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Do Words Matter? Evaluative Media Framing, Protest Actions, and Donations to Climate Action

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ABSTRACT

Public support is essential to effective climate policies, yet responses to climate activism may depend on how protests are covered in the news. Building on research on activist tactics, media framing, and construal level theory, we examined whether the tone of media coverage (neutral vs. negative), the radicalness of activist tactics (moderate vs. radical), and abstract versus concrete reflection on activist behavior shape costly behavioral support for climate action. Two experiments employed news-style vignettes, a real-effort task, and an incentivized donation paradigm to assess actual financial contributions to a climate-related cause. Study 1 ($N = 555$) validated the manipulations of activist behavior and media tone. In Study 2 ($N = 1907$), participants reflected either on why activists behaved as they did or on how they behaved, before deciding whether to donate part of their earnings to a climate charity. Negative framing was associated with lower donations than neutral framing, but this small effect did not reach conventional statistical significance with preregistered covariates ($p = 0.052$) or without covariates ($p = 0.090$). Exploratory moderated mediation analyses indicated conditional indirect associations. Under neutral framing, radical tactics were indirectly associated with lower donations through perceived acceptability and effectiveness. For moderate activist behavior, negative framing was indirectly associated with lower donations through perceived acceptability. The framing $\times$ tactic interaction was indirectly associated with donations through acceptability. These findings indicate that media framing and activist tactics are associated with evaluations of climate activism that, in turn, are associated with costly support for climate action.

Evoking public support for climate action is crucial in addressing the global climate crisis. To attract attention and mobilize public engagement, climate activists employ a range of actions—from moderate measures, such as participating in public protests, to more radical tactics, like gluing themselves to the pavement to block traffic. The effectiveness of these strategies remains uncertain (Fisher and Nasrin 2020). Some assume that radical actions may deter public support due to their confrontational nature; however, research on radical flanks suggests that the presence of a radical faction can sometimes increase support for a

separate moderate faction by making the latter appear more reasonable by comparison (Simpson et al. 2022).

The present research addresses a related but distinct question. Radical-flank research examines comparative judgments between factions within a movement. In contrast, people in everyday media environments may encounter a single report about one protest action, without an explicit comparison between moderate and radical factions. We therefore examine how people respond to a single described activist tactic that

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varies in perceived radicalness, and whether the evaluative tone of media coverage shapes this response.

While prior research has shown a radical flank effect when individuals are presented with neutral descriptions of (radical) activist behaviors (Simpson et al. 2022), real-world public discourse – across both traditional and social media – often features evaluative or even biased portrayals of climate activism. The impact of such portrayals, independent of the actual nature of the activist behavior (moderate or radical), is not yet understood. The present research therefore examines whether the tone of news-style coverage – neutral versus negative – changes behavioral support for climate action independently of whether the described tactic is moderate or radical.

Another contribution of the present research concerns the measure used to capture support for environmental actions: Simpson et al. (2022) explored individuals' *intentions* to support moderate versus radical climate activist groups. Yet the critical question extends beyond intention: it concerns whether people are willing to make *tangible sacrifices* for climate action, such as paying higher taxes, making donations, altering their diets, or changing travel behaviors. Measures of intentions often have a modest correlation, at best, with actual behavior, a phenomenon known as the “intention–behavior gap” (Carrington et al. 2014; Sheeran and Webb 2016). Focusing on actual behavioral support rather than self-reported measures of intent offers a more valid picture of public commitment to climate action. Accordingly, the present research measures real financial contributions to climate initiatives. Our study advances the literature by investigating how media framing of climate activism is associated with people's willingness to adopt climate-related behavior that requires an actual personal sacrifice.

In addition to examining the impact of framing, we also manipulated construal level to explore whether individuals' abstract or concrete mindsets would shape their responses to activist behaviors, given that construal level theory (Trope and Liberman 2010) suggests a more abstract mindset may encourage broader, principle-driven thinking and long-term decision-making.

The paper proceeds by outlining our pre-registered hypotheses and presenting findings from two experimental studies.

1 | Media Framing Effects

Framing theory posits that the way information is presented influences how it is interpreted and acted upon (Chong and Druckman 2007; Entman 1993). Frames shape perceptions by emphasizing certain aspects of reality while downplaying others, thus guiding public interpretation and prioritization of issues. In the context of climate activism, media framing can highlight or de-emphasize particular elements of activists' behaviors (e.g., the disruption caused by the protest vs the cause for which climate activists are protesting), influencing public

perceptions and support. Negative framing—marked by a critical or biased evaluative tone—can elicit adverse emotional responses such as anger, frustration, or fear, which may diminish public sympathy toward the targeted group or cause (O'Neill and Nicholson-Cole 2009; Feldman 2017). It can detract attention from activists' underlying goals by focusing instead on the disruptive or controversial nature of their actions. Such framing may reduce support for climate action when it leads recipients to evaluate the activists' behavior less favorably.

At the same time, negatively framed coverage could elicit a counter-reaction if recipients interpret it as an attempt to constrain or unduly influence their judgment of the activists. Such a response would be consistent with psychological reactance theory, according to which perceived threats to freedom of choice or judgment can elicit anger and negative cognitions that undermine persuasion (Quick and Stephenson 2007; Rains 2013). Whether negatively framed media coverage is perceived in this way may depend on recipients' prior attitudes and their perceptions of the coverage. Negative framing may reduce support by directing attention toward the controversial nature of activist behavior, but it may also prompt some recipients to reject the evaluative framing of the coverage. We therefore specified a non-directional hypothesis¹:

H1. *Support for climate action will differ between participants exposed to negative rather than neutral media framing of climate activist behavior.*

To assess support for climate action, we employed a behavioral outcome measure: financial donations to a climate charity. Donations represent a voluntary decision to forgo personal financial resources in support of a collective cause. They therefore complement measures of behavioral intention, which do not always translate into actual behavior (Carrington et al. 2014; Sheeran and Webb 2016). In experimental research on climate change, monetary donations to NGOs engaged in CO₂-emission reduction have been used as a behavioral indicator of climate-change mitigation (Bechtoldt et al. 2026), and donation paradigms have also been used to examine how climate-related communication can affect financial support for climate solutions (Ryba et al. 2022). In the present study, participants decided whether to donate a proportion of money earned in a real-effort task, ensuring that the donation decision involved an actual personal cost rather than a hypothetical allocation. At the same time, donating to a climate charity is not equivalent to supporting a particular activist group, protest tactic, or climate policy. Our conclusions therefore concern financial support for climate action rather than direct support for activist groups portrayed in the experiment.

1.1 | Radicalness and Spillover Effects

Radical activist behaviors, such as blocking traffic or defacing monuments, are inherently contentious and more likely to

¹The preregistration specified competing directional predictions for H1 and H2. Because the planned analyses used two-sided tests, we present the confirmatory hypotheses as non-directional. Also, the preregistration specified the predictions concerning radicalness as H1a/H1b and the predictions concerning media framing as H2a/H2b. For narrative clarity, the present manuscript discusses media framing before activist behavior radicalness and therefore presents the framing hypothesis as H1 and the radicalness hypothesis as H2. The tested effects are unchanged. H3–H5 correspond to the preregistered interaction hypotheses. The original preregistered wording, data and code are available on OSF: <https://osf.io/5z472/overview>.

provoke polarizing interpretations than moderate actions, such as participating in a protest march. Whereas radical actions by climate activists often get significant public attention, they also violate social norms, potentially leading to reduced support for both the activists and the broader movement they represent (Simpson et al. 2022; Wright 2009). This rationale aligns with the psychological spillover effect, which suggests that negative evaluations of one aspect of a movement, e.g., its methods, can spill over into broader attitudes toward the movement's goals (De Houwer et al. 2001; Hütter and Sweldens 2013). According to Simpson et al. (2022), however, these same tactics can also create a “positive radical flank effect,” wherein the radicalness of one faction makes moderate factions within the same movement appear more reasonable and receive greater public support.

While Simpson et al. (2022) examined whether the presence of a radical flank affects support for a more moderate faction, the present study examines how people respond when they encounter a single media report about climate activism. In everyday media environments, audiences may often read about one protest action at a time rather than explicitly compare moderate and radical activist groups. We therefore focus on the direct behavioral consequences of viewing a described activist tactic as moderate or radical, and on how evaluative media framing shapes these responses. Participants read one news-style vignette and subsequently decided whether to donate to a climate charity. Thus, this design examines whether the radicalness and framing of a single described tactic are associated with a costly form of support for climate action.

Building on the theoretical considerations outlined above, we hypothesize:

H2. *Support for climate action will differ after exposure to radical rather than moderate activist behavior.*

We furthermore hypothesized an interaction between the radicalness of climate activists' behaviors and the tone of media framing. Specifically, the tone of media coverage may amplify or attenuate public responses to radical protest actions (Feldman et al. 2015). We tested for this interaction effect, again allowing for competing outcomes.

H3. *The association between activist behavior radicalness and support for climate action will differ between the negative and neutral framing conditions.*

1.2 | Construal Level Theory

In line with construal level theory (CLT; Trope and Liberman 2010), people can represent the same event at different levels of abstraction that are systematically related to psychological distance. The more distant something is in time, space, social relations, or likelihood, the more abstractly it is construed; the closer it is, the more concretely it is represented. High-level, abstract construals emphasize superordinate goals and the reasons why an action is performed, whereas low-level, specific construals emphasize concrete means and the ways in which an action is performed. Psychological distance is one of

the factors associated with more abstract representations, but people can also be prompted directly to focus on why rather than how an action is performed (Liberman and Trope 2008; Soderberg et al. 2015).

Applied to the present context, an abstract construal may direct attention to the broader goal of climate protection, whereas a concrete construal may direct attention to the immediate and potentially disruptive features of activists' behavior. An abstract focus may therefore reduce the weight that participants assign to a specific protest tactic or reduce their susceptibility to evaluative wording in the media report. We tested this possibility by assigning participants to reflect either on why climate activists behaved as they did or on how they behaved. This design allowed us to examine whether focusing on activists' goals, rather than their concrete actions, changes how participants respond to radical activist behavior and negative media framing.

We preregistered two moderation hypotheses. First, construal level was expected to moderate the effect of activist behavior radicalness. Media reports about radical protest behaviors of climate activists were expected to elicit more support for action against climate change when readers focused on activists' goals, that is, the reasons behind their behavior, rather than on activists' actions, that is, how they behaved.

H4. *Construal condition moderates the effect of activist behavior radicalness on support for climate action. Radical activist behavior will elicit more support for climate action when participants focus on why activists behaved as they did rather than on how they behaved.*

Second, construal level was expected to moderate the effect of negative framing in media reports. Negatively framed media reports about climate activists' behavior were expected to elicit more support for action against climate change when readers focused on activists' goals, that is, the reasons behind their behavior, rather than on activists' actions, that is, how they behaved.

H5. *Construal condition moderates the effect of negative media framing on support for climate action. Negatively framed media reports will elicit more support for climate action when participants focus on why activists behaved as they did rather than on how they behaved.*

1.3 | Sociodemographic and Dispositional Covariates

Sociodemographic and dispositional characteristics are important determinants of how individuals respond to media framing and radical forms of climate activism. For example, women tend to express stronger pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors than men, possibly due to heightened concern for communal well-being (Xiao and McCright 2013). Higher educational attainment has similarly been linked to greater climate awareness and stronger support for climate action (Lee et al. 2015). This pattern likely extends to individuals who engage in pro-environmental behaviors in everyday life, such as avoiding air travel or maintaining a vegetarian diet.

Political orientation also plays a key role: individuals with left-leaning views are generally more supportive of climate policies and more favorable toward climate activism, whereas conservatives tend to be more skeptical of both the activists and their methods (Hornsey et al. 2016). In addition, holding strong pro-environmental values—such as biospheric and altruistic concerns—has been shown to increase support for climate action by aligning individual beliefs with collective goals (Bouman et al. 2018). These values not only shape attitudes but may also translate into tangible actions, such as donating to environmental organizations.

Beyond values and sociodemographics, emotional and attitudinal factors further influence responses to climate communication. Climate anxiety, defined as worry about the future consequences of climate change, can heighten engagement by emphasizing the urgency of the issue (Ogunbode et al. 2022), as can the perception that we are facing a severe ecological crisis (Bechtoldt and Schermelleh-Engel 2025). Feelings of self- and collective efficacy have also been linked to increased climate-related action (Jugert et al. 2016). Additionally, eco-guilt—guilt stemming from perceived shortcomings in one's environmental behavior—can motivate compensatory actions, including financial support for climate causes (Agoston et al. 2022). Controlling for these sociodemographic, value-based, and psychological variables enables a more differentiated understanding of how media framing and radicalness of activist behavior influence public support for climate action.

We conducted two experimental studies. In the pilot study (Study 1), we analyzed mock media reports to validate that the experimental material that we created effectively distinguishes between climate activists' radicalness and the negativity in the framing of their behaviors. The goal was to develop vignettes depicting climate activist behaviors and evaluate them based on the radicalism of the behavior (radical vs. moderate) and the framing (negative vs. neutral). These results, including Table S1 and Figures S1–S3, are reported in the Supporting Materials.

In the main study (Study 2), we conducted a preregistered experiment to examine how these media reports—describing climate activists' behaviors (moderate vs. radical) and framing (neutral vs. negative)—influence donations, while controlling for sociodemographic, attitudinal, and dispositional variables discussed earlier.

2 | Main Study

2.1 | Participants

Participants were recruited via Prolific in the UK. The study was pre-registered at https://osf.io/5z472/?view_only=a0113f9c8b86418da8f63c56c5db7a78. Eligibility required individuals to be at least 18 years old. A total of 2000 people were recruited. As preregistered, we only included those who correctly answered an attention-check item and were not speeders, defined as participants who completed the questionnaire in less than 50 percent of the median completion time of other participants. This resulted in a final sample of 1907 participants. The

preregistered power analysis, based on an ANCOVA with four experimental conditions and 15 covariates, indicated that this sample provided 96.82% power to detect a small effect of $\eta^2 = 0.01$; $\alpha = 0.05$.

Because the focal hypotheses concerned one-degree-of-freedom effects of media framing, activist behavior radicalness, and their interaction, we additionally conducted sensitivity analyses for these tests. The covariate-adjusted model had 80% power to detect an incremental effect of $\eta_{\text{partial}}^2 = 0.004$. The unadjusted model had nearly identical sensitivity. Thus, the analyses were sensitive to very small effects, but were less informative about effects smaller than approximately four percentage points in donation behavior.

More than half (54.4%) identified as female, 44.7% as male, and 0.8% as other. The average birth year was 1980 (SD = 13.57). To assess socioeconomic status, the study used the subjective social status ladder item, which has been shown to correlate with objective indicators such as income, occupation, and education and has been recognized as an unbiased marker of socioeconomic standing (Singh-Manoux et al. 2003). People were asked to imagine a ladder with ten steps: "Imagine a ladder that represents where people in society stand. At the top of the ladder are the people who are doing the best—those who have the most money, the best education, and the best jobs. At the bottom end are the people who are doing the worst—those who have the least money, the lowest education, the worst jobs, or no job at all. Where would you place yourself on this ladder?" (1 = *at the very bottom*; 10 = *at the very top*). Participants rated their standard of living as 5.59 on average (SD = 1.70).

Using a scale from 1 (very conservative) to 10 (very liberal), participants expressed their political views ($M = 4.46$, $SD = 2.03$). The largest group (43.7%) identified Labor as the party they felt closest to, followed by 16.2% for the Conservatives, 10% for the Green Party, 9.8% for the Liberal Democrats, 3.8% for the Scottish National Party, and 16.5% for other parties. Educational attainment was high: 41.9% held a Bachelor's degree, 16% a Master's degree, 13.9% had A-levels, 12% had secondary education, 7.7% had a vocational qualification, 3.3% held a doctorate, and 0.2% had primary education.

3 | Procedure

At the beginning of the experiment, participants could earn up to £2 through a real-effort task that required counting zeros in ten matrices containing both zeros and ones (Abeler et al. 2011).² The real-effort task was implemented to increase the perceived value of the money compared to simply providing it without effort. Cognitive dissonance theory suggests that people assign greater value to outcomes that require effort, as a way to justify the energy they invested (Axsom and Cooper 1985). Furthermore, since climate protection often involves sacrificing valued resources, such as money for charitable donations, the paid real-effort task enhanced the external validity of the experiment.

²The implemented real-effort bonus differed from the preregistered amount: participants could earn up to £2 rather than £3.

Participants earned 20 pence for each correctly completed matrix, which was added to their £2 show-up fee, resulting in a potential total earning of £4. Participants were informed that they would later decide whether to donate part or all of their earnings in the real effort task to a UK-based climate charity.

Next, participants were randomly assigned to one of the four vignettes from Study 1, which described climate activists' behaviors varying in radicalism (moderate vs. radical) and framing (neutral vs. negative); see Supporting Materials for details about the vignette and the validation of the scenarios used. They were then randomly assigned to either a concrete or abstract construal condition, in which they were asked to write a few sentences about either how climate activists behaved (concrete level) or why they behaved that way (abstract level). Finally, participants were asked whether they would like to donate a portion of the money they earned earlier to a climate protection charity, with the option to select any percentage between 0 and 100. After completing this task, participants provided demographic information and completed measures of dispositional covariates related to pro-environmental behavior.

4 | Measures

Pro-environmental values were measured with the Environmental Portrait Questionnaire (E-PVQ; Bouman et al. 2018). It consists of four scales measuring biospheric (i.e., concern for environment; 4 items; $\alpha = 0.89$), altruistic (i.e., concern for others, 5 items; $\alpha = 0.85$), egoistic (i.e., concern for personal resources; 5 items; $\alpha = 0.75$) and hedonic values (i.e., concern for pleasure and comfort; 3 items; $\alpha = 0.84$). Rather than directly asking about respondents' values, the E-PVQ introduces short verbal portraits of individuals that illustrate a value significant to the portrayed person (e.g., "It is important to them to prevent environmental pollution."). Respondents then evaluate how closely each description aligns with their own personality, using a scale from 1 ("not like me at all") to 6 ("very much like me").

Perception of an eco-crisis was measured with three items from the New Ecological Paradigm (Dunlap et al. 2000; e.g., "Humans are severely abusing the environment"). Items were answered on a six-point scale (1 = "I completely disagree", 6 = "I completely agree"), $\alpha = 0.86$.

Climate self- and collective efficacy were measured with four items, respectively, from Hamann and Reese (2020), e.g., "I think that my own actions can contribute to solving the climate crisis" ($\alpha = 0.81$) and "I think that our joint actions as people in the UK can contribute to solving the climate crisis" ($\alpha = 0.82$). Items were answered on a six-point scale (1 = "I completely disagree", 6 = "I completely agree").

Climate anxiety was measured with seven items adapted from Spielberg (1983) for climate change, as described by Ogunbode et al. (2022). Participants rated how they felt when thinking about climate change: calm, tense, anxious, peaceful, relaxed, worried, and terrified (1 = not at all, 6 = extremely), $\alpha = 0.95$.

Eco-guilt was measured with the scale of Agoston et al. (2022), comprising eleven items, e.g., "I very often feel that what I do for the environment is not enough, because it cannot balance other negative behaviors" (1 = does not apply at all, 6 = applies completely), $\alpha = 0.94$.

Individual pro-environmental behaviors were measured with 13 items from Bortfeldt et al. (2020), which asked participants to indicate the extent to which they engaged in various sustainable actions to reduce carbon dioxide emissions. Sample behaviors included riding a bike (1 = not at all, 6 = completely), $\alpha = 0.82$.

After making their donation decisions, participants rated the activists' behavior in terms of perceived acceptability and effectiveness. *Effectiveness* was measured using three items: effective, successful, and futile (reverse-coded), $\alpha = 0.74$; *Acceptability* was measured using three items: acceptable, intolerable (reverse-coded), and unbearable (reverse-coded), $\alpha = 0.86$. Participants provided their judgments using a slider ranging from 0 ("not at all") to 100 ("very much").

5 | Results

5.1 | Manipulation Check

Participants in the negative framing condition rated the tone as more negative ($M = 77.67$, $SD = 22.86$; scale: 0–100) than participants in the neutral condition, ($M = 43.19$, $SD = 22.29$), and the effect was strong, $F(1, 1903) = 1117.60$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_{\text{partial}}^2 = 0.369$; radicalness of behaviors did not moderate the effect of negative framing, $F(1, 1903) = 0.007$, $p = 0.931$. Similarly, participants in the radical condition rated the behavior of climate activists as more radical ($M = 70.36$, $SD = 21.19$) than those in the moderate condition ($M = 53.78$, $SD = 25.75$); again, the effect was strong, $F(1, 1903) = 247.259$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_{\text{partial}}^2 = 0.115$. Negative framing did not moderate the effect of radicalness, $F(1, 1903) = 0.44$, $p = 0.507$, $\eta_{\text{partial}}^2 < 0.001$. These findings support the effectiveness of the experimental manipulation, consistent with the results observed in Study 1.

On average, participants donated 21.64% ($SD = 32.03$) of their earnings. Table 1 displays the intercorrelations between variables. Women donated more of their bonuses than men, older individuals more than younger ones, and those with higher education levels gave more than less-educated participants. Donations were positively linked to leftist political views, climate-related anxiety, self- and collective efficacy, recognition of a global ecological crisis, feelings of guilt, biospheric and altruistic values, environmentally conscious behaviors, and perceiving the climate activists' actions in the vignettes as both effective and acceptable.

We then tested support for climate action, operationalized as donation behavior, while controlling for all preregistered covariates. Results are reported in Table 2. Participants exposed to negatively framed activist portrayals donated less than those who read neutrally framed reports, as shown in Figure 1. In the covariate-adjusted analysis, participants in the neutral framing condition donated an estimated 22.85% of their earnings, 95% CI [20.71, 24.99], whereas participants in the negative framing condition donated an estimated 20.22%, 95% CI [18.07, 22.36].

TABLE 1 | Spearman's rho intercorrelations between variables.

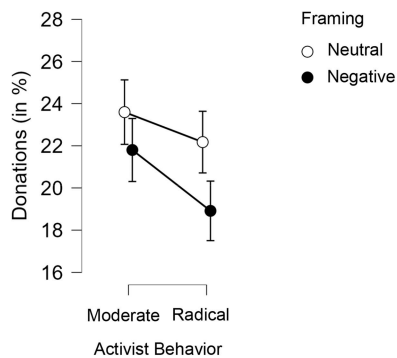
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
1 Gender																				
2 YoB	−0.052																			
3 Edu	−0.046	0.086																		
4 SES	−0.001	−0.085	0.270																	
5 Right	0.078	−0.206	−0.118	0.117																
6 CliAnx	−0.170	0.104	0.126	0.012	−0.372															
7 SelfEff	−0.065	−0.065	0.116	0.110	−0.153	0.392														
8 ColEff	−0.120	0.016	0.106	0.065	−0.238	0.429	0.738													
9 EcoCris	−0.055	0.035	0.161	0.027	−0.421	0.679	0.431	0.530												
10 Guilt	−0.127	0.121	0.131	0.042	−0.318	0.597	0.415	0.411	0.484											
11 EVBio	−0.041	−0.115	0.084	0.038	−0.201	0.453	0.475	0.480	0.503	0.331										
12 EVAlt	−0.144	−0.023	0.034	−0.010	−0.312	0.346	0.369	0.415	0.372	0.257	0.565									
13 EVHed	0.024	0.234	0.031	0.072	−0.096	0.050	0.102	0.159	0.090	−0.010	.236	0.357								
14 EVEgo	−0.003	0.203	0.119	0.213	0.139	−0.059	0.075	0.021	−0.110	0.104	0.019	−0.027	0.191							
15 EnvBeh	−0.047	−0.037	0.082	0.023	−0.195	0.406	0.437	0.420	0.379	0.378	0.473	0.308	0.015	−0.009						
16 Effic	−0.062	0.122	0.054	−0.032	−0.226	0.245	0.250	0.273	0.211	0.316	0.182	0.132	0.048	0.103	0.200					
17 Acc	0.000	0.108	0.188	−0.017	−0.438	0.342	0.188	0.252	0.439	0.319	0.276	0.202	0.044	−0.089	0.244	0.444				
18 Construal	0.025	0.030	−0.005	−0.002	−0.002	0.012	−0.006	0.003	0.014	0.033	−0.006	−0.012	−0.031	−0.012	−0.034	0.087	0.006			
19 Radical	0.016	0.010	−0.021	0.011	0.051	−0.002	−0.027	−0.033	−0.055	−0.003	−0.069	−0.040	−0.065	−0.009	−0.043	−0.244	−0.276	0.051		
20 NegFrame	−0.023	−0.003	−0.031	−0.026	−0.012	0.025	0.033	0.021	0.007	−0.010	−0.004	0.037	0.023	−0.019	0.007	0.002	−0.088	0.049	−0.003	
21 Donation	−0.087	−0.142	0.082	0.036	−0.148	0.276	0.274	0.282	0.285	0.292	0.323	0.239	−0.044	−0.045	0.280	0.209	0.223	0.011	−0.038	−0.036

Note: $N = 1886$; Participants with missing data on one or more covariates, including participants who could not be included in the preregistered binary gender coding, were excluded. Gender: 0 = female, 1 = male; YoB = year of birth; Edu = educational level; SES = socioeconomic standard; Right = right-winged political orientation; CliAnx = climate anxiety; SelfEff = self-efficacy; ColEff = collective efficacy; EcoCris = recognition of eco crisis; EVBio = biospheric environmental values; EVAlt = altruistic environmental values; EVHed = hedonic environmental values; EVEgo = egoistic environmental values; EnvBeh = individual environmental behavior; Effic = effectiveness of climate activists' behavior; Acc = Acceptability of climate activists' behavior; Construal = construal level (0 = concrete, 1 = abstract); Radical = radicalness (0 = moderate, 1 = radical); NegFrame = negative framing (0 = neutral, 1 = negative). Correlations ≥ 0.046 (0.078) are significant at $p \leq 0.05$ (0.01).

TABLE 2 | Covariate-Adjusted ANCOVA Predicting Donations (%) from Negative Framing and Radicalness, of Climate Activists.

	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	η^2
Radicalness (R)	0.763	0.383	< 0.001
Negative Framing (NF)	3.797	0.052	0.002
R * NF	0.004	0.95	< 0.001
Construal Level	0.475	0.491	< 0.001
Covariates			
Gender	1.561	0.212	< 0.001
Year of birth	19.336	< 0.001	0.010
Education	2.538	0.111	0.001
Socioeconomic status	1.968	0.161	0.001
Right-winged political orientation	0.972	0.324	< 0.001
Climate anxiety	0.021	0.885	< 0.001
Self-efficacy	0.272	0.602	< 0.001
Collective efficacy	3.417	0.065	0.002
Recognition of eco-crisis	3.056	0.081	0.002
Eco-guilt	15.37	< 0.001	0.008
Biospheric values	20.629	< 0.001	0.010
Altruistic environmental values	5.126	0.024	0.003
Hedonic environmental values	11.048	< 0.001	0.006
Egoistic environmental values	8.171	0.004	0.004
Pro-environmental behavior	3.019	0.082	0.002

Note: The model included activist behavior radicalness, negative media framing, their interaction, construal condition, and the listed covariates., $df = 1, 1866$ for each effect. η_{partial}^2 = partial eta squared. Participants with missing data on one or more covariates, including participants who could not be included in the preregistered binary gender coding, were excluded from the covariate-adjusted analysis.

**FIGURE 1** | Percentage of donations. Bars denote standard errors.

Thus, neutral framing was associated with an estimated 2.63-percentage-point higher donation than negative framing, $SE = 1.35$, 95% $CI [-0.02, 5.28]$. Although this small effect was descriptively consistent with lower donations following negative framing, it did not reach the conventional significance threshold, $F(1, 1866) = 3.80$, $p = 0.052$, $\eta_{\text{partial}}^2 = 0.002$. Given the precision of this estimate, the covariate-adjusted analysis had 80% power to detect a framing difference of approximately 3.8 percentage points in donations.

Repeating the analyses without the preregistered covariates yielded a similar pattern. Participants in the neutral framing condition donated 22.88% of their earnings on average, whereas participants in the negative framing condition donated 20.39%. The unadjusted framing effect was small and did not reach conventional levels of statistical significance, $F(1, 1903) = 2.87$, $p = 0.090$, $\eta_{\text{partial}}^2 = 0.002$. Thus, both analyses showed descriptively lower donations following negative rather than neutral framing, but neither provided support for H1.

We did not find a statistically significant direct effect of activist behavior radicalness on donations. In the covariate-adjusted analysis, participants exposed to moderate activist behavior donated an estimated 22.12% of their earnings, compared with 20.94% among participants exposed to radical activist behavior. The estimated difference was 1.18 percentage points, 95% $CI [-1.47, 3.84]$, $F(1, 1866) = 0.76$, $p = 0.383$, $\eta_{\text{partial}}^2 < 0.001$. Thus, H2 was not supported: Under the present experimental conditions, we did not detect a direct difference in donations between the moderate and radical behavior conditions.

The interaction between negative framing and radicalness was not statistically significant either in the covariate-adjusted analysis, $F(1, 1866) = 0.004$, $p = 0.950$, $\eta_{\text{partial}}^2 < 0.001$, or in the analysis without covariates, $F(1, 1903) = 0.27$, $p = 0.602$, $\eta_{\text{partial}}^2 < 0.001$. In the covariate-adjusted analysis, the difference between neutral and negative framing was 2.55 percentage points for moderate activist behavior and 2.72 percentage points for radical activist behavior. Although donations were descriptively lowest when radical activist behavior was paired with negative media framing, the framing difference was very similar across the moderate and radical behavior conditions. Thus, H3 was not supported.

To test H4 and H5, we estimated an observed-variable path model in lavaan. The model specified donation behavior as the outcome and included the main effects of media framing, activist behavior radicalness, and assigned construal condition, as well as the radicalness $\times$ construal and framing $\times$ construal interaction terms and all preregistered covariates. Because the model included only observed variables and one endogenous outcome, it did not include latent variables or yield informative global model-fit indices. Parameters were estimated using maximum likelihood estimation with standard errors based on 5000 bootstrap resamples.

The radicalness $\times$ construal interaction, which tested H4, was not statistically significant, $b = 3.07$, $SE = 2.68$, $p = 0.253$. Thus, radical activist behavior was not associated with higher donations when participants reflected on why activists behaved as they did rather than on how they behaved. The framing $\times$ construal interaction, which tested H5, was not statistically significant either, $b = -2.34$, $SE = 2.79$, $p = 0.402$. Thus, negatively framed media reports were not associated with higher donations when participants reflected on activists' goals rather than on their concrete actions. The main effect of construal condition was likewise not statistically significant, $b = 0.58$, $SE = 2.40$, $p = 0.810$. Overall, the data did not support H4 or H5. Full path estimates are reported in Table S2 in the Supporting Materials.

5.2 | Exploratory Moderated Mediation Analysis

Participants also rated the activists' behavior in terms of perceived effectiveness and acceptability. We conducted exploratory analyses to examine whether these evaluations were associated with donations and whether framing and activist behavior were indirectly associated with donations through perceived effectiveness and acceptability.

A covariate-adjusted MANOVA with perceived effectiveness and perceived acceptability as outcomes showed significant multivariate effects of radicalness, $F(2, 1872) = 119.84$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_{\text{partial}}^2 = 0.114$, and negative framing, $F(2, 1872) = 11.70$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_{\text{partial}}^2 = 0.012$. The radicalness $\times$ negative framing

interaction was also significant but very small, $F(2, 1872) = 3.73$, $p = 0.024$, $\eta_{\text{partial}}^2 = 0.004$. It reflected that the decrease in perceived acceptability from moderate to radical behavior was smaller under negative framing than under neutral framing.

We first examined perceived effectiveness. Radical behaviors were rated as less effective ($M = 33.95$, $SE = 0.67$) than moderate behaviors ($M = 44.67$, $SE = 0.67$). By contrast, perceived effectiveness was almost identical in the negative framing condition ($M = 39.31$, $SE = 0.67$) and the neutral framing condition ($M = 39.31$, $SE = 0.67$). Figure 2 illustrates this pattern.

We then examined perceived acceptability. Radical behaviors were rated as less acceptable ($M = 42.44$, $SE = 0.78$) than moderate behaviors ($M = 57.52$, $SE = 0.77$). Perceived acceptability was also lower in the negative framing condition ($M = 47.47$, $SE = 0.78$) than in the neutral framing condition ($M = 52.49$, $SE = 0.77$). The significant radicalness $\times$ negative framing interaction indicated that the difference in perceived acceptability between radical and moderate behavior depended on media framing. Figure 3 illustrates these differences.

We then estimated the exploratory moderated mediation model shown in Figure 4. The model included media framing, activist behavior radicalness, and their interaction as predictors of perceived acceptability and perceived effectiveness. Both evaluations were specified as predictors of the percentage donated, and all equations included the preregistered covariates. Indirect associations were evaluated using 5,000 bias-corrected bootstrap resamples and corresponding 95% confidence intervals.

Negative framing was associated with lower perceived acceptability ($b = -0.276$, $SE = 0.050$, $p < 0.001$), but not with perceived effectiveness ($b = -0.038$, $SE = 0.058$, $p = 0.519$). Radical behavior was associated with lower perceived acceptability ($b = -0.610$, $SE = 0.052$, $p < 0.001$), and lower perceived effectiveness ($b = -0.502$, $SE = 0.057$, $p < 0.001$).

The framing $\times$ radicalness interaction was associated with perceived acceptability ($b = 0.207$, $SE = 0.073$, $p = 0.004$), but not with perceived effectiveness ($b = 0.073$, $SE = 0.082$, $p = 0.372$). The positive interaction coefficient indicates that the negative association between radicalness and perceived acceptability was less pronounced under negative than neutral framing. Table 3 reports the results.

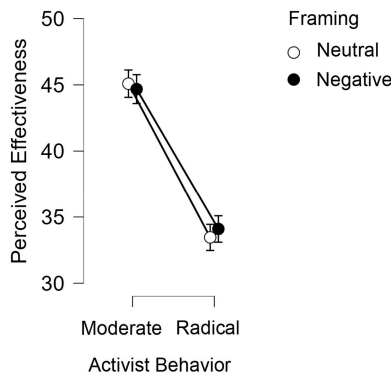


FIGURE 2 | Perceived effectiveness of climate activist behaviors. Bars denote standard errors.

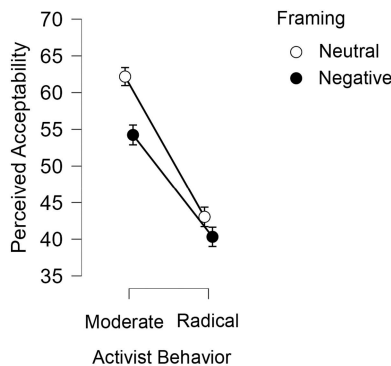


FIGURE 3 | Perceived acceptability of climate activist behaviors. Bars denote standard errors.

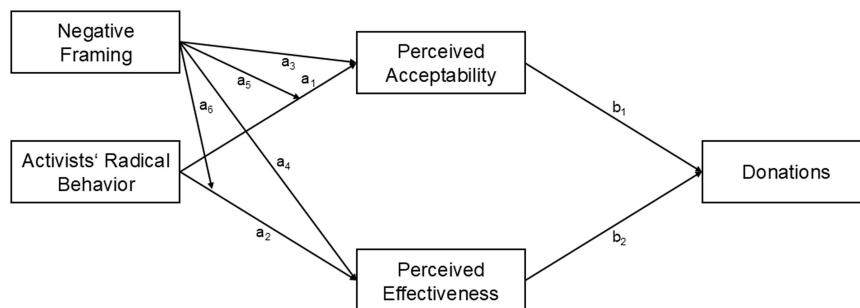


FIGURE 4 | Conceptual model of the moderated mediation. The arrows labeled a_5 and a_6 represent the negative framing $\times$ activist behavior radicalness interaction. Direct paths from negative framing, activist behavior radicalness, and their interaction to donations, as well as covariates, are omitted for clarity.

TABLE 3 | Model coefficients for the moderated mediation regression analysis.

Predictor	Perceived Acceptability	Perceived Effectiveness	Donation	Indirect Effects on Donation Estimate [95% BCa CI]
Radicalness (R)	−0.610 (0.052)***	−0.502 (0.057)***	1.675 (2.001)	Via acceptability: −1.352 [−2.519, −0.257] Via effectiveness: −1.363 [−2.322, −0.547] Total: −2.716 [−3.930, −1.628]
Negative framing (NF)	−0.276 (0.050)***	−0.038 (0.058)	−1.770 (2.030)	Via acceptability: −0.613 [−1.247, −0.141] Via effectiveness: −0.102 [−0.475, 0.215] Total: −0.715 [−1.386, −0.122]
NF x R	0.207 (0.073)**	0.073 (0.082)	−0.854 (2.732)	Via acceptability: 0.460 [0.085, 1.114] Via effectiveness: 0.198 [−0.189, 0.787] Total: 0.658 [0.015, 1.449]
Perceived acceptability	—	—	2.217 (0.904)*	—
Perceived effectiveness	—	—	2.718 (0.839)**	—

Note: Entries in the first three outcome columns are unstandardized regression coefficients with bootstrap standard errors in parentheses. Indirect effects are unstandardized product-of-coefficients estimates with 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals based on 5,000 resamples. Because the model includes an interaction, the indirect effects for radicalness are conditional on neutral framing, and the indirect effects for negative framing are conditional on moderate behavior. Covariates and the residual covariance between perceived acceptability and effectiveness are included but omitted from the table. * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$.

Both perceived acceptability ($b = 2.217$, $SE = 0.904$, $p = 0.014$), and perceived effectiveness ($b = 2.718$, $SE = 0.839$, $p = 0.001$), were positively associated with donations. The direct associations of framing, radicalness, and their interaction with donations were not statistically significant after accounting for the two evaluations and covariates.

Because the model included an interaction term, the estimated indirect associations for the main effects are conditional on the reference category of the other predictor. Assuming that zero denotes moderate behavior and neutral framing, respectively, negative framing was indirectly associated with lower donations through perceived acceptability ($a_3b_1 = -0.613$, 95% CI [−1.247, −0.141]), but not through perceived effectiveness ($a_4b_2 = -0.102$, 95% CI [−0.475, 0.215]). The combined indirect association of negative framing was −0.715, 95% CI [−1.386, −0.122].

Under neutral framing, radical behavior was indirectly associated with lower donations through perceived acceptability ($a_1b_1 = -1.352$, 95% CI [−2.519, −0.257]), and through perceived effectiveness ($a_2b_2 = -1.363$, 95% CI [−2.322, −0.547]). The combined indirect association was −2.716, 95% CI [−3.930, −1.628].

For the framing × radicalness interaction, the indirect association through perceived acceptability was positive ($a_5b_1 = 0.460$, 95% CI [0.085, 1.114]). Thus, the positive interaction coefficient indicates that the negative association between radicalness and perceived acceptability was less pronounced under negative than neutral framing. This pattern is consistent with the significant covariate-adjusted multivariate interaction reported above.

The corresponding association through perceived effectiveness was not statistically distinguishable from zero ($a_6b_2 = 0.198$, 95% CI [−0.189, 0.787]). The combined interaction-related indirect association was 0.658, 95% CI [0.015, 1.449].

6 | Discussion

This study examined how evaluative media framing, activist behavior radicalness, and construal manipulation related to behavioral support for climate action, operationalized as donations to a climate charity. Donations were descriptively lower following negative rather than neutral framing, though the differences were not statistically significant: On average, participants donated 21.64% of their earnings. While neutral framing elicited average donations of 22.85%, exposure to negatively framed reports reduced contributions to 20.22%, a relative decrease of approximately 11.5% compared to the neutral condition. The descriptive results are consistent with framing theory, which suggests that how information is presented can shape interpretation and behavioral outcomes (Entman 1993). However, given the lack of statistical significance, this descriptive difference should not be interpreted as conclusive evidence that negative framing produced a direct difference in donations under the present experimental conditions.

Exploratory tests revealed that the experimental conditions were associated with differentiated evaluations of activist

behavior: Under neutral framing, radical behavior was associated with lower perceived acceptability and lower perceived effectiveness. However, results revealed that for moderate behavior, negative framing was associated with lower perceived acceptability. Prior research similarly suggests that when media coverage emphasizes threat, controversy, or social deviance, public engagement may decline due to reduced perceptions of efficacy or heightened emotional polarization (Feldman et al. 2015). While the study did not provide statistically significant support for a framing effect on donations, the present study provides descriptive evidence that negative perceptions of climate protest tactics relate to lower behavioral support for the climate cause, and the exploratory analyses identify perceived acceptability as a theoretically relevant correlate of this association. This dynamic is especially relevant in an era of increasing polarization, where media outlets often reinforce ideological divisions and evoke strong emotional reactions (Druckman et al. 2013; Levendusky and Malhotra 2016). Both the radicalness of activist behavior and the evaluative tone of its media portrayal were associated with how participants evaluated the behavior.

The adjusted donation models did not yield statistically significant direct coefficients for activist behavior radicalness, the framing $\times$ radicalness interaction, the construal manipulation, or the interactions of construal with framing and radicalness. These findings should not be interpreted as evidence that protest tactics or construal processes are unrelated to public support. Rather, under the present experimental conditions, the study did not provide evidence for direct differences in donation behavior associated with these factors. The exploratory moderated mediation analyses nevertheless indicated a differentiated pattern of conditional indirect associations. Perceived acceptability is treated here as a normative evaluation of activist behavior, whereas perceived effectiveness is treated as an instrumental evaluation. Under neutral framing, radical behavior was indirectly associated with lower donations through both lower perceived acceptability and lower perceived effectiveness. Under moderate activist behavior, negative framing was indirectly associated with lower donations through lower perceived acceptability, whereas the corresponding indirect association through perceived effectiveness had a bootstrap confidence interval that included zero.

Because the model included a framing $\times$ radicalness interaction, the indirect association of radicalness refers to the comparison between radical and moderate behavior under neutral framing. Correspondingly, the indirect association of negative framing refers to the comparison between negative and neutral framing under moderate behavior. These estimates therefore do not describe effects averaged across all four experimental conditions.

Framing moderated the association between radicalness and perceived acceptability, whereas no corresponding moderation emerged for perceived effectiveness. The significant interaction coefficient indicated that the negative association between radicalness and perceived acceptability was less pronounced under negative than under neutral framing. This pattern does not imply that negative framing increased the acceptability of radical behavior. Instead, it indicates that negative framing

reduced the additional negative association between radicalness and perceived acceptability. One theoretically plausible interpretation is evaluative redundancy. Radical behavior may itself provide a salient cue of norm violation or social deviance, such that an additional negative evaluative frame contributes relatively little new information to judgments of acceptability. Moderate behavior may be more evaluatively ambiguous, making its perceived acceptability more responsive to a negative framing cue. Contemporary research on social evaluation indicates that impression formation depends on the integration of multiple cues and that morality-related information often receives particular weight in evaluations and impression updating (Abele et al. 2021; Brambilla et al. 2021; Luttrell et al. 2022). Research on cumulative impression formation has also highlighted the importance of informational redundancy when people integrate evaluative evidence (Alves and Mata 2019). Because the present study did not assess perceived ambiguity, cue redundancy, diagnosticity, or source credibility, this account should be regarded as a theoretically informed explanation to be tested in future research.

These exploratory indirect-effect estimates should not be interpreted as evidence of causal mediation. Perceived acceptability and effectiveness were neither manipulated nor assessed before the donation decision. The model therefore identifies statistical associations compatible with potential explanatory processes, but cannot establish that evaluations of activist behavior caused differences in donations (Fiedler et al. 2011; Bullock and Green 2021).

The construal level manipulation had no significant main effect or moderating effect—either directly or as a moderator of framing and radicalness. These null findings contribute to growing evidence that construal manipulations may have limited influence in applied settings, especially when other contextual variables (e.g., emotional tone, perceived legitimacy) dominate decision-making processes (Brügger et al. 2016). Rather than a failure, these findings refine the theoretical understanding of when and how construal level may shape climate-relevant behavior. More specifically, the present findings indicate that a brief construal manipulation was insufficient to produce statistically significant direct or moderating effects on donations in a context containing salient evaluative and moral cues. Our results suggest that brief mindset shifts do not easily override the influence of emotionally and morally charged cues, such as the tone of media coverage. This invites future work to test more immersive or enduring interventions that could shift individuals' cognitive framing of climate action. Such work should also examine whether construal effects depend on prior environmental attitudes, political orientations, or evaluations of the moral legitimacy of climate protest.

Together, these findings suggest that public reactions to climate activism are shaped by both the nature of activist behavior and the evaluative lens through which that behavior is interpreted. While radical tactics do not appear to elicit immediate rejection, they may reduce support when viewed as illegitimate and ineffective. In the exploratory model, radical behavior was indirectly associated with lower donations through both normative and instrumental evaluations under neutral framing, whereas negative framing showed a narrower pattern through

perceived acceptability under moderate behavior. These results underscore the critical role of media in shaping how activism is perceived and acted upon—particularly in polarized public discourse—by influencing key judgments of legitimacy and efficacy. The interaction pattern further indicates that tactic radicalness and evaluative media framing should not be treated as independent sources of social evaluation; rather, their associations with perceived acceptability may depend on the information each cue contributes within the broader evaluative context.

Related research indicates that public orientations toward climate policy are heterogeneous. Lütke et al. (2025), for example, identified distinct groups in Germany that differed in support for climate policy and in correlates such as conspiracy mentality and trust in democratic political institutions. While these differences could be assessed in the current study, future research should examine whether responses to evaluative framing and protest radicalness vary as a function of political trust, conspiracy beliefs, climate concern, and prior attitudes toward protest.

6.1 | Practical Implications

The findings suggest that both activist behavior radicalness and evaluative media framing may be relevant to public support through their associations with evaluations of activist behavior. In the exploratory model, radicalness was indirectly associated with donations through both perceived acceptability and perceived effectiveness, whereas negative framing was indirectly associated with donations primarily through perceived acceptability under moderate behavior. This finding has clear practical implications. Media coverage does not merely report activism—it helps define its public legitimacy. Media coverage can provide evaluative cues that audiences use when judging whether activist behavior is morally acceptable and likely to be effective. The present findings support a qualified practical implication: evaluative tone may shape judgments of activist behavior that are, in turn, associated with behavioral support. For activists and advocacy organizations, the results underscore the importance of anticipating not only public reaction to their tactics but also how these actions are framed by others.

Although radical protest behavior was not directly associated with donations, it was indirectly associated with lower donations through lower perceived acceptability and lower perceived effectiveness under neutral framing. The interaction did not indicate that negative framing intensified this pattern. Rather, negative framing attenuated the additional negative association between radicalness and perceived acceptability. This suggests that the communication strategy of activists should focus on shaping media narratives, not just choosing tactics. Future campaigns may benefit from working with journalists, using narrative frames that highlight goals and moral legitimacy, and anticipating how different audiences interpret activist behavior. They may also benefit from communicating the proportionality, intended consequences, and expected effectiveness of protest actions, particularly where those actions are likely to be perceived as disruptive or norm-violating.

This study advances the literature in several ways. First, the findings contribute to framing theory (Entman 1993) by indicating that negative framing was associated with lower perceived acceptability and with a conditional indirect association with donations through that evaluation. While previous research discussed the polarizing nature of radical activism, this study qualifies the proposition that framing negativity alone reduces public willingness to engage in climate-supportive action regardless of activist radicalness: the framing-related indirect association was conditional on moderate behavior, whereas radicalness was associated with indirect associations through both acceptability and effectiveness under neutral framing.

Second, the research presented here shifts the focus from ideological support for groups, such as attitudes toward activist groups, which was studied in previous research (Simpson et al. 2022), to tangible behavioral outcomes, addressing a critical gap in previous studies. By examining donation behavior, this study provides a more realistic understanding of public support for climate measures that require personal sacrifice. More specifically, the donation measure captures a behavioral outcome involving a real monetary cost, while not being equivalent to support for a specific activist group, protest tactic, or climate-policy proposal.

This study's strengths lie in its experimental design and focus on behavioral measures, which permit causal inference regarding the randomized framing, radicalness, and construal manipulations, although they do not permit causal inference regarding the measured mediator–outcome associations. The use of real-earned bonuses for donations enhances the ecological validity of the findings, as participants made decisions involving actual financial resources rather than hypothetical scenarios. By including a comprehensive set of sociodemographic, attitudinal, and dispositional covariates, the analysis accounts for key individual differences that influence donation behavior. The covariate-adjusted analyses therefore estimate associations conditional on a preregistered set of individual-difference variables, although covariate adjustment does not establish causal mediation. Additionally, the two-study design strengthens the study's validity. Study 1 ensured that the vignettes accurately represented varying levels of radicalness and negativity, laying a foundation for the experimental manipulations in Study 2.

7 | Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Despite its strengths, the studies presented here also have limitations. The effect sizes we observed were small. This may relate to the one-time exposure to media reports in our studies. The present study indicates that a brief media exposure was associated with differences in evaluations of activist behavior and with conditional indirect associations involving donations; however, the direct framing effect on donations was not statistically significant. Whereas future research is needed to analyze the effects of repeated confrontation with negative media reports, whether repeated exposure produces larger, cumulative, attenuated, or

qualitatively different effects remains an empirical question that requires direct examination.

Our reliance on an experimental setting may also limit its generalizability. While the use of real-earned bonuses adds realism, the controlled environment does not fully capture the complexity of real-world decision-making. Future research could extend this work by examining how framing effects operate in naturalistic settings, such as long-term charitable giving or political advocacy. Such research should additionally examine repeated exposure, competing media narratives, source credibility, social endorsement, and prior familiarity with activist groups or protest tactics.

Another limitation is the focus on a single cultural context, the United Kingdom. Cultural and contextual differences could influence how framing negativity and radicalness are perceived and how they affect behavioral outcomes. Comparative studies across diverse cultural settings would provide valuable insights into the universality of these effects. Cross-national research should also examine whether the acceptability-related interaction replicates across contexts that differ in protest norms, media systems, climate-policy conflict, and institutional trust.

8 | Conclusion

The findings presented here provide valuable insights into the relationship between evaluative media framing and behavioral support for climate action. By focusing on tangible behaviors rather than abstract intentions, this research contributes to the literature on climate activism, media framing, and public engagement with climate action. The present study indicates that media reports about climate protest shape evaluations of activists in differentiated ways: the portrayal of radical behavior was associated with both lower perceived acceptability and lower perceived effectiveness, whereas negative framing was associated primarily with lower perceived acceptability. These evaluations were systematically associated with willingness to donate to climate action, although the exploratory analyses do not establish causal mediation.

How climate protest is reported may be as consequential as what protesters do. By shaping whether a tactic appears legitimate and likely to work, media coverage may influence the conditions under which audiences are willing to support climate action.

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Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in OSF at <https://osf.io/5z472/overview>.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.

Supporting File: jasp70081-sup-0001-Words_Matter_SM.docx.