

Eco-Anxiety Narratives among Young Adults in the Contemporary Climate Crisis

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Abstract:

The contemporary climate crisis has increasingly affected young adults, producing eco-anxiety characterized by fear, grief, guilt, and uncertainty. This study aims to explore how young adults construct and communicate eco-anxiety narratives, and how these narratives influence emotional experiences, behavioral agency, and responses to climate information. A qualitative narrative inquiry was employed with 20 purposively selected young adults, integrating in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and analysis of digital documentation. Findings reveal three central patterns: first, interconnected emotional themes of grief, guilt, anger, and uncertainty; second, narrative-driven agency outcomes, where participants displayed either paralysis or proactive activism; and third, digital exposure shaping emotional salience, moral reflection, and narrative elaboration. The study's novelty lies in framing eco-anxiety as a narrative-mediated phenomenon that integrates psychological, social, and digital dimensions. Implications suggest that educators, mental health professionals, and climate organizations can support youth coping and engagement by facilitating narrative spaces, structured discussions, and responsible curation of digital content to transform anxiety into constructive action.

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INTRODUCTION

The contemporary climate crisis has shifted from being merely an environmental issue into a deeply human and psychological concern. One of the most visible manifestations is eco-anxiety, a form of chronic fear and distress related to environmental degradation and climate uncertainty (Gislason et al., 2021; Jamilah et al., 2025; Meo et al., 2025). This research is important for society because young adults increasingly experience climate change not only as scientific information but as a lived emotional reality shaping their daily decisions, identity, and future orientation. The urgency is amplified by the growing global evidence showing that mental health



burdens are rising alongside climate threats, particularly among youth populations. When anxiety becomes persistent, it can reduce well-being, impair social functioning, and even weaken civic trust (Lenggogeni et al., 2022; Velde et al., 2024). Therefore, understanding eco-anxiety narratives is crucial to develop social responses that are psychologically supportive and socially constructive.

In many contemporary contexts, young adults are surrounded by constant climate-related information through social media, news platforms, academic discourse, and public campaigns (Lawanda, 2020; Nguyen et al., 2021). However, rather than empowering them, this continuous exposure often produces emotional overload, helplessness, and anticipatory grief. In real-life settings, young adults frequently express feelings of fear about extreme weather, guilt about consumption habits, anger toward political inaction, and confusion about how to live ethically in a high-carbon society. These experiences appear in everyday conversations, digital storytelling, and personal reflections, indicating that eco-anxiety has become a widespread phenomenon (Baydaroglu et al., 2023; Yi et al., 2023). Yet, despite its visibility, many young adults lack spaces where such emotions are recognized as legitimate psychological experiences. As a result, eco-anxiety becomes internalized, individualized, and sometimes pathologized, instead of being understood as a socially constructed response to crisis.

Previous research has significantly advanced understanding of eco-anxiety and climate-related distress. Gislason et al. (2021) and Meo et al. (2025) argues that eco-anxiety is a rational psychological response to environmental threat, while Coe et al. (2022) emphasizes its complex emotional structure, including grief, guilt, and anger. Miles et al. (2021) and Gislason et al. (2021) demonstrate that young people worldwide experience climate anxiety alongside distrust toward governments. Meanwhile, Ptaszek et al. (2023), Gietzen et al. (2023), and Sperati et al. (2024) highlight ecological grief as a collective emotional phenomenon linked to environmental loss. Despite these contributions, much of the literature treats eco-anxiety as a measurable mental health variable rather than as a narrative process shaped by culture, media, and identity. Additionally, limited attention has been paid to how young adults construct meaning through storytelling and how these narratives influence coping, agency, and social engagement. This gap remains critical to address.

This study offers a state-of-the-art contribution by positioning eco-anxiety as a narrative phenomenon rather than solely a psychological symptom. Instead of focusing only on levels of anxiety, this research examines how young adults tell stories about climate crisis, including the metaphors they use, the moral frameworks they invoke, and the temporal imagination they construct about the future (Schipper et al., 2021; Vanyushina et al., 2020). The novelty lies in integrating narrative analysis with eco-psychological perspectives to reveal how climate emotions become socially communicable experiences. This approach allows the study to capture the complexity of eco-anxiety as both personal distress and collective meaning-making. Importantly, narrative patterns can reveal whether eco-anxiety leads toward paralysis, avoidance, activism, or adaptive resilience (Deng et al., 2021; Strakodonskaya, 2021). By identifying these narrative structures, the research provides a deeper understanding of climate-related emotional life among youth and contributes to developing culturally sensitive interventions.

Based on the societal urgency and the limitations of existing research, this study is guided by a central research problem: how do young adults construct and communicate eco-anxiety narratives in the context of the contemporary climate crisis? More specifically, the study investigates the dominant narrative themes, emotional patterns, and interpretive frames young adults use when describing climate-related fear, grief, guilt, and uncertainty. It also explores how these narratives are shaped by social media discourse, collective climate events, and perceived political failure. Additionally, the research examines whether eco-anxiety narratives tend to generate disengagement and hopelessness or foster meaning-making and pro-environmental agency. The research problem is important because understanding eco-anxiety through narratives can uncover how climate distress is negotiated in everyday life and how it shapes young adults' psychological adaptation, identity formation, and social participation in climate-related actions.

This paper argues that eco-anxiety among young adults is not simply an individual mental health condition but a culturally produced narrative response to a collective existential threat. The study proposes that young adults' eco-anxiety narratives operate as interpretive tools that mediate between climate information and personal identity, shaping whether distress becomes destructive or transformative. The originality of this research lies in its focus on narrative structures such as apocalyptic framing, moral self-blame, political betrayal, and hope-based resistance as analytical units that reveal deeper socio-psychological processes. As a contribution, the study provides a conceptual model explaining how eco-anxiety narratives influence coping strategies and civic engagement. Practically, this research can inform educators, mental health professionals, and policymakers by showing that supporting youth mental health in the climate crisis requires not only clinical responses but also cultural and communicative spaces for collective meaning-making.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design using a narrative inquiry approach (W. M. Lim, 2025). Narrative inquiry is selected because the primary focus of this research is not merely measuring eco-anxiety levels, but understanding how young adults construct, interpret, and communicate eco-anxiety through stories, metaphors, and lived experiences. Eco-anxiety is a complex psychological and socio-cultural phenomenon that cannot be fully captured through quantitative indicators alone. Therefore, a qualitative approach is appropriate to explore meaning-making processes, emotional expressions, and contextual influences such as social media exposure, climate discourse, and perceived institutional failure. Narrative inquiry also enables the researcher to examine how personal stories reflect collective anxieties and cultural framings of climate crisis. This design supports the study's goal of identifying dominant narrative patterns and their implications for coping, agency, and social engagement among young adults.

The research was conducted in two primary settings: (1) urban university communities and (2) digital spaces where young adults actively discuss climate issues. The urban university context was selected because universities represent a concentrated environment of young adults who are highly exposed to climate knowledge, activism, and future-oriented career concerns. Meanwhile, digital spaces

were included because eco-anxiety narratives are widely produced and circulated through online platforms, making them central to contemporary youth meaning-making. The study involved 20 informants, selected through purposive sampling with inclusion criteria: (a) aged 18–29 years, (b) self-identified as frequently exposed to climate-related information, and (c) having experienced emotional distress related to climate crisis. Informants consisted of 12 university students, 5 early-career workers, and 3 climate activists. Their backgrounds varied in gender, academic disciplines, and levels of climate engagement, enabling richer narrative diversity and broader interpretive insights.

Data were collected using three primary techniques (Kekeya, 2023). First, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted to capture participants' personal narratives of eco-anxiety, including their emotional responses, coping strategies, and perceived causes of distress. Each interview lasted approximately 45–70 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent. Second, the study employed focus group discussions (FGDs) to explore shared meanings, collective emotions, and how eco-anxiety is negotiated in peer interactions. Two FGDs were conducted, each involving 5 participants. Third, the study incorporated document and digital narrative analysis, including participants' voluntary climate-related posts, reflective writings, or screenshots of climate content that triggered anxiety. These documents served as supporting evidence to strengthen narrative patterns emerging from interviews and FGDs. Together, these techniques ensured that eco-anxiety narratives were captured both as individual lived experience and as socially mediated discourse.

Data analysis followed an interactive qualitative model consisting of data condensation, data reduction, data display, and data verification (Cole, 2024). First, during data condensation, interview transcripts and FGD recordings were organized and selected based on relevance to eco-anxiety narratives, emotional expressions, and interpretive framing. Second, data reduction was conducted through coding and categorization. The researcher applied open coding to identify narrative elements such as metaphors (e.g., "apocalypse," "collapse"), moral framing (e.g., guilt, blame), and emotional tone (e.g., fear, grief, anger). These codes were then grouped into broader narrative themes. Third, data display was conducted using thematic matrices and narrative maps to visualize relationships between emotional patterns, narrative structures, and coping orientations. Finally, data verification was carried out through iterative interpretation, cross-checking themes across informants, and ensuring coherence between narrative claims and supporting evidence. This process enabled the researcher to develop robust findings grounded in participants' lived stories.

To ensure trustworthiness and validity, this study applied four strategies (Fadli, 2021). First, triangulation of sources was used by comparing narratives from students, workers, and activists. Second, triangulation of techniques was implemented by integrating interviews, FGDs, and document analysis. Third, member checking was conducted by returning key interpretations and thematic summaries to selected participants to confirm whether the findings accurately reflected their experiences. Fourth, the study maintained an audit trail, including interview guides, coding notes, reflexive memos, and thematic matrices to ensure transparency in analytical decisions. In addition, the researcher applied peer debriefing by discussing coding and thematic

interpretation with qualitative research colleagues to reduce subjective bias. These procedures strengthened credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability, ensuring that the findings are trustworthy and academically rigorous.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

This chapter presents the findings of the study on eco-anxiety narratives among young adults in the contemporary climate crisis. It explores three main sub-themes: the dominant emotional patterns of grief, guilt, anger, and uncertainty; how these narratives influence behavioral agency, ranging from paralysis to activism; and the role of digital exposure in shaping emotional and moral responses. The results are illustrated through interviews, observations, and documentation.

Dominant themes: grief, guilt, anger, uncertainty

In this study, the dominant emotional themes of eco-anxiety, grief, anger, and uncertainty are operationally defined as recurring emotional expressions that appear consistently in young adults' narratives when describing their relationship with the climate crisis. Grief refers to feelings of loss, sadness, and mourning, often linked to damaged environments, disappearing seasons, or imagined futures. Guilt is expressed as self-blame for everyday consumption practices, such as using plastic, traveling, or eating certain foods. Anger arises from frustration with institutions, governments, corporations, and older generations perceived as failing to respond responsibly. Uncertainty refers to persistent worry and confusion about the future, including career planning, family decisions, and personal life trajectories under climate instability. These themes were not treated as isolated emotions but as interconnected narrative patterns. In participants' stories, grief often triggered guilt, guilt intensified anger, and all emotions collectively reinforced uncertainty.

Interview data revealed that grief was commonly expressed as a sense of loss of connection to nature and to future stability. One informant stated, "I feel like I'm grieving something that hasn't fully disappeared yet, but I can already sense it's going away." Another participant shared, "When I see news about forests burning, I don't just feel sad, it's like my chest is heavy for hours." These narratives suggest that grief is experienced not as a temporary reaction but as a prolonged emotional state embedded in daily life. Participants described grief as "quiet" but persistent, often resurfacing when encountering climate-related content online. The researcher interprets this as evidence that eco-anxiety is emotionally layered: grief operates as the foundational feeling that shapes how participants interpret environmental events. Rather than viewing climate change as external news, participants internalize it as a personal loss, indicating that eco-anxiety functions as a form of anticipatory mourning.

Guilt and anger emerged strongly in the interviews, often appearing together within the same narrative. One participant explained, "I hate myself when I buy things I know are bad for the planet, but I also hate the system because it feels impossible to live perfectly." Another informant stated, "I'm angry because they keep telling us to

recycle while companies destroy everything without consequences.” These statements show that guilt is not only self-directed but also socially structured, arising from moral pressure placed on individuals. At the same time, anger is directed outward toward institutions and perceived hypocrisy in climate discourse. The researcher interprets this pattern as a moral tension: young adults feel personally responsible while simultaneously recognizing that responsibility is unevenly distributed. This tension creates emotional exhaustion, because participants feel trapped between wanting to act ethically and realizing the limits of individual action. Consequently, guilt and anger intensify uncertainty about how to respond meaningfully.

Observational findings during group discussions and informal interactions supported the interview data. Participants frequently displayed non-verbal signs of emotional strain when climate topics were raised, such as long pauses, lowered voice tone, nervous laughter, and moments of silence after discussing extreme weather or political inaction. Several participants avoided eye contact when talking about guilt, while anger was expressed through sharper speech, quicker tempo, and visible frustration. These observations reinforce the interview evidence that grief, guilt, anger, and uncertainty are not abstract concepts but embodied emotional experiences. Restating the findings, young adults repeatedly narrated eco-anxiety as a cycle: grief emerges from perceived environmental loss, guilt develops from daily moral dilemmas, anger intensifies due to institutional failure, and uncertainty persists as the emotional outcome. Description of the overall pattern indicates that these emotions are interconnected rather than separate. The emotional narratives function as a continuous loop, where each emotion strengthens the next, creating sustained eco-anxiety in everyday life.

Narratives influence agency: paralysis or activism

In this study, the sub-finding “narratives influence agency: paralysis or activism” is operationally defined as observable behavioral differences among young adults when climate crisis narratives are discussed in group settings. Agency refers to participants’ visible orientation toward action, decision-making, and engagement in climate-related responses. Paralysis is defined as withdrawal behaviors such as silence, avoidance, passive agreement, emotional shutdown, or reluctance to participate in discussion. In contrast, activism is defined as proactive behaviors including initiating ideas, offering solutions, expressing willingness to join collective action, sharing practical strategies, or demonstrating leadership in climate-related conversations. This operational definition focuses on real-time interaction patterns rather than self-reported intentions. The observation emphasizes how eco-anxiety narratives function not only as emotional expressions but also as behavioral drivers that shape whether participants become disengaged or mobilized. Therefore, agency in this study is treated as a spectrum, ranging from passive paralysis to active engagement.

Table 1. Observation Table Narratives influence agency: paralysis or activism

Observation (Field Notes)	Indicators
Participants became quiet after viewing climate-related visuals.	Silence, reduced participation, avoidance behavior
Some participants avoided eye contact during the climate discussion.	Withdrawal, discomfort, emotional shutdown
Several participants repeatedly nodded but did not speak.	Passive agreement, low agency expression
A small group actively asked, "What can we do now?"	Initiative, solution-oriented framing
Participants suggested joining campus or local climate groups.	Collective orientation, activism tendency
Some participants redirected the discussion toward personal helplessness.	Hopelessness framing, paralysis response
Participants proposed small practical actions (waste sorting, campaigns).	Practical coping, agency activation
One participant volunteered to coordinate future activities.	Leadership emergence, activist identity

The data in the table indicate that young adults' climate narratives shape two distinct behavioral responses: disengagement and mobilization. Restating the findings, participants who engaged in paralysis behaviors tended to respond to climate narratives with silence, avoidance, and passive agreement, suggesting that climate information triggered emotional overload rather than motivation. Their withdrawal was observable through limited verbal contribution, reduced eye contact, and minimal interaction after climate topics were introduced. Conversely, participants who displayed activism tendencies responded to the same narratives by initiating solution-focused questions, proposing collective action, and volunteering for coordination roles. The researcher interprets this as evidence that eco-anxiety narratives do not produce a uniform outcome; instead, they function as a psychological filter that determines whether climate distress becomes immobilizing or activating. The observational data also show that activism behaviors often appeared when participants shifted from abstract catastrophe narratives to concrete, shared, and achievable actions, indicating that agency strengthens when narratives become collective and practical.

The overall pattern emerging from the observations shows a consistent behavioral split that can be described as a narrative-driven agency spectrum. Participants who were dominated by catastrophic or hopeless narrative framing tended to display paralysis responses, such as emotional distancing, silence, and avoidance. Their behavior suggested that the climate crisis was interpreted as too large, uncontrollable, and personally overwhelming. Meanwhile, participants who framed climate narratives through collective responsibility and practical possibility were more likely to demonstrate activism behaviors, including initiating discussion, proposing action plans, and expressing commitment to join groups. Another pattern observed was that paralysis responses were more common in the early phases of the discussion, when climate topics were framed as global threats, whereas activism responses increased as the discussion moved toward local community solutions. This indicates that the same climate crisis narrative can lead to different agency outcomes depending on how the story is structured and socially negotiated. Thus, agency is shaped not only by the intensity of eco-anxiety but also by a narrative orientation toward helplessness or action.

Eco-anxiety narratives shaped by digital exposure

In this study, the sub-finding “eco-anxiety narratives shaped by digital exposure” is operationally defined as how young adults’ emotions, perceptions, and understanding of the climate crisis are influenced by the content they encounter on digital platforms. Digital exposure includes social media posts, viral news stories, online climate campaigns, and multimedia content depicting environmental degradation, natural disasters, and ecological crises. Eco-anxiety narratives are considered “shaped” when these digital stimuli evoke emotional responses such as fear, grief, guilt, or urgency, and inform how young adults construct meaning and interpret their responsibilities toward climate action. Operationally, documentation captures these interactions visually and textually through screenshots, saved posts, and publicly available online materials. The study emphasizes the role of digital environments as both a source of anxiety and a medium for narrating experiences, highlighting that online content is a central context in which eco-anxiety emerges, circulates, and becomes socially recognized.

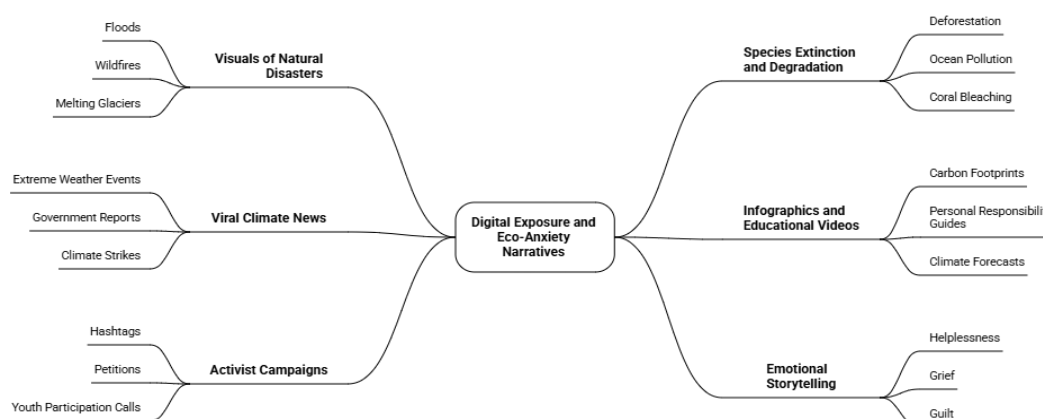


Figure 1. Digital Exposure and Eco-Anxiety Narratives

Analysis of the collected documentation revealed that digital content consistently influenced emotional responses and narrative construction. Participants exposed to vivid images of environmental destruction or emotionally charged posts frequently reported immediate feelings of sadness, worry, or guilt. Similarly, infographics that quantified personal environmental impact prompted reflection and moral self-assessment. Observing patterns across different media types, the researcher noted that visual and narrative intensity of digital content correlated with the depth and complexity of eco-anxiety narratives. Posts that combined visual imagery with personal storytelling had stronger emotional impact, often triggering discussions, social sharing, and online reflections among participants. This indicates that the digital environment acts as both a mirror and amplifier of eco-anxiety, providing material that participants internalize and weave into their own narratives about the climate crisis and personal responsibility.

Restating the findings, digital exposure shapes eco-anxiety narratives by providing content that evokes specific emotional and moral responses. Participants’ narratives reflect a combination of grief, guilt, and concern, closely aligned with the type of content encountered online. For example, posts on wildfires prompted narratives of grief for lost ecosystems, while posts on personal carbon consumption often provoked

guilt or ethical reflection. The researcher interprets these patterns as evidence that eco-anxiety is not only an internal psychological state but also socially and digitally mediated. Digital artifacts serve as external prompts that structure participants' storytelling, emotional framing, and moral positioning. The documentation confirms that online platforms are central to contemporary eco-anxiety experiences, shaping how narratives are formed, circulated, and reinforced among young adults.

The overall pattern shows that eco-anxiety narratives are strongly influenced by the type, intensity, and framing of digital content. Visually and narratively intense stimuli trigger stronger emotional responses and more elaborated narratives. Different types of content tend to evoke distinct emotional emphases: disaster imagery stimulates grief, infographics elicit self-assessment and guilt, and activist posts encourage reflection on agency. Additionally, the repetition and virality of digital content reinforce anxiety, creating continuous exposure loops that sustain narrative development. Another observed pattern is that emotionally relatable peer stories or influencer posts amplify identification and empathy, strengthening the narrative's impact. In sum, the digital environment functions as both the source and mediator of eco-anxiety narratives, shaping both emotional experience and meaning-making in young adults' climate consciousness.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that eco-anxiety among young adults manifests through interconnected emotional themes of grief, guilt, anger, and uncertainty, which closely align with prior research highlighting the psychological complexity of climate-related distress. Whereas previous studies often emphasize isolated emotional reactions, such as fear or anxiety, the present study demonstrates how these emotions form a dynamic, reinforcing cycle that shapes participants' daily experiences and moral reasoning. Grief functions as a foundational emotion, triggering guilt, which in turn intensifies anger and amplifies uncertainty. This layered pattern supports the notion that eco-anxiety is not only an individual psychological state but also a socially and morally mediated experience (Springmann et al., 2020; Sureth et al., 2023). Unlike some earlier studies that focused primarily on self-reported anxiety levels, this research integrates observational and narrative evidence, providing a richer understanding of how eco-anxiety is embodied and expressed in real-life social interactions.

The study also highlights how eco-anxiety narratives influence behavioral agency, producing divergent outcomes of paralysis or activism. Observational data revealed that participants exposed to catastrophic narratives often exhibited withdrawal behaviors, while those engaged in solution-oriented discussions demonstrated proactive engagement and leadership tendencies (Dóci et al., 2015; Rajão et al., 2022). This distinction expands theoretical frameworks of eco-anxiety by linking emotional narratives to observable agency outcomes, suggesting that anxiety alone does not determine behavior; rather, narrative framing and social context moderate the translation of distress into action (Lim et al., 2021; Rodríguez et al., 2021). These findings complement existing research on climate engagement, showing that collective discussion and concrete problem-solving can mitigate paralysis and encourage adaptive responses, a nuance less explored in prior literature.

Digital exposure emerged as a critical mediator of eco-anxiety, shaping the content, intensity, and emotional salience of participants' narratives (Cheng et al., 2023; Lähteenmäki et al., 2022). Participants' engagement with social media, viral climate news, infographics, and peer-generated storytelling amplified both emotional impact and moral reflection, reinforcing the formation of grief, guilt, and agency considerations. Compared to earlier studies that focus on offline experiences or survey-based self-reports, this study emphasizes the central role of online environments as spaces where eco-anxiety is not only experienced but socially constructed and circulated (Gislason et al., 2021; Meo et al., 2025). This observation suggests theoretical implications regarding the socio-digital dimensions of climate psychology, highlighting that eco-anxiety is a distributed phenomenon influenced by both individual cognition and mediated digital interactions.

Theoretically, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of eco-anxiety as a multi-layered, narrative-driven phenomenon that links emotional experience, moral evaluation, and behavioral orientation. It extends existing models by demonstrating how narratives operate as psychological and social mechanisms through which climate distress is interpreted, expressed, and acted upon (Hemeida et al., 2022; Yasir et al., 2023). Practically, the findings offer guidance for educators, mental health professionals, and climate organizations: interventions should consider both the emotional content of narratives and the contexts in which they circulate. Structured group discussions, narrative workshops, and responsible digital curation could support adaptive coping, channel grief and guilt toward constructive action, and reduce the likelihood of behavioral paralysis among youth (Usman et al., 2024).

Finally, the patterns observed in this study underscore the importance of integrative approaches to understanding and addressing eco-anxiety. Emotional experiences, behavioral responses, and digital exposure are interconnected components that collectively shape young adults' climate consciousness. By situating eco-anxiety within social, moral, and technological contexts, the research highlights opportunities for intervention at multiple levels, from individual reflection to collective engagement and digital literacy. Overall, the study bridges gaps in the literature by linking narrative structures, emotional patterns, and observable agency outcomes, offering a comprehensive framework for future research and applied strategies in supporting youth adaptation and resilience in the face of the climate crisis.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that eco-anxiety among young adults is a narrative-driven phenomenon involving interconnected emotions of grief, guilt, anger, and uncertainty that shape responses to the climate crisis. These emotions form a cycle where environmental grief leads to guilt, then anger toward institutions, and finally uncertainty about the future. Narrative framing and digital exposure strongly influence whether eco-anxiety results in paralysis or constructive environmental engagement. The study contributes academically by conceptualizing eco-anxiety as a socially and digitally mediated experience that integrates psychological, cultural, and technological perspectives through qualitative methods. However, it is limited by a small, purposively selected sample from urban university and digital communities, which restricts broader

generalization. Future research should explore diverse socio-cultural contexts, including rural populations, and examine long-term effects of narrative exposure on mental health, resilience, and climate action.

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