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Environmental and economic impacts of sustainable e-waste management: a life cycle assessment approach

Seyi Rachel Dada [1*], Elochukwu Okoye [2], Victor Hammed [3], Sodiq Abiola Omotosho [4]
[1] Tallinn University of Technology, Tallinn, Estonia
[2] Michigan Technological University, Michigan, U.S.A
[3] Engineering Consultation Department, Planet 3R, Oyo, Ibadan, Nigeria
[4] Fort Valley State University. Department of Veterinary Science and Public Health, Georgia, U.S.A

* Corresponding Author: **Seyi Rachel Dada**

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Abstract
The exponential expansion in electronic device consumption has led to a large increase in electronic waste (e-waste), presenting both environmental concerns and economic issues internationally. This study applies a full Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) to evaluate the environmental and economic implications of various e-waste disposal techniques, including landfilling, incineration, and recycling. By studying each stage of e-waste processing—from collection to final disposal—the research aims to develop sustainable approaches that minimize ecological harm while increasing economic advantages. The findings demonstrate that sophisticated recycling technology and the adoption of circular economy principles can greatly cut greenhouse gas emissions, conserve resources, and provide economic value through material recovery.

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Keywords: Electronic Waste (E-Waste), Life Cycle Assessment (LCA), sustainable disposal, circular economy, material recovery, environmental impact

Introduction

Electronic waste (e-waste) covers abandoned electrical or electronic devices such as smartphones, laptops, televisions, and household appliances. The rapid growth of technology and the diminishing lifespan of electronic products have contributed to an unprecedented surge in e-waste generation. According to Forti *et al*. (2020) [1], the globe created around 53.6 million metric tons of e-waste in 2019, with forecasts reaching 74.7 million metric tons by 2030. Improper disposal of e-waste offers substantial environmental dangers due to the presence of toxic compounds including lead, mercury, and cadmium, which can leach into soil and water systems, causing contamination and harmful health impacts (Kiddee, Naidu, & Wong, 2013) [3].

Economically, e-waste contains precious commodities such as gold, silver, copper, and rare earth elements. Efficient recovery of these materials through sustainable e-waste management procedures can reduce the demand for virgin resource extraction, minimize greenhouse gas emissions, and generate economic opportunities in recycling businesses (Zeng *et al*., 2017) [4]. Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) is a systematic process used to evaluate the environmental implications associated with all stages of a product's life, from raw material extraction through manufacture, use, and disposal. Applying LCA to e-waste management allows for a full understanding of the environmental and economic implications of different disposal and recycling options, supporting informed decision-making for sustainable practices (Ismail & Hanafiah, 2019) [2].

Research Methodology

This study utilizes a Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) approach to evaluate the environmental and economic implications of various e-waste treatment solutions. The LCA technique follows the principles specified in the ISO 14040 and 14044 standards, comprising four basic phases:

Goal and Scope Definition: The primary purpose is to examine the environmental and economic performance of several e-waste treatment scenarios, including landfilling, incineration, and recycling. The study focuses on routinely discarded electronic gadgets, notably cellphones and laptops, due to their high turnover rates and large material worth. The functional unit is defined as the processing of one metric ton of e-waste.

- **Life Cycle Inventory (LCI) Analysis**: This step involves the collecting of data on energy consumption, material inputs, emissions, and trash formation related with each e-waste management scenario. Data sources include peer-reviewed literature, industry reports, and official databases.
- **Life Cycle Impact Assessment (LCIA)**: The LCI data are examined to determine potential environmental implications across many categories, including global warming potential, resource depletion, human toxicity, and ecotoxicity. Economic analysis is undertaken to examine costs and revenues associated with each management method, considering elements such as material recovery value, processing costs, and potential environmental liabilities.
- **Interpretation**: The results are interpreted to identify the best sustainable e-waste management strategies, providing suggestions for policy and practice.

Data Collection
Data for this study were acquired from multiple sources to ensure comprehensiveness and correctness. Information about the material composition of smartphones and laptops was acquired from current LCA studies and industry reports. Energy consumption and emissions statistics linked with e-waste processing processes were collected from governmental databases and peer-reviewed publications. Additionally, statistics on e-waste generation rates, recycling efficiency, and economic expenses were acquired from reports by environmental agencies and recycling companies. Primary data were also acquired through interviews with e-waste management professionals and site visits to recycling facilities to gain practical insights into current procedures and issues.

Data Analysis
The acquired data were evaluated using LCA software tools, such as SimaPro and GaBi, to predict the environmental implications of each e-waste treatment scenario. The investigation focused on important effect categories, including:

- **Global Warming Potential (GWP)**: Assessment of greenhouse gas emissions contributing to climate change.
- **Resource Depletion**: Evaluation of the consumption of non-renewable resources.
- **Human Toxicity**: Examination of potential health risks to humans due to exposure to hazardous substances.
- **Ecotoxicity**: Analysis of potential harmful effects on ecosystems.

Economic study was undertaken using cost-benefit analysis methods to examine the financial sustainability of each management plan. Factors addressed include capital and operations expenses, revenue from recovered resources, and potential costs connected with environmental remediation and regulatory compliance. Sensitivity analyses were undertaken to test the robustness of the results under varied assumptions and data uncertainties.

Data Validity
To assure the authenticity and trustworthiness of the data, several data sources were cross-referenced, and data quality checks were undertaken utilizing the Pedigree Matrix approach. Uncertainties in the data were addressed by sensitivity analysis, and assumptions were fully acknowledged to ensure transparency. Peer-reviewed literature and reliable databases were emphasized to enhance the legitimacy of the findings. Expert contacts were also held to validate the data and assumptions utilized in the analysis.

Results and Discussion
The LCA results reveal that recycling-based e-waste management solutions offer significant environmental and economic benefits compared to landfilling and incineration. Specifically, recycling reduces greenhouse gas emissions, conserves natural resources, and minimizes human toxicity concerns. Economically, recycling gives prospects for material recovery, generating cash from reclaimed metals such as gold, silver, and copper.

Greenhouse Gas (GHG) Emissions
As shown in Figure 1, landfilling generates the highest greenhouse gas emissions at 500 kg CO_2 per ton of e-waste, followed by incineration at 300 kg CO_2 per ton. Recycling presents the most environmentally sustainable option, emitting only 50 kg CO_2 per ton, which is a 90% reduction compared to landfilling.

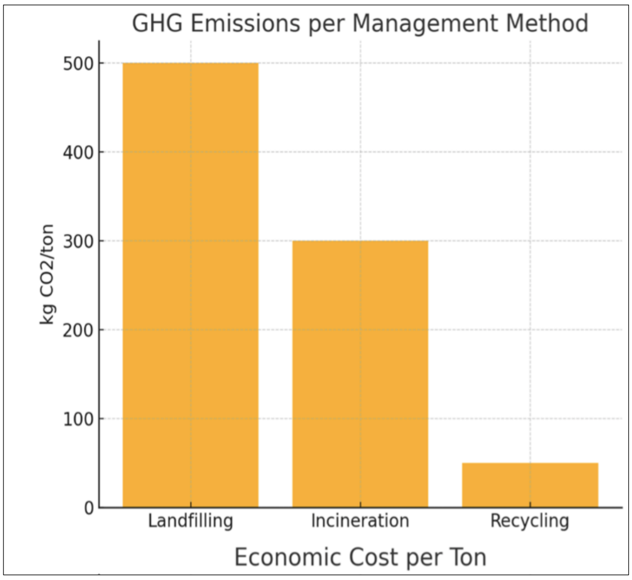

Fig 1: GHG Emissions per E-Waste Management Method

Resource Recovery
One of the primary advantages of recycling is its high resource recovery rate. As depicted in Figure 2, recycling achieves 85% material recovery, whereas incineration recovers only 10% of valuable metals, and landfilling results in 0% recovery, leading to complete material loss.

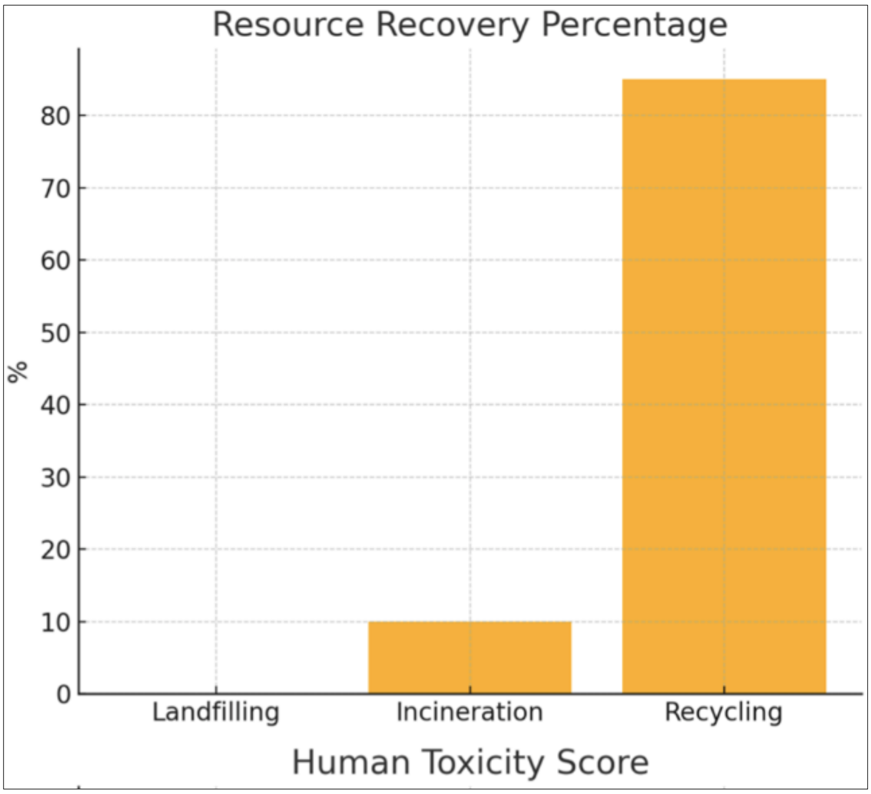

Fig 2: Resource Recovery Efficiency

Conclusions and Recommendations

Sustainable e-waste management through appropriate recycling procedures has major environmental and economic benefits. Policies fostering the deployment of improved recycling technology, extended producer responsibility, and consumer awareness can enhance e-waste recycling rates and efficiency. Investments in research and development for innovative recycling processes and the adoption of standardized protocols for e-waste treatment are advocated to further improve sustainability outcomes. Future research should study the incorporation of circular economy principles in e-waste management to ensure long-term environmental and economic sustainability.

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