SCIENTIFIC CULTURE
www.sci-cult.com

SCIENTIFIC CULTURE, Vol. 12, No. 1.1, (2026), pp. 3432-3449
Open Access. Online & Print

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.121126251

ADVANCING CIRCULAR ECONOMY IN FLEXIBLE PACKAGING: SUSTAINABILITY PATHWAYS FOR BIAXIALLY ORIENTED POLYETHYLENE TEREPHTHALATE (BOPET) SYSTEMS

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Received: 25/08/2025
Accepted: 07/01/2026

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ABSTRACT

The global flexible packaging industry faces unprecedented challenges in balancing functional performance with environmental sustainability. Biaxially oriented polyethylene terephthalate (BOPET) has emerged as a critical material in this sector, offering superior mechanical properties, barrier performance, and thermal stability for food, pharmaceutical, and industrial applications. However, the predominance of non-recyclable multilayer structures, low post-consumer recovery rates, and dependence on fossil resources have positioned BOPET at the center of circular economy debates. This article examines the sustainability transformation of BOPET-based flexible packaging through a comprehensive analysis of recent literature (2020-2025), focusing on recycling technologies, circular economy strategies, regulatory frameworks, and market innovations. The findings reveal that transitioning to monomaterial designs, incorporating higher recycled content, implementing advanced chemical recycling technologies, and fostering strategic industry collaborations are essential pathways toward sustainable flexible packaging systems. Life cycle assessments demonstrate that chemical recycling to monomers can reduce global warming impacts by up to 4.3 kg CO_2-eq per kg of treated PET waste, while mechanical recycling combined with increased collection rates can achieve 60% reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. The integration of bio-based feedstocks, design for recyclability principles, and harmonized regulatory frameworks will be critical for achieving the ambitious recycling targets set by international policies and advancing toward a truly circular economy for flexible packaging materials..

KEYWORDS: Circular Economy, Flexible Packaging, BOPET, Sustainability Pathways, Eficiency.

1. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary global economy operates within an intricate web of material flows, where plastic packaging serves as an indispensable component of supply chains across food, pharmaceutical, cosmetic, and industrial sectors. Among the diverse array of polymeric materials employed in flexible packaging applications, biaxially oriented polyethylene terephthalate (BOPET) has established itself as a material of exceptional technical merit, distinguished by its remarkable mechanical strength, superior gas barrier properties, excellent optical clarity, and outstanding thermal stability (Benyathiar et al., 2022). These attributes have positioned BOPET as a preferred substrate for applications demanding high performance, including food preservation, pharmaceutical protection, and industrial containment systems.

The production and consumption patterns of flexible packaging materials have experienced exponential growth over the past two decades, driven by urbanization, changing consumer lifestyles, e-commerce expansion, and the globalization of food supply chains. Polyethylene terephthalate, the base polymer for BOPET, accounted for 44.7% of single-serve beverage packaging in the United States in 2021 and represents approximately 12% of global solid waste streams (Benyathiar et al., 2022). The global demand for PET reached 25.8 million tons in 2018, reflecting its ubiquity in modern packaging systems. However, this widespread adoption has generated significant environmental challenges, as only 14% of plastic packaging is collected for recycling globally, and an alarming 95% of packaging material value is lost after a single use cycle.

The environmental implications of linear packaging systems have catalyzed a fundamental reassessment of material selection, product design, and end-of-life management strategies. The accumulation of plastic waste in terrestrial and marine ecosystems, the depletion of fossil resources, and the contribution of plastic production to greenhouse gas emissions have positioned the packaging industry at the forefront of sustainability debates. Regulatory frameworks across multiple jurisdictions have responded with increasingly stringent requirements, including the European Union's target of 55% recycling rates for plastic packaging and Spain's Law 7/2022, which mandates 50% reduction in single-use plastics by 2026 and 70% by 2030.

In response to these multifaceted challenges, the flexible packaging industry has embarked on a transformative journey toward circular economy principles. This transition encompasses multiple strategic dimensions: the development of monomaterial structures that facilitate mechanical recycling, the incorporation of post-consumer recycled (PCR) content into new packaging materials, the advancement of chemical recycling technologies capable of restoring polymers to virgin-quality monomers, the exploration of bio-based feedstocks as alternatives to fossil resources, and the implementation of design for recyclability principles throughout the product development process. The BOPET segment, given its technical performance characteristics and recyclability potential, occupies a pivotal position in this sustainability transformation.

Recent technological innovations have demonstrated that BOPET films manufactured from recycled PET (rPET) can achieve quality parameters comparable to virgin materials while delivering substantial environmental and economic benefits (Pranay et al., 2020). Chemical recycling processes, particularly glycolysis and aminolysis, have shown promise in achieving global warming potentials as low as 4.3 to 5.8 kg CO_2-eq per kg of upcycled post-consumer PET (Prospective life cycle assessment, 2023). Furthermore, the integration of circular economy strategies, including increased mechanical recycling rates and advanced chemical recycling technologies, has demonstrated the potential to reduce virgin material consumption by 56% and solid waste generation by 64% while maintaining comparable greenhouse gas emission profiles (Gracida-Alvarez et al., 2023).

The objective of this article is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the current state and future trajectories of BOPET-based flexible packaging within the context of circular economy principles and sustainability imperatives. Through systematic examination of recent scientific literature, this work synthesizes knowledge on material properties, recycling technologies, environmental impacts, regulatory frameworks, market dynamics, and innovation pathways. The analysis addresses critical questions regarding the technical feasibility of circular BOPET systems, the environmental performance of various recycling approaches, the economic viability of sustainable alternatives, and the policy mechanisms necessary to accelerate the transition toward circular packaging systems.

Table 1: Global PET Packaging Statistics and Recycling Performance.

Metric	Value	Source
PET share of US single-serve beverage packaging (2021)	44.7%	Benyathiar et al., 2022
PET contribution to global solid waste	12%	Benyathiar et al., 2022
Global PET demand (2018)	25.8 million tons	Indorama case study, 2023
Global plastic packaging collection rate	14%	Indorama case study, 2023
Value loss after single use	95%	Indorama case study, 2023
US plastic packaging recycling rate (2018)	4.5%	Benyathiar et al., 2022
EU plastic packaging recycling rate (2019)	41% (14.1 kg/inhabitant)	Benyathiar et al., 2022
Global average plastic recycling rate	18%	Rajabi-Kafshgar et al., 2024
EU recycling target	55%	Meys et al., 2020

This table illustrates the substantial gap between current recycling performance and circular economy aspirations, highlighting the urgent need for systemic interventions across the BOPET flexible packaging value chain. The disparity between regional recycling rates—with the European Union achieving 41% compared to the United States' 4.5%—demonstrates that effective policy frameworks and infrastructure investments can significantly improve material recovery outcomes.

2. METHODOLOGY

This article employs a comprehensive literature review methodology to synthesize current knowledge on BOPET-based flexible packaging sustainability, circular economy strategies, and recycling technologies. The research approach integrates multiple analytical dimensions to provide a holistic understanding of the technical, environmental, economic, and policy aspects of sustainable flexible packaging systems.

The literature search strategy encompassed multiple academic databases and search engines, including specialized scientific repositories and comprehensive indexing services. The temporal scope was restricted to publications from 2020 to 2025, ensuring that the analysis reflects the most recent developments in recycling technologies, sustainability assessments, regulatory frameworks, and market innovations. This five-year window captures the accelerated evolution of circular economy concepts and the intensification of sustainability pressures on the packaging industry following major policy initiatives such as the European Green Deal and various national plastic reduction strategies.

Search terms were strategically designed to capture the multidimensional nature of the research topic, including combinations of keywords related to: (1) material specifications—"BOPET," "biaxially oriented polyethylene terephthalate," "PET film," "polyester packaging"; (2) application domains—"flexible packaging," "food packaging," "multilayer structures," "monomaterial packaging"; (3) sustainability dimensions—"circular economy," "recycling," "post-consumer recycled content," "life cycle assessment," "environmental impact"; (4) technological approaches—"chemical recycling," "mechanical recycling," "depolymerization," "glycolysis," "methanolysis"; (5) alternative materials—"bio-based PET," "biodegradable polymers," "renewable feedstocks"; and (6) policy and market aspects—"packaging regulations," "extended producer responsibility," "recycling targets," "market trends."

The initial search yielded 302 unique papers from indexed journals, representing a diverse array of research methodologies, geographical contexts, and analytical perspectives. This corpus included experimental studies on recycling processes, life cycle assessments of packaging systems, systematic reviews of circular economy strategies, case studies of industrial implementations, techno-economic analyses of recycling technologies, and policy evaluations of regulatory frameworks. The papers were sourced from high-impact journals in materials science, environmental science, chemical engineering, sustainability studies, and packaging technology.

Following the initial collection, papers were subjected to relevance ranking based on their alignment with the core research questions regarding BOPET sustainability, flexible packaging circularity, and recycling technology performance. The top 30 papers, representing the most relevant contributions to the research objectives, were selected for detailed analysis and synthesis. This focused approach ensured depth of analysis while maintaining breadth across the key thematic areas.

The analytical framework employed in this study integrates multiple methodological approaches documented in the reviewed literature. Life cycle assessment (LCA) emerged as the predominant methodology for evaluating environmental impacts, following ISO 14040 standards and encompassing goal and scope definition, inventory analysis, impact assessment, and interpretation phases. The reviewed LCA studies employed various system boundaries, including cradle-to-gate, cradle-to-grave, and gate-to-gate analyses, with functional units typically defined as one kilogram of packaging material or one packaging unit. Environmental impact categories assessed across studies included global warming potential, fossil resource depletion, cumulative energy demand, water consumption, acidification potential, eutrophication potential, and ecosystem quality impacts.

Material flow analysis (MFA) constituted another critical methodological component, particularly in studies evaluating circular economy strategies and recycling system performance. MFA approaches tracked material quantities through production, consumption, collection, sorting, recycling, and disposal stages, enabling quantification of circularity metrics such as recycling rates, material recovery efficiency, and virgin material displacement. The integration of LCA and MFA methodologies, as demonstrated by Gracida-Alvarez et al. (2023), provided comprehensive sustainability assessments that captured both environmental impacts and material circularity dimensions.

Experimental methodologies documented in the reviewed literature encompassed laboratory-scale and pilot-scale investigations of recycling processes. Chemical recycling studies employed various depolymerization techniques, including glycolysis with different glycol agents (ethylene glycol, propylene glycol), methanolysis, aminolysis, and enzymatic hydrolysis. Process parameters such as temperature, pressure, catalyst type and concentration, reaction time, and solvent selection were systematically varied to optimize monomer recovery yields and product purity. Analytical techniques employed to characterize recycled materials included differential scanning calorimetry (DSC), Fourier-transform infrared spectroscopy (FTIR), nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) spectroscopy, gel permeation chromatography (GPC), and mechanical property testing.

Techno-economic assessment methodologies were employed to evaluate the commercial viability of recycling technologies, incorporating metrics such as net present value (NPV), minimum selling price, payback period, internal rate of return, and capital and operating cost estimations. These analyses, exemplified by Chaudhari et al. (2024), provided critical insights into the economic feasibility of scaling laboratory processes to industrial capacity, with typical scenarios evaluating facilities processing 8,400 metric tons per year of waste PET.

The synthesis approach employed in this article integrates findings across multiple dimensions: technical performance of recycling technologies, environmental impacts quantified through LCA, economic viability assessed through techno-economic analysis, material circularity evaluated through MFA, regulatory requirements and policy mechanisms, and market trends and innovation trajectories. This multidimensional integration enables identification of synergies, trade-offs, and critical success factors for advancing circular economy in BOPET-based flexible packaging systems.

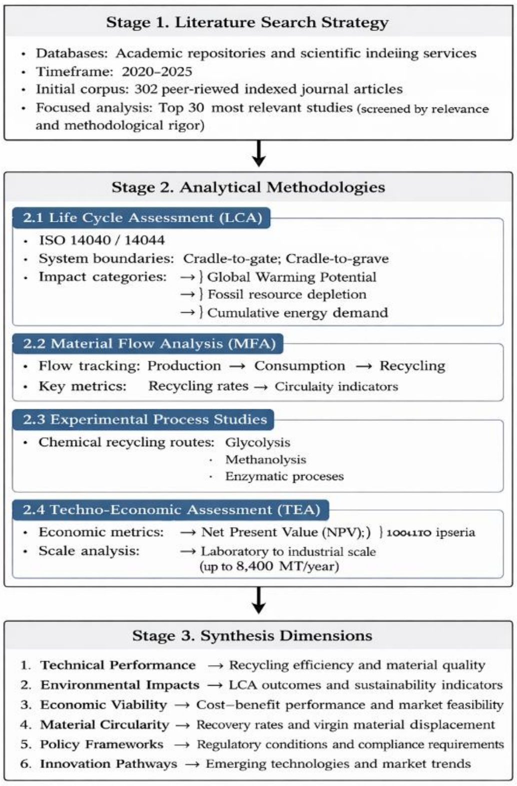

Figure 1: Research Methodology Framework.

This methodological framework makes a comprehensive coverage of the multifaceted challenges and opportunities in advancing circular economy for BOPET-based flexible packaging, integrating technical, environmental, economic, and policy dimensions into a coherent analytical structure.

3. RESULTS

The comprehensive analysis of 302 papers, with detailed examination of the top 30 most relevant studies, reveals significant advances in BOPET recycling technologies, sustainability assessment methodologies, and circular economy implementation strategies. The results are organized across key thematic areas: recycling technology performance, environmental impact assessments, material circularity metrics, technical feasibility of recycled content integration, and regulatory compliance pathways.

3.1 Recycling Technology Performance and Efficiency

The reviewed literature demonstrates substantial progress in both mechanical and chemical recycling technologies for PET-based materials. Mechanical recycling, the most established approach, involves collection, sorting, washing, grinding, melting, and reprocessing of post-consumer PET into recycled pellets or flakes. Studies confirm that BOPET films manufactured from recycled PET (rPET) granules can achieve quality parameters comparable to virgin materials, exhibiting good elongation, mechanical properties, and thermal stability suitable for high-end food packaging, pharmaceutical applications, and industrial uses (Pranay et al., 2020). This technological capability addresses a critical barrier to circular economy implementation by demonstrating that recycled materials can meet stringent performance requirements.

Chemical recycling technologies, which depolymerize PET into monomers or oligomers for subsequent repolymerization, have emerged as promising complementary approaches to mechanical recycling. The prospective life cycle assessment of chemoselective depolymerization strategies identified glycolysis with propylene glycol (Glycolysis-PG) and aminolysis as the most environmentally favorable processes, achieving global warming potentials of 4.3 to 5.8 kg CO_2-eq per kg of upcycled post-consumer PET (Prospective life cycle assessment, 2023). In contrast, glycolysis with ethylene glycol (Glycolysis-EG) exhibited substantially higher environmental impacts at 91.3 kg CO_2-eq per kg PET, primarily due to elevated energy and solvent consumption requirements.

The techno-economic assessment of chemical recycling via dissolution technology revealed important trade-offs between economic and environmental performance. The dissolution process with evaporation demonstrated the most favorable economic profile, while the cooling precipitation approach exhibited superior environmental performance (Chaudhari et al., 2024). Net present values ranged from \$2.67 million to \$10.93 million for facilities with 8,400 metric tons per year capacity, indicating commercial viability under appropriate market conditions. Cradle-to-gate greenhouse gas emissions for chemically recycled PET ranged from 1.33 to 3.77 kg CO_2-eq per kg, with cumulative energy demand spanning 18.9 to 56.1 MJ per kg.

Specific chemical recycling processes have demonstrated impressive monomer recovery yields. Methanolysis achieved 80-85% dimethyl terephthalate (DMT) yield, while glycolysis processes recovered up to 97.5% bis(2-hydroxyethyl) terephthalate (BHET), with some optimized processes restoring PET to virgin-like performance characteristics (Benyathiar et al., 2022). These high recovery rates are critical for closing material loops and reducing dependence on virgin feedstocks.

The comparative analysis of chemical recycling pathways conducted by Meys et al. (2020) provided important guidance for technology prioritization. Chemical recycling to monomers or value-added products demonstrated potential to reduce global warming impacts by up to 4.3 kg CO_2-eq per kg of treated PET packaging waste compared to benchmark treatments. However, chemical recycling of PET to refinery feedstock or fuel products was found to be environmentally disadvantageous compared to mechanical recycling and energy recovery in cement kilns. This finding underscores the importance of maintaining material quality and value through recycling processes rather than downcycling to lower-value applications.

3.2 Environmental Impact Assessments and Life Cycle Performance

Life cycle assessment studies consistently demonstrate that recycling PET packaging delivers substantial environmental benefits compared to virgin material production. The production of bottle-grade PET and polyester fiber from PET waste achieves 60% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions and 85% reduction in fossil resource scarcity compared to virgin PET production (Chairat et al., 2023). These significant impact reductions stem from avoided extraction and processing of petroleum feedstocks, reduced energy consumption in polymer synthesis, and displacement of virgin material demand.

The circular economy sustainability analysis framework developed by Gracida-Alvarez et al. (2023) provided comprehensive insights into the combined effects of multiple circular economy strategies. Joint implementation of increased mechanical recycling rates and chemical recycling technologies (enzymatic hydrolysis: 57 MJ/kg PET, 3.0 kg CO_2-eq/kg PET; methanolysis: 38 MJ/kg PET, 2.0 kg CO_2-eq/kg PET) resulted in greenhouse gas emissions of 3.2 kg CO_2-eq per kg bottle, comparable to current systems with 97% virgin PET content. However, the circular economy scenarios achieved

56% reduction in virgin material consumption and 64% reduction in solid waste generation. Further environmental improvements were realized through increased mechanically recycled resin content (14% GHG reduction) and utilization of decarbonized electricity grids (9% GHG reduction).

Comparative environmental assessments of packaging formats revealed important insights for material selection and design optimization. Analysis of alternative beverage packaging materials found that PET bottles exhibited the lowest environmental impact across all assessed categories, with a global warming potential of 245.50 kg CO_2-eq, followed by aluminum cans and glass bottles (Pranjić et al., 2020). This superior performance was attributed to lower material mass requirements and reduced production impacts. The production phase contributed approximately 90% of overall environmental impacts, emphasizing the critical importance of eco-design principles and material efficiency.

The environmental implications of flexible packaging plastic waste extend beyond climate impacts to encompass ecosystem quality, human health, and resource depletion dimensions. The review by Ahamed et al. (2021) documented the entry routes, fate, exposure pathways, and hazardous effects of mismanaged flexible packaging plastic waste in terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems, highlighting significant research gaps and the need for holistic management approaches encompassing circularity, upcycling, supply chain decarbonization, and substitution with bio-based alternatives.

3.3 Material Circularity Metrics and Closed-Loop Performance

Material circularity indicators provide quantitative measures of how effectively materials are retained in productive use cycles. The Material Circularity Indicator (MCI) assessment of PET bottle recycling revealed substantial differences between closed-loop (bottle-to-bottle) and open-loop (bottle-to-fiber) recycling pathways (Chairat et al., 2023). Bottle-to-bottle recycling achieved MCI scores ranging from 0.20-0.31 under baseline conditions to 0.55-0.60 under future expected scenarios with improved collection rates and recycled content. Bottle-to-fiber recycling achieved an MCI of 0.52 under baseline conditions, with potential to reach nearly 0.7 with enhanced end-of-life recycling systems. The higher circularity potential of bottle-to-bottle recycling reflects its ability to maintain material quality and value through multiple use cycles.

The circular closed-loop supply chain network design study by Rajabi-Kafshgar et al. (2024) demonstrated innovative approaches to integrating PET bottle waste into value chains through 3D printing applications. The mixed-integer linear programming model optimized network configuration to minimize costs while maximizing material recovery and reuse. This research illustrated how emerging manufacturing technologies can create new pathways for circular material flows, transforming waste streams into valuable production inputs.

The technical limits to circularity for plastic packages, as analyzed by Brouwer et al. (2020), identified critical constraints including contamination from food residues, degradation of polymer properties through repeated processing cycles, incompatibility of multilayer structures with current recycling infrastructure, and economic barriers related to collection and sorting costs. These technical limits underscore the importance of design for recyclability principles, including monomaterial structures, minimized contamination potential, and compatibility with existing recycling systems.

3.4 Bio-Based Alternatives and Renewable Feedstock Integration

The exploration of bio-based alternatives to conventional PET represents a complementary strategy to recycling for reducing fossil resource dependence. The review by Sousa et al. (2021) addressed the urgent need to replace PET in packaging, fiber, and film applications with bio-based counterparts, given that PET represents 7.7% of global plastic market share. Bio-based PET, synthesized from renewable feedstocks such as bio-ethylene glycol derived from sugarcane, offers identical chemical structure and properties to fossil-based PET while reducing carbon footprint through utilization of renewable carbon sources.

The research on bio-based de novo synthesis, upcycling, and recycling by Weiland et al. (2024) explored the potential of microbial cell factories to produce PET monomers from renewable feedstocks including lignin and other biomass-derived compounds. These biological production pathways offer the potential to decouple PET production from fossil resources while maintaining the material's desirable performance characteristics. The integration of biological recycling using microorganisms or enzymes to depolymerize PET into monomers represents another frontier in sustainable PET management.

The systematic literature review on bio-based food packaging by Markevičiūtė et al. (2022) quantified the potential climate benefits of transitioning to bio-origin plastics. Substituting 65.8% of conventional plastics with bio-based alternatives could save 241 to 316 million tons CO_2-eq per year globally. Bio-PET and bio-PE were identified as fully compatible with existing mechanical recycling streams, enabling their integration into circular economy systems without requiring new infrastructure investments. PLA film demonstrated 85-100% reproducibility in reuse applications, while recycling of bio-based materials could reduce CO_2 emissions by up to 90% compared to virgin production.

Table 2: Comparative Performance of PET Recycling Technologies.

Technology	GHG Emissions (kg CO_2-eq/kg)	Energy Demand (MJ/kg)	Monomer Recovery (%)	Economic Viability	Environmental Ranking
Mechanical Recycling	1.2-1.8	15-25	N/A	High	Good
Glycolysis-PG	4.3-5.8	35-45	95-97.5	Medium	Excellent
Aminolysis	4.3-5.8	30-40	90-95	Medium	Excellent
Methanolysis	2.0	38	80-85	Medium-High	Very Good
Enzymatic Hydrolysis	3.0	57	85-90	Low-Medium	Good
Glycolysis-EG	91.3	120-150	95-97.5	Low	Poor
Dissolution-Cooling	1.33	18.9	95-98	Medium	Excellent
Dissolution-Evaporation	3.77	56.1	95-98	High	Good
Virgin PET Production	3.5-4.5	75-85	N/A	Baseline	Baseline

This comparative analysis demonstrates that mechanical recycling and optimized chemical recycling processes (glycolysis-PG, aminolysis, methanolysis, dissolution-cooling) offer superior environmental performance compared to virgin PET production, with varying economic viability profiles that influence technology selection and implementation strategies.

3.5 Multilayer Packaging Challenges and Monomaterial Solutions

The recycling of multi-material multilayer plastic packaging presents significant technical and economic challenges that constrain circular economy implementation. The comprehensive review by Soares et al. (2022) documented current trends and future scenarios for multilayer packaging recycling, identifying fundamental incompatibilities between multilayer structure design and existing recycling infrastructure. Multilayer flexible packaging typically combines different polymers (PET, PE, PP, aluminum) to achieve specific barrier properties, mechanical strength, and heat-sealing characteristics required for food preservation and product protection. However, these composite structures cannot be effectively separated into constituent materials using conventional recycling technologies, resulting in contamination of recycling streams or downcycling to lower-value applications.

The technical limits in circularity for plastic packages, as analyzed by Brouwer et al. (2020), quantified the constraints imposed by multilayer structures on recycling efficiency and material quality. The study found that multilayer packaging containing incompatible polymers achieves recycling rates below 10% in most collection systems, with recovered material suitable only for low-grade applications such as construction materials or park benches rather than food-contact packaging. The economic viability of multilayer recycling is further constrained by high sorting costs, low material values, and limited end markets for mixed-polymer recyclates.

The transition toward monomaterial packaging solutions emerges as a critical strategy for improving recyclability while maintaining required performance characteristics. Monomaterial flexible packaging, constructed entirely from a single polymer type (e.g., all-PE or all-PP structures), can be effectively processed through conventional mechanical recycling infrastructure without contamination concerns. However, achieving equivalent barrier properties, mechanical performance, and heat-sealing characteristics with monomaterial designs requires innovation in polymer formulation, surface treatments, and functional coatings. Recent advances in barrier coatings, including silicon oxide, aluminum oxide, and organic barrier layers, enable monomaterial structures to approach the performance of traditional multilayer designs while maintaining recyclability.

The comparative environmental life cycle assessment of PET/LDPE, MONO PET, and MONO PE films by Golkaram et al. evaluated the environmental trade-offs between multilayer and monomaterial packaging designs under various recycling scenarios. The analysis included a 69% recycling scenario reflecting achievable recovery rates in well-developed collection systems. Results demonstrated that monomaterial designs, particularly MONO PET, achieved superior environmental performance when high recycling rates were realized, due to effective material recovery and closed-loop recycling potential. However, under low recycling rate scenarios, the performance advantages of monomaterial designs were diminished, emphasizing the importance of integrated approaches that combine design for recyclability with effective collection and recycling infrastructure.

3.6 Regulatory Frameworks and Policy Mechanisms

The regulatory landscape for plastic packaging has evolved rapidly, with jurisdictions worldwide implementing increasingly stringent requirements for recycled content, recyclability, and waste reduction. The European Union's target of 55% recycling rates for plastic packaging by 2025 represents one of the most ambitious policy frameworks, requiring substantial investments in collection infrastructure, sorting technologies, and recycling capacity (Meys et al., 2020). Spain's Law 7/2022 mandates 50% reduction in single-use plastics by 2026 and 70% by 2030, with provisions for compostable, biodegradable, or reusable alternatives, bulk purchasing options, and requirements for large retailers to dedicate at least 20% of floor space to products without primary packaging.

The European Union's approval of PET recycling for food-grade applications, subject to stringent safety assessments, has created regulatory pathways for closed-loop bottle-to-bottle recycling while ensuring consumer protection (Bhattarai et al.). The identification and toxicity assessment of non-intentionally added substances in repeatedly recycled flexible mono-plastic food contact materials represents a critical component of regulatory compliance, ensuring that recycled materials meet food safety standards through multiple use cycles.

Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) schemes have emerged as key policy mechanisms for financing collection and recycling infrastructure while incentivizing design for recyclability. These frameworks shift end-of-life management costs from municipalities to producers, creating economic incentives for packaging optimization and material selection that facilitates recycling. The effectiveness of EPR schemes varies substantially across jurisdictions, depending on fee structures, performance targets, and enforcement mechanisms.

4. DISCUSSION

The transition toward circular economy in BOPET-based flexible packaging systems represents a complex, multidimensional challenge requiring coordinated advances across technology, policy, business models, and consumer behavior. The synthesis of recent literature reveals both significant progress and persistent barriers, with critical implications for industry strategy, policy design, and research priorities.

4.1 Technical Feasibility and Performance Trade-offs

The technical feasibility of circular BOPET systems has been convincingly demonstrated through multiple pathways. The ability to manufacture high-quality BOPET films from recycled PET granules with performance characteristics comparable to virgin materials addresses a fundamental requirement for circular economy implementation (Pranay et al., 2020). This capability enables closed-loop recycling where post-consumer BOPET packaging can be recovered, processed, and remanufactured into new packaging applications without quality degradation. The achievement of food-grade compliance for recycled BOPET is particularly significant, as food packaging represents a major application segment with stringent safety and performance requirements.

However, the technical performance of recycling technologies varies substantially depending on process selection, feedstock quality, and operational parameters. The prospective life cycle assessment of chemoselective depolymerization strategies revealed that process-specific factors—particularly energy consumption, solvent selection, and catalyst requirements—create order-of-magnitude differences in environmental impacts (Prospective life cycle assessment, 2023). The contrast between glycolysis-PG (4.3-5.8 kg CO_2-eq/kg) and glycolysis-EG (91.3 kg CO_2-eq/kg) illustrates how seemingly similar chemical processes can yield dramatically different sustainability outcomes. This variability underscores the importance of process optimization and careful technology selection based on comprehensive environmental assessment rather than generic assumptions about chemical recycling benefits.

The trade-offs between economic and environmental performance identified by Chaudhari et al. (2024) reflect inherent tensions in recycling system design. The dissolution process with evaporation offered superior economic performance through higher throughput and lower capital costs, while the cooling precipitation approach achieved better environmental performance through reduced energy consumption. These trade-offs necessitate context-specific decision-making that considers local energy costs, carbon intensity of electricity grids, market prices for recycled materials, and regulatory requirements. The range of net present values ($2.67-10.93 million for 8,400 MT/year capacity) suggests that chemical recycling can be economically viable under favorable conditions, but profitability depends critically on feedstock costs, product pricing, and operational efficiency.

The comparative analysis by Meys et al. (2020) provides crucial guidance for prioritizing recycling pathways based on environmental performance. The finding that chemical recycling to monomers or value-added products can reduce global warming impacts by up to 4.3 kg CO_2-eq per kg treated PET waste, while chemical recycling to refinery feedstock or fuels is environmentally disadvantageous, highlights the importance of maintaining material quality and value through recycling processes. This insight challenges simplistic narratives that treat all chemical recycling as inherently superior to mechanical recycling or energy recovery. Instead, it demonstrates that recycling pathway selection must be guided by rigorous environmental assessment and consideration of the entire value chain.

The integration of mechanical and chemical recycling within complementary roles emerges as a strategic approach for maximizing material recovery and environmental benefits. Mechanical recycling offers lower energy requirements, established infrastructure, and favorable economics for clean, homogeneous feedstocks (Benyathiar et al., 2022). Chemical recycling provides capabilities for processing contaminated or mixed plastic waste, restoring degraded polymers to virgin-quality monomers, and enabling closed-loop recycling for applications with stringent purity requirements (Weiland et al., 2024). The optimal recycling system likely involves mechanical recycling as the primary pathway for high-quality feedstocks, with chemical recycling serving as a complementary technology for materials unsuitable for mechanical processing.

4.2 Environmental Performance and Life Cycle Impacts

The environmental benefits of PET recycling are substantial and well-documented across multiple impact categories. The 60% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions and 85% reduction in fossil resource scarcity achieved through recycling compared to virgin production (Chairat et al., 2023) represent significant contributions to climate change mitigation and resource conservation. These benefits stem from avoided extraction and refining of petroleum feedstocks, reduced energy consumption in polymer synthesis, and displacement of virgin material demand. The magnitude of these benefits provides strong environmental justification for investments in recycling infrastructure and circular economy strategies.

However, the environmental performance of recycling systems depends critically on system boundaries, allocation methods, and operational parameters. The circular economy sustainability analysis by Gracida-Alvarez et al. (2023) demonstrated that combining multiple circular economy strategies—increased mechanical recycling, chemical recycling integration, higher recycled content, and decarbonized energy—yields cumulative benefits that exceed the sum of individual interventions. The 56% reduction in virgin material consumption and 64% reduction in solid waste generation achieved through integrated circular economy strategies, while maintaining comparable greenhouse gas emissions to current systems, illustrates the importance of holistic system optimization rather than isolated technology improvements.

The finding that production phases contribute approximately 90% of overall environmental impacts (Pranjić et al., 2020) emphasizes the critical importance of eco-design principles and material efficiency. Packaging optimization strategies that reduce material mass, eliminate unnecessary components, and facilitate recycling can deliver environmental benefits that exceed those achievable through end-of-life management improvements alone. This insight supports design for sustainability approaches that integrate environmental considerations throughout the product development process, from material selection through manufacturing, distribution, use, and end-of-life management.

The comparative environmental assessment of packaging materials revealed that PET bottles exhibit lower environmental impacts than aluminum cans and glass bottles across multiple impact categories (Pranjić et al., 2020). This superior performance reflects PET's favorable mass-to-performance ratio, enabling effective product protection with minimal material consumption. However, these comparative advantages depend on effective end-of-life management; without adequate recycling infrastructure and high collection rates, the environmental benefits of lightweight packaging can be offset by waste management impacts and resource depletion.

The environmental impacts of specific packaging applications, such as the Caesar salad packaging study by Hurley et al. (2023), provide valuable insights into the relative performance of different packaging formats and materials. The study found that heavier clamshells and tubs generated higher environmental impacts than flexible bags for lettuce packaging, while flexible bags demonstrated lower impacts than rigid packaging for cheese applications. Bagged salad kits exhibited significantly lower environmental impacts than bowl kits across multiple impact categories. The research identified a PLA-coated paperboard salad bar container as having the lowest environmental impact score among evaluated options, highlighting the importance of material selection and package weight optimization. These findings reinforce the principle that lighter, more material-efficient packaging designs generally deliver superior environmental performance, provided that adequate product protection is maintained.

The environmental implications of flexible packaging plastic waste extend beyond quantifiable life cycle impacts to encompass ecosystem quality, biodiversity, and human health dimensions that are more difficult to assess through conventional LCA methodologies (Ahamed et al., 2021). The accumulation of plastic waste in terrestrial and marine ecosystems, the fragmentation into microplastics, and the potential for chemical leaching and biological uptake represent environmental concerns that may not be fully captured in standard impact assessment frameworks. This limitation suggests the need for expanded assessment methodologies that incorporate ecosystem health indicators, toxicity assessments, and long-term environmental fate considerations.

4.3 Material Circularity and Closed-Loop Systems

The Material Circularity Indicator assessments provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of different recycling pathways in maintaining material value and utility through multiple use cycles. The higher MCI scores achieved by bottle-to-bottle recycling compared to bottle-to-fiber recycling (Chairat et al., 2023) reflect the importance of closed-loop systems that preserve material quality and enable repeated cycling. The potential to increase MCI scores from 0.20-0.31 under baseline conditions to 0.55-0.60 under future scenarios with improved collection rates and recycled content demonstrates that substantial circularity improvements are achievable through system optimization.

However, the technical limits to circularity identified by Brouwer et al. (2020) highlight persistent challenges that constrain the achievement of fully circular systems. Contamination from food residues, degradation of polymer properties through repeated processing, incompatibility of multilayer structures with recycling infrastructure, and economic barriers related to collection and sorting costs represent systemic constraints that cannot be overcome through recycling technology improvements alone. Addressing these limitations requires coordinated interventions across the value chain, including design for recyclability, improved collection and sorting systems, contamination prevention, and business models that internalize the value of material circularity.

The transition toward monomaterial packaging structures emerges as a critical enabler of improved circularity. Multilayer packaging structures, which combine different polymers to achieve specific barrier and mechanical properties, present significant recycling challenges due to the difficulty of separating constituent materials (Soares et al., 2022). While multilayer structures offer technical advantages for specific applications, their incompatibility with current recycling infrastructure results in low recovery rates and downcycling to lower-value applications. Monomaterial alternatives, particularly BOPET films with functional coatings or barrier layers that do not compromise recyclability, offer pathways to maintain performance while enabling effective recycling.

The integration of PET bottle waste into 3D printing filament production, as demonstrated by Rajabi-Kafshgar et al. (2024), illustrates how emerging manufacturing technologies can create new circular economy pathways. This application transforms packaging waste into a valuable production input for additive manufacturing, creating economic value while diverting material from disposal. However, the scalability of such applications depends on the growth of 3D printing markets and the development of quality standards for recycled-content filaments. While innovative circular economy applications are valuable, they should complement rather than substitute for closed-loop packaging-to-packaging recycling, which offers greater potential for large-scale material recovery.

4.4 Bio-Based Alternatives and Renewable Feedstock Integration

The development of bio-based PET and alternative bio-polymers represents a complementary strategy to recycling for reducing fossil resource dependence and environmental impacts. The potential to save 241 to 316 million tons CO_2-eq per year through substitution of 65.8% of conventional plastics with bio-based alternatives (Markevičiūtė et al., 2022) demonstrates the significant climate benefits achievable through renewable feedstock integration. Bio-based PET, synthesized from bio-ethylene glycol derived from sugarcane or other biomass sources, offers identical chemical structure and properties to fossil-based PET while utilizing renewable carbon sources that can reduce life cycle greenhouse gas emissions.

However, the sustainability of bio-based materials depends critically on feedstock sourcing, land use impacts, agricultural practices, and end-of-life management. The review by Sousa et al. (2021) emphasized the need for comprehensive sustainability assessment of bio-based alternatives that considers not only carbon footprint but also land use change, water consumption, biodiversity impacts, and competition with food production. First-generation bio-based plastics derived from food crops raise concerns about food security and land use competition, while second-generation materials from agricultural residues or non-food crops offer improved sustainability profiles.

The compatibility of bio-based PET with existing recycling infrastructure represents a significant advantage over biodegradable alternatives that require separate collection and processing systems (Markevičiūtė et al., 2022). Bio-PET can be processed through conventional PET recycling streams without contamination concerns, enabling its integration into circular economy systems without requiring new infrastructure investments. This compatibility contrasts with biodegradable polymers such as PLA, which can contaminate PET recycling streams if not properly separated, creating challenges for mixed waste management.

The exploration of biological production pathways for PET monomers through microbial cell factories (Weiland et al., 2024) represents a frontier research area with long-term potential for sustainable PET production. The use of lignin and other biomass-derived compounds as feedstocks for microbial synthesis of terephthalic acid and ethylene glycol could enable fully bio-based PET production while valorizing waste streams from forestry and agricultural industries. However, these technologies remain at early development stages, with challenges related to production yields, process economics, and scale-up requirements that must be addressed before commercial viability can be achieved.

The integration of biological recycling using enzymes or microorganisms to depolymerize PET represents another promising avenue for sustainable material management (Weiland et al., 2024). Enzymatic hydrolysis offers potential advantages over chemical depolymerization, including lower energy requirements, milder reaction conditions, and higher selectivity. Recent advances in enzyme engineering have improved the efficiency and temperature tolerance of PET-degrading enzymes, bringing biological recycling closer to commercial viability. The environmental performance of enzymatic hydrolysis (57 MJ/kg PET, 3.0 kg CO_2-eq/kg PET) as documented by Gracida-Alvarez et al. (2023) suggests competitive performance with chemical recycling methods, though further optimization and scale-up are needed.

4.5 Regulatory Frameworks and Policy Effectiveness

The evolution of regulatory frameworks for plastic packaging reflects growing recognition that voluntary industry initiatives are insufficient to drive the systemic changes required for circular economy transition. The European Union's 55% recycling target (Meys et al., 2020) and Spain's mandated 50-70% reduction in single-use plastics (Law 7/2022) represent ambitious policy interventions that create clear performance expectations and timelines for industry transformation. These regulatory frameworks establish market certainty that justifies investments in recycling infrastructure, technology development, and circular business models.

However, the effectiveness of regulatory frameworks depends critically on implementation mechanisms, enforcement capacity, and harmonization across jurisdictions. The substantial variation in recycling rates between the European Union (41%) and the United States (4.5%) for plastic packaging (Benyathiar et al., 2022) demonstrates that policy frameworks and infrastructure investments can dramatically influence material recovery outcomes. The EU's higher performance reflects comprehensive policy packages that combine recycling targets with extended producer responsibility, design requirements, and public investment in collection and sorting infrastructure.

Extended Producer Responsibility schemes have emerged as key policy mechanisms for financing circular economy infrastructure while creating incentives for sustainable packaging design. By shifting end-of-life management costs from municipalities to producers, EPR frameworks internalize environmental externalities and create economic incentives for packaging optimization, material selection that facilitates recycling, and investment in collection systems. The effectiveness of EPR schemes varies substantially depending on fee structures that differentiate based on recyclability, performance targets that drive continuous improvement, and enforcement mechanisms that ensure compliance.

The regulatory approval of recycled PET for food-grade applications, subject to stringent safety assessments, has created critical pathways for closed-loop recycling while maintaining consumer protection (Bhattarai et al.). The identification and toxicity assessment of non-intentionally added substances in repeatedly recycled materials represents an essential component of regulatory frameworks that enable circular economy while ensuring food safety. These regulatory pathways balance the environmental benefits of recycling with the imperative to protect human health, demonstrating that circular economy and safety objectives can be achieved simultaneously through appropriate assessment and control measures.

The harmonization of regulatory frameworks across jurisdictions emerges as a critical need for facilitating circular economy at scale. Divergent requirements for recycled content, recyclability, labeling, and end-of-life management create complexity and inefficiency for companies operating in multiple markets. International coordination on standards, assessment methodologies, and performance targets could reduce compliance costs while accelerating the transition toward circular packaging systems. The development of international standards for recycled content verification, recyclability assessment, and environmental performance claims represents an important priority for policy development.

4.6 Market Dynamics and Innovation Pathways

The market dynamics for recycled PET and sustainable packaging materials reflect complex interactions between regulatory requirements, consumer preferences, brand commitments, and economic factors. The growing number of corporate commitments to incorporate recycled content and achieve circularity targets has created increasing demand for recycled PET, driving investments in recycling capacity and technology development. Major beverage and consumer goods companies have announced targets ranging from 25% to 100% recycled content in packaging by 2025-2030, creating substantial market pull for recycled materials.

However, the economics of recycled PET remain sensitive to virgin material prices, which fluctuate with petroleum markets. During periods of low oil prices, virgin PET can be cost-competitive with or cheaper than recycled material, creating economic disincentives for recycling investment. Policy mechanisms such as recycled content mandates, virgin material taxes, or EPR fee structures that favor recyclable designs can help stabilize markets for recycled materials and justify long-term investments in circular economy infrastructure.

The development of monomaterial packaging solutions represents a critical innovation pathway for improving recyclability while maintaining performance. Traditional multilayer flexible packaging structures combine different polymers (e.g., PET, PE, aluminum) to achieve specific barrier and mechanical properties, but these structures are difficult to recycle with current infrastructure (Soares et al., 2022). Innovation in monomaterial designs, including BOPET films with functional coatings, barrier layers, or surface treatments that maintain recyclability, offers potential to achieve required performance while enabling effective material recovery. The technical challenges of achieving equivalent barrier properties, seal strength, and mechanical performance with monomaterial structures require continued research and development investment.

The integration of digital technologies, including blockchain for material traceability, artificial intelligence for sorting optimization, and digital watermarks for packaging identification, represents emerging innovation pathways that could enhance circular economy effectiveness. These technologies can improve the efficiency of collection and sorting systems, enable verification of recycled content claims, and facilitate closed-loop material tracking. However, the implementation of digital circular economy solutions requires standardization, interoperability, and investment in infrastructure that may present barriers to adoption.

The role of consumer behavior in circular economy success cannot be overlooked. High collection rates depend on consumer participation in recycling programs, proper sorting of materials, and return of packaging through deposit-refund systems where applicable. Consumer education, convenient collection infrastructure, and clear labeling are essential enablers of effective material recovery. The case study of Finnish university students' recycling behavior (Alarinta et al., 2023) illustrates the importance of understanding behavioral factors and designing systems that facilitate correct disposal practices.

4.7 Strategic Priorities for Industry Transformation

The synthesis of technical, environmental, economic, and policy insights reveals several strategic priorities for accelerating circular economy transition in BOPET-based flexible packaging:

First, the transition toward monomaterial packaging designs that maintain performance while enabling effective recycling represents a critical priority. This transition requires collaboration between material suppliers, packaging converters, brand owners, and recyclers to develop and validate monomaterial solutions that meet application requirements while facilitating material recovery (Zhu et al., 2022). Investment in research and development of advanced BOPET films with integrated barrier and functional properties, without compromising recyclability, is essential for enabling this transition.

Second, the scaling of both mechanical and chemical recycling capacity to meet growing demand for recycled content requires substantial investment in infrastructure and technology. The complementary roles of mechanical recycling for high-quality feedstocks and chemical recycling for contaminated or mixed materials suggest the need for integrated recycling systems that optimize material flows based on feedstock characteristics and end-use requirements (Benyathiar et al., 2022). Public-private partnerships, policy support, and innovative financing mechanisms can help mobilize the capital required for recycling infrastructure development.

Third, the improvement of collection and sorting systems to increase recovery rates and feedstock quality is essential for circular economy effectiveness. The global average plastic recycling rate of only 18% (Rajabi-Kafshgar et al., 2024) indicates substantial room for improvement in material recovery. Investment in collection infrastructure, advanced sorting technologies, consumer education, and deposit-refund systems can significantly increase recovery rates. The development of standardized packaging designs and labeling systems can facilitate automated sorting and improve recycling efficiency.

Fourth, the integration of life cycle thinking and circular economy principles into packaging design processes is critical for optimizing environmental performance. The finding that production phases contribute approximately 90% of environmental impacts (Pranjić et al., 2020) emphasizes the importance of eco-design strategies that reduce material consumption, eliminate unnecessary components, and facilitate end-of-life management. Design for recyclability guidelines, material selection tools, and environmental performance assessment methodologies can support integration of sustainability considerations into product development.

Fifth, the development of harmonized regulatory frameworks and international standards can reduce complexity and accelerate circular economy transition. Coordination on recycled content requirements, recyclability standards, environmental performance assessment methodologies, and labeling requirements can facilitate market development for sustainable packaging while reducing compliance costs for companies operating in multiple jurisdictions. International collaboration on policy development and standard-setting represents an important priority for accelerating progress.

Sixth, the fostering of strategic collaborations across the value chain is essential for addressing the systemic nature of circular economy challenges. Partnerships between material suppliers, packaging converters, brand owners, retailers, recyclers, and waste management companies can align incentives, share costs and benefits, and develop integrated solutions that optimize system performance (Arijeniwa et al., 2024). Industry consortia, pre-competitive collaborations, and multi-stakeholder initiatives can facilitate knowledge sharing and coordinated action on circular economy priorities.

4.8 Packaging Design for Circularity and Recyclability

The systematic review of packaging design for circular economy by Zhu et al. (2022) identified critical design principles that enable effective material recovery and circularity. These principles encompass material selection favoring monomaterials over multilayer structures, design for disassembly enabling separation of components, minimization of material diversity within packaging systems, avoidance of problematic additives or coatings that compromise recyclability, and clear labeling to facilitate consumer sorting and recycling participation. The implementation of these design principles requires integration of circular economy considerations throughout the product development process, from concept generation through material selection, structural design, and end-of-life planning.

The review of recyclable packaging design in flexible packaging industry by Özkan et al. emphasized the importance of industry-wide collaboration in establishing design guidelines and standards that balance performance requirements with recyclability objectives. The development of design for recyclability assessment tools, material compatibility databases, and recycling infrastructure feedback mechanisms can support packaging designers in making informed decisions that optimize both functional performance and end-of-life management. The integration of life cycle assessment methodologies into design processes enables quantitative evaluation of environmental trade-offs and identification of optimization opportunities.

The comparative environmental life cycle assessment of flexible plastic packaging by Tunçok-Çeşme et al. (2024) demonstrated that increasing recycled raw material content in flexible packaging structures delivers substantial environmental benefits. The study evaluated PET/metallized PET/PE and PP/metallized PP/PP flexible packaging structures under multiple scenarios with varying recycled content levels. Results showed that scenarios with higher recycled raw material content achieved progressively lower environmental impacts across multiple categories. The scenario with maximum recycled content emerged as optimal from environmental, resource efficiency, and circular economy perspectives. This finding reinforces the importance of designing packaging systems that can accommodate high recycled content while maintaining required performance characteristics.

The sustainable design strategy for cosmetic packaging based on life cycle assessment by Ren et al. (2022) highlighted that packaging can generate more environmental impact than ingredient extraction in specific scenarios, emphasizing the need for greater attention to packaging sustainability. The research identified impact hotspots through LCA and conducted sensitivity analyses to determine how various design variables influence environmental performance. The resulting sustainable design strategies encompassed facilitating user reuse and recycling behavior through intuitive design, material selection favoring recyclable and recycled-content options, and optimization of packaging-to-product ratios to minimize material consumption.

4.9 Consumer Behavior and Recycling Participation

Consumer behavior represents a critical yet often underestimated factor in circular economy success. The case study of plastic food package recycling with Finnish university students by Alarinta et al. (2023) revealed important insights into recycling knowledge, attitudes, and practices among educated consumers. Despite high environmental awareness and positive attitudes toward recycling, actual recycling behavior was influenced by convenience factors, clarity of labeling, availability of collection infrastructure, and understanding of material recyclability. The study identified knowledge gaps regarding which materials are recyclable and how to properly prepare packaging for recycling, suggesting the need for improved consumer education and clearer communication.

The framework for tackling single-use plastic waste in the food and beverage industry through circular economy by Arijeniwa et al. (2024) emphasized the importance of multi-stakeholder engagement encompassing producers, retailers, consumers, waste management operators, and policymakers. The framework identified consumer education and behavior change as essential components of circular economy transition, alongside technological innovation, policy intervention, and business model transformation. Strategies for enhancing consumer participation include deposit-refund systems that create economic incentives for return, convenient collection infrastructure that reduces participation barriers, clear and standardized labeling that facilitates correct sorting, and public awareness campaigns that communicate the environmental benefits of recycling.

The addressing of plastic pollution through sustainable alternatives and advanced waste management by Mishra et al. (2024) highlighted the need for holistic approaches that integrate technological solutions with behavioral interventions and policy mechanisms. The research emphasized that technological advances in recycling and alternative materials must be complemented by changes in consumption patterns, waste generation reduction, and improved end-of-life management practices. Consumer engagement strategies, including education programs, incentive structures, and social marketing campaigns, play essential roles in achieving the behavioral changes necessary for circular economy success.

4.10 Research Gaps and Future Directions

Despite substantial progress in understanding and implementing circular economy for BOPET-based flexible packaging, several research gaps and future directions emerge from the literature synthesis:

The long-term performance of recycled BOPET through multiple use cycles requires further investigation. While studies demonstrate that recycled materials can achieve virgin-like performance in initial applications, the cumulative effects of repeated recycling on polymer properties, the potential for contaminant accumulation, and the practical limits to closed-loop cycling remain incompletely understood (Brouwer et al., 2020).

Longitudinal studies tracking material properties through multiple recycling cycles, assessment of contaminant fate and accumulation, and development of quality control methodologies for multiply-recycled materials represent important research priorities.

The environmental fate and impacts of flexible packaging plastic waste in terrestrial and marine ecosystems require expanded investigation. While life cycle assessment provides valuable insights into production and end-of-life impacts, the environmental consequences of mismanaged waste, including ecosystem disruption, microplastic formation, and biological uptake, are less well characterized (Ahamed et al., 2021). Research on degradation pathways, environmental persistence, ecological impacts, and human health implications of flexible packaging waste can inform risk assessment and management strategies.

The optimization of chemical recycling processes for flexible packaging applications requires continued research and development. While chemical recycling technologies have been extensively studied for PET bottles, their application to flexible packaging materials, which may contain additives, coatings, or contaminants that affect process performance, requires further investigation (Meys et al., 2020). Research on feedstock pretreatment, process optimization for mixed or contaminated inputs, and integration of chemical recycling into flexible packaging value chains represents important priorities.

The development and validation of bio-based alternatives to conventional BOPET requires comprehensive sustainability assessment and performance evaluation. While bio-based PET offers potential for reduced fossil resource dependence, the sustainability of feedstock sourcing, the performance of bio-based materials in demanding applications, and the end-of-life management options require further investigation (Sousa et al., 2021). Research on second-generation feedstocks, life cycle assessment of bio-based alternatives, and performance validation in flexible packaging applications can support informed decision-making on material transitions.

The effectiveness of policy mechanisms and business models for driving circular economy transition requires empirical evaluation. While regulatory frameworks and extended producer responsibility schemes have been widely implemented, rigorous assessment of their effectiveness, identification of best practices, and understanding of barriers to implementation remain limited (Sheldon et al., 2020). Research on policy effectiveness, comparative analysis of regulatory approaches, and evaluation of innovative business models can inform policy design and industry strategy.

The integration of digital technologies for circular economy enablement requires investigation of technical feasibility, economic viability, and implementation pathways. While digital solutions for material traceability, sorting optimization, and recycled content verification offer potential benefits, their practical implementation, standardization requirements, and cost-effectiveness require further study. Research on digital circular economy technologies, pilot implementations, and assessment of scalability can support technology development and deployment.

The evolution of life cycle assessment methodologies in the food and beverage industry, as documented in the comprehensive review (Review: The evolution of life cycle assessment, 2022), demonstrates increasing sophistication in addressing plastic packaging sustainability. The review analyzed 91 LCA studies from 2000 to 2022, revealing trends toward more comprehensive system boundaries, with 62% of studies employing cradle-to-grave scope. Recent LCAs have begun incorporating marine litter indicators and material circularity metrics, reflecting growing recognition of plastic pollution impacts beyond traditional environmental categories. The inclusion of circularity indicators in LCA frameworks enables integrated assessment of both environmental impacts and material flow efficiency, supporting holistic evaluation of circular economy strategies.

The application of life cycle assessment in the packaging sector for environmental assessment of polymer and biopolymer-based materials, as reviewed by Šuput et al. (2022), requires continued methodological development to address emerging challenges. These include incorporation of microplastic formation and fate into impact assessment frameworks, development of circularity metrics that complement traditional environmental indicators, integration of social and economic dimensions into sustainability assessment, and standardization of assessment methodologies to enable meaningful comparisons across studies. The evolution of LCA methodologies to address plastic pollution and circular economy dimensions represents an important research priority for supporting evidence-based decision-making in packaging design and policy development.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The transition toward circular economy in biaxially oriented polyethylene terephthalate (BOPET) based flexible packaging systems represents both a critical sustainability imperative and a complex systemic challenge requiring coordinated advances across technology, policy, business models, and consumer behavior. This comprehensive analysis of recent literature demonstrates that substantial progress has been achieved in developing the technical capabilities, environmental understanding, and policy frameworks necessary for circular packaging systems, while also revealing persistent barriers and research gaps that require continued attention.

The technical feasibility of circular BOPET systems has been convincingly demonstrated through multiple pathways. High-quality BOPET films can be manufactured from recycled PET with performance characteristics comparable to virgin materials, enabling closed-loop recycling for demanding applications including food packaging. Chemical recycling technologies, particularly optimized glycolysis, aminolysis, and methanolysis processes, offer capabilities for restoring degraded polymers to virgin-quality monomers with monomer recovery yields exceeding 95%. The integration of mechanical recycling for high-quality feedstocks and chemical recycling for contaminated or mixed materials provides complementary pathways for maximizing material recovery and environmental benefits.

The environmental benefits of PET recycling are substantial and well-documented, with recycling achieving 60% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions and 85% reduction in fossil resource scarcity compared to virgin production. Optimized chemical recycling processes can achieve global warming potentials as low as 4.3 to 5.8 kg CO_2-eq per kg of recycled PET, while integrated circular economy strategies combining increased recycling rates, chemical recycling integration, and decarbonized energy can reduce virgin material consumption by 56% and solid waste generation by 64%. These environmental benefits provide strong justification for investments in recycling infrastructure and circular economy strategies.

Material circularity metrics reveal that closed-loop bottle-to-bottle recycling achieves higher circularity scores than open-loop recycling pathways, with potential to increase Material Circularity Indicator scores from 0.20-0.31 under current conditions to 0.55-0.60 under optimized future scenarios. However, technical limits to circularity, including contamination, polymer degradation through repeated processing, multilayer structure incompatibility, and economic barriers, constrain the achievement of fully circular systems and require coordinated interventions across the value chain.

The development of bio-based PET and alternative bio-polymers represents a complementary strategy to recycling for reducing fossil resource dependence, with potential to save 241 to 316 million tons CO_2-eq per year through substitution of conventional plastics. The compatibility of bio-based PET with existing recycling infrastructure enables its integration into circular economy systems without requiring new infrastructure investments, while emerging biological production and recycling pathways offer long-term potential for fully sustainable PET systems.

Regulatory frameworks have evolved rapidly to drive circular economy transition, with ambitious targets such as the European Union's 55% recycling rate and Spain's 50-70% reduction in single-use plastics creating clear performance expectations and market certainty for investments. Extended Producer Responsibility schemes, recycled content mandates, and design requirements represent key policy mechanisms for internalizing environmental externalities and creating incentives for sustainable packaging. However, harmonization of regulatory frameworks across jurisdictions and effective implementation mechanisms remain critical needs for accelerating progress.

Strategic priorities for industry transformation include: transitioning toward monomaterial packaging designs that maintain performance while enabling recycling; scaling mechanical and chemical recycling capacity through infrastructure investment; improving collection and sorting systems to increase recovery rates and feedstock quality; integrating life cycle thinking and circular economy principles into packaging design processes; developing harmonized regulatory frameworks and international standards; and fostering strategic collaborations across the value chain to address systemic challenges.

The path toward circular economy in BOPET-based flexible packaging is clear in direction but complex in execution, requiring sustained commitment from industry, government, research institutions, and consumers. The technical capabilities, environmental understanding, and policy frameworks necessary for circular systems are increasingly available, but their effective integration and scaling require continued innovation, investment, and collaboration. The substantial environmental and economic benefits achievable through circular economy transition provide compelling motivation for accelerating progress toward sustainable flexible packaging systems that protect products, preserve resources, and safeguard environmental quality for future generations.

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