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BETWEEN THE FUTURE AND PRESENT: HOW ACTIVISTS IN THE YOUTH CLIMATE STRIKE EXPERIENCE EVERYDAY LIFE

MIĘDZY PRZYSZŁOŚCIĄ A TERAŹNIEJSZOŚCIĄ: JAK OSOBY
AKTYWISTYCZNE Z MŁODZIEŻOWEGO STRAJKU KLIMATYCZNEGO
PRZEŻYWAJĄ CODZIENNOŚĆ

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Abstract:

In the face of the escalating climate crisis, it is becoming increasingly important to understand not only young activists' strategies of action but also their imagined futures and how these visions shape their everyday lives. This article draws on the concept of imagined futures (Cuzzocrea & Mandich, 2015) to analyze how young people affiliated with the Youth Climate Strike (Młodzieżowy Strajk Klimatyczny, MSK) in Poland envision the future—and how these imaginaries influence their emotions, decisions, and ways in which they are involved. Based on qualitative analysis, the study reveals that visions of the future—both dystopian and utopian—strongly affect young people's mental well-being and their sense of significance, agency, and belonging. For some, hope for systemic transformation translates into concrete life choices and daily practices: pursuing education, engaging in grassroots initiatives, anti-consumption, or peer-led climate awareness-raising. Others struggle with a paralyzing absence of future imaginaries, leading to existential stagnation, burnout, and difficulties in long-term planning. The article shows that the future is not only a fictional line but a living category—carved out in everyday existence through fear, fatigue, hope, and seeking of meaning. In this critique, imagined futures function as emotionally and politically resonant constructs that shape daily practices and self-understanding, beyond mere protest rhetoric.

Keywords:

Imagined Futures, Youth Activism, Climate Crisis, Everyday Well-being.

Abstrakt:

W obliczu narastającego kryzysu klimatycznego coraz ważniejsze staje się zrozumienie nie tylko strategii działania młodych aktywistów, lecz także ich wyobrażeń przyszłości oraz sposobów, w jakie te wizje kształtują ich codzienne życie. Artykuł odwołuje się do koncepcji *imagined futures* (Cuzzocrea & Mandich, 2015), by przeanalizować, w jaki sposób młodzi ludzie związani z ruchem Młodzieżowy Strajk Klimatyczny (MSK) w Polsce wyobrażają sobie przyszłość – i jak te wyobrażenia wpływają na ich emocje, decyzje oraz formy zaangażowania. Na podstawie analizy jakościowej badanie pokazuje, że zarówno dystopijne, jak i utopijne wizje przyszłości silnie oddziałują na dobrostan psychiczny młodych ludzi, ich poczucie sensu, sprawczości i przynależności. Dla części badanych nadzieja na systemową transformację przekłada się na konkretne wybory życiowe i codzienne praktyki – takie jak kierunek kształcenia, zaangażowanie w inicjatywy oddolne, postawy antykonsumpcyjne czy edukacja klimatyczna prowadzona przez rówieśników. Inni zmagają się z paraliżującym brakiem wyobrażeń przyszłości, prowadzącym do egzystencjalnego zastoju, wypalenia i trudności w planowaniu długofalowym. Artykuł pokazuje, że przyszłość nie jest fikcyjną linią, lecz żywą kategorią – negocjowaną w codziennym doświadczeniu poprzez strach, zmęczenie, nadzieję i poszukiwanie sensu. W tym ujęciu wyobrażone przyszłości funkcjonują jako emocjonalnie i politycznie znaczące konstrukty, które kształtują praktyki codzienności i sposób rozumienia siebie – wychodząc daleko poza sferę retoryki protestu.

Słowa kluczowe: wyobrażone przyszłości, aktywizm młodzieżowy, kryzys klimatyczny, codzienny dobrostan.

Introduction

Environmental protection measures taken by young people are receiving growing attention because of the worsening climate crisis. Since 2018, the Youth Climate Strike (Młodzieżowy Strajk Klimatyczny – MSK) in Poland has given thousands of young people the opportunity to express their climate change concerns while demanding government accountability and developing future-oriented solutions (Boryczko, 2021; Madoń, 2020; Kocyba et al., 2021). The activist space focuses on the future as a fundamental concern because young people discuss it through discursive motifs (“There is no future on a dead planet”) and experience it as a real concern which affects their educational and work choices and personal health (Budziszewska & Głód, 2021). This research examines how members of the MSK envision their future during the climate crisis while studying the impact of their future visions on their emotional responses and daily routines. The movement’s understanding and broader issues of social intergenerational justice, democratic participation, and ecological crisis psychological and social effects require knowledge of how young climate activists see the future—where social justice is framed as equitable distribution of resources and recognition of marginalized groups (Rawls, 1971; Fraser, 1997;

Sen, 2009), democratic participation is understood as inclusive, deliberative involvement of citizens in shaping decisions affecting their lives (Young, 2000; Habermas, 1996), and the climate crisis is recognized as the urgent, systemic threat posed by anthropogenic climate change to ecosystems and human societies (IPCC, 2023; Hulme, 2009; Lakoff, 2010). All of the above raises the following research questions: how do young members of the Youth Climate Strike (MSK) construct and articulate their personal and collective visions of the future in the context of the climate crisis? And in what ways do these future-oriented perspectives shape their everyday practices, including educational trajectories, career aspirations, and lifestyle choices?

1. Imagined futures as a framework for youth climate engagement

People and communities use imagined futures to contextualize their hopes, fears and expectations in the future. The projections guide present-day actions and provide direction while helping people cope with both uncertainty and crisis (Appadurai, 2013; Cuzzocrea & Mandich, 2015). The future develops through stories, feelings and actions that take place in particular locations (Beckert, 2016; Tavorý

& Eliasoph, 2013). Youth climate activism depends on imagined futures which function as emotional guidance as well as political frameworks. The visions demonstrate how teenagers and young adults handle climate change together with economic instability and democratic decline (Threadgold, 2012; Woodman & Wyn, 2015). These visions are distributed unevenly due to interaction of social class and gender along with geographic location and cultural background. Dystopian imaginaries demonstrate institutional distrust and existential threats, but hopeful projections are a means of critique while offering new alternatives. Sociological research shows that utopian thinking functions as a method to reveal societal contradictions while envisioning transformative possibilities (Levitas, 2013). MSK youth experience imagined futures as practical survival methods which combine survival techniques with critical perspectives and caregiving approaches. Activists use these visions to maintain their involvement while managing their emotional exhaustion and creating significance during a period of worldwide uncertainty. The process of imagining future scenarios contains both emotional and strategic elements. The essential orientations towards futurity develop from emotions such as hope, anxiety and aspiration which are shaped by global inequalities and embedded in social imaginaries and affective atmospheres (Hage, 2003; Miyazaki, 2004; Appadurai, 2013; Anderson, 2006; Taylor, 2004). As such, studying imagined futures reveals not only how young people see what lies ahead, but how they live and act in the present. In this sense, imagined futures are not just mental projections—they are shaped by discourse, institutions, and collective emotions. They serve as moral compasses, coping mechanisms, and organizational logic.

2. Methodology of the research

In order to investigate how young Polish climate activists envision the future and find their own political agency within it, this research employs

a qualitative interpretive research model. In the study, two complementary data sources are used: (1) a series of in-depth qualitative interviews (IDI) with chosen Youth Climate Strike (MSK) activists, and (2) a computer-aided anonymous web interview (CAWI). In 2022, an open-ended online survey was disseminated through the MSK's internal and external communication channels. Out of the 46 participants, 39 gave thoughtful answers to the five main questions. These enquiries were chosen due to their ability to stimulate young people's imaginations regarding their personal, political, and environmental futures. Participants were primarily aged 16–25 and represented various regional and thematic groups within the MSK. The answers were coded according to qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2014) using inductive coding followed by thematic clustering. For an even deeper interpretation of the written answers, 20 semi-structured interviews with the MSK members were conducted in 2022. Interviewees were selected purposely to capture diversity in terms of age, location, level of involvement, and positionality within the movement (e.g., coordinators, new members, ex-members). In order to guarantee representation of diversity regarding age, geographic location, level of involvement, and positionality in the movement (e.g., recent members, coordinators, ex-members), the interview participants were carefully chosen. Depending on the availability of schedules, the interviews were conducted in person or online and lasted between 60 and 120 minutes. Personal MSK experiences, political efficacy and burnout views, climate futures and alternative preference judgments, and future plans for activism, education, and work were the main interview protocol themes. Answers and survey responses were coded thematically to facilitate triangulation of initial findings and recognition of recurring metaphors and narrative framings of future imaginations (Cuzzocrea & Mandich, 2015). Reflexive consideration was provided regarding positioning dynamics and rapport, since the researcher had prior

experience in youth climate networks. While this insider status enabled trust and openness in several interviews, careful measures were employed to ensure openness and confidentiality. Finally, it is important to add that the text is based on the report “Energy of the Future. Report on a survey of Youth Climate Strike members’ opinions on energy sources” prepared for the Open Plan Foundation in 2022.

3. Visions of the future

According to Klarenbach’s (2022) analysis, MSK activists have two different kinds of future imaginaries: hopeful futures and catastrophic futures. In the context of the climate crisis, these visions are not only manifestations of personal perspectives. They are also intricately linked to more general processes of identity formation, intergenerational responsibility, and political socialization. Young MSK members frequently articulate dystopian visions characterized by anxieties about resource-driven conflicts, social disintegration, and ecological collapse. Their profound annoyance with the systemic inaction on climate change is reflected in these projections. They expect more frequent disasters—wildfires, floods, and droughts, which threaten basic living conditions as the effects of climate change intensify. These situations draw attention to the widening gaps, which particularly impact already vulnerable populations like climate refugees. Indicators of eco-anxiety include institutional mistrust, dejection, and emotional exhaustion. Some people become disengaged or avoid thinking about the future as a result of the emotional toll (Klarenbach, 2022). On the other hand, a lot of MSK members create visions that are based on social justice, sustainability, and democratic renewal. Despite their differences, these imaginaries come together to form a comprehensive alternative to the current situation. A regenerative ecological relationship between humans and nature, based

on the preservation of biodiversity and renewable energy, is at the heart of this vision. The goal of social justice—a society devoid of systematic discrimination and violence, where equity, solidarity, and caring govern communal life—is equally significant. Another important tenet is democratic transformation; young activists envision inclusive, accountable, and participatory political structures where everyone’s opinions are valued. Calls for post-capitalist futures, which reject neoliberal economic models in favor of collaboration and shared responsibility, finally take on a more radical tone. When combined, these optimistic futures form prefigurative politics, which includes both critiques of the current state of affairs and attempts to create the kind of world to which young activists aspire (Klarenbach, 2022).

4. Imagined futures as a prism on everyday functioning among young climate activists

The visions of the future articulated by young climate activists are not merely symbolic or ideological—they profoundly shape everyday life, affecting how young people feel, act, and relate to the world around them. For MSK members, imagined futures are both a horizon of meaning and a survival tactic in the face of systemic uncertainty. They help young people make sense of educational, vocational, mental health, and relational decisions, and mediate their emotional responses to crisis and injustice. This section reflects on how different orientations towards the future—dystopian or hopeful—translate into everyday routines and practices. It examines how the equilibrium between activist involvement and psychological well-being is negotiated, and how imagined futures are utilized to enable persistence as well as withdrawal from climate activism. Thus, the future is a lived category—structuring not only long-term goals, but also day-to-day experiences of purpose, burnout, and belonging. In paying

attention to the quotidian, we show how future imaginaries are written into the micro-politics of care, time, and relationality. We thereby look beyond protest as an isolated event to show how young activists embody and prefigure change in the fabric of the everyday.

4.1. Imagining the future as a source of meaning—or its absence

Members of the MSK who are able to envision an alternate, more just world report a stronger sense of purpose in day-to-day life, both as activists and as people in general. Their visions of utopia serve as affective moorings that help with sustaining continued involvement in relationships, learning, and service towards the community. Conversely, those who struggle to imagine any future—either through sheer doubt or apocalyptic expectation—are bound to experience existential disorientation, demotivation, or withdrawal from long-term planning. “Peace, empathy, respect, closeness to nature, absence of power hierarchies, self-organization, being in the here and now” (Participant 11, Q34)—are associated with greater engagement in relational, educational, and civic activity. “I don’t have a personal vision of the future” (Participant 7, Q34)—this can be largely explained by planning problems, affect overload, and low motivation.

4.2. Contradiction between crisis awareness and everyday routines

The unifying thread that appears throughout the data is one of inner tension: participants speak of having the knowledge that there is a coming ecological catastrophe, while simultaneously having to meet day-to-day requirements—studying, working, maintaining relationships. “I think so, provided I don’t burn out mentally and physically from the workload—both within the movement

and outside it (such as university commitments)” (Participant 1, Q18). This mental-affective split creates symptomatic tension between practice and awareness, whereby the ethical demand for action on climate conflicts with daily habits of pedagogy and social life. Participants describe living two incompatible times, one defined by the *slo-mo* disaster of climate change and the other by institutional timers and social norms that operate as if the crisis were not approaching. One of the protesters quotes: “On the one hand, I know that all is falling apart, and on the other, I have to take exams and play it cool as if nothing is happening. It’s absurd and tiring from within” (Participant 8). Another puts it this way: “It’s hard to keep in mind the catastrophe and ‘normal life.’ The more I participate, the harder it is to live in a normal rhythm—as if nothing matters in light of what’s to come” (Participant 27). This tension produces what might be called existential fatigue: an experience marked by emotional depletion, persistent eco-anxiety, and demotivation on a personal level. It typically manifests itself in activist burnout, disengagement, body stress, avoidance behaviors (such as avoiding climate-related media), and an inability to make long-term personal plans. When these young adults are unable to marry the affective burden of global crisis with the normative expectation to “work” in existing systems, they also typically report feeling helpless, overwhelmed by information, and detached from dominant life scripts.

4.3. Daily life as a field for testing utopia

For others, particularly those who are still active in the MSK or an equivalent movement, “another world” is not a floating fantasy but a normative horizon realized in an ordinary way. These players turn their vision of the future into lifestyle and commitments to the real world that are consistent with their political and environmental identifications. They obtain information through

a need to equip themselves with an agent of system change. “I try to act locally—we organize collective cooking, clothing swaps, and climate education. All of this gives me a sense of agency, even if change is slow” (Participant 19). Apart from school-level education, they participate in grassroots movements, cooperative projects, and neighborhood green initiatives, viewing activism as a way of premising their preferred futures. Ordinary anti-consumption, ethical food choices, and low-carbon living are not framed in terms of sacrifice but of resistance and fidelity. Peer education, climate change workshops, and information networks are also attended by many, serving justice-oriented pedagogies and collective power. Thus, the imagined futures are both a plan and inspiration for structuring one’s life, a sense of mastery and meaning in structural uncertainty.

4.4. Lack of imaginaries leads to emotional suspension and stagnation

One shared thread in MSK members’ narratives is the articulation of blocked or absent futurity. Several participants state plainly that they are unable to imagine a personal future or envision it as fundamentally uncertain:

“I don’t have a personal vision of the future” (Participant 7, Q34).

“I don’t have one. I’m not able to think about the future” (Participant 16, Q34).

“I don’t know. I don’t realistically see my own future beyond a maximum of three years. I am not capable of imagining myself, for example, in the year 2040” (Participant 13, Q34).

This inability to envision a future is not a marker of apathy but points to a deeper emotional and cognitive impasse, one tied to psychological stasis, decision paralysis, and a sense of existential drift. What should be underlined is that the absence of imaginaries constitutes a denial of any vision of the future, rather than a position between positive or negative scenarios.

Participants describe “living one day at a time” or limiting their temporal horizon to a few years at most—conditions that close off long-term planning, whether in education, career, or long-term activism. These statements resonate with research on temporal disorientation and precarious subjectivities, where the future is a source of anxiety rather than aspiration (Anderson, 2010; Fisher, 2014). For these young people, the future is more a terrain of uncertainty too frightening to inhabit imaginatively rather than a resource for action. Thus, agency becomes scattered, and political engagement stalls—not due to apathy, but due to the lack of emotional and cognitive anchorage in a viable or imaginable tomorrow.

4.5. Imagined futures and everyday functioning: situating findings within the literature

The findings presented above resonate with scholars’ current findings on youth climate activism, which has repeatedly highlighted the role of imagined futures in structuring both political engagement and personal well-being. Research shows that young activists orient themselves toward the future as both a moral horizon and a lived temporal category, shaping their educational choices, affective dispositions, and everyday practices (Budziszewska & Głód, 2021; Kocyba et al., 2021). First, the contrast between utopian imaginaries and the absence of futurity echoes broader studies of temporalities under crisis. Scholars of social movements describe activism as a site of prefigurative politics, where alternative futures are not only envisioned but enacted in everyday routines such as collective cooking, climate education, or low-carbon lifestyles (Yates, 2015). In this light, participants’ practices of testing utopian commitments through local initiatives align with previous observations that movements like Fridays for Future offer arenas for living the future in the present (de Moor et al., 2020;

Wahlström et al., 2019). Conversely, participants' experiences of temporal blockage and inability to imagine themselves in the long term reflect what Anderson (2010) and Fisher (2014) have called *temporal disorientation and precarious futurity*—conditions of crisis that undermine the ability to plan or project oneself forward. Second, the contradiction between crisis awareness and everyday routines—expressed in narratives of taking exams while anticipating ecological collapse—closely relates to studies of eco-anxiety and existential fatigue. Hickman et al. (2021) demonstrate that young people often experience tension between ecological awareness and institutional demands, producing distress, burnout, and disengagement. Similarly, Panu (2020) conceptualizes eco-anxiety not simply as a pathology, but as an existential response to living between two temporal orders: one defined by accelerating catastrophe, and another by the rhythms of “normal” social life. Our findings confirm this tension, showing how MSK members articulate the burden of “living in two incompatible times.” Third, the emotional consequences of future imaginaries mirror both the empowering and destabilizing dimensions of activism noted in prior research. While hopeful visions correlate with sustained engagement, peer education, and civic participation (Pickard, 2019; Sloam, 2019), blocked or dystopian imaginaries produce demotivation and psychological suspension, leading to withdrawal or avoidance behaviors. These dynamics echo Stanley et al. (2021) differentiation between eco-anger, which often fosters action, and eco-anxiety or eco-depression, which can contribute to paralysis. Taken together, the MSK narratives expand upon existing literature by illustrating the micro-politics of everyday life, where imagined futures are not abstract ideals but practical orientations that shape how people study, work, eat and social relationships. They demonstrate how young people negotiate an equilibrium between activist commitments and psychological well-being, and how the capacity—or incapacity—to imagine a future directly

translates into persistence or disengagement from activism. By foregrounding the quotidian, these findings contribute to academic study that seeks to understand activism not only as public protest but as an embodied practice of living through crisis (Boryczko, 2021; Budziszewska & Głód, 2021).

5. Conclusions

The analysis of imagined futures among young MSK members reveals two dominant orientations: dystopian visions of collapse and utopian visions of system transformation. Imagined futures are not abstract projections but are grounded in material conditions, everyday practices, and affective experiences that frame how young people envision what lies ahead. The dystopian imaginary is characterized by specters of environmental disaster, rising social injustice, and the erosion of common life. These narratives are characteristic of affective responses such as despair, anxiety, and fatigue, often yielding retreat from activism or avoidance of long-term thought. They also signal profound distrust of institutions perceived as incapable of responding to the climate crisis. Activists' optimistic futures, on the other hand, articulate unambivalent affirmations of ecological rebirth, social justice, participatory democracy, and post-capitalist horizons. They are not merely imagined futures, unlike critique: they provide information for everyday practice, political struggle, and value-laden life decisions. Rather than being utopian or abstract in a simplistic sense, they are prefigurative politics—models of the futures that activists seek to bring about by doing things here and now. The outcomes make it evident that young climate activists do not imagine futures disconnected from their own existence. Rather, their futures are entwined tightly with the lived experience of everyday life, stages of development, and social circumstances enabling or blocking involvement. While for some, youth activism is an abiding involvement,

for others it is an interim but essential phase. The erosion of collective vision within the movement will also undermine individual motivation, and ensure that long-term participation comes with both structural support and mutual guidance. Ultimately, envisioned futures among activists are negotiated through contradictions between hopes and burnout, idealism and pragmatism, and the desire for change and the need to mature in situations of uncertainty. Imagined futures thus offer a powerful analytical tool to understand how young people navigate climate anxiety, sustain activism, and produce meaning during times of transition. It highlights the emotional, intellectual, and political dimensions of the response of young people to uncertainty and the asymmetrical access to imagining and building habitable futures. In their imaginings, dystopian or utopian, MSK activists reveal both the burdens and the productive agency of young people in the Anthropocene.

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