

GOING WITH THE FLOW

Harnessing Social Norms for Reusable Water Bottle Adoption

AUTHOR
Amelie Gahagan*, Program on the Environment,
Foster School of Business, University of Washington

SITE SUPERVISOR
Liesel Hans, Alliance for Water Efficiency

FACULTY ADVISOR
Sergey Rabotyagov, School of Environmental and
Forest Sciences, University of Washington

Background



Single-use (PET) bottles pose risks to human and wildlife health by leaching microplastics and contributing to climate change.



Recycling degrades plastic over time, simply delaying disposal, which emphasizes the need for reusability in achieving zero waste.



Social norms, the unwritten rules that dictate how people in a society should behave, can effectively promote engagement in pro-environmental behaviors.

Research Question

What social norms exist regarding reusable water bottles versus single-use alternatives among environmentally focused University of Washington students?

Internship & Methods



Wrote a **literature review** for my remote internship with the Alliance for Water Efficiency, exploring decision-making psychology to promote water-efficient behaviors



Conducted an **online survey** of UW students in environmentally related fields about their and their peers' water bottle usage

Results

Of 45 surveyed students in Biological Sciences, Environmental Sciences, and Environmental Studies majors...

100% agreed that using a reusable bottle is trendy and more socially acceptable on campus.

80% believe that reusable water bottle users are more environmentally aware (Figure 1).

Conformity to social norms did not vary significantly among different demographic groups, such as living situation and gender.

Compared to single-use water bottle users, people who drink water from reusable bottles are _____.

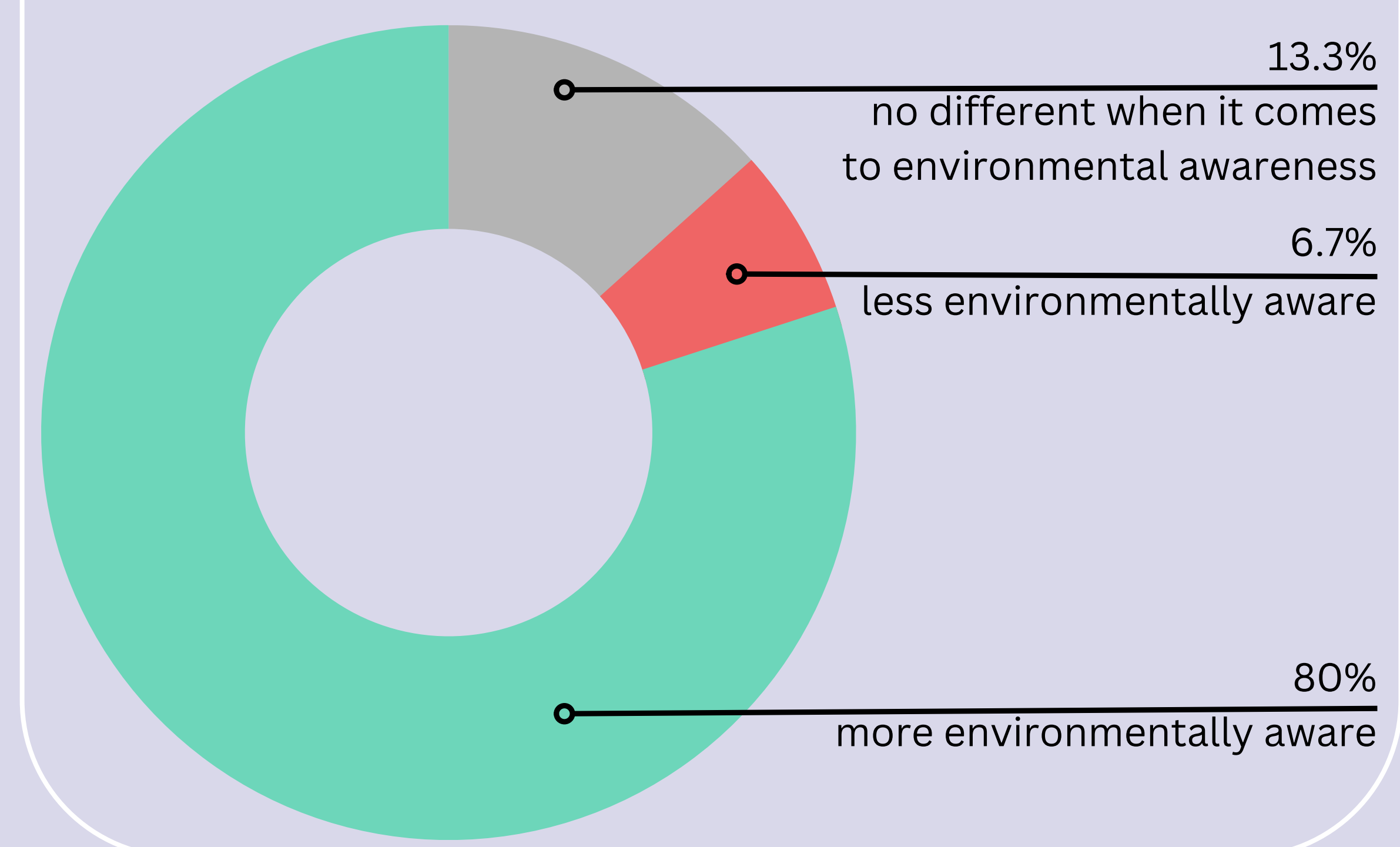


Figure 1. The percentage breakdown of responses to a question from the online survey.

Significance

1 Changing Individual Behavior
Advertising to raise awareness about the trend of using reusable water bottles can promote their usage. Those who wish to be viewed as environmentally aware may be more inclined to transition to reusable bottles given these results.

2 Influencing Decision-Makers
The results are advocacy tools to convince decision-makers, in public and private sectors, to support initiatives that encourage reusable water bottle use. Proof that students are in consensus can push policy.

3 Laying Groundwork for Future Studies
My research serves as a blueprint and comparison aid for further research at various universities and in different majors. It also sets the groundwork for exploring norms related to other eco-friendly behaviors like using a reusable coffee mug or bag.

Acknowledgements



Special thanks to Sergey Rabtyagov for the mentorship, Liesel Hans for the support, Rhea Shinde for the teamwork, and friends and family for the love.