

University Students' Behaviours on Single-Use Plastic and Their Ideas on Promoting Sustainable Practices

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Abstract: *As concerns about environmental degradation and plastic pollution continue to grow, understanding university students' perceptions toward single-use plastics is crucial. As the young generation, it is important to study what they think about future sustainability practices. The study examines university students' ideas on promoting sustainable practices of single-use plastic. The specific aspects studied are their current behaviours on managing single-use plastic waste, their exposure to information on sustainable practices, and their suggestions on how to enculturate sustainable practices of single-use plastic. The study involved questionnaire data from 386 participants who filled in an online Google form. The results indicated frequent use of single-use plastic, up to three times a day or more, despite having a good awareness of the importance of reducing the use of plastic. Their behaviours are driven by the need for convenience as they have busy class schedules. They perceive the troubles of having to carry with them reusable containers and do not wish to wash the food containers after use. Some are willing to pay up to RM2 per takeaway container for convenience. Their suggestions to reduce single-use plastic include vendors giving them a discount for customers who bring their containers and institutions providing functional facilities for them to wash their containers and refill their water bottles. The study suggests that infrastructure should be put in place to facilitate the enculturation of minimal plastic consumption.*

Keywords: Single-use plastic, university students, sustainable practices, Sarawak

1. Introduction

The issue of plastic waste is a global issue that has become more critical, and it contributes to the release of gases that are harmful in large volumes, such as methane and CO₂, because of unsustainable practices of waste management. Whether we like it or not, plastics are now part of our environment, and plastic is now ubiquitous in the marine environment and has created a lot of damage to it (Xanthos & Walker, 2017). In 2018, WWF estimates around 100,000 deaths of aquatic mammals are linked to the consumption of plastic bags or being trapped by plastic wastes that pollute the sea (WWF-Australia, 2018). As an example, the death of a whale in 2019 in the Philippines is attributable to the consumption of plastic bags worth 40 kg found in its stomach (BBC News, 2019).

Malaysia is reported to be one of the world's largest contributors to mismanaged plastic. As such, Malaysia's Roadmap towards Single-Use Plastics (2018 – 2030) was launched to combat the critical issue of plastic waste in our country (MESTECC, 2018).

In UNIMAS, the use of single-use plastics is widespread in cafeterias, food kiosks, and during official events taking place at the university. The following are the regular events with regard to single-use plastics on campus: the purchase of food at the kiosks or cafeterias that comes with a plastic bag, plastic container and plastic utensils that will be discarded after every use; the distribution of bottled water or packed food in meetings or official events on campus; the usage of plastic utensils by the patrons who eat-in cafeteria on campus. Despite the launching of the campaign 'UNIMAS towards Zero Single-Use Plastic' in January 2020, the dependency on single-use plastics is apparent as food vendors still offer to sell food in *tapau*¹ packs, and they charge RM0.20 for each container used. Similarly, meeting organizers on campus continue to provide packed food in single-use plastic containers, and this practice seems to be more prevalent after COVID-19, potentially due to hygiene purposes.

In what way does the campus community depend on single-use plastics? How do they treat plastic waste after use? How can we reduce our dependency on single-use plastic? This paper aims to provide empirical evidence on the extent to which the campus community relies on single-use plastic and how they manage the waste. Another important aspect covered in this paper is students' responses towards the different ways that could motivate them to rely less on single-use plastic packaging. A better understanding of these behaviours will help to determine how campus policy on single-use plastic should be designed and implemented to create sustainable practices related to single-use plastic.

2. Material and Methods

2.1 University Students and Their Use of Single-Use Plastics

University students are often seen as being at the forefront of social change, which extends to environmental issues like plastic pollution. As young adults who are typically more engaged with sustainability and environmental causes, students can be both part of the problem and part of the solution when it comes to single-use plastics (Truelove et al., 2023).

The lifestyle of many university students, characterized by busy schedules (academic load, dealing with assignment deadlines, attending classes, extra-curricular activities), tight budgets, and a reliance on fast food or take-out, encourages the use of single-use plastics. A typical day may involve purchasing bottled water, coffee in disposable cups, or snacks wrapped in plastic (Rabiu & Jaeger-Erben, 2024). It is a common practice among students to purchase takeaway food and dine in their rooms or between classes to avoid spending too much time in a cafeteria (Hamid et al., 2022); this way, they can manage different tasks simultaneously against their busy schedules. The convenience offered by online food delivery (OFD) has prompted more students to purchase takeaway meals using this method. A study on purchases made using OFD among university students in Terengganu found that about 85% of the respondents use OFD 1-5 times weekly to purchase food, while the rest purchase 6-10 times a week using OFD (Jalis et al., 2023). OFD is synonymous with single-use plastic packaging, and the growing demand for takeaway food using OFD contributes to the substantial growth of single-use plastic waste and greenhouse gas emissions (see Janairo, 2021). With many campuses lacking sufficient recycling infrastructure, much of this plastic waste ends up in landfills or as litter, contributing to environmental degradation (Ebrahimi & North, 2017).

¹ *Tapau* is a word commonly used in Malaysia to refer to takeaway food or drinks, usually in single-use plastic containers.