

An Analysis of the Effects of Strategic Messaging on the
Perceptual, Cognitive, and Motivational Antecedents to Climate Activism in Youth

Dr. Kelly Page Werder
Associate Professor
University of South Florida
4202 E. Fowler Ave., CIS 1040
Tampa, Florida 33620-7800
(813) 974-6790

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Recent headlines, like “College endowments feel the heat over global warming” (Berr, 2014) and “Students fight climate change, cite personal reasons” (Vendituoli, 2013), suggest a growing movement of climate activism among youth. According to one media report, “College campuses are becoming a hotspot in the battle against climate change. Activists at around 300 schools are pressuring the institutions to divest their holdings in oil, natural gas and coal companies -- the fossil fuels that scientists blame for carbon-induced global warming” (Berr, 2014).

Student-led activist organizations like the Environmental Action Group are engaging in advocacy campaigns on many U.S. college campuses. According to the organization’s Web site at George Mason University (<http://www.gmu.edu/org/environment/>), the group seeks to “create a diverse movement within the [university] community to make tangible improvements in our environment and empower students to take action for a healthy planet for our future.”

At some universities, these activist groups have been successful in facilitating institutional change. In May 2014, Stanford University announced that it would no longer make direct investments in coal mining companies after the student-led activist group Fossil Free Stanford petitioned the university to divest from 200 fossil-fuel extraction companies as part of a national divestment campaign (Berr, 2014).

This study contributes to current theory-driven research on climate and sustainability campaigns by examining the effects of activist communication about climate change. This study takes the position of the activist organization and examines the effects of strategic messaging on climate activism in youth. Specifically, this study attempts to: 1) understand the situational perceptions in youth that influence attitudes and behaviors toward climate activism, and 2) determine the message strategies most effective in influencing those perceptions to produce communicative action and other supportive behaviors related to climate activism.

The Integrated Model of Strategic Messaging (Werder, 2014) provides the theoretical framework for this study. The model, shown in Figure 1, applies an interdisciplinary perspective to identify the antecedents most influential in understanding and predicting the communication behavior of publics. Specifically, the independent and dependent variables of the situational theory of problem solving (Kim & J. E. Grunig, 2011; Kim, Ni, Kim, & Kim, 2012) and the theory of reasoned action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) are integrated to provide a more

comprehensive, robust way of understanding and explaining why publics engage in communication behavior, as well as other behaviors, related to organizational activities and goals.

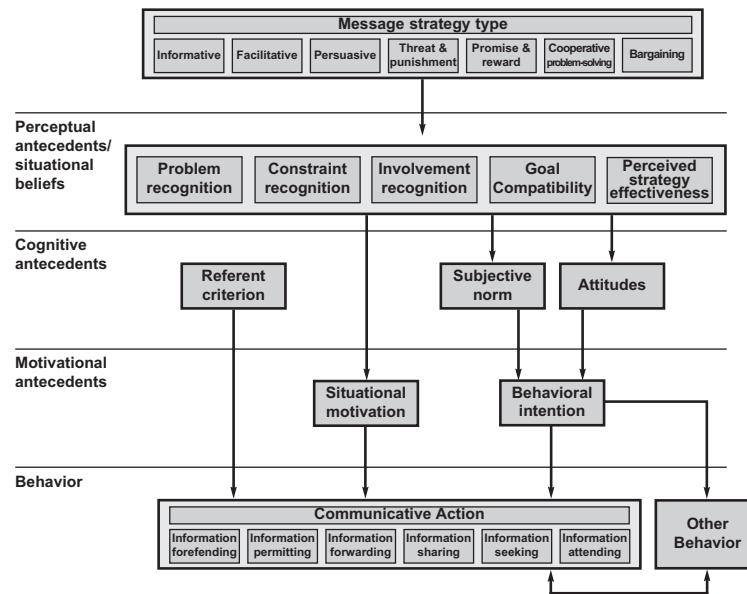


Fig. 1. The Integrated Model of Strategic Messaging

In this study, message strategy effect on perceptual, cognitive, and motivational antecedents to communicative action was examined using a posttest-only randomized experimental design (N=320). Seven message strategy types (plus a control condition) derived from the Public Relation Process Model (Hazleton & Long, 1988) were tested to determine their influence on perceptual, cognitive, and motivational antecedents to communicative action and other behaviors of youth toward climate activism. The seven message strategies examined in this study included informative, persuasive, facilitative, cooperative problem-solving, threat/punishment, promise/reward, and bargaining.

Preliminary findings suggest that youth are most motivated to engage in communicative action about climate change by persuasive and power strategies, such as threat/punishment and promise/reward; however, facilitative strategies were the most effective in motivating other behaviors, such as getting youth to sign a petition. In addition, the results of this study suggest that the Integrated Model of Strategic Messaging provides a useful framework for examining variables that influence climate activism in youth. Implications for practice include a predictive theory of strategic communication messaging that can inform activist organizations, as well as

the organizations being targeted for change through activism. The results of this study are also useful for climate and sustainability campaign planning and evaluation.

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