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Communication in youth climate activism: Addressing research pitfalls and centring young voices

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Abstract

All over the world, young people have been engaging in multiple forms of climate activism, performed through communication practices that seek to convey and construct alternative meanings around climate change politics. In this chapter, we discuss the main trends in contemporary literature, proposing new conceptual and methodological paths for centring youth voices in climate activism research. We first identify critical pitfalls in the field of youth participation which are related to research foci, assumptions, and practices: i) the old electoral dilemma, ii) the behaviourist perspective, iii) the ever-search for the spectacular, iv) the individual-collective dichotomy, v) the intrinsic benefit of participation, vi) the extractivist research. We argue that there is a risk of reproducing these pitfalls when researching youth climate activism. Therefore, drawing from empirical evidence (ethnographic, interview and survey data), we propose three pathways to foreground young people's voices and experiences in climate activism: '*beyond climate strikes', 'more than white activism',* and *'not like adults'*. Finally, we discuss the potential of a conceptual articulation of political agency and imagination and the need for incorporating participatory and visual methods. Such approaches will lead towards a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics and facets of youth climate activism.

Keywords: youth, climate change, political agency, imagination, participatory approaches

1 Introduction

> I don't do this [activism] only to have clean energy... I am doing this to have a fairer, more resilient, healthier world for the next generations, with justice, food, housing for all, and water (...). What I see in COPs [Conferences of the Parties] and some environmental movements is people wanting to stop fossil fuels (which I also want), wanting to stop emissions, but then they don't talk, for instance, about the loss of biodiversity or social issues. I'm fighting for a whole different world and not for clean energy, with all of us living the same life but using trains and driving Teslas! That's not the world I'm fighting for, you know? (Lara, Extinction Rebellion)

Young people are often at the frontline of social change. They play key roles in moments of popular unrest, political transformations, and revolutionary processes (Goldstone, Grinin, and Korotayev 2022) and are placed as "critical agents of change [in the] creation of a new world" (United Nations 2015: 16). Paradoxically, the phenomena of political marginalisation of young people – linked either to legal definitions of electoral politics or to normative assumptions on the full-fledged political citizenry – shape power differentials over engagement processes in public spheres (Bečević and Dahlstedt 2022; Malafaia 2022). Consequently, certain voices and practices of communication are unevenly considered and represented – including in academia – failing to grasp different understandings and constructions of the world. In recent years, young climate activists have been campaigning around various issues – from fossil fuels exploration to unsustainable consumption – and reclaiming "system change". The above quote depicts not only the sense of urgency and engagement towards the current climate crisis but also illustrates how notions of climate justice are brought into play when young activists imagine and communicate about the future. As the quote suggests, "*fighting for a whole different world*" can entail different meanings, be framed in diverse ways, and intersect with multiple issues. Such diversity will emerge if researchers are willing to listen to youth voices and centre research on their communication and engagement practices.

This chapter explores the interdisciplinary field of youth climate activism. Understanding youth climate activism requires considering youth participation from a wider and integrative perspective. We start by exploring how research has evolved and the multi-layers that characterise young people's relationships with the political. Specifically, we begin by identifying research pitfalls in the field of youth participation. Our arguments are supported by more than a decade of experience in researching young people's participation (e.g., Fernandes-Jesus and Gomes 2020; Fernandes-Jesus et al. 2015; Fernandes-Jesus, Ferreira, and Menezes 2012; Malafaia, Neves, and Menezes 2021; Malafaia et al. 2013; Malafaia et al. 2018). Subsequently, we discuss the field of youth climate activism, showing how neglecting the literature on youth participation can lead to reproducing methodological and conceptual shortcomings. We explore the themes and gaps in the literature, providing recommendations on how to address youth climate activism while recognising its diversity and complexity. Our arguments are illustrated and supported by empirical evidence (e.g., ethnographic fieldnotes, interviews, and surveys) from three research projects. Malafaia conducted an ethnography on youth climate activist groups between 2019 and 2022 as part of the project "Imagi(ni)ng

Democracy: European Youth Becoming Citizens by Visual Participation". Fernandes-Jesus conducted several interviews with climate activists engaged in community mobilisation against fossil fuels, between 2018 to 2020, as part of the research project "Beyond protest: understanding collective climate action". Both authors are members of the project "Climate futures and just transformations: Young people's narratives and political imaginaries", which recently conducted an exploratory survey with climate activists' groups. The final section of this chapter discusses how to conceptually and methodologically overcome research pitfalls to foreground young people's voices and experiences. We argue for a conceptual shift from climate activism to political agency and imagination that considers the value of visual and participatory methodologies.

2 Key research pitfalls in youths' political participation

Scholars from diverse fields have, for decades, seeking to make sense of "trends" (Spöri, Oross, and Susánszky 2020), "gaps" (Malafaia, Ferreira, and Menezes 2021), "patterns" (Enchikova et al. 2021) and "transformations" (Bermudez 2012) on youth political engagement. While political narratives recurrently point towards the withdrawal of younger groups from institutional participation mechanisms, nuanced layers must be considered. Like all other social phenomena, youth political participation does not develop in a social vacuum; instead, it breeds from existing material and immaterial conditions. Indeed, analysing youth political participation encompasses micro-level issues (e.g., cultural capital, socioeconomic status, gender) but also meso (e.g., media) and macro-level dimensions (e.g., countries' political culture, geographic disparities). Over the years, research has been progressively distancing itself from polarised and "black-and-white" views of participation towards more nuanced perspectives that go beyond whether young people participate and focus instead on how they are (and canbe) politically involved. We elaborate this argument through six pitfalls related to foci, assumptions and practices of research on youth participation: i) "the old electoral dilemma", ii) "the behaviourist perspective", iii) "the ever-search for the spectacular", iv) "the individual-collective dichotomy", v) "the intrinsic benefit of participation", vi) "the extractivist research".

The *old electoral dilemma* refers to the chronic concerns with low voter turnout. This is not only a longstanding topic of research in the youth participation field but one that repeatedly makes the headlines of media outlets, particularly in election periods. Research indicates that across consolidated Western democracies, voter turnout is decreasing, which puts

the legitimacy of representative democracies at risk (Briggs 2016; Mycock and Tonge 2012). Yet, even if young groups have voted less over the years than previous cohorts (Costa et al. 2022), European longitudinal data also reveal that this trend is not exclusive to younger people (Magalhães 2022).

The *behaviourist perspective* relates to a predominant approach that overemphasises the behavioural component of participation, neglecting other dimensions that are key to understanding youth's relationship with politics. Emotional and cognitive dimensions are usually explored as predictors, correlates and consequences of political action that are understood according to a checklist-type set of behaviours (ranging from voting to volunteering, boycotting and demonstrating). The consequences may encompass the inability to grasp, for instance, latent dispositions that under certain conditions may become irreversibly anti-democratic, as suggested by high emotional engagements with anti-migrant narratives (Malafaia, Ferreira & Menezes 2021), and emergent forms of engagement that might not look like it, such as sharing seemingly unpleasant selfies to contest the toxic positivity of social media (Meriluoto 2022).

Academic scholarship also tends to be characterised by an *ever-search for the spectacular* facets of political participation, focusing either on the absent or abundant sides of the engagement. This concurs with the aforementioned polarised trend: on the one hand, the withdrawal from conventional politics and, on the other hand, the claims about participatory transformation (Barrett and Zani 2015). This raises at least two problems. First, it leads to a narrowed scientific (and ultimately also political) grid that fails to represent ordinary and common people that are not "flashily" activists. Second, it creates an understanding of democracy as lived and built solely by "politically active" people and, simultaneously, political activity as a fixed category rather than a dynamic process (e.g., Ekman and Amnå 2012; Teorell and Torcal 2007).

The fourth point, the *individual-collective dichotomy*, relates to the often-elusive distinction between individual and collective types of engagement (van Deth 2014). In fact, most of the collective action is anchored in individual repertoires, and most individualised forms of participation are linked to collective and community dimensions. The immense research produced over the years on lifestyle and prefigurative politics (e.g., Fernandes-Jesus, Lima, and Sabucedo 2018; Micheletti and McFarland 2010; Yates 2021) shows the shift towards more personalised and individualised forms of participation occurring outside the realms of conventional politics, and it is summed up on the idea of "DIO politics" (Do-It-Ourselves). Elaborating on this idea, Pickard (2019) illustrates how young people are

connected to communities and networks that, even if digital, are important in sustaining what may be regarded as individual forms of participation.

The continuous requirements for people to participate are rooted in the belief about the *intrinsic benefit of participation*. However, participation may not entail democratic gains for society (Theiss-Morse and Hibbing 2005) nor bring about individual political development (Ferreira, Azevedo, and Menezes 2012). Activist burnout (Gorski and Erakat 2019), adoption of depoliticised approaches to social problems (Malafaia et al. 2018) and disenchantment with participation processes that unfold as symbolic façades (Fernandes-Jesus, Seixas, and Carvalho 2019) are examples that may negatively impact on democracy and lead citizens to turn their backs on politics. Research has shown that even participatory designs aiming at promoting youth participation in deliberative processes have been destined to fail due to recurrent problems such as condescending environments, disregard of the youths' diversity and non-recognition of young people's agency (e.g., Berger 2015; Boldt 2018).

Finally, *extractivist research* refers to both the top-down and instrumental view of youth participation and the research approach often adopted when looking at this phenomenon. While there is an assumption that young people should participate – often according to what researchers count as participation – there is also a disregard for the lack of conditions for their participation. When collecting data, we often foment young people's reflection on the reasons for their non-participation (linked to experiences of political disempowerment and margination), and after raising unsettling questions, we leave with the data. Confronting this dilemma entails an epistemological positioning of knowledge construction based on young people's visions and practices rather than framed by adult-led, top-down and binary conceptions of political participation. Additionally, this raises the importance of integrating participatory tools in research processes that may enhance "young people's imaginations of different worlds, different institutions and different ways of doing and thinking" (Bowman 2019: 298).

3 Research challenges in youth climate activism and how to overcome them

A comprehensive discussion on youth climate activism requires considering its diverse and complex nature across multiple contexts. We now discuss some of these complexities, illustrating how research on youth climate activism should avoid the risk of reproducing shortcomings that have been criticised in the field of youth participation: i) "Beyond climate strikes"; ii) More than "white activism"; iii) "Not like adults".

3.1 Beyond climate strikes

Scholars have sought to understand why young people participate in school strikes (Cologna, Hoogendoorn, and Brick 2021; Haugestad et al. 2021) and how the media represent these protests and the young activists (Almeida 2022; Mayes and Hartup 2022). Across different fields, the focus has been on the most visible side of youth climate activism, reproducing the trend to focus on the *ever-search for the spectacular facet* of youth participation. There are several problems with the excessive research focus on school strikes and the actions of high-profile activists from the Western world (Neas, Ward, and Bowman 2022; Walker 2020). This type of research tends to reproduce the (wrong) view that climate activism is mainly an activity and interest of White people in the global North (Neas, Ward, and Bowman 2022). Additionally, the overemphasis on climate strikes may misrepresent the motivations and claims driving (climate) mobilisations and the nature and meaning of climate activism. This is illustrated in studies limited to short questionnaires or interviews made to randomly selected protestors in the context of one or a small number of events (Lorenzini, Monsch, and Rosset 2021; Martiskainen et al. 2020). This approach encompasses problematic biases: they assume that someone who was, on a particular day, participating in a Strike demonstration represents the "School Strike for Climate" movement and qualifies as an "activist". We argue that, in the context of those studies, generalisations about the profile of Climate Strikers convey a very limited notion of activism while whitewashing all crucial elements (emotions, struggles, obstacles, resistances, communication practices) involved in the experiences of those who belong to the movement behind the protests' organisation, but not limited to moments of protest. Research should go beyond climate strikes and encompass young people's climate concerns, their lived experiences of climate change and their views on the future. In doing that, research should look at how young people define,experience and communicate youth climate activism on their terms and according to their contexts. Otherwise, there is a risk of neglecting the various forms of communication practices (Carvalho, van Wessel, and Maeseele 2017), which also comprise the less mediatic and/or non-contentious forms of collective action and everyday expressions of climate activism, which play a pivotal role in youth's engagement with climate change (Trott 2021).

Nevertheless, we recognise the critical role of school strikes in mobilising young people, particularly in Western and non-authoritarian political contexts, where protesting is likely to be perceived as a low-risk activity or where access to education is taken for granted

(Walker 2020). Recently, we looked at bottom-up activism against oil and natural gas exploitation in *Bajouca*, a rural village in Leiria, Portugal. We interviewed several local community members and activists, including a young person who had recently joined the climate movement:

> I started to pay more attention to climate change issues after the first school strike for climate, and since then, I have genuinely started to want to be involved since, after all, we're talking about our future. Regarding the drilling in Bajouca… my father had already mentioned it to me but only briefly. I'll be honest, at that time [when her father mentioned], I wasn't so interested because there was a lack of information about the drill. (Interview, Ema)

As illustrated in this extract, for this activist, participating in a school strike triggered engagement with the anti-gas drilling movement. During the interview, Ema continued to talk about her climate activism, her concerns about the future and the perceived need to act against the climate crisis on many fronts and in diverse ways. A study focusing only on the motivations for participating in school strikes for climate would not have captured the heterogeneity and diversity that we found in her particular approach and discursive construction on climate activism.

Youth climate engagement may range from individual and lifestyle-related forms (e.g., going vegan, boycotting certain products) to discussing climate issues with family and friends, participating in local environmental conflicts (e.g., anti-fracking movement), being an active member of an environmental organisation, participating in protests, etc. In climate activism, these multiple layers and forms of action are often intertwined (Fernandes-Jesus, Lima, and Sabucedo 2018). Thus, a truly comprehensive understanding of youth climate activism involves contesting the *individual-collective dichotomy* often found in the literature related to youth participation (Ekman and Amnå 2012; Fernandes-Jesus, Lima, and Sabucedo 2018), capturing diverse forms of climate activism and how to intersect. This requires taking the concept of everyday climate activism more seriously and as involving: "individual and collective efforts to change, adapt or disrupt one's own and others' everyday practices in response to concerns about the negative impact of these practices on the environment as it is known, valued and imagined" (Walker 2017: 14).

Furthermore, young people become climate activists for different reasons (Neas, Ward, and Bowman 2022). For example, a recent mixed-method study (Haugestad et al. 2021)

suggested that young activists perceive climate change as a structural problem that must be addressed collectively. Young people mentioned a shared concern and a sense of future deprivation as motivations for their activism. Additionally, group efficacy and identification were two critical variables in explaining participation. Yet, it is crucial to remember that most studies on the motivations for climate activism rely on data collected during or after demonstrations in countries in the global North. Nevertheless, research on collective action indicates that the context matters (Ancelovici 2021), suggesting thatprocesses and experiences of participation as well as the barriers and constraints are likely to vary across contexts and groups.

3.2 More than "white activism"

Even though youth is one of the most vulnerable groups to the impacts of climate change (Hickman et al. 2021; Plan International, Australian Youth Climate Coalition, and Oaktree 2015), they face exclusion from climate decision-making (Nkrumah 2021). In several countries, climate activists lack the freedom to participate in climate protests and demonstrations (Walker 2020) and even risk being threatened, silenced and criminalised because of their activism (Taylor 2021). It is worth remembering the shocking murder of the 14-year-old environmentalist Breiner David Cucuñame in Colombia in January 2022 (Torrado 2022). However, practices of "white activism" are often privileged in media coverage and research

Literature on youth climate activism has increased exponentially since 2018 (Neas, Ward, and Bowman 2022), mainly due to the emergence of the School Strike for Climate (also known as Fridays for Future), an international movement of students who skip school to protest and demand climate action. This movement was created after Greta Thunberg, and other young activists sat in front of the Swedish parliament for three weeks, protesting against the lack of climate action. Yet, young people, particularly from the global South, have been concerned with and acting on climate change way before 2018 (Cocco-Klein & Mauger 2018; Neas, Ward, and Bowman 2022; Trott 2021; Walker 2020). How the young Ugandan activist Vanessa Nakate was cropped from a photo taken at the World Economic Forum in 2020 shows how Black youth activists are often erased from climate change politics and debates. Discursive research on this incident demonstrated that the African media (including Ugandan television states) delegitimised the young activist's claims that she was a victim of a racist act, positioning her instead as a naïve and emotional attention-seeking person (Rafaely and Barnes 2020). As

potentially empowering or demobilizing, communication practices comprise modes of engagement and struggles over the construction of meanings and representations around it (Carvalho, van Wessel, and Maeseele 2017). This is crucial to understanding the socio-political margins of agency and, as showcased in the example above, the formation of discursive constructions that can downplay certain voices and amplify others.

Increasing the representation of youth voices from the Global South and marginalized youth groups in the Global North is critical to climate justice. Climate justice approaches should question the distribution of burdens and benefits of climate change across society, encompassing the contestation of disempowering and unequal structures, the design of just and inclusive decision-making processes and the recognition of pre-existing inequalities when responding to climate change (Holland 2017; Patterson et al. 2018). Those concerns can be found in the voices of young climate activists, who tend to hold more radical and justice-oriented understandings of climate change (Neas, Ward, and Bowman 2022).

Our research suggests that several dimensions of climate justice play a pivotal role in how the Portuguese youth climate movement frames climate change. As part of an ongoing project, we surveyed activist groups within the climate movement, including climate-core groups (climate change as their central organising cause) and climate-satellite groups (regular supporters of climate protests). We examined whether and which climate justice dimensions were salient in how activist groups reported goals and demands. Preliminary findings suggest that the youth climate strike movement led to the creation of some groups: "The inaction of international governments in addressing climate change, the initiative of Greta Thunberg in front of the Swedish parliament, and the global mass mobilisation resulting from it." (Local cluster, School Strike for Climate). Climate activists describe their goals as emphasising fairness and justice: "To ensure climate justice and that our planet gets hotter than 1.5ºC, while we raise awareness and ban all new fossil fuels projects" (National Climate Activist Initiative). Dimensions of climate justice are framed as interconnected and embedded in groups' needs and scope of action. "More equality, better planning, and more sustainable policies (…) that we save the planet without creating injustices." (Local cluster, School Strike for Climate). Citizens' right to participate and construct climate solutions were also part of demands for climate justice nationally and globally.

The centrality of climate justice frames and practices of communication within the youth climate movement contrasts with the lack of recognition of youth's voices in climate change policymaking, particularly of young people from the Global South and minoritised youth groups in the Global North. This has contributed to young people feeling tokenised and

instrumentalised "with widespread 'youth-washing' in climate change initiatives" (Thew et al. 2021: 2). As will be discussed below, this may relate to a lack of recognition of young people's political agency, hindered by adultism views of what (should) constitute youth climate activism.

3.3 Not "like adults"

Understanding political agency entails recognising the centrality of power in participation processes (Sanchini, Pongiglione and Sala 2019). Importantly, Weber and Giddens approach power as a relational process, which draws attention to both the dynamic features of human agency and the contingent natures of social structures. Lukes' (1974) distinction between "the power to" and "the power over" sheds light on the opposition between Giddens' (1985) reference to the capacity to transform things and Weber's (1964) notion about one's likelihood of being in a position of altering things despite constraints. The intertwinement between the notions of agency and power led Campbell (2009) to propose also a two-fold conceptualisation: the "power of agency" and the "agentic power". The first refers to the ability to initiate a particular course of action, and the latter considers the actor's behaviour independently of structural influences. This distinction enables analytic nuance because it challenges the limitations of the rational-choice theories, abandoning the presumption that if an activity is not "reasoned", it does not qualify as "action". Campbell's contribution allows us to understand that individuals may act as agents of change, consciously or not. Conversely, they can possess the power to bring about change and yet do nothing. The power to engage in action can vary in degree, time and circumstances. "By chance", we do not necessarily mean a tangible societal transformation but also the power to influence others' desires and beliefs, as Luke (1974) implied. When examining the processes of taking part in the conflictual definitions of politics (Mouffe 2005), we should question which dimensions of power and agency are at stake: why and how people act the way they do about the social conditions in which they are embedded – and, if able to act, what makes them restrain from it.

In practical terms, examining youth political agency involves more than looking at forms of climate activism (e.g., protests). It should consider young people's perceptions and experiences of power, their influence on political structures, and the hindrances they may face when trying to participate. It should also involve paying more attention to the role of communication practices in creating conditions for political engagement (Carvalho, van Wessel, & Meseele, 2017). Unfortunately, social forces and structural barriers often constrain

youth political agency, including adultism in both activism contexts and research about activism. Adultism in youth climate activism research can be found in most of the literature produced since 2018 (Neas, Ward, and Bowman 2022). For example, it can be found in research focusing on the outcomes of youth activism as mere learning and empowering experiences instead of legitimate political action (Neas, Ward, and Bowman 2022; Taft 2017). We are not arguing that the empowering potential of activism should be ignored. However, it should be highlighted that empowerment is essentially a relational process (e.g., Christens et al. 2012) experienced about others in a particular context. The impacts and complexities of those relational experiences should also be considered.

When looking at the outcomes of youth climate activism, we should also seek to avoid reproducing the view that participation is *intrinsically good*. As discussed previously, research demonstrates that we need to look at the context where participation occurs and consider its potential to facilitate experiences of quality (e.g., Ferreira, Azevedo, and Menezes 2012). Importantly, contexts of youth participation can also reproduce adultism. For example, recent research (Fisher and Nasrin 2021) looked at the composition of young people engaged in climate activism, demonstrating an exponential increase in the mean age of participants in the climate strikes between 2019 (18 years) and 2021 (32 years). A takeover of leadership roles in youth-led groups by experienced (and adult) climate activists explains this age increase (Fisher and Nasrin 2021). This relates to some of the main barriers young people face when engaging in activism. They are often viewed as political actors still in construction, as observed in the Portuguese climate movement. One of our recent ethnographic studies reveals not only the strong adult antagonisms faced by young climate activists throughout socialising contexts (e.g., families, schools; see Malafaia 2022) but also adult-based and paternalistic *manoeuvres* within the climate movement itself. The following ethnographic fieldnote excerpt illustrates the significant yet diffused instrumentalisation that youth-led groups face from long-established adult groups:

> During the "artivism", Gabriel told me that (…) the people from the "Nacional" group (the ones closest to the Clima[1] group) want that the Strike's youths share their experience at the meeting.
>
> - They're not using us, are they? – Gabriel asked me in a somewhat confused way.

[1] "Clima" – a fictional name to preserve the group's anonymity – is a climate justice movement based on the capital city of Portugal..

- ... In what sense? – I asked.

Raquel was shaking her head as if she was tired of these things. Gabriel told us that Palmira from Clima had called him a little while ago because of the Global Climate Strike poster, saying that there should be no indication of a Strike, only an indication of a concentration and a vigil instead because that is what has been decided. Raquel became visibly annoyed. (…) noticing my confused expression, she puts her arm around my shoulders and pulls me away from the group so we can talk more privately.

- Walk with me; I'll explain this better to you – She told me as she guided me in circles along the avenue – Clima created the Strike, putting certain people, students, leading the movement, but meanwhile, they went to the University.

– Raquel explained to me that as the Strike grew, the adult-climate-group started to feel the risks of losing control, somehow creating a logic that subverts the regionally democratic structure of the Strike movement (...)

– As this is right now, there are people representing the "National" group in the local groups instead of people in the "National" group representing the local groups, which is what it should be. (...) Some people from Clima are linked to *Bloco de Esquerda* [a left-wing party] and want to control this as it suits them. (...) Of course, this is paternalism, "be young, students, leading a movement, as long as you do what we think is best". (Fieldnote, School Strike for Climate, November 2020)

This fieldnote reveals that the involvement of adults alters the dynamics of the youth climate movement. It also illustrates the potential of using ethnographic methods to understand youth climate activism, including how youths' political agency is constrained in activism settings. While the recent shift in literature towards more qualitative approaches shows an increasing interest in young people's experiences and perspectives (Neas, Ward, and Bowman 2022), qualitative researchers are not free from reproducing an *extractivist approach* to youth participation. Most research on youth climate activism is still conducted by adults about young people *rather* than with them (Neas, Ward, and Bowman 2022). Challenging adultism in research requires facilitating participatory and collaborative knowledge production alongside young people (Neas, Ward, and Bowman 2022; Trott 2021) and conceptualising youth climate activism and political agency from a bottom-up perspective. Simply asking young people how they experience and make sense of climate activism may be a good starting point. If we truly want to listen to young people's voices, we need to accept that they express their political agency on their terms and communication practices, which may be "not like adults" do it.

4 Conceptual and methodological paths toward a youth-centred research agenda

The idea of "political appearance" (Arendt 1958; Rancière 2000) is linked to the unequal power relationships that compose the public sphere, determining who and what gets to be seen. Just as *non-white activism* is poorly portrayed and recognised, visibility may also have double-edged effects of either empowerment or control (Brighenti 2007). A recent ethnography (Malafaia 2022) reports concealing strategies by young people regarding their participation in the climate movement, including avoiding being photographed while in big strikes, which unveils adult antagonisms' development into structural barriers and daily constraints. Yet, grasping young people's agency, and the underlying resistance, was only possible by going *beyond climate strikes* and, thus, by not limiting the research to the most visible facet of activism, understanding that what is not visible may be equally important to make sense of the intricacies of participation.

The incorporation of visual methods in researching practices is a way to amplify the understanding of public spheres, political practices and modes of conceiving the political. For instance, Varvantakis, Nolas and Aruldoss (2019) combined different ethnographic and visual methods to develop an adaptation of the photo-story, allowing a multimodal and processual approach to children's relationship with politics, which would not be grasped if relying solely on verbal modes of expression. The refinement of methodological tools to understand young people's political engagement with climate change is of utter importance to avoid the risks of perpetuating the pitfalls in researching youth participation. We argue that research designs that intentionally incorporate visual methods and participatory approaches have the potential to foreground the analysis of political agency in processual terms. Furthermore, such a processual approach implies considering the conceptual value of (political) imagination in novel and inclusive ways.

The resurgence of social imaginaries and political imagination as central concepts in social sciences has unfolded the multifaceted nature of the concept, but also its somewhat underdevelopment as an analytical tool (Browne and Diehl 2019). Aiming at making sense of people's societal roles, "political imagination" (Machin 2022; Glăveanu and Saint Laurent 2015) and "civic imagination" (Baiocchi et al. 2014) emerge as critical conceptual terms. Baiocchi and colleagues (2014) employ "civic imagination" as an operational concept designating cognitive maps of the citizen-state relationship that guide political participation, enabling the grasp of the diverse ways people envision and work towards achieving alternative

futures. In a broader sense, Glăveanu and Saint Laurent (2015: 559) define political imagination as "all those imaginative processes by which collective life is symbolically experienced, and this experience mobilised given achieving political aims".

Climate change is an opportunity to contest existing structures, develop political alternatives and establish what is feasible (Machin 2022). Contesting and exposing what is wrong with the present *state of affairs* is a process that strongly relies on imagining alternatives and, thus, envisioning more sustainable and just futures. This is necessarily intertwined with a confrontation with (im)possibilities of those futures, which impacts the imaginative processes at stake. At the same time, it relates to communication, not as a mere process of messages transmission, but "as constitutive of how we understand the world and our place within it" (Carvalho, van Wessel, and Maeseele 2017: 5), which implies both verbal and non-verbal forms of symbolic action. While past literature on imagination had focused on the construction of scenarios and aspirations (e.g., Bottici and Challand 2011), recently, scholars have been converging towards the experiential component of political and civic imagination: the projection of new futures in which certain goals are prioritised (Ferrara 2011), based on the coordination within experiential scenarios (Glăveanu and Saint Laurent 2015) that define shared senses of legitimacy (Taylor 2004), lay grounds to political agency (Jovchelovitch 2015) and enable approaching democracy in action (Baiocchi al. 2014).

Focusing on political imagination implies paying attention to images in youth climate activism contexts and practices of communication. Imagination and images are not only semantically related: images are important ways of expressing imaginaries and simultaneously motivating imagination types (Bottici 2019; Grave 2019). Against the backdrop of the prevalent use of visual methods mainly focused on visual content, Luhtakallio and Meriluoto (2022) propose the snap-along ethnography as a method to study visual politicisation in the age of social media. This method consists of a research design that develops through online and offline participant observation and relies on a simultaneous analytical focus on the content of images taken by participants and the practices of producing and dealing with those images (image-taking, sharing, posting and commenting). Unlike participatory visual methods, such as photovoice and digital storytelling, the goal is not to "provoke" action. Instead, the snap-along incites a naturalistic understanding of young people's everyday and mundane experiences, enabling them to grasp both unexpected and emerging ways of politicisation and even proto-political practices. Pictures that never reach social media affordances or end up being deleted are as important as those that are re-posted or get massive "likes". Our point here is to shed light on methodological approaches that, besides enabling the exploration of both

possibilities and impossibilities of visibility (and, therefore, the power-agency dynamics underlying it), opens up new ways to approach young people's political agency from a youth-centred perspective. The development of the snap-along method with young climate activists enabled capturing how the visual framing of the movement takes place across different timings (Luhtakallio and Meriluoto 2022) and also how individual online pages are coordinated to prevent the depoliticisation of online communication and ensure that claims are rooted on community-based environmental struggles and injustices faced by "common people" (Malafaia and Meriluoto 2022).

Crossing disciplinary boundaries and adopting participatory research practices also encompasses epistemological positionings on co-creating knowledge and promoting the resonance of voices that are often neglected or may never reach public spheres (Malafaia, Fernandes-Jesus, and Luhtakallio 2022). We, then, join the claims for "youth-centred and participatory studies" that approach climate engagement as "more than protest, (…) as world-building project, [in which] creative methodologies can aid researchers and young climate activists as we imagine, together, worlds of the future" (Bowman 2019: 298). Certainly, pleas for participatory approaches are far from breaking news, and they intentionally include the worldviews and experiences of marginalized groups (Mertens 2021). On those grounds, Spiegel (2020) discusses photovoice as a methodology to generate narratives about environmental change and future aspirations and uncertainties. Based on research in a village in Central Kalimantan, Indonesia, Spiegel (2020) discusses the power relationships and sociocultural processes involved in producing "visual knowledge" and, mainly, in the researcher's voice on visual interpretation processes. This comes as a reminder of the importance of considering the researcher's positionality when instigating processes of imagination and agency. Recalling our previous discussion on those concepts and emphasising political imagination as a socially embedded process, we argue that bottom-up uses of participatory methods must be seriously considered. Rosa and Fernandes-Jesus (2020) explain how an intervention program with children and young people may represent a fundamental opportunity for voicing concerns and experimenting agency when the research-intervention design relies on a bottom-up approach. In developing "Citizenship Circles", they account for the back-and-forth process involved in a program that builds on the young participants' recommendations and involves the youth's proximal community.

The benefits of Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) for youth, organisations, and communities are well-documented in the literature. They include, among others, increases in social justice awareness and critical consciousness, a sense of agency and leadership, and

interpersonal and relational skills (Anyon et al. 2018). Importantly, YPAR helps create opportunities for youth and adults to work together "*not like adults*", i.e., in a way that recognises young people's expressions of political agency and contests power gaps and adultism in research. Such approaches are particularly needed and may help answer previous calls for research on citizens' political engagement with climate change (Carvalho, van Wessel, and Maeseele 2017) and how the political is imagined (Browne and Diehl 2019).

5 Final notes

As argued throughout this chapter, research on youth participation has been crossed by recurring pitfalls that, from our point of view, materialise into misleading research foci ("*the old electoral dilemma*", "*the behaviourist perspective*", and "*the ever-search for the spectacular*"), distorted research assumptions ("*the individual-collective dichotomy*" and "*the intrinsic benefit of participation*") and instrumental research practices ("*the extractivist research*"). Such pitfalls, we argue, translate into obstacles to advancing research that foregrounds young people's voices and practices in inclusive and democratic ways.

We have illustrated the consequences of reproducing existing research pitfalls in the field of youth climate activism while signalling how they can be avoided, namely through intentional efforts of conducting research studies that go "*beyond climate strikes*" that consider climate engagement as "*more than 'white activism'*" and that recognises that young people express their political agency in their terms, "*not like adults*". The relevance of those pleas is supported and illustrated by empirical data.

We have argued in favour of more socially and politically committed modes of doing research, going beyond conventional, flashy, and behavioural forms of engagement and amplifying the (already) loudest voices. Finally, we discussed moving towards a conceptual-methodological research agenda that goes beyond the most "eye-catching" and obvious forms of youth participation while embracing a youth-led and bottom-up approach. Such an approach inevitably requires refining our methodological tools and conceptual lenses. We suggest that considering political imagination as the conceptual backbone of young people's agency can enable grasping the agency-power-structures dynamics and, simultaneously, be used as an analytical tool that can animate novel methodological approaches based on visual and participatory methods. Ultimately, with this chapter, we aim to raise the conversation and pave the way towards more inclusive methodological and conceptual approaches to youth climate activism.

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