

Trash Talks: Practices and Perceptions of Geneva Residents



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I. Introduction

In today's society, sustainability initiatives are becoming more of a prevalent issue. With the ever-present threat of global warming, communities around the world are acting to alter their lifestyle practices and behaviors to have an environmentally-friendly impact. In an effort to bring Geneva, NY to the frontlines in this battle towards sustainable living, we have elected to work with Jacob Fox for our senior seminar research project.

Jacob Fox is an alumnus of Hobart College, class of 2016, who has started a local composting business in Seneca Falls, NY called Organix Green Industries. His company has 100 worm trenches that turn food scraps into soil and fertilizer. Jacob sources food scraps from local restaurants such as FLX Table or other local events such as the extra food from 5K runs. He sells the soil and fertilizer throughout the surrounding area, even setting down the soil and fertilizer himself with his business partners.

Jacob is passionate about the environment and has aspirations for expanding his efforts to having as widespread of an impact as possible, but every great vision starts somewhere. Thus, we have narrowed the focus of our research to help Jacob understand the current sustainability practices and perceptions of Geneva residents, as well as what Geneva residents would be willing to do to live more sustainably.

II. Research Objectives

For the purpose of our research project, we define sustainability as “engaging in lifestyle choices that reduce harmful effects to the environment through the conservation of resources.” After our first meeting with our client and collectively conceptualizing a definition for sustainability, we began to further develop our research questions.

Our first research question was: *What are Geneva residents currently doing to be sustainable?* We began the project interested in discovering what types of sustainable practices Geneva residents were currently doing to be sustainable, ranging from recycling habits, to conscious water and energy conservation, whether residents reuse or repurpose certain supplies like water bottles, plastic bags and used clothing, carpooling and transportation practices, to specific brands of cleaning supplies and other chemicals that individuals may use that can negatively impact our environment. While we started our project interested in a wide variety of different practices, we ultimately decided to narrow our scope towards specifically focusing on recycling and composting habits of Geneva residents.

Our second research question reasons for engaging in sustainable practices, as we began to research the question: *What factors are enabling or hindering Geneva residents from practicing sustainable behaviors?* Using the literature for reference, we wanted to understand what specific factors impact Geneva residents' lifestyle choices.

Our third and final research question focused on implications for the future by researching the question: *What are Geneva residents willing to do to be sustainable?* We were interested in finding out based on their perceptions and previous practices (if any) if there were certain practices that residents were more likely to practice over others. Through answering this research question and finding what residents are willing to do, we will use our findings to better inform our client on what residents would be willing to do to be sustainable to achieve his mission of making Geneva a more sustainable community.

III. Literature Review

1. Consumer Research:

Research has found that consumers do not retain the information they receive about

organic products for two reasons: first, the saturation of name brand marketing information in mainstream media has a large influence on consumption patterns and second, the transmission of information to consumers is necessary but not sufficient. Consumers are receiving information about sustainable products, but do not understand the information they are receiving, and thus it is not convincing them to change their habits. Overall, people indicate positive feelings about organic foods, however, they are not purchasing them. One study found that this is because consumers do not consider “organically produced” to be significant criteria in their shopping considerations. The taste, shelf life, and worth of organic products--three qualities noted to be of importance to consumers--were not perceived to exceed other products^{8,1}. Consumers were strongly influenced by their perception of the worth of their purchase. This, in combination with the added cost, was the largest deterrent found in buying organic products. On average, more consumers indicated that health benefits influenced their buying habits more than perceived environmental benefits²⁰. In general, an individual’s level of environmental consciousness is positively related to their attitudes toward organic consumption which suggests that effective marketing strategies that emphasize product safety, and affordable prices, can be developed to increase consumer intention to participate in organic consumption⁸.

2. General Sustainable Behaviors:

The main reasons that people chose not to participate in sustainable behaviors include a lack of knowledge and awareness, the added cost, the quality or availability of products, the added effort required to participate, the perceived inconvenience, the improper communication, and the lack of trust in the information they receive about sustainability^{7,2,4,6,10,11}. One factor that has been found to increase sustainable behaviors is ease of access. For example, the closer a drop off location is, the more likely a person is to recycle¹². Other factors that encourage sustainable

practices include social influences as well as altruistic and regulatory enforcements^{21,22}. The people who are most likely to participate in sustainable behaviors include: individuals who own homes, members of community groups, older residents, and individuals who vote more liberally^{1,2,3,4,6}. In contrast, the people who were found to be the least likely to participate in various sustainable behaviors included: younger individuals, males, people who had less faith that their individual actions made a difference, people with lower socioeconomic status, individuals with lower education levels, and people who were distrustful of the information they received about the environmental impact of their behaviors^{1,4,6,10}.

3. History and Norms Intervention:

In 1999, the cost of trash disposal in the United States was estimated to reach 75 billion dollars by 2000. In 1998, the EPA declared goals to reduce the use of landfills and in response, all fifty states enacted laws that required cities to reduce waste. Curbside recycling programs became the most common strategy implemented to meet these requirements and since then, curbside recycling has become a normalized behavior and a widespread solution to reducing the waste in landfills¹⁴. The dissemination of information is the most common strategy employed to change behavior and it acts on the assumption that if people knew more about sustainable behaviors, they would participate^{14,23}. Lack of knowledge is one barrier to action, however, motivation has been shown to be a more powerful factor²³. Norms are a strong source of motivation and have been shown to be more effective in changing behavior than traditional information dissemination^{17,18}.

Norms are beliefs about what other people are doing, the typical behavior of your peers, or perceptions of what others around you approve or disapprove of¹³. Perceived social norms are a strong predictor of behavior. For example, if you see blue bin recycling containers outside of a

majority of your neighbors' homes, you will be more likely to also participate in blue bin recycling. In addition, even if recycling is not the norm, but you believe that it is, this will still influence your behavior and make it more likely that you will recycle^{14,15,16}. The application of social norm interventions has been shown to be effective for a variety of practices including increasing sustainable behaviors^{14,15,16,17, 18}. In addition, norms interventions have been shown to be most successful when a consumer's mindset is at the collective level rather than an individual level¹⁵. Although, norms do not require consumers to have accurate knowledge in order to be effective, norms interventions in combination with knowledge dissemination that starts at a young age can be an effective tool for producing change in Geneva communities.

IV. Hypotheses

Upon concluding our literature review, we initially hypothesized that the Geneva residents of higher socio-economic status will be better equip and more likely to lead sustainable lives. Furthermore, we have hypothesized that the primary groups of people who do not live as sustainably will tend to be those Geneva residents from lower-income households and/or have completed lower levels of educational attainment, i.e. from lower socioeconomic status. Thus, we hypothesized the most prevalent factors attributing to the ability for Geneva residents to live sustainably are contributed to affordability and sustainable knowledge. Additional factors that we have hypothesized to actually enable sustainable practices throughout Geneva are general environmental concern, social pressures, and convenience. Whereas, the factors contributed to hindering sustainable behavior are due to an immense lack of access to sustainable knowledge and inconvenience among those of lower socioeconomic status. For example, inconvenience of sustainability within the lower income households can be understood in relation to their residential location and inability to access resources, i.e. composting bins. The more

disadvantaged neighborhoods may not offer the stores selling quality of foods that can be sustainably composted, such as fruits and vegetables, and the low-income households may be less inclined to decompose their food scraps because they are suspected to generate a lesser quantity of food waste. Therefore, we have definitively hypothesized that the Geneva residents of higher socioeconomic status will be the residents that engage more willingly and frequently in sustainable behaviors such as recycling and composting.

V. Methodology

1. Interview Schedules:

In order to collect information about the current sustainable practices and perceptions of Geneva residents, we started our research process by conducting door-to-door interview schedules. To ensure that our sample would be diverse in income demographics, we used the Geneva Neighborhood Resource Center to choose four income distinct neighborhoods and selected three random streets within each of them. We then split up into two groups and went door-to-door conducting the interview schedules. Participants signed a consent and then answered a number of questions ranging from sustainable household practices to purchasing habits. One researcher focused on recording the resident's responses to the questions on a clipboard, while another researcher asked the questions and focused on establishing rapport with the resident and asking follow-up questions as needed. Residents were then asked to fill out their own demographic information before putting the survey in an envelope.

After two days and roughly eight hours of knocking on doors, we concluded that interview schedules were not the most efficient research method. Due to cold temperatures and the number of apartment buildings in Geneva, many residents were not answering their doors or were refusing to participate in our research. After yielding around 17 interview schedules, we

ultimately decided it was time to reevaluate our research methodology. After assessing the interview schedules, we determined that this method was not giving us a sample size that was representative or generalizable of the greater Geneva community. We decided to redesign our research methodology in the hopes of providing our client with specific deliverables and viable solutions.

2. Store Surveys:

In order to increase our sample size and narrow the focus of our research, we decided to change our research methodology to surveys conducted at grocery stores in Geneva (see Appendix A). After analyzing our initial interview schedules and searching for trends in the findings, we narrowed the scope of our survey questions to focus on recycling and composting practices. In narrowing the scope of our research, we were able to condense the survey to one page, allowing for increased efficiency by respondents and warranting a larger sample size. Researchers surveyed outside at Tops and Walmart and were able to produce a total of 170 surveys total.

3. Focus Groups:

In addition to conducting interview schedules and surveys, we also decided that in order to gain more qualitative data and sustainable perceptions and practices we wanted to be able to host focus groups with residents. We reached out to multiple neighborhood associations through email and were able to participate in two focus group sessions at, Hildreth Hill and Castle Heights Neighborhoods. These focus groups allowed us to have informal conversations with Geneva residents using predetermined questions as a guide to illicit the dialogue (see Appendix B). From these conversations we were able to gain a better understanding of what Geneva residents were currently doing to be sustainable, how they thought their neighbors were doing

with practicing sustainable actions or not, as well as we were able to ask for their advice on what could help to improve sustainability practices across Geneva. The two focus groups combined provided is qualitative information from around 30 residents who generally were older, more affluent, and more involved in the community than typical residents, which provided us a balance between the convenience sample data that we collected from the interviews and surveys. Having this specific demographic combatted not being able to survey at Wegmans which markets toward a more affluent population.

VI. Results

1. Surveys:

To analyze the results of our surveys, we used IBM SPSS Statistics. First, we made a coding guide and coded our 170 surveys respectively. Upon doing so, we were able to observe demographic information, find frequencies, and perform bivariate analyses. From these tests, we produced a number of significant findings.

Demographics. The gender breakdown of our participants was evenly distributed. Out of the 98.2% of people who answered, 56.5% were female and 41.2% were male (see Appendix C). Additionally, the age range of the 145 participants who answered was fairly distributed across the four categories we coded for: 18-30 (14.1%), 31-45 (15.3%), 46-65 (31.8%), and 66+ (9.4%) (see Appendix D). The last demographic characteristic that was relevant to our data was race. At first glance, the results seem unevenly distributed (see Appendix E). However, according to the latest US Census Data for Geneva, NY, our results are equivalent to the breakdown of race for the ~13,000 residents in the city and the town of Geneva (U.S. Census, 2016). Therefore, the distribution of these three demographic characteristics ensured our sampling frame was representative of Geneva residents.

Recycling. The next group of significant findings from our data supported the literature review proposing that recycling is a normative practice and therefore, most people are likely to recycle. With a 100% response rate, we concluded 89.4% of our participants recycle, with “environmental concern” being the greatest reason cited for doing so (see Appendix F). However, when further broken down, women were more likely to indicate “environmental concern,” whereas men were more likely to cite “cost” or “convenience” as their reasons for recycling.

Next, out of the 10.6% of people who claimed they do not recycle, two-thirds cited “inconvenience” as the greatest reason for not doing so in comparison to cost factors, not seeing a benefit, not knowing how, or other (see Appendix G). Additionally, there was found to be a positive correlation between income and whether or not people recycle with a p value of 0.04.

Composting. In comparison to recycling, the majority of our 170 respondents indicated they do not compost food. When asked why, the greatest reasons cited for not doing so were found to be “inconvenience” or “do not know how” (see Appendix H). However, 80% of respondents indicated they would be willing to compost when given the following choices: A service picked up your compost for a fee comparable to trash pickup, someone set up a compost at your house, there was a communal location to drop off compost, or not willing to compost.

Out of the 31.8% of respondents in the 46-65 age group, almost half indicated they would never be willing to compost. Additionally, we found there to be a positive correlation between people who do not recycle and people who are never willing to compost with a p value of 0.008.

2. Focus Groups:

In order to widen the demographic reach our research, we conducted focus groups at two neighborhood association meetings, Hildreth Hill and Castle Heights. This allowed for an open

dialogue with the residents to better understand their current sustainability practices, their attitudes towards sustainability, their perceptions on how they feel their neighbors are acting to be sustainable, and their suggestions for actions to make Geneva a more sustainable community.

During each focus group session, we took detailed notes, which acted as our medium for interpretation and analysis. We coded the notes, underlining for key themes and similarities. We were able to extract the following five themes as important indicators influencing residents' practices and perceptions of sustainability: *awareness, demographics, incentives/consequences, trust, and values.*

Awareness. Throughout the focus group sessions, we garnered that respondents felt there was a general lack of awareness and knowledge about how to perform certain sustainability practices. We also found that this lack of awareness extends to not being aware of the resources already available in Geneva. This includes a lack of sustainable literacy, not knowing how to compost, not knowing about certain drop off locations for composting yard waste, assuming they cannot compost if they are renters or don't have a big yard, etc.

Demographics. We found that the demographic profiles of the residents played a role in the types of sustainability practices they engaged in and their perceptions towards sustainability. The demographic profile of the neighborhood associations tended to be older, white, and more affluent. Some of the respondents mentioned to us that they had lived through the Great Depression, therefore they felt more inclined to reuse and repurpose. We also noticed in our observations that the groups possessed the cultural capital to understand that the ability to live sustainably is not solely dependent on individual willingness or desire. In other words, they understood the systemic role of policy and education in influencing people's ability to live sustainably and provided suggestions accordingly.

Incentives/consequences. Another conclusion we drew from the focus groups was that people need incentives and consequences in order to engage in sustainable practices. They all acknowledged that not everybody feels strongly about environmentally-friendly living. Therefore, incentives can be used as a tactic to convert less environmentally-friendly residents to engage in a more sustainable lifestyle. Respondents mentioned that through the consequence of charging people for plastic bag use at grocery stores, it would incentivize people to utilize reusable bags.

Trust. We found that distrust played a role in respondents' attitudes towards sustainability such that some said, "Do my efforts make a difference? Will this actually be recycled or just thrown into a landfill?" With Geneva being located in such close proximity to a landfill, this is a sensitive issue for residents. The distrust felt by some respondents did not entirely influence their willingness to recycle or compost themselves, but it is an important notion that could be used to understand other residents' behaviors towards sustainable living.

Values. Lastly, we found that the respondents values are very important to them, and they perceive that their neighbors do not share their same values about sustainability. From our analysis, we believe this sentiment can be attributed to the fact that the sample of our focus groups was a convenience sample and inherently biased. In other words, the only people who showed up to the meetings were people who were passionate/interested in the environment, as they were given advance notice of our attendance. Therefore, they feel more strongly about making Geneva a more sustainable community than their other neighbors. However, their values being important to them is still valuable information for our analysis as it shows that there is a committed population of residents in Geneva who share the mission to make Geneva a more sustainable community.

The other purpose of our focus groups was to involve the community in the suggestions that we could provide to Jacob and Organix Green Industries. The focus groups were extremely helpful in providing us with interesting and insightful suggestions for making Geneva a more sustainable community. The groups advised to spread knowledge/awareness of the resources that already exist in Geneva, and to start a recycling club or other recreational activities for students. They explained that awareness through art/literature, such as children's books, is an effective way to spread the message of sustainability to the Geneva youth. Lastly, as previously mentioned, the focus groups suggested charging people for plastic bag use at grocery stores as an effective strategy for reducing waste. In fact, many communities across the world are already using this tactic, such as Europe and Canada, and even at some stores in the United States such as Aldi.

VII. Discussion

Upon reviewing our results, we found that the most frequently cited factors hindering sustainable behaviors are attributed to lack of knowledge and inconvenience. For instance, recycling is a practice that has been much more normalized throughout our society than composting. Residents appeared to have internalized recycling as a social norm, this was observed when we asked our respondents why they recycle and many replied, "Why not?" Recycling programs and options to recycle your trash has already been largely established and in operation for many years, thus convenient and internalized. Additionally, the general information about recyclable items and how to recycle has been widespread, more so than the sustainable practices of composting. Since recycling is an outdoor, public practice that inspires normative behavior, the fact that composting is largely performed in the household or in the backyard away from public eye proposes limitations for it becoming a normative practice. This makes it such

that recycling has become an internalized norm and consequently, many residents feel social pressure to conform. Based on our research, we suggest that expelling inaccurate myths about composting and teaching people how to compost will be a successful first step in normalizing this behavior. If composting was a normalized behavior in our community and residents were exposed to information and had convenient options to assist them, composting could become a normalized practice and incentivize residents to conform to the new norm.

Inconvenience was one of two major factors that we found to be severely hindering to the practice of composting. Per our hypotheses, we predicted that our data would demonstrate that residents in higher income neighborhoods, compared to those in lower income neighborhoods, would display awareness and more frequent engagement with daily sustainable living behaviors. For residents of lower socioeconomic status, purchasing composting bins and other equipment may be unfeasible for some. Furthermore, the actual compostable items are less present in more disadvantaged areas. For example, the quality of food for compost bins, i.e. fruits and vegetables, may not be sold in stores throughout certain neighborhoods. Additionally, lower income families tend to generate lesser compostable food scraps and as far as composting yard waste, their neighborhoods and apartment building structures do not allow for this space, thus (to them) composting would be futile.

Lack of knowledge, the second major factor hindering sustainable practices of composting, has revealed itself in many ways during the process of our research. Respondents had many commonly held misconceptions surrounding sustainability and more specifically composting. As mentioned above, respondents typically believed that ownership of a great big yard is a requirement to engage in composting and believed that they did not have the physical space to do so, however this is not true (it is possible to compost inside with a kitchen compact

bin). Respondents also expressed fears of its illegality and although composting was an illegal practice in Geneva until approximately two years ago, composting is in fact legal in Geneva today. At times, survey respondents appeared to have little understanding of sustainable literacy and expressed their unfamiliarity with the practice of composting and requested that we provide them with definitions. Numerous residents were completely unaware of the actual how-to process of composting and they did not understand the advantages and/or benefits of this sustainable practice. The information, convenience, and normalization of composting must be available in order for Geneva residents to begin more frequently engaging this sustainable behavior.

VIII. Sources of Error

Our survey was the cause for several errors in the course of our research project. The survey's formatting was inconsistent, and some questions were unclear. We had areas for our respondents to circle, check, fill-in, and write themselves which in hindsight was a bit confusing and difficult to code later for SPSS analysis. The survey spacing was tight with crammed wording (it was only one single page) and after the fact we grew concerned that our respondents may have overlooked some areas of opportunity to provide us with additional information. Also, our survey was administered strictly in English which has most likely caused error among our demographic analysis and outcomes. We were completely unable to reach non-native speakers, thus limiting some of the generalizability of Geneva residents among our results.

IX. Recommendations

According to our data, 80% of sampled residents indicated they would compost given the means to do so. Therefore, we propose the following recommendations for Organix Green Industries and the city and town of Geneva, NY.

First, Organix Green Industries should sell compost bins to Geneva residents. These can range from small kitchen containers to larger outdoor bins for the residents who have the space. Second, Organix Green Industries should partner with the city and town of Geneva to set up communal compost locations in the ten distinct Geneva neighborhoods. In order for Organix Green Industries to seek a profit, the company could charge a fee to pick up individuals' compost and then sell it fertilized soil back to participating Geneva residents and businesses.

While Organix Green Industries can work toward informing Geneva residents about sustainable lifestyle habits and practices, we propose the city and town of Geneva take on this responsibility. City Hall and other organizations should host informational sessions every few months on the specificities on composting: how to do so, the materials required, what is allowed, etc. In doing so, Geneva can work toward normalizing the behavior of composting. Second, the city and town of Geneva should improve communication across Geneva neighborhoods to raise awareness about what resources and events already exist that help to conserve environmental resources (i.e. E-waste drop-offs, clothing swaps, etc.). This communication should be environmentally friendly and primarily exist online, and additionally be spread through already existing Geneva groups (i.e. churches, neighborhood associations, etc.).

X. Appendix

A. Survey

This information will remain anonymous and confidential.

I certify that I am above 18 years of age.

1. Do you recycle? (Circle one)

Yes No

If yes, why do you recycle? (Check all that apply)

- Environmental concern
- Social pressure
- Convenience
- Cheaper

Other: _____

If not, why? (Check all that apply)

- Inconvenient
- Expensive
- I don't see the benefits
- I don't know how

Other: _____

2. Do you compost? (Circle one)

Food Scraps

Sometimes Always Never

Yard Waste (leaves, grass, brush, etc.)

Sometimes Always Never

If not, why? (Check all that apply)

- Inconvenient
- Expensive
- I don't see the benefits
- I don't know how

Other: _____

3. Would you be willing to compost if (Check all that apply):

- A service picked up your compost for a fee comparable to trash pickup
- Someone set up a compost at your house
- There was a communal location to drop off compost
- I would not be willing to compost

Demographic Info:

Gender (circle one): Male or Female

Age: _____

Race/Ethnicity:

- Hispanic or Latino
- White
- Black or African American
- Asian
- Other: _____

What's the highest level of education you have completed?

- Some high school
- High School Diploma/GED Equivalent
- Associates
- Technical or Trade School
- Some college
- Bachelors
- Graduate Degree
- PHD

What is your political affiliation?

- Democrat
- Republican
- Independent
- Other: _____

Household Income Bracket:

- Less than \$25,000
- \$25,000 to \$34,999
- \$35,000 to \$49,999
- \$50,000 to \$74,999
- \$75,000 to \$99,999
- \$100,000 to \$149,999
- Above \$150,000

Number of Persons in Household: _____

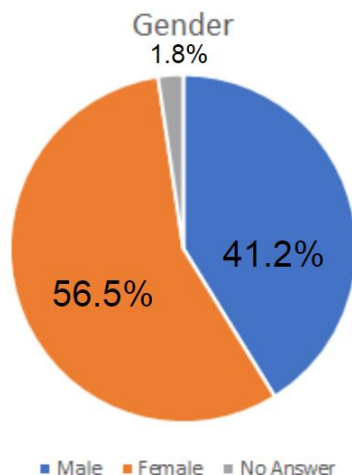
B. Focus Group Questions

These are the questions that we will reference to start a dialogue about sustainability in the Geneva community at pre-existing neighbor meetings/events.

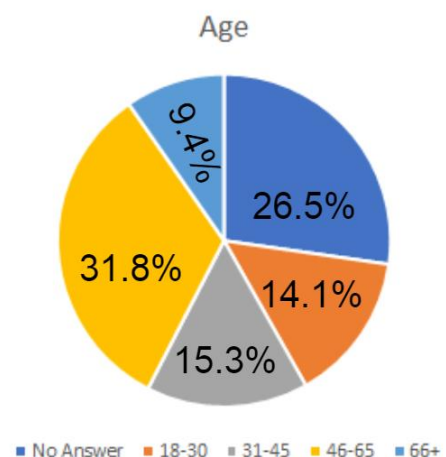
Consent forms will be distributed before two members of the Research Team will conduct the discussion while a third member will record and take notes.

1. What type of practices and behaviors do you do in your household to be sustainable? What is the most important to you and why?
2. How did you learn about these kinds of practices?
3. What would make it easier for you to live sustainably i.e. recycle, compost, buy organic, etc.?
4. How important is it to you to live sustainably? Is sustainability more importance than its associated costs?
5. Do you think your neighbors are sustainable? Do you think they share your same values of sustainability?
6. Do you see a need for improvement in environmentally friendly practices in the Geneva community? How? And Why?
7. We are working on a plan to make the Geneva community more sustainable. Can you offer any solutions or ideas for your neighborhood?
8. What attitudes towards sustainability best reflect your neighborhood?
9. What do you believe the willingness of your neighborhood is to participate in sustainable behaviors in the future?

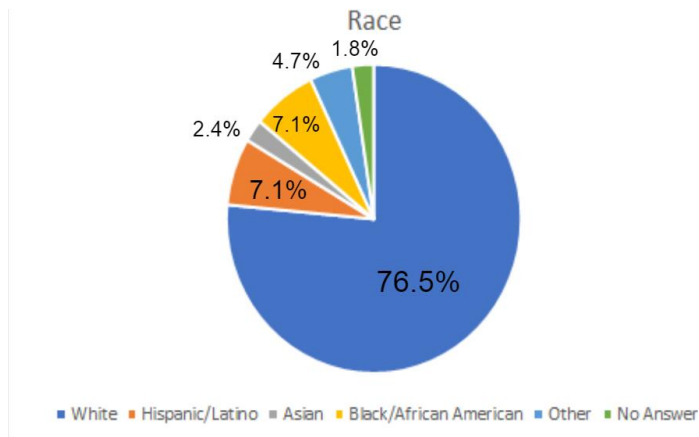
C. Gender



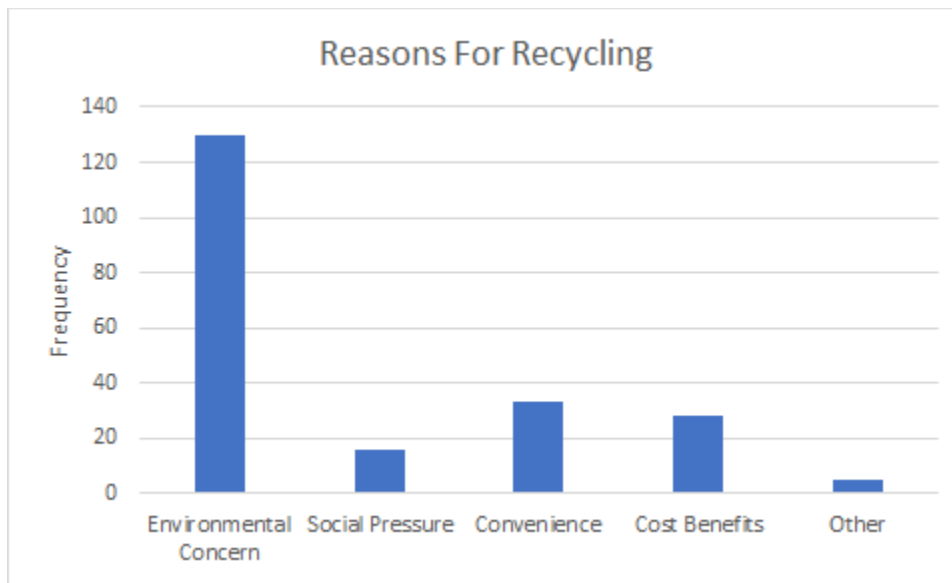
D. Age



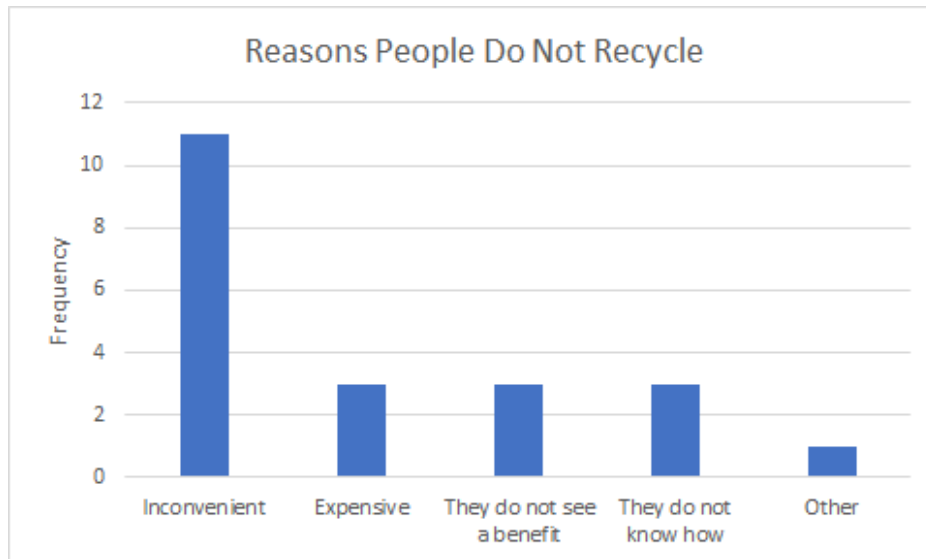
E. Race



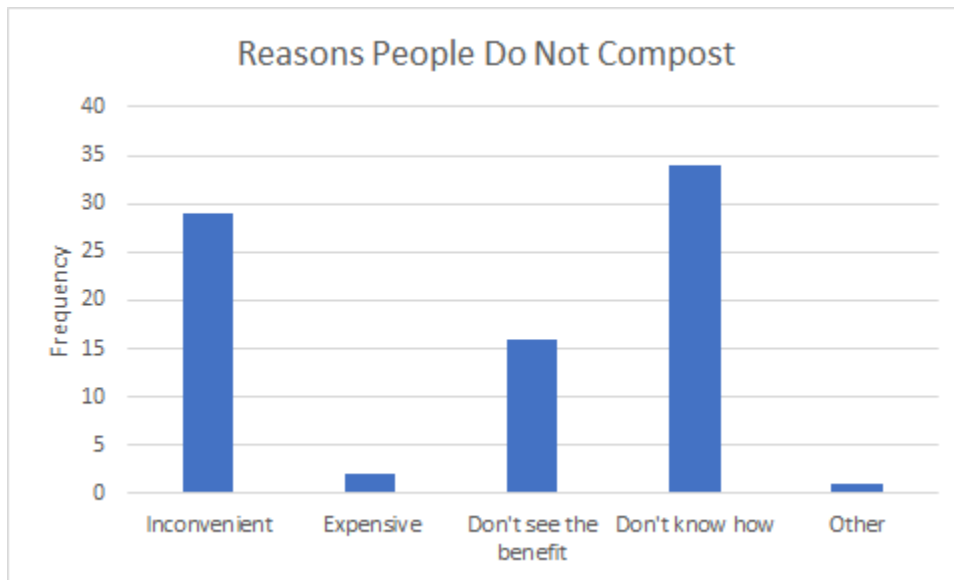
F. Reasons for Recycling



G. Reasons for Not Recycling



H. Reasons for Not Composting



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