

The Role of Local Retailers in Promoting Reuse of Plastic Bags in Finland

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Abstract

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<p>This thesis explores how Finnish local retailers facilitate the reusing of plastic bags and meet the sustainability commitment of the EU based on qualitative secondary data from government reports, NGOs, and retailer sustainability publications, and it also observes initiatives from K-Group, S-Group, and Lidl Finland. It emerges that awareness campaigns, pricing strategies, sustainable packaging, and NGO partnerships are some of the ways single-use plastic bag consumption is reduced. Aside from certain behavioural and resource challenges, local retailers have great potential to influence consumer behaviours effectively. The study concludes that such business practices align with Finland's commitment to the EU's plastics reduction target and to promoting a more circular and sustainable economy.</p>		
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plastic bags, reusing, sustainability		

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1 Introduction

Nowadays, plastic pollution has become one of the most alarming environmental challenges. The use of plastic bags is not the main issue, but disposing of them just after a single use is not good for the environment, and that creates high consumption of plastics, a short product life cycle, and a lengthy degradation timeline. Approximately 21 million tons of plastic ended up being discarded in Europe from 2016 to 2019 (European Environment Agency 2021). Even though large-scale organizations are adopting a sustainable approach to reduce plastic waste and implement environmental initiatives, the role of local retailers is under-researched. This is particularly important because local retailers are uniquely positioned to directly engage with consumers and influence their everyday behavior.

This thesis investigates how plastic bag consumption and sustainability practices are not only defined by national policies but also by EU directives. Furthermore, this study also suggests how to reduce the use of plastic bags in Finland. Finland has made good progress in reducing plastic and environmental pollution with more sustainable alternatives, but still, the consumption of plastic bags is over the acceptance levels. Here, local retailers have a significant network with communities that are capable of influencing customer behavior because local retailers operate at the grassroots levels of the retail ecosystem, connecting them to various social communities and networks.



Image 1. Penguin dead after consuming a discarded plastic face mask (De Sousa 2023)

Due to the convenience and low cost, plastic bags are widely used. Globally, about 9% of the plastic in use is recycled, while the rest ends up in landfills or in the natural environment (UNEP 2018). Single-use plastic bags are extremely lightweight and can be carried by the wind and water into the natural habitats, allowing them to pollute the environment by harming the wildlife and ecosystem, as shown in Image 1. Because plastics degrade slowly, they release microplastics into water and soil in the process, polluting the environment (Andrady 2017).

The European Union has taken various measures focusing on reducing plastic bag consumption. EU directives that focus on reducing plastic bag consumption per person or introducing restrictions and charges to limit the usage of plastic bags. Finland also focused on retailers making agreements in order to restrict plastic bag usage by implementing educational campaigns and monitoring systems (Ministry of the Environment 2022).

Local & regional retailers have strong ties with local communities, which enables them to interact with consumers and influence their customer behavior easily. Unlike large corporations, local retailers often lack sustainability departments and are less aware of the opportunities to incorporate sustainability into their operations. This has the potential to utilize these local and regional retailers and their networks to influence customer behavior towards reducing plastic bag consumption. Alongside the European Green Deal and the Circular Economy Action Plan of the EU, there is a rising need to evaluate the contribution of small sectors in achieving goals of sustainability (European Commission 2020).

This thesis investigates how local retailers in Finland contribute to plastic bag reuse and how their strategies align with broader sustainability goals. The following research objectives guide this study:

- To identify strategies employed by local retailers in Finland to promote the reuse of plastic bags.
- To understand how these strategies align with national and EU-level sustainability policies.
- To explore the challenges and opportunities local retailers face in encouraging customers to reuse plastic bags.

The study uses a qualitative research approach while collecting data from various credible secondary sources, such as government reports on plastic reduction policies and waste management, NGO and environmental group publications, sustainability reports and journals, and academic literature. The data is discussed using thematic analysis, which is used

to identify the patterns and strategies. In order to evaluate similarities and differences between different types of sources and retail practices, a cross-comparison technique has been applied. Due to the exploratory nature of the study and the very limited data available on local retailers contributing to the sustainability and plastic bag usage reduction, this approach is the most suitable.

2 Research Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This thesis uses a qualitative research design with a secondary data analysis. The qualitative approach is used because the study focuses on exploring strategies, opportunities, and challenges rather than calculating numerical trends. In this thesis, secondary data are selected as the main source of information because Finland has many documents and publicly available reports regarding sustainability and the consumption of plastic bags. This approach enables the thesis to conduct a wider and more detailed exploration of the topic without conducting on-field interviews and surveys. A qualitative analysis should also be in tune with the research's exploratory objectives. It allows for research on how local and regional retailers can contribute to policy goals, identify effective strategies to motivate consumers in the reuse of plastic bags, and understand the challenges that local businesses face in integrating sustainability measures (European Environment Agency 2021). The research design provides an evidence-based understanding of the topic by including information from various authoritative sources.

2.2 Thematic Analysis and Cross-Comparison Approach

The data collected are analyzed using a cross-comparison approach and thematic analysis. These methods enable the researchers to highlight recurring patterns as well as relationships among retailer practices, consumer behavior, and sustainability practices. Thematic analysis identifies and interprets the common themes appearing from various sources (Nowell et al. 2017). It is suitable for this study because the collected data are qualitative and need to be converted into a meaningful interpretation that synchronizes with the research objectives.

2.3 Limitations and Ethical Considerations

This thesis carries a strict code of ethical standards. Documents analysed in the thesis are from credible sources and are publicly available. Furthermore, all the sources used in the thesis are properly cited and attributed to their authors. Moreover, measures are taken to mitigate biases using diverse sources and cross-verifying datasets. Lastly, the thesis does not expose personal and business-sensitive information, respecting and maintaining privacy. These measures are taken to ensure reliability, integrity, and transparency.

3 Literature Review

In this chapter, a critical overview of academic literature and journals regarding plastic bag consumption and sustainability is presented. The emphasis is on four critical areas, such as legislation regarding plastic bags in the EU and Finland, the impact on the environment due to the usage of plastic bags, customer behaviour regarding plastic bags, and the role of local retailers in promoting community-based sustainability. Furthermore, it has assisted in identifying gaps that this research focuses on addressing.

3.1 The Environmental Impact of Plastic Bags

Plastic bags are one of the major contributors to plastic pollution, especially single-use lightweight plastic bags. Their impact on the environment is massive, damaging soil quality, marine ecosystems, and public health. The degradation of plastic bags takes hundreds of years; during that time, they release microplastics, which blend into the environment (Andrady 2017). These microplastics are then ingested by various marine organisms and enter the food chain, which poses major risks to human well-being. Due to the widespread habitual usage of plastic bags, this issue has worsened. Before implementing EU-wide plastic bag reduction measures, European plastic production was increasing around 3.5 to 3.8 % annually compared to the previous years (European Environment Agency 2021). Due to the lightweight nature of these bags, they are often carried by wind or water into the natural habitats, which makes it difficult to retrieve them and dispose of them responsibly.

High environmental awareness is present among the Finnish people, but plastic bag consumption is still prevalent and has posed challenges since the early 2010s. Voluntary agreements were introduced in order to reduce plastic bag usage as a countermeasure to plastic litter. Even in small volumes, it can have a massive environmental impact due to its longevity and widespread distribution (Ministry of the Environment 2022). In the global perception, UNEP focuses on that among the top ten items that are found in coastal cleanups, plastic bags are one of them, which underlines their resilience and ubiquity in natural habitats (UNEP 2018). The UNEP (2018) report also emphasizes that the most effective tool to deal with this is public awareness and initiatives at the retail level. In order to address the environmental impact of plastic bags, interventions are required at various levels to influence consumer behaviour.

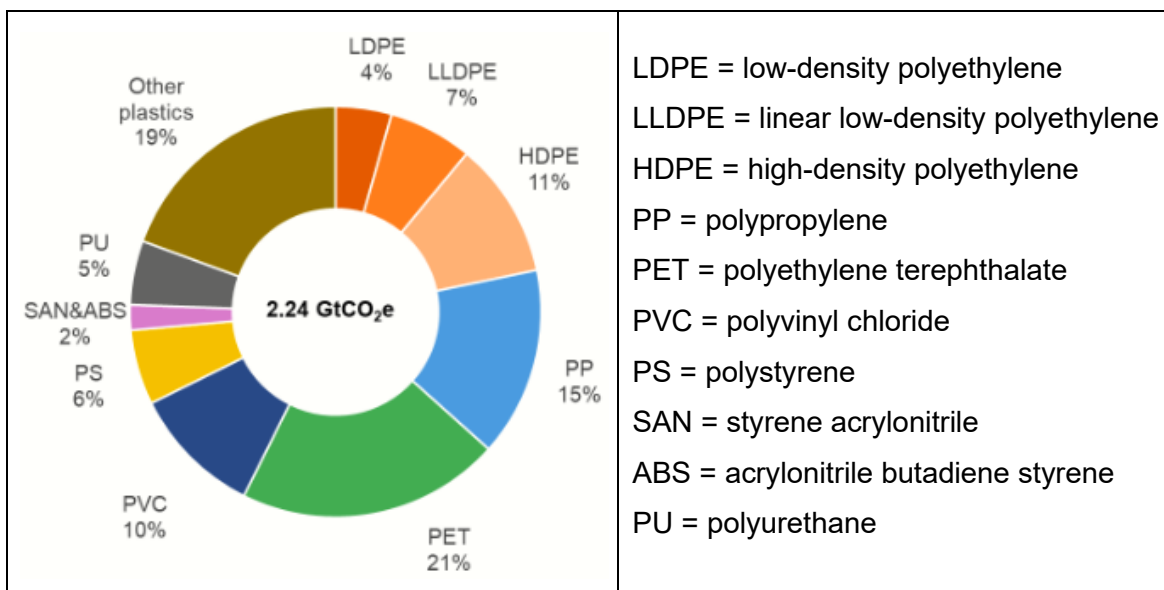


Figure 1. GHG emissions of 2019 from plastic pollution based on polymer type (Karali et al. 2024).

Behind the visible pollution, which is caused by plastic bags, the production life cycle, from the production phase to the disposal phase, carries massive threats to the environment. The production phase has a massive amount of fossil fuel consumption and also emits greenhouse gases. A recent study estimates and Figure 1 highlights that over 2.24 billion metric tons of CO₂ equivalents in plastic production by 2019, around 5.3% global GHG emissions are coming just from the polymerization stage (Karali et al. 2024). During the usage phase, lightweight single-use plastic bags leave a significant environmental footprint due to their one-time usage. If a bag is used multiple times, the per-use cost is lower; however, the data states that reuse rates are low.

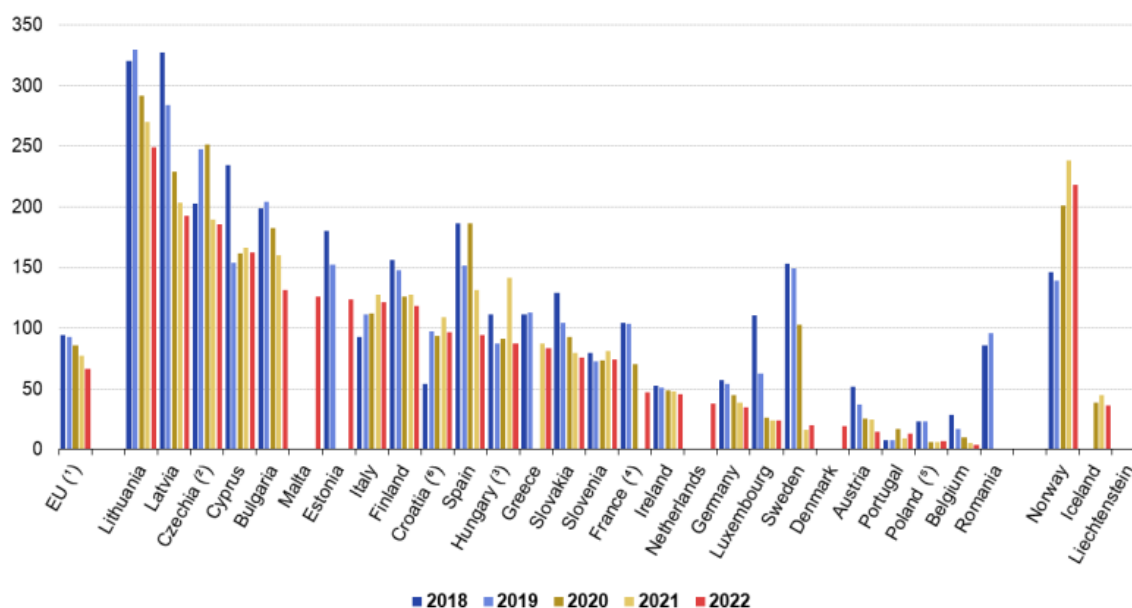
In the disposal phase, plastic bags are contributing to landfills and littering. They leave fragments, which are known as microplastics (<5 mm). These microplastics stay for decades, which is severely harmful in natural environments, endangering natural habitats at their peak. They have been found in soils, aquatic sediments, food, drinking water, and even in the air. They have both physical and chemical impacts. For physical impact, they are ingested by animals, which causes blockages and reduced feeding, and for chemical impact, they absorb toxic pollutants and transfer them as a very effective medium (Yarahmadi et al. 2024). Even for human health, exposure occurs through ingestion, mostly by consuming contaminated water and food. Also, inhaling airborne particles, dermal contact, and so on. Studies show that microplastics are inducing oxidative stress, impairing gut microbiota, disrupting immune function, and even leading to developmental and reproductive toxicity (Li et al. 2023).

3.2 Plastic Bag Legislation in the EU and Finland

The European Union has taken pre-emptive legislative measures against plastic pollution, emphasizing plastic carrier bags. Directive (EU) 2015/720 changed the Packaging & packaging wastes directive (94/62/EC) to aim for the reduction of lightweight plastic bags. Furthermore, it is mandatory for the member nations to reduce the annual per capita plastic consumption to 90 bags by 2019 and 40 by 2025 or to adopt and utilize economic instruments like pricing or outright bans (European Commission 2022).

Consumption of lightweight plastic carrier bags, 2018-2022

(number per capita)



Note: data not available for all years for all countries. Countries are ranked based on 2022 data.

(*) 2018 and 2022: Eurostat estimate.

(²) Definition differs. 2018-2019: estimate.

(³) 2021: break in time series.

(⁴) 2018-2019: estimate. 2020: break in time series.

(⁵) 2018: Eurostat estimate.

(⁶) Definition differs.

Source: Eurostat (online data code: env_waspcb)

eurostat

Figure 2. Lightweight plastic bag consumption from 2018 to 2022 (Eurostat 2024).

Finland took action based on this directive by signing a voluntary agreement between the Ministry of the Environment and the retail industry in 2016. This agreement focuses on reducing the consumption of lightweight plastic bags and also monitors the progress through a reporting mechanism annually. Even though it is not legally mandatory, the Finnish model is effective. Plastic bag usage per capita decreased significantly from 60 bags per capita in 2018, as shown in Figure 2, to 40 bags by 2025 (Ministry of the Environment 2025). The unique approach of Finland is its reliance on voluntary cooperation. The government issued collaborative voluntary agreements instead of restrictions or statutory bans or imposing

taxes. This strategy is admired for its flexibility and also aligns with Finland's high levels of environmental awareness and public trust in institutions (OECD 2021). Meanwhile, the lack of restriction has also enabled the retail sectors not to stop using plastic bags properly. This is more common in smaller and local retailers.

At a local level, municipalities of Finland also play a massive role in the encouragement of sustainable practice by educational initiatives and recycling infrastructure. Nevertheless, many formal legislative initiatives are primarily centralized and focused on larger retail chains with more compliance capacities. The European Commission's circular economy plan enforces the change from single-use plastic bags to reusable or recyclable alternatives (European Commission 2020). Although the directive does not include retailer-specified obligations, it gives space for local partnerships and initiatives. In the context, local or regional Finnish retailers have the potential to translate and implement policy into practice, especially at consumer interfaces.

3.2.1 Plastic Bag Reduction Targets and Progress

Monitoring progress for reaching the reduction targets of the EU has been a crucial part of the Finnish model. In 2016, when the Voluntary Green Deal launched, the baseline estimation given 40 plastic bags per person in a year should be used by 2025 (Ministry of the Environment 2025). As per the agreement, consumption declined steadily to around 63 bags per person by 2019, meaning Finland has met the EU's first reduction target of 90 bags per person by 2021.

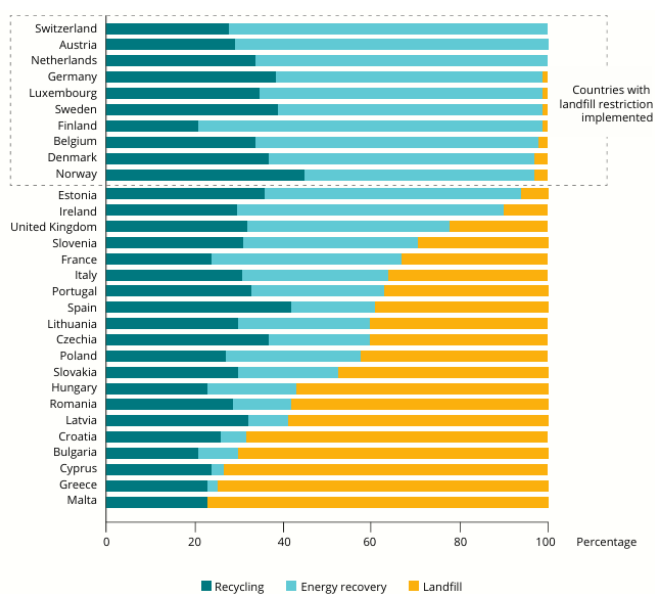


Figure 3. Energy recovery, landfill, and recycling rates based on consumer plastic waste (European Environment Agency 2021).

Figure 3 highlights that Finland primarily handles plastic waste through recycling and energy recovery, with implemented landfill restrictions, in contrast to southern Europe, where landfilling is still widespread. Latest evaluations highlight challenges, like, based on the Finnish Ministry of the Environment's review in 2024, the consumption in 2022 was around 56 bags per person (Ministry of the Environment 2024). Even though data show the reduction is happening gradually, however, the pace of reduction has decreased, which increases concern about Finland's goal of achieving 40 bags per person by 2025 (Ministry of the Environment 2025). This evaluation explains that additional efforts are required, or Finland might miss the EU's last target. The progress reflects EU trends on a broader scale. A report of the European Environment Agency (2021) states that countries that rely on voluntary measures have weaker reductions compared with countries that adopted pricing mechanisms and outright bans. However, Finland's voluntary model is praised that collective actions can still drive significant change when paired with public reporting and transparent monitoring.

The data on the progress of Finland not only tracks compliance aligning with EU directives but also highlights the role of retailers who are implementing reduction measures. Through committing to the green deal, the retailers of Finland play a key role who are responsible for promoting reuse practices through charging policies and awareness campaigns. This portrays how EU legislation can bring practical customer-level outcomes via regional and national actors.

3.2.2 Local-Level Regulations and Incentives

At the root level, retailers implemented measures that complement EU and national frameworks. Meanwhile, Finland did not mandate a general fee on plastic bags; some retailers charge their customers for lightweight bags voluntarily, and these practices were encouraged when Finland went through the green deal agreement (Ministry of the Environment 2025). This pricing mechanism encourages customer behavioural nudge, which also discourages unnecessary use of plastic bags and motivates customers to bring environmentally favourable alternatives.

Aside from pricing mechanisms, retailers employ awareness campaigns in-store to increase general awareness of customers on the environmental impact of plastic bags. Loyalty program incentives, posters, and checkout counter messages are among the usual tools to increase reuse behaviour. Such as many retailers offer bonus or discount points to motivate customers who use reusable bags, which aligns customer incentives with sustainability goals.

Another crucial root-level initiative is to increase the availability of alternative packaging options like reusable cloth bags and paper bags. While paper bags have significant environmental costs, they are usually marketed as a sustainable option because of their ability to biodegrade and recycle. Retailers experiment with deposit refund systems for more durable shopping bags that ensure customers can have long-term products instead of disposable items.

Municipal government supports local retailers by integrating strategies regarding waste management with EU directives. For example, local and regional waste authorities cooperate with retailers in terms of reporting plastic bag consumption levels, provide data for national monitoring. Also, NGOs enforce these initiatives by partnering with retailers on community-based sustainability programs, like campaigns in neighbourhoods and schools to promote sustainable bag use (UNEP 2018).

These root-level practices usually highlight the decentralized and highly interactive nature of the policy framework of Finland. EU-level and national rules set goals, but it is only in the local retail community where behavioural change is more encouraged. Therefore, local and regional retailers act as the implementers of policy and community educators who play a crucial role in aligning regulatory goals with certain customer practices.

3.3 Consumer Behaviour and Plastic Bag Reuse

In order to make any attempt in the reduction of plastic bag consumption and reuse, understanding consumer behaviour is crucial. Various studies imply that even though customers are generally aware of the environmental harm that is caused by plastic bags but this awareness itself does not that much of an effect in the implementation phase on the reduction of plastic bag consumption. ‘Attitude-behaviour gap’ is a concept where positive behaviour on sustainability does not lead to sustainable consumption behaviour necessarily (Vermeir and Verbeke 2006).

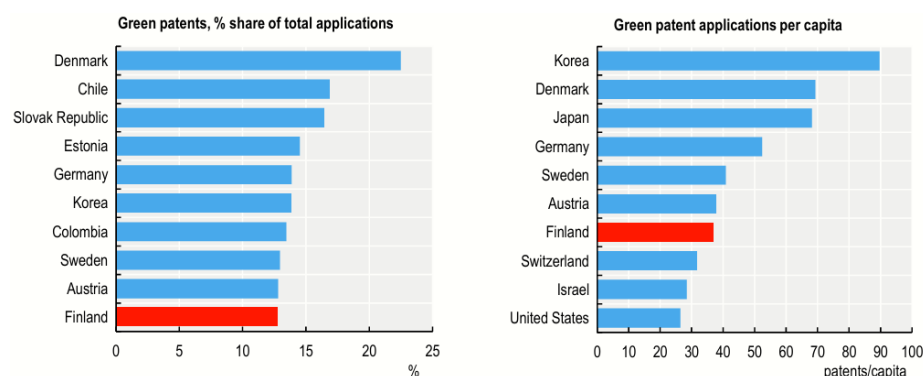


Figure 4. Green innovation leaders of OECD and green patent application (OECD 2021).

OECD (2021) environmental performance reviews show Finland leads in green innovation, as shown in Figure 4, and they are very concerned about environmental pollution. Surveys showed a significant level of environmental concern in consumers of Finland, which is crossing 80% of consumers agreeing that reducing plastic is extremely important (OECD 2021). But habit, convenience, and lack of incentives often become obstacles in reusable bag adoption. Consumers usually take single-use plastic bags when they are readily available, free, and when they are shopping suddenly. Without giving much thought, they take plastic bags.

Pricing mechanisms show good promise in changing consumer behaviour. Such as charging for single-use plastic bags leads to a reduction of their usage, which is seen in countries like the UK and Ireland (UNEP 2018). The voluntary agreement of Finland motivates retailers to charge for single-use plastic bags, even though compliance has varied. Local and regional retailers rely on informal practices and customer loyalty, may be reluctant to enforce such pricing mechanisms for fear of losing customers (Ministry of the Environment 2022).

Another crucial factor is the availability and visibility of alternatives. Providing reusable and recyclable bags at cash counters, offering various discounts for bringing customers' own bags, or using advertisements for promoting reuse are effective initiatives in retail sectors (Vermeir & Verbeke 2006). These tools are effective at local levels where retailers have repeated interactions with the same customers can influence them to build sustainable habits over time. Based on this, local and regional retailers have the potential to confront the attitude-behaviour gap by enforcing reuse practices in everyday transactions with their customers. Their roles go beyond selling goods; they are the primary agents of consumer behavioural change among the community.

3.4 Role of Local Retailers in Community-Based Sustainability

Local and regional retailers are integrated with their communities socially and economically. Unlike multinational organizations, they maintain personal and close relationships with customers and are more aligned with local concerns, norms, and values. This makes them a unique medium to influence and initiate sustainable behaviour that includes plastic bag recycling among the communities.

Sustainability based on community focuses on the importance of the role of local actors who can address global environmental problems and provide solutions tailored to that specific community. The trust and familiarity of consumers are key indicators to influence sustainable choices (Vermeir and Verbeke 2006). Local and regional retailers can utilize that

place of trust to introduce sustainability measures like promoting reusable bags, educational campaigns focusing on customers, and also collaborating with environmental NGOs.



Image 2. Reusable Plastic bag and disposable biodegradable plastic bag usage in Finland markets (Yle News 2025).

Several case studies indicate that Finnish shops have taken initiatives that include selling reusable bags that were made locally, as well as offering various kinds of loyalty points for customers who use those bags, and shops are emphasizing the use of biodegradable plastic bags, as shown in Image 2 (Ministry of the Environment 2022). These practices are small-scale practices but have a long-lasting impact, and these practices are infused with customer behaviour. Furthermore, they present the retailers' response to local values and speak to the urgency of environmental protection.

Even with these promising steps, retailers face challenges that are unique challenges. They do not have sufficient financial resources, staff, and marketing expertise like large-scale retailers. In order to implement sustainability requires time and effort, which can become some extent of liability for businesses that operate on tight margins. This invites targeted support for small business enterprises to participate in the sustainability transition because the challenges are acknowledged by the European Commission (2020) and also UNEP (2018). Nevertheless, with proper support enable local and regional retailers to become crucial mediators in a larger cultural shift. Their role is not restricted to selling reusable bags. They can contribute to shaping social norms, customer expectations & behaviour, and also collective responsibility.

4 Findings

This chapter presents findings from secondary data on how Finnish local retailers support plastic bag reuse. The section's findings are organized under four themes: awareness campaigns and customer education, price mechanisms and incentives to reuse, packaging alternatives and in-store practices, and partnerships with NGOs and community programs.

4.1 Awareness Campaigns and Customer Education

Many Finnish local retailers have initiated awareness-raising efforts aimed at encouraging customers to reuse shopping bags or bring their own bags. For example, a national survey by the retailer group K-Group found that 83% of its customers stated they always or usually bring their own bag to grocery stores; among pensioners, the figure was 93% (Kesko 2024). The same survey noted that unplanned store visits of 57% were the most common reason for not bringing a reusable bag. These findings show the value of education and prompting behaviour.

In addition, media reports indicate that early national campaigns such as Bring Your Own Bag were launched under the voluntary green deal in Finland, drawing consumer attention to plastic-bag use and reuse (Ministry of the Environment & Finnish Commerce Federation 2024). Local retailers often place signage at checkout areas, and some retailers publish sustainability reports highlighting reuse messages. Although the data is more robust for larger chains than for small local independent stores, anecdotal evidence suggests small local retailers have adopted communication tools such as posters, staff reminders, and bag-reuse reminders at the point of sale.

Local retailers actively raise awareness about plastic bag reuse. K-Group, for instance, uses in-store signage and its mobile app to remind customers to bring reusable bags and monitor bag consumption (Kesko 2024). S-Group employs digital and in-store campaigns to highlight the environmental impact of single-use plastics and the benefits of reusable bags (S-ryhmä 2025). Lidl Finland displays educational materials in stores promoting reusable bags and sustainability practices (Lidl Suomi 2024).

This awareness work aligns with the research objective to identify strategies employed by retailers; it also reflects alignment with national policy that emphasises prevention and reuse as the first steps in waste reduction. However, the scale and consistency of these campaigns among smaller retailers appear variable, indicating an area of opportunity.

4.2 Pricing Mechanisms and Incentives for Reuse

Pricing mechanisms appear to be one of the more effective strategies in reducing plastic bag consumption and promoting reuse. The mid-term evaluation of Finland's plastic carrier bag agreement shows that charging for bags is among the most effective means of reduction (Ministry of the Environment & Finnish Commerce Federation 2024). Indeed, the same evaluation reported that in 2022, the per-person use of plastic carrier bags covered by the agreement was about 56, against a target of 40 bags per person per year (Ministry of the Environment & Finnish Commerce Federation 2024).

For local retailers, this has meant increasing the price of lightweight plastic bags and providing discounts or loyalty points schemes for customers bringing reusable bags. One example from the K-Group, the price of a plastic carrier bag will be raised to act as an incentive for reuse (Kesko 2025). S-Group increased bag prices to €0.35 and €0.39 while lowering reusable bag prices to €1.25 to encourage adoption (Yle News 2025). Lidl Finland has never offered free plastic bags, instead promoting reusable options and small fees for paper or reusable alternatives (Lidl Suomi 2024).

These pricing and incentive schemes align directly with the second research objective of understanding how retailer strategies align with national and EU-level sustainability policies. They reflect the policy expectation that economic instruments of charging for use, promoting alternatives that drive behaviour change. For many local retailers, though, implementing and monitoring such schemes poses operational and cost challenges.

4.3 Packaging Alternatives and In-Store Practices

Beyond charging for bags, many retailers are changing bag-offering practices in stores and providing alternative packaging options. A Finnish study by Amerplast (2018) used life-cycle analysis to show that carrier bags made with 60 to 90% recycled plastic raw material had lower greenhouse-gas emissions than many conventional paper or biodegradable options (Amerplast 2018). This suggests that retailers adopting recycled-plastic bags or durable reusable bags can reduce environmental impacts substantially.

S-Group uses at least 30% recycled plastic in private-label bags and packaging, supporting national reduction targets (S-ryhmä 2025). K-Group promotes reusable and recycled bags, placing them prominently in stores (Kesko 2024). Lidl Finland commits to 100% recyclable packaging for private-label products by 2025 and reducing plastic use by 20% (Lidl Suomi 2024). Even Lidl Finland follows the REset Plastic Model (Figure 5) for using plastic in a sensible way. For example, some boutiques and small retail outlets in Finland publicly state

that they have said goodbye to free plastic bags and replaced them with paper or reusable bags subject to a charge (Finlayson 2024).



Figure 5. Lidl's REset Plastic Model (Lidl Suomi 2024).

These practices demonstrate a direct contribution by local retailers to the reuse agenda is the first research objective. They also reflect synergy with the policy hierarchy includes prevention, reuse, rather than just recycling. Nonetheless, the extent of adoption among all small local retailers remains unclear, which is a limitation of the data.

4.4 Partnerships with NGOs and Community Programs

Retailers are leveraging partnerships with NGOs and municipal programmes to extend the reach of reuse messages beyond individual transactions. For instance, the city of Kerava ran a plastic bag-free city project in which every household received a reusable multi-use bag, supported by local retailer involvement and consumer education (Paptic 2020). These kinds of partnerships help embed reuse practices within the broader community context and strengthen social norms around bag reuse.

Local small retailers may participate in community clean-up events, collaborate with municipal waste-management services for bag-reuse campaigns, or join larger retailer coalition programmes. While direct documentation for smaller independent retailers is limited, the available evidence highlights that such partnerships represent an opportunity for retailers to enhance their sustainability role and influence customer behaviour.

These findings reveal how local retailers are actively contributing to plastic bag reuse through four strategic lever-areas. They also show varying levels of implementation and resource capacity.

5 Discussion

This chapter reflects on how the findings align with the research objectives: the identification of strategies, alignment with national/EU policies, and challenges and opportunities faced by local retailers. Four sub-sections examine retailer initiatives vs policy objectives, challenges faced, opportunities and best practices, and comparison with larger retail chains.

5.1 Retailer Initiatives vs. Policy Objectives

The findings show that many local retailers in Finland have adopted initiatives like awareness campaigns, pricing, packaging alternatives, and partnerships that align quite closely with national and EU-level sustainability goals. K-Group, S-Group, and Lidl Finland's initiatives largely align with the EU Directive (EU) 2015/720 and Finland's voluntary Green Deal targets. Pricing strategies, reusable bag promotion, and community engagement reflect policy goals to reduce single-use bag consumption to 40 bags per capita by 2025 (Ministry of the Environment & Finnish Commerce Federation 2024).

However, the scale and pace of implementation raise questions about full alignment. While national figures indicate a reduction to approximately 56 bags per person in 2022, the target remains 40. Retailers' strategies are necessary but not sufficient where policy expectations imply systemic change across all retailers, including smaller outlets (Ministry of the Environment & Finnish Commerce Federation 2024). The local retailer measures, therefore, contributes to policy but may not yet fulfil its full ambition.

5.2 Challenges Faced by Local Retailers

Local retailers face several challenges, like resource constraints, where small shops may lack dedicated sustainability staff or monitoring systems. Then, consumer behaviour of unplanned purchases, forgetfulness of reusable bags, and habit favouring convenient plastic bags persist, for example, 57% cited unplanned visits shows on the K-Group survey (Kesko 2024). Also, data limitations are that many small retailers do not track bag-use statistics, making performance measurement difficult. Here, visibility and market pressure of charging for bags or limiting free options may lead to customer pushback or competitive disadvantages if neighbouring stores do not adopt similar measures. The mid-term evaluation flagged that though reductions occurred until 2020, usage rose again after the COVID-19 pandemic, indicating external shocks and behavioural disruption (Ministry of the Environment & Finnish Commerce Federation 2024).

5.3 Opportunities and Best Practices

Despite the challenges, the analysis reveals several opportunities and best practices for local retailers. Best practices include prominently placing reusable-bag options, using loyalty programmes to reward reuse, partnering with community campaigns to build social norms, and adopting recycled-material bags through local supply chains (Amerplast 2018). Retailers can also monitor bag use from apps tracking purchaser behaviour and publicise performance to enhance transparency and customer trust.

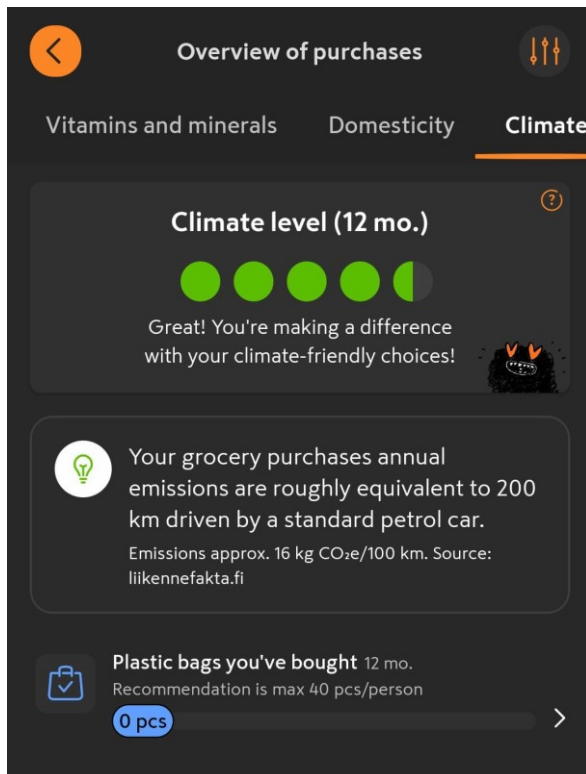


Image 3. Screenshot of the K-Group mobile app where they counted the purchased plastic bags.

As Image 3 highlights that the K-Group's bag counter in their app is a notable practice (Kesko 2025). Local retailers have the advantage of closer customer relationships and neighbourhood context, which allows them to influence behaviour through trust and repeated interactions. Smaller retailers may pivot more quickly to experimental measures compared to larger chains.

5.4 Comparison with Larger Retail Chains

Comparing local retailers with larger chains reveals differences in scale, resources, and visibility. Larger chains often publish formal sustainability reports, invest in tracking systems, and have centralised policies for packaging and bag usage, for example, K-Group. They

also may have economies of scale to offer reusable-bag stocks, alternative packaging, and marketing campaigns. S-Group, Lidl Finland, and local retailers, by contrast, may operate with fewer resources but can offer more personalised customer engagement and a strong community connection. The literature suggests that while large chain measures are vital for economy-wide change, small local retailers provide a critical last-mile channel to influence everyday behaviour in neighbourhoods (Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006).

6 Summary and Conclusions

This thesis shows how local retailers in Finland are contributing to the reuse of plastic bags and, at the same time, aligning their strategies with broader sustainability goals. This study focused on three objectives: to identify strategies employed by local retailers in Finland to promote the reuse of plastic bags, to understand how these strategies align with national and EU-level sustainability policies, and to explore the challenges and opportunities local retailers face in encouraging customers to reuse plastic bags.

The findings revealed four key strategic areas through which local retailers are progressing plastic bag reuse. These include customer awareness campaigns and customer education, pricing mechanisms and incentives, packaging alternatives and in-store practices, and partnerships with NGOs and community programmes. The given strategic areas reflect on local retailers' active engagement in the reuse efforts, and also, many of their measures follow certain policy frameworks like the EU's Directive 2015/720 and Finland's Green Deal. Nevertheless, the pace of change and consistency across all local retailers is uneven.

Challenges identified include resource limitations, consumer behavioural barriers to change, monitoring difficulties, and competitive pressures that may discourage sustainability-driven innovation in the retail sector. But opportunities do exist in leveraging community relationships, loyalty programmes, digital tracking, and public transparency. Using recycled plastic bags is still one of the best practices observed, as supported by life-cycle analysis. Then, there are more like increasing bag prices modestly to encourage reuse and having reuse campaigns within local community settings. Compared to larger chains, local retailers may seem to lack scale but can offer a closer consumer connection and agility.

In conclusion, while local retailers in Finland are making meaningful contributions to plastic-bag reuse, achieving the national target of 40 bags per person by 2025 will require broader uptake, stronger measurement, and greater behavioural change. In order to achieve an effective approach toward a more sustainable environment, policymakers, retailers, and community stakeholders must work together.

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