PepsiCo's Plastic Positivity:
How Corporate Initiatives Can Cripple Sustainability

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Executive Summary

Plastic pollution has become one of the world's most significant environmental crises, with global production exceeding 400 million tons annually and that number expected to triple by 2060. Despite growing public pressure and clear scientific evidence about the ecological and economic harms, as well as the health risks of plastics, multinational corporations (MNCs) continue to increase their production of plastics. This trend is especially prevalent among food and beverage companies, which account for some of the most significant plastic pollution worldwide. PepsiCo, the world's second-largest plastic polluter, publicly promotes itself as a leader in sustainability, but at the same time uses political corporate social responsibility (CSR) tactics to obscure, delay, and undermine actual solutions that would address the plastic waste levels these companies exacerbate. Political CSR is the way that MNCs heavily influence political movements around plastic waste governance and global action through a variety of strategies (Scherer et al., 2016). This case study examines PepsiCo's sustainability initiative, PepsiCo Positive (pep+), using qualitative coding methods and a discourse analysis of PepsiCo's public communications, sustainability reports, website rhetoric, and corporate imagery. It evaluates how PepsiCo frames its environmental commitments, whether it follows through on those commitments, and how the company uses political CSR to avoid any accountability for plastic pollution.

PepsiCo has intentionally branded its company, and particularly its sustainability initiatives, around positivity. However, this rebrand is based on specific tactics to spread optimism without taking any responsibility for continued plastic pollution. PepsiCo's use of strategic corporate framing mirrors existing tactics of greenwashing and political CSR, where corporations promote symbolic commitments to appear legitimate or friendly to their specific

cause, while still maintaining harmful business practices. PepsiCo's strategy involves redirecting the responsibility of plastic waste away from producers and onto individual consumers, promoting insufficient recycling systems, and emphasizing potential external constraints to discourage policy changes. PepsiCo acknowledges plastic pollution as a global issue but repeatedly shifts blame away from itself by highlighting investments in recycling, namely advanced recycling technologies and consumer education. This focus reinforces the idea that waste is an individual person's issue to solve, rather than a result of extreme overproduction by MNCs like PepsiCo. Using PepsiCo's reporting from the New Plastics Economy Global Commitment, I examine how PepsiCo's reported data contradicts its claims of progress. In 2023, PepsiCo increased its absolute tonnage of virgin plastics, even though the company pledged a 20% reduction by 2030 two years prior. In 2025, the company downgraded or eliminated several major sustainability goals, including its targets focused on reducing single-use plastic, increasing recycled content, and reducing its overall virgin plastic production. PepsiCo's explanation for these shifts utilizes strategic word choices such as "evolving goals" and "changing baselines," but lacks actual transparency and reflects a pattern of positive corporate language rather than real action.

My research further reveals how PepsiCo externalizes blame by citing factors such as an insufficient recycled plastic supply, restrictive regulations in specific countries where plastics are produced, and slow technological innovation. When a new policy is proposed that could harm its business model, PepsiCo emphasizes the potential economic harms, supply-chain constraints, or negative impacts on low-income communities. PepsiCo's tactics reflect existing corporate strategies that emphasize "policy perfectionism" instead of incremental change, appeal to social or economic justice, and shift attention away from the urgency of plastic reduction, focusing

instead on the risk of enacting regulations. PepsiCo's behavior clearly demonstrates how MNCs use political CSR to sidestep blame, influence public perception, and delay interventions that threaten their main goal of profit maximization and prevent policy action that would regulate their company. These strategies create a major obstacle for transformative solutions and let companies like PepsiCo continue to produce high levels of plastics.

Based on my findings, I conclude that voluntary commitments by major corporations with a personal stake in environmental issues are insufficient to meaningfully address the plastic pollution crisis. Greater policy interventions that involve legal repercussions are necessary. My recommendations include signing a binding Global Plastics Treaty, eliminating fossil-fuel subsidies that lower the cost of virgin plastics, establishing legal frameworks based on past tobacco lawsuits to regulate and penalize corporate greenwashing, and adopting strong legislation modeled after California's SB 54. Without mandating reductions in plastic production, increasing corporate accountability through legal means, and creating systemic policy change, plastic pollution will continue to grow even as MNCs promote additional sustainability campaigns.

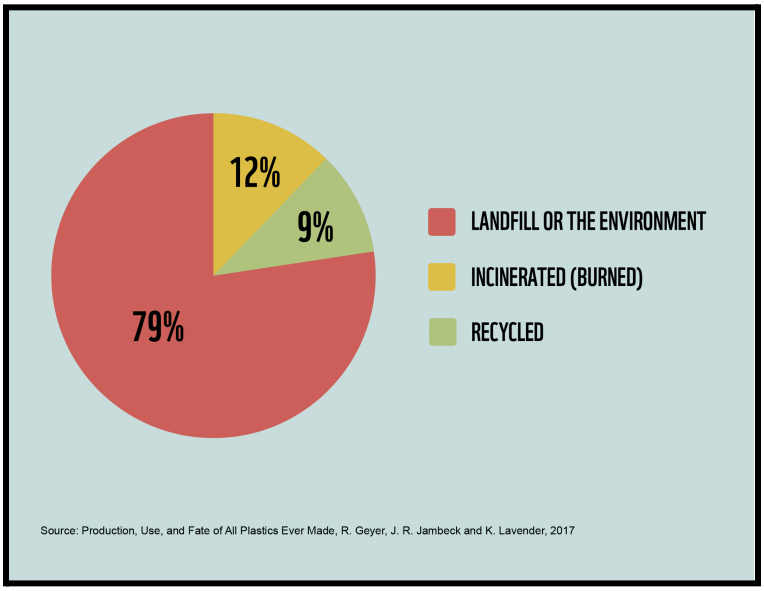
This case study contributes to scholarly and policy debates by demonstrating how PepsiCo's political CSR practices function to avoid responsibility, maintain its existing corporate business model, and obstruct environmental progress while creating the appearance of sustainability leadership. This case study clearly shows the need to enact more transparent mechanisms that force corporations to take responsibility for the environmental disasters that they cause. Understanding these strategies is essential for designing policies capable of curbing plastic production at its source and countering the deceptive narratives that dominate plastic-waste governance.

Introduction

Plastic pollution is a core driver of biodiversity loss, ecosystem degradation, and accelerates the process of climate change (International Union for Conservation of Nature, 2024). The amount of plastic in the world continues to increase annually (Cowger et al., 2024). Every year, more than 400 million tons of plastic are produced, and less than 10% of plastic has ever been recycled, leading to ecological crises, economic disasters, and health complications (Geyer et al., 2017). Plastic pollution is quickly becoming a worldwide issue, and solutions are not always black and white (Lau et al., 2020).

Figure 1

The Lifecycle of Plastic



Note. From: Production, Use, and Fate of All Plastics Ever Made (Geyer et al., 2017)

Many companies have launched campaigns promoting their commitment to reducing plastic waste, yet the majority of their packaging is still made from non-recyclable or difficult-to-recycle plastics. Current estimates suggest that only 15% to 20% of global packaging may be classified as recyclable or compostable (Lehnis, 2025). Accountability for this plastic waste poses another issue, as many plastics do not have branding or labels. According to a plastic

waste audit performed by volunteers coordinated by the organization Break Free From Plastic, of branded plastics found, only 56 brands are responsible for over 50% of the plastic pollution (Cowger et al., 2024). In addition, much of the public scrutiny for reducing plastic waste is focused on individual consumers recycling, rather than the corporations that are responsible for the waste.

As the plastics problem grows in severity and public awareness increases, various solutions are being proposed across both public and private sectors (Vandenberg, 2024). Importantly, the same multinational corporations (MNCs) who are causing the plastic pollution crisis are looking to get involved in sustainable solutions and move towards a circular economy, defined as "an economic model that emphasizes the efficient use and reuse of resources, products and materials in order to minimize waste and pollution" (Buchholz, 2023). Various MNCs have enacted sustainability commitments to demonstrate their dedication to help reduce plastic pollution, such as Coca-Cola's World Without Waste (WWW), PepsiCo's Pep Positive (pep+), and Exxon Mobil's Protect Tomorrow. These sustainable initiatives are supposedly at the core of MNC business models, allowing them to reposition themselves as environmental protectors, but what do these goals really aim to achieve? The MNC sustainability goals are filled with aspirational language and lofty promises, however it is unclear if the same companies that created the plastic pollution crisis can solve it through their existing sustainability initiatives. I wish to better understand how these MNCs are framing sustainability in their businesses, if there is real action behind their words or if it is nothing more than smoke and mirrors to distract the public from their problematic business practices.

Background

There is no better place to start than one of the largest plastic producing corporations in the world: PepsiCo. PepsiCo is second only to the Coca-Cola Company in global plastic pollution and has proclaimed itself one of the leaders in the sustainable packaging movement (Cowger et al., 2024). These major corporations have employed very successful marketing strategies to promote sustainability, but taking a deeper dive may uncover that their actions do not align with their messaging. The main goal of my research is to better understand the sustainable messaging of PepsiCo, specifically focusing on its plastic packaging, and how corporate social responsibility (CSR) tactics allow them to cloud the issue of plastic waste. CSR is defined as MNCs voluntarily integrating social issues into their business model through marketing, communications, and product design to build trust in their brand. PepsiCo has specifically utilized the framework of political CSR, where MNCs engage as "political actors in plastics waste governance, influencing discourses and actions globally" (Vandenberg, 2024).

PepsiCo's past alliance with the Plastics Industry Association (PIA) significantly undermines its credibility in promoting plastic-pollution reduction. The Plastics Industry Association has long advocated against bans, taxes, and restrictions on single-use plastics (Davidson, 2019). PepsiCo's involvement with PIA reinforces the idea that PepsiCo's sustainability commitments are largely symbolic. While PepsiCo withdrew from this alliance in 2019, this partnership weakened the corporation's stance in presenting itself as stewards of the environment (Davidson, 2019). Additionally, PepsiCo has consistently fought against systemic reduction of plastic waste, and notably has lobbied against Bottle Return Programs, commonly known as bottle bills, where consumers may return bottles and cans for a monetary fee (Kirstie et al., 2022). Specifically in 2021, a Boston-based firm lobbying on behalf of the beverage industry

(including PepsiCo) created the group "Vermonters For Recycling" to claim that an expanded bottle bill is "a solution in search of a problem" (Kirstie et al., 2022).

PepsiCo's newest sustainability initiative, pep+, released in 2021, promotes sustainability as a core practice of the PepsiCo corporation, organizing its sustainable initiatives into three pillars: Positive Agriculture, Positive Value Chain, and Positive Choices (PepsiCo, 2025). Plastic packaging falls under the Positive Value Chain, where pep+ promises to make 100% of packaging recyclable, compostable, or biodegradable by 2030, while reducing virgin plastic by 2% annually (PepsiCo, 2025). A majority of pep+ goals are centered around new innovations, such as switching to recycled polyethylene terephthalates (PETs) and creating more compostable materials (PepsiCo, 2025). With this information, PepsiCo's pep+ campaign offers a contemporary case study of political CSR in practice.

Research Questions

How does PepsiCo utilize political CSR tactics to market itself as a "sustainable" company? What strategies does PepsiCo employ to avoid taking on the responsibility of reducing plastic waste?

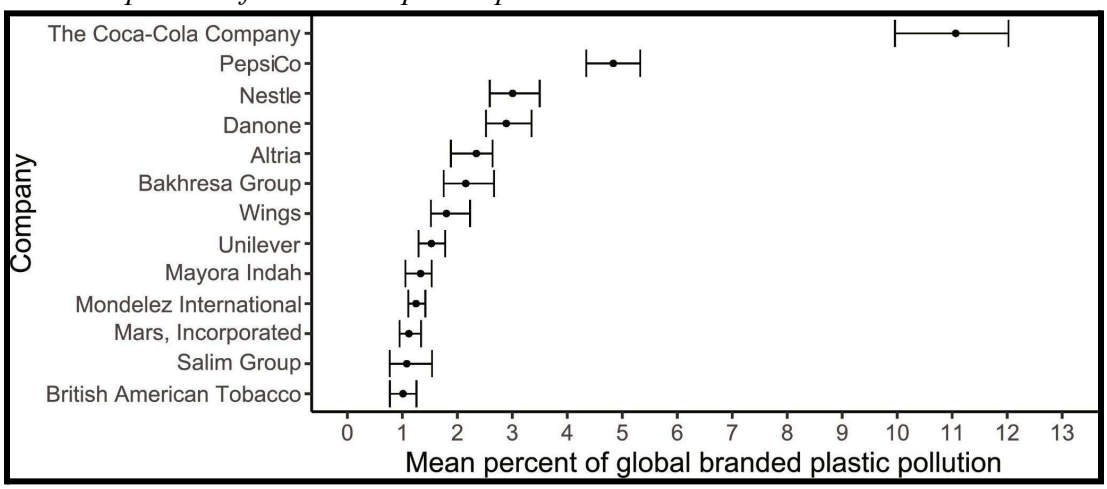
Literature Review

While the amount of plastic pollution continues to increase worldwide, only a handful of MNCs are responsible for the majority of the plastics that end up in our ecosystems (Cowger et al., 2024). As seen in Figure 2, according to data collected from 1,576 audits looking at plastics in the environment, 50% of the plastics found were unbranded, and "the top five brands globally were The Coca-Cola Company (11%), PepsiCo (5%), Nestlé (3%), Danone (3%), and Altria (2%), accounting for 24% of the total branded count" (Cowger et al., 2024). There was also a clear relationship between companies' amount of plastic production and the plastic pollution

branded with their label (Cowger et al., 2024). As shown in Figure 2, food and beverage companies are responsible for a disproportionate amount of plastic pollution in our environment (Cowger et al., 2024).

Figure 2

MNCs responsible for branded plastic pollution



Note. From: Global producer responsibility for plastic pollution (Cowger et al., 2024)

Due to the oversized impact that food and beverage companies have compared to nearly all other consumer sectors that use plastics in durable products, it is important to examine how these MNCs frame the narrative surrounding plastics and how they are intertwined with current plastic policies (Ncube et al., 2020). Their influence extends beyond marketing and branding with heavy involvement in the development, framing, and implementation of current plastic policies. For example, these corporations are engaged in a series of initiatives with non-governmental organizations (NGOs), philanthropies, and governments intended to illustrate how they are advancing and championing United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (Naik, 2023).

MNCs also position themselves as the solution to the crises that their business practices have exacerbated, building political power to advance industry-friendly policies in place of binding legislation (Naik, 2023). Understanding these relationships is critical to revealing how

MNCs affect regulatory outcomes and public perceptions of responsibility for plastic pollution. While these MNCs continue to publicly commit to reducing waste, studies reveal that these commitments overemphasize the degree to which companies engage in sustainability while they simultaneously exacerbate plastic pollution (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015; Vandenberg, 2024).

For instance, major beverage companies often pledge to increase the recyclability of their packaging or incorporate more recycled content, yet they simultaneously expand overall production of single-use plastic bottles each year. Coca-Cola's WWW campaign promised 100% recyclable packaging, but the company continues to produce packaging equivalent to 108 billion new plastic bottles per year, many of which are never collected or recycled (Laville, 2019). As a result, the volume of plastic entering waste streams rises even as the company advertises environmental progress (Brooks, 2023). This pattern demonstrates the role of CSR in the world of plastics, not as a neutral act but rather as a deceptive marketing tactic, allowing for corporations to falsely portray themselves as environmental champions (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011).

According to environmental scientist Jessica Vandenberg, CSR literature tackling environmental issues focuses on voluntary sustainability efforts that attempt to align MNC goals with societal values. When MNC efforts are examined more closely, we see that a concept known as political CSR emerges (Scherer et al., 2016). Political CSR is described as MNCs heavily influencing political movement around plastic waste governance and global action (Scherer et al., 2016). Literature argues that political CSR can shift attention away from transformative solutions, and ultimately worsen the plastic crisis (Vandenberg, 2024). This corporate shift is more commonly known as "greenwashing," where corporations use strategic tactics and symbolic initiatives to demonstrate their sustainability achievements in an effort to

mislead the public (Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Lyon & Montgomery, 2015). Analysis shows that sustainability campaigns often employ greenwashing by emphasizing consumer participation or technological optimism while perpetuating the very system that they are allegedly fighting (Lagasio, 2024). This emphasis on consumers has allowed corporations to completely reframe pollution as driven by consumer behavior rather than company overproduction (Dauvergne, 2018).

As previously discussed, plastic pollution research has shifted away from waste-management studies towards analyses of corporate responsibility. More recent literature focuses on the concept that producers must be the ones to deal with the costs of reducing plastic pollution, as producer overproduction has been widely identified as the primary source of the plastic waste crisis. There are multiple sources documenting that the root cause of the plastic waste problem is systemic overproduction. In many cases, the costs of continuing current plastic production levels and inaction may exceed the costs of action, which demonstrates that continuing high levels of plastic production is economically and environmentally damaging over the long run (Cordier et al., 2024). However, MNCs in the plastics industry have resisted this concept, preferring their own voluntary commitments that allow business to continue to profit without real transformative change (Clapp & Swanston, 2009). In fact, MNCs have been so successful in defining reform on their own terms, that they have managed to quell any notion of uniform reporting standards, meaning that they are able to choose what kind of initiatives they want to take on.

A clear illustration of MNCs preference for voluntary commitments is their signing of the New Plastics Economy Global Commitment (NPEGC). The NPEGC, established in 2018, is a commitment designed by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation in partnership with the U.N.

Environment Programme that requests governments and MNCs that represent over 20% of all plastic production commit to working toward a circular economy (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2025). This commitment allows MNCs, including PepsiCo, to submit their plastic production and waste data to ensure they are on track to hit their established sustainability goals. This commitment is purely voluntary with no enforcement or punishment mechanisms if MNCs miss their set sustainability targets or significantly reduce their proposed goals. This voluntary self-reporting allows MNCs to claim they are working towards a circular economy, evidenced by their support for the NPEGC, while simultaneously maintaining complete control over their own governance.

Another example of successful political CSR tactics occurred in June 2019, when Californians for Recycling and the Environment (CRE) was registered in California (Becker, 2020). Though its name evokes environmental stewardship, reporting shows that the group was substantially funded by the packaging industry, including major involvement from Novolex, a prominent plastic-bag manufacturer (Becker, 2020). CRE spent millions to lobby against or reshape proposed single-use packaging legislation, notably the Circular Economy and Pollution Reduction Act (SB 54) in California (Becker, 2020).

The American Institute for Packaging and the Environment (AMERIPEN), a prominent trade organization whose members include 3M, Eastman Chemical, ExxonMobil, and the American Chemistry Council, criticized this legislation, stating that SB 54 would “create an administratively burdensome system” (Heffernan, 2022). PepsiCo became a voting member of AMERIPEN in 2018, and in 2022, AMERIPEN’s board elections included Philip Rozenski from Novolex. This further demonstrates that AMERIPEN represents a wide range of packaging stakeholders, enabling them to shape regulatory processes in ways that prioritize voluntary

measures over binding mandates (Boger, 2022). Environmental advocates have criticized CRE and AMERIPEN for undercutting SB 54 and blocking stronger regulatory provisions. As of March 2025, Governor Newsom, citing unreasonable burdens to industry and duplicative regulations, asked the regulators to start over and did not implement SB 54 (Regele, 2025).

There are well-documented contradictions between MNCs' public commitments to reduce plastic use and their expanding production of single-use plastics. They frequently announce targets for 100% recyclable packaging, reduced virgin plastic, and their transition toward a circular economy, yet data consistently show that the total volume of plastic continues to climb. In 2023, many companies, including PepsiCo, increased their total plastic packaging volumes despite public pledges to reduce them (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2025). This divergence between what the companies claim to want compared to the actions they take in practice demonstrates a critical disconnect, and is an example of "plastic delay," a concept coined by Jessica Vandenberg, where companies use revised sustainability goals to maintain a business model still heavily reliant on single-use plastic (Vandenberg, 2024).

Vandenberg focuses on three main strategies of plastic delay when she discusses Coca-Cola's WWW Initiative and argues that the strategies employed exacerbate rather than solve the plastic crisis (Vandenberg, 2024). The three strategies she analyzes are redirecting responsibility, pushing non-transformative solutions, and emphasizing the downsides (Vandenberg, 2024). She concludes that CSR discourses entrench corporate values into mainstream norms of plastics waste and justify the forms of action that MNCs implement (Vandenberg, 2024). In PepsiCo's case, a majority of pep+ goals do not target the heart of the plastic industry problem and are instead a facade to continue overproduction while claiming that innovation makes PepsiCo a sustainable leader. Due to the parallels between these two MNCs,

Vandenberg's evaluation of Coca-Cola's WWW initiative provides a strong framework for evaluating PepsiCo's pep+ sustainability initiative.

Research Design and Analysis

In order to analyze PepsiCo's pep+ initiative, I utilized Johnny Saldaña's qualitative coding methods to analyze the company's sustainability reports, corporate documents, videos, infographics, sustainability goals, public opinion pieces, and news articles (Saldaña, 2016). Initially, I read these documents and applied in vivo coding, evaluation coding, and descriptive coding to dissect common patterns and themes (Saldaña, 2016). Next, I organized these codes into seven code groups based on the patterns and themes I found that were utilized in Vandenberg's case study, and ones that I believed to be relevant to the literature. From these code groups, I was able to extract key patterns that I observed in the raw qualitative data and apply the literature to evaluate each group based on my central question surrounding PepsiCo's use of political CSR to market itself as a "sustainable" company.

I applied a discourse analysis to these documents and corporate statements to examine PepsiCo's framing of both the plastic pollution problem and its role in the solutions. Discourse analysis is defined as, "a research method focused on the study of language beyond the sentence level, examining how oral or written statements interact with their social, cultural, and linguistic contexts" (Rholetter, 2024). Utilizing Vandenberg's qualitative analysis of Coca-Cola's sustainability goals, I examined my code groups to determine how PepsiCo directs focus away from its own responsibility in the plastic crisis, pushes non-transformative solutions, and emphasizes the downsides of policies that phase out plastics (Vandenberg, 2024). The pep+ initiative has three main pillars guiding its actions: Positive Agriculture, Positive Value Chain, and Positive Choices (PepsiCo, 2024). I focused on the positive value chain pillar of pep+, as

this is where the plastic management of PepsiCo resides. PepsiCo releases its yearly accomplishments in the three different sustainability sectors in its annual Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) reports. I systematically analyzed the accomplishments PepsiCo published and compared its goals with its previous ESG reports and corporate data, to assess the actions that are being put in place, rather than its promised future voluntary goals that can be altered without accountability. Additionally, PepsiCo joined NPEGC, which has a focus on company and government commitments to work towards a circular plastic economy (New Plastics Economy Global Commitment, 2022). NPEGC has raw data for PepsiCo's benchmarks and progress in plastic production between 2019 and 2024 that I used to cross reference the goal numbers that PepsiCo publicized.

Two major patterns emerged through my qualitative coding analysis of PepsiCo's political CSR approach to sustainability: the corporation's branding tactics, which included use of public press releases, website rhetoric, and imagery; and the many ways it avoided the responsibility of reducing plastic waste, even as the second largest plastic producer in the world. Below, I outline each of these subsections, and explain how PepsiCo markets itself as a positive, environmentally conscious leader, while simultaneously failing to make any tangible changes.

PepsiCo's Rebranding

Positive Public Messaging

When PepsiCo announced its rebrand, it used very specific language in its press releases that further emphasized its commitment to sustainability without making any real promises to the public. Press releases are a key way that companies report on their efforts and initiatives to reporters, industry leaders, and the public at large, so PepsiCo's word choice is particularly notable.

In PepsiCo's case, it continued to promote a company narrative of positivity when talking about its sustainability initiative, pep+. On September 15, 2021, when PepsiCo first announced the pep+ initiative, CEO Ramon Laguarta described it as more than a sustainability strategy, stating, “It's an ongoing transformation that powers our whole business, from innovation to production, marketing to distribution” (PepsiCo, 2025). PepsiCo’s use of positive framing implies to the reader that sustainability will encompass the entire PepsiCo operation, while providing very few tangible details. When shifting its sustainability goals, where PepsiCo eliminated or reduced many key targets, CEO Laguarta announced this move by stating, “our sustainability journey will not always be linear, but we are focused on doing the work that can both strengthen our business resilience and support a positive impact for the planet” (PepsiCo, 2025). PepsiCo’s constant public messaging attempts to reinforce the notion that its decisions are rooted in sustainability, even when these claims lack substance or intent.

PepsiCo also frequently talks about its business publicly as one where “communicating with transparency remains at the heart of PepsiCo's pep+ reporting approach and these resources offer a view of progress made and challenges faced as the company aims to drive business growth and value by delivering a more sustainable, people-centric future” (PepsiCo, 2025). This type of message framing enables the company to present itself as transparent, open, and ethical without having to specifically quantify its progress toward sustainability goals. PepsiCo offers aspirational goals without providing the context and data to effectively evaluate its progress or conflicts.

Positive Website Language

PepsiCo has made a concentrated effort to positively frame its actions, which is illustrated through the words and images it uses on its website. PepsiCo’s corporate-wide

sustainability initiative, pep+, is a clear example of how it picks and chooses specific phrases to highlight its positive sustainability efforts. As seen in Figure 3, at the top of the pep+ page on PepsiCo's website, it states in large font, "We're charting a new course to drive positive action for the planet and people" (PepsiCo, 2025). This phrasing was also intentionally used in its initial rollout of pep+ by highlighting it prominently on the company website. Although PepsiCo is the second-highest plastic polluter in the world, it uses positive framing to discuss the global plastic pollution issue not as something it is inherently responsible for, but instead as an opportunity for PepsiCo to enact its packaging vision, "a world where packaging never becomes waste" (PepsiCo, 2025).

By removing the company's role in pollution from its rhetoric but still choosing to acknowledge and even promote strategies for improving sustainability, PepsiCo legitimizes its "positive social practices" and invokes a feeling of shared moral values. This in turn strengthens its brand as one devoted to global well-being and social good, which helps shift the narrative away from corporate accountability. This type of positive framing legitimizes PepsiCo's own actions within the debate of plastic pollution.

Figure 3
Pep+ Slogan

Note. (PepsiCo, 2025)

PepsiCo has predominantly focused the conversation surrounding corporate plastic pollution on the solutions that it provides or intends to provide, positioning itself as an active participant in addressing the crisis while maintaining its existing production model. However, by

ignoring the numerous ways it contributes to plastic pollution, PepsiCo is absolving itself of any real responsibility to fundamentally change its business model, which could potentially make a real impact in reducing levels of plastic waste worldwide.

In 2025, PepsiCo announced that it would begin tracking reusability under the broad umbrella term of "reusable, recyclable, or compostable packaging" (PepsiCo, 2025). By combining these categories together and peppering them throughout its online presence, PepsiCo obscures its lack of actual progress in establishing or subsidizing actual reuse systems and shifts attention away from the real issue of reducing the production of new virgin plastic. Instead, PepsiCo focuses and promotes sustainability strategies that force the consumer to reuse, recycle, or compost its products, shifting all responsibility onto the consumer. This rhetorical strategy names the problem, specifically plastic waste pollution, and then promotes PepsiCo as the agent of change, offering only incremental, market-friendly solutions. In this instance, PepsiCo acknowledges the severity of plastic pollution but promotes recycling rather than reduction. This approach allows PepsiCo to appear progressive while sustaining its reliance on high-volume plastic packaging, permitting the company to focus on waste and recycling that prioritizes individual, piecemeal fixes over an actual systemic reduction in plastic production (PepsiCo, 2025).

On May 22, 2025, PepsiCo announced revised sustainability goals, which can now be found on the News and Media Sustainability section of its website. Each section features a "prior goal" that originated in 2021 as part of the pep+ launch, and is followed by an "evolved goal" as well as an explanation of "what changed" (PepsiCo, 2025). At first glance, each goal is described with flowery, positive language and promises of PepsiCo's drive toward a better future. However, when looking deeper at the specific goal evolution and word choice, the vocabulary

used does not match the action taken. PepsiCo's 2024 goal was to "Reduce our absolute tonnage of virgin plastic derived from non-renewable sources by 20% by 2030 (vs 2020 baseline)" (PepsiCo, 2025). PepsiCo's evolved goal reads, "Achieve an average of 2% year-over-year reduction in our absolute tonnage of virgin plastics through 2030" (PepsiCo, 2025). The "what changed" section in Figure 4 uses phrases like "sunset baseline" and "changing the scope," vague corporate terms that do not actually explain the shift, nor why it was unable to meet the original goal (PepsiCo, 2025). PepsiCo repeatedly demonstrates an ability to mask company failure in positive corporate words, which allows the corporation to avoid any accountability or responsibility for the sustainability goals it claims to promote.

Figure 4

PepsiCo's Evolved Virgin Plastic Reduction Goal

Note. (PepsiCo, 2025)

Positive Imagery

PepsiCo has gone beyond just its language to rebrand itself as a company that cares about the environment; it has constructed every part of its corporate image to appear as sustainable and welcoming as possible. On October 28, 2025, PepsiCo launched a revamped logo (Figure 5) that "boldly reflects who we are in 2025" (PepsiCo, 2025). On its website, PepsiCo explains what each component means: the orange in the top left represents its food and grain products to

demonstrate how it is "rooted in agriculture," the light blue in the top right illustrates its beverage products which are intended to "hydrate, replenish, refuel," the light green in the bottom right is an homage to its sustainability initiative "pep+," and the dark green swoop under the "P" is supposed to represent "smiles" and its "consumer-centricity" (PepsiCo, 2025). PepsiCo's official statement claims that the new logo, along with all lowercase letters spelling out "PepsiCo," "conveys a sense of approachability that mirrors the bold, consumer-centric spirit of our brands" (PepsiCo, 2025). This new logo may seem inconsequential, but it tells a deeper story: one of a brand hiding behind smiles, marketing tactics, and flashy colors to deflect attention away from PepsiCo's lack of progress towards real sustainability.

Figure 5

PepsiCo's Rebranded Logo

Note. (PepsiCo, 2025)

In addition to a new logo and vague, corporate language throughout its website, PepsiCo chooses intentional colors and imagery that promotes its purported brand goals of connection and sustainability. According to the company's official statement on the new logo, "our color palette draws from the real world — the rich soils that nourish our foods, our refreshing drinks, and the vibrant hues that reflect our commitment to people and the planet" (PepsiCo, 2025). Every part

of PepsiCo's webpage has the logo colors incorporated from the website's background, from the font color to a rolling banner promoting the new PepsiCo tagline: "Food. Drinks. Smiles." (PepsiCo, 2025). This vibrant, modern color palette promotes feelings of positivity and reminds the viewer that PepsiCo believes in sustainability and progress.

After scrolling past PepsiCo's "Discover who we are" section, the screen fills with large, colorful, cut off words in between pictures of happy consumers, farmers, and well-curated food (Figure 6). Bright blue and orange words like "AHHH" and "SNAP" are complimented by green "SUSTAINA…" and "...RATIVE." Without even displaying the full words "sustainable" and "generative", PepsiCo uses colors and imagery to imply that the corporation not only keeps customers happy and satisfied, but uplifts farmers and supports innovation.

Figure 6

PepsiCo's Positive Website Messaging

Note. (PepsiCo, 2025)

The first page PepsiCo redirects the viewer to is its "PepsiCo Positive" site, under the bright green heading: "Growing Positive Change" next to a picture of a woman planting a crop (Figure 7). Already, the viewer is primed to believe that PepsiCo's pep+ program is contributing to green agricultural initiatives, helping out people like the woman depicted. At the top of the pep+ page, a large picture with an image of green crops takes up the majority of the screen and

prompts the viewer to press play. The resulting video explains what pep+ is, what its goals are, and the potential impact this initiative could have on the planet. For the first thirty seconds, the viewer sees flashes of vibrant greenery, flowers blooming, waterfalls, a hand in a stream, a rainstorm, and farmers harvesting crops. A man asks if "you have ever wondered where your food and beverages come from" as light piano music plays in the background (PepsiCo, 2025). Later, he explains that "the answers are very complicated" (PepsiCo, 2025). While the happy speakers on screen boast about the international reach of PepsiCo, they acknowledge that PepsiCo's "incredible influence" means it has a "great responsibility" (PepsiCo, 2025).

Throughout the video, PepsiCo uses tried and true corporate tactics to depict positive, colorful imagery that distracts from the empty promises being made. It uses corporate-speak such as "evolving our portfolio of food and beverage products" on top of a video of an athlete drinking Gatorade that quickly switches to a bird's eye view of farmers harvesting tomatoes. PepsiCo claims it wants to build "a circular economy" while showing a shopping cart full of PepsiCo products after cutting away from a video of potatoes moving down an assembly chain. By combining inspirational phrases, vibrant imagery, and uplifting music, PepsiCo is priming the viewer to believe that it cares about the people and the planet, even without providing any tangible details or steps in how it plans to accomplish its sustainability goals. In fact, the words behind the video do nothing more than celebrate the act of launching a sustainability initiative with lofty goals, instead of actually describing how PepsiCo can shift its business practices to enact change. Every artistic choice made in the video goes back to PepsiCo's company rebrand, forcing the viewer to associate the company with one that promotes sustainability and positive change.

Figure 7

PepsiCo's Positive Website Content

Note. (PepsiCo, 2025)

Accountability Issues

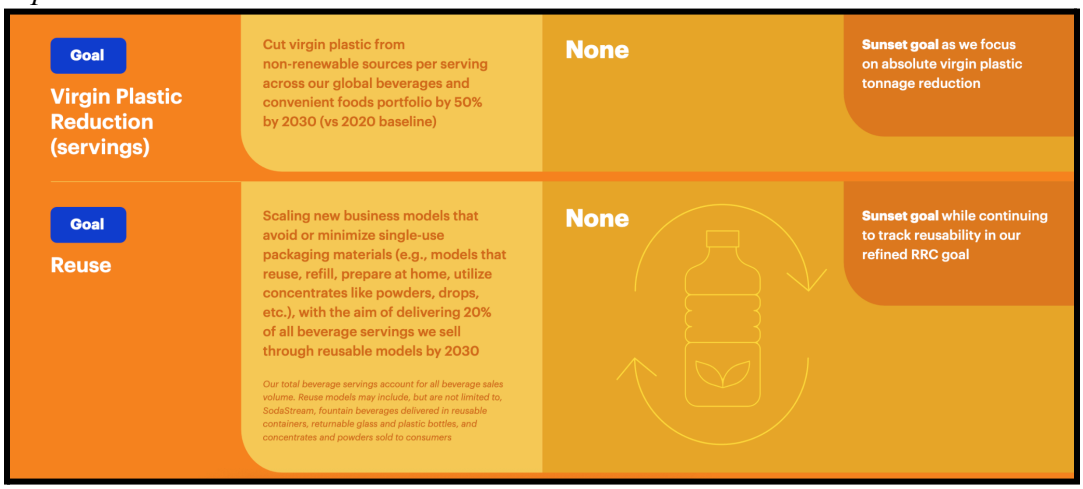
As the second largest plastic producer in the world, PepsiCo could have a significant impact on plastic pollution if it substantially altered its production methods and company design. However, as shown in its pep+ launch video, it prefers to set lofty goals with no concrete steps nor measurable benchmarks to hit. PepsiCo repeatedly touts building a "more sustainable future," even going as far as to "commit" to it, but it frequently does not explain how it plans to get there (PepsiCo, 2025). As much as PepsiCo showcases its supposed groundbreaking sustainability achievements while avoiding any actual accountability, there are some failures that cannot be explained away.

In 2025, PepsiCo released a set of "evolved" goals from its initial launch of pep+ in 2021, altering previous public targets that came with measurable benchmarks. The revisions were accompanied by an explanation as to why PepsiCo shifted its focus. As displayed in Figure 8, two specific packaging goals were eliminated entirely with no substitution. PepsiCo eliminated its existing goal of moving away from single-use plastics, as well as its attempts to reduce the

creation of virgin plastic per serving. Other revisions were weak and significantly deflated the company's previous ambitions. Instead of specifically stating why the goals were changed, PepsiCo cited vague "external factors" and "systemic barriers" (Harms, 2025). This use of corporate language is a clear tactic to avoid having to dive into the reasons PepsiCo failed to meet such a publicly ambitious goal and does not offer an alternative.

Figure 8

PepsiCo's Abandoned Plastic Goals



Note. (PepsiCo, 2025)

As shown in Figure 4, PepsiCo's initial goal of reducing the absolute tonnage of virgin plastic derived from non-renewable sources by 20% by 2030 "evolved" to a 2% year-over-year reduction in the absolute tonnage of virgin plastics through 2030 (PepsiCo, 2025). The reduction of virgin plastics by major corporations is a key element in reducing plastic waste, as it means that companies are reusing existing plastic instead of putting new materials into circulation. Shifting from a 20% reduction by 2030 to a 2% year-over-year reduction puts significantly less burden on PepsiCo as a corporation, as it is far easier to reduce virgin plastics incrementally in the short term. Furthermore, in the fine print of its revised goal, PepsiCo explained that this reduction would only be tracked in key markets, which are decided at the company's discretion and does not account for 20% of its total production (PepsiCo, 2025).

While no tangible reason was given for this goal shift, data taken from 2020 through 2025 tells a different story. After PepsiCo released its 2021 goal of a 20% reduction in virgin plastics tonnage by 2030, its production numbers actually increased. In 2020, PepsiCo released its usage data that showed it used around 2.18 million metric tons of virgin plastic (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2025). By 2023, PepsiCo reported around 2.3 million metric tons (an increase, not a reduction), relative to 2020 (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2025). Even after PepsiCo achieved a 5% reduction in absolute tonnage of virgin plastics from 2023 to 2024 in its key packaging markets, it did not put the corporation on track to achieve its previous 20% goal (PepsiCo, 2025). Thus, an "evolved" goal emerged.

Another 2025 goal shift (Figure 9) moved the corporation from an initial goal of using 50% recycled content in its plastic packaging by 2030, to a much weaker goal. PepsiCo lowered the goal percentage from 50% to "40% or greater" recycled content, and extended the timeline from 2030 to 2035 (PepsiCo, 2025). Additionally, the scope of the goal narrowed to solely focus on "primary plastic packaging in key markets" (PepsiCo, 2025). Not only does this shift demonstrate PepsiCo's lack of accountability and ability to move the goalposts when it was unable to hit its goal, PepsiCo is still not on track to hit its even easier benchmark. In 2024, PepsiCo reported that its post-consumer recycled packaging content was only approximately 15% in its key markets, well below the metrics the corporation would need to achieve its revised, easier goal (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2025). However, PepsiCo's shift towards a more achievable target and inability to meet even that goes unaccounted for and largely unnoticed.

Figure 9

PepsiCo's Evolved Recycled Content Goal

Note. (PepsiCo, 2025)

Jim Andrews, PepsiCo's Chief Sustainability Officer, stated in a 2025 LinkedIn post that the recent refinements in PepsiCo's packaging and reduction of plastic goals were not a "reduction in our focus on sustainable packaging, but rather an evolution that takes into the account what has happened, and what either hasn't happened or has happened a lot more slowly than we anticipated, over the past five years" (LinkedIn, 2025). Normally, such a blatant admission of failure blamed on external factors of the past five years, would be examined with scrutiny. Andrews is the face of PepsiCo's sustainability initiatives and should be expected to explain the corporation's failures. However, due to a lack of accountability, he offers only vague phrases to explain the changes. By failing to meet and then reducing its sustainability goals without being held to account, PepsiCo continues to present itself as progressive in the fight against plastic pollution without ever having to change its business model or behavior.

Avoiding Responsibility

Recycling Over Reduction

The core issue of plastic pollution is overproduction. However, any attempts to reduce production would force companies like PepsiCo to make significant changes to its business model or strategy. Because of this, PepsiCo has concentrated on promoting an individual's responsibility to recycle. It has incorporated this push into its "ambitious" packaging goals which

partially focus on improving current recycling systems. PepsiCo has boasted about its partnership with Intuitive AI, which launched a new recycling AI system called Oscar Sort AI (PepsiCo, 2025). As seen in Figure 10, this AI system "identifies materials and guides users to the correct bin to aid in proper disposal, improving overall recycling accuracy" (PepsiCo, 2025). It even gives rewards to consumers who correctly dispose of their waste and educates the public on recycling systems (PepsiCo, 2025). PepsiCo also touts its plans for SodaStream, stating, "leading the way in sustainable beverage solutions, SodaStream's innovative platform is continuing to expand into functional beverages and new markets, helping consumers significantly reduce their use of single-use plastic bottles and avoid billions of plastic bottles worldwide" (PepsiCo, 2025).

Figure 10

AI Recycling System Oscar Sort

Note. From: Don't Throw It Out, Sort It! (Cosgrove, 2025)

Unfortunately, individual recycling has been proven time and time again to have little impact on overall pollution worldwide. The rate of our consumption of plastic, both past and present, means recycling alone isn't going to get us out of the waste crisis. Of the industry and

government commitments made to-date, by 2040 the annual volume of plastic flowing into the ocean will be reduced by just 7% (Nissenbaum, 2021).

In addition to shifting focus to the individual and consumer, PepsiCo highlights its "strategic collaboration" with sustainable packaging partners in the recycling industries, stating this will lead to a "circular economy" in which materials are used, discarded, recycled, and then reused by a company (PepsiCo, 2025). For over fifteen years, PepsiCo has celebrated and promoted investments into wide ranging recycling technologies worldwide. Unfortunately, the very same technology that PepsiCo is promoting has been proven to be harmful to the environment (Sharpe, 2025). These decisions, like investing in a company called "Loop Industries," which works on chemical recycling, further shifts responsibility away from PepsiCo as a company while continuing to promote recycling as a good practice. This allows PepsiCo to maintain credibility as an environmentally conscious organization without doing any of the actual work.

In 2018, PepsiCo entered a multi-year supply agreement with Loop Industries to purchase production capacity for Loop's PET plastic made from 100% recycled material via a chemical recycling process (Toto, 2018). The chemical process converts waste plastic into new plastic or fuel, by dissolving plastic with chemicals or using heat to break it down into monomers, naphtha, fuels or other by-products (American Chemical Council, 2024). In theory, these new materials can go through a process to create new plastic products, but this technology is still uneconomical and technically challenging. In 2022, the National Resources Defense Council (NRDC) released "Recycling Lies," a report that revealed that most of the chemical recycling facilities in operation at the time were creating materials to be burned, and not recycled into new plastic (National Resources Defense Council, 2025). These chemical recycling plants were acting as plastic

incinerators, not plastic recyclers, contributing to pollution and not helping produce recycled plastic.

PepsiCo has successfully framed its recycling investments and goals as critical to sustainable progress when in reality, it continues to shift the responsibility for plastic pollution to individual consumers or promotes technology that does not work. Rather than focusing on its own massive overproduction, PepsiCo promotes the individual's role in sustainability, and emphasizes alternative sustainability solutions, which allows the corporation to avoid all backlash for its own harmful business practices. If PepsiCo was serious about addressing plastic pollution, it could at the very least identify elements of its own business that need to be improved, or avoid the subject altogether, but it instead chooses to form a narrative that redirects scrutiny towards areas that will not produce a meaningful reduction of plastic waste.

Externalizing Blame

While PepsiCo consistently spreads the message that it is a leader in the environmental movement, it also creates numerous excuses for its lack of sustainable action. When talking about sustainability efforts as a whole, to avoid accountability, PepsiCo shifts its language to identify actions that depend on other corporations or initiatives by outside groups. For example, there has been an increased interest in the idea of recycled plastics (rPETs) as a means of reducing the production of virgin plastics. Theoretically, PepsiCo could invest time and company resources into ensuring that a significant amount of its production utilized rPETs if it was as committed to sustainability as it repeatedly claims. Instead, on the Press Release section of its website, PepsiCo explains that "PepsiCo is already one of the largest rPET purchasers in the world. If there were more rPET available, we would buy it" (PepsiCo, 2025). PepsiCo then deflects blame, noting, "but here's the challenge; today, due to low recycling rates and limited

processing capacity, there simply isn't enough high-quality, food-packaging-grade rPET on the market" (PepsiCo, 2025). Instead of focusing energy on how to reduce its own carbon footprint, PepsiCo's language strategically diverts attention away from the fact that it has contributed to the amount of plastic pollution and places blame on low rates of recycling leading to a lack of rPETs.

Even after asserting its support for rPETs as a concept, PepsiCo makes repeated excuses for why switching to rPETS is unsustainable worldwide. For example, in PepsiCo's description of its packaging section under ESG topics, when talking about implementation in India, PepsiCo explains that "India only passed laws allowing rPET for beverage packaging in 2023, with food packaging added this year. Well-designed collection and recycling policies, such as Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) programs, are still lacking in many parts of the world" (PepsiCo, 2025). PepsiCo made excuses in China by citing the country's strict packaging rules that do not allow recycled packaging as a reason for its inaction (PepsiCo, 2025). PepsiCo consistently reiterates the idea that it cannot be the only one pushing for progress, and that advancing sustainable packaging requires complex solutions that are often unachievable because of factors outside of its control. While the plastics crisis is a complex issue that is not solely PepsiCo's responsibility, it is one of the worst offenders. By simultaneously claiming it supports the use of rPETs while also deflecting blame over corporate inaction onto external sources, PepsiCo continues its production and profit uninterrupted.

Emphasizing the downsides to delay implementing solutions

In order to maintain legitimacy while minimizing accountability for plastic pollution, the plastics industry, including PepsiCo, employs strategic techniques when new policies are proposed that have, in some cases, completely shut down certain key initiatives. PepsiCo does this by emphasizing the negative economic impacts, supply-chain disruptions, and regional

vulnerabilities that could come from the change, rather than focus on the environmental urgency of reducing plastic use. Additionally, PepsiCo emphasizes the positive aspects of plastic, and argues that it is necessary for social and economic justice, further deflecting blame from itself.

For instance, when the use of 30% recycled food-grade PET bottles was mandated by the Indian government beginning April 1, 2025, PepsiCo was one of the manufacturers that were considering legal options, arguing that this deadline was impractical and highlighting challenges such as recycling infrastructure, material shortages, and cost concerns (Mukherjee, 2025). Industry executives argued the mandate was too stringent and expensive and would force the companies to pass the cost onto consumers. The Economic Times reported that the Indian government is unlikely to extend the deadline, citing that companies have had sufficient time to comply (Mukherjee, 2025). Industry executives believe the rigid timeline could force them to seek an anticipatory stay in court, delaying implementation.

PepsiCo effectively uses the narrative strategy called “policy perfectionism,” where the user asserts that suggested policy solutions need to be perfectly crafted, with input from all stakeholders prior to adoption, effectively delaying any kind of regulatory action (Vandenberg, 2024). Environmental scientist Jessica Vandenberg argues that through an appeal to societal well-being, the plastics industry, with help from lobbyists, repeatedly argues that plastics are essential for social development and access to critical goods, suggesting that reducing plastic use would endanger public health and welfare (Vandenberg, 2024). This allows the plastic industry to divert the focus away from their own production, diminishing the pressure to change their methods. In a 2013 journal article, cardiologist Emily North, M.D. noted that plastics “continue to benefit society in innumerable ways” noting their essential role in modern life, particularly in medicine, food safety, and sanitation (North, 2013).

The plastics industry also engages in a type of reversal framing, transforming criticism into a perceived virtue. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Plastics Industry Association wrote to U.S. Health Secretary Alex Azar, claiming that single-use plastics offered health and safety benefits, which subsequently led to temporary reversals of bans on plastic bags (Kellar & Heckman, 2020). While touting the increased use of plastic as necessary for public health and safety, lobbyists utilized an appeal to economic justice in an attempt to block regulations on plastic waste, such as paying a fee for the use of a plastic bag that they said would create disproportionate burdens on disadvantaged communities (Root, 2019). In their appeal to social justice, corporations and lobbyists frame ongoing plastic production and recycling as vital to the livelihoods of waste workers and low-income communities, arguing that stricter regulations would harm disadvantaged populations (Vandenberg, 2024). PepsiCo makes the argument that eliminating this sector would remove critical sources of income and reduce livelihood opportunities for those reliant upon it (PepsiCo, 2025).

According to a May 2025 industry article published on Trellis, a sustainability focused media outlet, PepsiCo's Jim Andrew stated that the downgrades in its sustainability goals were necessary because policies to support sustainability and outside investment in clean technologies have not progressed as fast as was anticipated (Giles, 2025). He further noted that PepsiCo can advocate, collaborate, and work to try and move forward, "but there's only so much that we can do" (Giles, 2025). In this interview, Andrew once again diverted blame onto outside investments, the lack of progression of clean technologies, and slow policies supporting sustainability. This removed all blame from PepsiCo and provided no internal explanation as to why it downgraded its own sustainability goals that the corporation failed to meet.

PepsiCo draws upon tactics utilized by the plastics industry as a whole to highlight barriers like supply chain costs, regulations, and recycling infrastructure limitations when advocating against additional regulation. PepsiCo even goes as far as to talk about the positive implications of plastics, more than the potential benefits of reducing waste such as improved health, environment, and social justice. PepsiCo's overall narrative emphasizes the difficulties and downsides rather than potential benefits of its actions. PepsiCo's corporate language framing can cause consumers to interpret potential positive gains as not being worth the tradeoffs. In the current market climate or that plastic reduction is too difficult or expensive to deliver at the present time.

Recommendations

Based on PepsiCo's sustainability commitments through the pep+ initiative, it is obvious that the corporation chose to focus more on promoting the appearance of sustainability over enacting the fundamental changes needed to curb the plastic waste problem. In order to institute the meaningful change needed to address the plastic waste crisis, I outline four major recommendations that governmental bodies should follow to successfully hold PepsiCo and other MNCs accountable for their plastic waste production. The current status quo that allows corporations to dictate and self-regulate their commitments has clearly failed.

1. Global Plastics Treaty

An overwhelming majority of governments and nongovernmental stakeholders have expressed their support for establishing a new, legally binding global agreement to tackle plastic pollution by creating a new treaty process (March et al., 2022). During the fifth meeting of the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) in March 2022, representatives from 175 nations proposed developing an international, legally binding "Global Plastics Treaty" which laid

out key regulations to tackle plastic pollution worldwide (March et al., 2022). The idea behind the mandate was to address the full life cycle of plastics, from production and design to waste management and pollution prevention (March et al., 2022).

The most recent Global Plastic Treaty conference, which took place in 2025, stalled after the countries present failed to agree on a final text for the treaty. This was due to the competing interests between developed countries, developing countries, the plastics industry, and civil society organizations. The stalemate in the conference reflects deeper systemic issues with plastic reduction, where economic interests often override environmental urgency (Dauvergne et al., 2025). The treaty negotiations exposed fundamental conflicts between fossil fuel-dependent countries' interests and actions that must be taken to solve environmental problems, with the plastics industry undermining environmental progress through significant lobbying efforts (Dauvergne et al., 2023). MNCs have managed to influence several major plastic-producing countries that have gone on to reject national production reduction targets. This phenomenon is similar to the pattern of climate change negotiations, where corporations influenced the course of diplomacy (Dauvergne, 2018, 2023).

The sharp disparity in the negotiations between developed and developing countries when discussing specifics for the Global Plastics Treaty partially resulted from developed countries expressing support for more financially demanding goals, while developing countries emphasized their lack of technology and resources (Pham, 2025). The countries disagreed about the specific ways they could share and transfer advanced technology between them, as well as how much financial assistance developed countries were willing to provide. Additionally, developing countries lacked the capacity to enact comprehensive enforcement, reporting, and compliance (Pham, 2025). In order to effectively combat the global plastic crisis, countries must

resolve these disagreements to ensure that MNCs, like PepsiCo, are held accountable through legally binding global standards.

2. Ending Fossil Fuel Subsidies

Currently, fossil fuel companies receive approximately $10 to $52 billion per year in U.S. government subsidies (Carballo, 2025). In June 2025, Republicans in Congress added an additional $4 billion per year in subsidies through the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, which will be paid out over the next decade (Taft, 2025). In 2024, the Biden-Harris administration proposed a budget that would have reduced or eliminated certain fossil fuel subsidies (Brind'Amour, 2024). Under this budget, the federal government would have saved approximately $96 billion over ten years, money that would have directly benefitted the petrochemical industry (Brind'Amour, 2024). This same industry indirectly subsidizes virgin plastic production as the raw materials from crude oil and natural gas are the primary building blocks for virgin plastic production (Leviker & Meiffren-Swango, 2024). The fossil fuel industry relies on the continued use of its petrochemical product to invest in increased plastic production, as there have been increased attempts to globally shift away from fossil fuels. If these companies can keep plastic as the primary option for food and beverage corporations, they can continue maximizing their profits.

Plastics are currently the primary option for MNCs to maximize profits as they are cheaply manufactured (Sutton, 2009). If the federal government continues to subsidize fossil fuel companies, it allows these MNCs to continue producing greater amounts of plastics at a very low cost without providing any incentives for alternatives. If these subsidies are repealed or reconfigured, it could help rebalance the cost of more environmentally friendly packaging options, and incentivize companies to move away from their reliance on plastic production.

3. Legal Framework for Greenwashing

In September 2024, California Attorney General Rob Bonta filed a lawsuit against Exxon Mobil for violations of California law and claims of deceiving the public regarding the recyclability of plastic products (People of California v. Exxon Mobil, 2024). Bonta is advocating for an Exxon-funded abatement fund to address ongoing plastic pollution, starting a reeducation campaign to help consumers become informed about plastic and its recyclability, and preventing corporations from making false statements regarding plastics and recycling through legal means (People of California v. Exxon Mobil, 2024). The lawsuit is currently ongoing, and if successful, would create a legal precedent to significantly reduce the threat of greenwashing in California. MNCs have strategically employed greenwashing to maximize their profits, so a legally binding restriction on their tactics would have a direct impact.

This lawsuit is unprecedented and could establish a structure for broader use of public harm laws to enforce plastic producer responsibilities. It has the potential to mirror the multiple successful tobacco and opioid company lawsuits that were also based on public deception and harm, which resulted in tobacco and opioid companies paying out billions of dollars and agreeing to strict marketing restrictions. The tobacco and opioid lawsuits demonstrated liability for societal harm and corporate deception, and laid the groundwork for lawsuits of a similar type (Burtka, 2025; NASHP, 2025). Based on my research on PepsiCo's strategies of public deception, I believe that similar lawsuits in other states would be imperative in order to fully curb the deceptive greenwashing tactics used by similar MNCs that produce large amounts of plastic waste.

4. Legislation to Promote Producer Responsibility

California Senate Bill SB 54, the Plastic Pollution Prevention and Packaging Producer Responsibility Act, which passed in June 2022, mandates a 25% reduction in single-use plastic

production. This bill protects and restores ecosystems and communities most impacted by plastic pollution by requiring producers to pay $5 billion into an environmental mitigation fund (Ocean Conservancy, 2025). It also holds producers financially responsible for improving California's recycling and composting infrastructure by requiring that all single-use packaging and foodware be recyclable or compostable by 2032, and that all plastic packaging meet a 65% recycling rate by 2032 (made possible through producer investments in recycling infrastructure) to remain on the market (Ocean Conservancy, 2025). However, on March 7, 2025, California Governor Gavin Newsom rejected the regulations proposed by the California Department of Resources, Recycling, and Recovery (CalRecycle), for implementing SB 54. Newsom cited the high cost to business and industries as the reason for this rejection (Coneski et al., 2025). A bill introduced by Senator Ben Allen (D-CA-24) during the 2023 - 2024 legislative session, SB 1231, proposed ways to "fix" SB 54 (Plastic Pollution Coalition, 2024). In reality, the rule would have provided "a huge new loophole" and would allow plastic producers, instead of solely the state as originally designated, to identify and petition plastic products as "recyclable" (Plastic Pollution Coalition, 2024).

The lack of plastic legislation adoption from California, as one of the supposed environmental leaders of the world, demonstrates the tight grip the plastic industry has on business, government regulations, and the economy. In order to push back against the plastics industry, California must adopt the regulations proposed by CalRecycle that require a sharp reduction in plastic production. Furthermore, more states should adopt legislation modeled after SB 54 in order to hold MNCs accountable nationally. SB 54 provides a potential plastic reduction framework that could serve as a blueprint for national plastic waste policy.

Conclusion

PepsiCo's pep+ initiative demonstrates how political CSR serves as a powerful tool for MNCs to shape public narratives, delay meaningful regulatory action, and preserve business

models built on plastic overproduction. PepsiCo labels itself as a global leader in sustainability, but its shifting goals, strategic messaging, and continued failure to meet its own benchmarks reveals PepsiCo's lack of desire to actually address the plastics pollution crisis in a meaningful way. By emphasizing consumer responsibility and citing external barriers as reasons why it cannot make changes, while also reducing its own sustainability targets without repercussions, PepsiCo perpetuates this system where companies are allowed to regulate themselves voluntarily and are rarely held accountable for their actions.

Addressing the global plastics crisis requires more significant change and mandates than MNCs like PepsiCo are willing to make. It is imperative that the United States, and the rest of the world, take actionable steps like signing onto internationally binding legal agreements, increasing our own regulation capability, eliminating fossil-fuel subsidies that lead to increased production of virgin plastics, and follow legal frameworks like the ones utilized against the tobacco and opioid industry. As this PepsiCo case study illustrates, without mandatory changes that limit production and increase accountability, the world's largest plastic polluters will continue to pollute the environment for their own gain. Recognizing and addressing political CSR strategies that are so widely adopted will be the essential first step to creating policies that can reduce plastic waste at its source.

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