

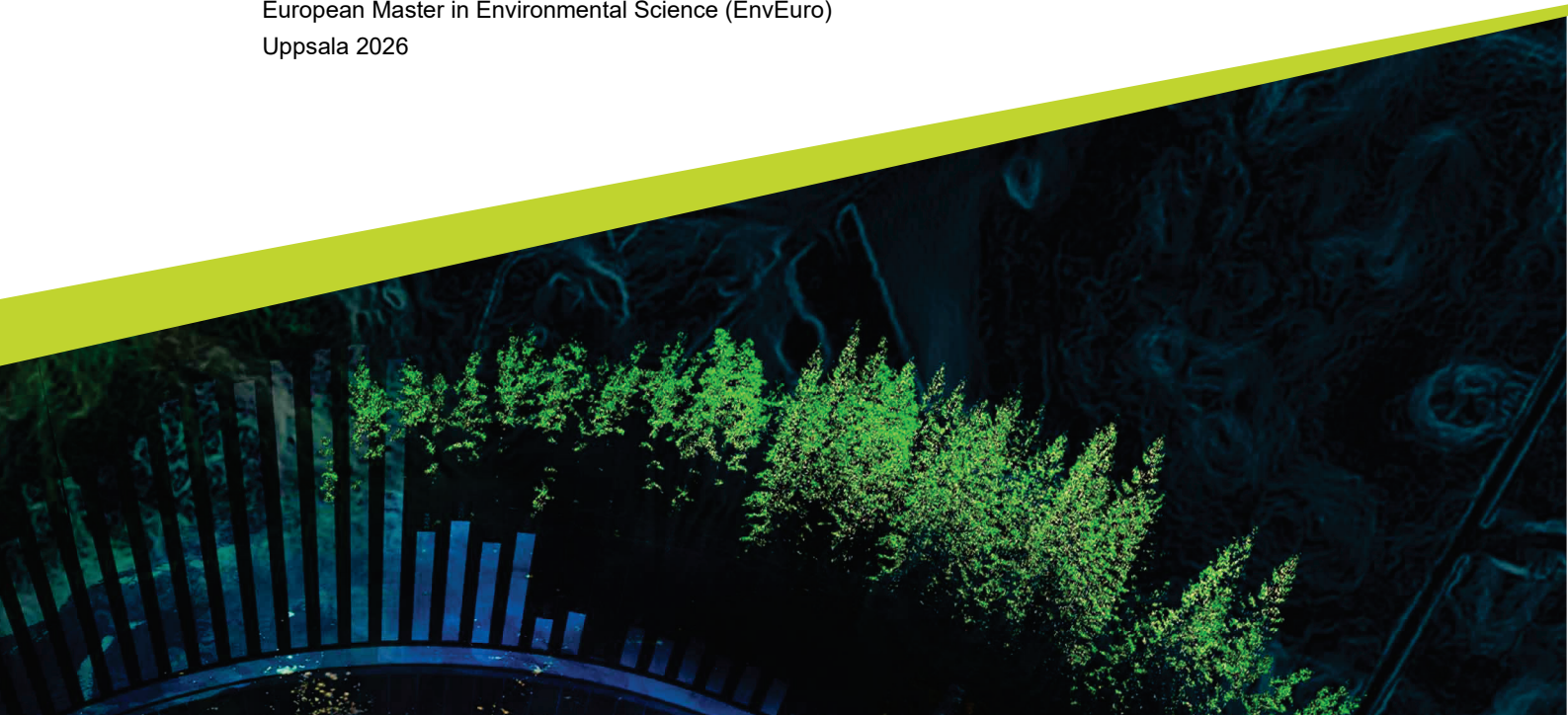


Solarpunk

A discourse analysis of Solarpunk futures on the
Reddit thread r/Solarpunk

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the discourse between users of the r/Solarpunk subreddit concerning the sociotechnical imaginary of Solarpunk. Solarpunk is a grassroots, community and artistic movement that aims to reimagine an optimistic future in balance with nature with the aid of technology and innovation. Understanding the discourse of Solarpunk may help gain insights on real-world sociotechnical transitions and the construction of a sustainable future. Furthermore, it exemplifies, how a desirable, sustainable future can be discussed and envisioned collaboratively. A significant part of the Solarpunk discourse takes place on the free online platform Reddit. Therefore, a qualitative discourse analysis guided by the theory of sociotechnical imaginaries was applied to analyse the negotiation process of r/Solarpunk users regarding optimistic future scenarios, the representation of the ecological crises and the self-identification with Solarpunk values. Reddit posts and comments of the thread r/Solarpunk were analysed in a three-step, iterative coding process. Four themes emerged: optimism through technology and innovation, optimism through community and collective agency, representation of the ecological crises and the negotiation of Solarpunk values. Findings show that users rely on technology to maintain their optimism, however tensions exist between users regarding the harmfulness of technologies. Collective agency is another main source of optimism for Solarpunk users. The ecological crises, like climate change or biodiversity loss, are not explicitly named in the analysed empirical material, potentially to avoid doomism. Lastly, users identify with grassroots, innovative and anti-hegemonic values and emphasise their vision of a Solarpunk society. The thesis demonstrates the importance of optimistic visions of the future, the positive connotations towards technology and innovation and the crucial role of community for a sustainable transition.

Keywords: Solarpunk, sociotechnical imaginaries, discourse analysis, optimistic future scenarios

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1. Introduction

Human history has been defined by profound structural transformations. Two pivotal turning points stand out: the Neolithic Revolution, which established agricultural practices approximately 10 000 years ago, and the Industrial Revolution, which drastically increased energy availability through fossil fuels (Kander et al. 2014; Allen 2024). While definitions vary across social sciences, such transformations are universally characterised as processes of structural change involving complex, multilevel, and dynamic components (Feola 2015).

These historical shifts have culminated in the contemporary era, marked by the simultaneous occurrence of multiple, interlocking crises. In response, scholars and activists increasingly advocate for a new systemic transformation, a kind of fundamental restructuring of society, economy and environment. Among the emerging environmental discourses on transitions, such as degrowth, a-growth or ecomodernism (Lehmann et al. 2022; Lara-De la Fuente 2025), Solarpunk has gained prominence in sustainability discourses and activist circles (Berg et al. 2021; Walther 2024).

Emerging in the late 2000s primarily through digital communication channels, Solarpunk originated as a counter-narrative to the dystopian aesthetics of the literary genre Steampunk¹ (Reina-Rozo 2021; Gerola & Robaey 2024). It has since evolved beyond mere literary genre into sociotechnical imaginaries, which are understood as a collective imaginative process of desirable futures (Jasanoff & Kim 2015; Reina-Rozo 2021; Kees Schuller 2025). Additionally, Solarpunk embodies an aesthetic movement consisting of natural colours and materials in fusion with technology. Solarpunk envisions an ecologically harmonious, socially just, and community-driven future grounded in non-harmful technologies. Crucially, it prioritises hope and agency over the fatalism often prevalent in climate discourse (Johnson 2020; Gillam 2023; Martí Escayol & Ciannella 2025).

This thesis addresses a critical gap in environmental communication research, as previous research has concentrated on Solarpunk as a literary genre, educational tool or even artistic expression and much less on its impact as a global movement or the interaction processes between members (Crosby 2023; Nørgård & Holflod 2024; Römhild & Weik Von Mossner 2025; Sleeper & Love-Nichols 2025). While a study has explored the connection of Solarpunk and the maker culture, managing to broaden the view on manifestations of Solarpunk in the real world by relying on

¹ Steampunk is a science fiction genre that relies on steam-powered machinery and avoids advanced technology (*Definition Steampunk* 2026)

online resources and grey literature, the negotiation processes of Solarpunk have not been a focal point (Kohtala 2024). Yet, especially these negotiations and discussions about theoretical concepts, ideas but also manifestations in the real world between Solarpunk enthusiasts are crucial to receive a full picture of the movement and to allow a deeper understanding of the values and objectives prevalent. Environmental communication research can provide a strong foundation to further understand Solarpunk and its optimistic discourse.

The developmental trajectory of Solarpunk has largely unfolded in online spaces, yet studies on how these digital environments function as sites for negotiating sociotechnical imaginaries remain limited, as discussed above. Solarpunk represents a particularly compelling case for environmental communication research in digital environments. It is a grassroots, bottom-up movement without formal political affiliations, but it has cultivated a following spanning multiple countries and continents. This decentralised structure makes it an ideal lens for examining how collective visions of sustainable futures emerge organically through digital discourse. Beyond its immediate scope, this research holds broader significance for the field. Even if Solarpunk does not achieve a holistic societal transformation, it possesses the capacity to reshape public perceptions of what is possible by demonstrating that ecologically just and community-driven restructuring remains attainable and desirable. Considering discourse theory and the way in which language shapes reality, tracking the ongoing discourse within this movement is essential for understanding how new narratives of sustainability are constructed and disseminated and how on-the-ground environmental practices could be influenced.

Given this context, the digital platform Reddit, specifically the subreddit r/Solarpunk, represents a particularly interesting space for this research due to its large, established, and active community. Additionally, the platform's unique structure facilitates discussions. Understanding how users in this space articulate optimistic futures is essential for understanding how digital imaginaries may influence real-world sociotechnical transitions and the construction of a sustainable future. Thus, one might question not only how these optimistic future scenarios are negotiated on this digital platform, but also how the ecological crises, including the climate crisis, biodiversity loss and pollution, emerge in the discourse. As the construction and negotiation of meaning never arises out of isolation, the self-identification of users is of particular interest in order to grasp the development and contestation of values of Solarpunk.

Therefore, I employ a qualitative discourse analysis of r/Solarpunk posts and comments to investigate users' perceptions and discursive dynamics regarding

Solarpunk. To guide my research, the following primary research question was developed:

How do Reddit Solarpunk users negotiate optimistic future scenarios?

The following two sub-questions act as a complementary aid to the main research question, while the focus remains on the optimistic future scenarios of Solarpunk to guide all three questions:

- a. How are the ecological crises represented and integrated within Solarpunk discourse?
- b. How do users self-identify with and negotiate Solarpunk values and tenets?

This thesis is structured as follows. Section 1 includes the introduction and traces the evolution of Solarpunk from an internet subculture to a wider movement, while critically examining the spaces where its meaning and values are continuously negotiated. Section 1.2 contextualises Reddit as a digital platform, analysing its specific characteristics for collective sense-making. Additionally, the section introduces the r/Solarpunk community as the primary site of inquiry. Section 2 outlines the theoretical framework, integrating discourse analysis and sociotechnical imaginaries in relation to Solarpunk. Section 3 details the methodological approach, including the qualitative content analysis, alongside the ethical considerations and study limitations. Then, section 4 presents the findings derived from the data analysis. Finally, section 5 discusses these results and draws conclusions while emphasising the relevance of the thesis.

1.1 Solarpunk

This section establishes the foundational context for this thesis by outlining Solarpunk's key characteristics.

Pinpointing the precise origin of Solarpunk is challenging, as it emerged from free online discourse on globally accessible blogs, websites, and forums. Most users do not cite each other, and online entries with text and images can be published anywhere without formal citation. Blogger Jay Springett attempted to compile a comprehensive list of Solarpunk posts starting in 2008, but the list ended in 2018, making Solarpunk's internet footprint even harder to trace (Springett 2018). This section outlines Solarpunk's key developmental steps after 2008. While a full overview is beyond the thesis's scope, the following section traces Solarpunk's development chronologically and thematically.

Solarpunk's origins are multifaceted. It has evolved as a genre in science-fiction literature, while concurrently being adopted by artists working in both traditional and digital media, as well as being represented in various forms of online media content (Springett 2018).

One of the earliest mentions of Solarpunk was in 2008. The blog "Republic of the Bees" published a blog entry, where they call out for a new genre "Solarpunk", having been inspired by the *Beluga Skysail*, a hybrid cargo ship using a big sail to reduce fuel demand (Republic of the Bees 2008; Gillam 2023). The author envisioned living in a Solarpunk world where old and new renewable technologies sustain daily life and argued that establishing Solarpunk values would require a struggle against the established elite (Republic of the Bees 2008).

In literary contexts, Solarpunk is often positioned as a counterpart to the science-fiction genres Steampunk or Dieselpunk² (Reina-Rozo 2021). One of the first mentions of Solarpunk in the field of literature was by the Brazilian science-fiction author Gerson Lodi-Ribeiro in 2012 (Lodi-Ribeiro 2012). He edited and published the anthology "Solarpunk: histórias ecológicas e fantásticas em um mundo sustentável", which translates from Portuguese to English as "Solarpunk: ecological and fantastical stories in a sustainable world"³. The collection includes stories by multiple science-fiction authors describing utopian technologies such as energy generation from lightning in the atmosphere or biofuel production with nanotechnology. However, this book primarily introduced Solarpunk in the Portuguese science-fiction community. While the abovementioned stories gave Solarpunk substance, later critics have argued they portray cyberpunk values under the cover of the Solarpunk name (Williams 2019).

Solarpunk gained a new dimension through a Tumblr post by @missolivialouise that reimagined the renewable-energy society and was published in 2014 (missolivialouise 2014; Gillam 2023). Tumblr is a blogging platform that allows postings with text, as well as multimedia content like photos or videos (New York University n.d.). On social media and blogging platforms alike, users often do not use their given name, but either a unique, made-up name or a combination of letters and numbers (i.e. a username), to conceal their real identities while remaining recognisable (Definition of Username 2026). This post proposed a plausible near-future genre blending renewable energy and ecological urbanism with Art Nouveau, Victorian and Edwardian aesthetics (missolivialouise 2014). The post emphasised art and aesthetic appeal by using keywords highlighting natural colours like greens and earth tones, stained glass and stimulating textures that are

² Dieselpunk is often regarded as the darker version of Steampunk, working with diesel machinery instead of steam (Ramos 2020). The speculative fiction often coincides with wartime settings.

³ Free translation by the author

aesthetically pleasing (missolivialouise 2014). @missolivialouise also included images to transport their message about the Solarpunk aesthetic.

Academics consider this posting and surrounding online discussions the origin of Solarpunk as it shifted from a literature genre toward an aesthetic that later got adapted towards an entire movement or even imaginary (Williams 2019; Reina-Rozo 2021; Gerola & Robaey 2024). As Reina-Rozo (2021) writes, “a process of collaborative construction through the internet begins”.

This process unfolded not only online, but also through community events organised in several big cities around the world (Reina-Rozo 2021). Examples of such events include the “Solar Punk Festival” by Ellery Studios in Berlin in 2018 (Solar Punk Festival n.d.), an event organised for hackers in Bogotá, Colombia, which was called “Solarpunk and solidarity economies / intro”, a short-story writing and art contest about Solarpunk or an online debate in a forum of leading thinkers and writers connected to Solarpunk (SSF World 2016). Artists and authors further contributed to the development of the genre and concept of Solarpunk with bodies of literature or art like illustrations and zines⁴ (Reina-Rozo 2021).

The expansion of Solarpunk continued with the drafting of a manifesto, first outlined by Flynn (2014, cited in Reina-Rozo 2021), a researcher and artist, on a University of Arizona website. The manifesto was subsequently developed by multiple anonymous authors forming the “Solarpunk Community” (Solarpunk Community n.d.). This manifesto has 22 pillars, and the original text can be found in Appendix 1.

The manifesto can be understood as an informational resource about the movement and a call-to-action at once (Solarpunk Community n.d.). It articulates the optimistic and utopian outlook on life and society that is inherent to Solarpunk values, while emphasising the realistic possibility of Solarpunk transforming society toward a better world. The Solarpunk Community envisions an ecologically harmonious lifestyle of humans worldwide, together with non-human entities, where art and community engagement enable a good life for all. They lay emphasis on a just, post-scarcity and post-capitalist society (Gillam 2023).

However, Solarpunk is not solely defined by the manifesto discussed above. While it serves as a guiding principle for many, the genre remains subject to a plurality of constant influences. Scholars describe it as an “ambiguous utopia” because it

⁴ A zine is defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as “a noncommercial often homemade or online publication usually devoted to specialized and often unconventional subject matter” (*Definition of ZINE* 2026).

acknowledges today's problems and conflicts without abandoning a hopeful outlook for the future (Johnson 2020).

Solarpunk recognises the interrelation between domination of nature and resource control as fundamentally incompatible with eco-harmonious living (Johnson 2020). This notion is also recognised in the concept of social ecology theory. Beyond environmental concerns, Solarpunk centres anti-racism, anti-colonialism and anti-hegemonic values as core to its framework (Johnson 2020; Gillam 2023; Martí Escayol & Ciannella 2025). These values distinguish Solarpunk from ecomodernism, which risks continuing green extractivism and colonialist practices to achieve the green transition (Gerola & Robaey 2024). Yet, Solarpunk rejects extractivism and by extension colonialism, instead recognising the empowerment that decentralised infrastructure and innovation offer to working-class communities and peoples of the Global South (Balkan 2024; Gerola & Robaey 2024). It acknowledges the harm that fossil fuel infrastructure and societies have caused to Indigenous communities. Rather than imposing external "development" as colonial powers historically did, Solarpunk's grassroots approach seeks to empower communities to build just, decentralised, post-capitalist societies independently, free from elite influence and funding (Balkan 2024).

As literature conveys, the name Solarpunk was a deliberate choice when the genre and aesthetic were first invented (Johnson 2020; Ursini & Samo 2023). Ursini & Samo (2023) explain that genre names containing "punk" function as compound words. The first element describes the setting or technology (cyber, steam, solar), while the second signals anti-authoritarian characters and themes. In this case, "solar" represents a hopeful outlook toward the future, brightness, cleanliness and light, while also referencing solar energy and technology such as photovoltaics (Johnson 2020). "Punk" stands for the values of the youth movement in the 1970s (Worley 2012) that resisted capitalist exclusion and socio-economic structures imposed after the Second World War. Solarpunk adopts these rebellious anti-hegemonic values, but exchanges 'no-future doomism' for hope and optimism (Gillam 2023). Doomism describes the sentiment that all action is too late regarding the climate crisis, however this notion is rejected by Solarpunk.

While not all punks identify as anarchists, Solarpunk values often align with anarchist principles (Worley 2012; Gillam 2023). The movement's bottom-up, artistic development and its decentralised, communitarian value system are inherently anarchist (Gillam 2023; Gerola & Robaey 2024). Concrete examples of these anarchist values include depictions of non-hierarchical community organisation in works of fiction or the crowd-sourced game development of a Solarpunk computer game, of which the beta version was published in January 2026 (Johnson 2020; Solarpunk Kickstarter 2026).

In light of these developments, Solarpunk has played a role in various research fields. From environmental education with a focus on adult play, towards media literacy educators who concentrate on Solarpunk's counter-hegemonic narratives, there is diverse research going on (Johnson 2020; Innocent 2025). In the field of philosophy and ethics of technology, a paper analysed two Solarpunk-inspired commercials and showcased how companies, and with them the elite, may appropriate the aesthetic and techno-utopian future, going against the inherently anti-capitalist values of Solarpunk (Gerola & Robaey 2024). Another paper has researched the potential role Solarpunk storytelling can play in enabling a just energy transition on the example of a rural community on the Colombian Caribbean coast consisting of locals and Indigenous People (Reina-Rozo et al. 2024). Yet, Solarpunk has also reached the field of interaction design, where it is being identified as an entire contemporary design trend (Fernaes 2025). Lastly, comparative literature studies with a feminist lens have also started research on Solarpunk. A paper by Rivero-Vadillo (2023) explores the differences between female cyborgs in cyberpunk versus Solarpunk stories. Despite this broad academic interest, researching Solarpunk remains a niche topic.

This section demonstrated that Solarpunk developed out of separate players and never formed a unified movement. However, its influence is tangible globally, with its presence reaching from architecture to art exhibitions and technology. Much discourse about and within Solarpunk occurs in online spaces, which is one reason why this thesis focuses on digital communication. Furthermore, significant communication regarding Solarpunk takes place on Reddit, and this thesis exemplarily examines this discourse as a representative case to investigate how optimistic future scenarios are negotiated.

1.2 Reddit

Now that Solarpunk has been explained in its origins and defining characteristics, the following section will first explain Reddit as a platform and its features, and then discuss the significance of the r/Solarpunk subreddit to this research.

Reddit is an online social platform, originally founded in 2005, which has proclaimed itself as “the heart of the internet” (Reddit Inc Homepage 2025; Elridge 2026). The platform enables users to register free, anonymous accounts and participate in online dialogue and knowledge distribution.

Several characteristics define Reddit. The platform has more than 470 million weekly users and over one hundred thousand active communities, referred to as subreddits (Reddit Inc Homepage 2025). According to its website, Reddit aims to empower communities by decentralising control (Reddit Inc n.d.-a). This occurs through several distinct mechanisms.

First, users, called redditors, are responsible for their respective subreddits, enabling them to decide on community guidelines. Subreddits are smaller sub-communities or forums centred around a particular topic and usually named by placing an R followed by a slash “r/” before the main theme. Thus, the Solarpunk subreddit is called r/Solarpunk. The community guidelines can range from discussion tone to topic restrictions within a subreddit, which can be enforced by volunteer subreddit moderators (Elridge 2026; Reddit Inc n.d. -b). At the overarching level exists the so-called “Reddiquette”, a rulebook made by Reddit users themselves (Reddiquette 2025). Additionally, Reddit features a Community Wiki and Guidelines displayed on the sides of a community homepage, representing a unique set of rules written by the subreddit community itself. It is expected that all users joining a community read and follow these documents, ensuring a respectful communication between Redditors. This can notably shape communication patterns. All rules are enforced by the aforementioned moderators and additionally through an automated tool called AutoMod (Automoderator), which can automatically remove posts containing certain keywords or post Reddiquette reminders (Automoderator 2025). Reddit collectively refers to these elements as the “culture” of a subreddit (Reddit Inc n.d.-b).

When a user wants to contribute to a community, they may join a subreddit and create a post. Discussion via comments under a post is called a thread. Usually, all posts are open for comments, yet sometimes they can be closed to any additional comments. Moreover, a community is shaped through upvotes and downvotes (Wiz_Johnny 2024; Reddit Inc n.d.-b). When a user writes a post, they can receive upvotes and downvotes. These votes represent the relevance or agreement other users assign to the topic of the post, ranking the post on the community page by displaying it higher up. The time passed since posting also plays a role in the ranking (Elridge 2026). The same system applies to comments. Comments can also receive upvotes and downvotes. The votes generated by a user’s contribution add or subtract points from their user account’s Karma points. The more so-called Karma points a user collects, the more established they are on Reddit. Some communities have age and karma limits for users wishing to join.

Overall, Reddit is seen as a social platform allowing authentic communication between users worldwide. The site is especially interesting for Solarpunk, as it generates a sense of community despite users living all over the globe.

Reddit was selected as the research platform for several reasons. First, Solarpunk has a predominantly internet-based origin, rendering r/Solarpunk a natural environment for studying discourse. Second, the platform provides access to diverse voices simultaneously. Third, the low entry barrier and anonymity facilitate

authentic, largely unfiltered user expressions. Section 3.3 examines limitations posed by moderation practices and subreddit Wikis.

R/Solarpunk was established in 2014 on Reddit ([r/solarpunk](#) n.d.). This subreddit is the most popular thread on Solarpunk, with between 20 000 and 50 000 weekly visitors and more than 1 000 weekly contributions. While there exist many other subreddits like [r/solarpunkAiArt](#) or [r/Solarpunk_de](#), they are all collected under the organisational umbrella of [r/Solarpunk](#).

The following chapter outlines the theoretical framework guiding this analysis, integrating discourse analysis and sociotechnical imaginaries to provide the conceptual foundation for examining Solarpunk discourse on Reddit.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Discourse analysis

This thesis is based on discourse analysis. A prerequisite for applying discourse analysis lies in acknowledging how language forms knowledge, worldviews and perception, and all of it is thus socially constructed (Gill 2000). Jorgensen and Phillips define discourse as “a particular way of talking about and understanding the world (or an aspect of the world)” (Jorgensen & Phillips 2002:11). Discourse analysis therefore assumes a social constructivist approach, which is premised on the concept that our understanding of the world should not be perceived as an objective truth, but of knowledge as a product of discourse (Jorgensen & Phillips 2002; Creswell & Creswell 2018). I am thus applying the definition of Jorgensen and Phillips to aid my comprehension of Solarpunk discourse, as by analysing the r/Solarpunk interactions, I am able to grasp discourse patterns and gain an understanding of the knowledge production between Solarpunk users and their perception of the world.

Language can thus not be seen as a neutral component, but is the means by which we actively shape a person’s knowledge (Tonkiss 2018). Furthermore, discourse is understood as a social practice, which characterises itself by people using discourse to actively *do things* (Gill 2000). Therefore, a discourse process can encompass plenty of dynamics, such as the sharing of ideas and information, but also emotional messages of anger or enthusiasm. It is not simply an exchange of meaning. Thus, the text, language and interpretive context of discourse are particularly important for discourse analysts as it helps them see how social meanings are continuously negotiated, formed and reproduced while social identities and facts are simultaneously created (Gill 2000; Tonkiss 2018). Therefore, discourse is not only defined by direct interactions and the exchange of meaning but also by intertextuality. The term describes the relationship between texts and how references between ideas and terms occur and shape discourse (Jorgensen & Phillips 2002). Therefore, a discourse is often influenced and transformed by the usage of terms and vocabulary, which stem from other discourses. In the context of Solarpunk, intertextuality is, for example, necessary when interactions on the transition of the energy sector draw on specialised vocabulary, i.e. from electrical engineering. If this intertextuality is not shared, it can create misunderstandings or even tensions.

Additionally, discourse analysis remarks not only on the vocabulary used and topics discussed in a particular text, but it also opens the analysis up to the intentions and tones of the users. This is particularly significant for a social platform like Reddit,

where users interact nonchalantly, with often shortened sentences, internet-specific vocabulary (e.g. LOL= laughing out loud), and with a different attitude than in offline interactions. Detecting these nuances of discourse remains significant in order to grasp the meaning-making processes between users and their full statements.

As noted above, the emergence of the internet and especially social media has added a new dimension to discourse analysis (Bolander & Locher 2020). On one hand, internet communication enables new possibilities to communicate and include information. On the other hand, important context and physical reactions from in-person interactions get lost and thus also shape the occurring discourse. Additionally, online discourse, especially on social platforms like Reddit, enables anonymous exchanges of written text, which shapes the tone but also the intertextuality and affinity between participants of a discourse. This can lead to imbalances in interactions, as the users do not know their (educational) background and therefore have diverging experiences of intertextuality. Moreover, the cloak of anonymity can encourage users to engage in impolite misdemeanour. However, in the context of r/Solarpunk, the AutoMod (explained in section 1.2) interferes with disrespectful interactions, which consequently also shapes the discourse and has to be considered in the analysis.

This continuous negotiation and formation of meaning make discourse analysis suitable for my research on Solarpunk. As it is simultaneously a theoretical framework and a method, it enables the analysis of reoccurring themes, topics and discourse patterns in the r/Solarpunk thread. It facilitates the analysis of the interactions between users, how they comment on posts and negotiate their understanding of topics. Therefore, through discourse analysis, this research explores how users negotiate optimistic future scenarios, represent the ecological crises, and identify with Solarpunk values.

2.2 Sociotechnical Imaginaries

The following subchapter expands on sociotechnical imaginaries and their relevance for Solarpunk as a concept of environmental discourse about the future.

Imaginaries are an established term in social theory describing the collective beliefs of society's functioning (Jasanoff & Kim 2015). Jasanoff and Kim (2015) define sociotechnical imaginaries as:

“collectively held, institutionally stabilized, and publicly performed visions of desirable futures, animated by shared understandings of forms of social life and social order attainable through, and supportive of, advances in science and technology” (2015:4).

According to this definition, society or subgroups of society construct desirable visions of the future, especially connected to technology but also social life (Jasanoff & Kim 2015). These sociotechnical imaginations about technology emphasise the potential possibilities of technology as a strong pillar of society's functioning and how it *could* improve people's lives (Liu 2026). Such visions are then further negotiated, and they become stabilised by institutions, which can encompass politics but also media (Jasanoff & Kim 2015). Another crucial point of the definition is the focus on "desirable", as these sociotechnical imaginaries have a positive and optimistic outlook on the future, and they prioritise what people desire from the future.

The process and term of embedding is particularly significant for sociotechnical imaginaries. It describes the incremental adoption of views and opinions within a broader societal context (Jasanoff & Kim 2015). It illustrates the process of intertwining a concept with a bigger background, but also how it becomes inextricably linked with it. For Solarpunk, solar panels are seen as a prerequisite for energy autonomy, thus their installation and use are embedded in the concept of a Solarpunk society.

Sociotechnical imaginaries in general correspond with Solarpunk values. Solarpunk can be understood as an optimistic vision of the future, relying on technology but also community to build said future. While Solarpunk is not a solely technologically focused concept, it relies on renewable and non-harmful technologies enough to attribute a significant role to them. However, Solarpunk also places a strong focus on art and social communities. Nevertheless, this thesis employs the concept of sociotechnical imaginaries to guide the analysis of the discourse on Solarpunk from the *r/Solarpunk* subreddit. Especially interesting is the utopian traits that are represented in sociotechnical imaginaries and how this potentially shapes the discourse and self-identity of users on Reddit (Jasanoff & Kim 2015).

Reddit aids in exploring the discourse of *r/Solarpunk* users by expanding the view on how individuals engage with and adapt these sociotechnical imaginaries in their own contexts. The background of the person doing the imagination, i.e. the Reddit user, is interconnected with their imagination process. Smith and Tidwell (2016) argue that ordinary people do not develop visions of a good society from abstract cultural sources alone, but draw inspiration from the existing material world, which in turn shapes what futures are considered possible. This means that imaginaries are taken up by individuals, they are reframed and contextualised according to their lived experiences and available resources. As the *r/Solarpunk* subreddit is globally accessible, these lived experiences can vary tremendously across users, therefore their inspiration sources are highly individual. Additionally, most users' backgrounds and living realities are unknown to the public, which is as well

significant for the research. This shapes the imagination processes and negotiation practices between users. However, discourse analysis also provides the opportunity to research the imagination processes of ‘ordinary people’ via the subreddit.

It is important to recognise the power dynamics associated with imagination itself (Jasanoff & Kim 2015). Who has the power to decide what is imagined, and how are these decisions shaping society? As power imbalances can lead to unequal access to products of imagination like books or art, this can result in a lack of diversity and representation in discursive spaces (Gerola & Robaey 2024). However, Reddit offers minimal requirements for participation in discourse apart from internet access and a device, therefore flattening power hierarchies within processes of imagination significantly. This accessibility corresponds with grassroots and decentralised values of Solarpunk. Discourse analysis can further aid in unpacking power dynamics between users during negotiations.

Imaginaries influence a collective understanding through text, images and metaphors (Jasanoff & Kim 2015). This is exactly what Reddit provides on a small-scale basis. The platform enables discourse via text, images and even artistic expressions such as music. Through this, alternative futures can be framed, visualised and increasingly naturalised (Jasanoff & Kim 2015). However, this thesis focuses on the visualisation and framing of Solarpunk using written discourse.

In conclusion, the integration of discourse analysis and sociotechnical imaginaries provides a robust theoretical foundation for examining how Solarpunk users negotiate optimistic futures on Reddit. Discourse analysis reveals linguistic and social mechanisms through which meaning is constructed, while sociotechnical imaginaries offer a framework for understanding the collective visions of desirable futures that underpin the movement. Together, these frameworks enable a comprehensive examination of the research questions regarding optimistic future scenarios, ecological crises representation and user self-identification with Solarpunk values.

3. Methods

This chapter outlines the methodological approach adopted for this thesis. Given the research questions, which examine the negotiation of optimistic future scenarios, the representation of the ecological crises, encompassing the climate crisis, and the self-identification of Reddit users with Solarpunk values, a qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate (Robson & McCartan 2016). To fulfil the research aim, a discourse analysis of posts and comments from the r/Solarpunk community was selected.

Given the diverse and evolving nature of online identities, this thesis adopts inclusive language conventions throughout. For the purpose of inclusivity and neutrality, contributors to posts on social media platforms such as Reddit are referred to using the singular “they/them” pronouns.

This chapter is structured as follows. First, the data collection process and the subsequent analysis are presented. Subsequently, the technical and personal limitations of the thesis, as well as ethical considerations, are discussed transparently.

3.1 Data collection

The data collection was conducted throughout March 2026, focusing exclusively on the Reddit community r/Solarpunk. Both posts and comments were considered valuable material for analysis. The data collection process followed several guiding principles, which are provided below, to ensure the highest possible objectivity and validity.

Seven specific dates were randomly selected via a computer algorithm within the period of March 1st to March 31st, 2026. Given the focus on the quality of text and the nature of discourse within r/Solarpunk, a shorter, intensive observation window was deemed more appropriate than a prolonged research period. This enabled an in-depth analysis of the content and responses. The selected dates for data extraction were March 2nd, 6th, 17th, 19th, 22nd, 23rd, and 25th.

Crucially, although the posts were identified on these specific dates, the actual compilation of the dataset was deferred until the end of the observation period. All written content from the selected posts was aggregated and entered into an Excel spreadsheet on March 31st, 2026. This approach ensured that the dataset captured the full trajectory of discussions, including comments posted days after the initial extraction date, as discourse often unfolds over time. Consequently, the data reflects

a comprehensive snapshot of the community's activity at the conclusion of the month, rather than a fragmented series of immediate extractions.

Several exclusion criteria were implemented to maintain focus on user-generated discourse. First, posts consisting solely of external links, such as news articles or videos, without accompanying textual commentary were excluded, as the research aims to analyse the discourse about Solarpunk rather than the external material itself. Second, posts requesting specific resources (e.g. book titles) were omitted, as these often elicit brief, factual answers without generating substantive discussion. Third, auto-generated comments from the r/Solarpunk AutoMod reminding users of community guidelines were also excluded.

Regarding comment depth, no fixed ratio between posts and comments could be applied due to the variable engagement levels typical of Reddit. However, to ensure methodological consistency and prevent the dataset from becoming unmanageable, the specific limits were applied. Posts with no comments were included in full. Posts with extensive comment threads were capped at the top 10 comments, ranked by upvote count at the time of aggregation. Replies to comments (sub-comments) were limited to the top 5 sub-comments per parent comment. Upvotes, a Reddit feature allowing users to signal support for content, served as the metric for ranking comments, ensuring that the analysis focused on the most visible and popular contributions.

These collection guidelines resulted in a final dataset comprising 23 individual posts and 322 comments, totalling 345 units of text used for the analysis. The analysis process is described below.

3.2 Data analysis

The data analysis followed a three-stage, iterative coding process, facilitated by the qualitative data analysis software QDA Miner (Creswell & Creswell 2018). The approach was designed to ensure that the categories emerged organically from the data while remaining aligned with the research questions.

The first phase consisted of familiarisation with the material and open coding of the dataset. During this stage, an open coding strategy was employed to identify recurring issues, emerging themes, and apparent problems within the discourse. This round generated a broad spectrum of initial codes, capturing the diversity of user contributions without imposing pre-existing categories. These initial codes were subsequently reviewed and condensed into thematic clusters to reduce complexity and identify core patterns. The four most prevalent themes identified were technology and innovation, community and collective agency, the environmental crises, and Solarpunk values.

The second phase concentrated on structuring the data according to the primary research interests. The focus lay on ecological crises representation, Solarpunk values and tenets, and the construction of optimism and hope. During this iterative coding process, new categories emerged, such as scepticism and the distinction between active and passive optimism.

The third phase examined the discursive dynamics by focusing on the communicative aspect of the online discourse. This stage concentrated on tensions, agreements and disagreements, and tone. The iterative process revealed nuances in tones, ranging from friendly to belittling, aggressive, and sarcastic. These categories contributed to an in-depth understanding of the discourse dynamics occurring between Reddit users, thereby enabling a better grasp of the negotiation processes at play.

By progressing from broad thematic identification to specific discursive features, this iterative approach ensured that the analysis remained grounded in the data while systematically addressing the research questions. The coding scheme was applied consistently across the dataset, allowing for a nuanced understanding of how Solarpunk users negotiate optimistic futures. The coding process resulted in the identification of four prominent themes in the discourse on r/Solarpunk, consisting of optimism through technology and innovation, optimism through community and collective agency, representation of the ecological crises and Solarpunk values. To exemplify the findings in the results chapter, each theme consists of several quotes. All quotes are reproduced with original spelling and emphasis, however if a quote shows only an excerpt of a comment or post, it is marked with “[...]” and significant spelling mistakes are marked with [sic]. Each quoted text is then followed by its identification number in parentheses from the coding process. The complete analysis can be found in section 4.

3.3 Limitations

This section details the limitations encountered during this research process.

Although the relatively short research timeframe was acceptable for fulfilling the purpose of this research, it remains a limitation. A longer timeframe could have provided different research material and potentially revealed shifts in communication dynamics or topics. However, since Reddit is a free platform used during users’ free time, traffic patterns remain inherently unpredictable and were deemed secondary to achieving the research aim within the constraints of this thesis, as the primary focus lies on the in-depth analysis of the content provided by users.

In addition, the seemingly free access of the platform and potential language barriers faced by users have to be addressed. While Reddit is a free platform, it still requires a level of digital literacy for users to be able to engage. Furthermore, the primary language in the subreddit r/Solarpunk is English. While other country-specific subreddits exist, which usually favour the local language in their interactions, they are significantly smaller in user numbers and traffic compared to the main subreddit r/Solarpunk. This could potentially be reinforcing power dynamics despite the movement's interest in decentralising access to humans globally. While I am recognising this limitation, the time and resource constraints of this thesis made me focus on the subreddit r/Solarpunk, as it is also the one with the highest engagement rates by users.

Another crucial consideration is the potential echo chamber effect often observed on social media platforms, of which Reddit is no exception. As enthusiasts engage with content and discuss with one another, their echo chamber intensifies. This represents a limitation for this research, as it affects the generalisability of the findings. However, while this is a dynamic that must be considered, it may also be an intrinsic part of the discourse under study, reflecting the community's internal cohesion.

This interlinks with another limitation, in that the personal history of users remains unknown. It is impossible to determine whether these users have been interacting for several years, know each other offline, or if a specific interaction represents their first encounter. These factors significantly shape the character and dynamics of the discourse.

Lastly, Reddit's Reddiquette and subreddit wikis (explanation in section 1.2) represent another limitation. These norms and rules actively shape interactions within threads. Even though Reddit posts and comments may appear authentic, they are filtered by community guidelines before publication and further moderated by AutoMod (the function of AutoMod is explained in section 1.2). These norms and regulations may affect the authenticity and originality of the discourse as users may self-censor to comply with community expectations, however at the same time, they could be seen as significant to the formation and inherently part of the community.

3.4 Ethical considerations and reflexivity

Finally, this section addresses the ethical considerations connected to this research.

First, I transparently acknowledge my own positionality. I am a woman from Central Europe with a degree in Environmental Science, near completion, focusing on environmental communication, management, and the technical aspects of climate change. This background presents limitations for this study. My education

emphasises technical and climatological details, which may lead me to prioritise certain types of discourse over others. Additionally, as a researcher, I interpret the data through my own cultural and academic lens. To mitigate the risk of this influencing the results, I have documented my decisions throughout the coding process and reflected on them thoroughly.

Secondly, there are several ethical implications connected to conducting research on Reddit. I have considered the ethical guidelines for internet research to inform my research approach (Franzke et al. 2020). There exists an ongoing scientific debate regarding whether it is unethical to research Reddit without obtaining explicit consent from users (Hintz & Betts 2022). On one hand, some argue that consent should always be obtained. On the other hand, others argue that due to the public nature of Reddit threads, users should only post content they are comfortable with being researched. One researcher attempted to resolve the dilemma by asking Reddit users directly in a Reddit thread. While opinions varied, the majority of respondents stated that research is acceptable as long as it does not target subreddits that explicitly prohibit it (Reddit 2020). After considering all points, including potential harm to users, I concluded that explicit consent from users is not required for this research. r/Solarpunk is a public subreddit with no special clauses regarding research or particularly vulnerable groups, and quotes are used with no corresponding usernames in this thesis to help keep the anonymity of users. It was important for me to respect the privacy and anonymity of users by upholding scientific standards regarding this matter (Robson & McCartan 2016).

Another ethical consideration concerns the unknown algorithm of the Reddit platform. As a social network, Reddit uses an algorithm to curate content for users. While some of the mechanisms are public, as explained in section 1.2, it remains unclear how the personalised process of content distribution works for each user. The algorithm therefore, constitutes an invisible entity within the Reddit discourse. However, since my research focuses on a specific subreddit that can be subscribed to (and the content is therefore always visible to subscribers), the algorithm's influence on content visibility is of lesser importance for this specific dataset.

Lastly, I do not possess demographic data of users posting in r/Solarpunk. This means I cannot determine the worldview behind individual posts or comments, whether the sample reproduces perspectives of the Global North, or how BIPOC⁵ voices are represented (Kopf 2026). While I cannot confirm whether my sample represents diverse perspectives, this is not the primary focus of my research. Rather, the Solarpunk community itself is the focal point. However, maintaining a general

⁵ BIPOC stands for Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour

awareness of these limitations while conducting the analysis helps mitigate potential research gaps and wrong conclusions.

4. Results

The discourse analysis of posts and comments within the r/Solarpunk community revealed a diverse spectrum of topics, ranging from hypothetical educational systems to specific technological applications such as water treatment facilities. This breadth aligns with Solarpunk's nature as an all-encompassing imaginary aimed at reimagining society from the ground up. Crucial for the analysis was the focus on the optimistic nature of Solarpunk and how these values are negotiated. I was guided in the analysis by the definition of optimism as the expectancy and confidence that an outcome will be positive, even in the face of adversity (Carver et al. 2010).

Through an iterative coding process, four overarching themes emerged regarding how users negotiate optimistic future scenarios, which are presented below. First, the data highlights a strong reliance on optimism derived from technology and innovation. Second, the role of community and collective agency appears as a central pillar supporting this outlook. Third, the analysis examines how the ecological crises are represented and integrated within the Solarpunk discourse. Then, the final section explores how users identify with and negotiate the specific values and tenets of Solarpunk. The following sections detail these themes, supported by illustrative excerpts from the dataset.

4.1 Optimism through technology and innovation

This theme encompasses the widest range of subtopics. The data indicate a prevailing positive disposition toward technology and innovation within the discourse. While users engage in nuanced debates regarding the specific design of solutions for high-energy production processes, a consensus exists that viable alternatives will emerge to overcome current barriers between contemporary society and a Solarpunk future, even if they remain currently speculative ideas.

As shown by a user addressing a thread originally questioning the viability of pharmaceutical production in a Solarpunk society, specifically critiquing the reliance on energy-intensive manufacturing methods, they state: “the reality is a LOT of pharmaceuticals [...] rely on extremely power-hungry manufacturing methods” (R139). In response, a commenter counters the pessimism:

“[...] Solarpunk generally embraces technology, I don't see the problem here tbh? We're not opposed to all energy generation or even high usage, it's to what end that power will be used and how it's generated where we begin our critique.” (R141)

This excerpt illustrates that the community does not reject technology per se, but rather evaluates it based on its utility and energy source. The verb “embraces” (R141) conveys a proactive stance, while the framing of “Solarpunk” (R141) as the grammatical subject suggests the user perceives the movement as a coherent entity with defined values. The term “critique” in quote R141 signals dissatisfaction with the current energy paradigms, specifically centralised grids and fossil fuel dependency, yet the overall tone remains optimistic regarding the feasibility of meeting the high energy demand of essential goods like medication. Notably, the user employs the pronoun “we” (R141) twice, indicating a strong sense of in-group identification and shared agency. Overall, the user is contesting the original post clearly, showcasing a disagreement in the vision of Solarpunk and the perception of whether something is problematic.

Similarly, a user argues that openness to technology is a defining characteristic in a discussion, attributing specific qualities to historical and current authors and thinkers to determine their alignment with the Solarpunk movement:

“[...] he [the author Murray Bookchin] is not opposed to technology, on the contrary, he openly embraces technology, [...]” (R089)

Here, the phrase “openly embraces technology” (R089) functions as a definitive test for compatibility, mirroring language used in threads about manufacturing. This recurrence across disparate topics suggests the phrase has become a standardised discursive marker within the community. It acts as a code word for legitimacy, allowing users to state that a technology aligns with Solarpunk values, when it is being embraced by a Solarpunk enthusiast and vice versa, attributing a person’s action as being according to Solarpunk values when they embrace technology.

Conversely, the discourse highlights a preference for decentralised, non-corporate innovation. In a thread where a user shares their “Plant Anywhere” smart garden project and requests ideas for integrating smart tech with sustainable growing, they state:

“I shared my Plant Anywhere smart tech garden companion with you guys a couple weeks ago, and I am looking for crazy and novel ideas on how to integrate smart, non-corporate tech with sustainability growing. [...] But give me your ideas on what else I could hook up to my garden planner app! If it’s cheap and DIY I will endeavor to realize it!” (R126)

This interaction emphasises a collaborative dynamic where users ask for feedback on Do-It-Yourself (DIY) projects that merge nature and technology. The explicit specification of “non-corporate tech” (R126) distinguishes these innovations from mass-produced, corporate solutions. The user’s commitment to “endeavor to realize it” (R126) reflects high motivation and a hands-on approach to sustainability.

Furthermore, the reliance on peer feedback demonstrates trust within the community network.

A tension emerges regarding the source of innovation. While technological advancement is welcomed, it is frequently conditioned on its origin. Grassroots, DIY initiatives such as building their own apps, off-grid energy batteries or even septic tanks receive encouragement, whereas corporate-led innovation is met with scepticism. This distinction aligns with broader counter-hegemonic sentiments observed in the data.

Regarding transportation, a user responds to a thread asking for ideas on how Solarpunk transportation systems could be structured. The user responds with a hierarchy of preferred modes, ranging from personal micro-mobility to public transit:

“Electric Bicycles>>>> They're simply fantastic. And eventually I think we'll have sodium-ion batteries (I mean, we already have them they're just low energy density and expensive). [...] But wait there's more! (lmao) Ebikes are multi-modal. [...] For regular commutes, ebikes are simply on a different level. And for longer stuff? Light rail all the way! Everything I've said is all just fanboy opinions though I'm not saying ebikes and light rail should be the ONLY [original emphasis] stuff but I'm speaking from experience that ebikes really ARE Solarpunk. I even used to charge mine for my commutes to work off of a solar panel that would charge a battery during the day which I'd use to charge my ebike back up over night [sic]” (R316)

The respondent constructs a layered vision of mobility, prioritising electric bicycles (ebikes) for daily, short-distance commutes while advocating for light rail systems for longer inter-city travel. The use of the “greater than” symbol (“>>>>”) (R316) visually reinforces the perceived superiority of ebikes over other transport modes. The commenter employs colloquialisms such as “lmao” (R316) (which stands for *laughing my ass off*) and self-deprecatingly labels their views as “fanboy opinions” (R316), which serves to acknowledge the subjective enthusiasm motivating the comment while simultaneously insisting on the practical validity of their experience.

Crucially, the user bridges the gap between the theoretical imaginary and present-day practice by describing a personal, functional system of charging an ebike battery via a solar panel during the day for use in commutes. This anecdote serves as a concrete example of how Solarpunk principles are enacted in the present, suggesting that the transition to sustainable mobility is achievable with currently available technology. The mention of “sodium-ion batteries” (R316) further indicates an awareness of emerging energy storage technologies, framing them not as distant sci-fi concepts but as imminent improvements to existing infrastructure. The overall tone is one of optimism in a pragmatic way, where the ‘problem’ of

transportation is viewed as solvable through a combination of existing tools and incremental innovation.

The discourse also extends to the intersection of biology and technology. This tension of how technology interacts with nature is widely discussed as Solarpunk aims for a harmonious relationship with nature. The following quote specifically addresses the contentious topic of genetically modified organisms (GMOs). It is an excerpt from a thread discussing solutions for pharmaceutical production, where a user introduces GMOs as a viable and widely accepted solution within the community:

“This has actually been addressed extensively. A crowd favorite is GMO plants that produce medication, which is rapidly becoming viable technology [...]” (R146)

Unlike traditional environmental discourses that often view genetic modification with suspicion, this excerpt presents GMOs as a “crowd favorite” (R146). The user frames the technology as a preferred solution for producing medication directly from plants. The phrase “rapidly becoming viable” (R146) positions the technology as a near-future reality rather than a speculative ideal. Furthermore, the claim that the issue has been “addressed extensively” (R146) suggests that the acceptance of GMOs is the result of prior community deliberation, normalising the integration of advanced biotechnology into a Solarpunk future. This speaks of a pragmatic approach, where technology is evaluated based on its utility for human well-being, as in this case, it would be used to “produce medication” (R146) and therefore benefit humans.

The data reveals a dual perspective on technology within the r/Solarpunk community. On the one hand, technology is viewed as an essential tool for maintaining living standards and facilitating the ecological transition. On the other hand, a distinct preference for decentralised, grassroots innovation over corporate solutions is evident. Despite this tension regarding the source of technology, the overall sentiment remains consistently positive toward technological application as a means to achieve Solarpunk goals.

4.2 Optimism through community and collective agency

This theme captures the optimism sustained through community endeavours and the perceived power of collective action. The data reveal that users view agency not as an individual pursuit but as a dynamic that emerges from group solidarity. The discourse is further divided into two sub-themes, including the aspiration for tangible existing Solarpunk communities that serve as proof of concept and the

ongoing negotiation of how these communities should be structurally and ethically organised.

A significant portion of the discourse is dedicated to identifying and validating real-world examples that embody Solarpunk principles. Users frequently seek confirmation from the community to determine if specific initiatives qualify as Solarpunk, thereby grounding the abstract imaginary in concrete reality. In a thread sharing details about an experimental community in southern India, a user poses the following inquiry regarding whether the group fits the movement's criteria:

“I recently came across this experimental community in southern India, where a bunch of people live together with a progressive mindset, and push the idea of being harmonious with nature [...] Is this solarpunk? I think it almost is [...]” (R009)

The request for validation serves a dual purpose as it seeks peer confirmation of the user's assessment and implicitly invites the community to co-define the boundaries of Solarpunk. By asking whether the community “almost is” (R009) Solarpunk, the user engages in a nuanced negotiation of criteria, suggesting that the group possesses the core attributes such as harmony with nature and a “progressive mindset” (R009), but may lack a specific element to be fully categorised. The phrase “almost is” (R009) is particularly revealing because it implies that the gap between current reality and the Solarpunk ideal is narrow and bridgeable, which reinforces a sense of optimism that such communities are not distant utopias but attainable realities. Furthermore, the user's description of the community as having a “progressive mindset” (R009) acts as a proxy for their own values, signalling a desire to align with a group that shares their worldview. The act of sharing this example also functions as an inspirational tool, demonstrating to other users that the transition to a Solarpunk lifestyle is already underway in various parts of the globe.

Beyond the existence of individual communities, the discourse strongly advocates for a model of society based on deep interconnectedness rather than isolation. In a discussion regarding the structural organisation of future societies, a user articulates a vision of integrated collectives by stating that local groups must connect to form a larger whole:

“A solarpunk future would have fewer to no isolated communities. Just as each individual needs to learn how to be part of a community, so too do individual enclaves need to reach out to the greater collective.” (R191)

This statement establishes a clear hierarchy of social organisation, moving from the individual to the enclave and finally to the “greater collective” (R191). The use of the subjunctive mood frames this as a normative ideal, representing a desired future state that contrasts with the current reality of fragmented or isolated groups. The

phrasing “need to learn” (R191) suggests that community integration is not an innate state but a skill or practice that requires active engagement, implying a critique of current social structures that may foster alienation. The metaphor of enclaves needing to “reach out” (R191) visualises the community not as a collection of static groups but as a dynamic network where local groups must actively engage with one another to form a cohesive whole. This perspective reinforces the theme of collective agency by positing that the strength of the Solarpunk future lies in the connectivity between its constituent parts rather than in their independence.

A recurring and critical sub-theme involves ethical deliberations concerning the inherent nature of humanity. In an exchange where one user argued that humanity is fundamentally ‘evil’, another user emphasises the human goodness to oppose the argument:

“Would you say the whole species is evil due to the flaws of a few? Making friends and helping hurt people are far more ubiquitous behaviours than starting wars and creating fascist ideology, even if the news would have you think otherwise.” (R254)

This comment exchanges the term “evil” (R254), which suggests an absolute moral failing and was first used by the previous user with the term “flaws” (R254), which implies correctable imperfections. The user claims that prosocial behaviours like friendship and mutual aid are far more ubiquitous than destructive ones. The reference to “the news” (R254) is significant because it identifies the source of pessimism as a constructed reality shaped by the media. By attributing the negative view to external information, the user highlights the internal optimism of the Solarpunk community by arguing that the ‘real’ humanity is defined by its capacity for care and connection.

Finally, the community is actively engaged in defining the scope, authenticity, and organisational structure of the Solarpunk movement itself. The user distinguishes between a “real” movement and those perceived as superficial or co-opted. In a post, a user invites discussion on Solarpunk’s core pillars to clarify what constitutes authentic:

“[...] Since then I’ve continued refining the philosophy and the movement behind it. The goal is to explore how spirituality, community, technology, and environmental stewardship can come together to create something constructive and forward-looking. I’m curious to hear people’s thoughts on solarpunk movements, eco-spiritual philosophy, and grassroots organizing. What do you think a real solarpunk movement should look like?” (R041)

This excerpt provides an all-encompassing definition of the movement by integrating elements such as spirituality, technology and stewardship. The goal to create something “constructive and forward-looking” (R041) frames the movement

as an active development toward an improved future. The tone of curiosity, evident in the phrase “I’m curious to hear people’s thoughts” (R041) positions the user as an open participant in discourse and trusting of others’ opinions and expertise. The question “What do you think a real solarpunk movement should look like?” (R041) assumes the existence of inauthentic versions, reflecting a community focus on preserving the movement’s identity against potential disruptions and ensuring the movement remains true to its principles.

This theme showed that optimism within the r/Solarpunk community is inextricably linked to the belief in collective agency and the power of community. Users actively seek to validate real-world examples of Solarpunk living, viewing them as proof that the transition is feasible. Simultaneously, they engage in negotiations regarding the structure of these communities, advocating for interconnectedness over isolation and defending an optimistic view of human nature. Furthermore, there is an effort to define the movement’s ethics and authenticity, emphasising grassroots origins. These interactions demonstrate a community that is not merely imagining a future but is actively trying to construct social and ethical frameworks necessary to bring it into being.

4.3 Representation of the ecological crises

This theme expands on the representation and integration of the ecological crises, encompassing the climate crisis, within Solarpunk discourse. While numerous users express a desire to live harmoniously with nature and transform society, explicit references to ecological destruction, biodiversity loss, or climate disasters are notably absent in the reviewed posts. Instead, environmental issues often appear as an undertone or are mentioned in passing. The following analysis examines how users navigate these topics, revealing a tendency to discuss the symptoms or economic drivers of the crises rather than the crises themselves. The first three quotes originate from the comment section of a post titled “The Abolition of Oil and its Derivatives” (R285).

The discourse frames the continuation of fossil fuel use through an economic lens rather than an ecological one. In a comment written during a period of global oil shortages and energy insecurity following the war in Iran in March 2026, a user analyses the cost dynamics of oil:

“It’s all about cost, and right now, even with the war on in the Middle East, oil is still extremely low cost compared to the alternatives. The true cost to the planet and what it costs all governments to keep it flowing and cheap is either not tracked, obfuscated, or denied. But depending on how much damage is done to the global economy because of this reckless policy that may change.” (R303)

This excerpt acknowledges the existence of environmental externalities by referencing the “true cost to the planet” (R303), yet it frames the solution primarily through economic disruption. The user suggests that the “reckless policy” (R303) of keeping oil cheap is only challenged when it threatens the global economy, implying that ecological damage alone is insufficient to drive change. The use of the modal verb ‘may’ in the phrase “this may change” (R303) conveys a tentative, hopeful attitude, suggesting that the user anticipates a shift in policy only if economic conditions deteriorate further. This indicates an awareness of the ecological crises but a reliance on economic pressure as the primary catalyst of change.

Another user contributes to the same discussion by shifting the focus from the substance of oil to the volume of its consumption:

“[...] I think the issue isn't that we use petroleum, it's how much we use in a wasteful way. How many Super tankers arrive in the US Every day and what if we could cut that number by 50% or 90% or 100% and only use the wells in the US for necessary uses.”
(R299)

This comment reframes the problem as one of waste and logistics rather than the inherent unsustainability of petroleum. The user proposes a reduction in imports in favour of domestic production, relying on “US American oil wells” (R299) for necessary uses. This perspective could reflect a nationalistic or localised viewpoint, where the solution is framed as self-sufficiency rather than a transition away from fossil fuels entirely. Or the user proposes the reliance on US American oil as a means for economic stability and price regulation. The lack of elaboration on why domestic oil is acceptable while imports are not suggests a potential disconnect between the user’s understanding of climate change as a global systemic threat and their proposed solution. It remains unclear whether this stance stems from a belief in the safety of local extraction, a reliance on future climate engineering, or a limited recognition of the global nature of carbon emissions.

A third perspective in this thread highlights the material benefits of oil while expressing regret over its combustion:

“Oil is an amazing chemical resource, with a huge variety of really beneficial uses. It's a real shame we choose to simply burn most of it.” (R292)

This user acknowledges the utility of oil as a chemical resource, particularly for materials like plastics, but expresses discontent with its use as a fuel. The phrasing “a real shame” (R292) suggests a regretful tone but lacks a specific explanation of the environmental consequences of burning oil, such as greenhouse gas emissions. This comment responds to a broader discussion in the thread weighing the benefits of lightweight plastic packaging against the issue of plastic pollution: “[...] there

are some uses of plastics that are good [...]” (R291). The support for oil as a resource creates tension with anti-hegemonic and localised values often associated with Solarpunk, given that oil extraction and distribution are typically dominated by large corporations. The user’s focus on the “beneficial uses” (R292) rather than the ecological impact highlights a pragmatic appreciation for the material properties of fossil fuels.

The discourse also engages with the concept of societal collapse as a potential way towards sustainability. Two contrasting comments illustrate the negotiation of optimistic future scenarios in the face of potential disaster:

“It might take a partial collapse for people to wake up and embrace sustainability...”
(R084)

“Maybe, but then you also have to account for how are things like solar panels getting made, minerals for all the tech getting distributed, etc. It can’t be as simple as ‘crumbling buildings and then solar panels’ and still be a grounded iteration

The way things are, a partial collapse knocks out so much more than I think most realize” (R085)

The first user posits that a “partial collapse” (R084) might be a necessary catalyst for the population to “wake up” (R084) and “embrace sustainability” (R084). The word “embracing” (R084) carries a connotation of warm acceptance, suggesting that the user views the post-collapse outcome as a positive transformation, despite the negative connotations of collapse itself. This reflects a hopeful undertone where the crisis is seen as an ultimately productive turning point.

The second user responds with a cautionary counterpoint, acknowledging the complexities of a sustainable transition. They highlight the environmental costs of the technologies required for a green future, such as the destructive extraction of minerals for solar panels and the energy-intensive logistics of distribution. This comment introduces a layer of realism, as the user notes that a collapse would have “so much more” (R085) severe consequences than anticipated, challenging the simplicity of the “partial collapse” (R084) narrative. Together, these quotes demonstrate an ambivalent representation of ecological consequences. While one user sees the crisis as a necessary wake-up call, the other warns of the unintended consequences of both the current lifestyle and the potential transition strategies.

The data reveal that the ecological crises are rarely named explicitly in the r/Solarpunk discourse. Instead, they are represented indirectly through discussion of economic costs, resource waste, and the logistical challenges of sustainability. Users exhibit a range of attitudes, from acknowledging the “true cost” (R303) to the planet to focusing on national self-sufficiency or the material benefits of fossil fuels. Furthermore, the concept of collapse is negotiated with ambivalence, serving both as a hoped-for catalyst for change and a feared disruption with unknown

consequences. This lack of a unified narrative on the crises suggests that the community is still in the process of defining how to articulate and address the environmental emergency while keeping Solarpunk as an optimistic framework.

4.4 Solarpunk values

This theme demonstrates how Solarpunk enthusiasts on r/Solarpunk identify with the movement's values and how the utilisation of these tenets fosters optimism and belief in a Solarpunk future. The data showcases the broad scope of imaginative processes and the negotiation of these values within the community. The following analysis examines how users articulate their identification with the movement, define its boundaries, and conceptualise the human role within this envisioned future.

The discourse frequently centres on the aspirational nature of the movement. In a thread initially discussing five different Solarpunk art styles, the conversation shifted toward collective envisioning. Two users express this sentiment in brief:

“Agreed, I like having something to aspire to.” (R053)

“This guy gets it. What if we get it right.” (R054)

These comments highlight deep optimism regarding the potential success of Solarpunk. The use of the pronoun “we” in the quote R054 indicates a strong sense of self-identification and collective agency. The phrase “What if we get it right.” (R054) conveys not only hope but also a belief that the application of Solarpunk values and collective transformative power could result in a desirable world. The shift from discussing art styles to contemplating the realisation of the future suggests that for these users, the aesthetic is secondary to the underlying possibility of achieving a successful societal transformation.

Another user provides a detailed vision of the spatial and cultural organisation of a Solarpunk future, illustrating the depth of imaginative processes:

“[...] Greater diversity of ecosystems and solar-centric cultures--ideally within a few-days hiking or biking or sailing distance--across much of the inhabitable world, is what most appeals to me; the idea that an exotic place is just down the bay, up the ancient freeway, over the mountains, or under full sail. [...]” (R079)

This excerpt demonstrates extensive world-building that integrates ecological diversity with cultural specificity. The term “solar-centric cultures” (R079) is multifaceted, potentially referring to societies powered by solar energy or those with a spiritual orientation toward the sun. The user envisions mobility achieved through non-fossil fuel means such as walking, biking, or sailing, emphasising a low-impact lifestyle. The phrase “inhabitable world” (R079) implies a recognition

that parts of the globe may have become uninhabitable due to climate catastrophe or that parts of the globe have been exclusively given back to nature. The reference to an “ancient freeway” (R079) implies its obsolescence in a Solarpunk world and suggests a repurposing of this infrastructure. While the phrase “under full sail” (R079) carries a romantic connotation, emphasising the desirability of this future for the user.

The community also negotiates the boundaries of the movement, particularly regarding the definition of specific outcomes. In response to a request for detailed ideas for a writing project, which had previously received sceptical feedback, a user defends the community’s reluctance to set rigid limits:

“Also functions as a central thread for other people because this is a public forum. However you might expect some pushback here because many of us care so deeply about this cause as a blueprint for bettering society that we tend to shy away from setting solid limits on what it will turn out like. The flexibility seems to give us hope that it will be resilient to failure, criticism, or political sabotage” (R019)

This comment acknowledges the forum’s public nature and the community’s role as a resource. The user identifies strongly with the group, using “many of us” (R019) to signal deep involvement and a shared commitment to “bettering society” (R019). The explanation for avoiding “solid limits” (R019) reveals a strategic approach to the movement’s identity. Flexibility is viewed as a source of resilience against “failure, criticism, or political sabotage” (R019). The mention of “political sabotage” (R019) suggests that the user perceives Solarpunk as a potent, realistic imaginary that could threaten opposing worldviews, thereby attracting opposition. Additionally, the tone of the comment reflects a user with experience in navigating the movement’s internal dynamics.

The discourse also engages with philosophical questions regarding human nature and its relevance to Solarpunk values. In a discussion about human evolution, a user argues for a nuanced view of humanity:

“[...] We carry within ourselves both a peaceful and caring side and a violent and exploitative one. Not even joking. Learn to manage that delicate balance, that's one of the [sic] core pillars of humanity. War and brutality are within us as are peace and cooperation.” (R073)

This quote presents a human-centred perspective, positing that both peaceful and violent tendencies are inherent to the human species. The phrase “learn to manage that delicate balance” (R073) carries a spiritual or introspective undertone, suggesting that balancing this duality is a core requirement for a functioning society and a challenge. Although the user does not explicitly link this to the current global conditions, the implication is that a Solarpunk society must account for and manage

these inherent human traits rather than assuming a purely utopian transformation of human nature.

Finally, users actively distinguish Solarpunk from another futurist imaginary called primitivism by emphasising the necessity of advanced technology. A user clarifies their stance on the direction of civilisation:

“[...] Solarpunk is in its essence the "one of the good endings" of civilization, kinda one of its endgoals. I don't have trouble [sic] with people being into anarchism, but primitivism doesn't feel very solarpunk to me. If there is no tech, there is no advanced civilization, and there is no solarpunk. Dying young from a cold, a rotten tooth, or broken bone is not solarpunk at all [...]" (R068)

This statement defines Solarpunk as a desirable “endgoal” (R068) or “good ending” (R068) of civilisation, implying a state of stability and fulfilment that does not require further improvement. The user explicitly rejects primitivism, arguing that the absence of technology equates to a regression to primitive living standards characterised by preventable suffering. The argument asserts that advanced technology is intrinsic to the Solarpunk imaginary, serving as a safeguard against the hardships of pre-industrial life. This perspective reinforces the movement’s commitment to a future that combines ecological sustainability with the benefits of technological advancement.

The data exemplifies how users on r/Solarpunk identify deeply with the movement’s values, viewing them as a blueprint for a desirable future. The reviewed posts and comments demonstrate a high degree of flexibility in defining the movement’s specifics, with users preferring an open-ended vision that allows for resilience against external criticism and internal failure. While there is a strong emphasis on ecological harmony and community, users also insist on the necessity of advanced technology and a realistic understanding of human nature. The negotiation of these values serves to maintain optimism, ensuring that the Solarpunk imaginary remains both aspirational and grounded in a belief that a “good ending” (R068) for civilisation is achievable.

5. Discussion

The thesis set out to investigate how users on the r/Solarpunk subreddit negotiate optimistic future scenarios, specifically examining the representation of ecological crises and the self-identification and negotiation of Solarpunk values. Through a qualitative discourse analysis of 345 r/Solarpunk posts and comments, four main themes emerged: optimism negotiated through technology and innovation, community and collective agency, the representation of the ecological crises, and the examination of Solarpunk values.

The findings reveal a multi-layered negotiation of what an optimistic future entails. While some users expressed enthusiasm for specific technological innovations, such as ebikes or solar panels, viewing Solarpunk as the desirable endpoint of our society, others acknowledged the complexities of the transition process, adopting a more hesitant outlook. Notably, community emerges as a critical factor, serving both as a vehicle for technological innovation and as a core Solarpunk value in itself. A significant finding was the underrepresentation of the ecological crises in the discourse. While users frequently articulated a desire for a sustainable future aligned with Solarpunk visions, specific references to the status of climate change or the biodiversity crisis were largely absent. Regarding self-identification with Solarpunk values, a clear pattern emerged wherein users positioned themselves as integral parts of the movement, often speaking on its behalf during negotiations of values, as evidenced by the discussion on ethical deliberations on human nature (R254). The following chapter answers the research questions, interprets these findings in relation to the theory of sociotechnical imaginaries, while also addressing the thesis's limitations and implications for environmental communication.

The theme of optimism through technology and innovation reveals that r/Solarpunk users utilise technological advancements as a primary tool for sustaining an optimistic outlook on the Solarpunk concept. This aligns with the theory of sociotechnical imaginaries, where users perceive technology as inextricably linked to their worldview and future aspirations (Jasanoff & Kim 2015). As demonstrated in the discourse rejecting primitivism (R068), users view technology as essential to maintaining living standards and managing transition challenges. Furthermore, users focused on the potential of technologies not yet fully realised, like GMO plants that grow medication (R146), which is a key mechanism of sociotechnical imaginaries involving the envisioning of utopian possibilities (Jasanoff & Kim 2015; Liu 2026). Generally, user statements correspond to sociotechnical imaginaries literature, by “embracing technology” (R141, R089) as an enabler of desirable futures (Jasanoff & Kim 2015). However, the feasibility of operating

these ideas within current resource constraints remains an open question, and the sources of those technologies remain unproblematised.

Certain technological imaginaries appear to have been stabilised within the discourse, evidenced by the recurrent phrase “embracing technology” (R141, R089) across various threads (Jasanoff & Kim 2015). Interestingly, critiques of technology were predominantly linked to anti-hegemonic values opposing large corporations and favouring Do-It-Yourself (DIY) initiatives (R126). This resonates with existing literature highlighting the anti-hegemonic properties of Solarpunk (Gillam 2023). However, a contradiction emerges when comparing user discourse with academic literature and the manifesto. Some users advocate for Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs), a technology often managed and distributed by large corporations with seed monopolies (R146). This indicates a divergence in how users negotiate Solarpunk values compared to the principles outlined in research or the manifesto (Gerola & Robaey 2024). The users’ positive connotation towards (DIY) technology emphasises the acceptance of technology as inextricably linked with a positive future, reinforcing the technological optimism imaginary, which is based on the belief that technological progress will inevitably lead to positive societal outcomes. This technological optimism, when “institutionally embedded” or “standardised” within the Solarpunk discourse, can then serve as a sociotechnical imaginary as it demonstrates a shared vision of the future that guides action and speculation among the members of the community (Jasanoff & Kim 2015).

Another critical factor in the negotiation of technology is the ambivalence between users’ aims and the consequences of their desires. Some users expressed a wish to live in harmony with nature, aligning with the vision in the manifesto (R009) (see Appendix 1), while others simultaneously favoured technological innovations that facilitate an ecological transition towards a Solarpunk society (R316, R068). Many such transitions towards a low-carbon society require interventions in nature, ranging from land use for renewable energy and destructive mineral extraction to the modification of plants to meet human needs (GMOs). These actions imply a domination of nature, which stands in tension with the anti-extractivist and anti-colonial values often attributed to Solarpunk in literature and the manifesto (Balkan 2024; Gerola & Robaey 2024). This tension shows the disconnection of users with the origins of technology and the steps required for manufacturing processes. Through the lens of sociotechnical imaginaries, it highlights the high value placed on technology and the fact that it has become an integral part of modern society.

While environmentally less harmful technologies like solar panels and e-bikes are celebrated (R316), not all users focus solely on renewables. As seen in the petroleum discussion in the previous chapter, some users express a desire for change while remaining rooted in existing structures, such as reliance on domestic

oil wells (R303, R299, R292). This suggests that certain characteristics of the Solarpunk imaginary are not yet fully embedded in all users' worldviews (Jasanoff & Kim 2015). This may be attributed to the dominant narrative of fossil fuel lobbying in their lived reality, particularly for users identifying as US-American, or a lack of full identification with anti-extractivist values and the acknowledgement of fossil fuel harms to infrastructure as proclaimed in the manifesto.

This raises the question of agency within sociotechnical imaginaries (Jasanoff & Kim 2015). Who holds the power to imagine and steer these futures? Solarpunk exemplifies a flatter hierarchy of imagination processes. By utilising Reddit as a primary space for discourse and community, the movement has enabled global participation in shaping the imaginary. This is uncommon among sociotechnical imaginaries, as Solarpunk values are not only theorised but also embedded in the real world through examples of DIY projects in users' gardens and garages (R126, R316). The dynamic was further evidenced by comments of users who had only recently discovered Solarpunk, indicating that the decentralised discourse welcomes new participants, empowering them to share insights and contribute to the collective imagination. This openness is interesting for sociotechnical imaginaries, as imaginaries are often shaped by power structures, governments and capital, and not through everyday people. After all, everyday people are not as restricted by governmental structures and economic interests in their imaginative processes, but are able to 'dream' further and think more out of the box than institutions or established power structures. Additionally, this openness for everyone to participate could not only facilitate discourse and promote discussions between people globally with differing life circumstances, but at the same time, the adaptability and applicability of imaginaries could benefit from including diverse perspectives and differing lived realities. Therefore, sociotechnical imaginaries with a low participation barrier, like Solarpunk, could help restructure existing power dynamics and increase the popularity of a sustainable transition by being 'of the people, for the people'.

Regarding the representation of the ecological crises, it is significant to note the lack of explicit naming of crises and emergencies in the natural world by Solarpunk users. Johnson (2020) described Solarpunk as an "ambiguous utopia" that acknowledges ecological crises while remaining a positive outlook. However, the data suggests an avoidance of explicit crisis language, e.g. by not stating why a partial collapse might be necessary to rebuild a more sustainable society (R084, R085). This overlaps with the Solarpunk manifesto, which speaks of environmental sustainability and living within natural limits without explicitly naming specific crises. This omission may serve to uphold the optimistic outlook. Discussing the prevailing ecological crises could easily foster "doomism", a sentiment explicitly rejected by Solarpunk values. Alternatively, this may stem from the movement's

aim to work *towards* something positive rather than *against* a crisis (Gillam 2023). Thus, it is logical that Solarpunk users adopt an approach focusing on the desirable future, as is characteristic of sociotechnical imaginaries, rather than the immediate crises. Nevertheless, one might have expected a stronger connection to ecology and more frequent interactions with nature in the discourse.

Interestingly, the discourse centred more on human nature than on the ecological crises as a focal point. This focus is understandable given the community's strong foundation in collective values. Defining human nature is crucial for assuming how a Solarpunk society might function (R078). It seems that human characteristics are viewed as something that can be influenced, if not changed. The community aspect of Solarpunk interlinks with the social dimension within sociotechnical imaginaries, as it is shaped by the people engaging with the imaginary, and it can only be manifested in the real world through their actions. This could provide Solarpunk enthusiasts with a sense of agency over their own characters and accomplishments, offering immediate gratification through personal behavioural changes and implementations of Solarpunk values. This mechanism may be influential in maintaining optimism, as ethical deliberations grant users a sense of expertise, while DIY projects provide tangible, immediate sources of fulfilment.

When negotiating Solarpunk values, the question among users of what constitutes a "real" Solarpunk movement arose (R041). This is particularly relevant given the research by Gerola & Robaey (2024) on the "elite capturing" of imaginaries, where Solarpunk aesthetics have been co-opted by advertising companies. The users' fear of losing the authentic characteristics of Solarpunk, although they are constantly renegotiated between users, or their fear of them being manipulated by external sources (R019), appears to be a justified concern, reflecting a protective stance towards the movement's integrity and its grassroots nature. However, this development showcases the nature of sociotechnical imaginaries and of boundaries being constantly contested and negotiated.

The vocabulary used by r/Solarpunk users is also noteworthy. It seems as if some users received satisfaction from employing technical terminology, not only regarding technological processes, but also sociological concepts (e.g. deep ecology, inhumanism, electrostatic condensers, acetaminophen). This usage may serve to legitimise their points of view and instil a sense of superiority and correctness regarding their vision of Solarpunk. Additionally, this may also be influenced by the fact that the data portrays digital discourse and, therefore, is potentially interpreted and read in a different way than discourse from in-person conversations, where body language and tone of voice between discourse participants can be noted and reacted to as well (Bolander & Locher 2020). On the one hand, this digital discourse enables users to look up terms, review and revise

comments before they publish something. On the other hand, they might not receive an immediate response from their discourse partner, resulting in them communicating into a void. However, it remains unclear if the digital environment influences the discourse or alters the negotiation processes.

Following on from the preceding considerations, the limitations of this thesis must also be discussed. The random selection of data sampling dates, combined with highly variable user engagement and unforeseeable topics raised in the subreddit, resulted in a very limited selection of the discourse in r/Solarpunk. As this qualitative research only managed to portray a snapshot of a situation, a longer timeframe with greater resources for data extraction and coding would likely have yielded a more comprehensive overview of the negotiation processes in r/Solarpunk. Additionally, the data was extracted from the main thread, however more specialised threads within the r/Solarpunk subreddit exist (i.e. r/SolarpunkArt), which could have resulted in an incomplete representation of negotiated topics in the discourse. However, exploring these additional threads was out of the scope of this thesis, and I identified the main thread as the prominent point of Solarpunk discourse. Furthermore, the timing of data extraction coincided with a period of global political turmoil. The outbreak of the war in Iran in March 2026 may have influenced the discourse, causing a shift in focus towards oil and energy security, potentially moving environmental topics to the background. This remains a variable that cannot be fully accounted for. Lastly, the AutoMod's function presents a limitation for this and future research as it modifies the displayed discourse without the researcher's knowledge or ability to intervene. I had the instance where I read a post on one of the selected days, but on the day of extraction, the post had been removed by presumably the AutoMod, as the post contained many derogatory terms towards other Solarpunk users. This filtering influences the perception of user interaction, as insulting and aggressive posts are systematically removed, potentially concealing conflict within the community. However, said filtering also represents a feature around how the discourse in the community is actually shaped.

In general, Solarpunk demonstrates significant potential in inspiring individuals to pursue a more sustainable and nature-harmonious society through its optimistic outlook. While it remains uncertain how our world will unfold in the future, Solarpunk could play a role in transitioning our society away from fossil-fuel-dependent infrastructure and mass production. Even if Solarpunk is not realised to its full theoretical capacity, its ability to inspire individuals to do more DIY work, use their time for gardening and nurturing the natural world while questioning the hegemony of capitalism and opening debates on human-nature relations could have a tremendous influence on addressing today's crises.

Furthermore, the findings demonstrate the benefits of flat hierarchies in imagination processes, as these low entry barriers can foster creative ideas and solutions from people with diverse backgrounds. This encouraging, optimistic environment between Solarpunk enthusiasts could lead to interesting innovations to aid the process of a sustainable transition, as history has often proven that innovations can come from unusual backgrounds. However, it is important to point out that technological innovations will not be the singular solution for our crises. Additionally, the findings show the importance of community and collaboration for users in order to uphold an optimistic outlook. This could be an important reminder for environmental stewardship programs and activist movements to not only focus on generating impact on their cause but to foster connection and community between individuals. Furthermore, the results can be seen as a reminder to communicators to not only warn about escalating crises, but also to emphasise optimistic messages about the future. However, it will continue to be a delicate balancing act, not to diminish the consequences of the global crises, but also to allow the imagination of an aspiring future. It will remain interesting to see, how Solarpunk might influence real-world sociotechnical transitions towards a sustainable transformation.

Future research offers numerous avenues for exploration. Studies could investigate the real-world impacts of Solarpunk by enthusiasts and the manifestations of the movement in reality, such as architectural influences, community projects and nature-harmonious tech innovations. Communication research could further examine the impact of optimistic outlooks and framings in activist communication to aid society's transformation towards sustainability. Additionally, more analytical research could delve into the user demographics behind the subreddit r/Solarpunk to explore which users are reached and who is unaccounted for and could potentially be inspired by the movement. The platform Reddit could also aid in a more quantitative content analysis, highlighting actual user engagement rates or exploring words and phrases used by Solarpunk enthusiasts to learn more about their framing. Solarpunk is definitely a field where further research could be carried out, with the potential to inspire global audiences and aid the transition towards a more (nature) harmonious society.

This thesis has demonstrated that discourses on transition and a sustainable future can be conducted in an optimistic way. While a realistic view should not be lost or ignored, an optimistic mindset and perception of possibilities could foster a more enthusiastic engagement with the future, as was shown by a user saying: "I like having something to aspire to" (R053).

6. Conclusion

This thesis has explored the negotiation processes and discourse on optimistic future scenarios in the r/Solarpunk thread on Reddit. Through the qualitative analysis, four main themes were identified, which consist of optimism negotiated through technology and innovation, community and collective agency, the representation of the ecological crises and the exploration of Solarpunk values.

These themes answer the main and sub-research questions on the negotiation processes of users towards optimistic future scenarios, the utilisation of the ecological crises in the discourse and the self-identification of users with Solarpunk values. The data provided evidence that Solarpunk users rely heavily on technological optimism, which corresponds with sociotechnical imaginaries where technological innovation is strongly linked with a desirable future and further developments of society. However, the social aspects of Solarpunk values were also identified as one of the main contributors towards an optimistic outlook towards the future. Negotiations on the inner goodness of human beings, but also the trust in community, were significant findings and were identified as crucial aspects providing agency and optimism to users. Interestingly, explicit discourse on the ecological crises and the background to why a sustainable future should be realised was lacking in the analysed empirical material. It remains unclear why this omission occurred. While one might suspect that naming the crises could result in so-called “doomism” and undermine the aim of an optimistic Solarpunk imaginary, the exact reasons remain hidden, implying some tensions or ambivalence within the movement’s supporters. This ambiguity could be a point of further research. Additionally, the manifestations of Solarpunk in the real world and the lived values of Solarpunk enthusiasts remain another research gap.

To conclude, this thesis has examined the complex negotiation processes of r/Solarpunk users and shown how an imaginary with inherently optimistic values can inspire and guide the path towards a sustainable transition by emphasising the interplay of technological optimism, collective agency and social, innovative values for a desirable future.

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Popular science summary

Is it possible to look forward to a positive, sustainable future with optimism? Yes, according to the findings of my thesis, “Solarpunk – a discourse analysis of Solarpunk futures on the Reddit thread r/Solarpunk”. It addresses, how a desirable, sustainable future can be discussed and envisioned collaboratively in an online space. Participants in the Solarpunk movement demonstrate how they can engage in an optimistic discourse about a socially just, nature-harmonious, community- and technology-based future. On the one hand, they draw on technologies and innovations that can enable a sustainable transformation of our society, such as solar panels, the circular economy or water treatment plants. On the other hand, they also actively support the further development of technologies and encourage DIY (do it yourself) projects amongst themselves. Yet, my findings also show how important community and the collective potential for change are to their optimism regarding a sustainable future. For Solarpunk enthusiasts, not only does great strength lie in joint action and in everyone making their own contribution to transformation, but community spirit and social engagement are also guiding values. I have moreover discovered that, in their discourse on the movement, little mention is actually made of the environmental crises threatening our society and the balance of our planet. This focus on working towards something positive and desirable, rather than panicking and trying to ‘escape’ from a crisis, is likely to be an equally important mechanism in sustaining these optimistic visions of the future. Finally, the Reddit users rely heavily on the value structures of Solarpunk, which are constantly being further developed and negotiated amongst the users. But what exactly is Solarpunk, and why are these research findings significant?

Solarpunk may be a movement that is (as yet) little known and has had little obvious influence, but for its young age – less than 20 years – it has already made its mark on literature, architecture, art and personal lifestyles around the world. There is no doubt that environmental, social and climate activists have been trying to bring about sustainable change for decades. Our society has more energy at its disposal than ever before, yet it consistently exceeds the limits for sustainable human life on our planet. Solarpunk is an idea, an aesthetic and, by now, a movement that seeks not only to dream of a new world and society, but also to bring it to life. Community, art, technology, and harmony with nature are its guiding values. The Solarpunk Reddit thread r/Solarpunk, which serves as a hub for exchange and connection within the movement, attracts up to 50,000 visitors a week. Here, they inspire one another, share their experiences and discuss how the theoretical values of Solarpunk can actually be implemented in the world to bring about a sustainable, just and ecologically harmonious future.

My findings show how these optimistic visions of the future can be inspiring. They also highlight the dynamics involved in what it takes to view social change with optimism rather than resisting it out of fear of the consequences. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate how important community and solidarity are for people who want to bring about change. These insights can help to inspire other movements and campaigns, so that one day a sustainable society may indeed become a reality. Reports of climate movements losing members and burnt-out activists have become increasingly common in recent years. With its optimism and values that promote active engagement and collaborations between activists and changemakers, Solarpunk could offer a potential way out of this spiral of exhausted activists and instead help shape a desirable, pleasant and harmonious future. Furthermore, Solarpunk demonstrates the importance of grassroots democratic values. When many people from diverse backgrounds come together, as is the case with the global Solarpunk exchange, a wider range of perspectives and lived experiences can be taken into account. Conversely, this also means that more people can be inspired by the new ideas and visions. This is further supported by Solarpunk's online presence, which can be seen as a leading example for successful community building in an online network. Ideally, the findings of this thesis will enable environmental communicators and activists to create a holistic picture of the dynamics of optimistic discourse within an environmental movement or vision of the future, in addition to providing a new puzzle piece of information for environmental communication research.

In order to arrive at these findings, I carried out a qualitative discourse analysis of the Reddit thread [r/Solarpunk](#), analysing 345 posts and comments. I chose the Reddit thread [r/Solarpunk](#) as it is one of the most popular forums for discussion about Solarpunk and therefore had a high possibility of showing authentic discourse between participants. In addition, I was guided by the theory of sociotechnical imaginaries, which describes how desirable visions of the future can be collectively formed and maintained. My analysis revealed four themes: optimism through technology and innovation, optimism through community and collective agency, the representation of the ecological crises and identification with Solarpunk values.

The findings show, Solarpunk is a movement for people wanting to remain optimistic about the future. It provides a community for people actively working towards change, and fosters creative ideas and solutions, which include technology, while emphasising the real possibility of one day living in a sustainable, aesthetically pleasing and enjoyable world in harmony with nature.

Appendix 1

A Solarpunk Manifesto

Solarpunk is a movement in speculative fiction, art, fashion, and activism that seeks to answer and embody the question “what does a sustainable civilization look like, and how can we get there?”

The aesthetics of solarpunk merge the practical with the beautiful, the well-designed with the green and lush, the bright and colorful with the earthy and solid. Solarpunk can be utopian, just optimistic, or concerned with the struggles en route to a better world, but never dystopian. As our world roils with calamity, we need solutions, not only warnings.

Solutions to thrive without fossil fuels, to equitably manage real scarcity and share in abundance instead of supporting false scarcity and false abundance, to be kinder to each other and to the planet we share.

Solarpunk is at once a vision of the future, a thoughtful provocation, a way of living and a set of achievable proposals to get there.

1. We are solarpunks because optimism has been taken away from us and we are trying to take it back.
2. We are solarpunks because the only other options are denial or despair.
3. At its core, Solarpunk is a vision of a future that embodies the best of what humanity can achieve: a post-scarcity, post-hierarchy, post-capitalistic world where humanity sees itself as part of nature and clean energy replaces fossil fuels.
4. The “punk” in Solarpunk is about rebellion, counterculture, post-capitalism, decolonialism and enthusiasm. It is about going in a different direction than the mainstream, which is increasingly going in a scary direction.
5. Solarpunk is a movement as much as it is a genre: it is not just about the stories, it is also about how we can get there.
6. Solarpunk embraces a diversity of tactics: there is no single right way to do solarpunk. Instead, diverse communities from around the world adopt the name and the ideas, and build little nests of self-sustaining revolution.
7. Solarpunk provides a valuable new perspective, a paradigm and a vocabulary through which to describe one possible future. Instead of embracing retrofuturism, solarpunk looks completely to the future. Not an alternative future, but a possible future.
8. Our futurism is not nihilistic like cyberpunk and it avoids steampunk’s potentially quasi-reactionary tendencies: it is about ingenuity, generativity, independence, and community.
9. Solarpunk emphasizes environmental sustainability and social justice.

10. Solarpunk is about finding ways to make life more wonderful for us right now, and also for the generations that follow us.
11. Our future must involve repurposing and creating new things from what we already have. Imagine “smart cities” being junked in favor of smart citizenry.
12. Solarpunk recognizes the historical influence politics and science fiction have had on each other.
13. Solarpunk recognizes science fiction as not just entertainment but as a form of activism.
14. Solarpunk wants to counter the scenarios of a dying earth, an insuperable gap between rich and poor, and a society controlled by corporations. Not in hundreds of years, but within reach.
15. Solarpunk is about youth maker culture, local solutions, local energy grids, ways of creating autonomous functioning systems. It is about loving the world.
16. Solarpunk culture includes all cultures, religions, abilities, sexes, genders and sexual identities.
17. Solarpunk is the idea of humanity achieving a social evolution that embraces not just mere tolerance, but a more expansive compassion and acceptance.
18. The visual aesthetics of Solarpunk are open and evolving. As it stands, it is a mash-up of the following:
 - a. 1800s age-of-sail/frontier living (but with more bicycles)
 - b. Creative reuse of existing infrastructure (sometimes post-apocalyptic, sometimes present-weird)
 - c. Appropriate technology
 - d. Art Nouveau
 - e. Hayao Miyazaki
 - f. Jugaad-style innovation from the non-Western world
 - g. High-tech backends with simple, elegant outputs
19. Solarpunk is set in a future built according to principles of New Urbanism or New Pedestrianism and environmental sustainability.
20. Solarpunk envisions a built environment creatively adapted for solar gain, amongst other things, using different technologies. The objective is to promote self sufficiency and living within natural limits.
21. In Solarpunk we’ve pulled back just in time to stop the slow destruction of our planet. We’ve learned to use science wisely, for the betterment of our life conditions as part of our planet. We’re no longer overlords. We’re caretakers. We’re gardeners.
22. Solarpunk:
 - a. is diverse

- b. has room for spirituality and science to coexist
- c. is beautiful
- d. can happen. Now

The Solarpunk Community

The Manifesto was copied from the website, only the formatting was adjusted for better readability <https://re-des.org/a-solarpunk-manifesto/> [2026-05-17]

AI Disclosure

I have used AI tools to help me correct my spelling and grammar in English as it is not my first language. Additionally, I asked AI to provide me with vocabulary I was missing in English and only knew in German or I asked the tool to help me tighten my academic English. I have used either a closed AI system that is based on ChatGPT but transmits no data to the outside, which is provided by my home university BOKU, or I have used the Swiss subscription-based AI tool Lumo, which also ensures highest privacy. All text in this draft was written by me, I did not use AI to generate any content. While I have used AI to help me understand some especially challenging papers, in those instances I have provided the closed AI tool with the paper and deactivated the web search function. Whenever I have used AI as a tool, I have carefully reflected the output and I have never blindly used or worked with AI results, but always evaluated their truthfulness and verified any claims, with the source material, even when uploading the original source to the AI. However, most of the time I have not needed help in understanding papers, so then I had no use for an AI tool.

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