

'Net zero hero' myth unfairly shifts burden of solving climate crisis on to individuals, study finds

Shifting responsibility to consumers minimises the role of energy industry and policymakers, University of Sydney research suggests

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It's not unusual to see individuals championed as heroes of climate action, with their efforts to [install rooftop solar](#) and [buy electric cars](#) promoted as pivotal in the fight to save the planet.

Hero figures can motivate others to follow suit, but a University of Sydney study suggests the way the energy sector shapes this narrative sets individuals up to fail.

Assoc Prof Tom van Laer, a co-author of the study, said the “net zero hero” story could be understood as the latest evolution in a long history of industry shifting environmental responsibility on to individuals.

The beverage industry [was early to the game](#), promoting recycling to shift the burden of waste disposal on to consumers in the 1970s.

Van Laer said the “net zero hero” narrative was prevalent in the many public reports, press releases and documents published by energy companies and policymakers.

“These include encouraging behaviours like turning off unneeded appliances and upgrading to more efficient ones, framed as crucial personal contributions towards broader emission reduction goals,” he said.

“However, such promotions often downplay the sector’s own significant role in reducing emissions.”

Electricity generation is responsible for close to half of Australia’s emissions,

based on 2021 International [Energy](#) Agency estimates, with transport and industry also major emitters.

Van Laer said individual climate warriors could be motivational and had helped drive a number of grassroots movements.

But when individuals are put on a pedestal in the absence of tangible corporate and government policies to decarbonise, these narratives can breed feelings of helplessness and disengagement rather than empowerment.

The study cited a plastic bag ban in Chile as an example of putting the burden on the consumer without appropriately acknowledging the systemic, market-wide change needed to move the needle on waste.

“Consumers don’t fall for that kind of scheme,” Van Laer said.

“They’re like, well, you know, if you’re not doing anything, why should we?”

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After analysing hundreds of documents, the researchers want the energy sector to recognise that heroes don't usually act alone.

The typical hero's journey recognisable from books and films involves an individual facing insurmountable odds that are overcome with the help of friends and allies.

In the context of the energy market, Van Laer said, storytelling should emphasise the role of companies and governments alongside individuals.

"At the moment, it's not presented that way," he said.

"It's like 'you, consumer, you can do this on your own and then we [companies] will fall in line."

"And that's a very tough sell."

Van Laer said those wanting to take individual action should not feel disempowered but recommended contextualising efforts to electrify homes or install solar alongside the role of industry and government.

