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A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY ON PERCEPTIONS AND HABITS REGARDING SINGLE-USE PLASTICS AT THE HIGH SCHOOL FOR GIFTED STUDENTS, UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCES, HUE UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the perception and habits regarding single-use plastics (SUPs) among students at the High School for Gifted Students, University of Sciences, Hue University (HUSC's HFGS). Using a descriptive approach, data were collected from 151 students via questionnaires and field observations. Findings indicated that although 85.4% of the students possessed a high awareness of SUPs and 72.8% were aware of the eco-friendly substitutes, the usage was still high due to convenience, availability, and price factors. Plastic bags, foam containers, and plastic bottles were frequently used items, and habit loops were perpetuated by time constraints and no other options. Despite these barriers, 85.5% of students expressed willingness to switch to alternatives if they were accessible and convenient. Students were in favor of supportive actions, including promotional activities (82.1%), providing reusable items (77.5%), and incentivization (74.2%), in contrast to only 37.7% in support of a complete ban. The study underscores the need for collaboration among schools, businesses, and students to address practical barriers and foster sustainable habits. Suggested interventions comprise raising awareness, investment in infrastructure, and incentives to support the sustained change of behavior. This approach may serve as a replicable framework for educational institutions across the region.

Keywords: Single-use plastics, high school students, plastic waste reduction.

1. INTRODUCTION

Plastic pollution, particularly from single-use plastics (SUPs), poses a growing threat to the environment, with approximately 300 million tons of plastic waste

discharged globally each year, half of which is SUPs [1]. These include straws, plastic bags, and bottles, decompose into microplastics over centuries, causing long-term ecological harm [2]. In Vietnam, the issue is equally pressing, with 1.8 million tons of plastic waste generated annually, of which only 27% is recycled [3]. Schools, as key institutions shaping future generations, are critical in fostering awareness and action to reduce SUPs. High school students, with their capacity to learn sustainable practices and influence their families and communities, are pivotal agents of change [4, 5].

As one of the leading institutions in Central Vietnam, the school is able to attract students who are academically gifted and able to uptake and disseminate environmental knowledge efficiently [6]. Its active involvement in programs such as the WWF-supported project of "Hue – Plastic Smart Cities in Central Vietnam" demonstrates its readiness to engage in plastic reduction efforts. Additionally, the school's advanced facilities and progressive educational environment provide a conducive setting for testing and scaling solutions to reduce plastic waste.

It should be noted that this study only considers perceptions and habits rather than general behaviours. Therefore, it does not use inferential statistics or the regression modeling commonly used in behavioral research. The research adopts a purely descriptive approach, aiming to capture observable usage patterns and levels of awareness among students. Furthermore, since the study emphasizes habitual practices and perception, rather than theoretical behavior change processes, no theoretical framework such as the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) or the Knowledge–Attitude–Practice (KAP) model is applied.

To better understand students' perceptions and habits regarding SUPs, this study addresses the following questions: (1) What is the current level of awareness and knowledge among high school students regarding the environmental impacts of SUPs? (2) What are the students' attitudes toward reducing the use of SUPs and participating in plastic waste reduction initiatives? (3) What are the prevailing habits and usage patterns of SUPs among students? (4) What are the key factors influencing students' continued use of SUPs? (5) What types of interventions do students perceive as effective and feasible in reducing SUP consumption in the school context? Answers to these questions will generate evidence-based insights for developing effective, scalable strategies to reduce plastic waste in educational environments.

2. METHODS

2.1. Secondary data and information collection method

This method is implemented based on the selective inheritance, analysis, and synthesis of information and data sources related to the research problem. The purpose

of this method is to collect data as a basis for scientific theory, helping to identify and develop criteria for the survey.

In this study, data related to the theory of plastic waste in general, the use of SUPs, and the level of generation, awareness, attitudes, and habits towards SUPs in Vietnam and around the world will be collected and analyzed.

2.2. Field survey method

A field survey, conducted from February to 2025, is an essential method before conducting this study, involving:

- Observing and investigating the current status of sources of generation and collection of waste in areas with large sources of plastic waste, such as canteens, break areas, schoolyards, etc.

- Observing the habits of using and disposing of SUPs of students at school.

The results of field observations are the basis for providing information about the research area, at the same time, collecting opinions from school leaders and related departments to better understand the actual conditions and help determine appropriate criteria for building a survey questionnaire.

2.3. Questionnaire survey method

This study used a questionnaire to interview students at the High School for Gifted Students, University of Sciences, Hue University (HUSC's HFGS). The sample size was calculated according to formula (1) of Yamane (1967) [7]. A 7% margin of error and default confidence level of 95% were chosen to balance accuracy and feasibility, given the study's resource constraints.

$$n = N / (1+N \times e^2) \qquad (1)$$

In which: n: Survey sample size. N: Total number of students at the HUSC's HFGS. With "N" being 580 students and "e" being 7%, the sample size calculated according to formula (1) is 151. The sample was selected using a stratified random method, with the strata being grades 10, 11, and 12.

The questionnaire development process was carried out in three steps:

1) Constructing the question framework based on the research objectives. The items were categorized into three main groups: types of SUPs and frequency of use, awareness, and attitudes & habits.

2) Designing a five-point Likert scale, based on its widespread application in environmental behavior studies, such as Oguge et al. (2021) [8]. The Likert scale enabled nuanced responses, allowing the measurement of varying levels of agreement, frequency, and willingness.

3) Validation and pilot testing: Content validity was assessed using the Content Validity Index (CVI), with a minimum threshold of ≥ 0.80. A pilot survey with 30 students was also conducted to verify the comprehensibility and practical relevance of the questions, allowing final adjustments before the main data collection.

2.4. Data processing method

The information and survey data collected through questionnaires were systematically compiled, organized, and analyzed using Microsoft Excel 2016. This process aimed to evaluate the current status of SUP usage, as well as the awareness, attitudes, and habits of students at the HUSC's HFGS.

To provide a comprehensive overview of the findings, descriptive statistical methods were applied. These included frequency distributions, percentage breakdowns, and average scores to analyze key variables such as the types and frequency of SUP usage, the level of environmental awareness, and the students' attitudes and self-reported habits regarding plastic consumption and waste sorting.

The descriptive approach allowed for a clear and accessible interpretation of the data, highlighting prevailing patterns and areas of concern within the target student population.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Students' awareness of single-use plastics

3.1.1. Knowledge related to single-use plastics

The survey results show that 85.4% of 151 students of the survey school (equivalent to 129 students) recognize SUPs. This rate shows that the majority of students have good basic awareness of this common environmental issue. This finding aligns with and diverges from previous research on youth perception and habits toward SUPs. Oguge et al. (2021) investigated the knowledge and attitudes of youth in Nairobi, Kenya. They found that 78% of respondents were aware of the environmental impacts of plastic pollution, slightly lower than the 85.4% awareness rate among students of the HUSC's HFGS [8].

Students not only correctly identify the concept but also give many specific examples, such as plastic cups, straws, plastic bags, foam boxes, etc. This shows that their knowledge is linked to real life, not just limited to theory. However, 14.6% of students still do not understand this topic clearly - a group that needs to be addressed through visual, accessible educational programs to raise awareness and support the formation of plastic waste reduction behaviors.

The survey results also showed that 72.8% of students (110/151) knew about plastic alternatives, which is 12.6 percentage points lower than the 85.4% who understood SUPs. This shows that many students are aware of the problem but are not clear about the solutions. Students mainly mentioned reusable products such as cloth bags, water bottles, metal straws, or environmentally friendly materials such as paper cups, sugarcane bagasse boxes. However, some still chose SUPs, showing confusion between "material alternatives" and "sustainable solutions". More than 27% of students (41 individuals) did not know any alternative products.

To overcome the above-noted issues, it is necessary to increase clear communication, distinguish between types of solutions (reuse, biodegradation), and emphasize convenience and environmental benefits to promote habitual change.

3.1.2. Perceptions of the negative impacts of single-use plastic products

The survey results presented in Table 1 show that students have a good understanding of the risks of using SUPs at high temperatures. They strongly agree with the recommendations to avoid using foam containers or plastic bags for hot food and drinks, and are aware of the potential toxicity of colored plastic bags. Students also reject the misconception that all plastic containers or food wraps are safe to use in the microwave, demonstrating a clear awareness of food safety.

Table 1. Students' level of agreement on warnings and safety habits when using SUPs

Description	**Agreement level (%)**					**Mean score**	**Standard deviation (SD)**
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**		
We should not reuse plastic cups, bowls, plates, etc. for holding food and drinks.	5.3	10.6	19.9	29.8	34.4	3.77	±1.18
We should not reuse PET bottles for holding drinks and food, especially hot items.	4.0	5.3	19.2	38.4	33.1	3.91	±1.043
We should not use any plastic bags for holding food and hot drinks.	2.6	6.6	20.5	29.1	41.1	3.99	±1.055
Colored plastic bags may have high toxicity when used to hold food and drinks.	2.0	5.3	17.2	27.2	48.3	4.15	±1.013
We should not use foam boxes to hold hot food.	2.0	2.6	10.6	35.1	49.7	4.28	±0.9

All types of plastic containers can be used in microwave ovens.	47.7	23.2	5.3	7.9	15.9	2.21	±1.494
All types of food wrapping films can be used in microwave ovens.	34.4	28.5	13.2	9.3	14.6	2.41	±1.411

Note: *1- Strongly disagree; 2- Disagree; 3- Neutral; 4- Agree; 5- Strongly agree.*

However, understanding that SUP items, such as PET bottles or plastic cups and bowls, should not be reused is less clear. Many students are also uncertain about the risks of reusing, especially with cold food and drinks. This suggests that more education is needed about the risks of bacterial accumulation, material degradation, and chemical leaching from reused plastics to help students make safer decisions.

3.2. Students' attitudes towards SUPs

3.2.1. Reasons for using SUPs

Figure 1 shows the main reasons why students use SUPs, mainly due to practical factors in daily consumption behaviour. "Convenience" and "easy to buy, easy to use" are the two most common reasons, reflecting the outstanding features of this product: no preparation required, easy to use, and no need to clean, suitable for students' busy lifestyles. In addition, the availability in many places, such as shops, restaurants, and delivery apps, further increases the level of access and dependence.

Notably, very few students used it due to a lack of awareness, indicating that the main barrier is not knowledge but practical factors such as price, convenience, and accessibility. Therefore, solutions should focus on reducing barriers to switching to alternative products, rather than just raising awareness.

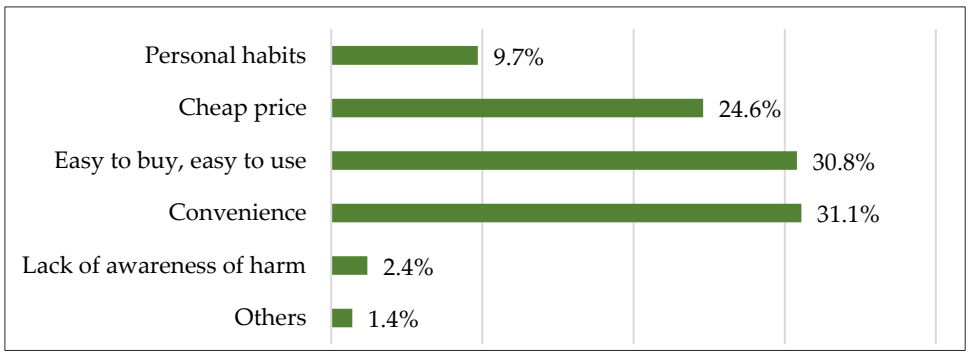

Figure 1. Reasons for students' use of SUPs

3.2.2. Willingness to give up using SUPs

Figure 2 shows that the majority of students have a positive attitude and are willing to give up SUPs if there are viable alternatives such as glass cups, stainless steel straws, or stainless steel boxes. Specifically, 85.5% of students are very willing or

willing, indicating that they want to act for the environment but still face barriers in terms of convenience, cost, and habits.

The proportion of students who are not willing is very low, indicating that the general trend is positive and can be transformed into action if there is appropriate support from schools, families, and the distribution system.

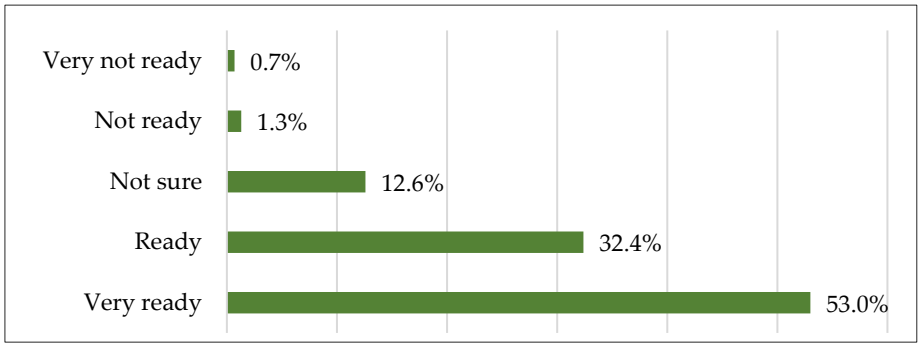

Figure 2. Students' willingness to give up SUPs

3.2.3. Willingness to participate in communication and education activities to raise awareness about plastic waste

The majority of students (97.4%) not only support these activities but are also willing to directly participate in activities to raise awareness about plastic waste, with 129 students (85.4%) answering "Yes". Although slightly lower than the support level, this figure indicates significant potential for student mobilization through volunteer teams, environmental clubs, and self-organized outreach events. Such participation serves a dual purpose: effectively amplifying environmental messages while providing students with valuable skill-building opportunities and deepening their commitment to environmental protection

On the other hand, 22 students (14.6%) are still reluctant to participate. This rate somewhat corresponds to the hesitant group in Figure 2, showing that they are less likely to change their behavior. The reason may be due to a lack of time, feeling that the activity is not practical, or not suitable for their interests. Therefore, it is necessary to design creative, flexible, and effective activities to attract this group.

3.3. Students' usage habits of single-use plastics

3.3.1. Frequency of using different types of single-use plastics

The frequency of using SUPs by students is presented in Table 2, showing a high dependence on plastic bags, foam boxes, and plastic bottles. Plastic bags are used the most, mainly for shopping and storing things, becoming the main source of plastic waste. Foam boxes and plastic bottles are popular for take-away food, although students are aware of the harmful effects, such as the impact of foam boxes on hot

food.

Plastic straws are used at an average level, with some students limiting their use. Plastic cups, spoons, bowls, and forks have a lower frequency, indicating that they are rarely used or have alternatives. Other products, such as food wraps and snack packaging, rarely appear.

In summary, the above analysis of usage patterns suggests that intervention programs should focus on changing habits for products with the highest frequency of use, by promoting reusable alternatives (cloth bags, personal lunch boxes, water bottles, etc.) and facilitating students' adoption of them in the school context.

Table 2. Usage frequency of SUPs by students

SUPs	Usage frequency (%)					Mean score	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		
Plastic bottle	0	20.5	39.7	25.8	13.9	3.33	±0.954
Plastic cup	7.3	43.0	25.2	14.6	9.9	2.77	±1.1
Plastic spoons, bowls, plates, etc.	5.3	55.0	21.2	12.6	6.0	2.59	±0.98
Plastic straws	4.0	31.1	30.5	26.5	7.9	3.03	±1.025
Plastic bags	1.3	15.2	24.5	32.5	26.5	3.68	±1.063
Foam food containers	5.3	15.2	34.4	27.8	17.2	3.36	±1.094
Others	0	0	0	0	0.7	5.00	±0

Note: *1- Never; 2- Rarely; 3- 1 to 2 times/week; 4- More than 3 times/week; 5- Every day.*

3.3.2. Factors influencing the use of single-use plastics

Figure 3 clearly shows common situations in which students use SUPs, suggesting several issues that need further analysis of causes and solutions. The use of plastic reflects the trend of favouring convenience in daily life, such as ordering food online, bringing food, or buying snacks. However, this convenience also makes students easily dependent on products that are difficult to decompose, contributing to the increase in plastic waste.

Plastic packaging in food service settings, such as restaurants, canteens, and street vendors, heavily influences students' consumption habits, limiting their access to eco-friendly alternatives. Lack of facilities such as drinking fountains or places to wash personal belongings is also a barrier. Therefore, it is necessary to coordinate synchronously: businesses use environmentally friendly packaging, schools strengthen

education and practical support, and students are encouraged to change their habits. Only with efforts from many sides can reducing plastic waste in the school environment be feasible.

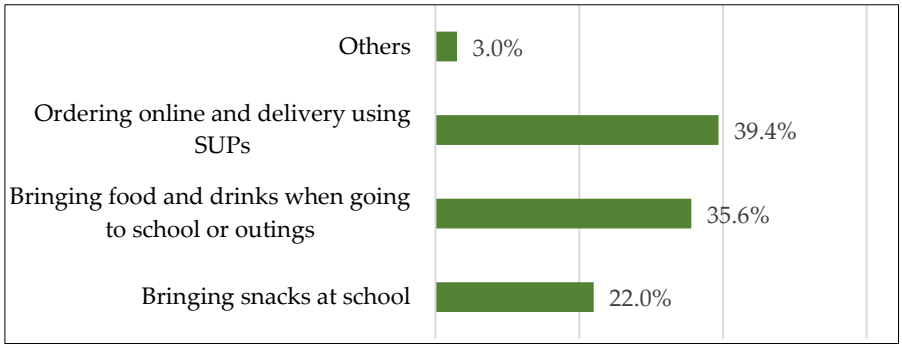

Figure 3. Students' habits of using SUPs

The survey at HUSC's HFGS shows the SUP usage habits align with Southeast Asian trends, driven by convenience and availability [10]. According to Access Partnership (2023), 88% of consumers in Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam are aware of plastic waste issues, but only 33% avoid non-recyclable packaging, similar to 85.4% of HUSC's HFGS students willing to reduce SUPs yet reliant on plastic bags and foam boxes (Figure 3). Awareness of alternative solutions (72.8%) at the school exceeds the regional average (55%). These findings also align with regional patterns in Southeast Asia. According to a UNESCO survey across five ASEAN countries in 2021, students frequently rely on SUPs due to convenience, lack of affordable alternatives, and insufficient school infrastructure [9].

3.4. Interventions aimed at decreasing SUPs usage

3.4.1. Students' opinions on solutions to reduce SUPs

Figure 4 shows the level of support students have for solutions to reduce plastic in schools. The majority of students are more inclined towards supportive and practical measures than prohibitions. The measure with the highest support is "Increasing awareness-raising campaigns about the harmful effects of plastic" (82.1%). Students not only want to access new information but also want to maintain continuous awareness to form a culture of caring for the environment. Forms of awareness-raising campaigns that are close, intuitive, and easy to access will be highly effective.

The next two solutions are "Provide alternative products" (77.5%) and "Encourage students to bring their items" (74.2%). This shows that students want schools to proactively create favorable conditions for them to access and use environmentally friendly products easily. Thus, schools could partner with local businesses and vendors to supply reusable products at subsidized rates or organize workshops to teach students how to use and maintain these alternatives.

A study by the European Commission on SUPs in educational settings reported higher willingness (92%) to adopt reusable alternatives among European students, possibly due to better access to infrastructure like drinking fountains and subsidized eco-friendly products [5]. This highlights that while awareness levels are high across contexts, the effectiveness of interventions depends on addressing practical barriers such as accessibility and affordability.

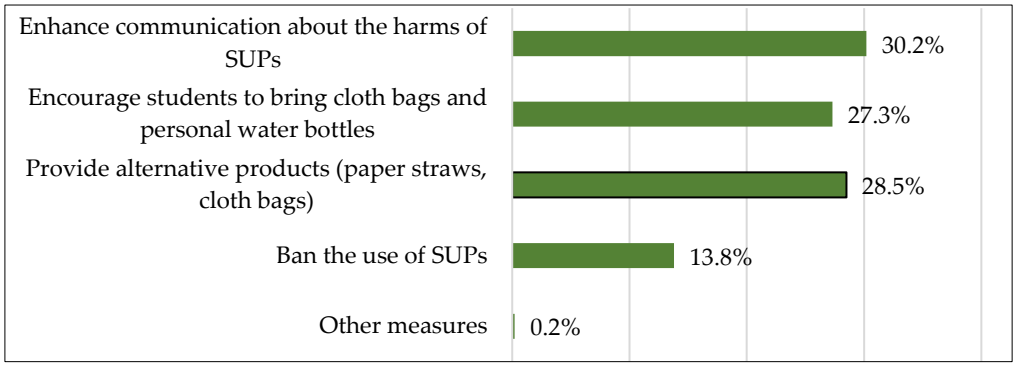

Figure 4. Measures to reduce the use of SUPs in schools

In contrast, "Completely banning SUPs" only received support from 37.7% of students. This low rate shows that students are not ready for rigid measures without adequate support. Therefore, if applied, there needs to be a clear roadmap and ensure that alternatives are truly convenient and popular.

3.4.2. Measures for reducing the usage of single-use plastics

Based on the findings in sections 3.1–3.4, the following stakeholder-specific measures are proposed to reduce SUP usage effectively within and around the school community:

The school administration can implement clear waste management policies, including source sorting in the canteen and schoolyard, to foster environmental habits. Labelled bins for recyclable plastics aid proper disposal, while a "Plastic for Rewards" program, exchanging clean SUPs for school supplies, boosts student participation.

Teachers play a crucial role in shaping environmental awareness by integrating the impacts of SUPs into subject content, organizing workshops on creating reusable items, and encouraging students to take part in green initiatives. Their guidance helps translate knowledge into consistent practice.

Students, as the primary agents of change, can contribute by joining Environmental Clubs, leading peer education efforts, and promoting responsible behaviors among classmates. Their involvement fosters a culture of environmental stewardship through peer influence and example-setting.

Local businesses, particularly canteens and shops near the school, can support

these efforts by replacing plastic packaging with biodegradable alternatives such as paper or sugarcane bagasse. Incentives like offering 5–10% discounts to students using reusable containers can further reinforce positive behavior.

Finally, **the parents and wider community** play a supportive role by contributing resources for school-based environmental programs and helping to establish plastic collection points in nearby residential areas. Reinforcing sustainable habits at home and in the neighborhood ensures that students' actions are consistently supported.

This integrated approach engages the school, educators, students, businesses, and families. It lays the foundation for long-term reductions in SUP usage and cultivates sustainable environmental habits

4. CONCLUSION

This study shows that students at HUSC's HFGS have a high level of awareness about the environmental impacts of SUPs, with 85.4% demonstrating sound knowledge and 85.5% willing to adopt alternatives. However, actual usage remains high due to convenience, accessibility, and low cost, especially for items like plastic bags, foam boxes, and bottles.

While awareness is a necessary foundation, it alone is not enough to change habits. Students favor supportive measures such as awareness campaigns, access to reusable items, and incentives, rather than outright bans. This highlights the need for interventions that are both practical and aligned with students' daily routines.

A coordinated approach involving schools, teachers, students, local businesses, and families is essential. Educational programs, infrastructure improvements, and behavior-based incentives can together foster long-term reductions in SUP use and promote sustainable habits. Schools thus have a vital role as catalysts for change in building a plastic-smart generation.

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NGHIÊN CỨU MÔ TẢ VỀ NHẬN THỨC VÀ THÓI QUEN SỬ DỤNG NHỰA SỬ DỤNG MỘT LẦN CỦA HỌC SINH TRUNG HỌC PHỔ THÔNG CHUYÊN, TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC KHOA HỌC, ĐẠI HỌC HUẾ

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TÓM TẮT

Nghiên cứu này phục vụ cho mục đích khám phá nhận thức và thói quen liên quan đến đồ nhựa dùng một lần của học sinh tại Trường Trung học Phổ thông Chuyên, Trường Đại học Khoa học, Đại học Huế. Dữ liệu được thu thập từ 151 học sinh thông qua bảng câu hỏi, quan sát thực địa và được xử lý bằng thống kê mô tả. Kết quả cho thấy mặc dù 85,4% học sinh có nhận thức cao về đồ nhựa dùng một lần và 72,8% biết về các sản phẩm thay thế thân thiện với môi trường, nhưng tỷ lệ sử dụng vẫn còn cao do các yếu tố tiện lợi, sẵn có và giá cả. Túi ni lông, hộp xốp và chai nhựa là những vật dụng được sử dụng thường xuyên, và vòng lặp thói quen được duy trì bởi sự hạn chế về thời gian và không có lựa chọn nào khác. Bất chấp những rào cản này, 85,5% học sinh bày tỏ sự sẵn lòng chuyển sang các sản phẩm thay thế nếu chúng dễ tiếp cận và tiện lợi. Học sinh ủng hộ các hành động hỗ trợ, bao gồm các hoạt động quảng bá (82,1%), cung cấp các vật dụng có thể tái sử dụng (77,5%) và các chính sách khuyến khích (74,2%), trái ngược với 37,7% ủng hộ lệnh cấm hoàn toàn đồ nhựa dùng một lần. Nghiên cứu nhấn mạnh sự cần thiết của việc phối hợp giữa nhà trường, doanh nghiệp và học sinh để giải quyết các rào cản thực tế và thúc đẩy các thói quen bền vững. Các biện pháp can thiệp được đề xuất bao gồm nâng cao nhận thức, đầu tư vào cơ sở vật chất và các biện pháp khuyến khích để hỗ trợ sự thay đổi hành vi bền vững. Cách tiếp cận này có thể đóng vai trò như một mô hình có thể nhân rộng cho các cơ sở giáo dục trên toàn khu vực.

Từ khóa: Đồ nhựa dùng một lần, học sinh trung học phổ thông, giảm thiểu rác thải nhựa.

Lê Thị Phương Chi sinh ngày 26/01/1975 tại thành phố Huế. Bà tốt nghiệp Cử nhân ngành Địa lý Môi trường năm 1997 tại Trường Đại học Khoa học, ĐH Huế và tốt nghiệp Thạc sĩ Khoa học Môi trường năm 2002 tại Trường Đại học Khoa học Tự nhiên, Đại học Quốc gia Hà Nội.

Lĩnh vực chuyên môn: Luật và chính sách môi trường, Quản lý môi trường doanh nghiệp.

Phan Thị Nha sinh ngày 26/01/1975 tại Quảng Trị. Cô hiện đang là sinh viên năm cuối thuộc ngành Khoa học Môi trường, Khoa Môi trường, Trường ĐH Khoa học, ĐH Huế.

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Lĩnh vực nghiên cứu: Quản lý môi trường, Du lịch sinh thái, Quản lý nhu cầu tài nguyên, Năng lượng tái tạo.