

# *The making of a movement (together): how climate activists perceive Greta Thunberg's leadership*

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

# The Making of a Movement (Together): How Climate Activists Perceive Greta Thunberg's Leadership

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing on the Social Identity Theory of Leadership, this study explores how Greta Thunberg's influence emerges through group processes where her leadership is sustained among climate activists by perceptions of *one of us* and *doing it for us*. Using a qualitative survey of 108 climate activists from the United Kingdom, Turkey and Sweden, we examine how these perceptions are constructed and maintained by climate activists across different socio-political contexts. Although many activists view Thunberg as central to raising awareness and mobilising action, her leadership is seen as effective when it aligns with collective values and identity. Perceptions of her leadership are dynamic and shaped by her behaviour, rhetoric and evolving relationships with activists, media and political actors. Some participants expressed concern about her dominance in the public narrative and questioned her representativeness due to her privileged background (e.g., middle-class White European). Notably, identity prototypicality (*one of us*) and advancement (*doing it for us*) were closely linked: Activists often cited the same actions or messages as evidence of both. Findings highlight the mutual influence of leadership and movement identity. Although prototypical leaders embody the movement's identity and facilitate collective agency, leaders who inspire mobilisation and organise collective actions for activists to enact their identity are perceived as more prototypical.

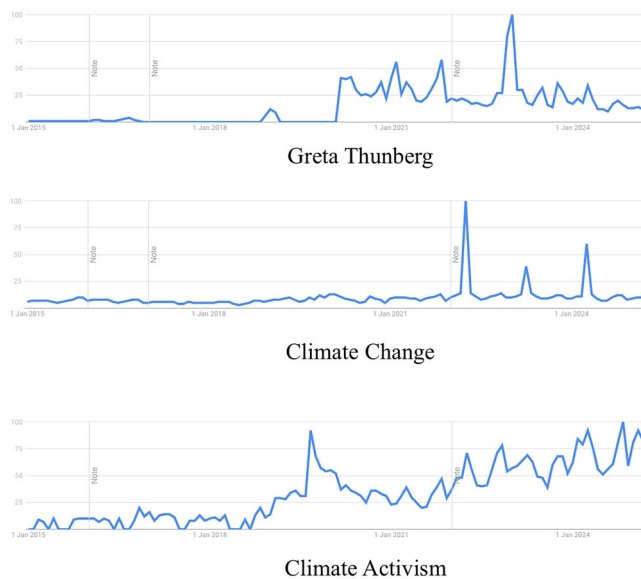
'For good or ill, leaders are widely recognised as the proper focus for our attempts to understand the tides and shape of history' (Haslam et al. 2020, 1). Given that climate crisis, disasters and environmental concerns are some of the most prominent and defining tides of our time, Greta Thunberg's appeal, not only for media and politics but also for psychology and social science research, should not be that surprising. In 2018, at the age of 15, Greta Thunberg began protesting outside the Swedish parliament, calling for stronger action on climate change while holding a sign that read *Skolstrejk för Klimatet* (School Strike for the Climate). Shortly after her initial protest, other students around the world engaged in similar demonstrations, leading to the formation of new climate activist groups such as Fridays for Future. Greta Thunberg's rapid rise to global prominence positioned her

as an ad hoc leader within the climate activist community. Her influence has been widely recognised in both media and academic discourse, often described as the *Greta Effect* (e.g., Gan et al. 2024; Hayes and O'Neill 2021; Mede and Schroeder 2024; Sabherwal et al. 2021; Watts 2019). For many, she is undeniably a key figure in raising awareness of the climate crisis and inspiring climate activism (see Figure 1).

Although the media construction of Greta Thunberg (e.g., Ryalls and Mazzarella 2021; Jung et al. 2020) and the top-down approach to her leadership through the analysis of her speeches (e.g., Holmberg and Alvinus 2020; Zulianello and Ceccobelli 2020) are widely investigated by various disciplines in the social sciences, social psychology has been particularly

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**FIGURE 1** | Google Trends interest for search terms Greta Thunberg, climate change and climate activism over the last 10 years (2015–2025).

equipped to examine the co-construction of such leadership through bottom-up analysis of followers' accounts. Social and environmental psychology research did not overlook this effect and recognition. Yet, despite the growing number of studies each year, research in social and environmental psychology exhibits two notable trends when examining Thunberg's impact, which we believe constrain the development of a more comprehensive understanding. First, although extant research in psychology has focused on individual-level attributes that could promote pro-environmental behaviours, including demographics (e.g., Desrochers and Zelenski 2023; Gifford and Nilsson 2014), personality disposition (e.g., Cipriani et al. 2024; Hämpke et al. 2025; Milfont and Sibley 2012), personal values (e.g., Bouman et al. 2020; Lou et al. 2024; Wang and Chen 2025; Wang et al. 2021), and ideology (e.g., Leung and Koh 2019; Milfont et al. 2025; Sparks et al. 2022), there has been less work on the climate crisis in the collective action literature (but see Daysh et al. 2024; Haugestad et al. 2021; Landmann and Naumann 2024; Uysal, Acar, et al. 2022, Uysal, Martinez, et al. 2025; Uysal et al. 2024; Vestergren et al. 2018, 2019). Second, interconnectedly, the role of Greta Thunberg's leadership is often discussed through her charisma, defining characteristics, traits and individual personality. The *Great Man* narrative, which was dominant in early research on the psychology of leadership (Haslam et al. 2011, 2020), is echoed in early research on the *Greta Effect*, ironically recast as the *Great Girl* narrative. The collective nature of the movement and the role of followership in her leadership are often overlooked. Hence, the dominant narrative becomes that activists follow in her footsteps because of her individual attributes, not because her actions and discourses align with activists' norms and expectations, sometimes naturally and sometimes by the pressure of shared group identity. This leads to a shortsightedness that overlooks the group process where activists and Greta Thunberg co-produce and co-transform their social reality together, and where Greta Thunberg can only sustain her leadership by aligning with collective norms and striving for collective objectives.

To address these limitations, we adopt the Social Identity Theory of Leadership (Haslam et al. 2011, 2020; Hogg 2001; Hogg et al. 2012; Reicher et al. 2005), which conceptualises leadership as a dynamic group process predicated on followership, where leadership and followership are inextricably linked. From this perspective, Greta Thunberg's leadership is not simply a function of her individual attributes in isolation; rather, it emerges through a group process in which she and other climate activists are joined together and perceive themselves as group representatives in a shared endeavour. This study employs a qualitative survey with climate activists from Sweden, the United Kingdom and Turkey to examine: (1) how perceptions of *one of us* (identity prototypicality) and *doing it for us* (identity advancement) are reflected in activists' accounts of Thunberg's leadership within the climate movement and (2) which of Greta Thunberg's behaviours, characteristics, discourses and relationships are perceived by climate activists as contributing to or harming the perceptions of *one of us* and *doing it for us*; therefore, contribute to or harm her leadership position in the movement.

## 1 | Social Identity Theory of Leadership

Leadership can be defined as a form of relationship in which some people exert influence on others to accept new values, norms and goals, and also to make efforts to reach those goals. However, leadership, particularly in social movements, is not a unilateral process but a mutual influence between leaders and followers, where both co-produce social situations that define and transform their shared mission. Effective leaders cultivate a sense of collective identity, enabling crowd members, including the leaders themselves, to perceive their goals as part of a common cause. Leadership fundamentally involves shaping beliefs, desires, and priorities by presenting a vision of how the world was, is, and should be (Haslam et al. 2020). When followers perceive a leader as *one of them* and *acting for them*, they are more likely to internalise the leader's mission and vision as their own. This alignment fosters engagement and commitment, transforming individual concerns into collective action.

Historically, early leadership research focused on identifying the personal traits and qualities that distinguish *great leaders* from *ordinary people*. Later, attention shifted to interpersonal dynamics between leaders and followers; though these interactions were often conceptualised as one-directional and hierarchical. The emergence of the Social Identity Theory of Leadership (Haslam et al. 2011, 2020; Hogg 2001; Hogg et al. 2012; Reicher et al. 2005) marked a paradigm shift by integrating leadership with group processes. The social identity approach to leadership, or *the new psychology of leadership*, argues that leadership is not merely about individual leaders and their followers but rather about how both interact within a social group through their shared collective identity (Haslam et al. 2020). According to this perspective, social identity is central to leadership, as it shapes how leaders and followers define themselves as members of an in-group and engage with one another as representatives of this in-group.

For leadership to be effective in mobilising collective action, leaders must be perceived by followers as aligning with shared

group norms, narratives and expectations (Haslam et al. 2023; Selvanathan et al. 2020; Uysal and Akfırat 2022). The social identity approach outlines four key principles of such effective leadership (Haslam et al. 2011; Steffens et al. 2014). First, leaders must be seen as *one of us* (prototypicality). They must represent the core values, beliefs and identity of the in-group while differentiating it from relevant out-groups. Leaders gain legitimacy by being perceived as prototypical members of the group. Second, leaders must be seen as *doing it for us* (advancement). Effective leaders are those who prioritise the in-group's interests over personal gain. If a leader is perceived as self-serving or favouring an out-group, they risk losing credibility and support. Third, leaders must *craft a sense of us* (entrepreneurship). Beyond representing the group, leaders actively shape its identity. They act as entrepreneurs of identity, constructing a shared understanding of *who we are* and reinforcing the norms, values and priorities that define the group. Finally, leaders must *make us matter* (impresariship). Leadership is ultimately about translating the group's identity, values and priorities into meaningful action. Effective leaders embed their group's mission into reality, providing rituals and performative spaces where in-group members can enact their identity.

## 2 | Current Research and Context

These principles provide a framework for understanding how leaders emerge and maintain influence in social movements. In this study, we apply the social identity approach to leadership to examine how climate activists perceive Greta Thunberg's leadership. Specifically, we investigate the ways in which she is seen as a prototypical climate activist (*one of us*) and as an effective leader who advances the movement's cause (*doing it for us*). Through a qualitative content analysis of climate activists' perceptions, we explore the characteristics, discourses and behaviours that contribute to Thunberg's leadership within the climate movement.

We conducted this study in the United Kingdom, Sweden and Turkey, chosen for their feasibility and contextual relevance to climate activism and the *Greta effect*. Although the choice was largely pragmatic, as we have established contacts, collaborations and familiarity with the climate movements in these countries, each context offers unique and relevant insights for understanding leadership and climate activism. Sweden is home to Greta Thunberg and school strikes. Although it is often viewed as a progressive state with a strong environmental ethic, bolstered by its green energy initiatives and policy frameworks aimed at sustainability (OECD 2025), the climate movement and policing have become more of a public debate in recent years (Bryant 2023; Hivert 2025). Although groups like Fridays for Future keep adopting non-violent normative activism, more so-called radical groups such as Extinction Rebellion Sweden and Återställ Våtmarker have used disruptive direct actions, including road blockades, to push for stronger climate action (Gayle et al. 2023; von Arnold 2018). Therefore, there have been growing factions and debates over tactics, leadership and the future of the movement among activists (Edquist 2019). The United Kingdom has a long history of environmental activism, with milestones such as the anti-nuclear protests in the 1980s

(Rootes 2000, 2013) and the more recent rise of climate movements like Extinction Rebellion (XR) and Just Stop Oil. In the United Kingdom, debates around policing and climate activism have been intense, with the passing of the 2022 Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act allowing stricter interventions against protests, including arrests and harsher punishment for civil disobedience (Uysal, Drury, and Acar 2025). Finally, in Turkey, environmental and climate activism face unique challenges due to the country's complex political climate and restrictive civil liberties. The Gezi Park protests in 2013 were a watershed moment, initially an environmental protest against urban development that escalated into a broader movement against the government's authoritarianism (Acar and Uluğ 2016; Uysal and Acar 2025; Uysal and Akfırat 2022). Since then, environmental activism has continued, but it often faces repression (Uysal, Acar, et al. 2022). Northern Forests Defense and Kazdağları Resistance are examples of movements fighting deforestation and mining projects, but these movements encounter significant pushback from both law enforcement and political institutions (Siccardi 2022). These overly punitive measures against protesters in Turkey, where every climate activist is burdened with significant political risks, constitute a stark contrast to the comparatively liberal contexts in the United Kingdom and Sweden, where not all but certain groups have been targeted.

## 3 | Method

### 3.1 | Participants and Procedure

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Dundee<sup>1</sup>. The survey was initially designed in English and then translated into Swedish and Turkish by the authors. We distributed the link to the survey on social media platforms and used snowball sampling. Data were collected between November 2020 and February 2021 in the United Kingdom, Sweden and Turkey. All participants completed the online questionnaire voluntarily. A total of 226 individuals participated in the study (112 from the United Kingdom, 62 from Turkey and 52 from Sweden). A total of six participants were excluded from the dataset as they had more than 20% missing data. The final sample was composed of 220 participants (110 United Kingdom, 59 Turkey and 51 Sweden); 108 participants were self-identified activists, and 112 were non-activists. In this study, we focused on activists' responses in the qualitative survey ( $n = 108$ ). We recruited 50 environmental and climate activists from the United Kingdom, 31 from Turkey and 27 from Sweden. Seventy-three activists were self-identified women, 32 men, one non-binary, and two preferred not to disclose. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 74 years ( $M = 29.77$ ,  $SD = 15.29$ ).

After the first set of open-ended questions, which were about activist identity and the movement, including values associated with the climate movement, prototypical activists of the movement, interests of protestors, and actions that protestors engage in, participants answered open-ended questions about the identity-leadership of Greta Thunberg. The questions aimed to extend activists' views on prototypicality, advancement, entrepreneurship and the impresariship of Greta Thunberg. This paper focused on activists' perceptions and accounts of identity prototypicality and advancement for Greta Thunberg's

leadership within the climate movement. These questions were: 'Think about the way you described a model or typical climate activist. In what ways is Greta Thunberg a model or typical climate activist?' and 'in what ways does Greta Thunberg stand up for climate activists?'

### 3.2 | Analytic Procedure

We used qualitative content analysis (see Schreier 2012) to examine participants' open-ended responses regarding identity prototypicality and identity advancement related to Greta Thunberg. Each argument (defined as a sentence or expression) in these responses served as our unit of analysis. On average, participants provided 56 words to address these two questions. We analysed 283 arguments from 102 activists regarding identity prototypicality (mean words = 33) and 202 arguments from 86 activists regarding identity advancement (mean words = 27). The goals of this analysis were threefold: First, to determine whether the concepts of identity prototypicality and identity advancement are reflected in climate activists' perceptions of Greta Thunberg's leadership within the climate movement; second, to explore how these concepts are expressed by activists in relation to Greta Thunberg's leadership; and third, to identify the behaviours, characteristics, discourses and relationships associated with identity prototypicality and identity advancement in Greta Thunberg's leadership as perceived by the activists.

To generate main categories, we employed a deductive approach based on the definitions of identity prototypicality and identity advancement, along with recent studies in these areas within the social identity approach to leadership (Haslam et al. 2020; Steffens et al. 2014). For identifying subcategories under the themes of identity prototypicality and identity advancement, we used an inductive approach that focused on explaining how each theme was articulated by participants, particularly regarding Greta Thunberg's behaviours and characteristics linked to prototypicality and advancement. Each response within the main categories was read multiple times, with initial coding for subcategories conducted by the first author. Subsequently, the coding scheme and quoted materials for each subcategory were reviewed by the second and third authors, and through repeated discussions, the subcategories were refined. The raw data and codes can be openly accessed on the Open Science Framework (OSF) webpage: [https://osf.io/mz8sx/?view\\_only=7046a5f4375c4f93878f59a137493b6f](https://osf.io/mz8sx/?view_only=7046a5f4375c4f93878f59a137493b6f).

## 4 | Results

### 4.1 | Main Category 1. Identity Prototypicality: One of Us

Activists were asked in what ways they see Greta Thunberg as a model or typical climate activist. In this main category, we analysed 283 arguments presented by 102 activists. We generated 10 subcategories concerning identity prototypicality in Greta Thunberg's leadership. The first subcategory reflects participants' reported perceptions of Greta as a prototypical leader; in particular they note her *determination, devotion,*

*passion, dedication* and *self-sacrifice* (frequency 44, 15.60%). Participants' responses in this subcategory include numerous references to Greta Thunberg's unwavering commitment to the climate cause, often at great personal cost. Participants frequently mentioned how she adversely impacted her education by not attending school every Friday to protest ('she also did a number of dedications like missing her school to protest') or how she became a target by speaking up, illustrating her self-sacrifice and strong will ('she is able to stand up for her beliefs against very powerful and oppressing voices'). Participants frequently emphasised their belief in Greta Thunberg's passion and resilience: 'She is very passionate about the cause she is fighting for' and 'she never gives up or loses her focus on demanding climate action.' Her selflessness and self-sacrificing acts during her leadership were praised, with participants noting that she faced intense scrutiny yet remained steadfast: 'She speaks her views and doesn't care what others think' and 'doesn't falter under scrutiny.'

In the second subcategory, many participants referred to the fact that *Greta was a young girl* (frequency 36, 12.77%, see Table 1). Although some of them referred to this as a prototypical feature or noted that Greta Thunberg is the ideal or inspirational leader for young girls, others referred to it in a way that highlighted Greta Thunberg becoming a leader despite being 'just a little girl'. For instance, one participant noted, 'She was a young girl who says something to the politicians that most of us adults are still afraid to say'. Participants often highlighted that Greta Thunberg became so influential among young girls by speaking up as a representative of her generation ('Greta represents the younger population'). Her youth and courage also made her a compelling role model, inspiring younger generations to take action: 'She is a good role model to younger kids who will maybe see her and be more proactive as saving the planet can be seen as "cool" and "popular"'. Here, some participants pointed out the difference between being a typical and being a prototypical leader or role model by highlighting that she is not a typical activist leader (e.g., *middle-aged man*) as she is a young girl ('different to typical activists who are often older and have more experience in that field'), but she is prototypical in a way of representing her generation who have shared concerns and common fate.

In the third subcategory (frequency 35, 12.41%), participants noted that *Greta inspired many people* to join her cause, encouraged students all around the world to school strikes and informed those who were previously unaware of the climate crisis. Through these efforts, she has a significant impact on raising awareness and changing attitudes and perspectives on the climate crisis and the actions required to address it. For example, one participant remarked, 'helping us all to understand the severity of climate change and how the global warming crisis will affect us and our future families'. By raising awareness, many participants believe she, directly and indirectly, influenced policy changes across different countries, highlighting the two-way relationship between prototypicality and advancement ('helped raise awareness worldwide about current environmental issues that need [to be] addressed', 'she motivates people to act and organise campaigns for climate change' and 'she has a really positive influence on all kinds of people and is a main model of activism').

**TABLE 1** | Overview of prototypicality (main code 1) subcodes and example quotes from participants.

| No | Subcategories                                                   | Frequency | Per cent | Example quotes                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|----|-----------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|----------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1  | Determined, passionate, devoting, dedicated and self-sacrificed | 44        | 15.60    | <p>'Harmed her education by not going every Friday'</p> <p>'Strong will'</p> <p>'Selfless'</p> <p>'She is very passionate about the cause she is fighting for'</p> <p>'She continues to fight for what she believes is right every day'</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| 2  | Being a young girl                                              | 36        | 12.77    | <p>'I think Greta Thunberg is a very good role model for young girls who are interested in environmental and climate action'</p> <p>'She speaks up as a young member of society'</p> <p>'She is a good role model to younger kids who will maybe see her and be more proactive as saving the planet can be seen as cool and popular'</p> <p>'Greta represents the younger population—different to typical activists who are often older and have more experience in that field'.</p> |
| 3  | Being inspirational and having a real impact/influence          | 35        | 12.41    | <p>'She encouraged students to skip school to demand action on climate change from their governments'</p> <p>'Greta Thunberg is an active citizen raising attention to the climate crisis'</p> <p>'She is inspiring others to make a change'</p> <p>'She made her voice to inform people about climate change'.</p>                                                                                                                                                                  |
| 4  | Consistency                                                     | 34        | 12.06    | <p>'vegan'</p> <p>'Greta is much more consistent—which is admirable'.</p> <p>'She lives her commitment more than most'.</p> <p>'Travelling by sailing to raise awareness about carbon emissions affected me the most'.</p> <p>'To prioritise ethical values, to carry out the values she defended and her individual life consistently'</p>                                                                                                                                          |
| 5  | Brave and confident                                             | 26        | 9.21     | <p>'Despite all of the hate thrown at her she is never discouraged'</p> <p>'Her words were powerful. Her actions were powerful'</p> <p>'She was a young girl who says something to the politicians that most of us adults are still afraid of to say'</p> <p>'She is more fierce than what I see as a 'typical' activist'.</p> <p>'She is relentless'.</p>                                                                                                                           |

(Continues)

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

| No | Subcategories                                                           | Frequency | Per cent | Example quotes                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|----|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|----------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 6  | Knowledgeable, intelligent, well-educated and follower of science/facts | 25        | 8.87     | <p>'She has a deep understanding'<br/>'Greta is very educated'</p> <p>'She is not ignorant; she talks with scientific data'.<br/>'More well-read than average activists'</p> <p>'She is understanding of the current climate crisis and displays a great field of knowledge on how to help these problems'.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| 7  | Outspoken, straightforward and clear rhetorician                        | 17        | 6.03     | <p>'She is very direct and serious with what she says as she is scared for what it going to happen'.<br/>'She is upfront and openly speaks about what is going wrong like any other activist'.</p> <p>'She is a model of climate activist because she has clear mind, plans and ways to reach out people and actually make her vote count'.<br/>'Her discourse is clear'.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| 8  | Being sincere and caring                                                | 17        | 6.03     | <p>'She is honest'</p> <p>'It is admirable for someone of that age to be that tactful'<br/>'She is well-meaning person who clearly cares about the state of the world'<br/>'She cares deeply about the climate'.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| 9  | Privileged/media attention                                              | 12        | 4.26     | <p>'I think a model activist should be a member of democratic assemblies: an education minister, a school principal, a head nurse, etc. In this way, they can transform their fields and policies. I'm not sure about the influence of tabloid figures'.<br/>'Greta is a 'typical' climate activist and at the same time she is not, because climate activists do not have to be young, Western, White, upper class, and often they are not'.<br/>'She fits in terms of her social status'</p> <p>'Climate activists need each other, but Greta doesn't need us for personal reasons—we are needed for the movement as a whole'.</p> |

(Continues)

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

| No | Subcategories                                | Frequency | Per cent | Example quotes                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|----|----------------------------------------------|-----------|----------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 10 | Having a wider justice/political perspective | 12        | 4.26     | <p>'Thunberg characterises it well, through a holistic focus that looks at the whole, i.e., not a one-sided policy on a single issue but a broad perspective on sustainability'</p> <p>'She affects other/larger arenas'</p> <p>'Someone who can fully rebel against the system can be a typical environmental/climate activist. I don't think it will work to try to persuade the institutions that have been part of the problem for years'</p> <p>'Apart from climate, she also has good ideas on issues such as human rights, inequalities, and the rights of autochthonous'.</p> |
| 11 | Miscellaneous                                | 24        | 8.51     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|    | Total                                        | 283       | 100.00   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |

The fourth subcategory is consistency (frequency 34, 12.06%). There was an abundance of references indicating that living her individual life in a way consistent with what she defends and promotes as a leader makes her prototypical and trustworthy in the eyes of people (e.g., 'she is very set on her own beliefs and values', 'to prioritize ethical values, to carry out the values she defended and her individual life consistently'). The most frequent references to the consistency of her individual life and her leadership included her vegan identity and her choice of using climate-friendly transportation, such as sailing and trains instead of air travel ('she thinks about how she will arrive at conferences also overseas by choosing more resource friendly transport alternatives instead of using the plane', 'she does not use airplanes as they are a major factor in reducing the carbon footprint'). In addition to consistency in her actions and discourse, the consistency within her discourse was frequently noted, highlighting how her arguments complement each other and are not conflicting.

In the fifth subcategory, participants highlighted Greta Thunberg's *bravery and confidence* (frequency 26, 9.21%). This subcategory includes references to her fearless attitude despite facing significant opposition, even when the opposition comes from powerful elites ('she is brave enough to speak up even against big leaders like Donald Trump'). Participants frequently mentioned how 'despite all of the hate thrown at her, she is never discouraged', highlighting her resilience. Participants also highlighted that she is 'fiercer than what is seen as a typical "activist"' and described her as 'relentless', highlighting once again being a prototypical leader is going beyond holding the average features.

In the sixth subcategory, participants reported that Greta Thunberg's *knowledge, intelligence, education and adherence to science and facts* enhance her prototypicality (frequency 25, 8.87%). This subcategory contains numerous references to Greta Thunberg's deep understanding of the climate crisis and her well-educated and scientific stance on environmental issues. Participants frequently mentioned that Greta Thunberg is 'educated' and 'not ignorant,' emphasising her reliance on scientific data and facts when speaking (e.g., 'follower of science', 'takes climate science behind her'). They also highlighted how her intellectual grasp of the issues inspires and informs people, thereby promoting her influence (e.g., 'displays a great field of knowledge on how to help these problems').

In the seventh subcategory, participants highlighted Greta Thunberg's *outspokenness, straightforwardness and clear rhetorical skills* (frequency 17, 6.03%). This subcategory includes references to her direct and serious manner of speaking, which stems from her genuine concern about the future. Her ability to communicate clearly, effectively and in straightforward ways about the seriousness and urgency of the climate crisis and the actions that have to be taken makes her a model climate activist. Participants noted her clear discourse and well-spoken nature enable her to express her understanding and articulate the responsibilities of decision-makers effectively, and further highlight her impact (e.g., 'her discourse is clear', 'clearly expresses the responsibilities of decision-makers', 'few are as eloquent as Greta. Not everyone is born a speaker').

In the eighth subcategory, participants emphasised Greta Thunberg's *sincerity and caring nature* (frequency 17, 6.03%). Participants frequently described Greta Thunberg as 'honest' and 'well-meaning', highlighting her authenticity and deep care for the state of the world. Additionally, participants admired her concern for the bigger picture, often comparing her favourably to many political elites ('lot more virtuous and concerned about the consequences and bigger picture compared to many of our world leaders'). They also noted that 'her activities were not only in front of the camera and in public'; she is seen as 'a real environmental activist' who 'speaks from her heart', emphasising her genuine compassion and dedication, beyond the public image concern.

In the ninth subcategory, participants reflected on Greta Thunberg's *privilege and the media attention* she receives (frequency 12, 4.26%). This subcategory includes more critical perspectives on her leadership and prototypicality, suggesting that her prototypicality and power to influence is mostly due to her position in the socio-political hierarchy and privileges (e.g., 'possibilities, education of her family'), in addition to media coverage (e.g., 'famous presentation which got viral was very effective and made her famous'). Some participants acknowledged that Greta Thunberg fits the mould of a 'typical' climate activist in some respects since she benefits from her young, Western, White and middle-class status, while they expressed scepticism about her prototypicality as these privileges are not representative of many activists (e.g., 'I do not believe everyone has the opportunities that she has had growing up to be as active in the struggle', 'There is also a class dimension. Young people all over the world are unlikely to do what Greta does such as not going to school, travelling the world'). Furthermore, some participants highlighted the collective nature of climate activism, suggesting that while Greta Thunberg garners significant attention (partly due to her privileges), the movement as a whole relies on the efforts of many activists. These critical perspectives suggest that while her privilege and media presence contribute to her power to influence and mobilisation, they also complicate perceptions of her as a prototypical activist.

In the last subcategory, participants highlighted Greta Thunberg's *wider justice and political perspective* (frequency 12, 4.26%). This subcategory emphasises her holistic approach to environmental activism where she integrates broader issues such as human rights, inequalities, and the rights of indigenous peoples into her climate advocacy ('she also has good ideas on issues such as human rights, inequalities, and the rights of autochthonous'). Participants noted their admiration that Greta Thunberg's focus extends beyond a single-issue policy to encompass a broader perspective on sustainability (e.g., 'through a holistic focus that looks at the whole, i.e., not a one-sided policy on a single issue but a broad perspective on sustainability'), affecting larger arenas and promoting systemic change, as well as her activism is characterised by a comprehensive understanding of the interconnectedness of various social and environmental issues (e.g., 'she is very aware of not just environmental issues but social ones as well'). This reinforces the idea that a prototypical leader in climate activism must adopt a multi-faceted approach that spans wider justice issues and inspires others to consider the wide-reaching implications of their environmental efforts.

## 4.2 | Main Category 2. Identity Advancement: *Do It for Us*

Subsequently, participants were asked in what ways Greta Thunberg stands up for climate activists. We analysed 202 arguments from 86 activists. We formed five subcategories concerning identity advancement in her leadership (Table 2). A significant proportion of participants (36.63%) emphasised her role in *empowering activists and providing them with opportunities to be heard*. They described her as a 'voice' for others, highlighting her efforts to make climate activists' concerns visible on a global scale (e.g., 'she voices their concerns,' 'she gives other young people the opportunity to have a voice.'). For instance, many pointed out that she uses her social media platforms, public speeches, and international appearances to share the ideas and struggles of activists, particularly those working in less visible or marginalised contexts. Participants also noted how she encourages and supports protests, fosters unity within the climate movement, and provides activists with both emotional and practical support. Quotes such as 'she empowers them to keep going' and 'she makes their voices heard by using her social media platform' illustrate the perception of her as someone who lifts others and highlights their contributions. Others admired her commitment to sharing her platform with marginalised and repressed activists, as exemplified by one participant's observation: 'In Madrid, she invited Indigenous people to speak at a press conference, prioritizing their voices over her own'. This subcategory also reflects her acknowledgement of the collective nature of the movement, as participants reported that they perceived her as frequently downplaying her individual significance to emphasise the importance of the broader climate activist network. By empowering others and creating platforms for activism, her leadership fosters a sense of solidarity and inclusivity, strengthening the collective identity of the climate movement.

The second prominent way participants reported that Greta Thunberg advancing the identity of climate activists is through her role as an *educator, source of inspiration and initiator of action*. This subcategory, comprising 35.15% of responses, highlights how her speeches, actions, and visibility serve as a catalyst for others to join and strengthen the climate movement. Participants reported that she not only started a global wave of protests but also inspired countless individuals to form their own environmental groups and campaigns. One participant stated, 'She managed to get the whole world to have a climate strike'. As an *educator*, participants stated that she uses speeches, interviews, and her social media presence to spread awareness about climate change and its consequences. Her efforts have helped amplify the voices of scientists and climate activists, as illustrated by the quote: 'She emphasizes listening to scientists more than climate activists'. Many participants found her particularly inspiring to younger generations. Her age, courage, and determination made activism accessible and relatable to young people, encouraging them to take a stand. One respondent noted, 'Being so young herself, she makes it more acceptable for other young people to be listened to'. Her ability to make activism intergenerational and inclusive, as well as her insistence on shifting focus from herself to the movement and science, underscores her effectiveness as both an *educator* and an *inspiration*.

The third subcategory highlights participants' reported perceptions of Greta Thunberg's *unwavering bravery and consistency*

**TABLE 2** | Overview of identity advancement (main code 2) subcodes and example quotes from participants.

| No    | Subcategories                                                   | Frequency | Per cent | Example quotes                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|-------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|----------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1     | Voice of others: empowering and creating spaces for activists   | 74        | 36.63    | ‘By letting others be heard with her’.<br>‘She tries to share her platform with other activists and organisations’.<br>‘Thunberg sees activists around the world and acts in unity with them.’<br>‘She helped give people a voice.’                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| 2     | Educator, inspirer and initiator                                | 71        | 35.15    | ‘Inspired others to join’<br>‘She began the Friday for Future movement’<br>‘She demonstrated that you can travel responsibly and with less of an impact’.<br>‘She has spread awareness to people who might not have known otherwise’.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| 3     | Relentless defense of the in-group against powerful elites      | 22        | 10.89    | ‘She is relentless in the face of powerful leaders’<br>‘She stands her ground’<br>‘She sticks to her beliefs strictly’<br>‘She was persistent independent of the opinion of others’.<br>‘Although she gets hate, she pushes on and speaks up’.                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| 4     | Warnings to decision-makers about the urgency of climate action | 13        | 6.44     | ‘Her protests sent a good message of how much time we have left if we do not take action’.<br>‘She informs decision-makers about the need for action’.<br>‘Calls out governments on their actions’<br>‘She will speak out against those who refuse to conform to certain expectations concerning the preservation of our planet’.                                                                                                                                    |
| 5     | Sincerity and absence of self-serving agenda                    | 12        | 5.94     | ‘She shows it is the most important thing to her’.<br>‘By seeing herself as a subject of climate justice, simply expressing her emotional and mental connection with the realities of the climate crisis’.<br>‘She is very clear about who she is’.<br>‘She is not a self-appointed leader’.<br>‘She does not want to be a leader in the way that many portray her as’.                                                                                              |
| 6     | Miscellaneous                                                   | 10        | 4.95     | ‘She also went against the belief that people with syndromes, OCD and selective mutism are just as intelligent, educated and capable’.<br>‘It is not the case that she generally devotes herself to defending parts of the climate and environmental movement or the like. Her focus is on other things’.<br>‘She is very neutral in the face of different types of activities, even though she herself is responsible for very clean actions’.<br>‘She is so kind’. |
| Total |                                                                 | 202       | 100.00   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |

*in defending climate activists as an ingroup against powerful and often critical outgroups.* This aspect of her leadership, cited in 10.89% of responses, emphasises her persistence and courage when faced with opposition from political elites, influential figures, and detractors on social media. Participants frequently mentioned her resilience in standing up for her beliefs, even in the face of criticism, hostility, and attempts to undermine

her efforts. One participant succinctly captured her fearless attitude by stating, ‘She continually debates with world leaders, especially Donald Trump! She is relentless in the face of powerful leaders’. Others praised her ability to remain steadfast despite public criticism, noting, ‘She isn’t afraid of criticism even though she is very young’ and ‘she did not give up on her beliefs’. One respondent commented on how she ‘stood against

downgrading world leaders and celebrities such as Trump and others and kind of refuted their claims', whereas another noted, 'even when they get "shit on" by the likes of Donald Trump, she stands her ground'. One remarked, 'Although she gets hate (probably because people are scared of the reality of the climate crisis), she pushes on and speaks up', whereas another described her as 'a passionate role model for every climate activist'. Her consistent defence of climate activists against powerful opponents was also attributed to her strong leadership and refusal to compromise. Participants frequently emphasised her determination, noting, 'she sticks to her beliefs strictly' and 'she is not giving up easily'.

The fourth subcategory focuses on Greta Thunberg's role as a vocal advocate *warning decision-makers about the pressing need for immediate action on climate change*. This dimension, representing 6.44% of responses, highlights her ability to challenge political and societal leaders while emphasising the urgency of the climate crisis. Participants noted her powerful speeches, protests, and consistent calls for accountability from those in positions of power. One respondent observed, 'She has addressed world politicians on how the young are going to be affected the most by their actions'. Another described how her protests 'sent a good message of how much time we have left if we do not take action', suggesting the time-sensitive nature of her warnings. One remarked, 'She is internationally known for challenging world leaders to take immediate action against climate change', whereas another stated, 'She calls out governments on their actions'. Her willingness to critique powerful institutions and individuals, even as a young activist, was seen as a defining feature of her advocacy. One participant captured this by saying, 'She is a child pointing out the failures of her seniors and how not much change is being made by their hands'.

The fifth and final subcategory highlights Greta Thunberg's perceived *sincerity and the absence of any self-serving agenda in her activism*. Representing 5.94% of responses, this dimension illustrates how her personal consistency, authenticity, and clear intentions resonate with activists. Participants viewed her as someone who genuinely believes in the urgency of climate action and lives by the principles she advocates. For instance, one participant noted, 'She traveled by boat across the oceans rather than taking the easier, faster way via aeroplane', a reference to her decision to minimise her carbon footprint. Another elaborated, 'She does not want to contribute to the emissions of greenhouse gases in her travels and prefers to travel by ship instead of air travel in order to convey that she is consistent and determined in her actions as in her thoughts'. Her role within the climate movement was also framed as one of humility and individual conviction rather than leadership ambition. One participant described her as 'not a self-appointed leader' but rather someone who 'speaks based on her own convictions and gets followers'. Another noted, 'She would carry out her strikes with or without other climate and environmental activists', highlighting her independence and dedication. Additionally, her perceived reluctance to embrace traditional leadership roles was captured in the comment, 'She does not want to be a leader in the way that many portray her as'. Finally, participants reported that the perception of her clarity and transparency about her identity were seen as key aspects of her sincerity. One respondent stated,

'She is very clear about who she is', whereas another remarked, 'Greta is one herself', suggesting that she embodies the values she advocates for without pretence or ulterior motives.

## 5 | Discussion

This study explored how climate activists in Sweden, the United Kingdom, and Turkey perceive Greta Thunberg's leadership in the climate movement, focusing on the identity prototypicality and identity advancement attributed to her leadership by activists. Our findings highlight three key trends. First, although Thunberg is widely regarded as a pivotal figure in raising awareness and mobilising action, activists' perceptions of her leadership are shaped by her alignment with the group's collective identity. This highlights how she embodies key characteristics that align with the identity of climate activists and how she plays a critical role in amplifying the movement's voice on a global scale. Specifically, her effectiveness as a leader is contingent on her being seen as *one of us* (identity prototypicality) and *doing it for us* (identity advancement). Our analysis identified multiple dimensions of her leadership, particularly her prototypicality—how she represents and models the activist identity—and her role in identity advancement—how she mobilises and empowers others to act. Second, our analysis reveals that these perceptions are not static but dynamic, influenced by her behaviours, rhetoric, and evolving relationships with activists, the media, and political institutions. While many activists report Greta Thunberg as embodying the climate movement's core values, others express concerns about her dominance in the narrative and media, in addition to the potential misalignment of her background with the movement's wider justice struggle due to her privileged background (middle-class White European). Third, the references for her identity prototypicality and advancement are highly overlapping, suggesting that the participants' perception of *being one of us* and *doing it for us* are intertwined and feed each other.

Previous studies have largely framed Greta Thunberg's influence in terms of her personal traits, charisma, and media presence (Gan et al. 2024; Mede and Schroeder 2024). However, our research emphasised the relational and group-based dimensions of her leadership. Findings indicate that Greta Thunberg's leadership is not solely a function of her individual attributes but emerges through her ability to represent and advance the shared identity of the climate movement. This aligns with recent studies on leadership in crowds and collective action, which emphasise that leadership in social movements is co-constructed by leaders and followers (Haslam et al. 2023; Uysal, Akfirat, and Cakal 2022; Uysal, Vestergren, and Acar 2025).

Our findings show that several characteristics contribute to the perception of identity prototypicality, which is based on her perceived alignment with the ideals, values, and behaviours expected of climate activists, most notably her determination, self-sacrifice, and consistency. Participants' perception of her unwavering commitment to the climate cause, often at great personal cost, was frequently referenced, reinforcing the notion that prototypical leaders in activism must display an extraordinary level of dedication. Her ability to persist in her advocacy despite significant personal sacrifices, such as missing school and

enduring public scrutiny, further solidifies her prototypicality. This shows how *one of us* and *doing it for us* are greatly intertwined in some groups, particularly groups who need urgent, tangible gains like climate activists.

A particularly interesting dimension of Greta Thunberg's prototypicality was her age and gender. Participants noted that she, as a young girl (at the time of data collection), was both atypical in comparison to traditional activist leaders (who are often older and male) and yet highly representative of a new generation of climate activists. Although she may not fit traditional activist stereotypes, she was still seen as highly representative of a younger, more passionate, and engaged movement. Moreover, her influence on younger followers was particularly emphasised, suggesting that prototypical leaders do not merely reflect the average but serve as aspirational figures who embody movement values in an idealised way.

Another critical element in establishing Greta Thunberg's prototypicality was her consistency. Activists frequently cited her adherence to climate-friendly lifestyle choices—such as refusing air travel and maintaining a vegan diet—as essential to her credibility. This suggests that consistency between one's personal actions and public advocacy enhances trust and legitimacy. Her perceived sincerity, honesty, and dedication strengthen her position as a role model, reinforcing the notion that prototypical leaders must exhibit coherence between personal behaviour and collective ideals. This aligns with the idea that a consistent and committed minority can influence majority opinion. The findings show that this is also true in the context of leadership, as consistent and resilient minority group leaders who are not initially seen as typical, like Greta Thunberg, can shift majority opinion and become prototypical leaders over time, having a substantial impact on broader attitudes and policies.

However, not all participants viewed Greta Thunberg as wholly prototypical. Some pointed to the role of privilege and media visibility in elevating her status, arguing that her global influence is at least partially due to her background as a White, Western and middle-class activist (see also Ryalls and Mazzarella 2021). These critiques resonate with debates of intersectionality in movement leadership, where certain voices gain prominence due to structural advantages rather than solely due to their activist credentials (Najati 2020). The term *Other Greta Effect*, for instance, has been used to describe how Greta Thunberg's symbolic role in the climate movement can universalise the experiences of Global North activists, while marginalising or erasing the struggles, contributions, and intersectional barriers faced by activists from less privileged and more precarious contexts (Coughlin and Morera Quesada 2024).

Relatedly, the most frequently cited dimension of identity advancement was her role in empowering activists and providing them with a platform to be heard. Participants repeatedly described her as a *voice* for the movement, amplifying concerns that might otherwise go unheard. This suggests that effective leaders in social movements act as conduits for the group rather than merely as individual charismatic figures. Greta Thunberg's influence extends beyond symbolic representation; she also mobilises concrete action. Her role as an initiator of climate strikes, particularly the Fridays for Future movement, was frequently

emphasised. Many participants credited her with inspiring them to take action, underscoring the importance of leaders who can transform ideals into reality; hence, identification with a cause into sustained activism. This finding highlights how perceptions of prototypicality and advancement feed each other (and even identity impresarioship): Although prototypical leaders not only embody the movement's identity but also facilitate collective agency and inspire tangible engagement, leaders in the context of social movements who inspire mobilisation and organise collective actions for activists to enact their identity are perceived more prototypical.

Furthermore, the findings highlight the need for intersectional approaches in leadership discourse, recognising both the advantages and limitations of visibility in activism. Her attempts for diversity and intersectionality through voicing the demands of marginalised activists and approaching climate activism as a part of a wider justice and collective liberation framework were not perceived as a flaw but an asset by most activists. However, it is important to contextualise these findings temporally. We conducted this study while (a) she was still a teenager and (b) before she became a target of political discourse, mainstream media, and certain activist factions due to her decolonial and pro-Palestinian activism. Therefore, we cannot generalise these findings to today's political context, as we do not know how activists perceive her now that she has grown older and become outspoken on other more contentious areas of social justice. Future studies should aim to replicate these findings in today's political context and explore how identity prototypicality and advancement evolve over time and the extent to which leaders like Greta Thunberg can maintain their influence as movements grow and diversify.

Overall, this study demonstrates that Greta Thunberg's leadership is perceived by climate activists not as a result of personal charisma alone, but as emerging from her alignment with the collective identity of the movement. Activists view her as both *one of us* and *doing it for us*, highlighting her determination, consistency and commitment to shared values. Her ability to amplify marginalised voices, act in line with climate ideals, and inspire collective action reinforces her position as a prototypical leader. Leadership in climate activism, as this study shows, is not about standing above the crowd, but standing firmly within it.

### Ethics Statement

This study is approved by the Dundee University Research Ethics Committee.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in Open Science Framework at [https://osf.io/mz8sx/?view\\_only=7046a5f4375c4f93878f59a137493b6f](https://osf.io/mz8sx/?view_only=7046a5f4375c4f93878f59a137493b6f). The raw data can be openly accessed on the Open Science Framework (OSF) webpage: <https://osf.io/mz8sx/files/osfstorage>.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The authors confirm that the manuscript adheres to ethical guidelines specified in the BPS Code of Human Research Ethics as well as their national guidelines.

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