

CASE STUDY

# Rent Your Cup: A Consumer-focused Behavioral Approach to Reducing Single-Use Plastics in Lao PDR



## Challenge

Across Lao PDR, rapid growth in café culture and takeaway beverage consumption has normalized the widespread use of single-use plastic cups, lids, and straws. Businesses prioritize convenience and speed, while consumers have come to expect disposable packaging as the default.

This system creates significant plastic waste, particularly in urban and tourism-heavy areas such as Vientiane, Vang Vieng, and Luang Prabang, compounded by insufficient and still emerging waste management systems. Despite rising environmental awareness among younger, urban consumers, there are limited convenient alternatives that fit seamlessly into existing and emerging consumption habits.

The core challenge, therefore, is not just awareness — but shifting an entrenched default behavior toward reuse in a way that is easy, attractive, and socially accepted.

## Targeted Behavior

This case focuses primarily on consumers as the core actors, and their use and return of rental cups over single-use plastic cups as the target behavior.

## Behavioral Solution

[Econox Laos](#) designed **Rent Your Cup (Sao-Jork-Jao)** as a circular service system embedded directly into existing café experiences. Key components included:

### Choice Architecture

A QR-code-enabled rental system **simplified** the process of borrowing and returning stainless steel cups, reducing **friction** in adopting reuse.

### Emotional Appeals

Cups featured **traditional** Lao motifs, increasing their aesthetic and cultural value.

### Material Incentives

**Deposit-refund systems** and small discounts (2,000–3,000 LAK) encouraged participation.

### Social Influence & Information

Café staff training, certification programs, and visible promotional campaigns positioned reuse as **modern, responsible, and socially desirable**.

Together, these elements aimed to reframe “reuse” from an inconvenience into a culturally resonant and accessible lifestyle choice.

## Results

Early implementation data reveals both promising adoption and critical system challenges:

- **125 total rentals recorded** across 13 participating cafés during the pilot phase
- **14 cups returned** (11.2% return rate)
- **19 repeat users** adopting the system

The relatively low return rate indicates that while initial uptake is occurring, the circular system is not yet functioning as intended. However, repeat usage suggests early signs of habit formation among a subset of users.

Survey data indicates strong stated motivation:

- **86.6% of users cited reducing plastic waste as their primary reason for participation**
- Cafés emerged as the most likely future use location (61%), indicating alignment with existing routines.

However, these data should be interpreted with caution given the known gap between stated and actual drivers of behavior. In practice, participation is also likely influenced by a combination of factors such as cost savings, social signaling, convenience, and habit, which may not be fully captured through self-reported responses.

Notably, return rates improved over time (from 5.9% to 11.2%), suggesting that familiarity may gradually strengthen compliance.



Photo Credit: Econox Laos.

## The Science: When incentives reveal values, not just behaviors

At first glance, the low return rate may appear to signal a breakdown in the incentive structure. However, from a behavioral science perspective, this outcome provides a powerful insight: with this consumer group and this target behavior, incentives do not operate in isolation. Rather, consumers appear to be interacting with identity, values, and meaning.

Many users chose to keep the stainless-steel cups rather than return them for a financial deposit, indicating that the cups held value beyond their monetary cost.

This behavior suggests several key dynamics:

- **Emotional and symbolic value overrode financial incentives:** The culturally distinctive Lao designs transformed the cups into desirable objects, and potentially even souvenirs, rather than purely functional items.
- **Identity and pride are behavioral drivers:** The cups may tap into a sense of Lao cultural pride or modern environmental identity. When people perceive an object as a representation of who they are, or even who they aspire to be, they are more likely to retain it.
- **Perceived value and convenience trade-offs matter:** Users may perceive the value of the cup to exceed the deposit required to return it, making it attractive to keep, while relatively low disincentives and the inconvenience of returning cups (e.g., limited return locations or travel constraints) further reduce return rates; this is likely reinforced by the cup's aesthetic and cultural appeal, which enhances its desirability beyond purely functional use.
- **Intermediate insights indicate alternative use pathways:** Rather than focusing solely on low return rates, emerging patterns suggest that some users may retain and continue reusing the cups independently, indicating an alternative pathway to reducing single-use plastics. This behavior points to an opportunity to design for both return-based and ownership-based models, where continued reuse by individuals could also reduce operational burdens, such as cleaning and redistribution, while still achieving environmental outcomes.

This aligns with broader behavioral science findings: material incentives are most effective when they reinforce — rather than compete with — emotional and social drivers.

In future iterations, combining:

- Stronger social norms around returning cups,
- Expanded and convenient return infrastructure, and
- Identity-based messaging tailored to different relevant user groups (e.g., residents or tourists) could help realign the system toward circularity while preserving the emotional appeal that drives adoption.

## Acknowledgments

This project was implemented through collaboration between [Econox Laos](#), participating café partners, and users who helped drive the Rent Your Cup system, with support from [Rare](#), the [Institute for Global Environmental Studies](#) (IGES) and the [Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia](#) (ERIA) under the [Regional Knowledge Centre for Marine Plastic Debris](#).

