Is the government's negligence towards climate change action responsible for creating eco-anxiety in today's youth?

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ABSTRACT:

The author's major aim with this research paper is to discuss whether the responsibility of mitigating global emissions lies with today's politicians and authorities, or rather with groups of young individuals who will have the duty fall on their shoulders once they have no world leaders to look up to. One of the primary focuses of this paper was to examine whether or not the deteriorating mental health of today's youth is taken into acknowledgment, and if so, as well as to identify the entities who are answerable for the stress and uncertainty that they face on a daily basis.

With every passing year, increasing evidence of climate change presents itself as worrisome natural disasters and heightening global temperatures. Scientists and ecologists give heedless warnings to governments, businesses and the world about the incoming dangers of climate change. As such, among the predominant features of the paper is to outline who indeed is approaching these warnings earnestly, as well as the people who take the most responsibility about confronting this situation head-on: Adults who have the power or children that don't?

Are individual actions imposed by companies on society even useful at all, or is it simply a strategic defense mechanism to misdirect from the true transgressors? What effective measures can the youth take to ensure that their voices are heard? What is stopping people in power from taking accountability and implementing measures to protect the future? Do governments and multinational companies owe the youth complete transparency into their action, or lack thereof, to help lessen youth's pressure?

Keywords: Eco-anxiety, climate change, youth activism, policies, fossil fuel companies

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INTRODUCTION

One of the shocking revelations of 2023 was how it was the hottest year on record since temperature records from 1850 (Ebbs et al. 2024). With such statistics, climate change no longer remains a future threat, but rather our present reality. Despite this, governments around the globe have failed to set up and maintain effective strategies to combat this crisis. Consequently, there's a rise in the anxiety and stress that young adults feel for the future of the planet (Bellemo & Sanson, 2021). To further worsen the mental health of the youth, governments, world leaders, as well as multinational oil and gas companies, shift the blame from themselves to common people to solve this crisis and to take actions that will somehow be enough to counteract the millions of emissions produced every year. As the United Nations Secretary-General, *António Guterres stated, "*My generation has largely failed until now to preserve both justice in the world and to preserve the planet. It is your generation that must make us accountable to make sure that we don't betray the future of humankind" (United Nations).

With the ever-increasing media coverage, discussion on social media, as well as environmental damage being included in school curricula, children face eco-anxiety at an unprecedented level. It's important to understand the pressure that the youth have to face. Many studies found that they are unable to cope with the emerging consequences. UNDP's Peoples' Climate Vote, the largest survey conducted on the topic of climate change, estimates that 70% of individuals under 18 years old are most likely to believe climate change is a global emergency. (UNDP, 2022). The psychological states of young adults are in constant danger of being ruined by the fear of climate change.

Understanding the implications this has on the psychological well-being of our youth, and investigating the real culprit, will help us grab ahold of this disastrous situation. The primary objective is to explore the causes and consequences of eco-anxiety faced by today's youth. In some cases, youth feel so much disappointment and frustration and go to great extents that can

sometimes harm themselves just to have their voices heard. Furthermore, the paper will attempt to discuss the role of governments vs. oil and gas companies in combating climate change and their refusal to cooperate. Finally, the paper will address the essential aspect of coping mechanisms for eco-anxiety, and ways to address climate change in a healthy and efficient way.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Causes of Eco-anxiety:

The prolonged consequences of the climate crisis are no longer only tied to environmental shifts such as storms, wildfires, landscape transformations, and rising temperatures- It's starting to affect mental health too. The American Psychology Association describes eco-anxiety as "the chronic fear of environmental cataclysm that arises from observing the impact of climate change and the associated concern for one's future" (Iberdrola, ND). A recent study reported that a total of 308 climate-related disasters were recorded globally, exceeding those from the last 30 years, resulting in an average of 16 droughts, 147 floods, and 100 storms (Asian Disaster Reduction Center, 2023). Among these, floods in Pakistan, droughts in Africa, typhoons in the Philippines, wildfires in Australia, and hurricanes in the Caribbean were regarded as the most devastating events. This has caused many people to become increasingly aware that the threatening danger of climate change is no longer an impending disaster glued in the future, but rather looms in front of us and is now our reality.

Severn Cullis-Suzuki, who gave a speech at the UN Earth Summit in 1992, got the title of "The Girl Who Silenced the World for 5 Minutes" when she urged global pioneers with a powerful statement: "You grown-ups say you love us. But I challenge you, please, make your actions reflect your words." (Vidal, 2022) In the COP24 event of 2018, Greta Thunberg, the strong-willed environmental activist who has taken the world by storm, addressed the world leaders in her speech and how little they talk about the climate crisis: "You are not mature enough to tell it like it is. Even that burden, you leave to us children." (NPR, 2019) The shocking contrast in the above 2 speeches makes a shameful revelation: little to nothing has changed even 3 decades later.

Climate change, in turn, causes increased amounts of eco-anxiety in young children, causing negative emotions such as fear, anxiety, despair, hopelessness, instability and outrage to arise. UNDP's Peoples' Climate Vote, the largest survey conducted on the topic of climate change, estimates that 70% of individuals under 18 years old are most likely to believe climate change is a global emergency. (UNDP, 2022). The psychological states of young adults are in constant danger of being ruined by the fear of climate change.

For many decades, governments and people in positions of power have ignored their responsibilities whilst young individuals command to see evident steps to take against the climate crisis but have been responded with no change. This consistent refusal to take young children's voices into account, accompanied by the many layers of deception and neglect that older generations treat the youth with, adds to the psychological distress that youngsters face on a daily basis regarding matters of global warming.

The Devastating Consequences of Eco-anxiety in Youth:

This pattern of governments' failure to protect young citizens' mental health by responding to their pressing concerns, arguably acts as one of the greatest violations of human rights. At the COP28 climate summit in Dubai, 12 year old Licypriya Kangujam disrupted a key session and rushed onto the stage, holding a sign above her head that said: "End fossil fuels. Save our planet and our future" (Hindustan Times, 2023). When later interviewed, she shared her sincere statement, "I protested because I want leaders to act, they must fulfil the promises they have made" (Badam, 2023). This example shows that there are soaring levels of "moral injury" in youth, which refers to the psychological and social impact of events involving betrayal of one's own deeply held moral beliefs (Koenig and Zaben, 2021)

A similar instance took place in October of 2022, a Claude Monet painting in a German museum was vandalized by two young climate activists in an attempt to bring about a wake-up call for climate issues and protest against fossil fuel extraction (Jones, 2022). The response by the museum director further fueled the fury in young individuals' climate activism: "While I understand the activists' urgent concern in the face of the climate catastrophe, I am shocked by the means with which they are trying to lend weight to their demands" (AlArabiya News, ND).

As observed in the aforementioned events, it is evident that there is a pattern being followed by young activists, each one getting its attention on the headlines more than the one before. All adding up just for one purpose: to grab the media's and government's attention, to demand answers and actions. To ask: How many more children have to risk their own lives before they are taken seriously?

This provides weight to the argument that eco-anxiety in young individuals is not entirely associated with the advancing environmental disasters; It is also linked to the failure of more influential entities, such as governments and businesses, to address these looming threats.

Reducing Climate Change on an Individual Level versus on A Global Level
Lack of Accountability from Powerful Entities:

Even though younger individuals have played the smallest role in climate change, they will have to face the most disastrous consequences in the future. This is a strong example of intergenerational unfairness which continues to worsen. According to a 2020 study conducted by PNAS, it was predicted that one third of the world's population will live in a climate similar to the Sahara desert within the next 50 years (Borenstein, 2020). This indicates that the effects of climate change are just around the corner. The study also suggested that by 2070, 3.5 billion people will live in intense hot temperatures that are considered inhabitable in the long-term.

The pressing concerns from younger people about climate change does not stem from their insecurities regarding individual action, but rather that they live in a world where those in power don't take actionable steps to make structured changes and agreements to reduce the problem, or rather refuse to follow up on their agreements. In the 2015 Paris agreement, all governments committed to "pursue efforts" to minimise global warming to 1.5C (2.7F), but are shown to have made no fruitful accomplishments. (UNFCC, ND)

Strategic Misdirection by Fossil Fuel Companies

The idea of carbon footprint was first introduced by BP, the British oil and gas company (Kilgore, 2024). It was used as a key measure and to inform people the amount of greenhouse gas emissions they may be contributing to. Its aim is to push individuals to make well-informed and sustainable choices. It is instead, in the modern day and age, being used as a weapon to misdirect the blame from multinational companies who have the highest emission of carbon dioxide, onto common individuals. This is supported by the evidence that the greater number of greenhouse gas emissions emitted globally are, in fact, not generated by individuals, but rather by the large-scale commercial activities that are controlled by governments and multinational companies. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has stated that 100 companies worldwide are responsible for approximately 70% of carbon dioxide emissions per year (Horný and Matějovcová et al. 2023). Such an alarming figure suggests that independent endeavors alone are nearly not enough to save the planet, but rather it demands action on a global scale.

Over three quarters of global greenhouse gas emissions were massively contributed by the excessive burning of fossil fuels such as coal products, manufactured gases and crude oil (Nunez, 2019). As a way to shift the blame away from themselves, the CEO Majid Jafar of Crescent Petroleum said, “Blaming the producers of oil and gas for climate change is like blaming farmers for obesity. It’s our societal consumption that is the issue.” (Meredith, 2023)

Unfair Consumption by Wealthy Countries

However, is it only governments and world leaders that refuse to opt for more sustainable choices? It was reported by a New York Times investigation that 23 wealthy industrialized nations should be held accountable for an estimated 50% for all historical emissions (Popovich and Plumer, 2021). Additionally, one of the biggest contributors to gas emissions was Japan, with over 77% of emissions between the years of 1751 to 2006, two and a half centuries (Oxfam, 2023).

This provides weightage to the argument that it’s not just oil and gas companies who are to be held accountable for their actions. As The Stockholm Environment Institute analyzed using a

study, the richest 0.1% of the global population emitted a composed amount of 200 tonnes of CO2 per capita every year (Cozzi et al. 2023). What is disconcerting about this is that 200 tonnes is ten times more than the richest 10% emit every year in total. “The super-rich are plundering and polluting the planet to the point of destruction, and it is those who can least afford it who are paying the highest price,” Chiara Liguori, Oxfam’s senior climate justice policy adviser, expressed. (Talukdar, 2023)

The Miniscule Impact of the Common Public Compared to Global Change

To gain a deeper understanding of how much, or how little, of an impact individual action has on the solution of climate change: 6% of the global population fly more than twice and 1% fly more than five times annually, whereas a total 90% only once every year or not at all (Gössling and Humpe, 2020). The same study investigated how in premium class, passengers use three times as much oil as those in economy classes due to the space constraints of airline seats. As a result, in some areas, the total aviation footprint of the top decile exceeds that of the bottom decile.

Statistics of individual carbon footprint involve the following: Firstly, sources of food, which adds up to 10-30% of the typical household’s carbon footprint released on an everyday basis. In addition to that, lower-income households account for a larger share of this figure (Center for Sustainable Systems, 2023). The same study suggested that 68% of food emissions are attributed to the production of food, with meat products releasing more greenhouse gas emissions per calorie compared to that of vegetable products due to an inefficient conversion of plant to animal energy. This evidence suggests that by opting for a vegetarian diet and eating less meat, an individual’s carbon footprint is lowered significantly.

Moving onto transportation, according to the Inventory of U.S. Greenhouse Gas Emissions and Sinks 1990–2021: During 2021, transportation contributed the largest share of the total US greenhouse gas emissions, which is 29% (EPA, 2021). The major sources of which are common means of transport used on a daily basis worldwide: railroads, cars, air travel, all have a factor in transportation end-use sector emissions.

For every mile driven, a typical passenger car emits 0.77 pounds of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere (Center for Sustainable Systems, 2023). The researchers further concluded that diesel releases 22.5 pounds of carbon dioxide every gallon while gasoline releases 19.4 pounds of CO2 when they're burned. Additionally, diesel contains 11% more BTU per gallon, cultivating effective fuel efficiency. It was also duly noted in the same study that the fuel energy-efficiency of air travel had shot up to 115% between 1990 and 2019, the reason being higher levels of occupation. Only a 20% increase in fuel efficiency was seen between 1990 and 2021 as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic (Center for Sustainable Systems, 2023). As a consequence of COVID-19 limitations, emissions released per passenger rose 47% from 2019 to 2021 after declining 44% from 1990 to 2019.

Despite these appalling statistics, progress is being made slowly but surely to overcome this grave obstacle - In order to entirely mitigate all greenhouse emissions, the Biden-Harris Administration published the U.S. National Blueprint for Transportation Decarbonization (Office of Energy Efficiency & Renewable Energy, n.d.). It serves as a step-by-step action plan to cut down any and all enormous amounts of greenhouse emissions from the transportation sector by 2050. This was done to meet US' President Biden's efforts to eradicate the climate crisis and achieve his targets of having net-zero carbon emissions by 2050.

Although individual action, ranging from risky protests to saving electricity in their homes, holds the potential to create a ripple effect against combating the climate crisis, the overall responsibility lies with world leaders and those in power to assist this systemic change. As international corporations emit the largest amounts of fossil fuels, governments play a key role in identifying threats and reducing them.

Action Taken by Governments:

A shocking incident of negligence occurred when Donald Trump, former president of the United States, agreed to build the Keystone XL oil pipeline in 2017 (Smith and Kassam, 2017). Its construction presents severe consequences in increasing carbon emissions as well as harming natural habitats. The pipeline's location near the Ogallala Aquifer is a distressing matter for environmentalists as it is planned to cut directly through the world's largest aquifer. The pipeline will not only generate more emissions than a regular oil pipeline but even the smallest leakage

can contaminate the surrounding underwater which accounts for drinking water for 1.8 million people and is one-third of the country's irrigation source (Barbash et al, 2018). This serves as an important example as it provides evidence to the argument that some world leaders are not taking actions with their citizens' best interests in mind.

Case study 1: Australia

Australia has placed zero restrictions on renewable energy and has instead continued to finance coal, eventually being the number 1 cause for natural disasters such as fires, droughts and floods in Australia. This causes people to have no other choice but to be forcefully displaced (AFP, 2023). "Displacements of populations and destruction of cultural language and tradition is equivalent in our minds to genocide," Tony de Brum, Marshall Island's foreign minister commented, as Radio New Zealand reports (Pashley, 2015).

Environmental scientists strongly recommend that for the growth of a greener future, Australia must cut down emissions by 47%. The country has only agreed to a meagre 26% yet at the moment, has only attained a 7% reduction of emissions (Climate Action Tracker, 2023). Opposed to the international treaty's agreed target of alleviating the climate crisis, In the 1997 Kyoto Climate Change Conference, Kyoto carbon credits permitted Australia to increase its global greenhouse gas emissions by 8% between 1990 and 2012 (The Straits Times, 2023). With Australia's current leadership, it remains unclear whether or not they are aware of the importance of this matter, as they threatened to extract their contract from the Paris agreement.

Case study 2: China

In contrast with Australia, there is strong dedication shown by China's government to mitigate the consequences of climate change as seen by their investments towards renewable energy and environmental protection projects. Shuang Liu, a senior associate at the World Resources Institute, reported that the country issued a ban on fossil fuel factory projects and has seen a robust commitment from Chinese banks who declined investments in building such factories (Prytherch et al. 2023). Moreover, they have even stopped overseas investments in coal projects

since September 2021 (Xue, 2023). It is clear that China prioritizes climate change and enforces policies to address it.

Another crucial action taken by the Chinese government is enacting a nationwide strategy for wetlands protection, animal species protection, and conserving natural habitats while also growing forested areas in the country (Davidson, 2023). The government has not only worked towards protecting the environment but has also heavily invested in electric vehicles such as battery-operated, plug-in hybrid, and fuel cell vehicles. The London School of Economics estimated that China has around ten million new-energy vehicles which account for more than half of the world's total. Many policy-makers have praised China's efforts including Cory Combs, associate director at China's Trivium and responsible for the country's climate policy, who commends China as 'remarkably ambitious on its renewable energy goals' and reports that the country will produce 1200 GWatts in renewable energy by 2030 (Combs, 2022).

Overall, China presents an excellent example of a committed government with a comprehensive and multi-faceted approach involving businesses working together to address one of the most significant challenges facing the planet.

C*ase study 3: Morocco*

Morocco is another splendid example of countries striving at their highest capacity to confront the threat of climate change head-on. The country has established the NOOR concentrated solar plant that is predicted to produce 35% of Morocco's electricity needs by 2030 (African Development Bank Group, ND). The government is also intensifying its efforts and aims to source 52% of total electricity from renewable energy in the next decade (Utilities Middle East staff, 2024). In addition, the government has ceased investments in fossil fuel projects by officially lifting all subsidies on oil, diesel, and natural gas products. This brings many benefits including an accelerated transition towards cleaner energy sources like solar, wind, and hydroelectric power, decreased demand for fossil fuels, and contributes to a large reduction in greenhouse gas emissions.

Another large-scale project is the Plan Maroc Vert designed by the Moroccan government to enhance agricultural productivity and help it become a driving force in the nation's economy

(Mathez and Loftus). Not only does the project utilise sustainable agriculture practices that preserve soil health and enhance water conservation, but also promotes reforestation to increase forest areas, and relies on solar power for all farming operations. This investment, therefore, helps mitigate the carbon footprint of agriculture. Overall, Morocco with its strategic plans and investments is actively pursuing ambitious initiatives to combat climate change.

Ways to Help Reduce Eco-anxiety in Youth

Circling back to the topic of eco-anxiety, it is primarily influenced by betrayal and the lack of trust that youth feel associated with governments and businesses around the world. As discussed, countries like Australia, China, and Morocco have put varying amounts of effort in the fight against climate change, and need to accelerate their efforts in order to rest the minds of the youth and protect their uncertain future. A recent study suggests that governments and mass media could play an important role in decreasing the effects of eco-anxiety in young adults.

Because of the continuous coverage about the deteriorating state of climate change in scientific articles, documentaries, novels, and everyday news, it is very difficult for youth to not feel eco-anxious. The study also emphasized the need of mass media such as news channels and social media, and how they can put efforts into reporting more accurate information about current and future predictions about climate change while also reporting the efforts taken by local businesses in combating it. It also claimed that governments need to become more transparent about the investments, projects and strategies that they plan to implement to help regain the trust and confidence that youth have in them. Overall, it is crucial that global powerful entities take steps to inform the youth about the protective strategies they are investing in the youth's future as this will greatly help reduce eco-anxiety.

METHODOLOGY:

The research method obtained for this research report was a literature review. Through the use of qualitative research, it was ensured that information was collected through credible sources such as newspaper articles, an in-depth review of case studies, virtual communities, and personal

accounts of young individuals regarding climate change that were obtained through interviews and surveys.

Choosing a literature review comes with its benefits - not only does it provide a multifaceted account to pick and choose from but includes many different perspectives and accounts of the same story which may help in looking at an event objectively. It also plays a significant role in providing top quality literature pieces and an insightful comprehension of studies that researchers have implemented in order to make the topic justified to its full extent. However, the reliability of an article is dependent on the author's complex understanding and must be objective rather than subjective to give the best results. Some may include information that is not up to date, as well as flaws in their evaluations and findings that can't be overlooked. This is owing to the fact that researchers are required to constantly keep themselves informed about global issues and must constantly evolve their perception and apprehension about the topic.

Finally, it was essential to use both qualitative and quantitative data to support this report and ensure a high-quality study on this complex topic. The secondary sources, gathered from highly reliable organisations, used in the report are sufficient for the purpose of this research. The use of qualitative research also has to do with the fact that the ever-present stress and anxiety in youth is not well expressed in statistics as it could instead be understood thoroughly by their own opinions and experiences. Additionally, some research required numerical data to show proportions, money invested, carbon emissions to show the weight of the problem. However, given that the topic focused on pressure faced by youth, it was essential to include qualitative data about their feelings, frustration, and overall views on this problem.

Other research methods could be conducted for this report to gather primary data on the topic. An online survey can be shared with youth across the globe with questions specifically addressing eco-anxiety and gaining quantitative and qualitative data about their view on this topic. More interactive procedures like focus groups with youth can help gain deeper insights into their sense of urgency for global warming and understand where their frustration stems from for the negligence shown by leaders across the globe. Moreover, one-to-one semi-structured interviews with youth activists will be beneficial in getting their perspectives on climate change activism and their motivation to join this movement. Structured interviews with psychologist

experts who have expertise in dealing with young adults can help shed light on the coping techniques to manage eco-anxiety.

CONCLUSIONS:

The focus of this study was to assess major governments' role on the future of climate change, and how their responses indirectly affect young individuals for better or for worse. This issue has become more prevalent in recent years than ever before, as with each year the consequences of global warming are more detrimental to the point that it poses a serious threat to millions of lives.

Through the literature review, the author aimed to highlight several key aspects in answering the research question such as psychological effects of climate change on youth, companies that emit the most emissions, as well as countries taking an effort to move in the right direction to end on a positive note.

Overall, the researcher believed this was an important topic to address as it contributes to the ongoing discussion of lack of action and the prevailing urgency towards the widely-branched topic of climate change. On one hand, it is evident that many governments and businesses have taken a hold of this situation and are going out of their way to prepare for the future, while on the other hand we see many businesses abstaining from taking accountability by not doing their fair share of input as the public expects them to. To add to this cause, some politicians have gone as far as to relentlessly ignore the ever-increasing problem, thereby putting more pressure on today's youth.

The overwhelming evidence suggests that youth are indeed not at fault for the repercussions of climate change as they have contributed the least global emissions, especially compared to multinational companies and corporate activities. Despite this, they have been burdened with the arduous responsibility to fix climate change, solely owing to the fact that today's children are tomorrow's future.

REFLECTIONS:

In this section, the researcher gives a personal reflection on the strengths and limitations of the report as well as a change in perspective through the research. The project has completed a thorough investigation into the effects of eco-anxiety in young adults and children, providing clear insights and up-to-date statistics on its underlying causes and alarming consequences through reliable secondary sources. This study will be valuable in shedding light on the psychological impacts of climate change, and help to foster policies and support systems for youth experiencing eco-anxiety. Moreover, it may mobilize policy-makers, government leaders, and businesses to participate in global action and treaties to mitigate global warming.

Youth may also benefit from the suggestions on how to better manage eco-anxiety and adopt safer and more effective practices to hold leaders accountable and call for action. In addition, using both quantitative and qualitative research methodology in the form of a literature review allowed the researcher to analyze and select the best-supporting sources to answer the research question. However, there are also limitations to the report, which are the limited control over the reliability of the data collected from secondary sources and a potential bias towards the topic affecting the researcher's analysis of the data.

Researching the paper has enlightened the researcher about certain global issues and the means through which they are currently being solved. By shedding light on this certain topic, it has been brought to the researcher's attention how adults' constant association of resolving global warming with youth has caused a severe rise of eco-anxiety with the concerned individuals. The constant negligence of particular country's governments in the world that have subjected both their young and elderly citizens to the horrors of the future. Both of these have instilled a wide spread of eco-anxiety in children and young adults.

The researcher was well-informed of the dangers that climate change brings to the planet, but through research, they gained awareness on the ever-growing urgency of the situation. By discussing statistics on the growing number of disastrous effects of climate change in recent years, the researcher found the connection that this presents on individuals, mostly evident through distress and negative psychological effects this has on them.

The study has highlighted the need for further investigation and research on the widespread eco-anxiety faced by youth. While there are several studies and reports published on the topic,

there is still a research gap for the best practices to handle the frustration and disappointment that young adults and children feel as well as ways to voice out their concerns without potentially harming themselves. Overall, the complexity of the biggest global issue facing the planet and its effect on the mental health of youth has helped the researcher progress their comprehension to a deeper level and made them recognize the importance of ongoing research in this area.

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