



*Citation for published version:*

Lee, K, O'Neill, S, Blackwood, L & Barnett, J 2022, 'Perspectives of UK adolescents on the youth climate strikes', *Nature Climate Change*, vol. 12, no. 6, pp. 528-531. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41558-022-01361-1>

*DOI:*

[10.1038/s41558-022-01361-1](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41558-022-01361-1)

*Publication date:*

2022

*Document Version*

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication](#)

## University of Bath

### Alternative formats

If you require this document in an alternative format, please contact:  
[openaccess@bath.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@bath.ac.uk)

#### General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

#### Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

# **Perspectives of UK adolescents on the youth climate strikes**

Submitted to Nature Climate Change as a Brief Communication

Katharine Lee<sup>1</sup>, Saffron O'Neill<sup>2</sup>, Leda Blackwood<sup>1</sup>, Julie Barnett<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Bath, Department of Psychology

<sup>2</sup> University of Exeter, Department of Geography

## **Abstract**

The school climate strike movement has become a powerful force, shaping how people engage with climate change. Here we use a qualitative interview methodology to give voice to adolescents in the UK. We show how our participants – strikers and non-strikers alike – were united in framing climate change as an issue of intergenerational injustice, suggesting they may share one of the conditions for a politicised collective identity.

Young people will be more exposed to future climate impacts [1], yet are marginalised in climate decision-making [2]. Unprecedented numbers of young people have joined the school climate strikes, with potential consequences for climate policy, and democracy [3]. Protests in March 2019 attracted 1.6 million people globally [4], and 6 million in September 2019 [5]. Although the pandemic has impacted in-person striking, the movement remains active and interest in youth activism – galvanised by activists like Greta Thunberg and Vanessa Nakate – continues. The growth in climate activism is indicative of a recalibration in how to address climate change: away from dominant approaches seeking to change individual behaviours in the private sphere, and toward collective action in the public sphere, speaking to wider political and economic change [6].

Whilst theoretical frameworks for collective action are well-established [e.g., 7, 8], concepts relating to climate activism are less well understood [see 9 for review]. Moreover, it is important to consider how young people specifically, view and engage with climate activism. We conducted our research in the UK, a significant all-time contributor to climate change [10] with a history of progressive climate policy [11], where youth are politically marginalised but privileged compared to those other parts of the world [12]. The UK is home to many high socioeconomic status (SES) individuals, who are both disproportionately responsible for greenhouse gas emissions and disproportionately powerful to impact change [13]. It is important therefore, to consider the perspectives of future adults in the UK. We present an inductive analysis of interviews with 22 British adolescents aged 11 to 17 about school climate strikes. Conducting research with minors (under 16 in the UK) requires parental consent [3], which may explain why in-person studies often include adults. We use semi-structured interviews to allow participants to direct discussion and foreground their own perspectives on the strikes, rather than those prescribed by the researcher. Our research question is: How do adolescents conceptualise the school climate strikes?

Based on participants' explanations about their choices around striking, we categorised them into three groups: strikers, would-be strikers, and non-strikers. The nine strikers' experiences resonated with those documented in the broader collective action literature [e.g., 14]. Strikers described the atmosphere as '*electric*', '*euphoric*', '*really super friendly*', '*great vibes*', '*almost like a festival*', and alluded to feelings of empowerment and connectedness with like-minded others, mirroring experiences of youth climate activism articulated elsewhere [15]. The six would-be strikers wanted to strike but had been unable to, either because their parents had not given permission, or because of concerns about a punitive school response. These were younger participants – all aged 11 to 13 – so this is perhaps unsurprising. They expressed some disappointment – along with resigned understanding and acceptance – about being unable to strike. Seven non-strikers prioritised being in school over striking. They acknowledged the importance of acting on climate change but were unhappy about striking during school.

The analysis revealed three areas of consensus and three of divergence. Participants were unanimous that climate change will have a disproportionate and unfair impact on their generation compared to previous generations, they held the government responsible for resolving climate change and described education as very important. Differences emerged when participants spoke about Greta Thunberg, the effectiveness of strikes, and strikers' motivations. Here, strikers and would-be strikers were aligned, non-strikers articulated more complex positions. A diagrammatic representation is shown in Fig. 1 and exemplar quotes are shown in Table 1.

The narrative of intergenerational injustice was universally articulated. It was presented as an incontrovertible truth that the participants' generation would be more affected by climate change than older generations – who bore responsibility for causing climate change and were negating responsibility for addressing it. This injustice gave these participants and their generation the right to speak and be heard; but beyond this, the right to challenge the legitimacy and morality of (adult-dominated) decision-making and efforts to silence youth voices.

Participants indicated that the principal aim of the strikes was to show the government how much young people care and to persuade them to act. Allusions to their own powerlessness to enact the changes needed, such as dismantling carbon-creating infrastructure and subsidising green initiatives, contrasted with the responsibility they placed with the government.

Regardless of their views about striking, participants stressed the importance of education. This was in a context where some politicians and public figures in the UK were virulently criticising the school strikes for being antithetical to education. The seven non-strikers gave their education as the reason for not striking. For them it was not necessarily that protesting was unimportant, but that being in school was more so. Strikers and would-be strikers also highlighted the importance of education. Choosing to strike did not reflect lack of concern about education, but a pragmatic decision that striking could replace school for half a day. However, the choice between education and striking was not static; strikers approaching educational milestones – such as major examinations – explained that these would present the need to re-evaluate.

### Table1 Exemplar quotes supporting themes

Strikers and would-be strikers talked about Greta Thunberg as an inspiring role model. They referred to her without prompting, appropriated her language, and said that she had inspired them to strike. In contrast, non-strikers did not mention Greta spontaneously and were less enthusiastic about her. Although they prefaced criticism with something approaching praise, their portrayal of Greta was, at best, ambiguous. They criticised her personal attributes – she was *'over the top'*, fearmongering, volatile, not *'normal'* in the way she speaks – but did not criticise her goals.

Strikers and would-be strikers believed that the strikes would be effective. Effectiveness was understood to mean persuading the government to act and convincing broader publics that climate change affects everyone, not just *'crazy hippy vegans'*. Some claimed that the strikes were already effective because the government had declared a climate emergency, others drew on the implementation of small, local changes that could develop into large-scale changes (*'a butterfly effect'*). Non-strikers were unconvinced that the strikes would effect change. They observed that the strikes had achieved little and – whilst they might play a part – would not be the catalyst for change. Striking was passive; congregating with signs was not *'action'*. Some suggested that individual actions, such as litter-picking or tree-planting might be more effective.

Strikers and would-be strikers' attributions for peers striking were simple; they care about their future and want to be heard. It was acknowledged that some strikers (depicted as a minority) might be motivated by missing school. Whilst this was not condoned, it was viewed as still helping the cause by adding to school absences on strike days. Non-strikers' representations of strikers were more complex; they were keen to distinguish between those pro-environmental strikers, motivated by principle (who should not be punished for striking) and those reprehensible *'skivers'* who simply wanted to skip school (and so should be punished). Whilst some strikers were described as praiseworthy, they were sometimes depicted as *'too'* environmental, or seen as subject to peer pressure, with one non-striker joking that the movement was a *'cult'*. By situating strikers at two poles, non-strikers positioned themselves as moderates between extremes.

Our analysis demonstrates that although participants were divided on the specific action of school climate strikes, they were united in the view that climate change is an issue of intergenerational justice. Importantly, the areas of divergence mapped on to wider social and political discourses and divisions about the legitimacy of school strikes as a form of action; debates about the respective merits of individual (behaviour change) vs collective (political) forms of action; and the character of Greta Thunberg. Thus, for example, all participants supported Greta's goals, but only non-strikers were critical of her persona. All groups acknowledged the existence of two *'types'* of striker, but only non-strikers made them a focus. We propose two non-exclusive explanations for this. First, non-strikers' positions may reflect their more jaundiced view of and faith in democracy [16] or their feelings of powerlessness or hopelessness in the face of climate change [17, 18]. Second, non-strikers may have deployed culturally available narratives about the strikes and strikers to justify their own decision not to strike.

When considering these findings in relation to prior theory and research, two conclusions can be tentatively drawn. First, in framing climate change as an issue of intergenerational and moral injustice, participants share one of the conditions for the development of a politicised collective identity [8] in relation to climate change. Not striking does not appear to reflect a lack of concern about the issue but may reflect a lack of perceived efficacy, individual or collective. Second, the wholesale adoption of this moral framing demonstrates that the school climate strike movement may indeed be more than a protest movement [19], if it leads adolescents – striker and non-striker – to recharacterize and reposition themselves and their peers in relation to the climate crisis. Further

research should be conducted with striking and non-striking adolescents in other parts of the world, to understand how they view the movement and its likely effectiveness.

<b>Topics of consensus</b>		
<b><i>Climate change is intergenerational injustice</i></b>	<b><i>Governmental responsibility for resolving climate change</i></b>	<b><i>Importance of education</i></b>
<p>...my generation are at the moment, is going to be the most affected by climate change. Olivia, 15, striker</p> <p>...it's sort of our generation that will be affected. So, we don't want that really to happen. Cos it will be us that get like the worst of it. James, 11, would-be striker</p> <p>...my generation is probably the generation that will be affected most by climate change, um, we should have the right to actually, you know, have a say, I guess. Ed, 15, non-striker</p>	<p>... they're meant for people to understand what is happening and also for the government, for governments to take action and like do something quickly. Esme, 13, striker</p> <p>...I think the people who organise them are aiming to um, kind of say to the government 'hey, we're skipping school for this, you need to er, act now... Emily, 11, would-be-striker</p> <p>... some change in how the government is treating climate change ... so it's obviously trying to influence their ideas to be like 'people care about this, change it'. That kind of thing. Rachel, 16, non-striker</p>	<p>...I think honestly as it's drawing nearer to my exams, probably not... after that, well I'm probably having a gap year so I'll go then. Shura, 17, striker</p> <p>...Yeah, cos with my GCSEs coming up, it might be a bit more different because it would be my education, it would be like more serious... Ryan, 13, would-be striker</p> <p>...I think there should be more strikes like on the weekend... and like in the evenings and stuff and like holidays. Cos when they're in school, school's important. I don't think you should miss school that much. Nicky, 14, non-striker</p>
<b>Topics of divergence</b>		
<b><i>Greta Thunberg</i></b>		
<b><i>Strikers/would-be strikers: Greta is an admirable figure</i></b>	<b><i>Non-strikers: Greta is an ambiguous figure</i></b>	
<p>...it's really good what she's doing. Cos, er, she's kind of start...kind of moving forward a bit because, er, she's standing up for what she believes in, which, and everyone is thinking 'well if she can do it why can't we?'. Emily, 11, would-be striker</p> <p>...What's the point of school if you don't have a future? Esme, 13, striker</p> <p>...I went to a strike after watching a video of Greta. Neo, 12, striker</p>	<p>...I guess she's kind of volatile, not really in her personality, but because she's a young girl and because she's quite.. she's not very like normal in the way she speaks... she's easy to make fun of. Ed, 15, non-striker</p> <p>...I think her, the way in which she's going is a bit, it's a bit... like striking fear. Which is, which is another way to go but personally I don't think that would be the ideal way to go. Amy, 13, non-striker</p> <p>...Sometimes I think she's a bit over the top with it. Nicky, 14, non-striker</p>	
<b><i>Effectiveness of strikes</i></b>		
<b><i>Strikers/would-be strikers: The strikes will probably be effective</i></b>	<b><i>Non-strikers: The strikes may not be effective</i></b>	
<p>...It's a butterfly effect. Matt, 13, striker</p> <p>...Already (city council) has come up with, I can't remember how many propositions they got given at one of the strikes and they've already had a response to each of those propositions and they're already having impact on each of those. And if that's the same for every small council then that would be a big change nationwide. And then if it's the same in every country then that will be a big change worldwide. Shura, 17, striker</p>	<p>...All they're doing is just stood there. Nicky, 14, non-striker</p> <p>...should combine it with doing more than just banging drums. Ed, 15, non-striker</p> <p>...Strikes don't really make a difference. Tina, 17, non-striker</p>	
<b><i>Strikers</i></b>		
<b><i>Strikers/would-be strikers: Most strikers are admirable</i></b>	<b><i>Non-strikers: Many strikers are not admirable</i></b>	
<p>...I think if people are going for the sake of missing school, they're still going. They're still helping the movement. Natalie, 16, striker</p> <p>...they want to prove their point and show that it's important. Sophie, 12, would-be striker</p> <p>...I think the majority of people do just want to have an impact and be able to say when you're older that you helped... Shura, 17, striker</p>	<p>...skivers... going to McDonald's, not on the strike at all. Ed, 15, non-striker</p> <p>...I think a lot of people have said that they're going to the strikes but they don't and they just skip school. Rob, 13, non-striker</p> <p>...It's a cult! Amy, 13, non-striker</p>	

**Acknowledgements.** We would like to thank the 22 participants who took part in this research. The research was funded by an ESRC studentship awarded to KL. Grant number: ES/J50015X/1

*Author Contributions Statement.* KL designed the study, conducted the interviews, analysed the data, and drafted the paper. SO, LB, and JB contributed to the data analysis and reviewed and revised the paper.

*Competing Interests Statement.* The authors declare no competing interests.

Fig.1: Diagrammatic representation of striker status, topics of consensus and divergence



## References

1. Thiery, B.W., et al., *Intergenerational inequities in exposure to climate extremes*. Science, 2021: p. eabi7339.
2. Elliott, T. and J. Earl, *Organizing the next generation: Youth engagement with activism inside and outside of organizations*. Social Media+ Society, 2018. **4**(1): p. 2056305117750722.
3. Fisher, D.R., *The broader importance of # FridaysForFuture*. Nature Climate Change, 2019. **9**(6): p. 430-431.
4. Wahlström, M., et al., *Protest for a future: Composition, mobilization and motives of the participants in Fridays For Future climate protests on 15 March, 2019 in 13 European cities*, P.R.P.f.a. Future, Editor. 2019: Keele Research Repository.
5. Taylor, M., J. Watts, and J. Bartlett, *Climate crisis: 6 million people join latest wave of global protests*. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/sep/27/climate-crisis-6-million-people-join-latest-wave-of-worldwide-protests>, 2019.
6. Whitmarsh, L., S. O'Neill, and I. Lorenzoni, *Public engagement with climate change: what do we know and where do we go from here?* International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics, 2013. **9**(1): p. 7-25.
7. Van Zomeren, M., T. Postmes, and R. Spears, *Toward an integrative social identity model of collective action: a quantitative research synthesis of three socio-psychological perspectives*. Psychological bulletin, 2008. **134**(4): p. 504.
8. Simon, B. and B. Klandermans, *Politicized collective identity: A social psychological analysis*. American psychologist, 2001. **56**(4): p. 319.
9. Haugestad, C.A., et al., *Why do youth participate in climate activism? A mixed-methods investigation of the # FridaysForFuture climate protests*. Journal of Environmental Psychology, 2021. **76**: p. 101647.
10. Matthews, H.D., et al., *National contributions to observed global warming*. Environmental Research Letters, 2014. **9**(1): p. 014010.
11. UK Government, *UK becomes first major economy to pass net zero emissions law*. Retrieved from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-becomes-first-major-economy-to-pass-net-zero-emissions-law>, 2019.
12. Walker, C., *Uneven solidarity: the school strikes for climate in global and intergenerational perspective*. Sustainable Earth, 2020. **3**: p. 1-13.
13. Nielsen, K.S., et al., *The role of high-socioeconomic-status people in locking in or rapidly reducing energy-driven greenhouse gas emissions*. Nature Energy, 2021. **6**(11): p. 1011-1016.
14. Neville, F. and S. Reicher, *The experience of collective participation: Shared identity, relatedness and emotionality*. Contemporary Social Science, 2011. **6**(3): p. 377-396.
15. Bowman, B., *'They don't quite understand the importance of what we're doing today': the young people's climate strikes as subaltern activism*. Sustainable Earth, 2020. **3**(1): p. 1-13.
16. Šerek, J. and L. Lomičová, *Adolescents' transitions between different views on democracy: Examining individual-level moderators*. Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 2020. **66**: p. 101104.

17. Ojala, M., *Regulating Worry, Promoting Hope: How Do Children, Adolescents, and Young Adults Cope with Climate Change?* International Journal of Environmental and Science Education, 2012. **7**(4): p. 537-561.
18. Ojala, M., *Hope and climate change: The importance of hope for environmental engagement among young people.* Environmental Education Research, 2012. **18**(5): p. 625-642.
19. Germaine, C. and B. Bowman, *Not (just) a protest: the Youth Strike for Climate as cultural exchange and collaborative text.* 2021.

## Method

The study employed a qualitative cross-sectional semi-structured interview design. Interviews were chosen because they are well-suited to exploring issues that are particularly salient to participants [20]. There is no definitive answer to the question of how much data – or how many participants – are required in qualitative, interview research. The utility of the concept of saturation is contested [21], with some arguing that it is illusory because ‘something new’ can always arise from more data [22] and that achieving conceptual depth and richness is a more appropriate goal [23]. Prior to recruitment, we followed Braun and Clarke [24] to weigh up what would constitute an appropriate sample size, taking into consideration the breadth and focus of the study, the method, and pragmatic constraints. We concluded that a minimum of 15 and a maximum of 25 participants would be appropriate. The study was advertised through local online message boards. Parental consent was obtained for all participants under the age of 16 prior to their interview. Twenty-two participants aged 11 to 17 were recruited. We did not collect parents’ demographic data, however, participants were recruited from an area more economically affluent than the UK average. Nine participants had attended one or more strikes (strikers), 13 had not attended a strike. Of these 13, six participants had wanted to strike but were not able to (would-be strikers) and seven had not wanted to strike (non-strikers). The participants lived in several locations: a large city, a small city, two small towns, and a village in the southwest of England. One participant was home-schooled, 20 participants attended one of their local schools and one a further education college. To maintain confidentiality, all participants have been given pseudonyms. A summary of participants is shown in Supplementary Table 2.

The interviews were conducted by the first author in October and November 2019. The interviews took place in participants’ homes or on university premises, depending on their preference. Interviews were conducted at participants’ homes or on university premises and lasted between 35 minutes and one hour. At the start of each interview, participants were given an information sheet and asked if they had any questions. Then they provided their consent (if over 16) or assent (if under 16). A semi-structured interview schedule was used as a guide, and interviews were audio-recorded. The interview schedule included questions about the nature and aims of the strikes, participants’ own and others’ decision-making about participating. They were also asked about the responses of their schools, parents and, for those who had attended a strike, what their experience had been like. Although the interview schedule was used to guide the conversation, the interviewer was responsive to each participant’s account, letting them guide the conversation and focus on a particular point as and when they wished. At the end of each interview, participants read a debriefing sheet and were asked if they had any questions. Finally, they were given a £10 voucher to thank them for taking part.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim. A total of 216 pages of interview data were analysed using thematic analysis [25], to identify patterns of meanings and similarities and differences across the dataset. An inductive thematic analysis approach was taken [20]; the data were examined without pre-existing conceptions or the imposition of existing frameworks. Data were first coded, then codes were grouped into higher order codes, with these then brought together into broader themes. The first researcher initially coded the data, and these codes, higher order codes, and themes were discussed several times with the other researchers, who also read the interview transcripts.

## Ethics

Ethical approval for this research was granted by University of Bath in July 2019. The authors declare that they have adhered to all ethical regulations.

#### Data availability

Data availability is subject to controlled access. Participants in this study consented to their data being stored securely at University of Bath and then destroyed. They did not consent to their data being shared.

#### References - Method

20. Braun, V. and V. Clarke, *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners*. 2013, London: Sage.
21. O'Reilly, M. and N. Parker, 'Unsatisfactory Saturation': a critical exploration of the notion of saturated sample sizes in qualitative research. *Qualitative research*, 2013. **13**(2): p. 190-197.
22. Low, J., *A pragmatic definition of the concept of theoretical saturation*. *Sociological Focus*, 2019. **52**(2): p. 131-139.
23. Nelson, J., *Using conceptual depth criteria: addressing the challenge of reaching saturation in qualitative research*. *Qualitative research*, 2017. **17**(5): p. 554-570.
24. Braun, V. and V. Clarke, *To saturate or not to saturate? Questioning data saturation as a useful concept for thematic analysis and sample-size rationales*. *Qualitative research in sport, exercise and health*, 2021. **13**(2): p. 201-216.
25. Braun, V. and V. Clarke, *One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis?* *Qualitative research in psychology*, 2020: p. 1-25.