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Mapping the Intellectual Structure of Refill-Reuse-Return Practices: A Bibliometric Review on Sustainable Packaging Transitions

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Abstract: The rapid expansion of plastic packaging across consumer goods has substantially increased global waste generation and intensified environmental pressures. Limited recycling efficiency and continued dependence on single-use formats have further exposed structural weaknesses in prevailing consumption systems. In response, refill-reuse-return practices have emerged as viable alternatives aimed at extending packaging lifecycles, reducing material throughput, and supporting circular economy transitions. However, the academic landscape of these systems remains fragmented, with dispersed themes and evolving conceptual boundaries. This study systematically maps the intellectual structure of research on these practices through a bibliometric analysis of Scopus-indexed publications, applying PRISMA framework. The study examines annual scientific production, country-wise contributions, influential authors, and thematic Map. The findings indicate a sharp increase in scholarly output after 2020, with few countries leading research activity. The thematic analysis indicates that research in this area is mainly driven by sustainability, environmental impact, and packaging systems. However, greater focus on consumer behaviour, business models, and practical implementation is needed, pointing toward important future research directions.

Keywords: Refill, Refillable Packaging, Reusable Packaging, Returnable Packaging.

I. INTRODUCTION

Plastic packaging has become an essential aspect of modern consumer markets because it is widely used in fast-moving consumer goods, is convenient, is hygienic, and works well logistically. But new studies on sustainability show that the quick rise of single-use plastic packaging has outpaced the ability to handle waste, putting more stress on the environment and making people rethink their consumption habits that depend on packaging (UNEP, 2023; Ritchie & Roser, 2023; OECD, 2022). Packaging waste is now a major sustainability problem because supply chains for fast-moving consumer goods use single-use

packaging systems a lot. This leads to a lot of waste after the product is used and environmental problems throughout the packaging life cycle (Geyer et al., 2017; Hemachandra et al., 2024; Misopoulos & Bajiraj, 2025).

The fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) business is one of the greatest causes of environmental problems linked to packaging since it uses a lot of single-use packaging and is bought a lot. Due to these traits, supply networks take up more material resources and make a lot of waste from consumers (Habermehl et al., 2024; OECD, 2022). Recent studies show that government programs like the European Union's Single-Use Plastics Directive and rising consumer awareness of plastic pollution have sped up the move toward more environmentally friendly and circular packaging solutions in industries that use a lot of packaging (European Union, 2019).

Recent study in the industry says that total worldwide packaging trash would reach around

434.5 million tonnes by 2025 and rise to nearly 525 million tonnes by 2030. This is a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of about 3.9% over the same time period (Smithers, 2025). Packaging accounts for more than 40% of all plastic waste, making it one of the world's largest generators of plastic waste. This demonstrates its significance in the global issue of plastic pollution (Ritchie & Roser, 2023). The fast growth in packaging trash indicates how bad the current waste management and recycling systems are. It also highlights how important it is to find upstream solutions that reduce the amount of material that needs to be moved and the damage to the environment.

In accordance to the environmental problems caused by single-use packaging, refillable, reusable, and returnable packaging systems are becoming more widely accepted as practical, sustainable alternatives that can extend the life of packaging, reduce material throughput, and allow for multiple product uses before disposal (Bradley & Corsini, 2023; Miao et al., 2023). The present study aims to provide a comprehensive bibliometric overview of the research on refill–reuse–return practices by systematically analysing its publication trends, intellectual structure, and conceptual development. It further seeks to identify leading contributors, influential sources, geographical distribution, and thematic trajectories in order to uncover emerging research patterns and future directions within sustainable packaging transitions.

1.1 Refillable Packaging Systems

Refillable packaging involves containers that are retained by consumers and replenished through dedicated refill systems, enabling repeated product use while reducing reliance on single-use packaging formats. Refill packaging solutions, which let customers utilize containers they already have to replace things, are becoming more commonly accepted as a good approach to cut down on single-use plastic (Lofthouse & Bhamra, 2006). Refill models let FMCG packaging last longer while using less material. However, Studies reveal that even though individuals claim they care about the environment when it comes to refills, their actual behaviour is determined by how simple it is to get to refill stations, how clean they think they are, and how handy they are (Zdonek & Jaworska, 2024; Tassell & Aurisicchio, 2023).

1.2 Reusable Packaging Systems

Reusable packaging cuts down on the requirement for single-use packaging by allowing several trips or rotations inside a reuse system. It includes strong containers that can be used many times (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2019). People often talk about reusable packaging as a key part of circular business models in the fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) sector. Reusable systems are better for the environment in many ways, but they can't be used as much because of problems in the supply chain, such as reverse logistics, cleaning processes, hygiene issues, and cost distribution. For a system to be successful, it is important that people use it easily and think it is clean (Bocken et al., 2022; Rane et al., 2025).

1.3 Returnable Packaging Systems

Returnable packaging systems rely on structured mechanisms for collecting, processing, and reintegrating used containers into the supply chain. These systems are particularly effective in high-volume FMCG contexts but require efficient logistics and

incentive structures to ensure consumer participation. Recent studies highlight that without convenient return channels and visible value for consumers, returnable packaging faces limited engagement despite its sustainability potential (To, 2023; Tran, 2025).

Even although there is increased interest in eco-friendly packaging, there is still not a clear understanding of refillable, reusable, and returnable solutions in the FMCG and personal care industries. Existing studies often examine isolated practices or perspectives, limiting clarity on overall research patterns and knowledge gaps. To fill in these gaps, this study uses a bibliometric analysis of Scopus-indexed literature to find the most important themes and keywords, the most important authors and institutions, the most important research trends, and the most promising new areas for research in the field of refillable, reusable, and returnable packaging in the FMCG and personal care sectors.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Environmental Rationale and the Emergence of Circular and Loop-Based Packaging Models

People typically consider refill, reuse, and return packaging as a way to fix the environmental problems caused by linear package technologies, especially in supply chains for fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) and e-commerce. 418 million tonnes of packaging waste were expected to be created around the world in 2024, with most of it being thrown away in landfills, burned, or leaked into the environment. This shows that the current waste management systems are not working well (Smithers, 2025). Most of FMCG products like personal care products come in flexible plastic packaging, which is one of the reasons why India has so much low-value plastic garbage. Recent data from the industry suggests that there is a severe problem with packaging trash in the nation. In 2022–2023, more than 4.13 million tons of plastic garbage were made (Environment Stories from the Margins, 2025; India Plastics Pact, 2022). System-level studies assert that closed-loop packaging solutions are essential for achieving measurable environmental advantages, as traditional packaging methods lead to significant material losses throughout distribution and disposal (Raut & Chandel, 2023). Bibliometric and conceptual assessments (Ram et al., 2024) show that the primary themes of debate in the current circular economy include cutting down on packaging waste, circularizing materials, and making the best use of resources.

Consumer Intention, Behavioural Drivers, and Barriers in Refill, Reuse and return Systems

From the existing literature, customer behaviour and the determinants affecting the adoption of refill and reuse systems represent a second common theme. Earlier studies indicate that perceived convenience, ease of use, and anticipated economic advantages are the primary variables influencing customer acceptance of refill and return systems, often outweighing environmental considerations alone. Regular compatibility, cleanliness perceptions, storage limits, and perceived product quality all affect how people plan to act. This creates a gap between what people say they want to do and what they really do when it comes to refilling or reusing (Tassell & Aurisicchio, 2023; Zdonek & Jaworska, 2024; Sandhu, 2025). When people care more about the environment, they are more likely to utilize refill systems. This is because they are more inclined to recycle and reuse things. Many people also think that using sustainable practices is important since it reduces social and environmental harm (Ngo, 2025; Da Silva et al., 2024).

System Design, Logistics, and Market-Level Constraints in Implementation of Refill, Reuse and Return system

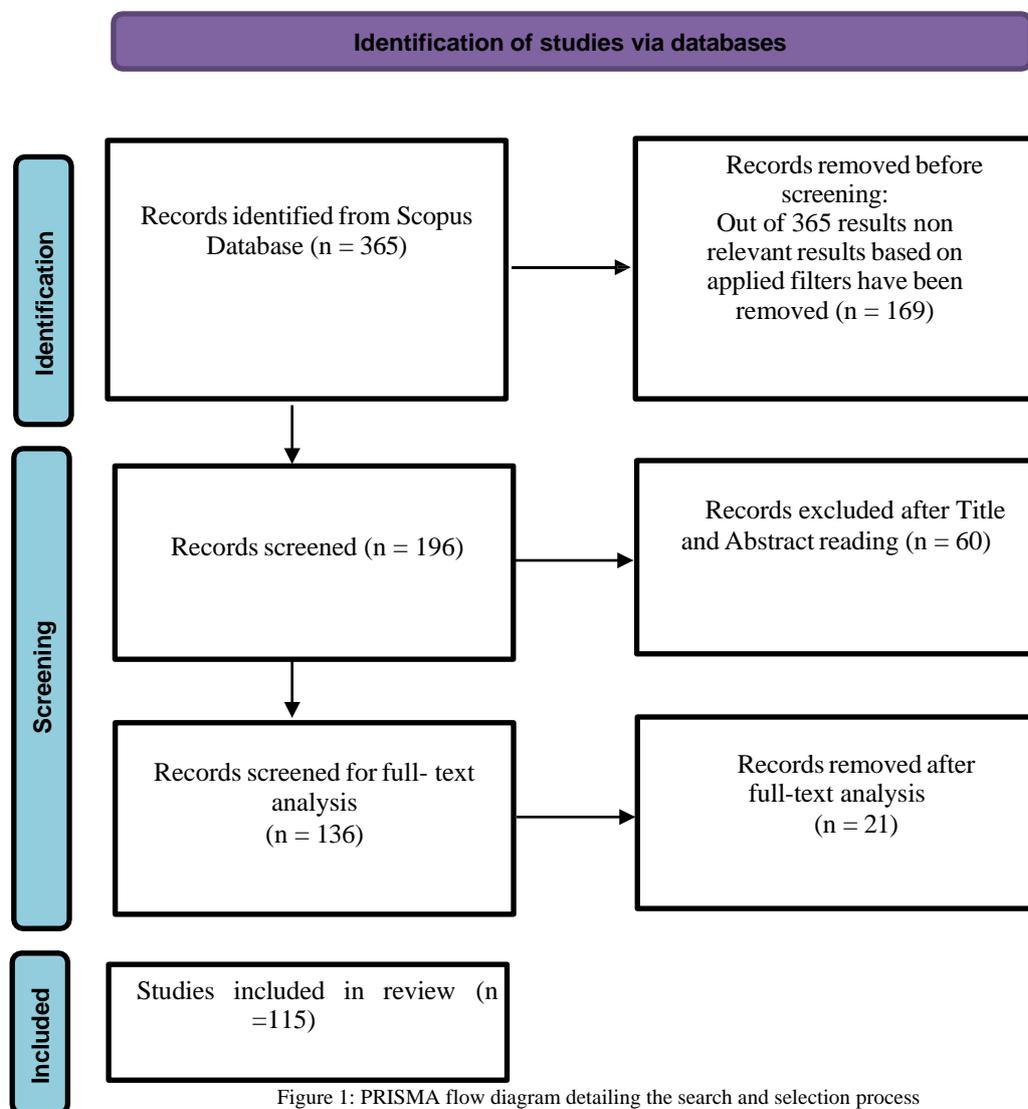
Research indicates that operational and structural challenges hinder the extensive adoption of refill, reuse, and return systems, even if they align with the principles of the circular economy. Research in the FMCG sector identifies regulatory inconsistencies, high initial investments, fragmented infrastructure, and limited reverse logistics capabilities as significant challenges for personal care packaging (Bocken et al., 2022; Furlani Filho & Cavalcante, 2025; Neumann et al., 2024). Moreover, successful implementation necessitates cohesive logistics, supportive policy frameworks, and functional packaging design that ensures usability, durability, and hygiene; in their absence, refill initiatives remain at a pilot scale and economically vulnerable (Zhu et al., 2022; Tran, 2025).

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a bibliometric research methodology to examine academic publications. Scopus, a significant academic database, was used as the main source for getting data because it has a lot of peer-reviewed publications. One of the best things about bibliometric evaluations is that they may find patterns in how knowledge is created across a lot of papers (Zupic & Cater, 2015).

A systematic search was conducted using the following keywords: ("Refill" OR "Refills" OR "Refill Packaging" OR "Refillable Packaging" OR "Reuse Packaging" OR "Reusable Packaging" OR "Return Packaging") AND ("FMCG" OR "Fast-moving Consumer Goods" OR "Consumer Packaged Goods" OR "Household Products" OR "Cosmetic Products" OR "Personal Care Products"). Only journal articles and reviews in English were included in this searching process. The resulting dataset was downloaded in CSV format and screened using the PRISMA framework to remove duplicates and irrelevant records. After screening, a final dataset of 115 articles was obtained for bibliometric analysis.

In this investigation, a systematic literature review following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines was adopted as the research method for collecting, analyzing, and synthesizing relevant data (Moher et al., 2010).



IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This part shows the results of the bibliometric analysis that was done with Biblioshiny (R- Studio) on a group of literature that Scopus has indexed. The data are systematically analyzed to ascertain publishing trends, citation patterns, principal sources, and emerging thematic frameworks.

4.1 Overview of the Bibliometric Database



Figure 2: Main information of the bibliometric dataset.
Source: Data extracted from Biblioshiny.

The dataset includes 115 publications from 2009 to 2026, showing that the research area is always growing at a pace of 4.16% each year. Despite the little increase, it indicates that refill, return, and reuse systems persist in garnering scholarly interest in sustainability research. The literature consists of 57 sources, demonstrating that the subject is interdisciplinary rather than confined to a certain journal cluster. There are 482 authors who worked together on this topic, and each document has an average of 7.84 co-authors. There aren't any papers with only one author, therefore it's far more community-oriented and network-driven. There is still opportunity for more cooperation between countries, even if the international co-authorship rate of 25.2% shows that a decent level of global engagement is already happening. The field is new and changing, as seen by the fact that its average document age is only 2.71 years and it has 961 references. The average of 22.53 citations for a work also demonstrates that it is becoming more influential and well-known in the academic world.

4.2 Number of Publications

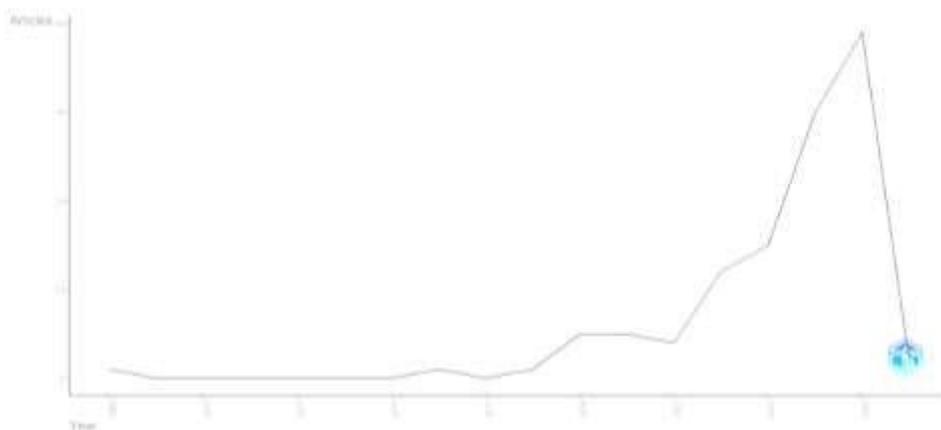


Figure 3: Annual scientific production. Source: Data extracted from Biblioshiny.

In the early years, there wasn't much academic interest in refill, reuse, and return packaging technologies in the FMCG business. This is shown from the very low amount of research done between 2009 and 2017. A little rise after 2018 shows that more people are aware of plastic waste and packaging options that are better for the environment. There has been a big increase

in publications since 2021, which shows how important refill and return models are becoming in discussions about sustainability and the circular economy. (Geissdoerfer et al., 2017; Kirchherr et al., 2017) assert that the significant increase in publications post-2020 reflects the escalating academic focus on circular and sustainable consumption patterns. The drop that seems to happen in 2025 is probably because there isn't enough data for that year. Overall, the trend suggests that this is a subject of study that is still growing, with more scholars becoming interested and a lot of potential for future research.

4.3 Citation Dynamics Over Time

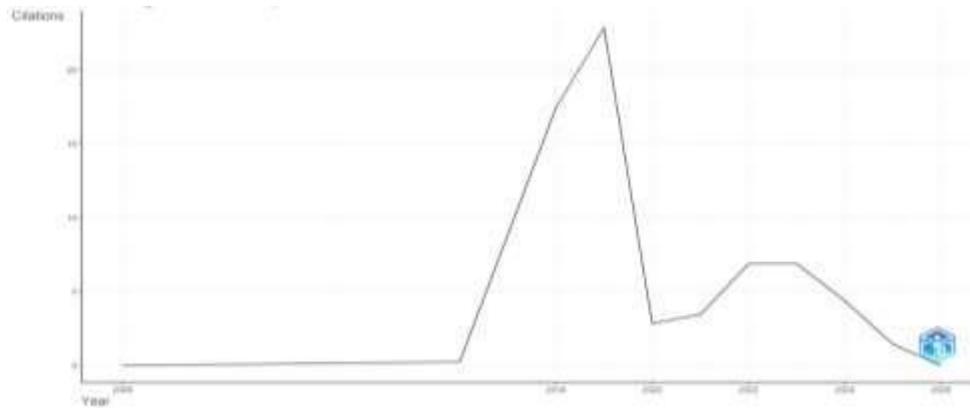


Figure 4: Average Citation per year. Source: Data extracted from Biblioshiny.

The average number of citations each year was very low until 2016, showing that early efforts on this issue had little impact on academic activity. A strong surge around 2018–2019 shows that a few basic works acquired substantial academic attention, impacting subsequent research on refill and reusable packaging solutions. The decline after 2020 suggests that the publications are more recent since more current research has had less time to collect citations. Overall, the trend shows that the topic is growing, but its conceptual foundations are based on a small number of highly cited publications. This shows that additional in-depth and diversified empirical research is needed.

4.4 Leading Journals by Number of Publications

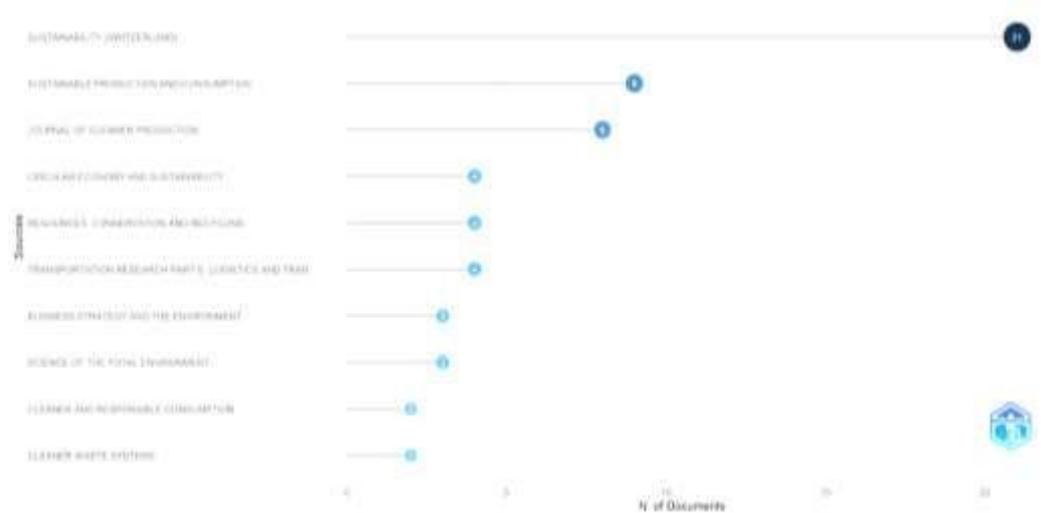


Figure 5: Most relevant sources. Source: Data extracted from Biblioshiny.

According to a review of the most relevant sources, much of the research on refill, reuse, and return packaging solutions is published in journals that focus on sustainability. Sustainability (Switzerland) is the main source, followed by Sustainable Production and consumerism and the Journal of Cleaner Production. This shows that this study field is closely related to environmental sustainability and responsible consumerism. The presence of journals focused on environmental management,

concerns, and complexity constitute significant barriers especially associated with these practices in the FMCG sector (Magnier & Mugge, 2023). All of these studies back up the two main points of our research: how customer behavior affects refill-reuse-return models and how ready businesses are at the system level.

4.7 Temporal Trends in Scholarly Contributions

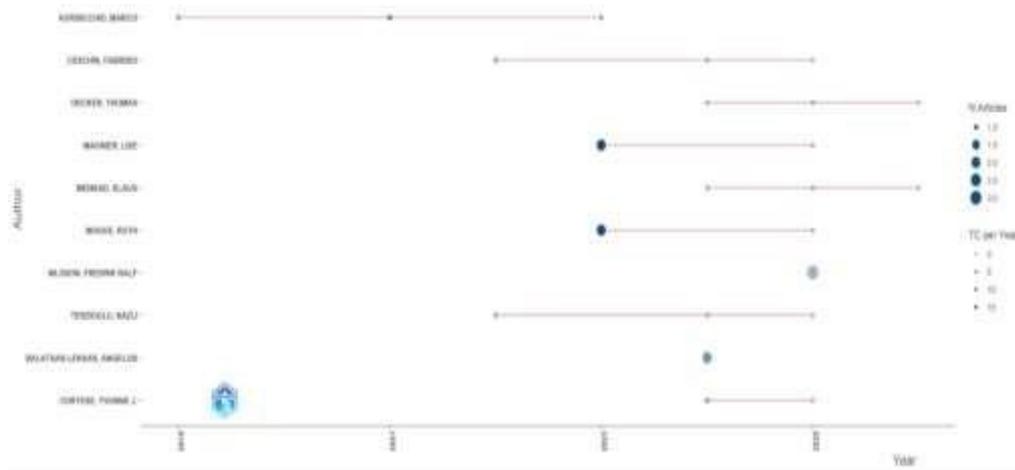


Figure 8: Authors Production over time. Source: Data extracted from Biblioshiny.

This figure shows that research on refill-reuse-return and circular FMCG systems has sped up since 2020. Most of the authors started working between 2021 and 2025. There don't seem to be many contributions from 2019 to 2020, which suggests that structured scholarly research on reuse and refill models is still in its early stages. Aurisicchio and Ceschin are two academics who have made steady contributions throughout the years, showing that they are still interested in sustainable system innovation and circular business models. In recent years, writers like Magnier and Mugge have focused more on how customers see and behave with reusable packaging alternatives. According to the temporal pattern, refill-reuse-return research is a young but swiftly expanding topic. It starts with theoretical debates of the circular economy and moves on to more practical studies of how consumers accept it and how businesses put it into practice. This directly supports how useful and timely your study is in the Indian personal care setting.

4.8 Geographical Distribution of Scientific Output



Figure 9: Country scientific production. Source: Data extracted from Biblioshiny

S.No.	Country	Freq.
1	UK	46
2	CHINA	41
3	GERMANY	38
4	ITALY	31
5	NETHERLANDS	23
6	FINLAND	22
7	SPAIN	22
8	FRANCE	21
9	USA	20
10	HUNGARY	19
11	INDIA	15
12	POLAND	14
13	BANGLADESH	13
14	CANADA	11
15	SOUTH KOREA	11

Table 1: Country scientific production. Source: Data extracted from Biblioshiny

According to the data, most of the research in this subject is done in Europe. The UK has the most publications (46), followed by China (41) and Germany (38). A lot of European countries are quite involved, which shows that they are actively researching and making policies around sustainable supply chains and the circular economy. The USA makes a small contribution, but China is a big part of Asia. India is a new contributor with 15 papers, which shows that more and more scholars are interested in this field. India still has a long way to go when it comes to increasing its research output and strengthening international relationships, even if it is one of the best countries.

The European Union's Circular Economy Action Plan, which promotes closed-loop value chains and resource efficiency, is in line with the fact that there are so many Europeans living in the area. China's early adoption of circular economy concepts via national policy frameworks aimed at enhancing industrial circularity and resource productivity exemplifies its significant contribution (Geng & Doberstein, 2008).

4.9 Temporal Evolution of Country-wise Scientific Production

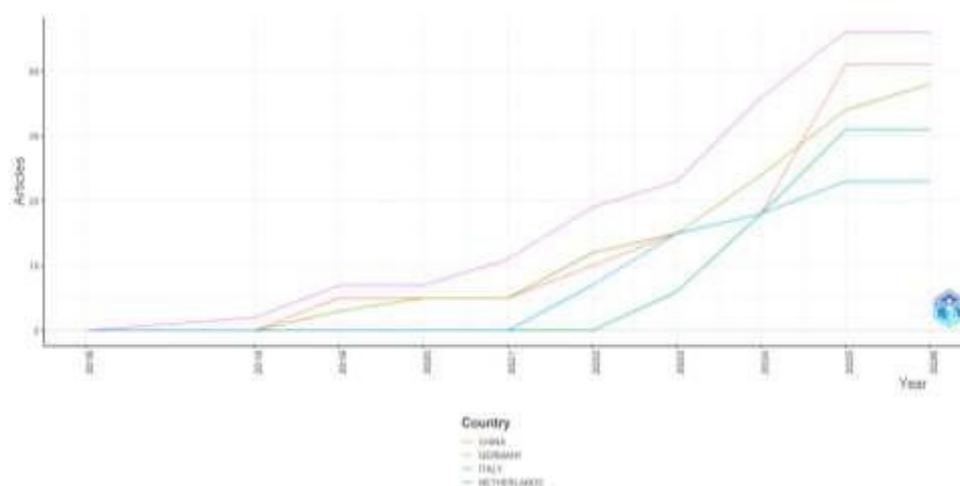


Figure 10: Country production over time. Source: Data extracted from Biblioshiny

The thematic map sorts research themes by how dense (development) and central (relevance) they are:

- Topics like packaging, recycling, sustainable development, environmental effect, and the circular economy are all heavily represented in the Motor Themes quadrant (high centrality & high density). These themes are exceedingly significant and well- developed, and they are the intellectual heart of the study domain (Verma et al., 2025).
- The Basic Themes quadrant includes terms like plastic, consumer attitude, and review that have a lot of centrality but not a lot of density. Even though these subjects are important to the field, they still need further theoretical and conceptual development. This conclusion aligns with recent studies indicating that, although being central to discussion; consumer-related concepts remain conceptually fragmented and are not completely integrated into systemic transition models (Kirchherr et al., 2018; Scope et al., 2024).
- Risk assessment, water contamination, and words that are only used in one field are examples of topics that belong in the Niche Themes quadrant (high density but low centrality). Despite their complexity and specialization, these remain substantially distinct from the broader context of research.

Sustainable business and questionnaire surveys are two examples of topics that belong in the Emerging or Declining subjects quadrant (low centrality & low density). This means that these disciplines are either just starting off or losing momentum.

The thematic structure illustrates that research on packaging that focuses on sustainability and the circular economy is a key driving factor in the field. Behavioural and material-specific features are still evolving within the wider sustainability framework.

V. IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The bibliometric analysis indicates a significant expansion in research on refill, reuse, and circular consumption models, highlighting a growing academic focus on sustainable packaging practices, yet revealing gaps in conceptual and empirical development, particularly in emerging markets like India (Kirchherr et al., 2017; Muranko et al., 2024). The dominance of certain countries and authors suggests that local perspectives remain underrepresented, presenting opportunities for context-specific studies that integrate behavioural, systemic, and policy dimensions. For practitioners, the findings underscore the importance of understanding consumer drivers and barriers to refillable and reusable packaging, enabling brands and e-commerce platforms to optimize reverse logistics systems and reduce single-use packaging. Policy-makers can leverage these insights to design incentives, infrastructure, and awareness programs that encourage adoption. Future research should focus on empirical investigations in the Indian FMCG and cosmetics sectors, examining technology-enabled refill solutions, evaluating policy effectiveness, and combining multidisciplinary approaches to bridge the gap between theoretical frameworks and practical implementation in sustainable consumption systems (Scope et al., 2024; Zdonek & Jaworska, 2024).

VI. CONCLUSION

The bibliometric analysis reveals that research in this topic has been developing continuously and swiftly, especially after 2020. This demonstrates that scholars around the world are becoming more interested in it. The findings indicate that sustainability-related subjects prevail in the industry, with environmental impact, packaging, recycling, and the circular economy identified as the principal areas of intellectual engagement. China and Europe do the most scientific research in the world. This shows that institutions are focused on sustainable development methods and that policies are robust. India is getting more involved, but its research output is still relatively low, which means there is a lot of space for growth and working together with other countries. The thematic framework says that the area is developing toward a more holistic approach that takes into account different views on how consumers behave, how materials may be used in a sustainable way, and how to evaluate the environment. Overall, the study topic is active and expanding, aligning more with the objectives of the circular economy and global sustainability.

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