

December 2024

Entertainment Media and Climate Change Database Trends

Project Summary

A USC team, composed of the Dornsife School's Public Exchange, the USC Office of Sustainability, and the Annenberg School's Norman Lear Center, supported by the Sustainable Entertainment Alliance (SEA), collaborated on a project that tracks current evidence and trends around climate stories in media and entertainment, audience demand for climate stories, and climate stories' potential social and economic impact. The project introduces a novel tool: **a living, searchable database of research and articles**. The database aggregates and summarizes existing research related to climate storytelling in entertainment media, helps identify gaps in the existing research, and ultimately, enables stakeholders to build the case for incorporating more climate stories into entertainment media.

Trends by Topic

Topic 1: Audience and Consumer Insights

- Research and articles in the Audience and Consumer Insights category most often included the following subtopics: *audience surveys and surveys about brand attitudes*.
- There is high demand for climate representation in the media, with both parents and the general public expressing strong support for climate-focused content in media.
- A significant number of consumers are willing to pay a premium for environmentally friendly products, and younger generations like Gen Z and Millennials prioritize sustainable purchasing and frequently align their consumption habits with environmental values. Businesses making ESG claims experience higher growth and brand loyalty, with products marketed for their sustainability outperforming traditional ones.
- Concern about climate change is growing globally, and many consumers view media, brands, and institutions as responsible for promoting pro-environmental behavior.

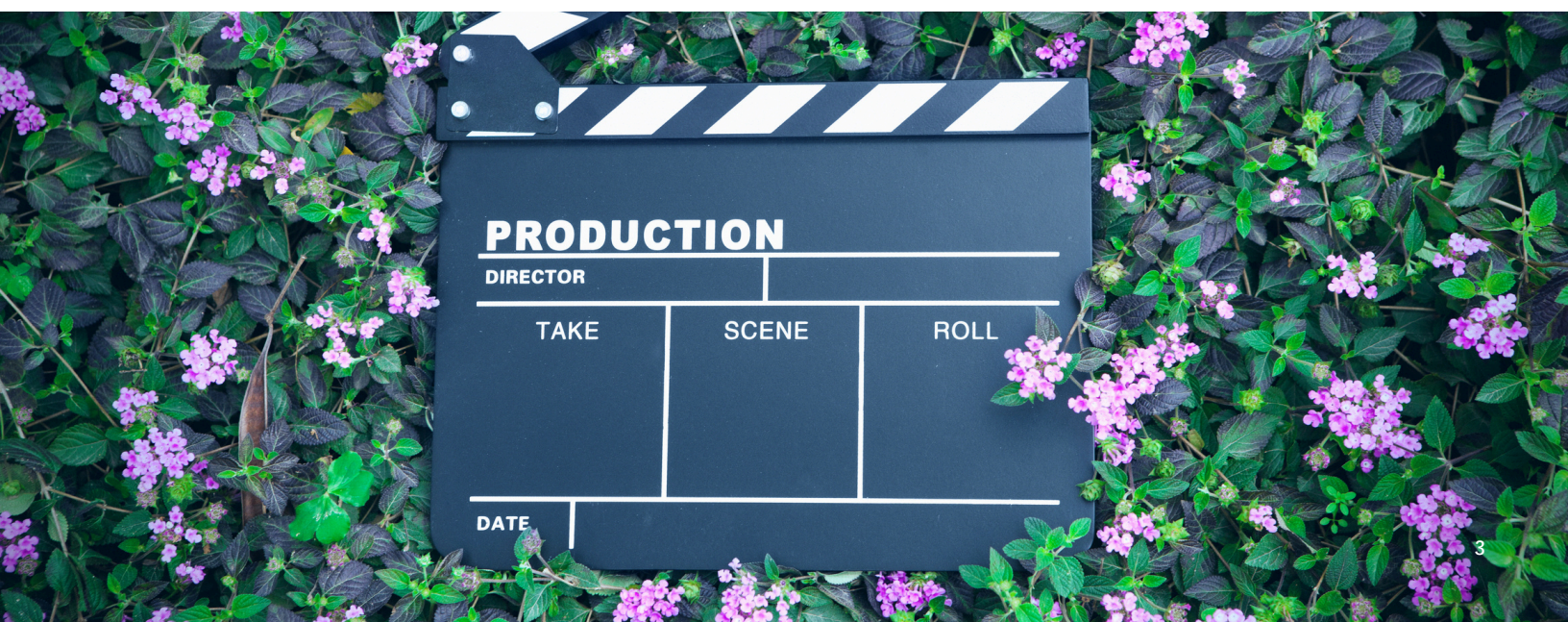
Topic 2: Media Industry Insights

- Research and articles in the Media Industry Insights category most often included the following subtopics: *industry trends in sustainability, studios' sustainability advancement, and analyses of climate content.*
- Both mainstream and entertainment industry-specific press are covering the growing momentum for sustainability and climate storytelling within Hollywood.
 - Coverage largely focuses on the dual efforts of: sustainability in front of the camera *and* behind the scenes; scripted *and* unscripted content; and advocacy inside and outside of Hollywood.
- News articles also frequently mention the perceived resistance to telling stories about climate change, due to the perception that it's too politically sensitive or overwhelming for audiences.
 - There is a sense of a growing openness to sustainable storytelling by top executives, as evidenced by the momentum for the Climate Content Pledge in the UK, as well as SEA's collective efforts to organize the US entertainment industry.
- The coordination of climate storytelling or themes across multiple TV shows and media companies (e.g., Late night hosts' "Climate Night," British soap operas' climate crossovers) appears to be a promising trend, with collective efforts being leveraged to encourage climate awareness and action among audiences.



Topic 3: Business Rewards

- Research and articles in the Business Rewards category most often included the following subtopics: *general business rewards* (e.g., increase in subscribers), *title commercial success*, and *audience response*.
- Research on the commercial success and business rewards of climate has been steadily increasing in the last couple of years, with analyses like the [Climate Reality Check](#) and [A Glaring Absence](#) highlighting the box office success of climate stories.
- News items and opinion pieces highlight the commercial success of titles that include climate-related content and climate allegories, including *Don't Look Up*, *Avatar: The Way of Water*, *Interstellar*, *Call of Duty*, and *Twisters*.
- There is an uptick in critical praise for movies tackling climate change in novel ways, especially independent films that explore nuanced themes, including resistance, indifference, and the relationship between humans and the environment.
- A number of surveys show a growing demand for sustainable products — especially among Gen Z consumers — as well as reputational incentives for companies committed to being eco-friendly and transparent about their environmental impacts.
- Awards for eco-conscious productions, as well frameworks that guide productions in becoming more sustainable, help foster an environment in which sustainability is rewarded, and expected.
- Several reports show that it pays to be attuned to social causes, showing current and future business rewards for companies that prioritize representation of BIPOC communities and social issues in media content and marketing.



Topic 4: Business Risks

- Research and articles in the Business Risks category most often included the *risk of silence/responsibility* subtopic.
- Because business data remains proprietary to entertainment industry studios and companies, this section highlighted mostly indirect and perceived risks, rather than empirical negative impacts on businesses.
 - Many articles focused on the growing competition between media brands and companies in the sustainability space, with several positioning themselves as a leader in this desirable category.
 - The competitive advantage risk is supported by surveys showing a growing number of people, especially Millennials and Gen Z, aligning their dollars with their sustainability values and by research studies demonstrating successes of films that incorporate climate themes and stories.
 - Many news items highlight the presence of greenwashing and climate misinformation in the media industry that ultimately hinder mitigation efforts.
 - In addition to market competition, social pressure was highlighted as a risk, with commentators focused on the environmental impacts of media production and the perceived absence and minimization of the climate crisis in current news and TV/film.



Topic 5: Social Impact of Media

- Research and articles in the Social Impact category most often included the *prosocial effects of media on audiences* subtopic.
- This is the most research-heavy category with most entries coming from peer-reviewed academic journals and research-based reports.
 - Studies published in journals focus on the positive individual and societal impact of environment-focused media.
 - The effects of environmental media on audiences' attitudes, knowledge, and intent to act is well-established. The longevity of those effects, and whether audiences actually changed their behavior, remain under-researched, in part due to cost and time required for such studies.



Data and Research Gaps

- There is little data in the public domain on business risks, especially in entertainment. In addition, information associated with specific companies, including considerations and criteria for greenlighting content, is largely proprietary.
- There is little public data on the impact of climate and sustainability-related titles on mindset changes, long term behavior changes, or the specific emotions experienced by audience members.
- Actual data on celebrity engagement with sustainability and climate change, along with the effects of this engagement on audiences, is limited.
- Various advocacy-oriented reports and news articles suggest that climate content attracts younger viewers, who are more concerned about environmental issues and wish to see content that reflects their reality authentically. The idea is that climate content could provide a competitive edge in a crowded streaming market. However, there is little research showing whether climate content actually attracts younger demographics and/or drives subscriptions to streaming platforms.

Directions for Future Research

- Future research might involve gathering and integrating data on audience preferences, content features, social impact, title performance, and more to look for patterns. Potential research questions could include:
 - Do media companies with commitments related to sustainability actually increase their climate-related content?
 - How does this climate content perform across different measures of success (number of viewers, social media conversations, critical reviews, awards)?
- Another potentially fruitful research area might involve looking at the extent to which different *types of climate narratives* motivate or demotivate audiences to take action. Research question examples include:
 - How do “doom and gloom” or dystopian climate narratives in film and TV impact different audiences? What types of emotions do they evoke and how do these emotions, in turn, affect audience members’ likelihood to take climate actions?
 - How do dystopian narratives compare to hopeful climate narratives across different indicators of success (number of viewers, online conversations, critical reviews, awards won, etc.)?