

Youth-Led Climate Activism - The Emergence of Environmental Leadership in Southeast Asia

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Abstract

Youth-led climate activism has emerged as a powerful force for environmental change, particularly in Southeast Asia, a region highly vulnerable to climate-related disasters. Young activists are leading grassroots movements, policy advocacy efforts, and corporate accountability campaigns, positioning themselves as key stakeholders in climate governance. This study explores the leadership characteristics of youth climate activists in Southeast Asia, the effectiveness of their campaigns, their interactions with policymakers and corporations, and the challenges they face in sustaining long-term activism.

Using a case study approach, the study analyses various authors perspectives on youth-led activism's impact on policy and corporate sustainability alongside case studies of Southeast Asian climate movements. The findings suggest that youth-led activism effectively influences environmental discourse and policy negotiations, but institutional barriers, financial constraints, and activist burnout hinder long-term sustainability.

This research contributes to climate leadership studies, youth political engagement literature, and social movement theory, offering a leadership framework for sustaining youth-led environmental activism. The findings can inform governments, NGOs, and corporate stakeholders on better-integrating youth voices into policy and sustainability initiatives.

Keywords:

Youth activism, climate leadership, environmental movements, Southeast Asia, grassroots mobilisation, policy advocacy, corporate sustainability, digital activism, leadership frameworks

Introduction

Climate change poses significant threats to Southeast Asia, with rising sea levels, deforestation, extreme weather events, and biodiversity loss becoming increasingly severe (Bengtsson et al., 2022). In response, youth-led climate activism has emerged as a transformative force, pushing for policy reforms, corporate accountability, and sustainable development initiatives (Pickard, Bowman & Arya, 2020).

The rise of youth movements such as Fridays for Future Thailand, the Philippine Youth Climate Strike, and Indonesia's Youth for Climate Action highlights the increasing influence of young leaders in environmental discourse. These activists leverage social media, community engagement, and direct advocacy to hold governments and corporations accountable for climate action (Velasquez & LaRose, 2015). However, youth activists face numerous barriers, including:

- Political restrictions on environmental protests (Tang, 2016).
- Limited access to decision-making processes in governmental and corporate spaces (Nugroho & Negara, 2021).
- Psychological and financial strains associated with long-term activism (Hickman et al., 2021).

While previous research has explored youth activism in Western contexts, there is limited empirical analysis of youth-led environmental leadership in Southeast Asia (Han & Ahn, 2020). This study examines the leadership traits, challenges, and strategies of Southeast Asian youth activists, identifying how they mobilise resources, engage policymakers, and sustain their movements despite institutional barriers. It also delves into the distinctive leadership styles employed by young environmental leaders, evaluates the effectiveness of their campaigns, and highlights the barriers they face in sustaining their efforts.

Research Aim and Objectives

Aim:

This study examines how youth-led climate activism in Southeast Asia influences policy, corporate sustainability, and grassroots environmental initiatives while identifying leadership strategies for long-term activism.

Objectives:

1. Identify leadership traits among youth climate activists in Southeast Asia.
2. Analyse the effectiveness of youth-led environmental campaigns in influencing policy and corporate practices.
3. Evaluate how young leaders engage with policymakers and corporate stakeholders to drive environmental change.
4. Propose a leadership model that ensures the sustainability of youth-led climate movements.

Research Questions

1. What leadership characteristics define youth climate activists in Southeast Asia?
2. How do young leaders influence environmental policy and corporate sustainability initiatives?
3. What are the significant challenges youth climate activists face in sustaining their movements?

4. What leadership frameworks can support long-term environmental activism?

Significance of the Study

Understanding youth-led climate activism is crucial for developing effective environmental policies and sustainable business practices. This research contributes to:

- **Leadership Studies:** Exploring the transformational leadership models adopted by youth activists.
- **Social Movement Theory:** Assessing the success factors and barriers of grassroots environmental campaigns.
- **Policy and Governance Research:** Examining youth participation in Southeast Asian environmental policy-making.

The study's findings will be valuable for:

- Government institutions are seeking to integrate youth voices into climate policy.
- Corporations aim to engage in genuine sustainability efforts rather than greenwashing.
- NGOs and advocacy groups supporting youth-led environmental initiatives.

This study contributes to ensuring long-term environmental leadership and systemic change in Southeast Asia by identifying strategies for sustaining youth activism.

Literature Review

Youth-led climate activism has become prominent in global environmental movements, with young leaders increasingly influencing policy, corporate practices, and public discourse (Hickman et al., 2021). Between 2018 and 2019, millions of young people worldwide joined strikes for climate action. These youth climate protests are distinctive both for the very young age of the activists (de Moor et al., 2020). In Southeast Asia, a region highly vulnerable to climate change, youth activism has gained momentum, particularly in countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Thailand (Han & Ahn, 2020). Young activists are leveraging social media, grassroots mobilisation, and direct engagement with policymakers to demand action on climate issues.

This literature review examines climate vulnerability in southeast Asia, the role of youth in climate leadership, the leadership characteristics of youth climate activist, the effectiveness of their campaigns, their interactions with policymakers and corporate stakeholders, and the challenges they face in sustaining their activism. Additionally, this section identifies key research gaps in the study of youth environmental leadership in the region.

Climate Vulnerability in Southeast Asia

With harsh weather, environmental degradation, and rising sea levels posing existential dangers, Southeast Asia is regarded as one of the most climate-vulnerable regions in the world. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2021) identifies countries such as the Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia as being at the forefront of climate-induced risks. Rising sea levels are flooding coastal areas, which are home to millions of people, leading to displacement and economic losses. Moreover, the region's dependence on agriculture exacerbates the impacts of droughts and erratic weather patterns.

Environmental degradation, including deforestation, loss of biodiversity, and pollution, is widespread in Southeast Asia. These issues worsen the region's vulnerability and significantly to climate change. The urgency of addressing these challenges has given rise to localized climate movements, many of which are led by young people who understand the intergenerational implications of environmental degradation (ADB, 2022). Youth activists are not only responding to the immediate threats posed by climate change but are also pushing for long-term institutional changes that put sustainability and equity first.

The Role of Youth in Climate Leadership

The emergence of youth leaders in the global climate movement is redefining the standards for advocacy and leadership. As Della Porta (2009) argues, social movements rely on the ability to mobilize resources and construct collective identities, both of which are evident in youth-led climate initiatives. With an emphasis on intersectionality and inclusivity, Youth activists bring a unique perspective to climate advocacy. The use of digital platforms has amplified the voices of young activists, enabling them to create networks of solidarity and reach a worldwide audience. For instance, the Fridays for Future movement, initiated by Greta Thunberg, has inspired parallel movements in Southeast Asia, where youth activists have localized their campaigns to address specific regional challenges (Fridays for Future, 2021). In advocating for systemic change, young leaders like Melati Wijsen in Indonesia and Mitzi Jonelle Tan in the Philippines have gained prominence.

Leadership Characteristics of Youth Climate Activists

Transformational and Collective Leadership

Leadership within youth-led climate activism is often transformational, characterised by:

- Inspirational vision – Young activists rally communities by emphasising intergenerational justice and climate urgency (Bengtsson et al., 2022).
- Empowerment of peers – Activists employ horizontal leadership structures, encouraging collective participation rather than top-down decision-making (O'Brien et al., 2018).
- Moral authority – As representatives of future generations, youth leaders wield strong moral legitimacy, making their activism highly persuasive (Pickard, Bowman & Arya, 2020).

Youth climate leaders also practice collective leadership, relying on collaborative decision-making and decentralised networks to sustain activism across different regions (Fisher, 2019).

Gap Identified:

Despite the international nature of the climate strikes, there is limited literature on the factors that influenced youth participation in these protests beyond the global North. Although, youth leadership has been extensively studied in Western contexts (e.g., Greta Thunberg's movement), there is limited research on how Southeast Asian youth apply leadership frameworks in their activism.

Effectiveness of Youth-Led Environmental Campaigns

Digital Activism and Social Media Mobilization

Youth climate activists in Southeast Asia have embraced **digital activism** as a powerful tool for mobilisation:

- Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok amplify youth voices, enabling global outreach (Velasquez & LaRose, 2015).

- Online petitions, viral campaigns, and digital protests help circumvent government restrictions on street demonstrations (Earl et al., 2022).

However, digital activism also has limitations, including:

- "Clicktivism" concerns where online engagement does not always translate into real-world action (Schumann, 2021).
- Censorship and government crackdowns, particularly in countries with restrictive policies on activism (Tang, 2016).

Direct Action and Grassroots Organizing

In addition to online activism, Southeast Asian youth engage in direct action, including climate strikes, protests, and community-led environmental initiatives (Moser & Boykoff, 2013). Successful case studies include:

- Fridays for Future Thailand, a youth-led movement inspired by Greta Thunberg, has pressured Thai policymakers to strengthen climate policies.
- The Philippine Youth Climate Strike advocates for fossil fuel divestment and stronger disaster preparedness measures.

Gap Identified:

Most research on climate activism effectiveness focuses on Western movements; studies on Southeast Asian youth-led environmental movements remain scarce.

Engagement with Policymakers and Corporate Stakeholders

Youth Influence on Environmental Policy

Young activists engage policymakers through:

- Lobbying and policy dialogues, where they present research and petitions to government officials (Barrett & Brunton-Smith, 2014).
- Participation in international forums such as COP Climate Conferences, where Southeast Asian youth advocate for more substantial climate commitments (Nugroho & Negara, 2021).

Despite these efforts, youth-led environmental advocacy faces barriers:

- Limited political inclusion – Many governments exclude young activists from formal policy discussions, treating them as symbolic rather than substantive participants (Corner et al., 2015).
- Bureaucratic resistance – Policymakers often prioritise economic growth over environmental sustainability, making implementing climate policies complex (Cordero et al., 2020).

Collaboration with Corporate Stakeholders

Some youth-led environmental movements partner with businesses to promote sustainable practices, such as:

- Pressuring corporations to divest from fossil fuels and invest in renewable energy (Newell, Pattberg & Schroeder, 2012).
- Collaborating with brands to promote sustainable consumer habits (Wright & Nyberg, 2017).

However, such engagements pose ethical dilemmas, as corporations often use greenwashing to improve their image while maintaining environmentally harmful practices (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015).

Gap Identified:

There is limited research on how Southeast Asian youth navigate corporate partnerships and policy negotiations, especially in the context of government restrictions on activism.

Challenges Faced by Youth Climate Leaders

Political and Legal Barriers

In many Southeast Asian countries, youth activists face legal risks for challenging environmental policies. Key challenges include:

- Government surveillance and repression – Activists are frequently targeted under anti-protest laws (Tang, 2016).
- Defamation lawsuits by corporations, particularly against activists who expose environmental violations (Gonzalez et al., 2021).

Economic and Social Constraints

Youth activists often struggle with the following:

- Limited funding for grassroots campaigns, as most resources are directed toward more prominent environmental NGOs (Velasquez & LaRose, 2015).
- Balancing activism with education and employment makes long-term engagement difficult (Pickard et al., 2020).

Psychological Burnout

Sustained activism can lead to climate anxiety, frustration, and emotional exhaustion (Hickman et al., 2021). Studies suggest that:

- Given the urgency of climate threats, young activists experience burnout at higher rates (Cordero et al., 2020).
- Peer support networks and mental health programs are essential for sustaining activism over time (Bengtsson et al., 2022).

Gap Identified:

There is limited empirical research on the psychological toll of climate activism on Southeast Asian youth, particularly regarding burnout, resilience strategies, and emotional well-being.

Identified Research Gaps

While youth-led climate activism has been widely studied in Western contexts, several critical research gaps remain regarding Southeast Asia:

1. Leadership Styles in Youth Activism

- How do Southeast Asian youth leaders differ from Western counterparts in terms of leadership structures and engagement strategies?

2. Effectiveness of Youth-Led Climate Campaigns

- What factors determine the success or failure of grassroots climate movements in Southeast Asia?

3. Policy and Corporate Engagement

- How do youth activists navigate policy-making processes and corporate partnerships while avoiding co-optation and greenwashing?

4. Sustainability of Activism

- What psychological and financial support mechanisms can help youth activists sustain long-term engagement?

This literature review highlights that youth-led climate activism in Southeast Asia is driven by transformational leadership, digital mobilisation, and grassroots organising. However, young activists face barriers to policy engagement, economic constraints, and psychological burnout.

Future research should:

- Explore Southeast Asian-specific leadership frameworks in youth climate activism.
- Examine how activists engage policymakers and corporations in restrictive political environments.
- Investigate long-term sustainability strategies for youth-led movements.

By addressing these gaps, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of youth environmental leadership in Southeast Asia, ensuring that their efforts remain impactful and sustainable.

Methodology

This study explores the leadership characteristics of youth climate activists in Southeast Asia, their influence on environmental policy and corporate sustainability, and the challenges they face in sustaining long-term activism. Given the complex nature of activism, political engagement, and environmental advocacy, a case study approach was adopted to comprehensively analyse youth leadership, campaign effectiveness, and engagement strategies.

This section outlines the research philosophy, approach and strategies that guide the study.

Research Philosophy

A pragmatist research philosophy is adopted to integrate quantitative and qualitative data, ensuring a holistic understanding of youth-led climate activism (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019).

- **Positivism:** Allows for the quantitative analysis of youth activism's impact, particularly regarding policy influence, campaign effectiveness, and digital reach.
- **Interpretivism:** Enables the study to capture subjective leadership experiences, activist motivations, and challenges through interviews and thematic analysis.

By applying pragmatism, this study ensures that numerical data and leadership narratives are examined, leading to a balanced analysis of youth-led environmental activism in Southeast Asia.

Research Strategy

1. Case Study Analysis:

- Selected youth-led climate movements in the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Thailand are analysed to identify patterns in leadership effectiveness, activism sustainability, and stakeholder engagement.

Data Collection Methods

Secondary data sources are utilised to capture the full scope of youth-led climate activism.

• Case Studies:

- Analysis of four youth-led environmental movements across Southeast Asia:
 - Fridays for Future Thailand
 - The Philippine Youth Climate Strike
 - Indonesia's Youth for Climate Action
 - Vietnam's Green Generation Movement

Secondary Data Collection

- Academic Literature: Peer-reviewed studies on youth leadership, climate activism, and political engagement.
- Government and NGO Reports: Policy documents detailing youth participation in environmental policy-making.
- Media Analysis: Articles, social media posts, and campaign materials from youth-led environmental movements.

Data Analysis Methods

Limitations of the Study

Despite employing a rigorous methodology, several limitations must be acknowledged:

1. **Self-Reporting Bias:** Participants may overestimate or underestimate the impact of activism.
2. **Cross-Sectional Design:** Data captures one point in time, limiting longitudinal insights.
3. **Political Sensitivities:** Government restrictions on activism data collection may affect responses.
4. **Sample Size Constraints:** Although efforts ensure diverse participation, a larger sample could enhance statistical power.

Future research should consider longitudinal studies and cross-regional comparisons to validate findings further.

This methodological framework ensures a rigorous examination of youth-led climate activism in Southeast Asia. The study captures both empirical validation and leadership narratives by integrating quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews, and case studies. The mixed-methods approach enhances the findings' reliability and contextual richness, contributing to a deeper understanding of youth environmental leadership in emerging economies.

Case Studies of Successful Youth-Led Movements in Southeast Asia

This section provides a thorough analysis of successful youth-led climate movements in Southeast Asia, highlighting the ways in which young people have taken up environmental activism and spearheaded effective campaigns in several countries across the world. Each case study centers on a distinct movement or initiative, emphasizing the strategies employed, the outcomes achieved, and the challenges encountered by young activists in their respective home countries. Known locally as Yolanda, Typhoon Haiyan ,

Philippines: Post-Typhoon Haiyan Youth Engagement

The Philippines, an archipelago in Southeast Asia, is one of the nations most at risk from climate-related disasters. which struck the country in November 2013, was one of the strongest tropical cyclones ever recorded. As a result of the typhoon's extensive destruction, especially in the Eastern Visayas region, millions of people were displaced and thousands of people died. In the aftermath of the disaster, youth activists in the Philippines emerged as key leaders in climate advocacy, pushing for better methods of climate adaptation and disaster response. A group of young people, including students, environmental activists, and disaster survivors, formed the Philippine Youth for Climate Justice (PYCJ). To advocate environmental sustainability and climate justice, the PYCJ worked closely with local communities, other youth groups.

The youth's main initiatives included:

- **Campaigns for Climate Justice:** Youth activists in the Philippines lobbied the government to acknowledge climate change as a human rights concern. They organized rallies, petitions, and dialogues with lawmakers, calling for more stringent climate policies and better disaster preparedness plans (Concepcion & Laigo, 2016).
- **Post-Typhoon Recovery:** After the typhoon, Youth organizations were crucial to the relief and recovery operations. They collaborated with humanitarian organizations to help provide temporary housing, reconstruct communities, and distribute aid. Their involvement ensured that youth voices were included in the reconstruction process (PYCJ, 2014).
- **International Advocacy:** Filipino youth activists also took their message to the global stage. They took part in global climate talks, including the 2014 United Nations Climate Summit,

where they demanded for greater financial support for disaster-affected communities and for immediate climate action. This advocacy culminated in their participation at the 2015 Paris Climate Conference (COP21), where youth leaders from the Philippines pushed for stronger international commitments to climate change mitigation and adaptation (Barker et al., 2018).

• **Outcomes** **and** **Impact:**

The Philippines Youth for Climate Justice played an instrumental role in raising awareness about the intersection of climate change and human rights.

- Their campaigns led to the adoption of policies aimed at improving disaster preparedness and climate resilience, especially in vulnerable coastal and rural areas (Barker et al., 2018).
- Youth participation in the policymaking process sparked a national conversation on the need for youth inclusion in climate governance.

Challenges:

- One major challenge faced by youth activists in the Philippines has been a lack of adequate government funding and resources to implement long-term climate adaptation plans (Concepcion & Laigo, 2016).
- Despite growing awareness, climate change remains a politicized issue, and efforts to push for more significant climate action is more often than not faced with resistance from sectors with vested economic interests, such as the fossil fuel industry.

Indonesia: Youth-led Environmental Advocacy

Indonesia, with its vast forests, extensive biodiversity, and reliance on agriculture, is particularly vulnerable to the environmental damage brought on by climate change. Deforestation, illicit logging, and the fast growth of palm oil plantations, which contribute significantly to greenhouse gas emissions, are among the nation's major problems. Young people in Indonesia have started organizations and initiatives to advocate for stronger environmental protections, sustainable agriculture, and a shift towards renewable energy sources in response to these environmental problems.

Organizations like Indonesian Youth Climate Action (IYCA) and Greeneration Indonesia have worked on raising awareness about climate change and its effects on local communities. Young people have been inspired by these movements to engage in campaigns against deforestation, promote sustainable practices, and push for government action on climate change.

Key activities led by youth groups include:

Campaigns Against Deforestation: Indonesian youth activists have launched several campaigns to stop illegal logging and deforestation, especially in vital ecosystems like the Borneo and Sumatra rainforests. They have used social media to expose the environmental and social impacts of deforestation and have successfully pressured companies to adopt more sustainable practices (IYCA, 2017).

Advocacy for Sustainable Agriculture: Youth organizations in Indonesia have also advocated for a shift to more sustainable agricultural practices. They emphasize the value of organic farming and agroecology in reducing environmental impacts and combat climate change. These efforts have involved educational programs for farmers and the dissemination of information on eco-friendly farming techniques (Greeneration Indonesia, 2016).

Renewable Energy Advocacy: Another area of emphasis has been advancement of renewable energy. Indonesian youth have been actively raising awareness about the potential for solar, wind, and

geothermal energy in the country. They have organized campaigns, participated in renewable energy projects, and lobbied the government to invest in clean energy infrastructure (IYCA, 2017).

Outcomes and **Impact:**
In Indonesia, youth-led campaigns have contributed to greater public awareness of the negative environmental effects of climate change and deforestation.

Through advocacy efforts, youth organizations have influenced companies in the palm oil and timber industries to adopt more sustainable practices (Greeneration Indonesia, 2016).

Youth activists in Indonesia have been instrumental in calling for more robust national policies on renewable energy and climate adaptation.

Challenges:

The ingrained political and economic dominance of sectors like palm oil, which frequently obstruct meaningful environmental reform, is one of the biggest obstacles facing Indonesian young activists.

Additionally, there are also limited financial resources available for movements in the grassroots levels, which limits the scale and impact of their campaigns.

Findings and Discussion (Expected Results):

Youth-led climate activism has gained momentum worldwide, with young leaders in Southeast Asia playing a pivotal role in advocating for stronger environmental policies, corporate accountability, and sustainable community initiatives. Given the region's high vulnerability to climate change, deforestation, and rising sea levels, youth activists have become key agents in shaping climate discourse and influencing governmental and corporate decisions (Bengtsson et al., 2022).

This section presents the expected findings and discussion based on theoretical analysis, prior research, and anticipated empirical results. The study aims to provide insights into youth climate activists' leadership characteristics, their campaigns' effectiveness, the challenges they face, and sustainable leadership models for long-term activism.

Expected Findings

Leadership Characteristics of Youth Climate Activists

Southeast Asian youth climate activists demonstrate adaptive leadership qualities that equips them to navigate the complexities of climate governance. Their approach is characterized by inclusivity, intersectionality, and community empowerment. Collaboration is a top priority for leaders, who often working with Indigenous communities and marginalized groups to amplify their voices. One of the primary findings is expected to highlight the unique leadership traits of youth climate activists in Southeast Asia, which set them apart from traditional environmental leaders.

Transformational and Collective Leadership

- Youth activists often exhibit transformational leadership styles, inspiring their peers and communities through moral authority, shared vision, and grassroots engagement (Pickard, Bowman & Arya, 2020).
- Leadership within youth movements is collective rather than hierarchical, with decisions made collaboratively rather than dictated by a single figurehead (O'Brien et al., 2018).

Digital-First Leadership

- Unlike traditional activism, youth-led climate movements heavily rely on social media platforms for advocacy, mobilisation, and education (Velasquez & LaRose, 2015).
- Leaders leverage Twitter, TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram to amplify their voices, counter misinformation, and organise online petitions (Schumann, 2021).

Discussion

Southeast Asian youth climate activists must demonstrate adaptive leadership, balancing grassroots engagement with digital activism. While transformational leadership inspires action, the study anticipates challenges in maintaining long-term engagement, especially in restrictive political environments.

Effectiveness of Youth-Led Climate Campaigns

The findings indicate that youth-led climate activism has made significant strides in influencing environmental discourse and policy. In Indonesia, student-led campaigns successfully pressured the government to declare a moratorium on deforestation in critical regions (Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 2019). The Youth activists employ a combination of digital advocacy, direct action, and grassroots mobilisation to push for policy change and corporate accountability through;

Digital Mobilisation and Online Activism

- Online activism amplifies youth voices, enabling global reach beyond national borders (Earl et al., 2022).
- Campaigns such as #SaveOurRainforests (Indonesia) and #StopCoal (Philippines) have gained traction, pressuring governments and corporations to implement environmentally sustainable policies (Han & Ahn, 2020).

Direct Action and Community Engagement

- Climate strikes, public demonstrations, and petitions have successfully mobilised youth in Thailand, Vietnam, and Indonesia, demanding climate justice (Moser & Boykoff, 2013).
- Community-led reforestation projects, waste management initiatives, and sustainable agriculture programs showcase the practical impact of youth activism (Gonzalez et al., 2021).

Discussion

The expected results suggest that while digital activism significantly increases awareness, on-the-ground movements are crucial for achieving tangible change. However, the effectiveness of youth-led campaigns may be hindered by government crackdowns on protests and limitations in policymaker engagement. While activists work tirelessly in raising awareness and mobilizing public support, the translation of these efforts into structural and sustainable change remains a challenge due to systemic barriers, such as institutional resistance and inadequate enforcement mechanisms.

Engagement with Policymakers and Corporate Stakeholders

A critical aspect of youth-led climate activism is its interaction with governmental institutions and private corporations. These interactions range from collaborative partnerships to confrontational campaigns. For example, youth movements in Thailand have partnered with NGOs to influence climate policy, while campaigns targeting fossil fuel divestment have gained traction in Vietnam. In spite of these efforts, the effectiveness of youth engagement is often limited by power imbalances.

Policy Influence and Advocacy

- Youth activists engage policymakers through:
 - Formal lobbying efforts (petitions, public hearings, and legislative proposals).
 - Participation in international climate summits such as COP Conferences (Nugroho & Negara, 2021).
- Despite these efforts, many Southeast Asian governments fail to integrate youth voices into formal policy-making, treating their participation as symbolic rather than substantive (Barrett & Brunton-Smith, 2014).

Corporate Accountability and Sustainability Engagement

- Some youth-led organisations partner with corporations to promote corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, particularly in sustainable energy and ethical supply chains (Newell, Pattberg & Schroeder, 2012).
- However, activists are wary of corporate greenwashing, where companies claim to be environmentally friendly but continue harmful practices (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015).

Discussion

While youth activism influences public discourse and corporate responsibility, institutional barriers limit their influence on direct policy implementation. The study anticipates that youth activists who engage with policymakers through structured lobbying may achieve a more significant long-term impact than those solely relying on public protests.

Challenges Faced by Youth Climate Leaders

Youth activists face numerous barriers to sustained activism despite their passion and effectiveness.

Political and Legal Barriers

- Authoritarian restrictions in some Southeast Asian countries limit public demonstrations, online activism, and freedom of speech (Tang, 2016).
- Activists often face intimidation, surveillance, and defamation lawsuits from corporations and government agencies (Gonzalez et al., 2021).

Financial and Resource Constraints

- Many youth movements lack stable funding as they are often excluded from international climate funding programs, favouring large NGOs (Velasquez & LaRose, 2015).
- Limited financial resources make it difficult for youth activists to scale their initiatives beyond local communities.

Emotional and Psychological Burnout

- Many youth activists experience climate anxiety, frustration, and burnout, especially when faced with slow governmental action and repeated setbacks (Hickman et al., 2021).
- Support structures such as mental health programs and leadership development workshops are needed to sustain long-term activism (Bengtsson et al., 2022).

Discussion

The findings indicate that youth climate leaders require stronger institutional support systems, including:

- Legal protections against activist repression.
- Access to funding for grassroots campaigns.
- Psychological support networks to prevent burnout.

Without these, youth-led climate activism in Southeast Asia risks losing momentum due to systemic barriers.

Developing a Sustainable Leadership Framework for Youth Climate Activism

Systemic solutions are necessary to address the challenges faced by youth activists. Based on these findings, a leadership framework for sustainable youth activism is expected to include:

- Hybrid Leadership Models: Combining digital-first leadership with on-the-ground engagement for long-term impact.
- Institutional Integration: Strengthening youth representation in policy-making through formal advisory councils and legislative partnerships.
- Capacity Building: Establishing mentorship programs, training workshops, and mental health support initiatives to sustain activism.

Discussion

The study anticipates that a structured leadership framework can help youth climate activists in Southeast Asia sustain long-term environmental advocacy rather than relying solely on spontaneous grassroots mobilisation.

Future Research Directions

1. Longitudinal studies on youth activism sustainability – How do young leaders maintain activism over multiple decades?
2. Cross-national comparisons – How do Southeast Asian youth activists differ from their Western counterparts?
3. Technology's role in future activism – How can AI, blockchain, and digital platforms enhance youth-led climate movements?

Future research can further refine youth leadership models for climate activism by addressing these gaps ensuring sustained impact in policy and corporate environmental responsibility.

Conclusion

Youth-led climate activism is playing a pivotal role in shaping environmental policies and corporate responsibility in Southeast Asia. Despite the numerous challenges faced, these movements have demonstrated resilience and effectiveness (Fisher, 2019). However, long-term sustainability requires institutional reforms, financial support mechanisms, and mental health resources for activists.

This study is expected to demonstrate that youth-led climate activism in Southeast Asia is a critical driver of environmental awareness and policy engagement. Key findings indicate that youth activists exhibit transformational and digital-first leadership, enabling large-scale mobilisation and community engagement. While youth-led climate campaigns effectively influence public discourse and corporate sustainability, they often face institutional resistance in policy engagement. Additionally, activists encounter significant challenges, including political repression, financial instability, and emotional burnout, which limit long-term engagement. To enhance the sustainability of youth movements, a structured leadership framework that integrates grassroots organising, digital advocacy, and institutional engagement is necessary. These findings align with prior research suggesting that youth activism requires institutional support and structural engagement to achieve lasting policy impact (Cordero et al., 2020). This research contributes to academic discourse by expanding leadership theory to include youth-led, decentralised activism models within climate governance studies, highlighting the role of digital-first leadership in mobilisation and policy influence, and challenging the Western-centric focus of climate activism literature by emphasising youth leadership in Southeast Asia's unique sociopolitical landscape. Practically, the study offers policy recommendations for governments to integrate youth leaders into climate decision-making bodies formally, urges businesses to ensure genuine sustainability efforts rather than tokenistic partnerships with youth movements, and emphasises the need for NGOs and advocacy groups to establish mental health support systems and funding mechanisms to sustain youth activism. Ultimately, this research provides a roadmap for ensuring that youth-led environmental leadership translates into sustained political and corporate climate action.

Future Research Directions

While this study provides valuable insights, further research is needed in the following areas:

1. Longitudinal studies on youth activism sustainability – Investigating how young leaders maintain long-term engagement despite institutional and psychological barriers.
2. Comparative studies – Examining youth-led climate movements in Southeast Asia versus other global regions to identify regional leadership trends.
3. Technological Innovations in Activism – Exploring how blockchain, AI, and data analytics can enhance climate advocacy and mobilisation strategies.
4. Corporate Greenwashing and Youth Activism – Analysing how youth activists counter deceptive sustainability practices in business sectors.

Future studies can further refine youth leadership frameworks by addressing these research gaps, ensuring sustainable climate action and advocacy.

Youth-led climate activism in Southeast Asia has transformed environmental advocacy, demonstrating how young leaders can drive systemic change through digital activism, grassroots mobilisation, and policy engagement. However, sustaining this momentum requires institutional support, financial resources, and psychological resilience.

This study underscores the importance of integrating youth voices into climate governance structures, ensuring that young leaders are heard and empowered to shape environmental policies and corporate sustainability practices. By developing strategic leadership frameworks, this research ensures that youth-led climate movements remain a lasting force in the fight against climate change.

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