



Article

COVID-ized Ethnography: Challenges and Opportunities for Young Environmental Activists and Researchers

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Abstract: This article offers a critical and reflective examination of the impact of the enforced 2020/21 COVID-19 lockdown on ethnographic fieldwork conducted with UK-based young environmental activists. A matrix of researcher and activist challenges and opportunities has been co-created with young environmental activists using an emergent research design, incorporating a phased and intensive iterative process using online ethnography and online qualitative interviews. The article focuses on reflections emerging from the process of co-designing and then use of this matrix in practice. It offers an evidence base which others researching hard-to-reach youth populations may themselves deploy when negotiating face-to-face fieldwork approval at their own academic institutions. The pandemic and its associated control regimes, such as lockdown and social distancing measures, will have lasting effects for both activism and researchers. The methodological reflections we offer in this article have the potential to contribute to the learning of social science researchers with respect to how best to respond when carrying out online fieldwork in such contexts—particularly, but not only, with young activists.

Keywords: ethnography; environmental; online; activism; young people; COVID-19; lockdown; climate; strikes; methods



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1. Introduction

The recent COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on youth-focused research, particularly the study of youth environmental activism. The UK went into a lockdown on 23 March 2020 at which point all mass gatherings in the UK were made illegal as part of the Coronavirus Act 2020. This resulted in a fundamental shift to the way in which environmental activism could take place in public spaces. Ten days prior to the lockdown, youth led climate strikes across the UK, part of the global Fridays For Future (#FridaysForFuture) day of strikes, were cancelled. To contextualise the enormity of this obstruction to action for the youth environmental movement, only a year earlier in March 2019, 1.5 million young people were estimated to have attended climate strikes across 106 countries [1]. Wahlström [2] and colleagues go as far as to say that ‘no youth movement has had such a global reception before’ (p. 6). The COVID-19 lockdown therefore presented considerable—indeed fundamental—challenges to the youth environmental activist community as well as to those who research it.

This article offers a critical and reflective examination of the impact of the enforced 2020/21 COVID-19 lockdown on ethnographic fieldwork with young environmental activists in the UK. The intention is that these methodological reflections can add to the learning that social science researchers are gaining with respect to how best to respond when conducting fieldwork, particularly with young activists during this uncertain period. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a ‘public health emergency of international concern’ [3], and many universities have placed a moratorium on all face-to-face fieldwork. Where fieldwork is permitted, this has largely shifted online. Ethnography is a method that, by its very nature, embraces uncertainty, in that it is typically exploratory, seeking to uncover new

insights about relatively under-researched groups and processes. The shift to online data collection methods of hard-to-reach populations, such as young environmental activists, exacerbated this complexity and presented significant researcher challenges.

As a response to the new COVID-19 research landscape, this article advocates for greater methodological innovation during the pandemic (and its associated control regimes, such as lockdown and social distancing measures) that will have lasting effects for both activism and researchers. A matrix of research challenges and opportunities has been co-created with a group of young activists that draws on the researchers' observations of youth climate strikes and planning meetings, fieldnotes from relationship-building and networking activities with young activists as well as intensive ethnographic interviews with three young environmental activists. Several key themes emerged during this process, reflecting the challenges and opportunities for research and activism during the COVID-19 pandemic. These include the importance of building relationships and networks with young activists as well as researcher ethics and activist visibility in online spaces.

The matrix was designed both for youth activists and for those working in the wider youth research field when engaging in similar research under COVID-19-related circumstances. This is particularly the case with online research methodologies that are required where face-to-face fieldwork is not viable. It is intended that together, these insights and the matrix of research challenges and opportunities offer a valuable and original contribution to social science researchers and will promote innovation and co-creation when research can only take place online. In addition, the reflections emerging from the researcher matrix offer an evidence base that others researching hard-to-reach youth populations may use themselves when negotiating face-to-face fieldwork approval with their own academic institutions.

2. Young People's Environmental Politics and Methodologies of Co-Production

Young people have often been considered a generation apart when it comes to their engagement with politics [4], and they are often characterised as apolitical or even as politically apathetic, especially when compared to older adults [5,6]. However, for many contemporary academic observers, such a view is misplaced. Although studies have found that many young people experience electorally focused and elite-led politics to be unappealing and somewhat irrelevant [7], there is evidence that such disaffection is neither inevitable nor permanent [8]. Indeed, there is burgeoning evidence of a global tendency towards young people's support for, and participation in, new styles of non-institutionalised political action that seem to better fit their lifestyles and which permit the actualisation of their political aspirations [9]. Thus, we increasingly see young people taking a leading role in political campaigns and movements that centre on everyday issues and which are often spontaneous and intense—such as Black Lives Matter in 2014 and again in 2020, #MeToo in 2017 and also the 2018 #NeverAgain campaign against the US gun lobby [10].

Furthermore, environmental politics is witnessing a resurgence of popularity across the Global North and South, exemplified by youth-led activist groups, such as #FridaysForFuture (Youth Strike 4 Climate) and Extinction Rebellion Youth (hereafter, XR Youth) [2]. Whilst some countries are declaring a climate emergency, young people in other countries have taken their governments to court over climate change [11]. Climate change is part of a much wider environmental crisis held in the spotlight by scientists and activists, and whilst this heightened concern has recently been magnified by media coverage of XR and the #FridaysForFuture activist groups, such anxieties have been growing since 2015 [12].

However, how best to understand the experiences, interpretations and motivations of such young environmental activists is open to debate. A recent and extensive study of 1905 young climate strikers across 9 countries and 13 cities was conducted by Wahlström and colleagues during the March 2019 global youth climate strikes [2]. The findings, although offering a major contribution to the field, also come with limitations that Bowman [13] addresses in his analysis of the work. Key to such limitations is the lack of space given to

understandings of young environmental activists' imaginaries, both of the current concerns they have and importantly the futures they wish to see. In her research on the uneven lines of solidarity in youth climate strikes, Walker [14] notes that while contributions of a minority of participants in the youth climate strikes are significant, those involved in less 'high-profile activities' are often omitted in this kind of research. Engaging with such groups is key to understanding the 'generationally positioned' concerns of young people whose lives will invariably be impacted by the environmental crisis (p. 13).

Children and young people will endure the greatest number of consequences resulting from the environmental crisis and so will have a greater drive to act [15]. This has been complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In recent Beat Freaks [16] research, 65% of young people were worried about the impact of COVID-19 on their mental health, with a majority more worried than usual. A key theme that emerged was their fears for the future as a direct result of the pandemic. Taken together, these observations suggest that it is critically important for ethnographic researchers to understand young activists' experiences of the 2020/21 COVID-19 pandemic control regimes if they are to gain deep and valid insights into what lies behind their attraction to, and participation in, (different forms of) environmental politics.

Co-Production in the Research Process

To further understand these experiences, a matrix of challenges and opportunities to youth activists and researchers was co-produced with young environmental activists who all took part in Youth Strike For Climate. Bell and Pahl [17] claim that co-production can be seen as a utopian method, with 'an important role to play in rethinking and remaking the world for the better' (p. 105). While co-production as a method has been drawn from and grown out of a policy context, it has developed over time to ensure that collaboration is at the core of knowledge production [18,19]. Co-production is inherited from the field of participatory methods, with the aim of collective knowledge production from community spaces [20]. This aim has pushed the boundaries of dominant power relations that exist between the researcher and the researched. Bell and Pahl [17] argue that this is challenging work that requires a great deal of researcher reflexivity.

In addressing this challenge for this article, we argue that co-production and the participation of young people in this research exists on a spectrum. Key to understanding this is Roger Hart's [21] ladder of young people's participation. The co-creation of the matrix in this research is reflected in the sixth rung of the ladder of participation. This means that whilst this was an adult initiated research project, the young people involved were not merely consulted or informed about the matrix, but instead actively participated in the process of its creation. They also shared in the decisions that were made in terms of how it was developed.

Co-production, however, does not guarantee a non-hierarchical relationship with participants. An awareness by researchers of the power dynamics that exist with participants is key to recognising and working towards destabilising and rebalancing power [17]. Kara [22] writes about co-production in activist research and points out that traditionally research has been ruled by researchers. The aim of coproduction is to democratise such practices by incorporating the views and experiences of participants in knowledge creation [19].

Co-production allows for further conceptualisation of youth participation in research practices that serve to empower. Whilst there are many benefits that can be outlined through using methods of co-production in research with young people, there are also constraints. Furthermore, researchers who utilise co-production methods recognise that the legitimate expertise of young people is integral to knowledge creation. For instance, Tisdall [18] argues that when co-production takes this into account, it ensures that it has the 'potential for transformative change, which lies with its creation or improvement of participation spaces with children, young people and (adult) decision makers' (p. 70). In their exploration of the different conceptualisations of co-production, Flinders and Wood [23] argue that this is

political and serves as a form of resistance. These understandings of co-production were employed when developing the matrix of opportunities and challenges in the research for this article.

3. Research Context

Ethnography has been key to the co-production of this matrix. This article recounts researcher experiences of ethnographic fieldwork with UK-based young environmental activists during the early months of the 2020/21 COVID-19 pandemic. This fieldwork is part of a multimethod qualitative project. Phase 1 involved ethnography and Phase 2 involved semi-structured interviews.

The research utilises the three categories of political participation defined by Ekman and Amná [24]. This sees young people as participating in (i) alternative actions and spaces, such as protests and activist groups; (ii) electoral actions and spaces, such as voting and being a member of a youth council; and (iii) standby actions and spaces, such as active non-participation, including refusing to vote (pre-political action) and volunteering. Ethnography was initially selected as the optimal method through which to explore how young people participated in alternative forms of environmental politics. However, this research decision was presented with unprecedented challenges because of the 2020/21 COVID-19 pandemic [25], and it is on this issue that the remainder of this article will now focus.

4. Methodologies in Ethnography with Young Environmental Activists

Youth environmental activism is in a state of flux, and whilst research in this field is growing, there is limited qualitative—and in particular ethnographic—research available from which to glean understandings [26]. Ethnography can serve to create a space in which young people have particular control over the stories they impart about their participation. Whilst there is considerable encouragement for researchers to utilise ethnography to learn about activist communities, it is recognised that this method, like any other, comes with its own distinct set of challenges at the best of times. For instance, Alberro [27] reflects on the considerable difficulties that she encountered in her research, including access to activist groups as well as restrictions to the methodological choices that are most suitable for exploring these social phenomena.

As Onís and Pezzullo [28] state, ‘with pressing and colliding ecological, economic and social crises facing the world today, ethnography must remain a vital approach for those studying the frontline of environmental justice’ (p. 238). Nonetheless, literature exploring the challenges to ethnographic fieldwork during a global public health pandemic is in its infancy. How this pandemic will affect the nature of research with young environmental activists engaged in action towards transformative change is uncertain. Therefore, collaboration and exploration are required, particularly amongst communities of ethnographers. This article seeks to contribute to early understandings of this shifting landscape, taking the position that ethnography is key to understanding this social phenomenon.

A central tenet of activist ethnography is that knowledge creation is centred on the organising goals of activism and social movements [29]. Following an activist-researcher perspective, this research takes the position that participant observation is not possible in activist ethnography. Rather than *participant* observations, *activist* observations were carried out, involving active researcher participation in the planning and creation of the group. Through this method, it became possible to gain an in-depth understanding of the developments and drivers of young activists’ actions. This approach is adopted from the work of other activist scholars, such as Aguirre et al. [30] who deployed activist ethnography with young people in Spain.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, some research methods have been more impacted than others. Whilst online survey-based approaches have remained relatively unaffected, ethnography has been dramatically changed. Fine and Abramson [25] highlight the complexities of ethnography during the pandemic, but also claim that once

face-to-face fieldwork becomes possible post-COVID-19, participants and researchers will need to carefully navigate potential health risks when engaging with one another. Just as environmental activism has itself become constrained by the control regimes of the pandemic (such as lockdown and social distancing), so too have the ethnographic tools to study this particular field, which is now limited to either telephonic or virtual spaces [31].

A particular strength of ethnography is that it allows for a deep dive into the complexities of people's lives; without access to these worlds of experience, qualitative research—especially with marginalised groups—has become more challenging [32]. This is important because existing studies demonstrate the potential value of ethnography for the study of youth civic and political engagement. For instance, the MYPLACE (Memory, Youth, Political Legacy and Civic Engagement) project has helped expand understandings of civic engagement for young people across Europe. MYPLACE included large scale multi-country ethnographic fieldwork with youth activist groups [33], demonstrating the importance of this methodological approach to developing insights in this field.

It is important to reflect here that not all activism exists on the streets and not all ethnography necessitates in-person relationship-building. There has been a wealth of research into digital ethnography over the decades [34–36]. A useful conceptualisation of digital ethnography is offered by Murthy [37], who states that digital ethnography focuses on methods of gathering data that are 'mediated by computer mediated communication' (p. 159). This form of ethnography recognises that technology and digital media are imbedded in social life. Whilst digital ethnography has been evolving with the digital age, the central principles are the same as for ethnography in general—with a focus on the story that is being told by those being observed. Moreover, digital ethnography enables researchers to explore digital communities with a freedom that allows them to develop innovative ways to engage with, and learn from, their participants.

Furthermore, digital activism has evolved as an integral part of youth and non-youth activism in recent decades [38]. Whilst there are critiques of digital ethnography which characterise it as less valuable than face-to-face contexts, there is much that has been advanced by online ethnographic researchers over recent decades [39]. However, as has been demonstrated by the 2020/21 COVID-19 pandemic restrictions in the UK, young people and society at large have at times also rejected 'stay at home' measures and taken to the streets to exercise their collective political voice. This was first evident during the wave of global Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020 and also by the 2021 #KillTheBill protests against the Police and Crime Bill [40]. How far online spaces serve as a platform for political participation and how digital ethnography can respond to and reflect on these actions is brought into question through the bursts of such in-person demonstrations and acts of civil disobedience.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic has driven much of youth civic participation into the digital realm, it is also the case that young people have been using digital spaces to engage in activism since before the pandemic [41]. For instance, Pickard [42] reflects on young people's political participation and argues that their 'Do-It-Ourselves' politics involve vast repertoires of actions facilitated by the digital world. Whilst there are those who have criticised digital activism as no more than 'clicktivism' [43] or 'slacktivism' [44], there is recognition by a growing number of youth scholars that such repertoires of political participation are part of an expanding tool kit of young digital activists in exercising their political voices [42].

Despite this reality, what the COVID-19 pandemic has created is a situation where young people have been forced to act from behind a screen. Whilst some have taken to the streets in protest, not all have had the same access, ability or will to do so. The pandemic has exacerbated the pre-existing inequalities that play out in how young people politically participate, and little is known about how this emerging phenomenon is unfolding. In these challenging times, as young people continue to develop innovative ways to exercise their political voice, how researchers and in particular ethnographers learn from and adapt to these evolutions are crucial. Fine and Abramson [25] eloquently state that, 'it is too early to

suggest where such alternative and hybrid methodologies might lead, but creativity often bursts through on dark days' (p. 8).

4.1. Research Design and Methods—Phase 1

The project that informs this article was at a relatively early stage when the COVID-19 lockdown triggered a moratorium on academic face-to-face fieldwork by universities across the UK. Consequently, fieldwork could only be conducted online. An immediate restructuring of approach was therefore necessary to continue the research.

Prior to the lockdown, the research involved attending planning meetings, events and protests with a youth climate strike group in a medium sized city in the UK. The group was made up of young people who were typically aged 16 and older, together with a number of adult allies. Arrangements were also in train to attend planning meetings of other youth strike groups in different parts of the country as well as protests. These research plans and activities were critically disrupted once the COVID-19 lockdown began. In the months that followed, activist observations at planning meetings continued using online video conference platforms as environmental activism switched to online strikes, such as #ClimateStrikeOnline. Some of the research participants would strike from online lessons and post pictures of themselves and their placards on social media. Instead of meeting young people at protests and youth-led climate events, these took place on webinars, on Zoom and in public discussions, such as the XR Youth online educational series and the 2020 Transform the World youth climate summit.

During these months, a matrix of researcher and activist challenges and opportunities was co-created with the young people involved in the ethnographic fieldwork. The purpose of Phase 1 of this co-creation was to engage in dialogue with young environmental activists involved in the ethnographic research. This was achieved through activist observations rather than participant observations. Whilst some young activists continued attending school through online classes, others were furloughed from their jobs or lost their zero-hour contract employment. Consequently, opportunities surfaced to engage in complex conversations of shared experiences of the pandemic and its associated control regimes. Detailed fieldnotes were taken of the various activities, discussions and experiences with the group, and from these were developed a matrix of challenges and opportunities facing youth environmental activist groups during this time.

Table 1 includes this matrix, which was co-created with a youth climate strike chapter that was part of the UK Student Climate Network. This matrix draws upon reflections from activist observations of planning meetings, online relationship-building activities and co-produced educational workshops during the first UK COVID-19 lockdown, March and July 2020. The core group who contributed to the development of the matrix included 10 young environmental activists.

4.2. Research Design and Methods—Phase 2

The purpose of Phase 2 of co-creation was to acquire critical feedback on the matrix from additional young environmental activists using ethnographic interviews. The process involved three young activists with whom strong pre-established research relationships were already in place prior to start of the COVID-19 pandemic. They were each selected from different environmental groups, all aged between 16 and 25, and all living in different medium sized cities across the UK and from different positions of socioeconomic advantage, gender and life stage (one being at school; another not in any education, employment or training; and another in full time employment). Furthermore, each had been involved in environmental activism for at least 1 year. As the matrix had been built in conjunction with one pre-selected youth strike group (of 10 activists) in Phase 1, one young person from this group was selected for detailed scrutiny of the matrix. This was to ensure that there was continuity between the researchers' interpretations and the experience of a young activist from the same group. Two other youth environmentalists were selected from different groups, one from a Youth Strike 4 Climate chapter based in a different

geographical area and the other a young activist from XR Youth. The purpose of this was to ensure that it was relatable to young activists both within and outside of the group selected for ethnographic fieldwork.

Table 1. Matrix of challenges and opportunities for researchers and young environmental activists during the COVID-19 pandemic and related regimes of control.

Challenges	Opportunities
<i>Researcher</i>	
Building relationships with new networks of young activists	Able to engage more deeply with participants where there is a pre-existing relationship
Rapport with new participants	Activists and researchers spending more time at home and online which can be spent involved in shared activities
Participant observations in online meetings and events	Wide range of online platforms to engage with participants
Access to direct activism (both offline and online)	Activities with participants can be more accessible online to researchers who have financial limitations
Spontaneity in network building, i.e., protests	Building trust through shared lived experience of the COVID-19 pandemic
Ethics of consent online	
Surveillance online and cyber security	
Researcher mental health	
<i>Young Environmental Activists</i>	
Difficult to engage in direct action	More network building opportunities with new activist groups online
Struggling to be 'seen or heard' online	More time to engage in online actions
Access to physical sites of political action, i.e., protests	More time to build relationships with existing activist networks
Impact of actions is minimised online	Validation of importance of climate change through its link with COVID-19
Surveillance and online security	Young activists from rural areas feel more involved with networks online
Young activists' mental health	

These activists-as-research-participants were each sent the draft matrix and invited to reflect on this prior to joining a telephone meeting to discuss their observations. The discussions were unstructured, designed to explore their reactions concerning the value of the matrix in terms of possible omissions and whether it represented their experience of the impact of COVID-19 on their activism. This was to ensure that interviews would remain as natural as possible and to sense check for shared understandings.

The interviews confirmed that all elements of the matrix had been accurately represented (see Table 1). Whilst researchers posit that there are multiple ways of ensuring saturation in qualitative research [45], for this article, it was decided that saturation (and therefore the sample size) would be achieved once Phase 2 confirmed that the research aim and research parameters had each been met. In this case, the research was specific to the design of the matrix; the 'opportunities' and 'challenges' dimensions of the matrix emerged organically through Phases 1 and 2. Therefore, no further data collection was required for the purposes of satisfying the core research aim to co-develop the matrix [46].

5. Findings

In the unprecedented times of the 2020/21 COVID-19 pandemic, young environmental activism has necessarily undergone a process of relative transformation and has materialised online as a response to social distancing and lockdown measures. However, online activism is not a natural or preferred domain when compared to direct action in the physical world. Similarly, the matrix set out in Table 1—the content of which is not novel in scholarship around online methodologies—is not designed as a rubric for researchers to apply when embarking on online research under normal circumstances. Instead, through exploring the limitations imposed by the pandemic on research and

activism and a recognition of the symbiotic nature of the challenges and opportunities presented, it is intended that those new innovative methodologies can be engaged with in academic discourse. The following discussion considers in detail some of the key themes that have emerged from the process of designing the matrix for this particular research project. It gives focus both to relationship-building with young activists and to the ethics of online research. It then explores the themes of visibility, online spaces as a site of activism and the link between the pandemic and environmental concern that emerged as challenges and opportunities to the activists-as-research-participants.

5.1. The Researcher Perspective—Relationshipbuilding with Young Activists

Participant observations are one of the core pillars of ethnographic research, which can result in researchers embodying a variety of roles. Onís and Pezzullo [28] outline some of these roles as ‘performer, fellow worker, note taker, consumer, protester [and] community member’ (p. 231). In the short time that ethnographic field work was carried out as part of this research project, a number of these roles were embodied, including that of community member. This role necessitated a continual process of reflection of self-positionality in the research process, the relationship with research participants and the spaces that were engaged in. Although age was not an attribute shared with the young environmental activists, there were other commonalities that provided a distinct position from which to engage with them—including long-term experiences of environmental activism [47]. Furthermore, the climate strike group had a number of adult allies with whom networks had previously been constructed. Taken together, these factors presented opportunities for both insider and outsider roles that were of particular benefit when engaging with the young climate activists.

In addition, there were some unexpected opportunities to engage in greater depth and frequency with young activists with whom networking had been established prior to the lockdown. This developed through deepening feelings of trust and reciprocity, especially in terms of mutual support for well-being. Acquiring reliable and in-depth data requires relationships that go beyond the researcher and the researched. Young people’s engagement, either in consultation, co-production or research can often result in participants feeling like they are nothing more than data points and that their contributions are relatively tokenistic [48]. Investing the labour required to create relationships with participants embedded in mutual aid and cooperation (built across horizontal lines of power), allowed for enhanced and authentic understandings from the research. Joint researcher-participant activities were undertaken that were far removed from activism. These included sharing articles and reading materials, participating in reading groups, holding video calls to share personal experiences, helping with job applications and personal statements, supporting with schoolwork, attending virtual pub quizzes or simply checking in by text messaging.

Such interactions resulted in some degree of emotional exposure to the research participants—including some level of openness to cooperation in dealing with shared anxieties and feelings of isolation, loneliness, frustration and generalised uncertainty as a consequence of the pandemic. On those occasions where participants offered such support, it was important to reflect on the conflict and tensions between how much to share and how honest to be with them. The boundaries of friendship between ethnographers and their participants are not always clear; in acknowledging that researchers embody multiple roles with their participants, so too do their participants take on different roles in relation to researchers [49].

5.2. The Researcher Perspective—Negotiating Ethics Online

Engaging with potential participants via their social media comes with profound ethical considerations. Age, consent, public profiles, data protection and online safety of young people are each a factor needing to be taken into account. Even where such access issues are resolved, there remains an additional and important consideration with respect to young activists feeling safe online. Checker [50] emphasises the importance of trust and

reciprocity as being key to building relationships in activist ethnography. However, during lockdown, there have been considerable difficulties in attempting to build relationships with new networks of young activists online and this has presented obstacles to growing the participant base for the project.

An additional challenge is that activist groups are usually anti-establishment by nature and are often wary of outsiders [51]. It is therefore to be expected that, given the nature of their campaigning, many young environmental activists will display a degree of distrust of those who they consider to be in positions of authority, including researchers working in academic institutions. This raised a considerable tension for the project in terms of the power dynamics with the young activists and with how their consent should be negotiated. Activist observation of the planning meetings and the ethnographic interviews with the youth strike group were agreed to on the basis of complete anonymity of the group and all members. The requirement to gain signed consent (names and signatures) for the research therefore created a significant hurdle in developing the project. Ethics is an iterative process that must be re-evaluated throughout the research journey. On the relationship between ethics and consent in ethnography, O'Connell Davidson [52] discusses the issue of building relationships with participants and the unanticipated issues that may not be apparent at the start of a research project and which signed consent may not always cover. External issues around consent were much more difficult to navigate for the project once face-to-face meetings with participants were no longer possible. For example, attending group webinars with young people who took part in XR educational events presented deep and potentially valuable insights with respect to how young people are participating in environmental politics. However, consent was not possible to negotiate in the time-limited and structured sessions, and consequently, the data generated from observations of the discussions were not usable for the research project.

5.3. Young Activists' Perspectives—Visibility

Over the period of lockdown, some young activists raised issues concerning the restrictions on large public gatherings and the potential impact on direct activism. Key to those concerns were the lack of means through which to feel seen or heard. Previously, momentum had been building both in XR Youth and the UK Climate Strike Network. National and international protests and weeks of actions were about to take place, all of which were cancelled. Consequently, the move to online campaigning left some young activists feeling that their visibility had been dramatically reduced. However, in some respects, the shift to online platforms served as a partial equaliser between different groups of youth climate strikers. For instance, some of those living in rural spaces who had previously depended on the internet to engage in environmental activism before the pandemic, claimed that the new circumstances had increased the scope for their online activism and for their participation in decision making. Online space was also seen as an opportunity for more young activists to get involved, especially if large groups and social gatherings may have previously been a cause of anxiety. Elsewhere, other participants saw a particular benefit of the lockdown as having presented the opportunity to gain a number of IT skills resulting from their activism on online platforms (such as Slack [an online tool often used by environmental activists], Zoom and other technologies, such as Google Drive).

5.4. Young Activists' Perspectives—Online Spaces as a Form of Activism

There have been historic issues of alleged surveillance and undercover police infiltration of environmentalist groups [53], and these continue to have an impact on how some activists view the motivations of researchers. Some young activists who were approached as part of the project were increasingly concerned about surveillance online, choosing not to discuss certain matters on platforms like WhatsApp or Zoom, but opting instead for encrypted platforms like Signal and Telegram. They reflected that using platforms created by private corporations left their actions without adequate safeguards to protect

against police interference and surveillance. Additionally, one young activist mentioned that although there was value in online activism, they needed to observe the rules set by private platforms when organising. Taken together, these issues raised ethical questions for the research which also involved observations at online planning meetings with young activists.

In general, visibility in public spaces was favoured by all of the participants, but there was a lack of unanimity on the question of the importance of visibility in online spaces. Indeed, Fine and Abramson [54] in their reflections of the challenges to ethnographers, claim that the online world cannot be conflated with the physical world, arguing that ‘to say the physical and digital are interchangeable or produce similar analyses is a methodologically indefensible false equivalence’ (p. 4). Although all the young people who took part in the ethnographic interviews recognised that the shift to online platforms for their activism presented opportunities for networking and relationship-building, there were mixed positions on the effectiveness of online visibility. One youth climate striker unfavourably compared a Twitter storm¹ to the more effective physical occupation of a building; while Twitter could restrict access or delete social media posts, storming a building would invariably have a greater effect as activists would be considerably harder to remove. However, another participant saw Twitter storms as a very accessible way of drawing attention to the environmental causes that activists engaged with. Furthermore, although the young research participants recognised the possibilities for engaging in disruptive radical online activism, such as flooding the IP addresses of targeted corporations, concern was raised that such actions carry serious repercussions for activists, including possible arrest and criminal conviction.

5.5. Young Activists’ Perspectives—The Link between the COVID-19 Pandemic and Activism

For some young activists, the vacuum created by less schoolwork and little to no employment opportunities has provided more time for activism. The range of activities that the participants discussed were varied in nature, including participation at educational events and planning meetings; engagement in national and regional networking on platforms such as Slack and Zoom; continuing with plans for direct action in physical spaces; and for some, working on more electoral forms of engagement, such as youth councils. Many of the participants reported their involvement in self-educating activities, both collectively and individually.

Through the course of these shared activities, the young activists participating in the project revealed a sophisticated understanding of what they considered to be clear links between the COVID-19 pandemic, capitalism and climate change. For instance, discussions with the young XR activists revealed that they felt that the health risks presented by the pandemic itself were not the most important barrier to environmental activism for young people. Instead, they recognised that the laws and policies that have been put in place by political, economic and corporate power holders are of greater concern. Concurrently, they saw the pandemic itself being a direct result of industrial agriculture, instigating a greater need for environmental activism in opposition to its consequences. They cited in particular, the deregulation of companies and the exploitation of workers that culminated in profiteering for many corporations [55]. They explained this process as a cycle which begins with the pandemic creating increased profit opportunities for corporations, which then results in perpetuating the environmental crisis, which activists then need to engage with.

However, in discussion with the research participants, some changes were recognised as a cause for optimism, including, for instance, the high-profile closure of some Shell and British Petroleum sites [56]. Nonetheless, the interactions also revealed that whilst the young activists considered that some positive steps have been made by some corporations, the economic downturn and impending recession in the UK represented an escalating threat to socioeconomic inequality in recent years, irrespective of the pandemic [57]. This

¹ A Twitter storm is characterised by a rapid surge of social media posts usually about controversial topics, often political in nature.

process was seen as exacerbated (not caused) by COVID-19, accelerating financial collapse and resulting in further deregulation, privatisation and the entrenchment of the capitalist agenda through exploitation of the opportunities of societal chaos. Such ideas of corporations and governments utilising crises as a means of capitalising on such events are mirrored in the work of Green New Deal advocates such as Naomi Klein [58]. In this way, some participants saw the pandemic instigating further supply and demand for private security in a further destabilised society which would affect young environmental activists through the 'weaponization of surveillance' on social media. Attention was also given to the macro issues that young activists experienced in this time. An example of this was the youth climate strikes and the challenge to young people's ability to strike from school when they were not attending school. This was perceived as a means by which power has been taken away from young climate strikers.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

Just as the pandemic cannot be a call to retreat online for researchers, the same is true for young activists who, under the COVID-19 lockdown and social distancing conditions at the time of writing, were already beginning to push back into physical spaces. The 2020 Black Lives Matter protests drew many of the research participants into engaging with the movement, a great number of them spoke of the link between racial capitalism, racial injustice and the causes of the environmental crisis. Despite the control regimes around the pandemic, many young people chose to face the risks of mass gatherings to have their voices heard. For some of the research participants, this was also the case. However, under such circumstances, the potential exists for the emergence of a researcher-participant gap until the time when academic institutions sanction the resumption of face-to-face research activities. During this period, ethnographic studies in general, and researchers' understandings of the lived experience of young environmental activists in particular, are likely to become somewhat diminished. Whilst some researchers may successfully assemble successful cases for a return to face-to-face fieldwork, many will not achieve such positive outcomes. This may lead such researchers to question their own invisibility in sites of environmental activism as ethnographers and how that may rupture their relationships with research participants and act as a barrier to their understandings of this emergent phenomenon.

Whilst online spaces can certainly be utilised, in the absence of face-to-face fieldwork, there is a case for greater co-creation with participants to gather more authentic understandings of their lived experiences. It is this endeavour that has been the focus of this article in critically reflecting on the process of co-production of the matrix of challenges and opportunities. However, ethnography is becoming increasingly inaccessible as a form of research—and especially for early career researchers—as access to the field becomes increasingly complex, particularly in relation to funding issues and matters of research ethics. This has served to privilege other methods in the field, and this pattern is now being further exacerbated by the pandemic. The hope is that more methodological research on this topic will present itself in time to provide the ethnographic community with an evidence base from which to challenge ethical review boards to support such forms of research in the future.

COVID-ized Ethnography

Ethnography by its nature embraces instability and change. Researchers embarking upon a process for embedding themselves in sites of academic interest often welcome uncertainty from a position of opportunity. Concurrently, the shifting socio-political and economic global landscape prior to the pandemic was already primed for disruption. That being said, the pandemic has impacted actors not only from the position of the researcher or activist, but also as individuals with complex identities outside of these roles.

One key issue has been emotional connection through online space, particularly on video calls. During these months of the pandemic, research has been conducted online,

connecting virtually the participant-researcher home spaces and, in so doing, developing a sense of trust and bonding. This has been an unexpected benefit of online interaction that can be used in future research design. However, it must also be remembered that online spaces can also be spaces of privilege. Whilst many of the young people participating in the research had access to laptops, smartphones and Wi-Fi, this was not the case for all. Some even carried out schoolwork on their smart phones and did not have access to unlimited internet data. This needs to be built into any research design, recognising the intersecting inequalities that young people experience [59]. Finally, whilst there are opportunities for online relationship-building during the pandemic, this comes at a price. The loss of nonverbal cues and the taken for granted interactions that ethnography reveals in physical settings must be considered by researchers.

From the investment in mutual well-being during the early days of the pandemic and lockdown, deeper and more honest relationships were built. This would not have been possible without both groups being forthcoming about well-being and mental health challenges over this time. This has been an important experience to reflect on as part of the research process. Despite the personal nature of the discussions here, this was necessary to share in this article as others may be experiencing similar tensions around what to share with their participants and how to share those experiences outwardly to the academic community. Fine and Abramson's [54] work has been particularly important in aiding self-reflection in this context. They write about the dilemmas and opportunities presented by the COVID-19 pandemic on ethnography, stating: 'If there is one profound truth about ethnography, it is that intimacy, and not distancing, is crucial'. They ask, 'what are the implications as we readjust our research at a moment defined by the wide-reaching effects of the novel coronavirus COVID-19?' (p. 1). One clear adjustment made through the experiences of the research process has been an opening up to participants and a sharing with them of the lived experience of the pandemic. This has served to add to the experience of researching and relationship-building. This is something that other researchers are encouraged to reflect on in their own decisions concerning how to build research relationships during such uncertain times.

Whilst this pandemic has forced researchers to rethink their methodological approaches, as well as the nature of data collection, ethics and access, it has by no means stopped ethnographic research in its tracks. Amongst the ethnographic collectives (such as that of the University of Massachusetts and its affiliates), workshops and methods, courses have been created to support researchers to learn from each other's transformed research designs. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the plan in this research had been to meet young activists at demonstrations and actions across the UK, hearing chants, photographing placards and listening to impassioned speeches over megaphones. Instead, time has been spent in Slack and Zoom meetings and engaging in long discussions over Discord, Signal and Telegram. Despite disruption to the original research design, the opportunity has been to reflect on how the pandemic has impacted the research project and what learning can be taken from the fieldwork during the COVID-19 lockdown. This resulted in the development of a matrix which was then explored with participants through ethnographic interviews. The aim was, to an extent, to be able to co-create the methodological research findings with the research participants. Future research could explore this combination of ethnography and co-creation using ethnographic interviews as a means of creating innovations in a time of limited access to the field.

Fine and Abramson raise concerns in their reflections on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic which they perceive as likely to result in fundamental ethical and practical challenges for ethnographers [54]. In this context, how researchers—and, in particular, ethnographers who have been removed from their field sites—conduct their research is of great concern. The matrix and the discussion outlined in this article do not advocate that ethnographers retreat to the safety of online space without weighing up the consequences of this for their research projects. This is particularly true for research focused on hard-to-reach groups that are now more difficult to reach as academic institutions have placed

robust limits on face-to-face research activities as a response to the pandemic. Engaging in face-to-face fieldwork would require a profound introspection by researchers around the safety of themselves and their participants. However, absence from the physical field has equally profound implications for youth voice and the role of academia in creating a platform for sharing and learning from young people's experiences.

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