

Did You Fall For The Cute Animals On the New Recycling Bins?

Who doesn't love cute animals? Perhaps you saw the cute puppies, baby elephants, squirrels and seals on recycling bins in the LSK and residence hall buildings? Researchers suggest that "cute" things produce positive feelings, regardless of how you define it. But what exactly is their influence on behavior? That is what we wanted to find out.

The Recycling Bin Cuteness Study was conducted by HKUST's Prof Anirban Mukhopadhyay of the Marketing department, along with PhD graduate student, Tingting Wang, who designed and implemented the study. The Sustainability Unit coordinated the activities over the course of nine weeks from March until early May.



Figure 1: The lead researchers at work with the new bins.



Thanks to the generous support of Hang Seng Bank and their sponsorship of the Green Ambassador Program, 52 sets of new tailor-made recycling bins were placed in social, high traffic, and high visibility areas of the Lee Shau Kee Business Building (LSK) and every common room in UG Halls I, II, VIII and IX. The project aimed to assess whether appropriately-designed visually appealing images and messages on recycling bins would have an incremental effect on the amount of recycling at these locations.



Figure 2: Example of a cute "Active" message and design.

Four sets of cute animal posters with active and passive visuals and messages were designed and installed on bins in different locations. For example, the passive messages displayed stationary cute animals, with passive slogans like, "Please Recycle." In contrast, the active messages displayed dynamic cute animals and featured calls to action, such as "Recycle Now!" The differences between these two types of messages were subtle,

but the researchers suspected that even such small distinctions could result in a difference in recycling behaviors large enough for us to measure.

The study started with a “Baseline Phase” where we collected data weighing the amount of recycled materials daily before the new bins were installed. This was followed by a “Control Phase” where the bins were put on location, but the cute images and slogans were not visible. Finally, in the “Experimental Phase”, the cute visuals and messages were revealed. Throughout the study, all the bags in the recycling bins were marked with unique codes and the recyclable contents were collected by cleaning staff and then weighed and recorded by student helpers and Facilities Management Office staff.

So...with all the effort 50 helpers put in, did the cute animals manage to tempt us into recycling? Take a look at the following findings:

- Over 1,200 KG of materials were recycled at our installed bins at these five locations during the study
- At LSK, the presence of the bins led to a substantial increase in recycled amounts. There was 39.23% increase in recycling per week during the study period
- At LSK, the “Active” designed bins served to further increase recycling by 9%, over and above the standard bins used in the control phase
- At the UG Halls, recycling also increased substantially from the baseline to the control phase after introducing new bins in all the common rooms



Figure 3: Marking the bags and training the cleaning staff. Getting the details right in advance was critical for the success of the study.

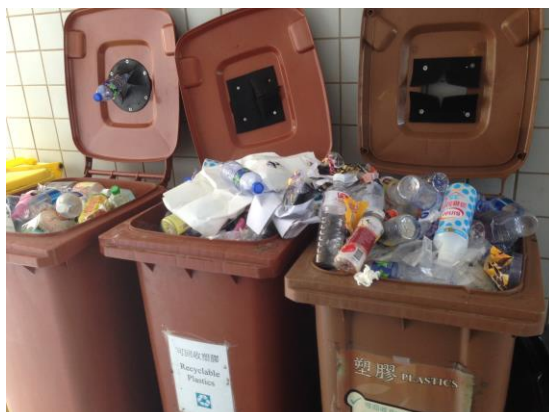


Figure 4: The outdoor recycling collection points were overflowing, even with extra containers brought in for the study period!

Even more impressively, the substantial increases in recycling behaviors resulted with no instructions, guidelines, or other signs besides the active or passive messages on the bins (of course, we needed to keep all other messages to a minimum so that we could test the “cuteness” effect). Now that the study is over, we look forward to developing new

signs and messages to help raise awareness of the importance of recycling on campus.

The study may be over, but many of the cute signs still remain. The next time you see one, you'll know a little more about what all those bins with the cute animals on them were for, and perhaps you'll take some pride in knowing that every time you recycled a can or bottle, you also furthered important behavioral research! Stay tuned to learn more about the recycling initiatives at green.ust.hk.



Figure 5: The study was successful due to the great efforts of FMO, the cleaning contractor (Wai Hong) and dedicated student helpers.