

Communicative mechanisms for promoting immediate climate action were a key interest of members of this subculture. Here, the explicit use of colloquial language served the purpose of motivating its primary target audience (young people) to accept their responsibility and act accordingly. Examples included Rezo's use of the term 'mate' (*Diggi*) to address his viewers or Luisa Neubauer's use of 'most-massively' (*massivst*) to accentuate the scale and urgency of the climate change problem. maiLab also used youth language but to a lesser extent as she directed her videos at young people interested in science. Moreover, members of this subculture highlighted the central role of emotional triggers in mobilising different societal actors to accept their responsibility for climate action and to act accordingly, which is what set them apart from the other two elite climate cultures discussed previously. It was for example regularly resorted to catastrophic language to mobilise audiences to take immediate climate action.

While having internalised individuals' moral obligation and responsibility to contribute to climate action, members of this subculture also questioned the efficacy of the individual, ascribing responsibility and efficacy to the political sphere instead. At the same time, they doubted the ability of current political leaders to legislate for effective climate action. The willingness of private-sector actors to engage in serious climate action and to do so voluntarily was questioned too, revealing a discrepancy between attested responsibility and efficacy. For example, some YouTubers viewed private businesses as very powerful actors that would always put their own interests first, unless laws and regulations forced them to act in the interest of the climate.

The 'system question' was hardly ever raised within this elite subculture. Overall, the participants of these elite climate cultures were unified by their implicit and explicit acceptance of 'official' narratives regarding the societal imperative to 'do something about climate change', albeit with varying degrees of urgency.

5.3 Climate cultures 'from below'

Only by analysing reactions on Twitter and Facebook to ideas presented by members of these elite climate cultures in the TV talk shows, the diversity of climate cultures in Germany became fully apparent. In fact, climate cultures 'from below' presented themselves as much more diverse and eclectic than those in the elite group, which has not yet adequately been recognised in climate-related research and policy. This invisibility of the climate-related views and practices of members of the public can be partly attributed to the fact that they rarely have access to the same kinds of elite platforms (e.g., political talk shows, prestige print media).

Two distinct climate cultures (action and inaction) were identified, with the latter displaying three subcultures (I: inefficacy, II: scepticism and III: denial/anti-

(youth)activism), each of which displayed its own discursive patterns and logics. Whilst none of the elite climate cultures questioned the authority of the IPCC-consensus, here the complaint repeatedly surfaced that the media was practicing a bias by not covering precisely that:

Frühlingsklima Heimatloosers⁴⁵: Many “media professionals” (e.g., I refer to the lack of variety in talk show invitations) view themselves as advocates of certain interests, as activists even. However, freedom of press is about NOT always joining into the choir of majority opinion.

Or elsewhere:

NicoHB: When the smallest party of the opposition secretes its bullshit, frenetically cheered on by the hand-picked audience, then you know: you are watching the forced fee financed public television.

These sceptical and even denialist voices were also **the loudest**, which manifested in the data with an abundance and wide variety of expressions belonging to these three subcultures. This was surprising because German society is not usually considered to be particularly climate-sceptical in the literature (cf. Grundmann, 2007; Tranter and Booth, 2015; Walter et al., 2018). What also stood out is the polarisation of the public debate between radically ‘green’ pro-climate discourses on the one hand, and especially these sceptical and denialist discourses on the other.

5.3.1 Pro-climate action culture

This first bottom-up climate culture was characterised by its ample cultural reference to ‘green’ values that were ultimately also mirrored in political affiliation. There was some overlap with the collectivist elite culture presented above. Opinions among its members tended to revolve around the following points:

- Debates about the individual holding responsibility and ‘quiet’ acceptance of some form of individual responsibility
- Rejection of conspicuous consumption
- References to the ‘climate consensus’
- Strong support for, and celebration of, the electoral success of the Green Party in the 2019 elections.

4 Twitter statement, political talk show *Anne Will*.

5 In these social media statements, style, grammar, and punctuation were kept to convey a picture as close as possible to the original statements (albeit them originally having been in German).

Importantly, representatives of this climate culture embraced the idea that people should 'practice what they preach', signalling efforts to rebut eco-hypocrisy arguments. This coincided with moralist appeals to be consistent and authentic and to set a good example. Furthermore, some expressions were quite alarmist. At the same time (and in contrast to the collectivist elite culture), there was little evidence of members of this climate culture recognising the many real practical obstacles that prevented citizens from leading their everyday lives in a climate-friendly way (lived efficacy), which left individual responsibility unquestioned. Responding to Kevin Kühnert (SPD politician) addressing this issue in the *Anne Will* talk show, some members of this climate culture raised the 'system question' and related aspects of climate justice:

G.D.S.: A politics relying on annual growth of 2 % is going to miss any climate targets in this world. A politics that enters into economic contracts with countries that will obviously be exploited through them does not deserve the name politics!

Johann E. Dressel: Kevin is right. Placing capital above animal or human lives is Satanical

Unbequeme Wahrheit (gern geschehen): If we don't change radically, through our actions we will be the murderers of our children. this is a fact. no matter what any capital marionettes say, then this will be fact!

They nevertheless denounced the apparent inefficacy of the current government with regard to climate action.

Scientific experts were also well respected by members of this climate culture, and there was some significant overlap with the collectivist elite climate (sub-)cultures concerning responsibility attributions to different societal actors, including the media (even though opinions differed regarding the responsibility of the individual, as mentioned above).

5.3.2 Inaction climate culture(s)

By contrast, this second climate culture 'from below' was characterised by its (at times fierce) rejection of current public calls for more climate action. As reasons for this rejection ranged from experiences of inefficacy to outright climate change denial, statements have been assorted into three subcultures:

Subculture I: Sense of inefficacy

This first subculture rejected current calls for climate action due to a lack of trust in the effectiveness and consistency of 'official' climate action measures. So even though its members may to some extent have admitted that protecting the climate

should be attempted, they either saw it as overrated or did not deem it realistic. Here, there was an abundance of arguments explaining why climate action was either utopic or not worth it.

Members of this subculture also remained largely unconvinced that society and individuals could afford wide-ranging climate action, pointing to the high cost of measures such as the promotion of electric vehicles or the purchasing of organic food.

Statements thus also exemplified the clear difference between 'official' attributions of responsibility and efficacy to the public and the way people actually experienced their role and options for decision-making.

Markus Quetsch @hartaberfair @SvenjaSchulze68: "Even if citizens feel a duty for the environment, they often have no alternative to environmentally harmful behaviour in their everyday. They do not succeed in leaving their car for the distances they need to travel... or not flying for work" –! (quotes SPIEGEL ONLINE article⁶: ecological assessment: "When it comes to environmental policy, Germany is a developing country")

Robert Schuchmann: Lack of realism when it comes to alternatives: BMW towards disappointed test driver: we very much regret that in your case the reach (of the e-car) does not correspond to what has been tested by us. As you have noticed already, in this weather driving without heating is intolerable.

Debates also unfolded within this climate subculture concerning who in society should be held responsible for acting on climate change. Similar to representatives of the previous pro-action subculture, members of this subculture were angry that politicians did not remain true to their particular responsibility. This contrasts the sceptical and denialist subcultures, where the political responsibility itself was not recognised (as the existence of climate change itself was refuted, at least in part). Further issues discussed in this subculture included the limited efficacy of the individual in their private sphere and the inherently profound climate impact within the realm of work-life and industry that seemed of much higher significance. These thus caused further doubt vis-à-vis individual responsibility and the overall feasibility of meaningful climate action.

Kjell Leinte: [...] Mothers in Stuttgart receive fines for driving a three-year-old Diesel but luckily there exists an [...] Audi e-Tron with gluten-free or vegan batteries. As long as locally we have ecologically daft double standards with self-

6 Ecological footprint: "Germany is a developing country when it comes to climate policy": Ökobilanz: "Bei der Umweltpolitik ist Deutschland Entwicklungsland" – SPIEGEL ONLINE – Wissenschaft: [spiegel.de https://www.spiegel.de/wissenschaft/natur/umweltpolitik-was-deutschland-von-anderen-laendern-lernen-kann-a-1259518.html](https://www.spiegel.de/wissenschaft/natur/umweltpolitik-was-deutschland-von-anderen-laendern-lernen-kann-a-1259518.html) (accessed 16/09/2022).

righteous delusion, there is no need to debate melting pole caps.

hart aber fair: Dear Kjell Leinte! You are right with regards to double standards. Still, the approach to create awareness and wanting to change something in small and local contexts is not generally wrong

Kjell Leinte: Of course. How much do we do in small contexts? I try to not buy anything wrapped in plastic. Do you know how hard that is? [...] I am just angry that humankind is just not earnest. [...] (today) we only consider ecologically secondary battlefields, to calm our conscience. Thus my comparison plastic bag – monster cars.

In addition to questioning the effectiveness of proposed climate action measures, members of this climate subculture also did not seem to believe that these measures can be reconciled with social fairness:

Stefan Krüger@Krüger: This demand (that flying becomes more expensive) I find outrageous. There are enough people who can already hardly afford to look at something else than their workplace and/or their own four walls.

If one was at least to say that frequent flying should become more expensive, that I would support!

This could also be seen through statements like *are rising incomes not the starting-signal for increasing consumption?* The efficacy of national-level climate action measures taken in Germany was also doubted, with climate change having been seen as a fundamentally global challenge (which stood in direct opposition to the above-mentioned statement by the YouTuber Rezo). Instead, they voiced that any successful domestic attempt would inevitably be cancelled out more or less immediately by the demands of rapidly industrialising economies (e.g., China, India) and global population growth.

Finally, many of those belonging to this group did not see how climate action could feasibly and practically be integrated into their everyday realities (= lived efficacy), even when they acknowledged that they had at least some responsibility to act.

Subculture II: Scepticism

There was, however, ample evidence of more radical objections to current calls for climate action across the data studied, yielding a second inaction subculture: its members tended to view climate change and related calls for action as no more than *scaremongering, hysteria* or a *ridiculous hype*.

Here, increased climate action was seen as unnecessary and excessive and the extent of the threat posed by climate change was not recognised and therefore played down. Thus, discourses regarding individuals' responsibility did not feature. However, there were regular references to morality and efficacy, for example when mem-

bers talked about 'double standards'. There was also elaborate complaining as direct backlash against the currently growing climate movement in general and a critique of costly measures that to them occurred in areas of everyday life that they did not consider to be very important.

Politicians were generally deemed untrustworthy, most of all the Greens. In fact, statements revealed a deep-seated lack of trust in establishment institutions and their ability to act decisively on the alleged climate challenge (where it was recognised), as well as many other issues.

Martin Rücken: We witness a new era of fascism – through environmental fascists.

Ma Drosch: You're not serious?!!

Martin Rücken: Yes, indeed. [...] and it has nothing to do with the warranted demand towards the population for responsible treatment of creation and nature. Environmental fascism is an ideology, that derives itself from a self-defined elitist expectation in the conviction to possess the only moral truth, that rests upon the opinion to be saving the world.

Politicians were also criticised for placing the burden of crisis management largely on the shoulders of the public.

Subculture III: Denial

Even more radical yet, in several social media threads the truth content of current climate science was questioned, complemented by more or less overt discourses of climate change denial:

Michael Rühl: Without climate change, we would not exist. Whoever stands for something else must be not quite right in their head.

Jens Thölking @Michael Rühl: Plants cannot live without water. Too much water and they die.

Michael Rühl @Jens Thölking: And are we living in drought?

For example, in some cases, climate change was treated as a conspiracy, led by the rapidly growing climate movement.

Alfred Wechsler: The population doesn't even realise how their freedom is being messed with. Don't give me this CO₂ immisions stuff. The real beneficiaries sit in the IPCC. they make the whole world crazy with computer programmes that are scientifically supported by wrong data.

Like in the two previous inaction subcultures, establishment politicians and institutions (for example the IPCC) were largely deemed untrustworthy, albeit more harshly this time.

Dr. Heiko Kallweit: Please make sure to invite enough 16year old wise-ass kids who from their major life experience give a proper chewing out. Here, there still exists a serious gap, as gender and migration have been treated sufficiently.

One rhetoric strategy repeatedly resorted to here was the use of quasi-religious insinuations as shown by the following social media debate:

David Ziegele: There is sensible environmental protection and there is quasi-religious eco-extremism. Right now the latter tends to dominate. The climate-dschihadists must be stopped.

?: You should reflect your blue-brown choice of words a bit. To call environmentalists dschihadists seems a little strange.

Chris Ruröde: Right, but you don't see that only radical measures will work? You ignore that 23000 scientists from faculties support these people?

Max Fritze Neumann: Millions of flies cannot be wrong.

David Ziegele: and what is meant by "blue-brown"? Göring-Eckardt (leading green politician) calls Greta a "prophet". And many are not open for other arguments. This is an extremist political movement with religious traces

Kerstin Ralf Nier: A new religion " the climate protectors "

This exchange once again exemplified the hatred that was expressed vis-à-vis 'those at the top', i.e., the political and scientific establishment and people in power in general. Overall, the data showed that the opposing attitudes regarding the role climate change should play in people's everyday lives collided with each other in new and interesting ways on such social media platforms.

5.4 Conclusion

Discursive variations that became visible through this in-depth analysis of media coverage of climate change topics around the 2019 European elections highlight the centrality of notions of responsibility and self-efficacy for understanding clashes between climate cultures. Here, a decoupling of responsibility and efficacy was clearly discernible across a number of climate cultures. For example, individual consumers were routinely blamed for not doing enough to protect the climate, including by climate activists, which placed the burden of responsibility on the shoulders of those who were least able to act. In contrast, powerful societal actors like politicians and business leaders were portrayed as limited in scope for climate action, despite their actual capacity to do so. This (perceived) inefficacy and irresponsibility of established actors was utilised by other political and civil society actors to challenge dominant scientific and 'official' climate cultures and to advance counter-arguments ranging from a radically green, pro-climate agenda to variants of climate change denial.