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Abstract: *This study examines climate change awareness and political engagement among university youth in Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, with particular attention to the role of democratic trust and institutional credibility. Using a qualitative research design, data were collected through in-depth interviews with university students to explore how young people understand climate change, the sources that shape their awareness, and the forms of civic and political action they adopt. The findings reveal that climate awareness is largely produced through informal learning spaces such as social media, peer networks, and NGO initiatives, reflecting gaps in formal education and state-led communication. While participants expressed great concern about climate risks, especially following recent floods, they demonstrated limited trust in governmental institutions and perceived environmental policies as largely symbolic. Rather than disengaging entirely, youth redirected their participation toward informal, community-based, and digital forms of climate activism. The study shows that democratic distrust does not result in apathy but reshapes environmental citizenship into decentralized and non-institutional practices. By situating youth climate engagement within a context of weak governance, the study contributes to understanding how young people in Peshawar, Pakistan negotiate agency, responsibility, and political participation under constrained democratic conditions.*

Introduction

Climate change is one of the major challenges of the twenty-first century, bringing with it ever more serious environmental, social, economic, and public health consequences. Pakistan is especially susceptible to climate-related disasters and has on several occasions been listed among the countries most affected by climate change. This susceptibility is exacerbated by its large population, reliance on climate-sensitive industries such as agriculture, and exposure to hazards such as heat waves, floods, droughts, and glacial lake outburst floods (Mirza & Latif, 2023). The devastating floods of 2022 underscored the extent of this vulnerability, affecting millions of people and highlighting the link between climate change, human security, and socioeconomic stability. Climate-related disasters can also transform environmental risks into immediate social and political concerns when communities directly experience their effects on livelihoods, safety, and everyday life (Singh et al., 2017). The 2022 floods further demonstrated the extensive social and economic consequences of climate disasters in

Pakistan and increased attention to the country's climate vulnerability and disaster preparedness (Iqbal et al., 2022).

Within Pakistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), and particularly Peshawar, provides an important setting for examining climate awareness and youth participation. Peshawar faces environmental pressures associated with urbanization, pollution, flooding, waste management, and changing temperatures. Research in the city indicates that people recognize the effects of climate change, including local heat and flooding, but remain less aware of appropriate adaptation strategies (Mujahid et al., 2022). Pakistan's vulnerability is also evident in its exposure to frequent floods and droughts, glacial retreat, declining agricultural productivity, water-related conflicts, and health risks (Government of Pakistan, 2012). The country's vulnerability to floods and droughts is projected to increase due to changing rainfall patterns, intensified flooding along the Indus River system, and worsening drought conditions (Aslam et al., 2017; Chaudhry, 2017). This gap between awareness and action is important because recognizing climate risks does not necessarily result in sustained civic participation. It therefore becomes necessary to examine how young people understand climate change and how their awareness is translated into environmental and political action.

Globally, youth have increasingly emerged as important actors in responding to the climate crisis. Movements such as Fridays for Future and other grassroots campaigns have transformed environmental politics by challenging political authorities, promoting intergenerational justice, and introducing new forms of participation (O'Brien et al., 2018; Pickard, 2024). These movements have also strengthened the political visibility of young people and raised questions about their recognition and participation within environmental governance (Rodela & Roumeliotis, 2024). The concept of environmental citizenship provides a useful framework for understanding this engagement because it connects environmental awareness with civic responsibility and active participation (Reis, 2020). From the perspective of republican freedom, youth activism can also represent civic agency through which young people challenge political exclusion, dependency, and domination (Pettit, 2012). Climate activism therefore extends beyond conventional political participation and may include community initiatives, online campaigns, clean-up activities, tree planting, and cooperation with civil society organizations. Globally, youth climate campaigns have mobilized large numbers of young people to demand political accountability and systemic environmental change (Kiilakoski & Mikko Piispa, 2023).

In Pakistan, however, youth climate activism develops amid institutional weakness, political uncertainty, and democratic distrust. Environmental governance has often been affected by limited implementation and institutional fragmentation (Government of Pakistan, 2012; Khan & Rehman, 2014). Consequently, young people may recognize the seriousness of climate change while remaining skeptical about the ability or willingness of political institutions to respond effectively. Rather than withdrawing completely from public life, some young people participate through informal, community-based, and digitally mediated activities. Such practices correspond with Pickard's (2020) concept of Do-It-Ourselves politics, which emphasizes decentralized and self-organized forms of civic participation. Research also suggests that youth engagement in Pakistan increasingly takes the form of social media campaigns, student-led environmental activities, and collaboration with civil society organizations, reflecting alternative forms of participation where confidence in formal institutions is limited (Ali & Rahman, 2021).

Universities are particularly important in this context because students represent future professionals, policymakers, and community leaders (El Zoghbi & El Ansari, 2014). Universities can encourage environmental knowledge, civic responsibility, and participation in sustainability activities (Abrar et al., 2023). However, research indicates that positive environmental attitudes among Pakistani university

students do not always translate into participation in environmental organizations and conservation activities (Aslam et al., 2022). Social media has also become an important source of climate information, providing young people with access to environmental debates and advocacy opportunities. Among young people in Peshawar, exposure to climate-related information through social media has been associated with willingness to participate in climate advocacy (Haq et al., 2025). Nevertheless, digital engagement does not necessarily lead to sustained physical participation. This distinction is particularly important in contexts where climate awareness is increasing but institutional opportunities for meaningful participation remain limited.

Despite growing research on climate awareness and youth engagement in Pakistan, limited attention has been paid to how university students in Peshawar negotiate climate activism amid political instability and institutional distrust. Moreover, youth climate research remains disproportionately focused on the Global North, leaving the experiences of young people in the Global South comparatively underexplored (Thew et al., 2020). This study addresses this gap by examining university students' perceptions of climate change, sources of environmental knowledge, forms of civic participation, and experiences of democratic distrust. It particularly considers how young people transform climate awareness into informal and community-based action while negotiating limited institutional credibility and political uncertainty.

Thesis Statement

This paper argues that although university students in Peshawar demonstrate substantial climate awareness and increasing engagement with digital environmental information, their transition from awareness to physical civic action is constrained by institutional distrust, political instability, and systemic barriers to participation. The study therefore examines the relationship between climate perceptions, information sources, democratic trust, and youth climate activism.

Research Questions

1. What are the current levels and patterns of climate change awareness among university students across different institutions in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa?
2. How does the level of climate change awareness among university students in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa influence their patterns of democratic engagement with climate-related issues?

Research Objectives

The primary purpose of the current study is to investigate climate change awareness among the youth in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and establish how the awareness influences political involvement and participation in climate-related actions. It is anticipated that the following results will be achieved:

1. To evaluate the degree of awareness about the climate change issue among the university students.
2. To examine how the level of climate change awareness influences students' attitudes toward climate change mitigation, and adaptation practices.

Literature Review

Youth awareness of climate change and political participation is an important research area in Pakistan, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), a region highly vulnerable to floods, droughts, glacial melt, and extreme weather (Mumtaz, 2025; Nouman, Rehman, & Begum, 2025). University students are especially important because they can influence public debate, support environmental initiatives, and contribute to future policy development (Mikelayi & Wumaier, 2023). Existing literature suggests that climate awareness can encourage environmentally responsible behavior and political participation, although these relationships are influenced by social, cultural, educational, and political contexts (Ojala, 2015).

Youth Climate Awareness: Global and National Perspectives

Globally, young people have become increasingly active in responding to climate change through movements such as Fridays for Future. Their activities include protests, educational campaigns, community initiatives, and political advocacy (UNICEF, 2021). Education plays an important role in developing climate knowledge because it enables young people to understand environmental risks, evaluate information, and make informed decisions (Kiril, 2020). In KP, youth are also important participants in political and social discussions. Habermas' Public Sphere theory highlights how young people can use spaces of communication and discussion to participate in social and political affairs and strengthen democratic practices (Saud et al., 2020).

Climate Change Awareness among Students

University students occupy an important position as future professionals, leaders, and policymakers. Their knowledge of environmental issues can influence future policies and community-level climate action (Lee et al., 2020). Universities can strengthen climate awareness by incorporating environmental education into curricula and providing workshops, field activities, and practical learning opportunities. Campuses can also function as spaces for sustainable practices and climate initiatives. Furthermore, universities can facilitate discussions among students, policymakers, scientists, and civil society organizations, helping students connect academic knowledge with practical climate challenges.

Socio-Demographic Determinants of Climate Change Awareness

Research indicates that climate awareness among Pakistani youth remains uneven. Limited educational resources and weak institutional engagement contribute to gaps in climate knowledge (Jan et al., 2020). Education, location, and socioeconomic background significantly influence climate literacy (Fatima et al., 2024). Studies also suggest that people in mountainous regions such as Gilgit, Hunza, and Chitral demonstrate relatively high levels of climate awareness because their livelihoods are closely connected to natural resources and they directly experience glacier melt, changing agricultural conditions, and extreme weather. Urban residents and individuals with higher levels of education and socioeconomic status also tend to demonstrate greater climate literacy. These differences highlight the importance of accessible and context-specific climate education.

Education System and Curriculum Gaps

Pakistan's education system faces significant challenges in developing climate literacy. Existing curricula often emphasize memorization rather than critical thinking and practical problem-solving (Bukhari et al., 2024). Simplified and single-narrative textbooks may also limit students' understanding of complex environmental issues (Habib & Zain, 2025). Climate education therefore needs to move beyond memorizing environmental facts toward developing critical thinking, problem-solving, and awareness of local climate impacts. Teacher training, improved textbooks, practical activities, and collaboration between schools, universities, and environmental organizations can strengthen climate education.

Role of Media in Climate Awareness and Youth Political Participation

Media has become increasingly important in shaping young people's awareness and political engagement. However, climate change received limited attention in Pakistani journalism up to 2023 because of infrastructural and editorial constraints (Asif et al., 2024). However, now Education, media campaigns, and trusted community figures can therefore play an important role in expanding climate awareness (Hussain, 2024). Also, the Theory of Planned Behavior suggests that environmental knowledge and positive attitudes do not necessarily lead to action unless they are supported by social norms and a sense of personal efficacy (Butt et al., 2019).

Social media has also expanded opportunities for youth political participation. Studies in Pakistan,

including KP, indicate a strong relationship between social media use, political participation, political knowledge, and political efficacy (Ullah et al., 2024). Nevertheless, family influence, traditional political relationships, and limited opportunities for independent expression can restrict participation (Saud et al., 2020). Thus, political awareness does not always translate into meaningful civic engagement (Ibrar et al., 2023).

Climate Awareness and Civic Action in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

Climate-related disasters can transform environmental concerns into political and civic action. The 2022 floods, for example, made climate vulnerability more visible and encouraged young people to participate in relief activities, student organizations, and online advocacy. These activities combined community support with criticism of inadequate government responses (Ruja & Entcheva, 2025). University-based fellowships, workshops, green-campus initiatives, and youth networks can further connect climate education with civic participation. However, their long-term impact may be limited when programs depend on temporary funding or lack of institutional support (Khattak, 2019).

Youth climate activities often focus on visible and low-risk actions such as tree planting, awareness campaigns, and online advocacy. Although these activities are valuable, scholars argue that meaningful climate action should also address policy, resource distribution, institutional accountability, and the structural causes of environmental vulnerability.

Empirical Gaps

The literature shows that climate awareness and youth political participation in Pakistan are closely connected but remain uneven. While young people increasingly use digital platforms and democratic spaces for political engagement, gaps remain in climate knowledge and sustained civic participation. In particular, limited research examines how university students in Peshawar understand climate change, what sources shape their awareness, and how this awareness influences their political and civic behavior. This study addresses this gap by examining the relationship between climate awareness and youth political participation among university students in Peshawar. It also highlights the need for stronger climate education, institutional support, accessible information, and meaningful opportunities for youth participation in climate governance and democratic processes.

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research design to explore young people's awareness of climate change and political participation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. This approach enabled an in-depth understanding of students' experiences, perceptions, and views on the relationship between climate change and political behavior.

Data were collected through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. Each interview lasted 30–45 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. Field notes were also taken. The study was conducted at the University of Peshawar, with students selected from different academic disciplines, particularly Environmental Science. Approximately 10–12 students were targeted, with interviews continuing until thematic saturation was reached.

Purposive, non-probability sampling was used to select participants with relevant knowledge of climate change and political participation. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis. Relevant statements were coded and grouped into broader themes, including climate-related risks, barriers to political participation, and the role of education in developing climate awareness.

Ethical principles were maintained throughout the research. Participants were informed about the study and their participation was voluntary, with informed consent obtained before each interview. They were also informed of their right to withdraw at any time. Anonymity was maintained through the use of

pseudonyms, while audio recordings and research data were securely stored and accessible only to the researcher. The researcher maintained cultural sensitivity, respected participants' views, and avoided imposing personal opinions during the interviews.

Findings

This analysis examines in-depth interviews with environmental science students at the University of Peshawar concerning youth activism, climate issues, and democratic distrust. Six themes emerged from the data, beginning with informal climate awareness and extending to the reimagining of environmental citizenship.

Climate Awareness through Informal Learning Spaces

The findings show that students' understanding of climate change is shaped less by formal education than by informal learning spaces, particularly social media and peer networks. Nearly all participants identified YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram as important sources of climate information. These platforms provide rapid, visual, and accessible information while connecting local experiences of flooding, smog, and deforestation with global climate narratives.

Talha explained:

"Because a significant portion of the conversations on climate change are occurring on social media, I tend to receive most of my information on social media. The various pages, videos, and posts give explanations in simple terms about climate, and they also relate international issues to the way they are in our area, which makes me perceive the problem better."

Kashan similarly emphasized the real-time nature of social media:

"Whenever there is a natural disaster, with videos and pictures, I'm always updated within a short span of time."

Ali, one of the interviewees, viewed social media as an effective tool for raising awareness and encouraging youth participation through campaigns and discussion.

Peer interaction was another important source of learning. Another participant, Tanveer, noted that discussions with friends allow students to critically evaluate different viewpoints and develop understanding through shared experiences and mutual learning.

University seminars and workshops were recognized as spaces for shared learning, but students considered them infrequent and limited in their wider impact. Abrar stated:

"Universities have carried out several initiatives such as giving lectures, carrying out research and running small projects. Yet the effect of these actions is still mainly limited to the university campuses and has not yet reached the broader community."

Kamran, another participant, added that students outside environmental science receive limited environmental education and therefore depend on social media, NGOs, and online campaigns. Some participants also reported creating awareness pages or translating climate information into Urdu and Pashto.

Overall, informal learning compensates for weaknesses in formal environmental education. It makes climate knowledge participatory, locally relevant, and socially constructed. However, access to these spaces is unequal because students with better internet access and digital literacy are more likely to benefit. Thus, informal learning is both empowering and fragile, providing awareness while sometimes leaving knowledge fragmented or superficial.

Institutional Distrust and Performative Governance

Students consistently expressed skepticism toward government environmental programs, particularly

tree-planting and awareness campaigns. Although some acknowledged initiatives such as the Billion Tree Tsunami as positive in principle, they questioned their transparency, monitoring, and long-term effectiveness.

One participant stated:

"Thousands of trees are planted often with great publicity to showcase the success of plantation campaigns. However, planting a tree is only the first step; ensuring its survival requires consistent monitoring, watering, protection, and long-term maintenance. Unfortunately, once the campaign is over, proper follow-up is often neglected. As a result, many of the newly planted saplings fail to survive, turning large-scale plantation drives into symbolic exercises rather than meaningful environmental action. The focus should therefore shift from the number of trees planted to the number of trees that actually survive and grow into mature trees."

Bilal similarly argued:

"The government likes publicity, not results, and so the efforts of the government are symbolic rather than substantive or real."

Students associated environmental governance with weak accountability, bureaucratic inefficiency, and tokenism. Yahya emphasized the absence of regular supervision and evaluation, while Kamran criticized the lack of scientific monitoring of tree survival.

Concerns also extended to universities. Students observed contradictions between sustainability seminars and campus practices, including plastic use, inadequate recycling, and energy waste. These inconsistencies weakened institutional legitimacy because students evaluated environmental governance not only through official claims but also through visible outcomes.

This distrust affected participation. Bilal explained:

"We also attend the tree-planting drives only when held by an NGO. Government incidents are pretentious."

Institutional distrust therefore pushes youth away from formal channels and toward informal spaces where they perceive greater authenticity and freedom. It represents not simply frustration but a response to perceived gaps between policy promises and practical outcomes.

Informal and Adaptive Climate Activism

Despite institutional limitations, students demonstrated active engagement through personal, community-based, and online forms of activism. Their activities included tree planting, clean-up campaigns, plastic reduction, awareness seminars, and social media campaigns.

Ali described creating an Instagram page that discusses local floods and air pollution in Pashto, emphasizing that people relate more easily to issues affecting their surroundings. Kamran described community clean-ups and tree planting:

"We pick bottles; we plant the trees by ourselves; no one in the government assists us."
Talha reported participating in awareness sessions, tree plantations, and social media campaigns through Facebook, Instagram, and his climate-related page, climatology.pk. Other participants mentioned NGO-led tree planting and student campaigns concerning vehicle emissions.

These activities demonstrate adaptive agency. Rather than waiting for institutional authorization, students use their immediate networks of friends, classmates, NGOs, and online communities to create opportunities for action. Kashan summarized this approach:

"We cannot change the entire system but can improve our surroundings. Even small

actions at the community level matter.”

Informal activism therefore represents adaptive climate citizenship: young people work around institutional barriers through creativity, collaboration, and ethical commitment. However, these activities depend heavily on individual motivation, time, digital access, and resources. There is also a risk that environmental responsibility becomes privatized, with students performing responsibilities that should partly belong to the state.

Democratic Disillusionment and Political Withdrawal

A strong theme across the interviews was democratic disillusionment. Many students considered voting, party membership, lobbying, and other forms of formal political engagement ineffective. Politics was often viewed as concerned with power rather than public interest, while participation was associated with risk, stigma, and family discouragement.

Faisal explained:

“Politics is very dirty in Pakistan, and thus our families do not encourage us to participate in it.”

Ali argued that young people feel their voices are not heard, while Bilal stated:

“When youth are not taken as meaningful stakeholders, it discourages us from engaging in political processes.”

Students also identified political polarization and limited opportunities for participation as barriers. Kamran noted that students struggle to find opportunities that fit alongside education, employment, and other responsibilities.

However, this withdrawal should not be understood as apathy. It reflects disappointment with ineffective institutions. Kamran explained:

“I’m not uninterested; I just don’t see any result.”

As confidence in formal democratic structures declines, students redirect their civic energies toward community work, volunteering, and environmental awareness. This represents a shift from institutional to moral citizenship. Nevertheless, the withdrawal of young people from formal politics can further reduce opportunities for institutional reform, creating a cycle of alienation and ineffective participation.

Education, Class, and Moral Responsibility

Students often described themselves as educated and morally responsible citizens who feel obligated to act when institutions fail. Education increases environmental awareness but does not necessarily provide opportunities to convert knowledge into practical or political action.

Irshad summarized this gap:

“The government only reacts when disasters happen, and the universities teach only theory but not practical activism.”

Environmental engagement was frequently framed as a personal moral duty rather than organized political participation. Ali explained:

“Peshawar is my hometown, and I feel responsible for protecting it.”

Similarly, Ijaz stated:

“I’m motivated by the idea that change starts with us.”

This moral framing allows students to understand environmental activism as responsible citizenship. At the same time, it creates a burden because educated young people are expected to compensate for institutional weaknesses despite lacking the authority and resources to produce systemic change.

Education is therefore both empowering and frustrating. It develops awareness while exposing students to the limitations of governance. Youth environmentalism consequently becomes a form of self-

governance in which students assume civic responsibility through everyday environmental action.

Reimagining Environmental Citizenship

The final theme concerns the redefinition of environmental citizenship. Students construct citizenship through everyday practices of care, cooperation, and informal activism rather than formal political participation. Their activities include tree planting, campus clean-ups, online awareness campaigns, and collaboration with NGOs.

Faisal explained:

"We don't wait for the government; we do what we can. Although our actions might be tiny, they enable us to make a difference practically."

These practices represent an alternative civic space based on trust, cooperation, and community relationships. Students rely on social networks, NGOs, and university communities rather than bureaucratic institutions. Their activism can therefore be understood as an everyday politics of care: decentralized, ethical, and community-oriented.

At the same time, this form of citizenship remains precarious because it lacks consistent institutional support. Nevertheless, it demonstrates that distrust in formal institutions does not eliminate civic engagement. Instead, it transforms its form. University youth in Peshawar increasingly practice environmental citizenship through localized action, moral responsibility, and collective care, creating alternative pathways for participation when conventional political and institutional channels are perceived as ineffective.

Discussion

The findings deepen understanding of how climate awareness among university students in Peshawar is produced, interpreted, and acted upon within a context of democratic distrust. Consistent with earlier work, climate knowledge is shaped far more by informal learning environments than by formal curricula (Jan et al., 2020; Bukhari et al., 2024). Social media platforms, peer discussions, and NGO activities serve as primary sites of meaning-making, enabling students to connect global climate narratives to local experiences of floods, heatwaves, pollution, and resource scarcity. While prior studies caution that such awareness can be fragmented or superficial (Fatima et al., 2024), the present findings show that informal spaces also enable translation into local languages, emotional engagement, and collective reflection, thereby strengthening perceived relevance and urgency (Ojala, 2015; Mujahid et al., 2022).

At the same time, reliance on informal learning highlights institutional shortcomings. Universities were perceived as offering technical or abstract knowledge with limited linkage to policy, governance, or civic action, reinforcing critiques of Pakistan's education system as insufficiently oriented toward critical environmental literacy (Habib & Zain, 2025). This disconnect contributes to a broader gap between awareness and effective participation, in which students understand climate risks yet feel ill-equipped to influence structural change.

Institutional distrust strongly shapes how youth interpret environmental governance. Echoing Ali and Rehman (2021), respondents framed state-led initiatives as performative, designed for visibility rather than long-term impact. High-profile programs such as afforestation drives were not rejected outright but evaluated through the lens of accountability, monitoring, and outcomes. This aligns with governance critiques that emphasize credibility and procedural legitimacy as prerequisites for meaningful civic engagement (Government of Pakistan, 2012; Khan & Rehman, 2014). The findings suggest that distrust is not an emotional reaction alone but a rational assessment based on repeated experiences of policy failure and symbolic action.

Importantly, democratic disillusionment did not lead to withdrawal from public life altogether. Instead,

it reoriented participation toward informal, adaptive, and community-based practices. Students engaged in clean-up drives, localized tree planting, online awareness campaigns, and collaboration with NGOs forms of action that reflects decentralized and low-risk engagement. These practices closely resemble what Pickard (2020, 2024) describes as Do-It-Ourselves politics and align with Reis's (2020) conception of environmental citizenship as lived responsibility rather than institutional membership. In republican terms, such engagement can be read as an assertion of civic agency under conditions of domination and exclusion (Pettit, 2012).

Climate disasters, particularly the 2022 floods, emerged as key politicizing moments. As Singh et al. (2017) suggest, direct exposure collapses the psychological distance from climate change, transforming it into an immediate concern tied to livelihoods, safety, and justice. Participants' narratives combined practices of care and mutual aid with explicit critiques of state inaction, reinforcing findings that youth climate engagement in the Global South often blends resilience-building with demands for accountability (Iqbal et al., 2022; Rodela & Roumeliotis, 2024).

However, the study also confirms tensions noted in the literature. Informal activism tends to prioritize visible, non-confrontational actions, which may leave deeper structural drivers such as policy incoherence, unequal resource governance, and political capture largely unchallenged (O'Brien, 2018). While these practices sustain agency and moral commitment, they risk individualizing responsibility and normalizing the withdrawal of the state from its obligations.

The findings extend existing scholarship by showing how environmental citizenship is being reimagined in Peshawar as ethical, relational, and community-centered amid democratic distrust. Youth climate activism here does not signal disengagement from democracy but rather constrained attempts at democratic renewal from below. Converting this energy into sustained transformation requires not only improved climate education but credible institutions capable of recognizing youth as legitimate stakeholders in environmental governance (Ali & Rehman, 2021; Mumtaz, 2025).

Despite these contributions, it has certain limitations. First, it is based on a relatively small qualitative sample drawn from selected universities in Peshawar, which limits the generalizability of findings to all youth in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa or Pakistan. Second, participants were predominantly university students, many from middle-class backgrounds, which may underrepresent the experiences of less-educated or economically marginalized youth who face different constraints and opportunities for climate engagement. Third, reliance on self-reported perceptions may overstate levels of awareness or activism, as participants could frame their engagement in socially desirable ways. Future research could address these limitations through mixed-method or longitudinal designs and by including more diverse youth populations.

Conclusion

This study sets out to explore how university youth in Peshawar perceive climate change and how this awareness translates into civic and political engagement within a context of democratic distrust. The findings demonstrate that young people are neither unaware nor indifferent to climate change. Instead, they possess a growing, experience-based awareness shaped by informal learning environments, climate-related disasters, and digital media. However, this awareness operates alongside deep skepticism toward state institutions and formal political processes. The study shows that democratic distrust plays a central role in shaping patterns of engagement. Youth participants largely viewed government-led environmental initiatives as performative and weakly implemented, which discouraged participation through formal political channels. Yet, this distrust did not lead to withdrawal from public life. Rather, it redirected engagement toward informal, community-oriented, and digitally mediated

forms of climate action. These practices reflect an alternative model of environmental citizenship grounded in moral responsibility, care, and collective action rather than electoral participation or party politics. At the same time, the findings highlight important limitations of such engagement. Informal activism, while meaningful, often remains localized and avoids confrontation with structural and policy-level drivers of environmental degradation. This creates a persistent gap between awareness and transformative change, where responsibility is increasingly individualized while state accountability remains weak. The study underscores the need to rethink youth political engagement beyond conventional measures of participation. In contexts marked by weak institutions and low trust, youth climate activism represents constrained but significant attempts at democratic renewal from below. Strengthening the impact of this engagement requires not only improved climate education within universities but also credible, transparent, and inclusive governance structures that can meaningfully incorporate youth voices into environmental decision-making.

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