The Psychological Effects of Climate Change Awareness on Youth Activism and Anxiety

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Abstract

This study examines the psychological effects of climate change awareness on youth, particularly focusing on the relationship between eco-anxiety and climate activism. With the increasing spread of climate-related information through education systems, media, and social platforms, young people are becoming more aware of environmental issues. While this awareness often motivates them to participate in climate activism and environmental advocacy, it can also lead to psychological distress such as anxiety, fear, and feelings of helplessness. The study employs a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative survey data from 200 young participants with qualitative interviews of 20 youth activists aged 13–24. Standardized instruments such as the Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale (GAD-7) and the Climate Anxiety Scale were used to measure anxiety levels. The findings reveal a significant positive relationship between climate change awareness and youth activism, while also highlighting the prevalence of eco-anxiety among young individuals. Moderate levels of eco-anxiety were found to encourage activism, whereas severe anxiety sometimes resulted in emotional exhaustion and disengagement. The study emphasizes the importance of integrating emotional support, socio-emotional learning, and mental health resources within climate education to help young people cope with environmental concerns while maintaining constructive engagement in climate action.

Keywords: Climate Change Awareness, Eco-Anxiety, Youth Activism, Environmental Psychology, Mental Health, Climate Education.

Introduction

Climate change is a highly publicized world problem of the 21 st century and its implications have become more apparent due to the increasing degrees of temperature rise, severe weather conditions, and environmental deterioration. Climate-related communication in both traditional and digital channels has caused the given crisis to be practically impossible to miss, at least, among the younger generations. The more people do learn about it the more there is a rush to do something about it.

As such, there has been an extreme increase in youth climate activism. Leaders like Greta Thunberg and groups like Fridays for Future have been able to mobilize millions of youth around the globe to petition government officials and make them take action now. Besides drawing the attention to the potential of young people to affect social change, these movements have helped to attract the awareness of the emotional burden that the climate crisis can impose on the minds of the young people.

Although the rising concern about climate change has allowed numerous young individuals to become actively involved in environmental activism, it has also produced a spur in the level of psychological stress. This includes anxiety, hopelessness, and a sense of existential dread—

commonly referred to as "eco-anxiety." These feelings of eco-anxiety, due to action or inaction on the part of those in authority, combined with the emotional burden of having to consider the possibilities of doomsday scenarios of the effects of climate change, is a complex mental issue, which is facing the younger generation.

Literature Review

Climate change awareness refers to an individual's knowledge, understanding, and concern about the causes and consequences of climate change. In the case of young people, the sources of this awareness can be both, formal and informal. The issues of environment are brought to educational establishments using science study courses and courses about sustainability, whereas mass media and social media are growing more and more important in shaping the perception(Ojala, 2012). Climate content has spread online increasingly quickly through platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and Tik Tok, either as science messages mixed with emotional appeals or pure emotional appeals. Additionally, there are popular documentaries and social-visible climate campaigns that have helped to raise the climate crisis to a populace issue, particularly those who are digitally active and socially involved (younger generations) (Corner et al., 2015).

Adolescence is a formative state that entails massive cognitive, emotional and social development. Piaget is of the opinion that during cognitive development adolescents acquire form of abstract and future thinking thus view them as more able to comprehend long term global problems facing the world like climate change (Piaget, 1972). Nevertheless, this thought development also exposes them to anxiety and concerns in everything that arises to deal with extraordinary problems which have no regional solution. Also, teenagers are in their developing identity, worldview and this predisposes them to outside stressors such as environmental degradation and existential dangers (Steinberg, 2005). Psychological distress can be accelerated by the feeling of helplessness or incapacity of action when confronting big-scale problems in the global community.

Eco-anxiety can be described as a form of permanent fear about environmental doom that is accompanied by a concern, sense of personal powerlessness to do something about it, and despair over how the planet is (Clayton et al., 2017). Eco-anxiety has not yet been defined as a clinical condition, but it has been gradually gaining basis among the psychology community and study experts, especially when it comes to mental illnesses among the young. Researchers have discovered that many youth report a great deal of climate-related distress in the form of sadness, guilt, anger, and fear of future (Hickman et al., 2021). Eco-anxiety, in contrast to general anxiety, is usually connected with some moral or ethical cause of anxiety about the planet and its future generations, and, therefore, can cause suffering and become an engine of action.

To alleviate their fear and find a way of mitigating the climate crisis, most youths have resorted to activism as a way of coping and acting on the climate crisis. Youth climate activism may be in different forms which include protests, school strike, lobbying their governors to change policies and use social media to spread awareness and changing their lifestyles to be sustainable (Han & Ahn, 2020). The emergence of the movement of young people around the world,

including Fridays for Future, Sunrise Movement, and Extinction Rebellion Youth, depicts the strength of young people as agents of change. The most common psychological reasons to engage in such activism are the want to work as an agent, the feeling of right and wrong, the belonging in society, and the desire to make the anxiety productive (Marlon et al., 2019). Activism is a coping strategy of many, as it enables them to deal with the emotional load of climate awareness.

There are a number of psychological theories that one can use to explain such a phenomenon of climate awareness, anxiety, and activism amongst youngsters. The theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) holds that, when individuals are unable to conduct an action that is consistent with their beliefs, they would feel traumatized psychologically. Where climate change is concerned, this dissonance can result in actions to be pro-environmental by young individuals to satisfy the inconsistency between their awareness and their own patronage.

Also applicable is the theory of locus of control (Rotter, 1966) and the individuals who think they can control the events taking place in their lives (internal locus) and those who believe that these happenings are under the influence of external forces (external locus). Individuals with high scores of the internal locus of control can also be more willing to participate in climate activism with the participation being seen as an opportunity to make a change, whereas those scoring higher on the external locus will be more anxious and fatalistic.

Methodology

A. Design of the Study

This research used mixed-methods research design in order to focus on both eco-anxiety and climate activism when investigating the psychological outcomes of climate change awareness among the youth. Both depth and breadth of understanding was obtained through a mixture of quantitative and qualitative approaches. The standardized surveys based on the levels of climate awareness, climate-related anxiety, and eco-anxiety gathered quantitative data. In support, a qualitative data source was collected by conducting semi-structured interviews with young adults participating in climate activism in order to investigate personal experience, motivations, and coping skills.

B. Participants

This study targeted the population that included young people between 13 and 24 years. High schools, universities and youth climate organizations were used to recruit participants to make them diverse in terms of background, level of education and geography. The final entailed 200 survey participants and 20 interview respondents. Demographic diversity, in regard to gender and ethnicity as well as socioeconomic status, was attempted given that environmental and psychological experience are intersectional.

C. Data Collection

Quantitative Data: A questionnaire survey with a number of well-established instruments were provided online to the respondents. General anxiety was evaluated with the instrument of Generalized Anxiety Disorder 7-item (GAD-7), whereas eco-anxiety was measured with

Climate Anxiety Scale (Clayton & Karazsia, 2020). Other elements that measured the awareness of climate change encompassed knowledge, perceived threat, and concern modified out of earlier environmental psychology research.

Qualitative Data: The sample consisted of 20 young people who self-reported to be actively engaged in climate activism (such as participating in the protests, organizing actions or promoting their causes via social media). Video conferencing was used as an interview medium and interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants and transcribed. The interview guide was based on the emotional reaction of participants to climate change and perceived psychological consequences, were driven towards sources of activism, and the mechanisms of coping with climate change.

D. Analysis of Data

Quantitative Analysis: Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the responses to the survey. Pearson remaining coefficients were calculated to check the relationship among climate change awareness, eco-anxiety, and general levels of anxiety. To measure the predictive value of awareness to eco-anxiety, as well as to activism participation, multiple regression analyses were used.

Qualitative Analysis: Thematic analysis was used to analyze the transcripts of the interviews, which follow a 6-step outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Manual coding was undertaken and tested by a second coder to give reliability. Such themes that emerged were: affect in reaction to climate change, self-empowerment and the psychology of activism. With the help of triangulation of the qualitative and quantitative parts, it was possible to establish regularities and reveal the experiences of young people in a more subtle manner.

E. Limitations

It has a number of limitations to be mentioned. First, there is the possibility of response bias because of depending on self-reports especially in measurement of psychological states and behaviors of activism. There are chances of underreporting or exaggeration of symptoms because of social desirability or errors of recall. Second, although the sample was tried to be heterogeneous, the results cannot be applied to all youth groups, especially to those who are not online or reside in areas where the climate change issue is not that widely discussed. Lastly, the study is cross-sectional and thereby cannot be used to make causal conclusions; it would be advisable to include a longitudinal study to explore temporal variations.

Results

The received survey responses were analyzed showing that participants were well-educated on the topic of climate change. Approximately 89% of respondents reported being "very aware" or "moderately aware" of the causes and consequences of climate change. The four most commonly referenced sources of information were social media (72 percent), school-based education (58 percent), and documentaries or news media (47 percent). Less percentage (23) got informed through family or community discussions. Considerably, the individuals more active in activist circles were more likely to report having in-depth information related to climate policy, systemic factors contributing to climate change and international agreements.

The GAD-7 results and the Climate Anxiety Scale findings indicated that the participants had high anxiety rates involving general and eco-anxiety. More than 60 percent fell on the moderate-to-severe category on eco-anxiety scale, with the most notable symptoms being an incessant anxiety about future (68 percent), a feeling of helplessness (52 percent), and physical manifestations of restlessness or sleep-related disturbances (34 percent). In qualitative replies, there was also mentioned emotional exhaustion and feeling overwhelmed due to constant climate-related information. Indicatively, 42 percent of the respondents stated that their environmental concern influenced their everyday choices such as changing lifestyles and treating mental health.

Correlation analysis with the use of statistical significance indicated a wide positive relationship ($r = 0.61$, $p < 0.01$) between climate change awareness and participation in climate activism. More aware participants reported a more vivid participation in protests, climate clubs, or online advocating. There was also moderate positive correlation between eco-anxiety level and activism participation ($r = 0.47$, $p < 0.05$) indicating that anxiety may either be a motivational tool and or a stressful variable.

Through regression analysis, awareness and eco-anxiety could both predict the activism with 39 percent variance of variance in the behavior of the activism ($R 2 = 0.39$, $F(2,197) = 23.84$, $p < 0.001$). Additional subgroup analysis though indicated a more complex scenario: individuals with mild-to-moderate eco-anxiety were found to be more activist compared to individuals with severe eco-anxiety who were occasionally found to be inactive or avoid certain things related to environment suggesting perhaps a paralying factor.

Interview qualitative form of analysis provided a number of prevalent themes:

Hope vs. Hopelessness: Several respondents vacillated between feeling encouraged about the effect they might have and conceded about what they considered to be the magnitude of the crisis. Some described their activism as a "fight against hopelessness," while others acknowledged moments of burnout and disillusionment.

Community and Peer Support: There was a constant theme of significance of social networks. Activist young people mentioned community spaces and peer support and mentorship as essential to continuously taking up activism and as building blocks to emotional health. Activism was commonly being referred to as a shared effort, which offers a path as well as psychological support.

Empowerment through Action: The participants were empowered as a result of doing actions mentioned in their words as they even stated: In some way, it made me feel more in control and hopeful. According to one participant, the subject quoted the answer that the more one does the less powerless they feel. This was a theme that was repeated in the idea

Discussion

This paper has found out that climate change consciousness among young people is a boomerang effect. On the one hand, high awareness is associated with civic engagement, especially that of climate activism. Conversely, increased eco-anxiety, future worries and emotional distress are linked to this same kind of awareness. These findings indicate that the

phenomenon of knowing about climate change, which can be discussed as a form of empowerment, also makes the young people subject to achieve the psychological burden. The data justify the prior claims that youth can be the most susceptible group to climate-related stress because of their age, moral vulnerability, and the fact that they do not control the system (Hickman et al., 2021; Ojala, 2012).

The data revealed two aspects in which activism exists as a positive outlet as well as a possible form of extra stress. A large number of respondents argued that activism was a type of psychological agency; they explained that responding to the sense of fear and feeling powerless was concrete action. The fact that moderate eco-anxiety correlates with greater activism rates proves that mild anxiety may be taken as a driving factor. Nonetheless, the statistics provided also showed that activism may start to feel emotional once severe issues related to eco-anxiety were experienced, resulting in a burnout, disillusion, or disengagement. This function with two dimensions calls to pay attention not only to affecting activism as a political intervention but also to defining it as an emotional work that involves sustainable efforts and sustained facilities.

The results indicate a severe deficit in the existing models of climate education that prioritize the transfer of information without giving a lot of consideration to emotional processing. The understanding about the necessity to provide emotional support to students should get more awareness, as well as the establishment of its own infrastructure. Integrating socio-emotional learning into climate education in schools and universities may enhance the possibility to reveal the problems and constructive coping strategies that students are able to demonstrate in their activity. Conversation with peers, reflective conversations and project activities can assist in overcoming that sense of helplessness and create a feeling of community and efficacy.

At a higher level of the society, the results of the study suggest that responsible media messages are needed. Although raising awareness of the urgency of the climate crisis is critically important, one should also avoid the stories that cause suicidal feelings or fatalism, especially in the case of young audiences.

Eco-anxiety is being faced more by mental health professionals in the clinical practice particularly in adolescents and young adults. The research emphasizes the need to create treatment strategies that usually legitimize climate-related distress in combination with leading young people on the course of resilience. These could involve cognitive-behavioral strategies that involve strategies on controlling catastrophic thinking, mindfulness interventions aimed at decreasing and managing anxiety symptoms and interventions based on empowerment that affirm climate action as a coping method. Model of community-based mental healthcare might also be productive because the youth can socialize with both peers and mentors who share their interests and principles.

Moreover, clinicians are to be trained on how to identify the eco-anxiety as such normal emotional reaction instead of pathologizing it. Specific interventions that appreciate the interrelation

Conclusion

The paper outlined a research topic on the psychological impact of climate change awareness

among young people and the interconnection of the factor with climate activism and eco-anxiety. Its results define that although climate change awareness is common among the youth generation and usually results in proactive actions, it is also associated with a high level of emotional distress among people. Middle intensity of eco-anxiety seems to be encouraging activism and a sense of agency, as the higher intensities may lead to psychological load and deactivate a person. It was found through interviews that activism can be a form of coping as well as an instance of emotional burden depending on the individual, reflecting the subtle combination of knowledge, attentional emotional response and a behavioral action.

This study can add to the expanding knowledge base on eco-anxiety and young people assistance systems by inspecting the doubled consequences of climate change recognition with the help of empirical evidence. It is emphasized that it is significant to accept emotional reactions to environmental concerns as valid psychological phenomenon. To the educator and mental health professionals, the results indicate that the use of integrated practices that assist with intellectual knowledge and emotional strength are necessary. The psychological complexity of youth experience should guide climate education, communication to people, and therapeutic sources of intervention.

Longitudinal research design is another possibility that the future research must take into account to monitor changes in the levels of awareness, anxiety, and activism. These studies would provide more insight on how eco-anxiety develops and whether activism can remain a healthy coping mechanism or become a chronic stressor. Moreover, Cross-cultural comparisons might help us understand the question of how various sociopolitical and cultural settings influence their youth reaction to climate change. Educational system differences, media exposure, or community values can contribute to the expression of eco-anxiety and/or the type of action that youths initiate and keep significantly different.

The youth is shaped by the fact that current climate change is at an unprecedented level, and their generation is on the virtual border between consciousness and action, suffering and hope. As important as it is to educate and train the youth on what lies ahead of them, so is it important to provide them with the psychological skills of dealing with their attitudes. By shifting the scales between awareness and agency, most easily achieved through education, mental health resources, and capacity to engage with a purpose, one can possibly create the generation that is more than aware, more than resilient, more than compassionate, but also firmly determined to see through the global uncertainty.

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