



International Journal of **A**dvanced **R**esearch in **E**ducation and **T**echnolog**Y** (IJARETY)

Volume 13, Issue 1, January-February 2026

Impact Factor: 8.152



Climate Anxiety as a Predictor of Emotional Distress among Youth

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ABSTRACT: Climate change has emerged not only as an environmental crisis but also as a significant psychological concern, particularly among youth. Increasing exposure to climate-related information, uncertainty about the future, and perceived lack of control have contributed to the rise of climate anxiety among young individuals. Climate anxiety refers to persistent worry, fear, and emotional unease related to environmental degradation and climate change. This paper explores climate anxiety as a critical predictor of emotional distress among youth. Emotional distress manifests in various forms such as stress, anxiety, helplessness, fear, and depressive feelings, which can adversely affect psychological well-being, academic functioning, and social relationships. By examining the conceptual and theoretical linkage between climate anxiety and emotional distress, the study highlights how heightened environmental concern may intensify negative emotional experiences among youth. The paper further discusses the vulnerability of young populations to climate-related psychological stressors and emphasizes the need for mental health awareness, supportive educational environments, and policy-level interventions to address climate-induced emotional distress. Understanding climate anxiety as a predictor of emotional distress is essential for developing preventive and supportive strategies aimed at promoting youth mental health in the era of climate change.

KEYWORDS: Climate Anxiety, Emotional Distress, Youth Mental Health, Climate Change, Psychological Well-being, Eco-Anxiety.

I. INTRODUCTION

Climate change has become one of the most pressing global challenges of the twenty-first century, affecting not only the physical environment but also the psychological well-being of individuals and communities. While its ecological and economic consequences are widely discussed, the emotional and mental health dimensions of climate change are receiving increasing scholarly attention. Among these psychological responses, climate anxiety has emerged as a significant concern, particularly among youth who perceive climate change as a direct threat to their future.

Climate anxiety refers to persistent worry, fear, and distress related to climate change and environmental degradation. Young people are especially vulnerable to climate-related psychological stress due to heightened exposure to climate information through digital media, limited control over environmental outcomes, and uncertainty about long-term social and ecological stability. Continuous engagement with climate narratives—often emphasizing catastrophic outcomes—can intensify feelings of helplessness, fear, and emotional overload among youth.

Emotional distress among youth has become a growing public health issue, characterized by experiences such as chronic stress, anxiety, sadness, and feelings of powerlessness. When climate anxiety remains unresolved, it may contribute significantly to emotional distress, influencing academic performance, social relationships, and overall psychological well-being. Youth who strongly internalize climate-related threats may experience anticipatory anxiety about environmental collapse, economic instability, and diminished quality of life, further aggravating emotional distress.

Understanding climate anxiety as a predictor of emotional distress is crucial in the current global context. Youth represent a generation that will live with the long-term consequences of climate change, making their psychological responses particularly relevant. Examining this relationship helps illuminate how environmental concerns translate into emotional challenges and highlights the need for supportive psychological, educational, and policy interventions. Addressing climate anxiety in a constructive manner is essential not only for promoting youth mental health but also for empowering young individuals to engage with climate issues in adaptive and resilient ways.

Conceptual Framework

The concept of climate anxiety provides a psychological lens through which the emotional impact of climate change can be understood, particularly among youth. Climate anxiety is not limited to immediate fear caused by environmental disasters; rather, it involves ongoing concern, anticipation of future harm, and emotional unease related to climate change and ecological degradation. This form of anxiety often arises from a perceived threat to personal and collective well-being, combined with a sense of limited control over environmental outcomes.

Emotional distress refers to a state of psychological discomfort characterized by negative emotional experiences such as stress, fear, sadness, helplessness, and depressive feelings. Among youth, emotional distress may develop when individuals struggle to cope with overwhelming concerns about their future. Climate anxiety acts as a cognitive and emotional stressor that can intensify emotional distress by continuously activating worry-based thought patterns and emotional arousal.

The relationship between climate anxiety and emotional distress can be understood through several psychological pathways. Persistent exposure to climate-related information may lead to cognitive overload, heightening emotional sensitivity and vulnerability. Youth who strongly identify with environmental issues may experience moral distress when they perceive a gap between the severity of the climate crisis and the adequacy of societal responses. This mismatch can foster frustration, hopelessness, and emotional exhaustion.

Youth are particularly susceptible to the emotional consequences of climate anxiety due to developmental factors. Adolescence and young adulthood are critical periods for identity formation, future planning, and emotional regulation. Climate-related uncertainty can disrupt these processes, increasing the likelihood of emotional distress. However, the intensity of this relationship may vary depending on individual coping mechanisms, social support systems, and opportunities for constructive climate engagement.

By viewing climate anxiety as a predictor of emotional distress, this conceptual framework emphasizes the need to address environmental concerns alongside mental health support. Recognizing the psychological dimensions of climate change is essential for developing strategies that foster emotional resilience, adaptive coping, and psychological well-being among youth.

Climate Anxiety among Youth

Climate anxiety has become increasingly prevalent among youth as awareness of climate change grows. Young people today are exposed to a constant flow of climate-related information through news media, social platforms, educational content, and public discourse. While such awareness can encourage environmental responsibility, it may also generate persistent worry and emotional strain. For many youth, climate change is perceived not as a distant threat but as an immediate and personal challenge that endangers their future security and quality of life.

Several factors contribute to the development of climate anxiety among youth. Media coverage that emphasizes catastrophic climate scenarios, extreme weather events, and environmental degradation can heighten fear and uncertainty. Additionally, the perceived inability of governments and institutions to effectively address climate issues may lead to feelings of powerlessness and frustration. Youth often feel burdened with the responsibility of addressing a crisis they did not create, intensifying emotional distress.

Climate anxiety among youth manifests in cognitive, emotional, and behavioral forms. Cognitively, young individuals may experience intrusive thoughts about environmental collapse or irreversible damage. Emotionally, feelings of fear, sadness, anger, guilt, and hopelessness are common. Behaviorally, climate anxiety may lead to withdrawal, sleep disturbances, difficulty concentrating, or, in some cases, excessive preoccupation with environmental issues.

Despite its negative psychological impact, climate anxiety is not inherently pathological. Moderate levels of concern can motivate pro-environmental behavior and civic engagement. However, when climate anxiety becomes overwhelming and persistent, it can interfere with daily functioning and emotional well-being. Youth lacking effective coping strategies or social support are particularly at risk of experiencing heightened anxiety and emotional imbalance.

Understanding the nature and sources of climate anxiety among youth is essential for recognizing its role as a predictor of emotional distress. Addressing this anxiety through awareness, emotional support, and constructive engagement opportunities can help transform distress into resilience and meaningful action.

Emotional Distress in the Context of Climate Change

Emotional distress among youth has emerged as a significant psychological concern in the contemporary era, particularly in relation to global crises such as climate change. Emotional distress refers to a state of psychological discomfort marked by persistent negative emotions, including stress, anxiety, sadness, fear, and feelings of helplessness. For many young individuals, concerns about climate change intensify existing developmental pressures related to education, employment, and identity formation.

Climate change contributes to emotional distress by creating a sense of ongoing uncertainty and perceived threat. Youth often worry about environmental degradation, extreme weather events, resource scarcity, and their long-term implications for personal and societal well-being. This anticipatory stress can lead to chronic emotional strain, even in the absence of direct exposure to climate-related disasters. The constant awareness of potential future harm can erode emotional stability and heighten vulnerability to mental health challenges.

Emotional distress linked to climate concerns may manifest in various ways. Academically, youth may experience difficulty concentrating, decreased motivation, and reduced performance. Socially, emotional distress can affect relationships, leading to withdrawal, irritability, or reduced engagement with peers and family. Psychologically, prolonged distress may increase the risk of anxiety disorders, depressive symptoms, and emotional exhaustion.

The impact of climate-related emotional distress is influenced by individual and contextual factors. Limited coping resources, lack of emotional support, and feelings of powerlessness can intensify distress, while supportive environments and adaptive coping strategies may mitigate its effects. Importantly, emotional distress related to climate change does not occur in isolation but interacts with broader social, economic, and personal stressors faced by youth.

Recognizing emotional distress in the context of climate change is essential for understanding its connection with climate anxiety. As climate anxiety deepens, it may act as a continuous psychological stressor, increasing the likelihood and intensity of emotional distress among youth. Addressing this distress requires not only psychological support but also broader social and institutional efforts that acknowledge the emotional dimensions of the climate crisis.

Climate Anxiety as a Predictor of Emotional Distress

Climate anxiety plays a significant role in shaping the emotional experiences of youth, functioning as a key predictor of emotional distress. As young individuals increasingly perceive climate change as a direct and unavoidable threat to their future, persistent worry and concern can evolve into a chronic psychological stressor. This ongoing state of anxiety heightens emotional sensitivity and increases vulnerability to distress-related outcomes.

The predictive relationship between climate anxiety and emotional distress can be explained through cognitive and emotional mechanisms. Continuous exposure to climate-related threats may lead youth to engage in repetitive negative thinking, including catastrophic expectations and anticipatory fear. Such cognitive patterns amplify emotional reactions, resulting in elevated stress levels, emotional exhaustion, and feelings of helplessness. Over time, these emotional responses may consolidate into broader emotional distress.

Climate anxiety also contributes to emotional distress by undermining a sense of control and personal efficacy. When youth perceive climate change as a problem beyond individual or collective influence, feelings of powerlessness may intensify. This perceived lack of agency can diminish hope and motivation, reinforcing distress and emotional instability. The gap between environmental awareness and effective action further exacerbates frustration and emotional burden.

Moreover, climate anxiety may interact with developmental challenges unique to youth. During this life stage, individuals are actively forming identities, setting life goals, and envisioning future possibilities. Climate-related uncertainty can disrupt these processes, leading to emotional conflict and distress. Concerns about environmental sustainability, economic stability, and quality of life may overshadow optimism, contributing to heightened emotional strain.

Understanding climate anxiety as a predictor of emotional distress emphasizes the need for early psychological support and preventive strategies. Addressing climate anxiety through emotional regulation, resilience-building, and constructive engagement can reduce its negative impact. By acknowledging the psychological consequences of climate change, stakeholders can better support youth in managing emotional distress and fostering adaptive responses in an increasingly uncertain world.

III. DISCUSSION

The growing recognition of climate anxiety as a psychological response to climate change has opened new avenues for understanding youth mental health in the contemporary world. This paper positions climate anxiety as a significant predictor of emotional distress among youth, emphasizing the complex emotional consequences of heightened environmental awareness. The discussion highlights how persistent concern about climate change interacts with developmental, social, and psychological factors to intensify emotional distress in young populations.

One of the central insights of this discussion is that climate anxiety represents a chronic stressor rather than a transient emotional reaction. Unlike situational anxiety, which is often linked to immediate threats, climate anxiety is rooted in long-term uncertainty and perceived inevitability. Youth are repeatedly confronted with messages about rising temperatures, extreme weather events, biodiversity loss, and environmental degradation. Such continuous exposure contributes to anticipatory anxiety, in which young individuals worry about future conditions that may threaten their safety, opportunities, and quality of life. This anticipatory nature of climate anxiety increases the likelihood of emotional distress, as the perceived threat is ongoing and unresolved.

The discussion also underscores the role of perceived lack of control in amplifying emotional distress. Many young individuals feel that despite their awareness and concern, they possess limited agency to influence climate outcomes. This perceived helplessness can foster emotional exhaustion, frustration, and despair. When youth believe that institutional responses are insufficient or delayed, climate anxiety may intensify into emotional distress marked by hopelessness and diminished motivation. The emotional burden is further compounded by the moral dimension of climate anxiety, wherein youth experience guilt or responsibility for environmental harm, even when they are not directly responsible for its causes.

Developmental factors play a crucial role in shaping the emotional impact of climate anxiety among youth. Adolescence and early adulthood are periods characterized by identity formation, future planning, and emotional regulation. Climate change introduces profound uncertainty into these processes, disrupting young people's ability to envision stable futures. Concerns about environmental sustainability, economic security, and social stability may overshadow optimism and confidence, leading to increased emotional strain. Climate anxiety thus intersects with developmental vulnerabilities, making youth particularly susceptible to emotional distress.

The discussion further highlights the cognitive mechanisms linking climate anxiety to emotional distress. Repetitive exposure to alarming climate information can lead to rumination and catastrophic thinking. Youth may engage in repetitive mental simulations of environmental collapse or irreversible damage, which heightens emotional arousal and stress. Over time, such cognitive patterns may become ingrained, contributing to chronic emotional distress. This process is particularly pronounced in individuals with high emotional sensitivity or limited coping resources.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that climate anxiety is not inherently pathological. Moderate levels of concern can serve adaptive functions by increasing awareness, fostering empathy, and motivating pro-environmental behavior. However, when climate anxiety becomes overwhelming and persistent, it may exceed an individual's coping capacity and contribute to emotional distress. The distinction between adaptive concern and maladaptive anxiety is critical for understanding the psychological implications of climate change. Emotional distress arises not solely from awareness but from the inability to manage or channel climate-related emotions effectively.

Social and contextual factors significantly influence the relationship between climate anxiety and emotional distress. Youth who lack emotional validation, social support, or constructive outlets for engagement are more likely to experience heightened distress. In contrast, supportive environments that encourage open dialogue, collective action, and emotional expression can mitigate the negative effects of climate anxiety. The presence of peer networks, family support, and institutional recognition of climate-related emotions plays a protective role in reducing emotional distress.

The discussion also points to broader societal implications. Ignoring the emotional dimensions of climate change may lead to long-term mental health consequences for younger generations. Emotional distress associated with climate anxiety can affect academic performance, interpersonal relationships, and overall well-being. Integrating mental health considerations into climate education and policy is therefore essential. Educational institutions can play a vital role by providing climate education that balances awareness with hope, resilience, and solution-focused narratives.

Finally, this discussion emphasizes the need for a holistic approach to addressing climate anxiety and emotional distress among youth. Psychological interventions should focus not only on reducing anxiety but also on enhancing emotional resilience, coping skills, and a sense of agency. Empowering youth through meaningful participation in environmental decision-making and action can transform anxiety into constructive engagement. Recognizing climate anxiety as a legitimate emotional response rather than dismissing it as irrational fear is crucial for supporting youth mental health in the context of global environmental change.

Reinforces the central argument that climate anxiety functions as a significant predictor of emotional distress among youth. The emotional impact of climate change extends beyond environmental concern, shaping psychological well-being and future orientation. Addressing this emerging mental health challenge requires coordinated efforts across psychological, educational, and policy domains to support youth in navigating the emotional realities of a changing climate.

IV. IMPLICATIONS

Understanding climate anxiety as a predictor of emotional distress among youth carries important implications across educational, psychological, social, and policy domains. Recognizing the emotional consequences of climate change is essential for developing comprehensive strategies that support youth mental health while promoting adaptive engagement with environmental issues.

Educational Implications

Educational institutions play a crucial role in shaping how young individuals perceive and respond to climate change. Integrating climate education with emotional awareness can help students process climate-related concerns in a balanced and constructive manner. Rather than focusing solely on catastrophic outcomes, climate education should emphasize resilience, problem-solving, and collective responsibility. Creating safe spaces within schools and universities for discussion and emotional expression can reduce feelings of isolation and emotional distress. Teachers and educators can also be trained to recognize signs of climate-related emotional strain and provide appropriate guidance or referrals when needed.

Psychological and Mental Health Implications

The findings underscore the need to incorporate climate anxiety into mental health assessment and intervention frameworks for youth. Mental health professionals should acknowledge climate anxiety as a legitimate source of emotional distress rather than dismissing it as exaggerated or irrational fear. Therapeutic approaches that focus on emotional regulation, stress management, and adaptive coping strategies can help youth manage climate-related anxiety. Encouraging constructive engagement, such as participation in environmental initiatives or advocacy, may also enhance a sense of agency and reduce emotional distress.

Social Implications

At the social level, fostering supportive environments is critical for mitigating the emotional impact of climate anxiety. Family, peer groups, and community networks can provide emotional validation and shared coping mechanisms. Open conversations about climate-related fears can normalize emotional responses and reduce stigma associated with distress. Community-based initiatives that involve youth in environmental problem-solving can transform anxiety into collective action, strengthening social cohesion and emotional resilience.

Policy Implications

Policy-makers must recognize climate change as not only an environmental and economic issue but also a mental health concern. Youth mental health policies should explicitly address climate-related emotional distress and allocate resources for preventive and supportive programs. Integrating mental health services into climate adaptation and sustainability initiatives can ensure a more holistic response to the climate crisis. Policies that encourage youth participation in environmental decision-making can also enhance psychological well-being by reinforcing a sense of agency and hope.

Implications for Future Interventions

The implications of this study suggest the need for multidisciplinary interventions that combine climate education, mental health support, and youth empowerment. Programs designed to enhance emotional resilience, promote adaptive coping, and foster optimism can reduce the negative psychological effects of climate anxiety. By addressing emotional distress alongside environmental challenges, society can better support youth in navigating the psychological realities of climate change.

V. CONCLUSION

Climate change has emerged as a defining challenge of the present century, extending its impact beyond environmental degradation to significantly influence psychological well-being. This paper has explored climate anxiety as a critical predictor of emotional distress among youth, emphasizing the growing emotional burden faced by young individuals in an era marked by ecological uncertainty. As awareness of climate change increases, youth are increasingly confronted with concerns about environmental sustainability, future security, and societal stability, which may intensify emotional distress.

The discussion highlights that climate anxiety is not merely an expression of environmental concern but a complex emotional response rooted in anticipatory fear, perceived lack of control, and uncertainty about the future. When climate-related worries become persistent and overwhelming, they may contribute to heightened stress, anxiety, feelings of helplessness, and emotional exhaustion among youth. These emotional experiences can interfere with academic functioning, social relationships, and overall mental health, underscoring the seriousness of climate-related psychological challenges.

At the same time, the paper recognizes that climate anxiety is not inherently maladaptive. Moderate levels of concern can promote awareness, responsibility, and engagement with environmental issues. However, without adequate emotional support, coping strategies, and opportunities for constructive action, climate anxiety may evolve into emotional distress. The vulnerability of youth is further shaped by developmental factors, social environments, and the broader institutional response to climate change.

The findings of this conceptual analysis underscore the importance of addressing climate anxiety through a holistic approach that integrates mental health support, education, and policy initiatives. Educational institutions, mental health professionals, and policymakers must acknowledge the emotional dimensions of climate change and work collaboratively to support youth well-being. Promoting emotional resilience, fostering a sense of agency, and creating supportive environments can help young individuals navigate climate-related concerns more effectively.

In conclusion, understanding climate anxiety as a predictor of emotional distress is essential for safeguarding youth mental health in a rapidly changing world. By recognizing and addressing the psychological impact of climate change, society can empower youth to cope with uncertainty, maintain emotional well-being, and engage constructively with environmental challenges. Addressing climate anxiety is not only a matter of individual mental health but also a crucial component of building a resilient and sustainable future.

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International Journal of Advanced Research in Education and Technology

ISSN: 2394-2975

Impact Factor: 8.152