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Understanding if Trust in Youth Environmental Leaders translates into greater Climate Action

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Abstract

This study explores the influences on every-day climate practices by answering the research question: Does trust in youth leaders inspire young people in western Europe (ages 18-26) to undertake environmental action in the form of daily practices? As trust has been studied to be positively influential on many areas, the aim of this research is to understand if, when placed into youth leaders, it can have motivating effects on the climate behavior of young people. Due to the advancing climate change, behavior shifts towards sustainability are urgent and thus an important subject of study. To collect data on the matter, a survey was conducted with 60 people at the University of Twente, Netherlands. By performing a regression analysis with the data, it was found that trust and its dimensions (*ability)*, *reliability*, *consistency*, *fairness* and *openness* are no predictors for every-day climate action. Only *ability* and the control *climate attitudes* could be found to be significant and influential on climate action. Four out of five hypotheses could thus be rejected. An implication of this research is that education and information however have a strong influence on the climate behavior of young people because they shape their attitudes which in turn have an effect on their action.

Table of Contents

Introduction

"Trust me" is a very common exclamation in the everyday life of human beings. Trust can be defined "in terms of confident positive expectations regarding another´s conduct" (Lewicki & Bies, 1998, p. 439), which can be understood as "the willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence." (Moorman, Deshpande & Zaltman, 1993, p. 82) or "the expectancy […] that a promise […] can be relied on" (Rotter, 1967, p. 651). In the field of governance, trust has received intense scholarly attention, with the resulting work suggesting that it is of high importance for healthy democracies. As trust implies higher life satisfaction, less corruption, increased social cohesion (Chan, To & Chan, 2006) and more economic growth, democracies with high levels of trust are expected to function more effectively and reach stability (Nguyen, 2017). However, over the past decades, a general loss in trust has been observed in many democracies. For instance, in the United States, trust in the government is estimated to have declined from 77 % in 1964 to 20 % in 2022 (Pew Research Center, 2023). At the same time, interpersonal trust between people in the United States seems to have also declined, shrinking from 46,8 % in 1973 to 31,9 % in 2018 (US General Social Survey, 2022). This trend also has been observed in European countries [1], with declining trust in the government, democracy, and public institutions like the police, health care systems, and the news media (Eurofound, 2022).

Trust is a foundation for legitimate democracies, therefore its absence leads to a general loss of effectiveness. Many plans and policies are not implemented although they might be of great urgency (Rodriguez-Sanchez, 2018), such as for example those concerning climate change and a shift to a sustainable future (e.g. the Green Deal). The inability to act on urgent issues like climate change evokes strong dissatisfaction and anger from the younger generations (Amer, 2017). This somehow intergenerational mistrust and distress may lead them to invest less time and effort in climate action or give it up entirely. Climate action, which is a very broad term, but among others can be defined as "the urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts" (United Nations, n.d.) includes many aspects, to name but a few: investments into renewable energy supplies, the occupation with land and agriculture, the combat against the remaining of conventional energy supplies, the rethinking of cities, transportation and buildings and much more. It also includes the leadership of people in climate movements and the participation in such movements, think tanks which work on ideas and policies, and last but not the least, individual "everyday practices" that contribute to more environmentally friendly habits (Rooney-Varga, et al., 2020).

These every-day practices or "grassroots initiatives" (Seyfang & Smith, 2007) on which the civil society can easily work on, are at the center of this research. They might also be called bottom-up, local, low barriers to entry- solutions which are supposed to contribute to a more sustainable development, detached from complex issues of governments as for instance an energy transition or those of

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[1] Reasons given for this decrease lie among others in inequality, corruption, abuse of public offices, intransparency and lack of consistency in the government´s work (Tahmina & Chowdhury, 2019).

mainstream businesses. Examples for such practices include cohousing, local food projects, (Church & Elster, 2002) as well as vegetarianism or veganism, second-hand fashion, bike riding, car-sharing, refurbing electrical devices and many more (Petrowski, 2023). All of them contribute to sustainable consumption.

Climate preserving innovations or practices are shaped by flexibility and thus, they must stay open to an evolutionary process to achieve sustainability. In order to remain easily applicable, the goals should be kept realistic, and the innovations focus on the "doing"-part. Furthermore, the practices exist beneath political conflicts and rather remain on community-level activities. This feature turns them into social innovations which offer opportunities for social learning. Nevertheless, participating in everyday practices does neither preclude the possibility to forge partnerships with local and national governments or companies, nor the strength to have regime influence (Seyfang & Haxeltine, 2012). Despite being possibly perceived small in size, small-scale actions are thus a relevant part of climate action when exercised in different communities, creating more sustainability and fostering social learning processes (Seyfang & Haxeltine, 2012). Since everyone is principally able to incorporate them in their daily life, they represent an important dimension of climate action. Through people joining each other in these practices, trends can solidify towards sustainable consumption or degrowth thinking which are then also increased considered in politics. The degrowth movement broadens the debate even further, also including social equity and fair distribution in the idea of sustainable consumption (Lorek & Fuchs, 2013). Despite their promises, these actions – and the role that trust plays in promoting them – are both understudied and underestimated in their climate preserving potential. One motivating force for practicing everyday climate actions might be young people's trust in role models or leaders.

Strong advisors or motivating role models within a similar age range who promote pro-social activities like climate action might however present a new way for young people to place their trust in. The youth climate activist is emerging as an important leader in current environmental landscapes. While many young people perceive politicians as ignorant, inconsistent, or even corrupt (Tanny & Al-Hossienie, 2019; Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024) some of them attempt to actively fight against this behavior. "I started the climate strikes in Berlin because I asked myself whether I was doing everything in my power to put an end to climate madness. […] Every person in this room has a global responsibility from which they cannot hide. So live up to it." (Neubauer, 2019) Those are the words of Luisa Neubauer, a leading German youth activist for climate change. She mobilized thousands of young people in Germany to participate in the Fridays for Future protests, climate strikes and climate action. Next to her, there exist dozens of other prominent young leaders, challenging their countries in environmental matters. Famous examples are the Swedish Greta Thunberg, Xiuhtezcatl Martinez from the United States, Nyombi Morris from Uganda and many more. Youth climate activists are in exchange with many politicians, companies, and international organizations. They organize protests and strikes and try to motivate young people to join them and become aware of their climate responsibility. Furthermore, youth leaders represent a

group, movement or community of other young people and often advocate for topics like inequality, climate change, social justice, etc. (UNFPA, 2019). Examples of how young people have effectively participated in their communities to instigate change include engaging in community service, conducting needs assessments, serving on committees, attending community meetings, and actively participating in organizing efforts, rallies, and marches (Lekies et al., 2009). Youth environmental leader are thus young people who take responsibility and intend to achieve change in the area of the environment, for example through movements like Fridays for Future. It has been seen that youth leaders are able to mobilize political acts for climate change policy making, however there is no certain knowledge if this also translates into general climate action and bottom-up climate action. It could be suspected that they evoke more trust among young people in contrast to established politicians and the governments of many countries who are confronted with a lack of trust. Here, one could stipulate that the lack of trust results in fewer environmental action. Another assumption could however lie in trust being a catalysator for everyday climate positive practices.

This thesis will therefore attempt to find evidence to the question:

Does trust in youth leaders inspire young people in western Europe (ages 18-26) to undertake environmental action in the form of daily practices?

The answer to this question is of high societal and scientific relevance. Regarding the latter, not only are these small-scale actions understudied, but also the effect youth leaders have on the exercise of those or if trust has an influence on them. While there exist studies on trust, trust and youth leaders as well as on trust and climate action, there is a knowledge gap about if trust in youth leaders influences environmental action, which this paper however intends to fill by providing insights on small scale actions and the effect of youth leaders in facilitating this form of climate activism. As trust was found to be an important mechanism for human interaction, democracies and social cohesion (Nguyen, 2017), it is worth being further studied, especially since it seems to evoke positive effects. If youth leaders can also cause trust and its positive effects, is thus another interesting area to study. Regarding the former, due to the progressing climate change, a behavior shift is of great urgency to face and preferably reduce the consequences of it (Whitmarsh, 2021). Understanding which factors might favor such shifts can contribute to a greater understanding of how to implement more climate positive behavior patterns, and are therefore of high societal relevance. Finally, understanding the interplay of trust, youth leaders and climate activism could result in great lessons for future activist strategies and result e.g., in frameworks that promote the role of youth leaders.

State of the Art - Theory

The main hypothesis underlying this thesis is that trust in young climate activists motivates everyday climate action. While every day actions may seem small in scale, the collective impact and positive externalities deriving from such actions are theorized to be highly impactful on both climate policymaking and on planetary health (Bergman, et al. 2010). The separate literatures on youth activism and trust can provide some clues about how trust in leadership may motivate everyday climate action. In what follows, this literature will be systematically unpacked and integrated to hypothesize about how trust in youth leaders may encourage everyday climate action.

a. Trust and climate action

Regardless of the urgency to participate in environmental action due to the advancing climate change and its consequences, many people still do not participate in it. Reasons for this standstill may lie in psychological barriers. These barriers contributing to climate inaction include limited understanding of the issue at hand, entrenched ideological beliefs that hinder environmentally friendly attitudes and actions, comparison with influential peers, the inertia of past investments and habitual behaviors, skepticism towards authorities and experts, apprehension about the risks associated with change, and others (APA Task Force, 2009; Gifford, 2011). Influential is however also the interplay of such tendencies, paired with the impact of social relations and social structures (Schmitt, et al. 2020). Trust may help overcome these hurdles.

Trust is beginning to attract the attention of climate change scholars. The emerging literature on this topic agrees on trust being interconnected with environmental concern and action (Bodor, et al., 2020). Trust always includes a certain expectation in others. The reactions to this expectation are unforeseen, creating an uncertain future which naturally involves risks. Despite these risks and because of them, people have to trust despite their uncertainty. Considering and assessing the outcomes are thus a commitment one enters in order to trust (Hardin, 2006). If this commitment to trust is taken, many consequences follow.

Trust has both interpersonal and collective impacts. Trust deepens connections and intimacy while facilitating interactions and extending their durability. This results in a reduction of control, suspicion and precaution, thus trust reduces transaction costs in economic terms (Bromiley & Harris, 2006). In social terms trust creates purer relationships. Additionally, it encourages creativity and innovation as well as spontaneity. Trust is also expected to increase solidarity, empathy and inclusion, creating a greater possibility for community. Trust furthermore mobilizes participation, cooperation, common thinking, action against inequalities and undertaking of collective responsibility (Sztompka, 1999). Bodor et al.´s (2020) research findings prove that high levels of trust strengthen the feeling of individual responsibility, translating into an increased willingness to participate in climate action. Additionally, and resulting from the eagerness to take action, people with high levels of trust are also more likely to accept the fact of human-made climate change and feel a concern because of it. Taken together, these findings

suggest that trust can also be a foundation for environmental action. Yet the effect of trust is not very obvious when policy support is questioned or controversial, as in the case of climate change. Furthermore, it is unclear whether individuals can catalyze trust in a cause, like the need to address climate change. Therefore, this research intends to understand if youth leaders can receive this support through trust and motivate to participate in bottom-up climate action, especially when the support for policy remains rather low.

b. Dimensions of trust linked with characteristics of youth leaders

Good youth leaders must inspire trust. The literature on youth leadership emphasizes attributes of youth leaders which make them effective. These can be overlaid against the different dimensions of trust. To demonstrate, these dimensions will be presented and connected with the characteristics and expectations of a good youth leader. If young people can place their trust in youth leaders who fulfill the dimensions of trust, will be researched in the following. Thus, by overlaying these literatures and assuming that the outcome of trust in youth environmental leaders results in bottom-up climate action, the following testable hypotheses can be put forward:

A first dimension can be named ***ability*** or competence and is an essential element of trust. It describes that a certain knowledge, skill or competence a person has in an area, evokes trust in people on tasks that are related to that area (Mayer, et al., 1995). A youth environmental leader holds specific knowledge about climate matters. Considering e.g., the person of Luisa Neubauer, it is visible that she gained specific knowledge through her studies of Geography in the field of environmental matters. Additionally, she offers great skills in communicating and presenting her concerns (Müller, 2023). Through the capability of being excellent in certain areas, regardless of whether it is knowledge related or skill related (Shek, et al. 2019), a youth leader can increase trustworthiness, fulfilling the expectation others hold towards them. This results in the first hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: The higher individual A's perception of a youth leader's ability is, the more likely he or she is to participate in bottom- up climate action.

Related to ability is the concept of ***reliability***. Trough a consistent and dependable behavior of the trustee, trust can be strengthened. By meeting commitments and obligations, as well as being responsible, reliability rises (Johnson-George & Swap, 1982). Youth leaders hold the strong want to create change and make a difference. They have to be determined to work towards solutions, always wanting to help others and committing to their tasks (Mortensen et al. 2014). Modeling and mentoring are also characteristics Mortensen et al. (2014) mentions. They refer to a leader being a volunteer guide, a mentor and a role model without putting unwanted pressure or force onto people. A good youth leader is thus a person to offer motivation or guidance with confidence rather than one who controls with power which is why they are theorized to be committed to working collectively. Through joining many people to discuss and collaborate, leadership becomes more powerful because of the collective and strong support and the unity to fight for a certain matter together (Mortensen et al. 2014) By representing the group and

formulating its intentions for others, the reliable character is shaped further (Cassell, Huffaker, Tversky & Ferriman, 2006). Considering how many people joined the movement Fridays for Future, inspired first by Greta Thunberg in Sweden, and today happening worldwide through the leadership of many international youth leaders (Bowman, 2021), it appears that youth leaders are able to unite and create trust and collectivity through mentoring and being dependable. The second hypothesis arises, stating:

Hypothesis 2: The higher individual A's perception of a youth leader's reliability is, the more likely he or she is to participate in bottom- up climate action.

A further dimension is ***consistency*** which stands for the stability and predictability of another persons´ actions, especially shaped trough credible communication in all different circumstances (Butler, 1991). As a good leader is distinguished by a strong character, describing determinism and idealism in the sense of true motives (Mortensen et al 2014), consistency can be expected. It implies that a person does not follow egoistic motives but is strongminded to create change with the best interest in their community. This resonates with literature that specifies social responsibility, self- reflection, ethical expectations meaning a moral character and excellence in certain areas, especially the ones of intrapersonal and interpersonal development (Shek, et al. 2019) as being core characteristics associated with good youth leadership. The determination to be the vehicle and driving force behind a sustainable change in communities and resulting less focus on power, status achievement and authority, marks a great difference between youth and adult leaders (Mortensen, et al., 2014). An example for a consistent behavior of a youth climate leader, is the sailing trip of Greta Thunberg to the UN climate summits in New York. As she wanted to be present at the conferences but did not want to act in contrary to her principles in how to protect the climate, she decided to sail to the United States on a zero-emissions yacht to minimize her carbon footprint (BBC, 2019). Consistency in words and actions can thus be seen as a characteristic of youth leaders and leads to trust in them. This creates the third hypothesis.

Hypothesis 3: The higher individual A's perception of a youth leader's consistency is, the more he or she is to participate in bottom- up climate action.

Fairness is a dimension which includes morals the trustee perceives as important, and which lead to a fair and equal treatment of others. This also excludes a biased thinking and once again evokes increased trust (Diekmann, 2007). Perceptions of injustice and bias are often associated with mistrust in government and policymaking (Van der Ploeg, 2020). This can be seen, for instance, in the farmers protests that have re-shaped the Dutch political landscape. Instead, perceptions of fairness are shown to increase acceptance of policies and practices, even when they come with some risk and burden (Maestre-Andrés, et al. 2019) To connect this with youth leaders, according to the opinion of many young people, anyone could be a leader at any time, meaning that leadership is not reserved for certain people, but rather that it is open to anyone who desires to create change regardless of age, ethnicity, height, etc. Additionally, youth leaders invite everyone to be part of the guided community, here too trying to spread equality and fairness (Mortensen et al. 2014). Nyombi Morris is a youth climate leader from Uganda

who comes from a very poor background. He grew up in slums, could not afford education and experienced climate change consequences very frequently due to floods. Despite his background, he realized becoming a leader and now motivates others to join activism despite potentially missing chances (Morris, 2021). With respect to the dimension of fairness, hypothesis 4 states:

> *Hypothesis 4: The higher individual A's perception of a youth leader's fairness is, the more likely he or she is to participate in bottom- up climate action.*

A last dimension of trust consists of **openness** or **transparency**. Through expressed feelings, shared thoughts and information, and a renouncement of cover-ups, trust develops and strengthens (Ibrahim & Ribbers, 2007). As skills like listening and communicating with others mark another characteristic of a good youth leader (Mitra, Sanders, & Perkins, 2010), they also meet the dimension of openness. Lack of transparency is often argued to be a key reason for low trust in government and in climate initiatives, like the green deal (Blind, 2007). This is not necessarily the case for climate activists who are known to openly share their believes, motives, and actions through diverse communication lines. Greta Thunberg for example, shows a lot of openness trough showing many of her emotions, especially her anger, but also when she speaks about the autism she is living with, making herself potentially vulnerable (Hattenstone, 2021). Luisa Neubauer, the German leader, equally makes herself transparent through showing emotions and sharing thoughts and information with her audiences, e.g., especially visible on social media (Neubauer, n.d.). The last hypothesis therefore postulates:

> *Hypothesis 5: The higher individual A's perception of a youth leader's transparency is, the more likely he or she is to participate in bottom-up climate action.*

Research Design

The overarching aim of this thesis is to examine whether trust in young climate activists translates into everyday climate action of their followers. It achieves this by testing the formulated five hypotheses which propose that trusting climate activists among a number of dimensions is positively associated with participating in everyday actions. Accordingly, this thesis runs a predictive model (regression analysis) on a data set collected via an online survey. More specific details about this approach are detailed below.

> *a. Materials: Survey Data*

The data for testing the hypotheses were collected by an online survey tool designed for the purposes of the thesis (for the questionnaire see Appendix) and conducted using the online platform, Qualtrics (https: www.qualtrics.com). The sample of this study consists of answers of first to third year students who are enrolled in the study program *Public Governance across Borders* or *Management, Society and Technology* at the University of Twente in Enschede, Netherlands. Together all invited participants created a sample size of 192 people, with a final participation rate of 60 people, aged between

18 and 26 years. On the 27th of May 2024, all students were invited to take the survey via an anonymous link, receiving a first invitation via the different WhatsApp groups of their years and several reminders. After ten days during which the survey was open for participation, the data was exported, and the survey filling time therefore completed. The participation remained voluntary for all respondents, and they had to give consent to be able to start answering the questionnaire.

The survey was distributed in English, which is not the first language of many participants. The questionnaire was thus formulated as simple as possible to understand and since both programs are taught in English, it is fair to assume the comprehension of the participants. As the paper intends to understand if young people trust in youth leaders and change their environmental behavior, the respondents have to consist of a peer of young people. As the chosen participants are located in countries where movements like Fridays for Future were very present over recent years, it was to assume that they are familiar with youth environmental leaders which is a prerequisite for being able to respond to the questions in the survey. Apart from this factor, the peer was mostly chosen out of accessibility reasons as this thesis is also written at the University of Twente.

Table 1 provides a summary of the sample's demographics. 60 students participated in the survey, which makes a respond rate of 31%. The mean age is 22 years. Gender wise, 40 people indicated to identify as female, 18 as male and 2 did not provide an answer. Female people thus form a majority of 67% and the percentage rate of male participants marks 30%. In the programs, the closest approximation for the gender distribution of all three years lies at 50% male, and 50% female. The participation rate of female students was thus higher. The variation of nationality is rather small, consisting of 49 Germans, 5 Dutch people, one Italian, one Austrian, one Hungarian and one person with dual citizenship Spanish and German. A majority of 82% being German despite the survey being conducted at a Dutch university can probably be explained by the fact that many of the students of the joint bachelor's program *Public Governance across Borders* come from a German university.

Table 1 Demographic Data

	Sample Mean	Min-Max
Age	22	18-26
	Number	Percentage
Female	40	67%
Male	18	30%
German Nationals	49	82%
Dutch Nationals	5	8%
Italian	1	2%
Austrian	1	2%
Hungarian	1	2%
Other	1	2%

b. Questionnaire

The survey was created and executed with the program Qualtrics from which the data was later exported. It includes questions about people's attitudes and feelings towards climate change as well as questions about their relation to youth leaders, to understand how relevant these topics are to them and if they are confronted with them. Those questions are formulated as statements, the participants can agree or disagree with. To receive answers on the created hypotheses, climate action as the dependent variable and trust in youth leaders as the independent one have to be analyzed. To be able to do so, the survey offers questions about actions the young people might have taken, such as examples that were given earlier like bike riding, being vegetarian, etc. Respondents can choose to agree or disagree whether they implement such practices in their daily life, creating the possibility to calculate a "climate action score" per person, depending on their answers. In order to operationalize the dimensions of trust, participants are asked to position themselves on a five-point-scale, agreeing or disagreeing with statements that describe the different features of youth leaders. As outlined in the theory section, the different dimensions of trust are combined with behaviors of youth leaders, creating statements such as "Youth leaders hold specific knowledge" or "Youth leaders openly share thoughts and information" (see Appendix). Here too, an overall "trust score" can be created and assigned with every person, but also "dimension scores" for each of the five dimensions. Three open ended questions about the interaction and perception of youth leaders, offer the possibility to collect some qualitative data for the case that the quantitative data proves itself to not explain anything.

c. Methods: Regression Analysis

In order to process and analyze the data set derived from the survey responses, Excel and the statistical computing program R were utilized. In a first step, the data was organized in Excel and descriptive statistics were created about the demographics, attitudes and feelings of the participants to

receive an overview about the data and identify characteristics. Measures like means, standard deviations or percentage rates were utilized to describe averages or frequency distributions. To test the hypotheses which means assessing the correlation and the influence of the independent variables: *ability*, *reliability*, *consistency*, *fairness* and *openness* on the dependent variable bottom-up *climate action*, a multiple regression analysis was conducted by calculating the ordinary least squares (OLS). This calculation is to estimate the parameters of the regression equation. A summary sheet of this regression then provides the important values for an analysis. The P-Value which must be < 0,05 is analyzed to proof whether the chosen model explains something or not. Significance codes can be read in order to assess which degree of significance the variable reaches (Babbie, 2021). By applying the climate attitudes score, gender and nationality as controls to see if the results change, a regression analysis was once more conducted. Additionally, a correlation analysis was executed in order to test the correlation between the different variables. To interpret such results, it was considered that the closer the coefficient is to 1, the higher the positive correlation. The following code was employed to conduct the analysis:

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> lm(formula = climate ~ ability + reliability + consistency +  fairness + openness, data)
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A note on goodness of fit. The R square value is analyzed to see whether the independent variables predict the dependent one, and the adjusted R square value, if it is < R square, indicates whether the chosen independent variables are relevant for the model. In short, this measure indicates how well the data fit the regression model (the goodness of fit). The F-test is conducted to assess the significance of the model, testing the linear relationship between the dependent and independent variables. It must be > 1. From the T-test one can conclude the relevancy of the different variables. If the T value is > 1, it shows that the variable is relevant.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics

	Average	Standard Deviation	Min-Max
Climate action (DV)	9	2,92	0-13
IVs			
Ability	3,64	0,93	1-5
Reliability	3,61	0,93	1-5
Consistency	3,82	0,93	1-5
Fairness	3,17	0,99	1-5
Openness	3,81	0,83	1-5
Controls			
Climate attitudes	4,75	1,53	0-6
Gender			
Nationality			

Operationalization

a. Dependent Variable

The dependent variable *climate action* was created through questions on actions the participants include in their daily lives. Summarized from examples in the studied literature, a collection of 13 actions was made which are known to be small scale and climate positive. Among these are factors like using public transport, recycling, changing eating habits, consuming organic products, etc. (see Appendix for entire questionnaire). All actions can be applied individually and fulfilled in an every-day life. Respondents could choose to agree or disagree whether they had implemented such practices in their daily lives within the past 12 months. Resulting from whether they agreed or not, a *yes* was assigned to the number one and a *no* to the number 0. That way, a climate action score could be calculated for every individual, ranging from 0 to 13 possible points. An average score of 9 reveals that the overall climate action among the participants is high, which shows that many of them design their lives climate friendly and actively change their routines and consumption behavior into a climate positive one. The standard deviation which is almost 3 shows that many even have a higher climate action score and others a lower one, which nevertheless remains in an area in which almost half of the described actions are implemented.

b. Independent Variables

To operationalize the independent variables for trust to test the hypotheses, statements about the characteristics of youth leaders were created. On a scale of 1 to 5, respondents could choose whether they strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), neither disagree nor agree (3), agree (4), or strongly agree (5) with 21 statements starting with "Youth Environmental Leaders are…". The statements were divided in the five dimensions, they were however not explicitly mentioned as e.g. "Youth leaders are fair", but indirectly inquired through characteristics that shape these dimensions. All characteristics of youth leaders that align with the five dimensions of trust were established in the theory section and thereafter put into statements for the survey. For the dimension of *ability*, the characteristics that were analyzed in the theory section to be significant for youth leaders were thus divided into three statements, testing for the skills, knowledge and competences youth leaders offer. The *reliability* dimension was operationalized by five statements that ask for the respondents' perception of youth leaders as dependable, reliable, responsible, and committed. The four statements to test for *consistency* were considered with characteristics like credibility, integrity, pure motives, and moral fiber. For the *fairness* dimension, participants were asked in four statements whether they agree with youth leaders being inclusive, fair and inviting to everyone. The last dimension *openness* was inquired by five statements about youth leaders being open and transparent, showing vulnerability, expressing feeling and thoughts and thoroughly explaining decisions. All statements can be examined in detail in the Appendix.
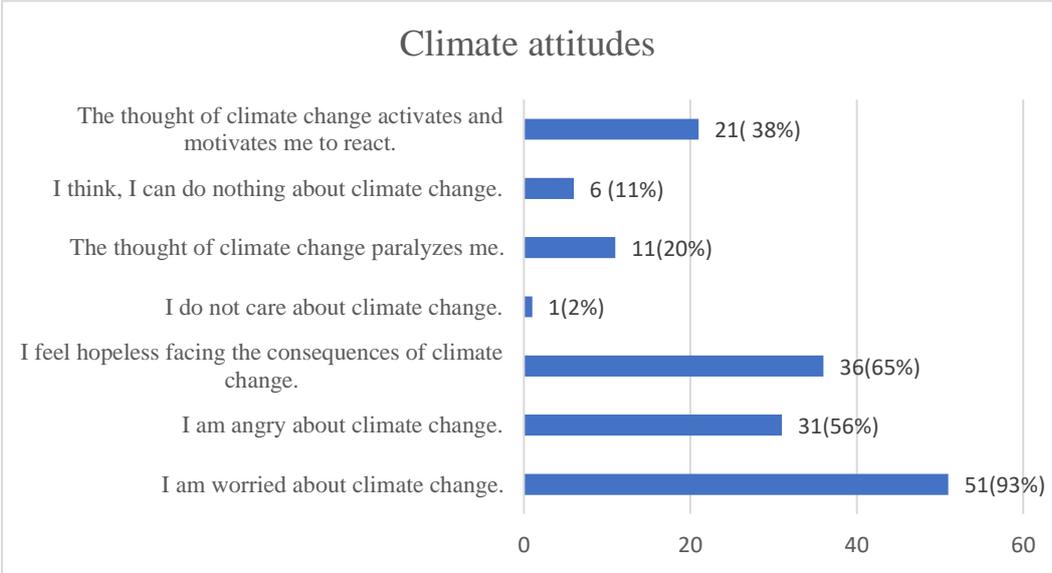
c. Controls

For an increased validity of the survey, the regression was additionally run with controls. One important control is *climate attitudes*. To gather information on the general climate attitudes of the young people

filling the survey, they were asked to agree or disagree with statements concerning their role in a time where the climate changes, their attitudes towards it and their feelings about it. Here too, through assigning a *yes* to a 1 and a *no* to a 0, a climate attitudes score could be calculated, reaching from 0 to 6 possible points. A general concern and worry about climate change is observable between the participants, as 93% responded to be worried and 56% also identified with the emotion of anger. Many participants also feel hopeless facing the consequences and in some people that results in paralysis (20%) or in the belief that they can do nothing about climate change (11%). On the other hand, 38% of the young people state that they are nevertheless activated and motivated by the though of climate change to react (Figure 1).

Concerning the attitudes, one can summarize they are all pointing to strong climate awareness. 90% of the respondents are willing to change their behavior in order to protect the climate and consider the consequences of their behavior on the environment in decisions. Similarly high is the attitude that everyday or bottom-up climate action contributes to its protection (87%) or the readiness to be motivated by others to be climate friendly (85%). A majority of 70% is additionally convinced that they as individuals can contribute to a better climate. Only the willingness to participate in organized groups that intend to protect the environment, is lower, reaches however still a majority of 53%. Overall, the participants can thus be described as very climate aware with a high willingness to behave positively towards the environment.

Figure 1 Climate attitudes

Gender was used as another control, testing for possible differences within the genders on their climate action scores and perceptions of trust. A negative value from the regression (-0,57, see Table 3) reveals

however that there is a negative relation and no significance, describing no influence of the gender on the outcome *climate action*.

The model was additionally controlled on *nationality* to see whether this influences the outcome. As the value for nationality from the regression is close to one (0,67, Table 3), one can conclude that nationality is positively associated with climate action. It can also be analyzed as being a factor of small significance. Because the variety in nationality is however rather small (see Table 1), this result is of no great relevance.

Analysis

a. *Do young people trust in youth leaders?*

To analyze if young people perceive youth leaders as trustworthy, they were asked to provide information on their general relation with trust first. An average of 4,16 from a scale of 1 to 5, reveals that most participants proclaim trust as important in their daily lives. On whether most people can be trusted, the students respond however rather moderately, creating an average of 2,98 which speaks for a generally lower willingness or possibility to trust in most people. When asked directly if the participants trust in youth leaders, the average between "I do not trust at all in them" (=1) and "I highly trust in them" (=5) lies at 3,35, presenting thus a moderate tendency towards their overall trust in youth leaders.

In order to understand the role of trust further, not only quantitative data was collected through the questionnaire, but also qualitative data through an open-ended question. Participants were asked if they perceive youth leaders as more trustworthy than other leaders and if they do so, why. While 40% of all participants did not provide any answer, a majority with 69% of those who did, responded with yes and offered explanation.

The strongest reason for more trust in youth environmental leaders which was mentioned several times, lies in the fact that due to their age, they can relate better to the issues the youth faces as they are in the same positions and confronted with the same consequences of climate change in their future. The matter is therefore more important and more urgent to them, they seem to "care more strongly about sustainable solutions" than older people which makes them, according to young people, more relatable. For the same reason, youth leaders are also described as closer to the people and more tangible, more authentic, more approachable, more honest and "more human". The dimension of openness as a factor of trust thus aligns with the perception of the trustworthiness of youth leaders by young people. Due to the enhanced proximity between the leaders and the youth, some describe youth leaders as figures of identification. Unlike role models, they are seen not as individuals to look up to, but as peers who are just like you. "I can identify with them more than with older leaders".

A very prominent alternative argument offered by the respondents builds on the claim that youth leaders are more idealistic and therefore have purer motives. They show the strong will to better the circumstances and to provide perspectives, sometimes also driven by some sort of naivety. According to the surveyed young people, they are more independent because they do not have to represent companies, governments, or lobby groups. This in turn makes youth leaders less corrupted, less compromised, and also less spoiled as there can be no great monetary motives behind their actions. Because of the non-existing representation of institutions, combined with their idealistic thinking, youth leaders do not necessarily attempt to be likeable, but rather show "brutal honesty" and offensiveness to underline the urgency of their causes. The true motive is thus seen as admirable, increases trustworthiness and follows the dimension of consistency as the work is executed with the best interest for others.

Additionally contributing to the consistency dimension, but also to the one of openness, is the stated argument that youth leaders are actively involved and can be found at protests. They remain true to their tasks in fighting for climate justice in a joined community and openly share their thoughts and feelings on such events, underlined by the quote "their conviction is more tangible". Because "they were activists before becoming leaders", their intentions are clear to young people which increases their trust in youth leaders and also touches upon the dimension of reliability as they stay committed.

A final argument given for the strong trustworthiness of young leaders consists of their well rated communication abilities to reach young people, also because "they are communicating more honest". This argument aligns with the ability or competence dimension in which communication skills are described as a factor of trust.

A connection of youth leaders and trust is hereafter established. Although the trust in youth leaders by the participants is not extremely high (median at 3,35 of 5), it is present and builds a foundation in order to analyze the hypotheses that have been put forward. Therefore, it remains to be analyzed whether this connection between youth leaders and trust translates into bottom-up climate action.

b. Does trust translate into climate Action?

The research question that motivates this thesis is, "Does trust in youth leaders inspire young people in western Europe (ages 18-26) to undertake environmental action in the form of daily practices?". Therefore, it was necessary to establish that such trusting feelings existed. The aforementioned results were thus analyzed in order to create a foundation and gain information on the general atmosphere around the topic of climate change, trust and youth leaders. The multiple linear regression analysis was performed to verify or falsify the different hypotheses, testing for a correlation between the dependent variable bottom-up *climate action* and the independent variables *ability*, *reliability*, *consistency*, *fairness* and *openness*. The results are reported in Table 3 and discussed below.

Table 3 Regression Results

Ability	1.6359 (0.6166) *
Reliability	-0.5502(0.7318)
Consistency	0.1237 (0.6792)
Fairness	-0.5892 (0.5885)
Openness	-0.5209 0.5056)
Climate attitudes	1.1710 (0.3002) ***
Gender	-0.5713(0.6517)
Nationality	0.6774 (0.3399)
Constant	2.4863 (1.5196)
N	60
R2	Without controls: 0.2278, Adjusted R-squared: 0.1562 With controls: 0.4282, Adjusted R-squared: 0.3385
F-statistic	Without controls: 3.185 54 DF, p-value: 0.01364 With controls: 4.773 51 DF, p-value: 0.0002049

c. Result: Trust in youth activists is only weakly associated with climate action.

Resulting from the regression, trust in youth environmental leaders appears to not have a strong effect on climate action. As the R-square value is rather low (0,23, Table 3), one can observe that the fit of the model is not very good which means that it does not explain the dependent variable *climate action* very well. Since the overall p-value remains below 0.05, one can however state that the model provides information and explains something. Considering the different dimensions in detail, only *ability* seems to be both positively and significantly associated with adopting climate action (1,64, Tabel 3). Therefore, only H1 is supported. The remaining hypothesis 2-5 are rejected as the dimensions are of no significance for the model. Additionally, their standard deviations show values close to zero (positive and negative) which stresses the rejection of them being meaningful independent variables for climate action. While *consistency* shows a weak value of 0,12 (Table 3) which does not speak for an association, *reliability* (-0,55, Table 3), *fairness* (-0,58, Table 3), and *openness* (-0,52, Table 3) are negatively related. These values are, following the fundamental statements of the hypotheses, not expected. Since these variables are however also not significant, there is no observable effect of them on climate action which is why

the hypotheses can simply be rejected. *Ability* thus remains to be the only dimension of trust that influences climate action.

Similar effects can be seen by analyzing the correlation coefficients of the different independent variables with the dependent variable trust. All dimensions (*reliability, consistency, fairness and openness*) apart from *ability*, are associated with a weak correlation coefficient (see Table 4) which does not speak for a great effect between them and climate action either. Ability is as the only dimension assigned with the r-value 0,46 (Table 4) which shows a moderate correlation and thus more influence of the variable on climate action. All correlation graphs can be reviewed in the Appendix.

Table 4 Correlation Coefficients

IVs	R=
Ability	0.4587137
Reliability	0.3814072
Consistency	0.3987882
Fairness	0.3006795
Openness	0.3202425

These quantitative findings from the regression align with some of the other qualitative findings. Since the underlying attempt lies in understanding if trust in youth leaders plays a driving role for bottom-up climate action, the students were also asked to provide information on their relation to youth leaders. 88% stated to "know, follow, or support youth environmental leaders" and when asked "Do you actively follow any youth leaders on social media (Instagram, TikTok, X) or on the news? If yes, where?" (see questionnaire in the Appendix), the most common answer resulted in Instagram and some also on TikTok or X. A majority of 65% reported to be inspired by youth leaders to behave climate friendly, controlling that there is an influence of youth environmental leaders on the climate behavior of young people. When asked however "Have you started any new practices (e.g., biking, vegetarianism, protesting...) because of Youth Leaders? If yes, which ones?", 38% did not provide any answer and of those who did, a minority of 43% replied with yes. Behavioral changes they mentioned mostly consist of changing eating habits with a trend to vegetarianism or veganism. Few also mentioned using more public transportation or joining protests because of youth leaders. A clear effect of youth leaders on the actual realization of climate action in the daily lives of young people can therefore not be observed, as the quantitative findings equally proof.

> d. *Result: Attitudes trump trust.*

The controls *gender* and *nationality* do not appear to be of great relevance for the model. Gender is not positively or significantly associated (-0,57, Table 3) and nationality not very meaningful because of its

strong homogeneity within most participants, since 82% are German (Table 1). The control *climate attitudes* however seems to be very relevant, showing a strong significance for the variable in the regression and a strong standard deviation value of 1,17 (Table 3). This controls that there are factors which highly influence the dependent variable climate action and shows that climate attitudes are the strongest significant predictor among all here analyzed factors. As climate attitudes do not mark a dimension of trust, trust overall turns out to be of rather weak influence on climate action.

Since, as seen in the descriptive statistics of Table 2, the general climate action average is very high, there must nevertheless be features which strongly influence this behavior. The attitudes of which the average is also very high which shows concern for the climate are one of them. The ability of youth leaders also marks an influence. Since all other dimensions of trust are not significant, trust in general is no influential variable to explain the dependent one. There must be however other factors which lead to increased climate action of young people, especially since it appears to be that, at least within the cohort of the respondents, young people strongly involve bottom-up climate actions in their daily lives.

Discussion

a. Education as an influence

The fact that the average climate action score between the participants is so high (9, Table 2), is something to be considered as it is the desired outcome this paper intends to analyze. By putting forward the mentioned hypotheses, the assumptions were made that the higher the people´s perceptions of a youth leaders´ *ability, reliability, consistency, fairness,* or *openness* is, the more likely they are to participate in climate action. Except for the hypothesis containing *ability*, all others including the left trust dimensions, could be rejected. Trust has hereafter no effect on climate action. Gender and nationality as controls were also found to be non-influential which can probably also be explained by the fact that the peer was rather small and homogeneous, consisting of a majority of female respondents and an even greater majority of German young people. Only climate attitudes as a control, which also showed a high average (4,75, Table 2), pointing towards a great concern for the environment, was found to be very influential and significant for climate action.

The positive and significant relationship found between attitudes and climate action is a good indication for several reasons. First, this is already expected in the literature and therefore aligns with it. Several scholars found that the attitudes and perceptions people have of climate change are very influential on their behavior towards the climate. Such perceptions and attitudes can be shaped and influenced and are mostly stronger predictors for a behavior change than e.g., political guidelines or sanctions (Weber, 2010; Whitmarsh, 2009). Since there is a positive correlation between high climate attitudes and high climate action in this analysis, it can only support this assumption and therefore be accepted as a valid predictor for climate action. Second, attitudes can be shaped by information and education. There is a

lesson to be learned here: If messages are well articulated, informative, and easy to process, the respondents can accept them and adapt their attitudes. Different techniques of informing or shaping the attitude can be applied, ranging from creating a narrative, over repetitive small reminders, to confronting with hard facts (Albarracin & Johnson, 2018). The possibility that young people can be strongly shaped in their attitudes towards the climate is thus existent, especially since they visit educational institutions in which the prerequisites for such information spending are given. There might lie more indirect effects behind the influencing variable of attitudes, these were however not part of this research and would exceed the scope of this thesis.

Interestingly appears the observation that the only accepted variable *ability*, is also strongly shaped by information and education. In order for the participants to assess youth leader´s ability traits, they were asked about the perception of their knowledge and their communication and networking skill. These factors also point towards the collection of information and its spreading, as well as education in knowledge and skills. Educating and informing young people therefore appears to be relevant in order to shape the attitudes of the youth towards climate change and to motivate and influence them to get involved in climate action. The latter is thus testified to be influenceable.

b. Trust as no irrelevant factor

While the assumptions were that the hypotheses would be accepted, it was still not a surprise when they were not. What was however surprising, were the negative values of the variables *reliability*, *fairness* and *openness* (Table 3). These might be explained by different factors. It is possible that the survey reached some limitations in testing trust in youth leaders. Due to different perceptions of trust in general, the dimensions of trust and its subcategories, it might have happened that the understanding of the respondents did not align with those meant when the survey was created. Differences in the perceptions might have also occurred because of translation issues (most respondents do not speak English as their first language) or due to the wording of the questions or statements which was interpreted differently. Additionally, the chosen dimensions might not have aligned with dimensions the participants would have chosen as categories of trust. Such factors might have led to a mistake in the construct validity, resulting in the rejection of the hypotheses. Apart from that, it is possible that the chosen measures for the survey were imprecise, meaning they lack specificity or detail, and may not accurately or sensitively capture the nuances of what is being measured. More nuances were however offered by the included qualitative questions, leading to another surprise found in the results.

Especially the qualitative question "Compared to other leaders, would you say that Youth Leaders are (more) trustworthy? If yes, why?" (see Appendix), offered results which highlighted trust in youth leaders as something present and important. In their answers, as mentioned earlier, the participants listed arguments why youth leaders are more trustworthy than others. Here it is observable that, with their own words, young people described several of the trust dimensions, demonstrating that most of the dimensions were not badly chosen or irrelevant. *Ability* was a mentioned dimension the participants described

18

by speaking of the communication skills youth leaders have. By speaking of the clear intentions and the constant will to pursue the set aim, the dimension *reliability* also finds a mention. *Consistency* was another dimension which was paraphrased by arguing that youth leaders follow true motives, remain honest, actively get involved and more. Also, *openness* was mentioned several times by sharing arguments about the proximity to youth leaders, their realness and their impressive sharing of thoughts and feelings. All dimensions, apart from *fairness*, are thus indirectly enumerated by the respondents and result in the assumptions that trust in youth leaders is existent and relevant and that youth leaders are perceived as trustworthy. It also shows that the chosen dimensions are not randomly or wrongly chosen as they find their mention in the responses without them being requested or asked for. Only fairness appears to be rather irrelevant as it is not listed in the qualitative responses and according to the regression also not significant. Compared to all other dimensions, it also reaches the lowest average which underlines that the respondents, regardless of whether they find fairness important or not, do not perceive youth leaders as very fair.

Summarizing from the qualitative questions youth leaders are trustworthy. If one does the same for the descriptive statistics, a large majority finds trust important and a small, but existent majority, trusts in youth leaders. When analyzing the average values for the different trust dimensions, it is also visible that all show a tendency towards the acceptance of them rather than a rejection, resulting in a tendency towards trust in youth leaders as well. Trust is therefore an important mechanism and youth leaders are perceived as trustworthy people, even more than other leaders. However, this trust does not seem to translate into bottom-up climate action. Because as described earlier, trust is nevertheless of such great relevance for human interaction, societies, and crisis management, it should be further studied how such trust of young people in youth leaders can be used to advantage.

c. Limitations

Due to the scope of this research, but also because of other factors, this thesis reaches many limitations. Starting with the chosen peer, it is obvious that the N=60 is quite small and the results thus less generalizable. Although expected differently, the nationality of the participants is very homogeneous, not really reflecting a variety of young people in western Europe as intended in the research question. This also minders the generalizability of the results for western European people, rather demonstrating German views. Additionally, it is to assume that the peer group was strongly biased, meaning that their results do not depict the reality very well. The survey was only conducted among university students who are all confronted with environmental matters and leadership themes in their study programs. As university students choose their programs voluntarily, it is to assume that they are thus interested in these matters and show a certain concern for it. The inclusion of a broader peer with young people who are either studying in other thematic fields or pursue other occupations, would have probably led to more reliable and more diverse results. For practicality reasons and the scope of the research, they were however chosen as such. Future studies with more researchers and resources could however extent such a

study to a wider public to include many more young people from other European countries. By, for example, spreading the survey to youth in a public area in several countries, including big cities as well as small towns, a wider range of people could be reached, increasing the generalizability of the results.

Another limitation of this research might lie in the fact that it is not entirely clear how present youth leaders actually are in the lives of young people. When asked if they actively follow youth leaders, the majority of the participants answered with *no* and a majority also answered *no* to the question if they incorporate new practices because of youth leaders in their lives. If it is thus the case that youth leaders do not play a great role in the lives of young people, it is questionable if the survey was designed appropriately. When many participants answered all questions about their perception of youth leaders rather randomly because they are not really in contact or confronted with them, the results could be distorted. This however can neither be confirmed nor rejected. To correct such a problem in future research, it could be considered to run experiments instead, to observe if young people change their behavior due to youth leaders, not having to rely on the answers given by themselves. Another research suggestion that aligns with the chosen approach would be to conduct a survey that initially asks about respondents' relationship to youth leaders, continuing only with those who indicate they actively follow these leaders. With this approach, a random response to the perceived image of youth leaders could be better excluded.

A last comment concerning the limitations can be made to the chosen model. It might be that trust did not affect climate action directly, but indirectly. This could however not be reproduced with the chosen model. More complex models, such as a hurdle model or a structural equation model might have been a better fit for this research. Because of the scope of this thesis and the capacity of the researcher, these other models could not be applied, which leads to the results as presented.

d. Outlook

As the climate attitudes proved to be such influential, it can be stated that education and information for young people in order to shape their behavior towards the environment, are very important. This knowledge should be further applied in schools and universities where information on climate change and climate protection can be spend to a great extent. Public campaigns and events could also present valuable possibilities to inform and educate young people in an appealing way. Since social media is the main source of information for youth (Hasebrink, et al. 2021), these platforms could also be applied more in offering information about climate change. Because youth environmental leaders are also present on such platforms, they could use their reach on social media even more in order to inform young people. As many respondents of this survey stated that youth leaders are competent, hold knowledge and are skilled at communicating, youth leaders appear to be well fitted and relevant actors in promoting such information to young people to shape their attitudes and thus their behavior.

Although this research could not prove that trust in youth leaders promotes climate action, it does show that trust is important for young people and that youth leaders are perceived as more trustworthy leaders than others. As trust in leaders is essential for the effectiveness and efficiency of the matter at stake, it puts youth environmental leaders in a very powerful position. However, many youth leaders are probably not present enough as they mostly do not receive as much attention as adult leaders. One can assume that with a higher public presence of youth leaders, their trustworthiness would increase even further. Youth leaders should thus be given more attention and a larger stage for their information and quests. By inviting them to more important events, by supporting them in their campaigns and by promoting their role further, they could become more present for young people, hopefully also inspiring others to join that path. Through social media presence, the organization and attendance of community and networking events, workshops and trainings, and active protesting, youth environmental leaders can also by themselves contribute to their presence and trustworthiness for young people. Hereby, as it became visible in the analysis of this research, they do not necessarily have to function as role models for other young people, but rather as figures of identification. In fighting for climate protection together, youth leaders and young people can work in a joint action. This includes that young people do not participate in climate action because of youth leaders, but rather with them, creating unity between young people which can be very valuable for protecting the climate.

Conclusion

Understanding if trust of young western European people in youth environmental leaders translates into greater bottom-up climate action was the underlying purpose of this thesis. Testing five hypotheses which state that the higher a person´s perception of a youth leader's *ability, reliability, consistency, fairness* or *openness* is, the more likely he or she is to participate in bottom- up climate action was performed by conducting a survey. The regression analysis of the collected data led to the rejection of hypothesis 2 to 5, with only hypothesis 1 containing *ability* being accepted. As a controlling analysis was additionally executed, the control *climate attitudes* was also found to be influential on the dependent variable *climate action*. A youth leader´s *ability* and a person´s *climate attitudes* are thus factors which have an effect on the climate action young people perform. Because all other dimensions of trust were rejected, the assumption that trust in youth leaders increases climate action, has to be falsified. Potential mistakes in the survey creation or interpretation errors might have influenced such results. Trust was however found to be an important mechanism despite its rejection for being a catalysator for climate action. Since many of the respondents described youth leaders as more trustworthy leaders than others, youth leaders still seem to have an effect on young people and appear to be well regarded. Investing in the relationship between young people and youth leaders can therefore be very important because youth leaders can be figures of identification and information provider. As information educates people and education shapes

attitudes, the attitudes of young people can still be influenced, resulting in possible climate behavior changes. Youth leaders should therefore be more present for the society as they influence it positively.

This thesis does not succeed in presenting trust as a driving mechanism for climate action. It nevertheless provides answers in an understudied field and fills a gap in explaining what influences or does not influence small scale climate actions. Regardless of the result this research offers, the societal relevance of the topic remains. The analysis reveals a strong concern and care for the climate among people, as evidenced by their assessed attitudes. Since the desired outcome of this study lies in increasing pro-environmental behavior, it is very encouraging that many of the respondents are already actively engaging in such practices. In a further study it would be interesting to understand what other factors shape this behavior and even if it is just within a certain cohort, to study if trust in between them eventually has an effect on their environmental behavior. As protecting the climate is a central task of our time, it is most desirable that many further studies are occupied with understanding how we can influence the human behavior in order to become climate friendly.

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Appendix

All appendices can be found in the attached zip-file. It contains:

1. Survey Questions
2. Data survey (Excel)
3. Regression analysis summary
4. Correlation analysis summary
5. Ethical Permission