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## CLIMATE ANXIETY AS A LENS INTO YOUNG PEOPLE'S POLITICAL EXPRESSION ON YOUTUBE

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### Introduction and Theoretical Framework

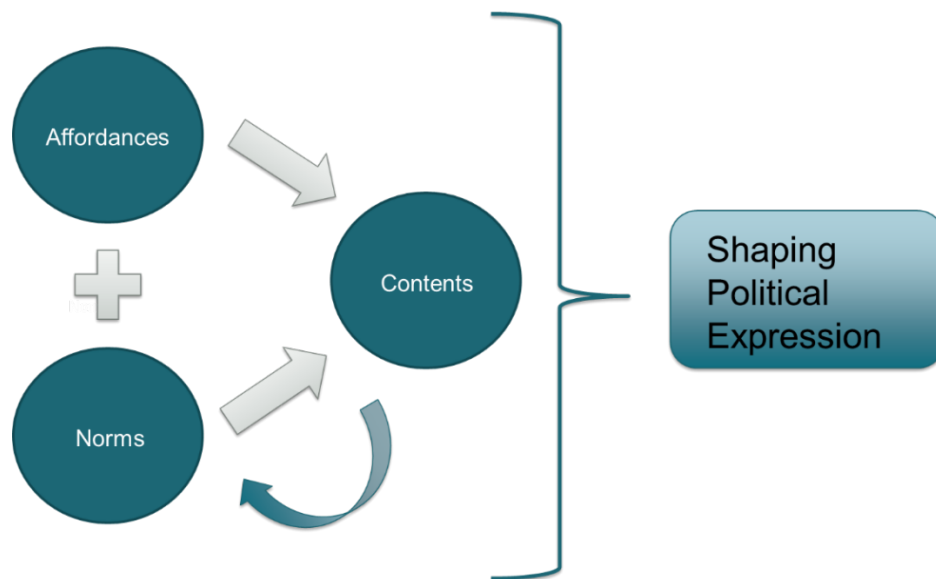
Climate anxiety—the feeling of dread and distress associated with worrying about the future of the planet—has been posited as a defining feature of Gen Z (Katz et al., 2021). A large-scale global study of people aged 16-25 recently found that 75% see the future as frightening, and 45% believe that climate anxiety negatively affects their daily lives (Hickman et al., 2021). At the same time, climate change remains a highly politicized topic, and a prominent subject of political expression across social media platforms (Funk, 2021). This study examines youth communication around climate anxiety on YouTube, with the aim of illuminating the role of affordances, norms and contents in shaping youth political expression.

Given that differences between social media platforms crucially shape their political dynamics (Bode & Vraga, 2018), our broader research offers and tests a theoretical model (Figure 1) explaining how different platforms enable—and constrain—certain forms of political expression, via the interaction between their *affordances, norms, and contents*. While each of these aspects has been considered separately in previous work (e.g., boyd, 2010; Davis & Chouinard, 2016; Kreiss, Lawrence & McGregor, 2018; Maia & Rezende, 2016; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Stromer-Galley, Bryant & Bimber, 2015), we consider their interaction in a single framework, which we see as operating at the meso level (the level of the platform), between the micro level of individuals and the macro societal level.

In doing so, we make several important contributions on the theoretical front: 1) we focus on how the choice of a platform may shape the resulting expression, rather than

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how and why people choose to use different platforms; 2) relying on content analysis, we use content (rather than user perceptions or self-reports) as a starting point, to illuminate perceived affordances and norms; and 3) we designed our framework to be applicable across contexts and platforms. While we focus on political expression here, the framework is also useful for other forms of expression on social media platforms (e.g., self-expression or community building) and for both comparative and single-platform studies.



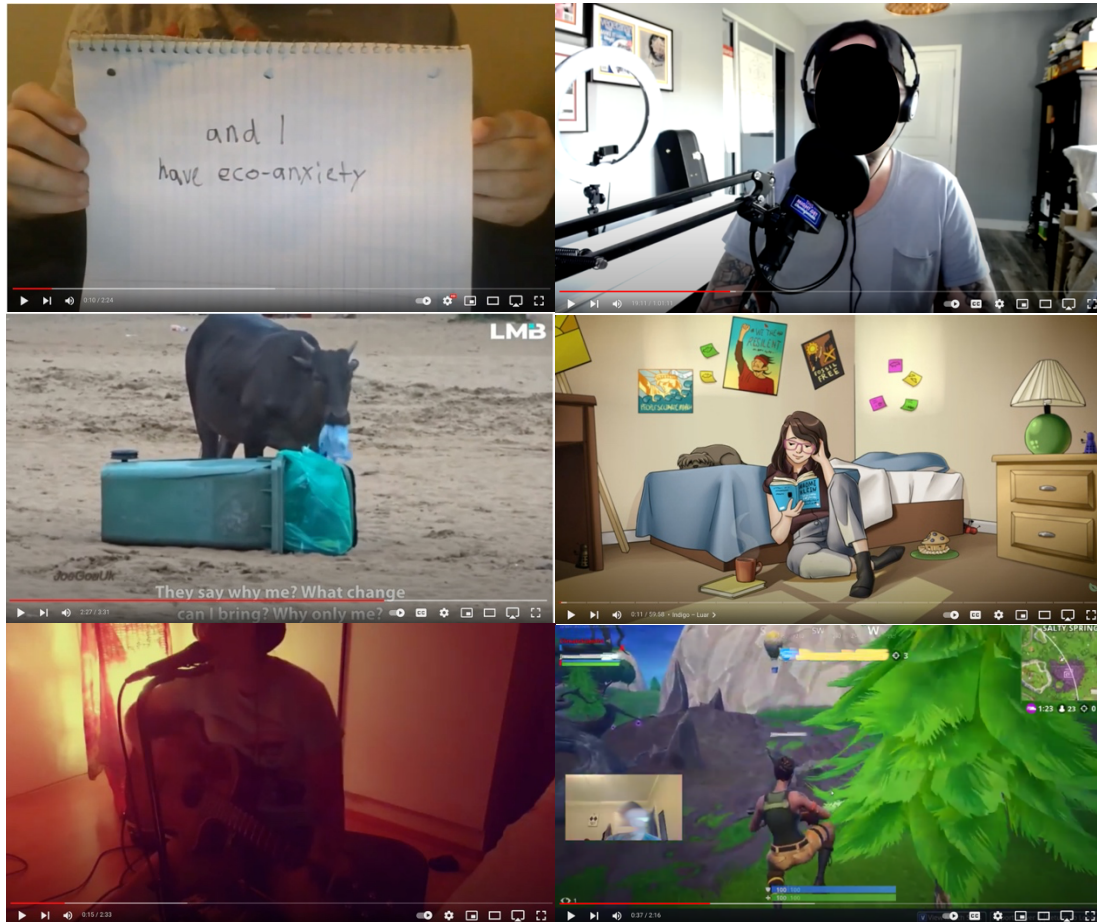
**Figure 1.** *The affordances/norms/contents (ANC) framework*

## Research Design

As the premier video platform for youth worldwide (Omnicores, 2022), YouTube is an essential source of environmental information for young people (Allgaier, 2019; Kaul et al., 2020), and a space where youth often create and respond to climate change-related content (Funk, 2021).

Data was collected in June 2022. To create our corpus, we searched for the keywords “climate anxiety” (563 public videos) and “eco anxiety” (382 public videos). Then, to narrow in on youth-created videos, we eliminated videos that were posted by organizations (538); posted by individuals speaking in a professional capacity, such as psychologists or academics (155); unrelated to climate change (57); or shared by individuals who were clearly not youth (11). After eliminating duplicate videos (38), we were left with a final corpus of 146 youth-created videos around climate/eco anxiety.

We employed a qualitative content analysis of these 146 videos, as well as the over 20,000 comments posted on them. Reflecting the relatively new emergence of the term climate anxiety, all but 4 videos were posted after December 2018. Most of the videos were vlogs—focused on providing advice for climate anxiety from a personal, relatable perspective—but the genres represented were quite diverse (see Figure 2). Overall, the corpus was characterized by very low engagement, in terms of both views (half of the videos had under 70 views) and comments (40% of videos had zero comments).



**Figure 2.** Different video genres in the corpus (from top left: vlog, podcast, short film, animation, song, gamestream).

## Key Findings

Our findings section considers the case study through our proposed ANC framework.

In terms of **contents**, a central message across the videos was the call to—as one young YouTuber put it—“channel [climate anxiety] into taking action, instead of laying in bed thinking about how the earth is on fire.” Many videos contained lists of actionable things one can do, both to deal with climate anxiety (e.g. acknowledge your feelings, connect to nature, find community) and to help the environment (e.g. reduce your waste, eat less meat, plant a tree). At the same time, videos also stressed that protecting the planet is not just the individual’s responsibility, and that corporations and governments should bear the bulk of responsibility.

In terms of **norms**, we found that the vast majority of videos assumed an imagined audience of young people who are concerned about the climate. Thus, the goal was to provide information and advice rather than persuade about climate change. A central norm in these videos was the idea of “doing what’s right for you” and refraining from

judging the choices of others. Comments were, similarly, mostly supportive, though there was also an awareness of the political and potentially divisive nature of climate change as a topic. Significantly, climate anxiety was framed as a collective, youth-specific issue—creators explicitly addressed young people in their videos, and commenters often disclosed their ages as fundamentally connected to the climate anxiety they're experiencing.

The case study richly illustrates YouTube's **affordances** of expressivity and connectivity (see Kligler-Vilenchik et al., 2020). Tapping into YouTube's expressivity affordances, these videos showed an in-depth engagement with the topics at hand—in terms of length, amount of information, and often the effort put into preparing them. At the same time, this emphasis on content may come at the expense of reach, as illustrated by the low engagement around the videos; our research further theorizes this relationship and, in contrast to much literature on YouTube, shines a spotlight on content that is less prominent or “successful” on the platform. Our findings also illustrate how YouTube affords *connectivity*, enabling creators to connect with a likeminded audience committed to climate change. Here, the comment section played an important role in facilitating connectivity, often serving as a space for discussion, venting and solidarity.

## Discussion

Our analysis foregrounds a key tension between social media as a site for cross-cutting exposure versus a space for insider conversations. While we often assume that the key aim of political discussion should be to enable dialogue across political views (Mutz, 2006)—including around the topic of climate change (Schäfer, 2022)—our analysis illustrates the significance of insider conversations among youth, and the centrality of YouTube's expressivity and connectivity affordances in allowing young people to engage with these topics on a personal and intimate level. At the same time, our research illuminates the mental toll of political expression for young people, and further highlights this connection between the affective and the political drive.

Significantly, this research also probes the global aspects of youth online political expression, with climate change being a particularly apt lens into these dynamics. On the one hand, the global youth connections we spotlight in our findings can be quite powerful, and have the potential to be a meaningful mobilizing force for political action. However, though our data included users from across the world, videos seemed to focus on the experience of climate anxiety by youth in Western contexts, versus those most directly affected by climate change, living in the Global South.

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