LET'S TALK ABOUT FEELINGS: ENVIRONMENTAL COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE OPTIMISM AND MANAGE ECO-ANXIETY IN THE NEXT GENERATION
Session: A, Breakout Room #5

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With the continued rise in environment-related problems around the world, doomist media and detached curriculum are causing many young adults to experience feelings of helplessness that researchers define as eco-anxiety. Although it can be paralyzing, positive and progress-focused narrative can harness this anxiety into productive learning and collaborative action (Pihkala 2020). The aim of this study was to provide environmental communicators strategies to better connect with youth audiences both online and in the classroom. I worked with Sustainability Ambassadors, a nonprofit based in King County, as an Impact Storytelling Intern designing content for grant-funded campaigns and aiding in the curation of a youth-targeted marketing strategy. Engagement data was measured by means of counting likes, comments, and the number of accounts each post reached (known as, “impressions”), and then compared to assess which modes were most popular among our audience. I also conducted interviews with three student ambassadors and a nonprofit marketing consultant; their responses, in conjunction with a multidisciplinary literature review of relevant sources, exposed some opportunities for eco-anxiety management within the intersections of activism, education, and social media. Findings suggest nonprofits can target youth audiences by using entertaining but value-oriented conscious marketing techniques. When coupled with transformative pedagogies that personalize learning and offer collaborative and critical dialogues, environmental communication can recenter the narrative on collective action, provide youth agency over their learning, and assist the next generation in imagining a future that overcomes contemporary feelings of doom.