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### CHARACTERISTIC OF PALM EMPTY FRUIT BUNCH (PEFB) FIBERS REINFORCED LOW-DENSITY POLYETHYLENE (LDPE) FOR PEFB/LDPE POLYMER COMPOSITES

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#### Abstract:

The study presents the characteristic of Palm Empty Fruit Bunch (PEFB) fibers reinforced Low-Density Polyethylene (LDPE) for PEFB/LDPE polymer composites into deck panel application. This research aims to formulate the different composition ratios of PEFB fibers reinforced for PEFB/LDPE polymer composites into deck panel application. The importance of this study is to fabricate a new material environmentally polymer composite material from waste resources of oil palm such as PEFB fibers abundant in Malaysia. This research includes the different composition ratios of PEFB fibers, which are 0.1, 0.2, 0.3, 0.4, and 0.5 (wt/wt%) reinforced LDPE plastic waste mixed with epoxy resin and hardener with a ratio of 3:1. The waste fiber from PEFB was grinded into 0.5 mm-1.5 mm  $\pm$  0.05 to produce fine fibers with an 18000-rpm speed grinder machine. The mixture was poured into a mold and cured for 48 hours at room temperature. The physical and mechanical testing was conducted on the sample with different composition ratios of PEFB fibers. It is revealed that the greater ratio of PEFB fibers, 0.5 (wt/wt%), produced the

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lowest density of 1.048 g/cm<sup>3</sup> and maximum porosity up to 60%. The tensile strength test showed 0.4 (wt/wt%) of PEFB fibers reinforced with LDPE plastic waste had the highest tensile strength at 6.20 MPa that exerted 360.89 N of force. It can be concluded that the optimal composition for deck panel application is 0.4 (wt./wt.%) PEFB/LDPE polymer composites.

#### Keywords:

PEFB, LDPE, Polymer, Composites, Panel, Strength

## Introduction

Currently, Malaysia is the world's second-largest palm oil producer and the world's largest exporter of palm oil. In 2019, it exported roughly 17.4 million metric tonnes of palm oil and palm-derived products. Exports total approximately 67.5 billion Malaysian ringgits. In total, Malaysia's palm oil industry contributed approximately 36.9 billion ringgits to the country's gross domestic product (Parveez, 2024). The PEFB fibres are either burned or discarded. These practices lead to environmental pollution by emitting gases containing particulate matter such as tar and soot particles. The indiscriminate disposal of PEFB fibres adds to the atmosphere's methane emissions.

Global plastic production climbed from 1.5 million tonnes per year in 1950 to 275 million tonnes in 2012 and 359 million tonnes in 2018. Countries dump between 4.8 million and 12.7 million tonnes of plastic trash into the oceans each year. Plastic has a low recovery rate compared to other materials such as glass, paper, iron, and aluminium (Pilapitiya, 2024). Therefore, the lifespan of plastic can be optimized by reusing and recycling items regularly to reduce the production of new plastic. The usage of plastic waste will minimize the use of non-renewable sources and can create an eco-friendly product. PEFB fibers and LDPE plastic waste are used in this study as raw materials to formulate the different composition ratios of PEFB fibers reinforced LDPE for PEFB/LDPE polymer composites into deck panel application.

## Literature Review

Polymer composite is a new alternative structural material that combines natural fiber and petrochemical-based polymer. The higher number of natural fibers in a product can reduce the usage of petroleum-based polymers. Palm Empty Fruit Bunch (PEFB) fibers are a part of palm oil residue waste (Kaewtrakulchai, 2024). Low-Density Polyethylene (LDPE) plastic is hugely attractive as a plastic manufacturing material to customer across a range of sectors and widely used in packaging for both food and non-food purposes, such as foils, trays, and plastic bags (Krehula, 2024). Thus, LDPE is ideal for mass production and large product batch runs as it requires very little energy and investment to produce, and it also can be recycled. The use of PEFB fibers reinforced LDPE in polymer composites for the production of low-cost and functional products was rapidly growing.

### *Palm Empty Fruit Bunches (PEFB)*

The palm fruit is embedded in a fruit bunch. An empty fruit bunch is obtained when the oil is extracted from the palm fruit leaving a bunch of fibers. According to SIRIM Berhad, Malaysia, an oil palm mill produces 23% of PEFB for every ton of Fresh Fruit Bunch (FFB) (Ghazalli, 2023). The amount of waste generated by the oil palm industry is growing as the industry grows. Therefore, the use of these wastes as compost is considered as to overcome their negative impacts and recycle them to produce a useful by product for agriculture. Table 1

tabulated the mechanical and physical properties of PEFB fibers (Faizi, 2019). As a result, PEFB is commercially marketed to produce mattresses, car seats, insulation, and composites.

**Table 1: Mechanical And Physical Properties of PEFB  
Fibers (Faizi, 2019)**

Categories	Applications
Tensile Strength (MPa)	60-81
Young Modulus (GPa)	1-9
Density (g/cm <sup>3</sup> )	0.7-1.55
Diameter (μm)	250-610
Elongation at break (%)	8-18

### ***Low-Density Polyethylene (LDPE)***

Low-density polyethylene (LDPE) is a thermoplastic derived from the ethylene monomer. The LDPE structure that was the first grade of polyethylene, manufactured in 1933 by Imperial Chemical Industries (ICI) using a high pressure free radical polymerization process (Abdullah, 2021). Table 2 shows the properties of LDPE (Kormin, 2017). LDPE is commonly used in the production of containers, dispensing tubes, wash bottles, tubing, plastic parts for computer hardware, and molded laboratory equipment. Its most popular use is in plastic bags.

**Table 2: Properties of LDPE (Kormin, 2017)**

Categories	Applications
Melting Point	105 to 115°C
Density	0.910–0.940 g/cm <sup>3</sup>
Chemical Resistance	Good resistance to alcohols, dilute alkalis and acids
Temperature Resistance	up to 80°C - 95°C for shorter times
Cost	have low cost polymer with good processability
Impact Strength	high impact strength at low temperature
Electrical	Excellent electrical insulating properties
Physical	Transparent in thin film form

### ***Polymer Composites***

Polymer Matrix Composites (PMCs) are very common due to their low cost and simple fabrication methods. The use of nonreinforced polymers as structure materials is restricted by their poor mechanical properties, namely strength, modulus, and impact resistance (Phiri, 2024). The reinforcement of polymers by a tight fibrous network enables the fabrication of PMCs due to their characteristics on high specific strength, high specific stiffness, high fracture resistance, good abrasion resistance, good impact resistance, good corrosion resistance, good fatigue resistance, and have a low cost (Thanikodi, 2024). Polymer composites have a wide application due to their valued of low cost and fabrication processes. Table 3 shows the application of polymer composites in different categories (Markandan, 2023).

**Table 3: Application Of Polymer Composites on Different Categories  
(Markandan, 2023)**

Categories	Applications
Automotive Industries	body panels, leaf springs, driveshaft, bumper, and doors
Aircraft Industries	Parts for military aircraft, space shuttles, and satellite systems
Marine	Fiberglass boat bodies, Canoes and Kayaks
Sports Goods	Footwear, sports equipment and other sporting goods
Biomedical	Medical implants, orthopaedic devices, MRI Scanners, X-Ray
Electrical	Panels, housing, switchgear, insulators, and connectors.
Protective Equipment	Bulletproof vests and another armor.
Industrial	Pressure vessels, pump housing, valves, Blades, and blower
Structural	Bridges, Beams and Cranes

***Deck Panel***

A deck is a flat, weight-bearing surface in architecture similar to a board, but is commonly located externally, sometimes higher from the ground, and is generally attached to a structure. Composite decking is a combination of two components, usually wood pulp and recycled material such as water bottles or plastic bags, that has come on the market in response to environmental and longevity issues (Jamal, 2024). Proponents of composite decking have welcomed this as a much-needed advancement as to reduce tree logging for new decks.

**Methodology**

The PEFB fibers and LPDE plastic waste were used as the raw material for PEFB/LDPE polymer composites into deck panel application. The preparation of samples was involved the different compositions of PEFB fibers reinforced LPDE plastic waste mixed with epoxy resin and hardener. Figure 1 shows the PEFB fibers, LDPE plastic waste, Epoxy resin (DER-331) and hardener (Jointment 905-3S). The PEFB fibers includes cellulose, hemicellulose, and lignocellulose chemical blocks and is currently used as a biofuel, fertilizer, and compost production, but its future use is undefined (Faizi, 2019).

From the previous study, the mechanical and physical properties of PEFB fiber are listed in Table 1. The use of cellulose as a polymer has received many attentions because it contains non-toxic materials, which is biodegradable that does not emit any pollutants into the atmosphere. Low-density polyethylene (LDPE) plastic waste was collected and repurposed to create new and useful plastic items through the plastic recycling process. The recycling process is the most effective method for dealing with waste polymer products that are not harmful to the environment (Ojo, 2023).



**Figure 1: (a) PEFB Fibers (b) LDPE Plastic Waste (c) Epoxy Resin (DER-331) (d) Hardener (Jointment 905-3S)**

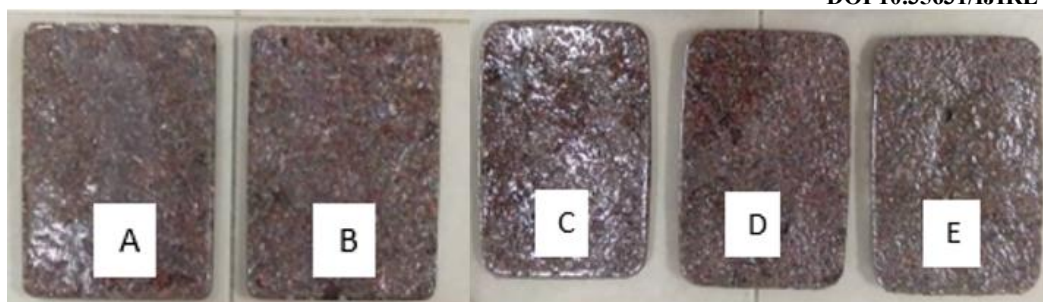
Epoxy resin is a type of resin with stiff mechanical properties, good chemical resistance, and high adhesive strength, which make it extremely useful for a wide variety of applications and was utilized as convertible coatings in the paint industry (Lu, 2022). Meanwhile, A hardener is a substance that is added to many kinds of mixtures and it is used in certain mixtures to maximize the resilience of the mixture until it has been set (Achmad, 2021). During the mixing phase, a hardener may be either a reactant or a catalyst in the chemical reaction. The preparation of samples was involved the different compositions of PEFB fibers reinforced LPDE plastic waste mixed with epoxy resin and hardener. The composition ratio of PEFB/LDPE polymer composite as referred to Table 4.

The sample preparation processes were involved drying process, grinding process, refining process, weighting process, mixing process and curing process. The PEFB fiber was dried for five days at a temperature of 30°C to eliminate any moisture content from the PEFB fibers and ensure the quality of the fibers sustain and were grinded using an 18000 rpm of the high-speed grinder into a fine stack of fiber strands with a PEFB fibers size of  $3.0 - 5.0 \pm 0.05$  mm. Then, the PEFB fibers were refined to  $0.5 - 1.5 \pm 0.05$  mm of particle size and were weighted based on the composition ratios using an analytical balance. The epoxy resin and hardener were mixed with a ratio of 3:1 to form a matrix and the mixture was poured into a mold with a  $10.0 \pm 0.05$  mm thickness. Next, the curing time was approximately 48 hours at a room temperature of 25°C. After the curing time, the PEFB/LDPE polymer composites was removed from the mold. Figure 2 shows the different composition ratios of PEFB/LDPE polymer composites.

**Table 4: Mechanical and Physical Properties of PEFB fibers**

Sample	Ratio of PEFB fiber	Ratio of LDPE plastic waste	Ratio of epoxy resin and hardener
A	0.1	0.2	3:1
B	0.2	0.2	3:1
C	0.3	0.2	3:1
D	0.4	0.2	3:1
E	0.5	0.2	3:1



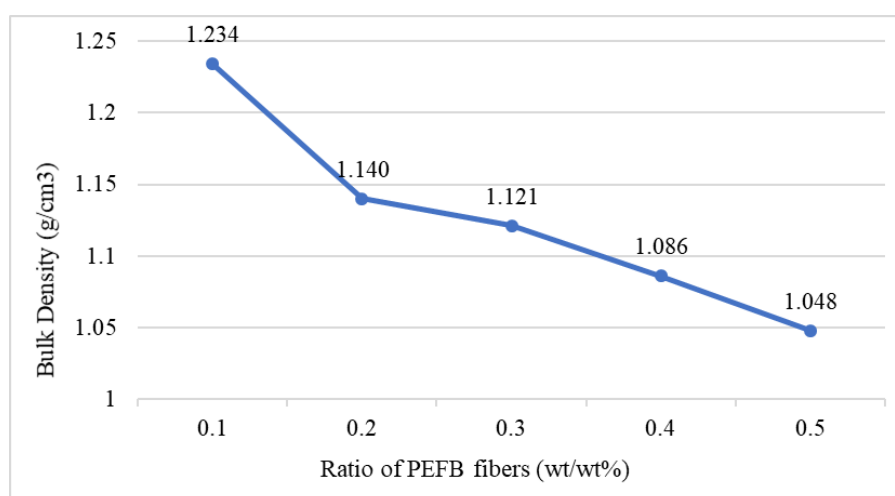


**Figure 2: The Different Composition Ratio of PEFB/LDPE Polymer Composites Sample (A) 0.1, (B) 0.2, (C) 0.3, (D) 0.4, (E) 0.5 (wt/wt%)**

## Results and Discussions

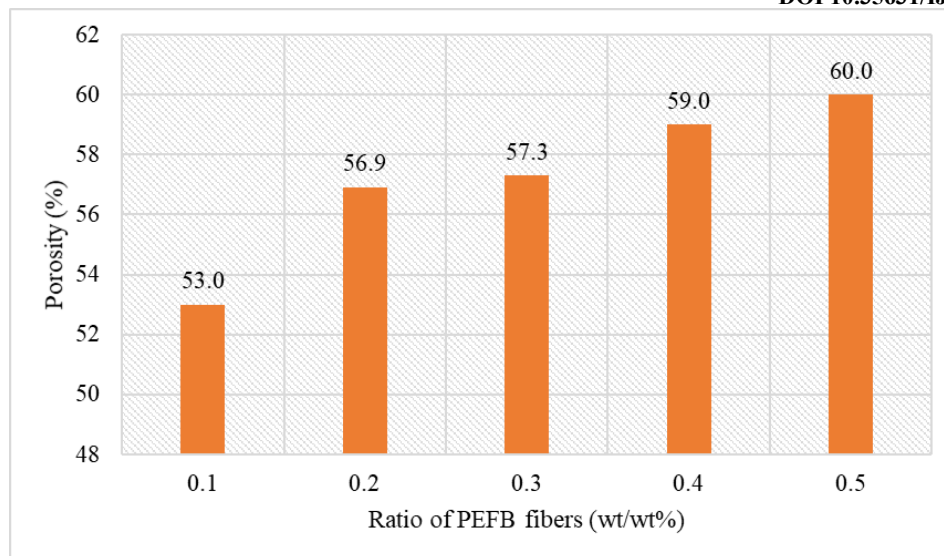
### *Density and Porosity Analysis*

The result revealed that the density decreased as the PEFB fibers ratios increased, as shown in Figure 3. The lowest density was  $1.048 \text{ g/cm}^3$  at the highest PEFB fibers ratio of 0.5 (wt/wt%), while the highest density was  $1.234 \text{ g/cm}^3$  at the lowest PEFB ratio of 0.1 (wt/wt%). A previous study on the characteristics of PEFB composites board reported a density and porosity test as a water absorption test. The greater the amount of resin in a material mixture, the less water absorption into the sample. Thus, the higher the resin applied, the lesser the pores observed (Nayyab, 2024). Therefore, the presence of PEFB fibers as fillers in the matrix reduces the sample density and makes it lightweight.



**Figure 3: Density With Different Ratio of PEFB Fibers Reinforced LDPE Plastic Waste into Polymer Composites for Deck Panel Application**

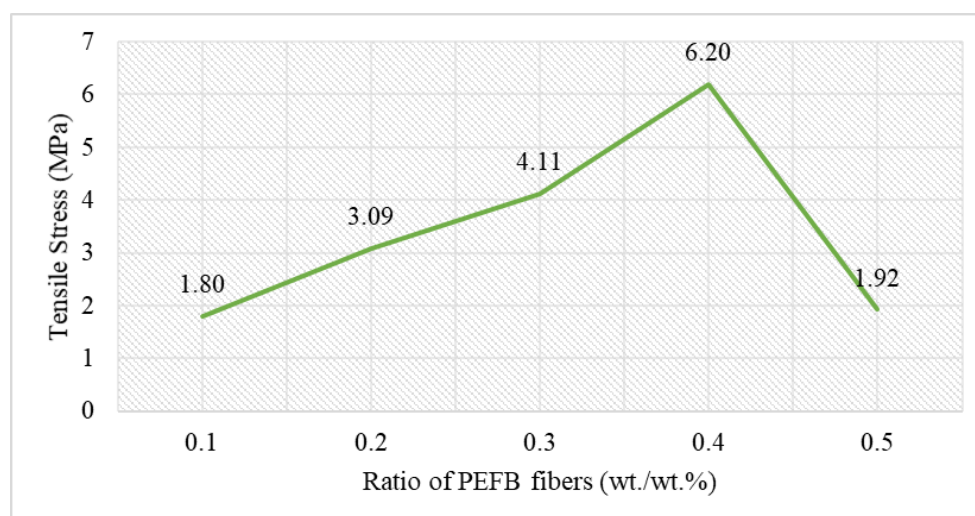
Figure 4 shows that the porosity of all samples was in an ascending trend as the ratio of PEFB fibers increased from 0.1, 0.2, 0.3, 0.4, and 0.5 (wt/wt%). The lowest apparent porosity is 53.0% at the lowest ratio 0.1 (wt/wt%) and a 0.5 (wt/wt%) of PEFB fibers resulting in the higher percentage of porosity apparent of 60.0%. Therefore, the study revealed that the higher the amount of PEFB fibers, the greater the appearance of the porosity in the polymer composites. A result from previous revealed that higher surface density leads to a denser fibrous network with a low porosity rate, and longer fiber reduces the total amount of fibers while increasing pore size (Ichim, 2024).



**Figure 4: The Percentages of Apparent Porosity in Polymer Composites Sample**

### ***Tensile Strength Analysis***

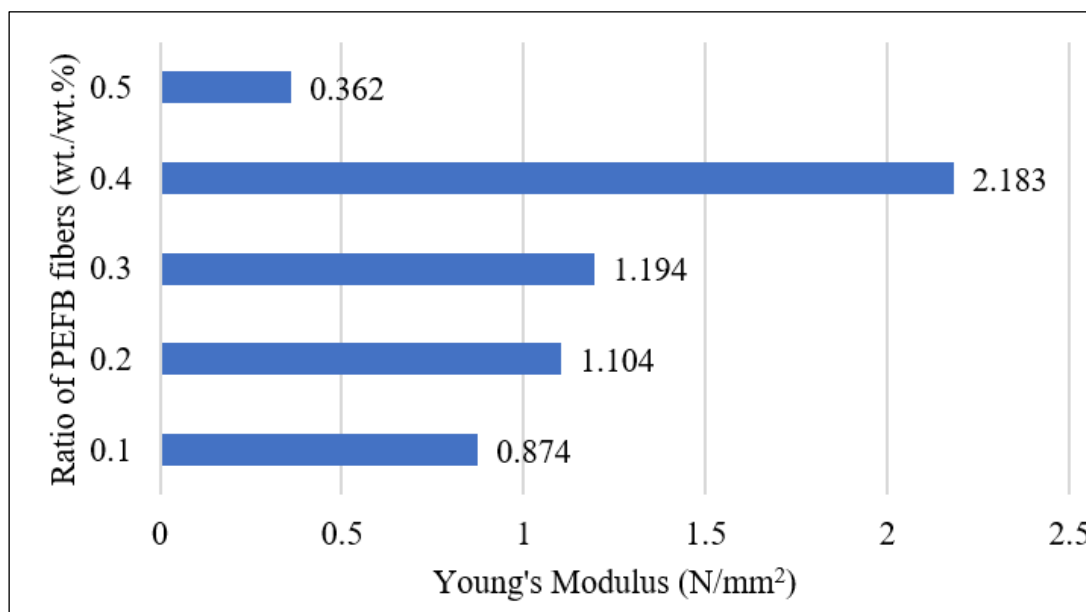
The tensile strength grew that as the weight of the filler grew due to a filler matrix bonding that is stronger than most composites with less filler strength, a medium quantity of filler loading provides the maximum tensile strength. A previous study on coir fiber reinforced polyester composites revealed that optimal composite strength required a substantially higher number of fibers in a sample than the epoxy sample (Jamal, 2024). It is highlighted that a larger fiber aspect ratio can transmit the load more efficiently. Figure 5 shows that Sample D with a ratio 0.4 (wt/wt%) had the highest tensile stress of 6.20 MPa, the highest load value of 360.89 N at a peak elongation of 2.84 mm. Where, the lowest tensile strength at a 0.1 (wt/wt%) ratio of PEFB fibers, which tolerates the lowest load value of 123.96 N with a tensile stress of 1.80 MPa and had elongate to 2.06 mm at peak. Since epoxy is brittle, which reduces its ability to absorb impact energy. Therefore, a filler matrix bonding that is stronger than most composites with less filler strength, a medium quantity of filler loading provides the maximum tensile strength (Shah, 2020).



**Figure 5: Tensile Strength with Different Ratio of PEFB Fibers**

### ***Young's Modulus Analysis***

The result shows that 0.4 wt/wt% of PEFB gives the higher the tensile of materials, the higher the young's modulus of materials. Elastic modulus measures a material's resistance to tensile load as the corresponding stress-strain relationship expects the material's stiffness (Rajakumar, 2022). It is sufficient to prove the tensile strength and young's modulus rise when the composite material stiffens (Serra-Parareda, 2021). That is, it can withstand more load and so deforms less. As a result, a material or structure with a significant volume and a low modulus of elasticity has a high impact strength because stresses must be transmitted uniformly throughout the object. Figure 6 shows the young's modulus ( $\text{N/mm}^2$ ) for different composition ratios of PEFB/LDPE polymer composites samples, where ratio of 0.4 (wt/wt%) has 2.83  $\text{N/mm}^2$  of Young's modulus.



**Figure 6: Young's Modulus with Different Ratio of PEFB fibers**

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