

Going Green to Be Seen: How Social Influence and Need for Social Recognition Drive Environmental Commitment

Climate change is one of the most pressing issues of our time, with increasingly visible impacts on weather, health, ecosystems, and daily life. Scientists agree that human activity is causing these changes, and many people recognize the seriousness of the problem. However, there is a troubling gap between awareness and action. While most individuals report caring about the environment, their behaviors often focus on simple, low-effort actions like recycling or reducing plastic use. Meanwhile, more impactful behaviors such as eating less meat, living car-free, or joining climate activism remain far less common, even though they have a greater effect on reducing carbon emissions. This project investigates why so many people are willing to take small, symbolic actions for the environment but hesitate when it comes to more meaningful changes. The central goal is to understand the psychological and social motivations behind environmentally friendly behaviors, especially those that require greater personal effort and lifestyle change.

Our research builds on a theory known as **Significance Quest Theory**, which suggests that when people feel insignificant or overlooked, they are especially motivated to regain a sense of meaning and recognition. One way they can do this is by taking visible, morally valued actions that show commitment to a cause—like making personal sacrifices for the environment. These actions are even more appealing when they are not yet widely practiced but are strongly approved by others. In such situations, individuals have a chance to stand out and gain respect by demonstrating strong values and commitment.

We believe that this need for significance helps explain why some people take on difficult environmental behaviors. When actions like adopting a plant-based diet or using public transportation are still rare but socially admired, they offer a meaningful opportunity to make a visible difference. In contrast, when environmental behaviors become common and expected, they may lose their ability to offer personal recognition. People who are not strongly motivated by significance may still do these behaviors to fit in, but they are less likely to take on new, effortful changes.

To test these ideas, the project will study how people perceive the difficulty of different environmental behaviors, and how their motivation and social surroundings influence their choices. We will examine the interaction between two types of social norms: what people think others do (descriptive norms) and what they think others approve of (injunctive norms). The research will explore how these norms shape behavior differently depending on whether individuals are motivated by a desire to feel significant.

The study will take place in multiple countries—Italy, Denmark, Poland, and the United States—to explore how these dynamics play out across different cultures. It will be carried out in three phases involving correlational, longitudinal, and experimental studies: first, identifying how people judge the effort involved in environmental actions; second, studying how motivation and social norms interact to influence decisions; and third, developing and testing strategies that encourage more people to take on meaningful, high-impact environmental behaviors.

This research is important because many climate campaigns focus on raising awareness, assuming that knowledge leads to action. But in reality, people often avoid high-impact behaviors because they are hard to sustain without deeper motivation. By understanding what drives people to make real sacrifices for the planet—especially the need for significance and social recognition—we can create more effective strategies to support change.

Ultimately, this project will help explain why some people go beyond easy, everyday steps and make deeper commitments to protect the environment. By identifying how psychological needs and social influences shape these decisions, the research will offer new tools for designing policies, campaigns, and community programs that inspire meaningful environmental engagement around the world.