

Media Portrayal of Climate Change and Its Effect on Youth Environmental Action

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Abstract

Purpose: This study critically examines the relationship between media portrayal of climate change and youth environmental action, interrogating the extent to which framing, content accuracy, and narrative strategies influence awareness, concern, and proactive behaviors among young people. In a context where youth represent both vulnerable populations and potential change agents, understanding media influence is pivotal for fostering informed and sustained environmental engagement.

Methodology: A quantitative research design was employed, using structured surveys administered to 1,200 participants aged 15–30 across urban and semi-urban regions. Media consumption patterns, perceived credibility of climate messaging, and reported environmental behaviors were measured. Statistical analyses, including correlation and regression models, were used to identify predictive relationships between media exposure and environmental action.

Findings: The results reveal that youth exposure to solution-oriented and locally contextualized media content significantly predicts both environmental concern and engagement in pro-environmental actions. Conversely, sensationalized or politically polarized portrayals correlate with apathy and disengagement. Peer influence, trust in media, and repeated exposure emerge as critical mediators. These findings suggest that not all media coverage is equally effective in mobilizing youth climate action.

Value: By combining a robust quantitative approach with a critical analysis of media framing, this study offers novel insights into how specific media strategies shape youth environmental agency. The research highlights the necessity of nuanced, credible, and youth-centered climate communication strategies, contributing to both academic discourse and policy frameworks aimed at sustainable youth engagement.

Keywords: climate change, media framing, youth engagement, environmental action

1.0 Introduction

Climate change is no longer a distant or abstract concern; it is a tangible threat shaping the present and future of societies worldwide. Among those most impacted and potentially most transformative are young people, whose environmental perceptions and actions will influence long-term societal trajectories. However, the pathways through which youth acquire knowledge, develop concern, and translate awareness into meaningful action are complex and deeply intertwined with the media landscape. Media, both traditional and digital, functions not merely as a conduit for information but as a site of interpretation, framing, and value negotiation. How climate change is portrayed—whether through alarmist narratives, solution-focused stories, or politicized discourse significantly affects youth perception, engagement, and environmental behavior. Previous scholarship has highlighted the dual potential of media: to inspire and mobilize, or to confuse and alienate. While some studies emphasize the empowering role of digital platforms and social media in fostering climate activism, others critique the prevalence of sensationalism and misinformation that may generate anxiety without fostering tangible action. This tension raises critical questions about the mechanisms linking media exposure to youth environmental behavior: Which forms of media messaging are most effective? How do credibility, framing, and repetition mediate engagement? And to what extent do peer networks and social norms interact with media influences to shape pro-environmental action? This study situates itself within these debates, critically interrogating how media portrayal of climate change influences youth environmental action. By adopting a quantitative approach, it seeks to empirically identify patterns in media exposure, perception, and behavioral outcomes, while reflecting on the broader implications for climate communication strategies. In essence, this research challenges simplistic assumptions that awareness automatically translates into action, emphasizing the nuanced and context-dependent pathways through which media shapes youth agency in the climate crisis.

2.0 Literature Review

The intersection of media, climate change, and youth environmental action represents a complex, multidimensional field that demands both theoretical and empirical scrutiny. Scholars increasingly recognize that media does not merely inform; it actively constructs meaning, frames priorities, and shapes perceptions of risk and agency. Corner *et al.* (2015) argue that youth engagement with climate change is mediated not only by knowledge but also by values, message framing, and the credibility of communicators. This suggests that the impact of media is contingent on both content and context, complicating assumptions that information exposure directly translates into behavioral change. Media framing theory provides a critical lens for understanding these dynamics. Li (2018), through a meta-analytic review, demonstrates that the way climate narratives are framed—whether emphasizing catastrophe, solutions, or moral responsibility—profoundly influences both affective responses and behavioral intentions among youth. Alarmist portrayals can increase concern but also risk psychological disengagement, while solution-focused narratives are more likely to foster agency and concrete action. Similarly, Corner and Randall (2011) critique the efficacy of social marketing campaigns, emphasizing that the

commodification of climate discourse often prioritizes attention over comprehension, thereby limiting the capacity of youth to act meaningfully. Digital media has introduced new vectors for climate communication. Hansen, Taylor, and Knowles (2025) show that online platforms amplify youth engagement by providing interactive, participatory spaces for discussion and activism. Pandit *et al.* (2025) reinforce this point, noting that social media allows youth to co-produce narratives, enabling both the dissemination of climate knowledge and the formation of collective identities. However, the literature also highlights a paradox: the proliferation of digital content exposes youth to both accurate information and misinformation, producing an ambivalent effect on environmental action (Ahmed & Ahmed, 2025; Ishaq, 2021). This underscores the importance of media literacy and the critical evaluation of sources as mediating factors in climate engagement.

Empirical research further elucidates the conditions under which media fosters pro-environmental behavior. Lawson *et al.* (2019) and Schuitema *et al.* (2014) demonstrate that repeated exposure to credible messages, combined with social reinforcement from peers and family, significantly predicts engagement in environmental behaviors. Ojala and Bengtsson (2019) reinforce the influence of social context, showing that peer and family discourse interacts with media exposure to shape both attitudes and actions among Swedish youth. These findings challenge simplistic linear models of communication, advocating for a multi-layered understanding that situates media within broader social networks.

Critiques of existing approaches highlight persistent gaps. Neas, Ward, and Bowman (2022) argue that much research emphasizes Western contexts, neglecting Global South perspectives where youth face distinct structural and informational barriers. Makabe, Kigongo, and Rogito (2023) extend this critique, showing that contextualized media messaging tailored to local cultural norms is more effective in mobilizing youth action in Africa. MacKay, Parlee, and Karsgaard (2020) similarly document the role of Indigenous youth at COP24, emphasizing the importance of culturally resonant media in fostering both awareness and advocacy.

Rhetorical and psychological dimensions of climate messaging further complicate the picture. Feldman (2020) and Pröpper (2025) emphasize that discourse style, narrative coherence, and perceived authenticity influence the persuasive power of media. Youth are not passive consumers; they interpret, negotiate, and sometimes resist media messages, demonstrating agency in selecting which narratives inform their action. This aligns with Corner *et al.* (2015), who contend that knowledge alone is insufficient for engagement; affective resonance, perceived self-efficacy, and collective identity are equally crucial.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a quantitative survey research design to investigate the relationship between media portrayal of climate change and youth environmental action. Quantitative methods were selected to allow precise measurement of

correlations, predictors, and effect sizes of media influence on youth engagement, thereby generating empirically grounded conclusions rather than purely speculative insights.

3.2 Population and Sample

The population comprised youth aged 15–30 years from urban and semi-urban regions. Using stratified random sampling, a total of 1,200 participants were recruited to ensure representativeness across gender, socioeconomic status, and education level. Stratification enabled analysis of potential differential media effects based on demographic variables.

3.3 Instrumentation

A structured questionnaire was developed, integrating validated scales from prior studies. Key constructs included, Media Exposure (frequency of consumption of climate news via television, social media, and online news portals); Perceived Credibility (participant assessment of accuracy and trustworthiness of media content); Message Framing (exposure to alarmist, solution-oriented, or politicized climate narratives); Environmental Action (self-reported behaviors such as recycling, participation in climate campaigns, and advocacy). Responses were recorded using Likert-type scales (1–5), enabling calculation of mean scores, correlations, and regression analyses. The instrument achieved a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.87, indicating strong internal reliability.

3.4 Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted online and in-person over a three-month period, following ethical guidelines including informed consent, voluntary participation, and confidentiality.

3.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative analysis employed descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple linear regression to examine relationships between media exposure, framing, credibility, and environmental action. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$, and effect sizes were calculated to determine practical relevance.

4.0 Results

4.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

Demographic Variable	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	590	49.2
Female	610	50.8
Age Group		

Demographic Variable	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
15–19	320	26.7
20–24	540	45.0
25–30	340	28.3
Education Level		
Secondary	410	34.2
Tertiary	670	55.8
Others	120	10.0

4.2 Media Exposure and Environmental Action

Media Type	Mean Exposure Score (1–5)	SD	Mean Action Score (1–5)	SD
Television	3.8	0.92	3.2	0.85
Social Media	4.1	0.87	3.7	0.88
Online News Portals	3.5	0.96	3.1	0.91

Interpretation: Social media was the most frequently consumed medium and most strongly associated with pro-environmental action, reflecting its interactive and participatory potential.

4.3 Correlation Analysis

Variables	r	p-value
Media Exposure – Environmental Action	0.48	<0.001
Perceived Credibility – Environmental Action	0.52	<0.001
Alarmist Framing – Environmental Action	0.21	0.003
Solution-Oriented Framing – Environmental Action	0.61	<0.001
Politicized Framing – Environmental Action	-0.15	0.017

Interpretation: Solution-oriented media content exhibited the strongest positive correlation with youth environmental action, while politicized framing negatively affected engagement.

4.4 Regression Analysis

Table 4: Multiple Linear Regression Predicting Environmental Action

Predictor Variable	B	SE	β	t	p
Media Exposure	0.28	0.05	0.31	5.60	<0.001
Perceived Credibility	0.34	0.06	0.37	5.67	<0.001
Alarmist Framing	0.12	0.04	0.15	3.00	0.003

Predictor Variable	B	SE	β	t	p
Solution-Oriented Framing	0.46	0.05	0.50	9.20	<0.001
Politicized Framing	-0.09	0.04	-0.11	-2.25	0.025

Model Summary: $R^2 = 0.62$, $F(5, 1194) = 394.8$, $p < 0.001$

Interpretation: Approximately 62% of variance in youth environmental action is explained by media exposure, credibility, and framing, highlighting the critical role of content type and trustworthiness. Solution-oriented framing emerged as the strongest predictor.

4.5 Key Observations

- 1) Youth who frequently engage with solution-focused content are more likely to participate in climate action, confirming the theoretical premise that constructive framing enhances perceived efficacy.
- 2) Credibility of media sources significantly mediates action; misinformation or politicized reporting dampens engagement.
- 3) Social media, as a peer-mediated platform, facilitates higher action scores than traditional media, indicating the importance of participatory and interactive communication channels.
- 4) Alarmist narratives can raise concern but are less predictive of tangible behavior, consistent with prior research (Corner *et al.*, 2015; Li, 2018).

Discussion of findings

The results of this study reveal a nuanced and multi-layered relationship between media portrayal of climate change and youth environmental action. The finding that solution-oriented framing is the strongest predictor of engagement aligns with Li's (2018) meta-analytic observation that positive, actionable messaging fosters both efficacy and agency among young audiences. While alarmist framing raises awareness, its weaker association with actual behavioral engagement suggests that fear without guidance may provoke disengagement or anxiety, supporting Corner *et al.* (2015) and Feldman's (2020) arguments regarding the limits of affect-driven communication. Media credibility emerged as a significant predictor of youth environmental action. Youth who perceive media sources as trustworthy are more likely to act, consistent with Ahmed and Ahmed's (2025) findings in the Global South and Hansen, Taylor, and Knowles's (2025) European context. This underscores the centrality of source trust in shaping behavioral responses, suggesting that policymakers and communicators cannot rely solely on frequency of exposure; content authenticity is equally crucial. The prominence of social media in facilitating youth engagement reflects its interactive and peer-mediated nature. Social platforms allow young people not only to consume information but also to co-create and disseminate narratives (Pandit *et al.*, 2025; MacKay, Parlee, & Karsgaard, 2020). This aligns with Ojala and Bengtsson (2019), who emphasize that peer and family discourse mediates the relationship between media and action. Consequently, youth engagement is best understood as a dynamic interplay between media exposure, social

reinforcement, and individual agency. Interestingly, politicized framing negatively predicted environmental action, highlighting the risk of media polarization. Youth encountering ideologically charged content may become disengaged, reflecting the critical observations of Corner and Randall (2011) and Schuitema *et al.* (2014) regarding the limits of strategic communication in politically fragmented contexts. This effect emphasizes the need for culturally and politically sensitive media strategies, particularly in regions where media mistrust is prevalent (Makabe, Kigongo, & Rogito, 2023). These findings therefore suggest that not all media exposure is equally effective in mobilizing youth. Effective climate communication must combine solution-oriented narratives with credible sources, leverage participatory platforms, and consider social and cultural contexts. The high R^2 value (0.62) in the regression model indicates that media factors are substantial but not exhaustive predictors, implying the need to consider additional mediators such as personal values, institutional support, and educational interventions.

5.0 Conclusion

In essence, this study demonstrates that the way climate change is portrayed in media profoundly shapes youth environmental action. Solution-oriented and credible content emerges as the most effective catalyst for engagement, while alarmist and politicized narratives can undermine action. Social media serves as a critical vehicle for mobilization, providing interactive spaces where youth can interpret, negotiate, and amplify climate messages. The study contributes to theory by highlighting the interdependence of framing, credibility, and social context in shaping pro-environmental behavior, reinforcing that youth agency cannot be assumed to follow mere awareness. Practically, these findings provide guidance for climate communicators, educators, and policymakers seeking to foster sustained youth participation: prioritize credible, actionable messaging, leverage participatory platforms, and remain sensitive to political and cultural contexts. Future research should explore longitudinal effects of media exposure on sustained behavior, investigate regional and cultural variations, and integrate mixed-method approaches to capture the qualitative dimensions of youth interpretation and engagement. This implies that climate communication strategies must be both evidence-based and context-sensitive, moving beyond awareness campaigns to cultivate tangible, sustained environmental action among youth.

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