



Environmental Science
& Policy Program
at Michigan State University

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Abstract or Concrete? The Uses and Effects of Climate Change Images in the Media

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In today's society, human attention is a scarce resource. People tend to prefer visual news information over reading text. Climate change is a topic that has been frequently reported and discussed in various media sources. The majority of people in the United States view climate change as an abstract and distant risk, even though images of climate change in the media are often thought to be consumable and concrete. How to effectively communicate climate change via images in a more concrete and urgent way remains a challenge. Until now no study has examined whether climate change images are concrete or abstract, and how images being abstract or concrete can impact people's perceptions of climate change. In order to solve these open questions, we firstly studied whether climate change images in the media are concrete or abstract. We developed a novel and replicable coding scheme to quantify the abstraction level of images. Results show that climate change has been visually portrayed as a relatively concrete rather than abstract issue. Second, we studied how abstraction levels of climate change images can influence people's perceptions of the issue. We experimentally tested to what extent images with different abstraction levels can influence people's mindsets. By understanding the uses and effects of climate change images in terms of their level of abstraction, policy-makers and media workers can be better informed on how to use images effectively to influence public perceptions about the risk of climate change.

10 a.m. Monday April 24, 2017

273 Giltner Hall

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