



# The Effect of Image Priming on Consideration Towards the Environment

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## Introduction

Since the Industrial Revolution, humans have caused a 1° Celsius rise in global warming, and we are already experiencing serious climate and pollution impacts such as more extreme weather and millions of premature deaths per year caused by air pollution. In order to foster collective action and widescale use of green technologies and governmental policies on climate change mitigation, there must be a societal transformation in our attitudes and values—particularly, by placing more importance and value on nature conservation.

A crucial element that contributes to shaping public opinion on an issue is imagery because images have the capacity to provoke certain emotional responses in the viewer.



Deforestation in Indonesia. *Aulia Erlangga/CIFOR*

## Research Question

“To what extent does priming with images affect college students’ consideration towards the environment?”

Priming is a psychological technique where exposure to one stimulus such as an image or word can affect an individual’s response to a subsequent stimulus.

I hypothesize that participants who are exposed to images of climate impacts among people and in nature will place more priority on environmental conservation compared to participants who view images of climate impacts only in nature and participants who are exposed to images that do not relate to climate change.



*sloanreview.mit.edu*

## Significance

Studying possible climate change solutions through a psychological lens will help inform policymakers, news reporters, educators, and other influential figures on how to influence public opinion towards recognizing the importance of the climate crisis and engaging in pro-environmental behavior. Thus, studying the effect of image priming on behavior will offer beneficial insight on how to frame the climate crisis in a way that elicits a behavioral response among a non-expert audience.

## Literature Review

- The significance of priming with environmental images is shown in Franěk and Režný’s 2017 study as the results supported their hypothesis that images can influence people to be more engaged with outdoor environments. The researchers found that those who were primed with photographs of trees walked significantly slower in an outside environment compared to those primed with photos of malls and those who were not primed (Franěk & Režný, 2017).
- Studies by Lenhman et al. (2019) and O’Neill et al. (2013) show a clear pattern of which images are rated as significant and relevant to climate change. These images include natural disasters such as floods, polar bears, industrial smog, deforestation, and cracked grounds. However, in O’Neill et al.’s study, participants also responded that images of climate impacts in nature did not make them feel like they could do something about climate change. In addition, O’Neill et al. (2013) and Lehman et al. (2019) suggest that images of politicians and celebrities undermine public engagement and care about climate change.
- In a study by Duan et al. (2017), the researchers coded the themes of 635 climate change images from US newspapers and found that images of politicians and celebrities were often used as media representations of climate change. In contrast, images of ordinary people dealing with climate impacts were less common but were identified as more concrete, which means that these images prompt a psychological connection between the subject of the image and the viewer.



Flooding in Venice, Italy; 2019. *Getty*

## Method

- A sample of a minimum of 60 participants will be recruited via SONA. Participants will be 18 years of age or older and undergraduate or graduate students who are currently enrolled at CSU Stanislaus.
- Students will first be presented with an informed consent form and once the student gives their formal consent to participate, they will be asked to complete a demographics questionnaire.
- Those who disclose that they are 18 or older will be presented with 5 images. The themes of these images will depend on which condition the participant is randomly assigned to: images of climate impacts among nature and people, images of climate impacts only in nature, and images that do not relate to climate change.



Image from nature only condition. *Alamy*

- After viewing these images for about 30 seconds, participants will be asked to imagine that they are given \$400 to distribute among 4 different charities (environmental, education, health, and animal sanctuary). Participants will be asked to give the money to one or more charities.
- After completing this task, which should take several minutes at most, participants will be directed to a debriefing form and thanked for their time.

## Expected Results

On average, participants in the nature and people condition will distribute more money to the environmental charity compared to participants in the nature only condition and the non-climate condition.

## References

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