

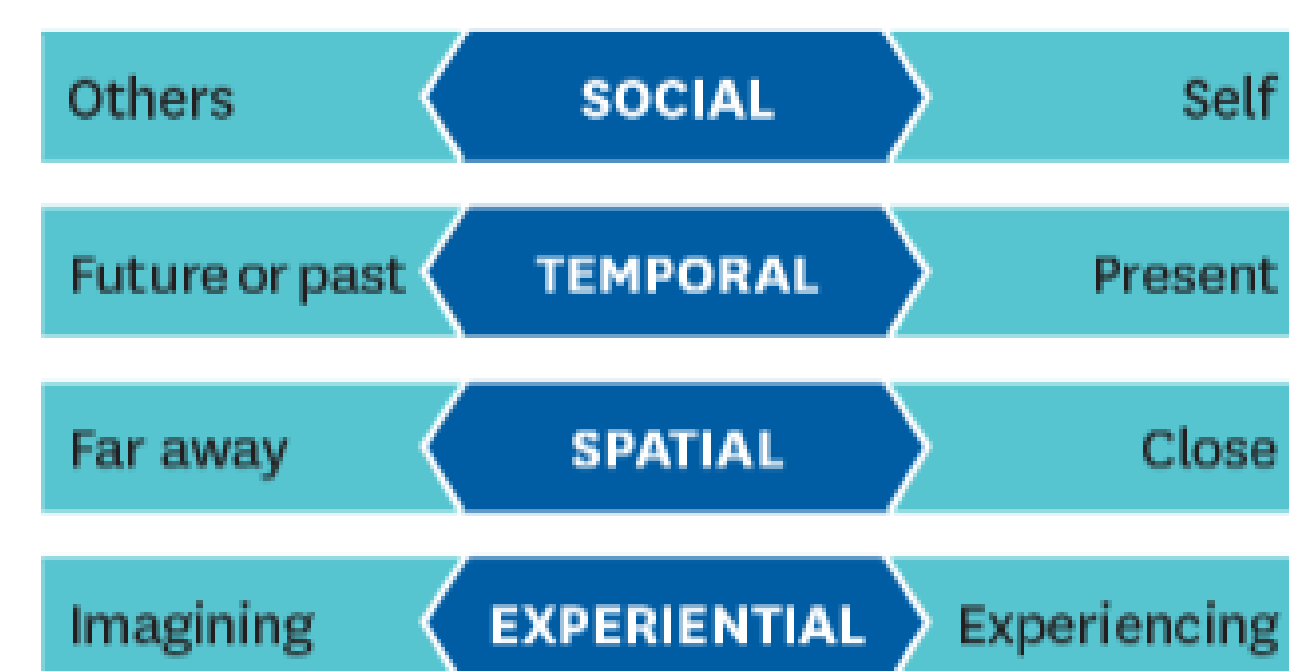
Multimodal persuasion: Metaphor in climate change activism

Kimberly Grogan

Climate change and psychological distance

Several studies have shown that public concern about climate change decreases as psychological distance from climate change increases (Keller et al. 2022). Psychological distance refers to the subjective perception of distance between oneself and climate change consequences. In an attempt to minimize psychological distance from climate change, environmental activists have created robust campaigns to persuade viewers that the ecological crisis is urgent. This analysis focuses on posters created by environmental activists known as Extinction Rebellion (XR).

Types of Psychological Distance



Research Questions

- How does XR use metaphor to attempt to minimize psychological distance from climate change?
- Who is most likely to be receptive to their message, and in what ways might XR's framing be counterproductive?

How metaphor aids minimization of psychological distance and influences decision making

Human minds are most suited for reasoning about situated, task-relevant and human scale interactions (Fauconnier & Turner 2002). Due to climate change's vast causal and temporal scale, and that consequences aren't often directly experienced by many in the Global North, it can be difficult for human minds to focus on or accurately reason about its effects, and exhibit mitigative behavior to ward off its consequences. Metaphor facilitates conceptualizing climate change in a manner that is at human scale and more commensurate with human reasoning capacities.

- Metaphoric framing can affect people's choices and actions (Thibodeaux & Boroditsky 2013) Framing shapes reasoning - and metaphoric mappings allow source frame reasoning to guide target-frame reasoning.

Intersubjective accessibility

Intersubjective accessibility (Dancygier and Sweetser 2014) is defined as (1) the degree of directness of perceptual or experiential access and/or (2) the level of confidence that other conspecifics will share that access and develop a shared experiential assessment. Choosing frames that are experientially accessible can aid in the dissemination of a particular metaphoric mapping and/or framing.



Figure 1

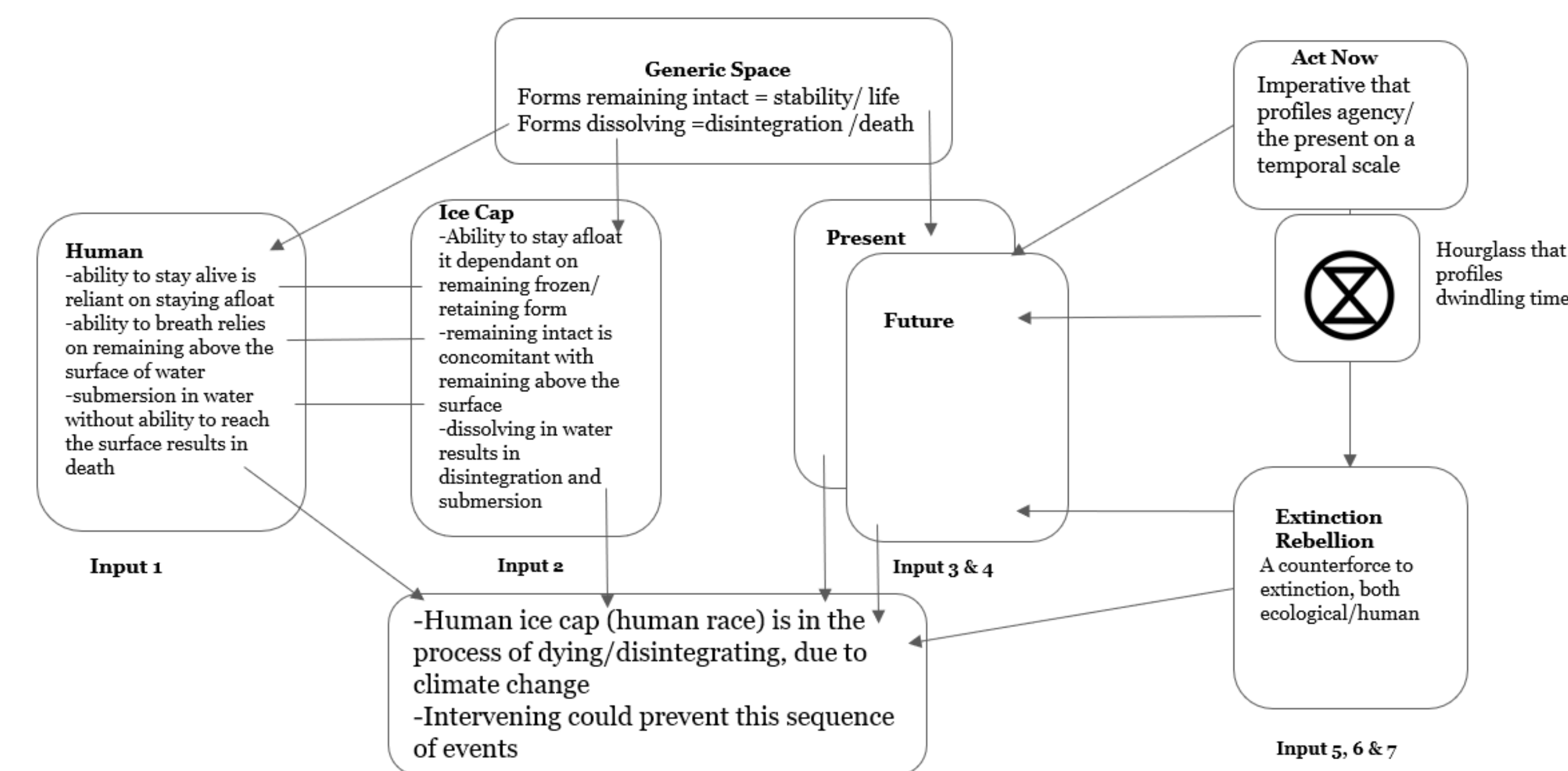


Diagram 1

Methods

(1) Identify frames (Fillmore 1985) that are being evoked via text or visual components 2) Identify salient frame metonymies 3) Utilize conceptual blending theory (Fauconnier & Turner 2002) a cognitive process which relies on the melding of conceptual structures, such as frames, that are then combined to create a new conceptual/ inferential structure not accessible in the disparate inputs. To analyze the blends, I take into account the communicative goals of the creators (Goatly 2007; Musolff 2016).

Conceptual Blends

In Figure 1, the melting human ice cap metonymically evokes climate change, as well as the human race. Time, Space and Cause/Effect are tightly compressed, a hallmark of blends (Fauconnier & Turner 2002). The metaphoric framing attempts to diminish social, temporal and emotional distance, through depicting climate change and its consequences as a socially structured, task-oriented interaction that foregrounds individual agency.

- Intervening to prevent the form from being submerged below water is a natural embodied response that relies on empathy/ experiential alignment with the depicted form.
- Reasoning about climate change is tractably transposed into reasoning about saving human life, and as such, the choice is clear: one has a duty to intervene. See Diagram 1 for blending analysis.

The textual components of the group's moniker, *extinction rebellion* reconstrue extinction, a consequence of climate change for multiple species, including humans. Rather than a phenomenon that is passively undergone without awareness or ability to intercede, extinction is reconceptualized as a phenomena that humans can collectively fight and/or rebel against. "Act Now" situates the need for action in the canonical present of the viewer.

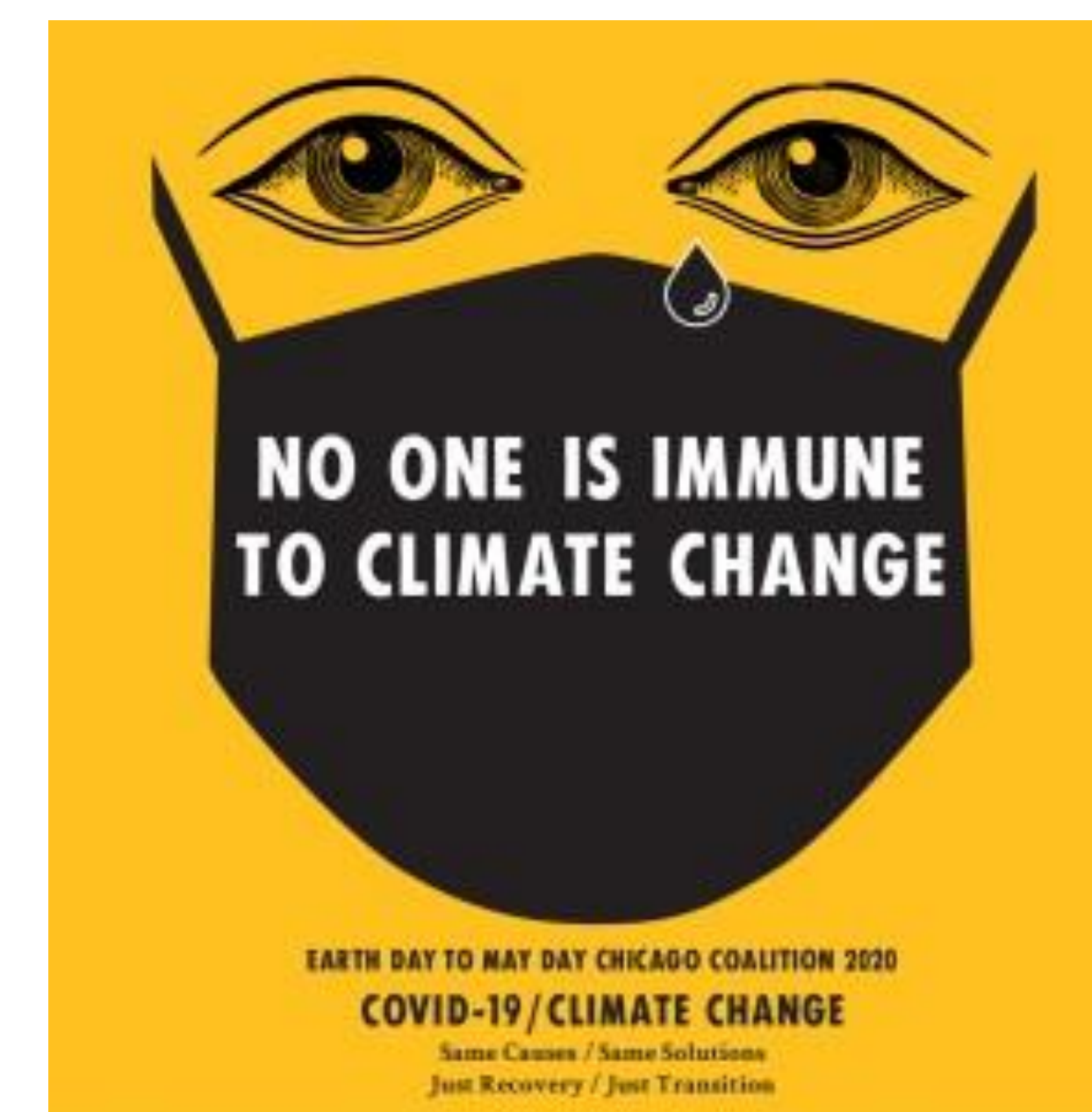


Figure 2

The tearing eyes metonymically provide access to the human race and directly engage with the viewer, while the mask metonymically provides access to the pandemic. The framing suggests that, similarly to the pandemic, climate change is an issue that affects everyone and requires collective action as a solution: individual action (such as wearing masks) have to be taken *collectively* to be effective and make a difference. Due the available structure in the COVID-19 frame, asserting that, "No one is immune to climate change," further highlights lethal consequences of climate change. Once again, Time, Space and Cause/Effect are tightly compressed.

Intersubjective accessibility versus frame acceptance

Frame activation doesn't guarantee frame acceptance or alignment (Musolff 2016). Metaphor can be interpreted differently, depending on many variables, such social context, as well as prior held beliefs (Gibbs & Coulson 2012). If XR's goal is to galvanize action and influence decision making, it's important for them to consider how different framings might be received by diverse viewers.

- **Figure 1:** Due to the ubiquity of the ice cap in climate change discourse, its persuasive capabilities are likely dampened (Dancygier 2023), though the human component could remedy this.
- Ice caps can also trigger an association with the infamous sinking of the Titanic; messaging could either be enriched by this association or negated.
- For the intended rhetorical effect, the ideal viewer of the poster would need to already align with scientific explanations of climate change, and know that ameliorating rising temperatures to prevent further glacial melting is thought to be possible via mass advocacy for regulatory legislation.
- Figuration could trigger a sense of urgency, but while consequences are overtly highlighted, tractable solutions are not.

- **Figure 2:** Framing could be ideologically alienating, due to differing experiences or beliefs pertaining to the pandemic, and thus has the potential to backfire in unforeseen ways.
- Wearing a mask is, unfortunately, politically contentious, and depending upon economic status, vastly different consequences of the pandemic were experienced.
- Lethal consequences are highlighted, but as individual culpability is foregrounded (through mask wearing), the framing neglects to address the need for systemic action that has a top-down mitigative effect.
- Both Figure 1 and 2 could reinforce a common critique of environmentalists: that their focus on death incites a sense of doom.

Conclusion

Taking into account the variety of ways that a message can be received is an important consideration in utilizing frames to aid the cause of social movements (Benford & Snow 2000). The climate crisis and a majority of the discourse around it has become less of an epistemic issue--whether or not it's real--and more of an ideological issue: who is responsible, who can and should act, and how, and what does mitigative action look like. XR's posters are oriented towards galvanizing individuals to join their cause and/or engage with mitigative action, but their framing could inadvertently negate frame activation and/or acceptance; they could also ideologically alienate viewers who aren't already aligned with their cause. Examining the different effects that frames can have, depending on knowledge, experience or ideological stance is necessary to fully assess what the potential reach is of persuasive metaphorical discourse relating to climate change.

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