

# YOUNG PEOPLE'S AWARENESS OF CIRCULAR ECONOMY: THE CASE WITH ECONOMIC STUDENTS AT CAN THO UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

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## ABSTRACT

*Awareness precedes action. One must become aware of something before attending to it (Graziano & Webb, 2015), and then to actions. Similarly, a full awareness of the circular economy (CE) could help make its implementation in an economy more efficient. However, up to now in Vietnam, CE is still a new concept, and there have not been many studies investigating the public's awareness of CE, especially among young people. This study, using descriptive statistics with 226 survey samples of economics students at Can Tho University of Technology, will describe the current awareness of young people about CE. The results show that young people's awareness of CE is still quite low. In addition, green purchases (one of the identifying signs of CE) among young people are not yet popular and depend heavily on price factors. These results may provide good indicators to competence agencies in attempts to raise awareness and responsibility of young people about CE.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The term “circular economy” was first used in Western literature in the 1980s (Pearce & Turner 1990). Then, economies around the world have adopted the Circular Economy in their sustainable development. For example, the German government enacted “the Closed Substance Cycle and Waste Management Act” in 1996, which provided a closed cycle waste management and ensured environmentally compatible waste disposal (Su et al. 2013). Also, the Japanese government established a comprehensive legislative system to promote the creation of a recycling-oriented society through Eco-town projects in 1997 (Dong et al., 2016; Berkel et al., 2009). The Chinese government has

adopted a Circular Economy strategy to decouple economic growth, resource use, and environmental degradation since around the 2000s (Geng et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2009).

Not surprisingly, the circular economy is a very new concept in Vietnam (Nguyen et al., 2022). Following Germany and Japan - the pioneers in systematic efforts to implement the CE (The World Bank, 2009), the Vietnamese government signed “The Circular Economy Development Project in Vietnam” in 2022. And the Government has just been filing the Regulatory Sandbox of the Project. Therefore, the public awareness of CE is still elementary in Vietnam. Vietnamese, especially young customers, have noted green purchasing (Hoang & Nguyen, 2013; Nguyen

et al., 2017), but they still do not adequately understand CE development.

The entities related to CE development consist of the government, enterprises, and the public, and the awareness of those entities in promoting CE is important while putting CE into practice (Xue et al., 2010). Valuable studies related to people's environmental awareness have been carried out by researchers in different countries, but few empirical studies focused on people's CE awareness (Guo et al., 2017). In Vietnam, many studies have focused on environmental awareness, green purchases, or waste management (Nguyen, 2012; Nguyen et al., 2019; Le et al., 2019; Nguyen, 2023; Schneider et al., 2017). There were also papers on CE and sustainable development, and most of the papers researched the factors affecting the disclosure of sustainable development (Le et al., 2019) analyzed the impact of enterprises of the circular economy practices (Chowdhury et al., 2022), introduced CE form of enterprises (Clube & Tennant, 2021; Tran et al., 2022), and recommended suitable mechanism or comprehensive legislative system to implement CE practices (Herrador et al., 2023; Phan et al., 2023). So far, little research on public awareness, especially young people's awareness, of CE development has been conducted in Vietnam.

Using descriptive statistics and comparative analysis, this research offers an overview of the awareness of young Vietnamese about CE development. We conducted a survey on economic students of Can Tho University of Technology (CTUT). The results (through 226 surveys) showed that young people's awareness of CE was quite low, only 11.06% of young people heard, understood, and knew clearly about CE, while 48.23% heard but were not very interested in CE. In addition, the survey results showed that green purchase (one of the identifying signs of CE) among young people was not yet

popular and depended heavily on price factors. These results may provide good indicators for competence agencies in attempts to raise awareness and responsibility of young people about CE.

Papers of public attitude or awareness of CE have been conducted around the world. For example, Vagner (2021) identified the awareness and behavior of the population of Slovakia concerning the circular economy. They surveyed a random sample of 830 respondents. They concluded that the environmental awareness of CE in Slovakia is low, and they should learn from the neighboring countries about this concept.

Almulhim and Abubakar (2021) aimed to understand public awareness and attitudes to CE transition in Saudi Arabia. They did a cross-sectional, snowball-sampling-method survey with 402 residents of the Dammam Metropolitan Area. The questionnaire was composed of eight closed-ended questions with an open-ended question to solicit additional information and consists of three sections: assessing public attitude towards CE part, uncovering public behavior, and inquiring about respondents' demographic details. The results indicated that the respondents had little understanding of the CE concept due to limited awareness of the topic. Moreover, they found that the respondents' level of awareness regarding the CE transition was positively related to their level of education.

Krajnc et al. (2022) evaluated young people's awareness and attitudes towards the CE and the Green Deal (GD) in Europe. They collected by surveying 286 young people from five European countries. The research framework in the paper was closely related to the nine priorities of the EU's GD: biodiversity, farm-to-table, sustainable agriculture, clean energy, sustainable industry, construction and reconstruction, sustainable mobility, pollution reduction, and climate

action. The analysis showed that young people believed in the principles and priorities of CE but did not receive enough support to participate and implement the priorities actively. Moreover, young people approached the CE from different angles and showed responsible behavior in everyday life, had already heard about the CE's goals and action plan, but had been unable to reason, think, and evaluate in an entrepreneurial way when linking the CE to business opportunities.

There are also research papers on attitude or awareness toward CE that were conducted in Portuguese, UK, Ireland, and Lithuanian. They all used questionnaires which were composed of specific models. The results showed that respondents became more aware of CE and CE practices.

Meanwhile, although green economy research is increasingly focused on Vietnam (Bang et al., 2023; Dat et al., 2023; Nguyen, 2023), literature about CE is not abundant and papers about public awareness of CE are rare. Searching results for the phrase of words "circular economy awareness in Vietnam" on the ProQuest database yields few papers about CE.

Nguyen et al. (2022) presented the current situation of CE inquiry and the implementation of CE in some industrial branches in the world and Vietnam. Currently, Vietnam does not have a legal framework for the circular economic development, nor does it have a set of criteria to identify, evaluate, summarize and provide an accurate classification of the development level of the CE. Therefore, it is necessary to research and promote the implementation of the CE for the sustainable growth and a protected environment in Vietnam.

Tran et al. (2022) documented the factors that impact willingness to participate in the circular economy in Vietnam. They surveyed 431 people in Hanoi and its surrounding provinces with a questionnaire measuring the

respondents' level of agreement to participate in the circular economy. They used the structural equation model (SEM) to analyze the data and test the complex relationships between the variables in the model. They found that attention to the environment, and attitude towards intention are the factors that have a strong impact on willingness to participate in the circular economy. They suggested that policymakers in Vietnam need to pay more attention to people's groups such as family, friends, and mainstream media, and need to distinguish population groups according to different criteria comprising occupation, education level, and age to assess people's willingness to participate in the CE.

So far, papers about CE and public awareness of CE in Vietnam are still limited. We, through this paper, wish to enrich the literature on public awareness of CE in Vietnam.

## **2. METHODOLOGY AND DATA SAMPLE**

### **2.1. Methodology**

The authors used a survey questionnaire to collect data describing the overview of Vietnamese youth's awareness of CE development. This article aims to study the understanding, attitudes, and behaviors of young people about CE development. Therefore, the authors designed a questionnaire following the structure in the research of Xue et al. (2010), Liu et al. (2009), Liu and Bai (2014), and Guo et al. (2017), but restructured the questions to suit the Vietnamese environment. Then, the authors conducted statistical analysis to describe the current state of young people's awareness of CE.

To study the awareness of CE among young people in Vietnam, the authors chose Vietnamese university students as the research subject. The average age of university students in Vietnam was from 18 to 22 years old, which was suitable to represent the youth

age. More specifically, the authors conducted the survey with students studying economics at (CTUT). Economic students have several chances to learn about CE's concepts, green economy, and related terms. So they should have known about CE more than the others. Thanks to the level of awareness of economics students about CE development, we can infer the level of awareness of the youth (and others) of Vietnamese in general.

In this study, the authors conducted both qualitative and quantitative research. Qualitative research allowed the authors to shape the questionnaire, and quantitative research helped the authors to understand the current situation. Regarding qualitative research, the authors drafted the questionnaire according to Xue et al. (2010), Liu et al. (2009), Liu and Bai (2014), and Guo et al. (2017), and adjusted the questions considering some studies on CE in Vietnam such as Herrador et al. (2023), Tran et al. (2022), and Tran et al. (2023). Then, the authors sent the draft to two economic experts working at the Institute of Socio-Economics of Can Tho

City, and two random students, asking them to answer the survey to get their opinions on the structure of the questionnaire, English terminology in Vietnamese. The authors revised the questionnaire based on the feedback of the experts and students. Next, the authors conducted a preliminary study by randomly sending the questionnaire to 20 students. The authors received 12 respondents and continued to edit the questionnaire into the final version.

Then, the authors conducted a quantitative study (main survey) with economics students at (CTUT). The authors used a convenience sampling method to conduct the survey, in which the sample subjects were selected mostly from economic students studying at CTUT based on the ease of access of the research subjects, instead of randomly selecting from the entire population. The students participated in the survey independently, and their response process was not supervised.

**2.2. The data sample**

**Table 1. Demographic statistics**

Questions	Frequency	Percent (%)	
Gender	Male	53	23.45
	Female	173	76.55
Education	Secondary school	0	0.00
	College	1	0.44
	Undergraduate	225	99.56
Married	Single	226	100.00
	Married	0	0.00
Career	Student	222	97.37
	Others	4	2.63
	Have no income	107	47.34
Income	0-4 million VND	100	44.24
	5-9 million VND	18	7.96
	10-14 million VND	1	0.88
	15-19 million VND	0	0.44
	15-19 million VND	0	0.44

*Note: This table presents the demographic information of the respondents. The sample has 226 respondents in total. The percentages are calculated by dividing column 3 by 226. VND is Vietnam Dong.*

Research data was collected from January 1 to May 30, 2024. The survey questionnaire was randomly sent to 500 economics students at CTUT via students' e-mail. A total of 230 responses were received back (the response rate was 46%). After the screening, we obtained 226 appropriate responses. The demographic statistics of the data sample are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 presents the demographic information of the respondents. The study sample has a total of 226 responses, of which the majority of the respondents are female (76.55%); all are single and most of them are students (99.56%). Regarding to educational level of the survey respondents, 225 respondents are undergraduates or students. As they are students, most of the respondents choose no income (about 47%), or low income of less than 4 million VND/month (about 44%).

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1. The young's understanding of CE

Table 2 presents the respondents' understanding of CE. For question 1.1, while only 11.06% of the respondents understood well about CE, about 48.23% of the respondents said they had heard about CE but did not care about it. Another 40.71% believed that they had no information about CE (33.63%) or had no information about it and did not care about it (7.08%). This result was similar to some other studies. For example, Liu et al. (2009) concluded that surveyed people had limited awareness and poor understanding of CE.

For questions 1.2 and 1.3, we tested if the respondents were familiar with "3R", an important term of CE including Reducing, Reusing, and Recycling. Although more than 55.58% of the respondents thought they had not heard of "3R", most of the respondents correctly chose the components of "3R". The statistical results showed that 70%, 48.3%, and 40.4% of the respondents chose

Recycling, Reusing and Reducing respectively as "3R". We could infer from the results that the respondents might have heard of the concept "3R" and its components but not cared about it.

Question 1.4 presents that most of the students understand the important role of CE development. Answering "Why should we develop CE?", 78.30% of the respondents chose "Energy-saving and environmental protection", 56.10% of them chose "Reducing costs", and 30% of them chose "The obligation of the national policy". So, in the perception of young people, the implementation of CE in the economy was not only due to the inevitable needs of the development trend but also due to the requirement of the competence agencies. This proves the important role of competence agencies in developing CE.

Finally, question 1.5 presents the channels through which the students got information about CE. The results showed that most of the students used the internet for information (77.8%). This channel dominated the other channels such as "Radio and TV", "Newspaper and Magazine", or "Conversation with friends", accounting for 37%, 33.9%, and 30% respectively. Besides, not many students read "Government Documents" or "Public-service Announcements" for CE information (13.9% and 9.1% respectively). This suggests that competence agencies need to diversify the distribution means of information specialized in national laws, regulations, decrees, and so forth to reach young people rather than just paper documents.

The results showed that economics students at CTUT, who had many chances to get familiar with circular economy terms, had rather poor awareness of CE. Then, we could infer that the awareness and understanding of CE among young people, who had few opportunities to learn about CE terms, possibly even lower. However, we hope that the awareness and understanding of

CE among businesses operating in the market is higher, as they are the ones directly affected by the Government's green economic policies.

**Table 2. The respondents' understanding of CE**

Question		Frequency	Percent (%)
1.1. Have you ever heard/understood/known about the circular economy?	Hear/understand/know well about circular economy	25	11,06
	Have heard but not much interest in circular economy	109	48,23
	Have no information about the circular economy	76	33,63
	Have no information and no interest in green economy-circular economy	16	7,08
1.2. Have you ever heard of "3R"?	Yes	100	44,42
	No	126	55,58
1.3. What do you think "3R" is in the circular economy? (Choose three answers)	Recycling	161	70,00
	Reusing	111	48,30
	Reducing	93	40,40
	Reproduce	63	27,40
	Redesign	29	12,60
1.4. According to you, why should we develop CE? (Choose three answers)	Energy-saving and environmental protection	180	78,30
	Reducing costs	129	56,10
	The obligation of the national policy	69	30,00
	Public appealing	64	27,80
	Having no idea	28	12,20
1.5. By which method do you usually get information about CE? (Could choose more than one answer)	Radio and TV	85	37,00
	Newspaper and Magazine, etc.	78	33,90
	Government Documents, etc.	32	13,90
	Conversation with friends, etc.	69	30,00
	Internet	179	77,80
	Public-service Announcement	21	9,10
	Others	43	18,70

*Note: This table presents the respondents' understanding of CE. The sample has 226 respondents in total. The percentages are calculated by dividing column 2 by 226.*

**3.2. The young's attitude to CE**

Table 3 presents the respondents' attitude towards CE development. We have 5 questions in total to understand the students' attitude.

The practical application of a circular economy has many facets. Vertically, it involves enterprises, industrial parks, and

regions (cities, cross-cities, provinces, and so on). Horizontally, it includes industries, urban infrastructures, the cultural environment, and the social consumption system (Bilitewski, 2008). Obviously, putting CE into practice can create barriers. Some important barriers are listed in question 2.1.

The results of question 2.1 show that according to students, the main barriers to CE development included "Lack of public awareness" (70.90%) and "Lack of financial support" (40%). Barriers such as "Lack of legislation", "Lack of technology", "Lack of punishment" and the like are equally important, making up around 30%. This result suggests that current policymakers should pay attention to promoting public awareness of and financial support for CE development.

**Table 3. The respondent's attitude to CE**

Question		Frequency	Percent (%)
2.1. In your opinion, what are the main barriers for CE development (Choose three answers)?	Lack of public awareness	163	70,90
	Lack of financial support	92	40,00
	Lack of legislation	76	33,00
	Lack of technology	73	31,70
	Lack of supervision	38	16,50
	Lack of encouragement	66	28,70
2.2. Would you like to do garbage classification?	Lack of punishment	54	23,50
	Yes	220	97,35
2.3. Do you usually classify the garbage?	No	6	2,65
	Offen	140	61,95
2.4. Have you been known "green products"?	Sometimes	86	38,05
	Yes	211	93,36
2.5. What are the signs helping us identify "green products"?	No	15	6,64
	Manufacturer's commitment	61	26,99
	Advertising, communication from manufacturer	52	23,00
	Information on product packaging	97	42,93
2.6. How much more money are you willing to pay for "green products" (i.e. "energy-saving products") compared to ordinary products?	Other	16	7,08
	Unwilling to pay more	28	12,39
	About 105% of ordinary products' price	111	49,12
	About 110% of ordinary products' price	42	18,58
	About 115% of ordinary products' price	14	6,19
2.7. In your opinion, what could be the most effective methods to push CE development? (Choose one answer only)	It does not matter	31	13,72
	Executing compulsory regulations	59	26,11
	Setting government macro-control policy	53	23,45
	Promoting public awareness	94	41,59
	Has no idea	20	8,85

*Note: This table presents the respondents' attitude to CE. The sample has 226 respondents in total. The percentages are calculated by dividing column 2 by 226.*

Waste classification is one of the important awareness in CE development. According to Giusti (2009), waste classification has been discussed and practiced in some countries for many years. Question 2.2 and 2.3 were designed to understand young people's views on garbage classification. The result showed that 97.35% of students would like to classify garbage every day. However, in question 2.3, only 61.95% of respondents regularly classified waste. So, it indicates that young people understand the importance of waste classification in daily life, but there is still a gap from awareness to action. It may be because the conditions for implementing waste classification in Vietnam have not been properly supported, especially the poor infrastructure.

Questions 2.4 and 2.5 ask whether young people are aware of green products on the market. The results showed that 93,36% of the respondents knew about green products. Specifically, 42.93% of the respondents used information on the product packaging to identify green products, 26.99% used information through government commitments to manufacturers, and 23% used information from manufacturers' advertisements and communications.

The government (2021) mentioned in Vietnam's "National Strategy on Green Growth for the 2021-2030 period and Vision to 2050", green products include products with recycled ingredients, environmentally friendly products and services, products of biological origin, energy and water saving products, vehicles using alternative fuels, and products using renewable and alternative energy, replacing native toxic substances in dangerous oxidizing chemicals. In general, the price of green products is more expensive due to the strict requirements in their production process. Therefore, consumers in general may

not be willing to purchase green products when comparing their prices.

Question 2.6 measured the acceptable price of green products that young people in Vietnam can afford. The results showed that 49.12% of the respondents were willing to pay 5% more for green products, while 12.39% of the respondents were not willing to pay more for them. In addition, 13.72% of the respondents did not care about the price of green products.

So far, although the surveyed students knew about green products, they paid less attention to purchasing green products in their consumption behavior. In general, students' green shopping behavior is influenced by the price of green products. For example, students only bought recycled products at low prices or did not pay more for green products.

In addition, when answering which methods could effectively promote CE development (question 2.7), 41.59% of the students chose to raise public awareness of CE. Besides, the options "Executing compulsory regulations" and "Setting government macro-control policies" accounted for 26.11% and 23.45%, respectively. The results suggested that it was necessary to increase the public understanding of CE and promote green consumption trends. Also, regulation makers should take a role to attract the participation of the entire society, from central to local levels, businesses and citizens, civil society organizations and research agencies, and so on.

### 3.3. The young's behavior toward CE

Table 4 presents the behavior of young people towards green products and green consumption. Question 3.1 presents the number of green products purchased by young people. 28.32% of the respondents did not buy any green products in the survey month. Another 70% of the respondents bought at

least one green product in the survey month. However, the number of green product consumption was still quite low, only 7.08% of students bought more than 6 green products in the survey month.

The statistical results of questions 3.2 and 3.3 showed that students did not prioritize green products in their consumption behavior. Up to 65.49% of the students considered the type of products to decide whether to choose recycled products instead of non-recycled ones. In addition, 53.54% of the students said

"Do not bring shopping bags" when shopping, meaning that students had not built green consumption behavior in daily life.

Meanwhile, green purchasing in some other research was more optimistic. For example, Liu et al. (2009) did a survey of people in Tianjin, China, and found that over 75% of the respondents said they would like to buy green products while this number in a similar survey in Shijiazhuang, China was nearly 50%.

**Table 4. The respondents' behavior toward CE**

Question		Frequency	Percent (%)
3.1. How many green products do you buy this month?	0	64	28,32
	1	40	17,70
	2	45	19,91
	3	35	15,49
	4	16	7,08
	5	7	3,10
	6	3	1,33
	Above 6	16	7,08
3.2. Do you prefer to buy recycled products over non-recycled products?	No, I have a negative attitude towards such goods, and I never buy them	14	6,19
	I don't pay attention to the origin of the product	24	10,62
	It depends on the type of product	148	65,49
	Yes, I always buy such products	40	17,70
3.3. Do you usually carry your own shopping bag when going shopping?	Yes	105	46,46
	No	121	53,54
3.4. Do you think we should develop green economy/circular economy?	Yes, but need financial support	75	33,19
	Yes, but not in the near future	40	17,70
	Yes	100	44,25
	I don't know	10	4,42
	No, because economic factors are more important	1	0,44

*Note: This table presents the respondents' behavior toward CE. The sample has 226 respondents in total. The percentages are calculated by dividing column 2 by 226.*

Regarding the necessity of CE, 44.25% of the respondents affirmed that the economy should be developed toward a green economy and circular economy. The other 33.19% stated

that CE should be developed with financial support. About 18% of the respondents perceived that the circular economy should be developed but not in the near future.

Shortly, the results in Table 4 show that the intention to consume green products was still low. Therefore, we need more campaigns for green products to promote consumption intentions.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

With rapid industrialization, Vietnam is facing many challenges of resource depletion, pollution, environmental degradation, and climate change. Both resource scarcity and resource efficiency have challenged the country's sustainable development. In such circumstances, the circular economy could be adopted as a national development strategy. In such a circular economy, methods that help optimize the use of energy, water, and natural resources could be provided. However, the circular economy is a new concept in Vietnam, and public awareness of this concept is quite low.

The results of this study showed that a majority of young people had poor awareness and an understanding of CE and its importance to economic development. Even, a number of the respondents were not interested in CE.

Although getting notices about green products, young consumers were not willing to buy green products at higher prices. Green purchase among young people also depended on the price of the product. 12.39% of respondents answered that they did not want to pay more for green products. However, an optimistic sign was that nearly 50% of the students were willing to pay 5% more for green products.

The results also showed that the main barriers to CE development were inefficient awareness from the public in general and young people in particular, and lacking financial support. This implied that we should initially increase people's understanding, and then implement financial support policies to relevant entities to develop the CE in Vietnam.

The findings from this study may give suggestions to policymakers on raising

awareness and responsibility of young people to EC. Then, future research can focus on clarifying public policies for circular economic development in Vietnam.

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## THỰC TRẠNG NHẬN THỨC CỦA NGƯỜI TRẺ VỀ KINH TẾ TUẦN HOÀN: NGHIÊN CỨU ĐỐI VỚI SINH VIÊN KINH TẾ TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC KỸ THUẬT - CÔNG NGHỆ CẦN THƠ

### TÓM TẮT

*Nhận thức là bước khởi đầu dẫn đến hành động của các chủ thể có liên quan đối với một vấn đề khoa học, tuy nhiên cho đến nay ở Việt Nam chưa có nhiều nghiên cứu tìm hiểu về nhận thức của cộng đồng về kinh tế tuần hoàn (KTTH), đặc biệt là trong giới trẻ. Nghiên cứu này, sử dụng phương pháp thống kê mô tả với 226 mẫu khảo sát sinh viên ngành kinh tế của trường Đại học Kỹ thuật - Công nghệ Cần Thơ, sẽ mô tả thực trạng nhận thức của giới trẻ về KTTH. Kết quả cho thấy nhận thức của giới trẻ về KTTH còn khá thấp. Ngoài ra, kết quả khảo sát cũng cho thấy hành vi mua sắm xanh ở giới trẻ cũng chưa phổ biến và phụ thuộc nhiều vào yếu tố giá cả. Những kết quả này có ý nghĩa quan trọng đối với việc phát triển KTTH và triển khai các chương trình KTTH, đặc biệt là các chiến dịch nâng cao nhận thức và trách nhiệm của giới trẻ về KTTH.*

**Từ khóa:** *Giới trẻ, kinh tế tuần hoàn, nhận thức, Việt Nam*