



Guilt and innocence – Emotional discourses in online discussions on climate change and housing

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the discourses of guilt and innocence represented in Finnish online communication in different platforms. Guilt and innocence represent emotional reactions, which are discursively constructed and connected to values and social norms. We pose two research questions to our study: how are the nuances of guilt and innocence presented in online discussions, and how are self- and other-centered discourses constructed in different platforms. The data of the study consists of online discussions concerning people's mundane housing in relation to climate change appearing in the comments on blogs and in the discussion threads on an anonymous online discussion forum. By combining Greimas' semiotic square with discourse analysis, we show how the categories of guilt and innocence as well as not guilty and not innocent highlight the nuanced ways in which polarizing perspectives to self- and other-centered discourses appear on different platforms. Our research contributes to the discussion on environmental communication by revealing more than just two opposing poles; our analysis shows the fine-tuned differences intertwined with gendered discourses constructed in discussions on different platforms. While feeling guilty or not innocent in the blogs is mostly connected with the participant's own actions of not doing enough, assigning guilt to someone else seems to be common on the anonymous discussion forum. Still, the analysis indicates that while community norms and expectations shape the discourses they do not determine how the discourses turn out.

1. Introduction

Climate change (CC) discussion is characterized by opposing views. Denialist discourses construct an opposing pole to discourses that support the scientific position on CC and express concerns about its consequences (e.g., Howarth & Sharman, 2015; Horta et al., 2017; van Eck et al., 2020: 455). Although climate change is discussed widely across the Internet, thus providing a substantial source of data for researchers (Matthews, 2015: 155), there are significant gaps in the extant research. First, there is an over-emphasis on traditional sources such as news outlets and mainstream social media (Corsi, 2021), analyzing for example media representations of CC (e.g., Doulton & Brown, 2009; Whitmarsh, 2009; Anshelm & Hultman, 2014; Horta et al., 2017). Considerably less attention has been paid to "ordinary" people's personal accounts than to expert, professional, or organizational blogs (Joosse & Brydges, 2018: 689).

Second, in terms of opposing viewpoints, the CC denialism and

climate skepticism in online discussions are much more widely studied (e.g., Williams et al., 2015; Matthews, 2015; Kaiser, 2017; Bloomfield & Tillery, 2019) than online discussions that support the scientific position on CC. Indeed, because of the over-emphasis on denialist viewpoints, the masculine perspective has been highlighted. Furthermore, van Eck and Feindt (2022: 196) emphasize the need for comparative research on social media, since the reconstruction of the discursive realities of these "competing online camps" explains how support for or resistance against certain climate policies is rooted in competing discursive constructions of reality.

Third, when it comes to emotional reactions to CC, the feeling of guilt has been studied extensively, whereas the "opposite" of guilt, innocence, is less studied in this context. To illustrate, previous studies indicate that evoking guilt could lead to behavioral intentions or actual pro-environmental behavior (Rees et al., 2015; Moore & Yang, 2020; Ågoston et al., 2022). Yet, the contradiction between guilt and innocence is prevalent in discussions on who to blame about climate issues.

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Guilt and innocence represent emotional reactions that tend to be connected with how people evaluate both their own and others' behavior (e.g., Höijer, 2010; Neckel & Hasenfratz, 2021). These reactions show how such emotions are discursively constructed and related to feelings towards oneself and others.

To fill these gaps, *this paper aims to explore the discourses of guilt and innocence represented in Finnish online communication concerning people's mundane housing in relation to climate change*. Our study is situated within the field of environmental communication, and we delve into discussions produced by "ordinary" people and combine the views of two "competing online camps." Thus, our data covers both scientific opinions and CC skeptical, even denialist, views offering possibilities for examining the construction of both masculine and feminine laden discourses. To encompass a wide range of discourses, the data sets were chosen to represent as opposing views as possible of the Finnish online discussions based on a wide data search across the internet. On this basis, we selected 17 lifestyle blogs providing access to more scientific and feminine laden discourses, and searched for similar topics in one open and anonymous discussion forum, Ylilauta (including 50 discussion threads), where CC skeptical and masculine discourses pervade (Haasio, 2015; Vainikka & Harju, 2019). Based on these multifaceted data, we pose two research questions to our study.

- 1) How are the nuances of guilt and innocence presented in online discussions?
- 2) How are self- and other-centered discourses constructed in different platforms?

Online platforms shape the information available and influence sustainability-related norms and values (Haider, 2016). Examining online discussions thus makes it possible to reveal citizen voices outside mainstream media discourses. In this paper, we analyze specifically housing related discussions on lifestyle blogs that could also be described as personal blogs and a specific type of discussion forums, imageboards. Imageboards, such as 4chan and the Finnish Ylilauta ("Overboard"), are anonymous discussion forums that have developed their own subcultures. Imageboards are birthplaces of various discourses that might have wider impact on society (Ylä-Anttila et al., 2020: 1; Hämäläinen & Lahti, 2021: 332). These online communities may also act as forerunners of key trends in online CC communication (Corsi, 2021), and thus provide a significant place for research.

Although Ballantyne et al. (2018: 649) reframed CC as a personally relevant local issue for a homeowner, there is a lack of studies on communication concerning climate-wise living by ordinary citizens that would be based on data from different platforms representing diverse views (Haider, 2012; Joosse & Brydges, 2018: 689). In order to make visible the fine-tuned meaning-making of inherent complexities and contradictions intertwined in these opposing views, we combine discourse analysis with Greimas' *semiotic square* (1987), to illuminate the nuances of different discourses. In this way, we contribute to extant research on environmental communication not only by looking at platform-specific discourses, but also by showing variability in the discourses in terms of feelings of guilt and innocence.

The paper proceeds as follows: First, in the Section 2, we will present relevant research on online discussions on climate change (2.1), and gendered discourses of climate change (2.2). In Section 3, we will introduce our research data (3.1) and methods (3.2). In Section 4, we will go through the results of our analysis illustrating self- and other-centered discourses belonging to the meaning categories of guilt, innocence, not-guilty, not innocent, and finally, in Section 5, we discuss our results encompassing the different discourses, their connections to the different platforms, and their implications.

2. Previous research on ideologies and discourses

2.1. Online discussions on climate change

The CC blogosphere has been found to be generally polarized between bloggers who either support or reject the scientific position on CC (Elgesem et al., 2015). In this paper, we will analyze specifically lifestyle blogs that could also be described as personal blogs that mostly support the scientific position. Personal blogs differ from other types of blogs in that they are run by non-experts and non-professionals with a focus on sharing personal information (Joosse & Brydges, 2018: 697). Similar to Joosse and Brydges (2018), we use the term *green personal blogs* for these kinds of personal blogs with a broad interest in sustainability and everyday life. They represent sustainability as something that is and can be performed in everyday life, and reinforce the individualization of responsibility (Joosse & Brydges, 2018: 697).

This specific blog type provides a significant data source, as such blogs represent spaces of everyday cultural politics through which people make sense of, and deal with, sustainability issues. Personal blogs translate the complex landscape of sustainability into individual everyday practices, and the influence of these blogs is based on the personal experiences of a peer (Joosse & Brydges, 2018: 686-687). They can also act as key intermediaries by brokering green norms, tastes, and identities, translating the complex concept of sustainability into hands-on advice on desirable sustainability practices (Doyle, 2016; Soneryd & Ugglä, 2015). In this regard, user comments are also a valuable source of data, since they provide users with a public space for debate, which can influence public opinion on CC and further scientific discussion (Schäfer, 2012; Walter et al., 2018; van Eck et al., 2020: 456).

Extant research on the CC blogosphere has found a multitude of fruitful perspectives. For instance, van Eck and Feindt (2022) have analyzed how CC blog commenters interactively construct the meaning of issues, identities and relationships. They identified five storylines in climate activist blog discourse. In the action storyline, politicians and nation states are portrayed as either heroes or villains, depending on their stances on climate actions. The most frequent types of heroes are mainstream scientists, the general public, and businesses – in bloggers' discourse, they often portray themselves as heroes (van Eck & Feindt, 2022: 201-203). In the social justice storyline, the general public and developing countries are portrayed as victims of climate inaction. Businesses, politicians, and nation states are blamed for harming everyone who is suffering from the consequences of CC (van Eck & Feindt, 2022: 203). In the disaster strikes storyline, nation states and the general public suffer the consequences of CC, whereas businesses, politicians, and nation states are villains. The potential catastrophe storyline emphasizes future generations as the victims. The opportunity storyline emphasizes the opportunities for the economy of adopting an international agreement and acting upon CC (van Eck & Feindt, 2022: 204).

On the other hand, van Eck and Feindt (2022) have identified four storylines from the climate skeptical blog discourse. In the hoax storyline, anthropogenic climate change (ACC) is constructed as a conspiracy of scientists, politicians, and mainstream media, who are portrayed as villains, and CC is framed as a religion, fantasy, or joke (van Eck & Feindt, 2022: 199). Anshelm and Hultman (2014: 89-90) found similar discourses in traditional media texts. In the no scientific evidence storyline, scientists supporting ACC theory are seen as villains and in the climate skeptical science storyline, scientists rejecting ACC theory as heroes (van Eck & Feindt, 2022: 200). In the injustice storyline, children and the general public are portrayed as victims of unethical environmental campaigns and protests, and climate activists as the villains responsible for the injustice (van Eck & Feindt, 2022: 201).

Interestingly, the concept of eco-guilt has been discussed in different types of CC studies. The concept of eco-guilt derives from an "individual's guilty feelings induced by behaviors that are harmful to the environment" (Mallett, 2012). Guilt in consumption corresponds to the

subjective acknowledgment of having done or desired something that does not meet moral standards (Barbeta-Viñas, 2022: 2-3). Ágoston et al. (2022: 6) identified eight types of eco-guilt in an interview study. One of them, prophetic individual responsibility, concerns the individual responsibility to educate other people, because otherwise they will neither understand nor do anything. It is an especially relevant form of eco-guilt in personal green lifestyle blogs. Other examples are self-criticism, self-examination, and self-blame, focusing on how one could modify one's behavior to live an even more ecofriendly life, and dissatisfaction with one's actions, which involves criticism and dwelling on negative emotions with fewer attempts to engage in self-improvement. In system maintenance guilt, a person feels they are part of a bad system, such as capitalism or globalization, which they cannot control or leave. In guilt/individual responsibility criticism, the responsibility is shifted to companies, with a focus on the idea that individuals should apply more pressure on companies (Ágoston et al., 2022: 6-8).

In addition to the blogosphere, other unconventional yet influential parts of the Internet can provide access to rawer, unfiltered discussions that are typically not seen on traditional and moderated communication platforms (Corsi, 2021); especially on sites where comments are anonymous, citizens can express their views freely (Hämäläinen & Lahti, 2021: 330-331). In particular, *imageboards* are birthplaces of various discourses that might have wider impact on society (Ylä-Anttila et al., 2020: 1; Hämäläinen & Lahti, 2021: 332).

Members of imageboards often see themselves as belonging to an alternative, niche, or even marginalized group (Marwick & Caplan, 2018: 5; Ylä-Anttila et al., 2020: 1). Users do not know each other, and do not reveal much about their own lives. The bonds between them arise from boundary-work and shared notions of who they are not. Boundary-work constructs a community of the like-minded who have common enemies and believe that they understand certain "truths" about the world that others do not. The users protest against "them," by which they mean hegemonic society, and "the decay" of the mainstream media (Ylä-Anttila et al., 2020: 3-7). Imageboards are particularly popular among young men (Haasio, 2015: 105-106; Vainikka, 2019; Hämäläinen & Lahti, 2021: 332).

Ylilauta's – a Finnish imageboard – discussions are male-dominated, and its discussion culture is characterized by "openness" and giving room to persons and opinions that are marginalized in society (Haasio, 2015; Vainikka & Harju, 2019). Being mostly white straight men (Haasio, 2015; Vainikka & Harju, 2019; Ylä-Anttila et al., 2020), Ylilauta users have a societally privileged position. From this position they find many (political) opinions that challenge the societal status quo to be status threats, and thus treat them as unnecessary, immoral, or laughable (Phillips, 2013). Interestingly, many Ylilauta users at the same time consider themselves marginalized (Vainikka, 2018).

Ylilauta has become "a seedbed for right-wing radicalization" of young men similarly to 4chan (Ylä-Anttila et al., 2020: 1). Racist narratives can permeate discussions on CC and other topics. In climate nationalism, racism and nationalism are integrated into climate change narratives, and users appear to accept that climate change is happening, but blame developing countries, claiming that the responsibility for causing CC falls on them. Those who oppose CC regulation are, instead of refusing scientific evidence, starting to use climate change science for their own purposes, which seeks to harmonize the existence of CC with a political agenda based on racism and nationalism (Corsi, 2021).

In the next section, we will delve into previous research focusing in particular on gendered discourses of CC.

2.2. Gendered discourses of climate change

Gender-related research in environmental studies has become increasingly important (Anselm & Hultman, 2014: 86). Anselm and Hultman have studied how different masculinities influence environmental issues. Hultman and Pulé (2018: 40–41) talk about industrial and breadwinner masculinities, which refer to "malestream patriarchal,

hegemonic and normative masculinities who background the social and environmental implications of industrialization for the sake of capital growth and its associated accesses to power and privileges." Global Northern, straight, white, and middle-aged (and older) men are deeply embedded within global industrial and economic systems, and can be seen as the group most responsible for causing CC and other environmental problems (Hedenqvist et al., 2021: 209). Individuals who benefit from industrial and breadwinner masculinities can perceive ecologization as a threat to their power position and even to their existence. This generates resistance, which may take extreme forms, such as misogyny, pseudo-science and conspiracy theories, which often accompany CC denial (Hedenqvist et al., 2021: 208).

According to Hultman and Pulé (2018), hegemonic masculinist socializations promote emotionally restricting norms of toughness and stoicism. The patriarchal and capitalist principle of domination, combined with the masculinist norms related to industrial and breadwinner masculinities, may block the ability to acknowledge and deal with the pain and suffering caused by abusive behavior, obstructing personal and structural change (Hultman & Pulé, 2018; Hedenqvist et al., 2021: 214). The urge for domination and control rises from the lack of emotional comfort and ability to be earnest (Hedenqvist et al., 2021: 213). People suppress their surroundings in a similar manner as their personal feelings. Emotional and personal insecurity can lead to adopting "a bully mentality" as a compensation strategy – being violent against oneself, other people in dominant groups, marginalized people, and other-than-human nature. Masculinist norms that restrain feelings and intuition but instead emphasize logical problem-solving, trust in economic rationalism, seeking technological fixes to social and ecological problems, and amplifying competitive and individualistic approaches to life (Hedenqvist et al., 2021: 214) are also visible on imageboards like Ylilauta.

The identity-protective cognition thesis suggests that people selectively credit and dismiss asserted dangers in a way that protects their in-group's cultural identity. For example, white males display skepticism toward risks when activities central to their cultural identity are under threat from these risks (Kahan et al., 2007). More generally, people support CC frames that credit their cultural identity and dismiss frames that challenge this identity (van Eck et al., 2020: 455).

Raising criticism of specific (and relatable) behaviors invokes emotionally charged responses such as guilt, shame, and anger, which are then commonly suppressed. Autonomy and toughness, aligning with traditionally masculine characteristics, make it difficult to acknowledge the personal impacts of one's choices and behaviors on others, and provokes defensive behavior, which can be a key source of resistance to change. Criticism may be perceived as a threat to self-identity control and accumulated power, which in turn may lead to aggressive rejection or resistance of the ecologization process (Hedenqvist et al., 2021: 215).

Brookes and Chalupnik (2022) observed in their Reddit study that the r/vegan subreddit revealed a set of discourses that provide oppositional representations of vegan and non-vegan men. The findings of Iveson and Formato's (2022) study about masculine toxic behaviors in YouTube responses show that deviant and subordinate masculinities are seen to be associated with political or social movements. Traditional masculinity is threatened by groups of men who are considered socially inferior, provoking a (white) male sense of nostalgic entitlement. Online platforms become mediated spaces for discrimination, where antifeminist sentiments are implicit. Our article also adds to the literature on discourse and masculinities, and constructions of gender in different online spaces by examining the constructions of variety gendered discourses in two different online platforms.

3. Data and methods

3.1. The research data

The data of this study consists of blog posts and comments, and

online discussion forum message threads that have been collected within a larger project. Among the vast amount of project data concerning discussions on CC and housing on a multiplicity of online platforms, we chose these two types of data because, based on earlier research, they can be considered as “opposites” in many ways in the context of Finnish open online discussions (e.g. Ylä-Anttila et al., 2020; Joosse & Brydges, 2018). This choice enables us to shed light on different online realities, and cover a wide range of discourses.

The empirical context of these online discussions is housing. It forms a relevant focus on CC discussion as housing and construction account for 30–40 % of GHG emissions and energy use (Nielsen & Farrelly, 2019). Although Ballantyne et al. (2018: 649) reframed CC as a personally relevant local issue for a homeowner, there is a lack of studies on communication concerning climate-wise living by ordinary citizens that would be based on data from different platforms representing diverse views (Haider, 2012; Joosse & Brydges, 2018: 689).

The data was mapped using various keywords related to the topic, such as “carbon footprint,” “carbon neutral,” “low carbon,” “climate change,” “climate friendly,” and “climate warming” combined with “housing.” On this basis, we selected 17 lifestyle blogs from the years 2018–2021 and a total of 46 blog posts with 552 comments for the actual analysis. In addition to blogs, we searched for similar topics in one open and anonymous imageboard, Ylilauta, where we collected 50 discussion threads from 2019 to 2021, with a total of 543 messages. As no search function is available, the data was gathered manually.

Based on their descriptions, the blogs are female-led and attached to the ecological lifestyle. Some of them emphasize ecological lifestyles, while some are more general; the chosen blog posts concern pro-environmental living. Thereby, they represent discourses that express concerns about the consequences of climate change and scientific position to CC. As previous research has noticed, Ylilauta’s discussions are male-dominated, and its discussion culture promotes opinions that are marginalized in society (Haasio, 2015; Vainikka & Harju, 2019; Ylä-Anttila et al., 2020). These two datasets balance each other and create a setting that enables a deep and rich examination of the varied manifestations of the construction of gendered discourses of guilt and innocence.

3.2. Combining discourse analysis with Greimas’ semiotic square

As a method, we combined a discourse analytical approach with Greimas’ semiotic square (1987). We looked at the discursive construction of emotional reactions to climate-friendly housing based on the meaning-making categories included in the semiotic square. Thus, the semiotic square was employed as a tool to highlight the ideological contradictions and binary oppositions central to polarization. Based on its profound idea, meaning-making is constructed in the differences between signs, and thereby it enables exploring how cultural categories make other categories meaningful in these relations (Leipämäa-Leskinen et al., 2018; Greimas, 1987). In particular, Greimas’ semiotic square sheds light on the fine-tuned meaning-making of inherent complexities and contradictions related to climate-change discussions in different online platforms.

The model has been used in different fields of research for studying cultural meanings, especially for identifying cultural elements that are absent, that is, implicit and often negative meanings (Weber, 2005: 233). The semiotic analysis takes one cultural concept as a starting point and helps to identify underlying binary distinctions of a symbolic system. Following, our starting point is the idea of emotional categories of guilty or innocent and their contradictorial and binary relations.

According to Greimas (1987), each unit of meaning in a narrative brings about the contrary meaning, and these form oppositional pairs, such as light and dark, shallow and deep, good and bad and in our case, guilt and innocence. However, in addition to the oppositional pairs, each part of the pair is connected to what it is not. So, for example, the opposition light vs. dark and the contradictory opposition not-light vs. not-

dark together form a semiotic square. Therefore, the specific advantage of utilizing semantic square is that it facilitates analyzing meanings in relation to other meaning categories, as it shows how they make other categories meaningful through their relationships (Bardhi et al., 2010). In this way, it enables us to analyze discourses and emergent meanings in a more fine-tuned way, avoiding simple dichotomies.

To provide discursive interpretation for the categories of semiotic square, the categories were sought by focusing on the patterns of discourses representing guilt and innocence. To be more specific, our qualitative discourse analysis was conducted in three steps through repeated reading (and categorizing) of the data sets. First, we identified the patterns by looking at the objects, actors, and actions presented in the texts (Carvalho, 2000; Carvalho et al., 2016; Fairclough, 2003, 2013; van Leeuwen, 2008). Basically, we analyzed who (e.g. blog post writer, anonymous commentator) is sharing the feelings in question or showing them, to which kinds of objects and issues (e.g. housing related doings like showering, other people, nations), and how these actors and actions intertwine with the contradictions and binary positions presented in the semiotic square. Second, we paid attention to the contextual factors (Fairclough, 1995; 2013) as well rather than just actual linguistic expressions of the feelings. We looked at how overall topics (e.g. energy saving, heating, carbon footprint, money and consumption, recycling, and eco-friendly lifestyle) and general backgrounds and characteristics of platforms (e.g. racism, nationalism, marginalization, self-absorption, science optimism, societal awareness) were implicitly or explicitly present in the discursive patterns of guilt and innocence.

Third, we considered how ideological aspects of the climate change debate were represented discursively in the texts. According to van Dijk (1998: 8) ideology is *the basis of the social representations shared by members of a group and allow[s] people, as group members, to organize the multitude of social beliefs about what is the case, good or bad, right or wrong, for them, and to act accordingly*. Ideology is the groundwork for the most fundamental political standings – how society should be organized, what the role of the state is, what kind of government is desirable. Ideology influences the selection and representation of objects, actors, the language, and the discursive strategies employed in a text. The author’s ideological standpoints are not always explicit in the text; identifying them requires a good deal of interpretive work (Fairclough, 2003; 2013). In terms of the environment, ideology has essentially to do with normative and political standpoints on the relation between man and nature.

This way we identified self-centered and other-centered discourses that are taking part in both online platforms to simultaneously individualize and collectivize the climate change debate. Our analysis was qualitative in nature, so a certain level of subjectivity in interpretive work is unavoidable. However, to strengthen the trustworthiness of our interpretations, we ensured that the saturation point was reached for each category by supporting identified discourses by a substantial number of data extracts. We acknowledge that in some individual cases, these discourses and opposing views were also leaking into each other, i. e. intertwining ideological, emotional and semiotic square aspects of the debate, but as these remained as separate mentions, they were not interpreted as constructing discourses stemming from saturated data. In the following, we present our findings by illustrating each category with most typical examples from the data.

4. Results

As our data stems from two types of online discussions, we produce two semiotic squares that showcase the underlying polarization in different online platforms regarding CC discussions on housing at the sociocultural level (Figs. 1 and 2). We show opposing semantic categories, which in the current study are guilty and innocent, and further elaborate those opposing poles with the complementary categories of not guilty and not innocent. Thus, the categories of guilty and innocent are interpreted as opposites to each other, whereas not guilty is

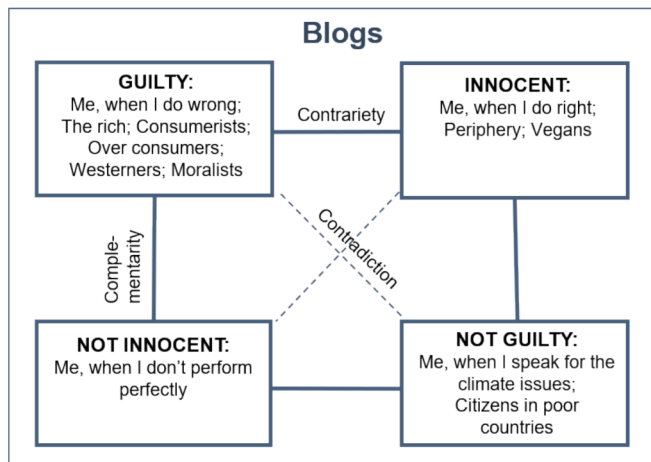


Fig. 1. Semiotic square showing the meaning categories on lifestyle blogs.

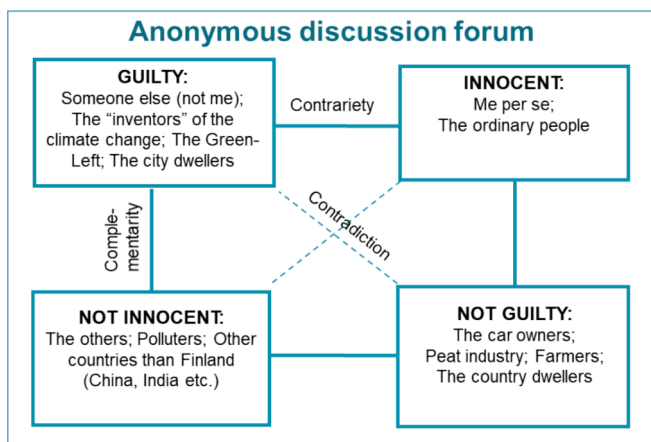


Fig. 2. Semiotic square showing the meaning categories on anonymous discussion forum.

contradictory to guilty, and not innocent contradictory to innocent. However, the category of not innocent complements the category of guilty, similar to how not guilty is complementary to the category of innocent.

At the discursive level, our findings indicate that even though housing is a shared issue in people's everyday lives, there are myriad ways of positioning oneself in relation to the environmental consequences of one's housing choices. For example, and not surprisingly, in the blogs, which are "personal blogs", the authors' own actions are highlighted (self-centered), while on the anonymous discussion forum, the focus is more on the actions of others (other-centered). Certain types of discourses are reinforced, and users tend to align with prevalent discourses for many reasons, among others, to confirm their own beliefs or to gain social acceptance, but while community norms and expectations shape the discourses they do not determine how the discourses turn out. This can be seen in the internal contradictions and complementarities pictured in Figs. 1 and 2, where guilt and innocence bring about other types of contradictions, such as urban-rural, domestic-foreign or rich-poor.

Next, we discuss our analytical findings from the perspective of the four parts of our semantic squares. Each category is illustrated with chosen quotes from both data sets, these quotes represent most typical examples of the data on these categories. Each square is considered as a category of its own, consisting of discourses in which selected meanings make other categories meaningful through their specific relationships. The discourses and emergent meanings are described, showcasing their

variations in regard to self- and other-centeredness, which is an important differing feature between the two parts of our data.

4.1. The category of guilt

This category consists of two discourses: the self-centered discourse of guilt and the other-centered discourse of guilt. In the self-centered discourse of guilt, the writers indicate that they feel guilty about their own actions. This discourse emerged pervasively in the lifestyle blog data. Examples include using unnecessary amounts of hot water and living in an excessively large apartment with too many belongings:

"I feel guilty about taking too long, hot showers" (B = Blog data).

"A smaller apartment, lower emissions. My husband and I need to downsize our possessions, so that when the children move out, the stuff will fit in a smaller home" (B).

In these kinds of examples, the writer acknowledges that the actions were wrong and unethical from the perspective of CC. The first example reflects dissatisfaction with one's actions, mostly involving criticism and dwelling on negative emotions with fewer attempts to engage in self-improvement (Ágoston et al., 2022: 7). The latter example features more self-criticism, self-examination, and self-blame, with thoughts about how to change their lifestyle to be even more eco-friendly (Ágoston et al., 2022: 6).

In the other-centered discourse of guilt, the guilt was assigned to someone else, blaming others for various things. It was present in both types of online discussion, but especially prevalent on Ylilauta. In the following example, others (the readers, addressed with the pronoun "you") are blamed for consumerism:

"If you imagine that you have to own more and more stuff, move into a bigger and bigger apartment or house, get a bigger car, or keep flying around the world for the holidays to experience meaning and true happiness, you should rethink" (B).

This example reflects Ágoston et al.'s (2022: 2) prophetic individual responsibility type of eco-guilt, where one feels an obligation to educate other people about the harm they cause with their (in)actions, in order to make them understand and act accordingly. In the following examples, others are blamed for wasting water and energy. In the first example, people in general are blamed for wasting water in the shower, whereas in the second example, the guilt is explicitly placed on women.

"The shower isn't a 'water park' – DON'T indulge in unnecessary and excessive splashing around. Just wash up and close the taps" (Y = Ylilauta data)

"Usually if women get to decide (which is a big mistake) the temperatures will be set high" (Y).

The examples above use different discursive patterns to display emotions and other-centeredness, e.g. using metaphors (water park), giving capitalized directives (DON'T indulge), and diminishing women's role (which is a big mistake). Others were also blamed for inaction or sticking to old (and outdated) technological solutions, such as in the following example, which puts the onus on housing companies:

"It's definitely worthwhile for the housing company to install meters in connection with plumbing repairs – they're silly if they don't. It's a good way to encourage saving water and eliminate the problem of freeloaders" (Y).

Emotional triggers are implicitly present in the expressions such as "definitely worthwhile" and "they're silly". The example reflects ideologically techno-optimism, which sees that environmental problems can best be solved through technological development and eco-efficient innovations. Economic and environmental objectives are complementary and technological innovations are regarded as a means of combating climate change. Techno-optimism is connected to eco-modernist discourse, which has a strong status in both western (Hajer, 1996) and

Finnish environmental political thinking (Teräväinen, 2010: 204; Kangas, 2016: 222).

Also “outside agents” – other than the writers themselves or the readers – were blamed. In the following example, Western and/or Finnish society and businesses are blamed for building excessively large apartments:

“On average, really large apartments are still being built in Finland, and that certainly maintains the image of what a home should look like. A smaller apartment features enough room to live well when the space solutions are designed to make sense” (B).

It seems that the writer whilst blaming also appeals to the sense (designed to make sense) and sensibility (ideal “home to live well”) regarding the issue. The example reflects van Eck and Feindt’s (2022: 203) social justice storyline, where businesses, politicians, and nation states are blamed for harming everyone who is suffering the consequences of CC due to their inaction. It also reflects the guilt/individual responsibility criticism storyline, where the responsibility is shifted to companies and it is thought that individuals should be more radical and apply more pressure on companies (Ágoston et al., 2022: 7).

4.2. The category of not innocent

This category complements the discourse of guilt, and it appeared especially in blog data. In the self-centered discourse of not innocent, the writers acknowledged that they are not innocent, but at the same time defended their own acts and thereby downplayed their guilt by finding excuses for why they cannot “perform perfectly.” Basically, they connect actions and emotions or ponder their actions from the emotional perspective. One way of doing this was to refer to difficulties in their personal life, such as in this excerpt from a lifestyle blog:

“My own carbon footprint is big. I drive to work and my home has direct electrical heating. Those are things that I shouldn’t feel anxious about or even try to make a major change. My life wouldn’t be possible if I used more than 2 h 30 min for commuting on public transport” (B).

Another way to downplay their guilt was to refer to lack of money or unwillingness to make a substantial financial “sacrifice” to save energy or reduce their carbon footprint:

“By far the biggest carbon footprint [...] we have comes from the fact that our house, built in 1956 [...], still has mainly oil heating. I really don’t like it myself, but unfortunately, at this point in our lives we don’t have the tens of thousands of euros we’d need to invest in a new heating system just because of the carbon footprint. Especially when we’ll certainly not be able to live in our current home long enough to pay for it” (B).

The example reflects system maintenance guilt, in which the person feels they are part of a bad system, but cannot control or leave it; they blame a larger system (capitalism, globalization) for CC but at the same time feel remorseful that they are participants, servers, and beneficiaries of this system and thus also contribute to the destruction of the environment (Ágoston et al., 2022: 7-8). The example also illustrates how self-centeredness could be attached not only for the persons themselves (I really don’t) but their family (our lives, we don’t have...) as well.

The other-centered discourse of not innocent included, for example, blaming countries other than Finland, and it emerged in Ylilauta data in particular. The following example shows how climate nationalism and emotions towards home country are visible in the discourse, passing the blame for the climate crisis onto developing countries, claiming that the responsibility for causing climate change ultimately falls on them (see Corsi, 2021):

“Finland’s carbon dioxide emissions are a flyspeck on the world map, so even if tomorrow all Finns moved to floor-based crofts, heated by burning wood and lit by shingles, would use bicycles or horses and carts to travel

and never fly, wash laundry in a cauldron and become vegetarians, it unfortunately wouldn’t matter on a global scale” (Y).

Similar to the exaggerated expression “even if ... all Finns moved to ... crofts” above, also, Vowles and Hultman (2021: 87-88) found “the claim that the actions of a small country like Sweden are negligible in a global context is a form of implicatory denial that is repeatedly used.” This framing of the problem implies that nothing can be done nationally. As part of the Global North, Sweden has a large historic carbon footprint, and is obliged by the Paris Agreement to cut its emissions faster (Anderson et al., 2020); pointing the finger of blame elsewhere denies the moral and political implications (Vowles & Hultman, 2021: 87-88).

Others could also be blamed for moralism or hypocrisy, such as in this example from blog post’s comment:

“Even those who are enthusiastic about Linkola’s [a Finnish deep ecologist who promoted rapid population decline] writings wouldn’t move to the harsh forests of Finland to live without electricity and use moss instead of toilet paper in the outhouse, even though that’s exactly the constructive solution they consider the best” (B).

The writer refers to others with the pronouns “those” and “they,” and uses hyperbolic expressions. In these kinds of expressions, the difference between the literal meaning and the contextual intended meaning is one of degree, not of kind. This is because what matters is common enemies (see, e.g., Lewis, 2020). Vowles and Hultman (2021: 87-88) found that portraying politicians and other climate change leaders as a greedy, hypocritical elite was one strategy to attack anyone promoting action on climate change: “One way of opposing action on climate is to avert the blame”.

4.3. The category of not guilty

The self-centered discourse of not guilty included, for example, defending one’s own acts and thereby downgrading one’s guilt by finding excuses for why one cannot save energy. This was a common discourse feature in both the blogs and Ylilauta data. On the other hand, the other-centered discourse of not guilty did not appear in either one of the datasets, which may show that finding excuses for others is not easily constructed in these types of online discussions.

One way of constructing oneself as not guilty is to use compensation as an excuse for not saving energy or reducing the carbon footprint. In the following example, the writer states that geothermal heat and a wood-heated sauna and fireplace compensate the carbon footprint:

“However, I’m aware that the carbon footprint is compensated by environmentally friendly housing choices – geothermal heat and a wood-heated sauna and fireplace” (B).

The construction of oneself as not guilty is emphasized through the use of words like “however” and “I’m aware” – illustrating a discursive pattern of self-centeredness. Another way is to refer to external conditions such as the geographical location of Finland in a cold climate and use it as an argument for having a big carbon footprint when compared to warmer countries, like in the following example:

“In Finland, we have high heating costs and it affects our carbon footprint, while this isn’t the case in warmer countries” (B).

The defending patterns were also constructed together with economic and natural resources discourses. Some writers, especially in the Ylilauta data, used economic reasons to defend their own actions:

“It [water] is so damn cheap after all. You can waste hundreds of euros on all kinds of useless shit in a year, so I’m not going to skimp on water” (Y).

The example refers to the fact that in Finland, scarcity has not really limited the use of water. Finland’s water resources are abundant compared to the population and water use. As a result, water has also

been affordable for consumers. By using both generalized and exaggerated comparison (all kinds of useless shit), this writer justifies the not-actions.

4.4. The category of innocence

The category of innocence consisted of occasions and ways in which oneself or others were seen as blameless. Firstly, the self-centered discourse of innocence included seeing oneself as innocent and doing the right thing, and it was found in both datasets. In the following examples, the writers accentuate that they are not doing “bad” things, such as using underfloor bathroom heating or consuming too much water:

“One big consumer of electricity that we don’t use is the bathroom’s underfloor heating (and we don’t have a sauna either)” (B).

“And I certainly don’t use excessive amounts of water, I don’t wash the dishes with running water and I just go to the shower to wash myself and not for enjoyment” (Y).

This kind of discourse includes implicit blaming “between the lines,” implying that “those who don’t do like I do, do wrong.” It can also be seen as reflecting the prophetic individual responsibility idea of [Ágoston et al. \(2022: 6\)](#), concerning the individual responsibility to educate other people, because otherwise they will neither understand nor do anything.

Second, the other-centered discourse appeared also in both data sets. The discursive construction of innocence included seeing others as sufferers of energy-saving actions, such as in the next example, where comfortable living was used as an implicit argument for why the writer does not want to save energy:

“Some people I know live in a cold and dark house all year round and are able to reach about 14-15000kWh in similar houses. Is that a life worth living? And where I’m from, would it be worth the €600/year I’d save?” (Y).

The writer makes a rhetorical question (Is that a life worth living?) to challenge the idea of sustainable behavior at the expense of comfortable living – in a way, also judging others’ actions. This example reflects [van Eck and Feindt’s \(2022: 201\)](#) injustice storyline, which sees environmental campaigns and protests as unethical and CC policies as too costly, considers children and the general public as victims of the mentioned campaigns and protests, and portrays climate activists as the villains responsible for this injustice. The comparisons between oneself and others – even though you all are ‘the general public’ – is a typical way to construct innocence in the other-centered discourse.

5. Discussion

Discussions of mundane issues may reveal not only contrasting, but even more fine-tuned differences in the views in the societal atmosphere concerning CC. We analyzed the categories of guilt and innocence as well as not guilty and not innocent, which highlight the nuanced ways in which polarizing perspectives to self- and other-centered discourses appear on different platforms.

Applying the semiotic square helped to illustrate how cultural categories, such as guilt and innocence in the context of climate change, make other oppositions, such as rich and poor, urban and rural, meaningful. The method also highlights that polarization is a more complex issue than simple oppositions would indicate. For example, even when CC is not explicitly addressed, the topic is still implicitly present in discussions of everyday practices, such as saving energy. If we studied only the discourses of “guilt and innocence” without the semiotic square, the analysis would not show the variations between the opposite categorizations. Through the semiotic square, we show opposing semantic categories, which in the current study are guilty and innocent, and further elaborate those opposing poles with the complementary categories of not guilty and not innocent. These discourses are dependent on the position taken by the discussants: Everyone may feel, or be seen as,

guilty or innocent, or not, from some perspective. At the first sight, in the blogs, feeling guilty or not innocent is mostly connected with the participant’s own actions of not doing enough (cf. [Ágoston et al., 2022: 6-8](#)), whereas assigning guilt to someone else seems to be common on the anonymous discussion forum. However, looking beyond these binary positions, our analysis reveals more nuance.

The discourses on the lifestyle blogs emphasize concern and responsibility for the state of the world. These discourses reflect the importance of environmental values, and the writers construct self-centered discourse of guilt about it. The writers express their wishes to curb climate change, even if it is against their own individual interests. On the one hand, as the self-centered discourse of not innocent appears, it highlights awareness of one’s own carbon footprint, and where there is “room for improvement”. When it comes to Ylilauta discussion forum, guilt was most commonly assigned to someone else. Ylilauta discussants consider overconsumption bad because it consumes money, not because of its effects on the climate and environment. These discourses reflect the importance of economic values (cf. [Hedenqvist et al., 2021: 214](#)), which, however, can also lead to more sustainable solutions. “Enjoyment” is often seen as a vice (e.g., in the shower “you can’t enjoy yourself”), and may also be associated with women (or “femininity” in general). On the other hand, saving energy and water can be seen as “not worth it” if the financial savings are not big enough. In Ylilauta’s (“masculine”) discourses, the primacy of the male perspective was present, and one wants to retain agency and power. Depending on the person’s own (economic) life situation, making a lot of money, living frugally, or taking advantage of the subsidies offered by society, all aim at the same goal – the individuals’ control of their own lives and finances. Emotional discourse is built on the tensional, and even opposing cultural ideologies of individualization and collectivism – the common good.

By using this method, we were thus able to reveal how discourses construct different meanings and distinctions between platforms. This means that while many of the phenomena are present in both datasets, they are dealt with in different ways and the target of (not) innocence and/or guilt varies in different discourses and platforms. Thus, while the contradictions are at a universal level, discursive cultural differences emerge between different online communities. Future research could use alternative approaches that could explain the contrasts, such as linguistics-based discourse analysis established in appraisal theory (as [Martin & White, 2005; White, 2015](#)).

It should be noted that the discourses we found emerge more commonly on certain platforms, but are not strictly restricted to them. Therefore, it seems that two online communities were served by these platforms and their functionalities, enabling the construction of different discourses. Future research is necessary to study communities that do not represent such opposing views as examined here. This study deliberately selected communities that are as diverse as possible in order to gain access to polarized discourses with their variations. Even in these communities, however, it could be seen that the discourses can also “leak” into each other some individual cases. Presumably, more dialogue between different discourses would be found in online communities and platforms in the “border zone.” Studying several different communities yields a more diverse picture of how discourses occur more widely, and whether and how they may mix with each other.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Eveliina Salmela: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Merja Koskela:** Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization. **Henna Syrjälä:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Liisa Kääntä:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization.

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