# “To Create Communities Where Care is Enjoyed and Valued in a Very High Regard”: Motivations, Approaches, and Impacts of Youth-Led Climate Collectives

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## Abstract

"To Create Communities Where Care is Enjoyed and Valued in a Very High Regard": Motivations, Approaches, and Impacts of Youth-Led Climate Collectives

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This doctoral dissertation explored youth engagement in climate collectives and how these groups affected participants' lives, focusing on young people 13–18 years of age in the United States and Canada. Due to people's concern for the escalating climate crisis, the study examined the following central research question: How do climate-oriented groups led by young people approach climate organizing, and how do the individuals who make up the groups perceive their participation in the movement? The research delved into the intricacies of youth-led climate work through 30 semi-structured individual interviews, weekly participant observation, and two group interviews. Participants were members of climate-oriented collectives including Extinction Rebellion Youth, Sunrise Movement, Sustainabiliteens, and school-based clubs. Thematically analyzed results are presented in three categories: motivations, group processes, and impacts. Motivations ranged from family and upbringing to a compelling sense of urgency around the climate emergency and a heightened awareness of the global movement. Group processes participants discussed highlighted the diversity in advocacy approaches, emphasizing planning and communication, leadership styles, and outreach. The impacts encompassed nuanced emotions, navigating the challenges inherent in being a young person, perceptions of success, and effects on adolescent identity development. In the discussion section, I propose a frame of reference for comprehending these young people's contemporary experiences of climate organizing, centering concepts of generativity and meaning-making. This research contributes valuable insights into the effects of climate organizing on young people, stressing the importance of amplifying youth voices in the climate movement and adults' obligation to provide space for and support these collectives. It underscores the need for educational, civic, and policy frameworks to center young people's perspectives while empowering youth participation in climate-related decision-making processes.


**Keywords**: activism, groups, climate crisis, youth-led, meaning-making

Hope is the belief in the plausibility of the possible, as opposed to the necessity of the probable. To be a realist is to recognize that the world is not a domain in which the probable always happens. Goliath is more likely to win, but sometimes David does. Inevitable is not a necessity; it's a probability.

—Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon (Maimonides), *Jewish Philosopher 1138-1204*

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1 Framing and Background

Across the globe, numerous young people are voicing immense concern about the present-day climate crisis. They are profoundly aware of climate change's imminent impacts on their futures and those of their younger siblings and unborn offspring. Social media has exacerbated youth awareness of global climate-related events. It has also led many young people to find inspiration from their peers internationally who are engaging in climate-related activism. Witnessing their peers engaging in this work empowers many youth to voice their similar concerns and feel a sense of kinship with those who feel similarly. Existential concerns regarding the future of planet Earth that many young people express often stem from the widely acknowledged threat of the climate crisis. Further, a scientific consensus underscores that anthropogenic activities extend beyond environmental impacts to social, economic, and human health problems. Despite their fear of the future, numerous youth are responding collectively to the myriad of issues that anthropogenic climate change poses. These young people come together in groups to do so regularly.

In many ways, climate organizing is becoming part of participating young people's identities and adolescent development, given their time spent engaging in this work, as well as how often they think about it (Han & Ahn, 2020). Numerous climate scientists are now backing young climate activists' calls for climate justice. In March 2019, a group of 44 scientists and scholars who called themselves Scientists for Future wrote, "based on robust scientific evidence, we declare: [young people's] concerns are justified and supported by the best available science" (Hagedorn et al., 2019, p. 79). The psychological toll that the climate crisis poses is evident in the rise of climate anxiety and depression among adolescents, involving a host of emotional responses, including fear and increased stress (Hickman et al., 2021). Some youth view climate change as out of their hands and as too big of a problem to grapple with, often related to fear-based messaging around the issue (Corner et al., 2015). In fact, in a global study, Hickman et al. (2021) found that 70% of people between the ages of 16 and 25 years old are either somewhat worried or very worried about climate change.

Supporting young people's concerns, climate science research has shown that human activity has caused the global mean temperature of the Earth to increase by 1.25°C above

preindustrial levels, rapidly approaching the 1.5°C threshold of the Paris Agreement (Matthews & Wynes, 2022). The consequences of human behaviors since the onset of the Industrial Revolution span from sea level rise to increased frequency and intensity of extreme weather events, to food and water shortages (Ellis et al., 2010; Leigh et al., 2019). Kline et al. (2018), in describing the interdependence among countries' economic development, emphasized anthropogenic climate change as a social dilemma affecting intergenerational inequities well into the future. Taking the inherent intersectionality of the climate crisis into consideration, consequences will disproportionately affect marginalized communities and future generations (Gutterman, 2022). Catastrophic scenarios also pose more health risks to children than adults (Ahdoot et al., 2015). More specifically, in the context of the Global North in which the present study took place, Canadian children have specific vulnerabilities to climate change because of health, socioeconomic, and sociocultural factors (Walker, 2020). To date, global climate change has progressed to the point that stabilizing planetary temperature will require a complete elimination of anthropogenic $CO_2$ emissions, as well as drastic reductions in other anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions (Allen et al., 2018; Matthews & Caldeira, 2008; Matthews et al., 2020; Rockström et al., 2017). Implementing drastic changes in carbon dioxide, methane, and other environmentally detrimental emissions to combat climate change will require a detailed, coordinated, and internationally enacted policy approach that calls for widespread pro-environmental behavior across various actors (Varela-Candamio et al., 2018).

Historically, social movements have played a critical role in addressing widespread structural inequities throughout the globe (Lopez, 2020). More often than not, governments do not support grassroots activism, which often involves protesting against existing policies. Martín (2022) mapped the evolution of the environmental justice movement between 2010 and 2020 and found organizations' actions have grown richer and more nuanced regardless of governmental inaction, gaps in resource distribution, and rising human rights issues regarding the climate crisis. People of all ages are taking to the streets, staging protests, and lobbying for better climate policy across the globe. However, young people stand particularly at the forefront of the movement both worldwide and across North America (Ballew et al., 2019; Skovdal & Benwell, 2021). It is therefore important for scholars to explore how young people's engagement in climate advocacy shapes adolescent identities, beliefs, and peer-to-peer relationships. The research presented in this dissertation can inform education, theories of adolescent development,

environmental policy, and practice, and contribute to the growing body of scholarly literature on youth-led climate activism and youth civic participation.

### 1.2 Research Problem and Research Question

While scholars have conducted significant research on youth-led climate activism in general (e.g., Bowman, 2019; Christou et al., 2023; Kowasch et al., 2021), more research is needed to know about youth-led climate work, specifically that which takes place amongst young people up to the age of 18. Most of the research on this topic has involved older youth (e.g., up to the age of 25 years) or well-publicized youth leaders (e.g., Greta Thunberg), as opposed to how participating in climate-oriented groups has affected young people's everyday lives—this study aims to fill that gap. I sought to address this research gap with this study by exploring the youth participation experiences of a specific age group in Canada and the United States through climate organizing with their peers. More specifically, I aimed to document diverse groups' approaches to collective climate organizing and the behind-the-scenes work in which these groups partake (e.g., meetings, planning, gathering materials, and external support), as well as how this work affects the individuals' day-to-day lives and development as adolescents.

With this study, I explored what emerged from the group processes involved in young climate activists' work, how the individuals felt that this type of youth engagement affected their experiences of adolescence, and how climate-oriented youth-led groups allowed for social connections to form and flourish among those in the age range of 13 to 18. I chose to explore the experiences of a younger cohort below the legal voting age in Canada and the United States (Wyness et al., 2004). As the anthropogenic effects of climate change will impact children, given that they are citizens of both the present and the future, their opinions, ideas, and rights on mitigating the situation need to be studied (Langhout & Thomas, 2010; Page, 2006; Triechel, 2020). Understanding the impacts of youth-led climate activism on children's lives is crucial to informing policies and practices that will affect young people in the present and future. Therefore, the main research question guiding this study was: How do youth-led groups approach climate-oriented work, and how do the individuals who make up the collectives perceive their participation in the movement?

Following the above research question, the aims of this study were:

(a) to explore how young people engaged in climate organizing in youth-led groups, to document the behind-the-scenes work these groups partook in that allowed them to

(b) put on their actions that the public could see,

(c) to understand what emerged from the group processes involved in this work,

(d) to study how young people formed social connections and made collective meaning within their climate-oriented groups,

(e) to listen to young people's individual perspectives of their climate work and its impacts on their everyday lives and adolescent development.

I employed a qualitative research design with interviews as the primary form of data. To fully understand young people's participation and experiences of climate organizing, I saw value in using multiple sources of data. Other sources of data included observation of one group's meetings over 9-months, observation of three of that same group's in-person actions, and two group interviews. Given the context of the Coronavirus Disease of 2019 pandemic (hereafter, COVID-19) during which I conducted my research, my alternative data sources (e.g., participant observation and group interviews) proved limited in terms of a case study approach, as I had originally intended. Therefore, I mainly drew on a thematic analysis of interviews.

### 1.3 Rationale and Significance

This topic is both theoretically and societally significant because youth-led activist groups are at the forefront of the worldwide climate movement as it presently exists. As Sloam et al. (2022) put it, "2018 and 2019 confirmed that young people are at the vanguard of action on climate change" (p. 684). With the present study, theoretically, I questioned how youth-led climate collectives function to meet their goals and how these groups impact the individuals' lives who participate in them. Societally, I aimed to address a fundamental question of political change in democratic countries by offering insights into the lives of those engaged in social change movements. Considering age, given that climate change will affect children most in the long term, younger adolescents are more likely than older adolescents and adults to engage in pro-environmental behavior, an umbrella term under which climate organizing falls (Cocco-Klein & Mauger, 2018; Krettenauer, 2017). Despite the immense amount of work that some young people, such as those involved in the present study have been doing to combat the climate crisis and concurrent structural inequities, popular media often depicts adolescents involved in climate organizing in an ageist manner (Poot & Bauwens, 2023). For example, many adults in power treat youth activism as not having the ability to generate any macro-level changes, because those involved are below the legal voting age (Bergmann & Ossewaarde, 2020; Wood,

2020). Therefore, following Bowman's (2019) study of adult-centric viewpoints of youth-led climate activism, I aimed in part to problematize and counter ageism in popular depictions of young people's climate activism, given that many of the individuals I spoke with mentioned feeling that they felt society de-valued their work because they were below the voting age.

This study acknowledged the importance of youth voices and perspectives in shaping climate policy, in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 2023). I also considered the roles of eco-cultural identity (Milstein & Castro-Sotomayor, 2020) and eco-citizenship (Hayward, 2021; Heggen et al., 2019) in fostering climate-related civic participation among engaged young people. I recognized the need for a deeper understanding of youth experiences of taking collective action for causes they care about and that affect them. This form of youth participation is intrinsically intertwined with adolescent psychological development and their feelings of belonging in today's world. This study, therefore, is a contribution to existing literature on youth-led climate activism, particularly in a North American context with youth between the ages of 13 and 18 years. Note that for this study, I specifically define the terms youth and young people as those between the ages of 13 and 18 years and use them interchangeably.

The position I am taking in this thesis is that through their climate work, a vast number of young people have already been effective and have the potential to affect even more meaningful change both for their own lives as well as for the trajectory of climate policy and the longevity of the biosphere and those who inhabit it. As children will inherit the consequences of environmental, social, and economic decisions major stakeholders make today, young people have a unique stake in cultivating a better future, unlike older generations who have contributed more to the present climate catastrophe than youth have. This study aims to contribute to academic understanding of youth-led climate organizing, particularly focusing on individuals up to the age of 18, a demographic that has received limited attention in existing research on the topic. While previous scholars have explored the operational and motivational aspects behind young people's engagement in climate advocacy work, a notable gap exists in understanding how participation in these groups affects adolescents' day-to-day lives and identity development. I sought to fill that gap by delving into the youth participation experiences in this specific way in the U.S. and Canada. Additionally, the study uncovered the impacts of this work on individuals' lives while considering ageism against those below the legal voting age.

This study's significance lies largely in its implications both societally and theoretically. Youth-led climate collectives play a crucial role in the pivotal global climate movement. Understanding the functions of these groups is paramount for effective climate action, policy enactment, and, ideally, fostering social and environmental justice. Gaining insight into their practices and strategies could contribute to more inclusive and impactful climate policies. This knowledge can empower young people via fostering their agency and active participation in shaping a just and sustainable future. Further, this study has implications for climate change education (CCE) within educational institutions, as well as for the emotional processing of negative climate-related emotions within group settings.

My specific interest in this topic comes from a long history of my love for the planet, my own animal rights-oriented activism when I was in high school, my experience farming and working on permaculture gardens, and a tangential form of building upon my master's thesis. I wrote my master's thesis on whether nature-based early-childhood educators included sustainability in their pedagogical approaches. Given societal barriers, they largely do not CCE as part of nature-based early childhood education (see Ginsburg & Audley, 2020). After that research experience, I decided I wanted to focus more on the young people themselves who are doing the work to better the planet, mostly outside of the constraints of North American school systems.

### 1.4 Organization of Thesis

I organized this thesis as follows. In Chapter 1, I introduce the topic and its temporal relevance and importance. In Chapter 2, I discuss the relevant literature in light of the overarching research question and aims. Within the literature review, I introduce the broader context of climate activism, followed by young people's motivations for involvement, the group processes involved in this type of work, the impacts of youth climate organizing for the young people involved, and how eco-activism relates to environmental and climate education. In chapter 3, I describe the methods employed in my study, including participant sampling and demographics, data collection and analysis, and a description of my researcher positionality. In chapters 4 through 6, I present the study's findings organized into categories, which I generated through thematic analysis techniques (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013). Chapter 4 presents young people's motivations for climate organizing. Chapter 5 examines the approaches to group processes youth took within their collectives. Chapter 6 identifies climate work's impacts on

young people's lives and participant-demonstrated reflexivity of their youth-led climate advocacy. Taking into consideration both the literature review and the findings, in Chapter 7, I discuss the implications of the study. In Chapter 8, I provide an overall conclusion of the study.

# Chapter 2: Literature Review

## 2.1 Introduction

Numerous predictive models underscore the urgency of addressing the climate crisis. Rising global mean temperature is likely to lead to more frequent and intense extreme weather events as well as a rise in sea level, which poses threats to coastal communities. However, the climate crisis includes more than just environmental effects. It will likely cause displacement, particularly in low-income communities, exacerbating existing health and economic inequities. The climate crisis's social, economic, and environmental effects are interconnected, necessitating comprehensive mitigation strategies. Many young people are acutely aware of the likely effects of the climate crisis as well as the profound impacts on their future. Therefore, adolescents who are involved in climate organizing are using their voices to try to be catalysts for positive change and demand meaningful action from policymakers. This chapter presents the pertinent literature relevant to my main inquiry question of how young people participate in youth-led climate organizations and how they perceive their participation in the movement. I have organized this chapter into four sections: motivations for involvement in climate activism, group processes, impacts of climate work, and education. Each area is relevant to how young people approach climate activism and how the individuals within the groups perceive their participation.

In order to conduct this literature review, I used various keyword combinations, given the breadth of necessary background on the topic (see Table 1). I was particularly interested in the research around the groups that I studied. Therefore, I searched for previous studies on them. My searches on Google Scholar excluded the following: inaccessible book chapters, introductions, articles only about frames or framing, blogs, newspaper articles, commentaries, opinions, responses to previous articles, and editorials. Table 1 shows the keyword combinations I used on Google Scholar and the resulting number of possible articles, book chapters, or dissertations.

**Table 1**

*Examples of Google Scholar Keyword Combinations and Search Results*

| Keyword Combination | Search Results |
|---|---|
| "Teenagers" AND "Climate activism" | 403* |
| "Teenagers" AND "Climate activism" AND "North America" | 89* |
| "Youth" AND "Climate activism" | 2,750* |
| "Youth" AND "Climate activism" AND "North America" | 541* |
| "Sustainabiliteens" | 11* |
| "Fridays for Future" | 15,100* |
| "Extinction Rebellion" | 9,930* |
| "Extinction Rebellion Youth" | 59* |
| "Sunrise Movement" | 1,310* |
| "Sunrise Movement" AND "Climate" | 1,180* |
| "Sunrise Movement" AND "Climate" AND "Youth" | 775* |

*Note.* * Some results were not accurate for the keywords I had entered.

From my exhaustive search, it appeared that much of the research on youth climate organizing has been conducted on Fridays for Future (e.g., Fisher, 2019; Frank, 2022; Huttunen & Albrecht, 2021; Schinko, 2020). This vast number of studies on Fridays for Future (FFF) makes sense given that Greta Thunberg founded FFF in August 2018 when she was 15 years old and began her school strike for climate on the steps of the Swedish Parliament, which later sparked an awakening across the globe for others to join (Fridays for Future, 2023). As Table 1 illustrates, on Google Scholar, 15,100 results came up on when I inputted the keyword "Fridays for Future," and considerably fewer with the keywords "Extinction Rebellion Youth," "Sustainabiliteens," or "Sunrise Movement" (see Table 1). I did not find research specifically conducted on school-affiliated climate advocacy groups. This is a notable gap in research, as those who participate in Fridays for Future school striking protests largely come from socioeconomically and racially privileged backgrounds (della Porta & Portos, 2023), which does not necessarily hold true for the other initiatives, even in terms of the participant demographics from my study.

When inputting the keyword "Extinction Rebellion," Google Scholar provided 9,930 results, which were mainly studies of Extinction Rebellion (XR) that focused on the adult factions of the collective, not on the youth affinity groups that I studied (e.g., Burgess & Read,

2020; Gunninghum, 2019, 2020; James & Mack, 2020). To illustrate the discrepancy in the literature on adult activism in XR and XR Youth, when I used the keyword "Extinction Rebellion Youth" in Google Scholar, I got 59 results, many of which were either citations, or did not meet my inclusion criteria. However, scholars have focused somewhat on Sunrise Movement in recent years, with 1,310 results on Google Scholar when I used the keyword "Sunrise Movement," 1,180 results when I used the keywords "Sunrise Movement" AND "climate," and 775 results when I used the keywords "Sunrise Movement" AND "climate" AND "youth." Many of these results regarding Sunrise Movement were undergraduate and master's theses, blog articles, and citations, not peer-reviewed journal articles. These studies also included youth up to the ages of 24 or 30 years old, which my study did not.

The United Nations defines youth as those between the ages of 15 and 24 years, whereas they define children as those under the age of 18 years. However, climate-oriented groups that define themselves as youth-led include those between the ages of 13 and 18, but some allow those up to the age of 35 years (Sunrise Movement, n.d.). Many studies of youth-led climate activism today consider youth to be up to 30 years old (e.g., Monteiro et al., 2023; Ross & Janzwood, 2022), while some studies consider youth to be between the ages of 18 and 24 years (e.g., Dolan, 2019; Howell, 2022). Similarly, many studies of youth climate organizing center data collection on college or university campuses (e.g., Bratman et al., 2016). In contrast, Trott (2017, 2019, 2020, 2021) studied climate activism of 10- to 12-year-old children in an afterschool program, demonstrating the importance of such opportunities for young people within the school setting as benefiting their mental and physical well-being. Trott's (2017, 2019, 2020, 2021) research also demonstrated the potential of intergenerational teaching and learning in terms of climate change education (CCE). To further illustrate this point of young people's potential for intergenerational teaching and learning, Lawson, Stevenson, Peterson, Carrier, Strnad, et al. (2019) wrote, "Children have a role in creating change [both] now and in the future" (p. 461), a perspective which the present study employs. Taken as a whole, scholars have conducted research on young people's climate activism in general (e.g. Akiva et al., 2017; Baldwin et al., 2022; Elliott & Earl, 2018; Han & Ahn, 2020), yet still many questions exist. Inquiries around the behind-the-scenes work that leads to groups' actions as they are depicted in popular news media outlets and social media, as well as how the young people involved feel about their youth-led climate collectives, are what the present study has covered, in part. Given

the research aims of the present study, the literature included in this chapter include motivations for engagement in youth-led climate activism, group processes involved in young people's climate organizing, impacts of their climate work, and climate change education, as it pertains to this type of youth civic engagement.

### 2.2 Youth Motivations for Involvement in Climate Activism

Numerous studies have explored the reasons for the uptick in climate-focused activism among a myriad of young people today. However, no single answer exists as to why young people feel motivated to engage in climate organizing, though researchers have cataloged a range of reasons (see Akiva et al., 2017; Haugestad et al., 2021; Noth & Tonzer, 2022; Schwartz et al., 2022; Sciberras & Fernando, 2022). For example, in studying the motivations of young adults' social and environmental action at a university in California, Derr (2020) found a wide variety of reasons for acting pro-socially and pro-environmentally, ranging from learning and practicing skills, to supporting identity development, to embodied experiences such as being a person of a marginalized community experiencing the effects of the climate crisis. Similarly, Blick (2018) interviewed young adults ranging from high school to post-college age about their motivations for engaging in climate advocacy and found the largest catalysts for engagement to be social justice concerns and a sense of community with peers who care about the same issues. In their study of climate strikers across four countries including participants from Sunrise Movement, Extinction Rebellion, and other groups, Martiskainen et al. (2020) concluded that for those who attended school strikes for the climate, motivations ranged from values, individual concerns about the climate crisis, and social justice issues, among other catalysts such as inadequate schooling related to climate change.

Young people's motivations for engagement depend on a combination of factors. For example, based on data from Austria and Portugal, Kowasch et al. (2021) found that youth felt motivated to engage in climate activism because of feelings of solidarity and associating or identifying with collective goals among peers, leading to an engaging form of civic engagement and eco-citizenship. In terms of group affiliation, in studying the Sunrise Movement, Bridgman (2020) described collective identity, justice, and feelings of solidarity as catalysts for young people's engagement in climate organizing. Along the same lines, Dolan (2019) interviewed university students in Australia and reported connection with nature, family, and peer influences, as well as awareness of global injustices, were what motivated youth to engage in climate

organizing. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, van der Weij (2022) found both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for young adults' engagement in youth-led climate work, including knowledge of the effects of climate change, values, emotions, and social norms among peers. Amongst the range of motivations for involvement in the youth-led climate movement, my analysis of the relevant literature revealed three dominant motivators: a sense of urgency, family and upbringing, and awareness of the global movement, which I discuss below in this order.

### *2.2.1 Sense of Urgency and Responsibility*

While Miedijensky and Abramovich (2019) wrote, "Change is usually a complex process that occurs in stages over time" (p. 3), scores of young people today have demonstrated through their words and actions that there is no time to wait to mitigate the climate crisis. Though all social movements claim that there is no time to wait, Levin et al. (2012) "identif[ied] climate change as a super wicked problem" (p. 125). To illustrate young people's feeling of urgency, in a speech given at the World Economic Forum in January 2019, Greta Thunberg pleaded, "I want you to act as you would in a crisis. I want you to act as if our house is on fire. Because it is." (Thunberg, 2021, p. 22). Almost all climate change research references the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report (Pörtner et al., 2022) for scientific data and updates on the global climate crisis situation. Considering the immense importance of the IPCC reports regarding young people, O'Brien et al. (2018) wrote,

> According to the IPCC (2013), by the year 2050, a child born in 2000 is likely to experience atmospheric concentrations of $CO_2$ of between 463 and 623 parts per million by volume (ppmv), compared with about 400 ppmv [for a child born] in 2016. They are likely to be living with 8.4–11.3 billion others on a planet that is 0.8°C to 2.6°C warmer [than pre-industrial levels]. (p. 2)

These projections, among other relevant scientific data, have led certain young people to speak passionately about the immediacy with which humans must act on climate change. Given the myriad of young people's awareness of the direness of the climate crisis, as well as how it is likely to affect them, this sense of urgency often motivates them to act.

Hickman (2020) noted that youth feel angry and helpless due to growing up with an acute awareness of the climate catastrophe. Innumerable young people "feel abandoned by a world that seems cruel and indifferent" (p. 412) to the detrimental effects of anthropogenically induced climate change. Chawla (2020a), in researching the relationship between childhood nature

connection and the ability to cope with the emotional burdens related to environmental degradation, found that "some teens voiced anger and sadness when they witnessed natural areas damaged or destroyed by humans … yet worry and fear [related to environmental disasters] are arguably expressions of connection [to those places]" (p. 630). Sense of urgency is sometimes an expression of deeper emotions in relation to the climate crisis. Often, eco-anger (as opposed to eco-anxiety or eco-depression) has led people of all ages to experience a sense of urgency to act. Thus, these negative emotions then have led to engagement in climate organizing as well as individual pro-environmental lifestyle choices such as composting or riding a bike instead of driving a car (Stanley et al., 2021).

People who directly experience climate change-related natural disasters, including but not limited to hurricanes, floods, and droughts, suffer effects on their psychological well-being as a result of these exposures. Thus, the increase in disastrous weather events resultant from climate change has affected people's mental health. Younger adults tend to experience greater depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) than older adults as a result of experiencing climate disasters (Chen et al., 2020). Chen et al. (2020) found that "Greater exposure [to natural disasters] is intuitively associated with higher levels of symptoms [of anxiety-related disorders]" (p. 3), yet that social cohesion and community relationships directly affect eco-resilience. Related to community and social connections, Krettenauer (2017) noted that sympathy led to empathetic anger, which in turn led to prosocial activism, an umbrella term under which climate advocacy falls. Positive emotions also stem from climate change awareness. Stevenson and Peterson (2015) noted climate concern and hope as independent predictors of young people's pro-environmental behavior, "which does not dampen the impacts of hope" (p. 1). Meanwhile, Trott (2017) found children's action-taking described as alleviating their climate change worries, congruent with earlier literature on the topic (e.g., Haynes & Tanner, 2015; Malone, 2013; Percy-Smith & Burns, 2013).

Many researchers have explained youth climate advocacy as rooted in the desire to protect the planet and preserve it for future generations, specifically concerning human rights, and violations of them through displacement of communities, loss of access to clean water and food, and economic inequities due to the climate crisis (Gasparri et al., 2022). Countless young people view the climate crisis as a significant threat to their future, their potential offspring, and the longevity of the today's society as it presently exists (Lee et al., 2020). Youth, therefore, feel

a responsibility to raise public awareness about the climate crisis to secure their futures, as well as those yet to be born, rooted in concepts of generativity. Generativity, the seventh stage of Erikson's (1964) theory of psycho-social development, caring for future generations' existence and well-being, strongly influences numerous young people's motivations toward climate activism. However, Erikson was referring to older people in their last stage of development, yet the concept is relevant to young people as well (see Lawford et al., 2020; Lawford et al., 2005). Matsuba and Pratt (2013), in studying the psychological processes involved in the development of environmental activists, defined generativity as people's concern and care for the next generations as well as the natural environment and how its current state will affect future unborn beings. Therefore, young people who engage in climate activism are often engaging in generativity via caring for the existence and well-being of future generations. Generativity, an often collective morally focused motivation, can lead to the prosocial action of working on behalf of a cause greater than oneself. Erikson's theory posited that generativity only begins in middle adulthood. However, more recent research has demonstrated that feelings of generativity can also develop during adolescence (Lawford et al., 2020; Lawford et al., 2005).

Individual life experiences and emotions have also influenced youth motivations to engage in climate activism. Ojala (2015) found intense negatively connotated emotions such as anger, frustration, and sadness (and sometimes even depression) to motivate youth climate activists who may have witnessed the firsthand impacts of climate change on their own communities, felt the effects of extreme weather events themselves, or had loved ones experience such tragedies. Fear can motivate action; as such, awareness of possible catastrophic scenarios has sometimes driven youth to act (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017). Fear has been useful in terms of galvanizing action in different ways. Experiencing negative environmental degradation during childhood is associated with catalyzing climate change action in that those closest to the problem are often those closest to the solution (Ceaser, 2015). These significant life experiences have fueled some young people's motivation to fight for climate justice.

In addition to desiring to protect the natural environment, a sense of social responsibility has also motivated a great number of young people to engage in climate organizing. Jia et al. (2017) described common morally-founded themes in relation to catalyzing climate action among environmental activists to include: concern for other species, vigilance for the environment, and personal disgust toward ecologically irresponsible individuals. Following

Mikulewicz et al.'s (2023) call to extend intersectionality to the field of climate justice, a multitude of young people today view climate change as a human rights-related societal problem requiring collective action. Thus, some young people also find motivation to act through their desire for radical social and political change to take place both in the Global North as well as in the Global South. That is, a myriad of youth today want to challenge the status quo and promote an alternative way of life which is not reliant on fossil fuels, both in North America and elsewhere (Fisher, 2019). Masses of young people see climate change as an issue requiring massive and radical systemic change, and they believe in their own agency to cultivate the positive future they seek for the world (Baldwin et al., 2022). Next, I discuss the ways in which family and upbringing catalyze youth climate activism.

### *2.2.2 Family and Upbringing*

Family backgrounds and the contexts in which young people grow up impact their inclinations toward climate action, especially if the culture in which they spent their childhood supports moral and prosocial behaviors (Krettenauer et al., 2020). That is, socialization happens largely within the context of the nuclear family, while "family norms are found to have a strong influence on child behavior" (Grønhøj & Thøgersen, 2012, p. 298). Oftentimes, when a child sees their parent enacting a certain behavior, the child will want to mimic their caregiver. That is, what parents and caregivers do in front of their children, far more than what they say around or to them, greatly influences young people's pro-environmental behaviors and inclinations (Mead et al., 2012). Further, adolescents' perceptions of their parents' behaviors matter more than adults' actual behaviors when measuring effectiveness of parental influence on their children in terms of pro-environmental behavior (Grønhøj & Thøgersen, 2012). Building on this point regarding children's mirroring of adults' actions, Lawson, Stevenson, Peterson, Carrier, Seekamp, et al. (2019) found that behavioral modeling in the family context is important for children's development of pro-environmental behaviors. However, this is not to say that discussing climate change action-related behaviors is irrelevant in the family context. Lawson, Stevenson, Peterson, Carrier, Strnad, et al. (2019) found, "Family level of climate change discussion … to be the strongest predictor of children's climate behaviors, followed closely by a parent's likelihood to engage in those same climate behaviors" (p. 684). These findings suggests that parental action coupled with family discussion about pro-environmental actions in the home

can influence young people to care about the climate crisis and could in-turn lead them to act to mitigate it.

How friends and family view climate change shapes adolescents' own views on the topic, especially given that discussion of climate change among family members has increased climate change concern among masses of young people. Stevenson et al. (2019) conducted a quantitative study surveying middle school students in North Carolina about their climate change concern and noted an increased frequency of discussion about climate change with family and friends strongly predicted adolescent care for environmental degradation. Therefore, family influence was more important than peer influence in terms of climate change concern among adolescents. Discussing climate issues within a household may promote climate action regardless of parental feelings or beliefs about climate change (Stevenson et al., 2019). Socialization within the family context, therefore, could stem from societal norms and social mores, and often more than not, the nuclear family setting can reinforce these (Lawson et al., 2019). Family can also be influential in terms of young people's understanding of climate change and often to catalyze pro-environmental action. In multiple studies, the more that parents discussed climate change, the more individual mitigations occurred within the family context (e.g., Grønhøj & Thøgersen, 2012; Lawson, Stevenson, Peterson, Carrier, Seekamp, et al., 2019; Mead et al., 2012). Yu et al. (2019) studied the influencing factors for recycling as an individual mitigation strategy. They asserted a meaningful relationship between social identity and eco-friendly behavior and found adopting pro-environmental behavior to be based on civic virtues for adolescents, including climate-related advocacy and activism (Yu et al., 2019). Grønhøj and Thøgersen (2012) asserted that the vast majority of initial socialization happens within the nuclear family context. Parents and caregivers teach values both implicitly and explicitly within the home setting (Grønhøj & Thøgersen, 2012).

Stapleton (2015) used sociocultural identity theory to study young people's environmental identity development and noted that culture is intrinsically linked with environmental identity development. Stapleton's (2015) study demonstrated that young people's interactions with individuals and communities directly impacted by climate change, as well as collaborating with peers to help ameliorate such issues increased those youth's inclinations toward climate organizing. Stapleton (2019) studied young North American adolescents who went on a group trip to Bangladesh and witnessed the effects of climate change on a developing

country. The youth involved in this study noticed stark differences in the abstract versus felt effects of climate change and learned the value of shock factor. Many of those youth indicated that they "did not feel compelled to take action until [they] saw the impacts" (Stapleton, 2019, p. 742). Through conducting a critical qualitative analysis of these adolescents' experiences, Stapleton (2019) posited that human connection is central to activist work and that emotional attachment to climate change is based on interpersonal relationships with other activists and individuals who have directly experienced the effects of climate change. Of note is that \ these students were likely from wealthier socioeconomic statuses which may have may have been a contributing factor. Similarly, Gould et al. (2018) conducted a study with Grade 8 students on the island of Hawai'i and reported immense cultural relevance regarding feelings of connectedness to nature, self-efficacy, and behaviors related to the natural environment. Their findings suggested that existing models of environmental behavior omit cultural and ethnic factors inherent in intersectionality of social location. Therefore, culture is relevant in terms of young people's socialization within the family context as a possible catalyst for climate organizing. Awareness of the growing global movement calling for environmental action in the face of an impending climate catastrophe has also motivated some young people to act, as much as a sense of urgency and influences of family and upbringing.

### *2.2.3 Global Movement*

Activism to mitigate climate change, including striking from school, protesting outside of banks, and creating theatrical displays, has spurred a novel form of global youth citizenship and civic participation in recent years. In some ways, public figures such as Greta Thunberg, have catalyzed youth engagement in climate activism (Sabherwal et al., 2022). While Thunberg has gained immense international popularity in popular media in recent years and frames the climate crisis as a moral and ethical issue (Molder et al., 2022), she is not the first to act against environmental degradation in such a drastic way as striking from school or work. As Hayward (2021) noted, "The energy of contemporary youth movements reminds us that a combination of youthful populations and frustration has been a key factor in revolutionary change for centuries" (p. 24), harkening to previous youth-led environmental activism in other forms. In the United States alone, since the 1990s, environmental activists such as Julia Butterfly Hill, and others, have been taking radical actions to protect the natural world against human-induced environmental degradation (Ballantyne et al., 1998; Perez et al., 2015; Taylor, 2011). However,

the contemporary economic mindset of the global community, as well as dominant governmental structures have thus far posed persistent barriers to resolving the climate crisis (Beer, 2022; West & Brockington, 2012).

Young people's climate activism is often contextualized within the local place in which the work is conducted, given that "social/environmental issues are grounded in the particular history of an area" (Ceaser, 2015, p. 216). Place and time are relevant factors to youth-led activism for the climate and for other causes. Kelley et al. (2014) asserted that all forms of resistance against existing institutions are temporally contextual. Tuck and Yang (2014) contended that youth resistance across the globe has reshaped nations over countless decades, not only in recent years. Further, Tuck and Yang (2014) criticized popular media as "treat[ing] youth uprisings and resistance movements as emerging out of nowhere as overflows of pure affect" (p. 9). However, in reality, most, if not all, youth activism is modeled in historical community organizing efforts such as the American Civil Rights Movement (Farrell et al., 2019). Youth have been standing up against various injustices in both visible and invisible ways for many years—youth-led activism is not new. News of such movements, however, spreads more quickly today, with the advent of the internet as well as social media activism.

Young people largely view governments as responsible for addressing the climate crisis, yet youth simultaneously do not trust those same governments to act on the issue (Corner et al., 2015). Climate strikes have provided participating young people with opportunities for social and political action (Martiskainen et al., 2020). Social influence from their peers who are also involved plays a significant role in young people's inclinations toward engaging in climate advocacy. Young people who perceive their peers and greater social networks as valuing and supporting climate advocacy and pro-environmentalism have been more inclined to engage in climate activism than those who do not (Haugestad et al., 2021). This peer-approval bias suggests that social norms and peer influence are crucial for motivating youth to participate in climate organizing (Haugestad et al., 2021).

Though family and upbringing have often been more influential in galvanizing youth climate action, peers have also motivated swaths of young people to act collectively to mitigate the climate crisis. Taken as a whole, youth motivations for climate activism are multifaceted and complex— no single answer exists as to why young people begin this work. The desire to protect the natural environment, social responsibility, subjective experiences, emotions, and social

influence all factor into young people's inclinations and motivations toward engagement in climate activism (Blick, 2018; Dolan, 2019; Martiskainen et al., 2020; van der Weij, 2022). As this section described, motivations for involvement in climate collectives range from a sense of urgency and responsibility to family and upbringing, to an awareness of the global movement in which their peers are involved.

### 2.3 Group Processes

Climate-oriented groups provide opportunities for young people involved to connect with like-minded peers, engage in social and political activism, and develop a sense of collective identity centered around environmental issues that all individuals in the group care about (Polletta & Jasper, 2001). Activist groups often engage in collective processes, including consciousness-raising, collective empowerment, and group-level decision-making, none of which can occur when an individual engages in activism alone (Hirsch, 1990). For this paper, I define group processes as how young people involved in youth-led climate collectives function together as a whole, focusing on identifying collective goals and strategies, making group-level decisions, resolving issues, and engaging with the external world outside of their community. These group processes include but are not limited to the interactions among group members, discussion of shared ideological standpoints, decision-making processes, and leadership styles. This definition includes the intricate interactions, dynamics, and mechanisms that shape the collectives' functioning as a group.

These group processes play integral roles in fostering collaboration, decision-making, and forming and pursuing their shared goals. Effective communication is a central component of these processes as it involves exchanging pertinent information via meetings and other online platforms. Collaborative decision-making includes but is not limited to consensus building and democratic voting with the goal of ensuring that all members' voices are heard and respected. Within these groups, task distribution is often based on skills and interests with the goal of efficient and egalitarian workload management, considering the intricacies of being a young person in today's world. Within this definition, conflict resolution strategies aim to address differences in opinion and maintain cohesion within groups. These group processes are invaluable for fostering collaborative and inclusive environments that empower members to work together towards their shared goals (Hirsch, 1990). I organized this section on group

processes into ideological frameworks for climate organizing, forms of approaches to strategic action, and communication, kinship, and affiliation with the group.

### *2.3.1 Ideological Frameworks for Climate Organizing*

Just as young people have differing motivations for commencing engagement in climate work, their ideological frameworks for and approaches to environmental advocacy also differ. Young people hold particular vantage points in comparison with those older than they, given their unique age group. Also, they will inherit the effects of anthropogenic climate change that those above them caused, as in every generation, the young inherit the mistakes as well as the accomplishments of the previous generations. Given the anger that has catalyzed some youth to engage in this work, the seeds of dissent emerge when "young people's values and worldviews diverge from [the values of] those holding power" (O'Brien et al., 2018, p. 7). In general, activists use specific ideological frames to guide their work. Taylor (2011) noted that activist groups use collective action framing, such as injustice and agency, to facilitate common ground among individuals who may not have otherwise come together to act. In line with climate drivers of change being bound with social drivers of change (Nightingale et al., 2020), much climate activism surrounds more than just environmental degradation and is, therefore, intersectional by default, a standpoint that many climate advocacy groups uphold. Kelley et al. (2014) wrote that organizations with "a conscious agenda to change" (p. 87) play essential roles in revolutions, not only those focused on ameliorating the state of the climate crisis. When approaching activism through the lens of intersectionality, youth engage in organizing work that addresses multiple structures of oppression with the goal of overall justice (Heaney, 2021).

A great deal of young people's climate activism centers around fossil fuel divestment campaigns, which exist mostly on college and university campuses, as fossil fuels are major contributors to anthropogenic climate change (Bratman et al., 2016; Braungardt et al., 2019). Considering Falk's (1971) distinction among types of activism, fossil fuel divestment is a form of climate activism that aims to be system-transforming. Fossil fuel divestment campaigns themselves function in response to broader societal failures to meaningfully address climate change, as energy consumption, particularly the burning of fossil fuels, is one of the largest contributors of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions (Siddik et al., 2021). One major goal of young people's climate activism, while emphasizing a just transition to a carbon free economy, is to get to a social tipping point in which fossil free is the new norm (Gunningham, 2019). Though the

overall goal of young people's climate organizing is much greater than simply managing the effects of the climate crisis. Scott et al. (2014) theorized two forms of resistance: system-compatible and system incompatible. Political systems, more often than not, allow and sometimes encourage system-compatible resistance. Meanwhile, system-incompatible resistance "claims that movement organizations are parasitic" (Scott et al., 2014, p. 65) and categorizes such youth resistance as anarchic, oppositional, and subversive.

Groups take differing ideological approaches to their climate advocacy, one of which is an overtly political stance aiming to affect change within systems as they presently exist. Battistoni (2021) described President Biden's importance regarding Sunrise Movement's approaches to climate advocacy and pushing forward the Green New Deal (GND). Representative Ocasio-Cortez's backing of the GND led numerous U.S. congress members to pledge to not accept fossil fuel money, which was a massive win for Sunrise Movement (Russo, 2019). For a doctoral dissertation, Neas (2022) observed Sunrise Movement, conducting extensive oral history interviews with individuals involved in Sunrise hubs in California. Neas (2022) found that Sunrise Movement framed climate change differently than most other groups in that they chose to purposefully re-politicize, as opposed to depoliticize, the climate crisis. Sunrise Movement focuses on a three-planked theory of change including building people power, political power, and a political agreement across various social actors (Prakash, 2019). Sunrise also engages in political populism (R. A. Huber et al., 2020) to get all constituents of the American democratic party to sign on to the GND.

Extinction Rebellion (XR), however, takes a quite different approach, which largely encompasses civil disobedience and radical system reformation. XR engages in economic disruption as activism in order to shake up the political system, based on the American civil rights movement, in order to move toward a social tipping point which governments and corporations cannot ignore (Gunningham, 2019). Although not specifically youth oriented, when describing climate activism, Gunningham (2019) asserted, "Enormous pressure must be brought to bear on governments, so that they feel compelled to act" (p. 202). Dimitriadis (2014) theorized disorderly conduct as leading to revolutionary change. While groups have utilized differing ideological frameworks to guide their climate work, they also engage in different forms of and approaches to strategic action.

### *2.3.2 Forms of and Approaches to Strategic Action*

Young people have taken varying approaches to climate activism, oftentimes in line with their ideological viewpoints on the issues at hand. More often than not, social change as well as policy change for climate justice happens outside of accepted social mores and structures. Falk (1971) posited a framework of three distinct orientations to social change, including system maintaining, reforming, and disrupting. Following Falk (1971), O'Brien et al. (2018) typologized young people's opposing of climate change as expressed in three different forms of dissent: dutiful, disruptive, and dangerous. According to O'Brien et al. (2018) dutiful dissent involves political advocacy and lobbying, disruptive dissent entails striking and protesting, and dangerous dissent outwardly aims to unsettle the status quo. As they are carried out in practice, "varied forms of activism are often combined, pointing to how young people are challenging power relationships and political interests" (O'Brien et al., 2018, p. 1) through their climate organizing. To plan for their actions, youth-led climate groups use specific strategic frameworks, which may involve "back casting, where a desirable future is identified and then the process necessary to reach it are delineated" (Shirani et al., 2016, p. 434). The bulk of what occurs in these groups that the public sees, however, is their outreach in the forms of actions, which are often theatrical in nature, in public spaces such as train stations, outside of government buildings or banks, and on social media, as well as what gets reported on popular news media outlets.

Groups approach their public-facing actions based on the ideological frames which their collectives have agreed upon. Meunier (2021) categorized the fossil fuel divestment campaigns, youth climate strikes, and young Evangelicals for Climate Action as disruptive dissent. Sunrise Movement and other forms of climate-oriented political advocacy fell under dutiful dissent and threatening the fossil fuel industry and the capitalist establishment fell under dangerous dissent, as Extinction Rebellion and some other radical groups have done (Meunier, 2021). Some approaches to actions in the form of civil disobedience have included placing tiny houses and tree houses along the paths of pipelines, which are in the process of or are going to be constructed, in order to halt building new environmentally detrimental infrastructure (Richards, 2022). This approach to civil disobedience is similar to the widespread tree-sits of the 1990s in the California Redwoods (Salmond, 2006).

Other strategic actions have included pushing for fossil fuel divestment based on ethical principles via marches and protests on college campuses (Bratman et al., 2016; Braungardt et al.,

2019). Fossil fuel divestment campaigns, founded on communal affiliation with a cause, for example, have aimed to act against societal failures (Bratman et al., 2016), especially given these activists' awareness that fossil fuels contributed to roughly 78% of the total increase in greenhouse gas emissions between 1970 and 2010 (Braungardt et al., 2019). The divestment movement, in line with Sunrise's approach, re-politicizes climate change and challenges traditional power relations, bringing these issues into the public sphere (Bratman et al., 2016), just as the tree-sits of the 1990s did (Fritsvold, 2009). Finally, a novel form of activism in today's age that cannot be forgotten is cyber activism. Across Canada, the United States, and beyond, young people today have used social media as a tool to enhance their climate engagement both among themselves, and with the public (Chia, 2021). Employing Resource Mobilization Theory (McCarthy & Zald, 1977), Chia (2021) found that youth have utilized social media to put forth a call to action through a sense of urgency and to spread their message and demands to a wider audience. After the COVID-19 pandemic struck, the majority of youth activism moved to online platforms for a period of time (Soler-i-Martí et al., 2020; Verlie & Flynn, 2022).

Some forms of collective action fit within existing systems and structures, while others call for more radical civil disobedience outside of accepted social norms and mores. However, social activism does not exist or occur as an independent entity; rather, it functions in concert with policy processes and knowledge production (Corry & Reiner, 2021). As well as planning and carrying out actions, these groups also engage in purposeful communication, bonding, and inadvertent collective identity formation as part of their group processes.

### *2.3.3 Communication, Kinship and Affiliation with the Group*

Group processes include what results from planning and executing strategic actions, such as the cultivation of a community, for example. Although young people take different approaches to climate advocacy, in all forms of group-level action, collective identity is necessary to sustain momentum. When studying climate strikes in various locations, Martiskainen et al. (2020) identified a research gap in the ways in which activists communicate, "as well as how these organizations form and function" (p. 2) though they did not specifically focus on group-level activism of young people, but on individuals who attended the global strikes in September 2019. Although groups approach their organizing in different ways, through planning of and execution of their actions, they almost always form a sense of kinship with one

another (Goralink & Nelson, 2011). This foundation of friendship, community, and sense of belonging facilitates planning and organizing.

Feeling a sense of belonging to a community of other actors has been integral in many youth's motivation for climate action and in their sustained drive toward achieving their group's goals (Derr, 2020). That is, often in order for individuals to act, they must feel collective affiliation with the group as a whole. Additionally, intergroup relations have led to social resilience for individuals, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced climate activism to occur online (Krings et al., 2021). A person needs to feel supported by others in order to act (Derr, 2020). That is, youth must have a sense of collective affiliation to a common cause and to a group acting for causes they believe in communally in order to continue in the often-thankless work of activism. Additionally, relationships with others within their groups have been significant aspects of young activists' identities, leading to a sense of kinship and to feeling part of a community (Derr, 2020).

Within social movements, collective identity has often supported group cohesion so much that scholars have used the concept to explain why activists begin to mobilize in a group setting (Poletta & Jasper, 2001). Munro (2021) found relationship building among activists led to deeper connections and associations with the group and with its cause, which in turn led to group cohesion, a precursor to collective identity. Individuals must together identify with the group with whom they organize in order to form a collective identity, which, in turn, leads to group cohesion in the form of a reinforcing feedback loop (Friedman & McAdam, 1992). Furthermore, collective identity formation has been imperative in sustaining activist movements over time, and in order for momentum not to subside when motivation might otherwise be low because of actions not having intended outcomes (Fominaya, 2010). Emotions also can occur collectively. For example, van Zomeren et al. (2019) noted that hope increased motivation if said hope was problem-focused, took place within the group setting, and was solution-oriented. Collective hope, therefore, can be an important ingredient in sustaining youth-led activist groups' work because it can act as a catalyst toward group affiliation and collective identity, both of which are often components various forms of organizing. Communication, kinship, and affiliation with the group all occur within the context of group processes, however, they also overlap with the impacts of this work.

## 2.4 Impacts of Climate Work on Young People

Engagement in climate work impacts young people in a multitude of ways, ranging from evoking various emotions to the cultivation of collective identity and sense of belonging, to positive youth participation and feelings of agency, to education. I discuss these impacts in this order. Many young people today are acutely aware of the effects that the climate crisis is likely to have on their lives—this awareness evokes a myriad of confusing feelings. Meanwhile, for involved young people, taking part in youth-led climate-oriented groups allows for a sense of belonging that they may not have otherwise had, given this somewhat novel form of youth participation and agency. Through conducting qualitative interviews with youth activists in Poland, Budziszewska and Głod (2021) illustrated that young people perceive their participation in climate activism as mostly empowering. Given young people's engagement in climate collectives, consequences and outcomes for participants are significant in many ways, including positive and negative effects such as feelings of empowerment, anger, and anxiety (Nissen et al., 2021).

### *2.4.1 Emotions*

Having an acute awareness of the climate crisis evokes complex feelings for many people that are oftentimes difficult to navigate. Hope and despair, for instance, are intrinsically linked impacts of young people's climate organizing. Especially for children, hope is essential to combating climate anxiety (Buchanan et al., 2021). Consciousness-raising activities in which groups engage, however, may inadvertently nurture despair which can often lead to apathy (Stevenson & Peterson, 2015). Utilizing temporal theory, Shirani et al. (2016) considered that people's thoughts about the future involve hopes, fears, and anticipations, as well as imagination and creativity, demonstrating that imagination helps to successfully plan for the future. Individuals often need to imagine positive futures to think of creative solutions to large-scale problems (Kelley et al., 2014).

Simply having awareness of climate change and its effects have caused many people to have increased anxiety in both adaptive and maladaptive ways (Clayton, 2020). Adaptive forms of climate anxiety are useful in that they can serve to motivate people to act accordingly. Clayton (2020) noted that "Anxiety becomes maladaptive when the sensitivity to potential problems – differences between what is expected and what is encountered – is too great, triggering an emotional response and rumination that inhibit resolution of anxiety" (p. 2). Therefore, climate

anxiety is a global threat not only to human physical health, but mental well-being as well. In a collaborative study, a developmental psychologist and a young climate activist described the heavy emotional burden that acute awareness of the climate crisis poses for young people, as well as the areas in which mental health professionals may support young people through these tribulations (Sanson & Bellemo, 2021). Overall, climate change has negative psychological effects for humans, especially those of lower socioeconomic status (Evans, 2019). Communities of lower socioeconomic statuses have already felt the impacts of the climate crisis, given proximity of living space to freeways, power plants, or other infrastructure that impact human health. Additionally, there are often negative psychological associations with climate change awareness not coupled with engagement in climate action, as individuals might feel hopeless without the agency or self-efficacy that comes with engaging in activism (Corner et al., 2015). However, emotional resilience, buttressed by peers, has led to sustained action under stress, as "Action is an antidote to despair" (Hoggett & Randall, 2018, p. 229).

Psychologists consider climate anxiety to be an adaptive response to awareness of the climate crisis while experiencing living through it (e.g., Crandon et al., 2022). Feelings of eco-anger (i.e., anger in relation to the state of the climate crisis) and ecoanxiety (i.e., anxiety or fear in relation to possible catastrophic climate-related scenarios), both of which are often prevalent emotions in the face of the climate crisis have different impacts on individuals' abilities to both take climate action and maintain psychological well-being (Stanley et al., 2021). As an alternative to anger and despair, Nairn (2019), through arguing the potential for learning from young people's collective expressions of hope and despair, called to "acknowledge despair and cultivate hope" (p. 447) in climate action groups. Hope is often seen as the perceived possibility for positive change, yet several studies suggest that it needs to be oriented toward achieving a collective goal in order to be effective at motivating action (van Zomeren et al., 2019). In fact, hope is often a guiding principle for young people in group-level activism, whether implicitly or explicitly, that activists utilize because fear and outrage are not sustainable (Kelsey, 2016).

Braiwaite (2004) defined collective hope as "hope that is genuinely and critically shared by a group" (p. 7). Collective hope, therefore, is a shared value that leads to group cohesion among other factors positively associated with the efficacy of group-level activism (Harré et al., 2017). Similarly, Lin (2013) found collective hope, in the organizational context, was a cooperative motivational state that aided group development towards a common goal as a result

of peer-to-peer emotional support within the activist collective. Activist groups often employ collective hope (whether implicitly or explicitly) to help sustain their momentum toward their goals via words of encouragement spoken to one another. Collective hope is useful in myriad ways for youth-led climate-oriented groups. Li and Monroe (2019) noted collective hope helps groups solve problems because of the shared belief that problems are fixable, and it therefore can create a sense of meaning in activists' work to address issues. This increased sense of meaning further increases hope, creating a positive feedback loop.

Knops (2021) collected data through surveys, participant observation, and group interviews in 2019 and 2020 in Belgium, and described the interrelated stories that young people's climate organizing posed regarding the juxtaposition of hope and fear, via studying youth climate groups' expressions of indignation toward the status quo. Stevenson and Peterson (2015) found efforts toward building concern can sometimes backfire because they may lead to despair which can in turn lead to apathy. In contrast, however, hope can work to overcome despair in that hope is "a vital coping resource" (Lazarus, 1999, p. 674). J. Huber (2023) wrote that often despair "is experienced as a kind of painful longing for the impossible that goes along with a sense of frustration and inner conflict" (p. 85) yet is useful for action. At both individual and collective levels, hope has catalyzed motivation to act when hope has led to feelings of both individual and group self-efficacy. Chawla (2020b) asserted that social trust and civic action led to constructive collective action, as opposed to apathy or denial which do not motivate individuals or groups towards action.

Drawing on other research, Li and Monroe (2018) found that hope goes beyond despair in that hope implies a trust in the unknown whereas despair insinuates a distrust in the future. Hope combines willpower, way-power (i.e., brainstorming ways to overcome a problem), a disposition of self-efficacy, and optimism into one positive psychological concept, including trust in others (Li & Monroe, 2018). Through examining the role of hope in young people's engagement with climate issues, Ojala (2012) defined constructive hope as the ability to face environmental uncertainties while believing in one's own and others' actions as having the capacity to make a difference, and simultaneously find meaning in action. Echoing this point, Chawla (2020a) asserted that social trust, "believing that one is not alone in taking action" (p. 635), was vital for the development of constructive hope in that the trust "gave meaning to individual actions" (p. 632). Further, Chawla (2020a) emphasized that, "What matters [in

collective activism] is social trust—feeling others' support and knowing that other people are also acting to protect the natural world—and the capacity to find meaning in addressing challenges" (p. 636).

Hope, while being a vital component of young people's engagement with climate change, can be motivational and can lead to more feelings of positivity (Li & Monroe, 2019; Ojala, 2012; van Zomeren et al., 2019). Nairn (2019), Li and Monroe (2018), and Stevenson and Peterson (2016) used different methods to support their theories of hope's usefulness in terms of reframing despair. Meanwhile, through examining the ways in which young climate protestors imagine the future and their levels of optimism and pessimism regarding climate change, Cattell (2021), argued that regular participation in climate action led to optimism among young people. Climate change, therefore, needs to be addressed in part through collective action in which hope takes center stage, given that hope often increases motivation (van Zomeren et al., 2019). Constructive hope, therefore, is a foundation from which group cohesion as well as individuals' senses of self-efficacy have been born (Chawla, 2020b; Hayward, 2021; Li & Monroe, 2018).

While climate activism includes a range of complex emotions, eco-anxiety and hope were most prominent (Àgoston et al., 2022; Coffey et al., 2021; Rozuel & Bellehumeur, 2022; Stanley et al., 2021). Anxiety and helplessness, when experienced alone, led to burnout more often than not (Nairn, 2019). However, in a group, these challenges have played an integral role in individuals' dealing with emotions surrounding the climate crisis, as the existence of the collective allows for a communally felt belief in viable solutions to large-scale problems (Nairn, 2019). Participating in these youth-led groups helped young people to cope with the difficult emotions that arise due to being a young person during the climate crisis (Ginsburg & Blanchet-Cohen, 2023, *in press*). Further, young people today have experienced positive emotions, such as hope, resulting from their climate work (Fisher & Nasrin, 2021). Thirdly, Frankl (1959) noted that meaning is cultivated in three ways: first, by creating or doing something and second, by experiencing something or encountering someone. He wrote, "Most important, however, is the third avenue to meaning in life: even the helpless victim of a hopeless situation, facing a fate he cannot change, may rise above himself, may grow beyond himself, and by so doing change himself" (Frankl, 1959, p. 118). Young climate activists have often grounded their hope and optimism in a belief in the power of collective action and the potential for individuals to make a difference through their advocacy done in groups. A sense of meaning can come from belonging

to a social group, which further increases hope, creating a positive feedback loop (Li & Monroe, 2019). Collective identity and sense of belonging often result from group-felt emotions within youth-led climate organizations.

### *2.4.2 Collective Identity and Sense of Belonging*

Collective identity, a sense of belonging, and attachment that individuals have to a particular group or social category were important outcomes of youth-led climate activism (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Fominaya, 2010; Futch, 2016). A range of factors influenced collective identity development among youth climate organizations, including group norms and values, social identity development, and significant life experiences (Crocetti et al., 2014; Dresner et al., 2015). An emerging theme in the field of climate organizing is the role of the collective in helping individuals cope with climate grief, leading to further group cohesion. For example, civic engagement in the form of climate advocacy is an active means of coping with climate grief (Ray, 2020; Wray, 2022). Through studying the intersections of science, politics, and emotions through the eyes of youth climate activists, Zummo et al. (2020) wrote, "The use of 'we' and 'our' when putting forth solutions suggests a call for some amount of collective responsibility" (p. 1218). Goralnik and Nelson (2011) found language, care, and empathy, as well as an emphasis on the development and maintenance of community led to feelings of kinship among group members, which allowed for collective affiliation and identity to flourish among group members. Additionally, acting with a collective as opposed to by oneself also allows for social learning to occur. Social learning includes knowledge sharing and co-creation, relationships, practices among diverse stakeholders, and going beyond the individual to include communities in learning (Ensor & Harvey, 2015).

Group norms and values, social identity development, and individual emotional experiences factor into creating collective identity. Young people often feel more empowered through their work as a result of working in community with their peers (Ceaser, 2015). Collective motivation requires individuals associating themselves with their group through psychological ties to other members acting for the same cause (van Zomeren et al., 2019). For groups to feel agentic power for the cause they are working for, as Bandura (1997) found, they need to feel collectively self-efficacious and accept both personal and collective responsibility for the issues they are fighting (Dresner et al., 2015). Care and felt support from others, as well

as youth's belief in themselves and the belief that others have in them, have led to feelings of self-efficacy within the collective (Li & Monroe, 2018).

Once youth feel a sense of place and belonging within their group, collective affiliation with group goals has often buttressed young people's motivation to continue with their activist work (Martínez et al., 2012). Group affiliation is an antecedent to collective identity formation, which is "part of the process of mobilization" (Kurzman, 2008, p. 9) and is integral to activist organizations gaining momentum. Reiterating the necessity of community within youth organizations, Sandford (2020) wrote,

> Community is important because today's young generation seems more isolated than previous generations. Lots of loneliness, depression, and anxiety are exacerbated by the issues of today. Fear of the climate crisis, racism, and the rise of the far right are often made worse by the influences of social media and cyberbullying. To combat these fears and worries, your community can offer support. (p. 135)

Community and camaraderie are integral outcomes of group climate organizing, especially for young people. Beam and Kim (2020) echoed Sandford's words of social isolation among young people as higher than among older adults, especially post-COVID, which participation in groups can ameliorate. Social coping (i.e., emotional processing with others in a group setting) often occurs within activist collectives through discussion of shared emotions related to climate change and advocacy work (Ágoston et al., 2022). Similar to social coping, research in Western Australia that brought together Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth found that climate activism in groups promotes mental health and resilience, particularly when youth have opportunities for emotional engagement with one another (Godden et al., 2021).

Working with others in a group setting can be a catalyst for social trust to form, which often leads to constructive civic action (Chawla, 2020a). This is not to say that all members within a group hold the same values or views. In fact, Ingram et al. (2015) found group cohesion does not always entail thinking the same way, as "individuals with sometimes very different perspectives can cohere in a group that has a collective life" (p. 7). Human connection also supports positive change goals (Ingram et al., 2015). In addition to collective identity and sense of belonging, young people who participate in climate collectives often find that this involvement affects their identity and sense of agency.

### *2.4.3 Young People's Participation and Agency*

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC; United Nations, 2023), recognizes that children and youth have the right to voice their opinions and to have their perspectives listened to in all matters that affect them (Chawla & Heft, 2002; Hart et al., 2014; Hicks & Holden, 2007; United Nations, 2023). The UNCRC brings to the forefront the importance of listening to children and young people. Thew et al. (2020) claimed that youth is a political position, even though many political actors have argued against such claims. Bullón-Cassis (2022) emphasized youth's central position in climate issues and found youth to be an important political position. O'Brien et al. (2018) stressed that "youth are neither in a state of 'becoming' future citizens nor training to be participants in the sphere of formal politics; they are citizens with agency" (p. 4); therefore, their opinions should be relevant.

Some adult-centric perspectives have categorized children's experiences as homogenous while young people's lived experiences quite often differ greatly, depending on a myriad of factors related to their social location. In a longitudinal analysis of young participants' justice claims at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCC) between 2015 and 2018, Thew et al. (2020) found youth felt "socialized so that their perception of their right to participate as equals diminished, ultimately leading to their loss of belief that youth is a valid political position" (p. 8). In contrast, Bratman et al. (2016) wrote that youth are themselves agents of change. Western society therefore needs to shift toward a new environmental paradigm to see youth as agentic themselves (Yu et al., 2019). Dimitriadis (2014), however, cautioned researchers "not to valorize the experiences of youth in irresponsible ways" (p. 44). Adults must view youth not just as future agents of change but as present-day actors with full capabilities and promote young people's abilities and resiliency (Spellman, 2015). Although adults are often present, Tuck and Yang (2014) asserted that youth need agency symbolically and in actuality and that adults need to allow youth-centric youth networks that do not involve adults at all. However, in the present study, in practice adults are present to varying degrees, congruent with other recent research on the topic (e.g., Elsen & Ord, 2021).

Part of adults recognizing youth perspectives on matters that affect young people is understanding how engagement in climate organizing affects adolescent development today. Scholars have somewhat differing theories of identity development in relation to the natural environment. Kempton and Holland (2003) outlined three stages of environmental identity

development: (a) salience, which implies a shift in consciousness toward becoming aware of environmental problems, (b) identification with and seeing oneself as having agency, and (c) becoming more knowledgeable about how to engage in environmental practices, which then allows an individual to influence and support others toward the same goal. Later, however, Hayward (2021) contended that certain forms of young people's engagement in climate organizing reflect a form of non-citizenship founded on fear and frustration among youth. The sociocultural context in which children grow up shapes their identity, especially given that the formation of an environmental self begins in childhood for many activists (Matsuba & Pratt, 2013). Further, identity is socially influenced and reinforced (Williams & Chawla, 2015). Social identity is a sense of belonging to a specific in-group providing a source of pride and self-esteem (Varela-Candamio et al., 2018). Social interactions among activists within their youth-only spaces have aggrandized positive environmental identities and affinities both for the group and for the cause, which has generally led to positive ecological behaviors (Dresner et al., 2015). Youth-only spaces have helped foster young people's senses of agency, power, and belonging, as well as their senses of meaning and purpose (Burke et al., 2016). Through these youth-led spaces, in conjunction with the value of intergenerational collaboration, climate activism has become part of young people's identity (Han & Ahn, 2020).

Young people's climate work is becoming an integral part of their adolescent development. Strong environmental identity, then, leads to positive ecological behavior as well as an increase in felt meaning. Referencing Hayward (2021), I contend that youth engagement in climate activism today is a form of positive eco-citizenship, which enhances eco-resilient eco-cultural identities among children. Regarding young people's experiences of citizenship in today's world, Hayward (2021) wrote,

> An ecological citizen will need skills of empathy, critical thinking, the ability to reason and reflect, alongside skills to communicate clearly, and to listen to others who may have very different life experiences, and the moral restraint to live within material limits. To add to this daunting list, ecological citizens will need the virtues of compassion, tolerance, cooperation, determination, and courage. (p. 34)

For this thesis, I assert that this form of youth civic participation supports eco-cultural identity. Regarding this relatively novel term, Milstein and Castro-Sotomayor (2020) stated,

> The notion of eco-cultural identity offers an overarching framework for understanding *all* identities… *all* identities have Earthly constitutions and forces.… We are made of, part of, emerging from, and constantly contributing to both ecology and culture.… In these ways, one's eco-cultural identity – whether latent or conscious – is at the heart of the personalities, subjectives, and practices that (in)form one's emotional, embodied, mental, and political sensibilities in and with the all-encompassing world. (p. xvii)

Eco-cultural identity, in short, combines one's environmental identity (and, to an extent, one's moral identity) with their cultural identity. It is how humans see themselves as part of the communities and larger environments in which they live and work, spend their time, and those in which they grew up, and those in which they interact with on a regular basis.

That is, "eco-cultural identity includes [but is not limited to] how individuals and communities conceptualize, understand, and tell stories about their relationships to local or distant regions, ecosystems from which they draw resources, and the planet as a whole" (Audley et al., 2020, p. 446). Inherent in one's eco-cultural identity is an individual's understanding of themselves in conjunction with how they relate to their local community, the natural surroundings in which they live, and their culture (both the culture which has been passed down generationally and that which they may have adopted on their own). In order to positively transform the way that people view the natural environment at large, and those physical environments in which they regularly interact (e.g., city parks, urban streets, woods, gardens, etc.), their eco-cultural identities must shift toward eco-resiliency in order to maintain stamina in their environmental and climate activism. Through arguing that children should be recognized as key actors in promoting sustainable development, Hayward (2021) proposed that citizenship should nurture creativity in children's political and civic participation. Citizenship should also provide opportunities for young people to engage civically, focusing on social agency, environmental education, embedded justice, and self-transcendence. Young people today are experiencing a specific form of civic engagement and citizenship based on their participation in these youth-led climate organizations mostly outside of conventional education systems.

### 2.5 Eco-Activism and Environmental and Climate Change Education

Scholars have conducted a considerable amount of research on environmental, sustainability, and climate change education (CCE), though not particularly as they relate to youth-led climate organizing. The breadth of literature on the subject and its relevance to my

study topic, regardless of the lack of my participants' discussing the issue, made it worthwhile to include in this literature review. To illustrate the overlap, in studying young eco-activists, Epstein-HaLevi et al. (2021), explored the ways in which youth organizing has evolved into a branch of education, particularly through informal education, demonstrating the overlap between education and youth climate activism.

Climate change education (CCE) is a relatively novel and growing field. Hung (2016) outlined key discourses in CCE regarding climate change as scientific, economic, political, and ethical. CCE calls for teaching from an interdisciplinary perspective, meaning that it is not simply a class nor subject in the school day. Rather, CCE has the potential to initiate a radical shift in educational approaches permeating all areas of curricula and to fundamentally shift the way that the education system presently exists (Olsson, 2022). Given the present state of youth climate action across the world, the education sector must catch up with young people's climate activism (McGimpsey et al., 2023). Importantly, Pickering et al. (2020) asserted, that to date, schooling does not adequately prepare North American youth for climate change mitigation action.

In a review of literature on the topic, Rousell and Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles (2020) noted, "Existing climate change education research has tended to focus on children and young people's scientific knowledge of climate change" (p. 91). Instead, CCE research should attempt to discern how it could be culturally responsive and intersectional and whether it has focused on behavior change and macro-level mitigations as of yet. Monroe et al. (2019), also in a review of literature on CCE, found two pertinent themes of CCE programs: "(1) The programs focused on making climate change information *personally relevant and meaningful* for the learners. (2) The activities or educational interventions were designed to *engage learners"* (p. 800). These themes demonstrate the importance of child and youth engagement with what they are learning in order for it to be relevant and meaningful to students' lives. That is, children should be taught about what matters to them in order for them to be engaged in their own learning. Therefore, CCE should be both participatory and child-framed (Rousell & Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles, 2020).

The implementation of widespread CCE at all developmental levels could help shift behaviors toward pro-environmentalism (Mochizuki & Bryan, 2015). Jorgenson et al. (2019) wrote that CCE should ideally focus on local and tangible changes that students and families are capable of doing, in order for the lessons to be effective at attempting to combat the effects of

climate change at the personal level. Meanwhile, Ginsburg and Audley (2020) found environmental and sustainability education to emphasize facts about climate change and individual action, with little to no importance placed on collective climate action or mitigation strategies. Chang and Pascua (2017) wrote, "CCE must necessarily provide children with the capability of engaging in climate change discourse, critically and accurately" (p. 177), in order for them to transfer the knowledge they gain through CCE onto others, such as family members and friends.

Though environmental education has existed for over 50 years, it is, as of yet, not enough to combat the negative effects of climate change that the planet is facing today. Almost three decades ago, Jickling (1997) wrote "The urgency and magnitude of climate change suggests that we need education that changes behaviors immediately to reduce greenhouse gasses or even to take safe routes to school in the event of flooding," (p. 884). More recently, Chang and Pascua (2017) put forth a challenge, calling for more research on CCE that "provide[s] children with the capability of engaging into climate change discourse, critically and accurately" (p. 177), illustrating the apparent gap in climate change education curricula and research. CCE is relevant to youth-led climate organizing in that the present study, in part, demonstrated that many young people feel their schooling has as of yet left them feeling either underprepared or completely unprepared in terms of the climate knowledge they would like to have learned.

This chapter covered literature relevant to the main inquiry of this study which was to investigate how groups of young people approach climate organizing and how the individuals who make up the collectives perceive of their participation. Following the themes generated through thematic analysis, Chapter 2 included literature relevant to motivations, group processes, and impacts of youth-led climate organizing. The following chapter covers the methods I used to gather and analyze data for this study, as well as my researcher positionality.

# Chapter 3: Methods

This chapter first provides an overview of the data collection approach I took for this study, specifically identifying how I addressed each research aim through both an individual and group focus. Next, I give an overview of participants, including how I went about finding them and some overall demographics about the individuals who took part in the present study. Then, I explain my approach to data analysis utilizing thematic analysis. Finally, I describe my researcher positionality and how I remained reflexive throughout the process of data collection and analysis.

## 3.1 Data Collection

To reiterate, the guiding research question for this study was: How do youth-led groups approach climate-oriented work, and how do the individuals who make up the collectives perceive of their participation? The research aims of this study were:

a) To explore how young people engaged in climate organizing in youth-led groups,
b) To document the behind-the-scenes work these groups partook in that allowed them to put on their actions that the public could see,
c) To understand what emerged from the group processes involved in this work,
d) To study how young people formed social connections and made collective meaning within their climate-oriented groups,
e) To listen to young people's individual perspectives of their climate work and its impacts on their everyday lives and adolescent development.

I will refer to this research question and these study aims throughout this chapter to substantiate my reasoning for my chosen data approach.

### *3.1.1 Overview of Approach to Data Collection*

I initially intended to utilize a descriptive, iterative, constructivist, and anti-positivist approach throughout data collection and analysis as is called for in Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2017). However, given various constraints, including the COVID-19 pandemic, hindering many of my initial plans regarding data collection, especially relating to participant observation of all groups' in-person actions, I was unable to fully follow Charmaz's (2017) approach as I had outlined in my research proposal. I mainly used concepts from Constructivist Grounded Theory of constant researcher reflexivity throughout the entire process

of data collection and analysis, and to create my theoretical frame of reference which I present later in the discussion in Chapter 7.

Most relevant was Braun and Clarke's (2013) approach outlined in their work *Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners* in my data collection and analysis in terms of their steps for analyzing qualitative data and their advice on writing the final report. I conducted semi-structured individual interviews and group interviews with youth who participate in climate-oriented groups cooperatively. I conducted one in-person interview at a café in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and the rest ($n = 29$) via Zoom video conferencing software because of COVID-19 restrictions during which I collected my data. I recorded all interviews and transcribed them verbatim myself. I supplemented the interviews with participant observation (Kawulich, 2005) of one group's weekly meetings over a 9-month period and three of that same group's in-person actions. These three forms of data (i.e., interviews, participant observation, and group interviews) allowed for some variation in data collection and triangulation. Throughout the data collection process, I remained aware of my social location and my inherent, implicit impact. At the commencement of the data collection process, I conducted preliminary content analyses (Neuendorf, 2019) of the mission statements and aims displayed on the groups' websites and on their social media accounts, as well as strategy documents and specific written materials used for actions (however, only two of the groups involved shared such documents with me). Through these preliminary content analyses, I familiarized myself with the aims and goals the groups displayed to the public.

Below, I describe each of the study aims in depth, and how each study aim related to either the group or the individual. The first section focuses on the group as a unit of analysis, and the following section focuses on the individual. Next, I describe some participant demographics, leading into my approach to data analysis. This chapter ends with an extensive description of my researcher positionality and potential biases.

### *3.1.2 Group Focus*

This study had an overall focus on how participation in the group affected the individual. Initially, I wanted to follow full groups, and compare them to one another in the form of a comparative case study. However, I was not able to get participant consent from all individuals within any groups other than the one that allowed me to observe their meetings consecutively. Therefore, in some cases, I only interviewed one participant from a given group. However both

Extinction Rebellion (XRY) and Sunrise Movement (SYM) are large organizations which have local group factions. Sustainabiliteens (ST) used to function this way but changed their approach part way through my study. Therefore, I clumped all participants who participated in XRY together, all who participated in SYM together, and all who participated in ST together. The study also included five groups from school clubs; because they all were tied to an educational institution, I categorized those groups as school-based. Therefore, there are not only four groups in the study, but rather four categories to which participants could belong.

The first three aims of this study (i.e., aims a, b, and c) outlined above were to understand how groups of young people engaged in climate work in terms of both the approaches they took, what occurred in the behind the scenes work that went into their actions, and what emerged from the group processes. The overall aim of observing what occurred in the group setting was to decipher what emerged from the group processes involved in planning and executing actions. Richards and Farrokhnia (2016) noted that grounded theory involves human communication and language as the primary empirical focus of data collection, therefore, a substantial portion of this study centered around studying group processes that occurred within these youth-centric collectives. Relatedly, because social interactions among activists lead to social reinforcement around a cause (Dresner, et al., 2015), and because cooperation is more likely to lead to action than individual behavior (Chawla, 2020a), I observed as many group meetings and in-person actions as was possible given the context of the COVID-19 pandemic during which I conducted this research.

With the one XRY group I observed, participant observation served a role in investigating interactions among members to understand group processes in an open-ended, yet systematic manner (Kawulich, 2005). This aspect of data collection allowed me to see the interactions and contributions of group members from as close to the insiders' perspectives as possible, while remaining reflexive and cognizant of the fact that my own social location impacted how I viewed and interpreted what I observed. My participation in groups' meetings was almost entirely passive, as I said nothing unless directly spoken to and tried to keep my facial expressions as neutral as possible, given that meetings this group held occurred on Zoom. When I was with this group at their in-person actions, I actively participated and took fewer field notes than when I was passively observing their meetings and acting as note taker. When attending this group's in-person actions, I wrote field notes of individuals' contributions, and of

individuals' interactions with one another in as detailed a manner as possible after the conclusion of the event in a small notebook (which I kept in a locked drawer in my home, to which only I had access). However, due to my inability to observe all groups, my notes proved to be of little use in data analysis because they only described one groups' meetings and actions. Therefore, the field notes taken before served as source of triangulation to inform the data analysis of my interviews, providing context to some of the comments participants made.

As previously stated, I initially aimed to observe these groups of young people operating naturally and to supplement what I observed with introspection in qualitative interviews. However, given the context of the COVID-19 pandemic under which I conducted this research, data collection did not occur as I had hoped. Because I had to do almost all of my data collection virtually, the main form of data that I collected for this study was individual interviews, discussed next. I supplemented that data with two group interviews with 3 interviewees from the same group in one, and four from the same group in another ($n$ = 7).

### *3.1.3 Individuals Within the Group*

With the fourth and fifth aims outlined above (i.e., aims d and e) I wanted to gather individuals' perspectives and experiences within the group, with aim (d) being a blending of the individual and the group perspective, and aim (e) being the individuals' perspectives within the group setting. Individuals–with their own perspectives and mindsets—make up groups. Within activist collectives, social connections lead to collective meaning-making. In order to discern how meaning was formed, as well as to hear individuals' perspectives within the group setting, to some degree, I utilized what I observed during participant observation to inform what I asked of participants in conversation during interviews. Hayward (2021) wrote, "Children are acutely aware of the times when they felt listened to" (p. 177). Therefore, because the fourth and fifth aims above were conversational in nature, I fulfilled these aims through interviews and group interviews. In line with the UNCRC, this study also recognized that young people have the right to voice their opinions and have their opinions listened to regarding matters that affect them (Hart et al., 2014), for example, the climate crisis. I conducted semi-structured individual interviews and two group interviews to ensure that the young people felt that I, as a researcher and academic, listened to their voices and perspectives, as well as to allow space for them to share stories about their activism or any pertinent experiences that they might have wanted to discuss.

Interview questions were mostly surrounding individuals' perceptions of their groups' approaches to climate work as well as what they felt their own place to be within the group. The main sections of the interview schedule were an overall introduction, group functioning, intergenerational influence, meaning-making, and a conclusion. In the introduction, I asked some demographic questions, how the individuals became concerned about the climate crisis, and how they became involved with their group. In the segment on group functioning, I asked participants to generally describe their groups' activities, how meetings were run, how they felt about their group's communication, how decision making, and leadership occurred, and their approach to social media use both for their group as well as individually as it related to climate activism. In the section on intergenerational influence, I asked about adult influence, and young people's perceptions of whether the way their groups functioned was different from the way that adult activist collectives run. In the section on meaning-making, I asked about whether individuals identified as an activist, why this work was meaningful to them, and whether another young person inspired their climate work. I concluded the interviews with a general question about whether they wanted to share anything else that my questions may not have covered, and a final optional demographic question regarding how they self-identified in terms of gender and ethnicity. Interviews lasted between 30-minutes long and 90-minutes long, with the average length of interview being 44-minutes. I conducted interviews between December 2021 and June 2022.

Interviews also allowed space for individuals to share what they might not have wanted to share in a group setting, while group interviews were utilized to facilitate group discussion surrounding the same subject, and to delve deeper into some themes that I generated from interview transcriptions. While I partly utilized participant observation to generate interview questions, attending groups' meetings and events also allowed for "observ[ation] of situations informants have described in interviews" (Kawulich, 2005, p. 4). I triangulated these methods of data collection (e.g., interviews, group interviews, and participant observation) together as much as possible with written documents that some groups provided to me to get an overall picture of youth-led climate organizing in Canada and the United States.

## 3.2 Participants

### *3.2.1 Finding Participants*

I used a purposeful qualitative sampling (Patton, 2015) recruitment method to select participants actively involved in youth-led climate-oriented groups across in Canada and the United States. I took roughly 2-months to look for possible groups with whom to work, initially searching using keywords in Google, including "youth-led climate activist groups" and "youth climate collectives." If I found groups' email addresses on their websites, I emailed them to ask about meeting via Zoom (see Appendix A for email sent to potential participating groups). Some groups responded, and I asked to meet with them to discuss my study. If groups responded and agreed, I conducted preliminary meetings with group leaders to determine participant interest during the spring and summer of 2021. See Appendix B for the verbal assent script used in initial meeting with group leaders. Afterward, I sent them another email with information to share with their group members. See Appendix C for the follow-up email sent to the point person in a group after the initial interest meeting.

I did not find enough participants this way, so, next, in order to find more potential participants, I used social media outlets such as Instagram and Facebook to find more groups. I posted on numerous climate-oriented or youth-led Facebook groups and used my personal Instagram to message potential groups. See Appendix D for the invitation to participate in a study which I posted on Facebook and Instagram. Most groups agreed to meet initially to discuss the possibility of working together through Instagram. After a quick exchange on Instagram, I asked for an email address so that I could send them more information about my study (see Appendix C). I met with each potential group either at one of their groups' regularly scheduled meetings, or one-on-one with a group leader via Zoom. During that time, I gathered that many young activists felt that the way that their groups functioned was "a bit of a mess," in their words. Therefore, I sought to work with groups of young climate activists to learn about the constructiveness behind these groups' self-perceived messiness (see research aims b and c) as well as how they formed social connections and made collective meaning (see research aims d and e). I also aimed to understand the processes that occurred in these groups' planning meetings and other behind-the-scenes organizing work that led to their collective actions, strikes, and protests (see research aims a and b).

I used a snowball method to recruit additional participants via word of mouth by asking interviewees at the end of their interview whether they thought any of their fellow groupmates might be interested in doing an interview. I found organizations via word of mouth and internet searches using keywords such as "youth climate activist groups" and "youth-led climate action," in Google. Selection criteria for choosing groups with whom to work included that the groups were entirely or primarily led by young people under the age of 18 years, could communicate via email and videoconferencing, existed within North America, and were English-speaking, or could participate in an interview in English. The participants were all members of groups of young people of high school age engaged in some form of climate activism, advocacy, or organizing within a collective. The purpose of the choice to only include youth at or below voting age was to shed light on young people's work given ageist depictions of youth activists in popular media (Bergmann & Ossewaarde, 2020).

Before formal data collection began, I attempted to form relationships with groups by attending some groups' meetings without taking field notes and asking how I could help with their tasks in any way in order to give back to them for allowing me to be present and observe. However, some groups did not want me to attend regular meetings after my initial meeting with them because they wanted to avoid an adult present. I also learned through one of my individual interviews, that one school-affiliated group has an adult or multiple adults present, and sometimes, the young people in that group have felt that the adults present have usurped decision-making around some of their event planning. That knowledge further solidified my belief that I should allow these spaces to be youth-only as much as possible.

Participants included groups from the international Extinction Rebellion Youth umbrella group, the United States Sunrise Movement umbrella group youth-centered hubs, school-affiliated climate clubs, and one group from the Vancouver-based Sustainabiliteens collective. See Table 2 for participant group affiliations. Note that though I categorized four group types, not all participants within a group type were from the same location. Participants who were from the same local group (e.g., all Sunrise Youth Los Anelges participants, $n = 4$) knew one another. However, those who participated in the same umbrella group but were not from the same local group did not necessarily know one another.

During the week before the interview was scheduled to take place, I sent two consent forms to each participant via email, one for them to sign themselves, and another for them to ask

their parent or guardian to sign and return to me. I gave directions for each participant and parent or guardian to please scan and email back the signed consent forms to me before the interview commenced. See Appendix G for consent form for participants and see Appendix H for consent form for parents or guardians. Some participants were in their final year of high school and were 18 years old ($n$ = 3) at the time of the interview, therefore, I only sent those individuals the consent form for participants, as they were no longer legally minors and did not need parental consent. For the participant whose interview I conducted in-person, I emailed the consent forms beforehand, and asked him to bring both forms to the interview, printed and signed. I have all scanned and signed consent forms saved in a locked file on my personal computer which is password protected. In addition to the consent forms, which followed the ethical protocol of Concordia University, I returned transcriptions to participants for validation and member checking (Birt et al., 2016). Almost a third of all participants ($n$ = 9) provided additional comments on transcriptions, with minor suggested edits. Additionally, as I am aware that the young people involved in climate organizing volunteer their time and do not get paid for this work, I aimed to value their time and not be extractive of participants for data. I provided compensation and paid each participant $18 USD of my own money (as I did not receive funding for this study) for their time. For the group that allowed me to observe their meetings, I acted as a note-taker for almost all meetings that I attended.

### *3.2.2 Group Affiliations*

As touched upon briefly above, groups included Extinction Rebellion Youth (participants were from Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, North Carolina, California) Sustainabiliteens (all participants were from Vancouver), Sunrise Movement (participants were from California and Massachusetts), and school-affiliated climate clubs. Four total XRY local groups, four total Sunrise Youth hubs, three private school groups, two public school groups, and one Sustainabiliteens collective were included in the study. I aimed to learn how these groups differed in their approaches to climate organizing as well as how they were similar. Note that the claims that I make about the specific groups with whom I worked cannot be generalized as true about the umbrella organizations under which some of the collectives fall but can only be accurate about the small groups with whom I worked. See Table 2 for participants' group affiliations as well as their locations. See Table 3 for participants' length of participation in their

groups, which demonstrates that my interviewees have largely been members of their groups for a long time and are mostly not new to climate organizing work.

**Table 2**

*Participants' Group Affiliations and Locations*

| Name of Organization | Location and No. of Interviewees |
|---|---|
| Extinction Rebellion Youth, umbrella group (XRY)<br>*United States Context* | Boston, Massachusetts (*n* = 4)<br>New York, New York (*n* = 1)<br>Charlotte, North Carolina (*n* = 1)<br>XRY National Team (*n* = 2)<br>Total XRY = 8 |
| Sunrise (Youth) Movement, umbrella group (SYM)<br>*United States Context* | Cambridge, Massachusetts (*n* = 1)<br>Boston, Massachusetts (*n* = 1)<br>Ipswich, Massachusetts (*n* = 1)<br>Los Angeles, California (*n* = 3)<br>Total SYM = 6 |
| Sustainabiliteens (ST)<br>*Canadian Context* | Metro-Vancouver area of British Columbia (*n* = 4)<br>Total ST = 4 |
| School-affiliated clubs<br>*United States Context* | Andover, Massachusetts (*n* = 3) private school<br>Boston, Massachusetts (*n* = 2) public school<br>Chicago, Illinois (*n* = 1) private school<br>Portland, Maine (*n* =2) private school<br>Sharon, Massachusetts (*n* = 4) public school<br>Total school-based = 12 |
| TOTAL | *N* = 30 |

**Table 3**

*Length of Participation in Group*

| Time Span | No. of Participants |
|---|---|
| 1 month to 6 months | 3 |
| 7 months to almost 1 year | 2 |
| 1 year to 1.5 years | 5 |
| 1 year and 7 months to 2 years | 9 |
| 2 years and 1 month to 2.5 years | 8 |
| 2 years and 7 months to 3 years | 3 |

#### 3.2.2.1 Extinction Rebellion Youth

Extinction Rebellion Youth (XRY) is an international collective which young people started in February 2019 as a response to wanting a youth-only space within their umbrella group Extinction Rebellion (Extinction Rebellion Youth, n.d.). They are "an international rebellion of young people using non-violent civil disobedience to fight for immediate and just government action against the climate and ecological emergency" (Extinction Rebellion Youth Boston, n.d., para. 2). Extinction Rebellion United States demands that the government tell the truth regarding the state of the climate crisis, that the government enacts "legally binding policies to reduce carbon emissions to net zero by 2025," for the government to create a citizens' assembly to oversee these changes, and a just transition prioritizing minoritized populations (Extinction Rebellion U.S., n. d.). Extinction Rebellion Youth (XRY) emphasizes that they are autonomous from Extinction Rebellion (XR) adult groups, but that they often cooperate with the adult factions.

#### 3.2.2.2 Sustainabiliteens

Sustainabiliteens (ST) a Vancouver-based movement of young people began in January 2019 with a gathering at Vancouver City Hall "to support one of the first municipal declarations of climate emergency, which passed unanimously that day" (Sustainabiliteens, n.d.). They aim to create a more livable world for the present and future and are entirely run by high-school aged youth; in fact, individuals who graduate from high school can no longer participate in ST. They are "united by the urgency [they] feel to stop climate catastrophe and by a shared vision to exercise [their] agency and create a more just and sustainable world" (Sustainabiliteens, n.d.). They also want to restructure the present systems which they see as broken. They do not exist within an umbrella organization, and do not utilize adult help. While Sustainabiliteens used to have separate factions across the metro-Vancouver area, during the present study, they restructured, and at the time of writing this paper, they have one unified group.

#### 3.2.2.3 Sunrise (Youth) Movement

Sunrise (Youth) Movement (SYM) is a United States national youth-led movement of people of high school age. They exist under the umbrella of Sunrise Movement which includes people up to age 35. Sunrise itself began in 2017, but in 2018, hundreds of hubs launched across the United States after a sit-in at United States Representative Pelosi's office in which Representative Ocasio-Cortez participated to demand a Green New Deal (GND; Sunrise

Movement, 2023). While Sunrise is largely a climate action group, they have many commitments displayed on their website, one of which appears to be specifically intersectionally focused, namely, fighting against racism and bigotry against those of lower socioeconomic statuses or other types of abilities (Sunrise Movement, 2023). Sunrise describes that they are,

> building an army of young people to make climate change an urgent priority across America, end the corrupting influence of fossil fuel executives on our politics, and elect leaders who stand up for the health and well-being of all people (Sunrise Movement, 2023).

Though Sunrise Movement includes young people up to the age of 35, for the purposes of this study, I only included Sunrise Youth hubs, in which only young people from 13 to 18 years old participate.

#### 3.2.2.4 School Groups

School groups were completely different from all the other types of collectives involved in this study. The five school groups included in the study ranged from being targeted towards protecting the oceans or forests, or planting trees, to being specifically politically focused, and engaging in lobbying and climate advocacy work. Though participants came from multiple school-affiliated groups, I categorized school groups together for the purposes of this paper because each school group participant ($n$ = 12) described adult help to some degree. That is, in addition to being school-affiliated, one major difference between school-affiliated groups and non-school-affiliated groups was regular adult or faculty help and intervention. Additionally, I did not want to disclose which school participants attended, for anonymity reasons, therefore, given the similarities, it made sense to put all school-based groups together. For anonymity reasons as well, I have not named which schools their groups were affiliated with so that participants cannot be identified based on these affiliations.

#### 3.2.2.5 Comparison of Groups

Seemingly, Extinction Rebellion Youth and Sustainabiliteens both engage in protestor policy engagement, as Corry and Reiner (2020) describe it. They create and enact plans for social change purposely from outside the political system (Corry and Reiner, 2020). Meanwhile, Sunrise Movement, Extinction Rebellion Youth, and Sustainabiliteens all seem to ideologically agree (based on content analyses of websites, as well as based on interview data) that "social disadvantages and environmental disadvantages are directly intertwined" (Ceaser, 2015, p. 207).

These three groups keep human rights in mind when protesting the concurrent climate catastrophe with widespread structural inequities. Therefore, they engage in climate justice activism by challenging longstanding dynamics of power and privilege, and they uphold concepts of intersectionality (Moradi & Grzanka, 2017). Sustainabiliteens is more specifically climate oriented than Sunrise Movement, but also aims to reclaim democracy, therefore is also politically oriented. It is apparent that these groups are different; that is, though they both take intersectionality as central to their organizing practices, Sunrise Movement is more politically oriented, and engages in lobbying work. Extinction Rebellion, however, focuses on a radical restructuring of the way that government is presently enacted globally, making it the most distinct from all of the group types. As stated above, school groups are different from all of the other collectives in that they are affiliated with an educational institution, and all have a faculty or staff member present at their meetings who helps them.

### *3.2.3 Participant Demographics*

I asked participants a few demographic questions, some at the beginning and some at the end of their interview (see Appendix F for all interview questions). I offered participants to refuse to answer these (and any) questions if they wished, but none of them did so. At the close of their interview, I asked participants how they self-identified in terms of ethnicity and gender (see Tables 4 and 5). Therefore, when I first identify a participant in the findings section below with their quote, after their pseudonym, I include their age and self-identified ethnicity (e.g., African American, Asian, Jewish, white, etc.). Note that I capitalized all historically marginalized peoples' ethnicities, and I wrote the word "white" in lowercase letters. This capitalization and subsequent lack thereof is purposeful in attempt to decolonize my work whenever possible. I indicate the organization to which they belong after their self-identified ethnicity. I do not include participants' self-identified gender in their quote identification because no participant discussed gender as relevant in their groups nor in their work, however they did mention age and ethnicity as relevant. This is not to say that gender is irrelevant to youth-led climate work but that the participants in the present study did not mention it. All participants included in this study lived in North America, with the majority in the United States ($n = 26$) and a handful in Canada ($n = 4$).

Table 5 illustrates the spread of ethnicities that participants self-identified as. I did not offer a list of ethnicities from which they could choose to identify, but rather I asked them how

they identified in terms of ethnicity (and gender) and used their words in Tables 4 and 5. I did not ask about participants' parents' or guardians' socioeconomic statuses, given this could be a sensitive question, and I did not want them to feel judged in any regard. Therefore, this study lacks a measure of participants' socioeconomic statuses. I included Table 6 to show the variance in participants' age at the time of their interviews. Table 7 shows participants' grade in school at the time of their interview.

**Table 4**

*Participants' Self-Identified Gender*

| Self-Identified Gender | No. of Participants | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Female | 22 | 73% |
| Male | 5 | 17% |
| Non-binary | 3 | 10% |

**Table 5**

*Participants' Self-Identified Ethnicities*

| Self-Identified Ethnicities | No. of Participants |
|---|---|
| White (including Caucasian) | 9 |
| Jewish/white | 4 |
| "Mixed Asian" (including bi-racial, Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese) | 7 |
| South Asian (including South-East Asian, and Indian) | 7 |
| Latinx (including Mexican and Latina) | 2 |
| African-American | 1 |

**Table 6**

*Participants' Age at Time of Interview*

| Age | No. of Participants |
|---|---|
| 13 years | 1 |
| 14 years | 2 |
| 15 years | 4 |
| 16 years | 11 |
| 17 years | 9 |
| 18 years | 3 |

**Table 7**

*Participant Grade in School at Time of Interview*

| Grade in School | No. of Participants |
|---|---|
| Grade 7 | 1 |
| Grade 8 | 1 |
| Grade 9 | 1 |
| Grade 10 | 8 |
| Grade 11 | 12 |
| Grade 12 | 7 |

### 3.3 Data Analysis

I employed inductive reasoning around qualitative findings from my verbatim interview transcriptions to analyze my data (Glaser & Strauss, 2017; Richards & Farrokhnia, 2016). I coded all data utilizing axial coding and initial organization of themes (Richards & Farrokhnia, 2016). I accounted for member checking by sending participants tables of results and transcriptions of their interviews and asking for their feedback in terms of accuracy of findings based on the tables (Birt et al., 2016). I closely followed Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2013) methodology of thematic analysis involving a six-step process of familiarizing myself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining, and naming themes, and finally producing the final report.

The first step involved familiarizing myself with the data through reading all transcriptions and notes from interviews several times in order to gain a deep understanding of the content and immerse myself in the data. After each interview took place, I listened to the recording, transcribed the interview and then printed it, and did a first run through of coding. I then put those codes into a code book in a Microsoft Word document, which I referred to throughout my data analysis process. The second step in their method was to generate initial codes, which I did systematically highlighting significant words or phrases that stood out to me. I created a key of all of the colors so that I would be able to recall which phrase belonged to which code in the printed material. I followed Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2013) semantic coding process, allowing codes to capture obvious meaning, and then created codes that were closely tied to participants' exact words. Following Saldaña (2016), I coded to "look for patterns which were repetitive, regular, or consistent occurrences of action [or] data that appear[ed] more than

twice" (p. 5). Then, within my code book, I grouped individual codes together to form categories. I reviewed the categories to ensure they were distinct and did not overlap with one another.

Third, I generated themes by reviewing the categories I created and considered how the categories related to one another. I did this using paper notecards and physically organized them myself. At this point in my data analysis, I learned of HyperRESEARCH (Version 4.5.4) coding software, which I had not known of previously. I then inputted all of my interview transcriptions into HyperRESEARCH and re-coded each interview again electronically. This use of data analysis software allowed for easier categorization of codes, which then allowed me to organize my themes electronically instead of using notecards, which became somewhat messy and confusing, given the large number of interviews. Once I had identified and solidified themes, I began the fourth step of Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis method—reviewing and refining themes. I went back through the interview transcriptions again on HyperRESEARCH to ensure the themes represented the data accurately and captured the meaning of the participants' words. I wrote paragraph descriptions of each theme, as Braun and Clarke (2013) recommend. I employed inductive and semantic thematic analysis, primarily grounded in the data themselves, aiming to stay as close as possible to participants' own words (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Smith, 2015). While I mostly described the data, in some ways, I used interpretive thematic analysis as well, going beyond just description, in order to create a frame of reference for young people's experiences of civic engagement in today's world because of their involvement in youth-led climate activist groups, which I present in Chapter 7.

Finally, for the last step in Braun and Clarke's (2013) process, I wrote the first iteration of the results section to present the themes I generated in a concise and organized manner. I included quotes from the dataset that illustrated the themes and demonstrated their relevance. Overall, the process of coding, categorizing, and generation of themes I followed was iterative, including constant review and refinement. Throughout the process, I remained aware that as a scholar, I was active in the research process and therefore, the data were somewhat subjective. Additionally, I am aware that my unique standpoint as a researcher informed my coding process as well as my own theoretical assumptions. Therefore, I next discuss my positionality as a researcher in depth. Note that I did not analyze the group interviews, because not all participants took part in them.

### 3.4 Researcher Positionality

In this section, I acknowledge the ways in which my subjective experiences and aspects of identity shaped my research questions, methods, and interpretations of findings. Considering the importance of researcher reflexivity, I understand that I cannot truly be unbiased, and my social location and life experiences inevitably affected the outcomes of the study. I considered that, "we are always part of what we study, and we always stand in definite relations to it" (AbuLughod, 1990, p. 27). Notably, I strived to remain cognizant of my possible influence on the group and on individuals while aiming to alter what participants said and did as little as possible (Longhurst, 2003). I constantly problematized my perceptions by keeping a "deeply reflexive gaze back on [myself] and the research process as well as on the empirical world," (Charmaz, 2017, p. 35). This section will discuss my positionality as a researcher, and how my personal experiences and identity influenced my choice of topic because of my values, as well as my care for the planet, which inevitably led me to study this topic.

My passion for the natural environment, animal rights, and social justice issues began at quite a young age. When I was just 6 years old, in the first grade, I learned about the environmental activism of Julia Butterfly Hill, who famously lived in a Redwood tree in California, named Luna, for 2 years to prevent the tree (Luna) from being cut down. Hill's bravery and commitment to protecting the natural world sparked my love for the planet from when I was in grade one to this day. My love of and care for the natural world only grew stronger as I became more involved in environmental and animal rights activism throughout my adolescence and young adulthood.

In 2009, when I was 14 years old, I attended Boston's EarthFest, a then annual event bringing together environmentally conscious individuals and organizations from across the region. While wandering the booths, I stumbled upon the Massachusetts Animal Rights Coalition (MARC). It was through talking with the group's founders, Helen, and Steve, that I first learned of the idea of veganism and animal rights activism, which resonated with me deeply. Before discovering MARC, I was a vegetarian from the age of 8 years old after learning where meat really came from, but I had not deeply considered the impact of my food choices on non-human animals or on the environment. However, after learning about factory farming and animal exploitation, I felt moved to act. I gathered literature from their booth to read later that night, and I went vegan almost immediately and immersed myself in the work of MARC through engaging

in regular animal rights activism and advocacy in Boston with them. See Figure 1 for photos of myself doing animal rights activism with MARC when I was in high school.

In retrospect, it is clear that this experience was a turning point for me, even though I did not know it at the time—it not only changed my diet and lifestyle, but also led me to become more engaged with environmental and social justice issues that surround animal exploitation. I became more aware of the interconnectedness of these issues as well as the intersectionality of justice and how animal welfare and environmental issues relate to humanity's relationship with the more-than-human world. In many ways, this experience at EarthFest in 2009 was a microcosm of my experience of the youth-led climate movement that has swept the world today, as I was in high school at that time and engaged in activism as an adolescent. This experience is a testament to the power of community and education in inspiring change and demonstrates that small moments have a profound impact on the trajectory of our lives and the world around us, in line with significant life experience (SLE) research.

**Figure 1**

*Photo of Self, Wearing a Chicken Suit, Protesting Meat Consumption at the Following Year's EarthFest in Boston, Massachusetts*


*Note.* Photo credit: Rachel Grosz.

Another experience during my adolescence which impacted my desire to study youth-led climate activism was working at The Food Project (TFP) throughout my high school years, from

ages 14 to 17 years old. TFP is a non-profit organization based in eastern Massachusetts that works to promote sustainable food systems and access to fresh produce to urban and lower income communities. This experience introduced me to the concept of sustainable food systems, and of the intersectionality of social justice issues, including food, environmental, and racial justice. TFP also instilled in me a sense of community and the power of collective action, which I see reflected in the youth-led climate activism that I studied.

Two other SLE's, which took place during my undergraduate years at the University of Massachusetts Amherst (UMass) led to my interest in studying youth climate organizing. Working at EarthFoods Café, a student-run cooperative plant-based café furthered my interest in sustainable food systems. As a worker-owner in a collectively run café, I gained first-hand experience in alternative business models and community building, which encouraged me to think critically about how collective efforts impact the environment. Concurrently, I worked at UMass Amherst's permaculture gardens, where I learned more about regenerative agriculture, Indigenous growing practices, and food justice. See Figure 2 for a photo that my then boss and friend took at the end of the growing season of me standing next to a stalk of corn, which was captioned as "Corn as big as Julia!"

**Figure 2**

*Photo of Self, Standing Next to the Corn We Grew at the Permaculture/Teaching Garden in 2015 at the University of Massachusetts Amherst*

*Note.* Photo credit: Xochiquetzal Berry.

Lastly, during my Master of Arts in Teaching at Smith College, I conducted a study and wrote my thesis about whether nature-based preschool teachers taught sustainability in Massachusetts, USA, and I found that they largely do not, due to parental and societal limitations

(see Ginsburg & Audley, 2020). This research not only broadened my understanding of sustainability education, but also influenced the present study. Through conducting that study, I learned the importance of creating and cultivating a strong connection between young people and the more-than-human world, as well as the value of nurturing children's innate sense of wonder and curiosity about the environment. This experience allowed me to approach the present study with a greater appreciation of the role of personal connection in shaping environmental values and behaviors (i.e., eco-cultural identity). It also provided me with a valuable perspective of how early childhood education can support and inspire environmental action among young people.

Taken as a whole, as a researcher who was actively involved in animal rights activism, as well as sustainable food systems work during high school and university, it is likely that these SLE's greatly influenced my desire to study youth-led climate activism. The dedication I felt for advocating on behalf of non-human animals likely shaped my interest in exploring how young people today are working towards creating a just and livable world. My background in animal rights activism may have influenced my interpretation of the data collected in the present study. For example, in order to make the interviews for this study somewhat less formal, and to make participants feel more able to share, when it was relevant, I told participants briefly of my experience as a young animal rights activist. Additionally, if they shared that they were vegan, I told them I was as well, in order to establish rapport. I am aware that these two divulgences may have impacted the data, which is why I am reporting them now. This is not to say that my personal views and experiences definitely skewed the results, but rather that my perspective likely informed how I approached and analyzed the data.

Additionally, I must consider all aspects of my social location, which may have impacted my study's research questions, design, or interpretation of findings. Case (2013) defined social location as the various socially constructed aspects of a person's identity that shape individuals' experiences, opportunities, and perspectives in society, including race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, ability, socioeconomic statues, education level, and religion, for example. As an observant Jewish, female, cis-gender, American-born, physically able-bodied, English-speaking, middle-class, university-educated, plant-based eating person, my social location as well as my personal life experiences undoubtedly shaped my approach to this study. Growing up with parents who were enthusiastically politically-liberal likely also contributed to my interest in studying youth-led climate activism. Additionally, my experiences within the animal rights

movement informed my perspectives on the relationship between anthropogenic climate change and the more-than-human world. As an individual from a middle-class background with access to higher education, I am aware of the privileges that come with my social location, including access to resources and opportunities that others do not have. These privileges may have impacted how I approached the study and interpreted the findings, as my worldview likely does not fully align with those of the participants from different social and economic backgrounds.

Considering my positionality and social location, this study has many possible limitations that need to be acknowledged. Some points I return to at the end of my Chapter 7, in the discussion. Given that I am only fluent in English, this limitation by default omitted many possible groups of young people with whom I could have worked for this study. Other limitations to the study include physical location, and access the youth involved had to technology in order to participate in meetings and interviews that occurred in an electronic setting. As with all research, my social location and personal experiences have undoubtedly influenced my approach to this study, and it is important to acknowledge the ways in which my identity may have shaped my perspectives and interpretations of the findings.

# Chapter 4: Findings: Motivations for Involvement

## 4.1 Introduction

The following three chapters (Chapters 4, 5, and 6) cover the results of my study of young people's experiences of partaking in climate collectives across North America. In the following three chapters, I present the four main themes in the following order: motivations for involvement in youth climate groups in Chapter 4, approaches to group processes in Chapter 5, and young people's reflexivity of their experiences of climate work in Chapter 6. Taken as a whole, these four themes work together to describe young people's experiences of eco-citizenship and civic engagement in today's world through their involvement with youth-led climate organizations between the years of 2021 and 2022 across the United States and Canada. Please note that I use the terms youth, young people, and children interchangeably to describe the participants in this study, who were all between the ages of 13 and 18 years old at the time of their interviews.

After collecting all qualitative data (individual and group interviews and observations of meetings and actions that groups held) and transcribing interviews and group interviews verbatim, I analyzed interview data using a specific qualitative analysis approach outlined in the methods chapter. I used group interview transcriptions and field notes from participant observation for triangulation, but the results presented here come only from the thirty interviews I conducted. During the thematic analysis process, I organized results by theme and category. I subcategorized some themes by group and present them here, organized by the group into which participants fall (e.g., Extinction Rebellion Youth [XRY], Sunrise Youth Movement [SYM], Sustainabiliteens [ST], and school-based groups). Private and public-school responses were similar, so I grouped them together into school-based groups when subdividing categories by group. I purposefully differentiated groups' responses for particular themes in which participants' responses differed the most depending on the group to which they belonged, which allowed me to compare responses more easily. I only sub-divided themes into groups when responses strongly differed from one another depending on the group to which the interviewee belonged.

Please note that I analyzed quotes analytically, "closely tied to the *content* of the extracts presented" (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 252), instead of illustratively. That is, in line with inductive thematic analysis approaches, I "make specific interpretive claims about the *particular*

extracts [I] present – as well as making more general descriptive or interpretive patterns about the data overall" (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 252). Please also note that I use activist or activism, organizer or organizing, and advocate or advocacy throughout the results section when referring to participants' climate work. These terminology differences align with how the youth described their work, extrapolated upon at the end of Chapter 6. Some participants identified with the term activist, while others preferred the term organizer or advocate; therefore, I used their preferred term when speaking about or referring to each individual's work.

Chapter 4 covers why young people in the present study chose to participate in this work. Though I did not specifically ask what motivated participants to engage in climate organizing, the topic came up at the beginning of all interviews. Three questions in the introduction to the interviews inadvertently led participants to discuss motivations for involvement. These questions asked how they became concerned with climate change when they started being interested in acting against it and how they became involved in their group (see Appendix F for the interview schedule). Below I present motivations in terms of family and upbringing, sense of urgency, and global movement awareness.

### 4.2 Motivations for Involvement in Youth Climate Groups

While discerning motivations for involvement was not a research aim, it emerged as important to provide overall context for these specific individuals' reasoning for their engagement with this type of climate work as young people. Therefore, though not in direct response to a purposefully outlined research aim, participants shared their views of the climate crisis in general and how these intense thoughts and experiences from early childhood until the present translated into actions or helped them to identify as climate activists, advocates, or organizers. Although participants shared many motivators for engaging in climate action, when summarizing data from interviewees on motivations and catalysts for engagement in this work, I found they could be grouped into three sub-categories: (a) the roles family and upbringing play, (b) young people's sense of urgency around responding to the climate crisis, and (c) the roles of news and social media. Combined, these motivations helped to explain why the thirty young people involved in the present study chose to engage in climate work.

### *4.2.1 Family and Upbringing*

Out of the thirty participants, half ($n$ = 15) shared that they felt motivated to act to alleviate the state of the climate because of their families, either purposefully or inadvertently. Within the context of this study, family influences could be related to a participant's upbringing (e.g., growing up in an eco-friendly home), topics discussed as a family, parents' professions, or family backgrounds, including but not limited to culture. One-quarter of participants ($n$ = 7) shared that their parents have engaged in or currently engage in climate organizing, and this parent modeling led the participant to want to do the same. For example, Carly (13, white/Jewish, XRY) shared,

> My mom was like, "Oh, climate change is a real problem!" So, she joined XR [Extinction Rebellion], and [then] I was introduced to XR. This was before there was an XR Youth [in her area]. And I was involved in climate activism for a while, but it probably, the severity of the crisis probably hit me last year when I was 12. It was harder to understand when I was little…. [I thought], "Why isn't everyone freaking out? Why did my mom just start thinking about it?" …. I did get into activism because my mom started freaking out. If your parents aren't freaking out, then they are wrong! …. You're the people being brainwashed by your parents, not us.

Carly noted her mother's response to climate-related news and how her mother first joined XR as impacting her. Through attending actions with her mother as a young child (under the age of 11 years), Carly later joined XR and helped to start a local chapter of Extinction Rebellion Youth (XRY) with the assistance of adult XR members, and one other child of an XR member from the local group that Carly's mother joined—Elijah, who I will introduce later. Thus, Carly was introduced to climate activism as a young person through her parent's direct influence via her parent's engagement in activism.

Carly found her mother's recency of concern around climate activism rather appalling. She thought her friends' parents, who were not "freaking out," were gravely wrong from a moral standpoint. She went on to say that the parents of her peers, who were not immensely concerned about the climate crisis, were "brainwashing" their children into believing the current state of the more-than-human world as well as the effects of climate change are normal. Carly's mother's involvement with Extinction Rebellion impacted Carly's life considerably. This parental engagement in climate organizing was one way in which parental or family engagement in

climate advocacy motivated young people to do the same. Though less intense than Carly's opinion, seven other participants echoed Carly's perspective in terms of their parents' concern affecting their inclinations towards action.

I asked each participant if anyone influenced their engagement in climate activism. Several participants had a parent or older family member who was involved in activism in one way or another. Multiple participants stated that these individuals influenced the youth's behavior in terms of engaging in climate organizing. Similar to Carly's experience, Elaina (14, white, SYM) also had a parent who was a climate activist:

> My dad's an activist, so he's influenced me personally, and has always been there to give me advice whenever I'm trying to navigate the issues of working for a small organization and being an activist and dealing with activist burnout even as a young kid. I think he's definitely, he hasn't actively influenced, but he's helped.

In response to the question of whether an adult influenced her engagement with climate advocacy, Elaina shared that her parental influence was indirect. That is, Elaina's experience of parental influence regarding activism was more of modeling than Carly's. Carly mentioned that her mother brought her to XR events. Interestingly, while Carly refrained from noting any specific tools that her parents shared with her in terms of being an activist, Elaina described them. Comparing Elaina and Carly's perspectives revealed that parent or caretaker modeling of activism can affect young activists in substantial and varied ways.

Another way in which young organizers' families influenced or catalyzed youth engagement with climate organizing is through cultivating a love of nature in their children. In different ways, young participants' families instilled in their children the idea of adoration, care, and stewardship for the more-than-human world, which participants largely identified as "nature," given that nature is the most common word to refer to natural environments (i.e., the woods or the wilds). Kamala (16, Japanese/white, SYM) illustrated this notion of familial cultivation of care for the natural world:

> My family's always been exposing me to national parks and camping, and … outdoor activities, and I'd say they put more of an emphasis on "nature's beautiful, and we should respect it," but not so much on the science, and educating me on that, but just exposing me to outdoors activities made me from a young age appreciative of nature.

Kamala noted her family's outdoor activities, as well as discussions of caring for nature as catalysts for her wanting to engage in protecting the more-than-human world. This exposure to the natural environment, with the scaffolding of direct teaching of love of nature, is beneficial at a young age to instill an ideal of protecting and stewarding the Earth.

Similarly, Amelia (16, Jewish/white, school-based) told a story of going to Alaska at a young age with her father, a park ranger. Her father's occupation led her to care deeply for non-human animals and flora:

> We were hiking with a naturalist and a park ranger, and I was asking all of these questions. I was like, "I wanna be a park ranger when I'm older, and I'm gonna know all the animals." [The naturalist] showed us a pika, and if you're not familiar with pikas, they are ridiculously cute. They're like Alpine Mountain mice. They're larger, and they stuff their cheeks like chipmunks, adorable. So, we're looking at them, and she's like, "So they're dying out because climate change is causing tree line decrease, the trees are going up the mountains because it's getting warmer, and these animals need alpine habitat," … So, I remember that was very scary [for me], I was very bothered by that. When I got home, I was like, "Dad, we need to go to Glacier National Park. We need to go to Australia to see the coral reefs." I was suddenly very aware of all the things we were losing, which is frightening.

Amelia's recounting of an experience from her childhood with her father influenced her in terms of leading her to care deeply for the natural environment. Amelia remembered many details from this experience of hiking with her father and traveling to places where most children are unlikely to go. She shared that animals, unlikely or unexpected weather patterns (e.g., lack of snow on mountains where it usually would be), and "loss of biodiversity" and its effects on humans made her feel concerned about the degradation of the natural environment at the young age of 10 years. She noted that her awareness of this loss of essential and expected aspects of the more-than-human world made her feel fearful for the future, and this fear, in conjunction with the influence of her father's profession, led her to engage civically in climate advocacy. However, this fear of losing natural world wonders did not immediately lead her to want to engage in climate advocacy, however. Instead, it first led Amelia to want to see coral reefs, renowned national parks, and glaciers, for example, before climate change took them all.

Parents, caretakers, and older relatives model behavior to their younger kin. As parents' occupations or activist inclinations influenced participants, so too do parents' opinions, especially regarding political affiliation. Based on participants' responses, it seems parents' left-leaning political inclination influenced participants' activism. Those youth who engage more politically in their climate organizing behaviors (e.g., lobbying, canvassing for politicians, or writing bills) spoke more of their parents' political affiliations or voting tendencies than did those who engage in non-political climate organizing (e.g., protesting theatrically outside of banks or other corporate property). When asked about when she first became aware of the climate crisis, Julianna (18, white, SYM) shared her family's political ideology and her father's occupation as influencers of her awareness of climate change as well as catalysts for her engagement in politically affiliated climate advocacy with Sunrise Movement. Juliana observed:

> I've been aware of it [climate change] for my whole life, just because I was raised in a very [politically] liberal family, and my mom especially always talked to me about political issues and climate change. And my dad works for the EPA [Environmental Protection Agency], so I grew up in an environment where EJ [Environmental Justice] and climate change were discussed to some extent.

Amelia's and Julianna's parents' careers led to family discussions of the state of the natural environment, which led them to care for and want to protect the more-than-human world. Julianna used the word "liberal" in reference to her family's political ideology, a term that another SYM member, Melanie, also used to describe SYM's work. Juliana's use of the words "talk" and "discuss" implied that her parents may have intended to influence Julianna to engage in climate advocacy. Discussion, especially repeatedly, of similar focus points in popular news media often act as influencers for young people to begin engagement in climate advocacy.

Formative memories during middle childhood also seemed relevant motivators for multiple participants' interest in climate advocacy. Felix (17, Chinese American, school-based), whose climate advocacy is quite politically oriented (e.g., lobbying and bill writing, among other activities), discussed a formative memory with a parent related to liberal political ideology. Felix recalled a memory from younger childhood about listening to National Public Radio [NPR] with his father in the mornings before school:

> Listening to NPR every morning as my dad drove me to school … and NPR, of course, was doing responsible reporting, so climate change often came up. As I grew older, the

> frequency of those reports only grew in my mind, so I certainly became concerned and aware of it in public school, I just didn't feel like I could have a stake in doing something about it until I got to [current private school].

Unlike Julianna's politically-liberal parents, Felix's father may not have intentionally tuned the radio to NPR to influence his son, Felix, toward liberal political ideology. However, inadvertently, this radio listening every morning during early through middle childhood led Felix to become aware of climate change as a young person. Interestingly, the change from public to private school made Felix feel he had agency in climate advocacy due to various factors upon which it is impossible to speculate. Parental and familial behaviors have long-lasting impacts on young people and shape their choices and values while growing up.

Though not all participants mentioned cultural and ethnic backgrounds in responses regarding catalyzing climate organizing, six out of seven participants who identified as South Asian discussed their specific culture's importance regarding sustainability. Seven out of the thirty total participants self-identified as coming from South-Asian (including South-Asian, South-East Asian, and Indian) backgrounds. Among those individuals, the aspect of upbringing relevant to cultivating eco-citizenship is culture. Based on the results of the present study, culture motivated these young people to engage in climate organizing, whether it be the cultures in which they grew up or the cultures with which they identify. Six South-Asian participants noted that the culture in which they grew up is inherently eco-friendly and sustainable. In one way or another, they each mentioned that they learned pro-environmental and sustainability lifestyle practices (e.g., recycling, reusing, and composting) from their older relatives who grew up in South Asia and not from their parents nor from social or news media, where many participants who were not from South Asian cultures learned these practices. Relating to culture and individual sustainability practices, Zelda (15, South-Asian, ST) shared,

> I'm Pakistani. I'm South-Asian. Culturally, I know we are some of the most [eco-friendly people] … my family is incredibly sustainable. We're all just farmers, we live in a very rural area. But Pakistan and South Asia are gonna be … most affected by climate change because of floods and droughts and all that. And I had always seen for such a long time, these people, and my family, we've been doing what everyone [in the Global North] is [now] doing, like the whole recycling and sustainability. We've been doing that for generations, since my great-great-grandparents. So, why is it that we are being affected

> by this so much? So, I think internally I knew that the more environmentalist aspect of climate change, of climate action, was somewhat surface level.

Not only did Zelda touch upon the intersectionality inherent in the climate crisis (i.e., that the climate crisis affects those most marginalized first and most severely), but she also told the story of how her family has been living sustainably for multiple generations, regardless of other cultures' practices. Zelda extrapolated that she observed her great-grandparents engaging in what people living in the Global North now consider sustainability behaviors when she was a young child. Therefore, she felt that citizens of the Global North currently appropriate sustainability behaviors. Sabrie (15, South-Asian, school-based) spoke about her South Asian culture as well:

> It's nice that at home we have a focus on it [sustainability] and, there's always new stuff that we are adding, and it's not something that we're just like, "oh, we're doing enough so we can stop now." It's nice that we continue to think about what else we can do.

Though Sabrie did not explicitly state that her South Asian culture led her to engage in climate advocacy, she did share that she learned sustainability behaviors from her parents, who are South Asian, as well as other factors about her South Asian upbringing. Her parents and grandparents modeled the pro-environmental behaviors that she cares about and employs daily, reinforcing her desire to engage in climate advocacy. Parents, guardians, and caregivers influence young people's inclination to engage in climate organizing. However, they are far from the only catalysts for young people's engagement in climate organizing that I found through this study.

### *4.2.2 Sense of Urgency*

Some participants described climate change as an obviously solvable problem and felt frustrated with governments and institutions for not acting. These participants felt the injustices of climate change being a burden for young people to bear. They want to make the world better for younger and future unborn generations and expressed anger and a sense of urgency that motivated them to begin and to continue in the work of climate advocacy. Therefore, their feelings of necessity to act and awareness of the climate crisis were firmly established and began at an early age. For example, Grace (18, Latina, SYM) stated, "I think I've always been concerned. I don't remember. I think I've been concerned since I was old enough to understand what was going on." Similarly, Melanie (17, white, SYM) reflected,

> I think that I've always been concerned about the climate. I think, growing up in my generation, I've talked to a lot of young people my age, and I think that we all share that

> we've always grown up with climate change. We've never grown up in an era where it wasn't a serious issue. But, as I've grown older, it's become much more of an issue.

Participants grew up with an acute awareness of the climate crisis, seeing and hearing devastating news regularly, so much so that 20 out of 30 of the interviewees in the present study mentioned their awareness of such catastrophes for as long as they can remember. Given that participants in the present study are in their adolescent stages of life, they are only becoming increasingly aware of the issues that climate change presents for the planet and all of its inhabitants.

Of the thirty participants, five shared that the COVID-19 lockdown gave them time to think and increased their awareness of the injustices occurring around them more blatantly, particularly as they relate to the climate crisis. Each of those five participants shared in one way or another that learning that humanity can reduce emissions, as people did during the COVID-19 lockdown (Nguyen et al., 2019), demonstrated to them that the Global North is capable of making the necessary emissions reductions but chooses otherwise. This awareness of humanity's capabilities, especially those in power in the Global North, exacerbated young people's anger towards adults for lacking proper action to combat the climate crisis, given that governments and corporations have the necessary information and tools to do so. Ethan (16, Mixed-Asian/white, XRY) shared,

> [The COVID-19 pandemic] was when I really wanted, I felt like, I'm in the middle of this maelstrom of confusion, chaos. I need to just do something. I can't just be passive … it [climate activism] just feels like it's necessary for me.

Ethan described climate organizing as something that feels imperative for his mental well-being. Through this work, he felt he was doing something positive to affect the widespread issues caused by anthropogenic climate change. Ethan came to this realization of the urgency around climate issues while stuck at home and experiencing half of his high school career from his computer during the COVID-19 pandemic, not from learning about the climate crisis from visiting a science museum with his grandparents when he was a small child, as he mentioned earlier in his interview. Given that the lockdown period felt like "chaos," and a "maelstrom of confusion," it is possible that compounding world events made participants more acutely aware of the climate crisis for various reasons, some of which youth explicitly mentioned, such as time to think; others of which were not mentioned but can only be surmised.

Caroline (16, white, school-based) echoed this feeling of necessity to act: "I would just say I'm an activist because I need to be." Of the thirty participants, 15 shared that action against climate change felt like an obligation or a burden that older generations left young people. Marianne (15, white, XRY) told this point through the lens of intersectionality, which many of these groups try to embody. She described,

> I feel like if my generation has been handed this issue that is going to harm everyone, and is gonna harm, especially marginalized people, it's not a choice to me. It's just like, well I have to do this, or I have to do all that I can, or I'm gonna feel horrible about it.

From Marianne's perspective, the climate crisis has been "handed" to the current youth by those of older generations currently in power. That is, those of the Baby Boomer and Gen X generations, as well as those generations born since the Industrial Revolution (which took place circa 1740-1820), have created the mammoth issue that is the climate crisis, and young people today, as well as all future generations, have to withstand the worst of it. Therefore, Marianne, like 15 other participants, felt that action against climate change is "not a choice," because these young activists collectively feel that if they do not try to cultivate a better world, then no one else will, and that time is running out. As will be discussed later, the burden of acting to create a better future is negatively affecting young people's mental health. Marianne touched on this idea of feeling like she has to act against climate change because of guilt when she said that she will "feel horrible about it" if she does nothing. Though they are in different XRY groups, Jake (18, Mexican, XRY) also illustrated this feeling of not having a choice:

> I feel like we're kind of forced to take action, in a way. It's not really our choice, to an extent, which is really unfortunate, because I know [we're] kind of battling like, [we] have to do it, and I want to, but I know there's often, I think this is also true with Communities of Color, we're talking like Indigenous and Black people, as well, where there's this weight on your shoulders where it's like, you are supposed to be the one acting because it's impacting you.

Related to Marianne's emphasis on the inherent intersectionality of the climate crisis, Jake discussed the feeling of being forced to do the climate work he does and related it to the collective struggles of People of Color (POC). Though not specifically addressed, intersectionality was mentioned explicitly or covertly in various ways in two-thirds ($n$ = 20) of participants' interviews.

Feeling forced to act seemed to negatively affect participants' psychological development. Zelda eloquently articulated this idea when she declared, "It's survival work. It's not something we do as a hobby…. this isn't just something we do for leisure because we're so good [or out] of selflessness." Zelda's emphasis on and use of the term "survival work" illustrated that climate organizing is mentally taxing and burdensome, an idea echoed throughout participants' retelling of their experiences of being climate activists. Makayla (17, white/Jewish, school-based) elucidated the notion of the emotional burden that the feeling of urgency around the climate crisis poses for young people:

> A lot of the time I feel really upset that there's this burden of, "Well, you need to be a climate activist. You don't really have another option because this is a threat to the entire world." But at the same time, I'm grateful for this cause that I really care about, and I'm grateful for the opportunity to change it.

Here, Makayla touched upon the feeling of not having another option other than to do the work of climate advocacy, given that some people think of Generation Z (to which all participants in this study belonged) as the last generation of the human species (hence the letter Z)—a notion of which these young people are aware. Makayla reframed the burden she feels of being a climate activist through her gratitude practice which she referenced later in her interview.

Another vital motivator for engaging in climate advocacy shared among many participants is generativity—that is, "an interest in establishing and guiding the next generation" (Erikson, 1964, p. 267), in other words, acting not necessarily for the benefit of one's own generation, but for those younger and not yet born. While numerous participants shared the idea of generativity, none used this specific developmental psychology term. As Makayla aptly put it, "[youth] want to be active contributors to change, to making the world a better place, to contributing to that trend of history leaning towards justice." These young people acting to combat the climate crisis work partly for their own lives and for their future selves but somewhat more so for their younger siblings and their potential offspring. Elaina (14, white, SYM) described,

> I just remember seeing the IPCC report and going, "Oh my gosh! This is a problem that is going to be affecting my children, grandchildren, and generations to come," because usually, climate change is just such a glossed-over topic. And, from my privilege, I'm able to not really care about it. I was allowed the privilege of not really caring about it up

> to that point. But I was just like, "I need to do something collectively for the world, for the first time in my life."

The release of the 2021 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report, detailing that society needs to meet emissions reduction targets sooner than the 2018 IPCC report had outlined, sparked an intense feeling of generativity in Elaina, as well as some of her peers. She realized then, at the age of 13 years, that without massive action on climate change, her unborn offspring would likely see an uninhabitable world. Elaina mentioned that she is aware of her white upper middle-class American privilege, which has allowed her to not realize the severity of the climate crisis until now. This awareness led Elaina to act to make the world a habitable place for her loved ones and for those not yet born.

Relating to generativity, Julianna stated, "I just think it's the most important political issue to address right now, because, if the world becomes uninhabitable in a couple of hundred years, the other things just won't really matter," pointing to the sense of urgency that young people feel towards the issue. Julianna is not alone in such feelings. Caroline (16, white, school-based) shared: "For me, it's, I can't leave being a planet that's gonna fall apart for the next people," subtly hinting at generativity. Similarly, Felix spoke of his interest in this work, but got more specific about his reasoning than some of his peers:

> There is an urgency that comes with, [the awareness that] if we don't do something now, we're gonna suffer the effects as adults, and we want to be adults. We wanna live when we wanna when our adulthood would be, we want to exist during that time… I sort of said facetiously, but half not facetiously, earlier that I sometimes will imagine my life as an adult, and I want the Earth to exist when I'm an adult [laughs]. So, in that sense, [climate work is] very meaningful to me because I like life, and a lot of the climate advocates that I work with like living, and [like] living things, [like] living themselves, and a [like a] living Earth.

Though Felix spoke of his own and his peers' adulthood, they are not yet adults and want to be able to live happily and healthily into adulthood. Urgency and generativity are intertwined motivators that lead to the feeling of immediacy in terms of necessity to act. Next, I discuss another source of young people's acute awareness of the climate crisis: news and social media outlets reporting the global movement of climate activism.

### *4.2.3 Global Movement Awareness*

Participants in this study indicated that young people now get their news mainly from social media outlets such as Instagram and Twitter, as opposed to newspapers, news media websites, or news channels on television. For example, Kamala (16, Japanese/white, SYM) stated,

> I think it was ninth grade; I just kept consuming a bunch of very saddening, depressing facts about climate change, and the science behind everything. It just made me unmotivated to do anything. I [thought] it's too late, and nothing's gonna change.

As Kamala illustrated, what young people read, see, and scroll through on social media affects them significantly. Of the 30 participants, 12 shared that seeing fellow activists on social media encouraged their involvement in youth climate organizing. To illustrate this point, Sabherwal et al. (2021) coined the term "The Greta Thunberg effect" (p. 322) to describe intentions to spur engagement in climate activism as Greta Thunberg and others modeled with the Fridays for Future school strike group.

Media coverage surrounding Greta Thunberg is a recurring example of news and social media acting as catalysts for engagement in youth climate activism. For example, Melanie said, "we've seen these young leaders rise to a sort of fame, especially Greta Thunberg," a sentiment twelve other participants echoed. To illustrate, Ethan shared,

> Greta Thunberg was just a huge rallying cry for a lot of people, and now we have this kind of community, this sense of unity of brotherhood if I can use that word in a gender-neutral way; it definitely feels like you [are] part of something bigger than yourself in a way that gives you agency and individuality.

For Ethan, Greta Thunberg's example was motivational and inspiring, creating in many ways a sub-culture for young people to be part of to contribute to something bigger than themselves. Participants reported that this sub-culture of youth activists against climate change positively affects young people's development, and to some degree counteracts the negative effects inherent in awareness of the climate crisis. Similarly, for June (17, Vietnamese American, XRY) Greta Thunberg's work, which she found through popular and social media, also led her to participate in youth climate organizing:

> I had learned that Greta Thunberg would be coming to my city, there were a bunch of speakers, there was a stage, it was huge. And so, after I went to that and I listened to all

the speeches, that's when I learned. At first, I went because it was like a Greta Thunberg thing, but then I learned about the true urgency and the true nature of climate change, and how it affects more than I thought it would.

June initially went to her first strike because Greta Thunberg was going to be there, and she stayed in XRY because of what she learned through following Thunberg's work. Popular news and social media influence young people to engage in climate advocacy work. These influences seem to exemplify where media and social media positively affect young people because they motivate them to join a movement or group that allows them to feel increased agency in an issue that often seems insurmountable.

### 4.3 Summary

As presented above, motivations for partaking in climate work fell under three main categories: family and upbringing, sense of urgency, and global movement awareness. Families were somewhat influential for young people's inclinations to do climate activism. More impactful, however, was how young people felt about the climate crisis—their awareness of it made them feel compelled to do something. They felt they could not just stand idly by but had to be part of the work of changing the future. These feelings were encompassed in both their sense of urgency about the matter, as well as their awareness of the global climate movement. Next, I will discuss group processes in youth-led climate collectives.

## Chapter 5: Findings: Approaches to Group Processes

### 5.1 Introduction

In response to research aims a, b, and c, this chapter describes how groups involved in the present study engaged in climate advocacy differently across collectives. Research aims a and b are concerned with what groups actually did during their planning meetings and actions. Research aim c is focused on what happened among the individuals within the groups in response to this planning and resultant acting as collectives. In the present study, internal planning and communication, leadership styles, and outreach surfaced as critical factors in group processes, which are essential aspects of climate organizing. Concerning the first category, internal planning and communication, participants shared that proper communication was essential for their groups to function smoothly and efficiently. Youth actions for climate advocacy, whether big or small, require significant planning and multiple meetings to put on a single event, which I describe in the first section of this chapter. When discussing the second factor, participants noted that groups took differing approaches to leadership, whether organized, decentralized, or somewhere in the middle. Some collectives talked about utilizing adult leadership or support, and some did not, largely dependent on whether they were affiliated with an educational institution or not. Finally, regarding the last category under the theme of approaches to group processes, outreach, participants noted that they engaged with those outside of their group through actions they held in public places and via communication on social media, both of which served specific purposes for their goals. The most significant differences among group-level approaches to climate organizing were the ways in which their collectives functioned together, which I am calling group processes, for the purposes of this paper. For that reason, I subdivided the three sections that follow by group to which participants belonged.

### 5.2 Planning and Communication Within the Group

The public sees one outward spectacle of the actions undertaken and planned by these youth-led groups, but much behind-the-scenes planning, and communication take place to put on these actions. Internal planning involves all the preparatory meetings involved in planning for actions. Communication permeates all aspects of planning, so I discussed that first. Specifically, participants discussed proper communication as leading to the most successful actions for each group. After describing communication, I discuss meetings and planning. Below, I have divided

the data by group to differentiate among groups' diverse approaches to communication and planning. At the end of this section, I will give a comparison of the groups in terms of this theme.

### *5.2.1 Extinction Rebellion Youth*

Extinction Rebellion Youth participants ($n$ = 8) had lots to say about how their communication takes place in their group in various ways, including positive, negative, and neutral. Generally speaking, XRY participants reported that their group members are on the same page but that disagreements occur somewhat regularly, though conflict resolution proves important in promoting group cohesion. Ethan, for example, thought disagreement to be healthy:

> I think it's good for there to be a little bit of conflict, even, for some healthy disagreement, because I think that kinda brings out the best in us. I'd say that's what good communication looks like, when we're allowed to disagree with each other, but, of course, most of the time, it's all, we are one mind.

Ethan considered conflict within the group almost necessary for forming bonds at the collective level. He shared that he finds conflict to be a positive thing. He used the term "one mind," which connotes that ideas come from the collective rather than individuals, something which other participants did not echo. In contrast, regarding conflict, June described that her group struggles with communication:

> Communication is definitely one of the biggest things we've struggled with internally…. whenever that happens, we all have a conflict resolution call. So, anybody involved in the conflict, we'll all go on a meeting … a resolution call and give each other time away to process and figure out what we'd like to say, and then join back on the call and be able to talk with one another and figure out where this miscommunication happened and how we can fix it, and also personally how you were hurt by the conflict.

Participants spoke of good, effective communication as one of the most critical aspects of youth climate organizing for everything to run smoothly, given the many moving parts involved. With XRY groups being autonomous from XR adult collectives, youth resolve conflict without adult intervention. June's group has a system to deal with issues as a collective, which she described extensively. According to June, these resolution calls usually end positively and contribute to developing group cohesion and collective identity. June was the only XRY participant to describe a specific process for overcoming conflicts within the group. However, other groups

described some form of conflict resolution, such as school groups, which I extrapolate upon later.

Communication permeates the planning process, and participants emphasized that lots of conversation regarding events happens outside of scheduled meeting spaces. XR purposefully only utilizes encrypted electronic communication applications to discuss planning for actions. When an action is happening soon, planning (including multiple contingency plans of all possibilities that could occur), in addition to constant communication, is integral, as participants shared. Regarding communication directly before and during actions, Marianne expressed,

> If we're talking about something like targeting Chase Bank … it would be constant communication, going to calls, for the action team, and planning it all out together and making a plan B, a plan C, making sure everything goes okay. Making sure people are NVDA trained, which is non-violent direct action, making sure the right people talk to the police if needed, making sure people understand the risks, making sure people understand the benefits of this, spreading the news, and then debriefing after it happens. And if anything goes wrong, taking responsibility for it and learning from it.

Many XRY local groups have a dedicated action team which is largely in charge of the communication and planning for actions, more so than other working groups. However, planning involves more than organizing all aspects of the day of an action itself. It also involves planning backup plans, as well as an immense amount of communication in the lead-up to the event, and almost constant communication among various people on the day of to get the event up and running on the scheduled day and at the scheduled time. Marianne, here, mentioned the "NVDA training," an online 2-hour non-violent direct action training run by the adult faction of Extinction Rebellion, which I attended once to observe, and another time so that I could participate more fully in XR actions and act as an observer for this research study. Everyone who wants to participate fully in actions run by XR (including whether or not they want to get arrested or risk arrest) is encouraged to take the NVDA training at least once. Marianne noted that the action team "takes responsibility," for whether anything goes wrong at an action, implying that the action team holds more responsibility than the other working groups. Other XRY local group coordinators did not mention such responsibility.

Meetings and planning for actions are both forms of communication that youth-led climate collectives do. Most planning involving discussion in these XRY groups occurs via

Zoom or Google Meet conferencing platforms, given that I conducted this study during the COVID-19 pandemic. Groups that existed before the pandemic met in-person either weekly or bi-monthly, generally on weekends, in a planned location. However, some groups formed temporally close to the onset of the pandemic. Therefore, they had to adjust very quickly to quarantine protocols, and thus meeting online became the norm. Marianne gave a general overview of what occurs in her XRY group's regularly scheduled meetings, as well as a breakdown of the different working groups that make up the team:

> First, we usually do introductions. We talk to each other about how we're doing, 'cause we're all pretty good friends. Then we go into updates of each working group, and then usually we talk about anything that's come up on email, or anything we've heard word of. And then we talk about any new projects, if that's what that meeting is about. We sort of hear voices from everyone [about] what they're interested in doing or starting up, and we try to find a way to do that and complete that. Then we split up into [working] groups and work on whatever we worked on in our working group meetings in the past week.

Though participants illustrated that all XRY groups' meetings function similarly, not all of these collectives have separate working groups because of size differences. XRY working groups include art, fashion, action, outreach, and communications. Some do not have the same separations, however, from group to group, meetings run somewhat similarly, as we can see from Ethan's explanation of how his group ran meetings:

> We get together, we meet, every week, we really try to do that if we don't do anything else. It's good to at least just talk about things. And we'll plan what a good idea for our next action would be, and then we try to nail down details about that. So, we've done, [putting up] posters, doing, march[es]; those are the big two that we've done.

One aspect of planning that Ethan noted as of utmost importance is meeting every week, even if only for a few minutes, something that only two other participants said as well. Through my observations of Ethan's XRY group, I noticed that this regular meeting structure allowed for group cohesion and collective identity to form through discussion among youth who know each other reasonably well. However, a meeting focused on planning an action occurs quite differently from regularly scheduled weekly meetings when an action is not coming up shortly. There are many moving parts involved in putting on an action. These groups of young people

have to consider all the logistics involved, including the possibilities of what might go wrong. Regarding how meetings take place for action planning, June explained:

> For our actual actions, where we have a certain goal or a certain issue that we're tackling, those we always try to add a certain sense of theatrics in it because that's what the media will come and report…. [For a specific action] as for the planning of the entire process, it took a lot, it took multiple weeks because it [was] a really big action that we all had to plan. I think a lot of people were able to participate in the planning. I think it went really well. I didn't feel rushed during the planning. I think it went really well because actions require props, and we were able to have group art builds where we could just bond and work towards something we can actually use for the action.

Extinction Rebellion, generally, not only the youth factions, aims to have events (e.g., parades, marches, sit-ins) that draw attention for the public to see and for the media to report on when actions have the goal of increasing awareness of the climate crisis. For example, XR actions often involve giant puppets that multiple people hold on long poles. They also often include their Red Rebel Brigade, which are groups of people wearing red robes and acting as silent messengers to demonstrate the urgency of the climate crisis. XR also holds events which they call die-ins, in which as many volunteers as possible pretend to be deceased in public places, acting as if they have died of climate change. At these actions, these individuals lie on the ground with signs on top of them with slogans such as "there is no planet B," "now is too late," "our future's chained to your actions," "our home is on fire" and, "fight for our future," to demonstrate the dire need for governments and corporations to act on climate change. XR makes all of the props they use in their actions at their art builds, which four participants described as adding to members' bonding with one another, something I noticed when attending an art build that one of these participating XRY groups hosted.

Regarding art builds and planning, June felt that the planning process went well partly because her group had enough time to plan, and that bonding felt built into the planning process through the art builds they held for a specific action. June added, "logistically, I don't think a lot of people realize we don't just choose a random spot, and then choose to picket or rally outside of there," demonstrating that each aspect of an action is carefully and tactically planned out in advance. XRY members shared that they map out every aspect of an action, including the exact meeting place, and ending place if it is a march or parade, as well as what to do with props after

an event. Similar to June, Ethan described some aspects of consideration that his XRY group takes for planning actions:

> We kind of plan according to what other organizations in the area are doing. We don't want to step on their toes. We take the weather into consideration. You know, current events like [Conference of the Parties] COP26 or some natural disaster, those are all things we take into consideration when we think about what our next action's gonna be.

Each group, to some degree, is aware of other local groups' climate organizing within their states and cities. Sometimes, groups collaborate in statewide coalitions, such as Massachusetts Youth Climate Coalition or Maine Youth Action, both of which multiple participants from the present study belong but will not be identified to maintain participant anonymity. As Ethan mentioned,

> XR groups may protest well-known government meetings like COP26 or the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCC).

Planning for actions, however, is different from what occurs during the actual actions, given that factors change, such as current events, time of year, and weather. XR, as an organization, specifically creates demands for each of its actions that align with its overall demands, described above in the methods section. Marianne articulated,

> [For] every action, a part of the process is creating a set of demands. So, when we were targeting Victoria's Secret, we don't just wanna do things and then say, 'okay, figure it out,' to them. So, for Victoria's Secret, we created a plan, we created demands, we created all these things, and then as we did it, that's what the direction was.… When we're planning actions, we have, 'calling out,' actions, and then 'calling in,' actions. So, when we're calling out to organizations, or corporations or whatnot, we're calling them out, like, 'hey! Chase Bank is doing this,' or, 'Victoria's Secret is doing that,' but when we're calling someone in like we've done in the past with Holzweiler, which is a brand that reached out to us a while ago, we give them a set of demands, and they have to follow it, that's sort of like we work with a brand to do better, to be better.

The way Marianne described actions was different from how all other participants described them. Marianne differentiated between "calling-in" and "calling-out" actions, words common in social justice organizing spheres. Most actions that XR does seem to fall into the "calling-out" category, such as protesting the construction of pipelines, marching on government officials'

homes in response to decisions, or holding a theatrical event outside of a bank headquarters, for example. Marianne's XRY group has a specific fashion working group, which not all XRY factions have, that focuses on how the fast fashion industry is wasteful and harmful to the environment and human rights in various ways. Marianne shared that plans created for fashion-focused actions differ from those created for bank-protesting actions. She stated that her XRY group makes concrete demands towards the fast fashion industry regarding waste usage and slave labor, for example. In contrast, for a bank-focused action, they demand divestment from fossil fuels, for example. Given that XR has demands not only for banks and large corporations but also a radical change in how the government is run (e.g., creating a citizen's assembly), actions have different goals depending on the audience or target of the action.

Something novel about XRY in comparison with the other groups is that sometimes XRY holds arrestable actions, unliked any of the other youth-led climate action groups. Therefore, XRY plans for possible arrests and what could happen in such scenarios. Discussing actions that include possible arrests, Kyra (16, South-East Asian, XRY) commented:

> When we're planning, it's like, "okay, what could go wrong?" And, we're taking precautions in all these measures. It's like, "okay, what if we get arrested?" Then we have these bail fund spreadsheet[s] and we're like, "okay, here's who would pick up the people from jail. Here's who would pay the bail." We have this prepared for every action, like what would happen if we all got arrested, or some of us got arrested.

Given that the actions that XRY groups put on are civil disobedience-oriented as one of XR's central tenets is NVDA, police, and other public figures often condemn XR's actions. Therefore, XRY actions, more so than most of the other groups' actions, require precautions, especially if possible foreseen negative consequences end up occurring.

Though participants shared that planning can be monotonous, they also described that it is sometimes fun. Kyra shared that:

> I really like the planning process, because it feels really, just satisfying to work with people, and figuring out logistics it's really like, "hey, let's meet here, let's do that." And you go earlier, and you scout the place, it just feels like organizing and I really just really like the feeling of that.

Kyra shared that she finds meaning in the planning process and the actual enactment of actions. The planning that involves camaraderie and community and that is not done just on one's own

felt more meaningful for Kyra. Given that all participants from this study are involved in climate action groups and not just working individually in climate advocacy, a certain aspect of bonding is involved throughout the planning process—leading to greater group cohesion and the cultivation of collective identity, something I discuss later.

### *5.2.2 Sustainabiliteens*

Among the Sustainabiliteens (ST) members interviewed, I found discrepancies in how communication occurs and what good communication looks like and feels like, which could be related to the changes that ST members mentioned happening within their group during the time I conducted this study. For example, regarding communication, Jessica (17, white, ST), claimed, "we want to keep a happy and positive atmosphere," among ST members. Whereas she also shared that it is difficult to maintain positive communication among all ST members. Jessica remarked,

> Successful communication at Sustainabiliteens is definitely something that is still being developed. There [are] a lot of miscommunications to this day, especially because it's branched across so many platforms of communication, and so many little groups and pockets of organizing, and smaller group chats, and stuff like that. Not being able to meet in-person is a huge hindrance to successful communication in organizing. So that's something we've definitely had to adapt to.

Jessica felt miscommunications occured because of the various modes of communication that ST members use to discuss organizing-related topics. Electronic communication occurs across various platforms and is not synchronized in one place, which Jessica noted that members felt was unideal. Jessica also found meeting virtually to be a standard limitation to organizing and activism that the COVID-19 pandemic created, which she described as "a huge hindrance to successful communication" in her group, which four other participants echoed. Though she and her group members experience communication difficulties, Jessica seemed optimistic that these qualms improved with time. She also felt that individuals strengthened their affiliation with the group through increased collective identity based on shared goals and regular communication.

Aliza (16, bi-racial Korean/white, ST) described the communication that occurs in ST in a reasonably positive light: "We just listen to each other's ideas and thoughts about the topic of discussion, or just thoughts about building off of each other's [ideas] is really helpful." The approach of intently listening frequently surfaced in ST participants' discussions about

communication in general. Annie (16, Chinese, ST) spoke similarly of the communication that occurs among Sustainabiliteens members:

> I think we usually go in the direction of a majority point of view. But at the same time, that can be kind of blurred with whoever is the loudest in the discussion, and whoever has the confidence to defend their point of view to the end of all things.

Annie's view of the communication among ST members is somewhat of a combination of Jessica's and Aliza's perspectives—Annie saw it as mostly functioning well. However, some people talk over one another, which seems detrimental to group cohesion. This description of talking over one another came up repeatedly in different interviews as a hindrance to the cultivation of community and camaraderie among one another. Apparently, views of communication among ST members were not homogenous. Zelda described the communication and meetings that occur among Sustainabiliteens in a relatively positive light:

> We really value having a kind and easy-going and just welcoming structure.… We're all able to just be friends and have that bond with each other as we go through our organizing. When we're able to have organized meetings and we're not just kind of all over the place, that's good communication when you're able to get things done, but still retain strong bonds within your group.

Throughout her interview, not only when discussing communication, Zelda emphasized the importance of individual connections with fellow group members to create strong bonds within the group. These bonds allow for positive and successful communication within the collective, leading to increased felt success in these groups' climate organizing. Zelda suggested that friendship with fellow organizers, both one to one and on a group level, creates the basis for good communication in the group.

Regularly planned meetings often came up in participants' discussions about communication. One difference between Sustainabiliteens and the other three group types is that in terms of planning and meetings, at the time of the interviews with ST members, ST was not having regular meetings, and they were going through a transition period in terms of group structuring. About the state of their group at the time, Zelda noted,

> We don't have regular weekly meetings. It's just the working groups that have weekly meetings [at this point]. I know that the leadership group does meet every week, so I can just speak from there because I'm a part of them.… Basically, one of us creates an

> agenda, and then that person sometimes ends up facilitating…. We start with a check-in question just to break the ice, [and to] get everyone's minds ready. Check-in questions are usually fun and funky and just something casual. Then we just get right into it…. We try to problem-solve, we do some visioning, it's just those very normal things that you would expect.

Given that Zelda's description is only about leadership meetings, I cannot generalize it to make any assumptions about the rest of the meetings that take place among Sustainabiliteens members. In addition to being for bonding, Zelda's description included the questions that the leadership team asks themselves, such as what they want to bring back to the rest of the group, other actions that are happening in their area that they might take part in, and how they feel about the overall group structure. The leadership group asks these questions of themselves to keep their group reflexive of their structure and organizing in general to improve constantly. This structure of working group leaders coming together to form a leadership team was common across groups included in this study other than school-based groups. Leadership team members also share updates from their working groups so that all members can report back to their working groups. Less specifically than Zelda's rendition of leadership meetings, Jessica described ST meetings:

> We always start with a check-in question. Sometimes it's climate oriented, sometimes it's what's your favorite food? Just something informal to get people talking. We always ask [at] every single meeting for people to say their names, [their] pronouns, and what grade they're in, just in case anybody forgets, and to destigmatize pronouns and to make [our meetings] an open space for everyone.

Check-in questions and sharing names and pronouns came up in all groups' descriptions of meetings and occurred round-robin style across all collectives. This approach to starting a meeting allows for cultivating a safe(r) space among individuals. Annie elucidated about ST meetings more generally and what occurs in them:

> A good chunk of [the meeting] is discussion and trying to get everyone's inputs on whatever we're doing. Usually, we start with updates, and we go into discussion on next steps or whatnot. At the end, we try and assign action items to leave with people to continue to complete over the next however so long it is between our meetings.

Meetings occurred similarly across all groups, with only slight differences. I observed the most differences in meetings in school groups, primarily because of their need for adult influence or

faculty sponsorship. Almost all collectives emphasize getting as many opinions as possible in large discussion spaces, yet that some individuals speak up more than others, causing power differentials. As Annie explained, not all groups assign action items at the end of their meetings. All groups discussed planning as time intensive.

The public sees only a fraction of the behind-the-scenes work these groups engage in to put into action. In line with study aim b, which was to document the behind-the-scenes work that goes into putting on these actions, I observed the discrepancy in what the public sees compared to all of the planning that takes place through attending multiple meetings leading up to an action. This planning occurs both in regularly scheduled meetings and in specific action planning meetings that do not occur at ongoing intervals. Often, planning for actions requires extra meetings and last-minute meetings with specific individuals who hold certain roles within the group. Aliza, for instance, explained,

> There's definitely a lot of planning involved.… We have to find a location, we have to contact people to help around setting up, and if we're gonna do a march there's all of that planning involved. We have to find sound, we have to, these are logistic things.… There's a lot of social media involved, so we have to make posts. We have to do a press release often, and then there's, we need outlets, talking to other organizations, giving them, asking them for equipment, that kind of thing. There's getting people for a land acknowledgment.

Aliza outlined several steps involved in organizing an action, though not all of the steps that others discussed specifically. Some of these logistical planning aspects, including finding or renting sound and other equipment, are often difficult for young people due to ageism, which I discuss later. Zelda also listed multiple aspects of planning for actions:

> What we're gonna do also ends up being a very huge conversation. Are we going to do a mural? Are we gonna hand out 'zines? Are we gonna have a march, even? Are we gonna have a rally? Are we gonna do chalking? Because that's also gonna be very dependent on, if we're gonna do a march or anything that's gonna have us in the streets, we're gonna need marshals. We're gonna need peace bearers. We're gonna need police liaisons. If we're gonna do a mural, then we need to think about, of course, are we gonna do this on public or private property? So, all of those logistics of what exactly we're actually

> gonna end up doing, and the where, what, when, why ends up being like, you would never know we put this much thought into it.

In detailing all of the planning that putting on an action necessitates, Aliza and Zelda indicated that there are many aspects that young people consider before any action occurs. Zelda emphasized that without actually planning an action oneself, an on-looker could never know all of the factors that these climate action groups consider beforehand. The group process unfolds largely within the context of planning because, as individuals, participants must communicate logistically and consider others' perspectives, therefore acting as a collective.

### *5.2.3 Sunrise (Youth) Movement*

Though the number of participants coming from Sunrise ($n = 6$) was similar to that of Sustainabiliteens ($n = 4$), SYM participants engaged a lot more with my communication questions than did ST members. Grace, for example, expressed, "everyone's voice and everyone's opinion is welcome. If you have an idea, if you have an opinion, you know it's welcome and listened to," a sentiment which almost all Sunrise members declared as well. This idea of feeling listened to was a prominent theme regarding communication. Similarly, Meira (17, South-Asian-American, SYM) detailed how communication occurs within meetings, specifically,

> One thing that we do that I think is really successful at keeping everyone's opinion respected and heard is within our meetings, we have a system called stack. So, each person who wants to say something in the meeting puts an asterisk in the chat, and then we go person by person in order of the asterisks, so each person gets to say their thoughts on whatever the agenda item is.... If someone has a direct response, then they just put an asterisk with a [the letters] DR next to it, so they can directly respond to what someone else says. So that's basically our way of keeping our conversations organized. From all of the meetings I've been at, [the stack system has] been really successful at giving everyone a chance to speak, and making sure people aren't speaking over each other, and because of the fact that we can hear everyone's perspectives, it makes it easier to make decisions as a group…. Everyone is kind of on the same wavelength, and the disagreements we have are more just like, on the logistical side.

Other Sunrise interviewees, namely Melanie, Grace, and Kamala, noted the stack system as beneficial for positive and welcoming communication in SYM hubs. Participants shared that the

stack system allows individuals to feel listened to and, therefore, to feel their voices are heard among their peers while creating an organized formula for group discussion. This communal understanding of a group allows quieter participants to have an equal opportunity to speak and give their input, which could not happen without such a system. The stack system allows for "making sure people aren't speaking over each other," which leads to the creation of a welcoming and communicative atmosphere among the group, thus increasing collective identity among group members. From Meira's perspective, little disagreement occurs in her Sunrise hub, primarily because of their agreed-upon stack system. The stack system adds to the community and camaraderie cultivated within these groups through group processes inherent in planning and general communication.

However, not all SYM participants discussed the stack system when asked about how communication occurs in their groups. Speaking more generally than describing the stack system, Elaina vehemently shared,

> A beautiful thing about Sunrise is that [we] have this huge emphasis… on building a community, to make sure that, you [are] friends first before you get into advocacy because otherwise, tension builds up, toxicity builds up…. If you completely despise the people who you're advocating for causes alongside, then it usually ends in disaster.

Even though Meira and Elaina are in different Sunrise hubs, they both expressed that they feel their groups have a community feeling to them, suggesting that as a movement, Sunrise teaches participants to cultivate camaraderie with their fellow group members on a national level. This camaraderie is not necessarily coming from the national leadership, however. Elaina and all other Sunrise participants discussed friendship as an essential aspect of their climate advocacy work.

Participants described communication as one aspect of cultivating a community feeling within their groups. Individuals shared communication as necessary for voicing their capabilities in terms of time management, which four participants described as their "capacity." When adolescents in this study felt that their capacity was used entirely, they felt burnt out. Burnout is common among activists, not only those who engage in climate activism but for various social justice-oriented causes as well. Therefore, the collective allows members to share the burden of activist work to avoid or delay burnout—one of the major benefits of working in a group. Melanie specified the importance of communication in terms of getting tasks done:

> It's very important when we communicate with each other that we tell each other what our capacity is, because then everyone sort of knows, "oh, this person has very low capacity," we have to be kind and understanding, because we want to involve people. But, if they can't be involved themselves, then that just needs to be something that is respected. We communicate through these communication tools that we have, and work together to get things done, and depending on how much capacity you have, and how much energy and motivation, you can bring what you want to a certain action.

Participants who mentioned capacity in terms of burnout described that it is each individual's responsibility to share with the rest of the group the time commitment that they feel they can take on in terms of organizing. When all group members appropriately communicate their capacities and respect others' abilities correctly, the collective runs smoothly and supports its members. Participants described working collaboratively as a team and respecting each other's boundaries as necessary for communication generally and, more specifically, for aiding in group cohesion.

Like Sustainabiliteens, across the board of Sunrise hubs that I spoke to, SYM did not have weekly meetings, but some full hubs met monthly, and some met bi-monthly, but none that I spoke to met weekly. If a Sunrise hub had them, depending on hub size, working groups met weekly because their tasks are more time sensitive. Meetings ran similarly to how ST members described their meetings. Meira illustrated what occurs in the monthly meetings of her SYM hub:

> That's where we both catch up with each other on the different political projects that we're working on, but in addition to that, we also kind of educate each other on environmentalism or environmental justice… one thing that is pretty consistent is we make time to, I'm trying to think of the right word, I guess bond with each other.

SYM members said that full hub meetings exist for multiple purposes—to share updates, to get tasks done, and to bond with fellow group members. Bonding is an integral aspect of youth-led climate organizing to avoid or delay burnout among individuals and cultivate affiliation with the group among members.

Because working groups meet on a more consistent basis than full hubs, there might be more cohesion among members of the same working groups than among all members due to the frequency of communication. Therefore, differences in group cohesion depend on numerous factors, namely, group size and regularity of communication. One SYM participant spoke

specifically about her working group. Grace, an active participant in her Sunrise hub's political team, shared what they do and plan:

> The political team, we're in charge of, we organize rallies, [and] things like that. Currently, in progress, we're working on a rally for Green New Deal [city]. And we're doing op-ed trainings. We focus on the political aspect of the [climate], of getting… our committee members and city council members to vote for the GND. We endorsed candidates, we discussed, we had meet and greets with them, that kind of thing.

Each of the items Grace referenced took time to plan and execute. Each working group plans differently and has specific responsibilities. Members choose which working group they would like to join, while some do not participate in any working groups, but just with the full hub meetings and actions. Across all groups, planning for action takes work, time, effort, and commitment. Melanie outlined some of the steps involved in planning an SYM action:

> If we're putting on an action, there can be very detailed spreadsheets, because we can think, "oh, we wanna put this action on," talking specifically about this, but there's a lot of things involved in that. You can't think about all the details that you need to think about for an action. So, that can be anywhere from the art that you use, and sometimes you need to be in communication with someone who can talk to police, because it is a form of… it's a protest, so you need to be aware of the implications of protesting in public spaces. And, if you have people speaking, you need to have that already lined up. You need to have an order of the speakers, you need to have all the materials involved, you need to outreach to people, you need to advertise it online, or in-person. So, there's a lot involved with an action…. Usually, actions can take up to a couple months to actively plan, which I think that some people don't always realize.… You just don't realize that there was a lot to make something happen.

Similar to Zelda's description of planning for ST actions, Melanie detailed the numerous considerations involved in executing a public-facing action. Putting on actions takes not only internal planning and communication, but also external communication and coordination of moving parts. XRY, ST, and SYM all plan and hold their actions almost entirely without the help of adults. However, this lack of adult help or intervention is where school groups vastly differ from the other three groups in planning and executing actions.

### *5.2.4 School Groups*

Because school groups exist within educational institutions, whereas XRY, SYM, and ST all operate outside of and independently from the school setting, climate collectives within-schools have more parameters to work around, especially regarding adult influence and support.

> Participants who are only part of school-based climate organizations shared that they struggle more than out-of-school organizers might with putting on actions and planning, given that some form of school administration has to approve almost everything they do. School-based participants also emphasized the competitive nature of secondary school and all of the responsibilities that come with that social location of being in high school.

When discussing communication and planning, those involved in school groups talked about the other possible stressors involved in being a youth climate activist unrelated to the organizing work. These young people discussed burnout in depth. In terms of capacity and communication, Stella (16, African American, school-based) emphasized,

> It's important that we don't promise to do something, and then everyone relies on that, then if you can't do it, it just hurts everyone else.… If it doesn't work out and you say you wanted to do something, and you're like, "shoot, I just can't," and you don't tell anyone, then that really hurts the group, and people have to make up for that.

Stella alluded to communication sometimes falling through the cracks with school-affiliated groups for one reason or another, often related to schoolwork or other extracurricular obligations. Stella's comment about proper communication relates to what Melanie shared about communicating capacity to one another within the group. Sabrie (15, South Asian, school-based), though not part of the same school-based group, echoed Stella's words. Sabrie said, "things do take a considerable amount of time, and it's hard because there's a lot of other work going on," such as the academic and social pressures of being in high school. The number of participants from private schools ($n$ = 7) within the school group category was slightly more than those from the public-school category ($n$ = 6). Regardless of the smaller number, those who attended private schools spoke more about school stressors and how those obligations affected communication within their climate advocacy group. As other participants described, planning takes a considerable amount of time. Alyson (16, Asian American, school-based) illustrated,

> I feel like people maybe underestimate the amount of organizing it takes to get people to come [to meetings and events] too, that's also a very stressful thing. You don't really

> know how many people are gonna show up until it actually happens. So, it takes a lot of experience to organize a good event, or a good successful event. And then also, I think the beauty of spreadsheets is something that people underestimate too.

Time commitment came up often as something that others who do not do climate advocacy work may overlook. Referencing her experience, Alyson noted that the events that she and her peers planned increased in success over time and that they learned from their experiences of planning.

Communication varied among those in school-affiliated groups. Alyson, a leader in her group, said, "I feel really listened to if someone genuinely understands and considers the idea or the disagreement." Alyson described that she held a leadership position in her school group and that, from her vantage point it seemed her peers felt obligated to listen to her because of the relative power role she held. Meanwhile, Felix, another leader of this same school-based group, shared the approach he tried to uphold around communication:

> The [communication] philosophy is that we're trying to practice non-violent communication. We're all working together trying to do things, and sometimes it's very easy to be flustered when something isn't going your way, or to try to reconcile opinions. So, when that happens, using crutch phrases like, "I'm hearing you say" or, "when you say this, it makes me feel that" helps deescalate conflict if there is a conflict, and prevent conflict if there isn't one. Non-violent communication is one [way].… A lot of it is knowing that you're coming from a place where you want to work together. If you offend each other, it's not intentional, and the phrases that you use can better reflect that positive sentiment. Just pulling some of those out of your back pocket doesn't hurt.

This non-violent communication approach to group processes that Felix described is the most clearly outlined and intentional conflict-resolution philosophy that any participant shared across all groups. Though Felix talked about conflict, he presented it more theoretically in terms of how he and his groupmates try to reconcile differences without adult intervention and prevent future conflict. He described his awareness that he and his peers work collectively to try to affect an issue much greater than they as individuals. Ashira (16, South-East Asian, school-based), though not as detailed, described a similar approach:

> We try not to use words that are too offensive to anybody. We try to use general words, or general ideas, and we try to make it easy to comprehend for everybody, so it's not too

> difficult… and we try to share ways that people can incorporate [sustainability] in their everyday lives.

Though they were part of different school-affiliated groups, both Felix and Ashira illustrated inclusivity as an essential aspect of communication that their groups used to best get points across and to function smoothly. Similarly, Zara (15, South Asian, school-based), part of the same group as Ashira, gave an example: "We try to have group discussions and get everyone involved so everyone can share their own perspectives," in line with how her group mates described communication. Natan (14, Indian/Asian, school-based), part of a group, conveyed: "Everybody considers that there's more than one perspective on things, so we all try to work together to make sure that we can get the best point of view together, or the best perspective of everyone," echoing the necessity of hearing multiple perspectives and opinions. Relatedly, Makayla (17, Jewish/white, school-based), a co-president of her climate club, articulated one of their goals:

> Making sure that everybody is being heard that everybody is doing okay, when we have a meeting that everybody feels okay, that everybody has what they need, that everybody has gotten enough sleep, has food. I think communication is a lot about needs, and, because needs can also go to scheduling, and time, and how much time everybody has, and what people can do, and if someone needs to leave early, making sure that they don't feel uncomfortable …. Communication around scheduling and around needs is very important, and as long as people are telling us [co-presidents] what they need, in my opinion, that's really good communication.

Makayla presented issues that surfaced within her group regarding being a high school climate activist. Like Melanie's comment about communicating capacity above, Makayla considered what is important to communicate regarding abilities. In her interview, Makayla mentioned the mental health considerations of being a youth climate organizer four times. Participants illustrated that communicating individual needs to the leadership team and other fellow group members is integral to cultivating a sense of balance in individuals' lives while being a climate activist and sustaining a positive group atmosphere.

Next, I discuss meetings and planning in terms of school groups specifically. Unlike XRY, SYM, and ST, which utilize varying approaches to leadership, participants illustrated that school groups had defined leaders. All school-affiliated groups included adult help with

organizing in one way or another, given they have faculty sponsors assigned to them. Alyson, a leader of her school's climate coalition, commented about meeting planning structure in that, "How I like to organize meetings is to do it very methodically and very clearly, like, this is XYZ, this is XYZ," showing that she and the other leaders organize each meeting carefully for the club participants to attend—something which only two other participants described. Dissimilarly, Caroline, who participates in two environmentally focused clubs at a different school than Alyson, shared that their club meetings tend to be more amorphous. Caroline described,

> In the Restoring Our Oceans club, it's mostly kind of spontaneous, like, "What do we want to do today? Should we start a new project? Should we do something small?" In Environmental Club, it's similar, it's "Do we have a project going? If not, what should we start next?" We've done movie nights that show environmentally friendly movies. Right now, we're creating a presentation to show to some elementary school students. Then, it's also a balance of, "okay, how much work can we do outside of these meetings to make sure we're making progress?"

Though groups with school affiliations have similarities in how they communicate and run their meetings, they differ vastly across sites. For example, the clubs that Caroline participated in did not focus on activism or organizing but more on bringing awareness of environmental problems to their school and town community, often referred to as consciousness-raising. Therefore, because the foci of school-affiliated clubs are dissimilar, how they plan and what they do ends up quite differently. However, these differences in how they function are related more to the themes they discuss as opposed to how the groups function.

Alyson's approach to meetings was similar to some other groups' takes on organization before coming together as a group. In a different group than Alyson, Amelia (16, Jewish/white, school-based) described the thorough thought process and goal-oriented approach that her groups takes in planning meetings:

> We're kind of thinking about "this is our end goal, and then how do we get there? What are the short-term steps? What are the long-term steps? What are our immediate next steps to reach this final goal?" Whether that's passing a bill, [or] whether that's having a municipality declare climate emergency, maybe it's forming a certain group.

Amelia's group was politically focused. Therefore, she and her co-president, Cameron (17, white, school-based) based their group's goals and meetings on political topics. This specific

focus on politics within a school-based group was unique to that group, demonstrating the differences in extracurricular clubs from location to location.

Though not part of the same group, Felix described his group's thinking process in terms of planning in a somewhat similar and equally methodical manner:

> What we're trying to essentially think about [is] "we're a school, so what do schools do? They teach students in the classroom, students engage in extracurricular activities, and they want to educate people that are prepared for the world of tomorrow." So, how do you go about doing that? Well, first you can incorporate climate lessons into the classroom…. We were certainly building momentum [in classrooms] before the pandemic. Extracurricular-ly, students are interested in a lot of different things: art, theater, business, economics, you name it, there's probably a group for most things on campus. So, how can you get [students and faculty] to realize that climate change is an intersectional issue, that your affinity groups ought to be talking about climate if they hope to fully encapsulate how systemic injustices culminate in a synergy of prejudice.

Since Felix's school was a boarding school, it ran more like a university than a high school. Therefore, as Felix outlined, students engaged in different things at his school that do not occur at public schools. The sustainability coalition at Felix's school included many different, more specific clubs under the umbrella of the larger group. Each had its mission of bringing more sustainability and climate awareness to the school and making positive changes within and outside the school parameters. One faction of his school's sustainability coalition got teachers across disciplines to incorporate sustainability and climate into their curricular approaches before the pandemic—something novel to this group in the present study. Felix also mentioned students' other interests in extracurricular activities and that these groups could incorporate sustainability into their extracurricular time, given that sustainability and the climate crisis include intersecting injustices such as those that are racial and economic in nature. Felix reported that one of the main goals of the school's sustainability coalition was to bring awareness to the inherent intersectionality of the climate crisis to all aspects of the school's functioning, not only extracurricular activities.

Though not something Felix discussed in his interview, Alyson shared about community building in Zoom meetings within their group. Multiple participants spoke about the necessity of

including fun in organizing, specifically during meetings, which participants described could sometimes be tedious, depending on the topic. Alyson elucidated,

> We start [meetings] with hot takes… we did it for the first [Zoom] meeting and we thought it was really fun. I think it facilitated a lot of community on Zoom in a way that a lot of other clubs were having trouble with. It fostered a way to giggle, a way to laugh that's not very serious and totally business-like.

Five other participants from different groups (including XRY, SYM and ST) described this idea of "hot takes"—sharing seemingly unpopular opinions and discussing them— as popular among young people and as promoting laughter and camaraderie among groups of adolescents. Given the myriad adverse psychological effects of being a young climate organizer, the fact that doing this work within a collective allows for advocacy to be fun is entirely invaluable, as the same five participants described. Six participants mentioned that having to meet virtually hindered communication, community, and camaraderie. In contrast, these silly questions broached through "hot takes" brought that aspect of fun back to youth climate organizing.

### *5.2.5 Comparison and Summary of Planning and Communication*

Across all groups, participants described communicating capacity, having strategic planning and regularly scheduled meetings, and balancing schoolwork with organizing when discussing internal planning and communication. All participants mentioned that proper communication makes or breaks a group and that, in some regard, they each felt the need to work on this aspect of youth-led climate organizing constantly. Regarding planning, eight participants mentioned that the public sees only a small part of all the planning that putting on an action takes, and that this planning time feels undervalued by on-lookers.

Differences across groups in terms of planning and communication are many in format but not substantial. For example, XRY members described meeting weekly as necessary for group cohesion, while ST and SYM do not meet at that interval at all. School-based groups, on the other hand meet weekly, but because they are based around an educational institution, and meeting times are planned into the school day, or take place in-person right after school. ST members found successful communication to be difficult, but that regular communication led to increased collective identity. ST members also described that organized approaches to meetings felt like good communication, but that it does not always occur that way. SYM members said that good communication leads to community building. All groups shared that everyone's voice

and opinion matters. However, participants from school-based groups illustrated that it is detrimental for the group if one member says that will do something and then does not do it. School-based groups varied from one another in that they each had differing goals. Though there are some overlaps in terms of internal planning and communication, for the most part, participants in XRY, ST, SYM, and school-based groups felt differently about this aspect of group processes. Next, I discuss leadership styles and approaches which I also differentiated by group.

### 5.3 Styles of Leadership

Groups described varied approaches to leadership ranging from completely amorphous and decentralized to completely defined leadership with or without adult influence, depending on the group type and location. Participants' perspectives of leadership differed even within groups, depending on whether a participant felt they held a leadership position or not. Individuals who held leadership positions felt that their approach to leadership was more decentralized than those participants who did not hold such roles. Given that leadership styles vary vastly across group types, this section is separated into XRY, SYM, ST, and school groups to allow for both within and between case analysis and comparison.

#### *5.3.1 Extinction Rebellion Youth*

Extinction Rebellion, as an organization, internationally touts utilizing decentralized leadership approaches. However, like other umbrella organizations with factions around countries or across the globe, XR has a national team who somewhat oversees what the local groups do, though local groups are autonomous and can make their own decisions. In XRY specifically, local groups function mostly autonomously from the national team, but get financial support from Extinction Rebellion Youth US (XRYUS), which is how groups refer to the national team in the United States. Given that this study was conducted in North America, and that all XRY participants come from the United States, the perspective of XRYUS as an umbrella group will only be explored on a U.S. national level, even though XR as a whole, as well as XRY are international organizations.

Two participants from this study—Kyra and Jake—were part of the national team. First, I present their perspectives on leadership in XRY. Then I share others' perspectives to demonstrate the differences and similarities in leadership perspectives from those holding

seemingly higher positions than others. When discussing Jake's (18, Mexican, XRY) and her position, Kyra said, "We're [as national team leaders] the glue that holds everything together," illustrating her perspective of how the national team works concerning the local groups across the United States. Kyra continued her description as such:

> We have a rotating facilitation system, so two different people will facilitate the call every time, just to decentralize.… The national team … [has a] horizontal structure in the way that it's not top-down organizing. Local groups still remain very autonomous [from the national team]. We act more as a facilitator of resources for local groups, as opposed to their commanders on what work they need to be doing.… There [are] also resources in the sense where we have an outreach manual to help them sustain growth, and teach them how to do that, an action manual, so if you wanna learn how to plan an action, it's all available to you…. What's so awesome about the national team is that you're able to take resources that the local groups don't have and supply them with it.… We're just overseeing things and forming connections between local groups…. It's very antihierarchical…. Our leadership is almost not leadership, because everyone's kind of doing their own thing, and we come to collective decisions as opposed to top-down ones.

As XRY participants not part of the national team expressed, XRYUS helps the local groups and allows them autonomy in their actions and efforts. Because XR as an organization believes in a complete reconfiguration of the ways in which governmental bodies currently operate globally, it makes sense that they would focus on a horizontal structure of organizing as opposed to a top-down approach (Extinction Rebellion US, n.d.). From my observations of XRYUS Zoom calls that all XRY members are invited to, I noticed that local groups interact with the national team coordinators as much or as little as they would like. My observation therefore triangulates how Kyra described the interactions between the national team and local groups.

Participants from XRY who were not part of the national team confirmed that they feel their groups are autonomous from the national team but that XRYUS supplies them with resources and helps them with planning actions when necessary or when they reach out for help. Jake, also a member of XRYUS, shared his perspective of the national team in relation to local groups:

> We've found that where a lot of U.S. movements, specifically climate organizations have broken down is that they're very often centrally planned for the entire nation, and that

> really is not conducive to organizing in different places, because different places have different issues.

Jake's perspective of XRYUS's interactions with XRY local groups, though less detailed than Kyra's, demonstrated that XRY learns from what other organizations are doing in terms of social and environmental justice movements and adjusts what they are doing based on those observations—a practice of reflexivity. Learning from others' mishaps was one way in which XRY was able to uphold their horizontal organizing structure focused in decentralized leadership. Jake also touched on the importance of having local groups and not only a national group, because across the United States, and internationally, the climate crisis affects people, non-human animals, and flora differently depending on location, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity, for example. Therefore, the same local solutions cannot act as coverall solutions across the country. All XRY participants not part of the national team stated that the autonomy that they have from the national team is positive.

Marianne, the current coordinator for her XRY local group shared her opinion about the decentralization that local groups have from the national team: "There's not one center of power. No one has any sort of power over another person…. There's a national team to all of the XR[Y] groups, and we're decentralized from them." The idea of no single person having power over another individual came up ten times with different XRY participants when discussing the relationships that local groups have with XRYUS. Though XRY has group coordinators, they do not make decisions for the entire group without at least three-fourths majority agreement about a given decision, with input from all members. Ethan, shared his perspective that there is not one defined leader of either XRYUS, or of his XRY group:

> There's no real leader. Some organizations are more top-down, where the president makes the decisions, and everybody else just executes and follows, like a friggin' beehive or something. It might be less efficient, but XR makes most of their decisions with a really informal committee. It's based more on trust than on credentials, than anything. Like, anybody with any job or any background can come to XR and help plan an action. You can be up there with the veteran organizers, it's really great.

In his explanation about the lack of defined leadership in Extinction Rebellion, Ethan emphasized that one of the main reasons he joined XRY as opposed to other youth-led climate groups was because of the organization's emphasis on decentralized leadership. Group-level trust

came up three other times with other participants as a factor relating to lack of necessary defined leadership and sharing of power amongst individuals. That is, if collective identity and secure group affiliation are achieved, members trust one another making defined leadership is less necessary. Lucy, part of the same XRY local group as Ethan felt "everyone knows that we all hold a similar amount of power in the group," and that even though she lacks a named leadership role, she holds equal say in terms of decision making and planning. Ethan further detailed his understanding of leadership within their XRY local group:

> The most involved people just naturally take the lead. Everybody just kinda lets them because they're the most involved and that's what they do … [but] if it's just the three of us [most involved] playing catch, we don't ever throw the ball to anyone else, then, it's kind of hard to loop anyone else in. The [newer] people who come to meetings may not be that compelled to show up again if they're not getting any responsibilities.

I observed Ethan and Lucy's group meetings for nine months and attended the three in-person actions they planned and held. They executed these actions with minimal assistance from the XR adult group with which they were affiliated. Ethan, Lucy, Elijah, and Carly's group began relatively close temporally to when I commenced observing them. Compared with the other

XRY groups included in this study, they are small in number, with four regular members and eight to ten rotating other members (at the time that I worked with them). Ethan, in stating "the three of us playing catch," was referencing himself, Elijah, and Carly, who began this local group of XRY partly because both Elijah and Carly's parents were members of XR already. These three individuals (i.e., Carly, Elijah, and Ethan) expressed awareness that they participated the most out of the rotating other members of their then fledgling group. This unequal distribution of responsibility is something that their XRY local group discussed during meetings I observed. Each of them separately shared in their individual interview that they would like to work on distribution of tasks, as well as getting new members and giving or offering responsibilities to newer participants who desire to do more.

Leadership occurs differently in different XRY local groups. June, the acting local group coordinator for her XRY group, expressed her perspective on decentralized leadership in her collective:

> We almost take no leadership approach at all…. We try not to keep things too structured and too rigid, because then it starts feeling like a job and an obligation rather than doing it

> because it's something that you're passionate about…. We don't have roles or leadership positions, we just have the two [local group] co-coordinators, and our only job is to be the main-person that talks with national…. Because everyone has an equal say and there's not one person that has a title that's higher than others. We're all able to collaborate, and most of the time, we can pretty much reach a consensus.… It's a collective group.

June outlined the primary duty of the local group coordinators as she understood it and as it functions in her collective—to communicate with the national team and share back what the national team said and are doing. From June's perspective, the local group coordinator's role is to act as a messenger between XRYUS and their local group. Like Lucy's perspective, June emphasized that "everyone has an equal say," and that no individual holds a hierarchal position above another individual. June compared the idea of having leadership roles to organizing feeling like a job—something antithetical to youth-led climate organizing, given that 20 out of 30 participants spoke of fun as a necessary ingredient in their climate work. XRYUS allows local groups to define positions independently, allowing coordination to occur differently across collectives.

Different from June's perspective, Marianne, as the local group coordinator of her group, positioned herself as having to take responsibility for mishaps that may occur. Marianne stated,

> [As coordinator] if something goes wrong, you're a little bit at fault for it. Or, if something goes wrong, you have that sense of responsibility. So, it's making sure things get done. It's more of a professional job than being a working group coordinator.

June and Marianne, in different XRY groups, yet both local group coordinators, had vastly different perspectives of what it meant to be a local group coordinator. While June described the position as being solely responsible for communicating with the national team, Marianne held it as "more of a professional job," antithetical to how June perceived the role. Though, when an individual agrees to act as a local group coordinator and gets elected, other participants in this study without leadership roles illustrated that person then held more responsibility. That is, how the person acting as the local group coordinator follows through with the position differs depending on the local group. This differentiation in follow-through of the leadership position further exemplifies that each XRY local group is autonomous and distinct from the other local groups, echoing Kyra and Jake's perspectives of national team coordinators and holding no power over local groups' activities. Lucy described the role of an XRY leader succinctly in

declaring that the coordinator's job entails "assigning roles to people, asking one person to make a poster for the action, asking another person to post about it on Instagram, and asking another person to bring banners." Additionally, group coordinators change after a certain interval, depending on the group, therefore not allowing any one person to have a leadership role for their entire tenure in the collective. Overall, XRY groups embodied decentralized leadership and shared responsibilities among members.

### *5.3.2 Sustainabiliteens*

Sustainabiliteens has undergone much change since its founding in early 2019. When I first contacted Sustainabiliteens via e-mail in early 2021 to ask about possible participation in my study, they had multiple groups across the metro-Vancouver area. When I eventually conducted my study and interviewed four Sustainabiliteens members between February and April 2022, given all of the changes that the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated, at the time of those interviews, Sustainabiliteens had one primary group, and a few school-affiliated groups called School Leads, which, for the purposes of this paper will not be discussed in-depth, as only Jessica spoke of it, and minimally at that. The School Leads program differs from the rest of ST in that they exist within the confines of Vancouver-area schools but function as factions of ST. Jessica held a leadership role in Sustainabiliteens through being co-president of her School Leads group but not in the non-school-affiliated faction of ST. She commented about the way that leaders act in ST:

> I'd say the leaders in Sustainabiliteens are all very jovial fun people, which is really important. They make it interesting to show up to meetings, because sometimes it's not interesting to show up to a meeting. But, with the leaders in Sustainabiliteens, they make it a fun and happy time.

Similar to Alyson's comment about making meetings fun, for Jessica, it matters that the leaders in ST are "jovial people" and therefore add the element of camaraderie and joy to meetings. This aspect of community, camaraderie, and fun permeates many aspects of youth-led climate organizing. However, participants noted fun as necessary for meetings because they were more likely to attend meetings if they previously enjoyed them.

Sustainabiliteens does, however, have some form of defined leadership. Zelda, a leader in ST, spoke about her experience of being part of the leadership team:

> My most recent term, I've been one of the leaders, so I've been helping with the decision making with the planning of our big actions. That's sort of what I've always been doing from the beginning, 'cause I kind of became one of the lead coordinators of the group very quickly, like two months after I joined…. Basically, we're not there to be like, "we will make all the decisions and no one else gets to do anything." It's more like, "if you need guidance on something, if you need help, we'll help the organization move along a certain path that all of us collectively want us to move along." Right now… at our weekly meetings, [leaders] discuss what's happening in the team lead meetings, and where we want to go next. If we come up with anything that we want to implement into the organization, we'll send out something into the Slack like, "hey, is this something that you guys like, or are interested in, or cool with?" If most people agree, then that's cool, that's great. That's basically how the leadership makes decisions.

Taking XRY as an example of decentralized leadership in the context of the present study, it seems that Sustainabiliteens' approach to leadership is a bit more centralized than that of XRY, but not top-down like school-based clubs' enactment of it. ST uses the term coordinator, to describe those in positions of leadership, like XR does. A main difference between XRY's and ST's approach to leadership is that XRY coordinators refrain from making decisions without group discussion, whereas ST leadership sometimes makes decisions and then asks whether the rest of the group agrees, as Zelda described. However, ST aims toward decentralized leadership, yet they have less guidance in terms of how to run their group than XRY because they are not affiliated with a national umbrella organization, such as XRYUS.

Each ST participant I interviewed noted that ST shifted in numerous ways from 2019 until 2021. Jessica described some of the changes that ST tried to make from before the COVID-19 pandemic to after:

> We're trying to reform the structure of organizing spaces, to be very circle-ish instead of a power dynamic, because that's something that we've seen deeply rooted in colonialist and white supremist culture is a pyramid of structure…. We don't want a hierarchical structure of decision-making. We want it to be very circular and communal, and have everybody's voices heard as much as possible, because, you never know who's gonna have a problem, a qualm, or a really good idea.… We change more like a chameleon. We're kind of changing all the time.

Jessica's perspective of the leadership and structure of ST was different from Zelda's, given that Zelda described her leadership role as a decision-maker. Meanwhile, Jessica, the head of her ST group, described wanting to shift towards a more amorphous leadership structure than they had at the time. In contrast, Zelda did not mention that the way that leadership was enacted in ST needed to change. Jessica also included her perspective of intersectionality concerning leadership in that top-down structures have roots in colonialist partiarchal practices.

Overall, Sustainabiliteens members described ST as a climate justice-oriented group (as opposed to only climate action, which was more singularly focused as opposed to intersectional). Therefore, participants shared that in all aspects of their organizing, ST aimed to center marginalized POC or differently abled voices instead of white able-bodied voices. Considering that one of their goals is to be decolonial, Sustainabiliteens members demonstrated that their group mostly operated through decentralized leadership. However, their approach to leadership was slightly more structured than XRY, in line with ST being slightly less radical than XRY. Comparing leadership approaches that XRY and ST members described, the largest difference was in the lack of connection to an umbrella organization from ST and XRY's utilization of the national team for resources. If ST had an umbrella organization, as XRYUS does, then ST and XRY might function significantly more similarly in terms of their approaches to leadership.

#### *5.3.3 Sunrise (Youth) Movement*

Participants in Sunrise (Youth) Movement described its overall functioning differently than XRY and ST because of the organization's political focus with climate advocacy. As such, the way that SYM approaches leadership is more defined as well. SYM's different functioning in comparison to XRY and ST includes their defined leadership approach, which changes each year, making it somewhat decentralized but not wholly amorphous, like that of XRY. The hub coordinators in Sunrise groups have more say than do the leaders in XRY or ST. Melanie, who held such a position in her hub, described the leadership in Sunrise:

> We aim to not be hierarchical, because that can be damaging to people, but there are still people who do most of the work…. We do have a leadership transition every year. So, the leadership is going to change, sort of shift, as we go through the spring and the summer, because [twelfth graders] will graduate, and they can pass on their skills to younger members, that's how the hub works, since we're in that high school age frame.

Sunrise follows the school calendar more so than XRY or ST. Some SYM groups even meet in a school building. Melanie articulated that hierarchal structures "can be damaging to people," which other participants eluded to but did not say in so many words. Other SYM participants commented similarly regarding the mental health aspects involved in youth-led climate organizing, which popular media often overlooks. Given that participants described that most

SYM participants are academically and civically engaged, they compete in various ways, which Melanie may have been hinting towards in mentioning the detrimental structure of top-down organizing. Though SYM employs defined leadership to an extent, no hub leader has held such a position for more than a year's time, making SYM more decentralized than school-based clubs. Melanie pointed out that leaders are often the oldest in the group, and therefore when they graduate from high school, they share their knowledge with new leaders, who are usually at least two years younger than they are. Each SYM hub described a transition of leadership each year in order for one person to not hold power for longer than 12-months. Julianna, a leader of her hub, described the transition as it happened for her:

> Originally, I was leading the political team… organizing the actions like phone banking [for] the climate resolution. Then, when [former leader] left the hub to go to college, I started leading the hub… I would go to meetings for all the different teams, and just kind of make sure that the other people that were facilitating the [working group] meetings were all set. My main job has been facilitating the group chat that we have, and letting people know about the Zoom link, and making the [meeting] agendas.

Because Julianna described what it means to be a leader in her Sunrise hub and how it functions for her group specifically, her perspective cannot be extrapolated to encompass all SYM factions. In larger Sunrise hubs (i.e., those with upwards of twenty members), there are working groups, which they call teams, which is similar across all groups except for school groups. In Sunrise, each team has a lead, and all of those team leads come together for leadership meetings with the hub leaders, similar to the composition of ST's leadership team. Julianna stated that her hub used to be large enough to have separate working groups, but that the hub had gotten so small, to about seven or so people, because of all of the twelfth graders graduating from high school and moving on, that they no longer had working groups and just had full hub meetings. This change due to group size was similar to the XRY group that I observed. Julianna described her role as a leader as keeping the group running smoothly, organizing meetings, writing

agendas, and overseeing group communication. Julianna's experience of leading her hub was dissimilar to other Sunrise participants in the present study, as all other Sunrise hubs were larger than Julianna's.

Though groups have leaders, most regular members do not hold a leadership role, but participate in the hub by attending meetings and participating in actions. These individuals observe how the leadership functions and thus have different perspectives on leadership than those in positions of power. Elaina, not a leader of her SYM hub, described her perspective of leadership:

> It's very organized, it's very professional. But it's also fun. It's very engaging, and we don't leave anybody out. That's something that I always love in organizations, especially those that are youth centered. Because [youth groups] often can be a bit clique-y, so it's nice to find one that isn't. So, I would say it's definitely just, it's a very typical advocacy meeting, but one that's youth-centered.

Elaina, like others, noted meetings being fun and engaging as something young people enjoy about participating in these collectives. Though six study participants illustrated meetings as casual, four SYM participants felt meetings to be professional, suggesting a variance in how groups run meetings and a variance in leadership approaches within the context of SYM. Elaina emphasized that her Sunrise hub is not "clique-y," which makes her happy and makes her want to keep participating. The aspect of fun was important to many people, especially those without leadership roles.

Like XRY, Sunrise exists under an umbrella group called Sunrise National. Sunrise National seemed so function somewhat similarly to XRYUS yet held more power over hubs than XRYUS did over XRY local groups. Melanie and Meira were part of the same SYM hub. Meira described, leadership's function:

> Two people are our national and regional strategy leaders, so these are the hub coordinators who stay connected with Sunrise as a national organization as well as the rest of [the state], then [we have] two hub coordinators who are the support coordinators, who are focused on, like the name suggests, supporting our members, and doing HR-type stuff in the hub.... We also have currently six hub coordinators who are the group of people in charge of the entire hub, and at the head of making sure the hub is running smoothly and [in charge of] decision making.

The Sunrise hub that Meira, Melanie, and Kamala are part of is on the larger side in comparison to the other SYM hubs included in the present study. Therefore, they have multiple coordinators and separate political, communications and media, art, and finance teams. Compared to other groups, in some situations, Sunrise leaders make decisions without a unanimous or majority vote from all hub members. Like XRY leadership, Sunrise leaders communicate with Sunrise National and share what Sunrise National is doing with the rest of the hub.

As is the case with all groups, those without leadership positions view those in power differently than the leaders do. Grace, an active SYM member who participates very regularly in her group, described her perspective on how the leadership functions in her Sunrise Youth hub:

> We have leaders, but they're not superior. They're not like, "okay, so we're the boss." It's kind of like, "okay, so we're here, organizing you guys, corralling it all together." But everyone's not like, "okay, this person is superior to us, and their voice is the most heard." [The leaders are] the kind of people that they're like… when there's a meeting, they try to reach out to individual people, like, "hey, are you gonna join us for the meeting today? Will you be there?" That kinda thing, and it just makes you feel heard, like, "oh, wait, they value me." They come [to meetings] with agenda items and ultimately make the decisions in a way that's like, "okay, here's the decision," but it's all based off what other people have said and what we've discussed and come to an agreement… and if someone doesn't want that they'd be like, "no," and we'd have a discussion about that.

Though in different Sunrise hubs, Meira and Grace commented similarly about the functioning of leadership in SYM. Grace partook in the political team in her SYM hub and participated heavily in the government-related goings-on of the group. Therefore, her perspective of leadership and group functioning is mainly from the political team's angle. However, Grace also participated actively in the bi-monthly full hub meetings that her SYM hub led, which I observed twice. Grace shared that she felt leadership in her hub was supportive, but not in an overbearing way. From her vantage point, the leadership ran smoothly and supported the hub members.

There were a few tasks that separated leadership from regular hub members in SYM. Delegation of tasks largely differentiates leaders in SYM from regular hub members. Meira described the different roles that individuals could have that leadership may give them:

> We have people who work media, people who work on reaching out to candidates, people who work on creating the art that we need. Everyone has their role, and we can all agree on that.… It usually comes down to dividing up the different things we want to do and having people who are talented or passionate about certain tasks do those on their own, and then come together to create one rally, or one action that we want to do.

Overall, participants described the leadership position in SYM as involving keeping the group together and running smoothly. Aiming to avoid burnout, participants noted that each individual needs to do only the amount of work for the group that they feel they can handle. In Sunrise, as Meira described, leaders delegate what tasks individuals can take on if they would like. Sunrise members described that they aim to be decentralized in their leadership approach but only partially as decentralized as XRY and, to a degree, ST aim to be.

### *5.3.4 School Groups*

Given that they function within the parameters of public and private educational institutions, school groups have much more formal leadership than all other groups. For example, Sabrie (15, South Asian, school-based) put it bluntly that in her group, "there's a secretary, a president, a treasurer and stuff like that," similar to any other school-affiliated club. This approach to leadership is typical in any extracurricular club that a public school may have. In fact, some of the school groups in this study function almost exactly like any other extracurricular school-affiliated club at any high school. In contrast, some groups function quite differently than other clubs of different topics. I had thought that private-school groups would be similar to one another, and public-school groups would be similar to one another, but I observed that assumption as untrue. I observed similarities and differences in terms of functioning across all school-affiliated groups, and that not one group ran exactly the same as another. Furthermore, participants in school groups described having a leadership role as an ideal opportunity for young people to take part in during high school for life experience. Caroline, for example, illustrated her experience of leadership in her public-school club:

> We're all kind of learning how to be leaders, we're all 16, 17, so, we're young, but we're figuring out how to be leaders. And, leading is such a balance of not controlling, and not doing nothing, and doing your part as well, and it's definitely, it can be a challenge. I think the leadership aspect is, "okay, how can we lead everyone in the group to lead everyone in the community to do the right things, to make the right choices?"

Caroline described her approach to leadership as somewhat laid back, and as empowering her peers to lead as well, even if they do not hold the title of leader within the club.

As seven participants shared, having a leadership role can be difficult for adolescents to handle, given all the other stressors of being in high school. However, those in leadership positions benefit from the experience, as four participants described. Like Caroline, Felix wanted to share the power of his leadership role with his peers and not keep the role to himself, but rather distribute the responsibility. Felix questioned, "We're still trying to sort a lot of things out in terms of our organization. How do we democratize leadership opportunities? How do we make it feel as if underclassmen can be empowered to do [leadership] work?" illustrating that holding a role of power necessitates constant reflexivity of one's actions and awareness of one's positionality in relation to their peers. Both Caroline and Felix, as leaders, expressed wanting to empower their peers to take on as much responsibility as they felt comfortable. Young people sometimes compete for credit in various ways, especially if they are in the process of applying to universities. Felix, who attended an elite private school, commented:

> Sometimes who gets the credit can be an issue of tension. So, people who think that they're not getting the credit that they deserve, rightfully so, get upset over it. When that happens, it's my job [as a leader] to apologize for having hurt them, even if inadvertently. I tend to say, "I'm so sorry about this. Please know, here is where I stand, in non-defensive way, I just want to clarify some points so that you don't think I'm antagonistic. Do you have any time to chat, in-person, over a meal, or just over the phone, FaceTime, Zoom, whatever platform works best for you?" That conversation will often happen, and it's one where I have to remind myself [to] take deep breaths [and] practice non-violent communication. A lot of times they're saying, "I really don't like how you're doing this, and I don't like how you're doing that," and [I] say, "yes, you're right, that does misalign with what I was thinking and what I was intending. I'm sorry to have put that burden on you. How can we move forward together? What would you rather see me do?" So, that tends to be how conflicts are resolved. Oftentimes, [as the group leader] I'm the one who has complaints directed at me, and therefore it's my responsibility to clean those things up and make sure that the group moves forward together. So, it's a balancing act, and one that I'm still learning about.

Felix's group members who were not in positions of power echoed the problems that he outlined in terms of competitiveness. As Felix shared previously, he aims to employ non-violent communication in his approach to leadership. Therefore, his go-to phrases for conflict resolution are rooted in that philosophy. Like Marianne's comment that it is her responsibility as a leader to take ownership if something goes wrong, Felix noted that the onus to "clean things up" falls on him as co-president and founder of the group. No other participants described this type of blame and confrontation, suggesting that these occurrences might exist because of the high ranking of Felix's school and, therefore, the increase in competition among students.

Alyson, who was a grade below Felix, and a leader in the same group, described her perspective of leadership as "very free flowing… it's pretty non-hierarchal… and a very blurred, greyed cloud-like structure that we have going," which I was able to observe during the in-person full coalition meeting that I attended at their school. Further, Alyson specified,

> I think [being a leader is] just really giving people the space to do what they want and providing whatever support they need to fulfil that…. As someone who's in a leadership role, I think it is significantly easier for people to listen to me. When I'm like, "okay, let's bring it back together," I feel like people do listen to me, which surprises me, still, every single time.

Alyson led one faction of the group that she, Felix, and Stella participate in, while Felix ran the entire group, which could be why their leadership perspectives differ, given that Felix held more responsibility than Alyson did.

Stella was one grade below Alyson. She described her perspective of holding a leadership position quite differently from Felix and Alyson. Stella shared,

> I signed up to be a facilitator, which was a lot, 'cause you have to coordinate with your group, research your legislator, make asks, coordinate the asks, and then from all of that, contact your legislators to set up, but then, it gave me a lot of good skills.

Stella's leadership position was more specified and time-specific than Alyson's or Felix's, which could be why she described specific tasks they did not. Stella's leadership role (at the time) was more temporary than Alyson's or Felix's. Taking on a leadership position for many of these young people meant gaining skills that they felt will be useful for them later in life. However, none of the participants who held leadership positions stated gaining life skills as their sole reasoning for assuming the roles as such.

Styles of and approaches to leadership differ across all groups, not only from XRY to ST to SYM, to school groups. From school group to school group, individuals in the present study had different perspectives on leadership. Cameron, a leader in his group, which he founded with Amelia explained that in their group,

> Decisions are typically made through [a] quasi-democratic Quaker rule. In terms of the lobbying team that I manage, I make sure that everyone has [shared] their input, and then I make a decision on that, and sometimes I leave it up to a vote if they're interested in the bill or not, and if it's after the session.

School-based groups were the least radical of all of the collectives involved in this study. Being part of a school-based group, Cameron, as a leader, makes decisions for his group. This top-down leadership style demonstrates that groups affiliated with schools are more likely to employ a more centralized approach to leadership, given the parameters within which they must function.

Almost all school-based groups involved in the present study enacted leadership similar to a typical high school-based extracurricular club. Makayla described her approach to leadership in the club that she is co-president of with Marissa. Makayla specified,

> I really love telling people what to do. Especially this year, I've really been able to work on my leadership skills and try to fit in to the type of leader that I want to be.... I realized that I didn't need to be like other people. I could be myself. I could be firm, I could be strict and still be kind and listen to people and hear what [they] have to say, but I shouldn't be afraid of telling people what to do if they need a job, or to share my knowledge about what's happening, especially if I know what's happening…. [As copresident] I'm able to contribute a lot to this club by being aware of all of the different projects that are happening and being on top of any emergency emails that are coming through and being able to really give people jobs that one person can't do.

Makayla mentioned enjoying "telling people what to do," connoting a top-down leadership approach within her club. I only observed this hierarchal approach within-school-based groups. The other aspects of leadership that she described aligned with other school groups' approaches to leadership, such as delegating tasks and responding to emails, for example. Makayla continued,

> We have different types of jobs for everybody. It's definitely what people prefer. Two people in our club really enjoy working on spreadsheets, and I hate working on spreadsheets, so I am so happy to give them that job, because they say that it's so relaxing to do the spreadsheets, and I'm like, "you go for it!" So, it's not like it's tedious work because there are options, but it's definitely a lot of organizing…. We try to never put too many things on one person. If it seems like someone has a lot on their plate, we really try to take that off of people's shoulders to really have a cohesive group where nobody's doing more than they can handle.

Participants described that a leader's duties largely entailed delegation of tasks. Leaders of school-based groups communicated with adult or faculty sponsors and made plans for members to follow. As co-presidents and good friends, Makayla and Marissa shared that they work together to allow the club to function well and execute everything they set out to do. This copresident approach was similar in two other school-based groups.

Though not in line with decentralized leadership, no participants of school-based clubs said that they disliked how the presidents of their clubs ran the group. On the contrary, group members described that they enjoyed how their club presidents led their groups, and that this facilitation added to their reasoning for continuing to participate. Zara, not a leader in her group, shared that she finds the leaders of her group to be immensely helpful:

> [The leaders] are the ones that are able to initiate the ideas that we discuss… [they] help us figure out what to do with the ideas… They provide us with updates, and they help keep the group moving and productive… They also help with time management of the meeting, [they tell us] at the beginning of the meeting, we're gonna do this, so they organize, and they initiate, they continue the ideas that we contribute.

Zara noted that ideas mostly come from the leadership in her club, another example to substantiate the claim that a top-down leadership structure is inherent in only school-based clubs, within the context of the present study. Unlike XRY, ST, and SYM, school-based groups do not have demands they aim to fulfill, which could explain why these clubs differ most.

Finally, an aspect of school-based climate advocacy only (not the other groups involved) is that they utilize adult help, given their necessity for a faculty advisor or club administrator. That is, almost all school-affiliated groups include some form of adult influence or assistance, yet the degrees to which groups utilize it vary. For example, Amelia described,

> We work with what we call adult allies for a few things: to collaborate on issues or projects that we both care about; for resources, information, funding, kind of just sharing anything that is helpful to each other; and then the other side of that is the more, so sharing in a coalition.

Amelia's group is largely politically focused; therefore, it utilizes adult help more specifically than other school-based groups.

Felix, Alyson, and Stella, however, all shared their gratitude for their group's faculty advisor. Regarding adult influence, Felix shared,

> Adults have helped a lot.… They are consistent. They're the people who can say, "Remember this, remember that? We talked about this last time. We talked about that last time. Make sure that we're following through on this thread." It's a sort of reminder and gut-check. People who are able to devote their entire lives to this, to say, "Okay, I have your back, even when you have a paper looming."

Similarly, Alyson described,

> Our faculty advisors have heavily influenced the work that we do, and the way that we approach things. They are very empowering, and they support us in our adventures. They've been great in terms of, just logistically, they give us funding which is always great. Along with funding comes food and different posters that we can print out that a lot of students on campus do not have access to.... They give things to us in a very physical way, but also a lot of mentorship and feedback and in guiding us in, "okay, what is the goal of the [school] climate movement? What do we really wanna accomplish? And how do we accomplish it?" I think we can get very caught up in the nitty gritty details of each thing and not really consider the impact of our work, and sort of just creating realistic things to do. They certainly provide a lot of advice.

Felix and Alyson, in the same school-based group, spoke highly of their faculty advisors. Both participants described appreciation of their faculty sponsors, a sentiment all school-based participants echoed. Adult influence and help, as well as micro-level within-school actions, are the main ways in which school-based groups differ from other groups.

### *5.3.5 Comparison and Summary of Styles of Leadership*

From XRY, to ST, to SYM, and finally, school-based groups, leadership ranges from essentially decentralized to completely top-down approaches. A completely decentralized model

lacks formal leadership and aims to foster equal participation among members, as XRY and to a degree ST employ. Participants from SYM and somewhat ST described that partially decentralized approaches to leadership maintain some aspects of decentralized leadership philosophies with informal leadership or coordinators. Democratic leadership, as ST and somewhat school groups described involves decision-making through discussion, voting, and consensus building. ST utilizes a hybrid model, combining elements of decentralization and top-down structures, while allowing for flexibility regarding the most efficient and egalitarian. For the most part, top-down leadership models, as most school groups employed, feature centralized leadership, with a clear president, treasurer, and secretary, as most school-based clubs do. They include designated roles and there is a degree of clear hierarchy. Groups' choices of leadership style hinged on group goals and values. Therefore, leadership styles align with levels of radicality in that the most radical group, XRY, employs the most amorphous leadership. In contrast, the least radical groups utilize the most centralized leadership approach. In all cases, however, participants shared that leaders had the power to make members feel that their voices were heard in the group.

### 5.4 Outreach

For the purposes of this paper, I defined outreach as how youth climate organizers interacted with people outside of their groups in any form or manner. External interactions included but were not limited to in-person and online actions that these groups held, such as protests, strikes, and die-ins; online-based actions, such as phone banking or lobby weeks; and electronic communications, such as e-mail, social media posting, and press releases. In terms of the actions that youth-led climate-oriented groups involved in the present study groups did, I found these to range from small pro-environmental actions (e.g., switching from plastic to metal or bamboo utensils, or advocating for this switch at their educational institution) to larger-scale actions including marches and strikes on government or corporate property, including actions that may have risked arrest. Participants shared that this large range of activities, including small daily actions, was a means of feeling less overwhelmed with the gravity of the climate emergency, and gave them a sense of agency in a problem that felt so out of their reach to solve. The following section covers how participants spoke about the ways in which their groups interacted with the public. Given that one of the significant differences in how these groups function is how they interact with the public, I first subdivide this section by actions, media, and

social media, and then further sub-divide by group to allow for easier comparisons both within and across cases.

### *5.4.1 Actions*

For the purposes of this paper, I define actions as how each group interacts with the public or those who are not part of their groups. Actions might include but are not limited to remarkable and public events, such as strikes, marches, and parades, as well as more discrete actions, such as phone banks or bake sales. In some instances, groups define specific demands for actions. In these cases, groups direct their actions towards certain government officials or corporations. Other times, however, events are less defined and non-specific, such as parades or mural making. Generally, different groups take varying approaches to actions and to interacting with the public, which I discuss in this section.

#### 5.4.1.1 Extinction Rebellion Youth

Extinction Rebellion, as mentioned above, is the most radical of the group types involved in the present study in all ways, especially regarding actions. Therefore, their actions are the most theatrical and spectacle-like compared to all other participating groups' actions. Lucy put the point of XRY's actions rather bluntly: "we're trying to change laws to get the climate crisis under control." She extrapolated, "I would describe [XRY actions] as not necessarily arrestable actions, but not exactly completely lawful, because we have gotten warned by police before, but we have never been threatened. Well, we've never actually been arrested." Lucy's mention of possible arrest aligns with XRY's goals of gaining media attention through public actions, as five out of eight XRY participants stated. Some XRY groups, however, avoid possible arrest because "arresting funds the police," as Kyra stated. Jake listed some examples of previous XRY actions: "there could be walk-ins, die-ins, pretend oil spills on people, if you wanna go crazy, locking yourself, chaining yourself, handcuffing yourself to things," to give examples of what XRY groups tend towards regarding public-facing actions. Marianne extrapolated that in her XRY group, "we do flea markets, and we make 'zines, and we have concerts, and spray paint Chase Bank, and dye the fountain red," exemplifying the radicality that XRY aims to display to the public. Actions are the only way the public interacts with these climate-oriented groups. Therefore, non-members define groups by these events which they see either in-person or via news or social media.

One smaller goal of youth-led climate organizing that XRY engages in is teaching the public about the intersectional effects of the climate crisis on the planet and all of its inhabitants. Kyra shared,

> Something else that XR has done in the past that I really, really love is teach ins, and I think those are so awesome, and a lot of the times they're [on] topics that range from environmental racism to other forms of environmental justice, and it's not just like, "stop oil because emission's bad," it's like, "stop oil because you're destroying sacred land."

One goal of all of the intersectionally-focused and justice-oriented climate groups is to bring awareness to the myriad injustices inherent in the climate crisis. More than just XRY holds these teach-ins that Kyra mentioned to increase awareness; SYM and ST have done so as well. Participants shared that more people might act if they become aware of the compounding injustices inherent in the climate crisis. This notion of consciousness-raising and spreading the message aligns with XR's belief that governments will concede to their demands if 3.5% of the United States' population is engaged in climate advocacy (Extinction Rebellion, n.d.).

XR is known for the theatrical and eye-catching aspects of their actions that grab the public's attention and get XR and XRY widespread international news media coverage. The over-the-top displays that XR and XRY put on with their actions, as all XRY participants evidenced, are purposeful, with the goal of gaining more attention and increasing membership in the movement. June described a specific dramatic action that her XRY local group put on:

> We planned an action outside of the [bank] headquarters. I think it was so successful because it purposely balanced something really theatrical that would get the attention of the media and also people walking by, but also not so theatrical that you wouldn't be able to understand the concept right away. So, we planned a fake oil spill. We took molasses which is completely biodegradable and non-toxic, and we lined a tarp up on the sidewalk and we set it up so that there was a pipeline prop behind us, and we poured the molasses onto [XRY] volunteers. Molasses looks like oil, it's black. We had a demonstration where we sat out there and we had people passing out flyers, we had an outreach table, and we had a lot of media there as well.

One of the main reasons for doing actions, at least for XR and XRY, is to get the attention of the public and media to in part to increase membership, and in part to spread the message that humans are killing the planet. XR does this mainly by aiming to grab the attention of passers-by

and sometimes by intentionally inviting reporters to their events. The fake oil spill action that June described allowed her XRY local group to get lots of attention, leading to recruiting new members, educating the public, and greater visibility of the detrimental effects of pipeline construction. This fake oil spill is an example of an action targeted with specific demands of the bank in front of which they protested to divest from fossil fuels and to support no new fossil fuel infrastructure in the United States. Though actions such as this may not end with the bank or corporation agreeing to XRY's demands, these actions still gain attention and increase momentum for XRY.

Even in executing actions, individuals hold different roles. There is a difference between planning and partaking in action, as those who plan actions may withhold certain information until right before the event due to the action's illegality. While this withholding of sensitive information may seem like more of a top-down approach to leadership than decentralized, no single person holds all of the information about an action, rather, a few people do. A group of people plans actions, and as many members as would like can volunteer to participate in the action. Information is only ever withheld if there is an aspect of the action that could lead to participant arrest. Usually, the arrestable aspect of an action, such as sitting down in a road, has to be done quickly. Therefore, to some degree, XR's approach to action planning is somewhat non-democratic. However, those who agree to action are aware beforehand that an action could include possible arrest; they are just not told what specifically the action will entail before the day it is set to take place. Participants are never obligated to risk arrest. However, as previously stated, all individuals who would like to participate in an action in which arrest is possible must first take XR's non-violent direct action (NVDA) training. Kyra exemplified this difference in awareness of aspects of an action involving sensitive information and risking arrest with her road blockade story:

> We had our Earth Day action road blockade, and [most of] the [XR and XRY] people who came did not know we were blocking a road [that day]. They thought it was a protest.... We walked around, and then all of a sudden, we're telling them, "Okay, now go in the middle of the road!" We didn't force them, we were like, "If you feel comfortable, just letting you know, this could get you arrested," blah blah blah blah blah. We always go through that. But I think it's really interesting to see we know what's going to happen, this is what we have planned for the entire time, we are going to block this road. But

anyone who shows up to the action is just there to go with the flow, and we're really setting out that path and they're all just following it.

Though XR as a group touts decentralized leadership, they put on the most arrestable actions of any other climate organization. As such, those who are part of the leadership team cannot discuss these actions with others before for fear of getting arrested on the spot when participants first arrive at the meeting spot. Therefore, individuals who take part in planning actions from the beginning until the day of have more information than participants who show up and participate on the scheduled day. These two examples of XRY actions illustrate that, in comparison with other groups' actions, XR presents the most possible danger to participants while simultaneously gaining the most media attention given their radicality and theatrics. See Figures 3 and 4 for photos of my participant observation of one of an XRY's actions in-person.

**Figure 3**

*Extinction Rebellion Youth Boston Participants and Community Members at Cambridge City Hall in Cambridge, MA, for the Honk! Festival on October 9, 2021*


*Note.* Photo credit: Julia L. Ginsburg.

**Figure 4**

*Photo of Self, Participating in Extinction Rebellion Boston's Honk! Parade on October 9, 2021*


*Note*. Photo credit: Leonard Schwartz.

#### 5.4.1.2 Sustainabiliteens

Though I have categorized ST as less radical than XRY, this decrease in radicality is slight. ST, like XRY also engages in non-violent direct action (NVDA) but in a less purposefully civilly disobedient way than XRY. A main difference between ST and XRY is that ST engages in some political activism whereas XRY aims to work outside of the political system with the goal of the most radical form of change. ST, therefore, engages in a wider range of actions than XRY. Annie explained that in Sustainabiliteens,

> We do people power stuff, which [includes] direct action, strikes, protests, marches, and rallies and all of that, which are sometimes directed just generally to the government, and also can be directed to corporations, or banks who are funding pipelines and stuff like

> that. We also do some political actions, so that means getting involved in elections on all levels of government and endorsing candidates and volunteering for them. We also do stuff around education and engaging youth.

Annie's list of actions that ST puts on, though somewhat similar to the lists of actions that XRY participants spoke about, includes more possible actions than any of the other groups might do, given that ST is not tied to any specific agenda. The idea that Sustainabiliteens is not specifically politically aligned, and "changes like a chameleon," as Jessica described, allows them to include actions that are directed toward more sectors than all other groups. Aliza noted that some goals of Sustainabiliteens actions include, "pushing forward policies at the level of government, like climate related policies at any level of government," reiterating that ST in fact engages in actions that are politically focused, especially if an issue affects the Vancouver or metro-Vancouver area.

Sustainabiliteens is the only group included in this study that exists both within, and outside of schools. Therefore, ST actions could take place on or off school property. Jessica described an event that her ST School Leads group did outside of their school building:

> We made a mural, which I think was one of the most important moments [for] collaboration, for outreach, and for actually making an impact…. We wanted to have a shock factor, and to actually make it known that students have these fears and wishes, and [that] we need to be equipped with the knowledge to combat climate change.… Everyone came out, everyone participated, we had people walking by us to ask to join the club, and it got people actually seeing climate justice as something that was cool!

Actions have different goals and impacts depending on various factors such as location, time of year, and current events, to name a few. Though Jessica refrained from explicitly stating that the goal of the mural action was to gain new members, this is often an ideal outcome of actions, if none of the other goals were achieved. The event Jessica held at her school allowed her peers to view climate justice in a different light than they may have previously, which Jessica described as bringing her joy. Six out of 30 participants in the present study said that they would still take part in actions even if they had no other impact than increasing meaning and feelings of purpose among activists.

Multiple ST members talked about the different iterations that Sustainabiliteens has had over the past few years. These changes included shifts in ST-members approaches to actions,

among other things. Zelda mentioned the transition that ST went through and how their focus in terms of actions is different than it used to be as a result of the restructuring of the organization:

> In the beginning, our group was very focused on the striking aspect of climate activism. This was way back in 2019. Coming up on the more recent times, I think we've been more focused on specific and local action[s], and I know last summer we had an action against [insurance company] for insuring the TMX pipeline. That was not a strike.

Zelda did not elaborate about what the purpose of the action against the TMX pipeline was, however, she noted that ST's focus has shifted from national and international problems to more Vancouver and British Columbia-focused actions and even some hyper-local actions. Similarly, Jessica shared that Sustainabiliteens is "changing all the time," and these changes exist in the way that they put on actions as well. ST and XRY both engage in NVDA, but ST protests and engages in civil disobedience in a tamer manner than XRY. Additionally, ST engages in the widest breadth of actions than any other groups involved.

#### 5.4.1.3 Sunrise (Youth) Movement

As stated, Sunrise is the most politically focused out of all the groups included in this study. In line with their politically-liberal ideological focus, most of the actions that SYM participants spoke about were related to lobbying, canvassing, or other strictly politically-oriented actions. One of Sunrise's main goals is to get the Green New Deal (GND) passed through United States federal government. Therefore, participants described that SYM focuses almost all of their actions in one way or another in support of the GND. Extrapolating about this philosophical approach, Meira explained:

> Our activities are very much politically oriented, so, I would say that different movements tackle environmentalism in different ways, and the way we do it is definitely through the political process….We're oriented around pushing for the ideals that are in the Green New Deal, which is a transition away from fossil fuels, but also a just transition, so that we're adequately meeting the needs of minorities, not only Communities of Color, but also poor communities who have historically been most affected by climate change, and are usually left behind by legislation on energy or even the original New Deal legislation that created a lot of government public programs.

Given that Sunrise is politically oriented, and one of their main foci is the Green New Deal (GND), put forward by United States Senator Edward Markey and Representative Alexandria

Ocasio-Cortez, and backed by myriad Democratic leaders in the U.S. While being politically focused with their actions, SYM's approaches are still inherently intersectional because of the justice framework that the GND upholds.

However, not all actions that SYM has done have focused specifically on the GND. Melanie described a political action that her SYM hub planned and executed which garnered much media attention:

> We had a very successful action last summer focusing on Senator Feinstein, who, she's obviously up there in terms of people in power because she's in Congress. We got several news articles of footage, and I thought that was interesting… I think that in a campaign specifically, it's a lot of guesswork, because you can predict how many people you need to phone bank, how many doors you need to knock on, but you never really know until election day, but that early work does really pay off in the end, to lead to wins.

Meira, in the same hub as Melanie, spoke about the above-mentioned action which evidently mattered immensely to this hub as a whole for multiple reasons as well as the individuals who comprise it. Meira elucidated,

> One of the most recent projects that I think has been really successful that I was part of was a rally that we held outside of Senator Feinstein's office demanding that she support a civilian climate core, which… was something we were talking about back when the infrastructure bill was being passed in the states… after trying to reach out to her for several weeks, we staged a rally outside her office, as well as an occupation of the area outside her office for three days… As a result of our pressure, a week later, she did sign on to an open letter from a group of Democrats calling for a civilian climate core.

Melanie and Meira both found this action quite impactful for their own lives, as well as for their campaigns and overall collective goals. Though not all actions result in such wins or projected outcomes as this action did, some focused actions indeed result in intended outcomes, such as the above-mentioned "civilian climate core." Similar to XRY, as Melanie described, SYM hopes for media coverage of their actions, leading to increased awareness of the issues their groups support. When planning for and putting on actions, XRY, ST, and SYM, all aim to gain media coverage, and to a lesser extent social media posting, in order to add to their consciousness raising efforts around climate-related issues.

Larger groups seem to put on larger in-person actions than smaller groups. Smaller groups also tend to enact more localized actions than larger groups, as participants described. Julianna, part of a small Sunrise hub said, "We definitely did a mix of localized actions, and then actions that were inspired by what the Sunrise movement was doing nationally," in speaking about the events that her hub put on in the recent past, even though she expressed some embarrassment that her group was not presently active. Regardless of her expression of slight unease due to lack of actions during the COVID-19 pandemic, Julianna went on to say,

> On the national level, during the 2020 election, we did a few phone banks, not for anyone local, because there wasn't anyone local who was being opposed after Ed Markey won his primary. But there were some national elections that we really cared about, and so we were doing phone banks for [them].

Phone banks came up often among Sunrise participants only, a major difference between SYM and all other groups included in the present study. SYM participants hold both calling and texting phone banks to spread awareness of democratic and liberal U.S. political campaigns that Sunrise endorses. These national phone banking actions allowed SYM participants to act for their cause even during the lockdowns and quarantine of 2020 and 2021. Participants reiterated many times that Sunrise is quite persistent in their political actions, and in their asks of government officials.

Phone banking is not all that Sunrise does. Most of their actions, however, are political in nature. Meira described another action:

> We kept requesting for that politician to sign on the no new fossil fuel money pledge, but he just kept on taking fossil fuel money for his campaigns as donations. So, we staged a protest for that, and I got to help with the press coverage for that action which was really cool, 'cause I didn't expect that's something you would do in climate activism. But it turns out that, I learned basically the whole media relations process by helping write our press release and getting local news to find out that Sunrise [city name] exists, and we're demanding politicians to take these actions.

Sunrise focuses on political actions that align with their demands, largely related to the United States' national Green New Deal. Actions not focused on the GND are still political in nature, such as supporting democratic candidates at all levels of government. Almost across the board, the candidates that SYM endorse back the GND. This sole focus on political actions is dissimilar

to all other groups because XRY refrains from politically-oriented actions, and ST does both politically-oriented actions, and non-politically-oriented actions.

#### 5.4.1.4 School Groups

Actions that school groups put on varied greatly across the category, given that school groups differ from one group to another in terms of foci, ability, and adult influence, among other factors. Therefore, this section will be organized by within-school actions and out-of-school actions, as those were the two main approaches to actions that school groups took. With these within-school actions, much focus is on individual or on school-wide (though sometimes town or city-wide) pro-environmental shifts, such as switching from plastic utensils in the cafeteria to reusable ones, or getting solar panels installed on the school's roof. These pro-environmental pushes reflect the environmental and sustainability focus of most school-affiliated climate advocacy groups. School groups also engaged in out-of-school advocacy work. Some projects that school groups engage in may have the goal of affecting the community, town or city in which the school is situated.

Six of the school-group participants described environmentally and locally focused actions. Ashira shared an environmental focus on educating locals in the form of an action that her club put on: "We did a few projects on the lake that we have in our town, and what bacteria is in our lake, and everything in that area and how we can educate people in [town] about that." She went on to say that the environmental club at her school largely aims to fund raise each year in sharing, "Now, I think one of our new projects is trying to raise money for an endangered species, it's a type of turtle…. We're trying to raise money to help out with that." I did not observe these fundraising efforts in any other group, however. Each member of Ashira, Sabrie, Caroline, and Zara's group commented about fundraising for tree-planting that their group does annually. Regarding that project, Caroline stated,

> Most of our focus is based on raising money for the tree at the end of the year, or multiple trees, depending on how much money we raise…. [For example] the bake sale, people are always really really hungry after school, and so bake sales generally get a good amount of money.

Ashira also noted a different form of fundraising: "We're also planning a movie night that we can show in school to raise money for our club so we can plant trees in the future," reiterating the focus on planting more trees locally. The focus on tree-planting is similar to Natan's group's

focus, though these five participants are not members of the same group. Some of the actions that these two groups did could not be extrapolated to other groups because of the strong confines that these two schools place on the group to fit within the parameters of the public-school setting. Further, seven participants mentioned school-based limitations when discussing their clubs' actions.

Similar to XRY, ST, and SYM, educating others who may not have the same knowledge about climate and sustainability issues is a major focus of school groups. Ashira, Kamala, Zara, and Caroline all discussed their school group's aim to educate younger children in their local area about the state of the climate and how young children can participate in climate activism. Ashira described, "We're creating a presentation to show kids in [local] elementary schools about how they can help out with the environment, and what things are affecting the environment." Across all groups included in the present study, participants mentioned education and consciousness raising as an aspect of their activism. This specific school group, however, focused on local-level pro-environmental and sustainable lifestyle changes that individuals might make, as opposed to education on intersectional injustices inherent in the climate crisis, as the other groups largely discussed.

Continuing with the focus on activism within the community, Sabrie noted a plan that her group had before the pandemic that they had not gotten the chance to execute yet:

> We couldn't do this now, we might start this again because of COVID restrictions. The plan was to go to local businesses, and ask them about what their sustainability approach is, what they do to be sustainable…. It was essentially interviewing local businesses and seeing how they contributed to sustainability.

Like many other groups' plans, the COVID-19 pandemic halted this action, though, given differences in circumstance, members of this group shared that they might attempt this action again in the future.

School groups aim for actions within the school to make it more pro-environmental, which four school-based participants mentioned. Zara voiced, "I was trying to push in the school for smaller scale things, but still things that would have an impact in my school. I think we were trying to get some vegan or vegetarian option in the cafeteria, that kind of thing." Meanwhile, in a different school-affiliated group, Makayla spoke about within-school sustainability changes as well:

> Some stuff we do within the school itself…. [We've] done things like getting air dryers in our bathrooms…. This year we're working on getting things like a sustainable community room to support mental health and connect people to nature, which is a more local community organizing event.

Across groups, within-school actions vary in terms of goals as well as impact. No participant other than Makayla described mental health as an aspect of actions, however. These micro-level actions only came up among school-based participants because other groups focus on larger-scale actions and greater media attention.

Makayla, as co-president of her school group, described in detail what her group actually does. She explained that much of the organizing and planning that her group does involves contacting other people to help with the actions that they put on. Makayla described,

> It's a lot of working on on-going projects that we've had from previous years like our sustainable community room; projects to limit the plastic utensils in the dining hall; to get a meatless Monday for food during lunch. So, it's a lot of outreach. It's a lot of expanding our networks. It's a lot of emailing people to coordinate… It's so many emails. There's no way to get around emails when we're preparing for [an event]…. Organizing as emails; you get used to it, and you start to love it when people start confirming, and you're reaching your goals. We try to make it fun. We listen to music. We act crazy. We wear funky hats.

Makayla described "organizing as emails," to posit that the planning that goes into the actions that these groups put on is also the activism itself. In different ways, at least ten participants mentioned fun as important in both planning and enacting actions. Some, but not all school-affiliated groups also engage in political advocacy, in addition to school-based pro-environmental changes. For example, Makayla's co-president, Marissa, explained, "We've had lobby week after lobby week to get legislation passed, the majority of which fails, doesn't make it through house, doesn't make it through the senate, or has been vetoed, or it just doesn't go through." She described that often the let downs involved in lobbying are discouraging, but that the fun they have had throughout the process allows them to persevere. Therefore, fun serves multiple purposes in youth-led climate advocacy.

The nature of school groups, especially regarding climate advocacy, is dynamic. Therefore, youth take many approaches to actions. To illustrate the changing nature of her group, Amelia articulated,

> A lot of people think that we gave up on the strikes, but it's more like, it's a tool that had its purpose and its time, and we've moved on to something else that works better for the current moment. That's why I do different things in different seasons. [During] the legislative season, the best tool is policy, right now, the best tool is electoralism. As much as I hate electoralism—the idea that we're gonna put all our faith in someone, and idolatry in someone and that everything's gonna be fine if we get them elected, it's a very strange topic—it is a good tool if you find a good climate champion, you do wanna get them in office.

Amelia described the importance of her group's political advocacy in calling a candidate a "climate champion." This lobbying and advocacy that Amelia described is similar to SYM's approach. Though some school groups engage in politically-oriented actions, most remain within the confines of the school or the surrounding local area within walking distance of their campus for their actions. School-based activist collectives exist within the walls and confines of an educational institution with its own rules. Therefore, the fact that their groups are essentially extracurricular clubs limits them in terms of the greater youth-let climate movement.

#### 5.4.1.5 Comparison and Summary of Actions

The main differences lie in the enactment of actions that school-based groups engage in, in comparison with the approaches of the other three groups. While some school-based groups participate in actions with political orientations, the majority tends to operate within the parameters of the educational institution or local area near their campus. The confined nature of their actions sets them apart from the more autonomous and externally active approaches the other three groups enact. In contrast, XRY, SYM, and ST adopt more expansive and politically-charged approaches to their actions. XRY is known for its civil disobedience, aiming to draw attention to the urgency of climate issues through direct confrontation with political structures. SYM strategically organizes actions with a focus on legislative change, aiming to influence policy decisions. ST, while also politically engaged, tends to employ a mix of methods. Another integral way in which youth-led climate groups reach the public through outreach is via media and social media, discussed next.

### *5.4.2 Social and News Media*

The majority of participants ($n$ = 25) stated that both popular news media and social media play irreplaceable and invaluable roles in youth-led climate organizing. Currently, news media and social media overlap, especially among the generation to which the participants from this study belong. Therefore, some participants talked about both news and social media simultaneously, and while some only talked about social media. Young climate organizers described that they often communicate with news media outlets and write and share press releases, in order to gain more visibility for their actions. They use social media to share information and recruit new people into their groups, for example. Given that XRY, ST, SYM, and school clubs utilize news and social media differently, I also subdivided this by group.

#### 5.4.2.1 Extinction Rebellion Youth

Extinction Rebellion Youth uses social media mostly to display the actions they have previously put on to their followers, as well as to gain membership through posting about actions. XRY largely refrains from posting information about the climate crisis on social media, as multiple participants described. Carly exemplified the aspect of social media for XRY's organizing work:

> [Social media] is a really powerful way to spread the word. We also communicate with other XR Youth groups on social media and get ideas for actions on there. It's just, "Hey we're having an action," and people will show up just from Instagram.

As I observed at the actions I attended that Carly's XRY group held, many people, especially young people, attended the actions that Carly's collective planned because they saw it posted on social media. Many groups use social media as a tool for gaining membership. To illustrate, Marianne specified about social media use in her XRY local group:

> [On social media] we share what we're doing, when we want people to join, how we want people to contribute. It's kind of a weird phenomenon how teenagers communicate with each other. It's basically all through Instagram… it's interesting. That's kind of how we get a lot of the exterior communication done.

Marianne reflected about the use of social media among young people today, in that Instagram is one of the main ways in which those in Generation Z communicate with one another. Similar to Marianne, June commented about how young people utilize social media today as a source of

news. June elucidated, “With the rise of social media, so is the rise of different issues. They’re not all of a sudden happening, but people are all of a sudden talking about it.”

Participants also shared that social media increases awareness of the cause through posting about their actions. Almost all XRY members noted social media as having utmost importance as a tool for their work. Ethan, for example, shared,

> Social media is the way of the future, I think.… Most of our actions, we’ll post pictures after our actions. We’ll amplify other people’s actions in solidarity. I’ll comment on recent events, at least give my opinions and everything. Again, that’s another way of reporting, [we get] like a ton more visibility. A ton more bang for your buck. [Social media is] how you get, you know, how journalists find you, how potential recruits find you.

Especially with the transition onto some more online activism, as the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated, employing social media became even more imperative for climate organizing work.

Young people utilize not only social media, but popular news media outlets as well. Given that many actions, especially arrestable actions that XR puts on, aim to gain media attention, sometimes these groups (not only XR) alert the media of when their events are scheduled to take place so that reporters come and write about actions. When discussing media, eight participants shared that they felt young people get more media attention than do adult groups. Carly described,

> Media reports on us [youth] more, and we get adults to pay more attention to the crisis. You can have a very small turnout for a youth march, and it can get covered, and you can have a large turnout for an adult group that we’ve seen many times, and not get any news coverage.… When kids are going on the streets and saying, “We’re marching for our future.” I think it hits people differently than it does [when] adults [are marching]. And also, there’s a whole like, Greta reaction, kind of, where that was a very big news coverage, so the news can see that people react this way to things, so if we put more kids in the news, then it’ll get more [coverage].

Carly referenced the “Greta Thunberg effect” (Sabherwal et al., 2021, p. 322), often a catalyst for young people’s engagement in climate organizing. Her words echoed those of many other participants regarding belief that youth get more attention from the media for their climate advocacy because they are fighting for their own futures.

From observing their meetings, I noticed that XRY focuses a lot on the movement gaining momentum, often via media coverage. Ethan spoke about the importance of media attention:

> The point of an action is to get attention. You're only gonna reach a hundred eyes or something if nobody reports on it, just the people who are immediately there. If you do get reporting, you can reach ten times that number…. When we take action, very often we will see results if we look for them. I think we once marched on [newspaper] office. I was afraid because it didn't look like enough people were paying attention to us. It was a Sunday afternoon so there was probably nobody in the office. But we did get seen obviously, because before we did the action, [newspaper] would almost never report on the climate crisis, only if there was a fire in California or whatever. And they would never look at our actions, or Sunrise actions, for that matter. And now they spend more pages devoting to the climate crisis. They kinda are connecting the dots between extreme weather patterns and the climate crisis. And they'll even pay more attention to XR actions, and to other organizations. And, I think they actually have like a specific person devoted to that now, to climate change activists, which they didn't have two months ago, before we did that action. So, that was definitely a tangible result.

Ethan and Carly both described the importance of media attention for XRY's actions, a theme discussed often across all groups except for school groups. Not all groups have seen such tangible results as Ethan reported, yet almost all described news media articles as ideal results of actions.

However, individuals have different perspectives on how media views them. Jake, a member of XRYUS described his understanding of how the national team uses social media:

> Social media serves both to get information out, but also to get people to join…. We're not really members of the infographic industrial complex. I feel like we're kind of doing a lot more of, if we have an action, promoting that action, like, "oh my god, look at what they did!" But it's not necessarily like, "what is climate change? Here's how you fight it." You know? It's not the same kind of Canva-type thing.

Jake vehemently expressed his disproval of infographics that other youth-led climate groups post on Instagram. He described XRYUS's position on social media as simply to share actions that XRY local groups do. Almost across the board, XRY mainly uses Instagram as its social media

platform. Additionally, all XRY participants discussed the importance of media attention for actions to gain membership as well as raise to consciousness of the direness of the climate crisis.

#### 5.4.2.2 Sustainabiliteens

Unlike the other groups, in terms of media and social media, ST members only commented about social media and not popular news outlets when asked about external outreach. ST participants described social media use in similar ways to Ethan's analysis of social media as "the way of the future." Specifically, Annie declared social media to be "one of the main components of Sustainabiliteens' activism" and continued to state,

> Because we're reaching a teenage audience… [social media is] where everyone follows us to gain information, and things like that. So, social media is our main platform for making announcements on strikes and trying to get people to be informed on issues. It's definitely our most important [tool] in terms of communication, and influence on the public. We also try to share other issues and social media is just a really good platform for that.

Unlike Jake, Annie noted that ST uses Instagram to share information about the climate crisis as well as to present actions that ST has engaged in, to the public. However, not everyone in ST has the same perspective of social media. For example, Jessica shared,

> We use social media in two different routes.… Sometimes social media outreach can just seem like recruiting, recruiting, recruiting, come to this event, come to this event, like, only something to push on people to come out and join us. But, what we also wanna do is have a collaboration of something that you can just sit at and sit down and look at from home.

Unlike Jake's analysis of social media, Jessica noted her group in fact uses social media to communicate information with others through posting infographics, demonstrating variability in young people's utilization of different organizing tools.

Multiple participants shared that their age group obtains much of their news from social media. Relatedly, Zelda described the phenomenon that young people have greater access to social media than they do to news media:

> If you take a look at our Instagram, we have a lot of info[graphic] posts, because our main demographic is people our age: teenagers. And a lot of the times, teenagers don't have access to a lot of the nitty gritty issues that are involved in climate change. And so,

> we want to be able to have that accessible information for them to learn and educate themselves, and often especially in some areas, especially in schools, we don't have good accessible climate education. So, a lot of teenagers are gonna turn to social media for that, or the internet. So, we wanna be one of those credible, reliable sources [of climate news].

Contrary to Jake's perspective of the "infographic industrial complex," Zelda stated her belief that ST's social media presence functions as a resource for fellow young people to learn about the climate crisis due to participants' descriptions of lack of relevant education within their schools. Multiple participants discussed the lack of adequate climate change education in their school systems, yet only Zelda explained Sustainabiliteens' goal of combating this issue through sharing information about the climate crisis on their social media platform.

Without social media, youth-led climate advocacy would look much different than it does today. In line with Zelda's perspective, Annie elucidated,

> For Sustainabiliteens, social media is one of the main components of our activism, because we're reaching a teenage audience. That's where everyone follows us to gain information, and things like that. So, social media is our main platform for making announcements on strikes and trying to get people to be informed on issues. It's definitely our most important [platform] in terms of communication, and influence of the public. We also try to share other issues and social media is just a really good platform for that.

In different ways, Annie, Jessica, and Zelda, three out of the four participants in the present study who came from Sustainabiliteens, described social media as one of the main forms in which they engage in activism, which could relate to the fact that I conducted this study entirely during the COVID-19 pandemic. Annie also described social media as a form of communication to other young activists and a way of sharing the ST perspective on the climate crisis and its inherent intersectionality. ST's approaches to social media, though they slightly differ from XRY's tactics towards social media, mostly coincide with other groups' use of the tool for communicating ideas and recruiting participants.

#### 5.4.2.3 Sunrise (Youth) Movement

Sunrise Youth Movement members reported using both news media and social media to spread the word about their message, as well as to share their actions with the public. SYM

participants spoke of social media considerably more than they discussed news media, so I discuss social media first in this section. Although all groups use social media to some degree, individuals shared different perspectives on its uses and importance. Elaina, for example, shared her vantage point:

> With the rise of social media, there's been this thing that me and my twin sister love to call social media activism, which is reposting, "Oh, this is happening," but never taking action to act upon the seriousness of the issue. So, for climate change, I've seen lots of people being like, "Oh, the world is burning!" on their Instagram stories, and then it will be like, $900 [worth] of fast fashion in their cart on SHEIN or something like that. I think it's a reflection of the human perspective, well, humanity's duality, because it's like, "Oh, yes, I can say I support this cause," but, "Oh, no, if it affects my SHEIN hauls, how dare it! Never mind!"

Elaina exposed the dichotomy of what Jake noted with the "infographic industrial complex," in which people post information about the climate crisis on their social media platforms yet refrain from acting on these concerns. Elaina also described how much this hypocrisy of her peers bothers her, something that two other participants said as well in other ways.

Though Elaina's perspective of "social media activism," may be common among people her age, all other SYM participants described that Sunrise, as a movement, takes a similar approach to social media as other groups illustrated above in terms of posting events and some information mainly to Instagram. Julianna, in alignment with her peers' perspectives, reiterated social media's purpose of sharing actions and bring awareness to issues related to the climate crisis:

> I think we've really been using [social media] to promote actions that we're doing. So, posting about when we're doing a phone bank, or, when we're holding signs, or trash pick-up at schools…. We also did this, "Pass the Trash," video that we posted on our Instagram, which was in summer of 2020, when we couldn't really meet in-person, so we did a virtual thing, where one person would hold up a piece of trash, and then throw it off screen, and then someone would catch it, and then throw it off screen. That was really fun.

Julianna revealed the creative ways in which her small Sunrise hub used social media, especially when the COVID-19 pandemic shifted so much climate organizing to taking place online. This

collaborative video that Julianna described also suggests the notion of fun—both a catalyst and an outcome that participants described in relation to their group organizing.

In contrast to other participants, Melanie shared that her SYM hub uses social media in a more extensive way than other hubs who participated in this study:

> We started a blog…. I've helped with some parts of the newsletter that we send out monthly…. In regard to putting on an action, we always have posts and stories ready, so that people can look forward to something and know when something's gonna be put on…. Twitter can be more spontaneous, so we could be responding to a tweet that was put out, or, if there were current events, and if we wanted to respond to it ourselves and form a thread. Sometimes that can be a bit more passionate, and direct, but not as thought out, but Twitter sort of functions in a different way than Instagram does.

Unlike other participants, Melanie's Sunrise hub uses social media (i.e., a blog, a newsletter, and Twitter) in addition to Instagram more than other hubs in this study. However, the reason for this use of other social media platforms in her hub is unclear. Melanie went on to discuss various approaches for communicating with the public that she has utilized:

> I've written several speeches for actions, and I've also written poems, because I'm a poet. I think that's a really interesting, unique way of communication. And you can always wonder, "That's just one speech, how much of an impact does that have?" And I think, as a whole, it does have an impact.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, communications for activism have moved to a hybrid format. Melanie described different ways that she displays her activism through communicating her ideas to the public in creative ways. Unlike other participants, Melanie also reflected quite a bit during her interview about what impact her external work might have—her belief in the impact of her work helped her to maintain stamina in it, a notion of self-efficacy.

In addition to social media, SYM members described utilizing news media to communicate with the greater community, as well as with U.S. national newspapers. Sunrise participants described this form of media as quite important in their work. Meira shared,

> We do all of our own media outreach, and that's important because reaching out to the media allows us to tell our story and allows one protest to be bigger than one protest. It makes it something that people can read about in local publications, in local news, and find out about us through…. There [are] a lot of different steps that need to be taken, for

> example, creating press lists of journalists that need to be reached out to, creating a media advisory, or a press release, and getting the right photos for that, and then sending it to all of those press contacts, calling reporters to let them know about the press release, or calling with reports of visuals to see if they want to come and cover our protest day-of, so, [it's] a lot of work on that side to get media coverage.

Meira's description of the work that goes into getting news media coverage is reminiscent of participants' thoughts about how involved putting on an action is. Media, therefore, is another piece of action-planning that takes a considerable amount of time.

Participants noted that news media involvement presents differently when putting on an action. Sunrise participants described their interactions with the press the most out of all participants, suggesting that they interact most with news media in comparison with other groups in the present study. Similar to Ethan's comment regarding increased attention on their group when reporters cover actions, Meira shared that her SYM hub implements a process to encourage the press to write about their actions, enabling the group, to some degree, to ensure attention of those who read or watch the news on a regular basis. Melanie commented on a specific action that she, Meira, and Kamala put on with their Sunrise hub. Melanie described,

> We got several news articles of footage, and I thought that was interesting. You can credit that to a lot of how the action was set up, and the social media…. Sometimes if you get pushback, it's actually a good thing because people are thinking critically about what you have to say, and how it can fit into larger decision making that is happening around climate, and intersectional justice issues…. That [Fox News] had sort of paid attention to what we were doing was interesting to me, that they would pay attention to some young liberal climate activists. But, again, getting that pushback is actually really important, and it shows that people from diverse backgrounds are trying to understand what you have to say [regarding] an issue.

Unlike other participants, Melanie explicitly reflected on the news media coverage that her Sunrise hub gained from political actions, and what that attention meant for the youth climate movement at large. Sunrise, as a movement, focuses a considerable amount on educating the public about their group's demands, mainly, the GND, which aims to ameliorate the social and human rights impacts of the climate crisis. In comparison with the other groups, SYM

participants discussed that their group utilizes news media and social media more than XRY and ST, especially given their descriptions of press releases, blog posts, and news media coverage.

#### 5.4.2.4 School Groups

School groups, given their inherent association with the education sector, and therefore limitations due to the institutions under which they exist, contact media such as newspapers and the like, very infrequently. However, depending on what they may have planned at a given time, they may want to share their progress, mainly with local news outlets. Zara specified, "I've been continuing to help with the communications side of our activism, which is reaching out to the press when we have protests, and also communication between our members in our group." Zara lacked specification when she described protests, so I cannot infer what she intended to reference in that instance. Out of the twelve total participants who belonged to school-affiliated climate groups, only Zara spoke about news media outreach.

Participants in school-affiliated groups discussed social media use in their approaches for outreach, yet considerably less than participants from other groups did. For example, Stella mentioned,

> We have an Instagram team, and they're helpful just in posting. We made a graphic for the lobby week, and so they posted that on Insta, and they DM [direct message] organizations on Insta, in case they don't respond to our emails. Sometimes we get responses back [via Instagram].

Stella's description of her group's use of social media is in line with other school-affiliated participants' discussions of their use of the tool to share their actions, and to a degree, to gain membership.

Eight of the young people involved in the present study stated their awareness that they have better skills in terms of using social media than most older generations. These skills are useful in spreading their message. For example, Felix articulated,

> As high schoolers, we're a little more social media savvy [than older generations]. So, it's a little bit easier for us to remember when we're running an event to say, "Oh, let's post a story about this," when adults running the event will sort of just be like, "Yay! We're running the event." So, it's a sort of an awareness and attentiveness thing, too.

Though many participants talked about their age in terms of a hindrance to this work, given ageism, three participants, including Felix, identified younger generations' increased abilities in

terms of social media. Like other groups, school-based groups mainly utilize Instagram in terms of social media.

> Alyson described that her groups focuses their social media presence on Instagram: Instagram is our main form of social media. We don't have any other form of social media…. Sometimes we'll have informational posts, but those have less impact, so we really try to post our work, and not research that you can find elsewhere. So, we have posted things like our divestment letter, and Earth Week, and we've posted a few memes too, which we're very proud of, and just things like that, that sort of advertise our events, but also keeping things light and fun.

Alyson's description of the way her group employs Instagram as a tool had similarities to Jake's perspective of not sharing information that one might find on the internet, but instead posting what their group actually does regarding activism. Posting infographics on Instagram seemed to be a controversial issue among participants in terms of what purpose it served.

As stated previously, school-affiliated groups use social media the least out of all other groups. Caroline mentioned that her group uses social media quite minimally:

> We don't use social media to a huge extent, but we use it to show what we're doing, to advertise what we're doing, and just hope that someone who didn't know about our group will know about our group, and then maybe they'll join our group.… We're trying to raise money to plant trees. So, we've posted on social media, and so, for some of the posts I've created, I've noticed the support of comments, and that feels like a success, and we've gotten a lot of donations through that.

Caroline expressed using social media to gather donations, something that no other participant spoke about when mentioning Instagram. Her discussion of spreading awareness of her group, as well as accumulating more participants through social media compare to other group's descriptions of social media use. Sabrie, part of the same group as Caroline, verbalized another way in which their group uses social media. Sabrie shared,

> We did do one thing that was spreading news about getting more sustainable energy in homes and telling people about it so that they could get this review done of their home and see how sustainable their energy was and helping them to make it more sustainable.

No other participant spoke of sharing news about switching to renewable energy. Since school groups generally have a more local focus than other groups, the educational aspect of their media

presence often presents as more localized than the other groups. Ashira, part of the same group, also spoke about using social media for consciousness-raising: "We're trying to just spread awareness around the schools about how students can help out because kids these days can just throw trash around and everything and waste a bunch of water and electricity." Ashira's discussion of spreading awareness lines up with other school groups' approaches to consciousness-raising in a very local way.

#### 5.4.2.5 Comparison and Summary of Social and News Media

Each group's approach to social and news media as tools differed from one another. Altogether, young climate activists utilized news media and social media in their organizing to varying degrees and for slightly different reasons from spreading awareness about the climate crisis to increasing membership in their groups, to sharing their actions with the public. Multiple participants agreed that news media coverage was an ideal outcome of an action to gain membership and raise consciousness about the climate crisis. Both social media and traditional news media are powerful tools that young people utilize for their climate work. Participants described social media platforms, including Instagram and Twitter, as dynamic spaces where they share information and mobilize communities. These platforms allow a space for a direct and accessible channel for young people to express their views, connect with others, and coordinate actions. The immediacy and viral nature of social media today enable swift dissemination of information, especially regarding the organization of events and raising awareness. Meanwhile, youth in the present study recognize the importance of traditional news media for reaching a broader audience. Thus, young people engage with journalists, white op-eds, and press releases for their cause. As some SYM members described, youth also leverage news media to hold policymakers accountable. In essence, the combination of social and news media enables young people to get their messages across to diverse audiences, shaping public discourse and challenging established norms.

## 5.5 Summary

Chapter 5 delved into the three aspects of group processes described by young people in the present study. First, I described the different collectives' approaches to planning and communication, pointing to the importance of proper organization to facilitate actions to go smoothly. Next, I explored the range of leadership styles that groups employed, from decentralized to top-down, largely dependent on adult help, or lack thereof, in line with groups'

ideological stances, yet also dependent upon their affiliation with an educational institution or not. Further, I elucidated upon the range of outreach strategies that these groups engaged in, including actions and social and news media, which followed their ideological stances as well. As a whole, Chapter 5 dissects the group processes that take place within these youth-led climate collectives, encompassing planning, leadership styles, and outreach through public-facing actions and engagement with social and news media.

## Chapter 6: Findings: Impacts and Reflexivity of Youth Climate Work

### 6.1 Introduction

Just as groups took manifold approaches to youth-led climate organizing, the impacts of individuals' engagement in these groups on their lives as young people varied as well. In exploring the multifaceted impact of youth-led climate organizing, this chapter, therefore, delves into the effects of youth engagement in collective efforts. For the purposes of this paper, I define impacts as how engaging in this work within the context of a collective affected individual participants' lives from their own vantage points. Young people described many emotional impacts and that the group was invaluable in quelling the intense feelings involved in this work; therefore, that is the main focus of this chapter. Note that given that I focused this study on young people's perspectives of their own involvement with these groups, the impacts discussed in this section describe only the ways in which the participants in the present study spoke about them, as opposed to how news media described the effects of their actions. As such, I refrain from discussing the impacts of this work on climate policy, social issues, or any other outside parties, as participants did not discuss such topics to an extent. I use the term reflexivity to describe how young people spoke about the successes they felt they gleaned from their advocacy work and how they discussed youth-led climate work as affecting their adolescent identity development. Thus, impacts encompass the ways in which participating in climate advocacy work within a collective context affected individuals' lives, focusing primarily on the emotional dimensions young people described.

As previously stated, I utilized thematic analysis to identify and structure how participants discussed the impacts of this work on their lives. I organized these themes along a spectrum from collective to individual, mirroring how the youth articulated the effects of this work on their lives. This chapter unfolds through an exploration of the collective itself, including the significance of the group for coping through emotions and navigating youthhood alongside like-minded peers. Subsequently, I discuss individuals' perceptions of success and examine how they felt their participation in these specific youth-led climate groups affected their adolescent development and contributed to their sense of citizenship in today's world. Reflexivity served as a lens through which young people could articulate the successes they derived from their climate-related work and reflect on it. I end this chapter with a comparison across groups in terms of identifying as an activist, advocate, or organizer. Note that there was minimal variance

in terms of how participants felt about their climate work amongst the different types of organizations in which they participated; therefore, I did not sub-categorize this section by group, as I did with the other two preceding findings chapters, other than the final section of the chapter on activist identity or lack thereof.

### 6.2 The Collective

The group itself—the collective—provided much meaning in young people's lives, as almost all participants described. In fact, participants mentioned that the group provided the most meaning, more so than engaging in actions themselves. The collective allowed for feelings of community, camaraderie, shared culture, inspiration, and fun. These impacts, therefore, allowed young people to feel a greater sense of purpose than they might have otherwise had they not been part of these activist groups. Melanie, for example, shared, "I've found a lot of hope through the young people that I work with," noting the importance of the group for cultivating positive emotions.

Some participants described such an association with their group that it affected their daily life. Jake felt so much part of his group that he illustrated:

> You forget that there are things outside your group when you're working within it…. You get really close with those people, and through that, you're able to communicate ideas a lot better and come up with better things because when you're a lot more uncomfortable and unsure of yourself, you won't always say everything that comes to mind, and you might be missing out on a good idea, because you're too scared to say it.

Participants shared that friendship and camaraderie with fellow group members allowed for them to speak more freely and therefore get more done regarding their climate work because of their comfortability. Similarly, Ethan described, "We have this kind of community, this sense of unity of brotherhood, if I can use that word in a gender-neutral way. It definitely feels like you're part of something bigger than yourself in a way that gives you agency, and individuality." One-third of participants stated in one way or another that the group provides more meaning than acting alone would have. Similar to Ethan, June stated,

> We're extremely community-oriented. Since the very beginning, we've always stressed healing…. [We're] not just working together, but forming and building relationships, and making sure that the events that we do, and the organizing that we do is as restorative as possible…. We try to stress the fact that we're not just fellow organizers or colleagues,

> but we're actual friends, and I think we've been good at that. I think we've been good at creating a comfortable atmosphere and talking to each other not professionally, like talking to each other the way that regular high schoolers would talk to each other.

Participants noted friendship as one of the most important impacts of engagement in this work. They described feelings of connection stemmed largely from their common care for a cause much greater than them. Annie said,

> It obviously becomes an immediate connection between youth to care about this issue…. I feel very connected to the people I do things with, so, it's like partially, "Oh, you wanna protect that, right? And you wanna protect the people that you love on the Earth."

Relatedly, Kamala shared her perspective:

> Even just with the bonds and friendships that I've made through this, even using humor, or fun ways to cope with it while doing our best to make the biggest impact we can make, is very comforting.

Friendship and lightheartedness were integral to the bonding that occurred within youth-led climate groups. Purposeful community building through group emotional processing enabled space for feelings of empathy and camaraderie.

Individuals' voices and opinions mattering to their peers in the group was central to the creation of a safe(r) space, especially if an individual was from a marginalized community. Commenting on being part of a historically marginalized community, while involved in a youth climate organization, Annie (16, Chinese, ST) shared:

> We ha[d] … a BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, Person of Color] caucus … that I really felt listened to in…. It was mostly just a discussion space, and I was able to connect with a lot of people in that space, and we could share our experiences and [I] always felt very listened to, I think just because we had shared lived experiences especially when it comes to the climate spaces, which oftentimes is very white and like, ignores the struggles of BIPOC within it, and intersectionality.

Like Melanie, Annie specified that through collectively processing emotions, she felt more connected to group members with whom she could discuss shared lived experiences and therefore commiserate. Zelda, also part of this caucus, discussed the connection she felt with her teammates as well. Zelda touched upon the vulnerable conversations she had with her

groupmates with whom she identifies were what made her feel most successful in her climate activism.

The group allowed for the difficulties of being a young person and a climate activist to feel even a little bit lighter, because of the support that the collective provided. Young people described supporting one another and that they cultivated friendships because of these relationships within the group based on a common desire to help the planet. Regarding support and connection, Makayla stated,

> We're able to support each other a lot more with other aspects of our lives. Like, when it comes to classes and someone's like, "I have this teacher, I'm confused about this." We can be like, "Oh yeah, let me give you some advice," if we've already had that class or whatever. So, it's very community based.

Participants noted the ability to support one another not only in the work they engaged in for their climate organizing, but that they had formed friendships through this work, which they might not have cultivated had they not chosen to engage in collective youth-led climate work. Additionally, young people shared that fun added to the meaning that the group provided for them in terms of bolstering the interpersonal connections made through the group that allowed for a foundation of collectively cultivated meaning through engagement in work around a difficult issue. Amelia affirmed, "They're really fun, honestly, core calls! Because there's a lot of people… These spaces are really great, and really great and community supportive," reiterating the community aspect of the collective.

Half of all participants described the importance of listening to one another, and of feeling heard, an integral aspect of the group itself. Melanie reported,

> I learned a lot from listening to other people, that we share a lot in common, that you are not alone, that you can feel really lonely and in the dark, and think there's no hope, and it just seems dark and gloomy. But there's so many other young people who feel the same way as you do. It's great to be able to have spaces where you can express your thoughts, [even] if you're in a space where you can't actively change it, because there's a limit to what we can do. Like, we can have a lot of influence, but, especially in regard to national politics, there's only so much you can do. And then you're like, you can't influence the situation anymore. And you sort of have to accept it, at least temporarily, and the best

> thing to do is to reach out to other people, and just try to feel content with being able to empathize with other people and feel supported.

Melanie noted the importance of the group for both connection and community, as well as for supporting one another through all of the letdowns inherent in climate work.

Friendship came up as one of the most important outcomes of being part of these groups. Zelda stressed,

> I love this group so much, I have met my favorite people, my best friends through this group. It's so amazing and fulfilling to be able to have a group of people who have those same values and the same beliefs and the same passion that you do. So, that also really helped bond us, and just pushes us to do good work together…. We just talk about issues that are plaguing us, our feelings and climate grief, our fear and emotion, and also our joy. And we're really able to feel that joy and hope when we find that in each other, and that really boosts our morale. For me, that's what makes me feel like we're successful, like, "Oh we have these strong and passionate people, and we're finding this community and this joy with ourselves and with each other."

Zelda spoke of an increased ability to feel positive emotions because of discussing them within the group setting and knowing that she had peers to talk with about climate emotions. The aspects of community building and resultant resilience through the community came up often as integral parts of the group. Regarding community, Aliza described,

> I want to be able to create communities where care is enjoyed and valued in a very high regard, and I'm part of that care where caring for others would be to transform our society and help climate justice become a very key part of it, just to transform our society where we'll be able to combat climate change is a key part of it.

Young people hold extremely high standards for what they hope a transformed world might look like, through their work towards climate justice. Regarding communities and care, Meira remarked,

> I think holding onto those things that we care about in our communities is really important to protect and continuing to fight in the fight against climate change and continue to participate in the fight against climate change without falling into despair.

Participants described numerous reasons that their groups provide meaning for them individually, including friendship and camaraderie, as well as support and fun, among others.

Finally, Stella described her inclination towards engaging in climate advocacy because of having lived in a climate-affected community:

> I feel like most people are like, "Oh yeah! Let's save the planet!" But it's like, it's not saving the planet, that's so vague, and not personal. For me, with the community, when I think of climate change, I think of my community that I lived in for seven years… and like, it wasn't wealthy, a lot of my neighbors, talking about their jobs and how hard it was, and struggling to go places because they didn't have a car or access to food. And those are the people that I think of when I'm like doing this work, and when I'm saying that I wanna fight for EJ [Environmental Justice] bills. So, my personal experiences, with that in my community, that's what helps me, or not helps me, that's what I think about when I'm doing it, and why I do it, really.

Though only Stella shared coming from a community which experienced felt effects of the climate crisis, her motivation to continue related to connection with others, similar to other participants. The collective itself, and the community it provides for these individuals, as youth informed, led them to feel more purpose in their day to day lives. Another way in which young people found meaning through this work came from feeling successful in their endeavors, which I discuss next.

### 6.3 Coping Through Emotions

This section presents the range of emotions that young people experience in the face of climate change as well resultant from being involved in climate collectives. Various emotions arose for participating youth involved in climate-oriented advocacy groups. Some of the emotionally charged responses to climate work that participants discussed included hope, exhaustion, overwhelm, burnout, and a never-ending search for balance, among other lesser-mentioned emotions. Participants expressed feeling intense grief, fear, anxiety, and anger, before, during, and after actions. They also described feeling burned out as a result of feeling let down after actions due to lack of government or corporate action on their demands. Burnout also happened due to the stress involved with being a young person in today's world concurrent with being a climate activist.

Young people shared that they search for balance in their lives due to the emotional exhaustion involved with being a climate activist in conjunction with the stresses of school and adolescent development. They also shared that hope is involved in this work in numerous

ways—finding, losing, and sustaining it. The results of this study suggest that when these young people practiced climate advocacy in a group context, they often had an increased ability to overcome negative climate-related emotions such as, fear, anxiety, despair, and apathy. The group also allowed these young people to translate their negative emotions into positive action-catalyzing emotions.

Participants discussed negatively-connotated emotions as rampant parts of being involved in climate activism. Young people described grief, fear, and anxiety as common in terms of both catalysts for engaging in these youth-led climate organizations, as well as in terms of impacts of being an adolescent activist. Marianne spoke about her climate grief:

> I think that we're grieving every day. We're already experiencing so many effects of climate change. For me, the anxiety has already passed, because you can just look outside and see what's already happening, and you just know that it's gonna get worse. So, now it's sort of, it went from anxiety to anger, but that's just me personally.

Participants associated negative emotions both to catalyzing their activist work, as well as permeating their daily life as young people with an acute awareness of the climate emergency.

Though often engaging in climate organizing groups with fellow youth helps to quell such emotions, participants described that when an action feels fruitless or none of the intended results were achieved, these outcomes have often exacerbated climate grief and anxiety. Carly mentioned her varied emotions surrounding the climate crisis as intertwined and cyclical:

> I'm just really angry, then I'm really sad, and I'll just turn into a complete lump, and I won't do anything. First [awareness of the climate crisis] turns the anger into a driving force to do something powerful, and then it turns [those emotions] into action. And, with that [driving force] you can create action. So, it's like a sadness, grief, action, change kind of spiral…. I have a very difficult time feeling hope, especially after actions there's just a downward spiral where I have a lot of climate grief.… Definitely, there's some hope in there, although it can be difficult to feel.

Both Marianne and Carly shared experiencing intensely negative emotions associated with their awareness of the massive global injustices of the present day related to anthropogenic climate change. Carly, unlike Marianne, noted that she attempts to quell her anger through climate activism. This is not to say that Marianne does not utilize her anger as a driving force for action, she just did not explicitly say so. Like Carly, almost half of all participants described their

climate work as helpful in assuaging the significant emotions they experience regarding the climate crisis.

Participants have different ways of coping with the strong negatively connotated emotions that they feel as results of engaging in climate organizing. For example, Amelia shared:

> A running joke with [local] activists is that anxiety is in the activist starter pack. It's what drives a lot of people into it, but it doesn't mean that once you start [acting], it goes away, because, once you become an activist, you're inundated by climate news. To protect against that, I don't read climate news. I'm a climate activist who's not up on the current climate science. Bluntly, I don't feel like I need to be, because I know enough that we need to act now…. I don't think it's necessary for climate activists to sink deeper into that fear by reading [climate news] further when they already feel good to go. So, that's kind of my strategy—use fear as a motivator to get things done, and determination—but then also, I kind of shut myself off from climate media pretty well.

No other participants described Amelia's strategy for coping with climate news through purposefully ignoring it. Amelia illustrated anxiety acting as a catalyst for many activists to begin engaging in climate organizing. She also noted that she uses her negative emotions as motivators to begin and to continue with the work that she does around climate advocacy, something that 14 other participants echoed in different ways. However, though doing climate advocacy work helps in coping with the intense emotions involved, participants shared that it does not entirely assuage these feelings.

Participants described a more common way of coping with such feelings through relationships formed within the group, something repeated among about one-third of participants. For example, Aliza shared: "It's definitely been helpful to be in these spaces and find out that other people are feeling that way, and that we can be collectively grieving." Three other participants shared finding pushing away the fear, grief, and anger they feel whilst they in the middle of climate work (such as at an action) to be helpful. Yet, coping with these emotions within their groups after actions was necessary if they ignored the emotions during an action. Relatedly, participants described compartmentalization as a useful tool in climate advocacy work. For instance, Zelda mentioned,

> I try not to center the grief when I'm organizing. I try not to think about, "Oh I feel so scared about this," when I'm actually trying to make changes against it…. What does

> really ease my fear or ease my grief is being able to actually talk about the grief and being able to just express my emotions and my vulnerabilities and my perspectives with my peers. Working does not make my pain or my trauma going away, actually being able to process it is what really does.

Both Aliza and Zelda, as well as four other participants mentioned the physical and virtual spaces that allow for peers to commiserate and share their climate emotions so that they know others have the same mindset, and therefore feel less alone. Sharing emotions in a group setting came up as the most common way in which young climate organizers cope with the intense feelings that arise as results of their positionality in the climate movement. While participants described numerous negative emotions, they discussed them as mixed with positive feelings, given the dynamic nature of climate organizing. When asked about the role of hope in their work, most participants noted it as a catalyst for beginning and for maintaining stamina to continue this difficult work. Youth feel that faith in what they are doing is imperative to the work itself.

Hope came up as a much more prominent common and collectively felt emotion than fear, anger, and grief combined. Two-thirds of participants described hope as necessary for this work. Individuals shared that hope stems from different places, but the largest source for hope is interpersonal interactions with fellow youth organizers, as Zelda alluded to above. June asserted,

> Hope is the biggest thing you need when you're organizing, but it's also the hardest feeling to actually have…. I find hope a lot in the relationships that I've found from organizing. So, the friends I've made and also this is really cheesy, but the reason that I continue is because I've made so many personal relationships and friendships with the people that I organize with.

Hope comes from multiple aspects of engaging in this work such as successes in campaigns, however, the most common way that participants shared that they felt hope was through commiserating with their group members. Annie articulated,

> I think hope is essential to it. Activism work in general, I feel like is built off of hope, because you wouldn't be doing it if you didn't have hope that things change. I guess it's like, you need to have hope to meaningfully participate in the work and spread messages that aren't just doom-ism. We try to keep sight of that, though sometimes it gets a little

> hard to, but it's definitely like one of the most essential things to being like a successful healthy activist.

Annie assumed her peers also felt hopeful regardless of whether they expressed it, given her assertion of its necessity. Jessica also described this work as impossible without hope:

> The role of hope is everything in activism…. Without hope, you're fighting a pointless cause. Without hope, we should all just throw our hands in the air and say, "the world is gonna explode, we're all gonna die," you know? I always think about *Star Wars* when I think about this. It connects to *Star Wars* so much, like the idea of a new hope…. I feel like when I'm organizing, I feel like I'm part of the rebel alliance fighting against like Emperor Palpatine which is like the evil corporate companies. It's true! I feel like banding together as a group of youth, and having that hope, having that passion, seeing these good things happen.

As Jessica described, the idea of hope as "everything in activism," came up as a common occurrence among participants, though expressed in numerous different ways. Out of 30 total participants, 20 young people, in one way or another, described climate organizing as impossible without feeling hopeful about the future. Jake analyzed,

> I feel like hope is intrinsically linked with motivation. If you're not hopeful about climate, or fixing climate change, you're never gonna be motivated enough to try and solve it because why fix a problem that can't be solved? And so, kind of hope sustains organizing in that way, and it's kind of what organizing requires in order to be successful and even happen in the first place.

Five other participants described hope as important in leading to motivation. Meanwhile, Elaina related her hope surrounding climate activism to a power greater than herself:

> If you stop having hope, then you've given up. I should never give up if this is for those who I love most. I think if I lose hope, then my family loses hope, my community loses hope, and every thirteen-year-old considering getting into climate activism might lose hope because of that…. I think it's kind of like the domino chain, if one person starts to lose hope, then there's everybody losing hope. And we can't do that. No, what?! No! [We're] fighting against a system that absolutely despises everything that we're doing. You've gotta have the hope and you've gotta have the willpower to keep fighting against the system every step of the way. If you lose hope, then you don't have the willpower to

> continue on, and you've given up for future generations. And that's something that humanity should never do! I have immense faith in humanity…. I do believe that humanity can come back from a lot. So, I think even in the face of a pandemic, we still have hope. And, hope is just so pertinent, and I think it's, hope is just synonymous with activism. You've got to have hope that things will change.

In this interaction, Elaina emoted vehemently, seemingly, to convey her points more strongly. For Elaina, like many of her peers, activism cannot exist without hope. Hope emerged as the most important emotion that participants described regarding being a climate activist.

While hope works as catalyst for doing this work, it simultaneously exists as an outcome of youth-led climate organizing. Doing climate work, specifically in a group setting with peers provides a container for hope to flourish, as participants shared. To reiterate, Melanie stated, "Activism is what keeps me sane, it gives me hope. If I wasn't involved in some of these spaces, then I don't think I would be as happy as I was today," demonstrating the degree to which being part of SYM adds meaning to her life. Melanie illustrated that she finds hope through this work itself, and that being part of her group improves her quality of life. Lucy also felt that doing climate work makes her feel less hopeless on a day-to-day basis:

> I've been concerned about [climate change] for a long time, and [doing climate organizing] makes me feel less hopeless about the whole situation…. I think if I didn't do anything, I would feel less optimistic about the idea that we could change the direction that humanity is heading in climate change-wise. I think the fact that I'm involved with the fight against climate change makes it [easier] to see a future where climate change is actually cared about and talked about more.

Similar to Melanie's improved quality of life, for Lucy, being part of the fight for a better future regarding climate change and its compounding human rights issues allows her to feel optimistic about possible future scenarios. Ten other participants echoed a similar sentiment. For many participants, simply being involved in these groups provides increased hope and meaning for their lives, mostly related to commiserating with their peers. While hope is multifaceted and not necessarily always easy to cultivate, it has both collective and individual sources, as it comes from connection with others and not only from individual engagement in climate activism.

For some participants, gleaning successful results of their work in one way or another provides for or increases feelings of hope. Regarding success adding to hopefulness, Alyson

observed, “There’s a lot of energy and excitement around sustainability at [school] right now. That gives me a lot of hope in propelling other people to have hope and subsequently they feel like they have more agency.” Alyson described her hope increasing as a result of peers’ enthusiasm about the cause. This expression of hope relates to the social aspect of positive emotions in relation to others. Additionally, participants expressed that hope helps balance and counteract other emotions involved in being a climate advocate. Zelda shared,

> Of course, we’re always gonna have our fear, and our shame, and those negative emotions. But we need to be able to process those [emotions] and be able to hold them side by side with our hope and our joy, and hold them together in the face of oppression, because without that balance, without that knowing that we have hope, and we have faith, and we have community in each other, we’re not going to be able to continue fighting…. If we ignore the joyful and the hopeful aspects of our organizing, we’re just gonna put more negativity out there…. I am acknowledging that yes, I do feel scared. But I’m also trying to create hopefulness within my community.

The group itself, through discussion and commiseration, allows for positive emotions to coexist alongside negative ones, thus leading to feelings of balance, which participants also described as necessary. However, many youth struggle with hope, whilst living through the beginnings of the acute stages of the climate crisis. Melanie illustrated,

> Right now, we’ve almost passed the tipping point, and I struggle to have hope, because I don’t really see sufficient action from world leaders…. [I] just have this sort of sliver of hope, and it’s always sort of never enough, and we just got there. We have this climate plan, and it’s just enough to sort of get by, and it’s really hard for young people to live that way, when they want actually something very substantial. They want security about their future.

Though possible to differentiate, because emotions are dynamic, we cannot compartmentalized them. Individuals engaged in climate organizing experience negative and positive emotions simultaneously, especially given dire circumstances. For the most part, discussing emotions as a collective allows for positive emotions to trump negative emotions. However, such emotional confusion is part of the developmental age of adolescence, which I discuss next.

### 6.4 Dealing with Being a Young Person

Dealing with being a young person arose as an impact of this work for myriad reasons. Out of the 30 participants, ten brought up age as a relevant factor that impacts their activism. Participants described a specific positionality inherent in being a young person between the ages of thirteen and eighteen. Young people mentioned feeling burnt out and overwhelmed because of the draining nature of organizing in and of itself, especially in conjunction with being in high school and those compounding pressures. They also noted ageism as an impact of being part of youth-led climate groups in that some factors of organizing are more difficult because almost all of the participants in this study were either under the age of 18 years or were 18 years old.

Participants often described burnout and lack of motivation as related to the work of climate activism itself, but that these feelings sometimes related to being a young person and having numerous other things to deal with in daily life. For example, Ethan stated, "The thing about organizing is that it really drains you. It's honestly just emotionally exhausting. Especially on top of school and other responsibilities," harkening to the time constraints involved with being in high school, regardless of engaging in climate activism. Similarly, June stated, "I think being an organizer is really a burden when it comes down to it… If you really stop and think about what you're doing, it's fruitless," reiterating de-motivation after actions that did not have intended or expected outcomes. Similarly, Kamala described, "I think there [are] instances where people are just super overwhelmed with, maybe it's school, maybe it's pandemic stuff, and they just don't have the capacity to check in every day, or every week," exemplifying the myriad of obligations involved in being a high schooler. In terms of schoolwork and other extracurricular activities, Stella made a point to say:

> It's definitely a lot of work in doing this, in the organization, and especially that we all have school and we're all so stressed out…. We all have schoolwork and can't always make time…. Sometimes we sacrifice a grade or something, or a test. We're just like, "I'm gonna work on this testimony, or research these bills, 'cause, sometimes, it's just like, fighting for the climate is, or the bills, it just is more important than that math test."

Being in high school has its own obligations, regardless of being a climate activist. Multiple participants shared that sometimes they put their climate work before their schoolwork. Zelda emphasized: "All of us have busy lives. We're high schoolers, we're going through a lot, just in

this stage of life." That is, youth involved in climate organizing prioritize school differently than other high schoolers might, because of their activist values.

Oftentimes, participants stated sacrificing mental health and physical necessities such as sleep in order to complete tasks involved with climate organizing. Makayla emphatically exemplified de-motivation in conjunction with compounding stress of being an adolescent:

> I never get enough sleep. High school and activism combined, it's rough. It is not good on your sleep schedule…. Being an activist, or just working to, or just organizing in general, trying to change something can be really soul-crushing at times. It can be really difficult. Your sleep schedule gets messed up. It's stressful because you're constantly reminded of all of these issues of people suffering throughout the world because not enough is being done. It's definitely important to recognize that mental health plays a huge role in activism and being able to take care of yourself. You need to be able to take care of yourself before you can take care of other people, otherwise you burnout and then you can't help anybody.

Out of all 30 participants, only Makayla explicitly used the term mental health; 15 participants, however, described the effects of engagement in youth climate organizing related to emotional well-being.

Participants described that oftentimes, the work of being a climate activist itself, not even the results of the work, or lack thereof, leads to burnout. Melanie shared,

> When you have too many meetings and too many different things, it can lead to burnout. I think a good thing to mention is that that in the climate activism space, you have to think of burnout in a really particular way, because, there's burnout in doing too much of any work, but the work that we do is emotionally draining, because it's about a larger problem, it's about, in a sense, that we're ruining the climate on our planet, and we're trying to save it. But that's a very great, that's an immense task, and there's so many feelings connected with that.

Participants described feeling that burnout presented as more extreme in activists because of the emotional burden that is the work itself, as well as the constant awareness of the issue. These feelings of burnout resultant from climate activism, compound together with the difficulties associated with being in high school, leading to immense amounts of stress for these young people.

Fighting for a cause greater than oneself, inherent in activism, affected these individuals' emotional well-being in terms of feelings of being overwhelmed. Annie shared her perspective that the public has an inaccurate opinion of youth climate activists:

> I feel like a lot of people in the public think: "Oh, youth activists, they have endless spirit and motivation to put forward into these things." But I don't think that's the truth, at all. It's a lot of low motivation a lot of the times, and people will kinda feel demotivated by lack of change.

Groups of youth climate organizers fight against large corporations and governments which hold immense power in terms of climate policies. Therefore, participants described that many of the actions that these groups do end up fruitless, and therefore they feel let down. Compounded with the majority of these young people being under the age of 18 years old, and therefore lacking in agency to vote, participants shared that de-motivation can be common.

To combat these let downs which are out of their control, some groups aim described aiming to cultivate a regenerative culture. Kyra described:

> We really value a regenerative culture, meaning that if you do feel like you're burnt out, and a lot of times that's why people stop communicating is they feel so burnt out…. We look more favorably upon people saying, "Hey, I need to take a break," because communicating where you stand with capacity allows for a lot more transparency for the rest of your working group members to see, "Okay, they're gone, I need to step up and do this work," as opposed to it being like, "Are they gonna do it? Am I gonna do it?" So, telling people and emphasizing that regenerative culture makes people feel more comfortable to voice their capacity and realize when they need a break which saves us from a lot of communication errors.

Similar to the importance of communicating capacity in relation to group work, sharing what individuals felt able to do was important to prevent burnout as well.

Being under the age of 18 relates to the notion of having to deal with being a young person while engaging in climate activism, largely because of inability to vote and drive. Often, young activists feel misrepresented by the media due to ageism. Julianna noted,

> Some older people, older adults, especially, I feel like, don't recognize the level of stress, especially that student organizers go through, and the level of stress that we're dealing with in terms of the climate crisis and how it's gonna impact young people.

Participants described stress in relation to the climate as greater in young people because they will likely live longer with the effects of the climate crisis.

Given that these young people are in the adolescent developmental stage of their lives, they search for balance and purpose, both purposefully and inadvertently. Searching for balance came up in interviews as something that permeated many aspects of youth climate organizing. Elaina exemplified the positionality of being a young person in relation to balance or lack thereof:

> I have to balance other things. I want to have friends, I want to pursue other interests. I want to do fencing, and I want to learn a language, and I want to read. I want to do skincare and I want to work out. I've also got school, and so, it's definitely hard to strike a balance, especially one that's manageable. So, I'm always missing deadlines, I'm always the one that's like, "Oh, I'm so sorry I'm late!" So, it's definitely been inhibiting to have teenager-dom while also trying to do climate advocacy.

Youth seek balance around their everyday life activities in terms of scheduling, for example, among other things. They also seek balance in terms of the myriad emotions involved in this work.

However, some participants who have done this work for longer described recognizing that there is only so much that they can do. Melanie shared,

> It has been freeing to me to understand that what I've done is enough, and that I cannot solve this problem. Because, otherwise, you run this spiral of being constantly anxious and depressed because this is such a terrible situation…. But, you have to learn to live as a young person, you have to learn to live as if you're in high school, because if you don't do that, like, are you living? You have to find this balance. I realized at particular points in time, I have to focus on school, because that's what I have to do…. Even though there's this terrible thing called climate change, I can't always be acting upon it, because I have a life. I have other things to do. So, I think the last couple of years, I got really involved.… and realized that there is a way to find balance in things, and peace, and peace with not being able to do everything on your own.

Melanie described the burden that comes with being a young person in today's world, as well as with being a young person who cares deeply about the climate crisis, and the injustices that come with it. Melanie stated the importance of finding balance and accepting that youth may not

succeed in their attempts to quell the climate crisis, but that their efforts have meaning regardless, something she described as important for her personal growth and acceptance.

Young people also described the balance they seek in terms of all the emotions they experience with relation to climate organizing. Regarding holding positive emotions together with negative ones, Zelda explained,

> Of course, we are always gonna have our fear, our shame, and those negative emotions. But we need to be able to process those and be able to hold them side by side with our hope and our joy and hold them together in the face of oppression. Because, without that balance, without that knowing that we have hope, and we have faith, and we have a community in each other, we're not going to be able to continue fighting, continue on in our change-making. And when we try to do that change-making, if we ignore the joyful and the hopeful aspects of our organizing, we're just gonna put more negativity out there.

Similar to quelling negative emotions through discussing them with other youth activists, Zelda described the importance of community with one another in order to persevere in the difficult work of advocating for a better climate. Regarding balance, Carly described,

> There [are] basically two choices for me: either ignore, which at a certain point becomes too difficult, or I do activism. Both of those [options] are really difficult. Ignoring can be really great for the short term, and it's a lot easier, and I've definitely done a lot of it. But then, activism can be really frustrating, because there's the buildup while you're planning an action, and then there's the action, which feels great, and then there's after the action, where you just feel like you're not doing anything, and it's completely frustrating. But you have to remember that even if you aren't doing anything, it's really healthy for yourself.

Earlier in her interview, Carly described the cyclical nature of her emotions in relation to the climate crisis. She shared that her activism sometimes quells the intense feelings she experiences, yet sometimes it does not, or it even exacerbates her negative feelings. Carly also described the importance of rest, similar to Melanie's perspective above. Relatedly, Melanie shared:

> Rest is rebellion, because, the oil industry, they want you to worry, because they know the science. They know that what they're doing is wrong. So, to even rest and not work, to say that you're going to take a break, it's a form of resistance in itself.

Young people involved in climate advocacy groups described experiencing cognitive dissonance in terms of anger and grief around the state of the climate. They also shared that they were simultaneously trying to live as high schoolers, which was difficult. Only four participants spoke of the importance of rest, yet those four described taking a break from their activist with much emphasis.

While the search for balance is constant, engaging in this work and finding that balance provided meaning for the young people's lives included in the present study. Alyson articulated, "I think selfishly, this is one of the ways I can tackle this fear inside me and sort of bring meaning into my life." Though this work is difficult, it provided a sense of purpose for these young people in a very chaotic world. Meira described her experience of organizing as providing purpose for her life:

> It's extremely meaningful to me because of the fact that I thought of climate change as something that's only to be acted on later when I was an adult. But what the climate activist movement shows everyone is the fact that you can speak on the issues that you care about right now, and you can be heard about it right now.

Engaging in this work and therefore increasing their senses of agency, as participants described, allowed these young people to feel more autonomy than they might have had they not taken part in climate work. Similarly, Amelia shared,

> It gives a lot of meaning to my day-to-day activities, and to my life. Often, I wonder, "What would I do with my time if I wasn't an activist?" I feel like it's given me a lot of purpose, in a way. People say, "You're fighting against something so huge. You'll never be able to do anything." But I think developmentally and structurally for me, it's been a great way to kind of home in on my passions and give that sort of focus to my time and my days, while also kind of quelling that eco-anxiety by doing something. Something I think about a lot is that even if my actions are a drop in the bucket, they help me as a person, as an individual, so much.

Meaning and purpose came, in part, from feeling able to act on issues that mattered to these young people as individuals. Participants described finding balance and meaning as important to them, and as increasing their felt sense of purpose in their day to day lives. Being part of these youth-led collectives, as opposed to engaging in activist work alone increased felt meaning of the participation in youth-led climate activism for the participants in the present study.

### 6.5 Perceptions of Success and Effects on Identity Development

Participants defined success differently depending on various factors involved in their climate work. In this section, I discuss how participants felt about their organizing work and how their successes or lack thereof added to cultivating meaning through this work for the individuals involved. I end this section with participants' perceptions of how success affected their identity development. Congratulating themselves on wins of all sizes led young people to feel greater senses of self-efficacy. Makayla put it aptly: "Just those small victories in organizing something that feels so huge, and taking these doable steps towards that goal, it definitely feels just amazing and successful." Small wins that participants described included getting their school to switch from plastic to reusable cutlery, or teaching someone about individual pro-environmental behaviors, and that person then implementing them in their own lives, among others. Along these lines, Caroline said,

> You have to change your definition of success from: "Okay, so I'm gonna make sure the whole world doesn't burn down," to: "Okay, I'm gonna make sure my friends understand this and why this is important. I'm gonna make sure my family is doing what we can."

Participants noted that they might have had impacts on different levels, including on their immediate circles, and that each impact felt meaningful. This understanding that every impact had meaning helped individuals to stay positive. Young people also described the importance of voicing the positive results they had, as Amelia said: "Sharing little successes is a big thing that we often do, like, you know, boosting morale, like, 'this great thing happened!'" Similarly, Annie shared, "Just in a day-to-day grind of activism, it's fulfilling because you have small victories," echoing Amelia's point of the importance of sharing positive outcomes with their peers.

Young people also described feeling successful when actions had intended outcomes. For example, Kamala noted,

> I think that any time that, whether it be like we convince a local politician to sign on to a bill to support Good Jobs for All, or just getting a local leader elected, or any small change, it just gives me more hope, and also I can see it impacting on a small scale, and it just gives me more hope for bigger things that I hope to see in the future.

Witnessing their actions being successful increased hope as well as a sense of meaning for these young people, both of which felt successful.

Activists noted that when actions had intended outcomes, though they did not specifically use the term, this increased their felt sense of self-efficacy. Definitions of success varied, but Jake's blanket statement seemed to apply across the board: "You can't beat the satisfaction of having an action go well or seeing yourself on a newspaper or on the press or something like that," noting that when an action has some degree of intended outcomes, motivation increases. Reminiscing on a specific action, June shared,

> I think it was so successful because it purposely balanced something really theatrical that would get the attention of the media and also people walking by, but also not so theatrical that you wouldn't be able to understand the concept right away…. The most successful thing is when I'm able to physically see outsiders or new people being drawn into the movement or suddenly becoming aware and wanting to do something about the issue.… Just someone walking by, taking the time out of their day to ask what's going on, because that's really the goal at the end of the day. We can pressure corporations or businesses but if we're not trying to mobilize regular everyday people, then change is not gonna happen as quickly.

One goal of actions participants described was gaining membership, as June mentioned. Another successful outcome is increased motivation. Regarding motivation in relation to success, Annie shared,

> In terms of internal affairs, I would say a successful action is one where everyone feels motivated afterwards to continue building momentum, which a lot of times isn't the case because we put a lot of work into it, and we're tired afterwards…. A really successful [action] would be a combination of making a good impact on the public, and also depending on the target, like maybe changing something serious in power, or policy that we were aiming for, or a pipeline getting cancelled. Internally, everyone just feeling good about it afterwards, and being able to continue on with the same momentum…. I think idealistically, [success] would be a society that has put people over profit, essentially, and phased out fossil fuels, and been able to operate on clean energy. And also, in terms of equity and intersectionality has brought, equality to people of all different groups and backgrounds.

Adolescents associated feelings of success with increased self-efficacy, feeling heard or listened-to, and not feeling burnt out after actions. Individuals also described politically oriented wins

when asked about what felt successful. For example, Stella stated, "Success is getting those bills out of committee, or out of just dying in the state house. And, that way they can start doing the differences that they have written in them." Relatedly, Alyson reflected,

> I think success is less about the lobbying and the effect of the lobbying and if a bill passes, because I think it takes decades for a bill to pass, and it oftentimes requires patience and continuous lobbying for one bill to pass. And so, for a year to year success, I feel like engaging with underclassmen and teaching them how to lobby and them having the experience is such a big success, because you're really giving young people tools to email their legislator to schedule a meeting, to meet with them. Sort of that whole process is a learning process and something that is a skill that you can use for the rest of your life. It's not a one-time deal, and so, that is, I would consider that a big success…. I think engaging other people in the work is definitely success. We had so many underclassmen join us this year, and it's been really cool to see them learn about climate change, and explore their own ideas and explore new topics that I have never heard about. I think that's definitely a success. And also, engaging with people who thought that climate change was not affecting them, and engaging with just new people in general and just engaging more people in the movement.

Participants described one of the main goals of their organizing as engaging others in the work as well as education about the effects of the climate crisis. However, those groups that orient themselves politically noted tangible successes as important. Cameron, for example, stated,

> If I'm able to leave an impact on public law around a document, that's what I measure as my success as an advocate….  My dream is… as long as I leave an impact on these policies, or I have something that I could say that I was able to do, that's how I consider there's success.

Only politically focused groups discussed tangible results on policy as their definitions of success.

Most other groups defined success in terms of getting their group organized together, and all on the same page. For example, Jessica shared,

> Success can also happen as a result of good communication. An area that we were really successful is developing our training for the new intakes. We got everybody on the same platform for communication which was a big success to begin with because it was such a

> large group of people, and everybody has their different needs. We found a meeting time through polls, and we found a time that worked for everybody to meet, which was awesome. We kept meetings to a most condensed time possible, because we understood that everybody had their different capacities, especially we were doing it in a time that was very pressuring for school for a lot of the older organizers. So, right off the bat, our organization for organizing was incredible for that project…. Our success in that project was based off a fundamental understanding that everybody has different capacities, everybody can contribute a different amount of work. Our knowledge is good, but it can be built. So, we were all coming from a very honest and open place for that project, which is why I think it was very successful.

Jessica related success to communication and mutual understandings, something that four other participants shared as relating to success. Across groups, activists defined success differently based on their goals, standpoints, and experiences. Participants in different groups did not differ in their responses to how they defined success—differences in definitions of success depended more on individual perception.

Youth involved in this study described their engagement with climate activism as impacting their adolescent development in multiple ways, one of which was how feeling successful affected them. Lucy noted, "I'm very grateful to be a part of it, and I think it's really affected my development as a citizen of the world living in the climate change crisis." Similarly, June described, "It's been one of the most important things in my life since I was 15, so it's all I've known throughout all of my high school career. It's always been a constant," to illustrate the depth with which engaging in her climate activist group permeates her everyday life. Makayla similarly noted, "It's really my entire life besides school," demonstrating the time and commitment she puts into her climate advocacy. Similarly, Amelia shared, "I think developmentally and structurally for me, it's been a great way of home in on my passions and give that focus to my time and my days, while also kind of quelling that eco-anxiety by doing something," more vaguely describing her activist behaviors' direct effects on her life.

The interviews I conducted culminated with questions regarding how participants believed that their engagement with these groups might affect them later in life. Ten out of 30 participants shared that they felt this work led them to want to continue climate work in the future and likely for the rest of their lives. Annie reflected,

> I think the work I've done as a teenager will definitely impact the decisions I make in terms of what I go into in the future…. I think it'll probably change whatever I do in the future, and hopefully I'll have the same sort of community around me as I get older, whether I'll be doing the same sort of work or not, though I feel like I will be. Just having those values continue to shape the decisions I make as an adult, and also having the same sort of people around me would be the best thing that I would ask for.

Similarly, Natan illustrated,

> It directly affects who I'll be, and what I'll be when I grow up. And the world that I'll see when I'll grow up…. I don't want it to be completely polluted and everything will look dark and grey. I want it to be green and vibrant.

Ten other participants echoed both Annie and Natan's perspectives of their activism for the climate as affecting their development as citizens in today's world, as well as how they will choose to live their lives in the future. Ashira described how she felt engaging in climate activism affected young people in general: "teenagers now aren't afraid to use their voice, or stand up for what they believe in," which applied to most of the youth involved in the present study.

### 6.6 Activist, Advocate, or Organizer Identity or Lack Thereof

Identity development includes how the individuals who participate in these groups see themselves as part of the greater climate movement. I included a question in my interview schedule asking whether participants identified as activists or not. I did not consider that any participant might offer a different word for their climate work other than activist, but many did. Individuals expressed vastly different perspectives on what it meant to be an activist or whether they defined themselves as activists. Given that differences in perception of activist identity differed across groups, I sub-divided this section by collective in order to compare responses both within and across groups.

#### *6.6.1 Extinction Rebellion Youth*

Participants from Extinction Rebellion Youth shared that they disliked the term activist the most out of all other groups. Regarding specifically not identifying with the term, Ethan stated, "I don't go around being like, 'I'm an activist.'" There seemed to be a consensus among XRY participants in terms of distain for the term. June shared,

> I really try to stay away from the term activist. I align myself more with organizer. I think the definition of activist has always been really ambiguous, and people can kind of define it based on their own work. But I think with social media, I think it's really become twisted, and I don't wanna sound like I'm gatekeeping the term activism, but I think a lot of people interpret reposting something on social media, like an infographic that can be made by anybody that's not fact checked as activism because they think they're spreading awareness. And so, I don't know, I try to step away from that. I really like the term organizer because I think it really describes that I'm physically organizing.

June alluded to the "infographic industrial complex" that both Jake and Elaina discussed as reasoning for disliking the term activist. Jake described his hatred for the term activist most vehemently out of all participants:

> I hate that word and I feel like it's so weird. This is gonna sounds so bad because I know people that do, and this is like no hate to them, but I would never in a million years ever give myself that title like, "I'm an activist!" I just think it's so odd and so many times it's very self-serving where it's like being an activist gives me social capital and clout.… I know some people that in their Instagram will have like, "Activist!" and it's like, "Ah! This is so embarrassing for you, and so weird." It's like my least favorite thing in the world because it's like, "Look at me! I'm doing work!" as opposed to just doing the work. So, I don't call myself one, no.

When Jake spoke about his feelings regarding the term he was quite emphatic an animated, emphasizing his points. Similarly, Kyra shared,

> I feel like [activist is] an icky word. I feel like it's used poorly in a lot of situations. I like organizer better, I think. It just, for me it's just how it sounds phonetically, too. It's just, um, the word activist, it's hard when I'm talking to other people about [climate work] and they don't know other words besides activist. So, then, I'll have to go around [the word activist] somehow, which always becomes like, "yeah no, I do this," which is like, "oh so you do activism?" and I'm like, "yeah but," I dunno, because, yeah just activism feels like raising awareness about things because activism doesn't necessarily mean making change and doesn't necessarily mean doing anything, which is why I also avoid that word.

Two out of eight XRY participants identified themselves as activists. Those XRY participants who disagreed with the term activist preferred the term organizer and were very vocal and prolific about their thoughts regarding the word activist, often going so far as saying they hated it.

### *6.6.2 Sustainabiliteens*

Sustainabiliteens members, similar to XRY members, also preferred not to use the term activist and preferred the term organizer, almost unanimously. Of all the groups included in the present study, ST and XRY were most similar. To illustrate her perception of the word activist, Annie shared,

> A lot of times when you say you're an activist you automatically get judged a lot by people who have preconceived notions about how activists are just annoying and disrupting regular life. So, I think as a response to not get labeled as that sort of person, I try to label myself as not an activist, though I guess in definition, what I do is activism. So, I am, but I don't call myself one, really.

Similarly, Aliza stated,

> I think sometimes there's almost a stereotype, or very much youth activist stereotype that I'm not a very big fan of, because it creates this image of one type of person, especially in what I've seen, especially of these people who aren't fully aware of their [social] privilege.

Both Annie's and Aliza's perspectives of not choosing to label themselves as activists have similarities with how Jake and Kyra described their disdain for identifying themselves as such. Half of the youth involved in the present study shared that they felt that the general public, as well as popular news media portrayed youth activists in a way that they prefer not to be labeled, such as annoying.

Meanwhile, other ST participants stated that they prefer not to label themselves as activists because they viewed climate work as a necessity, not as a choice. They felt that this type of civic engagement was not something they chose to do, but that they must do. Zelda shared,

> I really don't like the word activism. But focusing on mutual aid and racial justice is where I really see my activism heading in the future…. When you say, activism it's almost like [saying], "This is a hobby of mine, I'm an activist. I choose to do this." I was having this conversation with my fellow Asian organizers. But it's almost a necessity for

> us. It's survival work. It's not something we do as a hobby. It's not affecting us in Canada or so-called Vancouver [yet]. It's going to be really affecting us in a couple decades, but our families [abroad] have already been so affected by this. So, this isn't just something we do for leisure because we're so of good of selflessness. It's survival work, almost.

None of the participants in this study who engaged in climate organizing work with Sustainabiliteens described themselves as activists, for one reason or another, which was not the case for any other group. Therefore, ST members had the most similarities in terms of individual perspectives, in comparison with the other groups.

### *6.6.3 Sunrise (Youth) Movement*

Responses to whether participants felt they were activists or identified themselves as such varied the most within cases among Sunrise participants, in comparison with all other groups. Kamala, for example, shared, "I think any small act can make you an activist," suggesting that she in fact identifies as an activist. Similarly, Melanie illustrated her belief in the term activist:

> I do consider myself an activist. I think that we can consider ourselves activists in many ways. Activism can manifest in many different forms. You can be the person that's giving the speech at a rally, but you can be an activist in other ways as well. You don't always have to be in the limelight because there's so many people working on this problem, and that want to solve this problem…. Activism is what keeps me sane, it gives me hope. If I wasn't involved in some of these spaces, then I don't think I would be as happy as I was today. I don't think that we should be so doom and gloom, but the science speaks for itself in that it's a very worrying situation…. I've just had to realize, and sort of come to a very adult understanding of it. It's that, I'm a young person, and I'm concerned about this, but there's only so much that I can do. And, I want to live my life and I want to get involved with these spaces, and I do as much as I can, but there are so many other things that are important to me. I don't simply call myself an activist, like, I'm a human being. I think that you should be able to say that if you're an activist, that, even if you're not working, that you are still an activist.

Melanie described her reasoning for purposefully choosing to identify as an activist with the most detail out of any other participant in the present study. She shared her activist identity as one part of her experience of being a young person, but that she strived for balance in her daily

life, as well. Out of all participants, only Melanie shared such a perspective of activist identity. Elaina felt similarly:

> When there's a lot of negativity coming from the society around you, it's hard to classify yourself as an activist. But I think anybody who tries to make a change, or takes a step towards change, especially when it comes to climate change, is an activist in and of themselves because they're deciding to go against the system that encourages, "Oh, let's go buy ten million Styrofoam balls and just dump them in the ocean!" You're kind of going against that system. So, I think it's anybody who even like takes little steps towards it is an activist.

Elaina and Kamala, though in different SYM hubs, shared similar perspectives that "anyone can be an activist." They felt that if they did not identify as activists, then they were gatekeeping the term and the work that they did from others.

Some SYM members, like both XRY and ST participants, said they felt unsure or apprehensive about labeling themselves as activists, both for societal reasons, as well as for developmental reasons. Meira shared,

> To be honest, I've never identified myself as an activist…. I think labeling myself as an activist feels a bit strange because in some sense, I'm still kind of figuring out who I am and what I want to do, at this stage of my life. But I don't want to downplay the fact that I do think of myself as engaging in climate activism…. This is just a personal preference, but I think of my activism more as something that I do, rather than what I am. So, I think of myself as participating in climate activism, but it's not the only way that I engage in environmentalism.

When asked about whether they identified as activists, five other participants from different groups echoed Meira's perspective of engaging in climate activism as an action as opposed to being a climate activist as an aspect of their identity.

Finally, some participants spoke about not feeling that they are doing enough, and therefore felt unable to identify as an activist. Along these lines, Julianna shared,

> I do feel like I struggle a bit with imposer syndrome, 'cause if I say I'm an activist, I'm saying, me, personally is having a huge impact on the world, and like, I am Greta Thunberg. And obviously that's not the case, but I do think that it's important for young

people to be able to acknowledge their individual roles, and how each of us, even by like caring about climate change, is having an impact, and is changing the world a little bit.

These varied perspectives of parts of their identity make sense given that adolescents are at such pivotal and impressionable developmental stages in their lives. As some participants shared, they are still very much in the process of figuring out who they are. SYM members were the most varied in their perception of the term activist, in comparison with the other groups.

### *6.6.4 School Groups*

Almost all participants who took part in school-affiliated climate groups shared that they indeed identified as activists. For example, Makayla said,

> I do identify as an activist… It would be very upsetting to me if I could not call myself an activist because of how much work and energy I put in. It's really my entire life besides school. But even in school, like in my history classes, I'm really asking questions about the movements that have happened. I'm asking questions about the intersectionality of these issues that are very white and male focused when we're learning about history. So, even, I feel like from every aspect of my life, I really try to have that activist mindset of, "What's wrong here? And what can we change to make it better?" And then, I think when you go to marches, and you're part of an environmental activism club, and sort of everything you do is around this cause that you really care about, I think that it's pretty impossible to not call yourself an activist.

Out of all school group participants, Makayla seemed to care the most about her activist identity, and she described how being an activist permeated almost all aspects of her life. Cameron felt similarly:

> I would certainly identify anyone as an activist, because I mean, as long as you're advocating for an issue or a value, or even a philosophy, then I would consider yourself an activist. So, in that sense, I've advocated for policy. I have certain values that I keep, and, a philosophy that guides it, and that's where I guide my legislation. So yeah, I would consider myself an activist.

Meanwhile Amelia described,

> I do personally identify as an activist. I think sometimes depending on the social situation, I may be less inclined to do so. Often it can be hard as a young person who seems to be the only one who cares about certain things, or knows things about politics,

> or to be known as the one to turn to when anything about climate comes up. But I do definitely identity as an activist.

Amelia mentioned the positionality of being a young person while simultaneously being a climate advocate, and the difficulties that come with that, something that six other participants mentioned as well.

Participants from school groups that engaged in activism in a more political way tended to prefer the term advocate as opposed to activist. Alyson, for example, stated,

> I think there's a difference between activist and advocate. I think I'm more an advocate, because I think of an activist as someone who is on the streets and being very bold and being loud and being very sort of rebellious and rebelling against whatever [and] making moves that are very public. I think what I do is more on the back end, more policy-based, more book-based, more making internal change within [school name] and not really holding walkouts or anything about that…. I think it's more people organizing and not really being loud. So, I think I sort of am an activist but more in the advocate sense.

Felix shared a similar opinion:

> I would identify as an advocate, not necessarily an activist, in the sense that, for some reason I feel like an advocate has a lower barrier to entry than an activist. Activist sounds like something that you have devoted more time than I would feel comfortable saying that I have to it…. Advocate feels a little less, or a little bit easier to feel comfortable with saying, just because you can advocate for things, activist implies activism which is a whole 'nother piece. For me, I would identify as an advocate…. Maybe I'll end up as a footnote in the dissertation saying like, "one subject identifies as advocate." [Laughs].

Felix and Alyson both used the word advocate to describe their school-based climate work. I did not prompt use of an alternative word when I asked whether participants identified as activists or not. Further, neither Alyson nor Felix knew that the other used the word advocate, even though they both participated in the same group. It seemed that individuals who engaged in more politically oriented, and sometimes school-based organizing preferred the term advocate to activist, because their work largely focused around climate policy.

Finally, some participants, especially those who engaged in climate work within the context of extracurricular clubs, shared hesitancy around describing themselves as activists

because of imposter syndrome or feeling that they have not done enough to deserve the title of activist. To this regard, Stella said,

> I don't really call myself an activist, because, at least for me, a lot of our work has been online, because that's just when I joined because it was in the pandemic. But we're still doing a lot of work, and, for me, the classic I feel like, image of an activist is someone going to protests, or rallies, and, I haven't been able to do that, because we had to go virtual. But it's also because it's only been like, like this is like my second year.

Similarly, Zara stated,

> I'm not sure if I would be an activist. I mean, I think I might be, because I definitely try to tell others [about climate change]. I mean, I am in maybe small ways because I try to tell others to stop doing maybe harmful things, or damaging things when I can.

Additionally, Ashira described,

> I try to be an activist as much as possible, but sometimes I do kind of go into those bad habits or sometimes I do go into my shell when people talk about the environment and everything. Sometimes I'm afraid to stand up and be like, "Hey, this is what's wrong; this is what you can fix." So sometimes I'm a little afraid to, but I try to be an activist as much as possible.

The only participants who noted imposter syndrome or feeling that they have not done enough to call themselves activists were those involved in school-based groups. Much of these young people's climate work took place online due to limitations of the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, those who described feeling that they had not done enough also alluded to lack of confidence about their climate work.

### *6.6.5 Recap of Activist, Advocate or Organizer Identity*

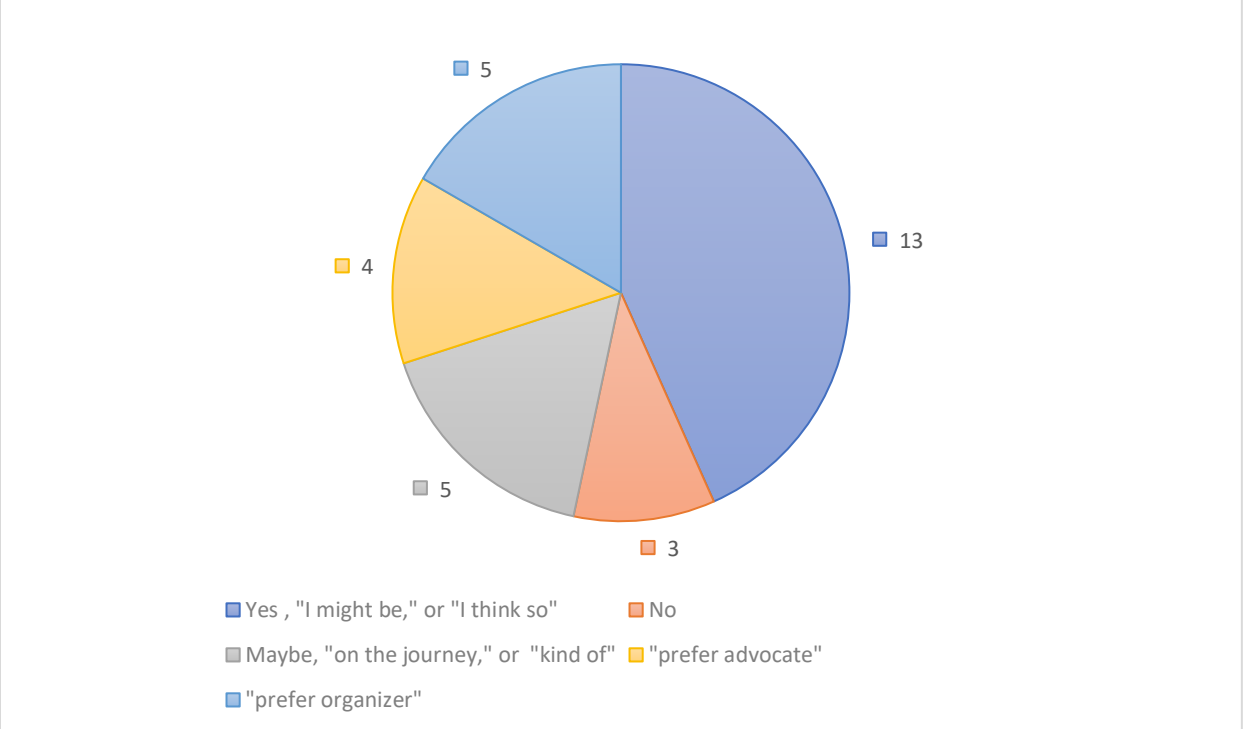
Though the approaches groups took to organizing varied somewhat across collectives, feelings about the work and how it impacted participants' lives were similar across groups, except in terms of individuals' perspectives on the word activist itself. Shared sentiments about the work itself prevailed across groups, underscoring a commonality in emotional experiences tied to climate organizing. However, a notable exception emerged concerning perspectives on the term activist itself. When I wrote the question "Do you identify as an activist?" I had surmised that participants would talk about how climate activism affected their identity as young people in today's world. Instead, this question probing self-identification as activists unexpectedly led to

an overwhelming focus on the term “activist,” with no explicit references to identity development. This unexpected emphasis on the term “activist” prompted a nuanced exploration of the significance of this label in youth-led climate advocacy work, revealing unanticipated intricacies in the participants' conceptualizations of their roles and developing identities.

The distinctions in self-identification among young people across different groups align with the diverse approaches these collectives adopt in their organizing efforts. Participants in both Extinction Rebellion Youth (XRY) and Sustainabiliteens (ST) predominantly preferred to identify as organizers, highlighting their emphasis on coordinating and facilitating actions. Meanwhile, those who participated in Sunrise (Youth) Movement (SYM) tended to align with the term activist. School-based participants varied in their preferences for the terms, in that four of them seemed to have some comfort in identifying as activists, two preferred advocate, and the others felt mixed emotions. These differences in identifying with certain terms symbolized groups' nuanced approaches to their climate work. Figure 5 displays the percentages of participants’ responses to the question, “Do you identify as an activist?”

**Figure 5**

*Participants’ Responses to the Question, “Do you Identify as an Activist?”*




*Note.* $N = 30$.

Responses to the aforementioned question were relatively consistent among individuals within each group, but differed across groups, which I had not hypothesized when developing my interview schedule. As shown in dark blue in Figure 5, less than half of participants ($n$ = 13) responded "yes," "I might be," or "I think so" to the question regarding activist identity. Shown in red on Figure 5, three participants responded "no" to this question. Shown in grey on Figure 5, five participants responded that they feel they may be, might be, are "on the journey" to becoming, or are "kind of" an activist. Almost half of all participants ($n$ = 12) shared that they either disliked the term activist, strongly preferring the terms organizer or advocate, or responded that they did not identify as an activist, for various reasons. Half of the participants belonging to XRY groups ($n$ = 4) responded "yes," to the above question, while half of those participants ($n$ = 4) responded they "strongly preferred the word organizer" as opposed to activist. One participant belonging to ST responded they "strongly preferred the term organizer" due to perceived negative societal notions related to the term activist. Some participants from both school-based groups ($n$ = 2) and SYM ($n$= 2) reported preferring the term advocate to describe their work instead of the word activist.

Many of the younger participants responded "no" or "maybe" to this question citing feeling as though they had not done enough to be able to be labeled an activist, but expressed they were working towards or wanted to become one. Others felt that having to do much of their activism virtually, given the COVID-19 pandemic, hindered their progress, and therefore they felt unable to identify with the term activist, but wanted to do so. Almost one-third ($n$ = 9) of participants were in either ninth or tenth grade during the time that I conducted interviews; therefore, these youth experienced the beginning of high school virtually, given the lockdowns that the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated. This unique and unideal high school experience may have led some of the younger participants to not feel as though they earned the label activist.

Participants from SYM as well as some from school clubs described engaging specifically in political advocacy work related to climate issues, hence their preference for the term advocate. That is, four participants shown in yellow on Figure 5, offered the term advocate to describe their climate work. The work SYM and some school groups described fell under the umbrella of purposefully politically-focused climate advocacy, most often in support of the United States' Green New Deal (GND). Those who identified as advocates did not engage in theatrical demonstrations or in making demands on corporations and banks such as XRY

participants described, but rather focused on how political advocacy could assuage the effects of the climate crisis. These participants described seeing value in working within existing political systems as opposed to outside of it, especially given their limitations in terms of those associated with educational institutions. They described lobbying policymakers and working collaboratively with community organizations and other stakeholders to get climate policies enacted in local, state, or national legislatures, and therefore largely identified as climate advocates.

One common issue that multiple participants noted regarding identifying as an activist was ageism from older generations, which youth felt often led adults to dismiss the opinions and actions of young people, especially those under the age of 18 years, given that they are unable to vote in elections. This dismissiveness and ageist discrimination from adults in their lives and of those in positions of power and authority, led some participants to feel largely disillusioned with the term activist. In short, these participants wanted to distance themselves from the activist label as they felt it invoked negative feelings towards their cause and did not accurately capture the depth and importance of their difficult work. Many adolescent climate workers preferred alternative terms as they emphasized the proactive and collaborative nature of their work and highlight the skills and knowledge they bring to the table.

As shown in light blue in Figure 5, five participants offered the term organizer to describe their work without my prompting for an alternative word. These participants felt as though the term activist had socially condescending undertones; therefore, they did not want to associate with that type of work (i.e., activism). This response suggests a form of resistance against the negative societal attitudes youth face based on their age and adult-perceived lack of knowledge. This abhorrence is their approach to redefining what it means to do youth climate work and asserting their agency and ability to challenge the idea that they are too young or inexperienced to make a meaningful impact on the world. Due to the activist label being largely off-putting for certain people, some participants rejected the term entirely, stating emphatically that they hated it. XRY participants who stated they hated or strongly disliked the term activist offered the term organizer as an alternative because they felt they organize people to engage in climate actions rather than carry out activist work as it is commonly conceived, or as they define it. As a whole, youth had differing perspectives on the term activist, varying from identifying with it strongly to vehemently hating it.

## 6.7 Summary

Chapter 6 covered the myriad of nuanced dimensions of the effects of youth-led climate activism on participants' lives through exploring both the collective and individual levels of perception. This chapter shed light on how youth navigate and cope with the intense feelings associated with their climate activism, emphasizing the integral role of the group in providing support and solace for their climate-related emotions. Moving from the collective to the individual focus of the themes in this chapter, I examined the unique perspectives, struggles, and triumphs participants described in the face of climate organizing as adolescents in contemporary times. I generally focus on how youth-led climate advocacy work shapes young individuals' evolving senses of self. These findings contribute valuable insights into the intricate ways in which youth navigate their roles and experiences in the constantly evolving landscape of climate activism within the global movement.

Next, in the discussion, I utilize the findings to present a frame of reference for understanding how young people experience citizenship in today's world and contextualize the present study within existing literature on the topic.

# Chapter 7: Discussion

## 7.1 Introduction

In undertaking this study, my primary objective was to gain greater insights into the organizational dynamics and approaches youth-led climate-oriented groups employ. With this research, I wanted to gauge young people's perceptions of their experiences of this unique and timely form of civic engagement, especially in terms of how they felt it affected their adolescent development. As a qualitative study undertaken with 30 participants between the ages of 13 and 18 years old (within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, from 2021 to 2022), I conducted interviews, participant observation, and group interviews. To frame, critically analyze and contextualize my findings in conversation with relevant literature, I related to concepts of eco-citizenship (Hayward, 2021), eco-cultural identity (Milstein & Castro-Sotomayor, 2020), meaning-making (Frankl, 1959, 2006), and generativity (Erikson, 1964; Lawford et al., 2020; Lawford et al., 2005). Drawing on relevant literature and synthesizing these theoretical frameworks with my empirical data, I present below a frame of reference that captures how young people in the present study felt about their climate work in today's dynamic world. Central to my exploration was a focus on understanding the group's effects on the individual, challenging the prevalent trend of individualization of responsibility regarding contemporary social and environmental issues. Thus, though my original intention was to compare groups, the study evolved into an emphasis on the profound influence and opportunities of group participation on the lives of individual adolescents.

In the three findings chapters (4, 5, and 6), I described the results of this study, which I organized based on thematic analysis. Though not part of the initial study aims, I elucidated the motivations for engagement, including family and upbringing, a sense of urgency, and an awareness of the global movement in Chapter 4. Participants articulated various motivations, showcasing the interplay of personal, familial, and global factors driving their engagement in climate-oriented activism. I illustrated the diverse approaches to group processes that participants described in Chapter 5, involving planning and communication within groups, styles of leadership, and outreach strategies. Finally, Chapter 6 serves as a presentation of the youth-perceived impacts of their climate work, highlighting themes of coping through emotions, dealing with being a young person, the significance of the collective, perceptions of success and effects on development, as well as the nuanced identity labels of activist, advocate, or organizer.

Taken as a whole, the findings chapters provided a comprehensive examination of the multifaceted aspects of youth-led climate organizing in response to my main inquiry question and my five study aims, outlined in Chapter 3. In this chapter, I first provide a comprehensive summary of the results in relation to each of my research aims. Next, I present the aforementioned frame of reference for understanding young people's experiences of climate-related civic participation, drawing on both the literature discussed in Chapter 2, and key themes generated through thematic analysis of the results of the present study. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the study's limitations and outlines potential directions for future research. I end with some implications for the broader academic discourse on youth-led climate activism in Canada and the United States.

### 7.2 Results Summary

I investigated how groups of young people approached climate organizing and how the individuals who made up the collectives perceived their participation in them. I addressed these study aims mainly through conducting semi-structured interviews with all participants ($N = 30$). I triangulated the interview data with participant observation of one XRY group's weekly meetings over 9 months and observation of three of their group's in-person actions. Additionally, I observed a handful of the other groups' meetings, actions, and workshops. I did not observe any other collective for an extended period of time, given that groups involved mainly categorized themselves as youth-led, and therefore did not want anyone over the age of 18 years present at their meetings. Some participants in other groups would have allowed my presence as an observer at their meetings. When the other groups voted on this decision, it did not get a majority vote. Also, though I initially intended to have one group interview from each collective, I was only able to conduct two group interviews with seven total participants from two distinct groups, one Extinction Rebellion Youth collective ($n = 3$) and one private school club ($n = 4$). The sources of triangulation (i.e., participant observation of meetings and actions and group interviews) allowed for more in depth analysis.

First, I will begin by discussing participant-reported motivations for involvement, as these accounted for roughly one-quarter of the interview time (between 10 and 20 minutes per interview) in almost all cases. Interestingly motivations for engagement had not been part of my initial research aims, but since participants discussed them in all interviews, it suggests that individuals' reasoning for involvement provides important context for situating the rest of the

data. The most prominent motivator adolescents described was their fear of the fundamental threat to the existence of humanity that the climate crisis poses. Additionally cited grounds for involvement included a sense of urgency and responsibility to act on this mammoth problem as well as influences from peers involved in the global youth-led climate movement. Hope was also a major motivator, so much so that two-thirds ($n$ = 20) of participants stated it as an essential driving force for their climate advocacy, without which this work would be impossible. Congruent with the present study's findings that many youth felt positive about the power of their generation to make change for the better (i.e., self-efficacy), Ojala (2012) described hope as an antecedent to young people's engagement with climate solutions. The present study's findings in terms of a sense of urgency were in line with previous research on the topic (e.g., Allan, 2017; Myers, 2014).

Individuals felt that working to address climate change was a problem much greater than themselves and, as such, requires massive-scale collective action. Juliana, Carly, and Melanie, among others exemplified this sense of urgency and need for such work when describing their lifelong awareness of the dire situation that the climate crisis poses. Grace went so far as to say that she could not think of a time in her life when climate change was not a problem. Numerous adolescents reported feeling that the problem was out of their hands, so much so that one-third ($n$ = 10) of participants expressed experiencing an almost debilitating fear related to the current state of the climate crisis. In the present study, young people also cited feeling better about the climate emergency and that their fears were somewhat quelled when they acted with peers, and that these groups reinforce their belief in the importance of the work they are doing. These positive feelings associated with involvement in their groups were especially prominent directly after a protest, march, or strike, as members of ST emphasized. Oftentimes, for the youth involved, engaging in action was an antecedent to ameliorating the big feelings that the climate crisis evoked, especially in debriefing after actions. Participant-described motivations laid the foundation for the rest of the study findings.

Now, with respect to the first study aim, a, which was to explore the approaches that groups of young people took to climate organizing (done through interviews). In line with Falk's (1971) classification of types of action and O'Brien et al.'s (2018) typology of dissent as dutiful, disruptive, or dangerous, groups exhibited variation in their ideological stances regarding climate work. Collectives were especially distinct in terms of their levels of radicality and whether they

chose to act within or against existing political structures. Despite these ideological distinctions, the actual execution of actions revealed striking similarities among groups, except for XRY actions, which often involved adults. Specifically, both Kyra and Ethan, both members of XRY, shared that they participated in XR adult actions in which they witnessed adults being arrested for road blockades. Therefore, XRY engaged in the most dangerous approach to action. However, much of what took place in terms of groups' approaches to this type of work that were not ideologically bound occurred before actions, specifically during their planning meetings, instead of during actions themselves. On the day of actions, participants in each group described a rapid-paced environment where everyone played a specific role, such as delegating tasks to others, handing out flyers to passers-by, holding signs, or giving a speech. Other roles that people executed on the day of actions included holding a bullhorn and leading chants, acting as a liaison with police if the action was arrestable, talking with passers-by if they had questions, and playing music, to name a few. While the approaches that groups took to actions were similar, the underlying ideological reasoning behind them differed, following the typology of dissent (Falk, 1971; O'Brien, 2018). Given that other scholars have conducted much research on how young people engage in climate activism, research aim a was the least significant in terms of how this study contributed to the field.

The second research aim, b, sought to document the behind-the-scenes work that enabled these groups to showcase their public-facing actions (done through observation of meetings and actions). While documenting this covert work, which took place mostly during groups' regularly scheduled meetings, I was able to witness the participant-described benefits of acting collectively in peer-governed climate-oriented organizations. This work, which spectators of actions could not see, included but was not limited to planning, organizational logistics, and marketing efforts such as creating social media campaigns and engaging with popular news media to promote their actions. For example, Carly mentioned all of the planning that goes into actions and how she felt that when an action was her idea, that she had to do the bulk of the work. Similarly, Kyra described an action in which she knew that the group was going to block a road, but that not everyone was aware before the action. Aliza illustrated the process of a press release in order to get more attendance at their events. The group processes outlined in Chapter 5 reinforced a sense of collective responsibility and a group-felt urgency to combat the effects of anthropogenic climate change.

The third study aim, c, was to understand what specifically emerged from the collective processes involved in these groups' organizing work (done through observation of meetings as well as discussion within the context of interviews and group interviews). Each collective employed several methods of decision-making while considering all opinions and ideas and working for the needs and interests of the group. Members utilized multiple communication and conflict resolution tactics to settle disputes and reach agreements regarding matters that affected their group, always with the intent of furthering their cause and for the betterment of the group as a whole. Ethan described that conflict which occurs during meetings is good for group cohesion. Inclusivity and representation of all members' ideas and opinions proved particularly important in groups' arbitration processes. Participants in SYM and school groups emphasized the importance of respecting everyone's opinion, which both Meira and Makayla emphasized. Felix went in-depth in describing the non-violent communication approach to solving problems that he employed as a group leader. Despite the fact that communication did not only occur during meetings but also via Slack, text messaging, email, Instagram, and in school, making decisions as a group with an almost unanimous vote was a strongly held value across collectives.

Also related to research aim c, collective processes led individuals to glean important life skills that they may not have otherwise learned had they not participated in these groups such as public speaking, leadership, and community organizing. This form of civic engagement (i.e., climate work in youth-led groups) allowed participants to see themselves as agents of change, thus leading them to take active roles in their communities and to demand their voices be heard. Specifically, six participants described the life skills they gleaned through these experiences during adolescence as important, extraneous, and surprising impacts of their climate advocacy work. Developing and refining social skills, including but not limited to respectful and effective communication, leadership, forming connections, compromising, self-expression, listening to one another, and working towards a common goal, were some of the many positive outcomes that individuals described as related to the group. These skills were not only useful for participants on a personal level, but necessary to their organizations' abilities to function almost entirely independently of adult interference, as the term youth-led implies. Research aim c proved to be the most significant aim in that it was the collective processes which led to ameliorating negative emotions, as well as buttressed motivation.

My fourth research aim, d, was to study how young people formed social connections and made collective meaning within youth-led groups (done through interviews and validated through group interviews). The present study highlighted the critical role of the organizations in which they participated for young people to feel that their voices were heard and for providing space to share their grievances related to the climate catastrophe with people with whom they could relate and who were their contemporaries. Through awareness that their peers felt similarly about the climate crisis, young people described the ability to build community and camaraderie within their youth-centric spaces. Specifically, Melanie and Zelda elucidated how their group involvement led to an increased sense of meaning because of their belonging to the collective. For numerous participants, friendships with fellow group members led to an increased felt sense of purpose in each of their lives. Participants also reported that collaborating with their peers towards a common goal led to an increased collective sense of purpose (as opposed to only individual), which in turn reinforced their commitment to the cause as well as buttressed their group affiliation. Through shared lived experiences and engaging together in collective action, young people, such as Ethan and Clara, in this study identified as belonging to a larger community dedicated to creating a better future for both their generation, those younger than they, and those not yet born. Research aim d was also quite significant in that not much research has been conducted on the social connections among young people in climate collectives and how these communities lead to meaning-making for adolescents.

My final study aim, e, was to listen to young people's thoughts about their climate work and how they felt about its impacts on their adolescent development. These youth-centric spaces not only served as platforms for expressing opinions and concerns with their peers who were like-minded, but also with an optimal environment to enact leadership roles that increased their confidence and interpersonal skills. Alyson and Felix, both leaders in their group, attested to the invaluable nature of these experiences for their skill development as young people. Multiple participants echoed this sentiment highlighting the acquisition of vital life skills gleaned through this work as instrumental for their adolescent development. The significance of these life skills was a recurrent theme among participants, illustrating the transformative impact of climate activism on personal development. Participants who did not explicitly discuss life skills talked about the emotional and social impacts this work had on their worldview and their inability to relate to their peers who were not involved in such groups. For instance, Lucy and Ashira both

shared their challenges in relating to and commiserating with their friends who did not share this care and concern for the planet. This social disconnect is a poignant example of how participants in the present study described their climate work as affecting their identity and worldview. Multiple participants shared that this work affected them greatly and that they felt they would not be the person they have become or are becoming if they had not taken part in their climate collectives. These testimonials collectively emphasize the multifaceted impacts of youth-led climate activism, extending beyond skill development to encompass identity formation, social connection, and a profound sense of personal growth.

Moreover, I valued adolescents' feeling heard, included, and taken seriously, which was related to my methodological approach, and was in line with the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 2023). Participants expressed gratitude for the platform my study provided them to discuss their experiences of this form of youth civic participation, as well as their concern for the climate crisis during their individual interviews. My findings suggest that educators, policymakers, and adults need to better understand young climate activists' concerns and voices. Across the board, participants denounced the climate change education, or rather lack thereof, they had received in school, whether it be public or private.

### 7.3 Frame of Reference for Young People's Experiences of Collective Climate Organizing

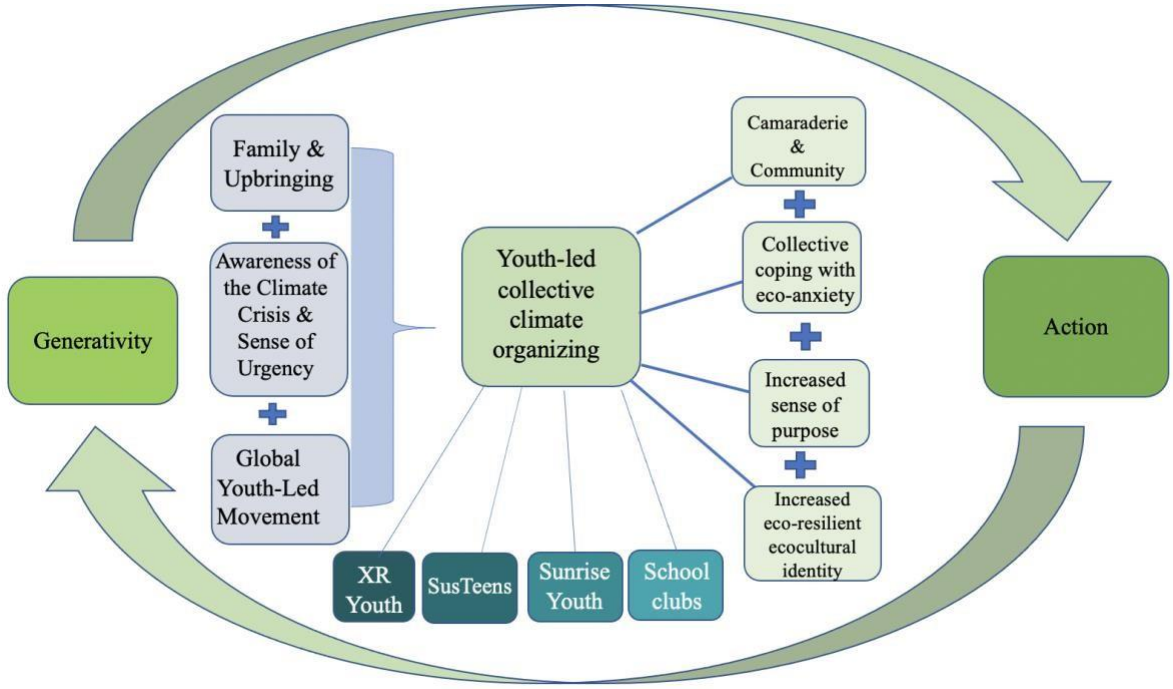
Young people in the present study felt their involvement in youth-led climate groups shaped their identity development immensely. Given this impact, my study suggests that for these young people, climate work is an experience of eco-citizenship that serves to enhance eco-resilient eco-cultural identity development. Young people explained that their climate collectives allowed them an increased ability to construct a sense of order in their lives, which they may not have otherwise had because of the COVID-19 pandemic and other compounding world events occurring at the time. Participants cultivated a deeper sense of purpose and meaning that they felt will likely have a profound impact on their identity development and their commitment to climate issues throughout their lives, resultant from this expression of eco-citizenship. In fact, when I asked them about how they thought climate organizing might affect them in the future six individuals speculated that they would likely continue this work indefinitely.

Audley et al. (2020) wrote that eco-resiliency is "responsive, adaptive, persistent, and fosters relations and empathy among humans and the more-than-human world…. [and that] the eco-resiliency frame supports an ecocentric worldview…. [which] highlights the embedded and

reciprocal nature of our daily interactions with the more-than-human world" (p. 447). Taking eco-resiliency as a frame, I therefore propose that these young people involved in these specific youth-led climate collectives were more likely to have eco-resilient eco-cultural identities as a result of their engagement in this form of collective youth civic participation.

**Figure 6**

*Frame of Reference for Understanding Young People's Experiences of Climate Organizing*




*Note.* XR = Extinction Rebellion. SusTeens = Sustainabiliteens.

Based on the results of the present study, I propose this frame of reference for young people's experiences of citizenship and civic engagement via youth-led climate organizing in Figure 6. The three boxes on the left demonstrate the major motivations that youth described as leading to the middle box, which is their enactment of youth-led collective climate organizing. Below the middle box are the four distinct groups involved in the study, from most radical (dark green, XRY) to least radical (light green, school clubs) in terms of their perspectives and ideological approaches to climate organizing in terms systems disrupting, or systems maintaining. To the right of the middle box are the four major outcomes of participation for the individual as participants described. Around the outside of the boxes is a reinforcing feedback loop, which starts with generativity on the left and leads to action on the right. Generativity was both a motivator to catalyze action for young people and a reason for continuing the difficult

work that these young people do. This reinforcing feedback loop suggests that generativity and action were intertwined for these participants, as the former lead to action which in turn increased generativity, and it seemingly would continue in a cyclical nature.

The present study's findings demonstrated that youth-led climate activism is a form of eco-citizenship that enhances positive eco-cultural identities among young people. I found the ways in which young people in the present study collaborated with their peers was an expression of eco-citizenship enacted within the context of their peer-to-peer collectives. Without these peer collaborations within which these young people engaged in climate activism and the group processes that resulted from such involvement, many of the effects on the individual would not have occurred. Eco-citizenship is a form of civic participation, whereas eco-cultural identity is a frame of reference for how humans relate to the more-than-human world. In the present study, the climate work in which young people engaged was an enactment of eco-citizenship which buttressed existing eco-cultural identities and largely provided for eco-resiliency.

Hayward (2021) considers eco-citizenship to involve personal, social, and political dimensions. I found the personal and social dimensions of eco-citizenship within the present study most similar to Hayward's approach to eco-citizenship, as my participants referred to their pre-existing values and beliefs as motivations for engagement in this work. This personal dimension included values, beliefs, and attitudes about the state of the environment, including a sense of connection and responsibility to the more-than-human world. In the social dimension which stresses the importance of relationships and community engagement for shaping young people's environmental attitudes and behaviors, including social mores and networks (Hayward, 2021). In my study, participants noted the community feeling they cultivated within their peer-governed groups as catalyzing their desire to continue this work. Since I did not include questions in my interview schedule related to climate policies, Hayward's description of the political dimension of eco-citizenship was not found in my study. But, as a result of their participation, participants were increasingly politically active, taking part in local (e.g., town, city, or school-wide initiatives) and global (e.g., Conference of the Parties, and United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change) discussions and campaigns surrounding climate issues, policies and practices that affect not only their futures but those of not-yet-born generations as well.

I also found Milstein and Castro-Sotomayor's (2020) definition of eco-cultural identity—a dynamic and complex process involving individuals and groups constructing and negotiating their sense of self in relation to the environment and culture in which they live—applicable to my study. Eco-cultural identity involves recognizing and appreciating the interdependence between humans and the more-than-human world, including how culture and the natural environment are intertwined and inextricable. It also requires an understanding of the ways in which power and privilege shape human relationships with the environments in which they live, play, and work (Milstein & Castro-Sotomayor, 2020). Considering this concept, in relation to my findings, half of the participants in the present study ($n$ = 15) stated that their climate organizing affected their identity development, made them behave more pro-environmentally, and therefore they wanted to influence their friends and family to do the same.

Interestingly, one-sixth of participants ($n$ = 5) reported culture as relevant to their climate advocacy. I did not specifically include questions about culture in my interview schedule. However, these five participants, who all self-identified as South Asian, mentioned it as important, suggesting that South Asian culture may intersect with pro-environmentalism, something upon which future studies could focus. Milstein and Castro-Sotomayor (2020) argued that eco-cultural identity involves a sense of connection and belonging to the natural world, which participants in the present study noted as part of their motivation for involvement from early childhood. Specifically, one-fifth of participants ($n$ = 6) shared that experiences with family and friends in nature (e.g., the woods or mountains) in early to middle childhood (i.e., between the ages of 0 and 12 years) inspired them to care for, protect, and steward it.

Additionally, to further make sense of my findings, I drew upon Frankl's (1959) seminal work, *Man's Search for Meaning*, in which he described his experiences as a Jewish person during World War II in Nazi Germany. Frankl emphasized the need to create meaning and purpose based on his observations of his own psychological struggles, as well as those of his fellow prisoners. According to Frankl, human beings find meaning through three avenues: creating something, experiencing something, or changing one's attitude about a situation. While in an entirely different context, this conception of meaning-making held true in the present study. Young people created meaning collectively through their involvement in these groups via interpersonal connections related to their unrest about the climate crisis. Almost all participants ($n$ = 27) expressed feeling as though their involvement in these groups gave their lives greater

purpose regardless of the outcomes of their public-facing actions. Six participants also described increased overall psychological well-being resulting from their involvement in this form of youth participation. Therefore, for the young people involved, engaging in youth-led climate-oriented groups not only provided a positive outlet to cope with the stress of being acutely aware of climate change, but also fulfilled the inherent need for a sense of belonging. This sense of belonging stemmed from the network of individuals sharing a larger purpose and working for a common cause, in line with Frank's conceptualization of meaning-making through difficult times. Young people gained a deeper understanding of the complex systems that underpin the climate crisis and developed a sense of agency and empowerment to address them collectively through this work. Taking part in climate groups provided young people the opportunity to work collectively with those who share a passion for ameliorating the climate crisis, which, in turn, led to camaraderie. Importantly, a sense of purpose and meaning-making are interconnected with generativity, as Figure 6 illustrates.

Finally, the present study also revealed that generativity, the concern for and commitment to future generations, and the altruistic desire to contribute to the betterment of society (Erikson, 1964) played into both the motivations for engagement and the emotional impacts of youth-led climate work, as the feedback loop in Figure 6 shows. Young climate activists expressed that their call to action stemmed from fear not only for their own futures but also for the lives and existence of future unborn beings. Thus, they were thinking in terms of generativity. Results of the present study demonstrated that people are experiencing generativity at significantly younger ages than Erikson (1964) originally posited, in congruence with contemporary research on the topic. While Erikson focused on the development of generativity in mid-life adults, Lawford et al. (2005) studied how adolescents develop it in relation to parenting style and community involvement.

They found that generativity may be a component of prosocial moral concern during adolescence and that communities in which young people participated helped to establish it. As a result of making positive societal contributions and attempting to impact future generations positively, people feel a sense of fulfillment and purpose in their lives, demonstrating the relationship between generativity and meaning-making. Participants also reported feeling motivated to act through a sense of responsibility to create a more sustainable world for future generations, such as their potential offspring and their younger siblings—that is, generativity was

a motivator—in line with other researchers' findings on motivations for climate activism (e.g., Derr, 2020; Haugestad et al., 2021; Noth & Tonzer, 2022). Specifically, two-thirds of participants ($n$ = 20) discussed concepts related to generativity as reasons for engaging in climate organizing, such as their own future lives, their younger siblings, and the lives of their potential offspring. Thus, this form of youth involvement significantly impacted these young people's lives, specifically relating to their psychological, social, and emotional development and shaped their experiences of citizenship.

Moreover, participants emphasized that engagement in youth-led climate work provided a sense of community and belonging. Youth described feeling able to develop meaningful relationships with their peers based on a common concern for the planet and for those who inhabit it by working with others who shared similar values and goals. They reported finding a sense of camaraderie within their peer groups that provided emotional support and feelings of encouragement that they would not have experienced had they done climate advocacy work alone. This sense of community helped to reinforce individuals' commitment to climate issues and sustained their efforts over time, especially when they felt let down as a result of an action not having gone as planned. That is, though they may have felt individual disappointment after an action did not have intended results, because they expressed these emotions to their groupmates, they were able to feel resilient and continue in their work—an experience of eco-resiliency.

The young people in the present study noted that engaging in youth-led climate organizing helped them to develop a deeper understanding of the complex social, political, and economic systems that underpin intersectional environmental issues of today. Working through these complex issues with their peers aided those involved in deriving meaning from difficult experiences and in developing more nuanced perspectives of the world around them. This work also helped adolescents to develop life-skills that will aid them later on, such as critical thinking, communication, and leadership skills. Participants reported that this form of civic engagement helped them to cultivate a sense of responsibility and accountability. Their engagement in these groups allowed for a sense of agency and empowerment to develop within them because they were able to address an issue they felt passionate and efficacious about with their peers. The increased sense of agency, in turn, helped reinforce their sense of purpose and meaning, as they felt they were making a tangible impact on the world around them. This work, therefore, led

these young people to rely on a heightened sense of self-efficacy and develop a stronger sense of eco-resilient identity as eco-citizens. Thus, young people are experiencing a new form of civic engagement than youth have before this epoch.

### 7.4 Limitations and Researcher Bias

Although the present study provided rich findings, multiple factors limited the results, which I outline in this section. The participant number of 30, all from the U.S. or Canada and English speaking, was not representative of the global population of youth engaged in climate activism during the time in which I collected data. The fact that I am only proficient in English likely influenced who was able to participate in this study. As a result, the findings I have presented need to be interpreted with caution; they may only be applicable to this specific group of participants and cannot be extrapolated to other contexts, (as is the case with most qualitative research). Furthermore, as shown in Table 4, in the methods chapter, participants were overwhelmingly females ($n$ = 22), with some males ($n$ = 5) and some non-binary identifying participants ($n$ = 3), which also likely does not represent all those across the United States and Canada who participated in youth-led climate-oriented groups between 2021 and 2022.

Another consideration is that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I conducted all but one interview via Zoom conferencing software. While this remote approach to data collection allowed for wider access to participants, it was also constraining due to technological limitations during interviews, including poor internet connection, sound quality, or inability to read nonverbal cues from participants. The use of online communication tools may also have influenced participants' responses to questions as they may have felt more or less comfortable speaking through this medium, given that I did not meet many participants in-person. Moreover, the use of remote interviews may have limited the diversity of the sample, as not all participants in youth-led climate-oriented groups have access to the necessary technology or internet connectivity to participate in such a form of data collection. One third of participants ($n$ = 10) left their camera off during interviews, which prevented me from being able to document facial expressions or verbal cues and further limited the rapport I was able to establish with participants. Finally, though not specifically related to remote interviewing, but important to note is the possibility that youth responded positively to some questions based on a desire to present as socially desirable to me as the researcher (Nederhof, 1985). This possibility may have impacted the validity of some findings. Despite these limitations, conducting mostly remote

interviews allowed for data collection during a time when conducting in-person research was largely not possible. Therefore, this approach allowed for the inclusion of those who may not have otherwise been able to participate in interviews in-person due to logistical or geographical barriers.

Although I observed one group's weekly meetings for a period of 9-months, attended three of their in-person actions, as well as some other groups' meetings and workshops, my observational data were limited and did not significantly contribute to my data collection nor analysis, but rather supported my claims and allowed for better triangulation. One group allowed me to observe them for 9-months, so, I wanted to give back to them, and not be extractive of them for data. Therefore, I acted as note-taker for their meetings, which limited my own detailed participant-observer field notes, as I had intended to take. Although I had hoped to be able to act as a participant observer for all groups, as I stated previously, most groups did not feel unanimously comfortable having an adult (i.e., someone over the age of 18 years) present at their meetings given that their collectives are labeled youth-led, and sometimes youth-only. Due to my only being able to observe one group extensively, my participant observation data are not representative of the other groups involved in the study—another limitation.

While I conducted two group interviews with two distinct collectives (one with three participants from the same group, and one with four participants from the same group) after I completed all interviews and encouraged each interviewee to participate in a group interview shortly after their interview, not all individuals were willing or able do so. I conducted group interviews in June of 2022, by which point multiple participants were preparing to go to university, had already started their summer jobs, or were preoccupied with other life events and did not respond to my email asking about participation in a group interview. This lack of all participants contributing to the group interviews likely resulted in a biased sample, with certain perspectives or experiences not fully represented in the data. Therefore, I was not able to use group interview transcriptions as a source of data, as originally intended. Instead, I used my group interview data, like my field notes from observation, as sources of triangulation.

Finally, as a researcher, it is important to acknowledge that my personal biases or perceptions likely influenced the study's findings, as I detailed in chapter 3. As a cis-gender, female, Jewish, middle-class American, English speaking, plant-based eating, highly educated individual, I have certain biases that could have affected the study's findings and data analysis.

For example, my personal beliefs, including my concern for animal welfare and the natural environment likely impacted the way I conducted the interviews, viewed participants, and interpreted and analyzed the data. If participants shared that they were vegan or Jewish, and inquired whether I was as well, I answered honestly in the affirmative. This divulgence likely affected the way these individuals answered further questions. Additionally, my identity as a highly educated individual with both a bachelor's and master's degree may have impacted my perception of the young people involved in the study. Despite efforts to minimize potential biases, it is important to recognize them.

### 7.5 Implications and Future Research Directions

This study has multiple implications for education and youth civic participation. Although for the most part participants did not focus on climate change education (CCE) in their interviews, the education sector has the largest implications for this study. Many youth shared that they went to popular news or social media outlets to learn about the climate crisis, and that they did not learn what they deemed necessary information about climate change or mitigation strategies in school. Further, one participant shared that she attended a politically-liberal independently run private school that focused on social justice, and that her educational institution, which she surmised that if anywhere would teach CCE would do so, did not, which bothered her immensely. The present study demonstrated that young people are asking their schools to take a more active role in addressing climate change and to teach about and engage in collective and institutional-level mitigations. Organizers' heightened pressure on governmental and corporate bodies regarding climate policy has shined a spotlight on environmental education (EE) and climate change education (CCE) and the growing need to incorporate sustainability principles and practices into curricula at all levels of education. That is, CCE does not need to only occur within environmental science courses but can be incorporated into almost every subject in school (Ardoin et al., 2022; Ariza et al., 2021; Dawson, 2015; Ginsburg & Audley, 2020; White et al., 2022).

The need for curriculum development around proper CCE including workable mitigation strategies became clear as all young people involved expressed disappointment in it in both public and private schools. They described the CCE they received in school as extremely limited at best, but more so as absent. Oftentimes, environmental education is taught largely as individual or household mitigation behaviors, which are the least effective in terms of climate

action (Chang & Pascua, 2017; Ginsburg & Audley, 2020; Jorgenson et al., 2019). But the present study highlighted the need for an increase in opportunities for students to learn about climate issues and sustainability, including not only formal classroom instruction, but also experiential learning opportunities such as outdoor education, community service projects, and environmental stewardship initiatives. More specifically, students need such opportunities with a collective focus that emphasizes connection with other youth who care deeply about the climate crisis, both within the school setting, as well as with the support of the school, but outside of the educational setting. These programs are not offered in most schools across Canada and the U.S., yet students could benefit from such experiences. Also, the present study validated the importance of climate-oriented groups for adolescents, as these peer-led groups often supplement the CCE that Canadian and American schools are largely failing to provide.

Another education-based implication from this study is the need for educational institutions to become more sustainable themselves. This response to adolescents' wishes would be a step towards validating students' concerns that their schools fail to care about the issues that they are fighting for, even if the mitigations that the school makes are seemingly small, such as adding compost bins to cafeterias. Participants from school-based groups recounted requesting that their schools switch from plastic cutlery to reusable flatware, asking their cafeterias to serve more plant-based food options for breakfast and lunch in school, to create accessible school gardens, and install solar panels on the roof of the building, all of which are possible at many schools across North America. Educational institutions could therefore lead by example in being more environmentally conscious, and in turn, students may then feel more empowered and supported in their climate work.

The results of this study also have implications for youth civic participation in that adults can support and collaborate intergenerationally with young people in social and political movements. Participants described gleaning interpersonal, leadership, and communication skills through their climate work in these groups. These competencies could be amplified in the school setting through speech and debate courses, or the creation of new high school courses oriented around these skills. Young people emphasized the importance of including youth voices and perspectives in decision-making processes related to climate policy issues that affect them and their loved ones. Young people bring unique insights and experiences to the table, and adults should listen to youth perspectives on timely problems (Blanchet-Cohen et al., 2023; Hart et al.,

2014). Adults, therefore, have a responsibility to support and empower youth in their efforts to engage in social, environmental, and political activism, including climate advocacy. Young people reported that adult support for their groups often came in the form of providing financial resources, mentorship, physical meeting spaces, and sometimes guidance, which could be increased, going forward. Further, adults must work to challenge their own age-based biases against young people and value youth perspectives.

Future studies could build on this research through incorporating a more diverse group of participants and data sources to capture a wider range of experiences and perspectives. Including participants from various geographic locations, cultural backgrounds, and socio-economic statuses, and specifically asking questions about these aspects of social location could enable exploration of how specific aspects of identity influence youth-led climate work. Future researchers could include interview questions specifically about how culture plays into youth-led climate organizing. For example, in this study, two SYM participants discussed a BIPOC caucus, in which they felt most welcomed and able to share experiences with those who they felt were most similar to them. Future research could thus focus on how differences and similarities in social locations affect interactions within groups and in turn affect sense of meaning cultivated via involvement in these groups.

Further, in-depth ethnographic interviews and facilitated group discussions could allow for more detailed and nuanced data about young people's experiences and perceptions of group based climate work. This approach would be similar to Neas's (2022) dissertation about how young people became climate activists, though it was not purposefully with people under the age of 18 years. If all participants agreed to participate in both interviews and group interviews, the group interview setting could provide for conversation with members of the same collectives, which could also provide for a more youth-led approach to data collection. Another possibility for future studies would be Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) approach which could better bolster and uplift young people's voices (Anyon et al., 2018). Finally, future studies could include weekly observation of each group's meetings and activities to glean a more complete picture of how groups function, and how participants engage with each other. Full participant observation of all groups' meetings and actions would allow future studies to gather field notes on what occurs behind-the-scenes from action planning to execution to debriefing. In order to maintain the youth-led status of the group, one of the group members could volunteer to be a

participant observer for meetings and could be trained to writ field notes about the meetings and action. This approach, in conjunction with a YPAR study design, could potentially provide a clearer picture of how these groups put on their actions, and what the youth perceive as best practices.

Examining the reasons why, the ways in which, and the effects of young people's engagement with climate-oriented groups could help researchers understand how these factors might be different from previous generations and determine best practices for young people as well as for adult involvement or support moving forward. Taking into consideration the UNCRC (2023) and the body of work undertaken since on the contributions of children's voices and actions as they relate to the environment (see Chawla, 2020a; Chawla & Heft, 2002), adults need to understand all the work that adolescents put into their climate work, so that in turn, youth feel fully supported in their work, and no longer feel undervalued but also considering they have unique perspectives and solutions.

This research study shed light on the group processes that enabled the young people involved to work together toward shared goals, and what allowed them to maintain energy and stamina to continue in their endeavors. Grasping the group dynamics of and approaches to leadership in youth-led in climate organizing enabled me to better understand the communication practices, and approaches to decision-making that facilitated successful collective action within their groups. Future scholars could apply this research to other areas of youth work, to develop effective strategies for supporting youth leadership in social change, especially in terms of supporting adolescent empowerment and their agency in critical current issues. Key takeaways for adult youth-practitioners include:

- Consider and provide spaces (e.g., rooms in school buildings, community centers, YMCA's) for young people to conduct their climate-oriented groups' meetings
- Recognize the range of emotions that surface because of youth involvement in climate-oriented groups
- Counter your own ageist perspectives of young people engaged in political advocacy
- Offer support that is based on young people's identification of need within their groups
- Identify and enact collective and/or intergenerational ways of supporting youth-led climate-oriented groups

## Chapter 8: Conclusion

Globally, young people are aware that climate change presents unprecedented existential challenges that affect both the present and the future, prompting many of them to address its effects via collective youth-led climate organizing. This research is grounded in the recognition that climate change poses unique challenges to young people. This study traversed the realm of youth-led climate activism and found that young people's engagement in climate-oriented collective groups has empowered those between the ages of 13 and 18 years in these groups to become more engaged eco-citizens. While previous research has focused on individual experiences or the perspectives of specific groups, such as college students or Indigenous youth (e.g., MacKay et al., 2020; Nairn et al., 2021; Ritchie, 2021) this study took examined the methods various groups applied, as well as individuals' perspectives on how the taking part in these collectives affected their own lives. Participants in the present study came from four distinct approaches to youth-led collective climate advocacy—Extinction Rebellion Youth, Sustainabiliteens, Sunrise (Youth) Movement, and school-affiliated climate-oriented clubs.

Results identified that a combination of young people's upbringing, a sense of urgency, and an acute awareness of the international youth-led climate movement inspired these young people to become involved in this form of civic engagement. These motivations underscore the importance of climate education and awareness raising, as well as the role of families and caregivers in instilling a sense of responsibility for the more-than-human world in their children. Results also highlighted the key role young people play in ameliorating the effects of anthropogenic climate change and emphasized the need for continued support and attention to their efforts. Participants described variations in group processes, including internal planning, leadership styles, and outreach strategies, highlighting the diverse ways in which youth-led climate work unfolds in the United States and Canada. Furthermore, the study unveiled the absence of a one-size-fits-all approach to this type of work, emphasizing the influences unique circumstances, physical locations, access to resources, and collective ideologies have on how climate action is carried out among youth-led collectives. Involvement in climate-oriented groups impacted involved young people in many ways, including coping with emotions both individually and collectively, dealing with being a young person in an adult-centric world, finding support and meaning through the cultivation of community and camaraderie with peers, and in terms of their adolescent identity development.

The present study's findings demonstrated how these groups provide a supportive space for young people to cope with the massive emotional weight of the climate emergency and how these groups help youth navigate societal strife surrounding the issue. The study also emphasized the need for ongoing support and education for young people involved in climate action work, as well as revealed the importance of recognizing the unique contributions and perspectives of youth in the broader climate movement, in part to combat ageism in popular media's depictions of young people's organizing. Moving forward, adults need to help alleviate youth's feelings that the existential burden of climate change is theirs alone to bear, and that they must fix it. Understanding how climate-oriented action work shapes young people's attitudes, values, and behaviors is crucial for informed environmental and educational policy-making and programs that foster youth development as active citizens of today and not only future citizens of tomorrow.

The outcomes of this study include but are not limited to coping mechanisms, sense of self and identity, how perceptions of success affected individuals' emotions, and how views about the climate crisis affected young people's psychological development. This study demonstrated that participation in these climate advocacy groups led these adolescents to learn to cope with emotions related to the urgency of the climate crisis and to contend with being a young person in a society that often devalues their voices. Collective action and social connection with fellow group members provided an avenue for young people to discover a sense of belonging and empowerment that positively impacted their psychological development and engagement in civic life via these groups. Understanding the ways in which climate work shapes young people's attitudes, values, and behaviors can enable researchers to better predict the long-term impacts of this form of youth engagement and related societal factors on adolescent psychological development and life skills, for example. This knowledge is temporally pertinent because it could help inform policies and programs aimed to engage youth in significant issues and support their development as citizens of today and tomorrow.

The present study shed light on the transformative experiences of young people engaged in meaningful work. It places immense importance on continued support, recognition, and compassion for youth's unique role in shaping the future of climate policy and society. This research contributes to the fields of education and youth civic participation because it focused on young people between the ages of 13 and 18 years, a group at times excluded from studies of

climate activism. Most studies of this kind have involved youth up to the ages of 25 or 30 years, an approach to youth studies that limits nuanced understanding of the experiences and perspectives of younger activists, who often face ageism in popular media and social settings. Specifically focusing on a younger age group, this study offers valuable insights into how young people navigate their participation in climate activism at a critical time in their adolescent development.

Furthermore, this research provided a unique perspective on the ways in which young people engaged in climate activism in North America within the context and limitations of the global COVID-19 pandemic between 2021 and 2022. As the world continues to grapple with the imperative challenge of ameliorating the climate crisis, young people's perspectives and leadership will undoubtedly play a critical role in shaping the way forward. Exploring how young people engaged in climate organizing in these specific youth-led groups, and how they reflected about their participation in them has given me a deeper understanding of the ways in which youth are driving change and shaping the future of climate policy and education. I hope this research will contribute to the growing body of scholarship that amplifies and centers the voices of young people and advocates for a just and sustainable future for all who inhabit planet Earth.

Most importantly, I am immensely grateful to each and every one of the young people who participated in this study as well as to the communities and organizations that support their civic engagement—I salute you. May we all continue to learn from your work and be inspired by your passion and dedication to this cause of vital importance. You embody the fact that collective action has the power to change the world. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A: Sample email sent to potential participating groups

Hello,

I hope this email finds you well and enjoying the beginning of the summer!

My name is Julia Ginsburg. I am a PhD student at Concordia University in Montreal.

I'm writing because I am specifically interested youth-led climate justice activism. I find your group's work particularly important and interesting, so I am reaching out because I am hoping to connect to see whether you might be interested in working with me on my study. If someone would be willing to speak to me about this, I would be very appreciative.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Thanks very much and all the best,
Julia

**Appendix B: Verbal assent script for initial group meeting**

Hi! My name is Julia. Thank you all for having me today at your meeting. I am from Concordia University in Montreal. I'm here to ask you if you want to take part in a research study. Feel free to stop and ask me any questions at any time, and I will be happy to answer them.

I am trying to learn more about what happens in the behind the scenes work that you all do in your climate justice activism. I want to learn about how your group goes about your activism and how you each feel about your own contributions to the group and to the overall climate justice movement. I'm interested in how your social connections form, and how you find meaning in your work, among other things like that. I am hoping to be able to attend your groups' meetings as an observer, and also have individual interviews and small group interviews to talk with you about your activism.

If you decide to help me with the study, this is what will happen: I will attend as many of your meetings as possible (either on zoom or in-person, depending on where they will occur). I will plan individual interviews and group interviews with all of you. Depending on the pandemic situation, I will either come to you to do the interviews and group interviews, or we can do them on zoom. I would also like to attend the events that your groups plan, and act as what's called a participant observer at those events, which means that I'll take part in what you're doing, but also be observing what's going on and I'll write down notes later about what I observed at the event.

Everything you tell me and that I hear in your meetings will only be used for this research project.

Being in this study is up to you! You are not at all obligated to participate, which is why I am asking you. If you get tired or you're not having fun during the interviews and group interviews, or you're feeling weird at all, we can take a break, or you can stop at any time you want to. We can also skip any questions that you don't want to answer.

Do you have any questions?

Do you want to work with me on this research study?

If you do want to work with me on this research study, I have a written consent form that I will send you all directly after this meeting. Since you are under 18, I will need both your signature on the form, and your parent or guardian's signature on the form. There are spots for both signatures on the form.

**Appendix C: Follow up email sent to point-person after initial interest meeting**

Hi [name],

Thanks so much again for meeting with me! As I had said, here is a summary of what you can bring back to the rest of the group to share about my research study. Here are my research aims for you to see:

(a) to explore the approaches that groups of young people take to climate justice organizing;
(b) to document the behind-the-scenes work that these groups partake in for the purpose of advancing their agendas,
(c) to understand what emerges from the group processes involved in young activists' organizing work;
(d) to study how groups of young activists form social connections, make collective meaning, and form collective identities;
(e) to listen to young people's perspectives of their activism and to understand what they perceive as successes in their work as well as the factors they see as enabling or constraining their progress.

Rough timeline and general logistics:

- Study would begin sometime in early October and run for 9 to 12 months.
- When meetings occur on zoom, I would attend on zoom, when they may begin to occur in-person, we can schedule when would work for me to attend.

Digest sessions (Interviews/group interviews):

-Interviews will occur at times of your convenience throughout the duration of the study in an individual online setting. If it is possible to conduct interviews in-person, I will make an effort to come to a location of your choice. Each person who is interested and has properly filled out and returned the consent form will have the opportunity to be interviewed. Interviews may be repeated if necessary.

- Group interviews consisting of 3-5 people could occur via zoom/teams or could occur in-person 1-3 times throughout the duration of the study.

Participant observation:

When I come to observe meetings on zoom, I can either have my camera on or off, it's up to you. When I come in-person, I would be taking notes but remaining silent. The goal with this part of the study is just for me to observe things as they already are, not to intervene in any way.

Are there any other questions you can think of? If so, feel free to let me know. Again, thanks so much for taking the time to meet with me and to consider working with me. As I said, I want to give back as well, along with asking you to participate in my study, so if there is anything that you can think of that I could offer to you, maybe in the form of note-taking for your meetings, or through a partnership with professors at my university, let me know.

**Appendix D: Invitation to participate in study posted in Facebook groups**

## Appendix E: Group interview Schedule

### Guiding Questions for Group interviews

***Introduction***

1. Can you all please share with me how you feel about the present state of the climate crisis?

*Probe:* And about the youth-led climate movement?

2. How did you all meet each other? How did the group form?
3. How do you consider what you are doing youth-led?
4. How do you feel when you contribute in the group?
5. How do you feel that being part of this group helps you address climate change? What do you find meaning in your work as a group? Why does what you do feel meaningful as a group?
6. Do you think all young people should be part of groups like yours to help them cope with "eco-anxiety" or "climate grief"? Why? Why are they not?
   *Probe:* What would you tell them to encourage them to do so?
7. Whose voices of young people are not part of your group and why should they be?
   *Probe:* How would you like to bring those voices into the group?

**Perceived success**

8. Discuss what each of you perceived as going well in the last meeting.
9. What led to these positive interactions in the last meeting?
10. Discuss what you all are satisfied with about the way your group is currently going or has been going over the past school year.
11. What is meaningful about the group aspect associated with your work?

**Approaches to challenges**

12. Describe what each of you perceived as challenging in the last meeting.
13. Why do challenges occur in meetings?
14. How do you solve challenges in meetings?
15. What, if anything, would you like to change about the way your group is functioning?

**Collective Aspect**

16. Who is the leader in your group? How did this person acquire leadership?
17. How is responsibility shared in your group?
18. How are social connections formed in your group?
19. How much do social connections play into the planning and outcomes of your actions? How so?
20. Do you feel like your group has a shared culture, or a collective identity? Can you describe this?
21. How do you help each other process your climate grief?
22. What are the most meaningful aspects of this work?

## Appendix F: Interview Schedule

### Interview Questions for Semi-Structured Individual Interviews

***Introduction***

1. How old are you?
2. Is your school public or private?
3. Would you consider where you live to be urban, suburban, or rural?
4. When did you become concerned about climate change?
5. Can you please tell me about when you started being interested in acting against climate change?
6. Can you tell me about how you started getting involved in [this group]?
    a. *Probe:* How did you find the group, or how was the group founded?
    b. *Probe:* How long have you been involved in the group?

***Group Functioning/Communication***

7. How would you describe your group's activities in terms of activism?
    a. *Probe*: Can you talk about the effect of COVID on your group's activities?
8. What do you think your own contribution to the group is?
9. Can you describe what happens in your group's meetings, in your own words?
10. How do group members communicate with one another?
    a. *Probe:* What does successful communication look like within your group?
    b. *Probe:* How do group members work together?
11. Does it happen that group members don't communicate successfully with one another? Then what happens?
12. How does your group go about taking into consideration different points of views?
13. What are some examples of how you see your group as successful in planning and carrying out activism for climate justice? Why?
    c. *Probe:* there's the public activities that others see, but there's also all of the planning that goes on. What is unique about how your group plans?
14. Tell me about a time that you felt listened to in the group. Why?
    a. *Probe:* Tell me about a time that you didn't feel your voice was heard in the group. Why?
15. How are decisions made in your group?
16. How would you describe the leadership approach that your group takes?
    a. *Probe:* Have you heard of the term "decentralized leadership"? If so, does your group utilize this leadership approach? How?
    b. *Probe:* Where did your group learn about this style of leadership?
17. How do you and your group use social media for your activism?

***Intergenerational influence***

18. Have any adults that you know of influenced your group? How so?
19. How does your group interact with those of different generations?
20. What is different about the way that your group works in comparison with the way that adult- led activist groups work, to your knowledge?

***Understanding of impact/perspective***

21. How do your group's activities address/reflect a climate justice perspective?
22. Do you feel there is a children's movement against climate change?

a. *Probe:* How so?

b. *Probe:* What is special about it being child-led?

23. What do you consider to be success in your activism against climate change?
    a. *Probe:* What's special about it being child-led?

***Meaning-making***

24. Do you personally identify as an activist? Why or why not?
    a. *Probe:* Why is doing activist work against climate change meaningful for you?
25. Who are you reaching with the activities that you do?
    a. *Probe:* How do you know who you are reaching?
26. Is there another young person who inspires you in your activism? Why? How?
27. Where do you see your activism against climate change going in the next few years?
    a. What would you like this work to be, for you in the future?

***Conclusion***

28. Is there anything else you'd like to share that you haven't had the chance to yet?

***Final Demographic Question***

29. Lastly, feel free not to respond to this, that is completely fine. But can I ask how you self-identify in terms of ethnicity and gender?

**Appendix G: Consent Form for Participants**

**INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM**

**Study Title: Approaches to Climate Justice Activism Led by Young People**

| Contact Information | |
|---|---|
| **Researcher** | **Faculty Supervisor** |
| **Julia Ginsburg**<br>**PhD Candidate, Concordia University, Montreal**<br>**[telephone number]**<br>**[email address]** | **Dr. Natasha Blanchet-Cohen,**<br>**Associate Professor, Concordia University, Montreal**<br>**Department of Applied Human Sciences**<br>**[telephone number]**<br>**[email address]** |

You are being invited to participate in a research study. If there is anything you do not understand, or if you want more information, please ask the researcher.

**PURPOSE:** The purpose of the research is to learn about groups of young peoples' perceptions and experiences of climate justice activism.

**PROCEDURES**: If you agree to participate, we will ask you to complete this consent form and participate in one to two interviews as well as one to two group interviews. These interviews and group interviews will take approximately one to one and a half hours per session and will be semi-structured and digitally recorded by the researcher. The researcher will also attend groups' meetings as an observer. At an initial introductory meeting with the entire group of young activists, the researcher will verbally explain the study and what it entails. There, you can ask any questions you may have about the study. After this meeting, the researcher will send a poll to each participant via email to schedule initial interviews and group interviews.

**RISKS AND BENEFITS:** The risks of this study are minimal, similar to those you may normally experience when discussing these issues. We can stop the study at any time if you choose not to continue. I hope the information I get from this study may help to understand the contributions of young people's climate justice activism in group settings. This research may benefit the climate justice movement at large. Upon completion of the study, I will send you a written summary of the findings to your group and tell you about what we learned from doing this project. **In appreciation of your time, you will receive $18 via PayPal after interview completion.**

**CONFIDENTIALITY:** As part of this research, I will gather information via the interviews and group interviews. I will also take notes during meetings when acting as an observer. Your identifying information will not be shared with others outside this research study. The information gathered will be confidential, which means that only the research team will know your real identity, but it will not be disclosed. I will only use the information provided by you and your group members for the purposes of the research described in this form. I will protect your information in various ways. Data and records will be stored on a password protected computer. I will record interviews and group interviews on my personal locked smartphone and transfer the recordings to my personal locked

computer. I will then transcribe interviews and group interviews verbatim and these transcriptions will also be stored on my personal locked computer. Only I know the passcode to my devices. The data will be destroyed five years after the completion of the study. I intend to publish the results of the research. However, it will not be possible to identify you or any of your group members in the published results. The information you provide could potentially be used in a future research project. In such a case, the project will be authorized by a research ethics committee. Personal information that could identify you or your group members will be removed or changed before files are shared with other researchers or results are made public. In all circumstances, the confidentiality of your data will be protected under the terms laid out in this form.

**CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION:** You do not have to participate in this research. If you agree to participate, you can stop at any time. You can ask that the information you provided not be used, and your choice will be respected. If you decide that you do not want me to use your information in any research reports, you must tell me, the researcher within two months of your participation. You may also make a request at any time after this date, and your information will be omitted from any additional research reports. There are no negative consequences for not participating, stopping in the middle, or asking me not to use your information. Please note that because of the nature of group interview discussions, contributions made there cannot be withdrawn.

**G. PARTICIPANT'S DECLARATION**

I have read and understood this form. I have had the chance to ask questions and any questions have been answered. I agree to participate in this study and my parent/guardian gives permission me to participate under the conditions described.

Participant consent:

I consent to my contributions being audio recorded: ☐Yes ☐No
I consent to my contributions being video recorded: ☐Yes ☐No

Name (print) _____

Signature _____ Date _____

* If you confirm that you agree to participate and that the interview will be recorded, please write your full name in the Zoom discussion (software used to perform the interview). This will act as a signature on this document.

***Please also share the attached parent/guardian consent form with your parent/guardian and return the two signed forms.***

If you have questions about any aspects of this research, please contact the researcher or her faculty supervisor whose contact information is at the top of this form. If you have concerns about ethical issues in this research, please contact the Manager, Research Ethics, Concordia University, [telephone number] or [email address].

**Please scan and return this form to: [email address] with the subject line:**
**Consent to participate in Approaches to Climate Justice Led by Young People Research Study**

## Appendix H: Consent Form for Parent/Guardian

## INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

**Study Title: Approaches to Climate Justice Activism Led by Young People**

| Contact Information | |
|---|---|
| **Researcher** | **Faculty Supervisor** |
| **Julia Ginsburg**<br>**PhD Candidate, Concordia University, Montreal**<br>**[telephone number]**<br>**[email address]** | **Dr. Natasha Blanchet-Cohen,**<br>**Associate Professor, Concordia University, Montreal**<br>**Department of Applied Human Sciences**<br>**[telephone number]**<br>**[email address]** |

Your child is being invited to participate in a research study. If there is anything you or your child do not understand, or if you or your child want more information, please ask the researcher.

**PURPOSE:** The purpose of the research is to learn about groups of young peoples' perceptions and experiences of climate justice activism.

**PROCEDURES**: If you agree for your child to participate, we will ask you to complete this consent form and your child to complete a consent form as well. Your child will participate in one to two interviews as well as one to two group interviews. These interviews and group interviews will take approximately one to one and a half hours per session and will be semi-structured and digitally recorded by the researcher. The researcher will also attend groups' meetings as an observer. At an initial introductory meeting with the entire group of young activists, the researcher will verbally explain the study and what it entails. There, your child can ask any questions they may have about the study. After this meeting, the researcher will send a poll to each participant via email to schedule initial interviews and group interviews.

**RISKS AND BENEFITS:** The risks of this study are minimal, similar to those your child may normally experience when discussing these issues. We can stop the study at any time if your child chooses not to continue. I hope the information I get from this study may help to understand the contributions of young people's climate justice activism in group settings. This research may benefit the climate justice movement at large. Upon completion of the study, I will send each participant a written summary of the findings and tell each participant about what we learned from doing this project. **In appreciation of their time, your child will receive $18 via PayPal after interview completion.**

**CONFIDENTIALITY:** As part of this research, I will gather information via the interviews and group interviews. I will also take notes during meetings when acting as an observer. Your child's identifying information will not be shared with others outside this research study. The information gathered will be confidential, which means that only the research team will know your child's real identity, but it will not be disclosed. I will only use the information provided by your child and your child's group members for the purposes of the research described in this form. I will protect your child's information in various ways. Data and records will be stored on a password protected computer. I will record interviews and group interviews on my personal locked smartphone and transfer the recordings to my personal locked computer. I will then transcribe interviews and group interviews verbatim and these transcriptions will also be stored on my personal locked computer. Only I know the passcode to my devices. The data will

be destroyed five years after the completion of the study. I intend to publish the results of the research. However, it will not be possible to identify your child or any of your child's group members in the published results. The information your child provides could potentially be used in a future research project. In such a case, the project will be authorized by a research ethics committee. Personal information that could identify your child or your child's group members will be removed or changed before files are shared with other researchers or results are made public. In all circumstances, the confidentiality of your child's data will be protected under the terms laid out in this form. I ask that all participants please respect the confidentiality of other group interview participants. Your child's identity will be known to other group interview participants and the researcher cannot guarantee that others in the group will respect your child's confidentiality.

**CONITIONS OF PARTICIPATION:** Your child does not have to participate in this research. If you and your child do agree for your child to participate, your child can stop at any time. You and your child can also ask that the information your child provided not be used, and you and your child's choice will be respected. If you or your child decide that you or they do not want me to use their information in any research reports, you or your child must tell me, the researcher within two months of participation. You or your child may also make a request at any time after this date, and your child's information will be omitted from any additional research reports. There are no negative consequences for not participating, stopping in the middle, or asking me not to use your child's information. Please note that because of the nature of group interview discussions, contributions made there cannot be withdrawn.

**G. PARTICIPANT'S DECLARATION**

I have read and understood this form. My child and I have had the chance to ask questions and any questions have been answered. I agree for my child to participate in this study under the conditions described.

Participant consent:

I consent to my child's contributions being audio recorded: ☐Yes ☐No
I consent to my child's contributions being video recorded: ☐Yes ☐No
Name of child participant (print) _____

* If you confirm that you agree for your child to participate and that the interview will be recorded, your child will be asked to please write their full name in the Zoom discussion (software used to perform the interview). This will act as a signature on this document.

Name of parent/ guardian (print) _____

Signature _____Date _____

If you have questions about any aspects of this research, please contact the researcher or her faculty supervisor whose contact information is at the top of this form. If you have concerns about ethical issues in this research, please contact the Manager, Research Ethics, Concordia University, [telephone number] or [email address].

**Please scan and return this form to: [email address] with the subject line: Consent to participate in Approaches to Climate Justice Led by Young People Research Study**