

“I Hope We Can Talk About Sustainability One Day Because That Would Mean All of Our Other Problems Are Gone”

Study Among Turkish Urban Youth on Environmental Awareness,
Environmental Concern and Pro-environmental Behavior

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Abstract:

Awareness and concern about environmental issues are rising globally, but research shows that increased awareness and concern does not necessarily lead to pro-environmental behavior. Cross-national studies found that countries’ economic and political context play an important role in the dynamic between awareness, concern and action. This research focuses on how environmental awareness, environmental concern and pro-environmental behavior are connected in the daily lives of Turkish urban youth. With its economic crisis and an increasingly authoritarian government, Türkiye provides an interesting context for

analysis. Through in-depth interviews, this study builds upon the experiences of young people in Türkiye. The study shows that participants are aware of, and concerned about environmental problems, mainly at a local level and some participants try to take sustainable actions through conscious consumerism and natural resource use. For most participants, however, environmental issues are not a priority. The political and economic struggles are prioritized in their daily lives. Participants expressed that they feel overwhelmed by the vastness of environmental issues, and unable to contribute on an individual level.

Keywords: Turkish Urban Youth, Environmental Awareness, Environmental Concern, Pro-environmental Behavior, Postmaterialism, Quality of Government

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A Word of Gratitude

It has been five years since I visited Türkiye for the last time. Türkiye, the country where my father grew up, the country where my roots lie. Even though I don't speak the language, I feel a strong connection to this place. My father accompanied me on this trip, and while I was doing interviews, he had time to catch up with old friends. As the traffic can be cruel in Ankara, we spent lots of time together in traffic jams and thus we had lots of time to talk. We talked about how it was for him to grow up in Ankara, and about how the city has changed so much since he left. We visited places that were full of memories for my father, and we met with friends and family. I feel very grateful to have shared this time with him. Sometimes I felt naive, as I learned that most people I talked to had such different priorities and worries and this experience has helped me to gain not only valuable insights for my research, but it also helped me to connect more to Türkiye on a personal level.

I want to thank all participants for their time, trust and valuable insights. Their contribution has formed the core of this thesis. I also want to thank Mustafa and Yaz for their tremendous help during my fieldwork period in Ankara. Without them I would have been lost in the concrete jungle of Ankara! I also want to give thanks to Annika, my supervisor, for her time, insights and positive attitudes. Our meetings were always very fun, and she always took the time for me. Lastly, I want to thank my classmates for their motivation and inspiration, for the study sessions at Sambib and communal lunches at the microwave-hut. It feels wonderful to be part of a community of like-minded students who help you grow as a student and as a person!

Setting the Scene

Climate change and environmental degradation are becoming increasingly pressing issues. The effects hereof are visible in all parts of the world, and range from floods, droughts and pollution to species loss. The United Nations Environmental Programme has defined three root issues regarding the environment: climate change, nature and biodiversity loss, and pollution (UNEP 2024). As a response, sustainability has become a prominent part of the political agenda, both at national and international levels. But engagement with environmental topics is not limited to the political sphere. Civic engagement with environmental issues has played an important role in environmental debates, and the role young people play in this process has gained considerable attention.

Environmental awareness and concern are rising globally, yet researchers find a disconnect between environmental awareness, concern and pro-environmental behavior. This is an alarming finding, as pro-environmental behavior of individuals is an important step towards a more sustainable future. Individual characteristics such as age, gender and political stance have been analyzed to explain why certain people are less likely to translate their environmental awareness and concerns into action (Gifford and Nilsson 2014). Boulianne and Ohme (2022: 771) show that there is a correlation between age and environmental awareness and concern, meaning that younger people are more likely to be aware of and concerned about environmental issues than older people. The global rise in youth-led environmental campaigns and actions exemplify this result. Similarly, research shows that environmental issues have become one of the top concerns among young people globally (Henn et al. 2022).

Since the 1990s, the interest in youth participation in societal debates has increased, because both researchers and politicians started to acknowledge the value of young citizens' perspectives on local and global issues (Pincock et al. 2024: 2). They argue that young people can play a pivotal role in creating a more just and sustainable future (ibid.).

Besides individual characteristics it is also important to look at the societal context in which people shape their environmental awareness, concerns and actions. This thesis will build upon cross-national research on the role of societal contexts on environmental awareness, concern and pro-environmental behavior. The focus will be specifically on Turkish urban youth. The majority of young people globally live in urban areas, and this is also the case for Türkiye (Buttigieg and Pace 2013: 29; Erdogan and Uyan-Semerci 2020: 17). It is therefore valuable to integrate perspectives of urban youth on environmental challenges.

Looking at Türkiye, the country currently faces an economic crisis and has a complex political climate, since Erdoğan came into power in 2002 and has increasingly taken on an authoritarian approach. The country's economic and political context, therefore provides a relevant point of analysis. Besides, Türkiye scores very poorly on international sustainable indexes, and it is argued that this trend is getting worse over time (Arsel and Adaman 2022: 60). Türkiye is the 15th largest carbon emitter of the world and ranks almost last in the global index for habitat and biodiversity protection (Demir 2022: 143). The Turkish economy is highly dependent on fossil fuels, particularly coal, which is a main driver for its environmental mal performance. Environmentalism is a highly politicized topic in Türkiye, and despite strong environmental laws, the country enforces unsustainable practices and faces many environmental challenges, such as habitat and biodiversity loss, deforestation and severe air, soil and water pollution (Paker 2020).

Türkiye's dire environmental situation has become of growing interest among researchers. The focus of these studies lay mainly on Erdoğan's right-wing populist, authoritarian and neoliberal governance approach and policies and the effects hereof on the environment and environmental activism in Türkiye (Akbulut and Adaman 2013; Arsel and Adaman 2022; Kurtiç 2022; Özen 2022; Paker 2020; Turhana and Gündoğan 2017). Studies on environmental awareness and concern among Turkish citizens, in particular Turkish youth, is limited however, and mainly based on statistical analyses (Harris 2014). These studies focus on environmental awareness and concerns among Turkish people, but not if and how these are translated into action. The aim of this thesis is to get a better understanding of the

environmental awareness, environmental concerns and pro-environmental behavior of young people in Türkiye, while taking into account their local political and economic context. Türkiye's cultural and geographical background is based on a constant limbo between East and West, religion and secularism and strong national sentiments as well as cultural diversity (Harris 2014), which provides an interesting context for analysis.

By focusing on awareness, concerns and pro-environmental behavior, I will not only study how young people *think* about environmental issues, but also if and how they *respond* to these issues. Although different definitions of these terms exist, I will refer to environmental awareness as having adequate knowledge on environmental issues (Szagun and Pavlov 1995: 93), and environmental concern as acknowledging the seriousness of the problem and the emotional response to this (Takács-Santa 2007: 27). Emotions that are particularly associated with environmental concern are fear, worry, sadness and frustration (ibid.). Pro-environmental behavior can be defined as a conscious effort to minimize one's negative impact on the natural world (Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002: 240).

This research will center around the following research question: **How do environmental awareness, environmental concern and pro-environmental behavior connect and play out in the daily lives of Turkish urban youth?** Through interviews with young Turkish citizens, I analyze young peoples' environmental awareness and concerns and the underlying structures that influence their actions. Insights of Turkish urban youth are of great value for policymakers and NGOs, not only to understand their behavior but also to address environmental topics in a way that aligns more with youth perceptions and concern (Kleinberg and Toomey 2023: 367; Nash et al. 2019: 2).

First, I will explore the topic of environmental behavior among young people and the I will look further into the gap between environmental awareness, environmental concern and pro-environmental behavior. The theoretical background will center around economic and political factors that can impact how people translate their environmental awareness and concern into action. The focus will be on economic prosperity and Inglehart's (1971) postmaterialist values, and

‘Quality of Government’ and people’s trust in their government. To provide context for my research, I will give a brief historical overview of environmental politics in Türkiye and the current state of affairs regarding environmentalism under Erdoğan’s power. In-depth interviews with Turkish urban youth provide empirical data that links theory to real-life experiences. Based on this empirical data I argue that the economic and political contexts in Türkiye highly influence participants’ attitudes towards environmental issues.

Youth and Pro-environmental Behavior

The levels of pro-environmental behavior among youth are often classified into two extremes. On the one hand, both academia and popular media highlight the valuable role youth play in the environmental movement, and the increase in youth-led organizations and protests (Hess 2021). They focus on the positive examples of youth engagement with environmental issues and discuss (political) activism, behavioral- and lifestyle changes and more conscious consumption and resource-use that have gained popularity among certain young people (Dimitrova et al. 2021).

On the other hand, there are also large groups of young people who are not taking pro-environmental action, or even reject the concept of sustainability (Urberg and Öhman 2024). Studies among young people in the UK, Malaysia and Czech Republic shows that a majority is aware of and highly concerned with environmental issues, and willing to implement more sustainable behavior, but most young people in these studies acknowledge that they don't translate this into concrete action (Ahmad et al. 2012; Dimitrova et al. 2021; Sloam 2020). Young people not involved in pro-environmental behavior are often accused of being apathetic (Lertzman 2013: 117). But Lertzman (2013) debunks the idea that being apathetic is just a selfish reaction and argues instead that apathy is a complex reaction to complex emotions.

With the emergence of social media, particularly young people are exposed to numerous sources of information, also about environmental issues. Easy access to information helps to spread awareness and concern but it can also be overwhelming (Pihkala 2020: 12). An increasing number of young people suffer from mental health issues related to environmental concerns (Godden et al. 2021; van Nieuwenhuizen et al. 2021). Dodds (2021: 224) explains that thinking about the climate crisis and environmental challenges can be stressful and anxiety inducing. Young people are not sure what to do and whether their individual actions have an impact (ibid.) Ignoring the issue or not caring about it is an often-used coping-mechanism to deal with feelings of fear and hopelessness (ibid.). The term 'eco-paralysis' is therefore introduced as an alternative to apathy by Albrecht (2011: 50).

He argues that people's failure to act might not be unwillingness, but rather the result of stress and hopelessness related to environmental concerns (ibid.). There might be young people who are consciously choosing not to take pro-environmental actions, but it is important to critically look at the emotions and struggles that underlie non-action before labeling this as unwillingness. Pro-environmental behavior or non-behavior among young people is thus layered, and researchers need to take into account the nuances of young people's awareness, concern and pro-environmental behavior.

The Dynamics of Environmental Awareness, Concern and Pro-environmental Behavior

Research has shown that global levels of environmental awareness and concern have risen in the past few decades (Tam and Chan 2017: 214). In general, more environmental awareness also leads to higher levels of concern (Zeng et al. 2023: 4). This means that people have become more aware about environmental problems and their impacts and that they are increasingly willing to contribute to solutions for these problems (Dunlap and Michelson 2002: 482). Although this could imply a hopeful development, other studies show that increased environmental awareness and concern does not necessarily translate into actual pro-environmental behavior (Johansson Sevä and Kulin 2018: 316; Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002; Tam and Chan 2017: 214). Pro-environmental behavior can come in many different forms and is usually divided into private and public actions (Johansson Sevä and Kulin 2018: 315). Actions at the household level, such as conscious consumerism, are considered private, whereas political actions, such as protesting or signing petitions, are considered public (Taniguchi and Marshall 2018: 388). Yet, levels of both private and public action on an individual level remain low worldwide (Johansson Sevä and Kulin 2018: 315).

Scholars have defined this lack of pro-environmental action as the ‘collective action dilemma’ (Kulin and Johansson Sevä 2021: 728), meaning that even though people are aware of the collective benefits of pro-environmental action, they are failing to act upon it. For a long time, researchers attributed the low levels of pro-environmental behavior to a lack of awareness and adequate knowledge on the topic (Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002: 241). It was argued that if people know more about environmental problems and the causes hereof, they would be able to act more consciously (ibid.). Still most policymakers and environmental non-governmental organizations focus on environmental education (ibid.). Although awareness about the topic is important, recent studies show that adequate knowledge on environmental issues is not a guarantee for pro-environmental behavior (ibid.).

Different explanations for the lack of pro-environmental behavior, despite awareness and even concern, have therefore been proposed. Individual factors may play a role, such as levels of empathy and altruism, as well as childhood-experiences and levels of education (Kollmuss and Agyeman2002). Through cross-national studies, comparing data from several countries, scholars also found that the gap between environmental awareness, concern and pro-environmental behavior differs across countries (Johansson Sevä and Kulin 2018: 315; Pisano and Lubell 2017: 31; Wolf and Moser 2011). This means that in some countries environmental awareness and concern leads to more pro-environmental behavior than in other countries (ibid.). Scholars argue that country-specific factors, such as the economic, cultural and political contexts, can help explain these differences (ibid.). Carmi and Arnon (2014) for example found out that in countries where people are more future-oriented, people tend to act more environmentally friendly. And Tam and Chan (2017) show that people in countries with loose social norms are more likely to engage in pro-environmental behavior, compared to people in countries with strict and conformist social norms.

Factors playing a role in how people translate their environmental awareness and concern into action, are thus numerous and layered. Within this research I will focus specifically on two economic factors and two political factors, because they fit well with the current societal context of Türkiye: 1. the economic state of a country, 2. postmaterialist values (Çarkoğlu and Kentmen-Çin 2015; Franzen and Vogl 2013; Inglehart 1971; Peisker 2023; Pisano and Lubell 2017; Taniguchi and Marshall 2018), 3. the ‘Quality of Government’ and 4. people’s trust in the government (Franzen and Vogl 2013; Johansson Sevä and Kulin 2018; Kulin and Johansson Sevä 2021; Tam and Chan 2017).

Economic Prosperity and Post-materialism

The economic state of a country has been linked to the level of environmental concern and pro-environmental behavior in several studies (Çarkoğlu and Kentmen-Çin 2015; Franzen and Vogl 2013; Peisker 2023; Pisano and Lubell 2017; Taniguchi and Marshall 2018). These studies show that in general people from countries with a stronger economy¹ express more environmental concern and are more likely to act pro-environmentally (Franzen and Vogl 2013; Peisker 2023; Pisano and Lubell 2017). This is often explained through Inglehart's (1971) post-materialist argument. Inglehart (1971) points out that societies change over time and when societies become wealthier people's values change. In wealthier societies people's basic material needs are easily met and therefore day-to-day survival is not a priority. This leaves room for the development of different, so-called non-materialist values, such as personal growth and freedom (ibid.). Inglehart (1971) defines environmental concern as another prominent post-materialist value, and he argues that people in wealthier, economically stable countries are more likely to concern themselves with environmental issues. Research also shows that post-materialist values boost climate activism (Henn et al. 2022; Sloam et al. 2022).

Although Inglehart provides an interesting analysis, his post-materialist argument has been criticized too. His argument, for example, does not account for the large body of environmental movements in economically less well-off countries (Yıldız 2022: 376). It is often marginalized communities in poor countries that are facing the most tangible effects of environmental degradation, and activism is in many instances intertwined with environmental justice concerns (Gonzalez 2015: 152; Scheidel et al. 2020: 1). Scheidel et al. (2020:1) show that these activists are not only driven by environmental protection but also livelihood protection. Based on this criticism Inglehart adjusted his argument more than twenty years later (Yıldız 2022: 376). He restated that, whereas post-materialist values partially explain environmental concerns and pro-environmental behavior, exposure to

¹ The Gross Domestic Product of a country is mostly used as the determinant for economic prosperity (Franzen and Vogl 2013).

severe environmental degradation is another important factor determining environmental concern and pro-environmental behavior (Inglehart 1995).

Çarkoğlu and Kentmen-Çin (2015) provide an alternative argument. They also found in their cross-country analysis that people in economically less well-off countries are less willing to implement ecologically sustainable behavior, because they feel that richer countries should take responsibility (ibid.). The economic development of richer countries highly depended on the exploitation of natural resources in poorer countries, which leaves these countries with an unequal environmental burden (ibid.). Changes in lifestyle to enhance pro-environmental behavior might be perceived as another burden, and therefore, as Çarkoğlu and Kentmen-Çin (2015) show, people choose not to engage in these practices.

Studies that focus specifically on the relationship between countries' economic prosperity and environmental concerns and pro-environmental behavior among young people is limited, and the results are mixed. Gong and Zheng (2021) found no significant difference between wealthy and poor countries and young people's environmental concerns. They state that young people are more in touch with the topic due to education and peers, compared to older people. Henn et al. (2022: 725) however, show contrasting results and argue that young people who are poor tend to be less concerned with environmental issues. This can be explained by the fact that these young people have a sense of more immediate concerns like financial stability, job-security and safe housing (Sloam 2020; Sloam et al. 2022: 725).

Quality of Government and Trust in Government

An ongoing environmental debate relates to who bears responsibility for environmental degradation and who should take action to counter its effects. Governments or individuals? Ideally the two entities would enforce each-other; engaged citizens can encourage governments to implement pro-environmental rules and regulation, whereas governments can encourage citizens to make more sustainable choices in their everyday lives (Kulin and Johansson Sevä 2021). The effect of the relationship between citizens and their government on people's environmental concern and pro-environmental behavior has been explored in several studies (Franzen and Vogl 2013: 7; Johansson Sevä and Kulin 2018; Kulin and Johansson Sevä 2021; Tam and Chan 2017).

The Quality of Government is often used as a measure to describe how well a government functions. Rothstein and Teorell (2008) explain that good Quality of Government entails a government that is unbiased, effective, fair and non-corrupt. Kulin and Johansson Sevä (2021: 746) show in their cross-national study that people from countries with a high-Quality of Government show higher levels of pro-environmental behavior both in the public and private sphere. They state that people are more willing to contribute on an individual level if they know that their government is implementing sustainable measures in an effective and fair way (Kulin and Johansson Sevä 2021). Similarly, corrupt governments generate suspicion among their citizens and make them less likely to take individual sustainable action (*ibid.*).

People's trust in their government is another important indicator for pro-environmental behavior. People from countries with low levels of trust in others and the government are less likely to take pro-environmental action even if they show high levels of environmental concern (Franzen and Vogl 2013; Johansson Sevä and Kulin 2018; Tam and Chan 2017). In contrast, higher levels of trust in the government makes people more likely to take future-oriented actions that serve a collective purpose rather than only fulfilling one's own individual interests (Kulin and Johansson Sevä 2021: 733).

Some studies, however, show contrasting results. Torgler et al. (2011) found that people from more corrupt countries are more likely to participate in environmental activism as they do not trust government intervention. If people do not trust their government, it can also lead them to take action in their own hands. Similarly, Franzen and Vogl (2013: 7) argued that low Quality of Government and little trust in governments can lead to higher levels of environmental concerns, because the government does not take adequate action. They also argue that high levels of Quality of Government and government trust can make people more indifferent in their personal actions as they feel that their government is taking action and therefore their individual actions are not needed (ibid.).

Studies focusing on young people in Australia, Malta and Morocco show that they are generally critical of the environmental efforts of their respective governments, and they blame their governments for not doing enough (Daadaoui and Saoud 2017; Fien et al. 2002; Mifsud 2011). This then demotivates these young people to take individual actions (ibid.). Research further shows that young people demand government support to encourage individual sustainable behavior. They want governments to take away barriers to act sustainably, such as providing cheaper public transport (Ahmad et al. 2012; Dimitrova et al. 2021; Sloam 2020).

The political context in which young people grow up also influences their environmental engagement as Kitanova (2020) describes. Young people in long-established democracies are more likely to engage in activism than young people in younger or less strong democratic states, like former Soviet countries (ibid.). This can be explained by young people's trust in the political system they grow up in. If young people feel that they can participate in politics and that their voices are heard, they are more likely to participate (Bene 2020: 5). Within authoritarian regimes, for example, youth activism is actively repressed by the state, which makes it a difficult and even dangerous task (Sika 2019). In Türkiye, authoritarian measures have led to relatively weak youth activism and civic engagement (Yabancı 2021: 473).

Environmental Politics in Türkiye - An Overview

When the Ottoman Empire fell apart in 1922 and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk established the Turkish republic in 1923, he envisioned a new modern state that would let go of its ‘backward’ Ottoman image (Akbulut and Adaman 2013: 1; Özler and Obach 2019: 778). Atatürk had a pro-Western orientation and he aimed for modernization and development in line with the West (Arsel and Adaman 2022: 60; Özler and Obach 2019: 778; Paker 2020). Harris (2014) is critical however of this narrative and argues that it stems from an Orientalist view in which the West is idealized and Türkiye is considered as its a-modern “Other” (Harris 2014: 11). Nonetheless, modernization plays an important role in Turkish politics, and it is defined through economic progress (Akbulut and Adaman 2013: 2). Modernization is seen as part of the collective interests of the Turkish nation, and it is the task of the state to fulfill this need through economic growth (Akbulut and Adaman 2013: 3). Modernization plays an important role in many countries, but the Turkish need for modernization takes on obsessive forms and is prioritized in policymaking, which also leads to justified state oppression in the name of development for the nation (Akbulut and Adaman 2013: 3; Paker 2020: 6; Turhana and Gündoğan 2017: 290).

It was only until the late 1980’s that environmental politics gained attention in Türkiye (Arsel and Adaman 2022: 61). The main explanation why Türkiye was quite late in addressing environmental issues is its focus on development and economic growth (Demir 2022: 138). Other societal aspects, such as poverty alleviation, the Kurdish conflict and political stability were prioritized (Demir 2022: 138; Keypour 2023). A critical moment in Turkish environmentalism was the Bergama protests that started in 1988 (Demir 2022: 138). The local community of Bergama, a town on the West-coast of Türkiye, started a successful grassroots movement against gold mining in their village (ibid.). After these protests, numerous other local grassroots movements arose, mainly protesting against the social and ecological impacts of resource extraction and energy generation in their areas (Arsel and Adaman 2022: 61; Kurtiç 2022: 5; Paker 2020). Although the

amount of national and international environmental organizations is growing, the environmental movement remains fairly small and scattered and therefore has not been able to gain political momentum (Arsel and Adaman 2022: 61, 63; Demir 2022: 145; Özler and Obach 2019: 776; Paker 2020: 12).

Environmental Politics under Erdoğan's Power

Erdoğan has gained immense popularity among Turkish people. His popularity mainly stems from a feeling of exclusion experienced by many rural and conservative people (Özler and Obach 2019: 774). Atatürk's secular and modern reforms, although still celebrated by many Turkish people today, did not resonate with all citizens and therefore created a sentiment of being left behind (Özen 2022: 6; Özler and Obach 2019: 774). Eventually Erdoğan could make use of this sentiment to gain power (Özen 2022: 3). When he came into power, he further increased the prominence of economic growth by taking on a neoliberalist turn (Paker 2020). But the state-led mega infrastructure projects, energy investments as well as commodification and privatization of natural resources have had major environmental impacts (Akbulut and Adaman 4, 5; Arsel and Adaman 2022: 62; Özen 2022: 5). The focus on economic growth hinders sustainable reform and critical assessments of the impact of polluting sectors such as transportation, agriculture and tourism (Özler and Obach 2019: 784; Paker 2020). Erdoğan presents his politics and neoliberal reforms as 'services for the people' and therefore justifies them (Akbulut and Adaman 2013: 5, 6; Paker 2020).

Erdoğan's right-wing populist authoritarian governance influences his environmental attitudes too. Studies show that (authoritarian) right-wing populist regimes increasingly influence environmental narratives and practices (Böhmelt 2021; Huber 2020; Kurtiç 2022; Özen 2022). Böhmelt (2021), for example, studied the relationship between populist leadership and environmental output, by comparing data from sixty-six countries. He argues that populist leadership is indeed correlated with overall lower environmental performance (*ibid.*), as is the case for Erdoğan. The relationship between right-wing populism, authoritarianism and environmental malperformance is usually explained through the nationalist,

anti-elitist and coercive narratives of authoritarian right-wing populist regimes (Böhmelt 2021; Lockwood 2018; McCarthy 2019; Ofstehage et al. 2022).

With regards to nationalism, Erdoğan has gradually taken on anti-Western sentiments, particularly after the failed attempts to become part of the EU in 2016, which is in stark contrast to Atatürk's pro-Western orientation in the 20th century, (Özen 2022: 4). This anti-Western sentiment became another powerful tool to delegitimize environmental concerns and movements, because they were accused of affiliation with foreign institutions to weaken the Turkish economy or challenge its energy sovereignty (Kurtiç 2022: 4; Özen 2022: 4, 6; Özler and Obach 2019: 773). It is important however to understand this anti-Westernism beyond the populist narrative. The Kemalist idea of catching up with the West, stems from an Orientalist² perspective. Similarly, with regards to environmentalism, Western narratives and policies remain dominant. Harris (2014: 17) explains that this creates a sense of loss among Turks, because they are afraid to lose parts of their cultural identity when they comply with these Western ideas.

At the same time, catching up with the West has become an argument to justify pollution and unsustainable growth. It is argued that the West was able to pollute in the past without any consequences, and that Türkiye, like other rapidly developing countries has the right to follow a similar path (Harris 2014: 11; Özler and Obach 2019: 782). Another point of resentment regards the dumping of Western waste in many non-Western countries, including Türkiye. Particularly during 1980-1990 Türkiye was a popular place where chemical waste of Western countries got dumped, with tremendous environmental effects (Demir 2022:141). It feels unjust that the countries who polluted in the past, now are at the forefront to determine international environmental regulations. It is therefore important to be critical of the historical geopolitical context in which the diverse sentiments regarding environmental challenges are created.

Erdoğan uses an anti-elitist rhetoric to show that he will serve 'the people' of Türkiye (Özen 2022: 4). He portrays environmentalists as leftist, Kemalist and pro-

² Orientalism, a term introduced by Edward Said in 1978, refers to the popular distinction between the West as modern and the East as primitive (Harris 2014: 4).

Western entities, keen on destroying the AKP and everything it stands for (ibid.). Erdoğan has used this enemy-perspective to both challenge environmentalism and strengthen his political power by appropriating environmentalism (Özen 2022). He presents himself and the AKP as the true environmentalists, in contrast to the ‘fake’ environmentalists who are driven by political ideologies (Özen 2022: 7; Turhana and Gündoğan 2017: 282). A telling example hereof is the introduction of a National Tree Planting Day that will occur every year on the 11th of November (Kurtiç 2022: 1; Özen 2022: 7). The seemingly innocent act of planting trees does not only become a symbolic act to obscure the environmental degradation caused by the government, but also a tool to challenge the legitimacy of environmental movements (Kurtiç 2022). This became even more clear in Erdoğan’s speech on the first National Tree Planting Day in 2019: “They [environmentalists] are nowhere to be found. They haven’t planted a single tree. Because planting trees is not their concern. They are interested in burning down Türkiye (in Kurtiç 2022: 6)”. However, besides its symbolic nature, Erdoğan's greening practices are also criticized by ecologists who warn that the projects are ineffective and at times harmful, because they do not take into account local ecosystems (Özen 2022: 7).

Increasingly, environmental activism becomes coupled with other social and political struggles in Türkiye. The 2013 Gezi protests are a clear example hereof. The protests, initially steered at the protection of a park in the center of Istanbul, culminated into nationwide protests against the state and its continuous focus on economic growth (Kurtiç 2022: 5; Turhana and Gündoğan 2017: 278). These protests, which posed a serious threat to the AKP’s power, served as a catalyst for Erdoğan's shift towards authoritarian governance (Özen 2022 1,5). This reform included the weakening of democratic institutions and freedom of speech, and created violent opposition towards environmental activists, both physically as well as psychologically through conspiracy theories and legal accusations (Özen 2022: 4). Environmental activism has thus become a difficult and dangerous phenomenon under Erdoğan’s power.

Due to the growing global awareness of environmental degradation, external pressure regarding sustainability increased. This has led Erdoğan to take on a

slightly more sustainable course under the banner of green growth (Kurtiç 2022: 3; Turhana and Gündoğan 2017). Green growth implies to secure both economic growth and sustainability, but it is criticized by many because it ignores the problematic environmental impacts of capitalist growth (Brand 2012; Turhana and Gündoğan 2017: 282). In the case of Erdoğan, green growth seems to be more symbolic than practical, since environmental measures are only implemented if they do not hamper economic growth (Kurtiç 2022: 3). Similarly, the Turkish environmental law system is very elaborate, yet proper implementation is lacking because economic growth is favored over environmental protection (Arsel and Adaman 2022: 61; Keypour 2023). Besides, the focus of its sustainable course lies on technocratic practices, which obscures the social impacts of environmental impacts of so-called ‘sustainable solutions’ (Turhana and Gündoğan 2017: 285).

An example hereof is Erdoğan’s focus on hydroelectricity as a renewable energy source. He implemented new controversial laws that allow private companies to have ownership over rivers for forty-nine years to create hydro-electric power plants (Islar 2012: 367; Paker 2020: 9). Although this can be seen as a sustainable measure, it fits very well within the authoritarian tactic to take control over resources to strengthen one’s political and financial power (Ofstehage et al. 2022: 1.2). The neoliberal approach of privatizing water as a natural resource, creates benefits for the state and companies, while it poses challenges to the livelihoods of local communities and the natural environment. (Islar 2012: 379). Under Erdoğan’s authoritarian and neoliberal approach natural resources thus become sites of power and control.

Erdoğan’s neoliberal practices have indeed led to economic growth and increased living standards for many Turkish people (Özler and Obach 2019: 780), but from 2018 onwards the country’s financial situation has drastically worsened (Elliot 2018). The country suffers from major inflation, and prices of everyday products change daily (Michaelson and Narlı 2022). The regional elections that took place in March 2024, showed cracks in Erdoğan’s popularity, as the opposition party won a majority of the votes (Michaelson and Aldatmaz 2024). Many people who used to vote for Erdoğan’s AKP explained that they voted for the opposition

party because of the economic situation, and the failure of the AKP government to deal with it (ibid.).

Erdoğan's governance has not only drastically influenced Türkiye's political, social and economic sphere, but also the environmental sphere. And his neoliberal, right-wing populist and authoritarian attitude both limits sustainable progress, and challenges any environmental counter-narrative.

The Conduct of This Study

This research has been conducted from a critical theory perspective, thus focusing on the social, historical and political factors that shape people's understanding in everyday life (Guba and Lincoln 1994: 109). The role of my research is to acknowledge the contextuality in which Turkish youth create environmental awareness and concerns and translate these into action. I therefore conducted qualitative research which allows for more in-depth discussions of relevant themes and debates. In contrast to quantitative research, qualitative research provides rich accounts of participants' perceptions, which helps to lay out the nuanced and complex way in which people make sense of the world (Cypress 2015: 357; Kleinberg and Toomey 2023: 373). Qualitative research in the Turkish context is limited, so this study helps to provide new and complementary insights to existing research.

I have used semi-structured, in-depth interviews to gather data on the real-life experiences of Turkish youth. In contrast to structured interviews, semi-structured interviews are more flexible. They help to address specific topics relevant for the research, but they also leave room for participants to add new insights (Galletta 2013: 2). With the help of a family friend in Ankara I was able to find participants and conduct 10 face-to-face interviews in Ankara. Five interviews took place at a university campus in Ankara, and five interviews took place at the participants' houses. Through a message on my personal Instagram account, I was able to reach two more participants who lived in Ankara with whom I had online interviews. Although I got into contact with the participants through mutual connections, I did not know any of the participants personally. The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, and the people I interviewed were aged between 19 and 29³ and all were university students. Since I am not fluent in Turkish the interviews took place in English.

³ There is no consensus for the age classification of youth, and classifications differ per country and organization, but generally the classification of youth lies somewhere between the age of 15 and 35 (Pincock et al. 2024: 4).

Nine participants were female and three were male. The unequal gender distribution is due to the fact that for me as a female researcher it was easier to get into contact with female participants. Research focusing on the effects of gender on environmental awareness and concerns show very contrasting results, as in some studies higher levels of awareness and concern is measured among women and in others among men (MacDonald and Hara 1994: 369). With regards to my research, the young women expressed their concerns more openly, and showed more emotional concerns such as fear, sadness and frustration. In general, the women also focused more on individual actions to take, whereas the young men showed little trust in individual actions. Being a woman myself, might also have influenced the conversation with the participants. I want to stress, however, that the focus of this research is not on gender differences.

My presence as a researcher influences people's behavior. Some participants told me beforehand that they were a bit nervous or did not feel confident in their 'knowledge' of the topic. It was important for me to be transparent and open about my research and create a safe space where participants felt comfortable to talk. I reassured them that there were no right or wrong answers, and that I am interested in their perspectives and experiences. Telling participants about my Turkish roots was often a useful icebreaker. I asked the participants for written or oral consent, varying per interview, to participate in the research and record the interviews. I recorded the interviews with my phone, to create a more relaxed atmosphere. The recordings have been stored locally on my computer and will be deleted on June 9 2024. The recordings have been used for research purposes only and were not shared with other parties.

The well-being of participants is extremely important and ensuring their safety was a priority during the research. Since freedom of speech, journalism and academic research have become sensitive topics in Türkiye (Demir 2021), I needed to be careful. Criticism of the government can have severe consequences, and under Erdoğan's power many journalists, scholars and citizens have been arrested (ibid.). All participants remain anonymous throughout the thesis and their names are not mentioned in the recordings to ensure that the recordings cannot be traced back to

specific individuals. I also decided not to talk about politics, unless participants started to bring up political topics themselves. As most participants hinted at being critical of the current government, I had expected that participants would be hesitant to share their insights, but the contrary was true. The people I interviewed were very eager to talk, open and honest and some interviews became quite emotional. At first, I felt a bit uncomfortable when this happened, but then one of the participants thanked me and told me that she was really happy for the space to talk and express her ideas.

Conducting in-depth interviews, however, also has its limitations. I was only able to talk to a small group of people. Most participants expressed some form of criticism towards the current government, which is important to acknowledge. A focus on young people with strong pro-Erdoğan sentiments, may have led to different results. Besides, the participants I interviewed mostly came from a higher socio-economic background, were highly educated, and lived in an urban environment. I want to be careful not to generalize my results and acknowledge that the rich diversity of Turkish youth is not properly reflected in this research.

The interviews took place in English, which is neither my own native language, nor that of the participants. Although all participants were proficient in English, some felt insecure about their level of English, and they felt awkward speaking in a non-native language at the beginning of the interview. Participants used an online translation app a few times, if they were not sure how to translate a Turkish word or phrase into English. As Koulouriotis (2011: 7) points out, it can be harder to express yourself in a non-native language and sometimes nuances or subtleties get lost in translation.

Lastly, I want to point out a struggle many researchers experience, namely the disparity between what participants *say* they do and what they *actually* do. Sometimes participants feel obliged to give socially desirable answers that do not resonate with their actual opinions or behavior (Bergen and Labonté 2020; Harvey 2018). I asked participants about their pro-environmental behavior, but I was not able to ‘check’ their behavior through observation. The people I interviewed, however, did not only focus on positive examples, but they also point out what they

did not do, or what they could do better. A discrepancy between what people said they do and what they are actually doing is therefore limited.

Through these in-depth interviews I was able to get a deeper understanding of the environmental awareness and concerns young people in Türkiye have and how they translate these into action. Afterwards I transcribed the interviews and hand-coded them. Based on the theoretical framework I created four themes for analysis: 1. Environmental Awareness and Concern, 2. Pro-environmental behavior, 3. Economic Challenges and 4. Political Challenges. Within these themes I established five sub-themes that were based on the hand-coding of the interview data: a. Environmental Education, b. The Role of Religion, c. Environmental Inaction, d. Environmental Activism and e. Türkiye versus the West. The themes and sub-themes were constructed by combining similar topics or arguments that were mentioned by at least two participants.

Participants' Environmental Awareness and Concern

All participants expressed some form of environmental awareness. Some pointed out general global issues such as climate change and pollution, but most participants focused on local issues in Türkiye or Ankara specifically. One topic that came up frequently was the change of weather in Ankara. Usually Ankara has cold and snowy winters, but according to the participants, it hardly snowed in the past two years. As one participant explained:

I mean, it has always snowed in Ankara in the winter, and it hasn't snowed a single day this winter, which is really shocking... Like, kids now wouldn't probably in ten years expect to see snow in winter in Ankara, which is very strange because, I mean, it always snowed.

Another participant was concerned about this change as well as other people's reaction to it.

This year, we only had two weeks of winter. And everyone was very happy, like, ah, the weather is so good. It's concerning! It's not a good thing to not have winter, or the opposite. So, yeah, it's very much concerning at this point.

The participants thus not only noticed this change, but they were also aware that it is something to be concerned about. As the winters are getting warmer, summers in Türkiye also tend to get hotter and dryer. For the past few years, Türkiye has suffered from major wildfires and droughts. As participants explained, this leads to water shortages, especially in Ankara which already has a dry climate.

Especially throughout the summer, there were major droughts. Like, the water barrages were really draining.

Besides changes in the weather, pollution was a topic that often came up. Particularly water and air pollution were mentioned. One participant usually spends her summers in one of the coastal cities and she explained how the water quality has worsened over time.

When I was a kid, the water was really pure, but now it is really bad...The surface is white and it is like trash... And we generally can't swim because of this bad situation.

Another participant who is originally from Izmir, a coastal city, argued that water pollution has always been an issue in this city.

We had a couple of years ago issues of pollution in the sea, and it affects the whole city because it smells...and people started complaining. And we had, I think back in 2004 or something, a mayor who really worked on the pollution of the sea and we started seeing sea urchins, like, it was cleaner. Now we have the same issue again, it's always an issue in the municipality in Izmir.

Water pollution is a visible problem in the coastal areas of Türkiye, and although the participants were not sure about the cause of this pollution they were aware that it is a problematic trend. Additionally, air pollution in the city of Ankara was pointed out. The pollution was mostly linked to the major traffic in the city. As participants told me, the public transport system in the city is not very good, so most people take the car to commute. One participant said that due to the economic state of the country, people cannot afford electric cars and many people drive old cars that are more pollutant. Several people mentioned the increasing number of people

in the city as another factor leading to more air pollution⁴. One participant argued that:

So many people come to big cities...so the number of people increases in Ankara. So, the driving has increased, and pollution is really high.

Air pollution is not only seen as an environmental issue but also as a threat to people's health and overall quality of life.

So we really get sick because of the air pollution... In the morning or afternoon, we can see the black or gray waves. And this gets [us] sick and it is really bad.

Interestingly, the most common environmental challenges that were mentioned, namely changing weather and pollution all have very tangible effects. The participants linked environmental issues to their own lived experiences and changes they have noticed over the years.

Besides awareness of the problem, most participants also expressed environmental concern, coupled with strong emotions. Feelings of sadness were expressed:

The planet is really important, and it is gorgeous, I think. But we don't use it carefully. And it is terrible because our planet gives so much.

Some expressed fear for the future and were afraid of things getting worse. One participant expressed her fear of increasing wildfires: *"I'm a little bit freaked out how the summer will go"*. Another participant said that she sometimes chooses not

⁴ Türkiye is currently hosting the most migrants in the world, around 4 million, mostly Syrian refugees (Yücel 2024). Although these people were initially welcomed with open arms, currently 80% percent of the Turkish population prefers the migrants to leave, mainly due to Türkiye's economic struggles (Yücel 2024). Besides, the devastating Earthquake in the South-east of Türkiye in February 2023 created an internal influx of migrants from the affected areas.

to think about it because “*it's a scary topic to think about*”. One participant was very pessimistic about the future, and she mentioned that “*crisis and apocalyptic scenarios come to mind*” when she thinks about environmental degradation. Another participant was worried specifically about the future of Türkiye.

If these effects of the climate change accelerate in 15 years or 20 years, I think Turkey⁵ would be the first country that would go extinct, so to speak. Because we are the first country that would run out of water... We are the first country to run out of food.

As abovementioned examples show, the participants are aware of environmental issues, particularly local issues and show concern for these issues. They pointed out problems that affect them in their daily lives and they are aware of the severity thereof. These findings are in line with the research showing that young people are increasingly aware of and concerned about environmental problems (Tam and Chan 2017: 214). Studies focusing on Türkiye specifically, also show that people in general are aware of this issue and its future implications (Dubel and Kaan 2017; Yıldız 2022) and a cross-national comparison of young people’s perception of environmental degradation demonstrates that environmental concern was highest among Turkish young people (Lee et al. 2020).

The participants’ focus on local environmental challenges is remarkable, but not uncommon. Although environmental degradation is a global phenomenon, people experience the effects of it mostly on a local level (Nash et al. 2019). As Gärtner and Schoen (2021) describe, personal experiences with environmental degradation play an important role in people’s environmental awareness and concern. They explain that through personal experiences, abstract global issues like climate change, become more tangible and therefore more real (ibid.). In contrast, research among Australian youth shows that if people are not personally experiencing the

⁵ In 2021 the Turkish government requested an official name change at the United Nations, to disassociate the country with the ‘turkey’ bird (The Guardian 2022). As of 2021, the country’s official international name became Türkiye (ibid.). Most participants, however, still used Turkey, instead of Türkiye during the interviews.

effects of environmental degradation, they are more likely not to pay attention to environmental issues in general (Connell et al. 1999). Personal experience of environmental degradation among the Turkish participants may thus play a role in their level of awareness and environmental concern.

Environmental Education

Interestingly, several participants claimed that a lack of environmental awareness and concern is a problem in Türkiye. Some participants thought that they did not have enough knowledge to engage in pro-environmental behavior, and some projected this idea onto other people, and argued that other people in Türkiye were not educated enough on the topic. This attitude sometimes came with frustration towards others, as participants felt that others “don’t understand” and “don’t care”. This feeling of frustration is understandable as it can be demotivating when other people around you seem not to care about this topic. Youth in the United States and Morocco share similar sentiments (Daadaoui and Saoud 2017; Tejada et al. 2020). The participants from these respective countries argued that people are often stuck in their habits and don’t care enough about the problem to change anything (ibid.). The American participants pointed out that the older people in their lives are not able to give a good example to younger generations either (Tejada et al. 2020). One participant I interviewed felt like a lot of people are not making an effort to educate themselves.

I don't think they are opening a book or watching the news to see what happens and learn solutions... I don't think they are spending too much effort to think and discuss about it.

Besides individual efforts to learn more about environmental issues, the role of education often came up during the interviews.

I think the lack of knowledge they have right now is an issue, because in schools we don't mention that much about this issue.

Although a majority of the participants agreed that environmental education was not a big part of their school curriculums, some said that they had classes in school on the topic of sustainability. One participant specifically mentioned recycling as an important aspect of her education.

In Turkey all the schools have these recycle boxes that we put in paper or plastic. I think it really helps... And I started school at 7 years old, so I am used to recycling materials. Because I learned from school and everybody, let's say in my age, learned this from school.

There is a big difference between private and public schools in Türkiye so this could explain the different answers. Ardalı et al. (2016) pointed out that formal environmental education in Turkish schools and universities has its shortcomings, mainly due to inconsistent implementation among different educational institutions and a lack of well-trained teachers. This explains the different experiences participants had, and their general skeptical attitude towards environmental education in Türkiye. To add, one participant had little faith in the government implementing more structural environmental education, as it would make people more aware of the government's own unsustainable practices.

One participant thought that accessibility to information and environmental organizations is an issue. She said that people, including herself, don't really know where to find information or how to reach environmental organizations.

From the perspective of someone living in Turkey, we don't know how to get to these organizations as well. Maybe that could increase our awareness or that could help us do something about our environment. I think accessibility is also an issue... especially here in Turkey. You have to, personally, try harder to get to some sort of organization, for example, clean out the beaches in Izmir... You have to make an effort for yourself.

Since many participants pointed out that a lack of awareness and education is a problem, they proposed that environmental education could be helpful. They argued that increased awareness will lead to increased environmental behavior.

Maybe they may develop some projects about that [sustainability] in universities. For instance... putting some highlights on this topic so we are aware of what we are doing and how we are impacting it.

It is a really important topic, but nobody knows so much information about this. I hope, someday, it can be a lesson in high schools.

I think starting at a young age would change a lot of things because your brain is not fully developed yet. You're open to information, and whatever you learn from an early age sticks with you.

Participants had different ideas about when to start environmental education; either from a young age, in high school or in university. And although they argued that education was important, they could not describe what environmental education should look like exactly and what kind of topics should be covered. It is interesting to see that the participants link more knowledge to more conscious pro-environmental behavior, while this assumption does not align with existing research (Johansson Sevä and Kulin 2018: 316; Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002; Post and Meng 2018: 12; Tam and Chan 2017: 214). Interestingly, young people from Australia, China and Malaysia also argued that others in their respective countries needed to be more educated in order to engage in pro-environmental behavior (Ahmad et al. 2012; Connell et al. 1999; Wong 2003). Although education plays an important role in creating environmental knowledge and awareness, we have to be critical of the idea that more knowledge automatically leads to pro-environmental behavior.

Environmental education has become a popular topic of inquiry, yet most studies are skeptical of the effectiveness of current environmental education approaches

(Trott 2022; Monroe et al. 2019: 791; Rousell and Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles 2020: 191). The focus of environmental education is on the cognitive aspect, in other words increasing factual knowledge on the topic (Rousell and Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles 2020: 203). Researchers propose that it would be fruitful to have more engaging and creative ways of environmental education, in which young people actively participate (Monroe et al. 2019; Trott 2022). This not only helps them to feel more connected to the topic, but it also creates a space where young people can express their own ideas and insights (Trott 2022; Monroe et al. 2019: 791; Rousell and Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles 2020: 191).

The Role of Religion

While most participants referred to educational institutions, when talking about increasing environmental awareness and concern in Türkiye, two participants mentioned the potential of religion. According to these participants, as a majority of Turkish people identify as Muslim, religion could play a role in increasing environmental awareness and concern.

I think, since Turkey is a really religious country... I feel like people can easily be religiously motivated... What I'm trying to say is, if people actually see waste as a sin maybe, they would do less of it. For example, lying is a sin and killing someone is a sin. So religion is kinda putting people in their place.

Religion is a very good linking tool to make somebody do something in our country... We didn't proceed with this step of education, but it might be used as an opportunity to deal with this kind of environmental issue as well.

They also argued that certain religious aspects already promote pro-environmental behavior, and thus religion cannot only play a role in educating people but also motivate them to act more sustainably.

Actually, in our religion [Islam], it's forbidden to waste anything, food, water, electricity, and the other. So people are acting without consciousness. Like, do not open water too much and do not waste water. Do not throw out the food, bread... We have some cultural stuff to prevent this.

Scholars have gained interest in the relationship between religion and pro-environmental behavior and explored the potential of religious environmentalism (Gottlieb 2007; Khalid 2010; Nilan 2020; Yildirim 2016). Gottlieb (2007) argues that a majority of the world population identifies as religious, and that religious environmental groups may be more accessible to these people than secular organizations. According to Nilan (2020: 936), secular environmentalism mainly focuses on scientific approaches which can be very distant from people's everyday experiences. Religious environmentalism, on the other hand, may provide tools and insights that are closer to people's everyday lives and spiritual practices (ibid.).⁶

The participants showed environmental awareness and concern, but they also argued that environmental topics should be discussed more and overall environmental awareness in Türkiye should be increased. Improving environmental education and exploring the educative potential of religion were proposed as potential solutions to tackle this problem.

⁶ It must be noted that religion is a sensitive topic in Türkiye, and public debates often center around secularism and religion (McKernan 2020). Although Türkiye officially is a secular country, Erdoğan has put a strong focus on religion and increased funding for religious projects and education (ibid.). Yet, research shows that especially young people in Türkiye increasingly object to religion (ibid.).

Participants' Pro-environmental Behavior

Some participants translated their environmental awareness and concern into action. The examples of pro-environmental behavior mainly focused on individual acts relating to making more conscious consumer choices and being careful with using natural resources, in other words private actions. Participants explained that they are careful with their usage of water, because of the earlier mentioned struggles with water-scarcity in Ankara. Two participants mentioned that they try to take public transport or walk as much as possible to avoid extra emissions from driving a car. Buying secondhand items was often proposed as positive sustainable behavior, but as one participant explained, it is not very popular in Türkiye because it is still very much associated with being poor. Some participants said that they try to avoid using single-use products and reduce their plastic consumption.

I'm trying to pay some attention to these topics... like having a bottle always with me, and I mean, for the coffees not... using... all the Starbucks cups. This kind of stuff I'm doing right now... I'm always going with cloth bags to the markets and shopping malls to not use all these plastic bags.

[I] try to use solid shampoos to prevent myself from using too much plastic. But it's like kind of minor stuff.

A more controversial topic that came up was recycling. Some participants argued that recycling was not a big thing in Türkiye, while the participants who learned about recycling in school were very positive about it. As Ojala (2008: 790) describes, recycling can create feelings of hope among young people, as it is a very tangible activity that makes them feel like they are actively contributing to a more sustainable world. Through small actions these participants try to do their part in living more sustainably. Without obscuring the importance of structural changes, individual behavioral changes are an important step towards more sustainable societies (Pickering et al. 2021: 2). Within the vastness and complexity of

environmental challenges, sustainable life-style choices can create a feeling of agency and control (Pickering et al. 2021: 3). The participants who participated in pro-environmental behavior felt that even with small steps they could contribute, and indeed have agency through their actions. As one participant explained, it is important to “[start] with small steps and then [take] bigger steps”.

Research from Brunei and Australia shows that young people in these countries also mainly engaged in sustainable action on an individual lifestyle-level, and that they feel that bigger, political actions take up too much time and have little tangible effects (Fien et al. 2002: 213, 214). Additionally, cross-national research points out that young people are more willing to take smaller, more convenient pro-environmental actions, even if they know that the impact is lower than bigger and less convenient actions (Lee et al. 2020: 11). Convenience, and a willingness to give up certain comforts might thus also play a role in young people’s pro-environmental choices. Since this topic did not come up during the interviews, it is difficult to say how much convenience played a role in pro-environmental behavior of the participants in this study.

Environmental Inaction

It is important to know, however, that most participants honestly admitted that they don’t actively engage in pro-environmental behavior, even though they experience the local effects of environmental degradation. This is in line with research showing that exposure to local environmental degradation does not necessarily increase people’s feeling of responsibility and pro-environmental behavior (Gärtner and Schoen 2021; Janmaimool and Chudech 2020). The participants expressed that they feel that their individual actions are pointless if there is no collective action taken by for example companies or the government.

I personally can't do anything that matters. Like, what I'm gonna do, recycle? I mean, I try to do my best, but something that I do doesn't really matter...The real concern that I have is how we can change these, you know, massive corporations

and... how they impact the climate. That's what my real concern is. And I feel like... we are powerless to do anything, personally.

None at all. Zero. Because I used to be, but then I realized whatever I do, whatever I minimize, whatever I change is nothing compared to the industry's output of carbon emissions. So now I just don't care at all.

So I think the things that I can do for the climate or for the environment in general doesn't really matter unless the factories or the big companies do anything to do with that. So I think I stopped caring at some point.

The examples show that these young people express a feeling of having very little influence. Toivonen (2022: 7) interviewed people from eleven different nationalities and found that the majority had little trust in their individual actions, and that they considered such small actions to be meaningless compared to “big powers outside of their control”. As a result of this feeling, they decide not to care about the issue. One participant I interviewed explained that not caring gives her a sense of control.

It's exhausting...so I started to not care... Now the only thing we have in our hands is to ignore it.

Not dealing with the complexity of environmental issues becomes a coping mechanism, as Dodds (2021) demonstrates. These attitudes resonate with Albrecht's (2011) notion of eco-paralysis. Not knowing how to deal with environmental challenges, leads to no action at all. The participants who took on this ‘I don't care’ mentality, were generally pessimistic about the future of the environment. Feeling hopeless is a heavy burden and challenges one's ability to act environmentally friendly (Ojala 2012; Wilks and Harris 2016). Young people who are hopeful about the future are more likely to act pro-environmentally friendly than those who have a pessimistic view about the future (ibid.). It is important though,

that hope is not based on denial of the urgency of environmental degradation, because then it limits pro-environmental behavior (Ojola 2012).

Although most participants struggled to act pro-environmentally, the participants do not suffer specifically from eco-paralysis, but rather from an overall action paralysis that comes from a general feeling of fatalism and hopelessness. From the interviews it became clear that most participants were not only pessimistic about the state of the natural environment, but also about the state of their country.

Economic Challenges

One aspect that led to pessimism among the participants, is the economic crisis Türkiye currently faces. The topic came up regularly during the interviews and participants explained that most people in Türkiye are struggling because of the economic situation. They argued that a majority of the population is focusing on getting their basic needs met, and therefore environmental issues are not their top-priority.

Because we have hyperinflation for, like, I don't know, two years, three years. So you can't really care about the environmental stuff [if] you are hungry.

Here people are just trying to make their day through all of this, especially, like, inflation and financial crisis...I mean, we have so much stuff going on. Because we're getting poor ... you kind of shift your point to a survival mode, and you don't have time to think about this [environmental issues].

There's so many other concerns... Turkish people face, especially, more working class families, that even if they are having some sort of environmental harm in what they do day to day, they can't even, like, begin to correct it because they have, to them, at least, more immediate concerns.

Sloam (2020) found similar results among young Londoners. He argued that for these young people, environmental challenges are less tangible and less immediate than other economic and social aspects, such as financial stability and job security (Sloam 2020: 5). Research focusing on the effects of the severe economic crisis in Greece on people's environmental attitudes, suggests that environmental issues became a lower priority for people compared to the period before the economic crisis and economic stability became a top concern (Papoulis et al. 2015: 716). Surprisingly, economic crises can have (unconscious) positive effects on people's pro-environmental behavior (Ivlevs 2019: 295). To limit expenses, people may use

resources more consciously and for example limit water and energy usage (ibid.). The people I interviewed however, mainly mentioned negative effects on pro-environmental behavior due to the economic crisis. As an example they pointed out that people are buying cheap and unsustainable products because they cannot afford to buy more durable products that are more pricey. One participant argued that because of hyperinflation it is better to buy material products, because this is worth more than saving money, which in turn encourages unsustainable consumption.

As the economic crisis has a very direct impact on the people I interviewed, some people became quite emotional. The economic crisis became a symbol for broader frustration and challenges the participants face, growing up in Türkiye.

I don't blame myself for being negative because right now in Turkey...we're losing our colors, and we are losing our beliefs. Because everything is happening all at once, and we're so tired.

We don't have the money here. We don't have justice here. We don't have the well, we don't have the tiniest opportunity to develop ourselves. So that's... why we don't care about anything other than our money and our sustainability... And, yes, it's heartbreaking, but we don't have any choice...I think I'm going to cry.

The examples show that the country's financial crisis takes up a lot of mental space and energy of the participants and this leads to frustrations. Interestingly, while the main focus of the interviews was centered around environmental issues, the discussions often led to broader frustrations and challenges the participants face. Participants link their environmental attitudes very clearly to their country-specific context and growing up in Türkiye. Inglehart's (1971) postmaterialist argument is exemplified by the participants responses. The economic insecurity in Türkiye creates more immediate concerns among the young participants, and most participants feel that they, and other people in their country, don't have the energy to deal with other complicated issues. For the participants, economic and social stability is thus an important determinant for pro-environmental behavior.

Political Challenges

Besides the economic crisis, politics was a topic often brought up by the participants. As one participant explained, not only individuals but also the Turkish government has other priorities than environmental issues. The government is dealing with several large societal problems.

[The] government has different priorities than environmental concerns, for example economic crisis, fixing the earthquake aftermath and immigration issues.

Tienhaara (2010: 197) explains that facing multiple crises in a country is challenging, but it is sometimes used as an excuse by governments to not focus on environmental challenges. She argues that it would be more beneficial to look at the interconnection between multiple crises and find multilayered solutions that tackle these crises together (ibid.). According to the participants this is currently missing in Turkish politics.

Some participants were not aware of any governmental action to address environmental problems and therefore argued that the government does not prioritize the environment.

I don't think there are any measurements about sustainability in Turkey or in general in Ankara and I don't think I have thought about sustainability and climate change in general for like years for now because, you know, they don't care about these kind of topics in Turkey.

Like, I don't think the government does anything for it because we've never heard of any action... But I feel like if they did something, they would be promoted... If we don't know anything, they don't do anything.

It is interesting that Erdoğan is trying to portray himself as more environmental-friendly, for example by introducing a national tree planting day (Kurtiç 2022: 1; Özen 2022: 7), but that his efforts have not reached the participants. Other participants were more critical of the underlying incentives of the government that influence their approach towards sustainability. Corruption was mentioned as one of the concerns, because through corruption it is easier to bypass environmental rules and regulations.

It's always been about stealing what the people have [talking about natural areas], selling it for a profit to companies, and then most of that money, I'm betting at least 60, 70% of that money goes into the pockets of the politicians, their campaigns, you know.

Ironically this participant argues that the government is 'stealing' from the people, while Erdoğan positions himself as the beneficiary of the people. As another participant explained, corruption is not only controversial, but it also negatively affects the natural areas in Türkiye.

The lack of environmental awareness and policies is very much due to just politics... Like, the government works really closely with construction lobbies... So most lands and large areas of forests or natural preservation sites that the government seizes and protects legally, after a certain point, I think they open it up for bidding, and then they sell it to one of the few largest companies for construction. And they build hotels and things, and it's usually filled with a bunch of corruption or controversies. So I think political corruption needs to be cleaned up first to do any actual, like, environmental change because there's no real incentive for environmental preservation or just improvement in general.

According to these participants, the government is more interested in financial gain than the preservation of natural areas in Türkiye. A study on among Malaysian youth shows similar results as they argue that corruption is a big problem in their

country, which limits environmental behavior (Ahmad et al. 2012). In Türkiye, issues of corruption were also mentioned in regard to the environmental law system.

They [environmental laws] are very good, but they are not enforced. But that's not the problem just for environmental law. It's just the overall problem of our law and how it works, our institutions. So, I mean, if you want... to have a better application of environmental law, we first need to fix our problems with our law institutions and their independence from government, third parties, organizations, and companies.

Corruption and an ineffective and unfair law system are indicators of low Quality of Government as defined by Rothstein and Teorell (2008). This not only challenges sustainable government actions, as the participants showed, but it also challenges the government's credibility. Most participants expressed great distrust in the government and their attitudes towards more sustainable behavior. They expressed that they feel like the government is not doing anything significant to deal with environmental degradation. Participants argued that they simply "don't care". This is in line with literature on the Quality of Government and people's trust in their government; as people have no faith in their governments they become reluctant to take individual action too (Franzen and Vogl 2013; Johansson Sevä and Kulin 2018; Kulin and Johansson Sevä 2021: 733; Tam and Chan 2017).

This feeling of distrust is also exemplified by participants' attitudes towards recycling. Although some participants, as mentioned earlier, recycled, a majority of the participants were skeptical of the Turkish recycling system. Household recycling levels in Türkiye are low in general, and the system is seen as inconsistent and ineffective (Umut and Velioğlu 2024: 2).

But we don't for example, we don't recycle...you just have one trash and then they take that. Even if you recycle it, sometimes they don't separate.

So I can't say I recycle because no one actually believes it really. It's not actually taken somewhere else in most people's minds, so they don't see a point in recycling if it's gonna be taken to the same place anyways... I mean, I can't tell you if it's true or not, but I think most of the recycling probably goes in with the trash at the same place, but it's just different bins. Like, I don't really think the municipal government really separates it as much.

These examples show that for most participants recycling is merely symbolic, and not executed properly. It therefore feels useless to participate in recycling. These perceptions were mainly based on rumors, and participants were not completely sure if and how the recycling system in Türkiye works. Ojala (2008: 789), found that Swedish youth were also reluctant to recycle, because they did not trust the efficiency of the recycling system in their country. Similarly, research on different recycling behaviors in EU countries, showed that people who had trust in their institutions, and thus their national recycling system, were more likely to participate in recycling (Pronti and Zoboli 2024).

Although some literature suggests that little trust in one's government can increase pro-environmental behavior (Franzen and Vogl 2013; Torgler et al. 2011), no examples hereof were given during the interviews. I therefore argue that the Turkish political context limits participant's willingness to engage in individual pro-environmental behavior.

Environmental Activism

One participant expressed that young people don't feel heard by the government: "I don't think the government or maybe the president, are interested in our wishes". This challenges feelings of agency and limits participants' engagement in public actions. None of the participants engaged in climate activism and people explained that under the current government, climate activism, or any form of activism, is difficult. These answers fit well with the literature on environmental activism under authoritarian regimes, showing that authoritarian regimes challenge any form of counter-narrative and respond aggressively to every form of critique and activism

(Middeldorp and Le Billon 2019; Ofstehage et al. 2022: 1, 3; Özen 2022). Criminalization, discrimination and incarceration are often-used tactics to silence environmental activists (Scheidel et al. 2020: 4). Several participants referred to the Gezi protests of 2013 to show the complexity of activism in Türkiye.

In 2013 one of the largest protests in Turkey, the Gezi protest [took place]. It started out over the destruction of a traditional and very historic central park and very rooted trees and environment... And they were going to bulldoze over it to build new homes or whatever. And that was the initial spark for that protest, it was completely environment based and then turned into other governmental issues of inequalities, racism, sexism, you know, overall, like, class based issues.

The Gezi protests marked the start of Erdoğan's authoritarian approach, which makes protesting an even more sensitive topic (Özen 2022 1, 5).

We had a rivalry back in 2013 just to save trees... This governmental outlook on this is very ideological, I think. They don't really care about environment, but now it turned into a rebellious thing to preserve green.

One participant explained that activism therefore, has shifted more to social media.

On social media, there's constant protests... there's a lot of Turkish... private information pages... because no one really trusts news sources as much. Most of them are tied to the government. And they wouldn't talk about environmental issues anyways. So... private... individuals develop their own news sources...And private citizens try to protect the environment or... animals or children...trying to get some sort of justice pushed through social media.

As research on Russia and China suggests, news sources in authoritarian regimes are often used for propaganda-purpose to strengthen political power (Alyukov

2023: 527; Chang 2021: 793). Social media and other digital news sources have been used as well by authoritarian regimes to spread and manipulate information in their favor (ibid.). At the same time, social media allows for access to alternative sources of information and perspectives (Alyukov 2023). Research suggests that social media therefore plays a crucial role in activism under authoritarian regimes and has created new spaces to share counter-narratives and criticism (Golkar 2015; Lee 2018; Sika 2019; Yabancı 2021). But activism in any form is difficult in an authoritarian context and limits the establishment of a strong environmental activist network, which is important to both motivate governments and individuals to act more environmentally friendly.

Interestingly, when discussing the topic of activism, people again explained that there are more pressing topics in Türkiye on which activism is focused. Mainly feminist struggles were mentioned as an urgent topic in Turkish activism.

I know there's a lot more activist groups on those [women's rights] because... femicide has been... a major issue in Turkey for, I think, pretty much a couple decades. It's always been an issue, but it's been rising, again, because justice is not served usually. And... women... domestic abuse rates are rising and murders are happening more frequently, and then the killers are just set free or nothing happens.

As the examples show, the participants don't perceive environmental issues as a top priority, nor do they think other people in Türkiye prioritize environmental challenges, because there are other issues that feel more immediate and urgent in people's everyday life. This is not to say that the participants think it should not be a priority and are not aware of the future consequences environmental issues may have. As one participant sums it up very accurately:

I hope we can talk about... sustainability and protest for it one day because that would mean... all of our other problems are gone.

Interestingly, some participants were a bit more critical about climate activism in general (not specifically in Türkiye). They argued that climate activism is important, but that the way it is done now is counter productive. Participants referred to the activists who threw soup at the Mona Lisa, or blocked highways to protest, and argued that these actions frustrate people rather than create awareness.

I think they're targeting the wrong audience with wrong methods.

One participant explained that many people get frustrated by climate activists and it becomes associated with elitism.

[There is] this assumption of these environmental issues and this awareness situation being...part of this intellectual group...And when you're trying to explain this [environmental issue], it's like you're trying to belittle them...it became [associated with] that very high privileged awareness.

As a response, she explains, people reject environmentalism and don't want to hear about it.

You tend to hear also: Oh, okay enough with this. We're all doomed. What can we do? ... So let's just stop talking about it...There is this new trend of refusing all of this becoming this cool thing to do... Like, I'm gonna keep eating meat. "You do whatever."

This hostile attitude towards environmentalism has become a popular research topic, and Feygina et al. (2010: 326) show that this attitude often comes from a fear of changing the status-quo and one's known way of living. Similarly, environmentalism is often associated with elitism and perceived to be only relevant to rich and highly-educated people, who have the time and resources to be concerned with it (Huber 2020: 964). This narrative, in turn, fits perfectly with Erdoğan's right-wing populist rhetoric claiming that environmentalists are the

elitist enemy of the people (Özen 2022). Although these insights are interesting, I want to be careful not to generalize, as these quotes do not reflect the perception of people who actually hold strong anti-environmental stances, but rather the perception of the participants about these people.

I want to highlight that this argument is not only used in right-wing populist narratives but also by environmental justice scholars. They refer to it as the ‘privilege of concern’ and argue that rich and middle-class communities have the privilege to be concerned with issues that go beyond their own survival (Chhokar et al. 2011: 1185, 1186). From this point of view, not participating in pro-environmental behavior is not linked to conservatism per se, but also to privilege and opportunities to be concerned.

Türkiye versus the West

Several participants compared the situation in Türkiye to Western countries. They argued that Western countries are more stable and that it is therefore easier to think about and act upon environmental challenges in these countries.

I'm trying to survive here. So, that's [environmental concerns] the least important of my problems here. But I don't know if... I was a student or I was an individual in like, a more social democratic country [talking about Scandinavia], maybe I could be more aware of what the world in general [is] doing with or how they are dealing with this kind of environmental stuff.

It seems to me like in the Netherlands or in places more to the north, you guys seem to be more aware because you have a systematic way of living. It appears to us. I don't know. But here, it's more like we have other issues.

Some participants thus romanticized other countries and thought that their own environmental attitudes could be different in another country-context. This romanticizing of Western countries aligns with what Harris (2014: 807) calls “the internalization of...Orientalist tropes”. By this she means that Turkish people

themselves portray Türkiye negatively in comparison to the ‘calm and organized’ West (ibid.). Harris (2014: 808) found out that a lot of Turkish people idealize Western environmental approaches, and that a lot of these sentiments relate to the availability of green spaces. Western countries are associated with a lot of green spaces, while Türkiye lacks such spaces. This was also a theme that came up during the interviews I conducted. One participant lived in France for some time and she compared the green spaces there to Türkiye.

While living in Paris, it was another capital , we had those big gardens. I call them breathing rooms. In terms of architecture every city needs a breathing room. You have to be in touch with nature. And while living in one of the busiest cities, it's very hectic, it's very crowded, you can always escape to a garden. And I think that also gives an awareness of this nature feeling because you're in touch with it ... But in Turkey, it's the complete opposite... here, we don't see nature enough.

The participant thus explained that being in touch with nature is really important, not only for one’s mental wellbeing but also to create a feeling of connection with nature. She later mentioned that the disconnect between humans and nature, particularly in an urban setting, may create unsustainable behavior. Studies show that green spaces in urban areas indeed have positive effects on the environment such as taking up CO₂ from the air, but also on the wellbeing of residents (Lee et al. 2015). Additionally, more time spent outdoors in natural areas increases feelings of connectedness to nature and a willingness to act pro-environmentally (DeVille et al. 2021). In Norway, for example, outdoor activities are an integrated part of the culture, and thus children from a young age are able to engage with nature (Gurholt 2014). Research among youth in Norway shows that their childhood experiences in nature, positively shaped their feelings of connectedness to and care for the natural world (ibid.). Although there are some parks in Ankara, green spaces in general are limited.

There are more buildings than parks [in Ankara]. And it is terrible because we don't have special natural areas, or green fields.

A report on the possibility of creating more green spaces in Ankara, shows that this is difficult to implement (Kulińska and Dendera-Gruszka 2019: 250). The city is struggling with its spatial capacities, and particularly the growing influx of people challenges urban planning in the city (ibid.). Ironically, in 2014 Erdoğan built his palace in the Atatürk Orman Çiftli, a former forest reserve (BBC 2014). He cut hundreds of trees to clear the land for this megalomaniac building project (ibid.). This project created lots of controversy, not only politically but also environmentally (ibid.)

Most participants linked environmental attitudes in Türkiye to political struggles and they argue that these underlying issues need to be fixed first, before people can and want to think about environmental problems. And as abovementioned examples show, a greening of the urban built environment might be valuable too.

Frustration, Fear, Love and Care

The aim of this research has been to get a better understanding of environmental awareness, concerns and pro-environmental behavior in the daily lives of Turkish urban youth. From the interviews it became clear that the young people I talked to are aware of environmental degradation. Particularly local environmental challenges that they experienced in their daily lives were mentioned. Several participants expressed emotions of sadness, fear and hopelessness with regards to the future of the natural environment, which shows that these participants are not only aware of the issue but also concerned.

Some participants translated their concerns into individual pro-environmental behavior, such as making conscious consumer choices and limiting waste. These participants created a form of agency by taking small actions in their daily lives. Most participants, however, did not actively engage in pro-environmental behavior. They felt that their individual actions are not effective, unless structural changes are made. Their lack of action does not simply come from apathy, but rather stems from a feeling of being overwhelmed. The participants were not only overwhelmed by the vastness of environmental challenges but also by the economic and political challenges Türkiye currently faces. The economic crisis puts a heavy burden on people, and the government does not provide any incentives to act sustainably. Most participants had little trust in the government and its ability and willingness to take sustainable action. According to them, the government does not care about the environment and is instead more concerned with strengthening power and financial gains. The young people I interviewed expressed that they don't feel heard and protesting in Türkiye is challenging, which also discourages participants from taking public action.

The participants stressed that they have different, more immediate priorities and concerns in their daily lives, which creates a disconnect between their environmental awareness, concern and pro-environmental behavior. These results fit into research showing that environmental awareness and concern does not automatically lead to pro-environmental behavior. Similarly, exposure to the effects

of environmental degradation does not guarantee a change in behavior. Even though environmental degradation has material impacts, they are still easier to put aside than economic, day-to-day survival issues for these Turkish youth. The political and economic context in which these young people grow up thus play an important role in shaping their environmental awareness, concerns and pro-environmental behavior.

Even though every country provides a unique context for analysis, the results of this research had some striking similarities to findings among young people in different parts of the world. Many young people, while transitioning to adulthood, are occupied with other concerns, such as getting a good education, finding a proper job and housing, and economic stability. Similarly, a majority of young people have little trust in individual behavior change. Although it is extremely important to demand systematic and large-scale changes from governments, it can easily become an excuse to detach oneself from individual responsibility and agency or it may cause eco-paralysis.

This research mainly identified barriers for Turkish urban youth to translate their environmental awareness and concern into action. It is important to continue research on this topic to explore potential solutions to these barriers, because young people play a vital role in shaping our future. Scholars can help translating these outcomes to youth organizations, policy makers, governments and educational institutions, both in Türkiye and beyond, to create a context where young people feel heard and encouraged to take environmental action. Fostering hope among young people is a powerful tool herein, as Ojala (2008) points out.

During the interviews often broader themes of frustration and discontent came up, and some participants were openly critical of the political and economic state of Türkiye. At the same time, I want to point out that most participants also told me that they did not want to give an all-negative view of their country. One participant said that she did not mean to “bash” her country. Another participant felt a bit sad for only being critical as she said: “I really love my country and its people”. It is important to stress that for the participants feelings of frustration and fear, go hand

in hand with feelings of love and care for their country, and a longing for a bright, just, and sustainable future in which they can thrive.

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