

Visualizing Ecological Distress: Exploring Discursive Constructions of EcoAnxiety on Social Media

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The concepts of eco-anxiety and ecological distress have gained attention amidst the escalating global ecological crisis. Against this backdrop, eco-influencers and climate communicators have given voice to feelings of ecological distress on social media. Previous research has examined the impact of climate change communication in news media on young people's mental health and their willingness to engage in climate action (e.g., Parry et al., 2022). However, critical perspectives point out that the way people understand distress is formed by public sense-making, expert knowledge, and specific socio-cultural influences (Wardell, 2020). Therefore, the field of ecological emotions has potential to integrate relational, contextualized, processual understandings of people's affective entanglement with the ecological crisis. In this presentation I draw on an ongoing research project that takes a critical environmental psychological perspective (Adams, 2021; Kühn & Bobeth, 2022) to investigate the discursive constructions of negative emotions related to climate change on social media platforms. Combining digital ethnographic research (Hine, 2020; Pink et al., 2015) and visual critical discursive psychological methodologies (Gleeson, 2020; McCullough & Lester, 2023), I ask: How is eco-anxiety made sense of and performed on Instagram? Data is drawn from observation of user generated-content (N=10 posts, comments, and field-notes) related to hashtags such as #ecoanxiety. The analysis illustrates how online contributors actively construct ecological distress through visual and linguistic discourse. Through Instagrams interactive platform vernacular we see how users both visually reproduce neoliberal, self-managed consumerist selves, yet resist individualization and psychologization of ecological distress. Through a critical discourse analysis, I problematize how emotionally-centered discourse on social media platforms may inadvertently serve as a distraction from necessary political and structural transformations. In this presentation, I illustrate how representations of ecological distress online reproduce ideals of individual resilience (Katwak & Weihgold, 2022), framing climate change as an individual's responsibility. Consequently, climate hope is often portrayed within societal positivity imperatives (Calde-Dawe et. al., 2021) eschewing figures of the environmentalist killjoy. By delving into the visual discourses surrounding eco-anxiety, the research contributes with new insights into current affective-discursive-repertoires social media users draw on to understand themselves, and societal responses to the climate crisis.



Figure. 1: Eco-anxiety is real, and sometimes it can feel like we're powerless against climate change 🌋⚡🌍. But remember, together we can have an impact! If you're feeling a bit anxious, these tips can help you cope. Image credit: ReachOut Australia https://www.instagram.com/reachout_au/, CC BY-SA 4.0.

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