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The Role of Priming Theory in the Media Effects Research Paradigm

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This article offers a comprehensive conceptual view of media priming as a central mental mechanism within the broader framework of media effects research. The main aim of the study is to explore how priming theory contributes to understanding the cognitive and emotional processes by which media content shapes public opinion, evaluative judgments, and behavioral responses. Methodologically, the study uses a conceptual analysis and theoretical synthesis approach. Drawing on a large body of research in communication science, political psychology, and cognitive science, the article analyzes the mechanisms, dimensions, and applications of cognitive and affective priming. The findings emphasize that media influence often occurs through the subtle activation of preexisting mental associations rather than through overt belief. Cognitive priming processes operate by increasing the availability of specific thoughts or evaluation criteria in memory, whereas affective priming activates emotionally congruent ideas and interpretive frames. The article emphasizes that priming theory is important not only for understanding short-term media effects, but also for tracking the long-term dynamics of media influence. It also highlights the importance of integrating priming theory into future studies of media effects.

Keywords: priming theory, cognitive priming, affective priming, news, influence, media content, media effects, hidden media effects, influence functions

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Роль теорії праймінгу в дослідницькій парадигмі медіаefектів

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Ця стаття пропонує комплексний концептуальний погляд на медійний праймінг як центральний психічний механізм у ширших рамках дослідження медіаefектів. Основна мета дослідження полягає в тому, щоб дослідити, як теорія праймінгу сприяє розумінню когнітивних і емоційних процесів, за допомогою яких медіаконтент формує громадську думку, оціночні судження та поведінкові реакції. *Методологічно* дослідження використовує підхід концептуального аналізу та теоретичного синтезу. Спираючись на велику кількість наукових праць із комунікаційної науки, політичної психології та когнітивної науки, стаття аналізує механізми, розміри та застосування когнітивного та афективного праймінгу. У висновках наголошено, що медіавплив часто відбувається через тонку активацію вже існуючих розумових асоціацій, а не через відкрите переконання. Процеси когнітивного праймінгу діють шляхом збільшення доступності конкретних думок або критеріїв оцінки в пам'яті, тоді як афективний праймінг активує емоційно-конгруентні ідеї та інтерпретаційні фрейми. У статті наголошується, що теорія праймінгу є важливою не лише для розуміння короткотривалих медіаefектів, але й для відстеження довгострокової динаміки медійного впливу. Це також підкреслює важливість інтеграції теорії праймінгу в майбутні дослідження медіаefектів.

Ключові слова: теорія праймінгу, когнітивний праймінг, афективний праймінг, новини, вплив, медіаконтент, медіаefекти, приховані медіаefекти, функції впливу

Media influence is most often evaluated in the context of negative assessments concerning individuals' dependence on mass information (Livingstone, 1998; Chaffee & Metzger, 2001). But why is this the case? How can such dependence be measured? What indicators suggest that this dependence is low or, conversely, high? When it comes to television news, it is precisely negative content that tends to capture and sustain viewers' attention and interest (Baumeister et al., 2001). The key element in a news story is change – and the more painful or striking that change is, the greater the potential of the news item to attract attention and leave a strong impression (Soroka, 2006). Regardless of the societal conditions in which the viewer lives – whether a country is at war or at peace – people typically return home in the evening and watch the news, where on average more than two-thirds of the stories present strong or moderate negativity (McIntyre & Gibson, 2016).

What motivates the viewer in this context? One paradoxical explanation lies in the notion that watching news allows individuals to feel that there are others in the world who are worse off than they are. Therefore, watching war coverage may be perceived as psychologically acceptable – whereas becoming a part of such news content is significantly more distressing. Over the past three years, Ukrainians have come to understand this paradox firsthand.

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How do media affect individuals, social institutions, and society as a whole? Addressing this question is the central aim of a substantial body of research grounded in what is known as the media effects methodological paradigm.

Media effects, referring to the outcomes of media influence – whether harmful, beneficial, or neutral – should be examined from both short-term and long-term perspectives. In both American and European scholarly traditions, it is well-established that short-term media effects can precisely reveal changes in participants' psycho-emotional states and the specific content responsible for these changes. In contrast, long-term media effects focus on the habitual and regular consumption of media by individuals or groups, independent of specific content. Unlike short-term studies, which can track immediate influences, long-term effects are harder to isolate and measure, as the content itself becomes a more diffuse variable over time. While no research design can pinpoint exactly how a specific film or video will affect an individual's behavior after a year, long-term studies are better suited to trace broad, enduring consequences. In empirical studies of short-term media effects, researchers may propose predictions or hypotheses regarding long-term dynamics, but these remain speculative, as tracking such effects with certainty at the tactical level is not feasible.

Another important view on media influence function is through lance "visible – hidden media effects" (McQuail, 2010). Visible effects are easier to observe, track, and process, therefore, to operationalize and analyze with statistical methods. "Hidden media effects" refers to media influences that occur subtly and are not immediately noticeable or overtly measurable (Fu, 2024). These effects result from the function of media content to shape thoughts, behaviors, or emotions in ways that may not be readily recognized by media consumers or researchers. Unlike more visible media effects (such as those seen in direct behavior change or emotional reactions), hidden media effects often manifest over time and may require specific research designs or methodologies to uncover (Slater, 2007; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013).

Why are these effects "hidden"? Because they (1) do not immediately manifest in obvious or measurable ways, and / or (2) do not manifest at all, so that their object cannot discern them from their natural way of thinking, feelings, behavior, habits, and environment. This makes hidden media effects more challenging to research and study compared to more visible media effects.

One compelling theoretical lens through which to examine hidden media effects is priming theory. Because priming operates by subtly activating pre-existing mental associations rather than producing immediate, observable outcomes, it exemplifies how media can perform a function of influencing thought and behavior beneath the threshold of conscious awareness. In this sense, priming functions as a mechanism of hidden media influence: it may not lead to direct behavioral change in the moment, but it can shape how individuals interpret subsequent information, make judgments, or respond emotionally over time. Understanding the priming process thus provides a useful bridge between the more visible and measurable effects of media and those that are latent, gradual, and embedded in everyday cognition.

Originating from cognitive psychology, this theory is based on the associative network model of memory, which posits that ideas or concepts are stored as interconnected nodes. These nodes are linked by semantic pathways to other concepts. Priming involves activating one of these nodes, which can then influence how new information is processed, serving as a filter, a lens for interpretation, or a foundation for forming judgments (Pan & Kosicki, 1997).

The primary **goal** of this paper is to provide a comprehensive conceptual analysis of priming theory within the broader framework of media effects research. In order to achieve this goal we have to accomplish several **objectives**:

1. Clarify the theoretical foundations of priming as a media effects mechanism, highlighting its unique contribution to understanding how media exposure influences perception, cognition, and emotion.



2. Explore the evolution and expansion of priming theory, including affective and emotional priming models that integrate associative network theories.

3. Position priming theory as a vital and integrative tool within the media effects paradigm, offering theoretical insights and practical implications for future research in communication studies.

To achieve these objectives, this study adopts a theoretical and integrative approach that emphasizes both conceptual development and critical synthesis. By examining the intersections of cognitive psychology and media communication theory, the paper seeks to scrutinize the underlying mechanisms that enable priming to operate as a powerful driver of audience cognition and affect.

Accordingly, this study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the role of priming theory in understanding media effects within contemporary media environments?

RQ2: How does priming theory contribute to explaining the cognitive and affective mechanisms under the media influence?

Method

In preparing this paper, the authors employed several general scientific methods. The descriptive method was used to define and justify the theoretical foundations of priming theory; analytical techniques were applied to characterize key theoretical concepts; and the method of synthesis was utilized to substantiate the relevance of both cognitive and affective priming within the media effects research paradigm. Additionally, inductive and deductive reasoning informed the analysis of empirical findings derived from studies conducted within the framework of priming theory.

This study employs a conceptual and integrative review methodology to examine the role of priming theory within the broader paradigm of media effects research. Rather than collecting primary empirical data, the paper is structured as a theoretical synthesis aimed at clarifying the mechanisms of cognitive and affective priming and their explanatory power in media-induced opinion and behavior formation. The research design integrates principles of conceptual analysis, comparative theory assessment, and literature-based evidence synthesis.

To achieve this, the study systematically draws on peer-reviewed scholarly literature, foundational texts in communication and cognitive psychology, and key empirical studies that have shaped the development of priming theory. This includes both classic theoretical contributions and contemporary applications of priming theory in political communication, news framing, and social media environments.

The analysis is organized around a set of guiding research objectives: (1) to demonstrate the psychological mechanisms underpinning media priming; (2) to differentiate cognitive and affective priming processes. The synthesis process is informed by analytical coding of theoretical constructs and interpretive mapping of interrelationships between media effects models.

To ensure conceptual rigor and scholarly relevance, literature was selected from leading journals in the fields of communication, media studies, psychology, and political science. Key sources were identified through structured searches in academic databases such as Scopus and Google Scholar, using keywords including media priming, cognitive accessibility, affective priming, and media effects theory. Inclusion criteria prioritized theoretical clarity, empirical grounding, and contribution to the evolution of priming theory as a distinct and integrative approach within media effects research.

Through this theoretical and literature-driven methodology, the paper aims not only to consolidate the current state of knowledge but also to advance a more nuanced understanding of how



priming theory illuminates the multifaceted ways in which media content influences cognitive processing, emotional responses, and behavioral outcomes.

Results and discussion

Priming Theory and Memory Networks

Priming theory offers a valuable lens for examining how media exposure activates mental linkages that influence audience attitudes and behavioral responses. Rooted in cognitive psychology, it draws upon the associative network model of memory, which conceptualizes knowledge as a system of interrelated nodes.

What is the mechanics of priming process? When media content activates one node in memory (for example, a news story about economic crisis), related nodes (such as unemployment or inflation) are also subconsciously activated through spreading activation (Collins & Loftus, 1975). This activation increases the *accessibility* of certain ideas, making them more likely to be used in subsequent judgments (Fazio, 2001). In essence, a media stimulus “primes” certain thoughts or feelings, which then serve as a filter or framework for interpreting incoming information and for evaluating issues or individuals. By selectively stimulating mental links in this way, media can bias which considerations come to mind easily for the public and which remain in the background.

At the core of priming theory is the idea that people do not – or cannot – consider all potentially relevant information when forming opinions; instead they rely disproportionately on information that is most accessible in memory at the time of decision (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Classic research in political communication defines media priming as “the process in which the media attend to some issues and not others and thereby alter the standards by which people evaluate election candidates” (Severin & Tankard, 2014, p. 226). In other words, by making certain issues or attributes more salient in the news, media can change the criteria that citizens use to assess political leaders or policies. This priming effect is often seen as an extension of *agenda-setting*: once the media have made an issue top-of-mind (e.g. the economy), that issue becomes the benchmark for judgment. Psychologically, this operates via the increased *ease of recall* of primed constructs – people are more likely to base their opinions on considerations that are readily brought to mind. As Tversky and Kahneman’s work on accessibility suggests, judgments and choices correlate with “the ease with which instances or associations could be brought to mind” (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973, p. 208). Thus, media priming leverages fundamental memory processes: recently or frequently activated ideas enjoy a higher activation level, and consequently exert greater influence on perception and decision-making.

Cognitive and affective pathways of media priming

From its inception, priming theory has been grounded in the cognitive dimension of media influence function (Wyer & Srull, 1986; Tory Higgins, 1996). In this early framework, the role of emotions was either viewed as inseparable from cognitive processing or regarded as secondary in importance. The initial conceptualization of priming was based on the idea that individuals, when perceiving media content, activate cognitive structures analogous to those previously formed through personal experience in similar situations (Neely, 1977). These structures typically have a clear verbal or semantic expression, which is why cognitive priming is often referred to as semantic priming, and the influence of media through this process is generally considered to be conscious or partially conscious (Jo & Berkowitz, 1994). Moreover, the predominant methods used to study cognitive priming – both historically and in current research – have involved linguistic tasks, such as presenting participants with incomplete words that could be interpreted in



either aggressive or neutral ways, thereby measuring the activation of specific semantic associations (Berkowitz, 1984).

Cognitive priming

Cognitive priming in media contexts refers to the process by which exposure to media content triggers semantically related thoughts, concepts, or knowledge structures in the audience's mind. Because memory is structured as an associative network, a single media message can activate a function of activating the web of related ideas through spreading activation. For example, a television news stories about a local crime wave might prime viewers' concepts of *danger*, *criminality*, and even unrelated issues like immigration if those concepts are linked in the person's cognitive network. Once activated, these ideas become more accessible and are more likely to be used in interpreting subsequent information or in making judgments. In this way, priming can activate entire schemas – organized knowledge frameworks – that shape how one encodes and evaluates new information. A media portrayal that fits a familiar schema (say, a "*corrupt politician*" schema) will not only bring that schema to mind but also bias the audience's interpretations in line with the schema's expectations. The result is that people exposed to certain frames or angles of perception will tend to interpret ambiguous information in a schema-consistent way. And empirical research has demonstrated such effects. In their seminal experiments, Iyengar, Peters, and Kinder (1982) showed that when television news emphasized certain national problems (such as defense or inflation), viewers later judged the U.S. President largely on those primed dimensions.

By *priming* certain aspects of reality while ignoring others, media effectively set the terms by which subsequent judgments are made (Kühne et al., 2011). Even if media exposure does not persuade someone to adopt new opinions outright, it can significantly shift the weight given to existing considerations: for instance, after constant media coverage of economic troubles, citizens might still hold the same opinions of, e.g., a politician or political party.

A key mechanism in cognitive priming is *accessibility increase*: frequent or recent media cues lower the activation threshold of associated ideas, making them spring to mind with little effort (Tory Higgins, 1996). These primed ideas then serve as readily available heuristics for decision-making. Research in mass communication has repeatedly confirmed that audience judgments (such as risk perceptions, policy preferences, or candidate evaluations) depend heavily on what information is currently most accessible, as opposed to all information stored in memory. For example, experimental studies find that immediately after viewing a news story about a sensational crime, people judge their community as less safe and express stronger support for law-and-order policies, reflecting the accessibility of crime-related thoughts (even if overall crime rates or personal victimization risk have not objectively changed). Likewise, exposure to stereotypical media portrayals can prime social stereotypes in viewers' minds: if local news over-represents crime committed by individuals from a certain racial group, audiences may more readily associate that group with criminality (Tsamadi et al., 2020). These cognitive priming effects underscore how media influence often performs the function of activating existing knowledge rather than imparting entirely new information. Notably, cognitive priming tends to be a short-term effect – the heightened accessibility of a concept will decay with time unless re-stimulated. However, as discussed later, repetition can make certain constructs chronically accessible, bridging into more enduring changes over time.

In addition to cognitive pathways, media also exert influence through *affective priming* mechanisms. Media content is often emotional in tone – news reports can be alarming or reassuring, entertainment can be funny or poignant – and these induced emotions can themselves function as primes. The affective route involves mood and emotion, tapping into what psychologists refer to as emotion-based priming. According to Bower's associative network



theory of affect, emotions are nodes in the memory network connected to related ideas and memories; thus a person's mood can selectively activate congruent cognitive material (Bower, 1981). For example, a feel-good human-interest story on the evening news might put viewers in a positive mood, which in turn increases the accessibility of positively valenced memories and thoughts. Subsequent judgments – say, evaluating a political proposal or another person – may then be unconsciously colored by this mood-congruent recall. Conversely, media segments that arouse fear or anger (such as graphic crime reports or angry political rhetoric) can prime viewers' threat perceptions and aggressive thoughts, respectively, by triggering related nodes in the associative network of memory. This mood-congruent priming means that the valence (positive or negative quality) of one's emotion can bias what information is retrieved and how it is or can be interpreted. In essence, people in a media-induced good mood tend to recall and rely on more favorable considerations, whereas those put in a negative mood access more pessimistic or critical thoughts (Kühne et al., 2011). These affect-driven shifts in attention and recall complement the cognitive priming route: where cognitive priming changes *what* we think about, affective priming can change *how* we feel and thereby influence *how* we think.

Another affective mechanism is *emotional contagion*, the process by which observed emotions in media spread to viewers and synchronize the audience's affective state with the tone of the content. Emotional contagion has been documented even in mass-mediated settings without face-to-face contact. In a striking example, Kramer et al. (2014) conducted a massive field experiment on Facebook and found that emotions expressed by others online influenced users' own emotions: reducing the amount of positive content in users' news feeds led those users to produce fewer positive posts (and more negative posts), and vice versa. This provides experimental evidence that simply seeing friends' emotional expressions on social media can induce a congruent emotional state in the viewer, forming massive-scale contagion via media (Kramer et al., 2014). In more traditional media, a similar contagion effect occurs when, for instance, a TV newscast delivered in an anxious, urgent tone transfers anxiety to the audience, or when a touching advertisement evokes tears and empathy in viewers. The induced emotional states then serve as *affective primes*: they can influence subsequent judgments independently of any specific media content. Research in political psychology suggests that emotions like fear, anger, or enthusiasm triggered by campaign ads or news can directly shape political judgments and participation (Weber, 2013). For example, anxiety induced by a threatening news story might prime a motivation to seek out more information (vigilance), whereas anger might prime attributions of blame and increase punitive policy support – distinct outcomes arising from different emotional primes. Emotions not only activate associated thoughts (e.g., anger activating thoughts of blame, or fear activating thoughts of safety) but also can serve as information in their own right ("How do I feel about this?"). As a result, affective priming can sometimes override or bias cognitive evaluations, especially when individuals rely on their feelings as a heuristic in decision-making.

Evidence of Priming Effects on Attitudes and Behavior

Priming theory's predictions have been supported by a wide range of empirical findings across communication and psychology. In the realm of political opinion, numerous studies have shown that media priming affects the criteria citizens use in evaluations. S. Iyengar and colleagues' classic experiments (1982; 1987) demonstrated that subjects exposed to news emphasizing certain issues (like defense, inflation, or civil rights) later weighted those issues more heavily when rating presidential performance. Similarly, Krosnick and Kinder (1990) found in survey analyses that during the Iran-Contra scandal, television news priming led viewers to judge President Reagan more on the basis of Iran-Contra-related evaluations and less on other dimensions, materially shifting his overall approval ratings. These studies confirm that



short-term shifts in media focus can translate into measurable changes in public attitudes and evaluations, even without altering underlying values or party loyalties. In advertising and consumer behavior research, priming effects are also well documented. For example, subtle cues in an advertisement's context or visuals can activate associations (a rugged mountain scene priming thoughts of adventure) that make a product seem more appealing if those associations match the product's image. Studies have separated *cognitive* and *affective* priming in advertising contexts, showing that a favorable mood evoked by an ad (affective prime) can lead to more positive brand evaluations, while specific product-related cues (cognitive primes) influence which product attributes consumers focus on (Meena Rani, & Nair, 2020). This dual influence in marketing highlights how priming can shape both what consumers *think* about a brand and how they *feel* about it, thereby affecting purchase intentions.

Another domain of evidence comes from media violence research. Berkowitz's Cognitive neo-associationistic model of media effects (1984) posits that violent portrayals prime aggressive ideas and emotions in viewers, making aggressive responses more likely. For instance, watching a violent film scene can activate a network of aggression-related concepts (such as "hit" or "kill") and even aggressive affect (anger), which increases the probability that subsequent frustrations will be met with aggression. Experimental studies support this: participants who viewed violent media have shown higher accessibility of aggressive thoughts immediately afterward (measured via word completion tasks and reaction times) compared to those who watched nonviolent content (Bushman, 1998). Such primed thoughts can also translate into behavior under facilitating conditions (for example, louder horn signal in a driving simulator or willingness to administer higher electric shocks in a lab setting, after violent media exposure). Notably, these effects are attributed to priming mechanisms rather than the deliberate acquisition of new behaviors; even in the absence of an explicit approval of violence, the viewer's internal network of aggression-related associations becomes temporarily heightened, thereby influencing both the interpretation of others' actions (e.g., perceiving them as hostile) and behavioral inclinations. Relatedly, research on media and stereotyping indicates that exposure to stereotypic images can prime discriminatory judgments. A couple of studies found that simply showing an image of a young Black man (vs. a young White man) in a newscast about a crime increased viewers' support for punitive crime policies – an effect driven by the activation of racial stereotypes linking Black individuals with criminality (Dixon, 2008; Domke, McCoy, & Torres, 1999). The associative links repeatedly forged by media (e.g., "immigrants" and "illegal", "welfare" and "lazy") can become chronically accessible constructs in the public's mind, influencing snap judgments and even policy preferences when related issues arise. Thus, from laboratory experiments to content analyses and surveys, there is substantial evidence that priming processes in media have tangible effects on how people perceive social reality, evaluate others, and behave. These effects span domains such as politics, consumer choices, aggressive behavior, intergroup attitudes, and beyond, attesting to the broad clarifying power of priming theory in media effects research.

Conclusions

The present study has offered a comprehensive conceptual exploration of priming theory as a fundamental mechanism within the broader media effects research paradigm. Our analysis affirms that priming plays a pivotal role in explaining how media exposure shapes public opinion and elicit audience's responses through both cognitive and affective pathways.

One of the central contributions of this study is its synthesis of cognitive and affective priming mechanisms to advance a more integrated understanding of how media influence operates beyond explicit persuasion. Rather than changing attitudes through direct argumentation, priming theory reveals that media effects often arise through the activation of pre-existing mental



associations, which subtly perform the function of guiding interpretation, evaluation, and decision-making processes (Bargh & Chartrand, 2000; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). Cognitive priming, rooted in the associative network model of memory, explains how exposure to media content increases the accessibility of specific thoughts, schemas, or evaluative criteria, which then become more likely to be applied in future judgments (Collins & Loftus, 1975). This study contributes to existing research by highlighting how affective priming – once considered peripheral – plays an equally vital role: emotions elicited by media stimuli can amplify, modulate, or even redirect cognitive activation, especially in ways that align with the emotional tone of the content (Bower &Forgas, 2001). Together, these processes demonstrate that priming theory captures both the cognitive and emotional dimensions of media influence, accounting for how audiences not only think about certain issues but also how they feel about them and behave in response – often without conscious awareness. This conceptual integration strengthens the priming theory and positions it as a central framework for analyzing both subtle and sustained media effects across political, social, and cultural contexts.

Nevertheless, this study also acknowledges several limitations. As a conceptual analysis, it does not include original empirical testing, and its conclusions are drawn from existing theoretical models and previously published studies. While this approach allows for integrative synthesis, it also highlights the need for continued empirical validation, especially in emerging media environments such as social media, immersive technologies, and AI-generated content. Furthermore, more research is needed to understand how individual differences (e.g., in media literacy, political ideology, prior knowledge) mediate or moderate the strength and direction of priming effects.

Future studies should aim to further empirically test the interaction effects between cognitive and affective priming, especially in high-choice media environments where audience agency and selective exposure play critical roles. Longitudinal designs would also help to explore how repeated priming contributes to chronic accessibility and long-term shifts in attitudes or ideological predispositions. Additionally, comparative research across cultural, political, and media systems could uncover how priming processes manifest differently depending on media structures, content regulation, or audience expectations.

Finally, the integration of priming theory into interdisciplinary frameworks – including neuroscience, behavioral economics, and computational communication science – could further enrich our understanding of media effects in complex and rapidly evolving information ecosystems.

Authors' contribution: Yurii Havrylets – conceptualization, problem discussion, literature review, writing the main text, Inna Bielinska – literature review, editing, preparation of the English summary

Declaration on Generative Artificial Intelligence and Technologies Using Artificial Intelligence in the Writing Process.

The author did not use artificial intelligence tools in the preparation of this article. The author of the article bears full responsibility for the correct use and citation of sources.

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