“I don’t have to suffer just because I’m an activist”

The role of humour as an adaptive coping strategy in managing eco-anxiety of climate activists

Vappu Jenny Aurora Väänänen

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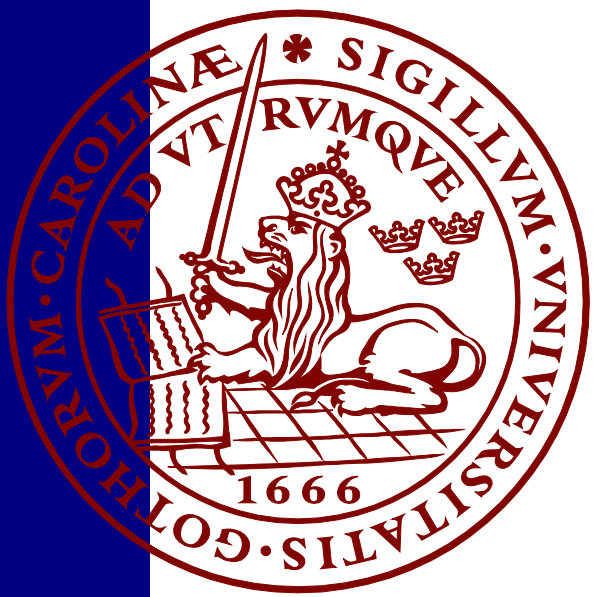

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Lund University Centre for Sustainability Studies

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Supervisor: Sara Gabrielsson, LUCSUS, Lund University

Abstract

The concept of 'eco-anxiety' has increasingly gained traction both in media and academia, with climate activists hypothesised as prone to experiencing it. However, humour has for long been a crucial aspect of social movements, and it holds strong potential in adaptively coping with stressors. Therefore, this thesis aims to describe climate activists' emotional experiences characterised as eco-anxiety and explore how humour can be used as an adaptive coping strategy to manage eco-anxiety. In-depth semi-structured interviews were held with climate activists in Denmark and Sweden. Resultantly, various eco-emotions are commonly felt, and humour is used more often indirectly than directly to cope. Regardless, emotional experiences are complex, and various limitations and conditionalities about the benefits and morality of humour are emphasised. Future research should aim to delve deeper into both issues to cultivate a more comprehensive understanding of eco-anxiety and humour's role in climate activism.

Keywords: eco-anxiety, climate activism, humour, adaptive coping, qualitative research

Word count: 11,989

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I started out this thesis process being absolutely terrified of what's to come. My previous thesis experience from my Bachelor's was scarring to say the least, and I felt I was already behind before we had even begun. Luckily, this journey wasn't only manageable but also so incredibly rewarding and inspiring, and I can confidently say I'm proud of myself – a sentence I've had a hard time saying out loud for most of my life. For all this I have many people to thank.

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As much as I want to end this on a bittersweet note, I want to make space for those who really need it the most. We are all living amid an era of genocide and humanitarian crisis in Palestine where innocent adults and children are being ruthlessly massacred in unspeakable ways. Anti-trans violence is rampant, due to which my trans brothers and sisters and non-binary siblings all over the world are being persecuted for simply being who they are. Fascism is on the rise once again, and incel-culture is preying on vulnerable children more than ever. We cannot fight alone, but we can all do our part. What needs to be done needs to get done, no matter what.

Free Palestine. Protect trans people. Fight fascism and misogyny.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Growing research on eco-anxiety

Anthropogenic climate change presents an urgent threat to human and planetary well-being (Lee et al., 2023). As rising temperatures and its effects have gradually been identified as a significant threat to human health (Coffey et al., 2021), research on its consequent mental health implications have proliferated (Cunsolo et al., 2020). Studies have highlighted both the acute and chronic effects of environmental disasters, including correlations to elevated anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, psychotic symptoms, and even suicide (Whitmarsh et al., 2022).

However, a focus on the repercussions of direct weather-related impacts has omitted the effects of indirect exposure to climate change (Whitmarsh et al., 2022). Consequently, 'eco-anxiety' and the affective dimensions of climate and environmental issues began gaining academic traction since the 2000s (Pihkala, 2022b). Research has since rapidly increased due to eco-anxiety having become popular in media discussions (Pihkala, 2022b). However, a need for a better understanding of the phenomenon as well as its dimensions and implications still exists (Pihkala, 2020; van Valkengoed et al., 2023).

1.2 Climate activists and adaptive coping

Not everyone is affected by eco-anxiety to the same degree, and it tends to be more prevalent among specific groups (Coffey et al., 2021). Climate activists are hypothesised to be among those who are more vulnerable to experiencing eco-anxiety as they dedicate a considerable amount of time thinking about climate change and devoting a lot of mental and material resources to address it (Dodds, 2021; Schwartz et al., 2023). Several studies on climate activists' emotional experiences exist (see e.g. Kleres & Wettergren, 2017; Landmann & Rohmann, 2020; Martiskainen et al., 2020; Nairn, 2019). These emotions are known to have significant implications for one's psychological health (Pihkala, 2022b). However, to my knowledge no study has yet explored climate activists' emotions under a holistic eco-anxiety framework.

As climate change is increasingly recognised as a significant stressor, knowing how to cope with it has important implications for one's well-being (Ojala, 2012). Coping is understood as the conscious and constantly changing efforts to "manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 141). Various types

of coping are recognised (Macy, 2007), however the focus of this thesis lies on adaptive coping strategies. These are long-term cognitive, behavioural, and emotional efforts to manage a particular stressor, readjust to it, and cultivate positive change (Macy, 2007). It embodies not only reducing negative emotional affect and psychological distress, but also generating positive self-esteem, promoting personal well-being, and regaining a sense of mastery over the stressor (Macy, 2007).

Activism is considered as an adaptive problem-focused means to cope with climate crisis: by attempting to address the stressor itself, such collective action promotes well-being through generating a sense of efficacy, managing fears, and cultivating hope as well as empowerment (Pihkala, 2022a; Schwartz et al., 2023). Humour is also argued to be a highly adaptive response to global climate change (Doherty & Clayton, 2011). It is a strong positive indicator of character strength (Kuiper, 2012) and a contributor to both psychological flourishing (Doherty & Clayton, 2011) and inner resilience due to its anxiety- and stress-reducing capacity (Colom et al., 2011). Moreover, humour has been a powerful tool of social movements in various political regimes throughout history, and it remains a crucial activist strategy globally to this day (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014).

1.3 Research questions and relevance for sustainability science

Consequently, humour as an adaptive coping strategy arguably proves to hold significant potential for climate activists' well-being in its ability to mitigate eco-anxiety. Therefore, the research questions of this thesis are as follows:

RQ1. What emotions do climate activists experience that can be characterised as eco-anxiety?

RQ2. How can humour be utilised as an adaptive coping strategy to manage eco-anxiety amongst climate activists?

This thesis presents relevant research for sustainability science, a field which seeks to comprehend and address the complex interactions between nature and society in a problem-driven and solution-oriented manner (Jerneck et al., 2011; Kates et al., 2001). It is characterised by multi-scalar, transdisciplinary knowledge and processes that bring scholarship and society closer together in the attempt to tackle 'wicked problems' (Jerneck et al., 2011). Consequently, the aim of this thesis is two-fold. Firstly, I hope for the findings to be scientifically relevant. This research topic has, to my knowledge, never been studied before. By drawing interdisciplinarily on climate psychology, humour, and social movements research, I aim to fill in a research gap by generating novel insights about the links between eco-anxiety, climate activism, and humour. I am also aiming to expand on existing literature on both eco-anxiety and humour's role in activism. Secondly, I hope for the findings to be

societally relevant. Activists have historically been integral in driving societal progress and strengthening democracy in innovative ways, demonstrating their important role in society (Hattle et al., 2025). By exploring the nuanced dynamics and conditions under which humour can be deemed useful or beneficial, the climate activist community can hopefully utilise the insights of this research pragmatically in building long-lasting and balanced activism.

2 Background

2.1 Eco-anxiety

There exists notable conceptual and operational ambiguity concerning 'eco-anxiety'. In the review by Coffey and colleagues (2021), eco-anxiety was found to imply a broad range of future-oriented negative and challenging psychological experiences, stemming from the awareness and threat of climate change and environmental destruction. Many different definitions for such anxiety have been proposed, such as a "heightened emotional, mental or somatic distress in response to dangerous changes in the climate system" (Climate Psychology Alliance, 2020, p. 22), "the chronic fear of environmental doom" (Dodds, 2021, p. 222), and the "persistent, difficult-to-control apprehensiveness and worry about climate change" (van Valkengoed et al., 2023, p. 258). It can include a wide range of emotional, cognitive, physiological, and behavioural indicators of conventional anxiety (van Valkengoed et al., 2023).

It is important to note that there is no single universal term used to encapsulate these experiences. 'Eco-anxiety', or alternatively 'ecological anxiety' (Cunsolo et al., 2020), is often used synonymously with the term 'climate anxiety' or 'climate change anxiety' in existing literature (Pihkala, 2020). This may be because of climate change being intertwined with other ecological and environmental phenomena (Pihkala, 2020). However, in this thesis I will use the term 'eco-anxiety' as it can be understood as an umbrella term that encompasses 'climate anxiety' and hence pertains to anxiety-symptoms resulting from anthropogenic climate change and related environmental issues (Pihkala, 2020, 2022a).

It is arguably more useful to understand eco-anxiety based on what it is not. Firstly, it is commonly believed that the term itself refers to the indirect exposure, effects, and perceptions to climate change-related events (Clayton, 2020), therefore excluding repercussions of direct exposure. Secondly, there is varying evidence on the pathological nature of eco-anxiety: some studies have found a correlation between eco-anxiety scores and generalised anxiety or depression scores, whereas others have not (Lawrance et al., 2022). Thirdly, it is also debated whether eco-anxiety constitutes a functional or dysfunctional response to climate and environmental crises (Whitmarsh et al., 2022). Some scholars conceptualise eco-anxiety as a strong form of anxiety separate from milder 'concern' (Clayton & Karazsia, 2020; Whitmarsh et al., 2022). In turn, others have demonstrated varying levels of impairment (Wullenkord et al., 2024) and argue that eco-anxiety both embodies a

healthy adaptive response to threat and is instrumental in motivating action (Coffey et al., 2021; Cunsolo et al., 2020).

Conclusively, I frame the concept of 'eco-anxiety' as a non-pathological experience, as argued by Pihkala (2020), and hence I define it as the apprehensiveness stemming from indirect exposure to and awareness of anthropogenic climate change-related and environmental issues. It is delineated by multiple indicators (van Valkengoed et al., 2023), however the focus of this thesis will be on the emotional ones.

2.2 Climate activism

As with eco-anxiety, there is conceptual ambiguity on what constitutes climate activism. As a subset of environmental activism, its main focus is on the multifaceted impacts of anthropogenic climate change, including consequent ecological losses, social crises and resource exploitation (Orr, 2025). It can vary in its level of confrontation (Garcia-Gibson, 2023), and it can be delineated according to four areas of influence: the judicial system, the economic and business sector, the political system, and civil society (Fisher & Nasrin, 2021). Moreover, climate activism can be distinguished from pro-environmental behaviours which are often limited to domestic life and consumption preferences (Alisat & Riemer, 2015).

In this thesis I delineate climate activism based on two core characteristics. Firstly, it can be argued to involve substantiated effort. Séguin and colleagues (1998) emphasise that activist behaviours require a greater amount of motivation and a stronger environmental attitude. Kirsop-Taylor and colleagues (2023) frame climate activism in a similar way, defining it as "strenuous exertion(s) and/or risk-taking to advance a particular cause or greater good" (p. 2). Secondly, climate activism is underpinned by dissent, meaning "a conscious expression of disagreement with a prevailing view, policy, practice, decision, institution, or assumption that is exacerbating climate change" (O'Brien et al., 2018, p. 1). Consequently, it attempts to either influence, change, or transform various policies, structures, and norms (O'Brien et al., 2018).

Conclusively, climate activism can be generally understood as behaviours that require 'active effort' to influence, change, or transform various legal, economic, political, or societal aspects or structures, as a result of disagreeing with status-quo 'modus operandi' regarding climate change and its consequent socio-environmental issues.

3 Conceptual framework

3.1 Eco-emotions and eco-anxiety

Since the 1990s, the role of emotions has gained interest in social movement studies (Goodwin et al., 2001), including the modern climate movement (Brosch, 2021). However, understanding what emotions are is a complex task in itself due to various theories of emotions existing across disciplines (Goodwin et al., 2001). Similarly in eco-emotions research, consensus seems to be lacking as different terms, such as 'feeling', 'emotion', 'affect', 'mood', and 'mental state', are used (Pihkala, 2022b). In this thesis, the term 'emotion' will be used as the all-encompassing concept for these phenomena.

I use Pihkala's (2022b) taxonomy of climate- and eco-emotions as the basis for identifying relevant emotions linked to eco-anxiety. However, as 'climate emotions' fall under the broader term 'eco-emotions' (Pihkala, 2022b) and my focus is on eco-anxiety more broadly, I will refer to all of them as 'eco-emotions'. Among the plethora of identified eco-emotions, some have been more directly linked to eco-anxiety than others (Pihkala, 2022b). These emotions are named in Table 1, along with the justification for the choice.

Apart from negative eco-emotions, Pihkala (2022b) also outlines numerous positive eco-emotions, especially in relation to activism. Feelings of togetherness, connection, belonging, and joy are commonly found in activist contexts. Furthermore, although climate activists reportedly experience disempowerment and stronger despair, hope and empowerment are nevertheless also present. This is often due to activists having a strong positive feeling that they can collectively make a difference.

Table 1. An overview of the eco-emotions characterised as eco-anxiety. The basis of this structure is derived from Pihkala's (2022b) taxonomy, however other related sources are used to expand on the terms.

Emotion group	Emotion	Explanation
Threat-related emotions	**Fear**	A commonly featured affective dimension in eco-anxiety, and a fundamental feeling that serves a life-protecting function (Pihkala, 2022b). It is precipitated by a more tangible threat regarding environmental destruction and ecological losses (Pihkala, 2020).
	Worry	A complex emotion that comprises fear and anxiety together (Ojala et al., 2021). Worry is characterised by uncertainty (Ojala et al., 2021) which can pertain to both environmental threats and environmental policy-making (Pihkala, 2020).
Anger-related emotions	**Anger**	A very commonly reported eco-emotion (Pihkala, 2022b) and arguably the most commonly researched activist emotion in social movements literature (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017). Anger is often experienced simultaneously with anxiety (Stanley et al., 2021)
	Frustration	A combination of anxiety and anger (Pihkala, 2022b). It is one of the most common emotional responses to ecological and climate crises (Pihkala, 2020). It often originates from the inability to achieve a desired goal ((Pihkala, 2022b).
Sadness-related emotions	**Grief**	A quintessential aspect of eco-anxiety (Pihkala, 2022b). Grief is understood as a more long-lasting and intense feeling or mood as compared to the basic emotion of sadness, and it is underpinned by various, often complicated forms of losses (Pihkala, 2022b).
Strong anxiety-related emotions	**Distress**	Solastalgic distress is a manifestation of anxiety and sadness simultaneously (Pihkala, 2022b).
	Existential anxiety	A common strong form of eco-anxiety (Pihkala, 2022b). Existentialism in this context concerns pondering 'life's givens', often including questions about mortality, societal collapse, and meaninglessness (Pihkala, 2020).
	Helplessness	These emotions are commonly featured in experiences of eco-anxiety (Pihkala, 2022b), and they are often triggered by the uncontrollability, unpredictability, and uncertainty of climate change (Pihkala, 2020).
	Powerlessness	
Strong depression-related emotions	**Despair**	A closely related emotion to eco-anxiety (Pihkala, 2020). However, the related concept of 'hopelessness' is also a common affective experience in eco-emotion research (Pihkala, 2022b). Many scholars believe it is important to separate the two (Pihkala, 2020), however their distinction is contested (Kwong, 2024). In this thesis I will adopt Kwong's (2024) distinction that involves a separation between 'hoping', meaning an active desire for an outcome to occur and a general belief in its attainability, and 'hopefulness', meaning one's orientation on the likelihood of reaching the outcome. Consequently, hopelessness entails that 'hoping' has ceased, whereas despair embodies the position that one no longer is 'hopeful' but remains 'hoping' (Kwong, 2024). Despair holds various connotations, one of which pertains to an urge to act, especially amongst climate activists (Pihkala, 2022b). Consequently, although despair is classified under strong depression (Pihkala, 2022b), in this context it is not a form of depression per se.
Emotions related to guilt and shame	**Guilt**	Unrecognised eco-guilt and eco-shame may manifest as anxiety (Pihkala, 2020).
	Shame	
Surprise-related emotions	**Confusion**	An emotion often linked to anxiety as it is rooted in uncertainty about both the exact nature and timing of a felt threat as well as about how to respond to the threat (Pihkala, 2022b).

3.2 Humour

The concept of 'humour' has many definitions across different fields of study (Carbelo & Jáuregui, 2006). However, it can broadly be defined as "any stimulus that can provoke laughter in a subject" (Carbelo & Jáuregui, 2006, p. 19). Whether intentional or not, humour works to generate or maintain a positive mood by engendering feelings of joy and amusement, either through comic efforts or their outcomes (Carbelo & Jáuregui, 2006; Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014).

There are three classical theories on the function of humour, all of which can be present in social movements (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014). Firstly, Superiority Theory argues that humour is an attempt to feel and position oneself as relatively superior to a particular other through mockery or ridicule (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014). Such humour serves two purposes: on the one hand, it may be an attempt to censure and 'discipline by laughter' those who are perceived as inferior, and on the other, it can establish or reinforce in-group and out-group boundaries by strengthening collective identity and a sense of belonging (Meyer, 2000). Secondly, Relief Theory posits that humour serves as a mechanism of releasing excess tension and stress (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014). Such humour is often useful in defusing high-risk or tense situations (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014). Thirdly, Incongruity Theory argues that experiencing amusement results from the combination of two or more disparate ideas in a surprising, unexpected, or odd manner (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014; Meyer, 2000). Humour is therefore a result of a cognitive process whereby certain socio-cultural norms and expectations are reformulated and reinterpreted (Meyer, 2000).

3.2.1 Coping humour in psychology

On an individual level, humour is studied to be an effective tool for dealing with stress and anxiety (Abel, 2002). Based on the works of previous scholars, Abel (2002) outlines two cognitive coping mechanisms that support a positive reappraisal of stressful situations and reduce associated negative emotions. Firstly, emotion-focused coping through humour is understood as a defensive measure aimed at mitigating negative emotions evoked by a stressor. The most common way is to distance themselves from the stressor by taking it or themselves less seriously. Additionally, minimising the issue at hand by highlighting positive aspects instead has also shown to function similarly as an emotion-focused coping mechanism. Secondly, problem-focused coping through humour entails utilising humour to impact or alter the stressor itself. This way humour can provide a conscious strategy to directly solve the problem at hand or to seek alternative perspectives on the issues.

Nevertheless, two points are important to note. To begin with, it is not always straightforward to separate the two coping mechanisms from one another (Pihkala, 2022a): for instance, 'reversal', meaning finding something funny in a stressful situation, can be a way to both alter the stressor in question as well as reduce negative emotions (Abel, 2002). In turn, to my knowledge, no studies on humour as an emotion- or problem-focused coping mechanism for specifically eco-anxiety exist, however related research offers relevant insights. Morgan and colleagues (2019) found that humour helps individuals manage existential anxiety by reducing death-related thoughts and providing distance. In her study about climate change memes, Peters (2021) reported that while a minority explicitly use humour as a coping mechanism for eco-anxiety, many felt relief, in addition to other positive emotions, after exposure to memes. Therefore, both studies indicate humour to function more as an emotion-focused coping mechanism, due to emphasis being placed on distancing and relieving negative emotions (Abel, 2002).

3.2.2 Humour in activism

Humour is a central tool in activism that educates and engages audiences, simplifies complex issues, fosters collaboration, and strengthens support for leadership (Branagan, 2007; Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014). However, it also serves a more fundamental purpose in helping to sustain activism itself. Firstly, humour is used a means to strengthen a sense of *collective identity* (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014). This is achieved either by delineating or amplifying in- and out-group conceptions or by de-escalating schisms between activists themselves through emphasising shared commonalities (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014). Secondly, humour often goes beyond forging collective identity as it is also a vessel to *build community* in activist organisations (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014). Sharing laughter with one's fellow activists is argued to have a similar bonding effect as marching together as humour helps cultivate long-term feelings of affection, solidarity, and loyalty (Hart, 2007). Thirdly, humour may help in *preventing activist burnout* (Branagan, 2007). Climate activists are more prone to experiencing burnout due to high emotional engagement and feeling as if they are individually responsible for carrying the burden of solving environmental issues (Nairn, 2019). In turn, humour can have healing effects by helping to alleviate this sense of responsibility, stress, and pressure stemming from activism and to combat discouragement (Branagan, 2007; Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014). Related to this is the ability of humour to *mitigate action-related stress*, especially in risky forms of activism, as it may help release tension before and during actions or help to cope with emotionally heavy occurrences after actions (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014; Lamberink, 2022). Lastly, humour in activism may act as a creative tool to *inspire action*, or it may *lift spirits* by balancing seriousness,

critical messaging, strong negative emotions, and stressful activities with sincere enjoyment and fun (Branagan, 2007; Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014).

Humour in activism can take form in various ways (Hart, 2007; Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014). Kutz-Flamenbaum (2014) differentiates 'external humour' and 'internal humour' in social movements. External humour pertains to all communicative forms of humour that are targeted at individuals and audiences beyond activist spaces. Common types of external humour include protest signs, publications, costumes, performances, symbols, political cartoons, and protest chants. In turn, internal humour refers to forms of humour that act as 'social glue' in nurturing, strengthening, or expanding an activist organisation or community. Such humour often takes the form of intra-group jokes and banter, although performances, slogans, and chants are also included in the case that they strengthen in- and out-group conceptions and attract new members.

3.2.3 Conceptual model

In relating these aforementioned concepts with each other, humour can consequently be viewed as both a direct and an indirect adaptive coping strategy in managing eco-anxiety (Figure 1). The direct strategy posits that humour in activism directly alleviates negative emotions characterised as eco-anxiety through emotion- and problem-focused coping mechanisms. These direct pathways are arguably supported by all theories of humour. Firstly, emotion-focused coping and Relief Theory both share with each other the aim to relieve negative emotions (Abel, 2002; Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014). Secondly, as incongruous humour allows individuals to challenge what is predictable and create space for new possibilities to materialise (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014), it can facilitate creative and critical thinking, consequently enhancing problem-solving (Temple, 1992). Thus, I argue problem-focused coping to be supported by Incongruity Theory. Thirdly, connections between Superiority Theory and the coping mechanisms are very ambiguous. However, forms of ridicule and mockery have for long been central strategies in social movements (Hart, 2007), including the modern environmental movement through satirical performances (Foran et al., 2017) and protest signs (Hee et al., 2022). I posit that humour reflecting Superiority Theory in activism leans more toward forms of emotion-focused coping: as such humour is mostly concerned with an enjoyable affective element of comic amusement (Lintott, 2016), I argue that this could possibly reduce negative emotions originating from anthropogenic environmental crises.

The indirect strategy posits that humour can alleviate eco-anxiety by sustaining activism itself (Branagan, 2007; Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014; Lamberink, 2022) which subsequently alleviates eco-anxiety as a problem-focused coping mechanism (Schwartz et al., 2023). 'Reduces action-related

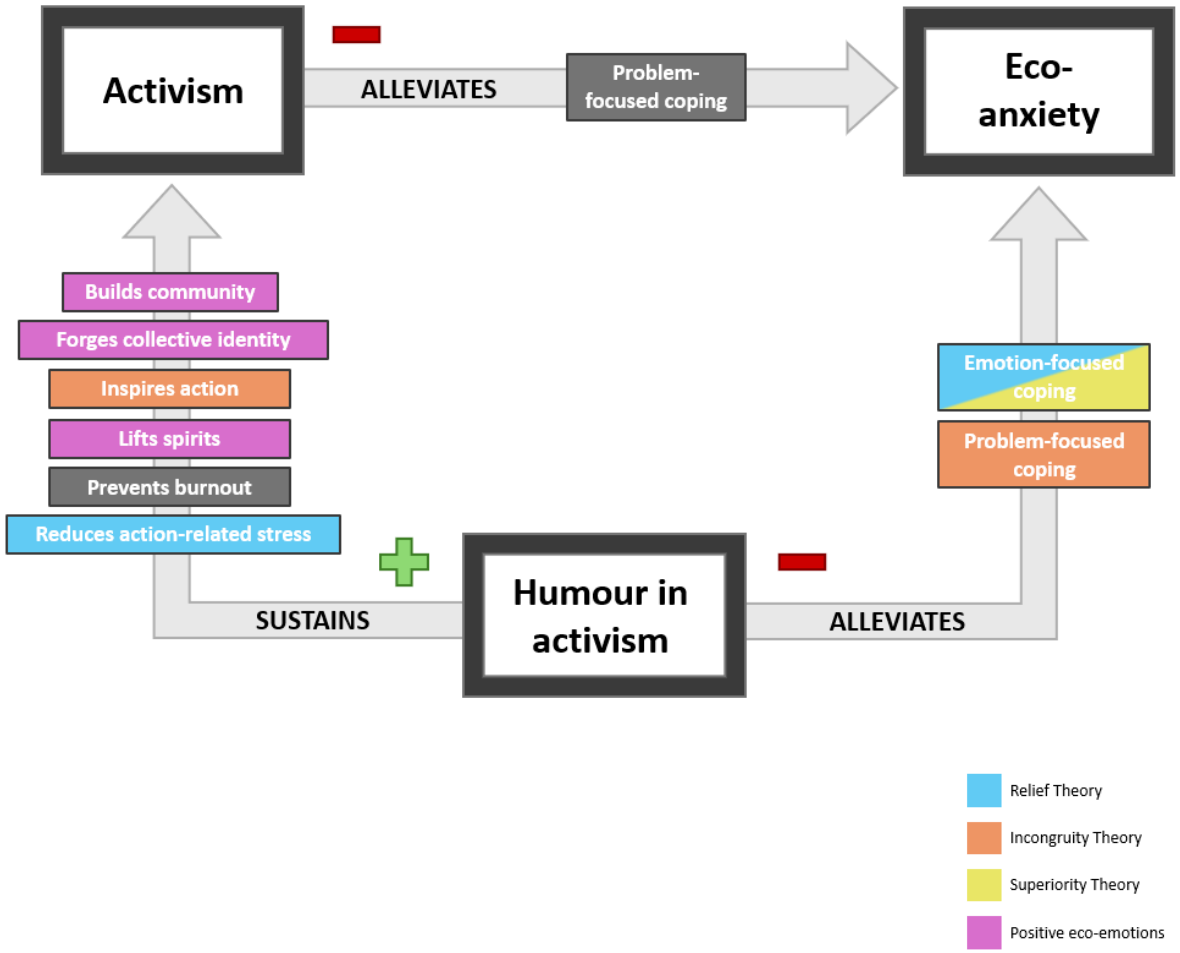

Figure 1. An original conceptual model hypothesising humour as an adaptive coping strategy to manage eco-anxiety of climate activists. This model presents a direct (right) and indirect (left) adaptive coping strategy. Each positive and negative relationship between concepts has its respective mediating variables (see Sections 3.2.1 – 3.2.3).

stress' can be linked both to emotion-focused coping and Relief Theory due to the aim of relieving negative emotions (Abel, 2002; Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014), and 'Inspires action' can be connected to Incongruity Theory as in this case humour acts as a creative tool (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014; Temple, 1992). In turn, 'Builds community', 'Forges collective identity', and 'Lifts spirits' may be linked to positive eco-emotions: the first two are intertwined with feelings of togetherness, connection, and belonging, and the last one is related to joy (Pihkala, 2022b).

4 Methodology

4.1 Research design

This thesis is a phenomenon-based case study that integrates aspects of both intrinsic and instrumental cases (Crowe et al., 2011). To begin with, intrinsic case studies focus on the uniqueness of a case that holds genuine interest to researchers and is typically not representative of other cases (Crowe et al., 2011). In this thesis, I am specifically interested in climate activists' experiences of eco-anxiety and the function of humour in the climate movement context. Therefore, the specific findings of this research are less likely to apply to other demographics and in other societal contexts outside of activism.

In turn, instrumental case studies attempt to gain a more comprehensive understanding of a larger phenomenon or issue beyond the case itself (Crowe et al., 2011). Such studies generate insights that are potentially transferrable to other related cases and are useful for theory-building (Crowe et al., 2011). Although the case in this thesis is unique, I am also aiming to expand existing literature on eco-anxiety as a lived experience and on humour's role in social movements.

4.2 Data collection

4.2.1 Interviews

I collected data through in-depth semi-structured interviews (Morris, 2015). In-depth interviews are one of the most common ways to gather qualitative data in understanding people, their experiences or perspectives, and certain topics in detail (Carter et al., 2014). In-depth interviews that are also semi-structured allow for the exploration of these topics through a more flexible interaction: all important subjects in the interview guide are covered whilst allowing the interviewer to probe expansive or clarifying follow-up questions (Morris, 2015).

In the context of activism, in-depth semi-structured interviews are frequently used for collecting qualitative data as this allows the researcher the opportunity to uncover nuances in activists' beliefs and to learn about their emotional experiences (Blee, 2013). This is especially applicable for studying emotions as they are ambiguous and fortuitous, hence such qualitative methods create room for reflection and exploration of interconnections between different emotions (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017). More specifically, I conducted 'key informant interviews' as these people are often 'movement insiders' who are familiar with and actively involved in their organisation's operations

(Blee, 2013). Therefore, I interviewed active members of climate activist organisations, meaning they are frequently involved in organising or participating in different activities. I assume they may have richer emotional experiences that have developed over time and better insight into the topics of this research.

4.2.2 Sampling strategies

I have used snowball sampling (Parker et al., 2019) as my primary sampling strategy. This strategy is useful in gaining access to hard-to-reach populations, such as activists, due to requiring personal trust, needing to be approached with sensitivity, and desiring to remain anonymous (Milan, 2014; Parker et al., 2019). Due to conducting key informant interviews (Blee, 2013), I combined snowball sampling with purposive sampling (Parker et al., 2019).

In addition, I have employed convenience sampling (Golzar et al., 2022) in the form of in-person recruitment. Through this strategy one can directly approach potential participants at their own events, and hence it is a useful strategy to reach activists in particular (Blee, 2013). In total, I attended four different activist events of three different organisations.

In total, I managed to recruit ten participants from seven different climate activist organisations across Sweden and Denmark. This scope is due to the 'seed contacts' (Parker et al., 2019) in my personal network being connected with Swedish and Danish organisations. Danish organisations include 'Becoming Species', 'Fossilfri Fremtid', and 'Den Grønne Ungdomsbevægelse', and Swedish organisations include 'Återställ Våtmarker', 'Fridays for Future Lund', and an organisation that wished to remain anonymous. In addition, I managed to recruit activists from 'Extinction Rebellion' in both Sweden and Denmark. The inclusion of multiple organisations can be viewed as a form of data source triangulation (Carter et al., 2014). Such a triangulation tactic helps me to gain varying insights across different organisations and people, thus boosting the validity of this research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Eight of the ten interviews were held online through video call based on the participant's own preference, and the length of the interviews varied from 43 to 67 minutes.

4.3 Data analysis

For my analysis I conducted a qualitative content analysis (Williamson et al., 2018). As it focuses on answering questions of 'what', 'why', and 'how' (Delve & Limpaecher, 2023), qualitative content analysis is particularly useful for this thesis in uncovering what different eco-emotions are present, why activists experience such emotions and why humour is or is not a useful adaptive coping strategy, and how humour specifically helps activists to manage eco-anxiety.

I conducted both manifest and latent analysis (Bengtsson, 2016). As manifest analysis entails describing text in a more apparent and direct way that does not deviate much from the original text (Bengtsson, 2016), it is useful in specifically naming different eco-emotions by coding them directly. In turn, latent analysis focuses more on uncovering and interpreting the underlying meaning behind the actual text (Bengtsson, 2016). Therefore, it helps me understand not only the intricacies of emotional experiences but also the implicit reasons for and conditionalities of using humour to cope adaptively.

4.4 Data management steps

Immediately after each interview, I downloaded the recording on my personal computer hardware. As for transcribing, I employed a verbatim transcription approach. I used Microsoft Word's embedded feature 'Dictate' to transcribe my interviews. After this I personally revised every transcript to correct any audio to transcription mistranslations and to add any missing words.

After I had transcribed all interviews, I began the coding process using the coding software 'NVivo 14'. I used an abductive coding strategy that iteratively combines both deductive and inductive approaches (Vila-Henninger et al., 2022). This strategy begins with using a theoretically grounded deductive codebook (Vila-Henninger et al., 2022) to be able to seek out predetermined and existing subjects of interest, boosting the reliability of research (Bengtsson, 2016). Deductive coding is then followed by an inductive approach to code anomalous, novel, or surprising findings (Vila-Henninger et al., 2022). Such a combined approach is useful for theory-building as emergent information is integrated into existing knowledge (Bengtsson, 2016; Vila-Henninger et al., 2022).

4.5 Ethical considerations

An ethical obstacle that I faced during this research was a sense of mistrust held by some activists. It is not uncommon for activists to be suspicious of researchers and their endeavours (Milan, 2014). Milan (2014) outlines several possible reasons for this. Firstly, collecting and publishing information about activists might compromise their activities or even personal safety. Secondly, many have direct experience with exploitation in the past: activists are often left with minimal benefit for themselves from the research as the researcher is merely interested in collecting the necessary data. Lastly, researchers might fall into the trap of speaking on the behalf of activists. Therefore, building trust as well as remaining transparent and honest about your research is crucial in building rapport with activists (Milan, 2014).

In this thesis I have aimed to achieve this through multiple avenues. To begin with, doing in-person recruitment was a conscious choice as meeting activists face-to-face helps build a more trustful researcher-participant relationship (Milan, 2014). For all my participants, I have tried building rapport by repeatedly emphasising my intentions, the aim of my thesis and the associated data collection procedure, the benefits of this research for them, and their autonomous choice to disclose as much information about their experiences as they are comfortable with. Furthermore, I have guaranteed participants their anonymity and confidentiality of other personal signifiers, and I have provided them with the additional option to anonymise their entire organisation. Lastly, I have asked participants for their approval for using quotations if they expressed such a preference.

4.6 Limitations

Multiple limitations in this thesis research exist. Firstly, in terms of sampling strategies, as snowballing is dependent on the researcher's personal network and resources, such sampling hinders the external validity, representativeness, and generalisability of the findings (Parker et al., 2019). Snowball samples are also characterised by selection bias: exactly who the researcher manages to reach is dependent on how the researcher's 'seed contacts' perceive their own contacts to fit the sample criteria and whether these people would be willing to participate (Parker et al., 2019). In my case, I reached out to multiple seed contacts, however only a few of them were able to further connect me to relevant activists and organisations. Consequently, the responsiveness and availability of all contacted organisations and individuals inevitably shaped the sample composition of this research. Moreover, this composition was also heavily influenced by convenience sampling, which holds inherent motivation bias (Stratton, 2021) and limitations in its generalisability (Golzar et al., 2022). The exact participants that I managed to recruit face-to-face was also determined by my own availability for attendance and travel budget.

Secondly, the sample of this research itself is also inherently limited. On the one hand, this research is demarcated in its geographic scope as I managed to recruit participants solely from Sweden and Denmark. As both emotional experiences and humour are culturally relevant (Hoemann et al., 2024; Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014), future research could replicate this study in other geographical and cultural contexts. On the other hand, the participants of this research in most cases represented their activist organisation alone. This may contribute to skewed data as it is possible they might have forgotten some examples of humour in their activism, have a specific organisational role, or have an overall anomalous opinion on the benefits and usefulness of humour compared to their fellow activists.

Thirdly, this research lacks methodological triangulation, which would boost the validity of the findings (Carter et al., 2014). As focus groups are commonly combined with interviews (Carter et al., 2014), it was originally planned that a focus group discussion with some participants would have been held after the interviews to delve deeper into specific topics and to fill in data gaps. Unfortunately, due to the lack of availability of the participants, I was unable to schedule such a discussion.

4.7 Positionality and reflexivity

Positionality and reflexivity are key in qualitative research as it involves the researcher examining their own background, how it shapes their interpretations, and any personal benefits gained from the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Consequently, acknowledging one's social positions as well as personal values, experiences, and biases helps ensure transparency and deeper self-understanding within the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Two reflection points are important to explicate. Firstly, the findings and implications of this research are specific in their geographic context. The foundational literature of this thesis (Abel, 2002; Branagan, 2007; Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014; Pihkala, 2022b) are all written by scholars from the Global North. Furthermore, the emotional narratives of climate activists in the Global South not only differ compared to those from the Global North but are also underrepresented in current literature (Kleres & Wettegren, 2017). Therefore, the insights emerging from the data might not be geographically applicable outside the Global North.

Secondly, outside of my own research, experiencing eco-anxiety as a climate activist is a familiar journey for me. I joined a climate activist group in my high school at 15 years old where we organised projects and events to educate our peers about the climate crisis. Learning about the science of climate change and the global econo-political system triggered a mix of emotions, including anger at world leaders, a fear of the future, grief for ecosystem losses, deep-rooted shame about humanity, and guilt from insufficient climate action by my home country. After high school, I continued activism in university but soon faced burnout after years of intense negative emotions. I have since then been involved in climate activism sporadically, and currently I am not active.

My personal experiences with the thesis topic inevitably underpin both my interest in the topic and my implicit biases about related experiences. Therefore, I reflected on my own internal experiences throughout the research process to avoid confirmation bias (Peters, 2022). In practice, this meant I kept questioning my interpretations of participants' experiences with eco-anxiety by journalling

about my emotions and thoughts during the data collection process. Moreover, I applied the same practice regarding participants' understandings of humour as an adaptive coping strategy. Personally, humour plays a big role in my life and well-being, however other individuals may not reap similar benefits from it. Consequently, having remained open-minded and accepting of contrary experiences was crucial throughout the thesis process.

5 Findings

5.1 Climate activists' eco-anxiety

Climate activist reportedly experience a wide variety of negative emotions related to the climate crisis. To begin with, all participants feel threat-related emotions: worry about the uncertainty of the future on a general and personal level (Participants 7 and 8 below) and fear about more predictable future repercussions of climate change (Participants 3 and 5 below) are present:

> P7: "My dream is to move to the country-side, to be able to grow my own food … But then I think 'Fuck, what if there's no nutrition left in the soil?' It's just this constant second-guessing or every time I have a good thought it's followed up by scared and worried thought. And that's just hard to deal with."
>
> P8: "…we don't know what it will look like and we don't know how many years we have before the [Gulf Stream breaks down]. … And we don't know how many years [it'll be] before our soils are completely depleted … that is just so super scary."
>
> P3: "…suffering of people and animals when you have crazy wildfires …, and when you have people trying to reach Europe because crop failure where they live because [of] droughts and crazy floods."
>
> P5: "The whole thing about flooding or drought … people in the Global South are already really threatened, but I really fear that this is getting much, much worse."

Secondly, various anger-related emotions, often pertaining to the lack of action of both public and private actors, are felt by all participants:

> P1: "…it seems so [unjust] that someone can just come and overrule everyone's opinion and it's not even democratic, it's not even in line with the law, like they broke [national] law that is supposed to protect ecosystems and biodiversity, and still it's being done. So, I guess [it's] just being like 'What the fuck?', you want to shout at someone…"
>
> P2: "…[the frustration is] a discrepancy between urgency of what is happening and all the scientific reports and everything that we can read … then the fact that people were not acting around me."
>
> P3: "…there's also a lot of rage and anger at the people that threw us into this because, c'mon, the oil companies have known it for ages. Thirteen years ago we were not in nearly a bad situation as it is now. There was so much that could have been easily done…"

Thirdly, grief about various types of losses (Participants 5 and 7 below) is experienced by almost all participants, and sadness about the suffering of other people (Participants 4 and 6 below) is also prominent:

> P5: “It's about animals and plants and stuff that you can see disappear in front of your eyes totally literally.”
>
> P7: “I think it's a sorrow over losing the life I imagined and the life my parents probably imagined for me, or the carefree life I imagined they had being the same age as me.”
>
> P4: “I'm really sad about the suffering people go through … [due to] climate disasters, losing your home, and losing your way of life because of desertification…”
>
> P6: “knowing that a lot of kids and women in [more vulnerable] areas … are in more pain and more suffering. So it gets very emotional for me…”

Lastly, powerlessness and hopelessness about the lack of one’s agency to enact change are extremely common emotional experiences. However, these will be elaborated on and further discussed in the context of other findings in Section 6.1.1.

5.2 Humour as an adaptive coping strategy

5.2.1 Direct strategy

Forms of emotion-focused coping are frequently utilised by climate activists. More specifically, distancing, as expressed by nine participants, is most often employed:

> P2: “…sometimes I think when you laugh about the something that will disappear or that will not be the same in the future then … maybe just want to avoid the depressing feeling and you laugh about it instead.”
>
> P5: “at the time you, when you have a good laugh or you can make jokes about what we are doing or what society is doing, it's like you get a whole different perspective, and so you don't really get to think both the sorrow and the desperation. And so it kind of gives you some air to breathe.”
>
> P6: “…it sounds bad to say it's a distraction, but I feel like it's good because it makes us distracted enough to get the work done.”

Besides distancing, ridicule and mockery are used by five participants, often targeted at those perceived responsible for the climate crisis:

P5: “…it's like a psychological defence system that if you cannot beat people, you can laugh at them or make fun of them at least. … It's a good way to kind of get some of your feelings out.”

P7: “…it creates a villain that I can just be angry at. So I guess it makes my emotions [simpler] and a bit easier to deal with. Because otherwise it would just be overwhelming all the time.”

In turn, forms of problem-focused coping are also utilised. Most commonly, humour is employed as a creative tool to discover new perspectives regarding the climate crisis:

P6: “…we also take humour and we try to be like: ‘How can we make it fun to make this change?’”

P5: “…sometimes [a ‘stupid’ brainstorm] gives the best perspective, because you think of something that's totally unreal. But sometimes it also can open thoughts about new perspectives on the climate crisis or a new kind of activism.”

P10: “…we have to break out of a cocoon, … and we won't succeed in breaking out unless we have a certain creative impulse.”

Moreover, two participants highlight the importance of integrating humour as a creative way to cultivate a more desirable future:

P2: “…the life we have now is very stressful, is exposed to the commercial pressure all the time. Maybe if that disappears … you will have more time, be healthier, and have more friends. So maybe you get closer to that by joking also.”

P6: “…we don't just want to create this future, but we want to create a future where we want to live in. So then we need to have a lot of laughs.”

5.2.2 Indirect strategy

The most frequently used indirect strategy, as expressed by nine participants, is humour as a community builder, even in cases where activists are not close or did not know each other prior:

P2: “…when you have some good moments together, it's not about trying to change the world and feeling a big responsibility. We also need, as a group, to have some moments together in the community and feel good together.”

P5: “…we did not know each other, we were eight or ten people. And the whole thing about having a good laugh is also that it really connects people. … Maybe you're ten people in a room laughing about it, and still you're more than one who share the same feelings that you do.”

P10: “The feelings of the barriers are reduced, the distance between people. You feel that you're part of a common group. Humour is a unifier…”

Although a less common strategy, humour also plays a role in forging collective identity. It unfolds through reinforcing in- and out-group boundaries with the public (Participant 1 below) and the perpetrators of the climate crisis (Participants 7 and 8 below):

P1: “…often we perform, people [are] like ‘What the fuck?’, and you're just so used to it now that it becomes more a thing that you can play around with. And that has definitely done something to our vibe in between us that is just great.”

P7: “…ensuring again that we think the same about this thing, like ‘We both hate Shell, ha ha ha’, we're on the same side of this.”

P8: “I think making fun of them amongst ourselves is a way to confirm to each other that they are wrong…”

The second most popular strategy is humour’s function in inspiring ideas for actions and activities:

P1: “I guess when we brainstorm for new actions, there's a lot about like jumping around and having like a big sheet of paper just writing a shit ton of weird words … you don't know what this next action is going to look like, so you just have to try out a lot of weird things and see how it feels and looks like.”

P3: “…you can always throw the idea of having a bunch of T-Rexes running around the airports [saying] ‘Save us from extinction! Ban private jets!’ Why not! Then you just laugh at the image in your head.”

P7: “It just helps like keep our brains fresh and create new ideas because if we're having fun then like it creates a flow and it's easier to get more ideas.”

Humour is also an important tool to reduce action-related stress, often by joking about stressful experiences with the police:

P4: “I think that could have been a situation that traumatised me. But just because of the way I coped with it in the moment with my comrades and the fact that we still joke about it to this day like ‘Remember that policeman that watched me pee?’ I'm just not giving it the power to scare me.”

P8: “…when we are doing actions and making fun of police experience, [humour] can definitely be a short-term solution to cope with that brutal experience.”

Some participants also experience humour to be useful in preventing activist burnout in the long run:

P2: “…when you are activist, very often people enter with a lot of good intentions and six months after they are in a burnout, and they leave the movement. So it's very important to try everything that would help people to have a sustainable activism in the long run, so [humour] is definitely one [way].”

P6: “I feel that it’s very easy to burn out in these kinds of organisations, including the one I am in because it gets so heavy… [I can just] have the fun and feel like ‘OK, I don't have to carry all of this burden, I can just have quite fun in the journey’. It makes them a lot of easier for me to relax and take care of myself.”

The ability of humour to lift spirits by making activism more fun plays an important role for a few participants:

P1: “…especially with this punk action concept, I feel we're really engaging with humour in a way that I just really love. It's become way more fun to do actions like this.”

P3: “It's not just [about] doing it because it's the right thing to do, it's actually fun.”

Outside the conceptual framework (Figure 1 in Section 3.2.3), climate activists commonly employ humour to empower themselves at the face of powerlessness:

P1: “…by taking back the laughter … it's reclaiming a bit the narrative or just insisting on ‘Okay, this is going to go down the toilet, but at least we can have fun while it's going down’.”

P2: “…there are some powerful groups acting to destroy the life on Earth, and at least I feel like every time I have a good time, it's something I win because they have not managed to destroy that … in a sense that ‘We can still laugh and smile and that you cannot take from us. You can take from us all the forests and everything. And but for now you still haven't taken all from us’.”

P4: “I think it often takes that feeling of powerlessness and turns it into a joke. And then once you laugh about it you feel like you're a little bit in power because … you're joking about them and they don't know. … It's just satisfying I think. It’s the tiny amount of power you have.”

Moreover, humour does not only prevent burnout, but it also plays a role in making activism lighter:

P3: ”I think it makes life a bit easier, a bit lighter, less heavy. … You can always [be] talking about the serious stuff. No, let’s have some jokes, even if they're silly, then I guess it gets the point that they're so silly but you still laugh anyways. So it makes everything a lot easier if you joke around a bit.”

P6: “[Humour] makes me be able to work with this. Otherwise it would get too heavy for me. Because of the humour I'm able to not drown in the heavy emotions and be able to act because it's light and fun also.”

Over half of the participants experience the importance of humour in even maintaining one’s ability to function:

P1: “I still need to feel alright in order to be part of society or a decently functioning human being. So I guess these different things definitely help me to keep my head above in a hopeful way … I don't have to suffer just because I'm an activist.”

P6: “I think we would die otherwise … I feel like I if I dug myself too much into this sadness it will be so hard to even do like the light tasks in this work, but if I have the humour on my side, I'm like ‘Fuck it. I can do anything’.”

Lastly, humour plays a significant role in sustaining motivation and continuing one’s commitment to activism for almost half of the participants:

P3: “Each meeting we have is fun. Each action you do turns out being fun in one way or another. It's also hard to give up.”

P5: “…it's what also makes you come to the next meeting because you leave one meeting feeling happy and glad. And you know there's lots of serious stuff that you have to talk about at the next meeting, but you also know that it's going to be fun at the same time. I think without that we wouldn't last long.”

P7: “It just makes me feel glad that I showed up.”

6 Discussion

Overall, the findings of this research support the validity of the conceptual framework (Figure 1 in Section 3.2.3). A variety of different eco-emotions characterised as eco-anxiety are felt by activists, of which threat-, anger-, and sadness-related emotions are the most common categories (Table 1 in Section 3.1). This aligns with the expectations of current eco-emotions research as fear, worry, anger, sadness, and grief are frequently and extensively discussed in eco-emotions literature (Pihkala, 2022b).

In terms of humour, both direct and indirect adaptive coping strategies are utilised. From the two direct strategies, emotion-focused coping is more frequently present in participants' activism, as anticipated (see Section 3.2.1). Problem-focused coping is used almost exclusively in a creative rather than critical manner.

However, coping with humour indirectly is overall more strongly preferred by participants based on their verbal responses. This is due to two reasons. On the one hand, most participants expressed not having previously thought of humour as a creative or critical tool for problem-solving purposes and did not emphasise this in their responses, hence weakening support for the role of humour as a direct problem-focused coping mechanism against eco-anxiety. On the other hand, although distancing is viewed as necessary by some, many doubt its adaptive value. Although humour is generally regarded as adaptive (Doherty & Clayton, 2011), there is a well-founded reason for this scepticism as reliance on emotion-focused coping, especially distancing, can be maladaptive in excess (Ojala, 2012; Pihkala, 2022a). However, the overall adaptiveness of coping strategies is always context-dependent (Ojala, 2012).

6.1 Eco-anxiety

6.1.1 Powerlessness and hopelessness

Most activists reportedly feel some degree of powerlessness in their activism due to limited agency to make an impact:

> P1: "…at the same time I realised I haven't got any power myself so I can't change it … the distance to where you are positioned and then where change can be created from this too big in the sense."

> P5: "…you just ask yourself: 'But does this even help in the tiniest bit? Should I just give it up?' Because you're up against not just the politicians and companies, but also a super big amount of people in the country who really don't give a fuck about the climate or nature."

Although multiple participants experience hope, mainly through being part of an activist community, many still use the word 'hopeless' to describe their lack of agency to create fundamental change. Based on Kwong's (2024) distinction of hopelessness and despair, activists' emotional experiences lean more toward the former as they implicitly feel diminished 'hoping' in addition to a loss of 'hopefulness'. Hopelessness is also closely intertwined with powerlessness in participants' locus of impact and ability to create change, often due to the deep rootedness of environmentally harmful politics and public values:

> P7: "…I can be mad at our [national Climate Minister] and say 'Oh, you're just a piece of shit and you're just letting them ruin my future. Why do you do this? You don't care'. But then I realise that he's just a politician, and he has to play the game with the other international Climate Ministers and with the industry and with the whole capitalistic system."
>
> P5: "I saw a paper had posted some statistic about if people thought that we should ban private jets … There was twice as many people who said: 'That's fine, if they have the power and they want to fly in their own jet plane, they should just do that'. … That makes me feel hopeless on the account of how people feel in [country of residence]."
>
> P8: "…it was not that I started the hunger strike with the expectations that it would change everything, of course not. Because it will not. Nothing we can do will. … It makes you feel hopeless because it feels like no matter how much we do, and no matter how much time we spend on these things, and no matter how successful we actually are in getting attention and in getting heard and in getting public [acknowledgement], support, and solidarity declarations … they are just so powerful."

This is somewhat of a surprising finding as activism is recognised as a key problem-focused coping mechanism for eco-anxiety (Pihkala, 2022a; Schwartz et al., 2023) and is correlated with feelings of empowerment, hope, and joy in the activism context (Pihkala, 2022b). However, feeling powerless as a climate activist due to the perceived lack of political power is also not an uncommon experience (Pihkala, 2020), and activists are often more prone to feeling hopeless and, consequently, to experiencing burnout (Nairn, 2019).

Regardless, all participants still embody deep commitment to their activism. Two possible explanations to this can be deducted from the data. Firstly, humour is commonly used to empower oneself, most often through ridiculing and mocking the perpetrators of climate change who are the

sources of activists' powerlessness. This supports the positive impact of such humour in climate activism as explained by Superiority Theory: by highlighting another's flaws and 'disciplining' by laughter, activists gain a relative sense of superiority that is experienced as enjoyable (Lintott, 2016; Meyer, 2000). Subsequently, this generates the eco-emotion of empowerment (Pihkala, 2022b).

The second explanation pertains to the participants' views on activism itself. Many participants experience activism as a moral duty or obligation:

> P5: "I think it's hard to deal with not doing anything. It's hard to be a bystander, it's hard to just accept that you're not really able to do anything."
>
> P6: "…it goes up and down, sometimes it feels like 'OK, we can make something good of this' and then sometimes I'm like 'I think it's too late, but I have to do what I can, I cannot just run away'."
>
> P9: "The most important thing is to actually do something about it, even though it might not change anything, you just have to do it anyway."

Consequently, regardless of whether change is perceived as obtainable, activists firmly believe it simply must be done. This may be linked to eco-guilt and -shame (Pihkala, 2022b). Interestingly, no participant feels eco-shame at all and only one participant experiences eco-guilt due to occasionally engaging in environmentally harmful individual behaviours. Therefore, a strong moral determination to engage with climate activism might also reflect an attempt to prevent eco-guilt and -shame rooted in their own or their peers' environmental wrongdoings (Pihkala, 2022b). Regardless, taking constructive action is known to hold some degree of benefit even when eco-anxiety persists (Pihkala, 2020).

6.1.2 Complexity of eco-anxiety and emotional overlaps

In describing emotional experiences related to the climate crisis, various terms are used by participants. For instance, in this thesis, 'sadness' is often used to describe experiences of 'grief', as conceptualised in the literature (Table 1 in Section 3.1), and many activists use the word 'sorrow' instead of 'sadness' or 'grief'. Moreover, anger is expressed using different vocabulary, such as 'frustration', 'annoyance' or 'rage', despite pertaining to the same topics. The term 'indignation', which pertains to moral outrage (Pihkala, 2022b), is also mentioned verbatim or implied by some activists. Additionally, 'fear' and 'worry' are used interchangeably despite conceptual differences in the literature (Table 1 in Section 3.1): the felt uncertainty of the climate and environmental crises are labelled with 'fear', 'fright', and 'scared', whereas 'worry' and 'concern' were expressed about more tangible threats.

Furthermore, participant responses reveal a complex overlap of emotions. Many frame their experiences using multiple emotions, making it difficult to distinguish the foundational emotion. Moreover, many participants attribute other, more surprising emotional experiences to specific topics regarding the climate and environment. For instance, although uncertainty is a core characteristic of worry (Ojala et al., 2021), a few participants additionally feel annoyed by uncertainty. Moreover, feelings of injustice are often linked to anger, specifically indignation, and reactions to the lack of climate action are expressed commonly through fury and frustration (Pihkala, 2022b). However, many participants also experience these in conjunction with sadness.

Conducting latent analysis was helpful in detangling the broad terminology used by participants and hence in uncovering the underlying meaning behind verbatim speech. Nevertheless, the diverse use of emotional vocabulary by participants showcases the complexity of emotion research and interconnectedness of various emotions, affects, and feelings, including those related to the climate and environment (Pihkala, 2022b). This interconnectedness in the empirical findings may have two explanations. Firstly, individuals tend to use a wide range of terms to describe overlapping emotional experiences when given the autonomous choice to self-label (Hoemann et al., 2024). Secondly, what is regarded as 'emotions' as well as the way they are expressed and interpreted are culturally bound (Dylman et al., 2020; Hoemann et al., 2024). Moreover, the descriptions of emotional experiences may additionally be influenced by the fact that all participants, except for one, communicated in their non-native language, resulting in the use of different emotional vocabulary (Ożańska-Ponikwia, 2012).

6.2 Humour

6.2.1 The dual function of humour

Using humour serves many purposes in coping with experiences of eco-anxiety directly and indirectly, however two broad categories of functionality emerge inductively from the data. On the one hand, humour is a helpful tool in preventing negative emotions or outcomes. Both direct strategies embody this, however it is most evident in participants using humour as an emotion-focused coping mechanism. As an indirect strategy, humour is reportedly useful in preventing burnout, making activism lighter, maintaining one's functionality, and reducing action-related stress. On the other hand, humour also plays a significant role in generating a variety of positive eco-emotions. Not only does humour induce empowerment but it also engenders heartfelt feelings of togetherness, connection, and belonging through building community, the feeling of joy through

inspiring action and lifting spirits, and the feeling of determination by amplifying one's motivation to continue activism.

Consequently, humour in activism can be considered to embody a dual functionality. Both the preventative and generative functions of humour seem to complement each other: for climate activists, experiencing positive eco-emotions to counterweigh negative ones serves alongside knowing how to manage the negative eco-emotions themselves. This sheds light on not only viewing humour as a coping mechanism to merely manage stressors and cognitively reappraise perceived 'threats' (Abel, 2002) but also emphasising its role in cultivating inner resilience (Colom et al., 2011) by generating a variety of positive eco-emotions (Pihkala, 2022b). The centrality of positive emotional experiences in activism is an important finding as they are significantly understudied in eco-emotions research (Pihkala, 2022b). Therefore, future research could further explore the 'generative' role of humour and the extent to which positive eco-emotions help to counterbalance negative ones resulting from the climate crisis.

6.2.2 The role of dark humour

All participants reportedly utilise various forms of 'internal' and 'external' humour (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014). Internal humour mainly comprises ironic and sarcastic conversational humour (Dynel, 2009), which often occurs spontaneously. External humour commonly takes the form of humour-based actions, such as musical and satirical performances as well as street theatre, and various types of online publications, such as posts and videos on social media and websites. Across these different forms, dark humour, meaning humour that "makes light of the morbid, unpleasant, and taboo" (Potter, 2023, p. 7), repeatedly emerged from participant responses. Two relevant subtypes of dark humour, namely disparaging and gallows humour (Potter, 2023), are elaborated on below.

Ridicule and mockery as disparaging humour

It is evident from the data that forms of ridicule and mockery in climate activism are important. As mentioned previously, these not only embody an indirect strategy through generating empowerment but they also have a direct effect on the emotional release of powerlessness and anger. This supports the anticipated connection between emotion-focused coping and Superiority Theory (see Section 3.2.3). Moreover, such humour is also reportedly useful in forging collective identity.

Still, over half of the participants are hesitant about ridicule and mockery due to various reasons:

> P1: "I believe way more in targeting the structures than the specific people."

P8: "…we make a quite great effort not to hang them out personally because we don't think that'll be OK."

P10: "…we should not mock or denigrate the opposition, but understand why they are thinking what they are. A lot of those people are brainwashed almost in the same way that [those] who do very little about climate change are brainwashed."

This is surprising as many forms of public ridicule and mockery, especially satire, have been established strategies in social movements throughout history (Hart, 2007). In this study, most participants hesitate on using such humour publicly, especially when focused on specific individuals deemed responsible for the climate crisis. In fact, it is mostly 'internal humour' (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014) in the form of conversational humour (Dynel, 2009) that is supported by Superiority Theory (Meyer, 2000) based on the empirical data. 'External humour' (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014) in the form of satirical performances, comic strips, social media posts, and satirical songs either embody critical societal commentary or target whole entities, such as governmental bodies, politicians as characters in general, or companies. It is rarely the case that they are utilised to target specific individuals or groups of people. This type of mockery and ridicule can be considered disparaging humour, a form of dark humour that denigrates a distinguished target (Ford & Ferguson, 2004; Potter, 2023). Such humour is presumed to be harmful as it generates and perpetuates hostility directed at the target and reinforces social prejudices against specific groups (Ford & Ferguson, 2004). Based on the data, participants who feel hesitant about disparaging humour may thus deem it as a form of negative humour, an offensive type of humour that is not correlated with lower anxiety and reduced negative emotions (Colom et al., 2011). Consequently, this might mitigate the beneficial impacts of mockery and ridicule as an adaptive coping strategy.

In conclusion, satire and conversational disparaging humour can still be viewed as significant in climate activism as it works as both an indirect and a direct adaptive coping strategy against eco-anxiety. However, there seems to be a boundary to be drawn at public disparaging humour about specific individuals due to being regarded as detrimental or unproductive. Nevertheless, it is not unheard of to denigrate individuals publicly in the climate movement, especially through protest banners (Hee et al., 2022). Moreover, Participant 5 seemed to find a silver lining: "…there [are] some boundaries that we should not step over due to our principles … but sometimes we find we can do this actually because it's not the person, it's the person's policy that we are really attacking". Therefore, future research could further explore the nuanced boundaries of disparaging humour in climate activism, delineating pros and cons of its usefulness as an adaptive coping strategy as well as its broader impacts on the climate movement itself.

Gallows humour

Another form of dark humour emerging from the data is gallows humour, meaning humour about horrifying and disastrous topics, including but not limited to death and mortality (Potter, 2023). Although not commonly expressed, it is mostly used directly as an emotion-focused coping mechanism, as exemplified by the jokes below:

> P4: "We're being violated by the police right, but hey! That's the life!"
>
> P10: "Shall we take a drive to the airport and lie on the runway?"

When used by activists, often in a self-deprecating manner, it aims to release stress and reduce negative emotions, as supported by Relief Theory (see Section 3.2.3). Moreover, a few participants occasionally utilise gallows humour about the climate crisis itself, such as joking about the effects of climate change or about dying as a result. However, this seems to be a highly unpopular approach as most participants feel resistance about climate-related jokes:

> P4: "…there's things I don't joke about like other people suffering, like you just can't talk about it, not as an outsider. So some things I think can't be addressed with humour."
>
> P6: "It feels a bit, prohibited to laugh about [the climate crisis]."
>
> P8: "I don't make fun of people dying, that would be super inappropriate."
>
> P9: "…it's really hard for me to see how, in what way possible, you can joke about the climate catastrophe. You just don't do that. It's killing people, and it will kill a billion people in maybe 6-10 years. You cannot joke about that. We're not joking about the climate catastrophe."

Gallows humour is a useful method of coping to reassert control amid unpredictable circumstances (Morgan et al., 2019) and protect oneself against heavy, uncomfortable, and taboo subjects (Potter, 2023). However, the strongest benefits of gallows humour seem to be applicable for individuals who themselves are the targets of the threat in question (Potter, 2023). For instance, gallows humour has historically been used by oppressed people as an act of resistance, and it is a generator of hope as well as an indicator of good morale (Potter, 2023). Consequently, the participants' strong resistance against gallows humour may be rooted in them not considering themselves as direct, acute victims of the climate crisis. Thus, activists perceive it as morally wrong to make light of the suffering of those who are viewed as the true victims. This supports the conceptualisation of eco-anxiety itself as a function of indirect exposure (Clayton, 2020). In other words, although participants experience negative emotions about the climate crisis, particularly fear and worry about one's own safety and security in the future, most of them do not feel acutely or severely impacted by it in the present moment. Regardless, gallows humour, as studied in environmental communication, may still provide general benefits by generating relief and confronting anxieties relating to environmental degradation

(Lyytimäki, 2021). Thus, future research could further explore the role and boundaries of gallows humour in climate activism and its usefulness in alleviating eco-anxiety.

6.2.3 General criticism against humour

Besides dark humour, participants also emphasised a plethora of general criticisms about humour in climate activism in their responses. Two main ones emerged. Firstly, half of all participants believe that humour is of secondary importance in their activism for a variety of reasons. The most common one pertains to the importance of the activist community itself:

> P4: "I get hope through seeing the community be strong and seeing the community come together … and knowing we're fighting together."
>
> P8: "I actually I feel that I connect way more with my fellow activists through emotions such as indignation and sadness because that's way more unique in our relationship, that we experience the world in that way or that we feel the same kind of things [about] the world … I think those feelings actually [are] for me more important in my work…"
>
> P9: "For me, it's much more important to sit around a big table and have a conversation, and sometimes you laugh and sometimes it's serious…"

Collectivising heavy emotions and spending quality time together are hence arguably more important than using humour as an adaptive coping strategy for some activists. Indeed, experiencing emotions collectively and building community in themselves sustain activist campaigns and participation in activism through stronger social cohesion and cultivating intra-organisational resilience (Brosch, 2025; Rye, 2024). Consequently, although humour plays a significant role in building community based on the empirical data, it is important to not neglect other factors that contribute to sustainable activism.

Secondly, half of all participants believe that 'external' humour can also compromise the seriousness of climate activism:

> P6: "…mostly we try to be serious [in our actions] to show that we're not doing this for fun. We're doing this because it has to [be done]."
>
> P7: "…I think maybe that's one of the weaknesses of humour … it's hard to say 'OK, this started as a joke, but now I'm actually serious'."
>
> P8: "…some of the time [humour is] a way to cope with some of these feelings. But on the other hand, we also really want to insist on being serious."

This limitation of humour as a communication tool is somewhat unsurprising as the external impacts of humour are highly context-dependent (Hart, 2007; Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014). In polarised settings, humour tends to be inhibited by seriousness and a pursuit of righteousness (Hart, 2007). Its success additionally depends on the audience it is targeted at: the more diverse the audience, the higher the potential for further division (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014). Moreover, humour is culturally and politically bound (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014). For humour to resonate with its audience, it needs to reference relevant topics and symbols and draw upon shared norms and values (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014). Thus, although the findings of this research indicate a significant importance of humour for activists themselves, sensitivity and strategic thought are needed to limit 'external humour' from hindering the success of activism itself.

7 Conclusion

This thesis has attempted to describe climate activists' emotional experiences that can be characterised as eco-anxiety as well as explore the role of humour as an adaptive coping strategy to manage said eco-anxiety. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten activists from multiple Danish and Swedish climate activist organisations. Based on the qualitative content analysis, activists experience multiple negative eco-emotions triggered by the climate crisis, including fear, worry, multiple forms of anger, sadness, grief, powerlessness, and hopelessness. Many expressions of activists' emotional experiences are complex and overlapping, calling for future research to further explore the nuances of and interlinkages between different eco-emotions.

The findings also reveal that humour is used both as a direct and an indirect adaptive coping strategy to manage emotions, with the latter being a more prominent strategy in general. From the direct strategies, emotion-focused coping is more recurringly employed, and from the many indirect strategies humour is utilised most frequently in building community, inspiring action, and empowering activists. Conclusively, humour can generally be considered a useful and beneficial adaptive coping strategy for climate activists to adaptively cope with eco-anxiety.

Novel findings on the interconnections between eco-anxiety, humour, and climate activism emerge from this case study research. Most interestingly, humour in climate activism presents a dual functionality, embodying both a preventative function against negative variables in activism and a generative function linked to positive emotional experiences. Previous literature has mainly highlighted the former (Abel, 2002; Pihkala, 2022b), however the findings of this thesis call for greater attention to be given to the latter in future humour and eco-emotions research. However, utilising humour also has its clear boundaries and limitations uniquely in the context of climate activism. The use of dark humour, specifically public ridicule and mockery as well as joking about the climate crisis itself, is substantially limited based on moral and normative reasoning. Furthermore, it is important to consider humour's secondary role in managing eco-anxiety in activism as well as its impacts in communicating with outsiders.

The results of this thesis are also fruitful for the field of sustainability science, presenting transdisciplinary knowledge that is relevant for driving sustainable progress (Jerneck et al., 2011; Kates et al., 2001). On the one hand, they outline unique and societally important insights of intrinsic case value (Crowe et al., 2011). On the other, the findings also embody instrumental case value (Crowe et al., 2011). In other words, they are significant not only for theory-building across

disciplines but also potentially for other actors and scholars in the field who might be experiencing eco-anxiety similarly. Considering both the strengths and limitations of humour, I hope the international climate activist community and sustainability scientists can reflect on these findings and implement that which is beneficial in their work at the face of heavy emotions. May laughter bring both healing and well-being for all who so desire.

8 References

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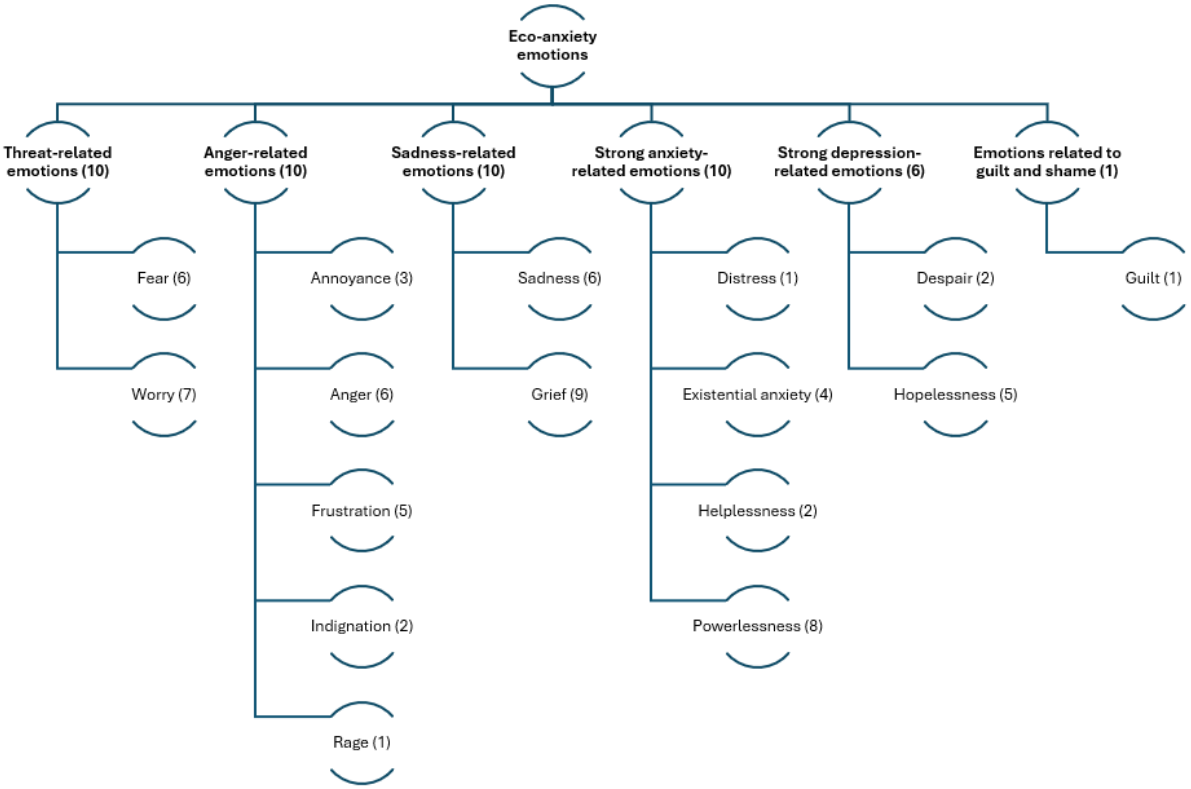
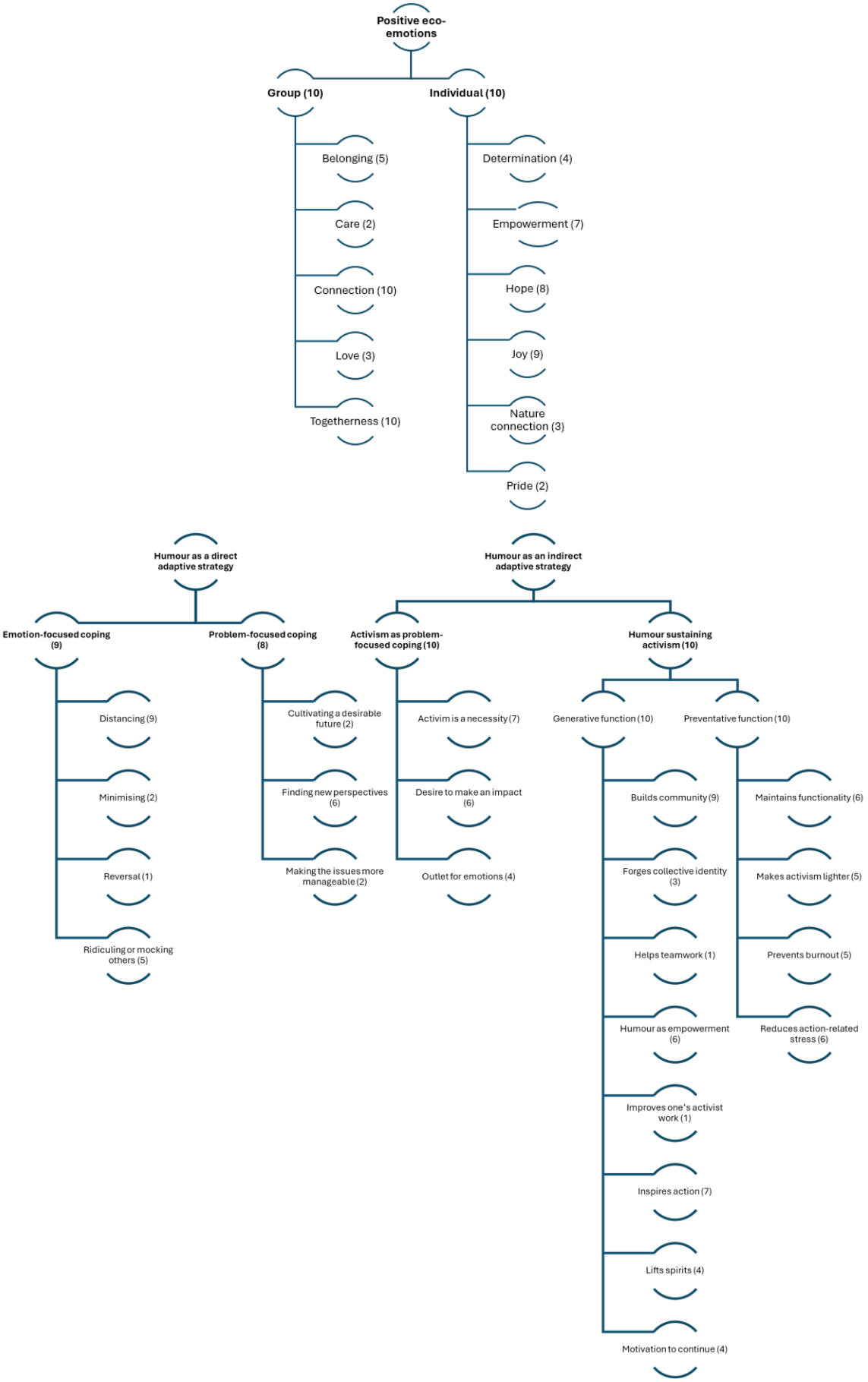
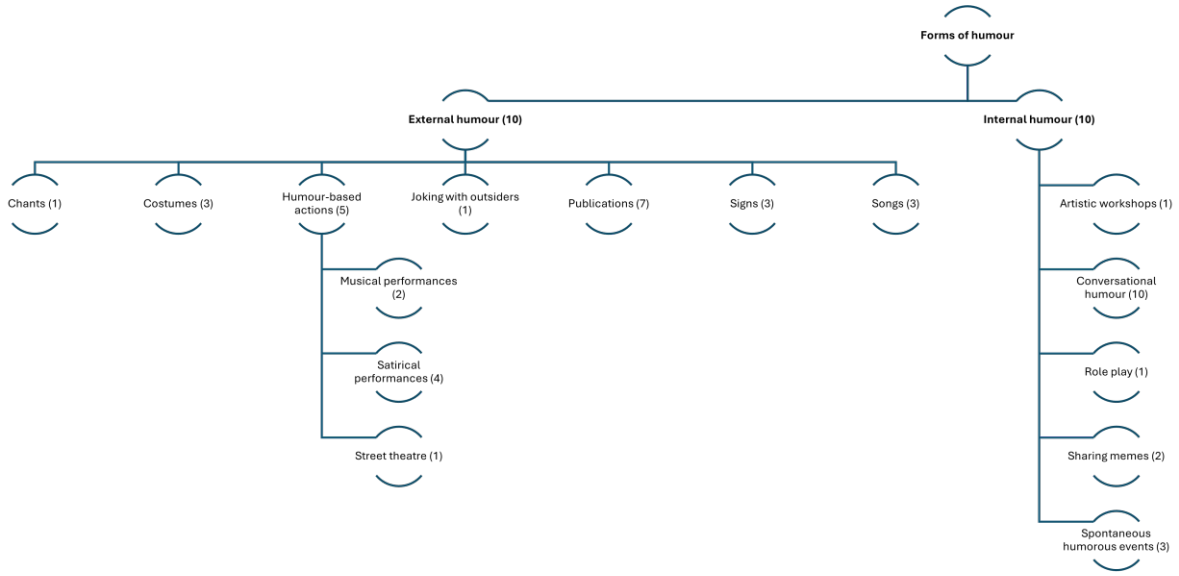
9 Appendices

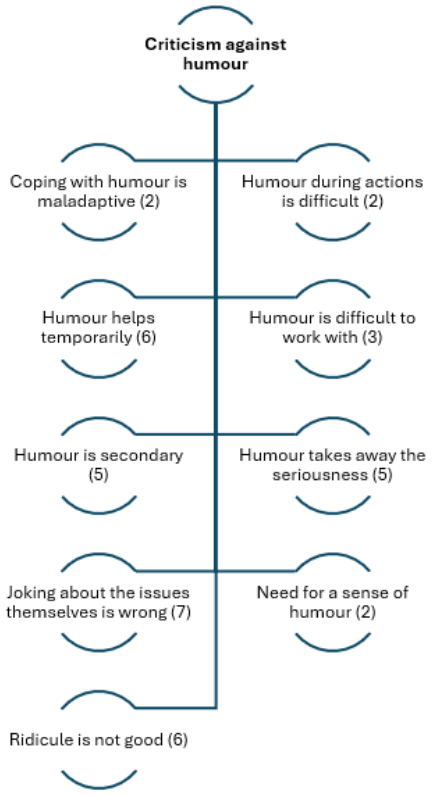
9.1 Appendix A: Code trees

Abductive code trees based on interview data, after both deductive and inductive coding processes. The numbers on the right-hand side of each word indicate how many participants reported these. The sum indicated in the axial codes does not represent a cumulative sum.




Positive eco-emotions
Group (10)
Individual (10)
Belonging (5)
Care (2)
Connection (10)
Love (3)
Togetherness (10)
Determination (4)
Empowerment (7)
Hope (8)
Joy (9)
Nature connection (3)
Pride (2)
Humour as a direct adaptive strategy
Humour as an indirect adaptive strategy
Emotion-focused coping (9)
Problem-focused coping (8)
Activism as problem-focused coping (10)
Humour sustaining activism (10)
Distancing (9)
Minimising (2)
Reversal (1)
Ridiculing or mocking others (5)
Cultivating a desirable future (2)
Finding new perspectives (6)
Making the issues more manageable (2)
Activim is a necessity (7)
Desire to make an impact (6)
Outlet for emotions (4)
Generative function (10)
Preventative function (10)
Builds community (9)
Forges collective identity (3)
Helps teamwork (1)
Humour as empowerment (6)
Improves one's activist work (1)
Inspires action (7)
Lifts spirits (4)
Motivation to continue (4)
Maintains functionality (6)
Makes activism lighter (5)
Prevents burnout (5)
Reduces action-related stress (6)


Forms of humour
External humour (10)
Internal humour (10)
Chants (1)
Costumes (3)
Humour-based actions (5)
Joking with outsiders (1)
Publications (7)
Signs (3)
Songs (3)
Musical performances (2)
Satirical performances (4)
Street theatre (1)
Artistic workshops (1)
Conversational humour (10)
Role play (1)
Sharing memes (2)
Spontaneous humorous events (3)


Criticism against humour
Coping with humour is maladaptive (2)
Humour during actions is difficult (2)
Humour helps temporarily (6)
Humour is difficult to work with (3)
Humour is secondary (5)
Humour takes away the seriousness (5)
Joking about the issues themselves is wrong (7)
Need for a sense of humour (2)
Ridicule is not good (6)

9.2 Appendix B: The interview guide

Introduction – 3 min

- Welcome! This interview is a part of my Master's thesis on climate activists' eco-anxiety and how humour can be used as a coping mechanism in your activism. My thesis is a part of my Master studies in Environmental Studies and Sustainability Science in Lund University.
- As stated in the consent form,
    - this interview will be recorded
    - your participation in this study is completely voluntary – you can withdraw at any time, even during this interview
    - you will remain anonymous, and any other personal signifiers will not be revealed
    - this interview will cover personal topics on emotions – you do not need to share anything you don't want to
- I'll be taking notes during the interview for myself.
- Do you still consent to being interviewed and taking part in my study?
- Do you have any questions before we start?

Warm-up questions – 5 min

- Tell me a little bit about your organisation.
    - What is your organisation about?
    - How long have you been involved?
    - What kinds of activities and events do you do?

Eco-anxiety and eco-emotions – 15 min

- Why did you become involved in climate activism?
- How are you concerned about climate change and the environment?
- When you are [doing activity], what feelings related to the climate and environment are present?
- How does the unpredictability/uncertainty/uncontrollability of the climate/environmental crisis make you feel?

Follow-up to all: How does it make you feel? Can you name any emotions?

- Specific emotions
    - Do you feel worried/afraid? About what specifically? Why?
    - Do you feel distressed? About what? Why?
    - Do you feel angry/frustrated? At what/who? Why?
    - Do you feel powerless/hopeless/helpless? Why?
    - Do you feel sad? About what? Why?
    - Do you feel confused (about the future)? How?
    - Do you feel guilt or shame? About what? Why?
    - Do you feel existential feelings (a sense of meaninglessness/feelings about our mortality)? Why?

Humour and activism – 10 min

- Internal humour
    - How often do you joke or share a laugh with your fellow activists?
    - What do you usually joke/laugh about? Why?
        - Do you usually joke about the climate/environment itself or something unrelated?

    - In which situations does this happen? During meetings/activities? Before activities? After activities?
    - Can you give any examples?
- External humour
    - What kinds of elements are usually used in [activity]? By 'elements' I mean protest signs, costumes, chants, songs, symbols, etc.
        - How is humour present or evident in these?
    - Do you use humour in your publications or social medias? If so, how?
    - Can you give any examples?

Humour as a coping mechanism – 20 min

Now having thought of the emotions in the beginning of the interview [name said emotions] and having talked about the presence of humour in your activism…

- DIRECT
    - How does using humour help you and your fellow activists manage your feelings about the climate/environmental crisis?
        - In your activism, does humour help you get distance to the climate/environmental crisis or to help you 'find the light in the dark'? If so, how?
        - In your activism, does humour help to reduce stress or provide relief about the climate/environmental crisis? If so, how?
        - Do you and your fellow activists mock or ridicule about those responsible for climate/environmental crisis? If so, what does it do for you emotionally?
    - How does using humour help you and your fellow activists find new ways to think about the climate/environmental crisis?
        - Is humour used as a form of criticism in your activism? If so, what/who do you criticise? How?
        - In your activism, does humour play a role in finding new perspectives or ideas about the climate/environmental crisis? If so, how?
        - In your activism, does humour play a role in communicating or framing solutions to the climate/environmental crisis? If so, how?
        - Does this help reduce negative feelings related to the climate/environment that we touched upon earlier in the interview? If so, how?
- INDIRECT
    - How do you see humour bringing mental balance to your activism?
        - In what ways could humour help prevent emotional overwhelm? If so, how?
            - Does using humour help you to deal with feelings of pressure and responsibility related to your activism? How?
        - Does using humour help you to create a sense of togetherness with your fellow activists? If so, in what way?
            - What feelings are connected to that?
        - How does humour play a role in keeping you committed to your activism? If so, how?

Closing questions – 5 min

- Thank you for your fruitful answers and insights! Your contribution is really valuable to me.
- Do you have any questions for me? (Is there anything you said that you would like to exclude from the thesis?)

- Quotations: Do you want me to send you the specific quotes to you for approval beforehand?
- Would you like to participate in an online focus group discussion with other activists at a later date?
    - Monday March 24th @ 18:00
    - Thursday March 27th @ 18:00

9.3 Appendix C: Interview consent form

This is an official consent form for Vappu Väänänen's Master thesis research.

Introduction

My name is Vappu Väänänen, and I am a Master's student in Lund University, Sweden, studying the international programme MSc Environmental Studies and Sustainability Science. As a part of my degree, I am currently conducting my Master thesis research titled "*Laughter as an antidote? The role of humour as an adaptive strategy to eco-anxiety of environmental activists*". In this thesis, I am looking to study the different emotions experienced by environmental activists characterised as eco-anxiety and how humour can serve as an adaptive strategy in managing eco-anxiety.

The interview and your role as an interviewee

For my thesis I am conducting in-depth interviews with various environmental activists internationally. Each interview will take between 45 and 60 minutes, and they can take place in-person or online.

During the interview we will talk about your personal experiences and views related to the study topic. The aim is to gain a better understanding of your personal emotional experiences, what forms of humour are used in your organisation, and how you view the way humour can be a coping mechanism to eco-anxiety.

Data collection, data storage, and participant rights

1. Your participation in this thesis is entirely voluntary and you can opt out at any given time without consequences.
2. The interviews will be recorded and stored as audio files on my personal hardware. These audio files will be deleted as soon as the analysis of the interviews have been finalised.
3. During the analysis process, the recordings and written transcriptions will be treated confidentially by anonymising your name and other personal signifiers. Your organisation may be mentioned by name in the thesis only with your consent, but your personal affiliation with the organisation will remain confidential regardless.
4. The data collected will be used solely for academic purposes in the form of a written paper. Quotations from your interview may be included in it only with your consent. The thesis will be published on a public website managed by Lund University Library (https://www.ub.lu.se/en/lund-university-library).
5. To ensure your privacy your participant rights are guaranteed by the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Swedish Data Protection Act in addition to the guidelines of The Swedish Research Council (https://www.vr.se/english/analysis/reports/our-reports/2017-08-31-good-research-practice.html).
6. This thesis concerns topics related to personal emotions and experiences that may be viewed as sensitive information. You will never be forced to disclose anything that you do not feel comfortable sharing, and there are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers on such experiences and emotions.

Please answer the following questions by selecting either 'Yes' or 'No':

I have read this form in its entirety, and I consent to taking part in this thesis as an interviewee knowing my rights and the procedures for data collection and storage. Yes / No

I consent to the researcher (Vappu Väänänen) recording the interview. Yes / No

I consent to the mention of my organisation by name in this thesis. Yes / No

I consent to the use of quotations from my responses in the interview in this thesis. Yes / No

_____

Date and location

Vappu Väänänen

_____ _____

Participant name and signature Researcher name and signature