

NURSING AND HEALTH POLICY PERSPECTIVE

Being a Climate Activist in Türkiye: Life Experiences, Psychosocial Challenges, and Emotional Burdens of the Guardians of the Planet

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The study aims to evaluate the life experiences, psychosocial challenges, and emotional burdens of climate activists, the guardians of the planet, related to the climate crisis, using a phenomenological approach.

Methods: This research was conducted in November 2023, utilizing an inductive qualitative framework. In-depth individual interviews were undertaken with 21 climate activists living in diverse regions of Türkiye through the WhatsApp mobile application. The research adhered to the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) checklist.

Results: Data analysis, three themes, and seven sub-themes were identified: climate crisis awareness and motives for becoming an activist (experiences, people involved, and personal attributes); the effects of being a climate activist on mental health (emotional burdens and coping with emotional burdens); and actions taken to reduce carbon footprints in addressing the climate crisis (social and behavioral).

Conclusion: Our study highlighted the challenges and coping mechanisms encountered by climate activists in their efforts to combat the climate crisis and revealed that these activists undergo psychosocial challenges and emotional burdens as a result of their engagement in this struggle. Certain activists struggle to manage their psychosocial challenges and consequently seek psychological assistance. Psychosocial support programs should be established for activists experiencing distress over climate change.

1 | Background

The evolving global order, accompanied by numerous advancements and innovations across various domains, also brings forth a multitude of challenges. Among these challenges, environmental issues undoubtedly stand out as particularly significant (Çınar and Asutay 2020). Although some of these issues might initially appear to concern only adults, it is, in fact, children and adolescents who are most significantly affected and will continue

to be so in the future (Ediz and Yanik 2023). From a different perspective, certain challenges, such as global warming, have captured the attention of the youth and evolved to a point where they are actively assuming responsibility and engaging in efforts to make an impact (Çınar and Asutay 2020; Ediz and Yanik 2023).

Even though the climate movement has evolved into a widespread phenomenon since the mid-2000s, its origins trace back to the early 1980s. Although concern about global

warming existed earlier, it was not until the 1970s that scientific communities began highlighting the issue, and it gradually gained public attention during the 1980s, largely thanks to the pioneering efforts of early activists (Yıldırım 2020; Levine et al. 2023). During this initial phase, the primary drivers of raising awareness were scientific groups and the environmental advocates collaborating alongside them. A minority of those dedicated to addressing global warming attempted to drive change by engaging in lobbying and advocacy, often with the backing of these scientific communities (Levine et al. 2023).

Greta Thunberg holds a pivotal role in the emerging wave of climate activism among the new generation. Greta Thunberg introduced a fresh dynamic to the discourse surrounding climate change and associated activism when she embarked on a 3-week-long sit-in protest in front of the Swedish Parliament, commencing on August 20, 2018 (Yıldırım 2020; Levine et al. 2023). Initiating this action before the elections in September, Greta Thunberg, born in 2003 and a high school student, continued her protest every Friday after the election (Yıldırım 2020). Thunberg's silent protest, adorned with a placard displaying the words "School Strike for Climate," swiftly garnered attention through the medium of social media (Yıldırım 2020; Levine et al. 2023).

Recently, intensifying extreme weather events, heavy rainfall, floods, high-level storms, and hurricanes, especially on the coasts open to the ocean, and frequent and unstoppable forest fires show that climate change is now affecting our daily lives more and more. Climate activists are also trying to make their voices heard by taking actions in line with this rebellion against extinction (Pandey et al. 2021; Antusch 2022). Climate activists contribute to raising climate and environmental awareness in line with the global youth movement and encourage individuals, society, and businesses to take measures against the global climate crisis (Antusch 2022). In recent years, the term "global climate crisis" has been increasingly used in the scientific and policy literature to emphasize the worldwide scale, interconnectedness, and urgency of climate change impacts. This concept reflects the recognition that climate-related environmental, social, and health challenges transcend national borders, requiring coordinated global responses. In the context of this study, the global climate crisis encompasses not only environmental degradation and extreme weather events but also profound implications for human health, equity, and social justice. (Pandey et al. 2021; Antusch 2022; Clayton and Karazsia 2020). In this context, the concept of "planetary health" has emerged within the field of public health, emphasizing the interdependence of human health and natural ecosystems. It recognizes that environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, and climate change directly threaten population health by increasing disease risk, exacerbating inequities, and undermining the determinants of health. Integrating planetary health into public health frameworks promotes preventive, equitable, and sustainable strategies that safeguard both human and environmental well-being. Within this framework, climate activists—who strive to address these intertwined environmental and health challenges—often experience complex emotions such as fear, disappointment, exclusion, hopelessness, and anxiety, which can in turn have psychosocial impacts (Pandey et al. 2021; Antusch 2022).

Psychosocial challenges associated with the global climate crisis tend to be more prevalent among individuals with increased awareness of environmental issues who have directly experienced the impacts of climate change (Clayton and Karazsia 2020). Although the degree of sensitivity to the global climate crisis varies among individuals, a sense of unease surrounding the issue can serve as a driving force to spur engagement in climate-related actions (Clayton 2020). Nonetheless, certain researchers argue that the stress induced by environmental concerns and climate crisis-induced anxiety can indeed foster pro-environmental behaviors (Clayton and Karazsia 2020; Homburg and Stolberg 2006; Higginbotham et al. 2014), subsequently giving rise to the phenomenon of climate activism (Albright and Hurd 2023). Engaging in climate activism typically means spending considerable time thinking about climate change, paying psychological costs, and committing material resources (Albright and Hurd 2023). However, this involvement can potentially contribute to mental health issues like anxiety and depression, ultimately leaving activists feeling drained and overwhelmed. Furthermore, instances where activism falls short of anticipated objectives can exacerbate feelings of distress, anxiety, hopelessness, and significant disillusionment (Albright and Hurd 2023; Kovan and Dirx 2003). In a study by Halstead et al. (2021), an exploration of the emotional journey of a young activist revealed that being a climate activist carries substantial responsibilities and can have adverse psychological effects. Further research is needed to understand the circumstances in which climate anxiety can encourage activism, and the conditions and limits surrounding the positive impacts of activism on climate anxiety. Policies and programs could also be established to encourage activism among those distressed about climate change (Clayton and Parnes 2025).

Despite the pivotal role climate activists play in advancing climate justice, a noteworthy gap exists in Turkish research concerning the exploration of challenges encountered by climate activists in connection with the global climate crisis. It has been determined that there are not enough qualitative studies conducted with climate activists in our country. Given these considerations, from both public health and psychiatric nursing perspectives, the global climate crisis is a critical health determinant affecting physical, mental, and social well-being. Public health nurses address its broad impacts on communities and advocate for vulnerable groups, while psychiatric nurses focus on managing climate-related psychosocial issues such as anxiety, hopelessness, and burnout (Higginbotham et al. 2014; Albright and Hurd 2023; Kovan and Dirx 2003; Halstead et al. 2021; Clayton and Parnes 2025). Understanding climate activists' experiences can inform community-based interventions and policies that promote both environmental sustainability and mental health. This study aims to explore, through a phenomenological approach, the life experiences, psychosocial challenges, and emotional burdens of climate activists in Türkiye, addressing a notable gap in the national literature.

2 | Methods

The authors adhered to the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) guidelines to report the results of the study (Tong et al. 2007) (Appendix 1).

2.1 | Study Design

This research was conducted in November 2023, utilizing an inductive qualitative framework. In-depth individual interviews were undertaken with 21 climate activists living in diverse regions of Türkiye through the WhatsApp mobile application.

2.2 | Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by Edmund Husserl's descriptive phenomenology, which aims to identify and describe the essential structures of lived experiences. Through bracketing (*epoché*), the researchers set aside personal assumptions to capture participants' experiences as accurately as possible, aligning with the study's aim of describing the life experiences, psychosocial challenges, and emotional burdens of climate activists in Türkiye (Giorgi 2009).

2.3 | Research Team and Reflexivity

Both members of the research team hold active positions as faculty members within nursing schools, specializing in doctoral education, and have a doctoral degree in psychiatric nursing with practical experience as clinical nurses in healthcare institutions. Additionally, both have received comprehensive training in qualitative research methodologies.

2.4 | Study Group

The study's participants were formed via the snowball sampling technique, wherein climate activists in various areas of the nation were engaged in interviews via the WhatsApp mobile phone application. Since it would be very difficult to conduct face-to-face interviews with climate activists living in various provinces of the country, interviews were conducted via WhatsApp. In addition, there are very few climate activist actions in our country, and those actions are limited to press releases or short protests.

Firstly, we reached the person we knew as a climate activist and met through social media, and then we asked him for help in reaching other climate activists, and then he helped us reach other climate activists. The interviews continued until the data were repeated and were terminated when data saturation was achieved by interviewing 21 climate activists.

The inclusion criteria were as follows: (a) being an active climate activist for at least 1 year; (b) being open to communication; and (c) consenting to participate in the study. The exclusion criteria were as follows: (a) having a language, speech, or hearing impairment that would prevent communication.

2.5 | Data Collection

The researcher developed a semi-structured interview protocol following an extensive review of relevant literature. This protocol consisted of two sections. The first section encompassed six questions, namely about age, gender, occupation, marital status,

place of residence, and the duration of engagement as climate activists. The second section includes a compilation of eight fundamental open-ended questions within the semi-structured interview framework. They were administered individually to climate activists through the WhatsApp platform. During the interview sessions, climate activists were probed to expound upon their encountered challenges, narrate personal experiences of adversity, and explicate their responses, with additional prompts such as "Could you provide further elaboration on your perspective?" and "What do you mean by that?" All interviews were conducted by the second author. The interviews were recorded using a Sony voice recorder and transcribed verbatim by the researcher for analysis.

Eight main questions and sub-questions related to the life experiences of climate activists and the impact of psychosocial challenges were used in the interviews.

The questions in the semi-structured interview form are as follows:

1. What do you think about climate crisis?
2. What raised your awareness about climate crisis? Was it a specific event, a debate, or did it develop gradually?
3. Can you tell us about the reasons that led you to become a climate activist?
4. How does it make you feel to take part in climate action (positively or negatively)?
5. Can you explain the effects of climate crisis on your mental health (positive or negative)? Have you received social/psychological support for its negative effects, and if so, what kind of support have you received?
6. After being a climate activist, have you made changes in your social or behavioral habits to reduce your carbon footprint? If so, can you tell us about the positive or negative effects of these changes on your life?
7. Can you tell us about your experiences that give you hope or despair in your struggle against climate crisis?
8. How are your actions as a climate activist perceived by your family, social circle, public opinion, government officials, etc.? Can you talk about the reflections of this on you?

2.6 | Data Analysis

In the analysis of qualitative data obtained from interviews, the 7-stage analysis method developed by Colaizzi (1978) for phenomenological studies was employed (Morrow et al. 2015). In this process, the interview texts were initially read independently and repeatedly by two researchers, aiming to comprehensively grasp the essence of the data. Significant statements within the interview texts were carefully selected, restructured, and presented in a more general context. Subsequently, the underlying data implied by these statements were systematically identified and thoroughly examined. Through collaborative discussions, the researchers formulated and solidified the meanings extracted from the data, working toward achieving a shared consensus. Once a mutual agreement was reached, the researchers

proceeded to categorize and arrange the identified themes into both main and sub-themes. These themes and sub-themes emerged in a coherent and articulate narrative, enhancing the overall clarity of expression. Furthermore, the inclusion of participant statements served to validate the interpretation and analysis of the data, offering readers a means to independently verify the findings (Yıldırım et al. 2021).

2.7 | Study Rigor and Trustworthiness

In a qualitative study, ensuring rigor and reliability is essential. In this research, trustworthiness was established based on Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

2.7.1 | Credibility

Credibility was ensured through prolonged engagement with participants, voluntary informed consent, creation of a safe interview environment that encouraged open dialog, member checking, and peer debriefing to confirm accurate representation of experiences. All interviews were conducted by the second author, audio-recorded, transcribed on the same day by the lead author, and reviewed by the other researcher for accuracy.

2.7.2 | Dependability

Dependability was supported by providing a detailed description of the research process, employing an appropriate qualitative design, conducting a pilot interview to refine the questions, and maintaining a systematic approach in coding and theme development, with transcripts reviewed by both researchers.

2.7.3 | Transferability

Transferability was enhanced through purposive sampling of participants who met the inclusion criteria, rich descriptions of the participants and context, and the interviewer's familiarity with cultural and social contexts, which facilitated effective communication.

2.7.4 | Confirmability

Confirmability was achieved through transparent data collection and analysis, an audit trail, reflexive notes, and the use of direct participant quotations. Reflexivity was further supported by the researchers' backgrounds as associate professors specializing in psychiatric nursing, with prior clinical and qualitative research experience (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Cypress 2017; Forero et al. 2018).

2.8 | Ethical Considerations

This research was approved by the Hakkari University Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee (dated 01.08.2023,

numbered 2023/79-01). Before the interviews, informed consent was obtained from the participants in writing via Google Forms. Recordings and transcripts were stored on a password-protected device. The study was conducted following the Declaration of Helsinki and the ethical standards of the National Research Committee.

3 | Results

The mean age of the climate activists included in the study was 24.38 ± 10.37 ; 17 of them were female, and 19 of them were single. In addition, 15 of the activists are students. The average duration of engagement as a climate activist was calculated as 3.09 ± 2.5 years. Young people are one important stakeholder group since their future is at risk. Furthermore, young people are the future leaders and decision-makers of society, and it is therefore important that they develop competencies to deal with this complex problem (Pereira and Freire 2021). Young people are also citizens of today who can both worsen this problem through an unsustainable lifestyle and help improve the problem by acting in as climate friendly a manner as possible in everyday life, influencing their parents and friends (O'Brien et al. 2018).

The demographic characteristics of the climate activists in the study are presented in Table 1.

3.1 | Themes, Sub-Themes, and Codes Identified

Three themes emerged, including climate crisis awareness and motives for becoming an activist, the effects of being a climate activist on mental health, and actions taken to reduce carbon footprints in combating the climate crisis. Each theme includes different sub-theme and codes that are summarized in Table 2pcpc. In this section, the participants' quotations are presented with the number allocated to each participant, such as P1, P2, P3,...

3.2 | Theme 1: Climate Crisis Awareness and Motives for Becoming an Activist

3.2.1 | Sub-Theme 1: Experiences

According to the data obtained from the interviews, climate activists have indicated that, among the reasons motivating them to become climate activists, the significant influence of natural events has been emphasized. In the interviews, events such as forest fires, drought, sea snot, and extreme weather were frequently emphasized. P3 described the evacuation process they experienced during the Marmaris fire and noted that today they would intervene more actively. These findings indicate that direct witnessing of disasters triggers a shift from passive observation to a desire for action. Thus, personal experiences transform climate awareness into a concrete motivation for activism.

“Every day, disasters are happening due to the climate crisis. Things like slimy sea mucus, forest fires, extreme heatwaves, unusual weather events, people

TABLE 1 | Characteristics of the participants.

Participant number	Age	Gender	Marital status	Occupation	City of residence	Duration of engagement as a climate activist
P1	21	Male	Single	University student	Bilecik	2 years
P2	16	Female	Single	High school student	Bursa	3 years
P3	18	Male	Single	High school student	İstanbul	2 years
P4	19	Female	Single	University student	İstanbul	7 years
P5	33	Female	Married	Environmental engineer	Bursa	1 years
P6	22	Female	Single	University student	Kayseri	1 years
P7	21	Female	Single	University student	İstanbul	5 years
P8	16	Female	Single	High school student	Hatay	2 years
P9	21	Female	Single	University student	İstanbul	1 years
P10	21	Male	Single	University student	Ankara	1 years
P11	36	Female	Single	Civil servant	Uşak	2 years
P12	20	Female	Single	University student	Bursa	1 years
P13	16	Female	Single	High school student	Balıkesir	1 years
P14	19	Female	Single	University student	Tokat	2 years
P15	49	Female	Single	Public relations expert	İstanbul	5 years
P16	46	Female	Married	Retired	Yalova	10 years
P17	22	Male	Single	Self-employed	Adana	4 years
P18	43	Female	Single	Environmental engineer	İstanbul	8 years
P19	18	Female	Single	High school student	İstanbul	2 years
P20	18	Female	Single	High school student	İstanbul	3 years
P21	17	Female	Single	High school student	İstanbul	2 years

TABLE 2 | Themes, sub-themes, and codes related to the psychosocial challenges and emotional burdens of climate activists.

Themes	Sub-themes	Codes
1. Climate crisis awareness and motives for becoming an activist	Experiences	Flood, fires, hurricanes, landslides, shifting of the seasons, extremely hot or extremely cold weather, sudden weather changes, ecosystem degradation, extinction of animal species, drought
	People involved	Meeting a climate campaigner, parental love of nature, insensitivity of individuals in the society, circle of friends, educators
	Personal attributes	Self-realization, increasing self-confidence, to fulfill his/her responsibility, raising awareness, to leave livable earth for my children, the idea of saving the world
2. The effects of being a climate activist on mental health	Emotional burdens	Anxiety, depression, burnout, hopelessness, despair, happiness, sustainable love, future anxiety, suicidal ideation, unhappiness, excitement
	Coping with emotional burdens	Overeating, doing sports activities, carrying out psychological self-care, nurturing hope, to continue the struggle, getting psychological support
3. Actions taken to reduce carbon footprints to struggle with the climate crisis	Social	Informing friends about the climate crisis and its effects on the environment, to organize seminars on climate awareness, acting as a climate ambassador, to continue the struggle
	Behavioral	Using a bicycle, not consuming packaged food, not consuming animal food, to pay attention to water consumption, not using plastic products, using public transport, to give importance to recycling for waste management, to be sensitive about zero waste

moving because of climate changes, droughts, and problems with farming and food... For example, in the Marmaris fire of 2021, I was on vacation with my family in Turunç, and we experienced the fire very closely. We had to evacuate Turunç and go to Marmaris. Somehow, we managed to rescue ourselves, but my mind remained fixated there. Back then, I wasn't very experienced; I didn't know what to do. However, if it were to happen now, I would definitely do whatever I could. Another instance is the ongoing Akbelen Forest massacre. It's a battle where hope and hopelessness coexist simultaneously... There are tons of examples like this." (P3).

3.2.2 | Sub-Theme 2: People Involved

The interviews with climate activists have demonstrated that the activists have been influenced by their parents' appreciation for nature, and the accounts provided by teachers or individuals engaged in climate advocacy, leading them to decide to become climate activists. Early encounters with role models and social influence significantly shape the path to activism. P1 shared that they began nature-themed projects under the guidance of a middle school art teacher and later joined climate-focused NGOs during university. This demonstrates that supportive social connections and inspiring figures consolidate environmental awareness and prepare individuals for activism. Therefore, activism is nourished not only by personal awareness but also by encouraging social bonds.

"In middle school, my art teacher had us draw nature and water, which led me to see images of drought and deforested lands online and start thinking about the issue. I witnessed the Kaz Mountains movement against cyanide mining, and in high school noticed winters were no longer the same. Social media posts on climate and pollution worried me, though I didn't fully grasp their scope. At university, I joined an NGO on climate and waste management after a training session, and later applied to the Young Climate Ambassadors program, where I learned more by observing trainers and fellow activists." (P1).

3.2.3 | Sub-Theme 3: Personal Attributes

Climate activists indicated that the motivations driving them to become climate activists include the desire for self-fulfillment, enhancing self-confidence, fulfilling responsibilities, fostering awareness, ensuring a habitable planet for future generations, and the aspiration to contribute to the preservation of the world. Motivations for activism included a sense of responsibility, the desire to develop self-confidence, the aspiration to leave a livable planet for future generations, and the ideal of protecting the

world. P4 felt compelled to make their voice heard, believing that the crisis could threaten their future, while P3 emphasized that a zero-waste lifestyle was both environmentally and socially empowering. These findings show that climate activism is not only an ethical duty but also a life domain that provides personal growth and social fulfillment. Thus, activism becomes a multidimensional process combining both individual and societal benefits.

"The belief that I/we can save this world is what drove me to act when I was young. Because this crisis is on a scale that could end my future. Every day, we experience events caused by the climate crisis, and every year we face major disasters, each of which leaves lasting damage in our lives. During such a significant crisis, I felt that I absolutely had to do something and make my voice heard in the world. That's why I became a climate activist." (P4).

"The state of the world wasn't getting better, and I felt I had to do something about it. Not just me, but everyone should! I set out with this mentality. I made changes in my own life initially, and I'm continuing my journey towards a zero-waste lifestyle. Alongside this, becoming a climate activist has led me to form wonderful friendships, bonds, and relationships. Socially, activism is also something enjoyable and empowering." (P3).

3.3 | Theme 2: The Effects of Being a Climate Activist on Mental Health

3.3.1 | Sub-Theme 1: Emotional Burdens

Climate activists have reported experiencing negative emotions like anxiety, depression, helplessness, burnout, and despair along with positive ones such as happiness, excitement, and hope. P3 experienced depression and anxiety during activism, while P6 believed that even small actions could have an impact. These findings indicate that climate activism carries a dual emotional load. Therefore, work in this field requires psychological resilience to manage emotional fluctuations.

"For the past 3 years, I've been struggling with depression and anxiety. The main reasons behind this are the climate crisis and animal exploitation. The climate crisis awareness and my journey towards veganism, which started enjoyably, gradually turned into hopelessness, nihilism, and even misanthropy. With so much happening in the world, with the majority of humans and animals living in misery and cruelty, what right do I have to be happy, or even to live? This thought led me to think of self-harm, to the point that for a period, every moment of my day was consumed by it." (P3).

“I believe that anyone working in this field has experienced what I call eco-anxiety. Sometimes, the bad news is so overwhelming that I feel like I can’t breathe. Even though I do my best, the decisions made by officials in power often turn out worse, and their exclusion of us from these processes can make me feel helpless.” (P7).

“Even though I sometimes feel like I’m struggling in vain and feel hopeless, I believe that every action can create a butterfly effect.” (P6).

3.3.2 | Sub-Theme 2: Coping With Emotional Burdens

Climate activists have expressed that they grapple with the emotional burden generated by their activism. Participants use various strategies to cope with the emotional strain of activism. These include nature walks, cycling, self-care practices, maintaining hope, and occasionally seeking professional psychological support. P1 stated that they turned to nature to avoid dystopian thoughts, while P5 emphasized taking time for themselves to protect their mental health. This demonstrates that sustainable activism is not solely action-focused but also includes self-care as an integral part of the process. In this way, activists maintain their emotional resilience and extend their commitment over the long term.

“Sometimes, dystopian thoughts come to my mind, and to escape from these thoughts, I immerse myself in nature and go for bike rides. I haven’t received any support.” (P1).

“When I feel overwhelmed by hopelessness, I distance myself and take time for myself. I engage in self-care for my mental well-being.” (P5).

3.4 | Theme 3: Actions Taken to Reduce Carbon Footprints in Combating the Climate Crisis

3.4.1 | Sub-Theme 1: Social

Climate activists have reported engaging in various actions to combat the climate crisis, primarily aimed at reducing their carbon footprints like socially communicating the climate crisis and its impacts to friends and acquaintances, conducting seminars to raise climate awareness, participating in climate ambassadorship initiatives, and persisting in their advocacy efforts. P7 shared that they changed their shopping habits and explained the reasons to those around them, serving as an example. These findings show that social interaction can amplify individual efforts to have a broader societal impact. Thus, awareness dissemination creates a multiplier effect in the fight against climate change.

“At first, I used to enjoy shopping almost as a hobby. However, it turned me into someone who avoids buying even a single unnecessary item. Especially when it

comes to clothing, buying anything that I don’t need starts to bother me. I tried to implement these changes in my own life and also encouraged my family and friends to incorporate these changes into their lives by explaining why I was doing this. By doing this, I believed that I was taking a beneficial step for the world and the future each time, which helped keep eco-anxiety mostly at bay for me.” (P7).

3.4.2 | Sub-Theme 2: Behavioral

Climate activists engaged in various behavioral actions to mitigate their carbon footprint as part of their efforts to combat the climate crisis, including bicycles, refraining from consuming packaged foods, adopting a plant-based diet, practicing mindful water consumption, not using plastic products, opting for public transportation, prioritizing recycling for waste management, and demonstrating sensitivity toward achieving zero waste goals. P1 reported taking steps to reduce both physical and digital waste. These findings show that activism goes beyond discourse and becomes embedded in lifestyle. Thus, combating climate change becomes a tangible and sustainable practice at the individual level.

“Yes, first and foremost, I started using my bike for transportation. I try to produce as little single-use waste as possible. I evaluated and organized the items in my room, and I either recycled or got rid of the ones I didn’t use. From clothes I didn’t wear, I created a nice cloth bag and decorations for my pots, fostering the behavior of reuse. Now, I carry my water in a glass bottle. When at a place, I choose glass cups over disposable ones. I organized and deleted unnecessary pictures and videos from the storage units on my phone and computer, reducing my digital waste.” (P1).

4 | Discussion

This study aimed to evaluate the life experiences, psychosocial challenges, and emotional burdens of climate activists, the guardians of the planet, related to the climate crisis, using a phenomenological approach. The life experiences of climate activists related to the climate crisis, psychosocial challenges, and emotional burdens they experience were analyzed in three themes.

4.1 | Climate Crisis Awareness and Motives for Becoming an Activist

As a result of the study, it was determined that climate activists have awareness about the climate crisis. As the impact of the climate crisis continues to grow in our daily lives, particularly since the 20th century, there has been an increasing focus on seeking global solutions and generating ideas to address this alarming issue. The climate crisis is truly a global challenge

due to its far-reaching effects that transcend borders. Most environmental challenges, including the climate crisis, possess regional and global dimensions rather than being confined to local characteristics. Consequently, the responsibility of finding solutions to environmental problems, especially the climate crisis, falls upon those who contribute to these issues. In other words, the primary path to mitigating the climate crisis lies in the formulation of policies by individuals, public entities, civil society, and the private sector, all working in collaboration under a global consensus. In this context, numerous global agreements and documents have been developed to address the climate crisis and broader environmental issues. The effectiveness of these international initiatives becomes evident through research conducted within specific countries (Tuncer 2022).

In today's rapidly evolving world of information sharing, awareness of the climate crisis is also accelerating. This surge in awareness holds particular significance for Generation Z, a cohort deeply intertwined with the digital realm, both globally and within Türkiye. Born into the era of the internet, the Z generation exhibits an increased concern for the climate crisis, which has organically become a central issue in their consciousness. Numerous studies underscore the climate crisis sensitivity of Generation Z. For example, Bytof and Ritch (2023) report that Generation Z perceives the climate crisis and environmental issues as their foremost concerns. In this research, unemployment followed as the second concern, and health ranked third. Conversely, among Generation Y, health took precedence as the primary concern, followed by unemployment, and subsequently, the climate crisis and environmental issues. According to the report issued by Petrescu-Mag (2023), a significant 73% of Generation Z consumers exhibit a remarkable willingness to invest in sustainable products, compared to other generations in this regard (Bytof and Ritch 2023).

In 2022, Amárach Research and Young Social Innovators (YSI) conducted a study involving 1090 Irish youth and revealed that an overwhelming 78% of respondents considered the climate crisis as their top concern for the future. Notably, more than 80% of those surveyed expressed the belief that both companies and governments were inadequately addressing the urgency of the climate crisis. Ninety-four percent of participants reported actively participating in recycling efforts, 76% were mindful of reducing food waste, 70% utilized public transportation, and 53% chose second-hand clothing purchases (Young Social Innovators 2022). In a separate investigation by the McKinsey Health Institute focusing on stress levels across 10 European countries, it was observed that Generation Z in Türkiye exhibited higher stress levels associated with the climate crisis compared to their counterparts in other participating nations (Günay and Güçdemir 2022). This research highlights the negative impact of the global climate crisis on young individuals.

4.2 | The Effects of Being a Climate Activist on Mental Health

As a result of the study, it was determined that climate activists experienced psychosocial difficulties due to their struggle. The challenge of adapting to shifting climates and their associated conditions has become a focus due to increasing displacement brought about by climate-induced disasters, biological invasions,

the depletion of natural resources, and the loss of habitats on a global scale. The emergence of mental health issues stemming from trauma and stress has been particularly significant in scenarios where the aftermath of climate-related disasters, exacerbated by extreme weather events, becomes a persistent aspect of daily life. This impact is especially remarkable among disadvantaged segments of society, characterized by disparities in socioeconomic status, age, and health (Gürçam 2023). In a study by Halstead et al. (2021), the emotional track of a young activist was examined, highlighting the profound responsibility that comes with being a climate activist and the fact that these individuals endure negative psychosocial effects due to their advocacy efforts. Climate activists, in alignment with the tenets of the extinction rebellion movement, strive to increase their voices through actions. As they navigate this challenging fight, these activists struggle with intricate emotions like fear, frustration, alienation, hopelessness, and anxiety; consequently, their psychosocial well-being can also be significantly impacted (Pandey et al. 2021; Antusch 2022). These findings align with the broader body of global literature on the subject.

4.3 | Actions Taken to Reduce Carbon Footprints in Combating the Climate Crisis

As a result of the study, it was determined that climate activists struggle for the climate crisis. The carbon footprint is characterized as the cumulative quantity of carbon and its equivalents consumed or acquired by an organism over its lifetime to fulfill its necessities and encompasses the carbon and carbon-equivalent emissions generated during the entire lifecycle of a product, starting from its production to its utilization and eventual end-of-life (Arora et al. 2022). Due to an increase in carbon footprint, global warming occurs, which jeopardizes natural ecosystems. By quantifying emissions through the lens of the carbon footprint, assessments can be conducted to gauge the environmental repercussions of these escalating emissions. Notably, activities such as private vehicle usage, fossil fuel-driven heating, heightened electricity generation, reliance on packaged goods, and frequent consumption of animal products serve to amplify the carbon footprint (Güneş 2018; Balta 2020; Kulözü Uzunboy and Sipahi 2020). The concept of a carbon footprint allows for the calculation of emissions comparably contributing to global warming. This approach enables the assessment of increases within the context of their environmental impact. Specifically, scenarios like individual vehicle usage, fuel-based heating, heightened electricity generation, reliance on packaged goods, and frequent consumption of animal products contribute to an increased carbon footprint (Güneş 2018; Balta 2020; Kulözü Uzunboy and Sipahi 2020). To mitigate the carbon footprint, recommendations include opting for public transportation, reducing consumption of animal-derived foods, minimizing clothing waste, cutting down on packaged items, and adopting renewable energy sources (Turgut and Budak 2022; Kumaş et al. 2019; Şengün and Kalağan 2022). The present study also noted that individuals advocating for climate action implemented similar strategies to diminish their carbon footprints.

5 | Implications for Nursing Policy

Given the psychological toll experienced by climate activists, nursing policy must prioritize the development of mental health

support frameworks tailored to this population. Policies should advocate for routine psychosocial assessments for activists, early identification of burnout symptoms, and accessible, activist-informed counseling services. This study offers important implications for Public Health Nursing (PHN) by highlighting how climate activists' experiences can guide community-based health promotion, mental health support, and policy advocacy. The findings show that early role models, direct exposure to environmental disasters, and strong social networks motivate activism, while activists often face eco-anxiety, burnout, and other emotional burdens. Nurses, particularly those in community and mental health settings, should be equipped through training and institutional guidelines to recognize and address climate-related psychological distress. Furthermore, nursing policy should support intersectoral collaboration to integrate mental health services with environmental advocacy networks. Institutionalizing such practices not only enhances the mental well-being of activists but also contributes to broader public health outcomes by sustaining the momentum of climate advocacy through psychological resilience and professional care.

6 | Conclusions and Recommendations

This research highlights the life experiences, psychosocial challenges, and coping strategies of climate activists, who are often regarded as guardians of the planet, in the face of the climate crisis. The results indicate that climate activists derive not only positive emotions such as happiness, excitement, and hope from their endeavors but also struggle with negative feelings, including anxiety, depression, helplessness, and hopelessness. These negative emotions stem from the ongoing unconscious actions of individuals and society, along with a lack of sufficient awareness. Insufficient support for activist roles has detrimental effects on their mental well-being, family dynamics, and social relationships. Certain activists struggle to manage their psychosocial challenges and consequently seek psychological assistance. The existing body of evidence overwhelmingly demonstrates an adverse correlation between the climate crisis and mental health. The psychological distress experienced by climate activists is rooted in their perceived inability to achieve desired outcomes through their efforts. There is an evident necessity for a practical framework aimed at protecting the mental health of climate activists, addressing psychosocial concerns, and preventing burnout. It is advisable to thoroughly examine the mental state of activists who are dealing with depression, anxiety about the future, and burnout and devise institutional policies and strategies to effectively counteract these challenges. Moreover, it is recommended that individuals in positions of authority acknowledge their responsibilities in the climate crisis. By assuming a greater share of the burden associated with the climate crisis and demonstrating tangible governmental measures, the negative emotions experienced by activists can be alleviated.

7 | Limitations

The main limitation of the study is that the research's scope was confined to participants from various regions of Türkiye; therefore, the outcomes depend on the specific participants and the relevant setting. The small and specific sample of participants

may not accurately represent the entire population of climate activists within the country.

Author Contributions

Sevda Uzun and Çiçek Ediz: writing – review and editing, writing – original draft, validation, project administration, methodology, formal analysis, data curation, and conceptualization. **Sevda Uzun and Çiçek Ediz:** writing – original draft, methodology, data curation, and conceptualization.

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Ethics Statement

This research was approved by the Hakkari University Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee (dated 01.08.2023, numbered 2023/79-01).

Consent

Written informed consent was obtained from each participant before recruitment into the study. Each participant was informed of his/her right to withdraw from the study at any time without suffering any negative consequences. Names of the participants were not revealed in the study report, and all information gathered from the study participants were treated confidentially, as special codes were used to represent the responses of each participant. The study was conducted following the Declaration of Helsinki and the ethical standards of the National Research Committee.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

All data generated or analyzed during this study are included in this published article and its Supporting Information files.

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APPENDIX 1: Combined Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ)

Number	Characteristics	Guiding questions	Explanations
Domain 1: Research Team and Reflexivity			
Personal characteristics			
1	Interviewer/facilitator	Which author(s) conducted the interview or focus group?	The second author conducted the interview
2	Credentials	What were the researchers' credentials? For example, PhD, MD	First author: PhD Second author: PhD
3	Occupation	What was their occupation at the time of the study?	First author: PhD, Faculty Member, Psychiatric Nursing Second author: PhD, Faculty Member, Psychiatric Nursing
4	Gender	What was the sex of the researcher?	Two researchers: Female
5	Experience and training	What experience or training did the researcher(s) have?	The first author has taken qualitative courses and published qualitative studies in international journals The second author has taken qualitative courses
Relationship with participants			
6	Relationship established	Was a relationship established before study commencement?	No prior relationship was established between the researchers and participants
7	Participant knowledge of the interviewer	What did the participants know about the researcher? (e.g., personal goals, reasons for doing the research)	Climate activists knew that the researcher had a PhD in mental health and illness
8	Interviewer characteristics	What characteristics were reported about the interviewer/facilitator? (e.g., bias, assumptions, reasons, and interests in the research topic)	At the beginning of each interview, climate activists were informed about the purpose and objectives of the study
Domain 2: Study Design			
Theoretical framework			
9	Methodological orientation and theory	What methodological orientation was stated to underpin the study? (e.g., grounded theory, discourse analysis, ethnography, phenomenology, content analysis)	It is a phenomenological study.
Participant selection			
10	Sampling	How were participants selected? (e.g., purposive, convenience, consecutive, snowball)	The snowball method, one of the purposive sampling methods, was used.
11	Method of approach	How were participants approached? (e.g., face-to-face, telephone, mail, e-mail)	The scheduling of the interviews was determined by the climate activists, who voluntarily agreed to participate in the study.
12	Sample size	How many participants were in the study?	A total of 21 climate activists were included in the study.

Number	Characteristics	Guiding questions	Explanations
13	Nonparticipation	How many people refused to participate or dropped out? Reasons?	No climate activists refused to participate in the study.
Setting			
14	Setting of data collection	Where was the data collected? (e.g., home, clinic, workplace)	Detailed information is given in the data collection section of the study.
15	Presence of non-participants	Was anyone else present besides the participants and researchers?	No, there was not.
16	Description of the sample	What are the important characteristics of the sample? (e.g., demographic data, date)	Climate activists who consented to participate in the study were recruited for the study.
Data collection			
17	Interview guide	Were questions, prompts, or guides provided by the authors? Was it pilot tested?	Detailed information is given in the methods section.
18	Repeat interviews	Were repeat interviews carried out? If yes, how many?	No repeat focus group sessions/interviews were required.
19	Audio/visual recording	Did the research use audio or visual recording to collect the data?	Interviews and focus group sessions were audio-recorded.
20	Field notes	Were field notes made during and/or after the interview or focus group?	All climate activists' responses and researcher observations were recorded.
21	Duration	What was the duration of the interviews or focus groups?	Each interview lasted between 35 and 45 minutes.
22	Data saturation	Was data saturation discussed?	Yes, it was.
23	Transcripts returned	Were transcripts returned to participants for comment and/or correction?	No, they were not.
Domain 3: Analysis and Findings			
24	Number of data coders	How many data coders coded the data?	Two researchers and a third individual independently coded the data.
25	Description of the coding tree	Did the authors provide a description of the coding tree?	The titles and subtitles in the results section represent the final coding tree.
26	Derivation of themes	Were themes identified in advance or derived from the data?	Themes were derived from the data.
27	Software	What software, if applicable, was used to manage the data?	The data were analyzed manually.
28	Participant checking	Did participants provide feedback on the findings?	No, they did not.
Reporting			
29	Quotations presented	Were participant quotations presented to illustrate the themes/findings? Was each quotation identified? (e.g., participant number)	Quotations have been presented with participant codes assigned to them.

Number	Characteristics	Guiding questions	Explanations
30	Data and findings consistent	Was there consistency between the data presented and the findings?	Yes, there was.
31	Clarity of major themes	Were major themes clearly presented in the findings?	Yes, they were.
32	Clarity of minor themes	Is there a description of diverse cases or a discussion of minor themes?	Yes, there is.