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Remaining in or leaving climate activism – insights from current and former activists on sustained engagement

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ABSTRACT

This study examines factors influencing sustained engagement and disengagement in climate activism, specifically within Extinction Rebellion. Through interviews with 26 current and former activists, we identify 10 barriers and facilitators, organized into 3 themes: Socio-organizational barriers and facilitators, Efficacy perceptions, and Burnout and strategies to avoid exhaustion. Participants discussed the following barriers to engagement, potentially leading to disengagement: (1) a lack of social integration, for example, due to biographical differences or difficulties in finding a clear role; (2) conflicts and disagreements (3) doubts about having an impact; (4) challenges within a non-hierarchical organization, such as unclear decision-making procedures or informal leaderships; and (5) burnout stemming from activism-related stressors; and (6) stressors external to activism. Conversely, factors facilitating engagement were: (1) strong social connections; (2) a pragmatic approach to impact, for example, enabled by having a long-term perspective on outcomes; (3) being driven by moral convictions; and (4) access to organizational and individual strategies to manage stress, including the acceptance of varying commitment levels. The findings suggest that the impact of these barriers and facilitators on the activist trajectory is influenced by one's motivations for engaging. Our discussion offers insights into fostering sustained engagement in social movements.

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SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS


SDG 13: Climate action

As concern over the climate crisis grows, an increasing number of people are protesting against political inaction in mitigating climate disasters (Gulliver et al., 2021). In recent years, new climate movement organizations have emerged, including Extinction Rebellion (XR) and Just Stop Oil (de Moor et al., 2021; Einhorn & Corrigan-Brown, 2023). These groups adopt a strategy of non-violent civil disobedience, involving deliberate and peaceful violation of laws with the intention of drawing attention to the climate

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crisis (Tescione, 2022). The literature on motivations for joining social movements is extensive, highlighting the roles of perceived injustice, belief in collective efficacy, and identification with the movement (van Zomeren et al., 2008), as well as emotional drivers like fear, hope, and anger (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017; Lorenzini & Rosset, 2023). Less attention has been given to the activist trajectory after initial engagement, i.e. what sustains activist involvement or leads to disengagement. This explorative interview study among both current and former activists in XR Sweden addresses what psychosocial factors influence sustained engagement and disengagement.

Early models of activist trajectories such as Klandermans (1997) three-stage framework, conceptualize activist trajectories as a process of initial engagement, sustained participation, and disengagement from a specific social movement organization. Corrigan-Brown (2011) later expanded this view, outlining four possible trajectories after initial engagement: remaining in the social movement organization ('persistence'), switching to another group ('transfer'), leaving the movement or protest activities for a limited period ('individual abeyance'), and leaving the movement or protest activities permanently ('disengagement'). In this study, sustained engagement refers to continued participation in XR Sweden – that is, the persistence pathway. More recent work emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between disengagement from a specific social movement organization and withdrawal from cause-related political action altogether (Driscoll, 2018). Here, disengagement is not defined as a complete exit from political action, as three participants continued their climate engagement through party politics and journalism, but as withdrawal from XR Sweden and from protest activities. The cross-sectional design of this study prevents us from determining whether such disengagement was permanent or temporary.

Given the limited research on activist trajectories within climate activism specifically, the following review draws on studies from diverse political contexts and theoretical traditions, while being primarily grounded in a social psychological framework. Social psychological literature identifies three core motivations that sustain participation: the desire to achieve political goals (instrumental motivations), to act on behalf of a group one identifies with (identity motivations), and to act in accordance with moral convictions (moral or expressive motivations) (Klandermans, 2022). According to the demand and supply model (van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2023), the degree to which these motivations (the 'demand') are met by the opportunities and resources provided by the movement (the 'supply') influence whether the engagement is sustained or not. Together, these frameworks offer a structured approach for analysing sustained engagement. Different theoretical traditions have informed research on these motivational pathways. Instrumental motivations are often linked to psychological models of rational choice, as well as expectancy-value and resource mobilization theories (Hill et al., 1975; Klandermans, 1997; McCarthy & Zald, 1977). Identity motivations are connected to the social identity theory and sociological theories of collective identity (Polletta & Jasper, 2001; Tajfel, 1978). Ideological motivations linked to research on moral reasoning, emotions, culture, and meaning-making (Klandermans, 1997, 2022; Tarrow, 1998).

Conversely, the dynamics of disengagement model (Klandermans, 1997; van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2023) conceptualises disengagement as a gradual process in which *insufficient gratification* – when one's motivations are no longer fulfilled – and *declining commitment* – a weakening of psychological attachment to the group or cause – together generate an intention to leave. This intention may ultimately be triggered by

a *precipitating event*, such as a conflict, failure, or turning point. While the model provides a useful framework, it does not on its own offer theoretical explanations to why gratification declines or commitment weakens. The following review draws on empirical literature on activist trajectories from various theoretical perspectives and organises it within the motivational framework, the demand–supply model, and the dynamics of disengagement model.

Perceptions of movement efficacy – the belief that collective action can achieve its intended goals – are a key factor in sustaining engagement (Bunnage, 2014; Conner et al., 2021; Downton & Wehr, 1998; Hornsey et al., 2006). In the demand and supply framework (van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2023), such instrumental motivations represent the demand, and when movements satisfy – or supply – that demand, engagement is more likely to persist. A recent longitudinal study confirmed that perceiving that the movement was close in time to achieve the desired change was a positive predictor of sustained engagement, alongside not feeling exhausted from the engagement (Cohen-Eick et al., 2023). Yet, definitions of success can differ significantly, with experienced activists being more likely to reframe outcomes more positively, a process that helps maintain their activist identity (Barr & Drury, 2009; Drury & Reicher, 2005; Gulliver et al., 2023a). Conversely, when activists feel that the movement is ineffective or that its goals are unattainable, gratification and commitment may be reduced and in turn lead to disengagement (Tausch & Becker, 2013; Santos Nascimento et al., 2021; van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2023). While beliefs about effectiveness matter, such rational calculations alone cannot explain sustained engagement and disengagement. Therefore, beyond instrumental motivations, identity-related factors have also been recognized as central in activist trajectories.

According to Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1978), individuals derive part of their self-concept from group membership. When personal and group identity are closely intertwined, this can strengthen commitment by fostering belonging and shared purpose (Barr & Drury, 2009; Downton & Wehr, 1998; Drury & Reicher, 2005). The number and strength of an activist's social ties within the organization – referred to as social embeddedness – is closely linked to social identification, as it reinforces group solidarity (Passy & Giugni, 2000), and contribute to maintaining shared beliefs (Bunnage, 2014; Rao & Power, 2021; Vestergren et al., 2018). Moreover, it sustains engagement by generating positive emotions (Gulliver et al., 2023b) thereby buffering the stress and demands of activism (Conner et al., 2021; Mannarini & Fedi, 2012). Importantly, these identity-based gratifications do not depend on the movement's actual political success but rather on the ongoing experience of acting together with others one identifies with. However, social identification may weaken – either due to shifts in the movement's composition, goals, or tactics (Corrigall-Brown, 2011; Santos Nascimento et al., 2021), or through changes in activists' own priorities and beliefs (Passy & Giugni, 2000). Identification may also be undermined by deteriorating or lost social ties; for example, when close friends leave the movement, or due to interpersonal conflicts (Becker & Tausch, 2015; Klandermans, 1997; Sandell, 1999). As identity-based gratification and commitment diminishes, disengagement becomes more likely (van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2023).

In addition to instrumental and identity-based motivations, moral motivations – sometimes referred to as ideological or expressive motivations – also play a role in

activist trajectories (Sabucedo et al., 2018; Uysal et al., 2022). These motivations reflect the desire to act in alignment with one's values, ethical convictions, or felt moral responsibility, despite uncertainty of the political outcomes (Klandermans, 2022). While less frequently discussed in the disengagement literature, when activists feel that their values are compromised – whether through strategic decisions or internal ideological divisions – commitment may weaken and with disengagement as a result (Gamson, 1975; van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2023).

A critique of the demand and supply model is that it risks framing activists as rational actors with fixed, pre-existing demands. In contrast, scholars argue that motivations are shaped dynamically through ongoing interaction with the social and organisational context (Fillieule, 2015). Research focusing on organizational processes has shown that sustained engagement is more likely when organisations foster strong social bonds through celebratory and educational activities, manage conflicts effectively, minimise bureaucratic frustrations, and have access to resources such as volunteers, funding, and external connections (Bunnage, 2014; Mannarini & Fedi, 2012; Nepstad, 2004; McCarthy & Zald, 1977). Such organizational factors may help maintain motivation and buffer against the stress associated with activism. Conversely, frustrating organisational dynamics – such as internal conflict, lack of transparency, disappointing leadership, and unfair decision-making – can increase the emotional strain of activism and affect all stages of the dynamics of disengagement (Downton & Wehr, 1998; Sandell, 1999; van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2023).

Similar organizational factors may also contribute to exhaustion and burnout, a common pathway to activist disengagement (Conner et al., 2021). While it has been linked to a 'culture of martyrdom' in some activist communities (Chen & Gorski, 2015), research on its underlying dynamics remains limited. A strand of literature has written about individual coping strategies to avoid burnout, such as taking breaks, seeking peer support, using humour or spirituality, and focusing on what one can control (Downton & Wehr, 1998; Driscoll, 2020; Einwohner, 2002; Maslach & Gomes, 2006). In relation to the dynamics of disengagement model, burnout can be understood as a factor that undermines both gratification and commitment – and may also serve as the precipitating event that causes exit.

A final aspect highlighted in the literature influencing the activist trajectory is life circumstances, often referred to as biographical availability (Bunnage, 2014; Gulliver et al., 2023b; McAdam, 1986). It involves changes in personal life circumstances – such as new jobs, caregiving duties, relocation, or health issues – that restrict time and energy and gradually erode engagement or prompt abrupt withdrawal (Nepstad, 2004).

Current research

In sum, previous research has identified a wide range of factors involved in activist trajectories, spanning from individual motivations and strategies, social relationships, organizational dynamics and life circumstances (Bunnage, 2014). However, most studies tend to examine either sustaining factors or reasons for disengagement in isolation. Moreover, much of the literature draws on samples of only current activists, and few studies include individuals who have disengaged (but see Passy & Giugni, 2000; Santos Nascimento et al., 2021; Whalen & Flacks, 1989). This limits our understanding of how

exposure to barriers and access to facilitators interact with individual's perceptions of these and how they operate over time. To address these gaps, this study includes both current and former activists, allowing for a comparative perspective on activist trajectories and enables an analysis of why and under what conditions facilitators no longer buffer against barriers. Further, scholars have increasingly called for more integrative approaches that combine psychological, social, and organizational perspectives (Driscoll, 2020; Fillieule, 2010; Nepstad, 2004). In response, this study adopts a broad psychosocial perspective. It combines the motivational framework with the models of demand and supply and dynamics of disengagement (Klandermans, 2022; van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2023). Another limitation in the literature is the scarcity of contemporary studies examining disengagement in current climate social movements. Therefore, using a qualitative, exploratory approach, this study asks: *What psychosocial barriers and facilitators do current and former activists in the climate activist group XR Sweden perceive to have influenced their sustained engagement or process of disengagement?*

Method

Case description

After its establishment in 2018, Extinction Rebellion rapidly grew into a global movement, spreading to 79 countries across six continents within 3 years (Gardner et al., 2022). The movement is characterized by its strategy of mass mobilization through nonviolent civil disobedience. By deliberately breaking laws and accepting the consequences, such as arrest, XR aims to generate significant disruption to force public attention and governmental response to the climate crisis. This includes occupations of public spaces, road blockades, and dramatic acts of protest (Berglund & Schmidt, 2020).

XR's organizational structure is decentralized, non-hierarchical, and leaderless. This allows individuals and local groups to act autonomously in XR's name as long as they adhere to its principles and values. While local groups collaborate for national mass mobilizations, they are also free to organize independent actions (Extinction Rebellion, n. d.). This non-hierarchical structure makes XR a compelling case for studying psychosocial dynamics, as it reflects broader trends in social movements that prioritize deliberative democratic practices, autonomous organizing, and innovative collective action (e.g. Snow & Moss, 2014).

Climate activism, including XR's work, differs from other forms of activism due to the global, multifaceted nature of the climate crisis. Unlike other issues, many climate activists face a unique tension: they are simultaneous contributors to and victims of the problem they address, particularly in high-emitting countries. Therefore, XR Sweden is a relevant context for this research as it embodies this complexity of climate activism.

Participants and interviews

Upon receiving approval for the study by the Norwegian Social Science Data Services [435803], participants were recruited by posting an advertisement in XR's communication channel, as well as visiting one of XR's local chapter's monthly meetings. Former activists were recruited through snowball-sampling, both via current and former

Table 1. Demographics.

	Gender		Age		Occupation			
	Male	Female	Range	Mean	Employed	Student	Retired	Unemployed
Activists	6	7	21–67	44	9	3	1	0
Ex-activists	7	6	23–56	39	9	3	0	1
Total sample	13	13	21–67	43	18	6	1	1

activists. Current activists were required to have been actively engaged with XR for at least 12 months, and former activists disengaged for at least 12 months. The sample included activists from three Swedish cities. On average, current activists ($n = 13$) had been involved for 2.5 years ($SD = 1$ year) and former activists ($n = 13$) for 1.4 years before disengaging ($SD = 5$ months). Former activists averaged 2.1 years since disengagement ($SD = 5$ months). Three former activists remained engaged with climate issues, though their involvement took the form of party politics or journalism.

Participants' involvement varied from daily to monthly participation, with eighteen having taken 'red roles' (willing to break the law during actions) and eight engaging in 'green roles' (supportive tasks during actions, like organizing cooking and communicating with the police and passers-by). Between action periods, all had experience in outreach, meeting facilitation, and/or action planning. Detailed demographic data is presented in Table 1. Interviews were conducted during the winter and spring of 2022, either in person or online, lasting between 45 and 80 minutes (averaging 65 minutes). Written or oral informed consent was obtained in the beginning of all interviews. The interview-guide included questions about barriers and facilitators, both internal such as thoughts and emotions, and external such as circumstances in the activist group or the person's life. Interviews with former activists also included a section on their decision to disengage.

Analytic procedure

All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim and anonymized. We employed inductive-deductive thematic analytic approach following Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019). Initially, transcripts were read multiple times for an overall understanding. The first inductive coding round included codes of potential interest, not necessarily related to our research question. This was followed by a deductive coding round, more focused on codes specifically relevant to the research question. Subsequently, relating codes were grouped into themes. Throughout the process, codes and themes were reviewed and refined in consultation with the second and third authors. Once the data was thematically organized, we began the interpretative phase, deliberating the significance and theoretical implications of the identified themes. The result of this interpretative process is presented in the analysis below. Selected quotes included in the article were translated to English by the first author and are identified using 'A' for current activists and 'F' for former activists, followed by a unique participant number.

Analysis

What psychosocial barriers and facilitators do current and former activists in the climate activist group XR Sweden perceive to have influenced their sustained engagement or

process of disengagement? The findings of our thematic analysis are organized into three main themes, encompassing subthemes of barriers and facilitators: ‘Socio-organizational barriers and facilitators for engagement’, ‘Efficacy perceptions’ and ‘Burnout and resilience factors’ (for an overview of sub-themes and codes, see [Table 1](#) in supplemental online material).

Theme 1: socio-organizational barriers and facilitators for engagement

How social embeddedness may sustain engagement

Participants highlighted the crucial role of social embeddedness in sustaining engagement. Firstly, social embeddedness served as a buffer against the stress associated with the significant norm violations that civil disobedience entails. This stress manifested from social media threats, criticism from friends and family, and tense police interactions. Participant A14 noted: ‘You need a strong local team where you know each other and care for each other afterward. It’s uncomfortable to have a lot of people against you, you become unpopular.’ The activist milieu provided a social context that affirmed and normalized activists non-normative convictions and actions. Secondly, being socially embedded functioned as a motivation in and of itself and as a source of inspiration. A2 expressed, ‘Then there is the inspiration from people who work very hard and take significant risks in civil disobedience [...] The conviction is so strong they’re not afraid of jail ... it’s inspiring.’ However, social embeddedness was not of equal importance to everyone. F6 expressed: ‘Many became good friends and found their social circle in XR, but my motivation was nerdier: I wanted to figure out how social movements can save the planet and contribute to that’.

Lack of social embeddedness as a reason for disengagement

Struggling to find an appropriate role or working group posed a barrier to becoming socially embedded and reported as a reason for disengagement. F12 exemplified this experience: ‘I never found my place or how I could contribute. I never got a good overview of all the working groups, and then my involvement kind of just fizzled out.’ Moreover, perceived differences, such as age disparities, hindered social integration and one’s identification with the local group. Former activist F3, who quit mainly due to lack of social embeddedness, talked about their local group stating:

My experience is that it’s quite segregated in terms of age. There weren’t many younger people. It was an older clique that was very active. They were very welcoming to me, but I never saw myself as part of them in the same way.

Conflicts and disagreements

Conflicts were recurrently reported by participants as a barrier and trigger for disengagement. These conflicts often arose from disagreements about the legitimacy of certain behaviours, what activities to prioritize within the movement, and the group’s strategic focus; whether it should be on creative street blockades in inner cities or more disruptive actions like highway blockades. F9 noted: ‘People want to go in different directions. And that is something that makes being in the movement a bit less fun, when people disagree on things.’ Conflicts also arose from harassments and

interactions with individuals perceived as difficult to collaborate with. Former activists F6 stated; ‘Sooner or later, a tricky person who is difficult to deal with shows up [...] There was a conflict that really drained me.’ For F6, these interpersonal strains also contributed to a process of exhaustion, a topic further explored in theme 2.

Although XR provided a framework for conflict resolution and guidelines for designated facilitators, former activists that stated they quit due to unresolved conflicts experienced these measures as inadequate. This insufficiency was attributed to either a lack of skilled facilitators in the local chapter or that some conflicts had already grown too big. As exemplified by F6, ‘We had to bring in external mediators [...] but by then, it had already gone too far. It was a question of time, level of expertise, and the quality of structures in place to handle such issues.’ F1, who left because they felt harassed, discussed this in relation to organizational limitations:

XR was conceived as an organization to attract many people, fast, within 6 months. It was not designed as an organization meant to last several years, with a system for decision-making and handling conflicts [...] There was some structure in XR, but it fell short in managing ‘difficult’ people.

Both inspiring and frustrating with a non-hierarchical organization

The non-hierarchical and decentralized structure of XR – permitting individuals to do whatever they wanted to if it adhered to XR’s principles, to come and go, and to participate with varying levels of intensity – introduced certain challenges. These included accountability issues, inefficient decision-making, and the potential emergence of informal leaderships, as noted by F5:

There were no decision-making structures [...] There were informal power structures that led to some individuals having more influence than others [...] It always ended up with someone just saying, ‘let’s do it this way’ and then others followed.

F1 talked about how informal leaders were welcomed by some but could also be a trigger to conflicts: ‘It’s hard to drive a flat organization without leadership! Individuals emerged with informal leadership [...] And with 95% of the other members this informal leadership worked well, but there was a minority who could not accept it.’

Although non-hierarchical structure could lead to frustration and conflicts, it was also perceived as inspiring and empowering. Former activist F1 discussed this double-edged sword, stating;

[...] ordinary organizations are governed by boards and annual meetings. That was not the case with XR. And yes, that was appealing, and at the same time it was challenging. It was both what was best with XR, but also what was difficult.

Overall, being socially embedded and identifying with the group buffered against the strains of activism and, for some, was a motivator for continued engagement, as previously noted by e.g. Gulliver et al. (2023b) and van Stekelenburg and Klandermans (2023). Barriers for social embeddedness – including not finding a clear role, biographical differences, conflicts, and frustrations stemming from challenging organizational structures – were reported as triggers to disengagement. However, many former activists left despite having multiple ties to XR and positive relationships with co-activists. As they began to question the efficacy of XR, and instrumental motivations were important for

them (Klandermans, 1997, 2022), social embeddedness was insufficient to hinder disengagement.

As they began to question the efficacy of XR, social embeddedness was insufficient to prevent disengagement, as instrumental motivations were more important to them. Next theme will explore the effects of different efficacy perceptions.

Theme 2. Efficacy perceptions

Doubts about having an impact

Doubts about what, if any, impacts the actions would have were reported as a trigger to disengagement. The doubts could be related to the impression that actions were badly timed and without specific targets. F1 stated, 'In Sweden, I do not think the actions were well timed. It would be better if they were linked to a specific political decision or target. Now, actions were targeted towards the system as a whole, and I don't think that works.' Others stated that they had stopped believing XR would achieve its main strategy of change, i.e. mass mobilization, noticing how actions in Sweden at that point did not grow any longer.

Doubt about efficacy was also present among current activists. However, they discussed their doubts within a more pragmatic framing of impact, which facilitated continued engagement.

Being pragmatic about efficacy

Despite experiencing doubts, current activists stated they still believed XR was effective in achieving some kind of change. Compared to activists that had quit, they reported a different perception of the goals of XR. The current activists did not think of mass mobilization as XR's primary objective, but instead redirected their attention towards the present, emphasising smaller, immediate impacts in terms of e.g. spreading awareness and engaging previously passive people.

I don't see it as there is a point in time, when it will be 'too late', and we might as well let the house burn down. Instead, no, it makes a difference, even if it's too slow and too little. [...] There are still a lot of people who have not yet realized but are like 'sleeping climate heroes', we just need to try to mobilize more of them. (A4)

Other current activists still regarded mass mobilisation as XR's main goal but had a long-term perspective on when this would be achieved. They pointed at social movements in the past where the struggle lasted for many years before an unanticipated social and political change happened, which enabled activists to remain both patient and motivated. A4 illustrated this by stating: 'It feels like an endless uphill battle, until it turns around. So maybe we will reach a tipping point when people understand, and when politicians take responsibility and real change starts happening.' Some participants talked about how discussions with activist peers had helped them to be pragmatic about efficacy and acknowledge the difficulties in measuring impact, as stated by A8: 'We discuss strategy a lot. It is a balance; you must be self-critical to not get stuck in an inefficient strategy, but also optimistic to get going'. This reflects the benefits of social embeddedness as it engages individuals in discussions about different views on outcomes (also noted by Barr & Drury, 2009). However, we also observed that different framings of outcomes

were associated with the degree of moral or existential motivations for participating in civil disobedience, a point elaborated in the next subtheme.

Moral and existential motivations beyond efficacy

Among current activists, concerns about having an impact were reported to become less important as moral, ideological or expressive motivations grew stronger, such as expressing one's conviction and enacting what one stands for. A7 and A2 talked about how they were driven by a moral obligation to act, stating that: 'You must fight for that which is most important [...] That's an anchor and it feels good to have it (A7), and 'Once I have grasped the severity of the situation, I cannot just step back and unlearn it, and just "live my life". I have an obligation to do what I can' (A4). Current activist A13 stated: 'I try not to get stuck in thoughts and doubts at efficacy, knowing what I know about climate crisis, I feel that the issue at stake is too important for that'. For them, engaging in civil disobedience evoked a sense of meaning and purpose, becoming an existential and moral imperative that transcended uncertainties about the outcomes.

Overall, our findings in the second theme suggest that doubts about having an impact existed among both current and former activist, but the two groups framed outcomes in different ways. In line with previous research on persistent activists, current activists in this study both emphasized long-term outcomes, but also incremental but cumulative wins such as increased awareness, support, or number of mobilized activists (Driscoll, 2020; Einwohner, 2002; Gulliver et al., 2023a; Hornsey et al., 2006). For some, a pragmatic approach to efficacy was also enabled by being grounded in moral motivations to remain engaged (van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2023).

Theme 3: burnout and strategies to avoid exhaustion

Stressors in the activism context

Former activists reported mental and physical exhaustion as contributing factors to their disengagement. Despite recognizing the high burnout risk in activism, they also pointed at several factors complicating efforts to limit one's engagement; a sense of urgency and responsibility, guilt associated with withdrawing from responsibilities, challenges of finding people to replace you, endless number of tasks in social movements, and long work hours preventing necessary rest. F9 who quit mainly due to exhaustion explained, 'It easily becomes your whole existence and I have noticed that it eats you up [...] No one says "stop", unless you do it yourself'.

But overwork could also be a result of the engagement being fun, creative, and rewarding. F6 described activism in XR as: 'It is like a carnival, but if you live in the carnival day in and day out, it gets exhausting.' F8 who quit due to burnout stated:

I was aware of burnout as a phenomenon in activism beforehand [...] but I managed to suppress that and instead really lived in this 'drive mode': thriving on the positive energy one gets from engaging

Stressors in contexts external to activism

Exhaustion also stemmed from stress in context external to XR. Usually, it was the convergence of personal life stressors, such as family illnesses, work or academic

pressure, and anxiety stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic that culminated in exhaustion. F7 explained how their exhaustion from work forced them to restructure other areas of life to be able to recover: ‘I had a lot of pandemic anxiety and I had burnt out at work, so there was just no . . . I had to start removing things, one by one.’

For some of the former activists, the COVID-19 constituted the precipitating event triggering disengagement as the cessation of in-person meetings and dissolution of working groups amplified the challenges of activism while reducing its social rewards.

When current activists were discussing what enabled them to stay engaged during the COVID-19 pandemic, they highlighted the significance of not contending with simultaneous barriers in one’s personal life, e.g. having flexible work hours, or as in A10’s case, not having children at home to care for: ‘I think, like engaging with or without the pandemic, it depends on one’s life circumstances . . . it’s not a coincidence that many young and older people are involved in XR, who, for instance, do not have children at home.’

Organizational and individual strategies to avoid burnout

Current activists highlighted XR’s organizational strategy of fostering a regenerative and sustainable culture as an important buffer against burnout. This strategy, referred to as ‘XR Regen’, included the practice of starting meetings with a check in on participants’ well-being. This practice allowed members to share their daily mood and workload, serving not only to regulate emotions and reduce stress but also to reinforce social connections. As stated by A4: ‘what was most important to me was that every meeting began with a check-in round where one could say how one felt.’ This practise normalized sharing if one felt overworked, and encouraged activists to say no to tasks if needed, and increased acceptance of different levels and intensities of engagement. A6 stated: ‘I easily feel ashamed when I have taken on too much, because it feels like a failure. Then it is very comforting, when I share it with the group, saying, “I can’t handle this now”, that they do not blame me.’ Similarly, A2 noted, ‘There is a tolerance for that we are all different, and want to participate in different roles, and at different levels of commitment.’

Adopting individual strategies to mitigate exhaustion, such as taking breaks from activism or limiting one’s workload, were motivated by activists having a long-term perspective on efficacy and viewing their engagement as a long-term commitment. A7 stated; ‘If you are going to fight your whole life, you need to take breaks’, and A13; ‘[. . .] getting burnt out does not help anyone. This struggle will last for decades, particularly the next decade is crucial.’ This can be compared with some of the former activists who entered the movement with the mindset of intense commitment over a short period as opposed to viewing activism as a lifelong journey.

Overall, this theme outlined participants’ accounts of how burnout among activists is influenced by both internal and external factors beyond activism itself (e.g. life circumstances and the COVID-19 pandemic), and how it can be mitigated by organizational support systems like XR Regen and individual efforts to maintain sustainable engagement levels. Within the dynamics of disengagement model, findings suggest that exhaustion could act both as a precipitating event triggering exit or contribute gradually to declining commitment and reduced gratification Klandermans (1997); van Stekelenburg and Klandermans (2023). Further, this study found that the tendency to adopt individual

strategies to avoid exhaustion is shaped by having a long-term perspective on efficacy and one's commitment.

Discussion

In this paper, we examined the psychosocial barriers and facilitators that current and former activists in the climate activist group XR Sweden perceive to have influenced their sustained engagement or process of disengagement. Our findings illustrate how activist trajectories are influenced by the interplay between psychosocial factors, motivations, organizational structures, and external events like the COVID-19 pandemic and life circumstances. Our analysis revealed four primary barriers to sustained engagement that were also reported as triggers to disengagement: (1) lack of social embeddedness, (2) conflicts and disagreements, (3) doubts about efficacy, (4) challenges within a non-hierarchical organization, (5) burnout stemming from activism-related stressors, and (6) stressors external to activism. These barriers were rarely experienced in isolation but rather as interconnected factors. For instance, doubts about efficacy were often accompanied by social conflicts or emotional exhaustion, creating a cumulative effect leading to withdrawal. Conversely, several facilitators were identified that buffered against these barriers and enabled sustained engagement: (1) being socially embedded, (2) adopting a pragmatic view of efficacy, (3) being driven by moral convictions, and (4) access to individual and organizational strategies to manage stress. However, we found that the relative importance of these barriers and facilitators varied across individuals, and our analysis – drawing on a motivational framework (Klandermans, 2022) – suggests that these differences were shaped by whether participants were primarily driven by instrumental, moral, or identity-based motivations. For example, for individuals primarily driven by instrumental motivations, social embeddedness had less of a buffering role against doubts about efficacy. For participants with moral motivations, the mere act of expressing their convictions provided intrinsic meaning thereby buffering doubts about efficacy, in line with previous research (Drury & Reicher, 2005; Rao & Power, 2021).

To further explore the psychosocial dynamics of activist trajectories, this section examines how social embeddedness can both sustain and hinder engagement. Consistent with earlier work (Conner et al., 2021; Gulliver et al., 2023b; Vestergren et al., 2018), this study found that embeddedness plays an important role in sustaining engagement (Conner et al., 2021; Gulliver et al., 2023b; Vestergren et al., 2018). Current activists emphasized the importance of social support, normalization, and inspiration from activist peers in managing the stress associated with the norm violations inherent in civil disobedience. These relational resources helped buffer doubts about efficacy, suggesting that when instrumental gratification becomes unstable or limited, social gratifications gain importance in sustaining engagement. However, the importance of social embeddedness depends on the activist's underlying motivations, in such a way that if social connection is not part of what an individual seeks, i.e. the 'demand' (van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2023), then even a supportive network within the group (the 'supply') may have limited impact.

Beyond serving as a buffer against doubts about efficacy, social embeddedness influenced activists' framing of efficacy itself. Our findings indicate that efficacy interpretations were partly shaped through reflective discussions among activists. Consistent with

Barr and Drury (2009), being socially embedded may prompt a pragmatic stance towards efficacy, motivated by the desire to maintain social connections within XR and one's identity as an activist. As Gulliver et al. (2023a) argue, re-evaluations of efficacy should not be trivialized as merely a means to mask failure but rather seen as a strategic prioritization of multiple aims of collective action to stay motivated. However, Barr and Drury (2009) caution that this process also carries a risk of leading to stagnation and could limit tactical innovation. Sceptical members who transfer or form a new organization with a different set of tactics may be beneficial for the overall climate movement. This diversification of the movement enhances the movement's capacity to engage a wider range of individuals.

The findings extend previous literature on social embeddedness through the accounts from former activists on barriers to social embeddedness. These included biographical differences, strategic conflicts, and a lack of clear structures for decision-making and handling interpersonal difficulties – factors reported as triggers for disengagement. Such frustrations have previously been linked to a reduced sense of empowerment and diminished positive emotions associated with activism (Barr & Drury, 2009) and by causing a misalignment between an individual's beliefs and identity and those of the group (Corrigan-Brown, 2011; Klandermans, 1997; Santos Nascimento et al., 2021). By including former activists, this study highlights how organisational shortcomings can disrupt social embeddedness and, in turn, influence activist trajectories – an issue explored further in the next section.

This study illustrates how organizational structure interacts with both social relations and individual motivations, and may function both as a barrier and a facilitator to sustained engagement. Organizational difficulties are common challenges within social movements (Gulliver et al., 2023b) with key issues including a movement's ability to manage conflicts, streamline decision-making, and navigate the emergence of informal leadership in leaderless structures. Our findings highlight the dual role of non-hierarchical, leaderless structures: while they promote inspiration and empowerment (Mannarini & Fedi, 2012), they also risk obscuring informal power dynamics and complicating decision-making processes (Fotaki & Foroughi, 2022; Sutherland et al., 2014). Activists saw the lack of clear structures for conflict resolution and decision-making as a source of frustration and disengagement. Addressing these issues requires a balance between maintaining the spontaneity and flexibility of grassroots activism and introducing some form of supportive structure – be it through clear working and decision-making procedures, leadership, or groups with specific mandates – to alleviate stress and frustrations. The absence of such a supportive structure may pose a risk to climate activism movements. From a demand and supply perspective (Klandermans, 2022), such organizational shortcomings frustrated the instrumental motivations of participants, who perceived the movement as ineffective in achieving its goals. Placed within the dynamics of disengagement model (Klandermans, 1997; van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2023), this mismatch contributed to declining commitment, illustrating how structural limitations can erode engagement.

While organizational dynamics can contribute to burnout, this study also shows that they may serve a protective function. Participants described the regenerative culture within XR – collective practices aimed at fostering emotional resilience and mutual care – as a key buffer against burnout. This finding aligns with prior research emphasizing the

role of supportive organizational environments in mitigating stress (Nepstad, 2004) and complements earlier work on individual coping strategies Downton and Wehr (1998); Driscoll (2020); Maslach and Gomes (2006); Chen and Gorski (2015).

Moreover, this study found that the tendency to adopt individual strategies to prevent exhaustion was shaped by activists' long-term perspective on efficacy and engagement. As previously discussed, such instrumental pragmatism appears to be linked to social and moral motivations, suggesting that self-care practices may likewise be informed by these motivations.

Conclusion and recommendations for organizers

From the analysis, four strategies for organizers aiming to retain members emerge: (a) strengthen social motivations through clear roles, opportunities to socialize, and conflict resolution frameworks, (b) prevent burnout by promoting open discussions on signs of burnout and offering roles with varying intensity, (c) address efficacy doubts by offering continuous discussions about strategies and theories of change, and (d) acknowledge the opportunities and challenges with a leaderless organization, such as the likelihood of informal leadership and flexible decision-making procedures that can be perceived as unfair. Understanding the roles played by differing motivations and psychosocial barriers and facilitators is crucial for meeting the growing concern about the climate crisis with a resilient and adaptive climate movement.

Limitations and future research

A potential limitation of this study is its reliance on retrospective interview data, which may be influenced by participants' efforts to construct coherent and favourable narratives, particularly on sensitive topics like disengagement from activism. Future research could complement these findings with observational methods to triangulate the results and longitudinal designs to examine the dynamics of the 'transfer' and 'temporary abeyance' trajectories (Corrigall-Brown, 2011) in greater depth.

The qualitative methodology does not determine causality or the relative importance of factors. Future quantitative studies could assess the significance of identified factors and examine their relationships. Despite this limitation, future qualitative approaches remain essential, for instance, to explore how organizers can navigate the socio-organizational challenges discussed in this paper.

The generalizability of findings is shaped by XR's specific characteristics, such as its focus on sustainable internal culture and non-hierarchical structure. The scale and complexity of the issue that XR addresses – the climate crisis – may amplify doubts about efficacy, limiting applicability of findings to activism addressing more localized concerns. XR's use of civil disobedience introduces stressors unique to high-risk activism, potentially limiting generalizability to movements with similar tactics. That said, our participants did not cite the illegality of their actions as a sole reason for disengagement. Instead, stressors such as interpersonal conflicts, organizational challenges, and doubts about efficacy were more prominent, and these factors are likely to be generalizable across a wide range of activist movements. Finally, conducted in a democratic society with legal protections for

free speech and protest, this study's findings may differ in less liberal contexts. Expanding research to varied sociopolitical settings is essential to assess applicability. Nonetheless, factors such as social embeddedness, stressors, interpersonal conflicts, and efficacy doubts align with findings from other movements, indicating the relevance of this analysis beyond XR in Sweden and climate activism.

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Author contributions

CRedit: **Britta Eklöf**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Sara Vestergren**: Conceptualization, Validation, Writing – review & editing; **Magnus Wennerhag**: Conceptualization, Validation, Writing – review & editing; **Christian A. Klöckner**: Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

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