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Climate Anxiety and Eco-Distress Among Young Adults in Delhi NCR: A Cognitive-Behavioral Perspective

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Abstract: *Climate change is no longer just an environmental issue—it's a deeply personal one, especially for young adults. In India's Delhi National Capital Region (NCR), the daily reality of smog-filled skies, water shortages, and unpredictable weather has made environmental concerns impossible to ignore. This study delves into the emotional and psychological impact of climate change on young adults residing in Delhi NCR, using the cognitive-behavioral model to understand how these stressors are perceived causing different emotions and behaviors. Through in-depth semi-structured interviews with 24 young adults aged 18 to 25, we explored how climate anxiety and eco-distress play a role in their lives (if any), what makes their experiences unique, and how culture and community influence their coping strategies. Thematic analysis help define five broad themes: embodied environmental distress, future-oriented catastrophic thinking, collective helplessness and individual agency, cultural coping and spiritual reconciliation and behavioral oscillation between engagement and withdrawal. These findings not only reinforce the cognitive-behavioral framework but also highlight the urgent need for culturally sensitive support and policy changes to help young people navigate the stress created by climate anxiety in Delhi NCR.*

Keywords: *Climate anxiety, eco-distress, young adults, Delhi-NCR.*

INTRODUCTION

The Emergence of Climate Anxiety

Climate change has emerged as one of the most pressing global challenges of the 21st century, with far-reaching consequences for ecosystems, economies, and human health. While the physical impacts of climate change—such as rising temperatures, extreme weather events, and deteriorating air quality—are well documented, the psychological ramifications are only beginning to receive systematic attention (Clayton et al., 2017; Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018). Among these, climate anxiety, also referred to as eco-anxiety or eco-distress, has gained prominence as a distinct form of psychological distress characterized by chronic fear of environmental doom (American Psychological Association [APA], 2017).

The Indian Context: Delhi NCR as a Case Study

India, home to over 1.4 billion people, is acutely vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. The Delhi National Capital Region (NCR), encompassing Delhi and its surrounding urban and semi-urban areas, represents a unique microcosm where environmental degradation and rapid urbanization intersect. The region is frequently cited for its hazardous air quality, water scarcity, and increasing frequency of heatwaves and unseasonal weather events (World Air Quality Report, 2023; Central Pollution Control Board [CPCB], 2022). These environmental stressors are particularly salient for young adults, who are not only more aware of global environmental issues but also face the prospect of living with the long-term consequences of current ecological trends (Hickman et al., 2021).

Rationale and Objectives

Despite growing global interest in climate anxiety, research focusing on the psychological impacts of environmental change among Indian youth—especially in the context of Delhi NCR—remains limited. This qualitative study aims to fill this gap by exploring the lived experiences of young adults in Delhi NCR, integrating cognitive-behavioural theory, and providing an empirically grounded

framework for understanding climate anxiety in this context. The objectives are to: (1) Explore the lived experiences of climate anxiety and eco-distress among Delhi NCR youth; (2) Identify the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural manifestations of climate-related distress; (3) Apply the cognitive-behavioural model to understand psychological mechanisms; (4) Examine cultural and contextual factors that shape these experiences; (5) Provide recommendations for interventions and policy.

Review of Literature

Defining Climate Anxiety and Eco-Distress

Climate anxiety is defined as a chronic or acute fear of environmental catastrophe, often accompanied by feelings of helplessness, guilt, and existential dread (Clayton & Karazsia, 2020). Eco-distress encompasses a broader range of emotional responses to environmental degradation, including sadness, anger, and grief (Albrecht, 2011). These phenomena are distinct from general anxiety disorders but may overlap in symptomatology and impact (Pihkala, 2020).

Global Trends in Climate Anxiety

Recent studies indicate that climate anxiety is particularly prevalent among young people worldwide. Hickman et al. (2021), in a large-scale survey of 10,000 youth across ten countries, found that over 60% reported feeling 'very' or 'extremely' worried about climate change, with significant impacts on daily functioning and mental health. The psychological burden is often exacerbated by perceptions of governmental inaction and a sense of powerlessness (Ojala, 2012).

Climate Anxiety in the Indian Context

While global data are increasingly available, research on climate anxiety in India is still emerging. A few studies have begun to document the psychological impacts of environmental degradation, particularly air pollution, on Indian youth (Gupta et al., 2022; Singh & Choudhury, 2023). For instance, Gupta et al. (2022) found that students in Delhi reported high levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms during periods of severe air pollution, with many expressing concerns about long-term health and environmental sustainability.

Environmental Stressors in Delhi NCR

Delhi NCR is characterized by a confluence of environmental stressors, including: Air Pollution: Delhi consistently ranks among the world's most polluted cities, with PM2.5 and PM10 levels far exceeding safe limits (IQAir, 2023; CPCB, 2022). Heatwaves and Extreme Weather: The region has experienced record-breaking heatwaves, unseasonal rainfall, and increased frequency of dust storms (IMD, 2023). Water Scarcity: Rapid urbanization and over-extraction have led to acute water shortages, particularly during summer months (NITI Aayog, 2019). Loss of Green Spaces: Urban sprawl has resulted in the loss of parks and natural habitats, reducing opportunities for restorative contact with nature (Sharma et al., 2021). These factors contribute to a pervasive sense of environmental threat among young adults, who are both witnesses to and victims of these changes.

Psychological Manifestations Among Young Adults

Young adults in Delhi NCR exhibit a range of psychological responses to environmental stressors, including: Anxiety and Worry: Persistent concerns about health, future prospects, and the well-being of loved ones. Anger and Frustration: Directed at perceived governmental inaction or societal apathy. Helplessness and Hopelessness: A sense of being unable to effect meaningful change. Somatic Symptoms: Headaches, sleep disturbances, and fatigue, often exacerbated during periods of high pollution or extreme weather (Gupta et al., 2022).

Gaps in the Literature

Despite these findings, there remains a paucity of systematic research on climate anxiety among young adults in Delhi NCR. Most studies focus on physical health outcomes, with limited attention to psychological mechanisms or intervention strategies. There is also a need for culturally sensitive frameworks that account for the unique socio-environmental context of the region.

Materials and Method

Aim: The study aimed at exploring the emotional and psychological impact of environmental and climate changes among young adults in Delhi-NCR.

Objectives

To explore the emotional response of young adults towards the rapid environmental and climate changes in Delhi-NCR.

To adapt the Cognitive-Behavioral framework for developing a better understanding of the cognitive appraisals that impact emotional and behavioral responses.

To study the influence of cultural led beliefs, societal norms and spiritual foundations on letting individuals adopt coping mechanisms in the face of environmental changes.

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design using semi-structured in-depth interviews to explore the lived experiences of young adults residing in Delhi-NCR experiencing rapid environmental and climate changes. A qualitative approach was chosen to capture the nuanced, subjective experiences of participants and to understand whether the situation or its appraisal is responsible for the climate anxiety (if any) in young adults. Integrating the Cognitive-Behavior model would help uncover the complex interplay between environmental stressors, cognitive processes, emotional responses, and behavioural patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The study was grounded in a phenomenological framework, which seeks to understand how individuals make sense of their experiences (Smith et al., 2009).

Participants and Sampling

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit 24 young adults (ages 18-25) residing in Delhi NCR for at least five years. The sample included 13 females and 11 males from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and educational institutions across Delhi, Gurgaon, Noida, and Faridabad. Inclusion criteria were: (1) age between 18-25 years; (2) current residence in Delhi NCR for at least 5 years; (3) self-reported concern about environmental issues; (4) willingness to participate in audio-recorded interviews. Participants were recruited through university notice boards, social media platforms, and environmental activist groups. Sample size was determined by data saturation, achieved when no new themes emerged from successive interviews (Guest et al., 2006).

Data Collection

The time period chosen for Semi-structured interviews was between September 2023 and December 2023, as it was a period when Delhi experienced high AQI levels and extreme weather events. The interactions lasted for about 45 to 90 minutes and were conducted in participants' comfortable and preferred language (English, Hindi, or a mix). The interview questions and flow was developed focused around the cognitive-behavioural model and existing literature, covering topics such as: (1) Personal experiences with climate and environmental changes in Delhi NCR; (2) Cognitive appraisals and perceptions about climate change and pollution; (3) Physiological and emotional responses to environmental stressors; (4) Coping strategies and behavioural changes; (5) Cultural and familial influences on environmental perceptions; (6) Future concerns and hopes. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and then written down as verbatim. The authors maintained notes to acquire any non-verbal cues and contextual information.

Data Analysis

The data received in the form of verbatim from participants through interview format was recorded with their consent and manuscripts were made by listening to the interviews to narrow down the content. After developing manuscripts with important content, they were read thoroughly two-three times by each author of the research paper. After adequate familiarization with the content, the authors color coded initial patterns across the data. The literature was reviewed to name the themes appropriately. Post defining and naming the themes, the authors found relevant verbatim as example to support the themes.

Ethical Considerations

The authors presented the draft of the research to the ethical committee before beginning data collection. Once the ethical approval was obtained, the participants were approached and were asked to provide a written informed consent that assured them of their confidentiality and right to withdraw from the study at any point without having to face any consequences. Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect participant identity.

RESULTS

Thematic analysis revealed five major themes that capture the experiences of climate anxiety among young adults in Delhi NCR. These themes illustrate the complex interplay between environmental triggers, cognitive appraisals, emotional responses, and behavioural adaptations, aligning with and extending the cognitive-behavioural framework.

Theme 1: Embodied Environmental Distress

Participants described feeling physical and bodily experiences that were brought in by environmental changes that just went beyond mere awareness to become deeply embodied distress. The pollution was not just seen but felt in their bodies, creating a constant state of physical and psychological vigilance.

"Every morning the grey sky just makes me feel heavy and tight in my chest. The pollution feels like a part of my system now, in my lungs, in my blood. I feel as if I have become contaminated." - P, 22

"During November and December, my phone shows 500 AQI or even higher, I tend to have this constant headache. Honestly, it's not just physical–it's this heavy feeling like doomsday, as if we are just slowly poisoning ourselves." - A, 24

A lot of participants reported psychosomatic symptoms including difficulties while breathing, skin irritation, and constant state of tiredness that intensified as the pollution increased. These physical manifestations were intertwined with emotional distress, creating a feedback loop of anxiety. Individuals also expressed feeling a heightened sense of awareness. Every sneeze, cough or little discomfort in their body made them blame it on the pollution and the deteriorated state of the environment.

Theme 2: Future-Oriented Catastrophic Thinking

Catastrophic thinking about the future was the dominant cognitive distortion that was observed among participants. Participants found themselves constantly worrying about long-term health consequences, career prospects, and family planning decisions.

"I often find myself feeling mind choked with the thought of developing lung cancer by 40. I wonder how many years of life I'm losing by living here."- R, 23

"Delhi has my heart, but I wouldn't ever want to raise my children here. What kind of a life would I be choosing for them? Always have to be indoors, or keep falling sick?" - K, 25

"When I think of how 2050 would look like, I feel paralyzed. Will Delhi even be a livable city? Will there be water to drink? It could be possible that we are the generation to know this city." - A, 21

Participants had a lot of "what if" questions that kept them ruminating about the worst-case scenarios of the future making it hard for them to live and enjoy in the present. They reported that environmental deterioration directly or indirectly controlled their decisions for their life planning, from career to relationship decisions.

Theme 3: Collective Helplessness and Individual Agency

The situation made participants believe that they were responsible for doing their bit towards the environment but also felt being a part of a collective crisis that needed substantial efforts for bringing in some significant change. It made them feel both responsible but helpless as they could only do their little bit.

"I do everything that I possibly can at my end–from segregating waste, using public transport to conserving water. But then the damage is at a large scale from construction dust being everywhere, cars honking to factories polluting. How will my small changes be of any good?" - S, 20

"I have started feeling guilty when I order food on Zomato or use the AC. But then why do we have to go through this, makes me so angry. Just because the policies and regulations are not in place." - V, 22

"We find ourselves doing damage control like organizing clean-up drives, awareness campaigns. It feels good in the moment, but actually it's like putting a band-aid on cancer." - R, 19

This theme revealed how climate anxiety in Delhi NCR is shaped by the disconnect between individual environmental consciousness and systemic inaction, leading to feelings of betrayal by authorities and older generations.

Theme 4: Cultural Coping and Spiritual Reconciliation

Culture and spirituality seemed to play a role in both providing comfort and being sites of conflict while individuals maneuvered their way through climate anxiety. Participants relied on religious beliefs, wisdom obtained by elders in the family, and cultural practices while also having a constant doubt about their adequacy in addressing environmental crisis.

"My nani refers to this time as Kalyug, the age of darkness. It helps sometimes when I think of all this being a part of a larger cosmic cycle but it also makes me want to give up." - D, 24

"Diwali makes me feel so conflicted. It's my favorite time of the year full of traditions, but some people keep lighting the fireworks making everything worse. How do you balance culture and environment?"- A, 21

"My parents keep saying that they have seen things worse than us and we will survive it but is the question about adjusting anymore–it's about survival. They don't understand the science, the irreversibility." - K, 23

Finding solace in religious practices like praying, meditating could be a temporary relief but it also made people feel guilty when they invested in religious practices like festival celebration or lighting ritual fires.The intergenerational divide in environmental perception created additional stress within families.

Theme 5: Behavioral Oscillation Between Engagement and Withdrawal

Participants expressed feeling a constant state of oscillating between experiencing intense environmental engagement/responsibility and suddenly feeling completely overwhelmed leading to total withdrawal avoidance of everything happening externally. This behavioral pattern has just been a reflection to the emotional turmoil that individuals encounter due to environmental concerns.

"I behave very bipolar with my actions because on some days I'm checking AQI every hour, scrolling through every possible article, attending awareness campaigns but on the other hand I delete all applications, avoid every news. It's too much." - M, 22

"I was very excited and motivated to join an environmental NGO. But then I saw nothing changing so I just got annoyed and had a burn out. Now I focus on my studies and try not to think about it." - R, 25

"I feel stuck in a vicious cycle. Experiencing extreme panic when pollution rises and taking all necessary measures like wearing a N95 and buying air purifiers to just feeling lost and numb after it's over. We're always swinging between crisis mode and denial." - I, 20

This period of swinging between two emotional states was compared to feeling like a "pendulum". It was described as being very overwhelming and emotionally exhausting as individuals struggled to find a balance and find their calm. Many reported experiencing 'eco-fatigue' and the need to take a mental break that could their mental health.

The Cognitive-Behavioral Model and Climate Anxiety

Overview of the Cognitive-Behavioral Model

The cognitive-behavioral model (CBT) emphasizes the interplay of thoughts emotions and behavior. It suggests how the negative appraisals of environmental triggers could lead to psychological distress (Beck, 1976). In the context of climate anxiety, environmental triggers such as air pollution or

extreme weather events can activate maladaptive thought patterns, leading to heightened emotional distress and unhelpful behaviours.

Application to Climate Anxiety in Delhi NCR

Environmental Triggers (Situation)

In Delhi NCR, frequent exposure to hazardous air quality, heatwaves, and visible environmental degradation serves as a constant reminder of ecological crisis. These situations could act as potent triggers for anxiety, particularly among young adults who are more attuned to global environmental discourse.

Cognitive Appraisals (Thoughts)

These environmental situations could lead individuals into appraising the scenario through distorted ways such as catastrophic thinking ('The air is so bad, I will get sick and die young'), overgeneralization ('Nothing will ever get better'), or personalization ('It's my generation's fault/responsibility'). Such cognitive distortions amplify feelings of vulnerability and helplessness (Beck, 1976; Pihkala, 2020).

Emotional Responses (Emotions)

These maladaptive thoughts give rise to intense emotions, including anxiety, fear, sadness, and anger. The chronic nature of environmental stressors in Delhi NCR means that these emotions may become persistent, leading to eco-distress or even clinical anxiety disorders.

Behavioral Reactions (Behavior)

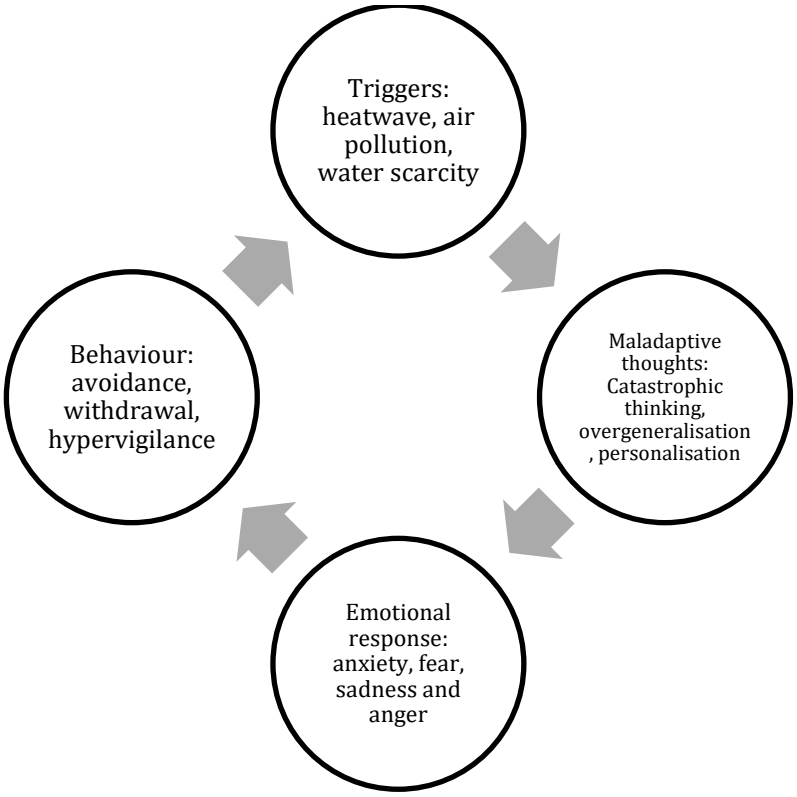
Behavioral responses to environmental triggers may include avoidance (e.g., staying indoors when AQI is high), hypervigilance (constantly keeping a check of air quality indices), or activism (getting involved in environment awareness movements). In some rare and serious cases, maladaptive behaviors such as substance use or social withdrawal may emerge as coping mechanisms.

Integrating the CBT Model: A Conceptual Figure

A conceptual figure has been created to incorporate the current scenario of climate change in the cognitive-behavioral model to help develop a better understanding of perceptions of individuals that could be leading to any possible emotional distress and maladaptive behaviors.

Figure 1. The Cognitive-Behavioural Model of Climate Anxiety Among Young Adults in Delhi NCR

This conceptual diagram illustrates how environmental triggers (such as air pollution, heatwaves, and water scarcity) initiate a cycle of maladaptive thoughts (catastrophic thinking, overgeneralization, personalization), which in turn generate emotional responses (anxiety, fear, sadness, anger) and lead to various behaviours (avoidance, hypervigilance, activism, withdrawal). The cyclical and interactive nature of these components is highlighted, with environmental factors as the initiating trigger.



DISCUSSION

The current study aimed at understanding the impact of environmental and climate changes on young adults in Delhi-NCR. This objective was met through structuring the research as a qualitative study which would help delve into subjective experiences of individuals. A semi-structured interview was carried out with participants and the data was further analyzed to derive themes through the lens of a cognitive behavioral framework.

The findings of this study both confirm and extend existing literature on climate anxiety. Experiences of physiological distress due to environmental changes aligns with recent work on the somatic features of ecological-anxiety (Clayton & Karazsia, 2020), while highlighting the particular intensity of these experiences in a heavily polluted urban context. The theme of distorted catastrophic thinking has also been reported in another study (Hickman et al., 2021) but with specific concerns about livability in Delhi NCR.

The study reveals how Delhi NCR's specific environmental challenges could create specific challenges for individuals making them vulnerable to experiencing climate anxiety. Unlike gradual climate changes experienced elsewhere, Delhi-NCR can pose immediate, visible, and tangible environmental threats on a daily basis. The reduced visibility due to pollution—literally seeing the toxic air they are breathing end up creating a state of panic and hypervigilance.

The participants faced a constant juggle between traditional cultural practices and environmental consciousness which resulted in significant amount of distress, underscoring the need for adapting to culturally sensitive approaches to climate anxiety. There has been an intergenerational divide in perceiving the environmental concerns that suggests the need for family-based interventions that could help navigate through different worldviews and find effective coping strategies to address the concern.

The CBT framework helps develop insight into cognitive appraisals about the environmental changes that could be causing young adults into experiencing climate anxiety. The collective nature of the threat, the realistic basis of many fears, and the cultural context require modifications to traditional

CBT approaches. The constant shuffle of being engaged and withdrawn suggests that more sustainable work on thought restructuring, rather than just focusing on reducing symptom (anxiety reduction), might be a more appropriate therapeutic goal for the given scenario.

The study provides valuable and specific insights into understanding the prevalence and causal factors of climate anxiety among young adults residing in Delhi-NCR. The qualitative approach adapted for the study gave the authors an opportunity to explore the topic in depth and understand intricate details that captured quantitative approach could have missed. However, the participants were only those who spoke English and Hindi may not represent all socioeconomic groups. The self-selected nature of participants may have attracted those more environmentally conscious. Future research should include more diverse samples and longitudinal designs to track changes over time.

Policy and Intervention Implications

Mental Health Interventions

The results of the study suggest the need for tailor-made mental health interventions that acknowledge the unrecognized battle of individuals experiencing anxiety in the face of rapidly changing situations of the environment in the 21st century. The interventions should be holistic enough in helping build resilience while working on effectively reducing anxiety with the help of adaptive coping strategies. Group therapy formats that combine psychoeducation, cognitive restructuring, and collective action planning may be particularly effective. Mental health practitioners at the University level should acknowledge and take into consideration climate anxiety as a valid and pressing mental health concern.

Environmental Policy and Communication

It has to be recognized by policymakers that environmental changes could significantly impact mental health and it needs to be addressed with appropriate plan of action. While creating a cost-benefit analysis, the psychological impact of not taking adequate action for the environmental changes should be accounted and considered.

Educational Initiatives

Understanding of the environment and climate should be included into the curriculum to help acquaint the current and upcoming generations with changes and ways to cope with them physically and psychologically. Individuals experiencing any form of anxiety or distress related to environment can be referred to support groups or mental health practitioners for professional help.

Community-Based Approaches

Communities should plan and develop effective initiatives to support the environment and individual mental health. Programs such as mindfulness, yoga and mental health supporting activities should be encouraged. Religious leaders and cultural foundations can help navigate a collective and effective way of finding a subtle balance between traditional values and environmental responsibilities.

Future Research Directions

This study uncovers several areas for future research: (1) Longitudinal studies that could track development of climate anxiety over a period of time and its relationship with environmental events; (2) Interventional studies that could test culturally adapted CBT based protocols for targeting climate anxiety; (3) Comparative studies across populations belonging to different socio-economic backgrounds; (4) Understanding the protective factors and resilience in the face of environmental adversity; (5) Development of validated measures for climate anxiety in the Indian context; (6) The role of social media in shaping climate anxiety.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative study provides empirical evidence for the significant psychological impact of environmental degradation on young adults in Delhi NCR. The five themes—embodied environmental distress, future-oriented catastrophic thinking, collective helplessness and individual

agency, cultural coping and spiritual reconciliation, and behavioural oscillation—reveal the complex nature of climate anxiety in this context. The findings support the utility of the cognitive-behavioural model while highlighting the need for contextual adaptations. As Delhi NCR continues to face severe environmental challenges, addressing the mental health impacts becomes crucial for the wellbeing of its youth. The study calls for integrated approaches that address both environmental and psychological dimensions of the climate crisis, recognizing that the mental health of young adults is intrinsically linked to the health of their environment.

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