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# Pansy asses and terrorists: Sensibilities of anti- environmentalist toxic speech against Extinction Rebellion Finland

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## Abstract

Hate speech against environmental activists has been on the rise globally, alongside a forceful criminalization of the climate movement in Western Europe. This article analyses anti-environmentalist speech and actions against Extinction Rebellion (XR) Finland, an environmental movement that employs non-violent direct action and civil disobedience to persuade individuals and institutions to address the ongoing ecological emergency. The materials consist of online commenting evoked by the news coverage of XR Finland's protests in October 2022 and May 2023, and ethnographic data from the protest sites. The data ranges from scorn and stigmatizing insults to fantasies of violence and physical assaults at the demonstration sites. The article discusses this data through the concept of toxic speech and explores the different sensibilities of such speech: (1) *the ironic and dismissive sensibility*, (2) *the emotionally invested sensibility* and (3) *the punitive, resentful sensibility*. This article highlights how these sensibilities and related affective practices are embedded in and compounded by gendered, class-based, ageist and ableist systems of power and argues that anti-environmentalist toxic speech contributes to environmental activism's delegitimization and stigmatization. It suggests that toxic speech normalizes violence towards activists and can ultimately violate activists' civil and political rights.

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## Keywords

Hate speech, toxic speech, affect, environmental activism, anti-environmentalism, violence, gender, stigmatization, delegitimization

## Introduction

Verbal attacks against environmental activists have been on the rise globally (Young, 2020), accompanied by a forceful criminalization of the environmental movement in Western Europe (Forst, 2024) and worldwide (Scheidel et al., 2020). Philosopher Elisa Aaltola (2021) laments that ‘public discussions on [the climate crisis] often lead to anger, mocking, denial and other defensive behaviours, one prominent example of which is the reception met by the climate advocate Greta Thunberg’ (p. 5.) Yet, as Aaltola (2021) recognizes, ‘Thunberg is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the fury met by those, who publicly speak of the current environmental catastrophe’ (p. 6). Aaltola is not alone in recognizing the volatility of discussions on the environmental crisis and environmental activism but rather joins a wealth of scholars noting that they are fraught with collectively organized denial (Norgaard, 2011), difficult emotions (e.g. Pihkala, 2022) and hostile speech towards activists (Anderson, 2021; Vowles and Hultman, 2021).

In this article, we examine the affective dimensions of anti-environmentalist speech and actions, analysing their sensibilities and sociopolitical implications. While the discursive processes of stigmatization (e.g. Brock et al., 2023), delegitimization (e.g. Muncie, 2020), criminalization (e.g. Di Ronco, 2023) and penalization (e.g. González-Sánchez and Maroto-Calatayud, 2018) have been investigated in the context of environmental protests, our study looks to enrich the existing literature by placing the focus on the affective practices contributing to these processes and the increasing hostility around environmental activism. Our materials consist of online and offline commenting on Extinction Rebellion (XR) Finland’s *Luontokatokapina* (‘Biodiversity Loss Rebellion’, henceforth BLR), which was organized between 5 and 14 October 2022. XR Finland, or Elokapina, is an autonomous branch of the global Extinction Rebellion environmental movement. It is a non-violent, non-partisan effort seeking to influence governments, corporations and individual citizens to act on the prevailing ecological emergency. The various protests of BLR were focused on Finnish industrial forestry, which has been at the centre of long-standing and highly emotional politico-ecological disputes in Finland. XR Finland drew particular attention to the culpability of three large forest industry companies (UPM, Metsä Group and Stora Enso) in biodiversity loss in Finland and pointed out how governmental support and wood production-centred logic contrast with attempts to stop biodiversity loss. We also gathered supplementary data from two UPM-related protests in May 2023.

The commenting evoked by the protests is dominated by affects and emotions associated with what is known as the hostility triad: contempt, anger and disgust, which are connected to aggression, opposition and conflict (Izard, 1977). These types of comments include various kinds of derogatory speech meant to ridicule, shame or sully the protesters and fantasies of physical or sexual violence towards the protesters. For this reason, we study the commenting using the concept of ‘toxic speech’, which is speech whose

harms extend from harms to groups of people to harms to the ‘social body’, or the socio-cultural practices of being, relating and interacting (Tirrell, 2017). We focus in particular on what the different sensibilities, or tones (Nikunen, 2015), actually *do*: that is, what kind of sociopolitical functions toxic speech against environmentalists and related affective practices play in our data. Those showcase the embeddedness of anti-environmentalist commenting in gendered, heteronormative, ableist, ageist and class-based systems of power. We in particular focus on the entanglement between gender and anti-environmentalism (e.g. Daggett, 2018). Like many other affect theory scholars, we argue that there are ‘political effects of emotional practices’ (Åhäll, 2018: 38).

### *Data and methods*

We focus on affective social media reactions to news articles dealing with XR Finland’s protests and the expressions of passersby at the protest sites. BLR featured a range of protests, from roadblocks organized in Finland’s capital Helsinki, to direct action at the forest industry’s production facilities. All these protests and performances pressured the Finnish government and forest industries into choosing sustainability over, for example, the forest firms’ profit-driven overfelling, while increasing public recognition of the reality of the interconnected crises of biodiversity and climate and Finnish forestry’s role in creating and perpetuating them. The criticism directed towards industrial forestry in particular appeared to ignite heated discussions. Forestry has been one of Finland’s leading industries since the 18th century (Kuisma, 1993); in addition, almost 14% of Finns own forest land (Forest.fi, 2019). Covering more than 75% of the country, forests are also important for many Finnish citizens for personal reasons. Thus, the central objects which the conflict addressed involve powerful symbolic and emotional dimensions, through gendered work, leisure and ownership, and are entangled with cultural and local attachments (Suopajarvi, 2009), making any criticism of them provocative.

Our article focuses only on protests that were covered by the news media and made their way into mainstream public discussion. Such protests were two roadblocks that stopped traffic in downtown Helsinki for several hours on 5 and 14 October, a direct action stopping traffic to the building site of a new Metsä Group Finland pulp mill in Kemi on 10 October, and protests at all three headquarters of Finland’s dominant forestry industry companies on 11 October, in which the protesters glued themselves to the headquarters’ main entrances and elevator buttons, thus disrupting easy access to those spaces. The UPM protests in May 2023 included protests held at the company’s headquarters on 16 May and at the Kymi pulp and paper mills on 22 May, where the criticism was mostly directed towards the company’s neocolonial activities in Uruguay.

Throughout the campaign, we conducted online and offline ethnographic research on the affective reactions caused by XR Finland’s protests. Heidi Kosonen observed the media coverage and online commenting through Internet ethnography, which allows for the observation of the progression and dynamics of online discussions in real time (e.g. Hine, 2015; Sumiala et al., 2019). For each protest, she chose a specific news medium and platform for ethnographic observation, but she later also studied comments that appeared elsewhere. All data were examined with the help of discourse analysis, which is appropriate for detecting recurring patterns and key themes and identifying both

prominent and missing elements by paying attention to details (e.g. Gill, 1996; Rose, 2007: 158). Riku Löf employed activist ethnography (Juris, 2007; Routledge, 2013), gaining engaged, embodied experiences and observational data from protest sites in Helsinki, Kemi and Kouvola. He observed the dynamics between activists and different publics, including counter-demonstrators, and interviewed passersby about their feelings and thoughts regarding biodiversity loss, the climate crisis and XR Finland's actions. He wrote down notes and made voice memos.

Data were gathered from the comment sections of news media sites and their Facebook and Twitter pages. Data on the Helsinki and Kouvola protests were collected from Finland's most prestigious newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat*, the public broadcasting company Yle's online news site, the tabloid newspapers *Ilta-Sanomat* and *Iltalehti* and the commercial news site MTV. Coverage of the Kemi protest was examined from three sources: Yle, the local newspaper *Kaleva* and the newspaper *Maaseudun Tulevaisuus* (which is the organ of The Central Union of Agricultural Producers and Forest Owners). The news coverage was generally focused on disruptions caused to traffic or the forest companies and police actions. The rationales behind the protests were usually noted very briefly. Such media frames negatively prime their reception and have been analysed as contributing to the depoliticization and delegitimization of protests (e.g. Bundzen, 2023; Muncie, 2020). When analysing social media comments, we looked at not only their textual elements but also the use of reaction buttons, gifs, stickers, memes and other visual and affective elements. Altogether, we gathered 4053 comments from the discussions relating to 18 news articles across social media platforms.

Studying social media and demonstration activities requires ethical consideration. In conducting this research, we followed the ethical guidelines on Internet research of the Association of Internet Researchers (2019) and the guidelines of the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity and The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity. No single individual can be identified from the comments included in this article or the transcribed demonstration observations.

### *Emotions in environmental conflicts and toxic speech*

Researchers have argued that understanding the affective dimensions of environmental crises is central to grasping the social processes that shape responses towards them (Norgaard, 2011; Pihkala, 2022). Yet, as pointed out by scholars from various fields in the humanities and social sciences, emotions cannot be studied as simple psycho-physiological states; rather, they are influenced by different affective economies (Ahmed, 2014), practices (Wetherell, 2012) and rules (Hochschild, 2003) that direct emotions and their expression. From this perspective, emotions are neither universal nor simply instinctive but contextual and partly shaped and orchestrated by predominant norms and discourses. Furthermore, affect and emotions are not simply the products of these practices; affective meaning-making also shapes norms and produces orientations toward different objects (Ahmed, 2014). Following Sara Ahmed (2014: 4), in this article we focus on what emotions do instead of what they are in an ontological sense. We see them as performatively produced, expressed and circulated. By performativity, we refer to

Judith Butler's (1993) notion of the 'reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains' (p. 2). Like other scholars dealing with emotions and affect, we do not conceptually differentiate between them but discuss them as inter-related 'bodily processes of affecting and being affected' (Ahmed, 2014: 208).

Whether studying affective discourses in general or the affectivity of environmental conflicts more specifically, the question of power becomes relevant. According to Margaret Wetherell (2012), power works through affect, and affect emerges in power by enacting, disrupting and reinforcing relations of power (pp. 16–17), which is particularly manifested in hate speech, a strongly affective speech enmeshed with power struggles (e.g. Langton, 1993). According to the European Commission's definition, hate speech is targeted against a specific, often societally marginalized, group of people or an individual based on their belonging or affiliation to such a group, and consists of expressions that advocate, incite, promote or justify hatred, violence and discrimination (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, 2023). Although the term is in that sense misleading, in that it is not necessarily motivated by hate or hateful in its content, hate speech is designed to arouse strong – hateful or otherwise hostile – emotions, feelings and attitudes towards such a group (Brown, 2017; Gelber and McNamara, 2016). Thus, as Tuija Saresma (2017) has also argued, hate speech is performative, political and populist in its strict polarization between 'us' and 'them' (see also Bangstad, 2015). Furthermore, Iginio Gagliardone et al. (2015) argue that 'hate speech builds on, and amplifies, conflicts that already exist in the society' (pp. 11–12).

In this article, we discuss affective discourses that could be categorized as hate speech, based on their stigmatizing effect and their origins in group polarization, under the concept of 'toxic speech' (Tirrell, 2017), which can be understood as a sibling concept to hate speech; it is recognized as speech that does harm not only through slurs and derogatory terms but also via seemingly innocent speech acts. Lynne Tirrell (2017) defines toxic speech, as consisting of 'the constant repetition of discursive tropes that cascade across the lives of whole groups of people' (p. 141). It is this process of cascading – combined with individuals' different sociocultural vulnerabilities – that can also render ostensibly innocent remarks harmful (148). Furthermore, toxic speech not only harms individuals and groups of people, but also damages the 'social body' itself, 'chang[ing] the practices that shape a society' and 'reshap[ing] social relations' (Tirrell, 2017: 142).

We study the different tones or sensibilities (Nikunen, 2015) of such toxic speech and connect it to different affective-discursive practices. Our decision to use the concept of toxic speech is based on its broader understanding of what kinds of speech can count as harmful and its recognition of the damage that speech acts can inflict not only on individuals and social groups but also to the relations between them and to the democratic principles of modern societies. We also seek to maintain hate speech's historical roots in the protection of particularly vulnerable groups of people (Brown, 2017; European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, 2023). While the stigmatization of environmentalists in our material sometimes stems from their association with such groups, as with slurs using the stigma of mental illness, disability or sexual minority status, they often have relevant sociocultural privileges in different domains. In using the concept of toxic speech, our aim is not to draw boundaries

between hate speech and toxic speech or to participate in the debate over whether this sometimes-contested concept is indeed useful (e.g. Udupa et al., 2021).

## The ironic and dismissive sensibility

The array of different derogatory discourses to which the XR Finland demonstrators are subjected both online and offline is vast. Frequent derogatory terms include references to the protesters' assumed youth ('kids having tantrums') and mental disorders ('closed ward hippies'), and especially their alleged unemployment ('welfare bums') and purported drug use ('sniffers of glue'). The protesters are often depicted as pampered, whining, young and excessively emotional urban 'pansy asses', who 'get their far-grown tofu from the cold departments of close-by supermarkets', and live on 'state subsidies', without 'needing to work for their livelihood'. Next to this, the comments include slurs like 'clowns', 'parasites', 'terrorists' and 'criminals' and (ostensibly) witty modifications of XR Finland's Finnish name *Elokapina* (loosely translating to 'rebellion for life', with the protesters called *elokapinalliset*, 'rebels for life'): '*eloapinat*' ('life monkeys') or '*keloapinat*' ('dying tree monkeys') and '*elovapinat*' ('shakies', which refers either to their cowardice or presumed drug-use).

The prevalence of this type of speech directed towards environmental activists has been identified in previous research (e.g. Anderson, 2021; Brock et al., 2023; Muncie, 2020; Park et al., 2021; Vowles and Hultman, 2021; White, 2021). Anderson (2021), for instance, recognizes ad hominem descriptions of Greta Thunberg as including 'disorders' ('autism', 'depression'), derogatory evaluative terms ('hysterical', 'disturbed') and age- and gender-based assessments ('kid', 'girl') (p. 101; see also Park et al., 2021; Vowles and Hultman, 2021; White, 2021), which also appear in our data. Furthermore, as Michele White (2021) notes, anti-environmentalists tend to develop 'straw versions' of protesters to dismiss their ideas. Similarly, in our data, comments are focused on attacking straw versions of XR Finland's demonstrators rather than discussing their message.

The repeated references to the protesters' purported mental health problems, drug use and unemployment and their constant infantilization and emotionalization can be seen as depoliticizing and delegitimizing moves designed to deprive them of the ability to reason, and the possession of knowledge. For instance, associations with previously delegitimized groups provide the ground for the delegitimization of environmental activism in comments scolding the protesters to 'go get a job' or welcoming them to do forestry work, which, according to the commenters, 'also paid the war reparations [to the Soviet Union]' and would allow 'mommy's little angels to learn real work'. Such references to war and forestry work are particularly interesting because they play an important role in the Finnish imaginary as benchmarks of nationalist and masculinist empowerment (Suopajärvi, 2009). Furthermore, many of these examples showcase how anti-environmentalist commenting seems to be embedded in, and reproduced through, gendered, heteronormative, ableist, ageist and class-based systems of power. Our data particularly display the entanglement of gender and climate trouble (Daggett, 2018; see also Hultman and Pulé, 2018; Kangasluoma, 2023) through the protesters' feminization and infantilization and the prominence of hyper-masculine affective practices.



When analysing the data, we recognize a prominent affective practice of irony that appears to guide much of the dismissive discussion in both offline and online contexts. Linda Hutcheon (1994) argues that, despite the apparent detachment from emotions, there is an affective charge to irony because it is used to tease out a range of emotional responses from anger to delight (p. 15). Irony and its playful edge operate to push political views further and create discursive in-groups around shared views (Nikunen, 2015). In this section, we discuss the forms that the ironic sensibility takes in our data and argue that something similar is happening in the debates over XR Finland. In the comments, irony seems to be used to maintain a detached, cold and aloof attitude and to mask deeply felt emotions under humour and scorn. Starting from outwardly innocent forms of trivialization of the protesters' arguments and their rationale for protesting, this sensibility also extends to insults and threats of violence, where the presence of humour, irony or simply a laughing emoticon supposedly renders these threats harmless. It disguises as humour forms of speech that are toxic, harmful and occasionally even illegal, removing the 'security that words mean only what they say' (Hutcheon, 1994: 14), allowing the commentators to dodge responsibility and critique (Gill, 2007) and making online moderating practices more complicated (e.g. Matamoros-Fernández et al., 2023).

Sebastian Tynkkynen, a member of parliament and the vice chairman of the radical right party The Finns, is an example of this ironic sensibility's influence in our data.<sup>1</sup> Tynkkynen is often present at XR Finland's protest sites, shooting hours-long livestreams to his social media channels, mocking protesters and encouraging viewers to make and spread ridiculing video clips of the protesters. Tynkkynen's use of an ironic tone may play a crucial part in his appeal, as this sensibility has been found to be fundamental to the affective practices on online discussion boards (e.g. Díaz-Fernández, García-Mingo, 2022; Vainikka, 2016). His livestreams of XR Finland demonstrations gather tens and sometimes hundreds of thousands of views; thus, his influence could be felt widely during our ethnography in both online and offline environments. Based on our observations, the exact discourses, catchphrases, ironic stances and even video streaming practices by Tynkkynen were often reposted and imitated in social media discussions and at demonstration sites by male spectators.<sup>2</sup>

One prominent ironic parroting emerged from Tynkkynen's video stream on 6 October (the second day of BLR), in which he managed to provoke a discussion with a female protester, who criticized Finnish forestry using the term '*puupelto*', which translates roughly to 'tree plantation/tree farm'. This designation was used to criticize extractivist monoculture forestry practices and to underline the industry's confluences with agriculture (Hyvärinen, 2020). The term is rather rare in mainstream discussions, and Tynkkynen quickly used that fact to mock the demonstrators: 'we have a new definition of forests. Hear this, we are not talking of forests but of "tree farms". This cannot be real! It was worth it to come and witness this'. The discussion was preceded by Tynkkynen's mockery of the protesters as 'city hippies' who do not know that Finland is in fact full of forests. Multiple clips ridiculing protesters quickly emerged and circulated on social media. Löf also witnessed frequent imitations of the ironic use of the term 'tree farm' and related ridiculing throughout the rest of the campaign.

The offline data in particular suggest that this ironic, detached sensibility is gendered and generationally divided and works to delegitimize environmental activism through



gendered and gendering affective practices.<sup>3</sup> At various demonstration sites, groups of teenage boys or young men were present, laughing and competing within their homosocial groups to see who could provoke the demonstrators most daringly. This can be viewed as connected to the emergence of ‘trolling masculinities’, which refer to boys’ and men’s more prevalent adoption of provocative online practices (Díaz-Fernández and García-Mingo, 2022) and to the rise of heteronormative, misogynist and homophobic practices in response to environmental activism and other perceived threats to the white patriarchal system (e.g. Daggett, 2018: 29). Especially for many young male spectators, the game of trolling and related ironic practices employed at the demonstration sites seem to be rooted in and reproduced through gendered relations of power. As Condis (2018: 11–12) argues, taking the bait and getting provoked renders one overly emotional, naive and thus feminine, while keeping an emotional distance and ‘pulling off a masculine performance of aloofness’ demonstrates ‘a cool-headed rationality, a mastery over the self that is traditionally associated with the performance of masculinity’.

The affective norms of this ironic and detached sensibility incentivize participants to avoid and disdain practices marked as feminine, like care or empathy for others and the planet (see, for example, Plumwood, 1993). This is clearly evidenced when groups of young boys at the demonstration site commented on the current mass extinction of species with remarks like ‘What does it matter?’ or ‘Who cares?’. The construction of masculine cool requires distance from and superiority to the objects of critique, which in many of the comments is performed by employing irony (Nikunen, 2015: 14). Irony and its playfulness emphasize the shared sensibility of the ‘like-minded us’ rather than the desire to engage with those who do not get the joke or others who hold differing values (Nikunen, 2015: 23). In addition – and problematically for the adoption of ecological values – the ironic sensibility clashes with what researchers (e.g. Seymour, 2018) have analysed as the affective texture widely associated with environmentalism, which emphasizes solemn and earnest tones.

Irony and other dismissive practices described appear to be intertwined with and work through an underlying system of dualistic dichotomies, as theorized by feminist thinkers. Such dichotomies include man/woman, human/nature and reason/emotion, which position environmentalists in the emotional, naive and feminized sphere, in contrast with the more highly valued masculinized rationality. In addition, the dichotomies recognized in the data revolve around the divide between urban areas and the countryside, evoking the ethos of hard work and laboriousness: maturity-as-separation, masculinist breadwinner jobs and affect related to work ethic and emotional stoicism (Gaard, 2017; Hultman and Pulé, 2018; Plumwood, 1993.) In the light of the affective practices analysed in this section, our data seem to exhibit ‘a structure of feeling present atmospherically’ (Anderson, 2016) that depoliticizes and renders the demonstrators’ claims unthinkable. This discredits the demonstrators as having failed to adjust to reality, leaving an affective impression of ‘ill-informed, irrational, and threatening Millennial ‘Others’” (Morris, 2021: 139) – a delegitimizing act that has been directed at the environmentalist movement more widely (Maesele and Raeijmaekers, 2017: 8; Morris, 2021). As we go on to argue, there are many tangible consequences of these affective-discursive practices.

### *The emotionally invested (disgusted, hateful) sensibility*

After comments in which affect and its toxic forms are disguised as irony, explicit anger, hatred and disgust towards the protesters figure prominently across our data.<sup>4</sup> Thus, as the second sensibility, we consider the category of ‘emotionally invested’ hostile comments, where a clear affective-moral stance is taken and expressed. With this category, we refer to explicit statements of feeling angry or disgusted by the protesters or the use of related emojis, GIFs or reaction buttons, and to comments that are writ large with these hostile affective states, for instance through their use of certain affectively loaded slurs or forms of ridicule. In resting on derogatory ad hominem insults and ridicule, this category shares some of the elements discussed in the previous section, but relies heavily on the performative functions of explicitly stated emotions through which the protesters are rendered disgusting and hateful (Ahmed, 2014).

Especially visible in our data are the politics of disgust, with the protesters repeatedly termed ‘vermin’, ‘trash/dregs of society’, ‘shit that should be washed from the streets’ or ‘messy-haired stinkers’, and mocked with coarse humour, profanity or exclamations like ‘yuck!’. In terms of visual elements, the vomiting emoticon is used with particular frequency, while the reaction buttons are dominated by anger and ridicule. In addition, commenters bond over their shared hatred in short or longer correspondences: ‘Oh, how much I hate them!’ and ‘So do I!’. As to disgust-related ridicule, several comments wish for the protesters’ disgrace through recurring fantasies of their loss of self-control through involuntary defecation or urination. For instance, in the 11 October protest at the headquarters of the three leading firms, a remarkable wealth of comments responded to the news of the protesters gluing themselves to the elevators with glee over such fantasies. These fantasies often have a punitive aspect, relying on the intervention of the police, as the commenters wish the protesters to be left in place to soil themselves. This type of humour is not limited to these protests but can also be found in comments about the other protests, responding, for instance, to the roadblocks on rainy days as *schadenfreude* related to protesters ‘sitting on the street with wet asses’.

As these comments are tied together by hostile emotions and their explicit expression, we may connect them to the model of morally motivated networked harassment, a form of online harassment justified by the commenters’ moral outrage (Marwick, 2021). Alice E. Marwick (2021) connects this outrage to harassed individuals’ violation of, or challenge to, the normative power structures and symbolic borders (pp. 2–3) regarding aspects like gender, sexuality and racial power that several previous studies on hate speech and online harassment have suggested as underlying the perpetrators’ justifications for their actions (e.g. Blackwell et al., 2018; Jhaver et al., 2018). Disgust, an emotion used in the construction and preservation of the ways societies and cultures are ordered and hierarchized (e.g. Miller, 1997; Nussbaum, 2017), features in the forms of harassment Marwick describes. Alongside anger, it is recognized as one component of moral outrage, and – as noted above – is particularly visible in our data. As a ‘brazenly and uncompromisingly judgmental’ emotion (Kahan, 1998: 1624), disgust serves moral functions in several cultures, their legislative systems (Kolnai, 2004; Nussbaum, 2004) and a variety of ‘revolting tactics’ seeking to justify forms of oppression and violence (Kosonen, 2020, 2022: 92–93).

The danger in disgust – especially in disgust-wielding discussions that have a moral or normative component – is that while it is often seen as a biological, instinctual and ‘inherently wise’ gut reaction (e.g. Kass, 1997), the structures and borders that disgust protects as essentially good, wise or pure are culturally constructed and hegemonic. Moreover, as Robert Rawdon Wilson (2002) and Ian Miller (1997) have recognized, repugnance and its expressions often punch down, towards those who have been rendered lower in sociocultural hierarchies. As Marwick (2021) also notes regarding morally motivated harassment, ‘feminists, anti-racist activists, gender non-conforming, and LGBTQ+ people are more likely to be harassed by people who adhere to traditional social norms which privilege Whiteness, heteronormativity, maleness, and so forth’ (p. 2). Similarly, outrage and toxic speech can be viewed in our data as targeting the protesters based on their deviance from the norms not only as activists but also through their association with marginalized groups of people, as on occasions when they are feminized and subjected to homo- and transphobic assumptions and language.<sup>5</sup> While the moral outrage is partly justified by the disruption the protests cause, it is important to note that this outrage is not simply expressed as anger over these disruptions but as hatred and disgust-informed toxic speech over the protesters’ real or alleged qualities. That is, these emotions are directed at the protesters based on what they are assumed to be instead of what they do.

From a critical point of view, we may analyse the comments expressing disgust, anger and hatred as affective practices through which these emotions are actively impressed onto the protesters’ bodies as if they were inherent qualities. In this sense, the discussions have a stigmatizing quality (Brock et al., 2023) that is achieved via speech acts that render the protesters disgusting and hateful through these emotions’ explicit expression (e.g. ‘I hate them!’ ‘Yuck!’), and through the use of signs that have been rendered ‘sticky’ with similar affect (Ahmed, 2014). For instance, frequently used slurs like ‘terrorist’ and ‘welfare bum’ drag along social tension and stigma as a result of histories of contact with other affectively loaded signs, objects and bodies (e.g. Ahmed, 2014; Butler, 2004; Tyler, 2013).<sup>6</sup> Much the same can be said of the coarse humour and their frequent association of common disgust-objects, like excreta, with the protesters. As Ahmed (2014) recognizes, mere association with the disgust-object is enough to make something or someone disgusting: ‘An object becomes disgusting through its contact with other objects that have already, as it were, been designated as disgusting before the encounter has taken place’ (p. 87; see also Kosonen, 2022: 97; Miller, 1997: 5).

As a result, XR Finland’s demonstrators are rendered hateful and disgusting in a way that comes to be sensed as their intrinsic quality, even if it is an effect of a history of these affective practices and their reiteration. That these qualities have already ‘stuck’ to the activists is intimated by the repertoire of derogatory terms used, many of them are familiar from previous discussions around XR Finland and from the history of anti-environmentalism more broadly (e.g. Anderson, 2021; Killingsworth and Palmer, 1995; Stoddart et al., 2022). This ‘sticking’ could even be witnessed within the timeframe of our ethnography, where certain forms of insult and ridicule carried over from commenting on one news item to the next and seemed to lead to more violent forms of speech and even to acts of violence. For instance, the online comments around the 22 May protests were overwhelmed by hundreds of explicit incitements for individuals and railroad engineers

to drive over the protesters with their cars or trains; the former was actualized in several attempts at the protest site (Amnesty Finland, 2023). One commenter, calling for such actions to clear the streets from ‘filth’, was challenged by another commenter: ‘Your comment is sick! It is illegal to incite violence’, and the follow-ups from several commenters revealed the level of dehumanization taking place in the repeated discourses and derogatory terms commonly used of the activists: ‘It would be sick if people were threatened, but those are just some monkeys’; ‘those immature little terrorists don’t seem that healthy either’ and ‘a civilian stopping traffic is sick too’.

Rendering the protesters disgusting and hateful can also be argued to hold certain sociopolitical functions related to abjection, which has been described as a ‘mechanism of governance through aversion’ (Tyler, 2013: 37) and operates through performative disgust and seeks to cast varied entities and bodies out of the symbolic order, especially through their designation as impure, dangerous or filthy (Bataille, 1993; Kosonen, 2020). Beth Berila (2004) recognizes this type of structure in nationalist discussions related to environmental justice issues and argues that ‘certain bodies become the landscape on which the boundaries of the heteronormative nation are inscribed and upheld’ through their designation as ‘toxic’ (p. 128).<sup>7</sup> Although the mechanism cannot in the ongoing discussions around environmental activism be simply tied to that of heterosexuality, this is not far from what Kjell Vowles and Martin Hultman (2021) argue has befallen Greta Thunberg, who is ‘portrayed and constructed as a threat to the imagined Swedish community of the far-right’ (p. 415).

Similarly, in our data, the mechanism of abjection from what the commenters view as proper Finnishness, determining belonging and individuals’ entitlement to political rights, takes varied forms. It might be most evident in conspiracy claims, with XR Finland portrayed as a threat created from abroad (‘DDR-originating green communism seeking to destroy Western values’) and the activists as agents of foreign nations, explicitly Russia (‘Putin’s trolls’). Yet this abjection is also present in the other derogatory terms through which the protesters are rendered filthy and defiling, associated with minorities previously seen as threats to the social body or dehumanized altogether as ‘work-shy mongrels’ or ‘monkeys’ devoid of human value, ‘that are expensive to society’. It denies the protesters the civil and human rights that the commenters see themselves as meriting and justifies their ‘purging’ from the social body as filth. The incitement to violence based on such dehumanization testifies in particular to the sociopolitical severity of affective markers that stick to their objects (Ahmed, 2014) and create groups of people that are viewed as lesser in value, defiling and dangerous.

## The punitive and resentful sensibility

As the third sensibility emerging in our data, we consider punitive aggression (Rhodes-Purdy, 2021). In our data, this includes not only different speech acts expressing rancour and a desire to punish the protesters but also violent incidents at demonstration sites. Punishment functions as a social practice, driven by the need to force offenders back into compliance and to prevent deviation by others (Rai and Fiske, 2011). With this, we move to analysing the territory between verbal violence and physical acts of violence, which we argue are not unrelated: affective meaning-making produces effects with the

circulation, reiteration and appropriation of toxic expressions marking others, against whom violence is justified (Silva, 2017: 7; Saresma et al., 2021).

In our materials, punitive aggression is expressed through desires to see the protesters punished through forms of public shaming, state punishment and alarmingly violent acts of vigilantism. For instance, several commenters expressed wishes to see the activists put in a pillory, as these examples indicate: ‘Cut off their hair and put them in stocks!’ and ‘More glue would have been the right procedure [from the police]. There they [the activists] would have been, eating mere bread and water,<sup>8</sup> like the ones put in stocks in front of the Church in the olden days’. The comments often rely on the violent discipline of the Finnish police, particularly their controversial use of pepper spray (OC gas) against XR Finland protesters in October 2020, which sparked a media scandal and led to the conviction of one police officer for negligent breach of duty (e.g. Horppu, 2023). Equally often, the comments meet the criteria of illegal threats (Finlex, 1995), like repeating verbal or visual threats of assaulting the protesters in various ways (‘Befriend them with a truckload of wolverines and wolves’ and ‘There’s work to do for the assault rifle’). Especially on Twitter, GIFs anticipating acts of violence (a man taking a baseball bat from his car trunk or an enraged emoji with an upraised machete) are common. Similarly, at the Kymi pulp mill, a truck driver, angered by protesters blocking the entrance to the facility, threatened to retrieve a shotgun from his nearby home.

Starting with the role of the police, whom the commenters expect to arrest, and even inflict physical punishment onto, the protesters, the first comments to appear in Twitter threads on the news reporting the roadblock on 5 October were a set of facetious comments and memes, or image macros, repeating the sentence ‘Gas, Inspector Pepponen!’. This memetic invitation to pepper spray XR Finland’s protesters ties together the media-tized use of OC gas by the police and allusions to proper Finnishness through references to iconic symbols from Finnish popular culture. The reference involves a 1983 song by the rock band Popeda, which developed a reputation as an icon of Finnish masculine working-class ‘geezer rock’. It also appeals to the police as a national institution and includes gendered aspects of patriarchal discipline and fantasies of violence towards the feminized protesters. In many comments, the police are expected to act as the commenters’ guardians of interests, a punitive force taking orders from them and the imagined ‘will of the people’: ‘The police will take care of it! They will cleanse the road by shooting them and throwing them in jail!’.

However, in some comments the celebratory sentiment shifts to expressions of indignation and distrust with the police because they appear inept and incompetent in the face of XR Finland’s perceived moral violations. One commenter laments that the ‘Finnish police are being too gentle with these terrorists. Beat their asses and throw them to jail for a few years!’ Another one demands ‘heavier deeds from the police so that this clownery will stop, where are the water cannons and pepper sprays!?!’. Sometimes the police are emasculated by the commenters, as when they are evaluated as ‘lacking balls’ for not having managed to terminate the protest violently enough. The disappointment over the police’s respect for citizens’ constitutional rights leads commentators to speculate on favouritism: Finland’s former interior minister Maria Ohisalo (Green Party) is seen as pulling the strings behind the police, or the protesters, or both: XR Finland is called ‘Ohisalo’s assault squad’ by one commenter, and another wonders: ‘Can’t you get those

bloody life-monkeys under control or have Ohisalo and that Mikkonen [Ohisalo's successor as interior minister, also from the Green Party] signed their insanity defences?'

In addition to blaming the police (or female politicians), many comments seem to direct frustration towards the overgrown 'nanny state' for being too generous with social benefits and too gentle on the protesters. The consistent alignment of commenters advocating for a crackdown on the welfare state, an increased emphasis on individual responsibility across all levels and expansion of the penal system suggests a pervasive influence of what Wacquant (2014) terms punitive neoliberal common sense within the anti-environmentalist imaginary. Many disappointed commenters perceive the state as either negligently allowing or actively abetting the protesters' actions, which is often combined with sentiments of victimization over one's own group being marginalized. One commenter, for instance, bemoans that 'this appears to be an illegal rebellion, but apparently the law is not the same for all groups of people. Nowadays, as a rule, one is apparently guilty just by being born a white heterosexual male'. Such comments come close to what Wendy Brown (2019: 161–188) recognizes as the affective state of *ressentiment* – the rancour of the historically privileged (cf. Nietzsche, 2024 [1887]). In our data, we see signs of this wounded sense of dethroned entitlement expressed through vengeance and punitive aggression. This is an intense affective state also recognized and evoked by right-wing agitators who constantly look to cast themselves as embodiments of 'the people's righteous fury' and find various scapegoats, such as immigrants, feminists and, increasingly, environmentalists (Vowles and Hultman, 2021).

As Matthew Rhodes-Purdy (2021) argues, the perceived 'failure of the state to punish the guilty breeds an intense and deep-seated desire to harm those seen as violating norms and values, regardless of the cost' (p. 1), and this rancour also encourages some people to go outside the system to enforce what they believe to be justice. We witnessed instances in which protesters faced direct physical violence, such as being pushed or punched by an aggressive passerby. Furthermore, there were multiple threats of running over the protesters with a car, which repeatedly were actualized, especially in the UPM Kymi demonstration, at which even Löf was deliberately rammed by a car. Young male bystanders threw rocks, beer cans and eggs at the protesters. Most of these assaults occurred without police intervention, who either were not present to protect the legal rights of the demonstrators or reacted very slowly.

The desire to punish demonstrators manifests in other ways as well. Commenters, both offline and online, frequently threaten to abandon their ecological practices or engage in polluting activities as revenge. For instance, they mention actions like burning a car tyre in their backyard every time protesters block a street. Cars and trucks occupy a special role in the punitive imaginary of the commenters and spectators. In various locations, many motorists engaged in 'burning rubber': gunning the car engine and spinning the tyres near demonstrators. This behaviour was observed repeatedly, such as during the demonstration at UPM's Kymi pulp and paper mills. In one instance, a pickup truck reversed next to the protest area and throttled the engine, producing a thick plume of black smoke that covered the protesters' belongings. Cara Daggett (2018) argues that such hyper-masculine displays of fossil fuel power, manifested through the smell, smoke and noise of burning rubber, serve as a form of authoritarian punishment of environmentalists. These displays not only have violent effects on the



climate but also carry frightening and intimidating aspects. Somewhat related was another disturbing incident in which a spectator brought a chainsaw to the demonstration site and amplified its sound through a loudspeaker system. This spectacularized concert of masculine, extractivist power lasted for almost an hour without intervention by the police or the dozens of spectators that had come to witness the demonstration.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have studied anti-environmentalist speech and actions directed towards XR Finland's activists, both on social media and at demonstration sites, through the concept of toxic speech (Tirrell, 2017). We argue that toxic speech against environmental activists works through various sensibilities, which we have mapped by detecting and analysing three different sensibilities or tones of speech: (1) the ironic and dismissive, (2) the emotionally invested and (3) the punitive and resentful. These findings contribute to the existing literature by highlighting the role of emotions and affective practices in the discursive processes of, for example, the delegitimization and stigmatization of activists. They can also assist future research in grasping the role of affect and emotions in the rapidly accelerating criminalization of dissent both globally and within Europe.

Our analysis reveals that anti-environmentalist affective practices intersect with and are compounded by gendered, heteronormative, ableist, ageist and class-based systems of power. This is clearly evidenced by numerous derogatory comments and ad hominem attacks, both offline and online, that both feminize and infantilize the protesters and associate them with other marginalized groups such as the unemployed, LGBTQ+ minorities and people with disabilities. These affective-discursive practices, through which anti-environmentalist toxic speech operates, work to delegitimize, stigmatize, abject and punish activists while reinforcing gendered boundaries and the white supremacist patriarchal structures that underlie and perpetuate ecological destruction.

Our overall findings support and bring further nuance to Cara Daggett's argument about the need to consider the entanglements of ecological and gender trouble. Daggett (2018) emphasizes 'the relationship – both technically and affectively, ideationally and materially – between fossil fuels and white patriarchal orders' (p. 29) and alerts us about moments in which 'challenges to fossil-fuelled systems [. . .] become interpreted as challenges to white patriarchal rule'. The examples in our data suggest a similar convergence extending to other masculinist extractive industries such as forestry. Extractive practices appear to be affectively entangled with gender and other cultural identities, and the hostile reactions to protesters can partly be seen as stemming from the sense of threat that their criticism of extractivism poses to these identities.

In addition, we recognize that anti-environmentalist toxic speech operates alongside authoritarian solutions to eco-crises and violent acts committed against peaceful protesters. Like Vowles and Hultman (2021), we observed the influence of prominent radical right politicians, such as The Finns Party's vice chair and MP Sebastian Tynkkynen, who, in his popular video streams of the demonstrations, seeks to agitate his followers into denigrating the protesters. As Tuija Saresma et al. (2022) recognize in their study of online hate in the Finnish context, hateful speech is often provoked by highly connected ideological agents, who incite a mob to pile on, further amplified by ordinary social



media users (see also Marwick, 2021). Related to this, our findings suggest that anti-environmentalist toxic speech sometimes originates from above but is similarly propagated by actors whose actions are more driven by affect and emotions and unconscious ideological components.

These hostile affective practices are particularly troublesome as generative processes; because they are repeated and reinforced by others, they ultimately become normalized, cascading into everyday social interactions (see also Tyler, 2013) and becoming embedded in social formations (Wetherell, 2012: 103). This is where the concept of toxic speech can be useful: it underscores the performative power and consequences of affective discourse. Individual insults may not cause immediate harm, but as part of a larger phenomenon they can ultimately accumulate and contribute to serious harms that extend from damage to individuals to damage to the social body. Thus toxic speech is particularly problematic as – ranging from seemingly innocent and harmless ironic expressions to emotionally invested forms of dehumanization and abjection and ultimately explicitly violent, punitive speech – it can erode democratic practices and incite real-world violence (e.g. Saresma et al., 2021). As we witnessed, toxic speech can pave the way for physical assaults against protesters, ranging from punches to deliberate vehicle-ramming attacks.

The affective practices pertaining to toxic speech analysed in this article thus have significant consequences, both from an individual and a collective perspective; as Lynne Tirrell (2017) argues, toxic speech ‘sows seeds of distrust, undermines the basal security of all members of the groups targeted, and eases the process of imposing sanctions against them’ (p. 142). It is crucial to acknowledge how performative affective practices influence both those who experience them and those who propagate them; for instance, disgust-based stigmatization diminishes compassion and solidarity as individuals actively seek to distance themselves from those who are stigmatized (Hancock, 2004: 142). Therefore, the critical concern with toxic speech and stigmatization revolves around how, in Stuart Hall’s (1997: 2) words, ‘systems of classification become the objects of the disposition of power’. The broad implication of our research is that toxic speech contributes to the normalization of violence and obstructs civil and political rights. Taking toxic speech against environmental activists seriously is important as both glaciers and democracies seem to crumble in a similar manner – first gradually, then suddenly.

### **Data Availability Statement**

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no data sets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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## Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

## Notes

1. There are typically various counter-demonstrators from different far-right groups present at XR Finland demonstrations, with many of them also engaged in video streaming activities (Pietiläinen, 2024).
2. In this article, we presume individuals' genders based on their social behaviour in order to analyse gendered power relations. At the same time, we remain aware of the potential risks of reproducing gendered assumptions and dichotomies.
3. While the online data also testify to irony's gendered use in these dismissive practices, they do not allow for a confident assessment of the commentators' ages.
4. The hostility expressed towards environmental activists can be connected to the other-condemning (climate) emotions recognized by Haidt (2003) and Landmann (2020). Climate anger and disgust in particular have been recognized as widespread in several international surveys and studies (e.g. Neckel and Hasenfratz, 2021; Smith and Leiserowitz, 2014), and in a Finnish survey, with 44% of respondents reporting feeling climate frustration, 31% climate anger, 28% climate irritation and 16% climate rage (Hyry, 2019).
5. Löf witnessed several occasions where the protesters' assumed homosexuality was used by groups of young passersby with the intention of insulting them.
6. The consequences of associating environmental activists with terrorism (Wagner, 2008) and extremism can be seen in the securitization and criminalization of environmental movements in various contexts (Metsänheimo and Löf, 2023).
7. Berila refers to the way nationalism operates in discussions that designate certain bodies as threats to the purity of the nation in relation to heterosexuality, that Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner (1998) have argued to be 'the mechanism by which a core national culture can be imagined as [. . .] a space of pure citizenship' (pp. 355–356). As Berila (2004) thus argues, 'the "purity" of the hegemonic nation is seemingly preserved by "purging" the "toxic" body' (p. 131).
8. Referring to the bread-and-water punishment used with minor criminals in the 18th and 19th centuries.

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## Biographical notes

Heidi Kosonen works as a post-doctoral researcher in Contemporary Culture Studies at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. She has studied hate speech, toxic speech, and counterspeech on several research projects and has especially specialized in the performative use of disgust through the Disgust Network, which she co-founded. Her research connects affect studies approaches to social justice and taboo-related questions in contemporary culture. She is an editor-in-chief of Finnish gender studies journal *Sukupuolentutkimus-Genusforskning* and a vice chair of *The Society for Cultural Studies in Finland*.

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