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Promoting Pro-Climate Actions: A Cognitive-Constraints Approach

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Abstract

Most Americans do not view climate change as an imminent threat. The present paper harnessed the power of two cognitive constraints essential to belief formation and revision—coherence and causal invariance—to guide the development of educational materials to foster pro-climate actions. Building on insights from philosophy, cognitive psychology, and anthropology, our materials presented questions on a range of everyday and otherwise personally relatable events to participants in 10 U.S. states with the highest level of climate skepticism. Participants answered the questions, explained their answers, and received feedback featuring scientific explanations. The latter typically deviate from participants' own (invoking the causal-invariance constraint), and are more coherent (invoking the coherence constraint). In support of our approach, although our intervention materials did not mention climate change or mitigating actions, they raised willingness to take pro-climate actions, but did so only when the components hypothesized to enable a coherent pro-climate-action narrative were included.