

# The Impact of Up-Close Animal Encounters on Aquarium Visitors Conservation Behaviors



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## Abstract

Research has indicated that the most important feature of a zoo or aquarium exhibit is its level of interaction. In response, facilities have seen an increase in more experience-oriented exhibits, where studies on interaction levels are limited. The current study investigated whether guests engaging in an up-close animal encounter would be more likely to make lifestyle changes (targeting single-use plastics) and contribute to conservation efforts. Participants were recruited from Mystic Aquarium after either observing a sea lion show, free with general admission or engaging in an African penguin up-close encounter for which they paid an extra fee to closely interact with penguins. Both groups received similar conservation messages about the impacts of single-use plastics on wildlife. Survey data was collected immediately after the show/encounter, with a follow-up survey two weeks later for all groups. Some participants were asked to take an additional pledge to reduce plastic use and the others were given a fact sheet about the animals. Preliminary data suggested that single-use plastics remained the same or decreased.

## Introduction

- Aquariums and zoos try to instill plastic conservative values using free and paid experience-orientated exhibits (Gutierrez de White & Jacobson, 1994).
- Through the participant's evaluation of the animals in their facilities, aquarium attendees are able to have a closer connection to the animals, as well as an educational course through the encounter (Ernst 2018).
- Utilizing a formal pledge to reduce plastic after observing the show/encounter increases the likelihood of the participants practicing these behaviors in the future (Macdonald, 2015).
- Facilities can measure their impact through participant conservation efforts in the near future after encounter/show (Godinez & Fernandez, 2019).



Fig. 1 Preliminary results for the survey conducted immediately after the show/encounter.

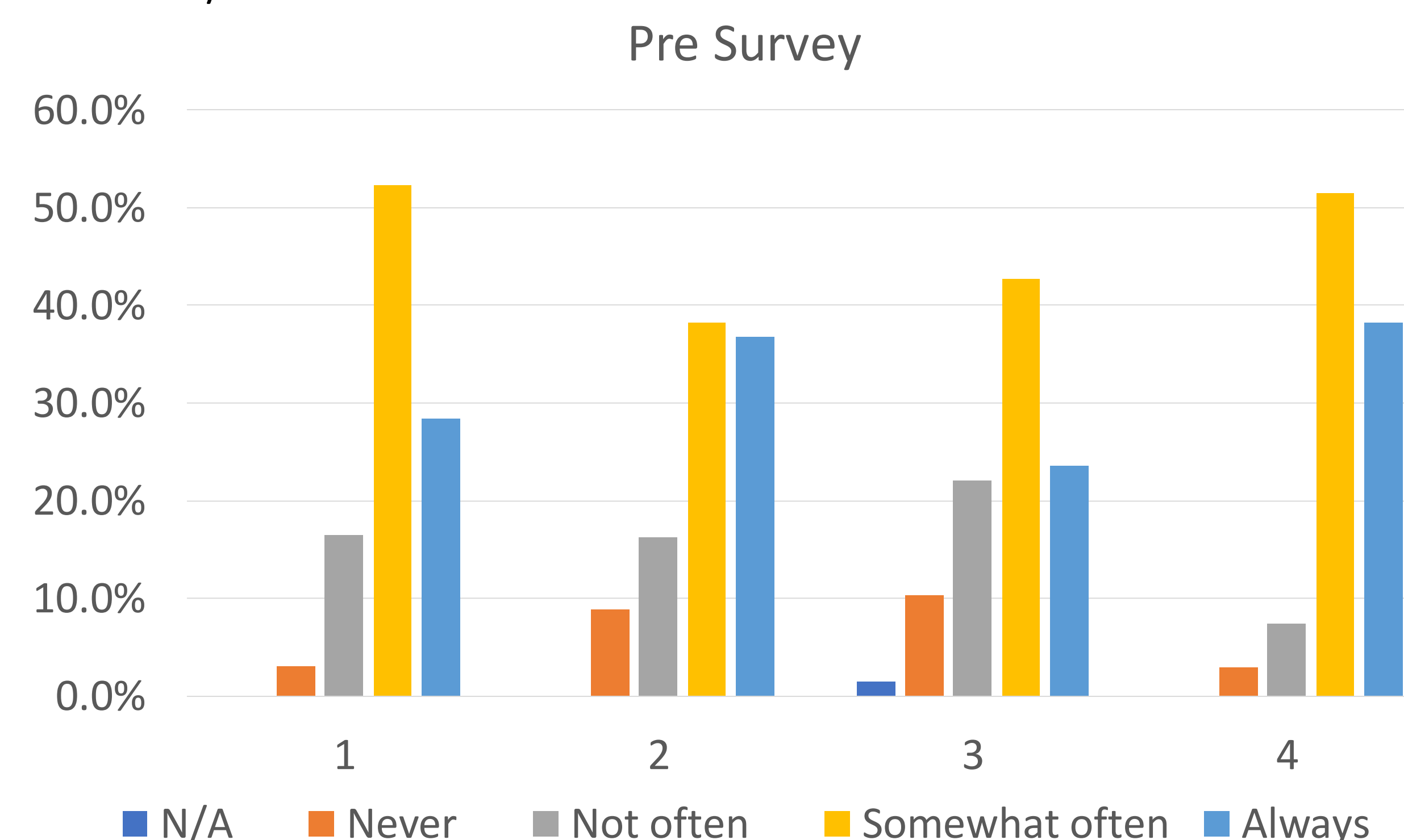
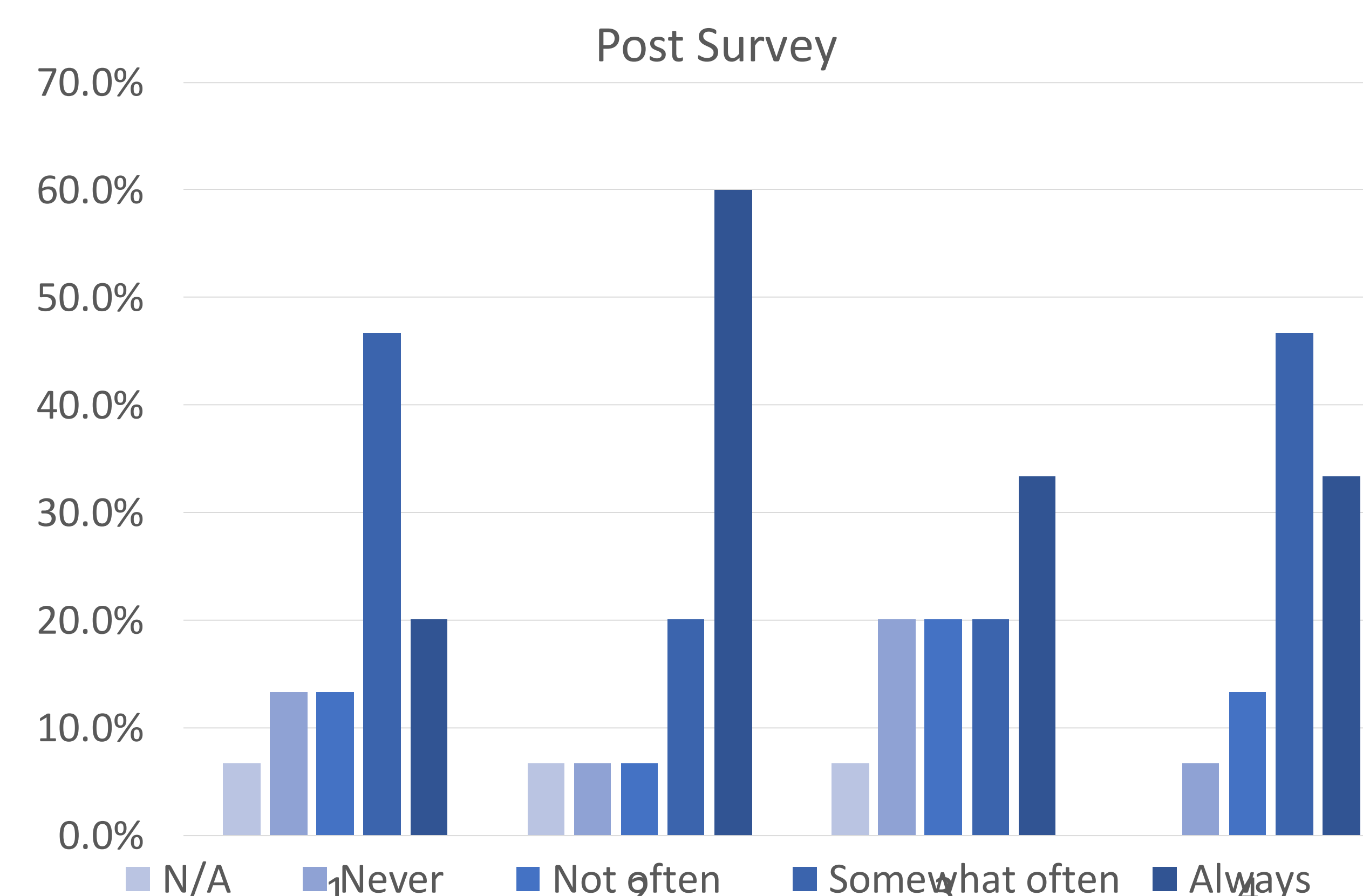


Fig 2: Preliminary results for the follow-up survey.



## Methods

- Sixty-eight participants completed the pre-survey taken immediately after engaging with an aquarium show/encounter and 15 participants also responded to the 2 week follow-up post-survey.
- The survey included four questions related to single use plastics. How often participants used: 1) plastic straws, 2) reusable bags at grocery stores, 3) reusable bags at other stores, and 4) reusable water bottles.
- All survey results were calculated as percentages.

## Results

- Pre-survey results for the four plastic use questions are shown in Figure 1.
- Post-survey plastic use results are illustrated in Figure 2.
- Preliminary results indicate a decrease in self-reported use by 33.3%, with 60% of participants plastic use staying the same.

## Discussion

- The change in behavior appeared to be related to an increase in use of reusable shopping bags.
- Future research with a larger sample size will investigate the variables of shows vs. interactive encounters, taking a pledge to reduce plastic use vs. non-pledge group, and demographic data.

## References

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