

# Why do McMaster Students opt to use Single-use Coffee Cups?

SUSTAIN 4S06 – Leadership in Sustainability

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SUSTAIN 4S06 student researchers holding their reusable mugs in the MSU Market after receiving the \$0.25 BYOM discount.

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## Overview

By 2060, emissions from single-use plastics are set to more than double, resulting in the annual emission of 4.3 billion tonnes of greenhouse gases [1]. Plastic-lined single-use coffee cups contribute to these plastic emissions as Canadians throw out approximately 1.5 billion disposable coffee cups each year [2]. Local actions have been taken by McMaster University to minimize waste, but initiatives like the program, “Bring Your Own Mug,” offering students a \$0.25 discount for bringing their own mug, have had little success [3]. Our study aims to understand the motivations behind students choosing single-use cups on campus. Our findings and data-driven recommendations intend to inspire sustainable behaviour change by encouraging students to reconsider their own climate actions, reduce waste generation through prevention, and reduce overall overconsumption of plastics.

## Objectives

1. Conduct interviews to understand students’ motivations behind using single-use cups.
2. Analyze interviews to highlight appropriate themes in the data.
3. Research and develop recommendations to reduce single-use cup consumption.

## Reporting

To achieve our first objective, we conducted 19 individual interviews with McMaster students. We asked open-ended questions seeking insight on their thoughts, beliefs, and experiences using and purchasing single-use cups on campus.

To achieve our second objective, we conducted thematic analysis and identified two themes in our data, convenience and awareness. Convenience had subthemes of being readily available, “When people want a coffee, they want a coffee... I didn’t know I was going to get [a coffee] today. I just decided”, and lack of responsibility, “[it is a] hassle to carry a reusable mug after it’s empty”. Awareness had subthemes of unawareness, “I know they [cups] are bad, but I don’t know exactly how terrible...” and confusion of disposal, “there [is] not always recycling easily available”. The latter comment signalling a lack of awareness that coffee cups are not recyclable.

Concluding our project, we conducted primary research to develop recommendations, and presented our suggestions to McMaster University’s Hospitality Services Marketing and Wellness Committee. Our suggestions included strategies to influence behaviour change through nudge policy and social influence, such as having “people of power” (i.e. Professors or student leaders) carry mugs, participating in the BYOM program. We also proposed a Mug as you Go Pilot Program, where first-year students can “rent” a mug and return it when they are done. These recommendations aim to promote pro-environmental behaviour and address barriers to using reusable mugs that students perceive and experience at McMaster.

## Collaborators

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