

Consumer and Business Perspective on Sustainable Packaging of Bubble Tea Industry in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The growing number of bubble tea shops in Malaysia has increased consumption, resulting in packaging waste issues. This research explores the perspectives of consumers and businesses on sustainable packaging in the industry. The research uses contextual document analysis to investigate the awareness of sustainable packaging among consumers and firms through scholarly articles in scholarly journals, online articles, blogs, and forum discussions. Previous studies suggest that consumers are increasingly interested in sustainable packaging, and businesses are becoming more environmentally conscious. However, challenges such as the cost of implementation and lack of infrastructure in some areas need to be considered. This study aims to analyse the understanding and awareness of sustainable packaging design among consumers and businesses in Malaysia. This research intends to shed light on the current state of sustainable packaging in the bubble tea industry and identify potential areas for improvement to address packaging waste issues.

Keywords: Sustainable Packaging, Bubble Tea Industry, Consumer Perspective, Business Perspective, Packaging Waste



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1 INTRODUCTION

The bubble tea industry in Malaysia has experienced significant growth in recent years, leading to increased packaging waste (Research, 2023). As consumer preferences shift towards sustainability, sustainable packaging has become a crucial aspect of the beverage industry. In response to this trend, businesses are seeking alternatives to single-use plastics for their packaging (Rajendran, Wahab, & Singh, 2019). Studies have shown that consumers are not only willing to pay a premium for eco-friendly packaging but also expect companies to take responsibility for their environmental impact (Nguyen, & Le, 2021). These evolving expectations highlight the importance of understanding consumer and business perspectives on sustainable practices within the bubble tea market.

Despite the growing awareness of sustainable packaging's importance, a significant number of bubble tea businesses in Malaysia still rely on non-sustainable options such as single-use plastics and non-recyclable materials (Arumugam, 2019). One reason is that many businesses face financial and logistical challenges when switching to eco-friendly alternatives, as sustainable materials can be more costly and require adjustments to existing supply chains. Additionally, while there is some government effort to promote sustainable practices, the specific impact of these policies on the bubble tea industry remains unclear, with little research assessing their effectiveness and implementation at the business level (Global Business Accelerator, 2024).

Market trends further complicate the issue, as consumer demand for affordability and convenience sometimes conflicts with sustainable packaging initiatives. Many consumers may express a preference for environmentally friendly packaging but hesitate to pay the associated premium costs. There is, therefore, a need for comprehensive studies to evaluate the awareness and understanding of sustainable packaging among both consumers and businesses in Malaysia (Hamid et al., 2022). Such research could provide insights into the motivators and barriers for adopting sustainable packaging, enabling industry stakeholders to better address environmental concerns while meeting market demands.

This research will specifically analyse the bubble tea industry in Malaysia, examining both consumer awareness and business practices related to sustainable packaging, with the understanding that its findings may not fully reflect packaging practices across the broader beverage industry. Using secondary data sources such as scholarly articles, online articles, blogs, and forum discussions, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive overview of the industry's current state in terms of sustainability. By focusing on sustainable packaging, this research holds significance for several reasons: it could yield insights that allow bubble tea businesses to better align their packaging practices with consumer preferences, addressing the growing demand for environmentally responsible options.

Additionally, the findings could support businesses in reaching sustainability goals that are increasingly prioritized by consumers and could serve as a foundation for enhancing industry standards. Importantly, the study also has the potential to inform policymakers about the needs and challenges of waste management and sustainable packaging, providing relevant data that could shape future regulatory efforts within the beverage sector.

1.1 Literature Review

Bubble tea, introduced to Malaysia from Taiwan in the early 2000s, quickly became a favourite, particularly among younger Malaysians, who appreciate its unique flavours and chewy tapioca pearls (May et al., 2021). However, as the industry grew, so did concerns about its environmental impact, primarily due to single-use plastic cups, straws, and lids, which contribute significantly to plastic waste. These concerns have led to increased pressure on bubble tea businesses to consider more sustainable packaging alternatives (Arumugam, 2019). Some businesses, such as ZUS Coffee, have responded with biodegradable options like rice straws. While these initiatives demonstrate an initial shift towards sustainable practices, consumer feedback suggests that these alternatives sometimes lack practicality, as many biodegradable materials dissolve quickly or impact taste (Gempak, 2024). This limited usability and the higher cost of eco-friendly materials hinder the broader adoption of such solutions, especially in a competitive market where businesses must balance sustainability with affordability. Moreover, without strict regulations enforcing the use of eco-friendly packaging, many businesses prioritize cost-effectiveness over environmental concerns (Kemper, 2024). For the industry to truly advance in sustainability, bubble tea businesses in Malaysia must innovate and invest in durable, consumer-friendly packaging options that reduce environmental harm while meeting market expectations (Asim et al., 2022).

The growing environmental awareness in Malaysia has driven a shift in consumer preferences, with many now favouring sustainable beverage packaging to reduce plastic waste (Bakar & Mohamed, 2024). Research indicates that Malaysian consumers are increasingly mindful of their ecological

footprint and show a strong preference for eco-friendly packaging options. Studies highlight that green packaging is generally viewed positively, and a considerable number of consumers are even willing to pay a premium for sustainable alternatives (Rajendran et al., 2019). This consumer demand signals an opportunity for the bubble tea industry to gain a competitive advantage by adopting sustainable practices. However, the widespread shift to eco-friendly packaging remains hindered by challenges such as the high costs of sustainable materials, limited availability, and a lack of government incentives that would make the transition easier (Nguyen et al., 2020). These barriers mean that although there is consumer support, businesses struggle to meet this demand effectively. To bridge this gap, Lee et al. (2022) also clarifies that coordinated efforts are needed from multiple stakeholders, including businesses and policymakers, to create a more supportive framework for environmental sustainability in packaging, potentially through subsidies, incentives, or policies that lower the costs associated with green packaging.

With that, the Government policies and environmental initiatives have also begun in shaping the bubble tea industry in Malaysia, with targets set to eliminate single-use plastics by 2030. This ambitious goal underscores the government's commitment to reducing plastic pollution, yet it poses challenges for many businesses accustomed to plastic packaging. While some bubble tea shops are gradually incorporating eco-friendly packaging to comply with upcoming regulations, a complete shift remains complex due to infrastructure limitations and the financial burden of sourcing alternatives (Zainal et al., 2023). However, the development of eco-friendly takeaway cups and biodegradable containers is becoming more common, demonstrating the industry's increasing awareness of sustainable packaging's importance (Cheng, 2022). Despite this, the bubble tea industry's dependence on plastic continues to be a significant source of plastic waste, prompting calls for more proactive measures. Transitioning to eco-friendly packaging requires collaboration between businesses and government bodies to establish practical solutions that align with Malaysia's environmental objectives. Ultimately, achieving sustainability in packaging within the bubble tea industry will involve strategic partnerships among businesses, policymakers, and stakeholders to overcome these structural challenges and work toward an eco-friendlier future (Cheng, 2022; Yeung, 2020).

2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative methodology to provide an in-depth understanding of sustainable packaging within Malaysia's bubble tea industry. By employing contextual document analysis, the study systematically examines various secondary data sources, including scholarly journals, online articles, blogs, and forum discussions, to capture a broad perspective on sustainable packaging issues (Bowen, 2009). Document analysis as a method enables a rigorous examination of existing literature, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of how both consumers and businesses perceive sustainable packaging (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This methodology is particularly suited for the study's focus on perceptions and attitudes, as it provides access to a range of perspectives and documented experiences across various platforms. This has been supported by Creswell & Poth (2018), whereby through qualitative data drawn from these diverse sources, the study aims to understand the complex factors affecting the adoption of sustainable packaging within the industry, focusing specifically on contextual influences unique to Malaysia's cultural and regulatory landscape will be achieved.

Hence, in analysing the collected data, this research employs thematic analysis, an established method for identifying and analysing patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is particularly effective for this study as it enables the identification of recurring themes and insights from the literature, providing a nuanced understanding of the factors influencing sustainable packaging practices in Malaysia. This study focuses on academic discussions regarding awareness levels among businesses and consumers, highlighting how knowledge of environmental impacts and sustainable alternatives has evolved. By examining literature published between 2019 and 2023, the research captures recent trends and developments in sustainable packaging practices (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012). Thirteen of the most relevant and thematically targeted pieces of literature were

selected from an initial sample of over 50, ensuring a well-rounded and focused analysis that directly supports the research questions and objectives.

3 ANALYSIS AND FINDING

In analysing the awareness and perspectives of both consumers and businesses on sustainable packaging design within Malaysia's bubble tea industry, this research conducted a thematic analysis. In which, this study seeks to uncover recurring patterns and emerging trends around eco-friendly packaging, identifying how environmental awareness shapes preferences and business decisions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A diverse range of sources, including scholarly journals, industry reports, online articles, and consumer forums, are examined to provide a holistic view of the challenges and drivers associated with sustainable packaging adoption. By understanding consumer preferences, the research explores how factors such as price sensitivity, environmental consciousness, and convenience influence the demand for eco-friendly packaging. Hence, industry practices are assessed to reveal how operational and cost constraints impact the adoption of sustainable materials. Ultimately, this study aims to provide insights that can guide stakeholders toward more effective and environmentally responsible packaging practices within the industry.

Table 1 Summary of All Collected Data Articles (2019-2023)

Type of Article	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Total
Scholarly Journal	5	4	3	5	3	20
Online Article	2	3	2	4	3	14
Blog	1	2	1	5	2	8
Forum Discussion	1	1	1	5	3	8
Total	9	10	7	13	11	50

The insights obtained from this research will inform the development of strategies aimed at promoting sustainable practices and enhancing environmental awareness within the Malaysian market. A summary of the 13 most pertinent scholarly articles, online articles, blogs, and forum discussions selected for thematic analysis is presented in Table 2 below.

This table outlines the titles of the articles, the respective author(s), and the key issues addressed within each publication. The selection of these articles was guided by the relevancy to the research focus on consumer and business awareness of sustainable packaging design in the Malaysian bubble tea industry. The issues highlighted within these articles offer valuable insights into prevailing trends, challenges, and opportunities associated with sustainable packaging in this sector. Hence it establishes a foundation for the subsequent analysis and discussion of the research findings, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the landscape surrounding sustainable packaging practices.

Table 2 Summary of Scholarly Articles narrowed down samples with the most accurate themes.

No.	Article Title	Author(s)	Issues Highlighted
1.	Scholarly Journal. Malaysian consumers' preference for green packaging. (2019)	Rajendran, S. D., Wahab, S. N., & Singh, M. K. P.	Increasing demand for sustainable packaging among Malaysian consumers.
2.	Scholarly Journal. Significance of Sustainable Packaging: A Case-Study from a Supply Chain Perspective (2022)	Asim, Z., Shamsi, I. R. A., Wahaj, M., Ahmed, R., Hasan, S. A. A., Siddiqui, S. A., Aladresi, A., Sorooshian, S., & Teck, T. S.	Importance of sustainable packaging in supply chain: environmental, social, and economic factors.

3.	Scholarly Journal. Determinants of Customer Satisfaction among Youths Who Consume Bubble Tea (Tealive) in Selangor, Malaysia (2021)	May, O. S., Isa, M. a. B. M., & Ley, O. C.	Factors influencing consumer satisfaction, potentially related to packaging choices.
4.	Scholarly Journal. Environmental Sustainability Framework for plastic Waste Management—A case study of bubble tea industry in Malaysia (2022)	Lee, C. J., Chang, L., & Tan, J.	Sustainability framework to address plastic waste in the bubble tea industry.
5.	Scholarly Journal. Development of eco-friendly bubble tea take-away cups (2022)	Cheng, S.	Development of eco-friendly takeaway cups for bubble tea.
6.	Online article. Sustainability Solutions: Bringing environmentally-friendly packaging into the mainstream (2021)	The Edge Malaysia	Businesses are driven to adopt environmentally friendly packaging.
7.	Online article. Bubble tea businesses must seek alternatives to single-use plastics (2019)	Arumugam, T. (NewStraitTimes)	Need for bubble tea businesses to transition to sustainable packaging
8.	Online article. How bubble tea culture contributes to the plastic pollution crisis (2020)	Yeung, M. (Bobagreen)	Environmental impact of single-use plastics in bubble tea culture.
9.	Blogs. 3 ways every Malaysian can reduce plastic waste when drinking bubble ... (2019)	Selena, C. (SAYS)	Practical tips for consumers to reduce plastic waste.
10.	Blogs. Packaging for delivery in Malaysia - Green Design Malaysia - Medium (2022)	Suib, S. (Medium)	Challenges and opportunities of sustainable packaging for delivery services.
11.	Blogs. Eliminating single-use plastics by 2030 seen as an uphill battle (2023)	Zainal, F., Gimino, G., Hilmy, I., & Yun, Y. X. (The Star)	Challenges in eliminating single-use plastics in Malaysia by 2030.
12.	Forum Discussion. Malaysian Bubble Tea Market Surge: Credence Research Unveils a Comprehensive Analysis of Growth, Trends, and Challenges through 2028 (2023)	Research, C.	Growth of bubble tea market and associated sustainability challenges.
13.	Forum Discussion. What's with bubble tea? you like? Bubble Tea Lovers Discussing Eco-Friendly Alternatives Debate on Single-Use Plastics in Bubble Tea Shops Consumer Preferences for Sustainable Packaging in Bubble	Ph. (phonghongbakes - blogspot) Various contributors on Reddit's r/bubbletea Members of Green Forum Malaysia Participants in LinkedIn Group: Sustainable Packaging Malaysia	Consumers concerns of environmental impact on single-use plastics in bubble tea packaging.

Table 3 below categorises the themes from the collected articles to identify the most frequently mentioned topics related to sustainable packaging, environmental impact, business impact, consumer impact, policy and regulatory implications, supply chain sustainability, and waste management in the bubble tea industry.

Table 3 Analysis of Most Mentioned Themes

No.	Article	Sustainable Packaging	Environmental Impact	Business Impact	Consumer Impact	Policy and Regulatory Implications	Supply Chain Sustainability	Waste Management	Total Mentions
1.	Scholarly Journal (2019)	✓	✓	✓	✓				n=4
2.	Scholarly Journal (2022)	✓		✓			✓		n=3
3.	Scholarly Journal (2021)		✓	✓	✓				n=3
4.	Scholarly Journal (2022)	✓	✓					✓	n=3
5.	Scholarly Journal (2022)	✓		✓	✓				n=3
6.	Online article (2021)	✓		✓		✓			n=3
7.	Online article (2019)	✓	✓	✓					n=3
8.	Online article (2020)	✓	✓			✓		✓	n=4
9.	Blog (2019)	✓	✓		✓			✓	n=4
10.	Blog (2022)	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		n=5
11.	Blog (2023)	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	n=5
12.	Forum Discussion (2023)	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	n=6
13.	Forum Discussion (2019-2023)	✓	✓		✓			✓	n=4
Total Themes		n=12	n=10	n=9	n=6	n=4	n=3	n=6	50

Table 4 below provides a summary of the most frequently mentioned themes in the articles, along with the corresponding percentage of total mentions. This highlights the prominence of each theme in the discussions around sustainable packaging and its impact on the bubble tea industry.

Table 4 Analysis Summary of Most Mentioned Themes with Percentage

Theme	Number of Mentions	Percentage (%)
Sustainable Packaging	n=12	24%
Environmental Impact	n=10	20%
Business Impact	n=9	18%
Consumer Impact	n=7	14%
Policy and Regulatory	n=3	6%
Supply Chain Sustainability	n=3	6%
Waste Management	n=6	12%
Total	n=50	100%

4 DISCUSSION

The analysis reveals that the most frequently mentioned themes in the reviewed articles are "Sustainable Packaging" (24%) and "Environmental Impact" (20%). These findings suggest a strong alignment with the research objective, which focuses on assessing consumer and business awareness of sustainable packaging design in Malaysia. The substantial percentage of mentions for these themes indicates that both consumers and businesses possess a heightened awareness of the environmental consequences associated with packaging. This awareness has led to a proactive search for sustainable solutions, underscoring a collective acknowledgment of the pressing issues related to packaging waste. Such concerns are particularly pertinent within the bubble tea industry, where the problem statement emphasizes the need for sustainable alternatives due to increasing consumer scrutiny and environmental responsibility.

The theme "Business Impact" (18%) also emerges as a significant area of focus, reflecting the mounting pressure on businesses to integrate sustainable practices into their operations. This pressure arises from a combination of factors, including consumer demand for eco-friendly products, evolving government regulations aimed at reducing environmental footprints, and businesses' own recognition of the importance of environmental sustainability (Asim et al., 2022). The acknowledgment that sustainability can enhance brand reputation and consumer loyalty further drives this trend. Additionally, the theme "Consumer Impact" (14%) highlights the vital role consumers play in influencing market dynamics. Increasingly, consumers demonstrate a willingness to pay a premium for eco-friendly packaging options, creating an incentive for businesses to prioritize sustainability in their offerings (Rajendran et al., 2019).

While themes such as "Policy and Regulatory Implications" (6%), "Supply Chain Sustainability" (6%), and "Waste Management" (12%) are less frequently mentioned, they remain relevant within the broader context of sustainable packaging. These themes underline the critical role that government policies play in shaping sustainable practices, the necessity for sustainability to be integrated throughout the supply chain, and the importance of effective waste management strategies to mitigate environmental impact (Lee et al., 2022). Together, these factors create a comprehensive framework for understanding the challenges and opportunities that businesses face in adopting sustainable packaging solutions.

In conclusion, the analysis indicates that sustainable packaging and environmental impact are among the primary concerns for consumers and businesses within Malaysia's bubble tea industry. The findings emphasize the urgent need for effective sustainable packaging solutions, driven by evolving consumer preferences, regulatory frameworks, and a collective commitment to achieving broader environmental sustainability goals. This research underscores the potential for meaningful change in the industry, contingent upon collaboration among stakeholders, including businesses, consumers, and policymakers, to foster a more sustainable future.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors played equal contributions towards the production of this paper.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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