Expressions of emotional discomfort in relation to climate change of Western European university students belonging to the generations Y and Z

Bachelor Thesis

of

Maren Osterkamp

Supervised by

Dr H. K. Toivonen

and

Dr L.M.A. Braakman – Jansen

Faculty of Behavioural, Management, and Social Sciences (BMS)

University of Twente

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Abstract

This paper explores Western European university students' expressions of emotional discomfort in relation to climate change. Research suggests that climate change has been shown to be connected to a variety of emotional responses. Previous research to this topic is predominantly quantitative, highlighting how concepts like climate anxiety are common within the population of mostly Western countries. Therefore, a qualitative study was conducted to gain insight into how students express and make sense of their negative emotional experiences in relation to climate change. To explore expressions of emotional discomfort in young adults, semi-structured interviews were conducted and analysed afterwards by the means of thematic analysis. The results illustrate how the participants describe their negative emotional experiences in various and complex ways which can be categorised as emotional discomfort.

Introduction

The severity of climate change is repeatedly confirmed by scientific research, calling people to action with more urgency than ever (IPCC, 2022). Climate change is one of the most pressing issues facing the planet, as it threatens to disrupt ecosystems, economies, and communities on a global scale (IPCC, 2022; WHO, 2021). Rising temperatures, melting glaciers, increasingly extreme weather patterns, shifting ecosystems, and declining biodiversity are some of the significant consequences of a rapidly changing climate (Hitz & Smith, 2004; IPCC, 2022). Additionally, climate change is affecting human communities by exacerbating poverty, threatening food security, and increasing the risk of conflict and migration (IPCC, 2022; WHO, 2021). As such, addressing climate change seems crucial for the survival of both people and the planet.

Climate change seems to be an important topic for younger generations since they worry increasingly about their future, for example if having children is a reasonable decision with an uncertain future (Hickman et al., 2021; Schiffman, 2022). To gain more insight into the subjective experiences of younger people this study is going to be of qualitative nature to explore the expressions of emotional discomfort in relation to climate change among students from Western European universities. The data is gathered by conducting semi-structured interviews with students from Dutch, German, and Spanish universities. The interviews are analysed afterwards by the means of thematic analysis

According to Pihkala (2022), scholars started to explore emotions, which can be linked to climate change, more often in recent years. Climate emotions can be defined as the subjective psychological experiences of individuals in response to the environmental and societal impacts of climate change (Mosquera & Jylhä, 2022; Pihkala, 2020b; 2022). These emotions include, but are not limited to, feelings of fear, frustration, anger, hopelessness, guilt, and despair (Duggan et al., 2021; Mosquera & Jylhä, 2022; Pihkala, 2020b; 2022). They are believed to be influenced by a range of factors, including personal values, beliefs, and

experiences, as well as exposure to media coverage of climate-related events and changes in the environment (Pihkala, 2021; 2022). Climate emotions are seen as an important aspect of the human experience of climate change, as they influence decision-making, behaviours, and mental health (Berry et al., 2018; Nabi et al., 2018; Ojala et al., 2021; Pihkala, 2022).

Recently, Pihkala (2022) categorised several climate emotions in a taxonomy. He includes a scope of different emotions, some which could be categorised as negative emotions, such as grief, anxiety, and anger. Other emotions could be described as more positive, such as optimism, motivation, and pride. By distributing them into subgroups he builds an overview of prominent emotions linked to climate change gathered from existing research (Pihkala, 2022). According to different scholars' further research might provide a better understanding of climate emotions which is expected to aid the development of more effective communication strategies and interventions for promoting greater public engagement with climate change (Pihkala, 2022; Chapman et al., 2017). However, due to the growing body of research, which suggests that climate emotions seem to be connected to mental health and psychological well-being on a complex level, it appears crucial to study this topic for the sake of possible interventions to reduce the impact of climate change on mental well-being as well (Ojala et al., 2021; Pihkala, 2022). Until now especially the concept of climate anxiety has been explored by different scholars (Clayton et al, 2017; Pihkala, 2019; 2020a).

The American Psychological Association (APA) defines climate anxiety as "a chronic fear of environmental doom" (Clayton et al, 2017). On a broader scale climate anxiety can be defined as psychological phenomenon that refers to the emotional distress and fear related to the current and future impacts of climate change (Clayton, 2018; 2020; Pihkala, 2020a; 2021). This emotional response is characterized by feelings of worry, fear, helplessness, and stress about the current and future state of the planet and its effects on individuals, communities, and the environment (Clayton et al, 2017; Clayton 2020; Morganstein & Ursano, 2020; Pihkala,

2020a). From a scientific perspective, climate anxiety can be understood as a result of cognitive appraisal processes, where individuals perceive climate change as a threat to their well-being, survival, or that of their loved ones and communities. This perceived threat can activate the body's stress response, leading to feelings of anxiety and physical symptoms (Clayton, 2020; Corr, 2011; Pihkala, 2021). Clayton (2020) argues that climate anxiety on a moderate level is a rational response to climate change. Although, climate anxiety can manifest in more severe forms and lead to other mental health disorders, scholars advise to avoid pathologizing climate anxiety as it could imply that it is an inappropriate reaction to climate change (Clayton, 2020; Pihkala, 2020a; Wu et al., 2020).

Studies have shown that exposure to climate change-related news, extreme weather events, and environmental disasters can increase the likelihood of experiencing climate anxiety (Clayton, 2020; Pihkala, 2019; 2021; Wu et al., 2020). It is important to note that no direct exposure to the consequences of climate change is needed as individuals can also suffer from climate anxiety by indirect influences such media coverage of the topic (Clayton, 2020; Pihkala, 2021). The emotional impact of climate change is not limited to individuals, and can also impact communities, particularly those that are most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change (Clayton, 2020; Pihkala, 2019). Overall, climate anxiety is a complex psychological response to the challenges posed by climate change. The topic is also a growing area of research in the field of psychology and environmental studies (Clayton et al., 2017; Clayton, 2018; Pihkala, 2019; 2020a).

Climate anxiety has been researched and measured in different quantitative surveys. However, scholars tended to use slightly different definitions of climate anxiety, sometimes including emotions such as sadness or grief into their definitions. Clayton and Karazsia (2020), for instance, developed a scale consisting of 22 items to measure climate anxiety, finding during three quantitative studies that climate anxiety is not uncommon, especially among younger adults (Clayton & Karazsia, 2020). Other national and international

quantitative studies found similar results (APA, 2020; Hickman et al., 2021; Pihkala, 2021). A national survey conducted in 2019 by the Finnish Innovation Fund found that 25 percent of Finns reported experiencing climate anxiety, while in the youngest segment (15- to 30-year-olds) it was 33 percent (Pihkala, 2021). According to a survey conducted by the APA (2020) two thirds of adults in the United States indicate that they experience a sense of climate anxiety. Especially, people from the generation Y (Millennials), which includes people born in the 80s to mid 90s, expressed a high degree of concern about climate change compared to older adults.

Besides that, Hickman et al. (2021) conducted a quantitative study to assess the degree to which young people are worried about climate change. To gather the data, they surveyed 10.000 individuals between 16 and 25 from different countries about their feelings and thoughts about climate change. Nearly 60 percent of the respondents said they feel "very worried" or "extremely worried" about climate change, while 45 percent of the participants claimed that their feelings about climate change impact their daily lives, for example an increase of stress levels and a decrease of overall well-being (Hickman et al, 2021). Another study examined differences between genders and age groups associated with reporting climate anxiety or other emotions linked to climate change. Small but consistent gender differences have been found as women expressed higher levels of negative emotions while male respondents tended to be more optimistic (Clayton et al., 2021).

All of the aforementioned studies have in common that they are of a quantitative nature, implying that there is a research gap when it comes to qualitative research. Thus, this paper aims to provide an insight into subjective experiences of emotional discomfort in relation to climate change of university students. Exploring this topic in a qualitative manner is important to understand how young adults express their emotional discomfort. Besides that, it could facilitate further research and interventions to decrease effects on mental well-being. This paper introduces the term emotional discomfort in relation to climate change instead of

using the term climate anxiety or broaden the scope to climate emotions. Emotional discomfort was chosen to describe negative emotional experiences which participants expressed in relation to climate change.

The target group was limited to students belonging either to the generations Y and Z, referring to young adults born in the 80s, 90s, and early 2000s (Dimock, 2022). As some examples of previous quantitative studies have shown, many younger people seem to be emotionally affected by climate change (APA, 2020; Clayton & Karazsia, 2020; Hickman et al., 2021; Pihkala, 2021). Wu et al. (2020) argue that younger people are significantly suffering from the effects of climate change. According to Schiffman (2022), Millennials and generation Z show high levels of engagement with the subjects of climate change and climate anxiety online and try to engage in pro-environmental behaviour.

Besides that, it can be argued that individuals belonging to the generations Y and Z are the current and future decision makers who most likely must handle the consequences of climate change and the impacts it has on the environment and human beings. Thus, it is crucial to learn about their perception of emotional discomfort they experience in relation to climate change. Especially considering that understanding and addressing the emotional dimensions of climate change seems crucial for developing effective strategies to mitigate its impacts and promote resilience in individuals and communities (Pihkala, 2019; 2021; Ojala et al., 2021). Taking all the aforementioned information into consideration the research question is *how do students at Western European universities express emotional discomfort in relation to climate change?*

Methods

To answer the research question semi-structured interviews were conducted, using an interview protocol. To gain a deeper understanding how the participants express emotional discomfort in relation to climate change, a qualitative data collection method was chosen.

Qualitative data might allow new insight in individual expressions of emotional discomfort which could be connected to pre-existing knowledge about climate emotions. The study was granted ethical approval on the 27th of October 2022 by the ethics committee of the University of Twente (request number 221309).

Based on the aforementioned argumentation the target group was limited to students belonging to either the generations Y or Z. People born between 1981 and 1996 belong to the generation Y, while people born between 1997 and 2012 belong to the generation Z (Dimock, 2022). However, for this research the birth years were further narrowed down, including only participants born between 1981 and 2004 into the study as the research question targets university students.

A group of nine participants, which were contacted by using a snowballing method within personal networks of the researcher, was interviewed to gather data for this paper. Six of the participants are female while the remaining three identify with the male gender. Six participants are German and three are Dutch. The participants are either students at a German, Dutch, or Spanish university. As the participants are between the ages of 20 and 27, they fulfil the selection criteria of being either a Millennial or Gen Z, albeit the birth years are clustered in the 1990s with one participant born in the early 2000s.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to give the participants the opportunity to speak freely about their feelings and experiences in relation to climate change. The interview protocol consists of seven main questions with the possibility to add probing questions wherever needed (Appendix A). The first question is formulated very broad to let the participants express their emotional experiences in relation to climate change without previously presenting them concepts of climate emotions. As the research question initially included experiences of stress in relation to climate change, the participants were provided with definitions of stress and climate anxiety (Appendix A), followed by questions concerning both of these concepts. However, as stress and climate anxiety were not the most prominent

emotions that were expressed by the participants, the scope was winded during the analysis. The remaining questions within the interview protocol concern coping strategies, a perceived influence on day-to-day life, and what participants think would help them cope. Lastly, the participants were given the opportunity to add any emotions they experienced in relation to climate change which have not been mentioned during the interview yet.

The participants were offered the options to be interviewed in either German or English, and most German participants preferred to be interviewed in their mother tongue. Dutch participants were interviewed in English. The English version of the interview protocol and a version translated to German can be both found in Appendix A. The participants could also choose if they preferred to be interviewed online or in person. However, some participants only had the option to be interviewed online as they were located in another country, or the travel distance was too far. Due to convenience and preference eight of the nine interviews were conducted online, while one interview was conducted in person. For the interviews that were held online, meetings on the platform Microsoft Teams were scheduled to have the opportunity of seeing each other via a video call. Two participants preferred to turn their camera off due to sickness. To audio record the online interviews the recording software Audacity was used. The interview held in person was recorded with the pre-installed recording app on an iPhone.

Prior to the beginning of the interviews each participant received an explanation of the following procedure, and the informed consent form was read to them. After the audio recording was started each participant gave their explicit oral consent to participate in the study. The participants had the opportunity to ask questions at any point prior, during, and after the interview, and were offered to voice feelings of unease anytime. After finishing the interviews, the audio recording was stopped, and the participants usually reflected on their experiences as most of them seemed to have the need to share their experiences from the interview.

To transcribe all audio recordings the transcription tool of Microsoft Office was used, and the generated transcripts were manually checked while listening to the audio recordings. The data was transcribed orthographically, noting interjections, pauses, and filling words in order to be more aware of moments of thought or hesitation while reading the transcripts. Since a transcriptions software was used to transcribe the interviews and the audio recordings were listened to in their original language to check the transcripts, the interviews held in German were first transcribed in German as well. After examining the transcripts for any errors and correcting the text manually, the German transcripts were translated to English as the paper is written in English.

To analyse the interviews, the qualitative method of reflexive thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2012) was chosen. This method can be defined as flexible tool which can be used in a systematic and structured manner in a variety of theoretical frameworks. As it does not rely on intercoder reliability, this method can be applied by one researcher alone, embracing the interpretative nature of data coding (Braun et al., 2019). According to Braun and Clarke (2019), the researcher's interpretation of meaning-making patterns is important in reflexive thematic analysis and creativity, subjectivity, and reflexivity of the individual researcher are encouraged. As the objective was to gain insight into the expressions of emotional discomfort as they were expressed by the participants no theoretical framework was used and thus, the analysis approach was predominantly inductive. As expressions of emotions turned out to be difficult to find strictly based on language level, body language, mimic, and intonation were also taken into consideration during the analysis. As the researcher conducted each interview it was possible to include these latent impressions into the analysis. In this case the term latent refers to interpreting a deeper level of meaningfulness to what the participant expressed.

All interviews were anonymised, including removing anything that could identify a participant. As common in qualitative research each participant was assigned a pseudonym to

refer to them during the analysis. All anonymised transcripts were combined into a single Microsoft Office document and printed to work with the data by using text-markers and side notes. To analyse the data the six steps of thematic analysis by Brown and Clarke (2012) were followed. During the first step of familiarising oneself with the data, it became clear that the data showed expressions of different climate emotions which reoccurred across the different interview transcripts.

During the second step relevant segments were coded, while writing notes with brief descriptions on an extra paper. The excerpt "countries should operate together to handle climate change" were, for example, coded with *Wish for global collaboration*. Then, codes which seemed to share meaning or identified a shared idea were clustered in initial themes during the third step. Again, brief descriptions of the initial themes were added to an extra paper in an effort to obtain an overview. A theme is, for example, *Emotions arising from seeing the inactivity of the government* to which the previous example code belongs. The preliminary themes were checked and adjusted while reviewing the data as a whole during the fourth step. Finally, the themes were further or redefined by the means of brief notes and a name was added to each theme. The sixth and final step included writing the results section of this paper.

Results

Within the data obtained from the interviews five themes could be found. The results of the analysis are displayed in an overview (Table 1) and each theme is described and explained based on examples afterwards. Table 1 shows the themes, codes which belong to each theme, the frequency of each theme, and a short definition of each theme.

Table 1

Overview of themes and codes

Theme	Definition	Codes	N (Frequency of the themes)
Emotions arising from seeing the inactivity of the government	The participants described emotions in relation to climate politics	Frustration Anger Wish for global collaboration	13
Emotions arising from thinking about the future	The participants described emotions they experienced when thinking about the future	Fear Sadness Helplessness Worry Uncertainty if to have children Hope	17
Emotions arising from thinking about the human involvement in climate change	The participants described emotions that they experience when considering human involvement in climate change	Guilt Anger Anxiety Togetherness Helplessness	13
Coping with emotions related to climate change	The participants described coping behaviour in response to climate change that they link to emotional experiences	Distancing oneself from climate change Adjusting day to day behaviour	15
Expressing personal suffering due the effects of climate change	The participants described personal suffering linked to the effects of climate change on individual well-being	Insomnia Distress Overthinking Uncertainty Discomfort	11

Theme 1: Emotions arising from seeing the inactivity of the government

  The first theme concerns the emotions and beliefs which participants expressed upon seeing the inactivity of the government in relation to climate change. Even though most participants acknowledged that each individual adjustment of behaviour or action of activism might be important, most participants mentioned the importance of political involvement to tackle the issue of climate change. The most dominant emotions that were expressed in that context seemed to be feelings of frustration and anger regarding the political approach towards climate change. Besides that, many participants expressed a wish for international collaboration to reduce the human impact on climate change. Even though no concrete ideas were issued, most participants said that the most effective way to tackle the issue of climate change would be if different nations worked together, especially countries with economic capacities. The theme is illustrated with an example from "Denise" below.

  "There should be more restrictions on a political level. If there would be harsher things like nobody can drive a car on a certain day. That would be cool. I also think I should not just be Germany, but it needs to be globally. If they would all say together, 'Okay, let's do this.' I think that would be important. [But I don't know, well, it's difficult to get-uhm] but [yeah] you can't control what other countries are doing. And you have bigger industrialised countries that want to get richer and I'm like oh well."

  The example from Denise shows how most participants expressed a wish for more political involvement even if that means that certain restrictions would be set by the government. Denise pointed out that rules issued by the government might need to be stricter. On a latent level this idea could stem from the reasoning that political rules and restrictions might be necessary to ensure compliance within society. Without the involvement of the government fewer people might engage in pro-environmental behaviour. Similar to this

example most participants described quite clearly that they believe an international approach would be crucial to reduce human impacts on climate change. It is also important to note how Denise used the words "nobody" and "together", illustrating the pattern within the data that most participants expressed the belief the problem of climate change needs to be tackled together - on a collective level instead of an individual level - and thus strengthening their argument for the need of more political involvement to facilitate said togetherness.

Another meaning-making pattern within this example would be the passive anger and frustration that Denise showed with her use of language and intonation. For example, some of her words had a cynical edge to it (e.g., "and I'm like oh well"), showing the latent frustration in her expressions. Within the data patterns like this reoccurred, expressing emotions on a latent level by using body language and intonation instead of emotion words. Emotions like these were often expressed in in the context of doubting an international approach can be implemented in the near future. Frustration and anger were also expressed with regards to the current lack of a clear political course concerning climate change.

Denise's example seems fitting to represent the first theme as it shows how participants expressed their frustration and anger upon the inactions of the government and politicians regarding the general approach to reduce human impact on climate change. However, the example also demonstrates how younger adults described their expectations of a higher success rate in decreasing human impact on climate change if rules were set into place by the government, especially if countries would operate on an international level.

Theme 2: Emotions arising from thinking about the future

The second theme includes meaning-making patterns where participants expressed emotions when thinking about the future. This includes their own future, the future of their children and grandchildren, or the future generations in general. Some participants also pondered if they should start a family at all considering the consequences of climate change. However, a few participants expressed emotions in regard to the future of other species and

the environment as well. While most emotions associated with the future seem to be of a more negative nature such as worry, helplessness, sadness, or fear, few participants mentioned a feeling of hope. For example, while they might be worried about the future of their children, they also are hopeful that society will eventually manage to tackle the issue of climate change in the long-term future. To illustrate both aspects of the theme two examples are given. The first example from "Freya" illustrates the uncertainty if to start a family that some participants expressed.

"If I think about having children, I am really considering it twice, you know? It is a stressful thought, if you think about in what kind of world you would put your children into. [pause of thought] You want the best for your children and at the moment it is not possible to guarantee a safe future for them because everything is just so uncertain with climate change and all."

Freya's expression of her worries demonstrates the distress that many participants experienced when they think about the future. A main aspect of this theme seems to be the uncertainty about what the future will hold for the participants themselves but also future generations, even more so within a personal context. Uncertainty was not only named directly during the interview but also could be found on a latent level when taking the body language and mimic of the participants into account. Most participants who brought up the worry about having children in the future expressed feelings of distress or uncertainty, either by directly naming these emotions or by expressing them with their body language and mimic. For example, a visible hesitation and repeated shrugging were categorised as indicators of uncertainty.

Besides that, the word "guarantee" was a strong expression for the wish to have an absolute certainty that the future will be promising and safe for her children. Freya expressed

experiencing uncertainty about the future, while also describing the need for certainty to feel safe putting children into this world. However, most participants who mentioned being afraid to start a family, did not come to a definite conclusion yet, but said with view on the current situation and the foreseeable future proceedings in terms of climate change, they find it difficult to justify putting children into this world. Most participants expressed viewing climate change as a considerable threat to the future which potentially influences their decision-making in personal development. The second example is from "Clara" and illustrates the emotions participants expressed in the context of environmental demise as a consequence of climate change.

"There was one time when I was on holiday last year. I saw the mountains and nature and I suddenly became very sad and there were like tears running out of my eyes because I was like 'Oh, these mountains are so beautiful, and they will melt and gonna disappear.' I felt very strongly at that moment."

Like other participants, Clara expressed grief about the loss of biological habitats but also the loss of something beautiful and impressive like mountains which human beings are allowed to witness on earth. Other participants described similar emotions, however, some described feeling robbed of their chance to experience the beauty of nature. Despite planning to travel the world, they seemed to feel as if their options are limited because some areas will simply disappear before they have the chance to see them. Like Clara most participants described nature as beautiful and impressive, something they would like to protect and experience in the future. Some participants described feeling helpless and frightened when thinking about the future of this planet. A few participants expressed to believe that human beings have a responsibility towards nature, while simultaneously describing to feel at loss for a solution.

However, the second theme also includes how participants expressed hope when thinking about the future, both environmental and personal. Even though fewer participants described feeling hopeful that problems surrounding climate change can be solved in the long-term future, it is an emotion which participants expressed in the context of thinking about the future. Hope was a rare expression of positive emotion concerning the participants' perceptions about the future as most other descriptions were associated with negativity. Participants who talked about hope, described that it helps them cope holding onto a bit of optimism.

Theme 3: Emotions arising from thinking about the human involvement in climate change

The third theme includes meaning-making patterns in which participants expressed emotions which are arising from being aware about human involvement in climate change. Feelings which were expressed by the participants range from guilt to anger, anxiety, and helplessness. The participants described recognising society's contribution to the increase of global warming and the consequences it has on climate change. In this context the wish for togetherness to be able to reduce human impact on climate change was expressed. Guilt was mostly expressed on an individual level, meaning that participants identified behavioural patterns which they show themselves and might be contributing to the problem of climate change. However, expressions of anger or frustration are mainly directed towards society and industrial institutions. Expressions of helplessness could be found both on a personal level or as part of society that encourages industrial growth and recklessness with their consume behaviour. The theme is further illustrated by the following example from "Conrad".

"Eventually it all boils down to money. Huge companies want to make money and put their responsibilities in relation to climate change onto others despite the fact that they should and also could take responsibility. [Uhm, I guess that considering-] especially considering that

they make so much money they should be obligated to invest a part of it into our planet because it would be great to have it for a bit longer."

Conrad described that large companies contribute a major part to the climate crisis in his perception. Criticism towards larger industrial institutions was a reoccurring pattern across the data, which appears to be quite similar to the first theme where criticism towards the political approach was a meaningful pattern. A sense of collaboration is viewed as crucial to tackle the problem of climate change. The third theme shows how participants express that this also applies to large companies. Conrad uses the word "responsibility" while expressing how he expects companies to step up and contribute their part to reducing the impacts of climate change. While he believes that the industry could and should take responsibility to limit their influence on climate change, he criticises that most of the responsibility is put onto others. Even though most participants mentioned their own possible contribution to the climate crisis, many seemed to share the belief that the problem needs to be tackled on a higher level as, for example, large companies do a have a major influence of the increase of climate change.

Furthermore, Conrad expressed a degree of anger towards large companies on a latent level. His intonation and choice of words implied a cynical and sarcastic edge to his answer. For example, he ended his sentence with a sarcastic comment (e.g., "it would be great to have it for a bit longer"). Besides that, he used strong words when expressing what he envisions how the approach of industrial institutions towards their contributions of climate change should be (e.g., "should be obligated"). Other participants expressed similar emotions with regard to industry and society, showing their frustration regarding a lack of sustainability in many larger companies. However, some participants also expressed a feeling of helplessness in this context as they do not see a way to change the approach of larger institutions. The participants expressed believing society as a whole must take measures to reduce humanity's

impact on climate change, reinforcing the notion of togetherness as a meaningful pattern within the data.

Theme 4: Coping with emotions related to climate change

The fourth theme concerns descriptions of coping behaviour that participants describe and how they link them to their emotions in relation climate change. While some participants describe to become more active, others express to feel the need to distance themselves from the topic of climate change because they describe to feel overwhelmed. However, every participant mentioned to adjust their behaviour to be more pro-environmental and sustainable. Examples that were named frequently include, using public transportation, trying to use less resources, making conscious decisions while shopping groceries such as buying regional and seasonal, or eating less/no meat. Participants link their coping behaviour to emotional discomfort, such as feeling anxious, worried, overwhelmed, or insecure. This theme is again illustrated by two examples. The first example from "Bert" shows an expression of pro-environmental behaviour.

"Since I learned more about climate change, and it became more present I've tried to adjust my behaviour. I usually buy regional and seasonal products, and I often go by train. Sometimes I even cycle far distances to avoid using the car when I'm staying with my parents as the public transport there is not very good. Doing things like that just helps me with my conscience and anxiety I guess."

Bert described that trying to adjust his behaviour in accordance with climate change helps him with cope with feelings of anxiousness. Similar to other participants he mentioned that the topic of climate change becomes more present and takes more room in his daily life compared to his childhood and adolescence. Most participants expressed experiencing some degree of emotional discomfort due to the space the climate crisis takes in the media but also

their personal lives. Expressions of engaging in pro-environmental behaviour because of the aforementioned reasons reoccur across the data. Participants discussed how they link their behaviours to feelings of emotional discomfort and a sense of responsibility. For example, like Bert said that behaving pro-environmentally helps him with his conscience, other participants expressed managing their feelings of responsibility by adjusting their behaviour.

Additionally, some participants, amongst others Bert, expressed feeling angered by reckless behaviours of friends and colleagues. A few participants described wondering if their efforts were in vain if other members of society display more environmentally reckless behaviours. This illustrates how participants describe perceiving individual behaviour as less useful if no action is taken in more collective ways. Again, a wish for togetherness was mentioned in this context as well. However, most participants talked about their intention to keep up their efforts despite worrying about it being possibly in vain. Another example from "Ella" illustrates the need to distance oneself from the topic of climate change.

"I have to be honest, and it maybe sounds stupid, but I stopped reading about climate change, and I stopped watching the news. It's not only climate change but there is so many bad news in the world, and I cannot calm down if I hear it. I don't know I try to be greener but if nothing else happens how is that of use? And listening to it all won't help either."

Similar to other participants, Ella described how she stopped consuming media which expose her to the topic of climate change to reduce the discomfort she experiences. Ella expressed to manage her feelings of emotional discomfort in relation to climate change by distancing herself from the topic. She describes viewing the climate crisis and how it is handled rather negatively which leaves her distressed. Some participants expressed how they distance themselves from the topic of climate change or limit their exposure to the topic because they feel emotionally drained from the topic.

Like Ella it seems to be difficult for them to share their experiences. They often used terms to justify or defend their positions or phrased their descriptions like confessions. Ella, for example, seemed to expect some kind of judgment as she immediately started with a rather negative label herself (e.g., "maybe it sounds stupid"). Like discussed in the context of the previous example, Ella also believed her efforts to engage in more pro-environmental behaviour might be in vain if no other measures are taken. She then proceeded to defend her position of distancing herself from media releases concerning climate change (e.g., "and listening to it all won't help either"). Ella's example illustrates how the participants expressed being affected from climate change and its presentation in the media, and how they link these experiences to their behaviour, such as distancing themselves from media. While Bert mentioned to cope with his anxiety by engaging in pro-environmental behaviour, Ella copes by limiting her exposure to the topic.

Theme 5: Expressing personal suffering due the effects of climate change

The fifth theme relates to expressions of personal suffering caused by the effects of climate change. Within the data several meaning-making patterns referring to participants' descriptions of personal discomfort which they linked to the effects of climate change could be found. The main impacts on personal well-being that the participants described are insomnia, overthinking, discomfort, feelings of uncertainty, and distress. Most participants did not consider the feelings they experience as climate anxiety but rather a lingering feeling of discomfort and uncertainty. Some participants expressed experiencing sleeping difficulties or distress as result of their general discomfort. This theme is, again, illustrated by two examples. The first example from "Conrad" shows the sleeping difficulties that some participants expressed.

"I have trouble sleeping or I fall asleep very late at least. I just need hours to finally rest because I cannot stop the thoughts. It's not just about climate change but if I'm lying

awake at night thoughts about our future and climate change rush back into my mind. I tend to get hung up on them, thinking back and forth."

Like Conrad many other participants described having trouble with overthinking, some of them at night, others during the day. Besides sleeping difficulties, participants mentioned having difficulties to concentrate. Some of them tried to cope by reducing their exposure to stressful topics such as climate change. Conrad expressed difficulties to cope as he keeps lying awake at night, occupied with his thoughts until he falls asleep. He also mentioned feeling drained and tired because of it. Descriptions of tangible suffering such as insomnia or overthinking were expressed rather concretely by the participants most of the time. The example from Conrad demonstrates how participants describe those aspects of their personal suffering, while the next example concerns expressions of a more diffuse form of suffering impacting well-being. An example from "Beatrice" illustrates the general feeling of discomfort or distress that many participants expressed.

"It just is an uncomfortable feeling, if you don't know what will happen to you and the world. It's stressful to be exposed to that topic constantly. Even at work my colleagues talk about it, also the older ones. They are like 'Everything was better in the old days' and I'm like 'Great, that's good to know', I don't know, it's just a bad feeling, I can't really describe it."

Beatrice indicated that she has difficulties to describe and categorise the emotions she experiences. Many participants seemed to have trouble finding the right words to express their experiences. The concept of stress appeared to be too severe for most participants as they described feeling a degree of unease which they would not yet categorise as stress. Like Beatrice several participants expressed finding it stressful to constantly being exposed to the topic of climate change. Beatrice described how she is confronted with the topic of climate

change at her workplace as well. She said the words of her colleagues worry her as their glorification of the past make her insecure. She described being uncertain about many things, for instance her own emotions but also her future. Beatrice expressed this uncertainty about her future by questioning what will happen to her but also the world. A few participants expressed similar thoughts as they, for example, mentioned feeling anxious from time to time or asked themselves similar questions like Beatrice. However, it seemed to be difficult for most of them to pinpoint the exact nature of their feelings, but some participants eventually settled for using words like discomfort, distress, or insecurity to make sense of their seemingly diffuse feelings of unease. This example illustrates how participants expressed personal suffering which they link to climate change. However, it is important to note that participants described to have troubles formulating said personal suffering concretely.

Discussion

The aim of this research was to explore how students at Western European universities express emotional discomfort in relation to climate change. After the thematic analysis of the obtained data five themes have been found. The first theme *Emotions arising from seeing the inactivity of the government* illustrates how participants described their emotions and beliefs in relation to climate politics. The second theme *Emotions arising from thinking about the future* includes how participants described the emotions they experienced when thinking about the future of the environment and their own personal circle. The third theme *Emotions arising from thinking about human involvement in climate change* concerns how participants described emotions that they experience when considering the impacts of the industry as well as societal and individual behaviour on the climate crisis. The fourth theme *Coping with emotions related to climate change* illustrates how participants described managing their emotional discomfort in relation to climate change by adjusting their behaviour. The fifth theme *Expressing personal suffering due the effects of climate change* includes how

participants described their personal suffering which they relate to the effects of climate change on individual well-being.

The results show how the participants expressed a variety of emotions and experiences which they link to climate change. All these expressions show a predominantly negative emotional experience which can be categorised as emotional discomfort. During the interviews the concepts climate anxiety and stress were explained to the participants (Appendix A). However, both definitions did not resonate with the target group. Based upon the analysis the term emotional discomfort was used instead to refer to the negative emotional experiences the participants expressed. This research shows that climate emotions are experienced by young adults in various and complex ways, implying that the participants described their emotional experiences in vaguer and more various words than using the terms stress and anxiety. Sometimes participants had difficulties to find words to describe their emotions and expressed how they are unsure how to conceptualise their feelings. It is important to mention that in many examples participants did not use clear emotion words to describe their feelings and perceptions. Because of this finding, observations of body language, mimic, and intonation with which the participants expressed their emotions and beliefs were also included into the analysis.

This research shows how students belonging to the generations Y and Z personally described and made sense of their emotional responses in relation to climate change. The results demonstrate that young adults subjectively expressed to suffer from climate change regarding overall well-being. Their perceived emotional discomfort which also seems to cause, for instance, fatigue, difficulties to concentrate, and has impacts on decision-making, should be taken seriously. Besides that, the results illustrate how the subjective expressions of the target group provide deeper insight and understanding into their perceptions, which might support further research and interventions.

Previous research indicated that climate emotions, especially climate anxiety, are not uncommon but can be found in a significant part of the population worldwide (APA, 2020; Clayton & Karazsia, 2020; Hickman et al., 2021; Pihkala, 2021; Pihkala, 2022). Quantitative surveys also suggested that especially teenagers and young adults seem to report feeling emotionally affected by climate change (APA, 2020; Clayton & Karazsia, 2020; Hickman et al., 2021; Pihkala, 2021). Similar to what previous studies found, the participants expressed feeling emotionally affected by climate change. The results of this thesis, however, suggest that the scope should be widened beyond the concept of climate anxiety and concern due to the climate crisis.

As previously discussed, there is a lack of existing literature when it comes to qualitative studies that concern subjective experiences of climate emotions. This thesis could contribute to that research gap by providing a first insight into how young adults express their emotional experiences in relation to climate change. Said experiences were labelled as emotional discomfort in relation to climate change, as the results suggested that the described emotions were more complex than climate anxiety. Thus, this paper indicates the importance of qualitative research in this field to learn about and understand people's impressions of the impact climate change has on them. The main idea resulting from this paper is that the emotions, experiences, and opinions of young adults are important and should be taken into consideration to find ways to support them.

A limitation to this research would be the small sample size as a group of nine participants was interviewed. Having fewer participants might limit the generalisability of the results. As this study was conducted in the framework of a bachelors' thesis it would not have been doable to interview much more participants and analyse the obtained data due to time constraints and the labour intensity of qualitative research. However, the results might have shown a greater variety or confirmed the existing themes even more if a larger group of participants would have been interviewed. Besides that, the researcher has limited experience

in the domain of qualitative research and considering how no other qualitative studies have been conducted for this topic, this might have led to shortcomings in this paper.

Another limitation of this study could be social desirability bias. As the participants have been gathered by snowballing personal networks of the researcher, most of the participants knew the researcher to some degree. Because of that participants might have given answers they deemed socially desirable. For example, they could have downplayed their experiences or said they are more pro-environmentally active than they are in reality. Such answers are usually given in a context when a person would like to avoid possible judgement from their social surroundings. Knowing the researcher might have evoked that effect in the framework of this study, thus influencing the results.

Considering the findings of this thesis, some ideas and recommendations can be given. Like mentioned before this research might provide insights which could be used to facilitate further research or psychological interventions. For instance, similar to Clayton's and Karazsia's (2020) scale to measure climate anxiety, a measurement scale for emotional discomfort in relation to climate change could be developed. As the results of this study suggested a concept that is more complex than climate anxiety, it appears relevant being able to measure emotional discomfort to define and understand it further. Measuring the concept of emotional discomfort in relation to climate change in the context of quantitative research, could add to the knowledge about to which degree or how many people are emotionally affected by climate change. This recommendation would require adding this new concept to the scope of terms in the field of environmental studies and its effect on human beings.

Another recommendation would be to conduct a similar analysis of emotional discomfort in relation to climate change with a larger group of participants to confirm and explore the results further. Perhaps it would also be useful to include more age groups to determine how they express their emotional discomfort in relation to climate change, and if it differs from other age groups. It could broaden the knowledge about climate emotions and

negative emotional experiences which can be linked to climate change. The gained understanding of the subjective perceptions and experiences of participants might be useful to support mental well-being and promote resilience. Psychological interventions could be developed based on the results of these studies, supporting people who suffer from the consequences of climate change.

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Appendix A

Interview protocol (English version)

Informed consent

The purpose of this study is to explore experiences of stress in relation to climate change among young people belonging to the generations Y and Z.

To gather information about this topic interviews will be held and analysed afterwards.

Your data will be anonymised and handled with confidentiality.

The interviews will be audio recorded. As soon as the audio is transcribed the recording will be destroyed. The anonymised and transcribed interviews will be stored within a One Drive file that can only be accessed by the means of my university account. After the 28th of February at latest those file will be deleted.

If you would like to withdraw from the study, you can do that at any point of the research by letting me know.

If you feel uncomfortable during or after the interviews, please do not hesitate to let me know.

Do you have any questions? If questions arise during the interview, please do not hesitate to ask me.

Do you give consent to participate in the study after being informed about the aforementioned points? Please answer with "Yes, I consent / Yes, I do / I agree to participate."

Questions

What kind of emotions did you experience in relation to climate change?

I will give you a short definition of the concept *climate anxiety* (Clayton et al., 2017).

Climate anxiety is a term used in research to refer to the psychological experiences a person has due to climate change. The concept was established relatively recently and might also be referred to as eco-anxiety, however, I we use the term climate anxiety.

Climate anxiety can be defined as 'sense of fear or worry in relation to climate change'.

Do you recognise having felt something like *climate anxiety*? If yes, can you tell me more about it? If not, please also elaborate (how you felt instead).

Probing: Is there something you notice happening in your body? If so, could you tell me what happened in your body?

Now, I will give you a definition of *stress* as stress can be conceptualised in different ways (Scott, 2022; Lazarus, 2006). In this context stress can be defined as 'physical or emotional tension which is your body's reaction to a challenge or demand.'
In addition: stress can be positive or negative.

Do you recognise having felt something like *stress* in relation to climate change? If yes, can you tell me more about it? If not, please also elaborate (how you felt instead).

Probing: Have you ever experienced the kind of stress that keeps you active? Could you elaborate?

Probing: Is there something you notice happening in your body? If so, could you tell me what happened in your body?

How do you cope with your feelings? Please elaborate.

Do your feelings about climate change influence your daily life? If so, please elaborate.

What would help you to be less stressed by your emotions in relation to climate change?

Do you have some other emotions about climate change that have not been discussed yet?

Idea to keep in mind: Maybe climate emotions are good? Because you are aware of the problem, and they keep you active?

Thank you for your participation!

Interview protocol (German version)
Einverständnis

Das Ziel dieser Studie ist, Stress, den junge Menschen im Zusammenhang mit Klimawandel erleben, zu erforschen.

Um diese Informationen zu erhalten, werden Interviews mit Teilnehmer: innen aus den Generationen Y und Z durchgeführt.

Alle gesammelten Daten werden anonymisiert und vertraulich behandelt.

Es wird eine Tonaufnahme von den Interviews gemacht, um sie anschließend zu transkribieren. Sobald die Interviews in Textformat sind, wird die Tonaufnahme gelöscht. Die anonymisierten und transkribierten Interviews werden innerhalb meines One Drive Accounts, der mir durch die Universität zur Verfügung gestellt wird, höchstens bis zum 28. Februar gespeichert.

Wenn du dich zu einem späteren Zeitpunkt entscheiden solltest, nicht mehr an der Studie teilnehmen zu wollen, lass es mich wissen, sodass ich deine Daten aus der Analyse ausschließen kann.

Falls du dich während oder nach dem Interview unwohl fühlen solltest, lass es mich bitte wissen.

Hast du zu Zeit fragen? Falls Fragen während des Interviews aufkommen sollten, lass es mich bitte wissen.

Gibst du dein Einverständnis an der Studie teilzunehmen, nachdem du über die zuvor beschriebenen Punkte aufgeklärt wurdest? Bitte antworte mit „Ja, ich gebe mein Einverständnis."

Fragen

Was für Emotionen (Gefühle) hast du im Zusammenhang mit Klimawandel gespürt?

Ich werde dir jetzt eine Definition des Begriffs *Climate anxiety* zu Deutsch *Klimaangst* geben (Clayton et al., 2017). Klimaangst wird in der Forschung genutzt um psychologische Erlebnisse, die eine Person im Zusammenhang mit Klimawandel erlebt, zu beschreiben. Dieser Begriff wurde erst in den letzten Jahren etabliert, wird zurzeit jedoch immer häufiger genutzt.

Klimaangst kann als emotionale Anspannung, Angst und Sorge im Zusammenhang mit Klimawandel definiert werden.

Hast du schonmal so etwas wie Klimaangst gefühlt? Wenn ja, erzähle mir bitte mehr davon.

Falls nicht, bitte beschreibe dennoch, was du stattdessen gefühlt hast und warum du deiner Meinung nach keine Klimaangst erlebt hast.

Probing: Hast du jemals eine körperliche Reaktion in diesem Zusammenhang gespürt? Zum Bespiel, physische Anspannung, Kopfschmerzen, Übelkeit oder ähnliches.
Nun werde ich dir eine Definition des Begriffs Stress geben, da Stress auf verschiedene Art und Weise definiert werden kann (Scott, 2022; Lazarus, 2006).
In diesem Zusammenhang kann Stress als eine emotionale und/oder körperliche Anspannung beschrieben werden. Stress ist die Reaktion deines Körpers auf eine Herausforderung oder Situation.

Hast du schonmal Stress im Zusammenhang mit Klimawandel gefühlt? Wenn ja, erzähle mir bitte mehr davon.
Falls nicht, bitte beschreibe dennoch, was du stattdessen gefühlt hast und warum du deiner Meinung nach keinen Stress im Zusammenhang mit Klimawandel erlebt hast.

Probing: Hast du jemals eine körperliche Reaktion in diesem Zusammenhang gespürt? Zum Bespiel physische Anspannung, Kopfschmerzen, Übelkeit oder ähnliches.

Probing: Hast du jemals eine Art von produktivem Stress in diesem Zusammenhand gespürt? Genauer gesagt, die Art von Stress, die dich aktiv macht und dir die nötige Energie dazu gibt? Zum Beispiel Klima-Aktivismus oder ähnliches?

Wie gehst du mit deinen Emotionen im Zusammenhang mit Klimawandel um?

Beeinflussen deine Emotionen im Zusammenhang mit Klimawandel deinen Tagesablauf / dein tägliches Leben?

Fällt dir etwas ein, was dir helfen würde mit deinen Gefühlen im Zusammenhang mit Klimawandel umzugehen?

Gibt es Emotionen, die du im Zusammenhang mit Klimawandel fühlst, und die noch nicht genannt wurden? Beschreibe sie bitte.

Eine Idee: Vielleicht sind diese Gefühle im Zusammenhang mit Klimawandel nicht von Nachteil? Sie helfen dir vielleicht des Problems bewusst zu sein und aktiv zu werden?

Vielen Dank für deine Teilnahme!