

Exploring Eco Emotions: A Comparative Analysis of Psychological Origins and Behavioural Impact in Teenagers and Young Adults

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Abstract

As environmental issues intensify, understanding their emotional impact on younger populations is crucial, as adolescents and young adults will face these changes firsthand. This study examines the eco-emotions experienced by these age groups, their psychological origins, and their influence on behaviour. The research addresses three key questions: (1) What common eco-emotions arise in teenagers and young adults? (2) What are their psychological origins? (3) How do they shape behaviour? Using semi-structured interviews with 10 participants, thematic analysis identified key themes in self-reported experiences. While the small sample size (N=10) limits generalizability, the study uniquely bridges developmental and environmental psychology, offering novel insights into age-based eco-emotional differences.

Keywords: eco-emotions, psychological origins, climate change, young adults, teenagers, thematic analysis

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Environmental degradation and climate change pose growing threats to humanity, impacting public health, infrastructure, food, energy, transportation, and mental health. Research indicates that 3.6 billion people already live in highly vulnerable areas (WHO). With 2024 recorded as the hottest year (NASA, 2024), climate change is increasingly affecting daily life, triggering widespread psychological impacts. It impacts psychologically by contributing to increased stress, anxiety, and trauma, particularly in vulnerable populations who face displacement and loss of livelihood as well as younger populations who may not have the resilience or coping mechanisms to navigate the long-term effects of environmental instability, leading to heightened feelings of fear and uncertainty about the future.

Since 2022, extreme weather has caused school closures for 400 million students (World Bank Group, 2024), increasing awareness and evoking complex eco-emotions. By directly disrupting education and daily routines, climate change is fostering a sense of helplessness and anxiety about the future among young people.

Climate change is not just an environmental crisis but also a psychological one, especially among youth. Eco-emotions can be negative, positive, mixed, or neutral. Negative emotions like eco-anxiety—worry

over environmental crises—and eco-anger, often stemming from helplessness, are commonly studied. Solastalgia, the distress from witnessing local environmental degradation, is another key response. However, due to the lack of standardized definitions, these emotions are often used interchangeably and can manifest in various ways, from sadness to low self-esteem (Drion et al., 2024). These eco-emotions, while varying in intensity and form, can significantly affect mental health, leading to feelings of despair, loss of control, and disconnection from both the environment and society.

Conversely, positive eco-emotions encourage pro-environmental behaviour. Eco-hope arises from witnessing environmental protection efforts, leading to eco-optimism—the belief in positive environmental change. Eco-pride emerges from personal contributions to such efforts. Like negative emotions, these terms lack precise definitions, and some individuals remain emotionally neutral toward climate issues. However, in contrast to the negative emotions, positive eco-emotions can foster a sense of agency and empowerment, motivating individuals, especially youth, to take action and engage in sustainability practices, thus counteracting the feelings of helplessness often associated with environmental crises.

Negative eco-emotions are prevalent most among youth. A study found 37% of students experience eco-anxiety, with over a third feeling fear about the crisis (Will, 2022). Another survey reports that 60% of young people feel extremely worried about climate change, and 45% say it affects their daily functioning (Hickman et al., 2021). While research on eco-anxiety is emerging, its origins, manifestations, and impact on behaviour remain underexplored (Kurth & Pihkala, 2022).

Understanding these eco-emotions can prove to be valuable because emotions have shown to directly impact a person's motivations and consequently their resulting behaviours (James Dennison, 2023), and understanding negative, positive and even neutral eco-emotions can help us to understand the possible ways it can impact a person's desire to help the environment which can prove to be helpful for various fields including activism, education and politics

Although extensive studies examine climate change's environmental effects, fewer address its psychological impact, particularly among youth. This study fills that gap by analyzing how eco-emotions develop, the factors influencing them, and their behavioural effects across different age groups. A comparative analysis will highlight how developmental, social, and experiential factors shape emotional responses to climate change, particularly among the most affected populations. The following chapter establishes a foundational understanding of these concepts to support the study.

Chapter 2

Review of Literature

The literature review was conducted to establish a strong foundation for understanding eco-emotions and their current status among youth. Research articles were sourced using the Google Scholar and PubMed databases with keywords such as youth, students, and eco-emotions. Studies were selected based on their relevance to the topic, ensuring a diverse range of research methodologies. The inclusion of both large-scale surveys and qualitative studies provided a well-rounded perspective—surveys identified broad global trends, while qualitative studies explored the deeper psychological and emotional experiences of young people.

Eco-emotions, including eco-anxiety, eco-anger, eco-hope, and solastalgia, have emerged as significant emotional responses to climate change (McCaffery & Boetto, 2024). Climate anxiety has been recognized as a global stressor (Hickman et al., 2021) suggesting that climate change is an issue impacting all

populations in the world psychologically. However, the direct impact of climate change on mental health remains debated. For instance, Drion et al. (2024) suggested that while eco-anxiety exists, it does not significantly affect mental health. These contrasting findings highlight the complexity of eco-emotions, necessitating further research into factors such as social support and media exposure.

Several key studies provide insights into eco-emotions and their implications. In 2021, the first large-scale global study on climate anxiety surveyed 10,000 participants across 10 countries. It examined climate-related emotions, the perceived impact of government inaction, and young people's mental health. These findings highlight how the lack of political action and communication can deepen feelings of powerlessness and frustration among youth, reinforcing the importance of inclusive discussions that validate their emotional responses and foster collective action toward climate solutions. (Hickman et al., 2021).

In 2022, the first systematic review of the health implications of eco-anxiety found correlations between eco-anxiety and symptoms of depression, stress, insomnia, and cognitive-emotional impairment, particularly among younger populations, women, and individuals in lower-income countries. However, it also suggested that eco-anxiety could lead to climate action. The review highlights how eco-anxiety in young adults and teens affects mental health, causing issues like depression and stress, while also emphasizing the need for further research to understand its impact and potential to inspire climate action. (Boluda-Verdú et al., 2022).

A 2022 qualitative study explored children's concerns about climate change in France and the USA through video conference focus groups. It examined social, educational, and cultural aspects of eco-anxiety, revealing that while children as young as seven understood environmental issues, they often felt helpless. Anger, frustration, sadness, and guilt were more dominant than anxiety, and parents' reluctance to discuss climate issues contributed to children's sense of isolation. This study shows how eco-anxiety, along with emotions like anger, frustration, and guilt, affects young children, emphasizing the role of parental communication in alleviating feelings of isolation and highlighting the broader psychological impact of climate change on youth. (Thomas et al., 2022).

A 2024 study focused on young adults in India, aiming to understand their perceptions of eco-anxiety and coping mechanisms. It sought to fill a research gap by examining whether eco-anxiety influenced future-oriented decisions, such as reluctance to have children. This study highlights how eco-anxiety in young adults in India affects their future-oriented decisions, such as the reluctance to have children, while also revealing that feelings of powerlessness and skepticism about individual or collective actions hinder their engagement in pro-environmental behaviours. The study also highlighted the need for further research into effective interventions such as educational programs, community initiatives, mental health support, and youth-inclusive policies that can help address eco-anxiety by fostering resilience and collective action. (Jain et al., 2024).

Another 2024 study examined the connection between an individual's natural living environment and mental health. It found that neither perceptions of environmental conditions nor anxiety about environmental issues had a significant direct impact on mental health. Instead, socio-economic factors such as education level and financial status played a more substantial role. A small effect of eco-anxiety-related behaviours and beliefs on quality of life was observed, but the study did not consider broader environmental influences such as media exposure, environmental knowledge, or past experiences, all of which may contribute to eco-emotional responses. However, the study did provide interesting insights into how socio-economic factors, rather than direct environmental perceptions, shape mental health outcomes,

suggesting that eco-anxiety's effects may be mediated by education, financial stability, and external influences like media exposure and environmental knowledge. (Drion et al., 2024).

From this literature review, several theoretical gaps were identified:

- 1. Action Dichotomy:** Conflicting findings exist on whether eco-anxiety motivates climate action or leads to paralysis due to helplessness. Some research suggests eco-anxiety drives activism, while others indicate it discourages action. Further investigation is needed to determine the conditions under which eco-anxiety fosters or inhibits engagement.
- 2. Role of Social Media:** Although social media significantly shapes young people's perceptions of environmental issues, research on its impact on eco-emotions remains limited. Understanding whether exposure amplifies eco-anxiety or fosters resilience is crucial for mental health interventions.
- 3. Developmental Factors:** Cognitive and emotional development varies significantly across age groups, potentially influencing how different generations experience eco-emotions. However, this remains underexplored in the current literature.

By addressing these gaps, this study aims to contribute meaningfully to the field of eco-emotions research through a systematic and well-structured methodology.

Chapter 3

Methodology

3.1 Introduction

In order to effectively understand the different experiences associated with different types of eco-emotions, a qualitative approach was taken in order to get answers to three research questions, covering three different subtopics which are: the psychological origins of different eco-emotions, the common eco-emotions among young adults and teenagers and the impact of eco-emotions on environmental action in the two age groups. Purposive sampling was used to select ten different individuals and semi-structured interviews to collect in-depth data. Following data collection, thematic analysis was conducted to observe emerging themes. The research design was created with careful consideration of ethical procedures, including data confidentiality and informed consent, letting the participants know that their participation is completely voluntary.

3.2 Research Objectives

To understand the underlying emotional, environmental and development factors that impact the different perceptions of the environment and its related issues among teenagers and young adults, compare the different manifestations of common eco-emotions such as eco-anxiety, eco-anger or eco-optimism between young adults versus teenagers and lastly uncover which emotions, whether positive or negative are most likely to result in productive behaviors like advocating for the environment, with a focus on how it differs between young adults and teenagers to further develop the current understanding of the field of eco-emotions as a whole.

3.3 Settings

The interviews were taken at the place and time of the participant's convenience, both online and offline in order to ensure the participant is comfortable and their responses are natural.

3.4 Sampling

Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique in which participants are selected based on specific characteristics, knowledge, or experiences. This method enabled the deliberate selection of participants with diverse experiences and emotional responses, allowing for the collection of relevant, in-

depth data. For this study, purposive sampling was employed to gather insights from two distinct age groups: teenagers (13–19 years) and young adults (20–29 years). Participants were recruited through school and university networks. Given the exploratory nature of this study, a sample size of N=10 was chosen to enable in-depth qualitative analysis. Data saturation was observed, meaning no new themes emerged in later interviews.

3.5 Demographic Data

The study included teenagers (13-19) and young adults (20-35) (Dictionary of Psychology, 2023), with an equal gender distribution. These age groups were chosen to differentiate developmental stages while ensuring a diverse sample. Participants were recruited through school and university networks, representing varied cultural backgrounds to capture social nuances affecting eco-emotions. This distinction aligns with Erikson's psychosocial development theory (Orenstein & Lewis, 2022), where adolescents in the 'identity vs. role confusion' stage seek self-definition, while young adults in the 'intimacy vs. isolation' stage prioritize deeper connections. These developmental differences shape how each group experiences and engages with eco-emotions.

Teenager Age Group

| Participants | Age | Gender |
|--------------|-----|--------|
| MH | 16 | Female |
| RS | 15 | Male |
| AB | 14 | Male |
| AL | 19 | Female |
| EZ | 13 | Female |

Young Adults Age Group

| Participants | Age | Gender |
|--------------|-----|--------|
| ND | 27 | Female |
| RG | 20 | Female |
| KS | 28 | Male |
| PV | 28 | Male |
| YM | 34 | Female |

3.6 Data Collection Procedure

The data collection began with an in-depth review of literature in order to frame appropriate questions in

order to fulfil the research objective. A semi-structured interview with 11 pre-determined open-ended questions was used for rich qualitative data collection after the questionnaire was thoroughly gone through and approved. Semi-structured interviews help explore deeper thoughts and feelings, allowing to deeper understand why people feel and act a certain way, while also allowing flexibility for the interviewer to add follow-up questions or change questions as suited to the particular case. Participants were made fully aware about the research topic and the goal of the interview. Questions were not shown to participants beforehand to ensure the answers remained authentic.

3.7 Analysis and Data Presentation

Thematic analysis, a qualitative research method, was employed to identify patterns and themes in the data. The process involved systematically organizing and categorizing data using in vivo coding, where participants' spoken words formed the basis of codes and themes. Inductive coding was used, allowing themes to emerge organically rather than being predetermined. The analysis began with open coding to break down raw data into key segments, followed by axial coding to uncover deeper relationships, and finally, selective coding to categorize data into overarching themes. To enhance methodological rigor, double coding was conducted, with a second researcher cross-checking emergent themes, ensuring greater validity and reliability.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were employed to ensure the integrity of the study. A key aspect of the applied consideration involves the informed consent taken by participants, wherein participants were provided a letter outlining the objectives of the interview and their rights. Participants were also informed directly by the researchers about the objective of the interview and were allowed to withdraw at any moment if they wished to do so. Confidentiality of participants' data was also ensured and anonymity was maintained. With these considerations in place, the participants' dignity, rights and welfare were upheld, ensuring an ethical environment for the interviews to take place.

Chapter 4

Results & Analysis

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings obtained from the thematic analysis conducted using semi-structured interviews in order to find common eco-emotions, psychological origins of those emotions, and the behavioural impacts of those emotions, comparing them between young adults and teenagers. The findings highlight the complex inter-connectedness of environmental awareness, development factors and behavioural influences. The study identified various key themes including: awareness of personal environmental behaviour impacting emotional response, personal experiences with the environment and solastalgia, which is the distress caused when a person experiences environmental damage in their home environment.

4.2 Eco-Emotions

4.2.1 Negative Emotions

The most common type of eco-emotion found was negative, with the specific eco-emotions including: eco-anxiety, eco-anger, solastalgia, helplessness and hopelessness. Participants expressed deep concern and distress after witnessing the environmental degradation around them, on social media and after discussing with their peers or family. Teenagers more often felt concerned about the environment when

they witnessed it in real life around them, heightening feelings of eco-anxiety and the need to take action. One participant (AB, 14) elaborated, “I can say that I got upset about the environment once, due to the rising issue of waste management especially because what once happened near my house was that there was a place where people used to dump garbage so due to some political issues, the garbage was not taken from that place for very long and it was full of garbage and it was too stinky.” This shows that after having a negative experience with the environment (due to an issue of waste management in their area) the teenager felt distressed that no action was being taken to solve the issue. This feeling has been evoked due to a daily inconvenience caused by the poor smell of the waste. Another teenager (AL, 19 years) talked about how environmental degradation affected their daily routine, greatly concerning them as they mentioned, “It (pollution) has in fact reached a point, where the winter season is going on, and the visibility is so bad that until like 7AM, you can see only one metre outside on a road. And I have early morning lectures which makes me even more concerned because I witness all of this fog and pollution early in the morning.”

On the other hand, negative eco-emotions in young adults came up to result in more introspection and internalization of negative eco-emotions. For example a young adult (RG, 20) said, “I guess some feelings are feelings of helplessness and frustration which I think have to do more with plastic and oceans or like oil and oceans because that has to do with like big companies and people who are more worried about their money and gaining the biggest profits rather than caring more about how they clean up when it comes to the production of their products. So I guess those feelings of helplessness and frustration with bigger companies come with pollution caused by bigger companies.” This quote highlights that the participant feels that due to the pollution being caused by the larger companies, there is nothing much she can do to help the issue, resulting in her having to simply internalize the negative feelings rather than being able to do anything about it. Another participant (KS, 28) says, “My personal experiences have affected my perspective towards the environment, because when you're talking about the environment I think about the human interactive intervention which is being done as well as the human actions that have been affecting the environment. A lot of thought processes about my perspective towards the environment have changed.” This shows that the participant has reflected deeply upon environmental issues, with their introspection even resulting in a shift in perspectives.

4.2.2 Positive Emotions

On the other extreme side of the emotion spectrum, significant positive emotions were also found in both age groups after asking the necessary questions to uncover them. The emotions were mainly inspiration and eco-hope. These feelings of inspiration and eco-hope mostly came through participating or witnessing environmental improvements or movements. Teenagers felt more inspired after witnessing others working and making significant changes, giving them the feeling that if others could do it, they could too. One participant (MH, 16) underlines this fact as she states, “I think the Chipko Movement was a very strong movement which took place and I think if we all stand up individually also we could make a change. It does not matter if you stand up in a bunch or individually at the end of the day, each step matters like it is important.” After learning about the Chipko Movement where many people came together for a non-violent, non-cooperation environmental movement (R. Mishra, 2017) she felt like there was still hope to help the environment. Another teenager said (EZ, 13), “I remember I felt really inspired by Greta Thunberg because I felt very personally connected to it and then I was like you know what I also want to skip school on Fridays but then I was like no I'll miss my favourite football practice” This shows that she felt very personally connected to and inspired by an environmental activist similar to her age, wanting to mirror the

activist's actions, in this case skipping school on Fridays to protest for the environment just as the activist, Greta Thunberg did. The positive feelings in young adults were more hope oriented. For example, a young adult (YM, 34) says that "It's always an initiative of the young people, especially those who are studying and go home and stay there for a few weeks for vacation. It's always the young generation and that gives me a lot of hope." This shows that the participant feels very uplifted by seeing younger generations doing work to help the environment. They feel that the younger generation, especially the ones who regularly go home to their family will be the ones making the most positive impact for the environment. Another young adult (KS, 28 years) described how pollution control gave them hope as he explained, "For example, there is another area in Thana, Mumbai area where chicks from flamingos used to come there, way back in 80s and 90s, in the 2000s they stopped coming there, but due to some human pollution control, these flamingos started coming back in the COVID. It was beautiful to see how nature, again, responds when you take positive actions." This shows that the participant felt hope after witnessing nature heal itself with the help of pollution control.

4.3 Psychological Origins

4.3.1 Personal Experiences

Personal experiences play an important part in terms of how a person perceives environmental issues as their past experiences can trigger specific emotions connected to the specific environmental issue. In teenagers, these experiences were mainly found to be related to solastalgia, which is the distress connected to experiencing environmental degradation in one's home environment. For example, a teenager (MH, 16) told the following story about a banyan tree near their home: "It was a really huge banyan tree and I think it was there for like, as long as I can remember, it was like dating back to my dad, according to what he told me. They suddenly decided to cut it down just for the widening of the road. This led to, like, I was genuinely very hurt because it was like a landmark for us." This personal experience with a banyan tree heightened her awareness and concern for the environment. Another teenager (AL, 19) talked about how an experience in a field trip to clean up polluted mangroves heightened her worry as she says, "When we landed up in those mangroves and we started cleaning the place- you won't imagine, we found every single thing which you can't assume it will be there into those places and eventually we started with cleaning things and we were cursing people at that time, like how can people be so rude to trees?" The mangroves were in her home environment and witnessing them being polluted very strongly heightened her awareness about environmental challenges.

The personal experiences for young adults resulted in more eco-anxiety, particularly due to experiencing environmental degradation when they least expected it, during their leisure. A young adult (RG, 20) describes her experience when she was out on a leisure trip to collect seashells where she says, "I was on the beach earlier this, or like this past fall, and I was looking around for seashells, and I came across a lot of plastic, and it made me sad thinking about the fact that this is the same plastic getting into our food, for example, seafood and fish that we eat" This highlights the fact that even while doing something enjoyable during her leisure, she was still forced to experience environmental degradation, resulting in feelings of anxiety as she worried about the plastic entering the food system. Another young adult (YM, 34) talked about how plastic pollution impacts her gardening hobby as she says, "It's so disheartening when you dig and do gardening, you find all the plastic waste. That was shocking to me because I felt that my place is green and we don't have pollution but that plastic waste is polluting a lot in rural areas so that's one personal experience." This shows that she felt severely anxious after witnessing pollution in her home

environment, especially because she thought it was pollution-free.

4.3.2 Social Media Influence

In today's world, social media carries immense influence on people's emotions, impacting things like politics, self-esteem, and information exposure. This influence is equally impactful to both the populations of teenagers and young adults. In teenagers, the social media influence brought up more negative emotions like anxiety and extreme worry, creating counter-productivity. For example, a teenager (RS, 15), "So I remember a few years ago when I was watching a video about how the universe would end and how our planet earth would get destroyed and one of the reasons was global warming and I got like super scared because after a few years my future generation will not have enough water, I won't have enough water which is actually very scary and you know, I started getting very scared." The teenager felt immense distress after watching a video about negative information on the environment, giving him a lot of eco-anxiety. Another teenager (MH, 16) said, "I think the most colossally hurtful post was probably the one with the wildfires and because there were wildfires in Australia. I remember reading a lot about it in depth because it was like not only is it a hazard to human health but then lots and lots of trees were also lost in that." This teenager felt extremely worried due to a post about an incident happening in another part of the world, even bringing up concerns about how the incident could affect human health.

In young adults however, the feelings turned up to be more positive or productive feelings, increasing sympathy towards the environment. For example, a young adult (RG, 20) mentioned her increase in sympathy after an experience online: "I sometimes see comments about how people think climate change isn't real. And I think it makes me sad to know that there's a lot of misinformation or just people who think they can't take action until it's too late when it comes to climate change. And it just makes me more sympathetic towards the changing environment." This shows that though she is experiencing something negative about the environment, she is able to channel it into a positive feeling which is sympathy. Another young adult (PV, 28 years) said, "I had seen a very, very old woman who was trying to help nature — you know, planting trees and all those things. This made me very motivated. I had seen the news in one of the local channels where they reported that she had been planting trees for many years. The number was in the thousands! This inspired me. If she can do it, then why can't we?" This shows that social media influences young adults in more positive and productive ways compared to teenagers. However, this may be more due to the type of content each age group is consuming rather than how they are perceiving the content. Also, social media was seen to be a highly effective tool in spreading general information about the environment and related affairs among both age groups.

4.4 Behavioural Impact

4.4.1 Pro-Environmental Acts

One major reason the topic of eco-emotions is important is because these emotions influence what a person will and will not do to help the environment. For example, a person with more eco-anger might be driven to cause more collective change (Agnė Skeirytė & Genovaitė Liobikienė, 2025). In teenagers, eco-friendly choices appear more through smaller, immediate actions. For example, a teenager (MH, 16 years) describes, "Earlier I wasn't so environmentally conscious but now I feel I do take certain steps to avoid environmental pollution or damage to the environment. Like, earlier as a child, like I think we all used to love to pluck flowers and twigs and stuff but now I don't think I would do that. I'm considering the damage." This shows that her feelings towards the environment are being shown through daily changes, like quitting plucking flowers and twigs because she feels that this is harmful to nature and doesn't want

to worsen the damage. Another teenager (EZ, 13 years) describes how her feelings towards the environment affects her daily activities as she describes, “In my daily life, I feel like I've kind of tried to become more environmentally conscious. Like I try to switch the lights off and I try to eat more vegetarian food.” This highlights that she's trying to do what is in her power to help the environment through her daily activities, like switching the lights off when she's not in the room and trying to eat more vegetarian food as she believes this can help the environment. The younger sample taken for this study were found to be more positively impacted by witnessing or participating in collective efforts than the older sample. In young adults, these eco-friendly choices were more consumerism-oriented. For example, a young adult (PV, 28) said, “We typically buy biodegradable products for daily essentials. For example, when we go out for milk, we don't buy the packaged milk that comes in plastic. Instead, we get it directly from cow vendors. This is how we ensure that we use products that are essential to us without contributing to plastic waste” The participant is trying to help the environment through what he is buying, believing that buying eco-friendlier products can result in him contributing less to plastic waste. Another young adult (RG, 20) mentioned, “My friend told me that thrifting is also something which I like. I didn't know it could help the environment and I think that's something that I found myself doing more often. Like I don't feel a need to constantly order online and shop just to throw it away.” Here, the participant talks about clothes thrifting which she learnt from her friend and after learning that it could reduce the amount of waste she produces when shopping, she wanted to do more of it. This shows an eco-friendlier shift in her consumerism habit, no longer feeling the need to rely on fast fashion which is unsustainable. (Maiti & Leong, 2025). Also, both age groups have been observed to have conversations about the environment and associated issues with their surrounding community, mostly with family and close friends.

4.4.2 Barriers to action

There are significant barriers when it comes to doing environmentally conscious acts in both age groups. In teenagers, it turned out to be more feelings of helplessness which resulted in barriers to productive action. For example, a teenager (RS, 15) says, “I just feel sad that we are damaging the environment and then I feel like doing something about it but I know I can't because even if I tried it won't really make a change anyway.” This shows that though the participant feels sad about the damage happening to the environment, they are not taking steps to help it as they feel they are powerless to make any real change. Another teenager (EZ, 13) says, “I really felt like I wanted to become a vegetarian for the environment. But then, my parents weren't really willing to do that because it was like, really like, you know, like then you have to make practically like two meals and stuff. So then, like we kind of had to make a compromise and stuff. So kind of, I actually felt really angry after a lot of my discussions with them.” In this case, though she wants to become vegetarian to help the environment, her parents are disagreeing with it due to logistic issues. This is something out of her control, and causes her frustration because she can do nothing about it.

In young adults, it turned out that barriers to action were more due to practical challenges. For example, a young adult (KS, 28) says, “When I buy materials from the market, there are eco-friendly materials available, but it is, yes, expensive, as I mentioned earlier. Secondly, it might not be as durable as the other products are. So yes, in terms of purchase choices. I've tried to buy eco-friendly items as much as possible, but in the end, the price also affects our choices.” This shows that though the participant wants to help the environment and is so willing to use more eco-friendly products, certain factors like price and durability of the object ultimately affect their decision in the end. Another young adult (YM, 34) said, “Something that I tried and I couldn't do would be the waste management in the village. In the cities we have the

system, but in the rural areas we don't have that. We don't have the resources and we are not aware of the harmful effects of our actions.” In this case as well, the participant wants to help the environment but she is unable to do so because the community around her are not able to change their mindset and she does not have the resources to make the change, thus making it practically difficult to solve the waste management issue in her village.

Chapter 5

Discussion & Conclusion

5.1 Interpretation of key findings

The results find that the eco-emotions, their psychological origins and their impact on behaviour differ significantly between young adults and teenagers, highlighting the nuance of emotions linked to the changing natural environment. Teenagers tended to feel more negative eco-emotions when they actively experienced environmental degradation while young adults simply internalised these emotions. For positive eco-emotions, teenagers tended to feel more inspired while young adults felt more hopeful feelings. Inspiration often sparks immediate motivation and a desire to take action, reflecting teenagers' stage of exploration and identity formation. In contrast, hope is a more future-oriented emotion, tied to long-term aspirations and a belief in positive outcomes despite challenges, aligning with young adults' focus on building stability and deeper commitments. In terms of psychological origins, personal experiences and social media played a significant role. In teenagers, experiencing changes in the home environment brought up several negative eco-emotions while in young adults, the negative feelings arose due to personal leisure disruptions, which could be attributed to a feeling of vulnerability or unpreparedness to face such issues during their leisure. Exposure to environmental issues on social media gave rise to more negative emotions in teenagers and more positive emotions in young adults, though this may be attributed to the type of content they are consuming and not exclusively the age group. Lastly, eco-emotions also impact behaviour. In pro-environmental behaviour, teenagers were more likely to take immediate steps to help the environment by adopting eco-friendlier habits, whereas in young adults, the pro-environmental behaviour was more consumerism-oriented. This data is also supported by a study conducted in 2023 which found a correlation between the pro-environmental behaviours and social and personal well-being in young people aged 14-20 (Maria Giuseppina Bartolo et al., 2023). When it came to barriers to action, teenagers found barriers due to feelings of helplessness and young adults found barriers in the practicality of implementing solutions such as barriers due to affordability and systemic inefficiencies. This may be due to the feeling that smaller actions to help the environment may seem less impactful, leading to a lack of measurable change which may discourage both age groups from helping to bring change. It is however, important to note that after analysing the self-reported data, it was found that these emotions only evoked momentary extreme feelings, eventually fading away as time went on. However, it was found that even those momentary feelings of guilt, anxiety or even hope towards the environment have the ability to impact a person's behaviour towards the environment. For example, feelings towards the environment impact consumerism habits in young adults. These findings have various real-life implications in climate communication, policymaking, education, mental health and entrepreneurship.

5.2 Implications

This study bridges psychology and environmental studies by analyzing eco-emotions through Erikson's

Development Theory, the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), and Affect Theory. With climate change and pollution on the rise, understanding eco-emotions can inform targeted strategies in climate communication, policymaking, education, mental health, and entrepreneurship.

- 1. Climate Communication & Media:** Climate messaging should be tailored to different age groups—teenagers respond better to empowering, action-oriented narratives, while young adults engage more with systemic solutions. Media should balance climate stories by integrating hopeful, solution-focused messaging to prevent psychological distress. Social media platforms should encourage engagement rather than trigger anxiety, particularly for teenagers, who are more vulnerable to negative eco-emotions.
- 2. Policymaking & Urban Planning:** Governments should introduce eco-friendly tax incentives and subsidies to make sustainable choices more practical, especially for young adults. Urban planning should prioritize green spaces, sustainable public transport, and eco-friendly infrastructure to make pro-environmental behaviour more accessible. Establishing youth climate councils would ensure young perspectives are considered in decision-making.
- 3. Education & Climate Awareness:** Schools should incorporate climate resilience training to help students manage eco-anxiety. Hands-on environmental projects, such as eco-clubs and community clean-ups, can give teenagers a sense of control and direct impact. Climate literacy should be emphasized across disciplines, integrating sustainability into science, economics, and humanities to encourage interdisciplinary learning.
- 4. Mental Health & Well-being:** Psychologists should develop interventions to help youth cope with climate distress, such as guided therapy sessions and resilience-building workshops. Environmental activism spaces should integrate self-care and mindfulness practices to prevent burnout. Public health initiatives should recognize eco-anxiety as a legitimate concern and provide accessible mental health resources.
- 5. Entrepreneurship & Innovation:** Young entrepreneurs should be encouraged to develop and scale sustainable businesses, with incubators prioritizing eco-friendly startups through funding and mentorship. Corporations should support youth-driven sustainability initiatives by providing platforms for innovative environmental solutions.

By addressing eco-emotions across these domains, this study provides actionable strategies to promote sustainable behaviours and climate resilience.

5.3 Limitations

This study has several limitations which have potential to impact results in other studies if addressed. These limitations include small sample size, a lack of longitudinal data, limited access to diverse participants, potential selection bias and self-reported data due to the nature of the data collecting which was qualitative. An important limitation of this study is the urban bias in participant selection, as all respondents were from metropolitan areas. Future studies should include rural populations to explore whether environmental perceptions differ based on geographic location. Additionally, while this study used qualitative analysis, a mixed-methods approach by incorporating surveys with larger samples could strengthen the findings by offering statistical validation of qualitative themes.

5.4 Conclusion

This research highlights the nuances of eco-emotions in two age groups, putting a spotlight on the different eco-emotions that emerge, the psychological origins behind those emotions and how those emotions

impact a person's behavior, whether by fostering climate action, triggering distress, or shaping consumerism decisions. These results have the potential to expand into many diverse fields such as climate communication, policymaking, education, mental health and entrepreneurship. By addressing the barriers to productive environmental action in young adults and teenagers, policymakers, educators and climate activists can come together to create a larger impact by guiding youth in converting their eco-emotions into productive environmental actions.

Future research should expand to eco-emotions and psychological origins in diverse cultural settings as well as in-depth longitudinal studies to assess how eco-emotions and their associated psychological origins can change across life stages.

In conclusion, it is important to understand getting negative feelings about the environment is normal but it is important to understand how to get over these feelings to translate our emotions into positive actions. Environmental education should focus on the field of eco-emotions, helping students find ways to channel their emotions about the environment productively. Support systems like clubs and student agencies can also help in channelling eco-emotions in productive action. Transcending emotional awareness and translating it into concrete and solid action is a critical requirement, imperative for moving forward.

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