

INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS ON
GENERATION Z'S PERSPECTIVE OF CLIMATE CHANGE

by

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This research focuses on how social and environmental factors influence the lifestyle decisions of Gen Z within the context of climate change. In doing so, this thesis explores several key topics, including whether women and families are making reproductive decisions in response to the climate crisis, how concerns about severe climate events influence where people choose to live, and the emotional responses and personal narratives connected to these experiences and broader climate discourse. I will delve into how these social and environmental factors affect people's quality of life and how they alter one's perspective of climate conversation and action. My research used contextual evidence about Gen Z to position myself within the proposal and to focus on future developments. This research will promote environmental thinking and create environmental dialogue amongst others. I conducted interviews with students at the University of Oregon who came from diverse backgrounds and whose ages ranged from 20-22. I ended up receiving 10 correspondents, resulting in 10 interviews. Motivated by my interest between the reciprocal relationship between the climate and humans, I conducted this research as a student investigator. I analyzed patterns that emerged from interviews and scholarly sources and considered how they aligned within these findings. I coded this data and answered the question,

“How do life course, gender, place, ideological and other cultural factors influence how Gen Z college students relate to climate change and make life decisions in the context of the climate crisis?” My findings indicate that gendered perceptions, future planning, places of residence, emotional responses, socioeconomic status, and political identity shape college students’ perspectives on the current climate crisis.

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Table of Contents

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF	2
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	3
INTRODUCTION.....	6
LITERATURE REVIEW.....	7
RESEARCH DESIGN/METHODS	11
FINDINGS & DISCUSSION	13
<i>MALE DEVIATION & GENDERED PERCEPTIONS</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>RELATIONSHIPS & FUTURE PLANNING</i>	<i>17</i>
<i>LOCATION & PLACE OF RESIDENCE.....</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>EMOTIONAL TIES AND POLITICAL DISCOURSE</i>	<i>20</i>
<i>SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS & AWARENESS.....</i>	<i>23</i>
LIMITATIONS/CONTRIBUTIONS	24
CONCLUSION	26
REFERENCES	27
APPENDIX A	28
<i>DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY</i>	<i>28</i>
APPENDIX B	30
<i>INTERVIEW QUESTIONS.....</i>	<i>30</i>

Introduction

As climate change has become an increasingly urgent and pressing issue, it has begun to influence the decisions of upcoming generations, particularly that of Generation Z. With growing concerns over the long-term impacts of the environmental crisis, this cohort is making- and in some cases being forced- to make lifestyle choices to protect themselves from climate emergencies. This thesis examines how various demographic factors—such as gender, age, geographic location, and personal ideology—shape the way Gen Z individuals approach decisions related to childbearing, where they choose to live, and how they respond to climate-related events and discourse. By focusing on the intersection of these factors and the previous climate experiences individuals may have had, this study aims to understand how demographic influences affect the quality of life and the perspectives of Generation Z students at the University of Oregon. Using qualitative data from interviews with students aged 18-27, the research explores how these individuals' life courses, emotional connections to climate issues, and cultural backgrounds inform their views and actions. This sample of students will give insight into larger demographics of Generation Z that may feel the same way. Ultimately, this research sheds light on the complex ways in which climate change is shaping the decision-making processes of young people, offering insights into how not only Gen Z, but future generations may respond to the developing environmental crisis.

Literature Review

Previous research on Generation Z's attitudes toward climate change reveals that it is a serious and relevant issue. Despite variations in geographical location and political context, empirical studies from China (Fu et al., 2022), Kenya (Ndeti, 2024), and the United States (IPSOS, 2022) show that many Gen Z individuals express deep concern about environmental degradation and its future implications. One of the most prominent themes in the literature is how this concern intersects with decisions regarding family planning and having children. In both global and local contexts, younger generations are questioning whether it is ethical or safe to have children in the face of a worsening climate crisis. These concerns are particularly prominent amongst women, who often frame their environmental attitude in collective and emotional terms (Holmes et al., 2023). Furthermore, the data collection methods used across these studies were largely surveys and questionnaires, highlighting the need for more in-depth qualitative research, especially among college students. Although Gen Z is usually at the forefront of activism, this group remains underrepresented in academic literature. This study seeks to address this gap by focusing on students at the University of Oregon and exploring how the climate crisis is shaping their personal choices, emotional well-being, and plans for the future.

A large topic that I focused on within my research was whether or not Gen Z wants to have children and or develop a family as due to the climate crisis. A common theme found throughout previous literature was that the climate crisis does affect how Gen Z thinks of creating a family. In Fu et al. (2022), they found that young people in China are concerned for their future children.

Some of the articles even included the difference in gender as it relates to climate change, specifically comparisons between men and women. For example, Holmes et al. (2023) discusses

how women have built maternal foundations based upon climate change. Their research shows how emotions have played a role within this process as well as how these emotions have altered their consideration of the future. The authors claim that women consider their future relationally, having their families and feelings guide their decisions. On the contrary, these researchers found that maternal outlooks reinforce gendered and individualized responsibility to combat climate change. In Ndetei's 2024 article, researchers found high rates of suicide as well as a drastic difference in data between females and males. The women tended to care more about climate change and were willing to learn more about it as compared to the men.

Prior research on Gen Z's attitudes about climate change most commonly uses surveys, interviews, and questionnaires. Those data collection methods were quite common before Gen Z. Surveys are a quick, easy, time efficient way to gather data without inconveniencing someone through other forms of data gathering. Similarly, some of these resources also used polls. For example, in the IPSOS's (2022) article, they polled Americans from ages 18-45 years old, and the data showed that a quarter of them have doubts about having children related to the climate crisis. The data found was weighted by differing qualitative data such as gender, age, ethnicity, etc. Although interviews were also used to gather data, surveys were the most common throughout.

Much of the research I conducted drew on inductive analytical perspectives to explain the empirical findings within the literature. Some of the data found related to where people were from, where people lived, their age, and various differing qualitative data. The literature showed that a good way to identify this sort of empirical data can be by conducting research in differing areas. For example, Ndetei's (2024) article, sent a questionnaire to 10 different high schools in Kenya throughout 3 different regions. The diversity within this data is extremely important. The context in which these college students have grown up relies heavily on their involvement and

concern with the climate crisis. In Orr et al. (2020), their survey of University of Georgia students showed a strong political charge behind the topic of climate change; many students showing little concern for the topic. Their research showed how politics play a role in the relationship between cognitive closure and climate change worry. Cognitive closure was described as wanting clear, definite answers and not liking uncertainty. The study found that students who needed high cognitive closure were less tolerant of ambiguity, resulting in lower concerns for climate change and vice versa (Orr et al. 2020). This is to be as expected as southern states typically have an influx of conservative ideals. This was one of the articles that I expected to represent as an outlier within my data, my findings showed otherwise. Due to the overall lack of sources involving students and climate change, this conservative content was not expected to be found, but an interesting advocate to be a part of my data. These findings and ideals can be compared to the data found at the University of Oregon based off of the differing states and people going to each university.

Another common theme I found was that there was very little information regarding specifically how college students are reacting to the climate crisis. The only two sources that stood out regarding this data were Orr et al. (2020) and Phillips (2015). Phillips (2015) specifically draws attention to the lack of studies done around the opinions of college students and climate change. Her study surveyed students at Kent State University asking them about their opinion on climate change and natural disasters. Considering this article was published in 2015, her lack of previous data was not shocking. The most shocking part was that Orr et al. (2020) was the most up-to-date article. Even taking both of these articles into account, they still differed from my intended research. This thesis provides new and more personal empirical evidence about the relationship between college students and the climate crisis. This research focused on personal effects versus external effects. In terms of this research, *personal effects*

relate to anything that is internal, or on an individual level of impact. This can include emotions, identity, or curated behaviors. *External effects* involves outside or environmental impacts that influence thoughts or actions. Examples of this can include social media and politics.

To conclude the research I have conducted, several main themes have presented themselves throughout. Many of these themes are based in cultural and ideological factors, as well as gender, place, politics, age, and class status. My research took into consideration previous literature in order to produce a proper interview program. I incorporated questions that addressed all of these topics, whether it be survey questions about gender, age, and where students live, or more in-depth topics that interviewees developed upon discussing their political identities and how that may tie into any of the other topics.

Research Design/Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the social and environmental influences behind Gen Z's thoughts on climate change and how these perceptions shape their behaviors, values, and future concerns. A qualitative approach was chosen to capture the in-depth perspectives and experiences of participants. In order to recruit participants for the interview process, I utilized the snowball sampling method ("Snowball"). This distribution approach involved reaching out to an initial group of eligible respondents who would then partake in the study and refer it to fellow peers who may be interested. Initial students were contacted through email as well as word of mouth. This was an effective and efficient way to gather qualitative data from students who met the requirements to be interviewed. All requirements included being a student at the University of Oregon and being between the ages of 18-27 (Generation Z).

I obtained 10 respondents, resulting in 10 completed interviews. Prior to the interview, interviewees were given a small demographic questionnaire. This was then followed by an array of open-ended, verbal-response questions. Interviews were conducted in person, ranging from 15 minutes to an hour in length depending on the reflection and engagement of each participant. Although some interviews were very short, it went to show the length at which certain individuals felt comfortable talking about the subject of climate change. While some questions asked throughout the interview process were not directly related to demographics, they were important as they asked broader questions to evaluate the interviewees lived experiences. To see the demographic questionnaire, please refer to Appendix A. To see the interview questions, please refer to Appendix B. Participants were audio recorded through Apple Voice Memos application to ensure accurate transcripts and to capture the emotional nuances of participants' responses. There was the occasional error in transcribing through memos, but I quickly noticed

and corrected these mistakes by reviewing the original audio recordings. Participants were given in depth details of the study's purpose, ensuring their confidentiality and getting their verbal and written consent to partake in the study. The memo transcripts were used to code each interview, draw out themes and relationships between one another, as well as pull quotes to support found evidence. No identifying information was linked to the interview transcripts.

After each interview, the recordings were then transcribed and thematically coded, drawing upon similarities from the data in order to identify trends and commonalities. These transcriptions served as the foundation of the qualitative analysis presented in the Findings section.

Findings & Discussion

There are a few key terms that were central to the discussion throughout this research. These terms and definitions will provide context to best understand the data found. First is the term climate change. Within this thesis, *climate change* is understood as long term shifts in weather patterns primarily motivated by human incentives (“What is”). The next term is *climate crisis*. The *climate crisis* is deemed as the tipping point to climate change in which the climate has reached the point of no return due to human exploitation of resources. Together, these definitions helped to mold participants concepts of the climate.

Most participants were white women in their early twenties. Additionally, all participants were also all self-deemed democrats, preferring left leaning politics while also belonging to middle and upper middle class socioeconomic statuses. Along with this, all participants had directly experienced a major climate event that they linked to climate change. Examples included large wildfires as well as extensive downpour events. This finding gives a sample bias to the students that partook in the interviews, influencing the way in which climate change was perceived.

The qualitative data from interviews revealed several recurring themes that reflect the multifaceted ways Generation Z college students interpret and respond to the climate crisis. These themes included male deviation and gendered perceptions, relationships and future planning, places of residence (location), emotional ties, class status and awareness, and political identity and discourse.

Male Deviation & Gendered Perceptions

While the majority of participants were women, notable gender-based differences emerged in perspectives on climate change. Men took on a more individualistic approach,

particularly regarding individual hobbies and pastimes, whereas women focused more on immediate and collective concerns, such as home safety and potential evacuation. Female participants frequently referenced personal relationships, often incorporating the perspectives of significant others, even when they were not present during the interview process. This gendered divergence reinforces existing research suggesting that climate concern is often more pronounced amongst women.

Based off of previous scholarly research, it has been found that women have built maternal foundations based upon climate change, involving emotions into their decision making as well as incorporating the consideration of their families' feelings (Holmes et al., 2023). On the contrary, men have been seen as taking a more individualistic approach to the topic, and or showing little concern, if any at all (Orr et al., 2020). When conducting interviews, opposite of the previous data was found. A lot of the male participants brought up compelling arguments and emotions that proved their concern for climate change. Two subjects in particular, Evan and Ben had very direct and pre-thought-out responses to many of the interview questions. Evan was a 20-year-old, white, democratic male with a Junior college standing from an upper-class family in Portland, Oregon. When asked, "Some frame climate change as a *crisis*. Would you?", Evan immediately answered, "Yes". When asked to elaborate and expand upon how climate change is ranked compared to other crisis' in his life, he stated, "[It's ranked] highly. Um, I think that climate change is something that has affected me more than a lot of other crises in my life, I don't really have that many". Ben was a 21-year-old, white, democratic male with a Senior college standing, from an upper-middle class family in the Bay Area, California. When asked the same question he stated,

"Yeah, I'd say so. Yeah, I mean, I think it's like when I see a crisis, it's like a sign that needs to be acted upon quickly, and I think climate change is definitely something that, without quick change, it might get and probably already is irreversible" (Ben).

The ways in which men versus women were affected by climate change varied greatly with minor similarities. Hannah and Kaitlyn were both white, democratic women from California with a Senior college standing, from upper-middle class families. Hannah was from northern California, while Kaitlyn was from southern California. They both have been severely affected by raging wildfires that forced them to almost evacuate their homes. Hannah stated:

“A couple years ago there were a ton of crazy fires that we were on the edge of evacuation zones for. We had school cancelled for smoke because the air quality was so bad... in the Sierras up near Tahoe, they all burned down, which is really close to my house, which is scary. We knew a ton of people who had to evacuate because of that, and then most recently the LA fires, my boyfriend had to evacuate” (Hannah).

On the contrary, when asked how climate change has affected him, Evan cut me off quickly and abruptly stated, “Fly fishing is f*cking sh*t because of [climate change]. Fish counts are down, waters are too warm, they should be colder, salmon is down, crabbing is not what it used to be”. This data became a trend in which men typically discussed how climate change affected their hobbies and past times while women discussed more pressing issues like their houses possibly burning and evacuation needs.

Relationships were a recurring topic discussed extensively within female interviews, whereas they were rarely mentioned in male interviews. Hannah discussed her long-term boyfriend multiple times. When asked questions, she would often correlate answers with him, and or provide more data from his perspective, even though he was not present. She said,

“My boyfriend had to evacuate due to the fires because he goes to UCLA, and all of LA was burning and classes were cancelled... He couldn’t even leave LA almost because airports were getting shut down and transportation was crazy” (Hannah).

A question that prompted discussions about relationships from both male and female participants was “Does climate change play a role in whether or not you plan on getting married and or having children?”. This ultimately evolved into discussions about where participants would live in the future. Hannah stated:

“I don’t think it really impacts those decisions. Like, I still want to get married and have children eventually, but I think it will definitely impact where we choose to live. Like, me and [my boyfriend] have different things that we want out of the type of environment that we live in. So, it will be kind of a conversation to figure out” (Hannah).

She continued to express places she would not want to live due to their climate events by saying:

“I don’t know if I’d ever want to be in the Midwest because of the amount of tornadoes that they get and the dry climate, or like in Florida because of the hurricanes. It just seems like there’s a lot of things that would go into consideration” (Hannah).

Her concern with geographical regions will be discussed throughout the next section. She went on to bring up concerns about house insurance relating to possible fires as well as other future endeavors such as the car she may purchase and whether it be an electric vehicle. In the interview with Ben, he stated, “I think it’s definitely something to think about, like long term, like, setting up a family... I don’t want to put my family somewhere that could easily burn down or is at risk of flooding”. When asked if he felt stress around the topic of climate change intertwining with his future he responded,

“I feel like I haven’t really put much thought into it. But like, as I do have to start making decisions within the next 10 years of maybe getting a house, that definitely is a decision that I don’t want to put myself in a place that could get wiped out” (Ben).

A major point of contrast can be seen within both Hannah and Ben’s interview responses. Hannah discussed how her boyfriend and her would eventually determine a place to live based on differing weather events. On the contrary, Ben emphasized himself within the situation using personal pronouns like “I” and “myself” rather than incorporating anyone within his life.

A noteworthy finding was the variation in the academic majors pursued by participants. Ranging from architects to business majors, these differences often corresponded with varying levels of engagement and understanding regarding climate change. For example, one architecture student approached climate activism through the lens of interior design, describing how art installations can be used to raise awareness about environmental concerns. This participant also

mentioned the number of times in which sustainability was brought up in class, regarding urban planning and design. Male interviewees with a business background tended to approach climate change with a more individualistic mindset, often expressing concerns related to business interests and financial stability.

Relationships & Future Planning

Despite previous scholarly literature, many participants did not find climate change to be an issue when posing ideas about future family intentions. Many interviewees had not thought about how climate change would affect the way in which they develop a family and or decide to have children. Students had not envisioned climate change playing a role in their personal life. Interviewees felt that other crises within their life held a forefront as compared to future endeavors. This shocking lack of engagement may reflect broader patterns of climate disengagement. These findings challenge previous narratives and highlight the complexity of integrating climate consciousness into personal life choices.

As mentioned, this study found that Gen Z has not considered family planning as it relates to the climate crisis. This could tie into the overall sense of complacency as mentioned before, as they do not see the climate crisis affecting their near future. While earlier studies suggested a growing trend of climate-related concerns influencing reproductive choices, these findings indicate that this connection may be less prominent among Gen Z than previously thought. Despite variations in geographical location and political context, empirical studies from China (Fu et al., 2022), Kenya (Ndeti, 2024), and the United States (IPSOS, 2022) show that many Gen Z individuals express deep concern about environmental degradation and its future implications. Contrary to earlier research linking such concerns to reproductive decision-making, this study found that Gen Z participants have not widely considered the climate crisis in relation to family planning. This suggests a potential gap between environmental anxiety and personal

life choices. Both female and male participants acknowledged that they had not previously considered the intersection of climate change and family planning directly. Some noted it might influence their decisions moving forward, while others maintained it would never impact their choices. This could have also been connected to the nature of having a longer-running influence throughout the interview process. Kaitlyn simply stated, “I don’t think I’ve ever thought about it, like, getting in the way of anything in my future”. As discussed earlier, Hannah had mentioned, “I don’t think [climate change] really impacts those decisions. I still want to get married and have children eventually, but I think [climate change] will definitely impact where we choose to live” (Hannah). She molded the question by addressing other concerns that she felt were more pressing within her future. Lucy took on a different approach by blatantly stating,

“No, I’m selfish. I’m getting married and having kids. That probably plays into my subconscious categorization of crisis’... Getting married wouldn’t have an effect, but kids would. There is definitely some guilt that my kids will have to live with my generations consequences of our actions...” (Lucy).

Lucy’s response was humorous but truthful. She proved to be well-rounded on the topic of the climate crisis but was unwilling to compromise on her decision despite knowing the possible outcomes for her children. The push and pull arguments from all of these women showed the differing perspectives that can come from the idea of family planning within a crisis at such a young age.

Throughout the interviews, male participants typically had little to say about the topic, even being dismissive. When asked, James simply stated “No”. Even when prompted further he asked, “How climate change ties into marriage and kids? No. I haven’t thought of that”. He seemed disinterested in the idea of delving further into that conversation.

These findings reveal a nuanced and often overlooked dimension of how Gen Z processes the climate crisis. While proving that concern for environmental degradation is high, its influence on intimate, long-term life decisions like marriage and family planning remained

limited. The contrast between prior research and this study reveals a disconnect between environmental awareness and personal decision-making. Participants like Hannah and Lucy illustrated the complexity of this tension. Meanwhile, male participants often disengaged from the topic altogether, further proving gendered differences.

Location & Place of Residence

Geographic context also emerged as a significant factor. All participants noted that where they lived has or had been previously threatened by climate events. For example, many cited experiencing high wildfire risk, particularly within regions such as Oregon and California. This distribution was expected, given the University of Oregon's geographic location. These experiences with environmental dangers appeared to influence participants, gaging their awareness and concern for the environment. This demonstrates how climate experiences and concerns are influencing mobility decisions, even at a relatively young age.

Students from California reported the highest exposure to climate-related events, particularly severe wildfires. The prevalence of such experiences among California-based students provides valuable insight into how regional environmental conditions may shape students' perceptions of climate change. Interviewees from Southern California expressed their concerns for their homes throughout the recent Los Angeles fires. Kaitlyn was in an evacuation zone for several weeks, expressing her concern for her family while she was away at school. Jillian from Portland stated, "I was at an outdoor volleyball camp and the air quality [from wildfires] was so awful that they had to shove us into these gyms. It was just hell". The sample of interviewees had all experienced a severe climate event, making the data even more personal and valuable.

Emotional Ties and Political Discourse

While participants reported experiencing a range of emotions in response to the climate crisis—including anger, frustration, anxiety, and guilt—a prevailing theme of emotional complacency emerged. Gen Z appears to be desensitized to catastrophic climate events due to constant exposure. Even participants residing in regions directly impacted by climate change, like those affected by wildfires or extreme weather, exhibited this emotional detachment, despite also demonstrating stronger personal and emotional connections to the issue. These findings suggest that continuous subjection to extreme climate events have produced emotional fatigue within Gen Z, leading to a lack of overarching concern for the environment. While not directly stated, it was obvious after the coding process.

Political identity was deeply intertwined with participants' climate views. Most aligned with progressive ideals and were critical of conservative climate skepticism. Several described their environmental beliefs as inseparable from their political identity, with their voting decisions and media consumption shaped partly by their stance on climate change. An overarching theme addressed how politics have become so deeply intertwined within the topic of climate change that it has overshadowed the urgency of the crisis, leading to complacency within Gen Z (Orr et al., 2020).

One of my interview questions stated, “What emotions have you felt in response to climate change?”. When initially asked, many participants took a while to ponder it, or did not know how to respond. But after coding several interviews, I found that many of them answered this question within other responses throughout the interview. This had been a very prominent theme throughout almost all of my interviews. For example, when asked, Hannah responded, “I feel like it’s tough because of politics, like, there is such a crazy divide in terms of like if climate change is even a topic of conversation”. But then throughout the rest of her interview, she

brought up other emotions such as anger, frustration, nervousness, and guilt as it related to her personal responses to climate change. Politics increasingly became intertwined in the conversation, with social media and political discourse playing significant roles in shaping emotional connections to climate change. Lucy, a 21-year-old, white, democratic female with a Senior college standing, from an upper-middle class family in Portland, Oregon stated,

“Well, the first word that comes to my head is dread. I don’t know, dread... It’s depressing. I guess like, anxiety... It’s also hard to think about [climate change] because it’s going to have an effect so far on in the future that you probably won’t be alive to see what really happens... I guess I also feel helpless, because a lot of the times it’s like, what am I going to do? The most powerful people in charge don’t give a flying f*ck about it and just want to capitalize [off of it]... Clearly, it’s not going to be what’s the most beneficial, but what’s going to make them the most money. It’s completely helpless, I care, but our government doesn’t” (Lucy).

Throughout Lucy’s interview, she inadvertently mentioned the prominence of emotional complacency and individualism. She spoke about climate activism, using the climate clock displayed in Times Square in New York as an example. She said, “I remember being shocked [learning about it], but no one really cared... Like it was a shock factor, but nothing has ever come out of that shock” (Lucy). She brought up emotional complacency through examples like that of the 2024 Los Angeles wildfires. She said,

“It’s crazy because you can’t really picture that if you’re not there. Like, you see it on the media, but for us, you never have to see it again. You see it and think ‘my God that’s awful’ and are asked to donate money, but after the fire is put out, the media has nothing else to talk about... I’ve completely forgotten about that fire because I don’t have to live it everyday” (Lucy).

She continued by noting that climate change is not properly represented throughout the media as it played back into the “shock factor” she had mentioned earlier; in which shock comes from the initial, horrific damage, but no action is taken after the fact.

Other male interviewees echoed these thoughts claiming that climate change is a topic of stress that they incorporate within their future endeavors. Ben stated, “I occasionally see stuff on Twitter... I feel like ever since Elon Musk has been in charge of Twitter, I’ve been seeing a lot

more political stuff on there... I sometimes see climate change stuff that does go towards the red side of things". Kaitlyn delved into this topic similarly, asking questions like, "Why can't we separate facts of what is actually going on in our world than in nature? Why can't we separate church and state?". She continued to claim multiple times throughout her interview that she finds that there are "other political crises going on that are more important [than climate change]".

When asked whether or not she would consider the state of the climate a crisis, Hannah stated, "I feel like lately within the state of politics in America, it's kind of come to a point where you really have to think about that and question it and reevaluate... We need to take a step back and think [how] it really is like a crisis" (Hannah). Politics have become so deeply intertwined within the topic of climate change that it has overshadowed the urgency of the crisis, leading to complacency within Gen Z. They have become deterred from the severity of the issue at hand and how it will affect them as well as future generations.

Interviewees who expressed feelings such as guilt or anxiety seemed more attuned to the moral and ethical dimensions of climate change, indicating that these emotions promote a stillness in activism. These emotions also served as motivators or inhibitors of action. Many participants initially struggled to articulate their emotional responses when directly asked, but emotional themes surfaced organically later throughout the conversation. This draws a possible conclusion to an emotional disconnect or suppression, as these emotions are tied to uncomfortable truths or a sense of helplessness and fear. For some, anger sparked advocacy against the current government. For others, feelings of anxiety or helplessness led to avoidance or disengagement. This duality aligns with research conducted by Orr and Phillips, pointing out that politics play a large role in shaping how college students determine the worriedness behind the current climate crisis (Orr, 2020). This further proves that emotions can both empower and paralyze individuals in the face of overwhelming current environmental state.

Socioeconomic Status & Awareness

Most participants identified with middle or upper-middle class status, resulting in an awareness of climate change and its fundamental environmental impacts. Students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds tended to demonstrate a greater familiarity with and understanding of climate change discourse. For example, students often referenced current events and recalled former educational experiences in which the topic was addressed. These findings are important as they suggest that socioeconomic status plays a role in shaping students' exposure to and understanding of climate-related issues.

The congruence found throughout interviews helped construct a thorough narrative. In summary, the findings reflected a group of participants that were politically engaged, emotionally invested, and aware of the basic implications that come with the climate crisis. The themes that emerged—from gendered perceptions and emotional ties to political identity and media influence—highlight the personal and societal dimensions of how climate change is understood and internalized by Gen Z. Despite a relatively homogenous demographic, the participants showed a diversity of perspectives shaped by academic backgrounds, personal experiences, and geographic contexts. Ultimately, these findings showed that climate change is not a singular issue but a shared experience that intersects with identity, emotion, place, and politics; thus, shaping this generation's awareness within their own personal dimension of this global crisis.

Limitations/Contributions

While this study has provided valuable insight into the ways in which demographic factors influence how Gen Z students think about climate change, there are several limitations to be acknowledged. The main limitation being the sample size of 10 students from the University of Oregon. This sample size does not fully represent the experiences of Generation Z, especially considering the size of the sample as well as the confined location. Additionally, the interviewees that were interviewed were predominantly white and democratic leaning, adding little racial diversity to the study. They also were within a very small age range. Another limitation includes the reliance of interviews to gather data. This left room for bias from the interviewee as they assessed the interview questions, and me as the interviewer. Future research can address these limitations by gathering a larger sample size and pushing the sample to Generation Z students throughout Eugene, rather than limiting it to just University of Oregon students. Researchers can also actively seek out different demographic groups to gather a larger range of racial diversity as well as add other forms of data collection such as surveys and or questionnaires. If I were to pursue this project further, I would gather data from a more moderate or conservative standing university to understand a broader depth of knowledge regarding.

This thesis makes several contributions to the understanding of how demographics influence the lifestyle decisions of Gen Z within the context of climate change. The interview processed allowed for in depth, personal, qualitative data that provided valuable insight into the

students on campus at the University of Oregon. This research subtly disproves the notion that men typically do not care for climate change as compared to women but instead care about it for differing reasons. It furthered existing literature by proving that men have a more individualistic outlook on the topic, as they were concerned more with their hobbies being affected.

Additionally, this thesis brought up other points including the involvement of politics within climate discourse that has led to a sense of complacency within Gen Z. This has caused a lack of overall concern for their future endeavors unless prompted otherwise. The politicization of the climate crisis has led students to be placed in an awkward state of limbo, in which they still show emotional concern, while not participating in the discourse or activism. They still felt nervousness, guilt, and stress when discussing these ideas, but have felt that there is not much they personally can do to make a large impact.

Conclusion

This research has explored how demographic factors including gender, age, place, and ideology shape the ways Gen Z college students perceive and respond to the climate crisis in their personal lives. By focusing on lifestyle decisions such as reproductive choices, residential preferences, and emotional responses, this study highlights the intersectionality between identity and environmental awareness. The qualitative data gathered from a group of University of Oregon students offered firsthand insight into how young adults navigate climate-related emotions and decisions, often in varied ways. Through coding and analysis, patterns emerged that reflect broader cultural and generational shifts, while also revealing significant gaps between climate concern and actionable life changes. This study posed as a solution to gaps in previous literature as well as providing contradicting data from past studies. By situating myself within this process and acknowledging the shared uncertainty of the future, this research aims not only to contribute to academic discourse but also to spark ongoing environmental dialogue. Ultimately, this study encourages a deeper understanding of how Gen Z is defining its relationship with the environment.

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Appendix A

Demographic Survey

- 1) Please indicate that you are 18 years of age or older and voluntarily agree to partake in this study.
- 2) How old are you?
- 3) What is your gender and preferred pronouns?
- 4) Where are you from?

- 5) What year of college are you in?
- 6) What are you studying?
- 7) How would you define your class status?
- 8) How would you define your racial status?
- 8) What political party do you best align with? If one at all?

Appendix B

Interview Questions

- 1) How would you define climate change?
- 2) When was the first time you'd say you recognized climate change?
- 3) Some frame climate change as a *crisis*. Would you? How would you compare it to other crisis' in your life?
- 4) Has climate change affected you in any way?
 - a. Places you've lived etc.
- 5) Where do you typically receive information regarding climate change?
 - a. News, school, friends, family, newspaper, social media, etc.
- 6) Do you feel that climate change is accurately represented throughout the media based off your definition? Why or why not?
- 7) What emotions have you felt in response to climate change?
 - a. Whether that be as a result of climate anxiety, and or political institutions, etc.
- 8) How do you react to climate change? Whether that be through things you do in your daily life etc.
- 9) Do you find that it's easier to speak about climate change with other people in Gen Z? Or other generations?
- 10) How do you envision your future being affected by climate change?
- 11) Do you find it stressful to think about your future and how it intertwines with climate change?
- 12) Does climate change play a role in whether or not you plan on getting married and or having children? Why or why not?

13) Have you actively made any decisions within your life to combat climate change and or avoid its consequences?

a. Financially, academically, socially, lifestyle wise

14) Do you believe that humanity has the influence and potential to solve climate change?

15) Do you have any ideas or suggestions on how we should move forward?