

Emotional response to climate change influences whether we seek or avoid further information

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Sixty-two percent of Americans now say they believe that global warming is happening, but 46 percent say they are "very sure" or "extremely sure" that it is not. Only 49 percent know why it is occurring, and about as many say they're not worried about it, according to the April report of the Yale Project on Climate Change Communication.

Because information about climate change is ubiquitous in the media, researchers at the University at Buffalo and the University of Texas, Austin, looked at why many Americans know so little about its causes and why many are not interested in finding out more.

The study, "What, Me Worry? The Role of Affect in Information Seeking and Avoidance" was conducted by Z. Janet Yang, PhD, assistant professor of communication at UB, and Lee Ann Kahlor, PhD, associate professor of public relations and advertising at UT Austin. It was published in the April 2013 issue of the journal *Science Communication* and is available at <http://scx.sagepub.com/content/35/2/189>.

Yang says, "Our key variables of interest were 'information seeking' and 'information avoidance.'

"We found that emotions have different impacts on both behaviors and that those with whom we socialize also are an important influence on our [communication behaviors](#)."

In particular, according to Yang, the study found:

- Those who had [negative feelings](#) toward climate change – feelings marked by states of fear, depression, anxiety, etc., – actively sought more information about climate change. They also saw climate change as having serious risks, and considered their current knowledge about it insufficient.
- Those driven by a positive affect toward climate change – an [emotional state](#) marked by hopefulness, excitement, happiness, etc. – actively avoided exposure to additional information on the issue. They also said climate change presented little risk to nature and humans, and they viewed their knowledge about climate change as sufficient.
- Our social environment has the potential to strongly influence whether we seek or avoid climate change information. This, the researchers say, may be because we are most often around people who agree with us about important issues, reinforce our perception of risk and support or discourage further action.

The study involved an online survey of 736 undergraduates from two large U.S. universities (61.3 percent female, 62.5 percent white, median family income, \$90,000).

The research survey was developed and executed using Qualtrics software and was designed to ascertain:

- The subjects' general affect in relation to climate change – positive (excited, hopeful, happy) or negative (concerned, worried, anxious)
- How much information about climate change they thought they

had and how much more they thought they needed

- How severe they found the threat of climate change to be to themselves and to nature, and its impact around the world
- How valuable they thought seeking information on the subject would be to them
- How much they valued others' opinions toward seeking information about climate change
- The confidence each had in his or her ability to find information about climate change

"Earlier research in social psychology has found that emotion, both positive and negative, is motivational and involves action tendency and action readiness," Yang explains.

"Those with a negative affect may seek out information, even if it includes negative predictions, in order to reduce their uncertainty and perhaps reassert control over the situation," says Yang.

"On the other hand, those with a positive affect who say they avoid seeking information may do so because they want to maintain their uncertainty – and their emotional equilibrium – from negative information that might upset them as well as contradict the attitudes of their social support group."

The researchers say the study results present several ways to improve the communication of risk information related to climate change. They say the data on subjects' reported information sufficiency suggests that risk communication about climate change might benefit from these approaches:

- Arousing a sense of curiosity and debunking false beliefs about ecological risks so people are not complacent about what they already know
- Highlighting potential negative consequences and fostering a positive attitude toward learning about climate change
- Monitoring the audience's [social environment](#) and its perceived ability for finding and understanding information about climate change
- Promoting optimism that human action, such as reducing greenhouse gas, could actually combat the consequences of [climate change](#).

Yang conducts research centered on the communication of risk information related to science, health and environmental issues, and on social cognitive variables that influence information seeking and processing, health decision making and public perception of environmental and health risks.

Kahlor's research is centered on health and environmental risk communication with an emphasis on mass communication of complex science and information seeking.

Provided by University at Buffalo

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