

ARTICLE

The intimate socialities of going carbon neutral

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Abstract

This paper argues that the generation of social intimacy is critical to enabling acts of environmental care. By interrogating the intimate socialities of a group of young people who grew up in a village community committed to carbon reduction, I untangle the influence of everyday intimacies on everyday (un)sustainabilities, particularly in relation to the popular but uncritical positioning of young people as ‘sustainability saviours’. I problematise assumptions that young people’s social intimacies are a straightforward enabler of lifestyle change aligned with sustainability by highlighting the fluidity of intimacies and associated senses of trust throughout young adulthood. I argue further that capitalising on this fluidity might in fact amplify bottom-up environmental care if young people can move readily between networked spaces of trust and support. Drawing from scholarship on friendship, family and community intimacies and the substantial literature on households as crucibles for more sustainable living, I suggest there is considerable reconciliation work demanded at a personal level in order to live comfortably within the everyday intimacies of social life at the same time as committing to individual environmental action. These arguments advance debates around the optimal social drivers of more sustainable lifestyles, at the same time as sounding a cautionary note in relation to the too easy emplacement of responsibility for driving change at the feet of young people.

KEYWORDS

community, household, intimacy, peers, sustainability, young adult

1 | INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I unpick a problematic assumption about how shifts towards more sustainable living can be engendered. Specifically, in response to the framing of youth as key drivers of more sustainable modes of everyday living (Tannock, 2021; Trott, 2021; UNICEF, 2020), I explore the intricate socio-spatial intimacies that shape young people’s engagement with opportunities to ‘grow up green’. This discussion contributes to current debates around how young adults’ purported environmental care is/could be expressed (and with what impacts) (e.g., O’Brien et al., 2018; special issue of *Children’s Geographies*, 2021), while sounding a cautionary note in relation to too easy emplacement of

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responsibility for driving change at the feet of young people, and overlooking the responsibilities of others whose contributions to the climate crisis have been greater (Caney, 2014; Davidson, 2008; Tannock, 2021). While young people have been constructed as socially influential in ways that can help important causes (including the climate crisis) gain widespread traction (Birdwell et al., 2013; Tannock, 2021), an intrinsic yet un(der)acknowledged facet of this phenomenon concerns how the social relations at its heart actually work. This in turn obscures understanding of both the spatial and temporal reach of youth-led influence. Here, I apply critical insights from geographies of intimacy to some of the dominant debates—and assumptions—around how shifts towards sustainable living, and particularly young people's roles within these, happen in practice. Framing young people's experiences of environmental (in)action through the lens of intimacies uncovers all-too-real tensions at the lived intersection of environmental care, self-care, and care for and with others. It also reveals the paradoxes that characterise a contemporary mode of young adulthood premised on exhortations to 'do good' in a world characterised by escalating social and economic (Chaddah, 2022; McDowell, 2017), as well as environmental pressures, which promise to impact younger lives in generationally distinct ways (Bryant, 2022).

I suggest that, while the generation of social intimacy—underpinned by a sense of trust and support—is critical to enabling acts of environmental care by young adults, these intimacies can work in contradictory ways in relation to attempts to socially embed sustainable living across extended sections of the (young) life course. I argue that capitalising on this fluidity of youthful intimacies—that is, the flux in their social and spatial affiliations—might actually amplify bottom-up environmental care if young people can move readily between networked spaces of trust and support. In doing so, I build on recent scholarship which has broadened and deepened analyses of everyday intimacies by examining those beyond immediate families and couples (e.g., Heinonen, 2022; Wilkinson, 2014) in order to understand a range of contemporary socioeconomic challenges. I employ the term 'social relations' to describe the wide-ranging social interactions that characterise everyday life, including peer-to-peer relationships among young people, intergenerational relationships with family, friends, neighbours, communities and looser acquaintances. The term 'social intimacies' refers to expectations (realised or not) of care, trust and support from a subset of emotionally and/or spatially proximate social relations, which are premised on shared practical and/or emotional investments. Of primary concern are the ways in which the social relations and intimacies that characterised the case study village *concentrated* forms of trust conducive to my participants' embodied expressions of environmental care, while experiences of social relations and intimacies outside the village required compromises which ultimately *diluted* that commitment.

The terms young person, young adult and youth are used interchangeably throughout the paper to refer to those aged 11–30. This wide age bracket encapsulates periods of significant change—growing independence, changes in peer relationships, the advent of paid work, growing individual responsibility and autonomy, and increasing awareness of one's situatedness within a range of structures. On a pragmatic level, it also encapsulates the narrative timeframes of the participants in the empirical project discussed.

2 | YOUNG ADULTS, AMBIVALENT ENVIRONMENTALISM AND THE 'SUSTAINABLE HOUSEHOLD'

In the last two decades scholarship concerned with how attempts at sustainable living by individuals, within households, and across geographically specific communities are shaped—and sometimes stymied—by complex inter- and intra-generational socialities has developed apace (Chineka & Yasukawa, 2020; Klocker et al., 2017; Phoenix et al., 2017; Stanes & Klocker, 2016; Walker, 2021). At the same time, thanks to increasingly visible forms of youth-led action on the climate emergency (e.g., *Children's Geographies* special issue, 2021; Thew et al., 2020), the truism that 'youth are the (sustainable) future' feels justifiable. Yet the growing socioeconomic precarity in Global North economies, with its attendant practical destabilisation and emotional anxiety (Aeby & Heath, 2020; MacNeil Taylor, 2021), prompts significant questions about the extent to which young adults have the means to live up to the responsibility for 'being the change' that some discourses have assimilated (Sloam, 2020). This is aside from equally important ethical questions about the intergenerational injustice of placing such responsibility on the generation which has contributed least to the climate crisis (Diprose & Valentine, 2019).

Preoccupation with the more spectacular manifestations of young people's environmental concern, such as protest and other collective and/or public forms of activism (e.g., Bowman, 2020; Herbert, 2021; O'Brien et al., 2018), or convenient narratives around the potency of their 'pester power' as intra-familial influences on consumption (O'Neill & Buckley, 2019; Tannock, 2021; Trott, 2021), also detract from interrogating the lived mundanities of putting environmental

care into practice in the context of lives at home, at school, at work, and the spaces in-between, where a range of structural forces and potent social norms exert complex influences. Those who have explored these influences have, for instance, highlighted the ways even material environments designed for sustainable living have flaws that impact young people's day-to-day lives, including aesthetics that create a sense of awkwardness or embarrassment (Hadfield-Hill, 2013; Horton et al., 2015; see also Birdwell et al., 2013). These emotional responses to living environments forge an underdeveloped link between the mundane materialities of young people's everyday lives and their emotional responses to environmental concerns, particularly as they are experienced socially and spatially (e.g., with and through family, friends and neighbourhoods).

Such attempts at practical and emotional reconciliation of the competing demands of young adulthood are most commonly situated within broader household contexts. Yet households too occupy an ambivalent place within theoretical, practical and policy-driven framings of how to enable more sustainable living. There has long been recognition of the fact that the dynamics of the 'family household' play a significant role in individual and shared orientations towards, and practices of, everyday sustainability (Collins, 2015; Grønhoj, 2006; Klocker et al., 2017), with households being framed as potential 'crucibles' of more sustainable living as a result (Reid et al., 2010). Indeed, Raven et al. (2021), in their systematic review of households in the context of sustainability transitions, note that despite acknowledgement that households are socially dynamic and composed of mobile components (including people and ideas), little research has examined how transitions and transformations emerge from them to move across sites and scales. However, none of this is to say that such dynamics are necessarily always enabling of pro-environmental action. Klocker et al. (2017), for instance, illustrate how cohabiting multi-generation family households are replete with tensions, emotionally and practically, in terms of material reconciliation of apparently competing needs and wants. Sometimes it may simply be easier to maintain existing norms conducive to household or family intimacy, even when alternative ways of 'doing intimacy' at home align with environmental action, meaning that opportunities for what might be described as a politically attuned intimacy are missed (Jamieson, 2019; Phoenix et al., 2017).

It is also important to note a tension in meanings of home and household in this context. Feminist constructions of home note how it is shaped socially and spatially by competing subjectivities and demands (Waitt & Harada, 2019), a framing qualitatively different from policy-oriented framings of the 'household' (including in pro-environmental initiatives), which tend to overlook such complexities (Klocker et al., 2017). Specifically, the intimacies that characterise 'home' are often overlooked in framings of 'household' that privilege the practical fulfilment of everyday needs, despite the fact that those intimacies are often central to those processes. Recognising this is important if the position of young people—within homes and wider communities—is to be taken seriously, since it is their social intimacies that underpin their positioning as influential pro-environmental agents. Price and Epp (2016), and Price-Robertson and Duff (2018) view families as assemblages which generate new 'lines of flight' (Price & Epp, 2016, p. 69) as their constituent units couple and decouple, a framing particularly pertinent to young adults leaving the family home, either taking practices with them or becoming disconnected from them. Tannock (2021) also notes the inevitable growing up of young people which, he implies, means they 'age out' of some of the social spaces where their environmental care (or activism) is nurtured. This growing up and moving on has been a long unspoken premise underpinning the championing of young people's environmental action; that is, they become environmentally committed and active adults who express this across realms of everyday life (home, work, leisure). In this respect, young adults' transposal of their pro-environmental inclinations into the contexts of their independent adult lives is merely illustrative of claims made for the significance of 'critical junctures' in life transitions (e.g., leaving home, co-habiting with a partner, having children) as moments where habits are tested and renegotiated (Burningham & Venn, 2020; Shirani et al., 2017). Indeed, it is this 'carrying-with' of embodied environmentalism that is fundamental to temporally and spatially enduring 'lived sustainability'.

The partiality of research into how (and, indeed, to what extent) young adults *actually live* their concerns with sustainability, coupled with the already acknowledged practically and theoretically muddy realities of the (un)sustainable home/household, illustrates the need for close scrutiny of the lived intersections of the social, spatial, material and emotional in the context of young people's embodied environmental care. I argue that these fundamentally determine the ways in which young people (can) 'do' sustainable living in a range of shifting household contexts, and I position the social intimacies that characterise young adulthood as a distinctly ambivalent and contradictory mediating force. Below I unpick the implications of these intimate tensions through the findings of a recent research project focused on the experiences of a group of young people who grew up in an English village committed to reducing its collective carbon footprint.

3 | GROWING UP GREEN

This paper draws on analysis from an RGS-IBG Small Grant funded project, 'Growing Up Green'. The project centred on Ashton Hayes¹ (referred to locally as simply 'Ashton'), a village in the north-west of England which, in the mid-2000s, stated its intention to try to become carbon neutral. The 2021 census gave the village population as 954 and its demographic is heavily skewed towards professional and high-skilled occupations (social grades AB, UK Office for National Statistics). Since the 'Going Carbon Neutral' project (henceforth GCN) launched, Ashton has achieved carbon reductions of 40% from its 2006 baseline, based on household behavioural changes and home improvements, such as installation of solar PV, heat pumps and insulation (www.goingcarbonneutral.co.uk, 2017). The scope of the 'carbon neutrality' aspirations within GCN had to be simultaneously ambitious yet achievable and inclusive in order to maintain community engagement. GCN was therefore framed around an aspiration to achieve 100% carbon neutrality (scope 1 and 2 emissions), although a target date was not set. While quantifiable improvements each year were sought (and achieved) via annual household surveys,² equally important was an approach to 'sustainable living' that centred accessibility and participation as much as reductions in negative impacts. In other words, it was recognised that some residents' professional lives, health conditions or other circumstances impacted their capacity to engage in some carbon reducing behaviours. This did not preclude anyone who wanted to engage with GCN's aims from doing as much as was within their means.

GCN emerged in a national government and policy context (led by the UK Labour government from 1997 to 2010) characterised by significant support for the shift towards more environmentally sustainable communities. Indeed, the emphasis during much of the early 2000s was as much on the 'community' as it was on the 'sustainable' (e.g., Hargreaves, 2011; Hobson, 2003), thus encouraging participation, engagement and collaboration across localities and across generations and other social 'divides' (Hadfield-Hill, 2013). The nature of villages, like Ashton, as often inherently socially tight-knit entities (a trait generative of challenges as well as opportunities) may have been especially enabling of the community intimacies required for a large-scale community project to succeed. It should be noted that all this was achievable because within its population Ashton had local expertise able to capitalise on national government funding opportunities available at the time, develop mechanisms for measuring impact and evaluation, as well as understand—and find compelling—arguments around the need to respond to the climate emergency. The privileges of the socioeconomic profile of the village thus undoubtedly played a key role in the successes of GCN. It is in this context of substantial knowledge and collective support that the experiences of Ashton's young people should be situated. I note this context for its own sake, but also to enable comparisons between the social intimacies that characterised my participants' lives within and outside the village.

From the start of GCN, young people in the village were drawn into the project primarily through attendance at the village primary school (which was, and remains, strongly committed to climate and nature education); they were not the focus of any specific interventions, nor were they explicitly framed as a distinct group of actors. Rather, they were understood as village residents who might (or just as easily might not) take an interest in the project of their own volition, or as a result of exposure to the interests of family members and friends. For my participants—who, at the start of GCN, ranged in age from upper primary school to sixth form college—their assimilation was largely through family dinner table conversations, ad hoc chats with family friends encountered around the village, and through village socialities such as evenings in the pub or volunteering stints in the local community shop.³ As the data discussed here demonstrate, it was the cross-generational, cross-family socialities that proved particularly potent in creating lasting impressions on my participants.

Between November 2018 and March 2019, 11 young adults who had 'grown up green' in Ashton Hayes were interviewed, following email introductions from key gatekeepers in the village and subsequent snowballing of the contact request. They ranged in age from 19 to early 30s, with most at the upper end of the age range. One participant who was still local to the area was interviewed in person in the village. A second who had returned to the village on a break from her university studies was interviewed in person in a nearby city. All other participants were interviewed via telephone or Skype as they were now living some distance from the village, including one overseas. Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 min, and all were audio recorded with participants' permission for later transcription. The project received ethical approval from Department of Geography & Environment ethics committee.

I move now to articulate specific themes within the growing literature on geographies of intimacies salient to the analysis presented here. I connect the intimacies of familial and peer relationships to framings of youth in discourses not just of what sustainable living looks like, but more significantly, the social mechanisms for getting there. I use this critical stance on young people's emplacement in these processes to question what the implications might be for broader understandings of 'sustainable lifestyles' of acknowledging these complex social intimacies. I then draw on my interview data in a discussion organised around three interlinked spheres of my participants' social intimacies.

4 | EVERYDAY INTIMACIES OF FAMILIES AND FRIENDSHIP

In the context of my concerns here, ‘intimacy’ refers to the simultaneously spatial and socio-emotional closeness that enables and is enabled by a sharing of place, concerns and social relations (Valentine & Hughes, 2012). It emerges through overlapping, reiterated practices, refers to both the quality of a relationship and the process of building that quality, and it has the capacity to be an encouraging and enabling force, as well as a source of pressure, confrontation, provocation and anxiety (Heinonen, 2022; Jamieson, 2011). Lauren Berlant’s observation that ‘... intimacy also involves an aspiration for a narrative about something shared, a story about both oneself and others that will turn out in a particular way’ (Berlant, 2000, p. 1; cited by Conran, 2011, p. 1455) highlights the value of intimacy as a practical tool in shared social projects that seek to create a specific future scenario, and thus as an analytical tool in the context of GCN’s impacts. Scholarship within and beyond geography concerned with the meaning, nature and impacts of intimacies is substantial and wide-ranging. Here I focus on a subset of that literature in order to focus on three key dimensions of intimacy as experienced within and at the intersection of adult and young adult lives: (i) how intimacy is created by and manifested within different socio-spatial configurations; (ii) its role in building and maintaining individual and collective senses of confidence and competence; (iii) the circumstances within which it creates anxieties that inhibit or undermine actions.

The mundane muddling through that characterises everyday life as lived in homes and neighbourhoods forms a key context for the building of intimacies. A growing literature concerned with how young adults ‘make home’ (e.g., Gorman-Murray, 2015; Holton, 2016; Hopkins, 2010) highlights the recursive relationship between social, spatial and material intimacies, with important attention drawn by Wilkinson (2014) to the intimacies of close relationships beyond traditional, heteronormative notions of family and partnership, and how unpartnered intimacies are positioned in relation to a range of structural, social and material forces and impacts. At the same time, the persistent economic precarity that characterises young adulthood in both the UK and elsewhere maintains these intimacies as fragile, susceptible to breakage with each shift in job or home. The house-sharing, for example, that for older generations was perhaps confined to a short period in early young adulthood, now commonly extends to young adults well into their 30s (and beyond) as stable accommodation proves increasingly unaffordable (Hoolachan et al., 2016). While house-sharing can be an experience ripe with new friendships, and thus positive social intimacies, it can equally be a source of significant tension, distress or ambivalence (Heath et al., 2017; Heinonen, 2022; Maalsen, 2019).

Regardless, cohabitation in shared space—whether individual dwelling, street or wider community—demands ongoing processes of negotiation and compromise, which themselves are generative of forms of trust fundamental to intimacy. Sometimes these negotiations are personal and interior—‘should I do this, or should I do that?’—and in this context, Valentine and Hughes (2012) highlight the home specifically as somewhere where individual actions can be hidden or revealed in order to (attempt to) escape judgement from others. At other times, such negotiations are not only shared, they can profoundly impact a sense of comfort in place, particularly when they are experienced intergenerationally (Yarker, 2019, 2021) or through repeated encounters or shared activities (Gorman-Murray, 2015). Indeed, it has been argued that it is regular intergenerational sociality that is essential for the transposition of, and sustained engagement with, environmental concerns for young and old (e.g., Hadfield-Hill, 2013; Martens, 2016). Central to encouraging and enabling actions aligned with sustainable living has been the notion of ‘action competence’ (Almers, 2013)—a sense that one’s actions will have the desired, positive impact premised on: (i) knowledge of action possibilities, (ii) confidence in one’s own influence and (iii) the willingness to act’ (Olsson et al., 2020, p. 742). Fundamental to the generation of this confidence is the encouragement and validation that emanates from trusted social intimates (e.g., MacKay et al., 2020), and it is this shared competence building that has, historically, been foundational to many of the ‘sustainable living’ initiatives targeted at both young adults and households (e.g., Hobson, 2003; Moloney et al., 2010).

Multi-generational participation has been identified as critical in maintaining pro-environmental practices and sense of individual and collective efficacy precisely because of how it broadens the scope of both the collective contribution and the accompanying social validation (Lakew, 2020). In their consideration of the relational production of friendship amongst young Finns, Korkiamäki and Kallio (2018) observe that, ‘... as friendships blend in with familial life and adults socialise with kids, kith and kin merge into socially established, inclusionary intergenerational communities ... By sharing their “amiable everyday”, young people and adults create intergenerational interplays where new opportunities may emerge from anyone’s initiative’ (p. 80). As such, inter-familial, inter-generational spaces of friendship prove critical to the development of interpersonal trust, itself critical to the willingness to create and embrace socially new ‘ways of doing’ everyday life. Spaces where shared interests (environmental or otherwise) are nurtured provide an important crucible in which young adults begin to learn what ‘success’ looks like and how it can be achieved (Holton, 2016). These shared explorations further build intimacies in recursive ways, based on practical and emotional shared investments. However, emphasis on the benefits of social

intimacies for young adults' agency should not obscure the fact that social intimacy, and its innate space for judgement, can also inhibit such actions. Norms that construct intimacies as 'normally' positive bely their negative sides, including judgement and rejection (Forstie, 2017; Maclaren, 2014), the latter arising when the boundary work that comprises intimacies begins to collapse, revealing aspects of an individual's 'backstage' or private life (Jamieson, 2005).

For young people, one of the few realms over which they wield some agency is their personal material consumption. Whilst consuming with peers can form an important social bonding experience, it can also be fraught with judgement and anxiety, with some young people reporting shaming from peers on the basis of making the 'wrong' consumption choice (Isaksen & Roper, 2008, 2012). Pelikán et al. (2020, p. 424) refer to an 'economy of dignity' that mediates young people's relationship to the objects and processes of consumption because of their deep desire to feel belonging and acceptance. Although this might primarily be interpreted with reference to acquisition, the concept has broader resonance, being equally applicable to the full schema of consumption (including acts of divestment) as well as decisions *not taken* because of anxieties about peer perception. For this reason, the 'backstage' space of the home is somewhere that young people are sometimes more able to escape from the expectations or pressures of the 'outside world', including from peers (Hopkins, 2010), although this does not negate the difference tensions that characterise home and family life. Nor does the home necessarily constitute 'backstage' when that home is shared with peers, as commonly—and often protractedly—experienced by young adults in the Global North. Holton (2016) describes young adult homes (especially peer-shared homes) as places where power dynamics, responsibilities and the 'unwritten rules' of each distinct household space have to be (re)negotiated, creating ample space for tensions or disagreements (see also Gorman-Murray, 2015; Heinonen, 2022).

Below I draw on interviews with my study participants (all attributed pseudonyms) to illustrate how the shifting intimacies of their young adulthoods modulated their expression of environmental care. I use the term 'environmental care' as a broad category to describe both their understanding of actions aligned with the reduction of environmental footprints (including carbon emissions) and their ability and inclination to act on that understanding in the context of their everyday life-worlds. The discussion is organised around three different socio-spatial intimacies: intergenerational, peer and anticipated.

4.1 | Intergenerational intimacies

... a lot of people from the school weren't necessarily, they were from outside villages as well, so they, whereas if you were in the village people were at the community shop, people would literally just talk about it [the Going Carbon Neutral project] in the shop because I worked, helped out, volunteered in the shop and Gerry would come in and talk to [everyone] because he worked in the shop and they'd be talking about meetings, it was kind of constant for me, yeah.

(Georgie, 19)

In this quote Georgie alludes to the ways in which village socialities maintained the visibility of GCN and contributed to its social validation as something to be involved with. The village school and volunteer-run community shop were critical sites of social validation inhabited at different times by my participants, as were the sports pavilion (built to the highest energy efficiency standards via government grant funding awarded to the GCN project) and the village pub. Haydee (aged 21) noted that the village's previous success in buying the village shop to run as a community enterprise, and the volunteering committed by residents of all ages (including some of this study's participants), meant that not only was there already shared commitment to local concerns, but residents had also tasted success with a significant community project.

These instances of cumulative social interactions produced a validation *concentration* effect through the ways in which discourse and practice enculturated new ways of doing aspects of everyday village life. Simultaneously, the visibility of locals joining in with community initiatives (including those part of GCN) has been shown to be important in the context of other climate action initiatives (i.e., the motivating effect of 'social comparison' noted by Burchell et al., 2016). Particularly valuable in Ashton was the conspicuous 'joining in' of well known, respected locals who had previously expressed resistance to becoming part of GCN—and this was noticed by my participants. Haydee noted:

I think having someone that other, kind of, more members of the community as well that maybe aren't related to the school or aren't related to whatever, having like the landlord of the pub, it just brings it a bit more

down to earth so some people think ‘oh okay, actually it’s kind of everyone’, it’s not just maybe something that seems a bit removed from them.

The diversification of residents involved with GCN generated what has been termed ‘thick trust’ (Williams, 1988), whereby social validation enables particular actions and feelings through creating a sense of security. My participants’ enrolment into the activities of village life, including initiatives specific to GCN (such as an environment-themed pub quiz), contributed to the generation of *intergenerational* thick trust, which proved critical as both an enabler of engagement at the time and lasting personal commitment to GCN’s ideals. Tim (29) illustrated the concentration of these social relations when he made the following comment:

Well, it was all through Gerry really and kind of, the different initiatives he was with, and the conversations either with him, with Alice [Gerry’s partner] or with Rich [their son], in terms of, yeah, kind of what was going on and what that whole kind of thing was around. And then, I mean, I’m not sure whether you’re interviewing Graham [study participant], but kind of conversations with him and his mum as well around, yeah, kind of what was happening, and I kind of started participating...

Graham (30), building on Tim’s reflections, said: ‘I was a young person in that community at the time—that has an impact on your perception of the [climate] challenge and people’s ability to have an impact on what that looks like’. This illustrates Stanes et al.’s suggestion that, ‘... the decisions made early in the biography of a particular age cohort or generation may become locked-in ...’ (Stanes et al., 2015, p. 56). In other words, for Ashton’s young adults, the layered intergenerational and inter-familial intimacies were fundamental to their sense of action competence as they ‘grew up green’.

However, these relationships were not static. Tim (29) who had not lived permanently in the village since leaving for university at 18 said:

Those relationships have kind of, I mean, don’t really happen anymore unless they see each other in a local shop or what not. So, no, I probably would say that my parents aren’t really aware of anything that is going on within Ashton at the moment because I don’t think many of their friends live in the village anymore.

Noting that, since he and his friends all moved away from the village, their parents see one another less often, Tim illustrates how the village young adults’ ‘growing up’ created fissures in social intimacies that extended beyond their own peer group. The result was that some older adults (like Tim’s parents) whose engagement with GCN was driven by core actors (such as Tim and his friends) become dissociated from the initiative, as key actors—the young adults themselves—moved away. This process of *diluting* both social intimacies and associated shared environmental commitments emphasises the gravitational role of key social nodes within broader networks (or communities), highlighting in particular how the presence of young people in place-based initiatives like GCN can act as a form of social glue to hold together wider intergenerational networks of actors. Further, it illustrates the challenges of maintaining the social intimacies that are fundamental to engagement and enculturation within projects like GCN when the social fabric of the community changes over time.

4.2 | Peer intimacies

The role of peer influence among youth, particularly in the context of consumption behaviours—sustainable or otherwise—has been treated somewhat uncritically. Linear influences have tended to be assumed, in which young adults follow the lead of dominant peers (e.g., Thürmer et al., 2020), often because of anxieties about judgement for acting otherwise (Isaksen & Roper, 2008, 2012). Haydee illustrated the more complex realities of doing everyday consumption with peers when she described attempting to shape new domestic norms in her university flat share:

I saw that Camden Council were advertising the fact that they’d introduced these food caddy bins, because I’d, we’d always used that at home so I always, I thought oh I’ll get one of those and I don’t know if my friends had used theirs at home in their household as much as I had at ours ...

She noted, with apparent sadness and frustration, that her diligence towards waste reduction and recycling had largely been met with teasing by her flatmates, albeit with some begrudging, if haphazard, compliance. Haydee found herself having to

tread a careful line between maintaining behaviours that were important to her, and that she considered important to share, and maintaining a sense of social harmony in her flat share (Clarke et al., 2017; Holton, 2016). This tentative, stop-start influence illustrates a far messier reality than dominant peer influence narratives have portrayed and emphasises how expressions of environmental care can ultimately be *diluted* by the prioritisation of conflicting social intimacies.

Further, studies of peer influence among young people have tended to focus on short-term consumption (e.g., moments of acquisition of material things), at the cost of broader views of how the material processes of consumption are situated in and shaped by time, place and social relations. In *Growing Up Green*, a key aim was to take this 'long view', reflecting on the role played by friendships in engaging with the GCN project both during my participants' residence in Ashton and subsequently in their adult lives away from the village. What became evident was how friendships played very different modulating roles depending on participants' age. Paul (22) reflected:

I think when you're in primary school you don't really have any sort of worries about, yeah, showing off and that kind of thing because, yeah, it's sort of kind of what you want to do and you would sort of be like 'oh yeah, we're doing this at home, we're doing that'. Whereas I think, yeah, maybe when you get to high school ... everyone has very different sort of priorities and probably were a bit more like, I think probably, yeah, trying to fit in and sort of shouting about how environmentally friendly you are is not probably the way you are going to fit in ... Especially teenage boys, all you want to do is make some friends and try and fit in and there's lots of other things you are going to worry about more than the environment when you are 14 years old.

Georgie (19) concurred, saying:

... at primary school you just don't really care and then you don't really come into your own and don't care what other people think 'til you're probably 17 or 18, you don't, I don't think I felt like I could have my own opinion on things, I kind of was worried everyone would judge me ... when I came home I could just be like 'oh, make sure we sort out all the recycling' no one's going to see me organising the bins outside the house if you know what I mean. So, yeah, whereas I think if I'd lived where I went to school and people are walking past all the time, I'd be much more ... wary? I guess I didn't want, I wouldn't have wanted people to see me looking like, I don't know, I feel like people would maybe judge me if they saw me trying to be eco-friendly.

Paul and Georgie's comments highlight two important things. First, they reveal the prevalence of social risks that characterise particularly the middle-teenage years and underline the potency of these risks for modulating young people's behaviours, even those (such as environmental care) they consider personally important and embrace away from peer-dominated spaces (like school) (e.g., Dunlop & Rushton, 2022). Here the risk of social dilution of environmental care is significant. Second, home is positioned as the corollary of this—a space where individual actions can either be undertaken freely, whether for personal satisfaction or in order to achieve validation from others, or they can be hidden, or carried out discreetly, in order to escape judgement (Valentine & Hughes, 2012). These dynamics, which shape and are shaped by everyday intimacies of domestic life, demand greater recognition of the bumpiness that characterises adolescence, such that periods of higher social risk—such as the mid-teens—can be understood differently from other periods of childhood and youth, in terms of their capacity to enable outward expression of environmental care.

Because the bumps in the road inevitably sit between smoother patches. The later teenage years—in the UK a phase which aligns with college, university and/or employment—appeared to be one such patch. Graham (30) noted this when he said:

... you know the stages of sixth form [college] and university and the years after, where everyone is interested in political debate has a really optimistic if not naive, youthful sense of their ability to influence change.

Graham, Rich and Tim all described climate change as the 'go-to topic' among their friendship group during college, with Graham noting their growing interest in discussing and debating as a mode of peer group interaction. It was at age 17–18 that Graham and Tim devised their own project in support of GCN's aims. Having taken a particular interest in the village's shared electric car, they devised a series of 'how to ...?' user guides and videos to encourage community use of the vehicle. While Tim described enjoying the 'freedom' to formulate this project on their own terms, both he and Graham noted that there was an element of self-indulgence at work as they knew their project would help build their CVs for their future careers. At the same time, just as their project also enabled further cultivation of

inter-familial, intergenerational intimacies, the ‘freedom’ Tim described was itself the product of an already existing set of intimacies and ‘thick trust’ within a tightly defined friendship group and wider community with shared concerns. The concentration of those overlapping intimacies in turn concentrated Tim and Graham’s expression of their environmental interests into an activity of both personal and community benefit.

The fluctuations in young adults’ social affiliations—between different moments in adolescence, and even at different times of day—should give those keen to responsabilise them reason for caution. As my participants demonstrated, there is considerable personal vulnerability, and attendant emotions of anxiety, to be managed in those moments when the risk of social opprobrium is high. Although there has been growing acknowledgement of the way that the climate emergency is feeding anxiety among young people (Wu et al., 2020), there has been less consideration of the fact that some of that anxiety might be as much about their peers’ response as the environmental threat itself.

4.3 | Anticipated intimacies

I’m still growing up, as it were, maturing in various ways ...

(Jake, 28)

The positioning of young adults as our planet’s best ‘hope for the future’ is premised on the hope that they will grow up committed to greater environmental care than have many of the generations preceding them. This anticipatory view, while not without both practical and ethical flaws, emphasises a futurity which—beyond being central to the global sustainability challenge and young people’s positioning within it—is inherent to the notion of ‘growing up’ and ‘moving on’ which underpinned the Growing Up Green project. A sense of anticipation was, perhaps unsurprisingly, evident in my participants’ thoughts about their capacity to enact the environmental knowledge gained through ‘growing up green’ as they became older adults. Central to these anticipated futures were the ways in which changes in important social relationships—partners, friends, future household and/or family configurations—were imagined to enable ‘adult’ lifestyles characterised by a sense of stability conducive to acting on environmental knowledge.

My participants were at a range of life stages—the youngest (two were aged 19) were just starting university, the oldest (in their early 30s) were established in their chosen professions. Their current socioeconomic circumstances were in some ways quite different, but there was a common thematic thread around anticipated or aspirational futures that can be summarised by the phrase, ‘Maybe in a few years’ time ...’ Across the group there was a tendency to defer implementing learning from ‘growing up green’ to a point in the future around 3 years away. This ‘three-year rule’ was true regardless of the age of the participant, perhaps reflecting a desire for the time for action to be tangibly close, in order to enable hope and aspiration, but not so close that it would present feelings of pressure or guilt for not being enacted sooner.

Laura (25) was, at the time we spoke, working part-time as a primary school teacher while completing a Master’s degree, and sharing a house with a housemate. Here she describes her frustrations with not being able to afford to buy the kind of food she would like, at the same time as looking forward to a point where she hopes different choices will be available to her:

Yeah, I’m in quite a difficult position at the moment, just because the Masters as I say has been taken down to part-time, so I needed part-time work, but obviously part-time work doesn’t bring in as much money. And so when I was full-time last year it was much easier to balance kind of all the bills that you’ve got to pay and then be able to source kind of like, if we say in terms of food, kind of what I’d really like to purchase. So I’m in a position at the moment where as much as I dislike it in many ways I think for these three years I’m just going to have to accept that [budget supermarket] has become my friend, and will continue to be my friend. And then after that when I see myself kind of settling down more and so on then I can really think about what I want it to look like.

Laura’s reference to ‘settling down’ was a common point of reference across several—although not all—participants. It can be understood as a logical recourse to an imagined stability, in terms of income and type and location of accommodation, but also in terms of the kinds of social stability conducive to the intimacies that, in GCN, were so enabling of shared commitments to and enactments of everyday sustainabilities. However, these imagined future lifestyles were not seen to always make enactment of environmental care easier. Several participants identified what they saw as trade-offs requiring reconciliation in the context of their ‘settled down’ future adult lives—indeed, some were wrestling with these already.

Family and romantic relationships formed a large part of my participants' future imaginaries. As he relayed aspects of his biography since leaving Ashton, Rich explained that he had met his American wife when they were both students and that maintaining their relationship—particularly when she worked in China for 2 years—presented a considerable challenge to his previously strongly held personal commitment to only taking one return flight per year. The environmental impact of this travel continued to be something he wrestled with:

I'm not in the mood for, you know, 12 months without seeing her or something, something ridiculous like that. And also because both of us want to see the world, we do fly more than we, well, than I feel we should and also with her being American, we go to see her family. So, I don't know if that, I still don't feel that I can justify doing it but I do it.

Rich recognised that he was in the privileged position of having the resources to enable such a quandary. Indeed, amongst those of my participants who were more established in their chosen professions there was implicit recognition of what might be seen as an affluence trap. Tim and his girlfriend, like Rich and his wife, enjoyed adventurous travel in their leisure time. Unlike Rich, Tim seemed less troubled by the costs—broadly defined—of this consumption:

I'm trying to think whether I would ever reduce my flying. I think I'd be more tempted to book a flight and then pay the added extra to make this flight carbon neutral, pay an extra £20 kind of thing, as opposed to not taking the flight in the first instance. And I think that's definitely something, I mean, that's probably one of the easiest things, I think, that probably had an impact on me from the whole carbon neutral project is kind of seeing problems like that and kind of having that willingness to pay extra to balance it out.

This underlines a long-standing but under-researched and under-critiqued tension within sustainable lifestyles research—the extent to which those high in multiple forms of capital (economic, cultural, social) have both the means to learn about and respond to the climate crisis in the context of their everyday personal and community lives, and the means to justify aspects of their consumption as excusable exceptions to the rules. There is no doubt that the professional expertise within Ashton Hayes was characterised by significant economic, social and cultural capital, and these were manifested in the GCN project in ways explicitly designed to do environmental good. These forms of capital—unsurprisingly—transferred to the young adults in the village, and were manifested in professional and personal lives that it seems are truly global, both in terms of environmental knowledge of the climate crisis, but also aspirations to have shared experiences of far-flung environments and cultures. In the concluding section I consider the implications of tensions like these for the salience of the quest for children to 'grow up green' and the associated responsabilisation of young adults.

5 | CONCLUSION

Here I have sought to highlight how the underacknowledged shifting intimacies of young adults—across space, scale and time—complicate the assumptions that too easily frame them as 'sustainability saviours'. As the participants in 'Growing Up Green' demonstrated, 'growing up' involves negotiating and reconciling competing emotional and practical demands in the context of cultural pressures, social expectations, awareness of the scale of global environmental breakdown and—for young adults in Britain—ongoing economic precarity. For these reasons alone, Jamieson (2019) quite rightly describes as 'naïve' arguments around both individualised and community action for sustainability where these unhelpfully simplify the situated nature of these actions. The shifting intimacies my participants revealed played out against—and were a function of—recursive movements between everyday spaces of trust (e.g., the village) and spaces of anxiety (e.g., school), and the critical junctures that characterise 'growing up', such as leaving the family home and navigating partner relationships (Burningham & Venn, 2020). The state of practical and emotional flux that characterises young adulthood—the sense of a need to wait for an anticipated (or imagined) future point of stability—aligns with the inherent futurity of sustainability as a (lived) concept (Shirani et al., 2017). In other words, the fact that my participants imagined their ability to *really* put their knowledge from the GCN project into practice was about 3 years away—regardless of their age and life stage at the point of interview—could be read as a sincere aspiration to reduce their individual carbon footprints when their personal and professional lives allowed. Nevertheless, in the short term, kicking the can down the road meant that opportunities presented by key transitional moments were missed, not intentionally, but because of other over-riding priorities.

What, then, can be done about this stymied potential? I suggest that the response is not to question or limit the potential of projects like Ashton Hayes Going Carbon Neutral; rather it is about creating *more* of them in order to enable *networks* of place-specific initiatives produced by—and productive of—intimacies of commitment, mutual support, and shared environmental care (cf. Kudo et al. [2020] on translocal learning for sustainability, and Pickerill [2020] on scaling up eco-communities). These might be (residential) community-based initiatives, but they might equally be workplace-based initiatives, not least because of the dominance of employment in (young) adult life. The critical point is the need to proliferate those spaces within which environmental care can flourish in a context of mutual trust and support. The generation of social intimacy is fundamental to this. This is not to say that enabling such a network is the only thing that needs to happen. In order for young adults to make best use of the environmental knowledges and dispositions they have the systemic issues around the precarity of young adulthood—specifically in relation to work and accommodation—need to be addressed at a national scale. As Tannock (2021, p. 183) writes, citing climate justice activist, Ahlers (2020), ‘No matter how much one admires the revolutionary potential of the youth’ who are ‘on the streets today ... they cannot by themselves shape the political and social structures that are necessary for a green and just transition’.

To close, I want to acknowledge that the forms of austerity that continue to amplify many young adults’ precarity in Britain were at some distance from the experience of the Growing Up Green participants. As MacNeil Taylor (2021) (and many others) demonstrates, how austerity shapes everyday intimacies has a bearing on individuals’ subsequent orientations to a wide range of challenges, opportunities, and everyday events. For that reason, whilst a detailed consideration of this has been outside the scope of this paper, it is important to note the significant heterogeneity within young adults’ everyday intimacies, not least along lines of class and race, and how in turn this shapes their inclinations towards environmental care. This should further increase the urgency and broaden the scope of attempts to create the social and economic stability young adults require to play their part—alongside older others—in safeguarding their (sustainable) futures.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data for this project is not.

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ENDNOTES

¹The decision to name the village, rather than attribute a pseudonym, was taken in discussion with GCN project leads, and with their full permission. Given the considerable media coverage the village has attracted over the years, it was felt that there was no need for anonymity in the context of academic publications. All participants have, however, been attributed pseudonyms as part of standard good ethical practice.

²These incorporated questions on a range of lifestyle themes, including domestic energy use, travel for holidays, consumption of local produce, and recycling.

³The Ashton Hayes community shop—run entirely by volunteers since the business’s previous owners decided to sell—was an initiative that predated GCN. The previous success of this local initiative constituted beneficial groundwork at the outset of GCN, as the shop provided proof of the local benefits of collective action.

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