

## **(De)Motivating Mitigation Behavior: An Exploratory Framing Study Applied to Sustainable Food Consumption**

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**Abstract :** This research provides initial evidence that self-efficacy of mitigation behavior – the belief that one’s action can make a difference on the environment – can be implicitly inferred from the way numerical information is presented in environmental messages. The scientific community sees climate change as a pressing issue, but the general public tends to construe climate change as an abstract phenomenon that is psychologically distant. As such, a main barrier to pro-environmental behavior is that individuals often believe that their own behavior makes little to no difference on the environment. When it comes to communicating how the behavior of billions of individuals affects global climate change, it might appear valuable to aggregate those billions and present the shocking enormity of the resources individuals consume. This research provides initial evidence that, in fact, this strategy is ineffective; presenting large-scale aggregate data dilutes the contribution of the individual and impedes individuals’ motivation to act pro-environmentally. The high-impact, underrepresented behavior of eating a sustainable diet was chosen for the present studies. US Participants (total N = 668) were recruited online for a study on ‘meat and the environment’ and received information about some of resources used in meat production – water, CO<sub>2</sub>e, and feed – with numerical information that varied in its frame of reference. A ‘Nation’ frame of reference discussed the resources used in the beef industry, such as the billions of CO<sub>2</sub>e released daily by the industry, while a ‘Meal’ frame of reference presented the resources used in the production of a single beef dish. Participants completed measures of pro-environmental attitudes and behavioral intentions, either immediately (Study 1) or two days (Study 2) after reading the information. In Study 2 (n = 520) participants also indicated whether they consumed less or more meat than usual. Study 2 included an additional control condition that contained no environmental data. In Study 1, participants who read about meat production at a national level, compared to at a meal level, reported lower motivation to make ecologically conscious dietary choices and reported lower behavioral intention to change their diet. In Study 2, a similar pattern emerged, with the added insight that the Nation condition, but not the Meal condition, deviated from the control condition. Participants across conditions, on average, reduced their meat consumption in the duration of Study 2, except those in the Nation condition who remained unchanged. Presenting nation-wide consequences of human behavior is a double-edged sword: Framing in a large scale might reveal the relationship between collective actions and environmental issues, but it hinders the belief that individual actions make a difference.

**Keywords :** climate change communication, environmental concern, meat consumption, motivation

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