

The Chill of the Moment: Teachable Moments and Climate Change

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Extended Abstract

Although much of the literature on the role of emotion in decision making has focused on the problem of excessive emotions, the lack of emotional response to individual and societal problems constitutes a challenge to issues, such as climate change, for which the consequences are distant and unfold slowly. The literature on teachable moments –learning experience that leads to behavioral change– suggests that the window of opportunities may be brief, when emotions run high, to lock in commitments for action. However, this literature relies on retrospective circumstances (e.g. hospitalization has been shown as 'an opportunity' for smoking cessation), and little is known about teachable moments' creation, and the role of emotions on them. For climate change, if we accept the reality and urgency of the problem, the need to discover triggers for action is acute, given the lack of such feelings of urgency on the part of the public. Here, three experiments examine the role of emotions and commitment on willingness to take actions dealing with climate change.

The first study examined the effect of emotional (vs. non-emotional) short videos. Participants were randomly assigned to either watch an emotional video (one out of four short videos with pre-tested relative strong emotional response, but varied content), or a non-emotional, informational, video about the science of global warming. As a behavioral measure, participants were then requested to volunteer their time completing an energy-footprint calculator. They were

told that more time was a "way of taking more action about global warming." In studies 2 and 3, we examine whether, consistent with the concept of *teachable moments*, the effect of emotional response diminishes over time on behavioral response. We conducted a two-part study with a one-hour time-window. Participants were randomly assigned to watch an emotional ad (music/images about climate change) or an informational, non-emotional, video. In study 2, participants answered the same behavioral measure used in the first study, either immediately or one hour after they watched the video. At the end of the study, participants answered a version of the energy-footprint calculator tailored to take the amount of time they had specified. To examine that results are not explained by participants' hyperbolic time preferences, in study 3 we asked participants to make a donation from a \$30-bonus payment, raffled between several participants, to an environmental organization just after watching the video or one hour later.

We found that participants who watched the emotion-evoking videos volunteered more time on the energy-footprint calculator, and donated more money to an environmental organization, than those who watched the non-emotional video. This was mediated by participants' emotional response: videos with greater emotional load caused people to take more action about climate change, compared to a non-emotional video. However, this difference completely disappeared only one hour after watching the videos. Moreover, for those who watched the emotional video, making their decision one hour after watching the video significantly reduced the time (donation) they decided to spend (make). This latter result was mediated by participants' emotional response after watching the videos. Finally, we found that these results hold for all the political views.

In conclusion, the results of the three studies suggest that a teachable moment created by short emotional videos can promote a behavioral commitment toward climate change mitigation.

Emotions played a key role in this teachable moment's creation and extinction; first, because of its effectiveness compared to an informational, non-emotional, video, and second, because it praises the importance of locking in people's commitments when emotions still run high.