Climate Action and Community Well-being

A Novel Communication Framework

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ABSTRACT
In the face of the global climate crisis, the language and narratives used to communicate about climate change can have significant impacts on community well-being (CWB) and community climate action. This paper presents a novel communication framework. It utilizes an adaptation of Corey Keys' Dual Continua Model of mental health to illustrate how climate communication narratives, which range from doom-and-gloom to advocacy and efficacy, intersect with community climate sentiment. This leads to four climate mitigation and adaptation levels – emerging, flourishing, vulnerable, and struggling – which coincide with CWB.

Utilizing countries in the Global North and South as examples, this paper explores how digital, local, and national media shape climate sentiment within communities. It posits that communities experiencing climate hopelessness narratives coupled with low climate efficacy may exhibit diminished CWB and limited progress on climate action. Conversely, communities exposed to climate advocacy narratives and high climate efficacy may demonstrate more flourishing CWB and greater strides in climate mitigation and adaptation.

This paper provides a conceptual model that maps these dynamics, with the intent of informing more constructive climate communication strategies, which foster community resilience and empowerment. Examples from the Global North and South indicate how cultural, geographic, and socioeconomic factors mediate the relationship between climate narratives and community outcomes. By

centering the community as an analytic anchor, the paper links community climate sentiment and CWB with communication impacts that create a collective capacity for climate action. This framework could inform policy, media, and civil society approaches to climate engagement, promoting holistic CWB alongside climate action and environmental sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

The effects of climate change are manifesting across the globe in the form of rising heat and sea levels, flooding, severe storm systems, and extreme weather events. Many communities are experiencing these changes first-hand, while others are being made aware through media sources. Given that people understand climate change through both personal experience and media exposure, the narratives used in climate communication play a crucial role in shaping public perceptions and responses. Communication is the process of exchanging information and meaning through a shared system of symbols (i.e., verbal, non-verbal, written, and visual) and encompasses the key aspects of sending a message: interpreting it based on a common understanding and achieving mutual understanding through various forms of expression (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, 2025; Fatimayin, 2018; Osei-Hwere & Osei-Hwere, n.d.). However, "Narratives are socially constructed 'stories' that make sense of events and phenomena, integrating them into worldviews" (Hinkel et al., 2020, p. 495).

CLIMATE COMMUNICATION

Climate communication uses different narratives in varied contexts. For instance, media outlets in the Global North have often emphasized the effects and projections regarding climate change (Guenther et al., 2024), due to the increased intensity and frequency of extreme events. Similarly, research on the climate impacts in Pakistan concluded that disaster is one of the most prevalent frames in the coverage, as it is elsewhere in the world (Painter, 2007; Parida et al., 2021; Qusien, 2024). In the Global South, the climate communication landscape is less emphatic. In India and Pakistan, for example, media reports have been characterized by a lack of sustained coverage and urgency around climate change (Poornananda, 2022; Qusien, 2024), with government inaction dominating the narrative (Qusien, 2025).

Both traditional and digital media serve as a primary conduit for disseminating climate narratives. Compared

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to family, friends, and co-workers (6%), people learn more about global warming through the media, including TV, movies, radio, newspapers, news websites, magazines (28%), and social media (Leiserowitz et al., 2024). The importance of narrative in telling the climate change story cannot be underestimated because it can shape preference and opinion and set the direction of climate action (Gjerstad & Flottum, 2022; Hinkel et al., 2020). For example, an experimental survey concluded that residents in the state of Louisiana view information from the local media on hurricanes more positively than the national media coverage (Andrews et al., 2023). Additionally, the Yale University Program on Climate Change Communication identified six types of audiences regarding climate change: alarmed, concerned, cautious, disengaged, doubtful, and dismissive (Leiserowitz et al., 2024). In 2023, they, in partnership with Meta, researched public sentiments on climate change in more than 100 countries and found "alarmed" to be the dominant group across the research countries, with the highest number of alarmed populations in Puerto Rico, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Panama, and Chile. In the US, almost one-third (32%) of the population is alarmed, and a fourth (25%) of the population is doubtful or dismissive of climate change (Leiserowitz et al., 2023). Research from Europe and the UK shows heightened concern around climate change, with 91% of the public in Portugal, 80% in the UK, and 81% in Ireland worried about climate change (Ibid).

»This "climate communication gap" can perpetuate disempowerment, as individuals may lack the knowledge or resources to understand and respond to climate change impacts.«

Exposure to the media coverage of climate change events has the potential to significantly affect people's emotional and psychological responses, influencing their well-being and quality of life. Recent research on emotional responses when thinking about climate change in the US has shown that the public has various emotions: "interested (58%), frustrated (49%), hopeful (44%), sad (43%), disgusted (42%), afraid (38%), angry (38%), anxious (36%), outraged (36%), hopeless (31%), or depressed (27%)" (Leiserowitz et al., 2024, p. 3). Clearly, negative emotional responses to climate change and climate engagement are higher when exposure to information on climate impacts is also high (Ogunbode et al., 2022).

Therefore, while climate communication narratives aim to convey the urgency of climate change and the resultant disasters, research has shown that an excessive focus on catastrophic outcomes can be counterproductive. The emphasis on catastrophe may cause individuals and communities to be over-saturated, reducing their engagement and fueling a sense of helplessness (Arnold & Shorenstein,

2018; Hinkel et al., 2020). Narratives can empower people and communities to be proactive and take action to mitigate climate effects (Hinkel et al., 2020). It is, therefore, important to understand how climate change narratives affect individual and collective responses (Gjerstad & Flottum, 2022).

FROM ANXIETY TO SENTIMENT

The growing awareness and concern about the psychological well-being aspects related to climate change, severe weather events, and the related doom-and-gloom narratives have led to the widespread uses of terms such as ecological grief (Albrechet, 2005), climate angst, climate anxiety (Clayton, 2020), eco-anxiety, eco-fear, and environmental anxiety (Bropy et al., 2022). Climate anxiety and other related terms are defined as a broad range of unpleasant emotional responses, including worry, fear, and distress, which are related to the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation. It encompasses feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, and guilt regarding the ecological crisis and anxiety about the future of the planet (Coates et al., 2024; Soutar & Wand, 2022). However, anxiety, as a term to describe the human response to climate change, is limited in its ability to capture the complexity and nuance of this phenomenon.

Conceptualizing individual and community responses to climate change as climate anxiety potentially misrepresents the underlying issues and contributing factors, such as emotional distress as a result of climate disasters. While social scientists, climate scientists, and mental health professionals may be able to distinguish between clinical and existential worries related to climate change (Soutar & Wand, 2022), lay audiences and mass communication practitioners may not understand this nuance. Generally, the term "anxiety" implies an internal and individualized response, rather than a collective experience. To amplify the collective experience of a community or population, it is important to acknowledge external communication factors and narratives that may influence the distress and discomfort felt by populations and communities who are experiencing the extreme and chronic effects of climate change. Moreover, the diagnostic connotations of "anxiety" can lead to the medicalization and pathologization of a normal, healthy, and adaptive response to a broader issue. This can lead to oversimplifying climate change issues and narratives, promoting individual-level solutions, such as coping strategies or mental health treatment, while neglecting the deeper communication challenges that could support a shift in climate emotions.

Instead of climate anxiety, we recommend using "climate sentiment" to describe public perceptions and emotional responses to climate change and its narratives. Unlike anxiety, climate sentiment acknowledges the complexity of these emotions at the population and community level, recognizing a range of responses – including fear, anger, grief, indifference, and empowerment – which are shaped by social, cultural, and political contexts (Cody, 2015; Santi, 2023). This framing shifts the focus from individual pathology to broader societal and environmental influences, validating these emotions as understandable reactions to real threats. Moreover, understanding climate sentiment can help explore how collective

emotional experiences not only reflect distress but also serve as a foundation for sustained climate action.

CLIMATE SENTIMENT AND COMMUNITY WELL-BEING

Climate sentiment in a communal context naturally extends to the broader framework of community well-being (CWB), which considers how shared emotions and social dynamics influence collective health and resilience. CWB is a dynamic and multidimensional concept, encompassing the collective health (i.e., the physical and mental health) and the quality of life of individuals within a specific geographic area and/or of those sharing common beliefs, cultural values, norms, and a social structure developed through established relationships. Individuals may belong to multiple communities based on factors such as geography, religion, occupation, and social and leisure interests (WHO,1998). CWB is co-created by individual well-being and the effectiveness of the social (e.g., social cohesion); governmental (e.g., access to resources and the economy); and environmental (e.g., the built and natural environment) factors that contribute to the overall health of the community (Cloutier et al., 2019; Hilger-Kolb et al., 2019; Murad et al., 2021; Phillips et al., 2018).

Climate narratives act as underlying mechanisms that either enable or restrict access to the various contributing factors of CWB (i.e., social, governmental, and environmental). Narratives play a crucial role in whether, when, and how individuals and communities can engage with, benefit from, and/or engage in climate action. Beliefs are transmitted through various forms of communication, influencing social cohesion or disunity, thereby making climate narratives a potential determinant of CWB. The nature of narratives and the intersubjective understanding of community members can create either positive or negative community-level sentiment (Lee & Kim, 2016). This sentiment can influence well-being experiences, ranging from efficacy to hopelessness.

THE INTERSECTION OF CLIMATE NARRATIVES AND CWB

The relationship between climate communication and CWB is complex and multifaceted, requiring a nuanced understanding of the numerous factors at play. Climate change narratives do not exist in a vacuum, they are interpreted and internalized through the lens of individual and collective lived experiences, cultural values, and socioeconomic realities. The lack of a strong sense of community cohesion may contribute to a perception of climate change as a distant or irrelevant issue. Without a robust support network and shared understanding of the challenges, individuals may be more prone to feelings of fear, hopelessness, or disengagement when confronted with dire climate projections. CWB and shared responsibility can foster a greater sense of engagement and motivation to address climate challenges. However, the communication of climate-related information must still be tailored to resonate with the lived experiences and values of these communities. Technical jargon or narratives that fail to connect with local realities may still result in a disconnect, despite the underlying collectivist orientation.

Access to climate-related information and communication channels can vary sig-

nificantly across communities. Marginalized or underserved populations may have limited exposure to climate narratives due to algorithmic biases in social media or a lack of representation in the mainstream media. This climate communication gap can perpetuate a sense of indifference or disempowerment, as individuals may not have the necessary knowledge or resources to understand and respond to the impacts of climate change. Addressing these nuanced intersections requires a multifaceted approach that considers the diverse cultural, socioeconomic, and technological factors shaping CWB. Climate communicators must strive to develop narratives that resonate with the lived experiences of their target audiences, leveraging trusted community networks and accessible communication channels to foster a sense of shared understanding and collective agency.

Researchers recommend the use of solutions-based narratives (Thier & Wu, 2024) for climate communication; some new media initiatives have already shifted towards a more solutions-oriented approach (such as the Grist Solution Journalism Network in the US), highlighting adaptation strategies and empowering ways for individuals to get involved. This shift in communication style may help foster a greater sense of hope and engagement, particularly among younger generations.

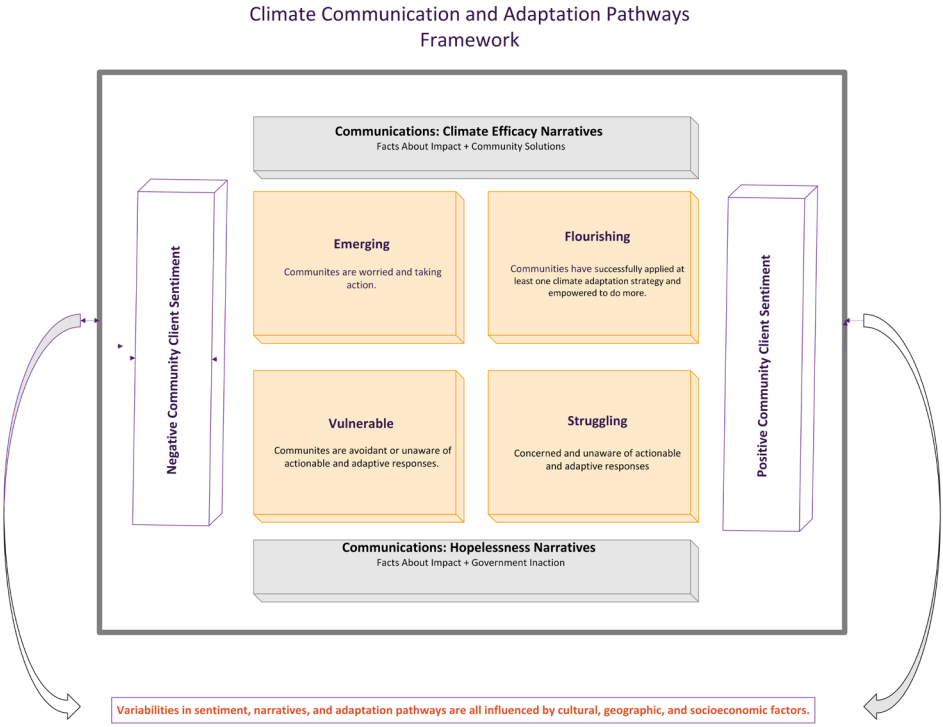
CLIMATE COMMUNICATION AND ADAPTATION PATHWAYS FRAMEWORK

The Dual Continua Model of mental health has been a valuable framework for conceptualizing the multidimensional nature of psychological well-being (Keyes, 2002).

»While climate communication narratives convey urgency, an excessive focus on catastrophic outcomes can be counterproductive.«

This framework posits that mental health exists on two continua: one representing the presence or absence of mental illness, and the other representing the presence or absence of positive mental health. Individuals can, thus, be categorized as flourishing (high positive mental health and low mental illness), languishing (low positive mental health and high mental illness), or moderately mentally healthy (Keyes, 2005).

In the context of climate change, we adapted the dual continua approach to better understand the dynamics of community sentiment and climate communication and its implications for climate mitigation and adaptive levels. Rather than mental illness and positive mental health, the Climate Communication and Adaptation Pathways (CCAP) Framework (See Figure 1) proposes that community sentiment, ranging from negative to positive, is associated with levels of climate action and adaptation based on climate communication narratives. It is important to distinguish between two key narratives in climate communication: the climate efficacy



narrative and the hopelessness narrative. The climate efficacy narrative combines factual information about climate change with a focus on solutions and community-level actions. This narrative seeks to empower individuals and communities by providing them with a sense of agency and the concrete steps they can take to mitigate and adapt to climate impacts. In contrast, the hopelessness narrative presents the facts about climate change, but emphasizes governments' inaction or inability to address the issues. This narrative can lead to feelings of helplessness, paralysis, or even denial, as people feel the problems are too large for them to have an impact.

CCAP PROPOSES FOUR KEY STATES WITHIN THIS CLIMATE SENTIMENT FRAMEWORK:

1. Emerging: Individuals and communities are worried about climate change and are taking initial steps to adapt. This aligns with negative climate sentiment and climate efficacy narratives.
2. Flourishing: Individuals and communities have successfully applied adaptation strategies to mitigate climate impacts and feel empowered to do more. This aligns with positive community sentiment and climate efficacy narratives.
3. Vulnerable: Individuals and communities exhibit avoidance behaviors or a

lack of awareness regarding actionable climate responses. This state reflects negative community sentiment and climate hopelessness narratives.

4. Struggling: Individuals and communities express concern about climate change, but lack awareness about how they can take meaningful action. This maps to positive sentiment paired with climate hopelessness narratives.

By situating these community sentiment states within a dual continua framework, the CCAP aims to provide a conceptual framework for analyzing how varied climate communication narratives may impact community engagement and climate resilience differently. This adapted approach offers a promising avenue for informing more constructive climate messaging strategies, which foster collective efficacy and adaptive capacity.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The CCAP Framework should be tested to better understand the relationship between climate communication narratives and their impacts on individual and community-level responses. While the literature has identified various public sentiment states around climate change, such as alarmed, concerned, and dismissive, more empirical studies are needed to examine how these sentiment states influence climate adaptation pathways. Future research should investigate the impact of hopelessness and climate efficacy narratives on CWB and climate action engagement. Such research could inform more effective and nuanced communication strategies to support and encourage global climate action. Furthermore, we recommend aligning communication strategies across the media, civil society, and governments to foster more positive climate sentiment and build community-level adaptive capacity in the face of climate change challenges.

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