

The first group (the elite climate cultures) finds expression in the three TV talk shows, online news portals, prestige print and influential political magazines and, perhaps more surprisingly, climate-related YouTube clips by young influencers that received significant attention¹.

In contrast, the second group of climate cultures ‘from below’ features very prominently across different social media, including comments sections linked to the aforementioned talk shows. In addition, some of these ‘non-elite’ climate (sub-)cultures appear in ‘alternative’ media outlets such as print magazines focusing on green lifestyles and climate action and political magazines that endorse anti-establishment views. However, these were not included in this study, due to their extensive range and diversity. Admittedly, some degree of overlap exists between some of the climate (sub-)cultures, for example regarding trust in expert opinions. However, I nevertheless decided to distinguish between these four climate cultures and their respective subcultures because of fundamental differences in key areas such as attributions of responsibility and expectations of efficacy vis-à-vis actual experiences of ‘lived’ responsibility and efficacy.

5.2 Elite climate cultures

Two separate elite climate cultures – individualist and collectivist – emerged from the analysis, with the second displaying a distinct subculture of young activists and influencers. Amongst these elite climate cultures, similarities included a shared language associated with ‘official’ positions on climate change and action as well as more or less explicit acknowledgements that anthropogenic climate change existed and presented a serious challenge to humanity. At times, participants from this elite category saw themselves as well-informed and sufficiently competent to educate the public. For example, the arguments and terminology used by prominent influencers and YouTubers revealed their high educational status (Rezo holding a masters- and Mai Thi Nguyen-Kim a doctoral degree) and their commitment to informing the public about climate change. Rezo’s video clearly demonstrated his ability to ‘speak the language of science’ (e.g., citing relevant studies, summarising and synthesising studies). This was also evident when analysing the ‘open letter’ video ‘signed’ by 90+ YouTubers. Here, the authors of the letter spoke of ‘risk hierarchy’, ‘scientific consensus’ and being ‘discredited’. All three elite climate (sub-)cultures featured some or all of the following arguments, many of which related directly to the aspects of responsibility and efficacy discussed in chapter 2:

1 Clicks to date (04/06/2020): Rezo: Die Zerstörung der CDU: 17.347.533. maiLab: Klimawandel: Das ist jetzt zu tun!: 866.947. maiLab: Die Klimawandel-Therapie: 88.652. Ein Statement von 90+ YouTubern: 4.395.518.

- Responsibility of political sphere versus individual responsibility
- Efficacy of individual purchasing decisions
- Social fairness of political decisions
- References to the role of the private sector (responsibility and efficacy)
- Efficacy of scientific knowledge/technological innovations (perceived vs. lived efficacy)
- Use of apocalyptic and catastrophic vocabulary (perceived vs. lived efficacy)
- The questioning of the growth-dependent capitalist free-market system (perceived vs. lived efficacy)

Table 3: Excerpts from elite climate debates

	Individualist culture	Collectivist culture	Activist/influencer subculture
Exemplary statements	<p><u>Ulrich Reitz (journalist, FOCUS-online):</u> <i>In the past, actually just a couple of weeks ago, it was all about your own very personal (carbon) footprint that you leave our offspring with every light-pink T-Bone-Steak [...]. This has now been literally chewed out, however, now it is about way more...</i></p>	<p><u>Robert Habeck (co-leader of the Green Party):</u> <i>... the point is that we live in serious political times and that our party is expected to carry an amount of responsibility like never before and we work extremely hard to do justice to this expectation. [...] and now we have the situation that almost every day another stone is being added to our backpack and then someone says, 'come on, run faster'!</i></p>	<p><u>Mai Thi Nguyen-Kim (YouTube science channel maiLab):</u> <i>[...] there are two very important things, every single one of us can or even must do. Firstly, stop using bogus arguments. The climate debate is befooled by bogus arguments, that not only keep politicians from acting responsibly but also often come in the disguise of something like this (Twitter posting): "Double standard à la Luisa Neubauer, attacks government for its alleged lack of political will for climate action but has visited more countries at age 23 than most people. [...]".</i></p>
Exemplary statements	<p><u>Ulf Poschardt (editor-in-chief of the conservative Welt-group):</u> <i>A car is way more than an object that lets you travel from A to B. [...]. We have to ask ourselves what else people do with their cars. They communicate, they enjoy themselves [...]. I think</i></p>	<p><u>Annalena Baerbock (co-leader of the Green Party):</u> <i>... and then there was this major fraud (Dieselgate scandal) that affects us all and that is why politics has to assume responsibility and compensate for this loss of trust.</i></p>	<p><u>Rezo:</u> <i>Well maybe (one could say) our efforts are being thwarted by other countries? Maybe we want to do a lot... What? Okay, other countries are starting initiatives and want to fight the crisis way more and we are thwarting that and are not joining in? Huh. Right, ok, CDU maybe is thwarting the fight against global warming, but hey, maybe</i></p>

	Individualist culture	Collectivist culture	Activist/ influencer subculture
Exemplary statements	<i>the question must be how electro-mobility can also be emotionalised. And here I remain unconvinced because the electro-cars I've driven have been interesting in terms of acceleration – but they have no soul.</i>	<i>[...] and the current problem lies in the fact that those who want to sustainably drive electro-cars have to pay way more because of the fossil subsidies [...] and this is what we want to end...</i>	<i>they have a good reason. So economically, this is unbearable. Coal is huge in Germany... What? Only 20.000 jobs in the whole of the coal sector? [...]</i>
Exemplary statements	<i><u>Michael Kretschmer (CDU politician):</u> ... what we need again is rationality, calm and sober acting. [...] but the whole thing has to happen with rationality and sound judgement... [...] There have to be ideas and ways to do this rationally... [...] we want to do everything we can to make this work. Supply security, reasonable prices, independent of other countries.</i>	<i><u>Jan Grossarth (Journalist, SZ):</u> Differentiating and balancing, out of responsibility, whilst being aware of the complexity, that'd actually be the more bourgeois-conservative approach. [...] What would a family business be without a lively environment? [...] in the long-term, climate action in fact supports the conservation of the market-based system.</i>	<i><u>Luisa Neubauer:</u> At this point, I would recommend re-reading the IPCC-report. <u>And later:</u> [...] and it's a shame that there is no climate scientist here... <u>Mai Thi Nguyen-Kim:</u> But do not be fooled, when people claim that research and innovation (alone) will save us all – no!</i>
Exemplary statements	<i><u>Ulf Poschardt:</u> ... I believe the challenge concerns us all, my criticism [...] concerning the school and university protests has been, that with spreading panic and with this kind of apocalyptic rhetoric...</i>	<i><u>Dietrich Brockhagen (Atmosfair-CEO, SZ-Interview):</u> ... But I am responsible for what I have control over. I cannot impact airports in China. But for their Mallorca-flight everybody is responsible themselves. <u>Kevin Kühnert:</u> [...] I believe that capitalism and market mechanisms have perforated our society too deeply.</i>	<i><u>Mai Thi Nguyen-Kim:</u> (Title: Climate change therapy; therapist:) Nobody finds climate change easy. Knowledge and rationality are a good basis, but generally they don't provide a personal motivation. What you need is a strong emotional trigger. (Patient:) But I am a very rational person. (Therapist:) Every person is susceptible to emotional triggers; the key is finding the right one.</i>

5.2.1 Elite with individualist tendencies

Current debates on climate action in Germany frequently attribute responsibility for climate action to the *individual* citizen-consumer, asking them to reduce unnecessary consumption to arrest climate change. Such views characterise this first elite type of climate cultures, coinciding with a more or less direct rejection of any legislative restrictions. The sarcasm in FOCUS-author Reitz's choice of discourse indicated his rejection of lifestyle questions being made anything but his own business. Ulf Poschardt also vehemently stressed individual responsibility. Politicians who fell into this climate culture also tended to call for minimal political intervention to avert climate change. For example, they argued against a carbon tax, citing low public acceptance for such measures.

Interestingly, representatives of this climate culture ascribed considerable responsibility to private companies but, at the same time, emphasised that these already took sufficient responsibility given their exposure to other economic pressures such as profitability and competitiveness. In this context, the power and influence of individual consumers (*Verbrauchermacht*) was emphasised once again.

In contrast, experiences of 'lived efficacy' by members of this particular climate culture did not correspond to this official discourse. Instead, representatives expressed little or no confidence in individual behaviour change and self-restriction as effective means of climate action. Thus, the moral imperative to act for the greater good of the climate was not recognised here. Support for laissez-faire politics and an (over)emphasis on individual decision-making featured prominently in this first elite climate culture.

Although social fairness was seen as essential for stability in society, many members of this climate culture rejected political efforts to redistribute wealth. Instead, trust was placed in the market to steer companies in the right direction, for example to develop technology to advance climate action.

Table 4: Excerpts from climate debates among members of the general public

Exemplary statements	Inaction climate culture(s)		
Pro-climate action culture	Inaction subculture 1: Sense of inefficacy	Inaction subculture 2: Scepticism	Inaction subculture 3: Denial
<p><u>Christian Wirth:</u> <i>What nonsense! It has never been easier for the individual to avoid CO₂: heaps of cheap meat, cheap flights, cruises, skiing holidays. All are ways to practice what you preach and fast CO₂. But this can only be done by practicing restraint.</i> <u>Lila:</u> yes, Ulf, one is supposed to feel bad if one drives the planet against the wall and with it the life of younger people. Let's finally take responsibility, particularly people like Poschardt. He wants to discredit the youngsters, so he can keep on denying what people like him have neglected and not having to leave their comfort zone.</p>	<p><u>Ed Dy:</u> As long as container ships on water pollute the air, major industry and pretty much each larger country only cares for greed for profit, no-one talk to me. The truly easy stuff is not being considered, instead every single time the small man is turned to for money or taken the piss out of. <u>Lisias</u> <u>Apolopulus:</u> In 10 years the CO₂ saved costs us 500 Billion Euros. China is having the same amount for breakfast within three months. <u>Klaus-Dieter Walter</u> <u>@starwarrior1958</u> <u>@AnneWillTalk</u> <u>@MPKretschmer:</u> Who wants to pay for climate action? The individual? I am not stupid Industry? Help, competitive disadvantage The state? Who is</p>	<p><u>XY:</u> We don't need climate hysteria, but WORLD-WIDE [...] purification plants, recycling [...]. -> link posted: environmental management instead of CO₂-ripoff <u>Bernd Lehmann:</u> About 2.8 billion people in India and China hang on German environmental minister Schulze's every word as they know, humanity's rescue will come from Germany. At least in the left-green grandeur delusion [...]. <u>Christoph Drescher:</u> Why not still do better? I don't understand this pub-argument »but the others are much much worse«. [...] <u>Joanna Li @Christoph Drescher:</u> I think, pushing the responsibility onto »the others« in the distance is easier than changing oneself, doing without and limiting one's consumption. <u>Alfred Wechsler @Joanna Li:</u> We don't push anything on others. It just remains patchwork if we do it alone. And as long as new coal plants are being connected to the grid in our neighbourhood, we don't have to switch off ours! <u>Dirk Evers:</u> All in all 100.000 flights per day in the world!! And those who drive are being blamed!! Just so you know, these flights fly with water and are 100 % clean [...], but once</p>	<p><u>Ferdi Krüger:</u> I no longer drink sparkling water, beer and other carbonised beverages. This way I surely significantly support the reduction of the human contribution of overall 0,04 % of the CO₂ monsters that are in the atmosphere. Germany go! And if it's the last thing we do! <u>Maba man:</u> Why should I intend to save CO₂? It is vital for plants and at the end all living beings! With more CO₂ the earth becomes greener. <u>SarbazSardar Soleymani @AnneWillTalk and @KuehniKev:</u> <i>This guy [Kevin Kühnert] is a liar. The only thing he wants is the disownment of the people and the curtailing of freedom.</i> <u>Thomas Gollinger:</u> All these TV-debates are always the same sorry it is not against you the same guys always sit there, and that the the earth is sweating is just far-fetched.</p>

Statements in **bold** = statements in direct opposition

Exemplary statements	Inaction climate culture(s)		
Pro-climate action culture	Inaction subculture 1: Sense of inefficacy	Inaction subculture 2: Scepticism	Inaction subculture 3: Denial
<p><i>reflex.</i> <u>#fridaysforfuture:</u> <i>[...] he does not want it to become uncomfortable to live irresponsibly</i> <u>Sonja Straate:</u> <i>[...] it is the fundamental obligation of each citizen to contribute to the protection of the natural environment and [...] to prevent all forms of ecological destruction through the introduction and support of environmentally-friendly practices and rules.</i> <u>Jonathan Gruner:</u> Freedom of the press means [...] [to not always agree] Main thing is that eventually EVERYONE in the circle sees eye to eye, isn't it?</p>	<p><i>he going to pay? EU? It only works world-wide UN? With China and the US having veto rights? ERGO-climate protectors-why don't you do this on your own !</i> <u>Christian Beetz:</u> <i>As long as I HAVE TO cover each palette at work with X meters of clingfilm for load securing but am expected to pay for a plastic bag because of the environment, I'm gonna kill myself laughing ...</i> <u>Petra Maier:</u> <i>[...] Why am I as individual consumer supposed to mind that the products offered to me increase business profits and, at the same time, ruin the environment? Why do you ask me to take responsibility for the damage they do?</i></p>	<p><i>again he who drives is responsible for all of it!! I wonder who is taking the piss out of whom!!! And why people go on believing this!!!</i> <u>Andre Vogler:</u> <i>All this is nonsense. Do they really believe what they ask? Where is all the electricity going to come from if there are only e-cars? Wind turbines? Of course! Wants everybody in their front yard. The electricity also has to be transported. [...] What about recycling the batteries? Nobody talks about that. All nicely blended out. All of this is a farce.</i> <u>Ludwig:</u> <i>I couldn't find the facts mentioned by Greta. Which are they? I increasingly understand the climate sceptics! The changing climate cannot be related to the increase in CO₂-concentration. I'm technically trained (btw).</i> <u>Sammy Man:</u> <i>Every cow farts methane and is as harmful for the climate as an SUV. therefore one should become vegetarian and NOT invade burgerking or mcdonalds after the Friday demo.</i> <u>Arthur Schuessler:</u> these are just dumb insinuations, rg. Mc Donalds etc. But unfortunately some people are this narrow-minded. <u>Steve Müller:</u> Rise against Leftgreen incitement!</p>	<p><u>fAKT 111:</u> <i>I am curious who will be held responsible for the ice age 115.000 years ago ;).</i> <u>Martin Hoffmann:</u> <i>Our young environmentalists should maybe for once critically question whom they actually protest for and who is really behind Friday-for-Future [...] (then follows whole conspiracy theory that the originator of the greenhouse-theory was the cousin of Greta Thunberg's great-grandmother).</i> <u>Voeegele@akivoeg:</u> <i>Command economy is what is being asked for. Living in socialism, Venezuela etc. All possible with the #climate lie. People wake up and vote out this mob. Flee out of Germany if you can, go to the USA, Switzerland etc. This reminds me of the mine and Gulag state GDR.</i> <u>#fleefromGermany</u> <u>Arthur Schuessler:</u> I recommend reading a good book about the topic some time.</p>

Statements in **bold** = statements in direct opposition

Expert advice and scientific insights were seen as central to effective climate action. In addition, rational decision-making was highly valued, translating into high levels of scepticism concerning the role of emotions in climate discourse and action. An exception to this lay in Ulf Poschardt's explicit recognition of the centrality of emotions in consumption (in this case, car ownership and use). He believed that people responded very strongly to emotional messages (as opposed to 'cold' factual knowledge), for example when considering their mobility options². Nevertheless, the overall privileging of ('cold') factual knowledge also put responsibility on individuals to inform themselves to make the right decisions. This, in turn, deflected attention away from the responsibilities of more influential societal players.

Besides, catastrophic and apocalyptic statements were largely absent from this climate culture and only featured insofar as they were being criticised. Lastly and unsurprisingly, in this climate culture there occurred no questioning of the free-market system.

5.2.2 Elite with collectivist orientations

The most prominent difference between the first and this second elite climate culture lay in their divergent attributions of responsibility. The second climate culture acknowledged the gravity of the climate crisis and the resulting need to act. Accordingly, and importantly, it ascribed much responsibility to political agents across the party-political spectrum. Criticism of current government inaction featured prominently, an argument that was largely absent from the individualist climate culture described above.

Members of this much more progressive climate culture also cautioned against a narrow focus on lifestyle, albeit for entirely different reasons than their individualist counterpart. While representatives of the previous elite climate culture did not want to be told what to do, members of this second elite culture instead questioned the impact of lifestyle changes. Thus, statements suggested that individual responsibility was overemphasised in public climate debates, not least because it stood in direct contrast to the limited influence individual consumption could actually have (lived efficacy). Consequently, they focused on the political sphere as a main lever of change (lived efficacy). Some members of this climate culture nevertheless argued for a shift in individual consumption habits, recognising the shared moral imperative to do so (hence the label 'collectivist').

2 This points to the different attributions of meaning certain practices carry with them besides the obvious primary one. According to Andreas Ernst, often a coupling of initially separate functions can be uncovered: "A car is not only used for mobility but also serves for social prestige, image cultivation and probably satisfies deep-rooting imaginations of freedom and independence" (2010, p. 138).

Another possible reason for redirecting attention away from the subject of lifestyles may have been to pre-empt and refute accusations of hypocrisy that were regularly levelled at elite advocates of climate action, most notably members of the Green Party and *Fridays for Future* activists.

Again, the impact of the private sector was considered to be high (lived efficacy), mirroring some of the statements made by members of the more individualist climate culture. However, existing efforts by private actors were deemed to be insufficient, and responsibility was instead attributed to political actors.

Concerning social fairness, this climate culture argued for sharing the burden of climate action much more equally than is currently the case. Politics was deemed to be largely responsible for organising this burden sharing, including through financial redistribution. This emphasis on the (interventionist) role of politics stood in stark contrast to the market-focused, *laissez-faire* perspective endorsed by many members of the individualist climate culture.

With respect to knowledge and technological innovation, some parallels existed between the two elite cultures: information deficit discourses, a prioritisation of science and faith in expert-knowledge loomed large. This said, here catastrophic and apocalyptic storylines featured to some degree, reflecting the idea that strong negative emotions (e.g., fear) would mobilise people.

Lastly, many members of this collectivist climate culture blamed current systems of production and consumption, politics and governance for accelerating climate change. However, not everybody expected solutions to emerge from a radical systems change. For example, journalist Jan Grossrath believed in the compatibility of the market economy and successful climate action.

Collectivist subculture: Emerging elite discourses of activists and influencers

The discourses of young German activists and influencers represented a subculture of the collectivist elite climate culture, as the discursive practices of its members closely resembled those of the parent culture. They equally stressed the importance of information provision, coupled with a firm belief in the effectiveness of scientific reasoning. Representatives also frequently deployed scientific arguments, techniques and terminology to promote climate action. For example, YouTubers Rezo and maiLab regularly referred to scientific studies and prominent climate scientists and campaigners. They also cited particular scientific findings to rebut skewed and misleading arguments used by climate sceptics to deflect responsibility (e.g., accusation of eco-hypocrisy aimed at politicians, *ad-hominem* arguments³).

3 Definition of *ad hominem* argumentation: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ad%20hominem> (accessed 05/05/2022) 1: appealing to feelings or prejudices rather than intellect; an *ad hominem* argument 2: marked by or being an attack on an opponent's character rather than by an answer to the contentions made.

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-