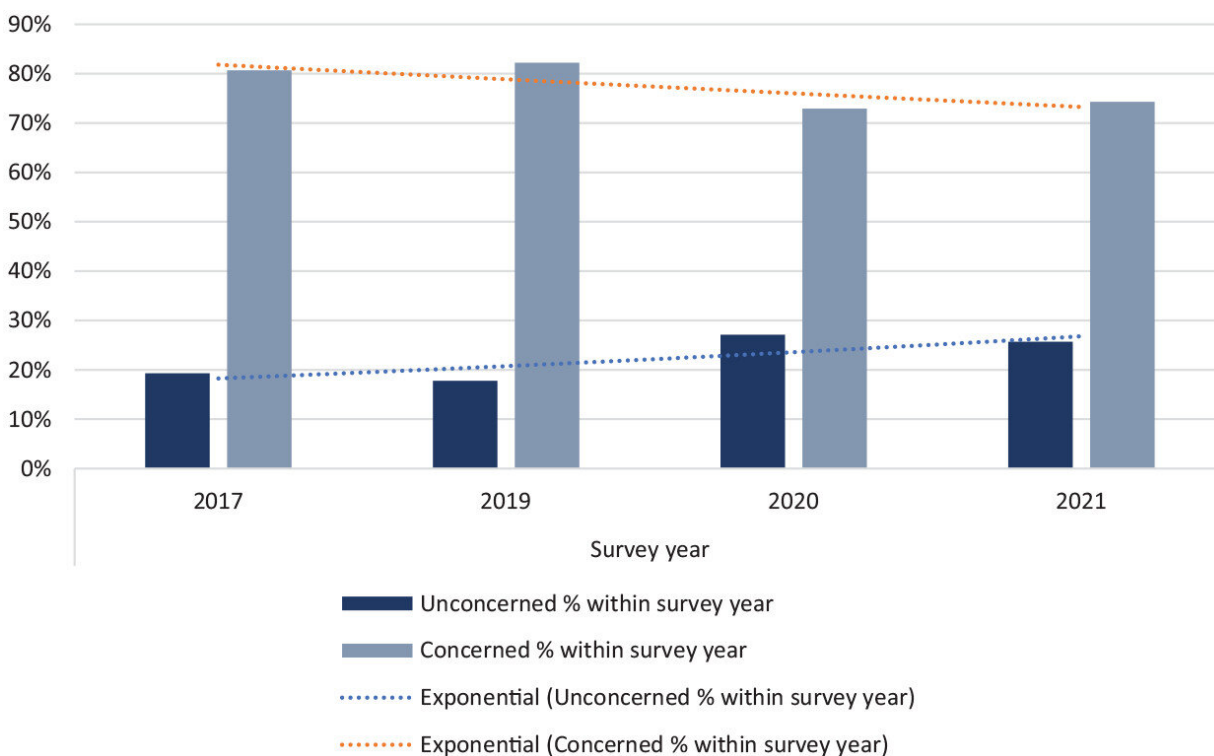


Greta Thunberg effect evident among Norwegian youth

December 9 2022



Dichotomous climate attitude (%). Credit: *Sociology* (2022). DOI: 10.1177/00380385221122416

Since 2017, nearly 3,000 young Norwegians aged 17 to 20 have shared in their own words what they consider important in Norwegian society, and whom they regard as good role models.

The [survey](#) showed a clear shift in Norwegian youth in autumn 2019, when Greta Thunberg received extensive media attention, and the "Fridays for future" movement spread with school strikes in several countries.

"What we see is that Greta Thunberg has been very important in uniting [young people](#) who were already concerned about the climate," says researcher Jan Frode Haugseth, from the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU). "She also helped to make more young people climate aware, especially in 2019."

Study of young people's engagement

Haugseth is an associate professor in pedagogy in NTNU's Department of Teacher Education. He heads the research program that investigates commitment and values among young people in Norway.

Haugseth and his colleague Eli Smepllass are behind the article "The Greta Thunberg Effect: A Study of Norwegian Youth's Reflexivity on Climate Change."

"Everyone has the opportunity to do what they want, just like everyone can choose to study or do whatever work they want. The most important challenge in society for me is the [climate debate](#), which I believe we really need to tackle." (Female, age 19, 2017 survey)

"When we started these surveys in 2017, we had no particular ambition to look at climate awareness. We wanted to know what young people think about our times and what inspires them," says Haugseth.

"When we observed how the responses changed in autumn 2019, and that young people themselves were mentioning Greta Thunberg and the importance of taking addressing climate and nature issues, we thought

this would be an interesting object of study," he said.

Let young people speak freely

One problem with regular surveys is that it is difficult to gauge how engaged the respondents really are. The match between what young people claim is important and how they actually behave is ambiguous.

In fact, some research suggests that even if young people answer that the climate threat is serious in surveys, they still live lives with high consumption and relatively high emissions.

"I'm really inspired by Greta Thunberg now. She is enormously resourceful, and I greatly admire her efforts. She is brave and uses her voice to fight for something she believes in. And she's humble at the same time. The focus shouldn't be on her." (Male, age 20, 2019 survey).

In other words, young people have climate awareness on a theoretical and overall level. But they seem to lack what the researchers call climate change reflexivity when it comes to their personal actions.

"We wanted a method to be able to measure young people's awareness of these issues. We found that we had the opportunity to study what young people tell us about the climate threat by simply asking them to speak freely, rather than posing questions. This ensures deeper reflection than survey questions, which are often answered quickly and without reflecting much," Haugseth said.

Before and after 2019

The surveys sent out by the researchers contained open text fields for respondents to express what they thought was important in society and to

define their role models in their own words.

"We found that in 2019 a lot more young people wrote that the climate threat was important, and they were concerned with the transition to a sustainable economy, restructuring and climate solidarity," said Haugseth.

"The answers from 2017 were less detailed. Youth were becoming concerned that other ways of managing society had to be found. We could see that after 2019 they argued in a more holistic way," says Haugseth.

This tendency applied to young people across geographical and social affiliations.

"We have to start thinking about the Earth and not just ourselves, and we have to start doing things that benefit the Earth—and not just making sure that we have the best possible time and prioritize economic stability so highly when we're facing such a big crisis." (Female, age 18, 2019 survey)

"Research often shows that social belonging, like the parents' level of education and occupation, affects what young people are interested in. But here we see that Greta Thunberg managed to mobilize young people in a broader sense."

"We also found that climate-conscious young people in 2019-2020-2021 expressed themselves as 'we' to a greater extent than in 2017. They come from [different places](#) and don't know each other, but have nevertheless developed a kind of community. They've become aware of each other, that there are more people than themselves who are concerned about the climate, and that more versatile solutions are needed than what the adult generation has come up with," says Smeplass.

Youth mention Thunberg—not climate reports

The researchers do not rule out that the media's increased attention to climate issues could also have influenced young people's consciousness around the topic—without Thunberg's influence.

"But Thunberg reached the young people to a much greater extent than the UN climate panel managed to do. None of the young people mention the climate reports in their answers," says Smeplass.

Young people are engaged with their peers. They're looking to their age cohorts, not upwards to what their parents are involved with.

"Norway should take advantage of the fact that the country is already in a transition period to switch to green and climate-friendly alternatives."
(Female, age 19, 2020 survey)

"Greta Thunberg represents the young generation. She managed to challenge world leaders and the elite and set the agenda. She is quite simply a young person who managed to back the elite against the wall, and a number of young people write that they admire her for this," Smeplass said.

In the pandemic years 2020 and 2021, fewer young people mentioned Thunberg and climate commitment than in 2019. Could COVID have caused young people to become less concerned about climate issues again?

"The best thing about Norway is our beautiful nature that we can all experience freely. We have to solve [global warming](#) so that young people can all have a future." (Male, age 19, 2020 survey)

"We believe we now have evidence to say that we can demonstrate a

deeper form of reflection, with a more clearly pronounced 'we' and a 'deeper' climate reflexivity, one year into the pandemic (spring 2021). At the same time, fewer survey respondents are reporting that they think the climate threat is as serious," says Haugseth.

"It's difficult for researchers to predict the future. The broad Greta Thunberg effect that we described in 2019 has been less visible during the pandemic. But the relevancy of her message for young people is a sign that their climate engagement hasn't disappeared," Smeplass said.

Down-to-earth argumentation

The researchers believe that young people connect their climate commitment to issues like environmental protection, education, restructuring and solidarity.

"This is a down-to-earth argument that is adapted to the sustainability focus in modern business development, and that we think will become important in the years to come. And a lot of young people still report that they take the climate threat seriously, even if they don't necessarily talk much about it. This is also a corrective to the notion that the most effective climate resistance is being organized by climate activists who stop traffic and sabotage art," says Haugseth.

"... in the future, Norway needs to find a new way to make good money other than oil—it's going to run out faster than we think." (Male, age 19, 2021 survey)

The fact that Greta Thunberg is not participating in this year's COP27 climate conference COP27 in Sharm El-Sheikh does not necessarily mean that she will have any less influence on young people's climate commitment.

"What we're interested in is how young people argue for the importance of their climate commitment. Because that tells us something about what they're really demanding and expecting from the future. In other words, climate summits aren't necessarily the most effective hotbeds for youth [climate](#) engagement going forward," says Smeplass.

More information: Jan Frode Haugseth et al, The Greta Thunberg Effect: A Study of Norwegian Youth's Reflexivity on Climate Change, *Sociology* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/00380385221122416](https://doi.org/10.1177/00380385221122416)

Provided by Norwegian University of Science and Technology

Citation: Greta Thunberg effect evident among Norwegian youth (2022, December 9) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-12-greta-thunberg-effect-evident-norwegian.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.
