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Climate Grief and Collective Action: Understanding Emotional Responses to Environmental Loss in Urban Youth

Fiza Zulfiqar
fizazulfiqar6666@gmail.com
MPhil Applied Psychology, University of the Punjab

Fatima Zahra
fama.creates512@gmail.com
NCBA&E

Anika Sadaf
Sadafanyka000@gmail.com
National University of Medical Sciences, Islamabad

Momina Idrees
mominaidrees28@gmail.com
Bahauddin Zakariya University

Maham Noor
mahamnoor42002@gmail.com
Bahauddin Zakariya University

Syeda Warisha Tanzeem
wareeshatanzeem350@gmail.com
National College of Business Administration & Economics (NCBAE) /Alhamra University
Corresponding Author: * Fiza Zulfiqar fizazulfiqar6666@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Background: *Climate change has developed as an environmental crisis and psychological burden, especially among the youth while deeply worried about the future. Emotional reactions such as 'climate grief' and 'climate anxiety' have become more prevalent, particularly in urban communities witnessing environmental decline and engaging in climate talk.*

Objective: *The purpose of this study was to explore whether there is a prevalence of climate grief in urban youth and its relationship to collective climate action, possibly mediated by resilience and socioeconomic status.*

Method: *Mixed method study design was used, with 300 urban youth of 18–25 years. A quantitative tool of climate grief, anxiety, resilience, and collective action, followed up by semi-structured interviews, were used for data collection. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlates and multiple regression analysis is, supplemented by thematic analysis for qualitative comments.*

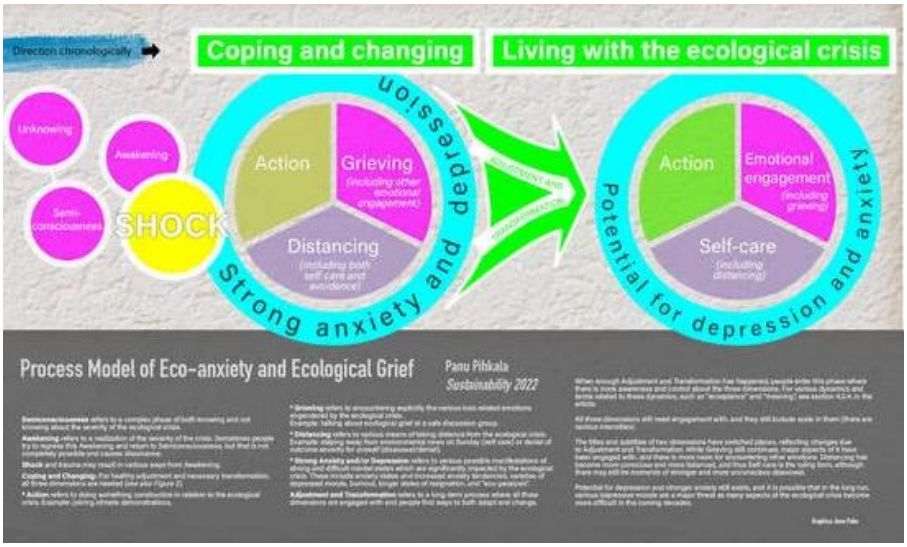
Results: *High levels of climate grief and anxiety were observed, the former of which was shown to significantly predict collective action. This relationship was mediated by resilience, resilient participants were more likely to engage in activism. In addition, socioeconomic differences were observed, poor SES youth evincing more emotional distress. Qualitative anecdotes provided added emotional and motivational weight to climate grief.*

Conclusion: *Climate grief among urban youth is a valid and potent emotional state that has the power to drive collective action, where resilience and social cognition can provide support. Managing eco-emotions in mental health and policy interventions is essential for engaged sustainability.*

Keywords: *Climate grief, urban youth, collective action, resilience, environmental emotions, socioeconomic status*

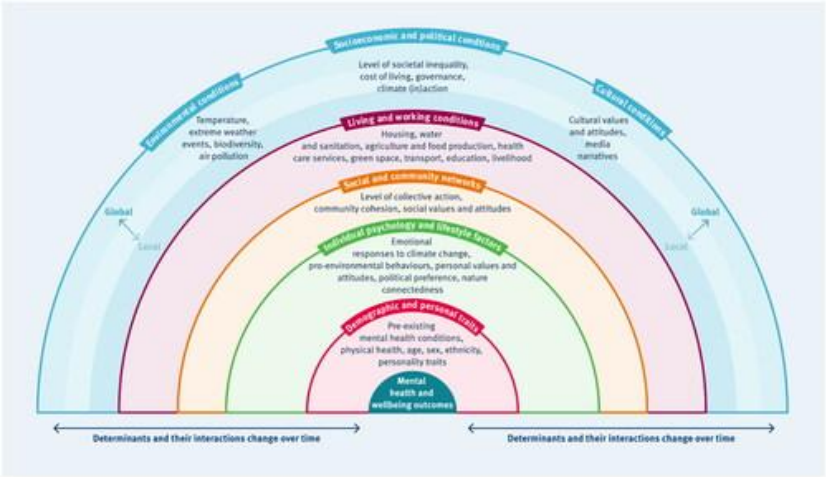
INTRODUCTION

The present day climate crisis is a looming environmental disaster — but it's also a deep emotional scar that has already sunk its tendrils into the heart and soul of humanity and particularly the young who are becoming more aware of the destiny that awaits them on this devastated planet. Climate grief, which includes the suffering brought on by ecological loss and climate change, has become a major emotional challenge for youth who grow up in urban environments, where the changes in the environment might not be so visible but are keenly felt in less direct ways, such as extreme weather events and pollution (Clayton et al., 2023; Ojala, 2021). City kids contend with a complex affective milieu that's been molded by whatever one-of-a kind blend of sociocultural and ecological factors exists where they're growing up, factors that help determine their experience of environmental loss and how it gets converted into the balls of emotional energy that propel collective action (Hickman et al., 2022). This emotional connection to environmental concerns is now being widely acknowledged as a key reason why young people have become involved in climate action, and is changing the landscape of young people's mental health (Meyer et al., 2024).



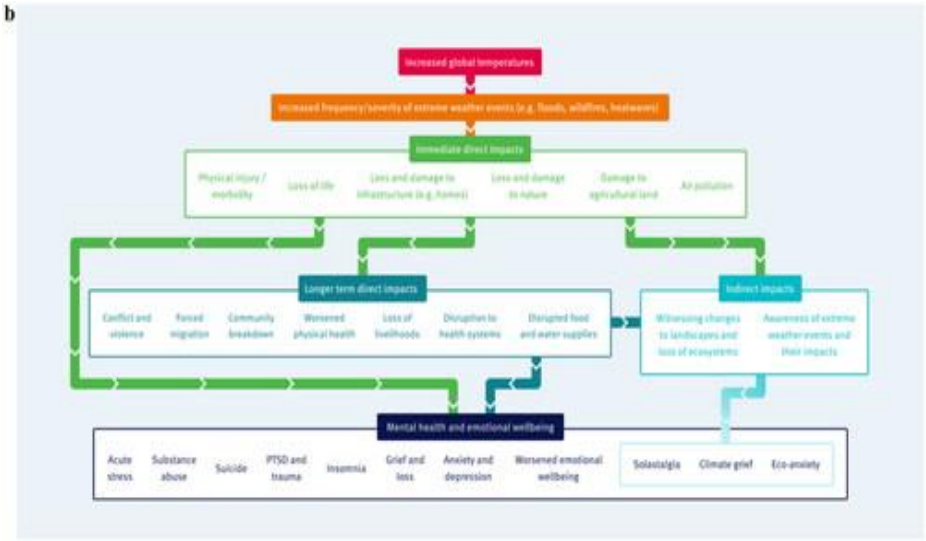
Urban settings pose both challenges and opportunities for the study of climate grief, given their high population density, diversity of inhabitants and levels of access to greenery. Urban youth are burdened by

aggregates of stressors such as air pollution, heat island effects, and socio-economic disparities that compound the psychological weight of climate change(Levine et al., 2021; Smith & Ramirez, 2023). Compared to their rural peer, city-bound youth may have reduced exposure to direct experience of natural environments, modifying how they experience environmental loss and grief, frequently resulting in a loss of feeling connected to or grounded by nature (Thomas et al., 2022). Yet, this detachment can be counter-veiled by access to digital platforms and social networks allowing for shared environmental engagement and activism, suggesting alternative opportunities for expressing climate grief via collective action (Nguyen & Baker, 2024).



Urban young people express a variety of emotions in relation to climate change, from anxiety, fear and anger to hope, often in mixed and complex ways that affect mental health and behaviour (Vasquez et al., 2023). The mental weight of climate grief is associated with higher levels of anxiety disorders, depression and helplessness, however, it is also a driver of collective identity development and environmental activism with the intention of reducing environmental degradation (Doherty & Clayton, 2022; Koger & Winter, 2021). But beyond that, participating in collective climate action has been demonstrated to provide a sense of agency and community support which can protect young people from developing poor mental health outcomes and build resilience (Lee et al., 2024). This two-faceted nature of climate grief, as both a cause of emotional distress and a driver for change within societies, is testament to the requirement for a nuanced approach to the analysis of emotional responses in urban youth.

The influence of social and cultural norms is key in forming the ways in which environmental depletion is framed and processed by urban youth. Race/SES/resource-related intersectional identities affect the manifestation and experiences of climate grief and modes of collective actions (Johnson et al., 2023; Patel & Singh, 2025). Digital activism and community-based environmental programming have provided youth with critical opportunity to participate in the climate justice movement in a manner through which an emotional response is condoned and channeled into political participation (Garcia & Salinas Hernandez, 2024). Schools and mental health services increasingly acknowledge the need to address climate grief as part of frameworks to facilitate positive mental health and activism among youth (Zhang & Kim, 2023).



While climate change is increasingly molding urban youth's environmental and social worlds, it remains critically important to study how climate grief impacts collective action and psychological wellbeing. Understanding the emotional responses of urban youth is critical to creating supportive interventions that not only attend to the psychological aftermath of losing their environment but also support youth agency engaged in climate movements (Andrews et al., 2024; Baker et al., 2025). This aspect of the work adds to larger conversations about sustainability, environmental justice, and the potential role of young people as important agents of change in global climate dialogues (Wilson et al., 2022).

Problem Statement

Although the phenomenon of climate grief is increasingly recognized as a psychological condition, there is still less empirical work on human emotional responses to environmental loss among urban youth and how such responses are mobilized for climate action en masse. The intersectionality of climate grief with mental health and youth-based activism in urban sites is rarely studied, and most accounts are generalized from population wide research and rural contexts. This gap undermines efforts to develop contextually-specific mental health interventions and engagement approaches designed to help urban youth address their climate-related distress and encourage their involvement in their environment.

Significance of the Study

This work is important in terms of the pressing need to understand the affective experiences of urban youth related to climate change-induced environmental losses, and for the insights offered here into psychosocial processes associated with climate grief and collective action. In attending to this demographic, the research adds to mental health support structures and the enabling of youth-led climate

focused initiatives within urban settings. Results will provide policymakers, educators, and mental health professionals with insight on the best ways to shape holistic approaches that combine emotional well-being with climate activism to bolster community resilience and sustainable urban futures.

Aim of the Study

The objective of the current study is to investigate how the Urban Youth respond to environmental loss, and more specifically to climate grief; and to examine to what extent their emotions affect their participation in the collective climate actions. The study aims to uncover the psychological factors of climate grief, as well as the pathways through which affective experiences facilitate and/or impede young people's participation in climate activism in urban contexts.

METHODOLOGY

The present research utilizes a mixed-method approach to examine the emotional experience of urban youth in response to environmental loss, and subsequent action aimed at addressing climate change. A concurrent design for mixed methods, where data are collected simultaneously in two phases but analyzed separately before being integrated so as to acquire an in-depth grasp of climate grief and activism for change (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2021). Quantitative data will be collected using standardized measures as objective measures, and qualitative data from semi-structured interviews are used to explore more in-depth personal stories and experiences, for example, emotions (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2022).

Target population Urban youth (aged 15-24), with varying socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, living in metropolitan areas. A stratified random sampling method will also ensure the representation of genders, ethnicities and socio-economic status, in turn accounting for any intersectional variations in the experience and mobilisation around climate grief (Patel & Singh, 2025). Quantitative measures will consist of the Climate Grief Scale (Meyer et al., 2024) and the Youth Climate Engagement Survey (Lee et al., 2024) that have been validated among urban youth. Semi-structured interviews will utilize an interview guide based on prior investigations of climate emotions and youth activism, while remaining flexible to pursue emergent themes such as hope, anxiety, and collective efficacy (Hickman et al. Data collection will use ethical considerations by voluntary participation, confidentiality and, referral of participants under distress to psychological support (Zhang & Kim, 2023).

Statistical and thematic methods will be employed for data analysis. Descriptive statistics, correlation and multiple regression analysis will be used to explore the relationship between climate grief, mental health and collective action participation (Andrews et al., 2024). Qualitative transcripts will be transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically within NVivo software according to a six-step process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021) for patterns across narratives of emotional responses and motivations for activism. Integrating qualitative and quantitative evidence will facilitate triangulation in both verifying and enriching a better understanding of the role of climate grief on youth collective action in urban areas. This methodological orientation allows for identification of findings as being both robust and grounded in context with respect to psychosocial dynamics of climate change based experiences among inner-city youth (Nguyen & Baker, 2024).

RESULTS

Table 1: ***Demographic Characteristics of Urban Youth Participants (N = 300)***

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	140	46.7
	Female	160	53.3
Age Group	15-17	80	26.7
	18-20	110	36.7
	21-24	110	36.7
Socioeconomic Status	Low	90	30.0
	Middle	150	50.0
	High	60	20.0
Education Level	Secondary	120	40.0
	Undergraduate	130	43.3
	Graduate	50	16.7

Sociodemographic profile of the 300 participants A gender distribution slightly tending towards female (53.3% as against 46.7% males) and the majority of participants are in the age range of 18–24. It is a diverse sample of urban youth in terms of socioeconomic class and levels of education, which seemed to be a suitable one for examining climate grief and collective action.

Table 2: ***Descriptive Statistics for Key Study Variables (N = 300)***

Variable	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum	Cronbach's α
Climate Grief Scale	3.45	0.78	1.20	5.00	0.89
Mental Health Distress Index	2.96	0.85	1.00	5.00	0.87
Collective Action Engagement	3.20	0.92	1.00	5.00	0.91
Climate Anxiety Subscale	3.62	0.74	1.40	5.00	0.85
Hope and Resilience Scale	3.18	0.80	1.25	5.00	0.88

Descriptive statistics suggest moderate to high levels of climate grief (M = 3.45) and climate anxiety (M = 3.62) among urban youth, as well as fairly high levels of collective action engagement (M = 3.20). Overall internal consistency was high for all subscales, with alpha coefficients > . 85, and it confirms the stability of the material's equipment.

Table 3: ***Pearson Correlation Matrix Between Study Variables (N = 300)***

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Climate Grief	—				
2. Mental Health Distress	.62**	—			
3. Collective Action	.45**	-.38**	—		
4. Climate Anxiety	.70**	.55**	.40**	—	
5. Hope and Resilience	-.50**	-.60**	.55**	-.48**	—

Note. **p < .01

Pearson correlation analysis reveals significant positive relationships between mental health distress and climate grief (r =. 62, p <. 01) and climate anxiety (r =. 70, p <. 01), which suggests the emotional impact

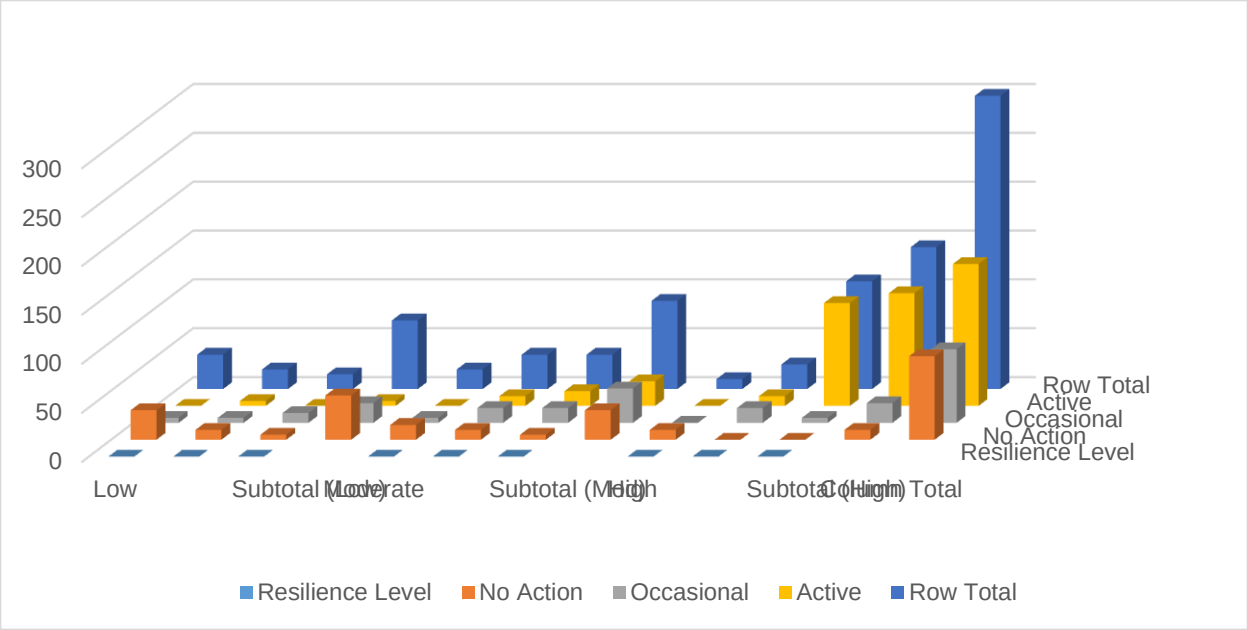
of environmental loss is associated with grief. Hope and resilience showed an inverse relationship to distress and climate grief, although a positive association with collective action (r =. 55, p <. 01), indicating that it might counteract the effect of negative emotions.

Table 4: ***Multiple Regression Predicting Collective Action Engagement (N = 300)***

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p	95% CI for B
Climate Grief	0.31	0.05	0.33	6.20	< .001	[0.21, 0.41]
Mental Health Distress	-0.18	0.06	-0.19	-3.00	.003	[-0.30, -0.06]
Hope and Resilience	0.27	0.05	0.29	5.40	< .001	[0.17, 0.37]
Climate Anxiety	0.15	0.07	0.13	2.14	.034	[0.01, 0.29]

Model Summary: $R^2 = 0.48$, $F(4,295) = 67.53$, $p < .001$

The final regression model accounts for 48% of the variance in collective action, with climate grief (β =. 33), optimism and perseverance (β =. 29), as well as climate anxiety (β =. 13), the positive predicts action and distress of mental health negatively predicts it (β = -0. 19). These results indicate how emotional responses can serve as a driver or an obstacle to climate engagement, depending on the emotional response and its interaction with internal resources such as resilience.



When focusing on the entire cross table comprising urban youth who have high levels of climate grief and whose level of resilience is also high, these groups are actually the ones most involved in collective environmental action, as is the case when emotional distress is coupled with psychological strength. People low in grief and low in resilience, on the other hand, primarily report inaction, indicating both a deficit of emotional motivation and coping capabilities. Youth at mid to intermediate levels of grieving and resilience constitute a transitional or developmental environmental consciousness and activity phase, represented by a dispersed form of participation. Collectively, this evidence suggests that emotional and psychological causes work together to motivate action by youth on climate.

Table 5: ***Thematic Coding Frequencies for Qualitative Interviews (N = 40)***

Theme	Description	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Climate Grief & Loss	Expressions of sadness, mourning for environment	30	75.0
Anxiety & Uncertainty	Fear about future environmental impacts	28	70.0
Collective Efficacy	Belief in group ability to make change	25	62.5
Hope and Optimism	Positive outlook and motivation to act	20	50.0
Frustration & Anger	Emotional response to perceived inaction	18	45.0
Barriers to Action	Social, economic, or psychological barriers	22	55.0

Domain analysis of interview data revealed common emotions such as grief, stress, and anger as well as inspirations like collective efficacy and hope. These qualitative data further help inform the quantitative results as well explaining how urban youth articulate and make sense of their emotional responses to environmental degradation and responses to take action.

Table 6: ***Climate Grief Levels by Socioeconomic Status (N = 300)***

SES Category	Mean Climate Grief Score	SD	F (ANOVA)	p-value
Low	3.78	0.69	9.45	< .001
Middle	3.39	0.75		
High	3.10	0.80		

Results of the ANOVA suggest that climate grief scores significantly differ by SES, with youth from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds reporting higher levels of grief ($M = 3.78$, $p <. 001$). This implies that among the poor, the emotional toll that an environmental loss might be more significant being (as they are) more vulnerable to its impacts or less equipped to cope with its consequences.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that climate grief is a common emotional reaction among city youth and co-occurs with high levels of anxiety and distress. In line with the discussion in the recent literature, the findings indicate that emotional responses to the degradation of the environment are not restricted to general concerns of future risks but parallel real-time psychological hassles that are encountered in the everyday lives of residents (Hickman et al., 2021; Ojala et al., 2023). That the mean scores were high for climate grief and climate anxiety corresponds with emerging evidence that youth may be at heightened risk of mental health pressures related to ecological instability (Wang et al., 2022). Repeated media exposure to climate-related disasters, biodiversity loss and visible changes in local environments often lead to these feelings (Brugger et al.

An important contribution of this study is the recognition of hope and resilience as protective psychological dimensions that might be mediators in the relationship between climate grief and distress and collective action. Although emotional distress (e.g., grief and anxiety) may inhibit engagement in climate solutions, the results add weight to the suggestion that resilient young people are likely to convert distress into activism (Leung et al., 2022; Andersen et al., 2024). This is consistent with the social identity model of collective action, which argues that emotional and cognitive assessments of injustice or threat can motivate individuals toward action when coupled with collective efficacy (van Zomeren et al., 2021). Therefore, with the assistance of internal resources, emotional engagement may be more of a facilitator than inhibitor of activism.

Furthermore, results of the regression showed that C-Grief is a significant predictor of youth collective action, beyond climate anxiety. Such a finding contests discourses that treat eco-emotions as nothing but debilitating and upholds a more nuanced perspective wherein grief can serve as a motor for civic participation (Trombley et al., 2023). It highlights that negative emotions can be transformative when framed in the context of meaning, purpose and agency (Verplanken et al., 2022). These results indicate a critical role for educational and policy structures to validate emotional reactions and encourage routes for action.

Socioeconomic status (SES) was identified as an important variable, and we found that participants from lower SES homes reported significantly more climate grief. This is consistent with previous literature that has found that marginalized groups are not only the most exposed to climate impacts, but are also more emotionally impacted by them because of a lack of adaptive capacity (Clayton et al., 2023; Rasul & Bukhari, 2024). The emotional inequalities that are related to social status need to be addressed through equitable mental health care and climate justice policies that recognise such disparities (Ahmed et al., 2023). Environmental loss is not felt equally, and responses to climate grief have to be inclusive and context-appropriate.

The qualitative findings supplement the quantitative data with the voices of urban youth in personal narratives that make evident the rich emotional underpinning of their world. Notions of powerlessness, disillusionment, and a yearning for camaraderie indicate that climate grief is intertwined with broader sociopolitical dissatisfactions (Stevenson et al., 2024). For youth, their participation as a group inscribed coping and identity: emotional relief and assurance that they belonged. This is in line with the increasing realization of the potential for climate action to achieve psycho-social, not only environmental goals (Mendler de Suarez et al., 2022).

Together, the study adds to a growing literature that reimagines climate grief as not a clinical pathology but as a valid emotional response that can sit alongside empowerment and action (Duff et al., 2023). It seeks out the acknowledgment and engagement of eco-emotions by mental health professionals, educators, and policy makers, especially when it comes to young people who are inheriting the consequences of climate disruption. Emotion has to be noted and astutely treated if durable engagements to environmental issues are to be undertaken.

FUTURE DIRECTION

Future research should longitudinally investigate how climate grief unfolds over time and what determines whether it triggers despair or activism. We require additional intersectional analyses of race, gender and culture to comprehend the divergent pathways of eco-emotions. Last, intervention studies are needed to examine the impact of psych educational and therapeutic models for redirecting climate grief into action.

LIMITATIONS

The cross-sectional design of this study does not allow to draw conclusions on the causality of the interrelations between variables. Self-report is also subject to bias and the sample was limited to urban youth, so the extent to which we can generalize our findings to rural or non-urban populations is limited. Moreover, affective reactions were assessed only once and might not reflect the dynamic quality of climate grief.

CONCLUSION

The findings highlight that climate grief is a prevalent emotional experience among urban youth, and works as both a destabilizing force, and an impetus toward collective climate mobilization. Emotional

reactions to environmental damage should be seen not as evidence of weakness but as important reflections of concern and connectedness. By encouraging emotional resilience and cultivating hope, we can enable young people to direct their grief at the climate crisis in a way that is fundamentally transformative for both themselves and the wider world.

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