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COFFEE SHOPS AND THE IMPACT OF SINGLE-USE PLASTIC CUPS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT: One of the most significant contributors to plastic waste involves single-use plastic cups, yet coffee shops in the United States continue to provide coffee beverages in single-use plastic cups. Between 250 and 300 billion single-use cups are used globally every year. Today, single-use plastics contribute to the millions of pounds of waste that end up in landfills and can also find their way into rivers, streams, and oceans. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand how independently owned coffee shop owners in Los Angeles and Greater Los Angeles County navigate the challenges of reducing single-use plastic waste. This study will utilize a qualitative phenomenological research design through semi-structured interviews with 15-20 participants. The research question guiding this study is: What are the lived experiences of independently owned coffee shop owners as they implement sustainable practices to address plastic waste in their establishments? Findings from this study will help address the growing problem of plastic waste and provide independently owned coffee shops with actionable guidance to reduce their plastic waste output, as well as understand why some coffee shop owners refuse to implement sustainable practices, or if there are any barriers they are encountering.

Key words
Plastic Pollution, Single-use plastic, Sustainability

INTRODUCTION

In the city of Los Angeles, there are hundreds of coffee shops available, with a growing number of them running as independent small businesses. As the number of coffee shops in Los Angeles grows, so does the plastic waste generated when coffee is poured into single-use plastic cups. The plastic waste problem is a global issue that requires action now, or the million tons of plastic waste in oceans, rivers, and landfills could grow to a substantially higher number in just a few years. Today, single-use plastics contribute to the millions of pounds of waste that end up in landfills and can also find their way into rivers and streams and ultimately into oceans (Muñiz & Rahman, 2025; National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, 2024). Besides the increase in total plastic waste, issues caused by plastic waste degradation and mismanagement can be detrimental to humans, marine life, and the environment (Dey et al., 2024; EPA, 2024). This study seeks to understand what the coffee shop owners' perceptions are of implementing sustainable practices in the city of Los Angeles. In addition, the study will contribute to the limited research on independent coffee shops' sustainable practice cycles, what they are doing to tackle the plastic waste problem, and whether they receive external support from local, state, and federal entities.

METHODOLOGY

This study will employ a phenomenological research design (Creswell, 2013) to explore the lived experiences of independently owned coffee shop owners and the impact of single-use plastic cup waste used to hold coffee beverages. A phenomenological study seeks to understand the essence and meaning of the coffee shop owners' experiences through their own viewpoints. Data will be collected through semi-structured interviews with 20-25 participants who will be selected based on meeting the inclusion criteria.

The criteria are:

- Independent coffee shop owners from coffee shops located in the city of Los Angeles.
- Provide coffee beverages in single-use plastic cups, and
- Coffee must be the main item on the menu.

The research question that will guide this study is:

- What are the lived experiences of independently owned coffee shop owners as they implement sustainable practices to address plastic waste in their establishments?
    - If a coffee shop owner refuses to implement sustainable practices, why does he or she refuse?
    - Is the coffee shop owner encountering any barriers to implementing sustainable practices?

PROPOSED OUTCOMES

This study seeks to understand what the coffee shop owners' perceptions are of implementing sustainable practices in the city of Los Angeles. In addition, the study will contribute to the limited research on independent coffee shops' sustainable practice cycles, what they are doing to tackle the plastic waste problem, and whether they receive external support from local, state, and federal entities.

The following objectives are sought in this research study:

Objective #1: Learn the coffee shop owners' perceptions on implementing sustainable practices.

Objective #2: Discover why some coffee shop owners do not use sustainable practices

Objective #3: Discover whether coffee shop owners are aware of sustainable practices.

Objective #4: Discover whether coffee shop owners are encountering barriers to implementing sustainable practices.

CONCLUSION

This study is important to the field of sustainability because of the impact single-use plastic waste has on our environment and ourselves. Findings can help guide coffee shop owners into more sustainable practices, as well as guide consumers into reconsidering how they enjoy their coffee. A shift in consumer practices may lead to reduced overhead and costs with fewer single-use plastic cup purchases. These findings may also help current California policymakers with plastic recycling/pollution legislation in future decisions, as consumer spending habits can direct businesses and the economy.

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