“It Is Always a Constant Battle”: How Do Youth Leaders Navigate the Climate Activism Ecosystem: Macro, Meso, and Micro experiences

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Abstract

With youth activism reshaping the global climate agenda, this paper examines the experiences of youth climate leaders in navigating the complex climate activism ecosystem. Using qualitative research methodology, we find that these youth activists uniformly view the climate crisis as a collective issue, emphasising the need for global solidarity to achieve climate justice. Our research also reveals that age is experienced as a significant structural barrier, frequently leading to the marginalization of youth voices in climate policy processes. From a contextual point of view, our interview findings suggest that there are notable distinctions in how EU and non-EU activists engage with government bodies. EU-based activists generally have greater access to policymakers, which allows them to take on formal leadership roles within established institutional frameworks. Due to substantial challenges in engaging national leaders, non-EU activists primarily direct their efforts toward leading community mobilization and international advocacy projects. We suggest that institutional contexts exacerbate the challenges of climate activism, highlighting the nuanced nature of the youth activist experience.

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1. Introduction

As one of the most pressing issues of contemporary politics, the urgency to address climate change catalysed a powerful wave of environmental activism amongst the youth (Martiskainen et al., 2020; Feldman, 2021). At present, none of the G20 countries are on track to meet the Paris Agreement objectives of limiting temperature increases to 1.5°C (Kirk, 2023). The failure of governments to adequately respond to the climate crisis prompted 15-year-old Greta Thunberg to strike outside the Swedish Parliament in 2018. Whilst the school strikes initially began as individual protests conducted by Greta Thunberg, the movement rapidly evolved into a global phenomenon known as 'Fridays for Future' (FFF) (della Porta & Portos, 2023). With more than 100 branches across the world, the FFF movement involves millions of young people skipping classes every Friday to demand action for climate justice (BBC, 2020).

Motivated by the recent surge in youth-led environmental activism, this paper examines the experiences of youth leaders within the climate activism space. Through a qualitative research approach, our study utilises 13 semi-structured interviews with youth climate activists to understand their motivations, participation methods and envisioned strategies to tackle climate change.

First, our study will begin with a literature review to situate our research objectives within existing research on youth climate activists and identify relevant gaps. Secondly, it will also outline the research methodology employed in this study, including the sampling strategy, interview process and thematic analysis of the qualitative interview data. Finally, this paper will analyse the key themes identified across our conducted interviews to draw detailed insights from the multi-faceted experiences of youth climate leaders from a micro, meso and macro perspective. The micro level will examine individual experiences and personal backgrounds of the interviewed youth activists, while the meso level will examine the influence of community contexts and organizational structures, as experienced by our interviewees. The macro-level perspective will consider the interviewees' experiences of systemic and institutional dynamics rooted in climate activism. Through this analysis, our paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of youth environmental activism and to highlight the varied experiences of young activists around the globe. The importance of this topic lies in its examination of the rapidly growing influence of youth leadership in the global climate movement, which has become a critical force in shaping contemporary environmental politics.

2. Literature Review

The influence of young climate activist Greta Thunberg, who launched the global youth climate activism movement in 2018, has led to a growing body of literature on the subject. This section aims to motivate the research question by discussing the current scholarly understanding on youth climate activism. The three recurring themes relevant to youth climate activism are motivations, impacts and challenges. By exploring the significance and limitations of contemporary academic literature, this review aims to situate the current research objectives within previous work and identify the gaps for researching youth climate activism.

2.1: Motivations

What enables young people to join the climate movement is a key research theme in the field. Most of the research uses Fridays for Future (FFF), which is the climate activism groups initiated by Greta Thunberg as a case study to explore the formation of youth motivations in climate activism (Kowasch et al., 2021; Haugested et al., 2021; Wallis & Loy, 2021; Molder et al., 2021; Moor et al., 2020). Researchers found that emotions and feelings of solidarity and collective aims are motives to attend strikes (Kowasch et al., 2021; Bright & Eames, 2021). As a global initiative that mobilised students to attend school strikes, FFF is valuable in understanding how youth climate activism evolved into such a large scale movement.

However, FFF attracts extensive academic interests, relying on this movement can overlook the diverse motives that inspire young people to engage in climate action. Firstly, FFF is neither the only nor the first youth climate activism group. Before FFF, organizations such as 350.org, Global Power Shift, Friends of the Earth, Gen Zero, and Climate Youth involved many young activists concerned about climate change in various ways (O'Brien et al., 2018). It is important to consider how historical backgrounds contribute to the variation in youth motivations on climate activism.

In addition to time, existing research can be Eurocentric, while climate activism is active in spaces outside of Europe. Some research has explored the motivations of youth climate activism in national contexts, especially in Western countries (Dolan, 2019; Wiig, 2021; Hilder & Collin, 2022). These sub-global literatures add nuance to the knowledge of youth climate movement. Yet, many of them still focus on the samples selected from FFF, potentially creating a context of 'universalism'. Recently, more scholars have expanded the discussion beyond European contexts (Conrad, 2023; Wilf et al., 2024; Monteiro & Capelari, 2023), demanding more attention to the Global South and underrepresented areas.

2.2: Impact

The impact of youth climate activism is evaluated in two key areas: its influence on individual participants' behavior and its effectiveness in driving social outcomes. On the one hand, youth climate activism is largely experienced by participants as empowering, enhancing their sense of agency, community, and personal growth (Budziszewska & Głód, 2021). On the other hand, most researchers believe youth climate activism has created positive change. The youth climate movement elevated climate change as a global priority, gained societal support, influenced policy changes, and emphasised the importance of including youth voices in global climate governance (Han & Ahn, 2020).

Youth climate activists are increasingly seen as capable political actors, using human rights law to advance their cause and beginning to shift international law towards recognizing the connection between people and the environment (Daly 2022). Education is one research area for examining the effects of climate activism on both individuals and society. The young activists concerning climate emergency not only form their environmental citizenships but also contribute to political dialogue, triggering changes for transformative learning (Kowasch et al., 2021). Researchers are calling for more attention to the relations between the effects of youth activism and climate education, proposing a changed relation to young people as political subjects and to facilitate a more interdisciplinary and imaginative climate curriculum (McGimpsey et al., 2023).

2.3: Challenges

Despite youth climate movements being impactful on individual and social outcomes, there are challenges that hinder their full potential. It has been suggested that youth activists are constrained in translating their moral authority and legitimacy into power and offering policy alternatives to the status quo (Han & Ahn, 2021). Studies have shown that these constraints include age and gender stereotypes, a lack of global policy frameworks for youth and climate action, underfunded youth organisations, and weak institutional links between youth and global governance (Rahmaty & Roesch, 2021). There is a literature gap in revealing the barriers for young activists to make changes on climate issues. It is necessary to understand the factors that contribute to these barriers and the strategies that could be developed for youth empowerment and leadership.

In conclusion, it is evident that the significance of youth climate activism has led to extensive academic literature on various dimensions. To advance the field, a wider range of youth climate movements, both chronologically and geographically, should be included in the discussion. In evaluating the effectiveness of youth climate activism, climate education remains a potential area of research that can problematise the relations to youth as political agents, and potentially leaders. Furthermore, looking into the challenges at different levels can possibly provide solutions to youth empowerment and facilitate the evolution of youth climate activism. By

expanding the scope of research to include diverse contexts, scholars can gain a deeper understanding of the role of young people in navigating climate activism ecosystems. This has been one of our main aims in the current project.

3. Research Methodology

This section presents the methodological approach to answering our research question. We chose qualitative methodology because we would like to explore in depth the personal experience of youth climate activists navigating climate ecosystems (Bryman, 2012). This section will introduce basic information on our data, participant recruitment criteria, and the interview guide. We will also discuss our data analysis method and some ethical considerations.

3.1: Qualitative interviews

We conducted 13 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with participants aged 18-25, representing a diverse set of countries, including those from the Global North and South, EU and non-EU states, as well as UN and non-UN member countries. All participants were engaged in environmental activism, albeit in different capacities, with many holdings or having held leadership roles. Notably, some participants expressed doubts about identifying as climate activists, a topic that will be explored further in the analysis section. A more detailed overview of the participants' profiles is provided in the table below.

Participant Pseudonym	Country of origin	Location of activism	Country of residence
A	Togo	Togo	France
B	Austria	Austria	Austria
C	Sweden	Sweden	Sweden and France
E	Canada	Canada	Canada
F	Italy	Italy	Italy and the Netherlands
G	Taiwan	Taiwan	Taiwan
H	The Netherlands	The Netherlands	The Netherlands
I	UK	UK	UK
K	Taiwan	Taiwan	Taiwan
L	Turkey	Turkey	Turkey
M	Taiwan	Taiwan	Taiwan
N	Brazil	Brazil and Sweden	Sweden
O	USA	USA and UK	UK

*Pseudonyms D, J and Y refer to researchers

3.2: Participant Recruitment

Whilst some studies explicitly require protest attendance or organisation as a selection criterion for participation (Budziszewska & Głód, 2021; Haugestad et al., 2021), we had a broader criterion as we wanted to explore how activists from different countries trade off and decide on the approaches (e.g. protests, campaigns, academic research) that work the best in their contexts. Participants were recruited through multiple channels: leveraging personal networks, cold emailing climate organisations, contacting activists via LinkedIn, and disseminating recruitment advertisements in climate activists' WhatsApp groups (See Appendix A).

Contact details were collected through a Google form, and interviews were scheduled accordingly. All interviews took place in June and July 2024, with participants signing ethical consent forms beforehand. Participants were offered the option of online or face-to-face interviews based on their preferences. Due to scheduling challenges, participant preferences, and budget constraints, only two interviews were conducted in person; the remainder were via Zoom (Salmons, 2012). Although the interview locations are varied, most of them were in their places of residence, where they should find comfort. Interview durations ranged from 34 to 68 minutes.

3.3: Interview Design

The interview guide was deliberately designed to cover a climate activist's entire journey and investigate similarities and differences in their views on climate issues. This approach allowed us to understand how micro, meso, and macro environments are experienced and shape opinions and strategies on climate action. The interviews focused on (a) motivations for engaging in climate activism, (b) methods of participation, (c) challenges and opportunities encountered during their activism, and (d) opinions on the current national and global climate situation (Budziszewska & Głód, 2021; Conrad, 2023).

3.4: Data Handling and Analysis

All direct quotes, names, and identifying features were anonymised, with participants assigned pseudonyms in the form of letters. Interviews were transcribed using audio-transcription software and verified verbatim to ensure accuracy. The transcribed material was thoroughly reviewed, coded inductively line-by-line, and analysed using inductive thematic analysis (Bryman, 2012). Thematic analysis is the most suitable method for our research questions as we aimed to study youth activists' subjective experience closely by interpreting the meanings of the interviews (Guest et al., 2012). The three authors collaboratively cross-checked, compared, and

categorised all analytical themes, refining them into final themes focusing on the most prominent ones for analysis.

3.5: Reflexivity and Methodological Considerations

The authors sought to balance reflexivity with methodological rigour by reflecting on how both their perspectives and those of the participants influenced the study (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Two methodological challenges are worth noting.

First, language barriers emerged as most participants were non-native English speakers, potentially affecting data accuracy, i.e. where what they say is different from what people mean (Griffee, 2018). During the interviews, there were a few occasions where interviewees could not find the appropriate English words to express what they wanted to say and had to use online translators for word searching. For Taiwanese participants, we mitigated this issue by conducting interviews in Mandarin, the native language of two authors. However, this introduced translation challenges, which we addressed by striving to convey culturally specific expressions as accurately (i.e., closer to the original meaning) as possible (Hepburn & Bolden, 2017).

Second, resistance from some participants to being labelled as "climate activists" prompted reflection on the power dynamics during interviews and whether this identity had been unconsciously imposed during the recruitment process (Griffee, 2018). This reflection is crucial, as it underscores the importance of staying cognizant of potential power imbalances in research and being receptive to participants' self-definitions. Notably, their open resistance may also suggest that participants felt relatively comfortable resisting imposed identities in our conversation. This might be rooted in our natural advantage of creating more equal power dynamics between interviewers and interviewees. As young people, we have fewer issues with adultism -- a common challenge in youth research (Neas et al., 2022) where adults are viewed as superior, creating power imbalances (Checkoway, 1996). This bias affects how "youth" is defined, methodologies are designed, and findings are interpreted. Although we held the power to label participants as "youth activists," which may have overlooked their intersectional identities, the more balanced power dynamic likely encouraged participants to challenge our definition of "climate activists." Recognising these dynamics is essential for reflexivity and ensuring reliable research data.

4. Thematic Analysis

To understand the experiences of youth leaders in the climate activism ecosystem, we first investigated how they embarked on their activist journeys. Given the global nature of climate movement and the diverse background of our participants, we investigate how participants’

motivations to engage with climate activism interacts with their specific cultural and socio-political contexts, which is often overlooked in similar studies (Haugestad *et al.,* 2021).

Our thematic analysis revealed five overarching themes concerning youth leaders' micro-experiences in the activism ecosystem. This includes the "motivations for climate activism" and "intersectional identity of climate activists," each with two sub-themes. The motivations are multifaceted and vary among participants. However, most share a deep concern for both the natural environment and human life, driven by a love for nature and a commitment to human rights. Their diverse identities, shaped by their socio-political contexts, significantly influence their activism approaches and experiences, as well as their self-identification as climate activists. From a macro-perspective, our third theme, 'stakeholder engagement', outlines the methods of participation and interaction within the political system. Another prominent theme that emerged from our interviews focuses on the systemic barriers that hinder young leaders from effectively addressing climate change. Finally, the theme of 'climate education' emphasises the need to raise climate literacy and promote a just climate transition.

4.1: Motivations for Climate Activism

Consistent with previous research (Neas et al., 2022), participants reported various motivations that initiated and sustained their activism. While motivations have evolved for some, particularly due to increasing responsibilities within the movement, their journeys have consistently been driven by passionate concern for nature and humanity. One participant from the UK emphasised:

> "I think just caring about people in the world and all the other beings that live on the planet made me care about climate change and really motivated me to start campaigning on it. And I think that has remained the same."

Situated in the broader debate between ecocentrism and anthropocentrism (Gagnon Thompson & Barton, 1994), youth leaders recognise that climate change is both an environmental and a human rights issue, harming nature and disproportionately affecting people from specific regions and countries. As a Turkish participant noted:

> "Everyone will be affected, from insects to all humanity, by even a half-degree temperature rise. The climate crisis affects me deeply — I see it in my dreams, with forest fires and crises. Climate change is a human rights issue. People are dying, losing their homelands, and their education rights."

Youth leaders do not seem to be constrained by the ecological dilemmas that requires one to sacrifice either depletion of natural resources or their own higher gains (Kortenkamp & Moore,

2001). Instead of choosing from a binary ontology, either ecocentrism or anthropocentrism, youth leaders recognise the interlink between nature and human wellbeing and treat climate change as an issue with multiple dimensions.

Awareness and knowledge of climate justice vary among participants, influenced by factors such as their connections with international institutions like the European Commission or the United Nations, their geographical origin—particularly whether they are from the "Global South"—and whether they belong to marginalised or disadvantaged social groups. Those with connections to the "Global North," or who have worked closely with international institutions, tended to discuss climate justice more frequently, emphasizing the disproportionate impacts on vulnerable communities and advocating for equitable solutions (Sultana, 2022). In contrast, participants from the "Global South" who work more locally often approached climate change primarily as an environmental or economic problem, rather than a justice issue. This difference in focus might stem from the fact that climate justice is a concept that emerged in the heart of the “Global North” and shaped by northern academic, institutional, and activist discourses (Schlosberg & Collins, 2014). This conceptual difference between “northern” activists and “southern” activists in our sample might reveal the centre-to-periphery knowledge transfer (Leandro Rodriguez Medina, 2024; Odora Hoppers, 2000). Such a dynamic reflects the historical pattern of knowledge transfer from the "Global North" to the "Global South," which may not always take into account the local contexts, priorities, or lived experiences of those most affected by climate change in the Global South (Kashwan, 2021). This mismatch in understanding could present a significant challenge for fostering global consensus and mobilizing collective action on climate justice, as it highlights differing understanding, priorities, and approaches between regions.

These insights illustrate the complex nature of motivations for climate activism among youth leaders, shaped by their diverse cultural and socio-political contexts.

4.2: Intersectional identity of climate activists

Recent literature increasingly employs intersectionality as a theoretical lens to examine climate actions. They highlight the disproportionate impacts of climate change on different social groups (Osborne, 2015) and how sociodemographic factors determine youth participation in environmental politics (Henn et al., 2021). However, few studies explore how climate activists with different intersectional identities engage with climate activism differently. According to our research, these identities — including age, gender, race, and class — can profoundly influence youth leaders’ strategies and experiences within the climate activism ecosystem.

Our findings reveal that participants’ identities significantly influence their micro-experiences in this ecosystem. For example, age seems to be experienced as an obstacle in two main ways. Firstly, their voices are often undervalued due to a perceived lack of expertise and authority.

Even when invited to speak with influential figures like Prime Ministers, they sense they are being used to advance others' agendas. Secondly, many young activists face competing priorities, such as academic studies, limiting their full commitment to activism. One participant reported:

> "Some adult organizations are very helpful; they provide us with expertise and knowledge that we, as young people, may lack since we aren't working full-time in the sector and haven't conducted much research. This support helps bridge gaps in our organization. However, some adults don't take us seriously, even when we share clear and true experiences. Additionally, it's easy to be tokenized as a young campaigner. Many politicians and corporations want to be seen engaging with young people, using us for media opportunities without truly listening to us."

This marginalization and tokenization of youth activists highlight that their demands are often not taken seriously due to a perceived lack of professionalism and expertise.

Socio-economic background also frequently emerged in our data. Participants from more affluent and educated backgrounds noted that their privilege allowed them the "luxury" of time to engage in social movements. Although participants acknowledged gender as a barrier, few provided in-depth elaboration. This suggests that age may be perceived as a more significant identity shaping the challenges faced by youth activists. However, this could also reflect a methodological issue. As discussed earlier, we may have unconsciously emphasised age during interviews, inadvertently signalling to participants that we were more interested in the challenges related to age than those linked to other identities.

Another intriguing finding is the variation in self-identification as climate activists among participants. While some comfortably introduced their work as activism, some displayed strong doubt and resistance to being identified as activists. This might be attributed to our sampling criteria. We did not focus on a specific form of activism, such as protests, which is common for much existing research (Henn et al., 2021). Instead, we actively recruited young people engaged in various climate change-related activities, including academic research, policy proposals, protests, campaigns, and attending climate conferences. This broader approach allowed us to capture a more diverse range of experiences and perspectives.

Influenced by their socio-cultural backgrounds, the nature of their work, and their living contexts, participants' resistance to the activist identity underscores its complexity and suggests that the term may not fully capture the diverse ways individuals contribute to the climate movement. Our non-EU interviewees were more likely to question the label of "activist" due to their engagement in climate movements through varied means such as academic research, climate education, and development work. Additionally, some resist the identity due to the

perceived risks associated with being labelled an activist. For instance, an international student, when asked about their involvement in climate activism, responded:

> "Activism is an elusive term, and it might not exactly cover what I do. I do climate action. Unfortunately, being an expat, it's been very difficult for me to access a lot of actual activisms, which in my opinion would be things like protesting, just because I do run the risk of, you know, getting deported if I get in trouble. I know that most of the protests are peaceful, but it is a really big risk."

This nuanced understanding of activism is rarely explored in previous research, which tends to adopt stricter participant selection criteria (Budziszewska & Głód, 2021; Haugestad et al., 2021). Our broader recruitment approach, however, revealed the limitations of a simplified view of activism, prompting us to question whether activism is limited to protests and marches or if it can include a wider spectrum of impactful climate actions. In line with Bobel (2007), we challenge the conventional image of activists as "extraordinary individuals" (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000), advocating for a more complex and nuanced understanding of activist identity in social movements.

Overall, our participants provided insight into the micro-experiences of young people navigating the climate activism ecosystem. Beyond the motivations that drive them to act, various factors influence the methods they adopt and the ways they self-identify within the ecosystem. We suggest that these nuanced experiences highlight the multifaceted nature of climate activism, and the diverse strategies employed by youth leaders to make change.

4.3: Stakeholder Engagement

The theme of stakeholder engagement focuses on the strategies utilised by youth activists to interact with systemic stakeholders. From a comparative standpoint, activists from EU member states were more likely to employ insider lobbying strategies as a means to engage with government officials. Insider lobbying is a type of political advocacy which involves direct interactions with policymakers through private communication channels (De Bruycker and Beyers, 2018). Interviewee B from Austria describes their activism, stating that:

> "I also did a lot of direct lobbying. So many meetings with politicians in Austria like for example from the city government of Vienna or national government, the federal government ministers and also tried to mobilise business people who have somehow influence in Austria to use this influence to put also pressure on politics..."

Similarly, interviewee C from Sweden describes themself as a "diplomatic activist". This is because the bulk of their activism is centred around lobbying fellow delegates across

international platforms such as the United Nations Climate Change Convention. On the contrary, non-EU interviewees usually expressed distrust with national government institutions.

After announcing their climate ambassadorship in the local press, Participant L from Turkey encountered hostile communication from government officials over their climate activism activities. The Minister of Education escalated the situation by questioning Participant L's teacher and asking, "why is she doing that?". As a result, Participant L felt scrutinised, noting that government officials "also suspected I'm an activist and a protester".

Whilst youth environmental activism carries negative connotations in the global South, participants from the global North stated that politicians actively seek media opportunities with youth activists because "a lot of politicians want to be seen doing more with young people" (interviewee I). This highlights the influence of political and cultural contexts on the experiences of young climate advocates (Cortese, 2015).

Furthermore, Participant L observed that their activism experience would likely have been different if they were a student in Europe where the same ambassadorial achievement would have received praise from ministerial officials. The positive evaluation of EU politics by non-EU individuals suggests that the EU is viewed as an aspirational model of environmental and institutional standards. This dichotomy between EU and non-EU activists corroborates with Adugu's (2023) theory that institutional confidence is one of the main predictors of environmental activism.

Higher levels of institutional trust enhance the likelihood that citizens will utilise formal political mechanisms to enact change (Koivula et al., 2021). In contrast to the EU interviewees, non-EU participants were less likely to hold formal representative roles within government bodies. The most common way for non-EU activists to engage in environmental politics was by participating through their independently established organizations or through external non-governmental organizations (NGOs). This preference may reflect a broader scepticism towards national institutions among non-EU participants.

Consistent with the broader distinctions between EU and non-EU participants, non-EU participants typically perceived international climate decision-making bodies as reinforcing the power asymmetries between countries (Ojo, 2023). Non- EU interviewees were more likely to critique climate conferences such as Conference of the Parties (COP) for "not letting people from less advantaged countries talk" (interviewee N). Interviewee A from the global South also identified the hypocrisy of Western leaders for travelling "with their private jets" to COP, highlighting the paradox between the actions of political leaders and their climate commitments (Roberts et al., 2023).

On the contrary, EU participants increasingly stressed the importance of international climate conferences as a priority action to mitigate climate change on an international scale. In response to a broad follow-up question about the utility of COP conferences, an EU participant immediately acknowledged the debate concerning the climate emissions associated with attending these events. Nonetheless, the same participant contended that the aggregate benefits of international conferences "outweighed the emissions" (interviewee B), therefore reflecting a rational assessment based on the perceived trade-offs.

Interestingly, this perspective contrasts against broader consensus in the academic literature which cautions against the emissions associated with travel to climate conferences (Parikh et al, 2023; Clark, 2022; Barnsley, 2023). Evidently, the differing viewpoints of EU and non-EU participants illustrate a complex interplay between macro-level evaluations of the impact of global institutions, along with micro-level concerns about individual actions of political leaders.

4.4: Structural Challenges

This theme refers to systemic obstacles that hinder young leaders from addressing climate change. Interviewees pointed out it is difficult to overcome the global framework of capitalism, which results in priorities for economic growth rather than environmental sustainability. As capitalism demands profit maximization and capital accumulation, the economy is generated at the expense of exploiting nature and social equality (Hickel, 2020). Interviewee E has extensive experience in fundraising and grassroots climate mobility, realising that:

> "The three biggest problems that we have are capitalism, consumerism, and colonization. Like all of those things go together that have set the foundations for how we are interacting with our world now."

This point of view aligns with how other interviewees think about public participation in climate change. While people show interest in fighting climate change, the economic priorities create significant fear and hesitation that might contribute to climate denialism or delayism (Franta, 2021).

The current economic framework of capitalism is interconnected with unproductive domestic and international institutions. Complaining about Taiwan's government decision to construct solar power plants at the expense of chopping down a forest, interviewee M from Taiwan mentioned that environmental values are undermined by economic benefits. They said, "It is difficult to form social solidarity when pursuing excessive economic growth that can potentially cause conflicts between sustainability goals." Interviewee M added that they are concerned that the global energy transition could merely exacerbate international inequality, with the energy

consumption from the global North transferring to the South. The peripheral role of developing countries in the global economic system not only subjects them to disproportionate risks but also leaves them in a notably weak position to drive their international transformation (Eckersley, 2016). It reflects the contestation between wealthy states in the Global North and more climate-vulnerable states in the Global South, explaining the difficulty of multilateral climate governance. International cooperation remains a loosely set of specific regimes, instead of an integrated and comprehensive institution to share the climate responsibility (Keohane, 2010).

Moreover, the structural challenges embedded within economic, institutional, and social factors construct unequal power relations between different actors in climate change.

For instance, one interviewee shared that the media could distort their climate strikes movement by "saying a bunch of kids are missing school to going to strikes, but the main reason they are doing it is to miss school."

These stereotypical approaches fail to acknowledge that young generations would be affected by climate change the most. 57% of Children feel worried about the health of the environment (General Comment No.26, 2022) and there is a gap in climate justice with only 2% of climate funds supporting child-responsive activities (CERI, 2023). Young leaders in climate change represent a subversion of traditional power hierarchies. By engaging in climate actions, they actively seek to diversify and shape the discussion. Their potential for thought leadership should not be overlooked.

The engagement of young climate leaders with domestic and international governance introduces a new image to overcome the structural challenges of tackling climate change.

Interviewee H has experience working with UN officials on legal affairs. They said, "If we are going to go through this process of combating climate change, it really should be an inclusive manner where people who are not being part of communities are now part of the discussion. They should be part of the conversation and have a say about what happens in their life."

Empowering young climate leaders discovers the experiences of different generations, providing a unique positionality that facilitates the understanding for interconnectedness and intergenerational justice in the climate dialogue. It is important to reimagine a shift from the anthropocentric, state-centric, and capital-centric forms of cooperation (Burke et al., 2016). Amplifying marginal voices diversifies the knowledge and forms of actions to rethink ecological politics and governance at every level.

4.5: Climate Education

This theme refers to the delivery and content of climate-related education during early schooling. Based on the anecdotal evidence provided by the interview participants, formal education systems across all interviewees' countries typically present climate change in a technical and scientific manner (Neas, 2023). This abstract portrayal is disconnected from the realities of climate issues which have tangible social implications across marginalised communities.

Interviewee O, whose climate activism is currently centred on reforming international climate education, identified that:

> "There was a lack of quality climate education. I wasn't the only one that felt like I hadn't received formal education on like the climate. And it was more like surface level things. I'm sure we've been taught how to recycle and, you know, those like turn off the lights."

The narrow focus on personal responsibility within climate education overlooks the systemic social justice dimensions embedded within the climate discourse. Interviewee F's experience of formal schooling also reflects the same sentiment by acknowledging that the current state of climate education has translated in a reduced level of general awareness on climate issues:

> "But it's like, literally two pages in the geography book of middle school. And it's towards the end, you know, so like when teachers really don't have anything else to teach, like, oh, by the way, there's climate change, enjoy. So, there was not a lot of resources for people to be informed as in the resources, but in the school system itself, many times, students will not be actively informed."

Participants observed that climate education is often relegated to a secondary status, serving as filler content within the curriculum. This contrasts sharply with the perceived importance of climate education as a crucial axis of knowledge production among youth activists (Field, 2017). The inadequate provision of climate education appears to be a common challenge for youth leaders across the globe (Trott et al., 2022). This educational gap leads to an insufficient level of climate literacy among the public, therefore weakening the collective solidarity required for the success of climate movements (Alkaher, 2020). As a result, the interviewed youth activists typically view climate education reform as an extension of their goals for systemic change.

The espoused vision of climate education to address the "neglected social dimensions" (interviewee O) aligns with Stapleton (2019)'s conceptualisation of climate justice education. Fundamentally, climate justice education is a human-centred approach which places an emphasis on social justice lens to frame climate issues. Our interview data suggest that climate education

reform is seen as an integral pillar to increase general awareness on environmental issues and facilitate an equitable response to climate change.

5. Conclusion

In summary, this research aimed to analyse the macro, meso and micro experiences of youth leaders in the climate activist ecosystem. Given the predominant focus on national contexts and the extensive literature on FFF activists, this study sought to broaden the scope by exploring the experiences of climate activists on a global scale. Our qualitative approach of conducting 13 in-depth semi-structured interviews revealed that age is experienced as a common structural barrier by youth activists in our sample. Many of the interviewees describe their individual experiences of feeling excluded and undermined by established political actors throughout their time in climate activism.

Delving deeper into the differing experiences between youth activists, we find that there are substantial differences in the engagement strategies employed between EU and non-EU activists. We find that activists from EU member states tend to advocate for policy change directly with political institutions. On the contrary, youth leaders from non-EU countries often are challenged on their activism work by their national governments. This reflects the broader barriers faced by non-EU youth activists in their efforts to engage with macro-level structures.

Although our study had a broad geographic scope, our sampling strategy of contacting climate organisations resulted in the concentration of advocacy-oriented activists in our research. To capture a more diverse picture, future studies should explore the wider spectrum of the climate activism landscape and explore the experiences of those beyond the advocacy sphere. In particular, examining the experiences of climate researchers and leaders who are engaged in non-traditional forms of activism will offer a more comprehensive understanding of the varied challenges within the environmental movement.

Overall, this study enhances existing research on climate activism by integrating diverse global perspectives to reveal the complex experiences of youth activists. By identifying key barriers faced by youth leaders in climate activism, our findings emphasise the need for structural changes to integrate youth perspectives into climate decision-making processes.

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7. Appendix

Appendix A: Participant Recruitment Poster

Appendix B: Interview Guide

<table>
<tr><th colspan="3">INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR YOUTH CLIMATE ACTIVISTS</th></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Introduction</td></tr>
<tr><td><u>Introducing our background</u></td><td colspan="2">Hello, my name is [NAME].

We are a group of student researchers studying at the London School of Economics. Thank you for agreeing to participate in our research project!</td></tr>
<tr><td><u>Our research</u></td><td colspan="2">Our research question is:

How do youth leaders navigate the climate activism ecosystem: macro, meso and micro experiences

If any of the questions are unclear at any point of the interview, please let us know and we will be happy to clarify it for you.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Topic</td><td>Open questions</td><td>Follow-up questions</td></tr>
<tr><td><u>Background of activists & Motivations</u></td><td>To start, we'd like to learn a bit more about your background.

● What climate organisation are you affiliated with?
● What is your role within the organisation?
● How long have you been involved in climate activism?
● Why did you start working on climate activism?
● How did you start working on climate activism?</td><td>● Where did you learn about climate change? (for the “why” question)
● Was there anything in particular that inspired you to participate in youth climate activism?</td></tr>
</table>

	○ Have your motivations changed over time? Or have they stayed the same?	● What made you decide to act, to turn commitment into action? ● Was there anything in particular that inspired you to participate in youth climate activism? ● What made you decide to act, to turn commitment into action?
<u>Actions</u>	● Which methods do you use to participate in climate activism? ● To what extent do you think the methods you utilise are effective? ○ How would you define effectiveness/ success? ● Have you encountered any obstacles or opportunities within your climate activism journey? ● How would you evaluate people's involvement in climate activeism efforts?	● In what ways, if any, does your individual identity and personal characteristics influence your participation in climate activism? ● what do you think **prevents** more people from getting involved in youth-led climate activism efforts
Cross-national experiences	Let's move onto your perceptions and opinions on the current state of climate activism.	

and personal perceptions	● What does climate activism mean to you?
	● How do you feel about [participant country]'s current climate situation?
	  ○ What are the obstacles and opportunities?
	  ○ Do you think climate activism in [country] is unique? If yes, how?
	  ○ What are the most urgent things that need to be addressed? List the top three.
	● How do you feel about current global climate situation?
	  ○ What should be the priority?
	  ○ What is hindering the progress?
	  ○ How have national and international institutions and legislations influenced your climate activism experience, if at all?	

Appendix C: Consent Form

Consent for participation in a research interview

What are the experiences of young climate leaders in navigating environmental activism within European Union (EU) and non-EU countries?

I agree to participate in a research project led by *Yunyan Huang, Ying Hang Zeng and Yiting Lee* from the *London School of Economics and Political Sciences*. The purpose of this document is to specify the terms of my participation in the project through being interviewed.

1. I have been given sufficient information about this research project. The purpose of my participation as an interviewee in this project has been explained to me and is clear.

2. My participation as an interviewee in this project is voluntary. There is no explicit or implicit coercion whatsoever to participate.

3. Participation involves being interviewed by a researcher from the *London School of Economics and Political Sciences*. The interview will last approximately 45 minutes. I allow the researcher to take written notes during the interview. I also allow the recording (by audio/video tape) of the interview. It is clear to me that in case I do not want the interview to be taped I am at any point of time fully entitled to withdraw from participation.

4. I have the right not to answer any of the questions. If I feel uncomfortable in any way during the interview session, I have the right to withdraw from the interview.

5. I understand that the researcher will not identify me by name in any reports using information obtained from this interview, and that my confidentiality as a participant in this study will remain secure. Subsequent uses of records and data will be subject to standard data use policies, which protect the anonymity of individuals and institutions.

6. I have read and understood the points and statements of this form. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

7. I have been given a copy of this consent form co-signed by the interviewer.

Participant's name *(type first name and surname here):*

Date signed:

Researcher names: *Yunyan Huang, Ying Hang Zeng and Yiting Lee*

Date signed: 09/06/2024

Researcher Email Addresses: y.huang147@lse.ac.uk; y.h.zeng@lse.ac.uk, ; y.lee53@lse.ac.uk

Appendix D: Project Information Sheet

Thanks for your interest in this project about the experiences of youth climate activists. In this email, I give you information about the project and ask for your consent to participate. If you agree, please type your **name** and add in the **date** in the attached document.

What is the study about?

We are conducting a group research project to understand the experiences of young climate leaders in navigating environmental activism within European Union (EU) and non-EU countries. Our central objective is to explore youth-led climate participation and investigate the impact of institutional variations.

What will my involvement be?

You will participate in an interview which will take approximately 45 minutes. Depending on your preferences, the interview will take place in-person, through Zoom or through a telephone call.

What will my information be used for?

The data and information collected through the interview will contribute to our final findings in our research. The research paper and poster will be posted on the Laidlaw Network. We assure you that the responses you share will be treated with strict confidentiality.