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Preprint

This is the submitted version of a paper presented at *ACR (Association for Consumer Research) conference*.

Citation for the original published paper:

Rezvani, Z., Samuelsson, P., Vallström, N., Fatemi, H., Drin, S. (2026)
Social relations and institutional trust in collective climate action
In: *Advance in Consumer Research*

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:
http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:oru:diva-132128

Title

Social relations and institutional trust in collective climate action

Short Abstract

Climate mitigation requires collective action. Little is known about social and institutional contexts shaping motivations for collective action. Using European Social Survey data, we show that social relations strengthen climate responsibility and collective efficacy, particularly when institutional trust is low, highlighting the role of social resources in collective climate action.

Extended Abstract

Introduction

Climate change mitigation represents a societal challenge because it requires collective action across citizens and institutions (Amel et al. 2017; White et al. 2019; Wohlgezogen et al. 2020). Research has partly approached this challenge from an individual-level perspective, emphasizing psychological drivers of collective climate action, particularly collective efficacy beliefs—the belief that people acting together can influence societal outcomes—and responsibility beliefs (Bandura 2000; Bamberg et al. 2015; Hamann et al. 2025; Rees and Bamberg 2014). At the same time, Transformative Consumer Research (TCR) emphasizes that consumer behavior is embedded in broader social and institutional contexts rather than reflecting individual beliefs and choices alone (Figueiredo et al. 2015; Prothero and McDonagh 2021; Winterich et al., 2023). Accordingly, individuals' relationships with other members of society and with political institutions represent social resources that may shape motivations for collective climate action.

However, we know relatively little about how individuals' social relations and institutional context jointly shape the beliefs motivating collective climate action. Addressing this gap, this research examines how individuals' social relations and institutional trust influence climate responsibility and collective efficacy beliefs. This study aligns with the ACR 2026 theme by showing how social resources elevate responsibility and collective efficacy for climate action.

Theory

Resources are commonly understood as assets that enable individuals to pursue goals and cope with challenges (Dorsch et al. 2017). Beyond material assets, resources also include relational conditions such as social relationships and networks that shape individuals' capacity to act (Cannon et al. 2024). Within this perspective, social resources can be understood as relational assets embedded in individuals' social environments that provide access to support, information, and shared norms (Coleman 1988; Lin 2001; Putnam 2000). These resources operate both through horizontal social relations among citizens and through vertical relations between citizens and institutions, often described as linking social capital (Szreter and Woolcock 2004). Institutional trust reflects citizens' confidence in these institutional relations and shapes how collective responsibilities are interpreted (Levi and Stoker 2000).

Through everyday social interaction, individuals encounter shared expectations and normative pressure regarding societal challenges. Such social embeddedness therefore shapes how individuals interpret collective problems and their own role in addressing them (Klandermans 1997; van Zomeren et al. 2010). While the content of shared expectations and norms varies across social settings, greater social connectedness generally increases exposure to shared

expectations regarding collective issues, making responsibility for such issues more likely to be internalized. Individuals who are more socially connected are more likely to internalize responsibility for collective issues such as climate change (Aldrich and Meyer 2021). In turn, assuming responsibility for a collective problem implies recognizing oneself as part of a broader collective addressing the issue, making beliefs about collective effectiveness more salient. Consistent with this reasoning, previous research has shown that stronger identification with a relevant social group strengthens collective efficacy beliefs regarding climate mitigation (Rees and Bamberg 2014).

H1: Social relations are positively associated with climate responsibility.
H2: Climate responsibility is positively associated with collective efficacy.

At the same time, the interpretation of responsibility may depend on the institutional context. When trust in political institutions is high, climate mitigation may be perceived primarily as a governmental responsibility. When institutional trust is lower, individuals may rely more strongly on horizontal social relations to interpret collective obligations (Fairbrother et al. 2019; Levi and Stoker 2000). In such contexts, social relations may become particularly important sources of guidance and collective interpretation.

H9¿Institutional.trust.moderates.the.relationship.between.social.relations.and.climate. responsibility?such.that.the.relationship.is.stronger.at.lower.levels.of.trust¡

Method and data

We use secondary data from Round 11 of the European Social Survey (ESS 2023/24), gathered from a cross-national probability survey of adult residents in 28 European countries (Total N= 40,156). We chose a sample of respondents from Northern European countries (Nordic and Baltic, N= 8,287) for our analysis. These countries share strong climate policy engagement with relatively comparable institutional structures, while still displaying some variations for testing the proposed model.

Measures of constructs are reported in Table 1 (Appendix). We estimated a moderated mediation model (Figure 1) using PROCESS Model 7 (Hayes 2022). Covariates in the model included education, subjective income difficulty, and perceived discrimination. Effects were tested using 5,000 bootstrap samples and 95% confidence intervals.

Results

Findings supported the proposed relationships. Social relations were positively associated with climate responsibility ($b = .501$, $p < .001$), supporting H1. This association was moderated by institutional trust ($b = -.027$, $p = .008$), indicating that social relations associated higher with responsibility when institutional trust was lower, supporting H3. Climate responsibility was positively associated with collective efficacy ($b = .170$, $p < .001$), supporting H2, while social relations were also independently associated with collective efficacy ($b = .083$, $p < .001$).

Regarding the covariates, higher education was positively associated with climate responsibility, whereas greater financial difficulty was negatively associated with climate responsibility. Perceived discrimination was not significantly associated with climate responsibility but was positively associated with collective efficacy.

Conditional indirect association analyses indicated that the positive association between social relations and collective efficacy through climate responsibility was statistically significant

across all levels of institutional trust, although the magnitude of this association decreased as institutional trust increased (low trust = .076; medium = .058; high = .049). The index of moderated mediation was statistically significant (–.0045, 95% CI [–.0084, –.0008]), indicating that the indirect association was stronger among respondents reporting lower institutional trust.

Discussion

This study contributes to research in Macromarketing and Transformative Consumer Research by demonstrating that motivations for collective climate action are associated with broader relational and institutional contexts rather than solely with individual attitudes. Specifically, respondents reporting stronger social relations also reported higher climate responsibility, which was, in turn, positively associated with stronger collective efficacy beliefs. These findings highlight the potential importance of both relational and institutional social resources in understanding collective climate action and extend prior work that has primarily focused on individual psychological determinants.

The positive association between social relations and climate responsibility was strongest among respondents reporting lower institutional trust, suggesting that social ties may become particularly important for interpreting collective obligations when trust in political institutions is weaker. This pattern is consistent with a compensatory dynamic in which horizontal social relations may partly offset lower confidence in vertical institutional relationships. While cross-sectional design does not permit causal conclusions, the observed associations support the proposed theoretical framework linking social relations, climate responsibility, and collective efficacy. From a Transformative Consumer Research perspective, these findings suggest that strengthening community-level social resources may represent one promising avenue for supporting collective climate engagement.

Because the study is situated in Nordic and Baltic countries characterized by relatively strong institutions and established climate policy engagement, the observed relationships may not generalize directly to contexts with different institutional configurations or forms of social capital. Future research should examine whether the role of social relations under conditions of lower institutional trust operates similarly across different contextual settings.

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APPENDIX

Table 1. Measures

Construct	Variable (ESS)	Measurement	Scale
Social Relation*	sclmeet	Frequency of meeting socially with friends, relatives, or colleagues	1 = Never – 7 = Every day
	inprdsc	Number of people with whom respondent can discuss intimate and personal matters	0 = None – 6 = 10 or more
	sclact	Participation in social activities compared to people of same age	1 = Much less – 5 = Much more than most
Climate Responsibility	ccrdprs	Perceived personal responsibility to reduce climate change	0= not at all–10= a great deal
Collective Efficacy	C34	Imagine large numbers of people limit energy use, how likely reduce climate change	0= not at all likely–10= extremely likely
Institutional Trust	trstprl	Trust in national parliament	0 = No trust – 10 = Complete trust
Education (control)	edulvlb	Highest level of education	ISCED levels
Income Difficulty (control)	hincfel	Feeling about household income	1 = Living comfortably – 4 = Difficult
Discrimination (control)	dscrgrp	Member of group discriminated against	0 = No, 1 = Yes

*Social relation was computed as the standardized mean of the three indicators.

Table 2. Results

Panel A. Effects on Climate Responsibility (Mediator: ccrdprs)

Predictor	b	SE	t	p
Social relation(X)	.501	.059	8.53	<.001
Trust in parliament (W)	.385	.036	10.74	<.001
X × W	–.027	.010	–2.67	.008
Education	.001	.000	8.50	<.001
Income difficulty	–.233	.038	–6.05	<.001
Perceived discrimination	.019	.088	.21	.832

Conditional Effect of Social Relation on Climate Responsibility

Trust level	Effect of X → M	95% CI
Low (p16)	.448	[.365, .531]
Medium (p50)	.341	[.282, .401]
High (p84)	.288	[.208, .368]

Panel B. Effects on Collective Efficacy (Outcome: colleff)

Predictor	b	SE	t	p
Social relation (X)	.083	.012	7.13	<.001
Climate responsibility (M)	.169	.004	39.73	<.001

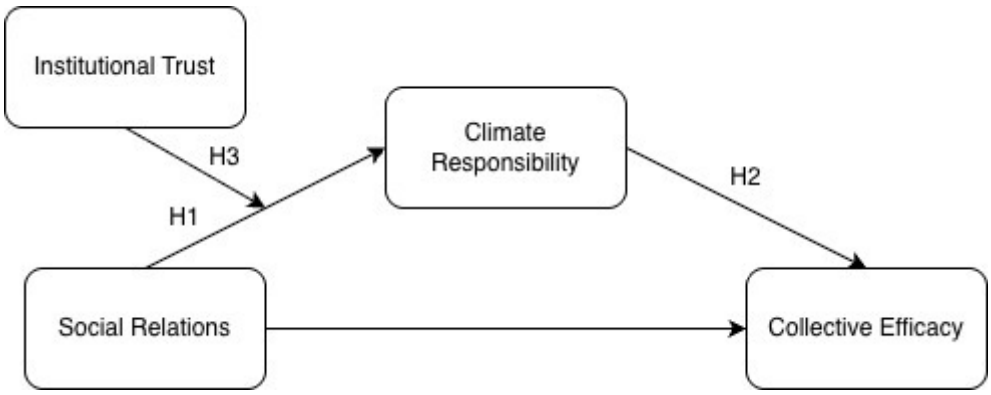
Education	.0001	.000	1.86	.063
Income difficulty	–.019	.015	–1.25	.212
Perceived discrimination	.114	.036	3.22	.001

Conditional Indirect Effects of Social Relation on Collective Efficacy via Climate Responsibility

Trust level	Indirect effect	BootSE	95% CI
Low (p16)	.076	.009	[.059, .093]
Medium (p50)	.058	.005	[.047, .068]
High (p84)	.049	.007	[.035, .062]

Index of Moderated Mediation: –.0045 (95% CI: –.0084, –.0008)

Figure 1. Conceptual framework and Hypotheses



Controls: Education, Income difficulty, Discrimination