

Constructions of Agency in Online Discourse about Climate Change

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Abstract

This Bachelor thesis analyses how people discursively construct agencies in relation to the issue of climate change. More specifically, this thesis analyses the ways in which individuals present themselves as able or unable when discussing climate change in an online environment. To this end, a social media post from Reddit and its related comments were analysed using discourse analysis. Overall, six types of agencies were identified amongst the data, with „Empty Motivational Talk Agency“ appearing most frequently. Five agencies portrayed people as being in charge, while the sixth constructed people as having „Anxious Diminished Agency“. Despite some limitations, the findings of this study might provide ground for new ideas on the themes, feelings and agencies people express in conversations about climate change. As the results implied that online exchange about climate change can be quite individualistic and superficial, more attention could be given to changing this way of discussing climate change. For example, climate change discussions of less studied cultures could be assessed to better understand the varied ways in which climate change is discussed. By gaining this deeper understanding, it might be possible to create climate discourse in which everyone is included and addressed in their current state.

Introduction

The discourse around climate change can seem rather daunting, as it is a topic which often creates frustration, panic, guilt and polarised opinions amongst its participants (Siperstein, 2016; Stoknes, 2015). Moreover, Siperstein (2016) argues that climate change is often avoided in regular conversation as it is generally perceived as an abstract, overly complex and ideologically-charged issue. Meanwhile, discussions around climate change are essential as they provide people with a chance to investigate and construct the role they play within it (Toivonen, 2022). Such conversations become more and more urgent as the severity of climate change is continuously confirmed by scientific research (IPCC, 2022). It is now widely recognised that climate change is a process of alterations to the earth caused by various natural factors which will have significant consequences on all living beings (IPCC, 2022). Consequentially, it seems crucial to take a closer look at the exchange already held around the issue. This paper will specifically explore how individuals explore their ableness in relation to climate change in a social media discussion. To be exact, varying kinds of agency constructed by individuals in an online conversation on climate change will be analysed.

To explore the conversation held around climate change, this thesis employs the method of discourse analysis. This strand of qualitative research sets out to understand people as they discursively construct themselves and relate to their environment (Wahlström, 2006). Discourse is thus treated as an active medium that humans employ to construct and explore different versions of the world and their social life (Toivonen, 2022). For this thesis, discourse analysis will therefore investigate how people use language as a meaning-making tool in order to make sense of the complexities of climate change and explore their role within it.

Looking at previous examinations of climate change discourse, various recurring themes or narratives can be identified that range from utopian and dystopian to apocalyptic. The story of the apocalypse is generally found to be one of the most common ways the issue is discussed (Toivonen, 2022; Stoknes, 2015; Christ, 2007). Its popularity is not surprising due to the strong influence of Christian-inspired narratives in the west (Stoknes, 2015). However, it is agreed to be a more ineffective and paralysing interpretation of climate change, as it does not leave much room for action against the issue (Toivonen, 2022; Siperstein, 2016). Along with this idea of the apocalypse comes the narrative of humans as ruthless and self-interested agents who will have to fight for ever-diminishing resources (Fisiko, 2012). This interpretation draws heavily on social Darwinism, in which people are portrayed in a constant struggle for

the „survival of the fittest“ (Fisiko, 2012). Such narratives are often rather individualistic and void of any hope to still avoid the impending doom of climate change.

There is also another prevalent, individualistic narrative in which people are urged to personally take climate action. Sipperstein (2016) points out how this framing of the environmentally responsible individual has been a dominant way of discussing climate change in the global north and south for many years. However, a growing body of research calls into question this overly individualistic approach towards the problem of climate change (Toivonen, 2022; Bamberg et al., 2015; Christ, 2007). There is a strong potential that such individualised environmentalism only threatens to strengthen humans' long-held, harmful and anthropocentric narratives as individual actors and consumers (Sipperstein, 2016). In opposition to such views, research now suggests shifting the discussion of climate change to a more collective approach (Chen, 2015; Bamberg et al., 2015).

Multiple studies proposing a more collectivistic approach to solving climate change commonly assessed efficacy beliefs amongst their subjects (Bostrom et al., 2019; Bamberg et al., 2015; Chen, 2015). If a person has a sense of efficacy, they perceive a general feeling of control and power over any situation experienced (Bostrom et al., 2019). The studies found that people often perceive themselves as much more capable of taking climate action if they feel a sense of collective efficacy instead of self-efficacy (Bostrom et al., 2019; Heald, 2017; Bamberg et al., 2015). These findings, therefore, underline the notion that the discussion around climate change should be redirected from an individual basis to a more collective or even global understanding of the problem.

While the research on efficacy has helped deepen the understanding of climate change discussions, it has also been criticised for being too narrow in its definition of an individual's ableness when dealing with climate change (Toivonen, 2022). A somewhat similar concept with a wider understanding of ableness is that of agency, which will therefore be the focus of this thesis. Traditionally agency is defined as an individual's perception of themselves as an active and intentional agent within their environment (Toivonen, 2019). It is, however, essential to note that this paper will not employ the psychologically-based, traditional definition of agency as a trait-like, enduring quality of an individual. Instead, agency here is defined through the context of discourse. This means people construct their agency by employing language to construct and explore their own (un)ableness regarding climate change (Toivonen, 2022). To be exact, individuals' constructions of climate agency and loss there-off will be explored as something that is conversationally negotiated and ever-changing.

More recently, research papers have focused explicitly on the discussions of climate change held in online environments (Bloomfield & Tillery, 2019; Lörcher & Taddicken, 2017; Koteyko et al., 2015; Schäfer, 2012). The new communication possibilities seem to hold important implications for discursive research on climate change (Koteyko et al., 2015). For example, due to the abundance of information that can now easily be accessed and the low barriers to public discourse, the discussion around climate change has become more accessible to laypeople (Lörcher & Taddicken, 2017). This shift in climate change discussion from real life to online, as well as from experts and mass media to laypeople and social media, appears significant for how the issue is discussed. Lörcher and Taddicken (2017) agree that it is vital to further research the dynamic context of social media spheres, especially in relation to the discussions held by laypeople about climate change.

To get a varied and in-depth look at online discussions of laypeople on social media, it was essential to pick a platform that would host a conversation with lengthy replies and various opinions about individuals' perceptions and feelings towards climate change. Based on such reasons, the social media platform Reddit was chosen. Reddit is a platform with fairly relaxed content guidelines on which anyone with an account can talk about their opinions or comment on other people's posts. Due to its popularity, easy access and wide range of discussions, it has quickly become a new favourite source for secondary data (Proferes et al., 2021). For this thesis, a Reddit post was chosen, including a lengthy comment section in which many individuals reply and discuss climate change. The original post and the following discussion will be used to analyse the different ways in which these people construct (non)agency in relation to the threat of climate change. Therefore, the research question in this paper is: "How do people discursively display agency when discussing climate change on social media?"

Method

Design

The material used for this discourse analysis was gained from a social media platform called Reddit. This specific social media platform was employed based on its easy access and wide range of discussion topics. Reddit is divided into different subsections called subreddits. Each of them follow a certain set of rules, have varying moderators keeping order and a specific voting system for links, self posts and more. The post discussed within this paper was found under the subreddit r/climatechange. I decided upon this subreddit as it promises to be „a place for a rational discussion on a divisive topic“. I aimed to find a conversation that was neither

heavily influenced by climate change denialism nor any other narrative connected to climate change. Both the name and description of the subreddit made me hope to find a discussion with as few of such biases as possible. After reading through multiple discussions I decided upon a post titled „Climate anxiety as a 14 year old“, discussing a teenagers feelings about climate change, with a very extensive comment section. My attention was captured by the length and depth of the comments in which people discussed their personal thoughts and feelings about the issue. I saw various potential ways in which these commentators constructed their (non)agency in relation to climate change.

While the data stems from an open social media platform, is public information and can therefore be considered fair use, there are nonetheless certain ethical issues that should be addressed. While the individuals were technically aware that they were expressing their views publicly, it is still impossible to obtain explicit consent on the use of their opinions due to the anonymity of their accounts. Therefore it cannot be said with the utmost certainty that the individuals in question would permit to their content being used for the purpose of analysis. In order to ensure as much privacy as possible no names or other identifiable features were mentioned in this thesis. Lastly, this research project was officially approved on the 23rd of march 2022 (req. number 220222) by the ethics committee BMS which further ensures it's ethical validity.

Data

The post titled „Climate anxiety as a 14 year old“ was written in July 2021 and has since received 175 upvotes and 132 comments by other users. Due to the anonymity generally enforced by Reddit, it is almost impossible to make any statements concerning the demographics of the people involved in the discourse. Multiple people mention their age because the original poster (OP) states that they are 14 years old and already experience high climate anxiety. In accordance with this, some people mention their own age. The ages mentioned range from 14 as the youngest to 59 as the oldest.

The original post was written by a user who has since deleted their profile. The text is only two sentences long and reads:

So I'm only 14 and hearing about climate change and the latest IPCC report has really sending a feeling of anxiety through as this is basically the future of the planet which will affect this generation of humanity and more to come and I've got an entire future ahead of me here. So I just want to let anyone know who maybe feeling the same that you're not alone and if

anyone has any helpful suggestions of how to help, feel free to leave them down in the comments (Reddit original poster, 2021).

Following, people in the comment section either offer words of encouragement, discuss the content of the governmental report or express their feelings towards climate change. The length of these comments varies from one sentence to multiple paragraphs.

Analysis

In this Thesis, I am employing discourse analysis to explore the (non)agency expressed in the previously mentioned Reddit thread. According to Potter (2012), discourse analysis perceives language and people's discursive interactions as the foundation of our social world. Meaning an exchange is not perceived as a mere conversation. Instead, it is treated as an action that individuals perform, helping them construct or understand any phenomenon (Toivonen, 2019). Meanwhile, however, it is essential to solely draw conclusions on a language level and refrain from making assumptions about underlying psychological processes.

A critical factor in discourse analysis is a constant variation between reading, writing, rereading and rewriting the material and the report (Shaw & Bailey, 2009). As the first step in my analysis, I did a general reading of all the comments in connection with the main post and copied them into a table with colour coordination. The comments would receive different colouring depending on whether they responded directly to the original post or answered a previous statement. This system provided me with a better overview of my data. To slightly diminish the large scope of my data, I then already decided to leave out specific responses that mainly were filled with scientific information about climate change and did not clearly include constructions of (non)agency in a sense meant in this research.

Next, I included a separate column next to the comments where I could take tentative notes of interesting ways in which people expressed themselves. These notes included linguistic tools that were employed, interesting ways of phrasing opinions, or reoccurring themes. For linguistic patterns, I analysed which personal pronouns were stated and whether the person used a passive or active voice (Kurri & Wahlström, 2007). Whether a person uses personal pronouns in a statement can determine if they appear to be part of the discussed phenomenon or not. I also paid further attention to the type of pronoun used, as a person using „we“ instead of „they“ could show them as part of the problem instead of distanced. Since one aspect of agency is whether or not a person takes ownership over their actions and effect on their surroundings, I believed pronouns to be an essential indicator of the portrayed agency. If

a person uses active voice, they place themselves right within the action, while passive voice indicates something is happening to them without their interference. Furthermore, active voice sentences are usually much more concise and to the point, while passive voice sentences tend to be overly wordy. For example, I noted that the original post seemed to use passive voice as the writer was very wordy in their sentence and portrayed climate change anxiety as something that is being „sent“ through them. Below, I included the sentence as an example:

So I'm only 14 and hearing about climate change and the latest IPCC report has really sending a feeling of anxiety through as this is basically the future of the planet which will affect this generation of humanity and more to come and I've got an entire future ahead of me here (Reddit original poster, 2021).

Interesting ways of phrasing could be any sentence or formulation by the poster that seemed vital to me in the sense that they were constructing a specific type of agency. For example, I noted that some individuals would always talk about the need to be prepared for the coming crisis caused by climate change. Therefore I made a tentative note next to them, calling it „Prepared Agency“. Below, I included part of a comment to illustrate this point:

I'm just like well, we're not going to avoid this. It's better to accept and prepare than be anxious because unfortunately things are going to get worse (Reddit commenter, 2021).

Lastly, general patterns could be anything that I would note across multiple comments as a recurring trend. For example, frequently, when a person portrayed themselves as anxious in a text, it would coincide precisely with them talking about being worried for their future or that of their children. It seemed noteworthy that the anxiety individuals were experiencing seemed to be most often linked to their families or their personal well-being in the future. As opposed to, for example, the well-being of other more threatened cultures or animals that could go extinct. Below, I included an excerpt from a more extensive comment to illustrate this pattern.

Am a fair bit older than 14, but climate change scares the crap out of me, especially for my kids (Reddit commenter, 2021).

Afterwards, I selected all the comments within which I had found the most noteworthy displays of agency and put them into a new table for a better overview. By reading through them again, I could decide upon tentative names for the types of agency I saw constructed within the comments. Creating a new table, I then gathered all names and gave them a definition based on the patterns I had observed amongst the posts. When taking note of the frequency of the construction, however, I quickly noticed that it was relatively low for most of them.

As a fourth step, I received feedback from a supervisor as well as a fellow researcher. I incorporated their feedback by reviewing all the data again, checking if I missed anything. By doing so, I could identify a higher number of posts with similar or identical ways of constructing agency like the previously selected comments. These new findings helped increase the frequency of the found constructions amongst the data. After adding the newly selected comments to my table, I proceeded to go back and forth from the feedback to reanalysing the data. Using this iterative approach, I reorganised the types of agency until I believed them to be the most representative of the expressions observed in the data.

Results

Table 1 provides an overview of the different agency constructions observed within the selected data. The column on the left contains the title given to the specific type of agency that was expressed. The middle column gives a more in-depth description of the previously named agency. Lastly, the right column provides the frequency with which this type of agency was observed within the 20 selected comments. Overall, six agency constructions were identified and ordered from most frequent to least frequent. In some cases, multiple types of agency could be found within the same comment. The examples given in the following in-depth discussion of the different types of agencies are derived from one of the 20 selected comments. Nearly all of them are one or two sentences taken out of a more extensive post, as they most accurately describe the type of agency in question.

Table 1: Overview of Agency constructions

Type of agency	Definition	Frequency of appearances
	The writer states that:	

Empty Motivational Talk Agency	Something has to be done about climate change, without being clear who should do something or what exactly should be done.	
Anxious Diminished Agency	They feel scared or anxious about climate change, often portraying it as something that is simply happening to them.	9
Surrender and Prepare Agency	Climate change is unavoidable, which creates a need to be prepared for whatever may come.	8
Anger Driven Agency	Climate change makes them angry. Often it is mentioned that this anger is used in some way to fight or bring about change.	7
Redirect Focus Agency	The focus should be redirected away from the climate crisis onto what is happening in life at this moment.	5
Hopeful Agency	There is still hope that climate change can be stopped or at least mitigated	3

due to science or working
together.

Empty Motivational Talk Agency

The most frequently observed agency construction within the selected comments was „Empty Motivational Talk“. It appeared ten times. People who created this agency often used cliché, vague, motivational words. Sentences such as „Just do your best!“ or „Keep fighting!“ are very typically associated with a widespread Western mentality of being able to do anything as long as an individual has the right mindset (Lecompte-Van Poucke, 2022). As such phrasings are usually applied in much more mundane or personal problems, using them in the context of a complicated, global threat such as climate change seems somewhat ill-fitting. The posts also never include a concrete plan of action for the issue, which is the reason for the use of the word empty. The personal pronouns used in this agency would vary depending on the poster. Some used „I“, talking about their own "fighting“, while others used „you“ or „we“. Expressions such as „you“ or „we“ can be associated with creating a sense of urgency or togetherness. In this case, however, the words mainly felt aimless as it was unclear to who they were directed. This lack of direction further underlined the impression of emptiness.

Example 1: „but all we can do is keeping on keeping on and do our best to fix it.“ (Reddit commenter, 2021).

In this example, the person seems to say that „we“ should never give up. While this comment might initially appear motivating, a closer read evokes a more lacklustre impression. „All we can do“ can be read like someone who does not see many options or hope for improvement anymore. This becomes even clearer in the part „keeping on keeping on“. The repetition here is interesting as it gives the impression of a never-ending struggle with no actual resolution in sight. All they can do is just to keep trying and trying. In the last part, the person uses the words „do our best to fix it“. Something along the lines of „doing our best“ is very typical for this category. Sayings like this will often appear motivating, but in reality, they leave individuals utterly clueless as to what this „best“ should be exactly (Lecompte-Van Poucke, 2022). Furthermore, „fixing it“ seems to be an unusual way of referring to climate change, as the use of „it“ implies that it is just another vague problem to take care of. The person does not make it clear at all if they are even talking about climate change.

Example 2: „Find your people. Commiserate together. Make change together.“ (Reddit commenter, 2021).

The second example uses the personal pronoun „you“. The author was mainly talking to the original poster, but it could be read as them generally giving out advice to people on what to do about climate change. The sentences here are concise and list several actions that can be taken. This is a typical pattern, both the listing of very vague actions as well as the shortness of the expressions. While this writing style is usually associated with being precise and clear, the vagueness of the actual words again reduces this effect. „Find your people“ at first sounds like helpful advice. However, what kind of people that would be in this situation or how to find them remains unsaid. „Commiserate together“ is probably the most precise advice as it could be followed more or less instantly. However, „make change together“ is the perfect example of the motivational speaker style in these sentences. Employing cliché and motivational phrases without any clear direction is typical of this sort of writing style.

Anxious Diminished Agency

Anxious Diminished Agency“ was the second most frequently found agency construction, observed nine times within the selected material. The writer would express their feelings of anxiety about climate change. There was a general pattern of people mentioning this anxiety in relation to their own future or that of their family and children. When creating this sort of agency, there was never any talk about „we“ or „you“. The person would either leave out personal pronouns altogether, or they would use „I“. It also seemed that most people portrayed both: climate change and their anxiety about it as something that was simply happening to them.

Example 3: „So I'm only 14 and hearing about climate change and the latest IPCC report has really sending a feeling of anxiety through as this is basically the future of the planet which will affect this generation of humanity and more to come and I've got an entire future ahead of me here.“ (Reddit original poster, 2021).

Firstly, it is interesting that this sentence is generally very rambling and long. There is no correct punctuation, which gives it a rushed and panicked feel. It appears that many thoughts are coming up all at once. Interestingly, „has really sending a feeling of anxiety through“ is presumably missing the word „me“. This lack of personal pronoun could be read as the original poster removing or distancing themselves from this experience of anxiety running through them. Furthermore, this phrasing makes it sound as though this anxiety is an uncontrollable

external force, just as climate change, which is simply happening to OP. „Which will affect this generation of humanity and many more to come and I’ve got an entire future ahead of me here“ perfectly illustrates the previously mentioned pattern of people talking about their climate anxiety in connection with their worry about their future.

Example 4: „Am a fair bit older than 14, but climate change scares the crap out of me, especially for my kids.“ (Reddit commenter, 2021).

This comment does include more correct spelling and punctuation, which might be related to the more mature age of the writer. However, similarly to the original poster, this writer does not start the sentence with „I am“ but simply „am“ instead. As in the previous example, this could be read as the writer distancing themselves from what they are writing about. The language in this post is crasser due to the phrasing „climate change scares the crap out of me“. However, just like in the first post, this person describes anxiety as something that is happening to them. While this wording is typical in English, it is still interesting in this context as climate change is once again portrayed as an active creator of this individual's feelings of anxiety. In this sense, they are representing their own agency as diminished. Lastly, this poster mentions being especially scared for their kids. Again, this repeats the pattern of anxiety mainly being related to what the future might look like due to climate change.

Surrender and Prepare Agency

The third most frequent agency construction was the „Surrender and Prepare Agency“. In this case, climate change is simply accepted. The people here do not express any hope of changing it, nor do they express anger or any other strong emotional reaction. They have merely accepted that bad things are going to be happening because of the climate and that the only thing they can do is to prepare as much as possible. This sort of agency often coincided with the advice to just focus on personal needs or personal survival. It was less about what could be done for the world at large. However, the people expressing these kinds of views did use „we“ as a personal pronoun besides „I“ and „you“. This might be related to the idea that everyone will be affected by the apocalyptic effects of climate change and that everyone should take care of themselves first in this situation. So while the use of „we“ would typically indicate togetherness, it might still be rooted in an „everyone for themselves“ kind of thinking.

Example 5: „Focus on how you will survive and what you can do to prepare now before the SHTF.“ (Reddit commenter, 2021).

This comment is more focused on the survival and preparedness aspect of this category. It perfectly illustrates the idea of focusing on the self first. These terms, „focus“, „survive“, and „prepare“, also are often used in connection with war or some kind of catastrophe. This agency construction creates the impression that the writer indeed expects extreme, catastrophic situations and a fight to stay alive. The way they discuss it, it resembles a lieutenant speaking to an army or at least a group of scouts. It is also noteworthy that the comment ends with an abbreviation of „shit hits the fan“ in all caps. Again rather crass language is used when talking about the threat of climate change. Such language use is often connected with strong feelings such as anger or fear.

Example 6: „I’m just like well, we’re not going to avoid this. It’s better to accept and prepare than be anxious because unfortunately things are going to get worse“. (Reddit commenter, 2021).

In the first sentence, the writer expresses certainty that there is no avoiding climate change; therefore, it does not help anymore to fight it. By stating this with such confidence, they create an air of authority around their words. The way they follow this statement with very straightforward advice only underlines this impression of superior knowledge compared to others. The writer uses „we“ in this sentence, which could be seen as emphasising that everyone will be affected by the consequences of climate change. In the following sentence, they repeat the previously discussed theme of „accept and prepare“ and portrays it as the most realistic and helpful path of action. It is also emphasised that things are going to get worse. This seems to mirror the SHTF statement from the comment above. In both cases, this could emphasise just how bad climate change will hit us.

Anger Driven Agency

This sort of agency construction appeared fourth most frequently and represents the expressions of frustration and anger towards climate change. Most people were angry at the lack of action they see when combatting climate change. People simply stated that they were mad in about half of these comments. In the other half, it was discussed how anger is essential to fight climate change. People were either stating how they use their anger to fuel their climate activism or encouraging others to do the same. Often the sentences were relatively short, which might give the impression that individuals did not want the force of their messages to be diluted by being too wordy. There was a pattern of short sentences in which individuals simply stated being angry without using pronouns or further information.

Example 7: „I use my deep well of anger to stay committed (as best I can) to my government policy job. It makes me ‚mission-driven‘.“ (Reddit commenter, 2021).

The person starts by saying that their anger is a deep well. Comparing something to a deep well is an illustrative metaphor referring to one's emotions. This metaphor explicitly emphasises the extent of this person's anger as a deep well could hold a lot of anger inside. By stating that they use their anger to be „mission driven“, their emotions are portrayed as a tool helping them take action. The writer paints themselves as efficient and capable by using their feelings to reach their goals. It is, therefore, interesting that this person included „as best as I can“ in brackets. With the rest of the statement, the writer seems to portray themselves as self-assured and determined. However, the part in the brackets takes away from this image and leaves more room for potential failings. There is no advice or anything about „us“ in this sentence. It is very focused on what this particular person is doing by themselves.

Example 8: „59 and angry as hell.“ (Reddit commenter, 2021).

This example represents the short sentences which simply state that people are angry. These comments are often very similar. They start with age, do not use a personal pronoun, and end right after the person states being angry. Often the comments do include a swear word. Since swearwords can create the sense that the person using them experiences strong emotions, they increase the impression that the writer of this post is genuinely angered by climate change. The shortness of these comments is reminiscent of the saying that people are lost for words because they are too angry. It creates the impression that people simply want to state that they are angry without having to explain why or how. Their agency construction, therefore, appears to be aimed at simply expressing their frustration and exasperation at the situation.

Redirect Focus Agency

This agency construction was observed five times amongst the selected comments. Here people were primarily advising other individuals from the thread. Generally, the advice was to not focus too much attention on climate change. Instead, people are encouraged to redirect their focus on other things. Most commonly, it was recommended that people should focus on the present or what is right in front of them. This redirection of focus was meant to bring the people more happiness or at least lessen their negative emotions towards climate change. It was also advised that people avoid doom scrolling online or focusing on all that is going wrong in the world. It seems that the way these individuals created their climate change

related agency was to present themselves as advocates of wellbeing in the face of a crisis. Because this agency construction was mostly connected to people giving other advice, the personal pronouns observed here were either „you“ or just none.

Example 9: „The second thing is to live in the moment. This helps a lot for happiness in general. It means actually focusing on what you are doing and experiencing right now and not be in your head thinking about all the things that are wrong in the world, because there are plenty and pondering about them won't do you any good.“ (Reddit commenter, 2021).

Here the first sentence immediately advises another person to live in the moment. It is followed up by the explanation that this will lead to more happiness. This sort of advice is typical of well-being movements in the Western world (Carruthers & Hood, 2011). People are encouraged to simply focus their attention on the present moment without judgement. However, these statements can become overused, undermining the movement's original efficacy and intention (Gillett-Swan & Sargeant, 2015). As a result, this somewhat simplified advice tends to trivialise more complex issues. For these posters it is more about what can be done for the individual being faced with the stress of impending climate change rather than taking actual steps toward solving the issue. For them, it is about ensuring that individuals' mental health is protected and improved. The second sentence also shows the theme of getting out of thinking about all the wrongs in the world. It states that there is not any benefit to just focusing on something negative. This idea is often observed in online discussions about societal or environmental disasters. People are advised to take a break from the flood of negative information and take care of their own mental health first.

Example 10: „you should always step back when whatever is bothering you is well outside of anything YOU can do. Its tough but otherwise you will not live life to the fullest.“ (Reddit commenter, 2021).

Again, it is stated to take a step back from what is bothering you. This advice might be appropriate for the original poster; however, it denies the reality of people who are already faced with the current consequences of climate change. For them, it might not be as easy to step back from what is bothering them or outside their control. Therefore, this comment ignores the reality of many people who are currently dealing with societal or environmental catastrophes. It is noteworthy that the „you“ is capitalised. This capitalisation might be intended to emphasise that this advice is solely meant for the original poster. The writer then acknowledges that simply stepping back might be challenging, but they also say that life cannot

be lived to the fullest if a person tries to change or focuses too much on something outside of their control. With this statement, the person implies that the best way to live a life is to live it to its fullest. The sentiments in this comment underline the notion, that this writer constructs their climate agency around ensuring peoples individuals wellbeing and mental health. Their way of dealing with climate change is to keep a healthy distance from it.

Hopeful Agency

This construction of agency occurred with the most minor frequency. It seemed noteworthy, however, as it differed from the other sentiments expressed in the thread. People, in this case, were actually showing hope. They were generally saying it is not too late and that we should believe that this world can become better again. The personal pronoun „you“ is never employed. Instead, the people in this category either use „we“ or „I“. This gives the impression that they perceive their agency as personal or related to bigger communities.

Example 11: „I think climate change is going to be trickier to fix than CFCs but we are capable of fixing big environmental problems. I really think we'll solve climate change.“ (Reddit commenter, 2021).

In the first sentence, the person says that climate change will be „tricky to fix“. This is interesting as it seems to make the considerable vastness of this global problem seem more like a math equation where sooner or later, there will be a simple solution that can be found. It could therefore be argued that this is trying to make the problem of climate change into a far less threatening one. The person then says, „we are capable of fixing big environmental problems.“ Here, they use the pronoun „we“. This creates a feeling of unity and everyone coming together. Ultimately, the poster expresses that they believe we can „solve“ climate change. Again this conjures up images of math equations that simply need solving.

Example 12: „Find hope in the better world we can build.“ (Reddit commenter, 2021).

In this example, the word „hope“ is specifically mentioned, and this hope is in „a better world“. Firstly, using „we“ again creates an impression of community and everyone doing their part. Secondly, building something together conjures up images of something stable and durable created for everyone. However, this sentiment falls short as it is never clarified what can be done for this better world or who will build it. The statement thus becomes reminiscent of the „Empty motivational talk agency.“

Discussion

This bachelor thesis explored the research question: “How do people discursively display agency when discussing climate change on social media?”. Using discourse analysis, six constructions of agency were found to be the most prominent amongst the selected data. In the following section, I will discuss these agencies in a broader cultural context and make comparisons to the findings of previous research.

Amongst the found agencies, it was noteworthy that five out of the six portrayed the individuals as active and in charge of the issue. Only „Anxious Diminished Agency“ constructed people as more helpless and lost. Furthermore, many comments across the five more agentic categories were written as advice to others. On the one hand, it could be argued that this was solely related to the original poster asking for help in their statement. However, on the other hand, this could also link to the idea of discursively positioning oneself as being in charge. Potentially, giving out advice to others might present a person as having already solved or mastered the problem themselves. Giving advice or putting oneself in the role of an expert can be observed as a common trend on social media, especially on a very discussion-focused platform such as Reddit and might further explain the frequency of advice-style comments (Horne et al., 2019).

This portrayal of capability might also be related to larger communication trends in Westernised societies. There is a popular narrative that „you can do anything as long as you believe in yourself“ (Lecompte-Van Poucke, 2022). In the Western world, it is often seen as essential to constantly grow into a more improved, capable and independent person (O'Donnell, 2021). This expectation may create difficulty for people to talk about their feelings of inadequacy or hopelessness. If the common ideology is to stay positive and take charge of one's destiny, there might be pressure to always adhere to this narrative. Because even if the social norms of everyday conversation and feelings are mainly undetectable, they will still strongly influence what we talk about and how we talk about it (Heald, 2017). This prevalent idea of an almost toxic positivity and can-do spirit might have influenced how people constructed their agencies in this comment section, aiming to paint themselves as more competent and in charge.

Furthermore, such ideas around toxic positivity might have been related to the frequent construction of „Empty Motivational Talk“. The overused and cliché phrasings used in this agency are often found in Western discourse centred around self-improvement and general empowerment (Lecompte-Van Poucke, 2022). It might be tempting to fall back onto them

when faced with any type of crisis and would go well with Healds (2017) and Toivonen's (2022) assertion that conversations about climate change often lack depth and complete sincerity in Western societies. While these common expressions might appear motivating initially, they often lack clear advice or direction (Lecompte-Van Poucke, 2022). Especially for an issue such as climate change, this discursive pattern seems ill-fitting as it appears to brush over the seriousness and complexity of the situation.

A similar trend of excessive focus on positivity and wellbeing might have been reflected within „Redirect Focus Agency“. Here, people mostly advised to step away from the severe issue of climate change to focus on the present and personal happiness. This advice often comes up in Western conversations around self-improvement and mental wellbeing. Interestingly, much of the discussion about climate change in this comment section echoes these ideals. As mentioned earlier, this seems especially ignorant of the realities of many individuals who are actually impacted by the consequences of climate change, as they won't be able just to step back from the issue. This pattern is echoed by Noorgard (2012), stating how people in nations with higher carbon emissions are both less likely to be directly impacted by climate change as well as show less concern towards the problem itself. People from Western countries can focus on personal happiness by employing a kind of „socially organised denial“, while people from the affected countries do not get this chance (Noorgard, 2012). Therefore, this sort of discourse is not helpful in actually doing anything against climate change itself.

When looking at the agency construction of „Surrender and Prepare“, another common discourse in relation to climate change can be detected. The way climate change was discussed in this category was very reminiscent of the popular framing of climate change as an apocalypse in the making (Toivonen, 2022; Stoknes, 2015; Christ, 2007). As with previous findings, humans were generally made out to be primarily self-interested and ruthless creatures in a constant battle for survival (Fisiko, 2012). However, as mentioned earlier, this construction of agency seemed to leave little room for hope or plans to counteract climate change. It might be essential to counteract apocalyptic interpretations of climate change to avoid general despair, inaction, or overly individualistic behaviour.

Lastly, it is remarkable that many agencies tended to employ a very individualistic tone. As presented above, „Redirect Focus Agency“ was very much centred on the personal happiness of individuals. In addition, „Surrender and Prepare Agency“ also mainly advised simply focusing on preparing oneself for the impending hardships related to climate change. Finally, „Anxious Diminished Agency“ dealt with people feeling anxious about their future or that of their family. In these agencies, people portrayed themselves or others as individuals

coping separately with climate change. This sort of discourse is likely related to the individualistically driven societies of Westernised countries, where much focus is put on the self (O'Donnell, 2021). As mentioned earlier, however, many research findings now suggest that an individual-centred approach to climate change is ineffective (Toivonen, 2022; Bamberg et al., 2015; Christ, 2007). Instead, the focus should be directed toward what can be done globally or at least at the societal level. This shift in discourse might even positively affect the likelihood of climate action taken by people of the Western world (Heald, 2017; Chen, 2015).

In the specific context of a Reddit-based discussion on climate change, it was interesting to observe the considerable range of agency constructions. While some painted themselves as realists who will have to fight for their survival, others constructed an agency of hope in a better world. While some encouraged people to step away from the issue, others argued for using emotions to fuel their climate activism. However, some general patterns were also detectable irrespective of the different viewpoints in the comments. There was a general trend of using rather vague and encouraging phrasings lacking specific instructions for helpful climate action. Furthermore, most comments took on a rather individualistic tone and ignored the global implications climate change will have on many other cultures or living beings.

While these findings might reflect larger societal trends, it is essential to mention that this thesis only analyses comments made on one specific post found in a particular subreddit. Additionally, discourse analysis limits the conclusions that can be drawn from the data. As previously mentioned, tentative conclusions can only be made on a language level. Inferences about an individual's true intention or psychological state are, however, not possible. Following this, no bigger generalisations can be made with true certainty. However, the utterly unobtrusive data collection and consensus meetings with another researcher and a supervisor strengthen the validity of the data. The reliability of the results was ensured by a thorough approach of multiple rereads of the literature and data, as well as constant adjustment of the found agencies.

Despite their limitations, the findings of this study might provide ground for new ideas on the themes, feelings and agencies people express in conversations about climate change. They might help generate new research and ideas in this area of interest. For example, the results implied that online discussion of climate change can be quite individualistic and surface level. This might reflect larger issues surrounding the way in which climate change is commonly discussed in Western societies. By normalising social media discussions in which laypeople are openly talking about their struggles in coping with climate change, it might become easier for experts in the field to give more targeted advice. Additionally, it appears

crucial to move the discussions from individualistic coping with climate change to a more communal or global level. This shift could be achieved by focusing research around climate change discussions on other, less-studied cultures and therefore raising awareness around alternative forms of climate change discourse. In addition, providing a bigger platform for the voices of different cultures in media such as books, movies and especially news outlets might also shift discussions.

For future research projects, one might compare how climate change is discussed amongst people from an individualistic culture as compared to people from a collectivistic culture. This might help gain a more holistic view of how people portray themselves in relation to this issue. Another way of broadening this research could be to specifically analyse conversations about climate change from people who are already directly suffering from its consequences. Their discourse and agency might differ in interesting ways from the findings in this paper. By focusing on more diverse climate change discussions, more attention can be given to groups of individuals more commonly neglected by research. In turn, a broader and more representative understanding of the ways in which people discursively make sense of climate change could be gained. As climate change discussions are often so overwhelming and polarising, it is important to truly understand and consider the different ways in which people express their opinions and feelings about the issue. By gaining this deeper understanding, it might be possible to create climate discourse in which everyone is included and addressed in their current state.

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