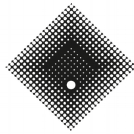
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Climate-Related Perceptions of Young People with Lived Experience of Disasters in Regional and Rural Victoria, Australia

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Climate-Related Perceptions of Young People with Lived Experience of Disasters in Regional and Rural Victoria, Australia

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Abstract

The experiences of young people, particularly young women, in regional and rural communities and their perceptions of, and responses to, the climate crisis are under-researched. This research focuses on young people outside of urban centres. These young people are largely absent from the broader climate conversation, despite the impact of climate-related disasters in their everyday lives. Their experiences sit within the concept of rural as being deficit, disadvantaged and backward when contrasted with the experiences of urban young people and emerging calls to challenge this bias. This paper reports on a small-scale study investigating how young people who have experienced climate-related disasters in regional and rural Victoria perceive the climate crisis, the relationship between climate change and climate-related disasters, and climate action. Qualitative data was collected from interviews with young women aged 18–23 ($n = 7$) from six different councils/shires in rural and regional Victoria, Australia, which were impacted by bushfires in 2019–2020. The analysis is attentive to the particularities of "place". The findings provide insight into regional and rural young people's perceptions of the climate crisis, the connection (or otherwise) to climate-related disasters and climate action. They also reveal their perception of an urban/rural divide concerning climate action tactics and climate mitigation policy. The research highlights the social and material realities of young people's everyday lives and feelings of stigma and fear, particularly where they perceived a conflict between climate action and the social and economic relations that shape their regional and rural communities.

Keywords Young people · Climate change · Rural/regional · Activism · Disasters · Place

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Introduction

Young people in Australia are increasingly impacted by climate-related disasters and disproportionately face the consequences of these events over their lifetimes (Gao et al. 2024). Young people in regional and rural communities in Australia have already experienced an escalation in such disasters and the impacts of the climate crisis. Research relating to the experiences of young people, particularly young women, in regional and rural communities and their perceptions of and responses to the climate crisis is "extremely limited" (Hohenhaus et al. 2023, p. 4; Boetto and McKinnon 2013). Research methodologies continue to be dominated by a bias that situates rural life and place as deficit to urban life (Corbett and White 2014). Further, Feldman (2022, p. 112) identifies the lack of representation in research of young people who do not "overtly engage with climate activism". There is even less known about the perceptions of young people who have experienced climate-related disasters in their communities. Research beyond large-scale surveys is scarce. Ziou et al.'s (2024) analysis of the 2023 Mission Australia survey of over 19,000 Australian young people found that lived experience of climate-related disasters is related to higher levels of climate concern. Finally, there is little investigation of the impact of government energy transition policies on young people's political engagement in regional and rural communities, including communities that are economically reliant on resource-extractive industries. As Hohenhaus et al. (2023, p. 4) state, "the voices of the youth who will be impacted by this transition have not yet been included in the climate conversation".

As such, this article investigates the perspectives and experiences of young people, particularly young women, from rural and regional communities in Victoria, Australia, who have lived experience of climate-related disasters and are employed in their communities to enable youth participation in disaster recovery and resilience. The distinction between rural, regional and urban young people is notable here, not only due to the contextualising of regional/rural places and young people as deficit but the participants' point of difference with their urban peers (Cook and Cuervo 2020; Corbett and White 2014; Cuervo et al. 2024). The research sought to answer the question: "How do young people who have experienced climate-related disasters in regional and rural Victoria perceive the climate crisis, the relationship between climate change and disasters, and climate action?" Interviews were conducted with young people ($n = 7$) from six different councils/shires in rural and regional[1] communities impacted by the catastrophic 2019–2020 Black Summer bushfires. This research centres "place" (Adolfsson and Coe 2022) and is attentive to the social and structural conditions that young people in rural and regional communities navigate (Butler 2020). In doing so, it contributes to a "spacialised youth sociology" (Cuervo and Wyn 2017, p. 228) to understand the complexities of young people's situated knowledge-making and political practices. This research is

[1] In Australia, regional is a term that refers to those areas that fall outside of a major city. Rural is a term that refers to those areas which are not part of any "Urban" area in the Australian Statistical Geography Standards, Section of State, Structure (Australian Census, released 20/07/2021).

significant as “engaging young people is an essential precondition for the success of climate action” (Arnot et al. 2023a, p. 1) and provides evidence at a local, community level that is largely absent in current scholarship.

Literature Review

Rurality, Regionality and Youth: Intersecting Identities

While “rurality” and “youth” are heterogeneous identity positions, both are structurally disadvantaged (Cuervo 2014). Rural identities are denigrated, othered and stereotyped (Waite 2022). The very idea of ‘rural young people’ has been described as “an outcome of classificatory dynamics and systems of measurement through which the rural has been seen as a sight of disadvantage and backwardness, compared unfavourably with the urban” (Cuervo et al. 2024, p. 1276; Farrugia 2016), and constructed in “opposition to ‘the urban’” (Nairn et al. 2003, p. 11).

Eversole (2022) suggests that in Australia, “regional” is a cultural idea as much as it is a geographic designation and argues that regional identity is largely framed by a peripherality from the metropolitan core and grounded in local contexts. Young people experience peripherality as being marginal to the political decision-making of dominant institutions located in capital cities. Eversole (2022, p. 145) describes this as resulting in both a “tyranny *of* distance” and a “tyranny *at* distance”. Such decisions are often shaped by dominant public discourses in which “regional” is negatively equated with economic decline, cultural conservatism and lack of opportunity for young people (Cook and Cuervo 2020). In such a rendering, rural identity is contrasted negatively with cosmopolitan sensibilities. The city becomes a “centre that privileges not merely metropolitan youth, but a certain vision of metropolitan life” (Farrugia and Ravn 2022, p. 4). However, notions of rural “backwardness” belie the complexity of rural and regional socio-economic patterns. At the same time the “countryside” or “rural life” has also been seen as offering young people a “healthy”, “outdoors”, “clean” way of life and *Gemeinschaft* of a small, “close-knit community” as opposed to *Gesselschaft* of the large, “impersonal” urban society (Tonnies 2021). Such framings obscure the complex “economic, political and cultural social relations [in regional and rural communities], each full of power and with internal structures of domination” (Massey 1994, p. 154).

Academic discourse and social policy continue to position urban youth as paradigmatic and normative, with rural youth on the periphery, seen as marginal and othered despite the diversity of Australian rural environments (Cook and Cuervo 2020; Cuervo et al. 2024; Farrugia and Ravn 2022). Rural young people are effectively erased in research that homogenises young people as “urban”, regardless of geographic location (Nairn et al. 2003). This difference is highlighted in research on political actions relating to climate (Feldman 2022) and responses to disasters. There is evidence of an emerging disruption to the urban homogenisation of young people in academic research. Regional and rural places are increasingly viewed in research as different rather than deficit (Cook and Cuervo 2020; Corbett and White

2014; Cuervo et al. 2024). This paper seeks to continue these contributions by directly examining rural and regional young people's experiences and communities.

The Particularities of Place: Young People's Political and Climate Action

Adolfsson and Coe (2022) address the importance of "place" in understanding the context of young people's political (and) climate action. Yet they note that the *location* where action takes place often remains unexplored. In this way, predominant approaches to young people's political (and) climate action perpetuate research methodologies that privilege metropolitan areas (Corbett and White 2014). Much of this scholarship relies on a tacit normative assumption of bias where "[u]rban areas are assumed to be the 'right' or the 'main' place for understanding political action and other places are assumed to function in the same way as urban areas" (Adolfsson and Coe 2022, p. 465). As identified above, such assumptions ignore the conceptual context of social, economic and cultural relationships in regional and rural areas (Hickey et al. 2024; Massey 1994). Furthermore, they overlook the "highly complex social differentiation" (Massey 1994, p. 154) that young people experience, subject to the flows and interconnections in communities that are distinctly different for this age group than for other social groups. Acknowledging these assumptions enabled the research to investigate regional and rural young people's *situated* knowledge-making and everyday political practices in response to the climate crisis and escalating climate-related disasters.

These understandings cohere with scholarship in youth studies, which stresses the importance of place and relationality in shaping young people's political identity and actions. Young people are enmeshed in relationships that shape their social environments. However, Massey (1994) argues that their power, control and initiation within these are constrained by existing structures of social, political, economic and cultural relations that are unique to each place. Harris and Wyn (2009) called attention to the micro-territories of the local, where young people's political thinking and acting take place. Harris and Wyn (2009, p. 342) argued that young people engage in politics through local spaces and relationships where "they already felt comfortable". It is also important to acknowledge that regional and rural places remain resilient (Corbett and White 2014) and create opportunities to shape "who the young people can be" (Hickey et al. 2024, p. 6). Waite (2022, p. 333) found that young people in a regional Australian town engage in micro-territorial place-making that re-appropriate spaces and reverse "processes of spatial exclusion which ultimately conceive young people as constantly in tension with the adult-centric spaces that they inhabit". Overcoming this tension enables regional and rural young people to carve-out and create opportunity (Hickey et al. 2024).

Young people claim spaces to express their agency and sense of self in places and within relationships that are "in fact shaped by and co-constituted not only by flows and interconnections of capital and labour but also of meaning, culture and ideas" (Massey 1994, p. 154). Massey (1994) argues that different groups, individuals and places negotiate their relationships with these, with some enabled, some creating, and others simply stuck with them. In seeking to understand the experiences

and perspectives of young people in regional and rural communities, Butler's (2020, p. 1185) theme of the "social and structural conditions of places" offers utility in understanding how the "conditions … intersect with other factors of young people's lives to shape social relationships in present rural contexts". Familial relations are important (Jones and Lucas 2023), with research showing that "parents still matter in regard to influencing coping with climate change among their teenage children and indirectly also proenvironmental behaviour" (Ojala & Bengtsson 2019, p. 928). By paying attention to the social and structural conditions that young people in rural and regional communities navigate, this research contributes to a "spacialised youth sociology" (Cuervo and Wyn 2017, p. 228) needed to understand the complexities of young people's situated knowledge-making and political practices in these diverse communities.

Young People's Everyday Political Practices in Response to the Climate Crisis

"Climate action" is a broad term that is used to describe a variety of activities designed to reduce carbon emissions — from large-scale global climate adaption strategies to personal everyday alternative practices such as walking or riding a bike instead of using a greenhouse gas-producing vehicle (UN 2025). Climate protests, such as School Strikes 4 Climate, are a form of climate action organised by civil society groups to raise public awareness and to influence governments and industries to shift their policies and practices in favour of a faster reduction in the use of fossil fuels and greenhouse gas emissions. Arnot et al. (2023b, p. 1) suggest that these forms of climate "activities engage young people and give them hope". These activities, however, are undertaken in a complex and "pervasive discourse that climate change is a *recent* problem for 'younger generations' to solve" (Nairn 2024, p. 1). Young people's sense of dependence on (Jones 2023) and/or trust/distrust in other societal actors relies "on the ability of people to come together and fight the climate threat" (Ojala and Bengtsson 2019, p. 911).

Young people's motivations for engagement in climate action and the forms that such action takes are complex and resist simplified narratives that risk obscuring "the complex positionalities negotiated by young activists who, in their activism, remain bound up in webs of intersecting structural inequalities" (Bowman 2020, p. 10). Young people engage in political practices relating to climate justice in a variety of ways, ranging from "everyday individual activism" (Woods et al. 2024, p. 81) to large-scale social change and protest movements. Underscoring the danger of treating young people as homogenous, Arnot et al. (2023b) find that some young Australians who are sympathetic to climate change mitigation nevertheless criticise some of the tactics of climate change protests.

Several recent studies (Boucher et al. 2021; Martiskainen et al. 2020; Memmott et al. 2021) examined the motivations of young people participating in climate action and found that their reasons for participating, their knowledge, and actions regarding climate change vary widely. However, in a survey of 600 young people, Noth and Tonzer (2022, p. 1) found that "young women are more likely to participate in such marches compared to men". Bessant et al. (2023, p. 477; Walker and

van Holstein 2024) concur, claiming that since 2018, “girls and young women have played leading roles in Australian climate politics”.

Concerning young people’s climate action, scholarship has predominantly addressed urban youth activists engaged in public demonstrations as the cutting edge of the climate protest movement (Feldman 2022). Scholarly attention has only recently addressed other forms of activism and the political action of young people outside urban areas. Adolfsson and Coe (2022, p. 456) argue this “metro-centric convention of global youth studies” means that research on rural young people’s political action is limited and, therefore, their political action tends to be obscured. Evidence suggests that rural and regional young people experience a range of structural barriers to their engagement and participation in climate action. Arnot et al. (2023a) suggest that some young people face barriers to participation in the climate movement. In particular, Arnot et al. (2023b) found that some rural and regional young people report feeling excluded from mass urban mobilisations that take place in large city centres. Additionally, Arnot et al. (2023b) note that a lack of local protest events as well as mixed support or opposition from family and friends can shape young people’s decisions. This includes times when “protesting simply did not align with how young people wanted to engage in advocacy and action for climate change” (Arnot et al. 2023b, p. 5). Boetto and McKinnon (2013, p. 15) undertook a review of literature “exploring the relationship between gender and climate change in rural Australia” and highlighted the “dearth of Australian research that focuses on rural women and climate change”. Further, climate action by young people is more keenly felt by parents and peers in communities that are economically reliant on resource-extractive industries (Morgan 2020). This research seeks to build upon Arnot et al. (2023b) and Morgan’s (2020) research relating to young people’s engagement in climate action in rural and regional areas by investigating the particularities of place (Adolfsson and Coe 2022) in relation to young people’s perceptions of climate action in regional and rural communities in Victoria.

Methodology

This study investigated the research question, “How do young people who have experienced climate-related disasters in regional and rural Victoria perceive the climate crisis, the relationship between climate change and disasters, and climate action?”.

Participants in this study were purposefully recruited (Creswell and Creswell 2022) through the Youth Affairs Council Victoria (‘YACVic’). Participants ($n = 7$) were aged between 18 and 23 years of age; all were women; all lived in a rural or regional area in Victoria; and all had lived experience of climate-related disaster(s) in their communities. Table 1 provides participant demographics. Participants had been employed as peer workers across six different local councils/shires for between 12 and 18 months, promoting youth participation in disaster recovery and resilience in communities that had been impacted by the Black Summer bushfires of 2019–2020 (MacDonald et al. 2024). This included establishing and supporting

Table 1 Participant demographics

Data identifier	Gender[a]	Age range[b]	Location	Council/shire[c]	Area
Participant 1	Woman	18–20	Rural	1	SE Victoria
Participant 2	Woman	21–23	Rural	2	NE Victoria
Participant 3	Woman	21–23	Regional	3	SE Victoria
Participant 4	Woman	18–20	Regional	3	SE Victoria
Participant 5	Woman	18–20	Regional	4	NE Victoria
Participant 6	Woman	21–23	Rural	5	NE Victoria
Participant 7	Woman	18–20	Regional	6	NE Victoria

[a]While gender was not an overt criterion for recruitment, the fact that all participants were women reflects both the predominance of women in the peer worker roles in the *Future Proof: Young People, Disaster Recovery and (Re)building Communities* project (11/12 were women) in which they were employed, and the women-dominated nature of the community services sector more generally

[b]Age ranges are used to ensure participant anonymity

[c]Council/shire names have been anonymised to ensure participant anonymity

youth advisory structures and facilitating training and events for young people in their communities.

The participants all identified as living outside urban cities.[2] The six local government areas/shires are themselves diverse, and the authors sought to resist presenting a "unitary" depiction of rural experiences (Nairn et al. 2003, p. 38). The length of this paper prohibits a detailed examination of the distinctive communities; however, in the results and discussion below, attention is paid to ensure the diversity of experiences and that environmental and social contexts are included (as relevant to the participant responses). We note a further limitation to the extent that participants reported the perceptions of young people they work with in their communities (i.e. one-step removed). We have identified these clearly to enable the reader to distinguish between the participants' personal perceptions and their perceptions of other young people's perspectives. These limitations, combined with the small-scale nature of this study, means we offer this paper as a contribution to encourage further, in-depth research to disrupt the biases in current literature about climate change, climate action and young people.

We used small group interviews ($n = 3$) to facilitate in-depth dialogue and collective sense-making among participants (Creswell and Creswell 2022). Two 90-min online interviews were conducted via Zoom to enable participants from an extensive geographic range across Victoria to participate. The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim and thematically analysed (Braun and Clarke 2022). The analysis was iterative and primarily inductive (Byrne 2022), with initial themes being

[2] The participants identified themselves as "rural" or "regional" and perceived themselves differently from other young people living in large urban cities, and using the terms "urban", "city" or "metro" interchangeably. While these categories have homogenising tendencies and do not necessarily allow for the heterogeneous nature of all young people (regardless of geographic location), we have used these categories as they were identified and used by the participants themselves.

constructed from the data (Braun and Clarke 2022). Through the use of a collaborative online whiteboard, tentative themes were presented to participants for feedback and expansion as part of the interview process. Following the interview, the data was again analysed, and the team dialogued to generate meaning from the patterns in the data (Byrne 2022). Adolfsson and Coe's (2022) caution to centre "place" in examining young people's climate actions informed the analysis. These themes were presented to participants ($n = 3$) in a follow-up online 90-min interview to provide feedback, clarification and validation (Braun and Clarke 2022).

Central to the data collection and analysis was the inclusion of a "youth co-researcher" on the research team (Third et al. 2023; Walker and van Holstein 2024). The youth co-researcher is herself a young person living in a regional community with lived experience of climate-related disasters. She has also experience working with young people in the context of youth participation in disaster recovery and resilience. Of the other authors, two currently live in a rural context, another grew up in a rural setting. While three grew up in metropolitan cities, all have periodically lived in rural or regional communities. All authors are settlers, living and working on First Nations lands that were never ceded.

Results

Fear and Anger: Talking About Climate Change

As an introductory activity, participants were invited to share an emoji in the online chat that represented how they felt when they thought about climate change and disasters (Fig. 1).

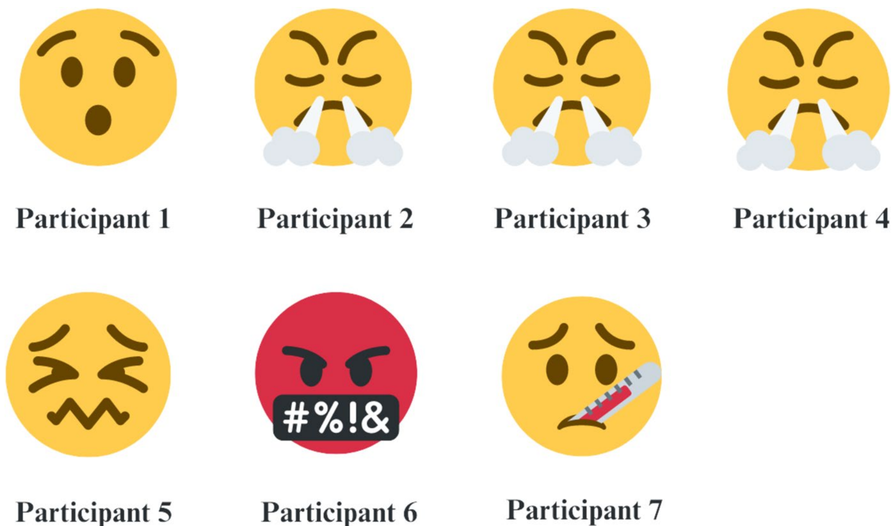

Fig. 1 Emojis representing participants' feelings related to climate change and disasters

Some participants explained that their emoji represented their feelings about the impacts of the climate crisis. One participant described feeling "sick" when they thought of "burning fossil fuels … the pollution [and the impacts on] wildlife" (Participant 7). Another participant identified feeling "fear because you don't really know what's coming" in the future (Participant 4). One participant explained that they had chosen an emoji that represented how people in her community felt about disasters as "they're just shocking to people and the system". The majority of participants, however, chose emojis to represent their feelings relating to *talking* about climate change in the everyday sites of their homes, school and work:

> I chose my emoji [because] it just makes me mad and angry … very frustrated as well when *talking* about the topic. *(Participant 2)*

> We chose the emoji because it makes us frustrated when we're *talking* about it to other people. *(Participants 3 & 4)*

> I chose my swearing emoji because when I have these *conversations* with people, it makes me very angry and want to do a lot of swearing, but … I can't just sit there and go, "You're an idiot". *(Participant 6)*

The sense of fear, frustration and anger relating to *talking* about climate change in their communities was expressed by participants from regional and rural communities across diverse geographic regions. In response to this identified challenge, one participant described how the youth groups they are involved in were interested in developing their capacity to engage their families:

> I ran a workshop once about trying to teach young people how to *talk* to family members about climate change. *(Participant 6).*

In addition to the frustration expressed by participants in talking about climate change in their communities, many participants expressed feeling an "intense pressure that our generation has to fix all these problems" (i.e. to address the climate and biodiversity crisis which they felt was "looming over us") (Participant 5). Participants described feeling pressure to address the climate crisis. Simultaneously, they felt unable to talk about climate change in their closest relationships.

Despite these frustrations, one participant described some regional and rural young people as being actively engaged in climate action, having learned about the climate crisis through civic and cultural activities. Other participants described climate action that they had participated in, such as youth-led climate action groups.

Climate Crisis Disconnected from Local Experiences of Climate-Related Disasters

Participants reported their broad awareness of the impacts of climate change on events and locations outside their local community, such as "icebergs melting" (Participant 1). Participants did not connect the "issue" of climate change to their lived experience of recent climate-related disasters in their communities. When asked "Do young people relate climate change and disasters?", participants

suggested that many rural young people who are impacted by climate-related disasters do not make a connection between their experiences and the climate crisis. Despite experiencing climate-related disasters, the climate crisis "seem[s] very distant from the idea that … they're being directly affected" (Participant 5) by it. One participant reflected on their experiences with a disaster resilience youth advisory group in their local community:

> When we ask the question, "Do you think you're affected by climate change?" Often it's, "No, I don't think so." "No, not yet. Maybe later." Even when the bushfires happened, I don't think immediately there was a correlation between bushfires and climate change. *(Participant 4)*

The absence of a "correlation" between climate change and climate-related disasters was confirmed by another participant who reflected on her observations of leading a community-based youth group focused on disaster recovery and resilience:

> The young people I'm in contact with are very, very aware of climate change and feel very passionate about climate change, but perhaps are yet to connect things that are happening in their everyday life to climate change. *(Participant 6)*

While the young people the research participants had worked with may not have "connected" local environmental changes or events to climate change, they were "connected" to the environmental events themselves:

> [T]hey're talking about a season, "We've had a really dry season this year, there hasn't been a good harvest. We've lost crop". Or if it's been a really wet season, "We've lost crop this year; we've spent this much on this"; and the economic impacts too. *(Participant 1)*

The participants reported a heightened awareness amongst young people in rural areas of changing weather patterns and the impact on their local environments, especially the economic effect of these changes.

Material Interests Influence Young People's Climate Action

Some participants reflected on their experiences of how adults dismissed climate change as an issue:

> My parents or older family members don't believe in it, and it just feels useless or hopeless trying to have a conversation about it because they shut it down real quick… don't want to talk about it. *(Participant 5)*

The rationale for such a dismissal of climate change appears to be rooted in economics and concern for livelihoods:

> [W]e're in a community where there's power stations, logging and all those other types of things. Their main priority is not renewable energy, it's making

> a living and having a job that they can live in and stay in for ages. *(Participant 1)*

> The logging industry is really important because it provides a majority of the population—those tiny communities—with jobs. Everybody knows everybody that works there… has family there. *(Participant 1)*

The demands of the climate movement and the climate policies pursued by the government call for a transition away from fossil fuels to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions and protect biodiversity. While the concept of a "just transition" (Galanis et al. 2025), which protects the livelihoods of workers in affected industries, has been advanced by trade unions and some environmental organisations, participants felt that climate mitigation clashed with the material interests of their communities and threatened the communities' economic base. Some participants in this study identified the Victorian Government's decision to bring forward the ban on native logging by six years and the announced future closures of coal-fired power stations as impacting their communities' economic interests. These climate-mitigation transition strategies were described as having a widespread effect, including a direct impact on "[y]oung people that work [in affected industries] and have apprenticeships" (Participant 1).

Perceived Rural/Urban Divide

Participants in communities who had been impacted by government energy transition policies felt that the perspectives and experiences of rural communities are poorly understood by urban populations, particularly by "political people" making climate policy decisions that affect the livelihoods of rural communities:

> The impacts that have happened from the people losing their jobs due to people [politicians] shutting down jobs due to climate change … there's a lot of anger and spite… they've lost their job and they haven't received support or anything from that… And there's these people that are in the city… the ones that are making the decisions when they really don't understand how people's livelihoods are affected by these decisions… So there's a lot of anger. *(Participant 1)*

The feeling that most urban people (particularly politicians) do not understand rural life and that governments were making decisions to progress policies that negatively affect rural lives and livelihoods also appeared to shape participants' perspectives on the climate movement itself.

Participants uniformly reported feeling disconnected from the "Melbourne-centric" climate movement and tactics. This was because rural young people have "a different life and a different set of values and beliefs sometimes… compared to those living in the city"; this values-divide "can play a part in whether or not it's easier to mobilise young people for something like School Strike 4 Climate" (Participant 6). Participants reported feeling that the School Strikes are "Melbourne-centric

and happen in the city with city people, with city beliefs" (Participant 6), and, as a result, inaccessible to many young people in regional and rural areas. In addition to the perceived urban/rural values-divide, one participant hypothesised that young people who are living through the impacts of climate-related disasters do not have the capacity or time to prioritise climate action:

> If you're on a farm and there's a bushfire coming and it could be the end of everything, is striking at school really on your priority list? *(Participant 5)*

Overall, participants described their sense that people in urban centres enjoy fewer barriers to participation in climate action broadly. This was most acute in the context of climate protest action, which was described as "a really privileged thing to be a part of" (Participant 6).

Absence of Safe Spaces to Talk About or Respond to the Climate Crisis

Participants identified the absence of safe spaces in their rural and regional communities for young people to come together to learn about and discuss climate change, and to engage in climate action. Sites, such as schools, homes and workplaces, were not considered by participants to be safe places where young people could discuss climate change action. Participants described feelings of fear or stigma of social consequences of discussing climate change or being perceived as a climate activist in these sites:

> In the bigger [city] areas you can have those opinions more and you can find those people with the same beliefs where you can still feel safe in that area, as well as feel validated. When you're going from a tiny school in your small community where everyone knows everything …everyone will find out within a minute of you saying something. *(Participant 2)*

> In the city, you can sort of afford to have those opinions [about climate justice] without it becoming too close to home. *(Participant 5)*

> I know as well when the [school] strikes were happening… especially within my school …a lot of young people around me were always bringing it up… It was bad and viewed as bad. *(Participant 2)*

As a result, participants described the real fear of social reprisal and punitive approach of both school administrations and student peers as constraining young people's climate responses:

> I feel like there's just stigma around it … there's that fear of judgment, they're actually passionate about climate change but they don't want their peers to judge them. *(Participant 2).*

> There's enough young people around who are interested, but are too scared to actually go and do something. *(Participant 3).*

> The school I went to was so against [School Strike] that they [teachers] were actively saying to students that … you're going to get in trouble for it. I thought it was pretty admirable that students were still leaving. It wasn't very many, but [they were] standing their ground against the teachers. *(Participant 2).*

While the responses revealed how social reprisal from peers and punitive measures from school administrations limited young people's capacity to engage in climate action (especially public protest actions), participants identified a small number of young people who chose to participate in these actions in spite of the social consequences.

Discussion

This study identified a disconnect between young people's lived experience of climate-related disasters and the climate crisis. Economic and social structures in regional and rural communities appear to inhibit climate awareness and climate action. This research also suggests that rural young people's climate consciousness is different, not deficit (Corbett and White 2014). Participants expressed that young people in their communities have a deep connection to land, offering detailed observations relating to changing weather patterns, such as the impact on farms of the lack (or over-abundance) of rain. These young people's proximity to the everyday, observable impacts of a changing climate provides opportunities for dialogue and conscientization (Freire 2009), an opportunity that is not explored in current literature where the urban is seen as normative and/or superior. One challenge will be creating trust with these young people to enable their openness to share experiences that threaten their perceived sense of safety in speaking up against the views of those in their familial and local places. The analysis suggests that social stigma, school environments, material interests and an urban/rural dichotomy in their regional and rural contexts informed participants' perceptions of the climate crisis, the connection to climate-related disasters and climate action.

Participants described the fear of social stigma as restricting their abilities to discuss the climate crisis, to learn more about climate change and/or to engage in climate action. In focusing on the particularities of place in the data, and how place is "constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations" (Massey 1994, p. 154), it was striking that the majority of participants expressed fear relating to social stigma for being perceived as "pro-climate action". There is increasing research documenting young people's "rational" climate anxiety relating to government/corporate/adult inaction relating to the climate crisis (Walker and van Holstein 2024, p. 1169; Hickman et al. 2021; Teo et al. 2024). Our study extends this research by examining young people's anxieties about social divisions and isolation from their participation in climate action, including everyday individual actions such as discussions (Woods et al. 2024). The "stress" and "anxiety" relating to climate change discussions with friends, schoolmates, and community members described by participants, limit young people's climate awareness and action as such discussions are an "important avenue for support and social change" (Jones and Lucas 2023, p. 1)

and the role of parents in influencing young people's climate awareness is well documented (Ojala and Bengtsson 2019). This is consistent with Arnot et al.'s (2023b) findings that opposition from family and friends shapes young people's understandings. However, this may be more acutely experienced by young people outside of urban contexts. This has important implications for young people's climate consciousness, agency and capacity to cope with the climate crisis (Ojala and Bengtsson 2019; Teo et al. 2024).

Participants identified school environments as sites of social stigma. Hickey et al. (2024) confirm that schools in regional Australia can be places where young people carve out their social power and locations where young people engage in political action while disenfranchised from formal political processes. However, this research suggests that in the context of climate, local school environments constrained young people's capacities to freely voice their concerns relating to the climate crisis or to engage in climate protest action. Here, we see evidence of Massey's (1994, p. 154) "power and internal structures of domination and subordination" that flow and interconnect differently for young people in schools. As a result, the micro-territories of the local (Harris and Wyn 2009) appear to reproduce barriers to young people's engagement and action. This finding builds upon the work of Arnot et al. (2023a) relating to barriers to young people's climate action. Schools are central to climate education (Feldman 2022), and "adult support and peer solidarity" is important to enable young people's climate action (Walker and van Holstein 2024, p. 1174). As a result, the influence of local politics on local schools in regional and rural areas, and the resulting impact on young people's climate consciousness and agentic capacities, deserves further research. Such impacts may be related to the fear of social stigma more broadly, as other research confirms the challenges of schools and education providers in regional and rural schools where young people feel that everyone knows their business (Collin 2015). It may also, however, be related to the relationship between educators and students in these communities feeling as though their material interests are threatened by climate mitigation initiatives.

Beyond school environments, this research suggests that in rural and regional contexts, place-based social, political and economic factors shape the participant young people's understanding of the connection between their own lived experience of climate-related disasters and the climate crisis, their climate awareness and their climate action more broadly. The adult, urban-based authors assumed, in line with existing literature, that young people with lived experience of climate-related disasters would relate to increased climate awareness and everyday political action. The youth co-researcher did not make such assumptions. They confirmed the views of participants and enabled the research team to understand the complexities of this through her own lived experience. We suggest that the social, political and economic narratives in regional and rural communities, as distinct from urban environments, limit discussions of the connection between escalating, cumulative disasters and the climate crisis. This appeared to be acutely felt in communities whose economic interests are currently focused on resource-extractive industries.

This research suggests that the impact of the climate mitigation policies of governments on the material interests of communities shapes young people's climate action in their non-urban contexts (Adolfsson and Coe 2022; Butler 2020). While

all participants described fear of social stigma for engaging in climate action, the risk of social and familial isolation for participating in climate action was heightened for participants who live in communities economically reliant on resource-extractive industries. Three participants were from regional and rural communities economically reliant on resource-extractive industries and described their supportive attitudes towards climate action as "being in opposition" to their families and friends' livelihoods (see also Morgan 2020). The youth co-researcher confirmed this, describing the intergenerational economic reliance on employment in resource-extractive industries as creating a contested landscape within the community. Further, in the feedback interview, the researchers probed whether the issue in these communities was hostility towards "climate change" or the perceived unjust transition. Participants from these communities confirmed that the hostility resulted from the material impacts of energy transition policies on their communities, rather than climate change or climate action generally. Participants felt that reframing climate mitigation as a "fair transition" may enable them to more freely and safely discuss and respond to the climate crisis. This study challenges notions of rural "backwardness" (Cuervo et al. 2024, p. 1276) or cultural conservatism (Cook and Cuervo 2020). Rather, in regional and rural communities economically reliant on resource-extractive industries, the perceived clash between the communities' material interests and climate action inhibits young people's climate consciousness and action.

Adding further complexity, many young people *themselves* are employed or undertaking apprenticeships within these resource-extractive industries. In these spaces, young people are not located in opposition to adult interests but rather are subject to the same economic relations. This is consistent with Butler's (2020, p. 1190) observations of the complexities of young lives in rural places. It also extends Nairn et al.'s (2003, p. 11) assertion that young people's behaviours are "regulated informally through adult… as well as peer behaviour". Our findings demonstrate this regulation of young people's climate action in the context of familial and peer material interests in resource-extractive industries. It highlights the need for place-based (Adolfsson and Coe 2022), relational responses to foster young people's engagement in the climate action movement in a manner that is responsive to the local social and material interests and "webs of intersecting structural inequalities" (Bowman 2020, p. 10).

Addressing the gap in research relating to climate change, climate action and young people, particularly young women, geographically located outside urban areas (Adolfsson and Coe 2022; Feldman 2022), the findings add further nuance to the body of knowledge while resisting "simply invert[ing] this rural/urban dualism" (Nairn et al. 2003, p. 12). However, it is of note that the participants themselves explicitly identified a dichotomy. As participants described their rural and regional locations as restricting their abilities to engage in climate action, some explicitly described their situations as being in contrast to like-minded "city-based" peers. Some participants perceived that their urban peers did not experience the same

social risks. They attributed this to reduced scrutiny because of the size and scale of cities and the distance and space that urban environments offer between working and personal lives.[3] Participants idealised urban environments as places that consistently socialize young people into "proenvironmental behaviours" (Ojala and Bengtsson 2019, p. 908). This suggests that the participants themselves positioned their rural environments as deficit. They appear to have internalised the "popular and media accounts [which] position young people's situatedness as central to the experiences they have available" (Hickey et al. 2024, p. 13). Further, the participants perceived that urban environments were socially inclusive, while their regional and rural environments were socially exclusive (cf. Nairn 2024). The urban/rural dichotomy was also expressed in conversations around government policy and climate movement tactics. Participants in communities economically affected by government energy transition policies described anger in their communities flowing from a perception that government decision-makers "imposed" economically harmful policies as they viewed people who lived outside of metropolitan Melbourne as "expendable". Participants described many climate movement tactics (especially protest actions) as "Melbourne-centric", consistent with Arnot et al.'s (2023b) finding that young Australians can be both critical of some tactics of the climate movement while still supportive of other climate actions. These perspectives may have been informed by the peripheral positioning of non-urban contexts in Australia (Eversole 2022; Farrugia 2016) and the resulting valorisation of urban lifestyles (Farrugia 2016).

The centrality of "place" (Adolfsson and Coe 2022) in shaping regional and rural young people's perceptions of and responses to the climate crisis and climate action was highlighted. Informed by the participants' roles in engaging young people in their communities in the context of disaster recovery and resilience, the interviews also revealed their perceptions of other young people. The small scale of this study necessarily limits the generalisability of the findings. However, this paper has identified avenues for further research by problematising the urban-centric homogenisation of young people in climate change and climate action research and the "marginalisation of underrepresented groups" (Feldman 2022, p. 113; Nairn et al. 2003). We make sense of the young women participants' experiences and perceptions through the social differentiation of economic, political and cultural social relations in regional/rural and urban areas (Massey 1994; Nairn 2024) in response to a predominant research bias which positions "rural Australia" in a deficit, "peripheral position on broader social, economic and political issues in relation to urban centres" (Cook and Cuervo 2020, p. 70).

[3] While beyond the scope of this paper, Walker and van Holstein (2024, pp. 1173–1177) offer a detailed discussion of young people's non-engagement in climate protest action beyond the perceived urban/rural divide.

Conclusion

This research investigated how young people who have experienced climate-related disasters in regional and rural Victoria perceive the climate crisis, the relationship between climate change and climate-related disasters, and climate action. By paying attention to the social and structural conditions in the participants' regional and rural communities (Butler 2020), this study resisted the homogenisation of all young people as "urban" (Farrugia and Ravn 2022), and addressed the knowledge gap relating to young people, the climate crisis and climate action outside of urban communities (Hohenhaus et al. 2023; Ojala and Bengtsson 2019); young people who do not participate in protest action (Feldman 2022); and young people who will be impacted by the energy/climate transition (Hohenhaus et al. 2023).

Where previous studies have identified the central role of women in the Australian climate movement (e.g. Bessant et al. 2023; Walker and van Holstein 2024), this study contributes further nuance by providing evidence of how social and economic structures outside of urban contexts — *beyond* gender — shape young people's perceptions of the climate crisis, and, particularly, climate action. Ziou et al. (2024, p. 17) found that the experience of disasters is "related to higher levels of climate-related concerns" in the broader Australian population. Yet, participants in this study did not connect their lived experiences of climate-related disasters to climate change. While participants expressed deep concerns relating to climate, these were spatially and temporally located outside of their communities (e.g. concerns about "ice caps" melting). This research suggests that the distinct social, political and economic narratives in some regional and rural communities may preclude discussions of the connection between escalating, cumulative disasters and the climate crisis. The analysis further reveals the acute nature of the perceived conflict between the material interests of communities reliant on resource-extractive industries and young people's climate action. This creates unsafe spaces and restricts young people's agentic capacities to engage in climate action.

This research was strengthened by employing a youth co-researcher from a rural community, with lived experience of climate-related disasters. In a discipline that privileges the urban as normative and/or superior, the contributions of youth co-researchers from non-urban contexts are invaluable for our collective sense-making. Finally, this study also raises areas for further research, including the adoption of dualistic rural/urban language by the participants in describing their own identities and opportunities in opposition to their "urban" peers; and how these young people's proximity to the everyday, observable impacts of a changing climate may be understood as a different, rather than deficit, climate consciousness.

Author Contribution BW contributed significantly to the conception and design of the work, the acquisition and analysis of the data and the drafting of this manuscript.

ND contributed significantly to the design of the work and the analysis of the data and provided lived-experience expertise.

JG contributed significantly to the conception and design of the work, the acquisition and analysis of the data and the drafting of this manuscript.

FM contributed significantly to the drafting of this manuscript.

TC contributed significantly to the conception and design of the work and the drafting of this manuscript.

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Data Availability The datasets used and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declarations

Ethics Approval Institutional ethics approval was obtained (HRE22-134) before the commencement of the study. Participants were briefed about the nature of the research and provided informed consent prior to participating in the research. The research was conducted according to the approved protocols.

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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