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Reputation(s): Constructing 'Sustainable' Identities Amid American 'Unsustainability'

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NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

Reputation(s): Constructing ‘Sustainable’ Identities Amid American ‘Unsustainability’

A Capstone Submitted to the

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By

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Abstract

Over the past few decades, climate change has been a significant area of interest for researchers across various disciplines due to its impacts both ecologically and socially. Sociologists have inquired about the social implications of climate change for years, but many of these studies have focused on the macro scale; this study investigates the way climate change is integrated into daily life. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with thirteen college students (aged 18-21) to explore how climate change impacts their day-to-day interactions, paying particular attention to how they conceptualize themselves in relation to the national attitude towards sustainability. Analysis of the interview data suggests that respondents view American lifestyles as decidedly unsustainable, and in order to identify themselves as responsible and environmentally conscious citizens, they strategically separate themselves from the ‘average’ American. Strategies for separation include emphasizing their own sustainable action in comparison to the unsustainable actions of their peers and justifying the unsustainable actions that they continue to take part in. Furthermore, respondents express a desire to shift American behavior to be more sustainable, and they highlight the role of education in this transformation despite evidence that their own education does not prevent them from partaking in some unsustainable behaviors. Further research could explore the generalizability of these observations and examine how different groups of people might internalize sustainability in different ways.

Introduction

Over the course of the last several decades, climate change has cemented itself as one of the key perils that plague society today. Whether in classrooms, on the news, or through social

media feeds, nearly everyone has at least been exposed to the concept of climate change; it is hard to deny that it has become a significant part of the human experience in the modern world. Though rooted in the natural sciences, humanity's dependence on the natural world recasts climate change as an area of interest in the realm of social science as well. Reckoning with the constant threat of climate change directly impacts social life at all levels, from international relations down to personal decision-making. This study examines how college students situate climate change within their day-to-day lives, paying particular attention to how they conceptualize themselves in relation to the environment and the global initiative around sustainability. To reify their positions as responsible and environmentally conscious citizens, the college students interviewed for this study strategically set themselves apart from the image of the unsustainable 'average' American and justify their own unsustainable behaviors. Once their distance from the unsustainable stereotype is made clear, my respondents display a desire to shift the behavior of the average American, highlighting the importance of education despite evidence that their own educated status does not prevent unsustainability within their daily lives.

Background

As climate change has slowly grown into more of a mainstream social concern, sociologists have taken up the mantle of examining the climate crisis from a sociological lens. The social implications of climate change have been explored at various levels since the 1970s with critiques aimed at social structures, institutions, and even the way social scientists conceptualize humans as separate from the environment (Manuel-Navarrete and Buzinde 2010). A commonly criticized social aspect of climate change on the macro level is the way capitalist democracies 'perform' sustainability while never committing to actual institutional change. Instead, they do the bare minimum in an attempt to appear as though they care about

sustainability while still preserving the status quo. Hinton and Goodman (2010) look at this phenomenon through the lens of consumer behavior, arguing that the concept of ‘sustainable consumption’ shifts the responsibility for environmentally friendly behavior onto the consumer while allowing capitalist democracies to appear as though they are putting in effort towards sustainability despite their continuation of economic practices that are known to be unsustainable.

On a more micro-sociological scale, the different ways that people around the world understand and relate to climate change has also been a significant area of interest. People across the globe often have localized understandings of how and why climate change is occurring, and it is not uncommon for individuals to simultaneously call upon local understandings and more Western scientific explanations to contextualize the concept of climate change in their own lives. Though local understandings can vary wildly from place to place, common themes include some notion of self-blame and tying negative changes to a lack of morality (Schneegg et al. 2021). While Schneegg et al. focus on acceptance and internalizations of climate change, others such as Norgaard (2012) study the social construction of climate denial. Some people still deny the existence of climate change overall, but it has grown more common for people to acknowledge climate change while denying their role in contributing to the crisis – this is what Norgaard explores in her analysis. In short, she argues that “perceptions of near and far, immediate or abstract are politically charged social constructions,” and individuals from wealthy nations socially construct a sense of distance and innocence from climate change (p. 81). This separation allows them to relieve themselves of blame for the climate crisis and guiltlessly continue life as usual.

While Norgaard's research indicates a tendency towards 'justified' inaction, others such as Wuthnow (2010) highlight a 'bias for action.' Wuthnow's central argument is two-fold: first, that individuals today live in a culture of peril, and second, that humanity exhibits a bias for action when faced with a threat. Rather than deny the existence of dangers such as climate change, people have an propensity towards taking action, breaking down seemingly unapproachable problems into small, doable tasks. Whether or not these tasks actually do anything to fix the larger crisis is practically irrelevant. As long as people feel as though they are making a positive impact, they will do what they can. Wuthnow also points out that many people don't just want to do something; they want to do more than those around them. Climate change is unique from other threats because it lacks a definitive moment used to incite action – what Wuthnow calls a 'rupture in time.' The lack of a rupture in time, in conjunction with the fact that the effects of climate change occur in the future rather than immediately, can make it difficult to convince individuals to take action. Nonetheless, many people still feel the desire to do their part, even as the response to climate change has become increasingly institutionalized with new technology and regulations on corporations being framed as the solution.

Norgaard and Wuthnow pose examples of willful denial and decisive action, but what might impact a person's stance on climate change? Fielding and Hornsey (2016) argue that support for environmental initiatives can depend on one's social identity: the people one is surrounded by and whom they identify with can sway their actions and beliefs. The level to which social identity impacts behavior varies depending on the relevance and strength of the identity. Fielding and Hornsey suggest that comparison between one's social ingroup and an opposing outgroup can foster more pro-environmental behaviors. If the ingroup is perceived as being 'better' or more environmentally friendly than the outgroup, ingroup members are more

likely to double down on existing pro-environmental behaviors and perhaps even pick up new ones. However, if the outgroup is perceived as doing ‘better,’ ingroup members may feel discouraged and opt to give up on environmental behavior. Fielding and Hornsey recommend making environmentalism important to people’s most salient social identities in order to improve engagement in environmentally friendly behavior on a larger scale.

Fielding and Hornsey’s emphasis on creating social norms around environmentalism is echoed by Heberlein (2012), who explores the relationships between attitudes, behaviors, and norms in the context of promoting environmentally conscious action. Heberlein argues that attitudes are relatively stable once they are originally established; instead of changing attitudes, we have to change behaviors. A common misconception is that educating the public is enough to motivate people to change their behaviors; in fact, Heberlein points out that efforts to change behaviors via education can have the inverse of the intended effect, particularly if the preestablished attitude is well-developed. Rather than focusing on education, Heberlein underlines the influence of structures on behavior. If the structures in place make sustainable action an easier or better option than the less sustainable alternative, people are more likely to opt into sustainable behavior. At the root of it all, though, Heberlein asserts that norms, not attitudes, are the key to changing environmental behaviors. People are motivated to comply with the social norm, even if it does not align with their usual attitude. Making sustainability into a social norm could thus deeply influence the public’s engagement in sustainable action.

Data and Method

The data used for this study is pulled from semi-structured interviews I conducted with college students during the 2023 spring semester at Northern Illinois University. When recruiting

respondents, I wanted my sample to include students that self-identified as environmentalists as well as more ‘average’ college students who did not strongly identify with environmental causes. Most respondents were drawn from my own social circles through convenience sampling, especially respondents who did not self-identify as environmentalists. To get in contact with self-identified environmentalists, I reached out to student groups on campus with an interest in sustainability. I gained a couple of respondents from those interactions and used snowball sampling from there to gain a few more environmentalist respondents. There were thirteen total respondents, five of whom self-identified as environmentalists (R3, R9, R11, R12, and R13). All thirteen respondents are college students between the ages of 18 and 22. Most are Northern Illinois University students, though three respondents attend other liberal arts institutions. To protect confidentiality, respondents are referred to simply in the order they were interviewed; for instance, the first interviewee is referred to as R1.

This study followed an inductive research process, and the interview guide was generated based on pertinent themes in the preexisting literature and my own areas of interest rather than out of a desire to test a preexisting thesis. Once the interview guide was finalized and respondents were contacted, interviews were conducted in person, primarily in relatively quiet corners of public spaces. Interviews lasted 45-50 minutes on average, and they were recorded and later transcribed. Following transcription, the dataset was compiled and analyzed using the grounded theory coding technique, where the code is developed from emergent themes during rather than before the coding process. Based on the thematic ideas that came up during the primary coding, I began to develop my thesis and narrow down my dataset. Some secondary coding was also conducted to dive further into the concepts that would become central to my thesis and relate them back to the preexisting literature.

Findings and Analysis

Originally, I had anticipated exploring the dichotomy between respondents who identified as environmentalists and respondents who did not self-identify as such in this section. However, the results from my dataset do not indicate as much contrast as I had expected. The main difference is in the level of expertise about how the science behind climate change works and its impacts at various scales. There is some additional difference in their commitment to sustainable behaviors with self-identified environmentalists being more willing to go out of their way to opt into sustainable options. Otherwise, though, most respondents share similar thoughts regardless of their identification with the environmental movement. In regard to the thematic concepts most prevalent for my thesis such as the perception of America, the justification of certain unsustainable behaviors, and the value of education, there is virtually no difference between environmentalists and others. As such, I make no distinctions between them in the rest of my analysis.

Perceptions of America

Throughout the interviews, there are many times when respondents discuss what they believed to be the attitude of the average American. Though everyone has slightly different things to say, everyone shares the same general belief: Americans are perceived as unsustainable. Of course, there is some nuance to this assertion; most respondents believe that people have valid reasons for their unsustainable actions, and almost every respondent notes that the ability to opt into sustainable action is a privilege not yet available to everyone. Still, no matter the reasoning behind their unsustainability, my respondents view the consumption patterns of the average American as decidedly unsustainable. Two key ideas take shape from the respondent's

comments about Americans: first that Americans are driven by consumerism, and second that Americans are resistant to change. These two ideas in tandem promote the image of American lifestyles as inherently unsustainable.

A prominent concern amongst my respondents is the consumeristic nature they associate with Americans. The more people consume, the greater their impact on the environment, and my respondents are wary of how much they believe Americans consume. R7 laments how pervasive she believes consumerism has become: “I think that consumerism is a big issue and a lot of Americans feed into it. On TikTok... I see those Shien hauls. They’re normal people. A lot of them are not necessarily influencers. They’re spending \$5 on something on Shien or Wish or whatever. The average American, I think they fall into that very often.” Others highlight how discouraging it is to see people feed into consumerism and buy things the respondents deem silly or useless. R11 embodies this view, stating that “it can be discouraging... if I happen to fall on one of those shorts or videos of useless tools that are sold now – like the millions of new unhelpful products that are cheap that people will buy.” Part of the consumeristic attitudes described by my respondents is the active discouragement of reusing things; instead, there is a push for the consumption of new items. R12 points out some perceived negative social sanctions around reuse that reinforce consumeristic behavior: “[People] think that their peers or someone else might think it’s weird if they’re reusing things.... I’ll notice a lot of people will be embarrassed – especially if they’re more men or masculine – they feel kind of embarrassed to use tote bags. They use a new plastic bag instead.” In short, Americans are perceived as almost wasteful in their consumeristic drive, abandoning more sustainable options such as reuse.

Beyond consumerism, respondents also emphasized their belief that Americans are resistant to change and thus less likely to look into newer sustainable options. It is common for

my respondents to express concern over the belief that Americans would rather continue doing things the way they always have. For instance, R4 worries that “if you tell people they have to get an electric car, people are going to be like, ‘but I want to get a gas car. I grew up on gas cars, why would I not want one?’ and stuff like that.” R10 notes that this resistance to change is often associated with older generations: “A lot of the older population in the States, I feel, give the impression that they just don’t understand or care [about sustainability].” A few respondents take it a step further, characterizing Americans as so set in their ways that they ignore or are even hostile toward change. R9 frets that “people do not want to listen to laws. They don’t want to listen to policy. They don’t want to listen to the government.” R10 sums it up concisely: “I think that’s an American thing. You see something you don’t like, it’s evil.” This perceived resistance to change is seen as a huge contributing factor to American unsustainability.

Separation From the Average American

Given the perception of Americans as unsustainable, to be sustainable is thus to distance oneself from the image of the average American. To situate themselves as responsible and environmentally conscious individuals, my respondents had to render themselves distinct from other Americans. This strategic separation is reminiscent of Norgaard’s (2012) tools of order and tools of innocence. In her analysis of the way Norwegians denied their impact on climate change, Norgaard notes how they used tools of order and tools of innocence to reconstruct a sense that everything is okay despite news of climate change. Tools of order assert continuity, emphasizing tradition and highlighting Norway’s cultural identity as in tune with nature. Tools of innocence have to do with distancing oneself from responsibility, such as asserting the ‘rightness’ of their actions or justifying their behavior by comparing themselves to countries doing ‘worse.’ It is the

concept of tools of innocence that comes into play as my respondents distance themselves from responsibility by separating themselves from ‘bad,’ unsustainable Americans.

When asked directly about how they thought they fared compared to the average American in terms of participation in sustainable actions, all of my respondents expressed that they were at or above average. Nine of thirteen participants said that they thought they were above average, and the other four thought that they were about average. Notably, there was nobody who thought they were below average; they thought they were at least on par with those around them. This desire to be doing just as much as – if not more than – everyone else is reminiscent of Wuthnow’s (2010) bias for action. Nobody wants to feel as though they are not doing enough. For those respondents who thought that they were above average, there were mixed explanations for why. Some look at it from a place of privilege such as R6, who says that they were more sustainable “just because I have a lot more privilege as someone who has a little bit of flexibility in the amount of money we have.” Others, like R10, view their behavior as above average simply because they perceive Americans as uncaring: “I would say I probably do a little bit more [than the average American] just because I feel like being cautious of your ways, recycling and stuff—it’s not really a top priority for a lot of Americans.” Whatever the reasoning, the idea of being above average was popular among my respondents.

Beyond just stating that they were at or above average, respondents often gave off a sense of moral superiority, juxtaposing their sustainable actions against the unsustainability of those around them. While never explicitly stated, there is certainly an implicit message of “at least *I’m* doing something.” For instance, after a rant about American consumerism and their desire to constantly replace ‘old’ items, R9 notes that “I wait until my pants physically cannot be pants anymore before I buy new ones.” R7 similarly recounts a story that frames her behavior as

positive in comparison to her roommate's 'negative' behavior: "My roommate? She buys a huge pack of water bottles every week. My Brita is free! I have a Brita and I refill my water, but she just uses the water bottles every week. It pisses me off. I'm a busy person—I'm tired and I have other things to do on my plate, but at least I'm trying to take action." The dichotomy of 'good' versus 'bad' behavior ties into Schnegg et al.'s (2021) claim that explanations for climate change are rooted in assertions of morality. Although my respondents do not believe that climate change is caused by a lack of morality like many communities described by Schnegg et al., there is still an inherent moral judgment involved in their discussions of climate change.

Justifying Personal Unsustainable Behaviors

Though my respondents distanced themselves from the idea of the average unsustainable American by asserting that they are at or above average and highlighting their 'good' behavior in contrast to others' 'bad' behaviors, they recognize that they are not infallible. All of my respondents acknowledge that they still take part in some kind of unsustainable behavior, whether it be long showers, extended commutes, or less sustainable diets. To reify their separation from 'actual' unsustainable Americans, my respondents have to justify their own unsustainability. In Norgaard's terminology, their self-justification is a tool of innocence used to systematically relieve them of any blame for the climate crisis. While many respondents do express guilt for their unsustainable behaviors, the justification of their actions helps to relieve them of that guilt so that they can continue living life as normal. Respondents rely on two main justifications for their unsustainable behaviors: first, that there is a lack of infrastructure that supports sustainable options, and second, that the sustainable choice requires too much of a sacrifice.

One of the most common justifications for partaking in unsustainable behavior is a lack of infrastructure to promote sustainable options. Frustrations often emerge over a perceived lack of good public transit options. Nine of thirteen respondents bring up public transport during their interview, either noting its absence or lamenting the pitfalls of preexisting options. Some also emphasize the lack of infrastructure for biking or walking. Given the perceived lack of options, respondents justify their often extensive driving habits. R9 sums up many of the key assertions around public transport in her statement: “Where I’m living, there’s not really public transport to get me where I need to go. There’s not really anywhere where I could just bike there or walk there. It’s all far enough that I’m like, ‘well, I guess I’m driving today.’ I mean, I go out as few times as possible in a week, but I can only do that so much.” Even after detailing the lack of options available to her, R9 feels compelled to further explain that she goes out “as few times as possible” to further drive home her place among the ‘sustainable few.’

Beyond public transit, respondents discuss a few other examples of how a lack of infrastructure ‘forces their hand’ towards unsustainable behaviors. A popular example is recycling; respondents often highlighted differential access to recycling depending on location. While some areas lack the infrastructure for recycling at all, others do not make it easy for people to ‘properly’ recycle. R5 articulates the latter complaint when she says, “Recycling is easier at home because if I have bottles, I can rinse them out and then recycle them. At school, there’s not usually a place to do that. You either throw it in the trash or throw it in the recycling can unrinsed.” Some respondents also note the lack of available sustainable options for necessary items such as food or clothing. R2 explains the struggle to find sustainably-sourced clothing for her body size: “I’m small. I get a lot of kid’s clothes. And while there are adult clothes that are made more sustainably, there’s not a lot of options for kids or people who are kid-sized.” In

short, my respondents perceive the options available to them as limiting; they are thus forced to ‘give in’ to more unsustainable options. By framing their unsustainable habits as unavoidable, respondents relieve themselves of responsibility for the harmful impacts of their unsustainability – it is a tool of innocence.

Respondents also justify their unsustainable behaviors by noting how the sustainable option requires more sacrifice than it is worth. For instance, when discussing sustainable actions he could theoretically add to his daily routine but opts out of, R10 notes that “I probably could take the bus to work or to get where I need to go, but it’s just incredibly inconvenient. It doubles or triples the time. It’s not reliable, in many cases.” As college students attempt to balance jobs, schoolwork, extracurriculars, home responsibilities, and social lives, time is a valuable resource. When a sustainable option takes up significantly more time than the unsustainable option, the desire to promote sustainability may have to take a backseat; time is simply too important to sacrifice. Others point out how draining it can be to always be vigilant about sustainability in an economy that seems to discourage environmentally friendly behavior. It can take extra time and energy to search for sustainable alternatives or find creative ways to reuse items. R9 talks about this extensively in her interview, explaining how “there are some things that I could find a [re]use for, but I don’t have the energy for it or the time for it. I’m already putting so much time into everything else that I just can’t do this at the same time.” The mental drain of always trying to be sustainable when sustainability is not yet the norm is thus considered too big of a sacrifice; sometimes, people will just have moments of unsustainability.

Building on the concept of constant sustainability being draining, several respondents discuss mental and physical health as barriers to pursuing sustainability. Some behaviors that are perhaps not the most sustainable still hold value to my respondents as a form of self-care. R5

justifies her reluctance to stop partaking in a behavior that, while more wasteful, is considered valuable to her mental wellness: “I could try to shorten showers – and I have been trying to shorten them a little bit – but also I don’t want to take too much time away from that because that’s my self-care time.” R6 also asserts how their concern for their psychological well-being prevents them from fully committing to a more sustainable diet when they state, “I could fully be vegetarian or vegan, but I’ve had problems with food before [in reference to an eating disorder] and I don’t want to add a layer on top of that by further restricting what foods I can eat.” The routines my respondents have set in place to maintain their mental wellness are potentially threatened by the introduction of more sustainable actions. Similarly, R3 notes how her physical health may take precedence over sustainable action: “I do have issues with my joints, and I usually walk places on campus and bike when my bike is here. I could go to the grocery store on my bike on a good day, but on a bad day – if my hips don’t work – I’ll have to drive my car.” Whether physical or psychological, my respondents’ personal well-being is considered too important to sacrifice in the name of sustainability, thus justifying their unsustainable actions and negating any guilt they may feel.

Education as a Proposed Solution

Though my respondents separated themselves from the average American and justified their own unsustainable behaviors, they were still invested in mitigating climate change and pursuing sustainable practices on a global level. Despite the negative image of Americans, promoting sustainability on a national scale is perceived as something too important to give up on; my respondents were interested in finding ways to change the behavior of average Americans to be more sustainable. There were several suggestions made, but by far the most prevalent was improved public education about climate change: it was mentioned in nine of thirteen interviews.

This aligns with Heberlein's (2012) observation that most people turn to education as a magical fix. It is a common assumption that if people knew more about the connection between their actions and climate change, they would be more motivated to pursue sustainable options. This thought process is echoed by several respondents, though R5 articulates it the most clearly: "I think for a lot of people, it's [about] education and knowing more about it. I think a lot of times people say to recycle but you are never told why, exactly. You don't see the impact that it has. Learning more about what's actually happening and what your impact is if you're *not* recycling or being sustainable – I think that would probably encourage a lot of people to see what we're heading towards on the path we're on versus what we could be."

Given the view some of my respondents expressed about Americans being resistant and even combative in the face of change, education is often posed as a solution not because it would be the quickest or most effective method but because it would meet the least resistance. Education is perceived as a viable alternative to other options such as increased regulation or stricter government policies because it does not directly inhibit people's actions or restrict their options; it simply provides them with more robust knowledge of the consequences of their actions with the hope that it is enough motivation to spark change. Having that sense of autonomy and control over one's choices seems to be important to respondents who were wary over American's willingness to do what they are told. R1, for example, emphasizes how "people knowing what they can do in their daily lives would be really good – just people knowing more about what's happening and feeling like they have some sort of control." Likewise, after a discussion of government regulations, R12 states that she hopes "it would be more about education than regulation."

Even though my respondents posed education as the most viable solution to change the behavior of the average American, it is clear that education alone does not prevent unsustainable behavior. In fact, there was contradiction within the interviews themselves; despite being educated on topics of climate change and sustainability, respondents still took part in some unsustainable behaviors. Respondents attempt to justify these behaviors, as discussed earlier, but they still partake in them no matter how justified they may be. Furthermore, respondents – environmentalists and non-environmentalists alike – still describe feelings of disconnection from climate change during their day-to-day lives despite their knowledge on the subject. R1 states that “I’m usually more thinking about my daily life as opposed to all the implications that it has,” and R13 notes that “[climate change] is important, but because you can’t see it all the time, it’s hard to believe sometimes.” Clearly, simply having information about climate change does not prevent people from getting caught up in their own lives, doubting the real impacts, and resorting to unsustainable action. This pattern aligns with Heberlein’s argument that education on its own does not change attitudes or behaviors despite the popular assumption that it will. Perhaps there are ways that the behavior of the average American can be changed, but solely relying on education evidently does not work.

Conclusion

The college students interviewed for this study wish to emphasize their concern about climate change and forge a sustainable identity for themselves. However, doing so requires that they separate themselves from the unsustainable reputation that surrounds American lifestyles. Using Norgaard’s terminology, respondents maintained their sustainable identity and managed the guilt they have about their contributions to climate change through the use of tools of innocence. These tools of innocence include the juxtaposition of the unsustainable behaviors of

others with their own more sustainable behaviors and the self-justification of the unsustainable behaviors they partake in. After clarifying their distance from the unsustainable average American, respondents display a desire to change American behaviors, promoting sustainability on a national level. The students interviewed in this study overwhelmingly suggest increased or improved education about sustainability as a way to get Americans to change their behaviors. However, there is an inherent self-contradiction evident within the interviews since even the most educated respondents still took part in some unsustainable behaviors. Clearly, education alone is not enough.

So, if education cannot generate sustainable behavior, what else would need to change for people to integrate sustainability in their lives – to, as my respondents suggest, change the reputation of the average American? Heberlein (2012) offers a few insights, emphasizing the influence that social structures can have on behaviors. When sustainable options are more expensive or less accessible than the unsustainable options, people are less willing to pursue the sustainable choice. If the government – or society – makes it a priority to change the structures that make sustainable options less accessible, there may be less resistance to sustainability. Additionally, Heberlein underscores the power of social norms; people are motivated to comply to norms, so if sustainability becomes the norm it could have a powerful influence over the average American's engagement in sustainable action. Although education is the most prominent theme in the interviews, many respondents also echo Heberlein's assertions, though with different words. Rather than call them social norms, interviewees emphasize the importance of making a habit out of sustainable action. Instead of using the term 'social structure,' respondents explain how the government needs to provide better infrastructure that promotes more

sustainable transportation options. Whatever the terminology, it is evident that actions beyond education exist and should be explored.

I do want to acknowledge the potential limitations of this study – namely, that the pool of respondents is relatively small and specific. All respondents are young, are in higher education, and have been exposed to concepts of climate change throughout their lives. Everyone interviewed also views climate change as an important issue that needs to be addressed. That is not a universal perspective. Thus, the findings are not necessarily universal. Further research would need to be done to explore how extrapolative these conclusions are to other groups of people. A longer-term study that includes elements of participant observation methodology and draws from a larger pool of respondents would be ideal.

Is it possible to change the behavior of the average American? Responses from my respondents are mixed. Some express tentative optimism, highlighting the potential for change and recalling how much has already changed in the past few decades. Others display more eco-pessimism as they worry about the politicized nature of the climate crisis and the perceived tendency for Americans to resist change. Whether optimistic, pessimistic, or an estranged mix of both, my respondents hold onto the hope that America's reputation can change. In the words of R11, "keeping that hope within yourself is – it's like your sanctuary. It's what you have to protect.... Looking at all of the cultural movements that are like, people walking barefoot or people living in tiny homes.... that inspires me and gives me hope that lifestyles and options are available." The portrayal of my respondents in this paper may seem critical at times – especially when discussing the tools of innocence they utilize to diminish their guilt – but they do maintain hope that America can change and that there are better things to come. And while they await

broader social change, respondents attempt to build their own sustainable reputations, distinct from America's unsustainability.

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