

Master's thesis – Master Sustainable Development

# Linking action and imagination:

*How climate court cases open up the public imagination and fuel inspiration*

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“This is a movement from my heart and for my heart.” – Respondent 21

*Woman, 73 years old, Basel, Switzerland, activist with the Swiss KlimaSeniorinnen*

**Abstract:** The 2015 Paris Agreement has given rise to a new trend of climate litigation: strategic climate court cases. Distinct from traditional environmental litigation, these cases – often started by activists – aim to bring about broader societal shifts, such as advancing effective climate policies, raising public awareness, and changing the behaviour of governments and industry actors. While the legal and economic impacts have been widely studied, the more symbolic and societal impact of these cases received limited to no attention. This research studies climate court cases as a source of inspiration. A media analysis and 25 in-depth interviews with Dutch and Swiss climate activists revealed that strategic climate court cases expand the horizons of what people can imagine, thereby opening up the possibility space for new ways of thinking, believing and doing. Building on the theory of imagination and imaginaries, this study underscores the central role of imagination in transformations. Imagination of how things may become motivates action towards change, and in turn, societal change further expands the imagination. Imagination can be studied at individual and collective levels; this multi-level research explores both. At the individual level, it introduces a novel operationalisation of inspiration, considering the role of emotions in bridging imagination and action. Here, inspiration is understood as a combination of (1) expanded imagination, and (2) increased emotional energy, which resonates to feelings of enthusiasm, empowerment, a sense of social connectedness, hope, and motivation. Interviews with Dutch and Swiss climate activists reveal that climate court cases instil new realisations and beliefs about citizens' political agency, climate accountability, and potential (future) systemic changes, while also increasing individuals' emotional energy. The latter is found to serve as the emotional engine that propels imagination and motivation for action. At the collective level, conducting a media analysis, this research explores whether climate court cases can be considered an imaginary: an idea or vision that has garnered widespread recognition and is institutionally stabilised, publicly performed and collectively held. Lastly, confirming this premise, this research studies the dynamics between a shared imaginary and individual imagination and inspiration, underscoring the relevance of imaginaries as they provide individuals with validation and a sense of support for their ideas, values, desires, and emotions.

**Key concepts:** Imagination, imaginaries, emotional energy, climate action, strategic climate court cases.

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### List of abbreviations

CCC	Climate Court Case
SMO	Social movement organisation
ECHR	European Court of Human Rights

# 1. Introduction

*In 2015, the Dutch environmental organisation Urgenda – together with 900 Dutch citizens – sued the Dutch state for not taking sufficient action to prevent global climate change and won. A court case like this had never been held before. The judge’s verdict gained worldwide publicity and in more than twenty other countries lawyers started similar court cases (Mommers, 2022). In the Netherlands, Milieudefensie followed in the footsteps of Urgenda by starting a lawsuit against Shell, demanding Shell to align its business plans to the goals of the Paris Agreement. Again, Milieudefensie won. The Guardian wrote: “Shell’s historic loss in The Hague is a turning point in the fight against big oil.” (Khan, 2021). More recently, the Dutch citizen’s movement Fossilvrij mobilised ABP’s pension participants to exert pressure on ABP – the largest pension fund of the Netherlands – to stop investing in fossil fuels. Fossilvrij prepared a court case against ABP, but before the judge got involved, ABP announced that it would sell its shares in companies that extract oil, gas and coal (NOS, 2021). At the time of this writing, another notable court case has been, for the first time, brought before the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. A group of elderly women has sued the Swiss government for violating their right to life and health by failing to curb emissions, given that older women are particularly vulnerable to heat-related illnesses (KlimaSeniorinnen Schweiz, n.d.). This case has the potential to cause a domino effect, as the verdict will influence how the 46 countries that are members of the European court will handle similar claims. Twenty years ago, we could have probably not imagined these relatively small groups of climate activists – the ‘Davids’ – fighting governments and corporate giants – the ‘Goliaths’ – in court, and the judges deciding in favour of the climate activists. However, now we can.*

Society faces major challenges like climate change (IPCC, 2023), biodiversity loss (IPBES, 2019), inequality, poverty and injustices (Alvaredo et al., 2018; Beauregard et al., 2021) that threaten our future. Climate scenarios indicate that more detrimental effects will follow if we do not act upon climate targets now (IPCC, 2023). Growing levels of awareness of the climate crisis and its related issues go hand in hand with an increased sense of negative emotions among citizens worldwide. Feelings of despair and powerlessness are widespread (Ogunbode et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2018). People realise that effective responses to the interlocking sustainability challenges require far-reaching transformations in economic, social, technical, political and cultural systems (Moore & Milkoreit, 2020; Riedy & Waddock, 2022; Simoens et al., 2022). Consequently, arguments contending that individual efforts to address climate change have limited impact as long as governments continue to fall short of their ambitions to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius, and major polluting companies persist in emitting substantial greenhouse gases, find resonance among citizens worldwide (Hickman et al., 2021; Kennedy & Givens, 2019; Stanley et al., 2021). However, despite these feelings of powerlessness and perceived lock-ins in the current systems, thousands of civil society organisations and a growing number of (young) climate activists are working towards a more just and sustainable future (Fisher & Nasrin, 2021).

According to Green (2016), change in complex systems like societies usually occurs slowly. However, occasionally, there are sudden, unpredictable jumps that can disrupt social, political, or economic relations and “open the door to previously unthinkable reforms” (p. 16). Such an event took place in the Dutch context on the 24<sup>th</sup> of June 2015, when the The Hague District Court decided in favour of the Urgenda Foundation, ruling the ground-breaking landmark decision that the Dutch state must urgently and significantly reduce emissions in line with its human rights obligations (Cox, 2016; Urgenda, 2019). This climate court case set precedent for other social movement organisations (see Fossilvrij, n.d.; Milieudefensie, n.d.). While there may be scepticism regarding the extent to which the Urgenda and Milieudefensie cases have achieved concrete results in terms of policy changes, given the limited compliance with the court rulings and the ongoing appeal by Shell (e.g., BNN VARA, 2022; Heijkants & Mesters, 2021; Kraan, 2023; RTL Nieuws, 2023), one could argue that they have had a concrete effect on ABP. For ABP, the threat of a lawsuit by Fossilvrij was enough to announce to stop investing in fossil fuels.

While climate litigation is nothing new, it has experienced a substantial increase worldwide. Over 1200 cases have been filed in the last eight years, and roughly one-quarter of these cases were initiated between 2020 and 2022 (Setzer & Higham, 2022). Moreover, the legal ambitions of these cases have shifted over the past ten years. The 2015 Paris Agreement – which recognises the importance of the engagement of “all levels of governments and various actors” in addressing climate change – has given rise to a new trend of climate change litigation, referred to in the literature as *strategic climate court cases* (Beauregard et al., 2021; Nedevska, 2021; Peel & Osofsky, 2020; Setzer & Higham, 2022). In contrast to traditional environmental litigation, these cases – often started by social movement organisations – go beyond the concern of an individual litigant and aim to bring about some broader societal shift, such as advancing effective climate policies, raising public awareness or changing the behaviour of government and industry actors (Nedevska, 2021; Setzer & Higham, 2022). Against this background, strategic climate court cases can be considered a new wave or ‘next generation’ of climate action, gaining popularity and momentum.

## 1.1. Research gap

The Dutch climate court cases – together with similar cases in other countries – have been widely studied. A literature review by Peel and Osofsky (2020) shows that the specific scholarship of climate change litigation is currently thriving in law and social sciences. However, these studies mainly centre on the legal aspects (e.g., Minnerop, 2019), such as the arguments used by plaintiffs and defendants, the legal frameworks used (e.g., De Graaf & Jans, 2015; Lin, 2012; Nedevska, 2021; Peel & Markey-Towler, 2021) and the administrative, political and economic consequences (e.g., Macchi & Zeben, 2021; Nedevska, 2021; Spier, 2020; Wonneberger & Vliegthart, 2021). Other studies beyond the legal field have analysed the effectiveness and achieved results of the cases in addressing climate change (e.g.,



Ariani, 2019; Butterfield, 2018; Preston, 2016; Setzer & Vanhala, 2019; Wonneberger & Vliegenthart, 2021b). In this perspective, especially the legal and the direct impacts of climate court cases have been studied extensively.

However, little to no attention has been paid to the broader and more indirect impacts of these court cases as a new form of climate action. Therefore, this research focuses on the transformative impact of the court cases and aims to uncover their potential for establishing new narratives within the transition towards sustainability. In this light, this research explores the wider, more symbolic value of climate court cases and studies them as a source of inspiration that may bring new realisations about the present and visions of the future, thereby expanding the horizons of what people can imagine.

Against this background, the court cases represent a new narrative that stresses the urgency for national and corporate climate measures and highlights the immediate responsibilities of states and emission-intensive companies to limit future global warming (Paiement, 2021). This narrative might shift the public understanding of climate responsibility and climate justice. Nevertheless, the link between climate court cases and public imagination has not been studied yet. Therefore, this research investigates whether climate court cases expand the imagination of publics at individual and collective levels, thereby opening up the possibility space for new ways of thinking, believing and doing.

## 1.2. Research objective and research question

The objective of this research is to provide empirically derived insights on whether and how the phenomenon of strategic climate court cases expands the individual and collective imagination, and to explore whether and how this inspires further climate action. In this light, the following research question has been formulated:

*How do strategic climate court cases open up the public imagination in a way that has the potential to inspire climate action?*

Several sub-questions have been formulated, which are outlined after the theoretical chapter, in section 2.6.

## 1.3. Scientific relevance

This research not only addresses the empirical research gaps regarding the scholarship on climate court cases as I mentioned above, but also makes theoretical and methodological contributions to the emerging literature on imagination and inspiration in the context of climate action and sustainability transformations.

According to Hawlina et al. (2020), social movements can open up the public imagination. In turn, imagination also plays a key role in supporting social movements, as people's imagination of how

things may become motivates action (Hawlina et al., 2020). In this research, I understand the *public imagination* as the combination of (cognitive-emotional) processes of imagination in individuals and collective imaginaries that are shared within a group or society. This thesis will investigate imagination at both levels.

Expanding on the theoretical contributions of this study, this research actively links imagination to action. In recent studies, several authors argue that the dynamics of imagination in driving social change and social movements requires further research (e.g., Hawlina et al., 2020; Moore & Milkoreit, 2020; Riedy & Waddock, 2022). Although the importance of processes of imagination has been highlighted in scientific literature, empirical research into the dynamics of individual and collective processes of imagination – especially in linking it to action – is lacking (Moore & Milkoreit, 2020).

Therefore, at the individual level, I propose a new operationalisation of ‘inspiration’ to link imagination processes to climate action. With this thesis, I introduce the theory on emotional energy within the scholarship of imagination, which – building on the work of Summers-Effler (2002) – refers to a long-term level of enthusiasm, personal strength, a sense of social connectedness and motivation. Here, I hypothesise that climate court cases can motivate further climate action through a process of inspiration, which involves both (1) an expansion of the imagination and (2) the provision of emotional energy.

Furthermore, at the collective level, individual visions can become more widespread, ending up as an *imaginary*. Broadly speaking, imaginaries can be understood as how people collectively see, think and dream about the world, and how they – in the context of social change – envision making changes in that world (Riedy & Waddock, 2022). Hence, imaginaries shape the mindsets and paradigms out of which people act. Therefore, they are crucial to sustainability transformations (Riedy & Waddock, 2022). However, the causal roles and social functions of imaginaries – including their roles in motivating action – are poorly understood and remain undertheorized (Milkoreit, 2017). Lastly, scientific evidence is lacking on the interactions between individual *imagination* and collective *imaginaries* in climate action (Davoudi & Machen, 2021). Hence, this study also aims to explore the mutual relation between individual processes of imagination and imaginaries at the collective level, and how they might affect each other in motivating climate action.

This study also seeks to contribute to the existing literature through its methodological design, conducting a multilevel study. This thesis combines a media analysis with in-depth interviews. Most existing studies on imaginaries solely rely on textual sources, like media items or policy documents (e.g., Ferrucci & Petersen, 2018; González-Vélez, 2002; Herr, 2022; Mutter, 2021; Pearce et al., 2019). In this perspective, there is a scientific need to go beyond these textual analyses, and to create a better and deep understanding of imaginaries. In conclusion, regarding the field of sustainable development, this research contributes to the understanding of the interaction between action and imagination, both individually and collectively through imaginaries, relevant to climate action and sustainability transformations.

#### 1.4. Societal relevance

Effectively protecting the climate requires the action of individuals and groups (Fritsche & Masson, 2021). In this light, imagination can motivate individuals to start engaging in new behaviours and therefore lies at the heart of social change towards a more sustainable future (Milkoreit, 2017; Moore & Milkoreit, 2020; Shaw et al., 2009). The results of this research might provide a better understanding of how inspiring phenomena like climate court cases can open up the public imagination and increase the potential for climate action, which can be highly relevant for Dutch and foreign social movement organisations, politicians, and climate activists, located in all the countries where strategic climate court cases gain ground.

## 2. Theory

This chapter aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the relevant concepts, theories, and existing knowledge in the field of imagination and imaginaries, and emotional energy. The first paragraph (2.1) takes a broad perspective and explores how climate court cases can be situated within the context of sustainability transformations, examining the court cases through a lens of processes of societal "unmaking and making". Paragraph 2.2 introduces the relation between climate action and public imagination, on which I build in this research. Following this, paragraph 2.3 addresses processes of imagination and inspiration at the individual level. Hence, I aim to explore whether and how climate court cases (1) expand the imagination and (2) increase the level of emotional energy experienced— as a new operationalisation to understand inspiration and its potential for driving further climate action. In the fourth paragraph (2.4), I discuss the theory on imaginaries to study the role of societal imagination at the collective level. Lastly, 2.5 offers a summary and in paragraph 2.6, the conceptual framework and sub-questions are introduced.

### 2.1. Theoretical background: an introduction

#### 2.1.1. The transformative impact of strategic climate court cases

The subversion and disruption of current unsustainable structures, institutions, and systems is a critical component of sustainability transformations (Feola et al., 2021). Here, Feola (2019) introduced the concepts of 'unmaking' and 'making', stating that sustainability transformations do not come about through the mere addition of 'solutions' or social imperatives, but that they also require the subtraction of problematic existing institutions, practices, power structures and imaginaries – such as the modern capitalist imaginary of growth – to make space for alternatives (Feola, 2019; Feola et al., 2021). Against this background, it could be argued that strategic climate court cases (CCCs) actively work to deconstruct unjust and unsustainable practices and restructure existing power dynamics, thereby contributing to sustainability transformations (Païement, 2021). Consistent with this line of reasoning, Rutting et al. (2022) described the lawsuit filed by Urgenda, court cases against multinational fossil fuel companies like Shell, and the divestments from fossil fuels by pension funds like ABP, as examples of *disruptive seeds*. The theory on disruptive seeds argues that for sustainability transformations, it is essential to question the current power relations, expand our visions of the future, and focus the attention on positive, bottom-up, niche initiatives or practices (i.e., disruptive seeds) that offer a novel, hopeful way forward (Rutting et al., 2022). In this light, the authors argued that strategic CCCs can be regarded as such disruptive and hopeful seeds, since they actively challenge the currently dominant, unsustainable systems and associated actors (Rutting et al., 2022).

Returning to Feola's (2019) theory on sustainability transformations, he highlighted that the unmaking and making of (un)sustainable systems include both processes at the individual and collective level, as well as material and symbolic (de)constructions. Regarding the latter, CCCs do not only achieve

results in terms of divestments or more stringent climate measures but might also contribute to the more symbolic breakdown and replacement of certain dominant beliefs. For example, the court case against Shell might have led to the ‘closing’ of certain public imaginations and ideas of a world in which the future lies in the fossil fuel industry. Moreover, since relatively small social movement organisations (SMOs), run mainly by volunteers, are taking national governments and corporate giants to court and win, climate court cases could also reveal a power shift and might allow for the deconstruction of current unsustainable systems. At the same time, the strategic lawsuits might make space for alternatives, and can thereby contribute to the unfolding of a wide variety of new future visions and imaginaries. In this research, I focus on this more symbolic impact of CCCs in constructing new imaginations, both at the individual and the collective level. This research aims to investigate whether (and how) CCCs – functioning as disruptive seeds – open up the public imagination by expanding their beliefs of what is possible in a way that has the potential to inspire further climate action.

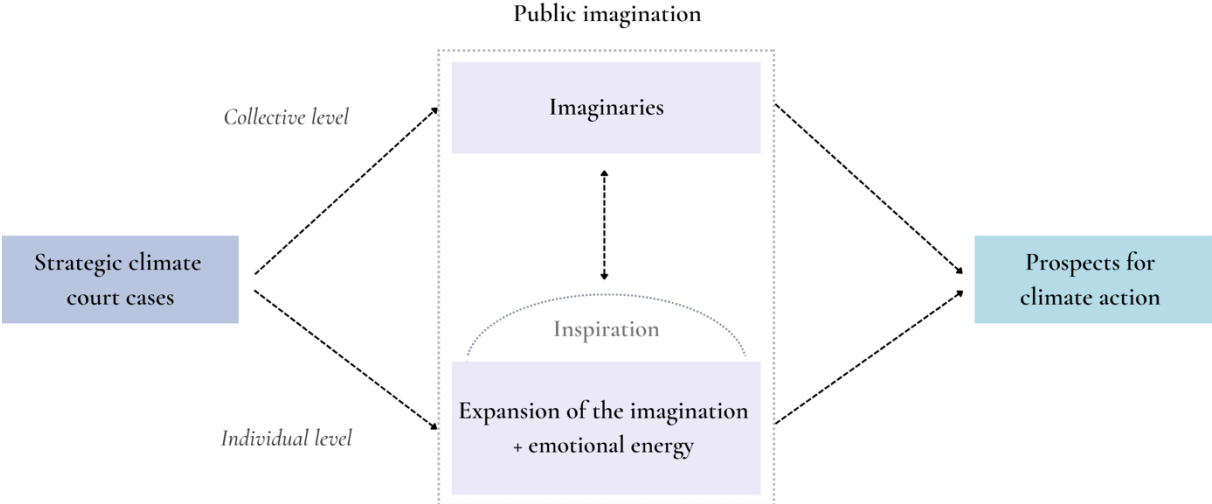
## 2.2. The role of imagination and imaginaries in driving climate action

Imagination concerns the ability to generate novel ideas and images of the present- and future-world, and has proven to be a necessary part of thought, abstract thinking, decision-making, problem-solving, motivation and action (Milkoreit, 2017). Processes of imagination are key to sustainability transformations. People’s dissatisfaction with how things currently are, their imagination of how things once were better or of how things may become often fuel social movements and (climate) action (Hawlina et al., 2020). As Milkoreit (2017) has argued, without the ability to imagine alternative possibilities to the existing systems and power structures in place, there would be no incentive to work towards change. Conversely, societal change is also key to the expansion of the imagination. When people witness new possibilities in action, previously unimaginable ways of being and doing emerge, opening up new imaginative possibilities (Hawlina et al., 2020). Thus, imagination and societal change are intertwined.

Imagination as a societal phenomenon can be studied at both the collective and the individual level. When visions and narratives of the future created by individuals or small groups are introduced to a broader public – for example via media attention – and become more widespread acknowledged, they may end up as *imaginaries* (Moore & Milkoreit, 2020). Imaginaries can be understood as collectively held images of the future. Examples of such imaginaries are ‘the circular economy’ or ‘the smart city’ (Jasanoff & Kim, 2015). Imaginaries set the horizons of societal imagination. Therefore, by expanding existing imaginaries and giving rise to new ones, new imaginative spaces are opening up, fostering the perceived possibilities for further climate action (Milkoreit, 2017; Riedy & Waddock, 2022).

These theoretical underpinnings form the basis of this research, as illustrated in Figure 1. In this research, I argue that CCCs as a new, innovative form of climate action expand the public imagination, thereby

introducing new ways of thinking and doing, which could foster the prospects for subsequent climate action. Here, *public imagination* is understood as the combination of collective imaginaries and individual (cognitive-emotional) processes of imagination. At the individual level, I argue that this involves a process of what I define as *inspiration*, which will be explained in the following section (2.3). At the collective level, I aim to study whether the phenomenon of climate court cases can be considered an imaginary – and how this relates to processes of inspiration at the individual level. The components of Figure 1 will be explained in more detail in the following paragraphs.



**Figure 1.** Illustration of the theoretical assumptions regarding the relation between climate court cases and prospects for climate action.

### 2.3. The individual level: A novel operationalisation of inspiration

At the individual level, I propose a new operationalisation of ‘inspiration’ in relation to climate action. In general, a clear conceptual definition of ‘inspiration’ is lacking in the literature (Smith, 2014). However, Thrash and Elliot (2004) have argued that inspiration involves two component processes: being inspired *by* and being inspired *to*. The first refers to “being awoken to the (perceived) intrinsic value of an elicitor object,” whereas the latter refers to “the motivation to actualize or extend the inspiring qualities exemplified in the evocative object” (p. 497). In this research, I will test both inspiring functions in relation to climate court cases.

As previously outlined in the introduction, an expansion of the imagination opens up the possibility space for new ways of thinking, believing and doing (Hawlina et al., 2020; Moore & Milkoreit, 2020). However, previous research has highlighted that while imagination can introduce new possibilities for climate action, it alone is insufficient to spur action (Moore & Milkoreit, 2020). Here, scholars have stressed the role of emotions (e.g., Alacovska & Holt, 2023; Fritsche & Masson, 2021; MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012; Moore & Milkoreit, 2020; Pereira et al., 2019; Pigott, 2018).

Emotions are intricately linked to imagination, as an expansion of the imagination is not confined to mere thought processes but is inherently tied to emotional experiences (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012; Moore & Milkoreit, 2020). However, scientific research on the role of emotions in linking imagination to action is lacking and existing results are ambiguous (Alacovska & Holt, 2023; Fritsche & Masson, 2021). Therefore, instead of focusing on short-term emotions, I introduce the theory on emotional energy within the scholarship of imagination, whereby high emotional energy refers to a longer-term mood of enthusiasm, agency, personal strength, hope, a sense of social connectedness and motivation. By doing so, I aim to gain a better understanding on how climate court cases affect individuals' processes of imagination and emotional energy, and what role this plays in supporting subsequent climate action. Hence, inspiration can be understood as a combination of:

- 1) The expansion of the imagination (the opening of new spaces for imagination – i.e., the perceived possibilities for action through new ideas, stories and practices (Milkoreit, 2017));
- 2) Increased emotional energy (inspiring actions might bring about feelings of high emotional energy, e.g., feelings of hope, enthusiasm, confidence and agency) (Summers-Effler, 2002).

The following paragraphs elaborate on the aspects of and the rationale behind this operationalisation.

### 2.3.1. Processes of imagination

In this research, I adopt the definition of imagination as proposed by Moore and Milkoreit (2020). The authors defined imagination as: “the interdependent cognitive and comprehensive social processes that generate shared understandings of the present and visions of possible future states of the world” (p. 2). This definition allows for an understanding of imagination as a potential capacity of individuals and groups pursuing sustainability transformations and emphasises the interaction between cognitive (individual) and social (shared) processes within processes of imagination. According to Moore and Milkoreit (2020), processes of imagination are both a way to learn about the world as it is – to gain an understanding of social reality through the (re)construction of knowledge – and a way to obtain resistance to reality by serving as a form of freedom of mind. Fulfilling both of these functions, imagination fulfils a critical role in societal change processes, as it enables individuals to understand reality and to possibly change it (Moore & Milkoreit, 2020). In this perspective, Milkoreit (2017) stated: “Explicit visions of desirable (sustainable) and undesirable futures are necessary to motivate and guide any kind of change, but might be particularly important for triggering transformational change – a process of fundamentally altering the structure and character of a given system.” (p. 1).

#### ***Three dimensions of imagination processes in sustainability transformations***

By conducting a literature review, Moore and Milkoreit (2020) distinguished three different analytical lenses or dimensions of imagination processes. These lenses represent three distinct roles imagination can play in sustainability transformations: (1) the role of imagination in transformative agency, (2) the

potential causal power of imagination in transformation processes and (3) imagination as a component of the dynamic relationship between the individual and the collective.

Firstly, from a *transformative agency perspective* scholars state that it is through imagination that the future is made present and that it enables agents to identify the actions or strategies that would support the achievement of the future goals in the present (Moore & Milkoreit, 2020). However, research in the cognitive sciences found that the mental processes of ‘future thinking’ share a common brain mechanism with memory. Hence, it is important to acknowledge that visions of the future are often vested in and shaped by the existing systems and power structures (Green, 2016; Moore & Milkoreit, 2020; Thagard, 2014), causing limits to possibility thinking. For example, fifty years ago, it would have been impossible to imagine Bitcoin trade. However, new ideas and experiences – like strategic climate court cases – can enter the possibility space for imagination. In turn, this expansion of the imaginative space can serve as a catalyst for novel imaginations and subsequent actions.

The second theoretical lens links imagination with *causation in transformation processes* (Moore & Milkoreit, 2020). Here, questions arise about the ways in which imagination may contribute to transformative changes. For example, Byrne and Uprichard (2012) considered the effects of imagination – the ideas, images and stories that are imagined – to be parts of trajectories or evolutions in transformation processes. However, Moore and Milkoreit (2020) concluded that the causal potential of imagination is only poorly studied, because both imagination and transformations are difficult to be reduced to linear assumptions or cause-effect analyses. Nevertheless, to study the causal power of imagination, the authors argue that it is necessary to connect the individual scale and the collective scale of shared future visions, collective behaviour, and institutional change (Moore & Milkoreit, 2020).

Following this, the third lens of *individual-collective dynamics* provides a perspective to explore how imagination connects individuals with groups, and how those collectives shape transformation processes. Imagination is not only a cognitive but also a social phenomenon. The brain does not function in isolation but receives continual input and feedback from its surroundings (Milkoreit, 2017). Thus, social dynamics, personal relationships, and group membership – for example within a social movement – also affect the contours and boundaries of the imagination (Moore & Milkoreit, 2020). The variety of social processes involved in processes of imagination is huge, including for example things like reading a book or watching the news. Once ideas enter the communication process between multiple individuals, they can contribute to collective meaning-making processes regarding possible futures (Milkoreit, 2017). The products of these processes are *imaginaries*, which will be further discussed in paragraph 2.4.

According to a recent study by Oomen et al. (2022) – “current scholars do not often address explicitly how certain visions of the future become a persuasive part of people’s lived experiences” (p. 257) and how (changed) imagined futures affect people’s behaviour. By empirically exploring the dynamics and processes related to all three analytical lenses as distinguished by Moore and Milkoreit (2020), this research aims to gain a broad and in-depth understanding of the transformative role of processes of



imagination. The three different dimensions – that are inherently interconnected – form the basis through which I aim to study the inspiring role of climate court cases, exploring the links between the (relatively new) concept of strategic climate court cases, public imagination, and the prospects for further climate action.

### 2.3.2. Linking imagination to action: Emotional energy

#### The role of emotions in imagination

As discussed before, imagination processes and action are inextricably linked to each other, whereby scholars stress the role of emotions. For example, MacIntyre & Gregersen (2012) argued that imagination is powerful partially because of the emotions that can be activated through imagining. Hence, the authors write that emotions “may be the key to the motivational quality of the imagined future self” (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012, p. 193). Building on this, Moore and Milkoreit (2020) stated that the inputs for action in the present are to a large extent generated through emotions activated in response to imaginations. Hence, emotions might serve as a catalyst, providing support for action that follows from processes of (expanded) imagination (e.g., Milkoreit, 2017; Pereira et al., 2019; Pigott, 2018). However, *how* emotions play a role in linking imagination to action has been left largely underexplored, and the results are ambiguous (Alacovska & Holt, 2023; Fritsche & Masson, 2021). For example, Pigott (2018) found that certain negative emotions can contribute to apathy, resulting in a lack of action, while positive feelings of hope might exhaust the horizon of our imagination and can thereby fuel action. Conversely, others argue that emotions of hope and optimism only serve purposes of emotional coping with threatening climate change and wishful thinking, which does not enhance further climate (Van Zomeren et al., 2019). Besides this lacking and mixed knowledge on the role of emotions in linking processes of imagination to action, previous research has often focused on the impact of negative emotions on climate action (Fritsche & Masson, 2021). Therefore, less evidence exists of the role of hope, optimism and inspiration (Fritsche & Masson, 2021). These insights correspond to Moore and Milkoreit's (2020) conclusion, stating that emotions are integral to individual and collective belief systems, but that “further research is needed to understand this link between imagination and emotions and its role in generating or suppressing transformative change” (p. 8). Against this background, I introduce the theory of *emotional energy* to explain how processes of imagination can increase the prospects for further climate action via the experience of (increased) emotional energy.

#### Emotional energy

Studying the development of feminist consciousness and the willingness of women to participate in resistance work against the gender hierarchy, Summers-Effler (2002) operationalised emotional energy and motivation for action. By extending the interaction ritual theory by Collins (1981) and Wiley's (1994) model of the self, the author presented a theory on how emotional dynamics between people and

within the self can produce critical consciousness and encourage resistance, which can thereby explain social inertia as well as the possibility for change (Summers-Effler, 2002).

To start, sociologist Randall Collins (1990) identified two types of emotions: (1) transient emotions like joy, embarrassment, fear and anger, that are dramatic and disruptive, and (2) emotional energy, which refers to a long-term emotional tone that is durable from situation to situation. The latter is experienced as the “long-term level of enthusiasm, personal strength, a sense of social connectedness and/or willingness to initiate interaction” (Summers-Effler, 2002, p. 42). In general, people are motivated to increase their level of emotional energy, whereby personal interactions over time teaches an individual which interactions and experiences are likely to build or lower their levels of emotional energy (Collins, 1981). Following this, Wiley’s model of the self (1994) stated that the self arises from the ability to anticipate the responses of others. Wiley saw thinking as communication between different parts of the self: the spontaneous ‘I’, the ‘me’ of the past, and the ‘you’ in the future. In this process, the emotional outcome of an interaction is used as information about whether one should avoid or seek out such interactions in the future (Wiley, 1994).

Building on this, Summers-Effler (2002) used the theory of emotional energy in the context of women in subordinate positions to illustrate how emotional energy lies at the basis of social change. She has argued that through experiencing solidarity and a collective identity, for example by sharing personal problems with others, women in subordinate positions can shift the blame for energy loss and apathy from themselves to the environment. This allows for the emergence of consciousness and awareness, exposing the social dynamics of oppression and overcoming feelings of powerlessness. A sense of injustice is critical in this process, as it moves the conflict out of the self and stimulates the experience of conscious anger. Negative emotions accompanied with feelings of injustice can then become the emotional fuel that contributes to the development of critical consciousness, which has the potential to motivate resistance and action. According to Summers-Effler (2002), this often requires an opportunity for awareness, which can be either constructed through group experience or caused by an external factor. Strategic CCCs could be considered such an external factor that can contribute to increased awareness, a sense of injustice and critical consciousness. As Summers-Effler (2002) argued: “The closer one is to consciously experiencing deviant emotions and understanding that they are shared across a social group with whom one identifies, the closer one is to experiencing critical consciousness.” (p. 51). Hence, seeing, hearing, or reading the news about the victories by Urgenda and Milieudefensie might have contributed to this realisation among individuals who felt concerned and/or angry about the climate crisis, but struggled with feelings of impotence and despondency.

However, the development of critical consciousness does not necessarily lead to participation in subversive activities. Regarding this link to action, Summers-Effler (2002) also stressed the role of emotions but highlights the impact of experiencing low or high emotional energy in this regard. She found that negative emotions (such as fear, anxiety, or shame) together with low emotional energy result

in feelings of depression or acceptance of impotence, thereby undermining the potential for action. In contrast, she found that fear followed with high emotional energy can manifest itself as anger, which can be seen as the temporary energy to overcome obstacles. Thus, negative emotions with low emotional energy often hinder action, while negative emotions combined with high emotional energy can generate hope: a feeling of positive expectations for future interactions (p. 53). Summers-Effler (2002) argued that hope is required to inspire action – which corresponds to the theory on processes of imagination, stating that action is guided by the beliefs and imaginations of alternatives and better future possibilities (Moore & Milkoreit, 2020). Thus, for individuals to act, there must be enough emotional energy. And for societal change, there must be a critical mass of people that thrives on hope and high emotional energy – which again reinforces the hope and emotional energy experienced by the participants.

In sum, low emotional energy is a feeling of impotence or low expectations for the future. Summers-Effler (2002) has described this as the situation in which other parts of the self are telling the ‘you’ that “you will probably fail.” Conversely, for someone to be inspired and motivated to act on his or her critical consciousness, one needs a feeling of positive expectations of future interactions, telling the self: “you can do it!”.

Although Summers-Effler (2002) used the case of gender, she explicitly states that her theory on emotional energy can be modified and applied to other situations that involve injustices and power imbalances. The emotional dynamics might be different, but the processes of developing critical consciousness, emotional energy, and a willingness to participate in resistance activity can thus also be observed in the climate movement. Subsequently, I hypothesise that the experienced level of emotional energy serves as a more accurate explanatory factor in linking imagination processes to (further) climate action than the experience of transient emotions. Thus, in my eyes, the theories proposed by Moore and Milkoreit (2020) and Summers-Effler (2002) have the potential to mutually strengthen one another.

## 2.4. The collective level: Imaginaries

While processes of imagination relate to the cognitive-emotional processes that generate imagination in individual minds, imaginaries are constructed more widely in society (Marquardt & Nasiritousi, 2021). According to Oomen et al. (2022), collective imaginations are (re)enacted in practice and travel through ‘organised fields of social practices’, like the media, existing cultural norms and imaginaries. Through repetition and the alignment of assumptions and practices, individual experiences, knowledge, and visions of the future can contribute to the formation of an ‘imaginary’ of how the world should be understood and acted upon (Oomen et al., 2022). A frequently used definition of imaginaries is provided by Jasanoff and Kim (2015). Although the authors defined a more specific form of imaginaries, namely *sociotechnical* imaginaries, their definition is widely acknowledged for the three specific characteristics of imaginaries they introduce by defining them as: “collectively held, institutionally stabilised, and

publicly performed visions of desirable futures, animated by shared understandings of forms of social life and social order attainable through, and supportive of, advances in science and technology” (p. 4). The last part of this definition highlights that imaginaries not only encode visions of what is possible, but also of how life ought (or ought not) to be lived (Milkoreit, 2017). Hence, they express a society’s understanding of good and evil. In this light, the authors stated that imaginaries always involve beliefs about values, norms and ways of life that characterise a society (Hess & Sovacool, 2020; Jasanoff & Kim, 2015; Milkoreit, 2017). Besides, like individual imagination, imaginaries can – at the collective scale – generate both change and stability in social systems (Jasanoff & Kim, 2015), since they define the boundaries of what societies can imagine. Thus, if imaginaries are extended or new imaginaries arise, new imaginative spaces could open the possibilities for new ways of being and doing (Hee-Jeong Choi 2023).

Some studies have applied the definition of imaginaries to phenomena beyond the scope of socio-technical sciences and technological innovations. Hence, some authors connected the concept of the imaginary to climate change (Milkoreit, 2017; Strauss, 2015; Whiteley et al., 2016; Wright et al., 2013). For example, Levy and Spicer (2013, p. 662) defined a climate imaginary as “a shared socio-semiotic system of cultural values and meanings associated with climate change and appropriate economic responses” and Milkoreit (2017) introduced a ‘socio-climatic imaginary’. Furthermore, several studies introduced other climate-related imaginaries, such as ‘the circular economy’ (e.g., Calisto Friant et al., 2020; Welch et al., 2017), ‘a fossil-free future’ (e.g., Marquardt & Nasiritousi, 2021), or the imaginary of ‘earth systems’ (e.g., Luke, 2015). Against this background, I hypothesise that strategic climate court cases might be considered an imaginary as well. Following the definition of Jasanoff and Kim (2015), they are (1) institutionally embedded as the cases are taken to court, (2) publicly performed since they are widely discussed in the media, and (3) to a certain level collectively held, as people are able to communicate with each other about the court cases and must then be able to experience a certain level of shared understanding. Additionally, Urgenda and Milieudefensie winning their climate court cases might have changed the horizons of what people can imagine, opening up the possibility space for new ways of thinking, believing and doing.

According to Marquardt and Nasiritousi (2021), imaginaries are a powerful tool to study different collective beliefs about the future or a certain phenomenon. Although imaginaries are often future-oriented, they can also relate to ideas and beliefs of the present (Vignoli et al., 2020). Moreover, imaginaries can be related to collective outcomes (e.g., a carbon-free society) but also to individual goals. Lastly, the aspect of ‘collectively held’ within an imaginary can be considered somewhat vague. In essence, one could argue that an imaginary can always only ‘live’ in the minds of individuals (Milkoreit, 2017). Thus, this research also aims to address the aspect of ‘collectively held’ within an imaginary: what does this include and what is the relevance of this aspect in opening up the public imagination?

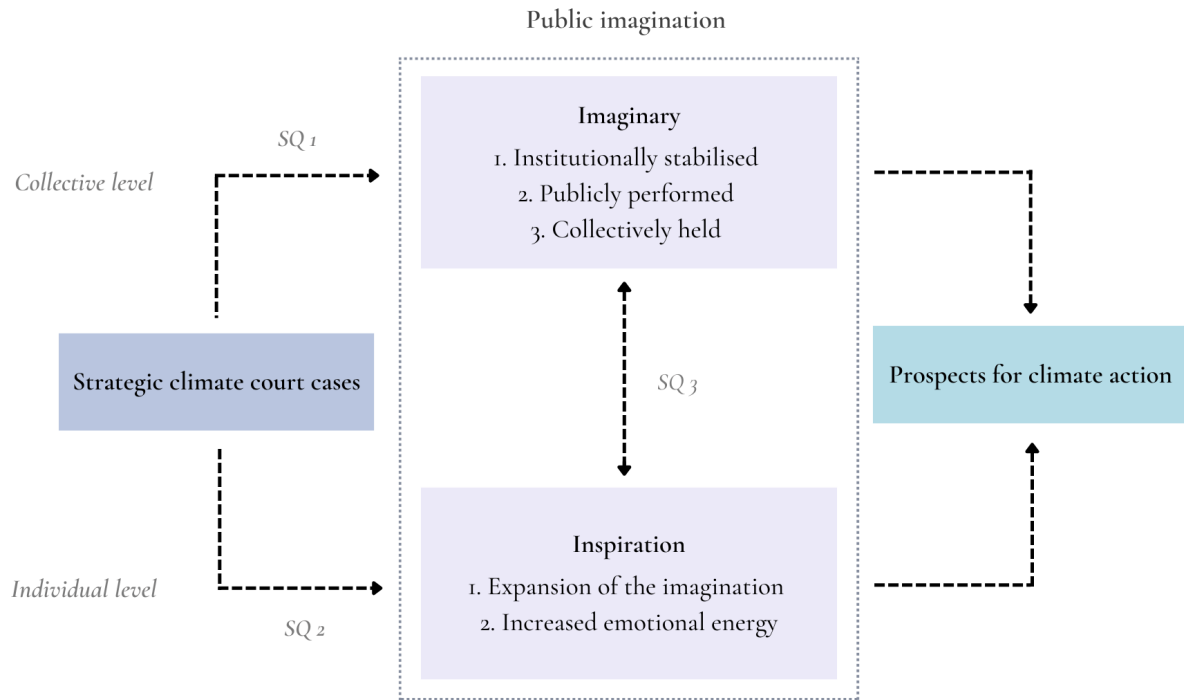
## 2.5. A summary

Sustainability transformations are a pressing societal need, given the urgency of addressing global warming and ensuring a sustainable future. Within these transformations, strategic CCCs emerge as a relatively novel form of climate action that – acting as disruptive seeds – play a role in the unmaking and making of societal structures, both in a concrete and more symbolic way. Regarding the latter, the CCCs possess the power to shift current societal narratives on climate justice and responsibilities amidst the climate crisis, thereby unfolding new imaginative possibilities for (collective) climate action. Nevertheless, the relationship between CCCs and imagination as a societal phenomenon has not been studied yet.

The ability to envision alternative futures serves as a guiding compass for decision-making and action. Therefore, the relevance of imagination cannot be underestimated, especially in times of rapid and unpredictable global change. Nevertheless, the causal role and social functions of imagination are still poorly understood, necessitating further research (Milkoreit, 2017). Previous studies have emphasised the role of emotions in linking processes of imagination to action, but the evidence regarding how emotions affect action is inconclusive. To address this gap, I introduced the theory on emotional energy, thereby proposing a novel operationalisation of inspiration which combines expanded imagination with increased emotional energy. Thus, this research addresses the interaction between the inspiring impact of CCCs and individuals' perceived possibilities for climate action. Furthermore, at the collective level, this research addresses whether the phenomenon of strategic CCCs can be understood as an imaginary, thereby aiming to gain a deeper understanding of the implications and significance of CCCs as a shared imaginative construct.

## 2.6. Conceptual framework and sub-questions

Against this theoretical background, a conceptual framework (Figure 2) and empirical sub-questions are developed to effectively address the research objective.



**Figure 2.** Conceptual framework

**Sub-question 1:** *Do climate court cases create a new imaginary and if so, how has this imaginary developed over time?*

The first sub-question (SQ1) provides insight into the collective context of CCCs and serves as a basis to study the public associations related to CCCs. A media analysis should offer a better understanding of CCCs has been described by different actors in the media, and how this evolved over time.

**Sub-question 2:** *How do climate court cases inspire individuals in ways that opens up the possibility space for (further) climate action?*

- **Sub-question 2a:** *How do climate court cases affect individual processes of imagination, and how does this impact the potential for climate action?*
- **Sub-question 2b:** *How do climate court cases affect the level of emotional energy experienced by individuals, and how does this impact the potential for climate action?*

The second sub-question (SQ2) addresses the processes of inspiration at the individual level, building on the theoretical concepts of imagination and emotional energy.

**Sub-question 3:** *What is the relevance of an imaginary (collectively held, institutionally stabilised, and publicly performed) for expanding the imagination and inspiring climate action at the individual level?*

Lastly, sub-question 3 (SQ3) investigates the relationship and interaction between the processes of inspiration and imagination at the individual level and imaginaries at the collective level. SQ2 and SQ3 will be answered through in-depth interviews, as will be outlined in the following chapter.

# 3. Methodology

## 3.1. Exploratory case study design

This research was designed as a qualitative exploratory case study design since little research on the relationship between climate court cases and processes of inspiration, imagination and emotional energy has been done in the past. An exploratory case study is well suited for gathering in-depth knowledge on a topic that is relatively unexplored and the development of new scientific theories, using an ‘open’ way of collecting and analysing (qualitative) data (Bryman, 2016; Verschuren & Doorewaard, 2010). This interpretive epistemological orientation fits the study of processes of inspiration, whereby I aim to understand people’s thoughts, visions, feelings, and motivations from their point of view. This research builds primarily on qualitative methods, including a media analysis and semi-structured in-depth interviews. Analysis was inspired by grounded theory, where researchers continuously interact with data collection and analysis (Bryman, 2016). Figure 3 illustrates the research process in a schematic format.

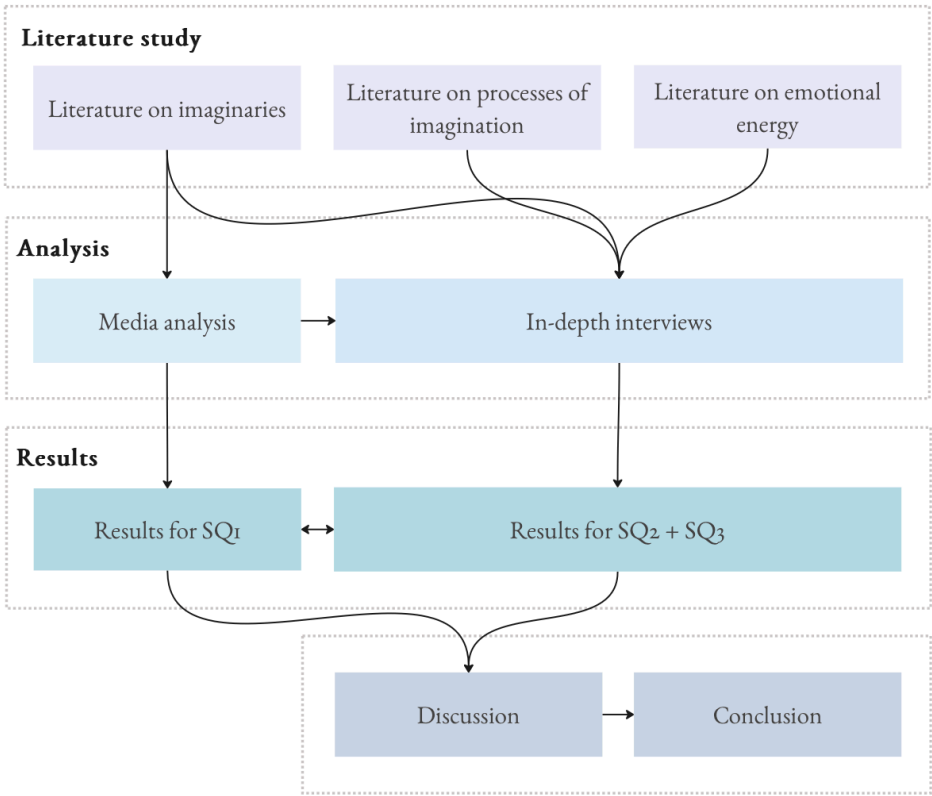


Figure 3. Research framework

### 3.1.1. Case description

As outlined in the introduction, strategic CCCs have emerged as a powerful tool in climate action and continue to grow in importance. The impact of some strategic climate rulings has been widespread, affecting courts and case-law, inspiring activists and alarming governments and companies worldwide

(Nedevska, 2021). In the Netherlands, two of these strategic high-impact court cases took place. In 2012, the Dutch Urgenda Foundation initiated the first successful strategic climate court case, aiming to enforce climate commitments made by the Dutch government (Paiement, 2021; Wonneberger & Vliegthart, 2021b). The case garnered support from 886 Dutch citizens, and after two appeals even the highest court in the Netherlands ruled in favour of Urgenda (Nedevska, 2021). In the meantime, the Dutch environmental organisation Milieudefensie sued Shell for their role in contributing to dangerous climate change. Again, the judge sided with the SMO. More recently, in 2021, Fossilvrij NL announced a court case against the Dutch pension fund ABP to make them stop investing in the fossil fuel industry. ABP – being the largest pension fund in Europe – is a pension fund for employers and employees in government and education which invested a lot of money (€15 billion was registered in late 2020) in fossil fuel companies like Shell, ExxonMobil and Gazprom (Fossilvrij NL, 2021b). However, before the case was officially taken to court, ABP announced they would divest from the fossil fuel sector (Fossilvrij NL, 2021a). Lastly, during the course of this research, a notable strategic court case was brought before the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in Strasbourg. The Swiss KlimaSeniorinnen, a group representing women over the age of 75, has taken legal action against the Swiss government, urging for enhanced climate policies from federal authorities. Their lawsuit emphasises that as elderly women, they are especially vulnerable to increasingly severe and frequent heat waves caused by climate change (KlimaSeniorinnen Schweiz, n.d.). The court case is supported and partly financed by Greenpeace Schweiz. At this time of writing, the case has been fast-tracked by the ECHR and a verdict is expected later this year (2023). A chronological overview of the events throughout these four court case proceedings is presented below.

### 3.1.2. The case selection process

#### The Dutch court cases

To comprehensively study strategic CCCs and its potential wider, transformative, and inspiring impact within a broad context, this research addressed four different court cases. The initial focus of this research was on the Dutch context. As such, the first three cases encompass all strategic climate court cases that took place or were announced in the Netherlands. Although the lawsuit announced by Fossilvrij did not result in an actual case, I chose to include the case since it marked the first case with tangible success: ABP officially announced its divestment from fossil fuels. This success could be partially attributed to the prior victories of Urgenda and Milieudefensie, which potentially influenced ABP's decision due to the threat of a similar legal process, accompanied by extensive media coverage, that they might not prevail in (Fossilvrij NL, 2021b). Moreover, a significant number of activists joined the Fossilvrij-ABP campaign following the announcement of the court case (Binnenlands Bestuur, 2021). This highlighted that initiating a strategic court case against a major fossil fuel investor might inspire people to participate and volunteer. Additionally, the distinct organisational structure of Fossilvrij and their ABP-campaign facilitated a high level of activist involvement. In contrast, Urgenda



and Milieudefensie primarily relied on a smaller team of paid staff. While individuals could become co-plaintiffs, this involvement often required minimal effort and did not translate to substantial contributions to case preparations or campaign activities. Conversely, Fossilvrij NL operates through distinct 'working groups' responsible for various tasks (communication, research, programming, etc.), enabling individuals to join these groups, participate in weekly meetings, and assume responsibilities. This context provided an ideal setting to study the potential link between the inspiring impact of CCCs and subsequent climate action.

### The Swiss court case

The fourth case was included at a later stage in the research process because this case represents a highly relevant follow-up case. During the time of writing this thesis, the court case by the Swiss KlimaSeniorinnen (and supported by Greenpeace Schweiz) was taken to the ECHR. Recognising the importance of gathering empirical evidence on the inspiring impact of CCCs and the associated imaginative and emotional experiences, the Swiss case substantially enriches this research. Firstly, the case offers a valuable opportunity to study inspiration (i.e., the expansion of the imagination and experienced levels of emotional energy) at the present time, while the Dutch court cases took place between 2015 and 2021. Thus, the involvement of the women in this case, who are currently in the midst of the legal process, provides insights into their current experiences, potentially offering more reliable and accurate results. Secondly, the Swiss court case was directly inspired by the Urgenda-case. Also, the in-house legal expert of Urgenda (respondent 9) is now one of the legal advisors in the Swiss case. This underscores the interconnectivity between the cases and emphasises the importance of the Urgenda-case in catalysing further climate action, even beyond Dutch borders.

### A concise timeline of the strategic climate court cases included in this research

#### 1) *The Urgenda Foundation vs. the Dutch government*

- November 2012: Announcement by the Urgenda Foundation to start a court case against the Dutch government due to insufficient climate policy.
- November 2013: Urgenda serves their subpoena at the District Court in The Hague (together with 900 Dutch citizens).
- 24 June 2015: Urgenda – together with lawyer Roger Cox – wins the climate court case against the Dutch government, thereby enforcing more effective climate action to reduce the Dutch share of global emissions. The court orders the Dutch government to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 25 percent in 2020 compared to 1990.
- 2015: The Dutch State appeals the ruling.
- 9 October 2018: The Court of Appeal in The Hague upholds the judgement of the 2015 Climate Case, deciding in favour of Urgenda.

- January 2019: The Dutch government files an appeal in cassation to the Supreme Court.
- 20 December 2019: Final decision of the Supreme Court, upholding the judgement of the Court of Appeal (Cox, 2016; Grantham Research Institute, n.d.; Urgenda, 2019).

### 2) *Milieudefensie et al. vs. Royal Dutch Shell PLC*

- April 2018: Announcement by Milieudefensie to start a court case against the Shell Group
- 2018: Milieudefensie presents the official letter holding the Shell Group liable for contributing to dangerous climate change to Royal Dutch Shell – together with six other NGOs (among others Fossielvrij NL) and joined by over 17.379 individual claimants. Roger Cox is again conducting the defence on behalf of Milieudefensie.
- 26 May 2021: The District Court in The Hague rules in favour of Milieudefensie, thereby ordering Shell to reduce its carbon emissions by 45 percent by 2030 from 2019 levels.
- 20 July 2021: Shell confirms that it would appeal the ruling, which is currently the last update on this court case (Macchi & Zeben, 2021; Milieudefensie, 2021).

### 3) *Fossielvrij NL vs. ABP*

- 2014: Fossielvrij NL launches a campaign for ABP to stop investing in the fossil fuel industry.
- September 2021: After 7 years of campaigning, Fossielvrij considers taking ABP to court (with the Urgenda vs. the Dutch government and the Milieudefensie vs. Shell case as legal foundation to build onto) and presents the plan of a court case during a meeting with involved activists.
- October 2021: ABP announces that it will withdraw from its investments in the fossil fuel industry by 2023 (Fossielvrij NL, 2021a).

### 4) *Swiss Climate Seniors vs. the Swiss government*

- November 2016: The KlimaSeniorinnen submit a legal request to the Federal Council, the Federal Department of Environment, Transport, Energy and Communication (DETEC), the Federal Office of Environment and the Federal Office of Energy.
- April 2017: DETEC dismisses the request.
- May 2017 – Appeal at the Federal Administrative Court against DETEC's decision.
- December 2018: Federal Administrative Court dismisses the appeal by the KlimaSeniorinnen.
- January 2019: KlimaSeniorinnen appeals at the Federal Supreme Court to dismiss their appeal, but the Federal Supreme Court dismisses the appeal again.
- October 2020: Announcement by KlimaSeniorinnen to take the case against the Swiss government to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR).
- 26 March 2021: ECHR greenlights the climate court case.
- 29 March 2023: The public hearing of the complaint by the KlimaSeniorinnen is held before the Grand Chamber of the ECHR in Strasbourg (KlimaSeniorinnen Schweiz, n.d.).

## 3.2. Data materials, data collection and data analysis

For this research, a textual media analysis was conducted to study the associations in relation to strategic CCCs and to detect whether the development of a shared imaginary can be observed. Moreover, 25 in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted to study the potential inspiring processes of imagination and emotional energy. This section discusses the data materials, the sampling strategies for data collection and the methods used to analyse the data.

### 3.2.1. Media analysis

To answer SQ1, I executed a comprehensive study into the Dutch media landscape, providing an exploration of the associations, emotions and tones related to the publicity concerning the Dutch strategic CCCs. According to several scholars, the public narratives and beliefs of a phenomenon fulfil a critical role in the construction of a shared imaginary (Ingram et al., 2019; Jasanoff & Kim, 2009; Moore & Milkoreit, 2020; Pearce et al., 2019; Riedy & Waddock, 2022). In this light, it is through communication tools that information flows exist between individual processes of imaginations and societal imaginaries (Moore & Milkoreit, 2020). According to Jasanoff and Kim (2009), language and public (social) media content are relevant resources for the analysis of societal imaginaries, including their change over time. Diverging opinions and contrasting ideas serve as indicators that help to illuminate imaginaries, along with the values they embody. Ultimately, it is through such discussions and public discourse that new imaginaries, offering a sense of possible alternatives, become apparent (Jasanoff & Kim, 2009).

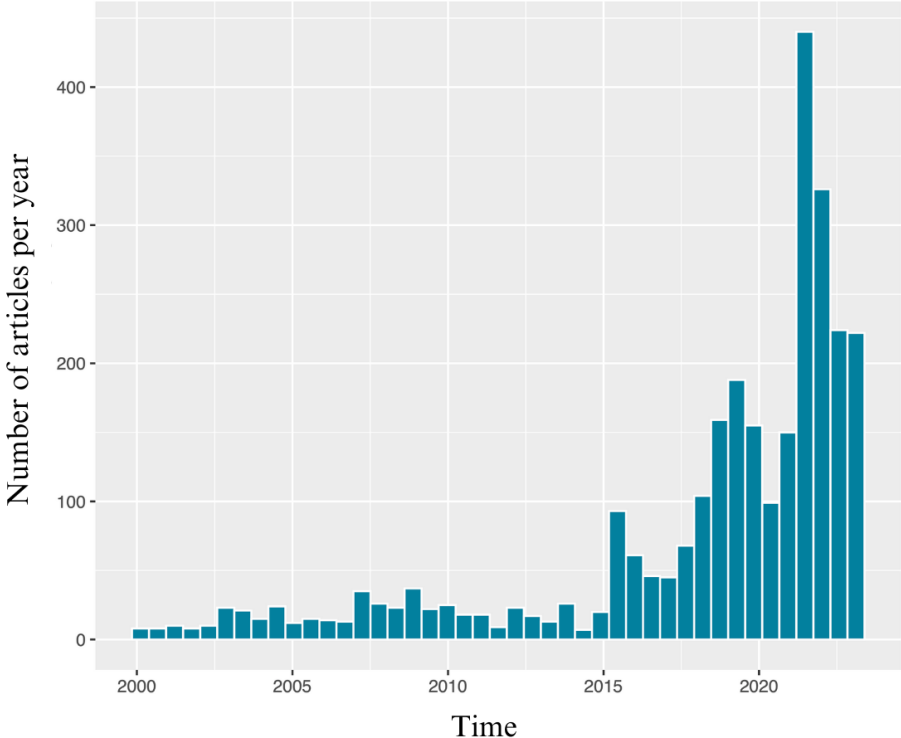
All media items were originally published in Dutch and quotes are thus translated to English. The Swiss context was excluded from the media analysis since I, as a researcher, lack proficiency in the Swiss languages. Nevertheless, this barrier does not impede the answering of SQ1. The Dutch context proved, in fact, more suitable for addressing SQ1 due to my intention to examine the potential development of a public imaginary and its progression over time. With legal initiatives from three distinct SMOs over the past decade, the Dutch landscape offered a fertile ground to explore trends and transformations in associations and collective perceptions regarding CCCs.

#### Sampling strategy and data collection

I planned to select a range of media items per 'main event' during the Dutch court cases, as reflected by the timeline above. This was decided under the assumption that these events would coincide with peak moments of media attention and that these events might have caused certain shifts in the public discourse. However, to check how much media attention the Dutch court cases gained and whether the key events I selected did indeed cause a peak in media attention – and to check for other periods of high media attention that I might have overlooked – I conducted a quick analysis on the Dutch news articles about the strategic climate court cases by Urgenda, Milieudéfensie and Fossielvrij over the years 2000 till March 2023. To do so, I retrieved newspaper articles from LexisNexis (NexisUni), which is renowned

for hosting the most comprehensive collection of Dutch newspaper sources, including local newspapers. The specific query employed was (in Dutch): "((klimaat AND recht\* OR uitspraak OR vonnis) AND (Urgenda OR Milieudefensie OR Shell OR Fossilvrij OR ABP)); period: 1/1/2000 till 31/3/2023; selecting [language: Dutch; News; Newspapers]. This resulted in 5196 articles (4521 articles after deleting the duplicates in R). A basic analysis of the distribution of these articles over time (using Rstudio) resulted in the following graph (Figure 4).

**Number of newspaper articles over time**  
 January 2000 - March 2023



**Figure 4.** Number of Dutch newspaper articles about strategic climate court cases over time

Thus, the results indeed reveal peak moments of media attention during the events from the timeline, such as the announcement of a court case by Milieudefensie (2018) and Fossilvrij (2021) and during the time of the hearings and verdicts (2015, 2018, 2019, 2021). The graph reveals a lack of media attention regarding the announcement of a court case by Urgenda (2012). A notable peak can be observed in 2021, marked by the victory of Milieudefensie against Shell, the announcement of Fossilvrij’s case against ABP and ABP’s decision to divest from the fossil fuel industry. Therefore, these key events were used to select a variety of media items for the analysis, encompassing news articles, social media posts, and comments. The specific sampling strategy for each category of items will be discussed below.

### ***1) News articles***

For the analysis of newspaper articles, I decided to include articles published by De Telegraaf, De Volkskrant and NRC. The rationale for choosing these newspapers is supported by several factors. Firstly, these publishers represent the three largest newspapers in the Netherlands, with respectively 6.839.000, 4.095.000, and 3.671.000 subscribers (Nationaal Onderzoek Multimedia, 2023). Secondly, the quantitative media analysis revealed that NRC published the highest number of articles ( $n = 327$ ) on CCCs compared with all other Dutch newspapers. De Volkskrant, and De Telegraaf published respectively 107 and 56 articles that aligned with the applied query in LexisNexis, which confirms that these three newspapers possess a substantial dataset from which relevant articles can be drawn. Thirdly, the three newspapers represent a diverse audience. A study by Nas (2000) showed that in general, readers of De Volkskrant and NRC are characterised by a more left-wing and green political orientation than the more conservative readers of De Telegraaf. Beside the content of these three newspapers, I included news articles published by two important Dutch news websites: *NOS.nl*, the Dutch public broadcasting system and largest news organisation in the Netherlands, and *Nu.nl*, the largest commercial online news website (Bakker, 2018). At these five news(paper) websites, I searched for relevant articles using the search lines: “Urgenda AND rechtszaak”, “Milieudefensie AND rechtszaak OR Shell”, and “Fossilvrij AND rechtszaak OR ABP”. I picked one article per key event to be included in the analysis. When available, the ‘main’ article published at the time that the event occurred was chosen. However, due to a lack of data, I sometimes had to include another article that was published a few weeks or months later instead. Remarkably, there were no news articles published on Fossilvrij’s announcement to start a court case against ABP. Table 3 (Appendix A) provides an overview of all the media items that are included in the media analysis, thereby also highlighting where data is lacking.

### ***2) Social media posts and press releases***

Apart from the news articles, social media posts on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram published by the SMOs involved (i.e., Urgenda, Milieudefensie and Fossilvrij) have been studied. The primary motivation for this was my interest in examining the comments that were made under these posts, because they provide a rich array of (shared) associations in relation to CCCs. Furthermore, gaining insights into how the SMOs themselves portrayed their actions and achieved results also offered an interesting perspective. For each event, one social media post per platform was included, thereby selecting the first posts that were published at the time the event occurred. Additionally, per event, the press release published on the website of the SMO was studied, offering more insights into how the SMOs communicated their results.

### ***3) Comments on news articles and social media posts***

When the data was available, I analysed a selection of the comments on all included social media posts and on the articles by NOS and Nu.nl. The latter has a comment-section on its website, but for comments

on the NOS articles, I used Twitter (now X) because NOS shared most of its articles there as well. For each media item, I included the top twenty comments, ranked by 'most relevant'. In general, these 'most relevant' comments encompass statements or opinions, filtering out irrelevant comments such as people only 'tagging' other people. Comments composed solely of emoticons were also excluded, as these can be challenging to interpret and introduce potential researcher bias. One limitation is that not every media item yielded a minimum of twenty comments (see Table 3).

#### Data-availability: Access to all media items included in the media analysis

To improve the transparency and reliability of this study, all media items included in the media analysis are stored in a shared folder on Sharepoint, which is accessible for all students and employees of Utrecht University.

#### Data analysis

All media items were coded using Nvivo 12. I started with assigning a label to each quotation to denote the right time period, the context (case), and source type: news article, social media post by the SMO, or a comment. The next step involved a process of open coding, labelling all sentences and paragraphs with the aim to identify and categorise various associations linked to strategic CCCs. Once every paragraph was coded with one or more labels indicating associations, I divided the quotations into three distinct periods corresponding to the shifts in associations I observed: 'associations before 2015' (predating Urgenda's first court case victory), 'associations in 2015' (when Urgenda won the court case), and 'associations after 2015'. The code tree is included in Appendix E.

#### 3.2.2. In-depth interviews

SQ2 and SQ3 were addressed by conducting semi-structured, in-depth interviews. This method aligns with the aim of this thesis to provide empirically derived insights and a deep understanding of individuals' processes of imagination and their experienced emotional energy levels.

#### Sampling strategy: purposive sampling and selection criteria

According to Summers-Effler (2002), a sense of critical consciousness is required to motivate an individual towards resistance and action. Thus, being familiar with the effects and consequences of the climate crisis is a necessary basis to address SQ2b. Hence, the most important criteria for selecting respondents (as presented in Table 1) were that they were familiar with one or more of the climate court cases and had closely followed the developments of the Dutch and/or Swiss court case(s). As a result, the focus was on interviewing individuals whom I classify as *climate activists*, although it is worth noting that this term is contested and fluid; not all respondents necessarily identified themselves as activists.

Respondents were approached using theoretical and purposive sampling: a process by which a researcher selects respondents based on the needs of the emerging theory (Bryman, 2016). The goal behind this strategic form of sampling is to select participants based on the kind of information they can provide, allowing the researcher to learn as much as possible about the phenomena of interest to answer the research questions in a way that is as meaningful and informative as possible (Bryman, 2016). Nevertheless, I still aimed to ensure that there was a good amount of variety in the resulting sample. Therefore, I interviewed activists that were to different degrees involved in climate activism and the CCCs under investigation, which resulted in respondents that were not directly involved in one of the cases, and respondents that were board members or internal lawyers of one of the SMOs. This allowed me to identify similarities and differences across the sample (Bryman, 2016). In that perspective, I also aimed to end up with a diverse set of respondents in terms of age, gender balance and geographic representation.

**Table 1**

Criteria for the selection of respondents

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Selection criteria for inclusion/exclusion of respondents. The respondent...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• possesses critical consciousness on the issue of climate change;</li> <li>• is familiar with the concept of climate court cases in general;</li> <li>• is familiar with at least one of the strategic climate court cases as included in this research;</li> <li>• has (closely) followed the news about the Dutch and/or Swiss court case(s)</li> </ul>

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In total, I conducted 25 interviews. The details of the interviews and the respondents are presented in Table 4, which can be found in Appendix B. To find suitable participants, I reached out to several Signal groups with climate activists and sent invitations to individuals who worked on the Urgenda or Milieudefensie cases via LinkedIn. After this, I found all other respondents using snowball sampling (Bryman, 2016). This way, I also got in contact with the KlimaSeniorinnen. I decided to stop interviewing when I noticed that I had reached a point where new data became repetitive; telling me that the data I got met the requirements of my research goal (Bryman, 2016).

### Data collection process

Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 90 minutes. The interviews were conducted face-to-face as much as possible. I even went on a short trip per train to Basel to meet and interview four women of the KlimaSeniorinnen. All interviews were recorded in audio format and subsequently transcribed.

The interviews were semi-structured, following an interview guide (see Appendix C) which outlined some key topics and open-ended questions to discuss. The precise content of each interview varied slightly, shaped by the course of conversation and individual responses. However, during each

interview, I tried to elicit a phenomenological description of 'climate court cases' from the participants to study the process of imagination. This involved asking the respondent to (optionally) close their eyes and describe the associations that came to mind when I asked for an in-depth description of what the phenomenon of 'climate court cases' evokes to him/her. Moreover, I actively sought to uncover instances when interviewees experienced heightened (or lowered) emotional energy levels. Inquiring about their feelings and experiences during such moments allowed for an exploration of their emotional and imaginative responses. Here, I used the feelings grid – as developed by Brackett (2019) – as a tool to make it easier for respondents to put emotions into words. Paragraph 3.3 further elaborates on the utilisation of this feelings grid. To prevent potential bias or steering of the dialogue and responses, I avoided direct inquiries regarding the possibility of increased prospects for future climate action. After each interview, I conducted an evaluation to identify new avenues of interest that emerged, which could then be incorporated into subsequent interviews to enrich the data collection process.

### Data analysis

All transcripts were coded using Atlas.ti. Analysis was again inspired by grounded theory, including a process of inductive coding and whereby I started coding the first interviews while still conducting the later interviews. According to Bryman (2016), this enables a researcher to become sensitive to contrasts between the categories and concepts emerging and facilitates the nuanced examination of existing codes for similarities, differences, and mutual relations. Each (relevant) paragraph of the interviews was first coded in an open way, resulting in a wide variety of labels related to specific experiences, associations, emotions, and opinions. Later, these codes were selectively assigned to one or more core categories that were used to narrow the codes down in a structured way with different code-levels (Bryman, 2016). In the end, these core categories with different sub-codes provided a useful framework for structuring the data in line with the research questions and research aim. The code tree is included in Appendix F (with the 'core categories' represented by the grey text blocks).

### 3.3. Operationalisation of variables

Table 2 provides an overview of the indicators used to study the different key concepts of this research. These indicators follow from the definitions of the key concepts as outlined in Chapter 2 and served as guidance for the coding process.



**Table 2**

## Operationalisation of key concepts: Imagination, imaginaries, and emotional energy

Analytical dimensions	Definition	Elements	Indicators
Imaginary	“Collectively held, institutionally stabilised, and publicly performed visions of desirable futures, animated by shared understandings of forms of social life and social order” (Jasanoff & Kim, 2015, p. 4).	(1) Collectively held, (2) institutionally stabilised, (3) publicly performed, (4) a shared understanding of social life and social order	Does the media item/respondent address associations related to the collective, institutional and public elements of climate court cases? Or associations in relation to CCCs and a shared understanding of ‘what is right’?  1) Collective elements: e.g., associations highlighting the shared social understanding of the concept.  2) Institutional elements: e.g., associations related to the importance of the court/government institutions involved in strategic CCCs.  3) Elements of public performance: e.g., associations related to the effects of the public performance of CCCs, i.e., reading/hearing about it in the media.
Processes of imagination	“The interdependent cognitive and comprehensive social processes that generate shared understandings of the present and visions of possible future states of the world” (Moore & Milkoreit, 2017, p. 2).	Associations related to the concept under investigation in its broadest sense	A phenomenological description of the phenomenon of ‘strategic climate court cases’ by the respondent.
The ‘opening up’ of new imaginative spaces	The expansion of existing imaginaries; when people witness new possibilities in action and previously unimaginable ways of being and doing emerge. When certain insights give rise to new processes of imagination (Moore & Milkoreit, 2017).	Associations related to new imaginative visions/insights.	Associations/mentions related to inspiration, witnessing new possibilities in action and experiencing the development of novel insights.
High emotional energy	“The long-term level of enthusiasm, personal strength, a sense of social connectedness and/or willingness to initiate interaction” (Summers-Effler, 2002, p. 42).	Feelings of positive expectations for future interactions, hope, agency and empowerment.	Mentions of experiencing feelings of enthusiasm, personal strength, agency, hope, self-confidence, a sense of social connectedness, motivation, and feelings of empowerment in relation to strategic CCCs.
Low emotional energy	“A feeling of impotence, or low expectations for future interactions” (Summers-Effler, 2002, p. 54).	Feelings of low expectations for future interactions, depression, or acceptance of impotence.	Mentions of experiencing feelings of impotence, statements that undermine the potential for action, expressions of pessimism, failure and losing hope.

### Use of the feelings grid during the interviews

During the interviews, I used a feelings grid as developed by Brackett (2019) (see Appendix D). The grid places emotions/feelings on two axes: high or low energy levels and feeling less or more pleasant. By differentiating between higher and lower levels of energy, Brackett (2019) adds an extra layer to emotions, reflecting the intensity. For instance, instead of just feeling happy, low-energy happiness might feel like contentment/satisfaction, while high-happiness feels more like exhilaration. Thus, the grid proved helpful for respondents to put feelings they experienced during specific events or moments of time into words and encouraged them to delve a little bit deeper into the feelings they experienced and the associated energy levels (Brackett, 2019; Brackett et al., 2019).

Despite the usefulness of the grid, it is important to note that the feelings depicted on the grid do not directly correspond to experiencing *emotional* energy, which feels more like confidence and enthusiasm. Even though feelings like ‘enthusiastic’, ‘optimistic’ ‘energised’ and ‘motivated’ are represented on the grid, the feelings pertain to what Collins (1990) characterises as transient emotions. In contrast, emotional energy is a long-term emotional tone that is durable from situation to situation. Moreover, some emotions cannot be strictly attributed to high or low levels of emotional energy. For instance, the feelings grid places anger alongside high energy. Yet, following Summers-Effler’s (2002) line of argumentation, anger can be experienced both during states of low and high emotional energy. Thus, the feelings grid was used as a valuable tool to enrich the conversations about feelings and energy levels but cannot be seen (and did not serve) as a tool to measure respondent’s levels of emotional energy.

### 3.4. Ethical considerations

The work you do as a climate activist is (often) something you do in your spare time and expresses a political opinion. Therefore, the names of the respondents have been anonymised. Nonetheless, all respondents consented to revealing their gender, age, and hometown within their quotes. This provides some context and transparency concerning the demographic makeup of the respondent sample. The audio recordings of the interviews have been stored at the secured environment of SURFdrive (under the control of Utrecht University). After finalising the transcripts, all recordings have been deleted. In accordance with ethical practices, all participants were fully informed about the collection, storage, and utilisation of the data through the informed consent form they received before or at the start of the interview. This document provided them with all necessary details to make an informed decision about participation. The informed consent form is enclosed in Appendix G.

## 4. Results

This chapter presents the empirical findings of this research. The chapter is divided into three parts: the results for sub-question 1 (4.1), for sub-question 2 (4.2), and for sub-question 3 (4.3). The conclusions for each sub-question will be presented in the Discussion (Chapter 5), offering a more in-depth analysis of the results presented here.

### 4.1. Results for SQ1: A new public imaginary

Going through the selected news articles, social media items and online comments, I studied the development of associations, tone, and wordings related to strategic climate court cases over time. Based on this analysis, I distinguished three distinct phases within the *becoming* of the imaginary of climate court cases, which correspond to three specific time periods:

1. the period before Urgenda won the case in 2015, which was characterised by novelty and scepticism;
2. the period spanning from 24 June 2015 (after Urgenda's victory) to 2018, which reflected a period of controversy and the initial emergence of novel future-oriented perspectives;
3. the period after 2018, following the announcement of the case against Shell and the Court of Appeal's ruling in the Urgenda case on 9 October 2018, which marked a stage of acceptance and normalisation.

The following paragraphs will elaborate on the media coverage on Dutch strategic climate court cases during these phases.

#### 4.1.1. Media analysis over time

##### ***2012 till 24 June 2015: Novelty, scepticism, and a PR stunt***

To start, the analysis of the newspapers dating from the time when Urgenda announced they would sue the Dutch government revealed a sceptical tone. Although the unique character of the court case was recognised, the case was mainly described as a symbolic campaign. For example, the NOS (U1) referred to the case as a “PR stunt” and a “sympathetic initiative by concerned citizens”. In different newspapers, legal experts reflect on Urgenda's plan. In all the articles included in this analysis, these experts argued that the case will probably not stand a chance in court. However, the attention for the court case and its symbolic value of putting the climate crisis on the political agenda seemed to be appreciated (U1: NRC, NOS, De Volkskrant). The following passages illustrated this sentiment:

“Professor of international environmental law Jonathan Verschuuren thinks that Urgenda's case will fail due to the lack of legal standards, he said in an interview in Trouw last year. [...] Nevertheless, Verschuuren thinks the legal action is still fine because it 'keeps things sharp'.

That is also the reaction of many other lawyers who weigh up Urgenda's chances and do not dare bet their money on a victory.” (De Volkskrant, U1)

“Professor of Constitutional Law at the University of Leiden Wim Voermans considers the chances of Urgenda being able to force the cabinet to adopt a different environmental policy virtually impossible. “They will probably lose the case and be sentenced to pay the legal costs. It is a few thousand euros, but you will get quite a bit of airtime in return.”” (NOS, U1)

Furthermore, the analysis showed a significant lack of data regarding the comments on the news articles and related social media posts. Although this might partly be due to the time period and Urgenda’s prominence at that time, it also showed a lack of online engagement from social media users in response to this news event.

### ***2015 till 2018: A period of controversy and the development of future-oriented visions***

Against the expectations, Urgenda won the court case. Subsequently, the tone in the media changed. All news articles and many comments now emphasised the unique nature of the case, calling the victory by Urgenda “ground-breaking” (U2: NOS, Urgenda press release), “historic” (U2: De Telegraaf, Nu.nl, De Volkskrant, Urgenda Facebook post), “revolutionary” (Nu.nl, U2) and “spectacular” (NRC, U2). Urgenda’s victory is reported as evoking emotional reactions, expressing happiness, pride, and gratitude. For instance:

“The verdict was received with cheers in court yesterday. There were primal screams and sobs. There were clenched fists. And afterwards, director Marjan Minnesma of Urgenda, the climate organisation that had started the case, and her two lawyers received a standing ovation from sympathisers. “I was tearing up when I heard the verdict,” says Minnesma.” (NRC, U2)

Social media comments included: “Goose bumps!”, “Great job! I am very happy today and so proud of the people of Urgenda.”, and “An example of the Netherlands as a guiding country. There is and remains hope, people.” (U2: comments on social media posts). In addition, a wide variety of the media items addressed the widespread effects of the verdict. Journalists often emphasised the impact of the case regarding the required policy measures the Dutch government needs to take now. Hence, the court’s decision was framed as a clear signal and strong basis to take more substantial action against climate change (U2: De Telegraaf, Nu.nl, NRC, De Volkskrant). For example, an article by NRC (U2) read: “This statement will spark discussion. Because of this verdict, politicians will have to do something.” Media reports also highlighted the inspiring role of the court case for other SMOs in the Netherlands and abroad. The NOS (U2), anticipated that “there will be many more climate lawsuits worldwide” and stressed that the director of Urgenda, Marjan Minnesma, had been called by people and media from all

over the world to explain the case (U2: NOS). In the comments section of a Facebook post (U2) by Urgenda, someone asked if the Belgium government will be next.

Another aspect of the CCC that garnered media attention shortly after Urgenda's victory was the role and institutional position of the court, along with the question of whether it is appropriate for a judge to intervene in policy matters (U2: NOS, NRC, De Volkskrant). Here, Urgenda argued: "They [the government] need to protect their citizens. If politicians do not do so on their own, the judge can come to the aid of citizens." (U2: Nu.nl). In response to this assertion, De Volkskrant (U2) explained:

"According to the ruling, judges may partly take the place of politicians if citizens need to be protected against unlawful actions by the government. In the case of climate change, according to the judge, it has been established by science that the interests of citizens are threatened if the government takes too little action." (De Volkskrant, U2)

In the comments section on Twitter under a post by Urgenda about their victory, this discussion also evolved. On the one hand, comments showed happiness regarding the judge's decision with statements such as: "Long live the truth and the rule of law" (U2: comments on a Tweet by Urgenda). On the other hand, there were many critical comments on the strategic use of court cases to enforce stricter climate measures. Here, it is argued that the case is non judicial and undemocratic. For example, people stated:

"We can abolish the Second Chamber [i.e., Lower House] if the court determines policy. Missed trias politica in school." (U2: comments on a Tweet by Urgenda)

"Ridiculous! A group of tree huggers who sideline democracy through the courts. It is not for activists or the courts to determine policy. Voters do this indirectly in the form of elections. This is a typical example of the arrogance of leftist activists and a black page for democracy." (U2: comments on a Facebook post by Urgenda)

Pending the High Court's decision on the Dutch government's appeal in the Urgenda case, Milieudefensie announced they would start a court case too, now against the fossil fuel multinational Shell. Most newspapers actively linked the cases to each other, presenting the Shell case as an action clearly inspired by Urgenda's work. For instance, De Telegraaf (M1) wrote the headline: "With the Urgenda verdict in hand, Milieudefensie aims to compel Shell to align its investment policy with the climate goals of Paris." Meanwhile, the author of an article in NRC (M1) already spoke about a trend, stating: "That fits in with a trend to fight for the environment through the courts."

However, despite Urgenda's victory, a sceptical tone could still be observed in 2018 (M1: De Volkskrant, De Telegraaf). Nevertheless, Urgenda now had proven these doubts to be unfounded. In this light, NOS (M1) quoted an Endowed Professor of Environmental Law, saying: "This requires a creative

judge, but well, with the Urgenda case we also thought that the claim would be rejected. See what happened.". Later, the article stated: "The question now is whether the trick will be repeated in the case against Shell" (NOS, M1). Although the tone was more optimistic for Milieudedefensie compared to the situation with Urgenda, similar sentiments from early 2015 could still be observed in 2018. For example, several legal experts estimated the chance of Milieudedefensie succeeding to be low, although they viewed the case to be at least good PR:

"In any case, it is good publicity for Milieudedefensie's climate case, says Van der Veen. "Even if the legal goal is ultimately not achieved, the subject has been put on the agenda." De Jong thinks so too. "It is good for PR anyway.'" (NOS, M1)

Nevertheless, the comment sections under the related social media posts by Milieudedefensie revealed more optimistic expressions. Several individuals highlighted their desire to join Milieudedefensie's campaign as a co-plaintiff. For instance, people commented: "Became a co-claimant. Let's turn this into an action, now that it is still possible." and "I am participating, I want a just, fair and cleaner world for myself, my children and grandchildren." (M1: comments on social media posts). Hence, these comments underscored the inspiring and mobilising effect strategic climate court cases can generate.

### ***From 2018 onwards: Acceptation and normalisation***

Lastly, the third phase I uncovered – starting in October 2018 after the Court of Appeal decided in favour of Urgenda – revealed a trend of climate court cases that has now become more widely accepted by society. The ruling by a higher court seems to have made short work of the earlier critique of the case being non judicial and undemocratic (U3: Nu.nl, De Volkskrant). Against this background, most of the comments on both Nu.nl and under the posts by Urgenda on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter now showed expressions of happiness and hope, something that some individuals argued to have lost when the Dutch state announced their decision to appeal the ruling. A selection of the comments showed: "This offers so much hope for the future!", "Thanks for all those years of blood, sweat and tears to get to this result. Because of you I have faith in the future.", and "Good news. There is still some hope..." (U3: comments on social media posts). The media analysis now also revealed explicit expressions of happiness and gratitude in relation to the role of the court. For instance: "The judge has now spoken three times. Fortunately, we live in a constitutional state!" (U3: comments on social media posts). Lastly, the higher court ruling in the Urgenda-case was often linked back to the Shell-case, referring to the verdict as an encouraging sign for Milieudedefensie's trial. For example, De Telegraaf (U3) stated: "Milieudedefensie also sees itself strengthened by the appeal decision in its own climate case."

In 2021, the District Court indeed ruled in favour of Milieudedefensie in their case against Shell. In the media, this case was recognised for its distinctive nature as the first instance in which a private company

had been held accountable for preventing future dangerous global warming (M2: NOS, NRC, NU.nl, De Volkskrant). The newspapers underlined the inspiring character of the case and its far-reaching consequences. NRC (M2) wrote: “This will lead to great reflection internationally”, and quotes lawyer Roger Cox calling the verdict “a turning point” in history. The comments on social media also revealed that people anticipate or hope that other polluting companies will now face similar legal action: “Now TATA”, and “Well @ABPpensioen hopefully that will set something in motion” (M2: comments on social media posts). Moreover, someone from the United States reacted: “Thank you from NM in the US. We are fighting here too and looking at your amazing victory for inspiration.” Thus, at this moment, the quotes illustrated a distinct focus on the future, with the case against Shell being perceived as a powerful signal to other polluting companies and a source of inspiration for additional climate-related legal actions. Nevertheless, there was also a remarkable number of comments which expressed fear for the future economic effects of this verdict (M2: comments on social media posts). For example, people argued: “How are we supposed to heat our houses, cool and heat the food, etc. if it continues like this?”, and “Are you also cheering when these companies leave NL?”. Moreover, there were again comments about the case being undemocratic and an abuse of power. In this light, De Telegraaf (M2) quoted a climate lawyer saying: “This is not jurisprudence, but pure climate politics.” Thus, a discussion seemed to have started concerning the power dynamics between the court and the private sector.

Lastly, some notable remarks could be observed within the media coverage surrounding the work of Fossielvrij NL to make ABP stop investing in fossil fuel companies. A first observation that stood out was the complete absence of media coverage by the Dutch news sources included in this analysis regarding the announcement of Fossielvrij to start a court case against ABP. Despite Fossielvrij reposting an article on Facebook from Trouw (another Dutch newspaper that is not included in my media analysis) with the headline: 'Inspired by Urgenda and the Shell verdict, activists are now also preparing a climate case against ABP' (FV1: Facebook post), it appeared that this event did not garner notable media attention. Also, Fossielvrij's social media posts announcing their plans to sue ABP received only a few comments. Nevertheless, the responses they did receive were overwhelmingly positive, with a relatively substantial number of individuals expressing their desire to become co-plaintiffs (FV1: comments on Facebook post).

In contrast to this lack of attention, ABP’s decision to cut their investments in fossil fuels did receive a lot of publicity. Against my expectations given the initial lack of attention to Fossielvrij’s work, the news articles now even seemed to fully acknowledge the pressing role of Fossielvrij in this decision. Although ABP presented its policy shift as if they came up with it on their own, most of the news articles referred to the prior actions by Fossielvrij (FV2: De Telegraaf, NOS, NRC). To illustrate, the headline by De Telegraaf stated: “Angry retirees and court cases: ABP gets out of oil and gas”. Additionally, NRC wrote:

“The ABP board was under great pressure to sell its fossil investments. Numerous action groups, consisting of civil servants and teaching staff, have insisted on this in recent years. Several college and university boards asked ABP to go green faster. And climate club Fossielvrij NL already threatened with a lawsuit to enforce this.” (NRC, FV2)

Against this background, Fossielvrij claimed their success by writing: “We did it! After years of pressure from our movement, pension fund ABP becomes fossil free!” (FV2: Tweet) and “We were in full preparation for our lawsuit against ABP, which was supposed to start next Friday. This lawsuit is not necessary now – and that is worth celebrating!” (FV2: press release). In line with these statements, one of the comments read: “Power to the people!” (FV2: comments under the social media posts by Fossielvrij).

#### 4.1.2. A shift in the public discourse over time

In sum, the media analysis unveiled that before Urgenda’s victory in 2015, a climate court case was not taken seriously as a new form of climate action; it was initially seen as a PR stunt and was not expected to make a real change or fulfil an effective role in the transition towards a more sustainable future. However, over the years, the news articles and online comments demonstrated a shift in this perception, from initial scepticism towards a more optimistic view of this form of climate action. After Urgenda won their case, the newspapers seemed to immediately recognise the unique character of this novel form of climate action. From this moment onwards, the media analysis uncovered that climate court cases have – at least for some people – a clear connotation with hope. Additionally, after the announcement of a court case against Shell, numerous comments expressed people’s desire and intention to become a co-plaintiff, as they believed that the case would contribute to a better, more sustainable, and equitable future. This sentiment was clearly illustrated by one of the comments on the news of Milieudefensie’s plan to start a court case against Shell, stating: “I am participating, I want a just, fair and cleaner world for myself, my children and grandchildren” (M1: comments on social media posts).

Therefore, the media analysis over time revealed the development of a novel vision of a desirable future, whereby the court cases embody an idea or image of citizens and SMOs asserting control over governments and environmentally harmful companies. This was reflected by expressions such as “Power to the people!” (FV2: comments on social media posts). Moreover, the climate court cases seem to be related to a vision of a world in which the power of ‘fossil giants’ can be and will be dismantled. In this light, Fossielvrij stated: “Our victory can trigger a domino effect both at home and abroad. The power of the fossil giants eroded a bit more yesterday, and we did that together.” (FV2: press release). Against this background, the media analysis also unveiled the cultivation of a fresh perspective regarding the responsibilities related to the reduction of emissions and protection against climate change. The strategic CCCs pursued by Urgenda and Milieudefensie, along with Fossielvrij's



pressure on ABP, seem to have instilled a revised public perception of the obligations held by both governments and companies. This perspective emphasises a duty of care by governments and the private sector that encompasses safeguarding against the disruptive impacts of climate change. For instance, following the judge's decision in the Urgenda case, the NOS wrote: "The control of emissions in the Netherlands is a responsibility of the State." (NOS, U2). Also later, following the decision of the Court of Appeal, one of the comments read: "It is good that the state is finally taking responsibility!" (U3: comments on social media).

Although the discussion regarding the role of the CCCs remains present, the media analysis unveiled that the intensity of this debate has waned over the years, indicating a shift in the public perception and increased acceptance of this form of climate action. Additionally, over time an increasing number of comments and news articles have expressed hopeful notions and empowering sentiments regarding the influence that SMOs and citizens can exert over the government and major polluters like Shell. Furthermore, there seems to be a growing belief that the trend of climate court cases will expand to other countries and other firms and will become more and more prevalent. Here, the comments showed expressions like: "The dominoes keep falling!", "On to the next one!" and "Next patient!" (FV2: comments on social media posts).

## 4.2. Results for SQ2: Inspiration at the individual level

This section presents the results from the 25 in-depth interviews. Firstly, I describe some general insights on CCCs as a new tool in activism, discussing whether respondents think of it as a game changer, and revealing respondents' initial reactions when I asked them about the time they discovered the possibility of starting a climate court case. These reactions shed light on the initial thoughts and beliefs that emerged in respondents' minds, together with the emotional response and the associated feelings. Hence, this paragraph can be seen as an introduction to both SQ2a and SQ2b. Following this, I provide the results for SQ2a (paragraph 4.2.2) and for SQ2b (paragraph 4.2.3). A deeper analysis of these results that also integrates the insights on imagination (2a) and emotional energy (2b) to answer SQ2, will be provided in the Discussion (chapter 5).

### 4.2.1. General findings

#### Strategic climate court cases: A game changer or not?

In general, the in-depth interviews revealed a prevalent sentiment among respondents regarding climate court cases, emphasising the novel, ground-breaking and refreshing character of CCCs as a new tool within climate activism. As posited by R22: "This is something new. A climate court case is like a fresh wind." However, opinions were mixed concerning the game-changing and transformative impact of the cases. The majority of respondents (nineteen out of twenty-five) unequivocally perceived CCCs as a game changer. Here, respondents argued that CCCs are an effective tool to force change (R1, R2, R3,

R4, R7, R8, R9, R10, R11, R12, R13, R14, R15, R16, R17, R18, R19, R21, R22, R23, R24, R25). A subset of them described CCCs as a last resort; a method to emphasise the seriousness of the climate crisis and its consequences (R4, R7, R11, R13, R14, R18, R19, R23, R24). In line with this, R3 referred to climate court cases as a strategic tool that gives activists an option to further escalate during campaigns, and R6 stated:

"Politics, they let us down, and short-term thinking prevails, and scientists have been saying it for more than thirty years. And they [the government and polluting companies] just do not do it, but then there are judges, and they say: 'You set a goal for yourself. You have a law. You have signed a treaty. You just must start doing it.'" (R6; translated – Man, 45 years old, Utrecht, teacher, and researcher)

However, while strategic CCCs are viewed as a valuable tool, there was also a critical perspective among some respondents. They argued that the concrete effects in terms of policy and behaviour changes are notably deficient (R2, R4, R7, R8, R10, R12, R14, R16, R19, R21, R22, R24). Hence, they pointed out that both the Dutch state and Shell appealed after the court's ruling and in the eyes of some respondents, both parties continue to disregard the verdicts (R2, R4, R7, R8, R12, R14, R19). Two respondents who were involved in the case against Shell highlighted these two sides of the same coin:

"However, it still needs to be implemented. I think it could be a very efficient tool, if the judgments of the judges are actually carried out because that is, of course, still a bit of a question in the Urgenda case, and also with Shell." [...] "This case has really offered hope to the global climate movement, so I think that is really great. But I also think that this is slowly fading away because Shell is not doing anything. Shell has appealed, which means you have to find these feelings of hope all over again." (R12; translated – Woman, 47 years old, Amsterdam, former senior communication advisor at Milieudefensie)

"Within the world of climate activism, I believe it is certainly a valuable tool to have. However, I am not hundred percent certain whether it has brought about a change in the course of climate policy, or whether it has had as much of an effect as we hoped for, or as we thought. Now, looking at what the State has done with Dutch policy after Urgenda; really, nothing at all. They managed to bring it to the Supreme Court and ultimately did not really give much for the following year, and in the end, it is due to the coronavirus crisis and a higher ETS price that the Netherlands has met its emission goals as set by the court. The same applies to Shell. I believe Shell has absolutely no intention of even partially complying with the judge's ruling to reduce emissions by 45 percent by 2030. Yes, it [climate court cases] is definitely a game changer to apply pressure, but whether it has actually achieved so much on the policy front, I

am not completely sure." (R14; translated – Man, 34 years old, Amsterdam/Brussel, former press officer at Milieudefensie)

Additionally, CCCs were often described as a very expensive (R4, R6, R16, R19, R21, R23, R24) and time-consuming instrument (R7, R11, R12, R13, R19). As R16 stated: "It just takes forever." Besides, some respondents characterised climate court cases as a somewhat detached form of climate action; as not as readily accessible as a demonstration or a climate march (R6, R14, R22). Moreover, respondents highlighted perceived gaps in the legal system. For instance, R12 argued how the individuals behind condemned companies can still hide behind the company's actions and decisions, avoiding personal liability by claiming to serve the shareholders' interests, and R7 underscored that in many European countries, you can endlessly continue with legal proceedings by appealing.

Nonetheless, despite these shortcomings and scepticism about the substantial impact of the cases on policy decisions, all respondents believed that CCCs are still worth the money and time invested. This distinction underscores the need to differentiate between the concrete, measurable impact of CCCs on policy decisions, and their broader, more strategic, and symbolic impact. The latter is considered to be equally, or in the eyes of some respondents, even more important – as articulated by R19: "The symbolic value, I think, is much greater than the actual value. But as important."

Against this background, respondents draw attention to the strategic and catalysing impact of CCCs, as they inspire others to initiate similar legal actions (R8, R9, R11, R12, R14, R25). Additionally, respondents suggested that CCCs are effective instruments to break down the social licence to operate of polluting companies (R2, R4, R5, R8, R9, R12, R13, R14, R19, R25). This debate-changing effect was widely recognised (R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, R7, R8, R9, R11, R12, R13, R14, R15, R17, R19, R21, R22, R23, R24, R25), highlighting the transformative impact of CCCs on individuals' mindsets. For instance, three different respondents – a student, a human rights expert, and one of the Swiss KlimaSeniorinnen – all emphasised the function and importance of this *symbolic* impact of strategic climate court cases:

"It is certainly a game changer. However, it will not replace the forms of climate action that were done before, and are still being done, because the real impact is probably too small and often too slow. Appeals can take up to ten years or even longer. So, it may not be the instrument with the most substantial impact. But it does give a very empowering feeling, which makes these lawsuits very important. And it probably also inspires, this idea of applying pressure through administrative channels. I can imagine that for many people – especially those lower down in those administrative layers – it offers an idea like 'it can also be done this way; this is another option'. So, yes, it is definitely a game changer, at least in terms of mindset." (R19; translated – Man, 21 years old, Utrecht, student)

"These lawsuits make it very visible, you know, where the problem lies. It is not just two parties facing each other in an anonymous legal case. There is a lot of discussion about it, in the newspapers, it is discussed internationally. It functions as a kind of media facilitator and societal facilitator. People are now finally realising, 'wait a minute, it is actually very strange that we have to go to court to enforce a healthy living environment.' So, I do not see... I also do not believe that the big win will be at the end of the day through a court ruling, like 'yes, okay, now it is going to happen,' because I think that expectation is somewhat naive. The big win is that there is increasingly more societal attention, and people are beginning to contemplate what is happening, and this is one of the ways in which more attention is drawn to the climate and biodiversity crisis. In that sense, I believe the symbolic added value of these climate court cases is just as impactful as the ultimate outcome: the court's ruling." (R7; translated – Man, 54 years old, The Hague, human rights advisor at UNICEF)

"I suppose that the utmost outcome could be a partial acceptance of the charge. But that is not so important, I think. Important is what is talked about and what has happened already around all this. It is a good, very important contribution to the atmosphere in the society, as to climate change. That is the most important thing, I believe." (R24 – Woman, 71 years old, Zürich, Switzerland, former politician)

As R7 and R24 argued, the significance of strategic CCCs goes beyond the final courtroom outcomes and the actual impact in terms of policy changes. Instead, the impact could also be found in the processes leading up to the verdict and the surrounding events. The cases draw significant media attention and thus serve as potent catalysts for thought-processes. In essence, the court cases stimulated people to think about and reflect upon the underlying issues, which – in the eyes of the respondents – could be seen as a valuable form of impact on its own. Hence, these quotes already touched upon the central focus of this research.

### Hearing about the possibility of a CCC for the first time

This paragraph discusses the reactions of respondents when I asked them about their initial thoughts and feelings when they learned about the possibility of a strategic climate court case. The objective here was to determine whether this discovery of CCCs had an impact on respondents' imaginative processes and their emotional energy levels. Asking about this moment revealed that for most of the respondents, this marked an expansion of their imaginative horizons, with the concept of climate court cases offering a newfound potential. For example, the thought-provoking impact of CCCs, which was previously referred to as the 'symbolic' impact of CCCs in paragraph 4.2.1, was recognised by one of the respondents, who recounted a personal moment of realisation when he heard about CCCs for the first time:

"I see it [climate court cases] as a major game changer. I think it can greatly help shift the public opinion. It happened to me too, that I thought: 'oh, apparently the government is not adhering to the rules as I expected.' And a lawsuit can very effectively bring that to light." (R2; translated – Man, 45 years old, Utrecht, teacher, and researcher)

Moreover, the discovery of the possibility to start a CCC was for many respondents marked by a sentiment of surprise (R4, R13, R16, R17, R19, R21, R25), followed by a cascade of emotions, including happiness (R3, 12, 14, 16, 18, 22, 25), hope (R4, R18, R9, R11, R13, 14, 16, 17, 25), and a sense of empowerment (R4, 12, 13, 18). One of the KlimaSeniorinnen stated:

“When I heard for the first time about the climate court case, I felt surprised that one can do that. Surprised and totally happy, and pleased, certainly. But yes, surprised, that was the foreground feeling. That this is something you can do. This is so great. I was convinced right away that this is really a good road to travel. [...] It was a sense of, ‘what a new way of activism.’ What a completely new way of getting something rolling, that I had never thought about, never heard anybody mention even around me. And I have been in the clean-up and in the climate movement all these years before, with another group, but no one ever said anything about this. [...] It was completely new for me. It was like: ‘how did this happen, that I did not know about this?’” (R16 – Woman, 74 years old, Dürnten, Switzerland, cultural anthropologist)

Later during the interview, R16 also described how the discovery of this new form of climate action ignited her imagination regarding the potential impact of the case:

“Growing up in this highly democratic country, it never occurred to me that you would be allowed to take your state to court. So, that was quite a revelation, and it was with the KlimaSeniorinnen, yes. Also, I was not sceptical at all, I only thought: ‘why did it never occur to me before?’ This will have a great, great effect. A great ‘habelwirkung’ [lverage effect] I call it in German. In English, sometimes they call it a trim tab factor. That you feel... For instance, when you are on a sailing boat, you have to move just one part a little bit, and then the whole sail or the whole ship moves in another direction. Slowly, but it does move. And I thought, oh my God. This is it. This is absolutely amazing. You can actually get to the court to get politics moving. I mean, wow! [...] Now imagine. [...] Then the whole game changes.” (R16 – Woman, 74 years old, Dürnten, Switzerland, cultural anthropologist)

This hopeful and empowering expression is also reflected by R4, who described how she cannot help but feel a sense of excitement regarding climate court cases and how these fuel her fantasies:

"When I see such a court case, it gives hope for the future again. And then I have almost all these fantasies, so that I start thinking, 'Oh, others are about to fall as well because of this.' You see? 'Yes, also France is taking action now' 'See? Proof for my dream. 'Yes, France is being targeted too.' 'New Zealand is joining in,' 'yay!'" (R4; translated - Woman, 55 years old, Arnhem, primary school teacher)

The above quote continues as R4 emphasised her belief in the importance of having a vision for the future in order to deal with the climate crisis and facilitate a transition towards sustainability. According to her, having a vision is crucial for motivating collective action and progress:

"A vision for the future. That is where we are heading. And yes, I think that is how it has always worked in history. If you have a vision... [...] We need a focus on 'what will work.' It also works when I deal with a difficult class, where I try to think, 'this is a nice class, guys, if we keep going like this, we will achieve this and that within a month... We can do it!' Then I think, 'well, I need to work really hard, but we are going to do it.' And that is how I believe it should also be with society. We are just going to do it. But for that, we need a vision, an image." (R4; translated - Woman, 55 years old, Arnhem, primary school teacher)

In summary, these initial reactions demonstrated that strategic CCCs are capable of opening up individuals' imagination and increasing the levels of emotional energy (i.e., hope and empowerment). Furthermore, during the interviews, another noteworthy instance in which respondents revealed a wide spectrum of new realisation and emotions was when they discussed the victories of Urgenda and Milieudefensie in court. Here, feelings of justice were mentioned (R1, R2, R4, R5, R9, R12, R13, R18, R19, R21, R22), alongside emotions of victory (R1, R2, R4, R7, R8, R9, R10, R12, R13, R14, R16, R17, R18, R21, R22, R24), euphoria (R12, R14) and the feeling of 'changing the world' (R4, R7, R8, R9, R12, R13, R14, R17, R21, R25). For some, these moments were even marked by tears of happiness (R1, R4, R12). Thus, both the initial introduction to the phenomenon of strategic CCCs and the subsequent victories seem to have impacted the processes of imagination and experienced levels of emotional energy. The following paragraphs will elaborate on this, addressing *how* strategic CCCs affect (a) individual processes of imagination (4.2.2) and (b) the level of emotional energy experienced by individuals (4.2.3), and how this impacts the potential for climate action.

## 4.2.2. Results for SQ2a: Individual processes of imagination and the potential for further climate action

### How climate court cases expand the imagination

The quotes presented above revealed that the discovery of the possibility to start a CCC affected individual processes of imagination in two distinct ways. On the one hand, the cases seem to make individuals realise things about the present – i.e., the current state of the world and the systems in place – that they did not think of before. On the other hand, CCCs appear to have the potential to generate novel ideas and images of the future-world. The following paragraph elaborates on *how* strategic court cases affect individual processes of imagination – encompassing both realisations regarding the present and revelations regarding novel future possibilities – and how they influence the potential for (further) climate action.

In total, I identified three dimensions in which strategic CCCs expand individuals' imagination. Firstly, distinguishing a dimension of (1) *political agency*, I found that CCCs lead individuals to realise that they have the agency to compel governments and companies to act in support of the transition towards a more sustainable future. CCCs thereby challenge the perception that large corporations and governments are immune to accountability. Secondly, the results uncovered a wide variety of realisations related to (2) *climate accountability*. Here, the interviews revealed a shift in the responsibility perception as a result of the CCCs, challenging the notion that citizens bear the primary responsibility for the consequences of unsustainable consumerism and daily-life behaviour and acknowledging that both governments and the private sector are responsible as well for implementing effective climate measures. Additionally, within this dimension, respondents' imaginations have expanded by now recognising a direct link between the climate crisis and human rights, leading to the realisation that governments and private companies failing to take adequate climate action can even be considered a violation of human rights. This emphasised a shift from viewing climate action as something optional or 'nice-to-have' to regarding it as a legal obligation. Lastly, I identified a dimension of (3) *climate futuring*. Hence, individuals see the transformative potential of strategic climate court cases, viewing them as seeds that can support entirely new ways of thinking about the present and future world, and suggesting that they can act as catalysts for systemic change. Although these three dimensions are distinct, some quotes of respondents do not neatly fit into a single dimension but instead touch upon two or even all three, underscoring the interconnectedness of these realisations.

#### ***Political agency***

To start, I found that strategic CCCs have brought about a new perspective regarding the capacity of citizens and SMOs to take matters into their own hands and force change. Specifically, the interviews revealed that CCCs have instilled in individuals a sense of agency, making them realise that the

emergence of strategic CCCs has introduced a powerful tool that enables activists to push for more far-reaching climate measures. This realisation signifies the notion that the trajectory of the future is not set in stone, but that citizens and activist groups have the capacity to alter the course of future events, particularly via the court. The following quotes illustrate this expansion of the imagination:

"What really inspired me at that time is, you see, we are activist organisations, and we are constantly engaged in lobbying towards the government, but also towards Shell, and we just get nowhere. And when I learned about climate court cases, I thought, 'this is actually a very efficient way of taking action'. Because you do not have to lobby every four years with a new government for certain measures that might be adjusted again in four years. I really thought, oh, but this is activism 2.0. It no longer depends on whether someone wants to or not, and whether someone will cooperate or not. No, it is now simply mandated by a judge. And then I really thought, yes, this is the future. Not only for climate activists, but I think for many different activist organisations, to go to an independent authority, to the court, and demand action." (R12; translated – Woman, 47 years old, Amsterdam, former senior communication advisor at Milieudefensie)

"We can do something! Because it felt like, for so long... It is this huge problem where we just have no influence at all, and it is all happening way too slowly. You can go on yet another climate march, and I can sit in the street and block it. But it is sometimes hard to grasp, like, what kind of influence does that really have? And this [the climate court case by Urgenda] did bring a sort of realisation to me, like, yes, there is something to be done. We can take matters, or actually the law into our own hands. So, it is a kind of feasibility of change of the future. And that, in that sense, really gave... And still gives me hope." (R8; translated - Man, 27 years old, Amsterdam, sustainability consultant)

Following this realisation, another revelation revolved around the perceived immunity of environmentally harmful and morally questionable companies, and governments. The interviews revealed that the strategic CCCs, and particularly the case against Shell, prompted respondents to realise that companies like Shell, often seen as being untouchable and beyond reproach, are in fact to some degree vulnerable as well (R1, R4, R5, R6, R7, R12, R13, R14, R19, R20). In essence, this means that despite their money, power, and vested status, these companies are also subject to the law, just like other smaller businesses and citizens. As R14 argued, this realisation opened up his imagination and reinforces his belief that he now possesses a tool to hold companies like Shell accountable. Furthermore, R13 described how she views the court case against Shell as a means to change what she described as 'the system in which powerful companies can simply act with impunity'. This implies the recognition that industry giants are not untouchable can mark the beginning of broader systemic change. Lastly, R19



dissented the power of Shell against human rights, highlighting the impact of CCCs by stating that ordinary citizens have the right to hold major polluters accountable, thereby protecting their own human rights.

"Shell is above the law. Shell has never been held accountable. I do not necessarily mean that they are not pursued by the Dutch government, but more that Shell has such good lawyers who can find loopholes in the law everywhere, and they have such a streamlined communication department, so professionalised. When you compare that to Milieudedefensie, it is ridiculous. So, we could not win on that front at all. [...] And then when we were in court against Shell... I just felt that they could not win this case. And again, I do not have a legal background, so you cannot assess my words in that context, but I just noticed that Milieudedefensie had a much stronger case than Shell's defence, so I realised that this Goliath feeling of Shell, that is something that is not justified at all, and I still see it that way. Shell is quite a big, very professional company. But, yes, Shell is also vulnerable. And so are Exxon, Total, and all these similar companies." [...] I think that it has expanded my imagination, that even those big companies, which seem so untouchable and can operate within legal grey areas, can still be held accountable and that there is a limit to their room for manoeuvre. I think in that regard, my imagination has grown to believe, 'yes, we can really do something about that.'" (R14; translated – Man, 34 years old, Amsterdam/Brussel, former press officer at Milieudedefensie)

"When I began my internship at Milieudedefensie, I really thought, 'yes, this can literally change the world. And I studied this [law]. Also, during my study, it often revolved around companies and the system we are in, and how companies can just... How do you say this? How companies can just do whatever they want in the world. That they are not held accountable or that there are not enough regulations to change companies' course. For me, that lawsuit was really the solution for this, to change that system. [...] If we win again in appeal, then in my view, you have really caused systemic change. And it is not easy to cause systemic change. That is the most difficult thing, and it often happens gradually. But such a court case is such a catalyst. [...] I think that the ruling [against Shell], and the court cases in general, have given me an immense amount of hope. It made me realise that there are indications that the system is genuinely changing, that predominantly.'" (R13; translated – Woman, 28 years old, Amsterdam, researcher at Milieudedefensie)

"That major polluters are not immune. Nor is the state immune. And that as ordinary citizens, we have the right to hold them accountable, and that power does not supersede human rights." (R19; translated – Man, 21 years old, Utrecht, student)

### *Climate accountability*

Secondly, I found that strategic CCCs play an important role in shifting the perceived responsibilities and obligations for sustainability challenges. In the Netherlands, the phrase ‘a better world starts with you’ is widely recognised, which was also highlighted by several respondents (R12, R13, R14). This line places the responsibility for creating a more sustainable future world on individuals, urging them to change their daily behaviours. However, the interviews unveiled that CCCs have effectively contributed to a broader and different understanding, suggesting that this responsibility should be shared by governments, industries, and corporate giants (R1, R2, R5, R8, R9, R11, R12, R13, R14, R19, R22, R24, R25). This shift in the perceived responsibility is exemplified by the following quotes:

“For a long time, the narrative was that individuals are responsible for climate change. This narrative was actually created by companies to deflect their responsibility. Through legal cases like this one against Shell, this narrative has been strongly challenged to show that, without companies taking responsibility and making changes, it simply will not work. I think it is a realisation that more and more people are having. More and more people are understanding that we need that systemic change, in the sense that companies really need to take responsibility for their CO<sub>2</sub>-emissions, and that this will also be legally enforced, even more so in the future. And not just for fossil fuel companies, but all major companies emitting CO<sub>2</sub> will be subject to this.” (R13; translated – Woman, 28 years old, Amsterdam, researcher at Milieudefensie)

"It [the court case by Milieudefensie against Shell] is once again a confirmation that such a company bears responsibility for it, not necessarily an individual." (R14; translated – Man, 34 years old, Amsterdam/Brussel, former press officer at Milieudefensie)

"Well, what that lawsuit has done is prove or show that the Dutch government has a duty of care towards Dutch citizens, and from that perspective, it also has an obligation to meet those climate goals. And I even feel that if I were to take to the streets now to protest, it is justified for me to protest because I am trying to hold the government accountable to that duty of care." (R5; translated - Man, 27 years old, Utrecht, consultant)

This last quote also revealed how the realisation of this responsibility shift contributes to a feeling of ‘being within your rights’ when participating in activist activities, which links to another way in which strategic CCCs have expanded the imagination of respondents on climate accountability. This realisation centres around a new narrative that establishes a direct and concrete link between the climate crisis and human rights; an awareness that is echoed by several respondents (R7, R9, R10, R19, R21, R22, R24,

R25). This link to human rights is found to fulfil a critical role in explaining why governments and the private sector bear responsibility for tackling climate change.

As R25 described, the court cases have introduced a fresh perspective into the climate debate, notably through the incorporation of the human rights narrative. Hence, R25 stressed that the climate crisis is not an isolated concern but is intrinsically linked to fundamental human rights, such as the right to a liveable environment and clean air. Particularly noteworthy here is the impact of the court case by the Swiss KlimaSeniorinnen, which seems to have played a pivotal role in shaping this evolving narrative in Switzerland. The KlimaSeniorinnen have actively underscored the links between global warming and health issues, including the heightened risks of early death due to increasingly frequent, prolonged, and intense heat waves (R21, R22, R23, R24, R25). In essence, the strategic CCCs appear to have expanded the understanding on the scope of the climate crisis and on the interrelated nature of issues, thereby stressing the responsibility of governments and private sector companies, who cannot ignore and violate fundamental human rights. This impact of the strategic CCCs was demonstrated through the following quotes:

“I would say it really builds on our fundamental values. So, we knew from the beginning that we could go to the European Court of Human Rights. And for me, these court cases, they bring in new aspects we did not have in the debate. So, we talked about climate like something separate from us. Climate is like, oh, ‘you see the tornadoes, it is bad’. And it is getting hotter. And it is this science. And then you turn the page in the newspaper and then you read about new cars, and then you turn the page again and you read about whatever. So, it is not interlinked. It was kept like a separate thing. And linking this in the court case with human rights is for me something, you know, with health, was for me something I saw as a huge chance. And it was one of the main reasons for Greenpeace... This was kind of the empowering reason. It was building new bridges, building new aspects into this climate debate. It was the key ingredient to invest a lot of resources in this. And I have two examples, maybe. One was that I had brought this case into the human rights group in Switzerland, the International Jurist Commission. Maybe you have heard of them, ICJ. And they have a Swiss section. And when I presented the case and there were all like long standing human rights lawyers, they were like, really, it was eye opening for them. They did not think about climate at all before. Like this was not on their radar. So, this was one thing. And the other thing is the whole health politics... Like there are many, many politicians involved in health issues, and they are not so polarised. They could work together, you know, conservative politicians with progressive politicians. And also, there I saw that talking about health issues connected to climate was opening new doors. [...] And this was for me the biggest strengths in these litigation cases.” (R25 – Man, 43 years old, Zürich, Switzerland, campaigner at Greenpeace)

This strength of the court case was also recognised as a new insight by one of the KlimaSeniorinnen:

“My hope is that it will wake up a lot of people. That it will make them aware. It starts with one and then ten and then a thousand. So, that you can think about: what does this heat do to my health? And this is not just a question of consciousness relating to the fact that the planet is warming up. People realise what is going on, but what does the climate do to my health and how does it affect everyone? [...] To me, it was like an awakening. Yes, an awakening.” (R22 – Woman, 70 years old, Arlesheim, Switzerland, anthroposophist)

Building on the quotes above, I distinguished a third way in which CCCs introduced a new perspective related to climate accountability. This realisation highlights the illegality of *not* taking sufficient measures to prevent climate change. Here, CCCs have opened up the imagination by revealing that not doing enough to limit global warming and reduce CO<sub>2</sub>-emissions in line with the goals as set in the Paris Agreement can be regarded as *illegal* (R10, R19, R21, R22, R23). Thus, taking effective climate measures is not just a ‘nice-to-have’, it is a requirement. R10 stressed this sentiment:

"It does not become more true because the judge says it. It just becomes illegal to do so." (R10; translated – Man, 55 years old, Utrecht, teacher, and researcher)

Moreover, one of the KlimaSeniorinnen recounted how she personally experienced this moment of realisation during the court case in Strasbourg:

"In these two days at the beginning of the court case, it was like a fairy tale. You know, I felt happy like a little child and this court [ECHR] is so holy for the whole of Europe and we got in there... The possibility to go in there is just ‘wow’, and I was very happy and felt powerful. But then suddenly, when we were sitting inside the court and then everybody was very quiet, and the seventeen judges came in... And I was sitting there, and my feelings turned from a fairy tale into a thriller. Because I realised, it is something criminal, if you go to the court and it is very serious. On television in Switzerland, they have a culture place... It is called culture place [Kulturplatz], and they made a video about us. They broadcast it one evening and they also said that it was very happy, the whole movement to join, but when it was all starting in court, it was so strong. And then they had the music behind it from *The Play of Death, by Spiel mir das Lied vom Tod*. They had this music... And that was how it felt like.” (R21 – Woman, 73 years old, Basel, Switzerland, adult educator)

Lastly, R12 underscored this expansion of the imagination as well, envisioning a world where ‘failing to take sufficient measures to prevent or reduce climate change’ is regarded as just as illegal as smoking in the car with children.

"Well, in the past, you could still smoke in the doctor's office. While during the past twenty years or so, that has completely changed. My mother used to smoke in the car. Well, you cannot even imagine people doing that now. And I hope that soon there will be an awareness that causing climate change, which is also very harmful to health, will be placed on a similar level as smoking bans. So, in the future, nobody will have to think about it, and you will really say, 'But you do not do that. That is not acceptable.' Right now, nobody thinks, 'Oh, should I light a cigarette in the doctor's waiting room?' And I do not even think in the car or in a restaurant or anywhere else. [...] Well, I do hope that, in about thirty years or so, everyone will think, 'Oh yes, causing climate change, that is super illegal,' because it is now, right? That is what this court case has actually established as jurisprudence. Yes, you cannot do that anymore. And you cannot get away with it. Yes, and I hope that this realisation becomes part of public opinion." (R12; translated – Woman, 47 years old, Amsterdam, former senior communication advisor at Milieudefensie)

### *Climate futuring*

Lastly, the third dimension I distinguish as a way in which CCCs affect individual processes of imagination emphasises the transformative potential of climate lawsuits, suggesting that they can foster systemic change. The quotes below revealed that some respondents have argued that CCCs can be seen as seeds of a completely new way of thinking about the current and the future world. Hence, these quotes suggested that CCCs can expand people’s imagination by fostering new perspectives on and desires for organising society in a different way. In the eyes of the respondents, these revised ways of structuring society acknowledge the limits of our resources and the impact on the environment and climate.

It is important to note that this dimension is not as widely recognised as the other two. Nonetheless, R5, R9 and R13 have argued how, for them, strategic court cases altered their way of thinking about the current and the future world.

For instance, R9 portrayed CCCs as seeds that can inspire alternative ways of thinking and interacting with society. Here, he described a worldview that recognises the interconnectedness of all things, which brings an obligation to respect the boundaries of nature. This is, of course, a worldview that stands in direct contrast with the principles of free-market capitalism. Hence, the respondent concluded that CCCs can serve as catalysts for envisioning and developing larger frameworks for new ways of organising our social, economic, and legal systems:

"Well, these climate lawsuits give the idea that you can change something at a fundamentally systemic level. And that fundamentally systemic level means that both the government and companies have a duty to take care of the environment and nature, right? And the idea that arises from this... It is actually about the more neoliberal behaviour and thinking of the past 30 years, where you say, 'everyone just does their own thing and does not have to worry too much about the damage it causes.' We need to solve that in a different way. And that, for me, is a kind of imagination... That you realise that these lawsuits contribute to an idea among people that we can actually organise ourselves differently. There is a very deeply rooted idea that the way the world currently works is just the way it is, and that this is very difficult or impossible to change. The way the economy, the capitalist system, the fact that the economy comes at the expense of nature and the climate. That is deeply ingrained in the actions of all individuals and in how governments think, and so on. The fact that you say, 'wait a minute, there are limits, and you have to consider what you are doing and whether it fits, or whether it is even possible within all those planetary boundaries and within the limits of climate change. Look, when Urgenda won that lawsuit, it was only about a 25 percent emission reduction level in the Netherlands by 2020, so that is quite limited. But the idea behind it goes much further than that. It is about every government having to think about whether their actions fit within the boundaries of climate change. And then the government has to explain very clearly why. And now, that is not happening in politics. Fact-free policies are being made. And in the courtroom, it suddenly became possible to demand this... And then you think, 'yes, it is possible to move towards a different kind of organisational mechanism, maybe even on a global level, where those who have certain influence - whether they are governments or companies - will actually be held accountable for that. In the public interest, and not just in a private interest, right? That these companies are not only allowed to pursue their own shareholder value, but that these kinds of companies will also have to adhere to certain frameworks. Well, if you then think about what that can mean for a different kind of world where we interact with each other in a different way, those are, let's say... The lawsuits are the seeds. Of course, you are not going to be able to enforce all of this with these lawsuits, but these lawsuits can show how you can think about these things differently, which – and I truly believe this – also helps in ultimately creating the larger frameworks, in terms of legislation and otherwise." (R9; translated – Man, 40-45 years old, Amsterdam, legal counsel at Urgenda)

This line of argumentation found to some extent backing from R5, who compared the realm of activism to a metaphorical football field. According to his reasoning, court cases work in tandem with more radical forms of climate action, such as Extinction Rebellion's (XR) activities. R5 posited that radical actions introduce fresh and more extreme ideas into the societal discourse, while climate court cases

subsequently contribute to broadening the boundaries of the socially accepted discourse. By doing so, they facilitate the questioning of the existing system, for instance, capitalism.

"If we imagine it as a field with two goalposts... Then XR, in my view, picks up the flag. There is always a certain discussion within a discourse that determines what can be discussed. But then, imagine, it shifts, so to speak, by now standing somewhere else on the soccer field, rather than staying between the goals. You create a new way of discussing and questioning things like capitalism, for instance. [...] It involves a small group of individuals offering a particular new perspective, and at first, everyone who hears it initially thinks, 'what nonsense.' Yet slowly... it gradually seeps in, sometimes. I believe that a filed lawsuit expands what can be socially discussed and accepted. [...] Such a court case plays a role in how the climate debate has evolved in public opinion." (R5; translated - Man, 27 years old, Utrecht, consultant)

### Linking the expansion of the imagination to the potential for climate action

As previously outlined, SQ2a is a twofold question. Therefore, after discussing how CCCs affect individual processes of imagination, this paragraph addresses whether and how these imaginative processes affect the potential for climate action. To start, the inspiring role of climate court cases was recognised by several respondents. For instance, various respondents highlighted how the Dutch cases and the Swiss case serve as a source of inspiration to others. Here, respondents stressed how the cases encourage and enable others to take similar legal actions (R8, R9, R11, R12, R14, R25), leading to a wave of climate lawsuits worldwide. However, it is important to note that this 'trend' of climate litigation does not provide clear insights into the potential relation between individual processes of imagination and increased prospects for climate action.

Nevertheless, some interviews confirmed the hypothesised positive correlation between broadening one's imagination and perceiving new possibilities for being and doing. For example, R5 highlighted:

"I actually think the goal of such a climate court case is to push boundaries. To set new boundaries, saying, 'hey, maybe what we have been doing so far, maybe it is not fair.' Its goal is essentially to create a kind of precedent. To then be able to act on it." (R5; translated - Man, 27 years, Utrecht, consultant)

Moreover, some respondents also indicated that the revelation of strategic CCCs had an inspiring and empowering effect on their own motivation to take action (R3, R4, R6, R7, R9, R11, R13, R16, R17, R21, R22, R25). For example, R18 argued: "My earlier feelings of helplessness faded into the background." Also, R17 – a member of the KlimaSeniorinnen and an artist – exemplified how the initial

encounter with climate court cases sparked a newfound wave of inspiration for her artwork, even though she also noticed that CCCs can feel like a somewhat distant form of climate action:

“I was very astonished, and I was very full of admiration that they took this way and that they worked it out until the end of March as we were there [in Strasbourg]. It was a long way. But I got to know all these women who carried the case with Georg [campaigner of Greenpeace] and others. So, I heard about it and I was very touched. But it was difficult to find a way of being active. And that is where I got much, much more into art than before. [...] And I always did art, but now this was an inspiration.” (R17 – Woman, 69 years old, Zürich, Switzerland, artist)

Hence, this quote revealed how R17 found her own unique way of engaging in climate action, drawing motivation and inspiration from the Swiss court case. Additionally, R7 also illustrated a link between the expansion of his imagination – as he discovered that the Dutch government does not act upon its responsibility and the verdict by the judge – and his subsequent, increased motivation to take climate action.

"It is painful to discover that in a democracy, even after a court ruling, policymakers, policy implementers, and the government itself do not take full-force measures to implement such a judgement. This strengthens my sense of activism because we are... The era of talking is over. This is just – or rather, unjust – political debate with a legal touch for show, and when push comes to shove, very little actually happens. That has strengthened my resolve to join others who also have had enough of it." (R7; translated – Man, 54 years old, The Hague, human rights advisor at UNICEF)

Lastly, another quote that underscored a link between processes of imagination and subsequent (climate) action origins from R9:

"Look, the moment I realised, when I was in that courtroom, in the first instance, that the judge was going to rule in our favour... Because the presiding judge was building up to it. Yes, that is when my hands started shaking. Or the hand I was typing with because I realised: this has the potential to be extremely significant. This is not just about the Netherlands and this Dutch case. This could truly be a game changer worldwide. So, it was a very emotional moment. And it was the same at the Court of Appeal and also at the Supreme Court, where I kept thinking, 'Wow, this is going to have an incredibly significant impact.' So, I became very aware of the historic nature of the case. The fact of how historic the moment is. And since the Urgenda case, I have dedicated myself to that cause. So, I have established a network to spread the case to



other countries. The Climate Litigation Network. So, there are now more than eighty of these cases worldwide. We did not start all of them, we only helped or initiated significantly less than half of them, but we have been able to contribute significantly to their dissemination. And it is just very special to be able to do that. So, I have always seen that case as something extremely important in itself and have dedicated myself to the case, or the idea of the case. And then you may think, what is that idea of the case, then? Well... The idea is that there is actually an enforceable right to climate protection, and that is such a powerful idea. And that idea also needs advocates, right? People who will run with it and who will just keep telling people about it so that the impact keeps growing through that." (R9; translated – Man, 40-45 years old, Amsterdam, legal counsel at Urgenda)

Thus, for R9, the Urgenda case has a direct connection to the subsequent actions he took, although it is worth noting that R9 holds a unique position, given his current employment at Urgenda.

Interpreting the quotes above, the quotes from R7 and R9, together with the statement by R18 arguing that her earlier feelings of helplessness faded into the background when she discovered the potential of CCCs, already indicated a link to aspects of emotional energy. In R9's case, this evoked feelings of empowerment and agency, while in R7's case, feelings of anger could be observed, followed by an increase in motivation to take action. This observation corresponds to the focus of SQ2b, which explores the role of emotional energy in fostering the potential for further climate action. Thus, the following paragraph (addressing SQ2b) will delve deeper into the inspiring impact of CCCs in terms of fostering emotional energy and will thereby further expand upon the link to climate action.

#### 4.2.3. Results for SQ2b: Emotional energy and the potential for further climate action

In the following paragraph, the focus shifts from thinking to *feeling*, exploring emotional experiences in relation to CCCs. Hence, SQ2b investigated the influence of strategic CCCs on individuals' emotional energy levels, and how this impacts the (perceived) prospect for climate action. In this regard, I operationalised high levels of emotional energy as experiencing feelings of enthusiasm, personal strength, agency, hope, self-confidence, a sense of social connectedness, motivation, and feelings of empowerment in relation to strategic climate court cases (Table 2).

In general, beyond the emotional reflections previously discussed in paragraph 4.2.1, the interviews revealed a strong connection between CCCs and increased levels of emotional energy. In this context, I differentiate the origins of heightened emotional energy. Firstly, I found that the idea or imagination of strategic CCC serves as a source of emotional energy by fostering feelings of enthusiasm, agency, empowerment, inspiration, and motivation. Secondly, I found that active participation in the

process of a strategic CCC supports these feelings as well and additionally instils a sense of belonging. The following paragraph presents these findings.

### ***Agency, empowerment, and personal strength***

To start, the empowering and agency-building impact of CCCs has already been prominently reflected in several quotes provided in response to SQ2a (e.g., R6, R8, R12, R13, R14, R19, R25). These previously cited quotes illustrated how the idea of CCC can open up the imagination of individuals, convincing them that they have the ability to take matters into their own hands and enact change. In addition, the interviews revealed that this empowering and agency-building impact of CCCs is widely echoed by a majority of respondents (R2, R3, R4, R6, R8, R9, R11, R12, R13, R14, R16, R17, R19, R20, R21, R22, R24, R25). For example, R16 argued: “I feel way more empowered since we started the court case. Very definitely. Yes, absolutely. There is no question.” Additionally, R19, who was previously quoted discussing the mindset shift and empowering feelings associated with CCCs, further argued later during the interview:

"Yes, ultimately, as an individual, you also have your own influence that you can exert outside... Yes, out here. So, it gave hope because even if the governance systems are complex and not always sufficient... You can make things happen outside these systems, and you can contribute to it very directly yourself. Yes, a sense of agency, like as an individual, you can really make a difference." (R19; translated – Man, 21 years old, Utrecht, student)

Here, R19 underscored the belief that as an individual, you hold the power to actively make a positive impact on addressing climate issues, particularly through strategic CCCs. Adding to this, he highlighted how this supports a sense of personal agency, which, in turn, can serve as a hopeful motivator for taking action. Building on this, R20 compared CCCs to other forms of climate action. Thereby she argued that CCCs offer a unique opportunity to challenge the larger, complex societal systems responsible for climate change by directly targeting the structures and entities responsible for it, rather than relying solely on individual behaviour changes or traditional protest methods. This, she believes, makes you feel more empowered:

“I think that is why I thought it was a really interesting form of activism, because it makes you feel way more empowered than just asking people to change or just protesting normally. I think in this way, it makes you feel more empowered to go against this big system.” (R20 – Women, 22 years old, Utrecht, student)

In the eyes of many respondents, this empowering feeling can for a large part be attributed to the imbalance of power between the activists or the SMO and the government or company that is being sued

(R1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 12, 13, 14, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23). Several respondents who were actively involved in one of the court cases argued that they experienced increased levels of excitement and emotional energy because they felt that they were fighting a stronger opponent in court (R6, R9, R12, R14, R16, R21, R22, R25). In general, strategic climate court cases are often referred to as feeling like David fighting Goliath (R1, R4, R7, R12, R13, R14, R22, R23). For example, R6 described how it felt to prepare a case against ABP:

"You are simply up against a massive institutional investor with 450 billion euros in its portfolio... The largest [pension fund] in the Netherlands, the largest in Europe, and the fifth largest globally. And then you, with a small group of people, because Fossilvrij is not very large, there were three people on the payroll and the rest were volunteers. You just go in there like a mosquito... Like a mosquito in the room and you are there to annoy an elephant. Just having a bit of fun. I found that very cool and exciting. [...] Yes, it is very exciting. And when I look at the grid [emotions grid], then I would say you are on high energies, and yes, pleasant feelings." (R6; translated – Man, 45 years old, Utrecht, teacher and researcher)

### *Hope*

In line with feelings of empowerment and agency, people associated CCCs with positive future expectations, or hope. All 25 respondents highlighted the hopeful aspects of CCCs. To illustrate, R9 talked about how the word 'hope' was the central focus in the responses Urgenda received after winning the case from the Dutch state in 2015:

"We literally received emails from all over the world. And the word 'hope' recurred in all these messages." (R9; translated – Man, 40-45 years old, Amsterdam, legal counsel at Urgenda)

Moreover, many of the quotes used to answer SQ2a already incorporated the concept of hope (e.g., R4, R8, R12, R13). As an example, R13 was previously cited in paragraph 4.2.2, stating:

"[...] I think that the ruling [against Shell], and the court cases in general, have given me an immense amount of hope. It made me realise that there are indications that the system is genuinely changing, that predominantly." (R13; translated – Woman, 28 years old, Amsterdam, researcher at Milieudedefensie)

This notion of hope is related to the idea of CCCs; the idea that they exist. However, later during the interview, when discussing her own involvement in the Shell case, she added:

"Yes, it is truly the best job. I think it is just very inspiring, and as I mentioned before, it is also a job that gives a lot of hope. Even though the subject matter I deal with on a daily basis is not hopeful, the instrument that I work with provides a lot of energy in the sense that you know that you could potentially... Well, a lot of change has already been achieved through that court case [Milieudefensie versus Shell], and you now ensure that even more change is going to happen." (R13; translated – Woman, 28 years old, Amsterdam, researcher at Milieudefensie)

Against this background, R25 emphasised the significance of these feelings of hope within the context of climate action. As a campaigner at Greenpeace, he underscored how hope reinforces further hope through action.

"What I see, one thing for myself, but also with many other activists that I talked to, also Greenpeace activists that were there, is that it is so important to cultivate hope in your activism. You know, to cultivate your optimism. The belief that you really can change something to the positive and that this hope comes through action because you do something, you create this space for hope. That was maybe the most powerful thing about this court case." (R25 – Man, 43 years old, Zürich, Switzerland, campaigner at Greenpeace)

This key aspect of the Swiss court case is acknowledged by all the Swiss KlimaSeniorinnen I interviewed (R16, R17, R18, R21, R22, R23, R24). For instance, about the Swiss court case, R18 argued:

"I associate it with great hope and pride that we have taken our lawsuit so consistently and far. The way to get there was inspiring and always exciting." (R18 – Woman, 79 years old, Zürich, Switzerland, psychotherapist)

Lastly, on this note, one of the KlimaSeniorinnen touched upon another hopeful aspect of the court cases, referring to the binding role of activism:

"In a certain way it gives hope because you connect with each other. And that connection... It is most important to connect with each other. If we can do that, there is hope." (R17 – Woman, 69 years old, Zürich, Switzerland, artist)

### *A sense of belonging*

The latter quote revealed how active involvement in a climate court case serves as another wellspring for renewed and heightened levels of emotional energy, particularly in terms of a sense of belonging (R1, R3, R6, R11, R16, R17, R18, R21, R25). The social connectedness and mutual sharing of feelings and experiences – both positive and negative – prove to be an effective source of increased energy levels,

excitement, hope, and empowerment. Moreover, sharing these higher levels of emotional energy seems to further reinforce the sense of community and solidarity. This sentiment was expressed by two of the Swiss KlimaSeniorinnen, with R16 explicitly describing how her involvement in the movement generates an increase in emotional energy, and R18 highlighting how, in her view, this sense of belonging enhances the commitment of all women:

“And now if I think of the movement, the climate movement in general, then I feel very often renewed in my energy. I am hopeful, and also playful. Oh, it is as happy, lively, energised. Maybe not hyper, but that would not... I am not that type. But that is looking at the climate movement in general. Now, when I look at the KlimaSeniorinnen... Then it is a feeling of belonging.” (R16 – Woman, 74 years old, Dürnten, Switzerland, cultural anthropologist)

“Ever since our association was founded, there has been and continues to be a special solidarity among each other. The community connects us all and strengthens our commitment.” (R18 – Woman, 79 years old, Zürich, Switzerland, psychotherapist)

Another notable finding relates to the value of the sense of community and solidarity within an activist movement as effective mechanisms for dealing with and addressing lowered levels of emotional energy, including concerns, pessimistic future expectations, and feelings of sadness (R6, R11, R12). To exemplify, R6 described this in relation to climate action in general:

"I also got a bit depressed by it [reading about the climate crisis]. And then my partner said, 'hey, do something, take action.' So, then I went to a climate march in Utrecht for the first time, in early 2020. There, I met all these other people who had the same concerns, and I did not have to explain myself to them. And they were taking to the streets and singing all these fun songs that I did not know yet. And I thought, this is a community and they have shared rituals, and that felt really comforting and nice. That was when I thought, I want more of this." (R6; translated – Man, 45 years old, Utrecht, teacher, and researcher)

### Inspiration and motivation for (further) climate action

Several respondents emphasised that they felt inspired (R4, R8, R9, R10, R11, R12, R17, R25) and motivated (R3, R4, R6, R7, R8, R9, R11, R12, R18, R25) in relation to or as a result of the climate court cases. For example, R4 stressed: “It makes me feel excited and I become inspired by it... Motivated. And quite hyper as well.” This relation between CCCs, inspiration and increased motivation to act is further emphasised by the following quote, which pertains to the day of the public hearing in Strasbourg for the case by the KlimaSeniorinnen. To provide some context, there was an evening gathering in a bar where all people who came to Strasbourg to support the elderly women were invited. In this context, R9

described how he observed that a certain level of concern about the climate crisis (i.e., critical consciousness) together with an expansion of the imagination, through the introduction of new possibilities like those presented by the KlimaSeniorinnen, can serve as an inspiration for individuals to act themselves. According to R9, this, in turn, provided a significant amount of energy, hope, and self-confidence to those who chose to get involved and take action.

"Yes, I also advised them [Swiss KlimaSeniorinnen], and the lawyers in that case. I was also present in the courtroom, and afterward... And then I immediately thought of you because there was a gathering after the hearing in the Grand Hall, for the 100 KlimaSeniorinnen and other interested individuals. And the prevailing theme of the discussion was how it instilled hope in people. There was also a podium where everyone could share their experiences, and a question that came up often was, 'Why are you part of the KlimaSeniorinnen?' And very often, the answer was: 'Well, when I look at the world, I find it all quite scary...' They had serious concerns and worries about their grandchildren, and then they saw something like the KlimaSeniorinnen, and they thought, 'Yes, I can be a part of that,' and that gave them a certain perspective for action. You could also feel that this group was greatly... Yes, it gave them an enormous amount of energy, especially because, in that generation, older women are often dismissed as unimportant, and there they were, the KlimaSeniorinnen, playing a central role in the most significant legal case in Europe at the moment. Well, that gave them an immense boost in self-confidence." (R9; translated – Man, 40-45 years old, Amsterdam, legal counsel at Urgenda)

The latter quote, along with most of the quotes cited above, indicates that climate court cases have impacted respondents' experienced levels of emotional energy, and have the capacity to support their motivation to engage in climate action. Therefore, the data suggests that CCCs can indeed increase the – at least perceived – potential for climate action. To further illustrate this point, the subsequent quote from R17 offered an example of how increased emotional energy and inspiration can foster subsequent climate action, in her case by organising an exhibition about climate change in her own house:

"It gives me so much energy to be involved in all this. It is inspiring also for my objects, for my art. After all that, I noticed how important it is to do things together. So now with my partner, we are planning a meeting, ten days in September. [...] And we will do ten days, making a mixture between big, how do you say, meetings with people. We have meetings, we will make a kind of exhibition where the people can play, look, move. And we will make discussions and we will make art." (R17 – Woman, 69 years old, Zürich, Switzerland, artist)

Thus, this quote highlighted the ability of CCCs to fuel emotional energy and inspire subsequent actions. R17 described her plans to start more discussions and create more art together with the visitors of her exhibition. This observation suggests that CCCs can enhance emotional energy, leading to subsequent actions that – I suppose – are likely to further boost emotional energy levels. Consequently, I recognise a positive feedback loop of emotional energy. To conclude, this effect shines through the following words by R21:

“Yes, I am very happy that I got this, how do I say this, that I am co-president you know, that position. It is for me, for my heart... This is a movement from my heart and for my heart.”

(R21 – Woman, 73 years old, Basel, Switzerland, adult educator)

On a last note, it is worth mentioning that alongside the observed positive correlation between CCCs and increased emotional energy, some interviews also uncovered instances of diminished emotional energy. For example, respondents expressed feelings of pessimism or losing hope (R1, R4, R5, R9, R11, R12, R16) concerning the realisation that a legal intervention is necessary, and that governments or companies do not take substantial action to prevent climate change unless they are forced to do so by a court. In this context, R7 argued that it is a shame that it has come to a court case, as every government has the duty of taking care of its citizens. Therefore, he called the CCC ‘a disgrace’. Additionally, it is argued that engagement in activism could at times lead to emotions reflecting scepticism (R1, R5, R8, R9, R13, R14, R19, R22) desperateness (R1, R4, R7, R12, R13, R16), indignation (R1, R4, R7, R13) and anger (R4, R7, R13). Nevertheless, the strategic climate court cases themselves were never regarded as the cause of reduced emotional energy. Therefore, this paragraph only discussed how strategic CCCs contributed to increased levels of emotional energy experienced by individuals, and how this impacts the potential for climate action; I found no evidence for a linkage between strategic CCCs and lowered levels of emotional energy.

### 4.3. Results for SQ3: Relevance of an imaginary for inspiration at the individual level

The third and last sub-question addresses the link between the collective imaginary and inspiration at the individual level. Previously, SQ1 addressed *whether* strategic CCCs did create a new public imaginary. Building on the results of the media analysis, the in-depth interviews revealed that the CCCs’ imaginary is also recognised by respondents as being institutionally stabilised, publicly performed and collectively held, and demonstrated the relevance of this for expanding the imagination and inspiring climate action at the individual level.

#### Feeling institutionally, publicly, and collectively supported

In summary, the results showed how respondents began to see and feel that the new ways of thinking, feeling, and doing – as identified in response to SQ2 – are actually institutionally embedded, publicly performed and collectively held. Therefore, individuals recognised the imaginary *as such*. As a result, they feel institutionally, publicly, and collectively supported in their beliefs, values, desires, and emotions. This is found to further strengthen the expansion of their imagination and their emotional energy levels, as they feel supported, excited, and motivated by the discovery that their (new) beliefs and visions of the future are increasingly viable parts of society.

### ***Feeling institutionally supported***

In the first instance, the imaginary of CCCs has gained institutional stability, for example by the allocation of resources (money and time), via the recognition of the court and through jurisprudence. A wide variety of respondents stressed that the involvement of a judge is important to them, as the judge is perceived as an objective and impartial authority who bases decisions solely on legal principles (R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, R7, R8, R9, R11, R12, R13, R14, R15, R16, R19, R21, R22, R23, R24, R25). For example, R6 argued:

"It matters that a judge says it, because he is impartial. Because he is objective. Because he truly looks at what is in the law." (R6; translated – Man, 45 years old, Utrecht, teacher, and researcher)

Additionally, R4 expressed how this institutional embeddedness provides her with a sense of hope and reliability. She drew a parallel to the way children often accept statements from trusted figures like parents or teachers without question, highlighting the trust she places in the judge's authoritative position:

"The judge only needs to say, 'I adhere to the law,' so that is so reliable. It gives hope. Because it is like how children argue, 'but mommy says so' or 'the teacher says so,' and then it is like that." (R4; translated - Woman, 55 years old, Arnhem, primary school teacher)

Many respondents even argued that for them, the recognition of climate activists' concerns at the institutional level is connected to a sense of justice (R2, R3, R4, R6, R7, R8, R9, R10, R12, R13, R16, R17, R19, R21, R22, R25). For example, R2 saw the court ruling as a form of concrete evidence that holds significant weight and compels others to take activists more seriously, especially in comparison to protests that can be more easily disregarded as the opinions of a small group. The argument here is that a court decision carries a greater weight of authority and legitimacy in society:



"I would use the word 'justice'. If you can demonstrate with a court case that you are in the right, then you have something that people officially cannot ignore. So, it is... Because I do have some trust in our constitutional state. A court ruling seems like something that the government or a company, or whatever, cannot just brush aside. While with a demonstration, you can more easily say, 'Well, these are just a few people with their opinions, and we have a different stance.'" (R2; translated – Man, 45 years old, Utrecht, teacher, and researcher)

Adding to this, about the victory of Milieudefensie, R7 stated:

“Such a judicial decision adds tremendous weight to... Let’s say, you now have the scientific weight on your side and the moral weight on your side.” (R7; translated – Man, 54 years old, The Hague, human rights advisor at UNICEF)

In this light, several respondents mentioned that they experience moral support by the court (R2, R3, R4, R7, R8, R9, R10, R12, R13, R14, R17, R18, R24, R25). This aligns with what many described as a sense of ‘being taken serious’ (R2, R4, R13, R17, R18, R24, R25), which is attributed to the respondents’ feelings of being heard and supported by the court in their concerns and the urge for climate action (R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, R9, R10, R11, R12, R13, R14, R15, R17, R19, R24, R25). For instance, R5 emphasised that the court’s decision in the Urgenda case provided him with a profound sense of support and serves as a validation for his stance on climate action. About the court case by Urgenda, he argued:

"It has created a sort of precedent. I do not know exactly, but my intuition and my feeling about what that lawsuit has done... Well, what that lawsuit has done is proven or shown that the Dutch government has a duty of care to Dutch citizens, and from that perspective, it also has an obligation to meet those climate goals. And I even feel that if I were to take to the streets now to protest, it is justified for me to protest because I am trying to hold the government accountable to that duty of care. In that sense, yes, I feel greatly supported by such rulings from the court." (R5; translated - Man, 27 years old, Utrecht, consultant)

Moreover, R10 described how the judicial system upholds and reinforces Europe’s shared moral values and principles. In this light, he argued that the court rulings’ alignment with the European Convention on Human Rights provides him with a sense he characterised as a boost:

"We have agreed upon a European Convention on Human Rights. Evidently, we all considered this a sort of moral set of rules, on which we sufficiently agreed to enshrine them. And it is binding. When then the judge tells you that further oil drilling is in violation of those rules,

yes, that feels like a boost.” (R10; translated – Man, 55 years old, Utrecht, teacher, and researcher)

Besides the aspect of the objectivity of the judge, respondents recognised that CCCs are a form of activism that takes place within the system (R2, R3, R5, R7, R9, R12, R13, R15, R17, R19, R21, R24, R25), rather than in opposition to it. Therefore, respondents see and feel that the actions they want to perform fit within the existing democratic system. This is found to be another institutional aspect that enhances the degree to which respondents feel institutionally supported and empowered in their beliefs, values, desires, and ways of acting. For example, R25 argued:

“We are using the pillars of a society, which one of them is the courts. That is true. And maybe this is because... This makes it so meaningful, and for activists so much that they want to be part of it and that they feel that they can make a difference. That is the system aspect. [...] Because we see really this could have an impact of the system using the system. (R25 – Man, 43 years old, Zürich, Switzerland, campaigner at Greenpeace)

Furthermore, when I asked R2 whether climate court cases provided hope for the future to him, his answer was:

“Yes. Because I think that if you can use the system in itself for something good, that gives me a lot of hope. And, of course, protesting and demonstrating are also part of our legal system – that is allowed. But this is more about using the systems we have established as humans from within. These systems seem to be able to work for change, for a transition in the right direction. So, the fact that we can use the law and not have to resort to anarchy or something to overturn everything, I find that hopeful.” (R2; translated – Man, 45 years old, Utrecht, teacher, and researcher)

Lastly, echoing R2’s earlier perspective that a court’s ruling holds more credibility than a demonstration due to the objectivity of the judge, R19 stated that CCCs for him also feel as a more legitimate and acceptable form of climate action, because it occurs ‘via the system’:

“Well, a demonstration or march is often legal too, but this is via the system. Even in the case of legal demonstrations, there is often this sentiment of... "Don't they have something better to do? Shouldn't they be working?" But in this case, it just feels like... It feels legitimate. It feels legitimate to do it through the legal route, well, for peace.” (R19; translated – Man, 21 years old, Utrecht, student)

### *Feeling publicly supported*

In the second place, where SQ1 demonstrated that CCCs gained sufficient media attention, the interviews revealed that respondents also recognise the relevance of this public performance. As illustrated by a quote that was previously presented, R7 argued that publicity can in general support the expansion of the imagination:

"These lawsuits make it very visible, you know, where the problem lies. It is not just two parties facing each other in an anonymous legal case. There is a lot of discussion about it, in the newspapers, it is discussed internationally. It functions as a kind of media facilitator and societal facilitator. People are now... finally realising, 'wait a minute, it is actually very strange that we have to go to court to enforce a healthy living environment.'" (R7; translated – Man, 54 years old, The Hague, human rights advisor at UNICEF)

Besides this public support for new ways of thinking, I found that photos, videos, and visual representations in the media can also play an important role in fostering the expansion of the imagination. For example, R25 recounted how a picture from the Urgenda case sparked his imagination concerning the potential impact of a climate court case and its ability to unite various individuals and groups behind a shared objective:

"Maybe one picture I can tell you... I saw this picture of the people in front of the court. I do not know where it was exactly, but there was this picture from Urgenda with this all-mixed people. And this for me was a powerful picture because it showed to me that Urgenda managed to get all those different people together behind one cause. And this was my, you know, thinking of broadening the movement. We need to find something where people can join in and make a difference. It is not the Greenpeace campaign you just can donate. It is something bigger. And this one picture was for me a special one. You see all the people with the signs, you see younger people, you see all the mixed. And this fact that it was 920 people – whatever, I do not know exactly the number anymore – in front of the court. That was for me very important. It was not just Urgenda. It was civil society. There were lots of co-plaintiffs." (R25 – Man, 43 years old, Zürich, Switzerland, campaigner at Greenpeace)

Adding to the impact of media coverage and visual representations, R4 told me that she still watches the YouTube video of the Urgenda court case, with the judge's monologue where she justifies her decision to convict the Dutch government, forcing them to reduce their emissions more drastically. She went on to explain that watching the video gives her hope and serves as a reality check. At times, she questions her own beliefs and doubts whether she might be overly concerned about climate change. However, when she watches the court case video again, it reaffirms her beliefs, validates her commitment to

climate action, and reinforces her sense of purpose. In essence, the video provides support for her beliefs, values, climate emotions and her imagination. It underscores that her desire for more assertive measures to combat climate change is not just a personal desire but is rather a shared desire that has the support from both the court and the media. Consequently, the video strengthens her belief in the importance of climate action:

“It gives me hope. And I also see it as a reality check. Because sometimes I think: 'Am I crazy?' Because when I look around... Yes, okay, everyone kind of separates their waste... Some do-gooders can afford a Tesla. But most people just go skiing. What do you mean, climate change? And they already think they are doing pretty well. "No, we are not flying to Bali this year." And then I think, 'Oh, am I crazy now? Have I become so hysterical?' And when I watch that lawsuit again, I think, 'No, this is real.'” (R4; translated - Woman, 55 years old, Arnhem, primary school teacher)

### ***Feeling collectively supported***

Thirdly, the imaginary of strategic CCCs is to a certain level collectively held, as people can communicate with each other about it and can then experience a certain level of shared understanding. However, as previously highlighted in Chapter 2, this ‘collectively held’ aspect of imaginaries is somewhat vague. Therefore, this research also aimed to address what ‘collectively held’ includes and what the relevance of this is in expanding the imagination and inspiring climate action.

To start, many respondents recognised that the imaginary of CCCs gains more and more resonance and is increasingly collectively held (R2, R4, R8, R9, R11, R12, R14, R16, R17, R19, R22, R23, R24, R25). For example, R12 described that as the court cases gained attention, it became evident that more people believed in and supported these initiatives, which was reflected in increased numbers of donations and members for Milieudefensie after they won their case against Shell. Moreover, the respondent saw how the media coverage became less sceptical about CCCs and that the public opinion shifted towards a greater understanding of the importance of climate action and the role of large companies in driving climate change:

“You can see that people believe in it, so the number of donations and the number of members of Milieudefensie increased significantly because people really thought, "Yes, I want to be part of this, I want to support this." And then suddenly, you also saw that very large donors approached us. You can see it in newspaper articles too; people suddenly wrote about us with a lot less scepticism. So, we are no longer those left-wing crazies who are always bothering Shell and getting angry at drivers. You can see that the public opinion is changing. Well, maybe not in my friend group, I already live in a bit of a bubble, and I have mostly left-wing friends, so yes, that is fantastic, of course. But I think in the bigger picture, you just see that

the whole climate movement... Yes, it is expanding, and, for example, Extinction Rebellion is also gaining more and more members. And even more people who never protested before now want to do it and even participate in the more extreme actions. So, I think it is also causing that, and I think we have come to understand much better that a better environment does not start with yourself, but that large companies actually have much more impact on... Yes, they can achieve much more in terms of the climate, and we as consumers can not do much about it, and you just want affordable choices as a consumer. So I think it's just a broad understanding among people that these kinds of companies are not all just fantastic employers, even though Shell claims to be every year. But yes, that power also becomes a bit clearer and shows, "Okay, what is Shell actually doing?" Well, again, I live in a left-wing bubble. But maybe the left-wing bubble gets a little bigger because of these things." (R12; translated – Woman, 47 years old, Amsterdam, former senior communication advisor at Milieudefensie)

This increased public recognition of the urge for climate action, together with a growing awareness of the responsibilities of governments and companies could also be observed in Switzerland, according to R22:

"There are still many people that do not know about them [KlimaSeniorinnen], but I think it is getting more and more that they get known. That they get known and that also their point, the point they want to make is getting known." (R22 – Woman, 70 years old, Arlesheim, Switzerland, anthroposophist)

In addition to recognising that the imaginary of CCCs is increasingly collectively held, respondents also saw the relevance of this, as the shared understanding of CCCs contributes to the establishment of new norms. For example, as a quote by R12 previously highlighted, twenty years ago, it was still considered normal to smoke everywhere, even in the doctor's office. A practice that is unimaginable today. Thus, together with the institutional stabilisation through the court, the collective nature of the imaginary of CCCs helps to shift norms and defines a new understanding of forms of social life and social order. This process instils R12 with hope, as she argued:

"Well, it gives me hope, I think, and a sense of confidence in the rule of law. Also, the trust that money does not always win. I believe that is very important for many people, but for myself as well. That companies like Shell are not untouchable and that they do not stand above the law. [...] It is so unjust, so well, this does strengthen your sense of justice, making you think, "Well, there is still justice, and Shell does not get away with everything." But I look at it, and it is progressing too slowly. However, I also have the trust that we will get there, just like in the past. Well, in the past, you could still smoke in the doctor's office. While during the

past twenty years or so, that has completely changed. [...] And well, I do hope that, in about thirty years or so, everyone will think, 'Oh yes, causing climate change, that is super illegal,' because it is now, right? That is what this court case has actually established as jurisprudence. Yes, you cannot do that anymore. And you cannot get away with it. Yes, and I hope that this realisation becomes part of public opinion." (R12; translated – Woman, 47 years old, Amsterdam, former senior communication advisor at Milieudedefensie)

This impact of CCCs was also highlighted by R9, who underscored how CCCs are collectively held since many other groups and individuals, including those not directly involved in the case, keep referring to it to demonstrate that they are in their right. Like R12, R9 also observed the interaction between the institutional stabilisation of the imaginary of CCCs and its collective nature in shifting the public discourse. Instead of discussing the existence of climate change, the focus has shifted towards the responsibility of governments to safeguard their citizens from its effects:

“But what you also see is that beyond this context, which I would describe as the third aspect, is that many other groups that are not directly related to the climate case keep referring to it. So, groups as ‘grandparents for the climate’ or basically the entire climate movement... All the various components of the movement have frequently pointed to the Urgenda case, saying, ‘Look, we are in our right. Even the court ruled in our favour.’ And that is very powerful. We are in our right. Well, this idea of being in your right and that you have been proven right by an independent and significant institution such as a court, which is clearly not influenced by politics... So, it is no longer about whether I happen to love nature and you do not, or whether you prefer to drive a big car, right? It is about the fact that I have a right, and that is based on the fact that we will all be severely affected, and that simply cannot be allowed. So, this has had a tremendous impact. That is why I also believe it is something very appealing to identify with and refer to. And you can see this broader trend within the climate movement, too. It has transformed the conversation. It is no longer about ‘What is climate change?’ but rather, ‘It is proven to be an existential threat, and the government has a duty to protect us against it.” (R9; translated – Man, 40-45 years old, Amsterdam, legal counsel at Urgenda)

### The imaginary’s believed impact on others

Besides recognising the imaginary as such, and besides feeling institutionally, publicly, and increasingly collectively supported in their beliefs, values, desires and emotions, the interviews revealed another relevant aspect of the imaginary. Respondents emphasised that they believe that the imaginary of CCCs – as being institutionally stabilised, publicly performed and collectively held – will contribute to the expansion of the imagination of others and inspire climate action in others. Therefore, beyond discussing the relevance of the imaginary of CCCs at the individual level based on quotes that demonstrate the

impact on the respondents themselves, the following paragraph focuses on its *perceived relevance for others*. This uncovers how individuals *believe* or already observe that the imaginary of CCCs will impact others, broadening their imaginative horizons and inspiring them to join in climate action. This influence has already been partially demonstrated through the quotes above, illustrating the relevance of an imaginary being collectively held. Those quotes revealed how, according to the respondents, the collective adoption of an imaginary broadens the imaginative perspectives of others and shifts the prevailing public narrative. Here, respondents mentioned that this influence often occurs through the institutional stabilisation and public performance of the CCCs' imaginary, particularly through the verdict of an objective and trusted authority like a judge and media coverage.

To illustrate this, a wide variety of respondents mentioned, for example, how they believe that the involvement of an impartial, institutional stabilised authority like the judge in the CCCs will increase the collective support of the imaginary (R2, R4, R6, R7, R8, R11, R14, R15, R22, R23, R24, R25). R14, who worked with Milieudefensie on the case against Shell, pointed out that shifting the public opinion and breaking down the social licence to operate of Shell was also one of the main objectives of the SMO. He believes that this can be more effectively accomplished by having their stance acknowledged by the judge:

"It has certainly stirred up the public discourse. That was also the goal within Milieudefensie, actually, to break down the social licence to operate of these kinds of players. I believe a lawsuit also embodies that to a great extent. You want to ensure that society no longer accepts that these companies can conduct their business as they currently do, and that the approval for such a company's behaviour diminishes in the eyes of society. And that comes into play in these kinds of lawsuits because an independent entity – the judge – says, indeed, 'this is not acceptable.' And that carries a higher level of credibility than, for example, politics, and I believe often even science. With this, you can get the public debate, or at least the public opinion, more on your side." (R14; translated – Man, 34 years old, Amsterdam/Brussel, former press officer at Milieudefensie)

Adding to this perceived higher credibility and effectiveness of CCCs due to the involvement of the court, R7 stressed:

"Most people realise that the judge bases his or her decision on rules, and the judge does not look outside... Like the judge does not look around like, 'okay, but what are they actually advocating for, and is that somewhat in line with my personal beliefs?' [...] The hope revolves around the idea that a judge is objective and applies the rules, and if those rules say that a company like Shell must adhere to environmental legislation or human rights legislation, I still

think that a majority thinks, ‘this is a good thing.’” (R7; translated – Man, 54 years old, The Hague, human rights advisor at UNICEF)

Beyond the consensus on the judge’s impartiality and the importance of judicial adherence to the law by governments and organisations, R8 emphasised how this institutional stabilisation, in his eyes, expands the imagination of people outside the climate bubble and increases the societal legitimacy of climate activists’ stance, their desires and their actions:

“Yes, you see, the judge as an institution... As a climate activist, you quickly get labelled as some kind of hippie. But such a judicial decision carries much more authority. For myself, it does not make that much of a difference. I was convinced of my correctness, but I just see very clearly how... Yes, through all the vested interests, people can keep denying and continue doing things the way they do, and they keep emitting, whatever. And now it has been clearly stated, 'no.' And it is based on arguments. There is simply a very good argument to be made for why this should no longer be possible. Why companies like Shell should change. In that sense... I think that it also causes a kind of mindset shift, even among many people outside of climate activists, beyond those who are very involved. It is now much more normal and clear that something needs to happen here. I think it has gained much more legitimacy.” (R8; translated - Man, 27 years old, Amsterdam, sustainability consultant)

Moreover, against this background, R24 highlighted how she believes that this institutional embeddedness of CCCs – due to both the involvement of the judge and the feeling that CCCs fit within the existing systems – can even inspire others to act themselves:

“One thing is... That this court case is an institutional thing. It is within the structure of our state. And the other thing is that it is not connoted with hooligans and activists - leftist activists or right activists - while a demonstration is... It is not a proper thing to do a demonstration, but it is a proper thing to go to court. Yes, so that helps in how we are seen by the public.” [...] “I mean, if more people would look at what is going on, free from prejudices. If more people could look freely at what is going around, they would accept the harder activist actions. And they would take part as well, but since most people are sort of engaged in old structures and cannot overcome these ideas, they do not see it. However, they still believe in authorities. And if an authority says so and so, it is easier for them to make a path forward. Easier to accept as well, and to act themselves.” (R24 – Woman, 71 years old, Zürich, Switzerland, former politician)



This believed impact of CCCs on other individuals or society as a whole is also associated with the public performance of the CCCs' imaginary. Many respondents highlighted that they have observed or that they believe in this positive relation between media attention and the expansion of the imagination and prospects for climate action (R2, R5, R6, R7, R9, R12, R13, R14, R15, R16, R19, R21, R22, R23, R24, R25). As R25 observed, this public performance enables the spreading of an imaginary and new ways of thinking, which can subsequently inspire others to get involved in climate action as well:

“Look at these courageous women. If they can fight for a better climate, you can do, you can too. And it is also about finding your meaningful way of being active. So, we had lots of interest from other countries to see if they could do something similar, like, like Urgenda had, you know. So, I was in Slovenia, for example, presenting the case there. And it was immediately on the main television news. Then, how to say, there was one kind of professor for environmental law who talked about it. And then we had a session with law students trying to find out how they could start such a case in Slovenia. So, this kind of spreading. And there were older people that thought of building their own groups, like in Luxembourg, for example. Also in Greece, there was this kind of being inspired and thinking, I could do, I could find ways of meaningful activism too.” (R25 – Man, 43 years old, Zürich, Switzerland, campaigner at Greenpeace)

Lastly, I found that the increased overall support can also serve as a catalyst for the imaginary becoming a stronger imaginary, thereby broadening the imagination of more and more people, and motivating a growing number of people to take climate action as well. Thus, as more individuals embrace this imaginary and start acting upon it, the institutional recognition and public attention will continue to grow. This, in a self-reinforcing cycle, spreads the imaginary to even more people, inspiring some of them to act as well. In conclusion, the CCCs' imaginary – as being institutionally stabilised, publicly performed and increasingly collectively held – can reinforce itself, inspiring more and more people and providing all these individuals with growing institutional, public, and collective support for their beliefs, values, desires, and emotions.

In this light, R9 described that the shift in the public discourse – whereby he underscored the expansion of the imagination as what I defined as an increased perceived political agency when answering SQ2a – is again reflected in the public performance of the CCCs. He noticed the changing public narratives in emails, conversations, and media coverage. Hence, the court cases – as they became institutionally embedded, publicly performed, and collectively held – have established a new framework for (collective) climate action. This frame instils an updated understanding of social life and social order; of how the world should be understood and acted upon. Moreover, R25 concluded that the influence of the Urgenda ruling and its associated altered frame of thinking still lives on, as it continues to be referenced every week in various contexts:

“You also see that a lot of people refer to it [the court case by Urgenda] as something that gives them hope. [...] So, I think that, indeed, it is a broader idea that has given us, regular citizens, a sense of, "we can break through this huge inertia." Yes, I believe that. Based on what? Well, based on all the emails you see and the things you hear people say. But I also think that you can see it in how the case is covered in the media. Not all the time... Sometimes in De Telegraaf, it is still about environmental activists versus the economy, and it becomes very political and interest oriented. But in many news items, from the friendly evening talk show to opinion pieces in quality newspapers, you can observe that there is much more a discourse like, "Wait a minute, we are all really in agreement that this is a terribly serious problem, and we should do something about it." Well, we are actually quite in agreement on that. And now even the judge said so. And in a way, that creates a framework that changes the way people talk about the problem. It is no longer like, "guys, we all agree on this; something needs to be done, and we are not doing enough." But it is now more about the how and the who question. For a large part, I think these climate cases have helped create a new frame, and you can see this in how so many references are made to that climate case. This even goes far beyond whether we happened to achieve that 2020 goal or not. It is still being referenced today, even though the ruling itself is three years in the past. And I think that is proof that Urgenda is still here. Every week, somewhere in the media, there is a reference to the Urgenda ruling.”  
(R9; translated – Man, 40-45 years old, Amsterdam, legal counsel at Urgenda)

## 5. Discussion

This chapter discusses and contextualises the findings of this research. First, section 5.1 provides the conclusions of the results, thereby answering the three sub-questions. Second, per sub-question, a more detailed elaboration on these findings will be provided, also placing the results in the context of the existing body of literature (5.2). Third, the theoretical implications that have not yet been covered in the discussions per sub-question will be addressed (5.3), subsequently discussing the methodological contributions of this research (5.4). Thereafter, the limitations of this research will be acknowledged, and suggestions for future research will be proposed (5.5). Finally, the implications for practice will be discussed, offering some recommendations for social movement organisations (5.6).

### 5.1. Answering the sub-questions

#### 5.1.1. Conclusion for sub-question 1

SQ1 addressed the potential formation of an imaginary around strategic climate court cases and its development over time. Based on the observed shifts in the public discourse in the media over time, I conclude that the Dutch strategic court cases did create a new public imaginary, encompassing the imaginative possibility of a transition towards a more sustainable and morally just system, where governments and companies can be, and increasingly will be, held accountable by citizens and SMOs for the impact of their decisions on the climate and environment. This imaginary developed over time through three distinct phases. Initially, there was a period characterised by novelty and scepticism, with CCCs being perceived as ‘a trick’. This was followed by a phase marked by controversy and the initial emergence of novel future-oriented perspectives. Ultimately, this transitioned into a stage of acceptance and normalisation, with CCCs evolving from a trick into a trend. In this final phase, the idea of climate court cases can be recognised as a more vested imaginary, offering new imaginative possibilities and visions of desirable, sustainable futures. Zooming out, the imaginary of CCCs can be considered as being part of an overarching climate imaginary that embodies the shared beliefs, desires and values associated with tackling the climate crisis. Within this broader context, the CCCs’ imaginary distinctly conveys the idea that legal actions and court interventions also have a critical role to play in addressing climate change.

Not every idea related to beliefs of the present or possible futures constitutes an imaginary. As argued in Chapter 2, imaginaries are institutionally stabilised, publicly performed and collectively held. Moreover, imaginaries always involve beliefs about values and norms, instilling a moral order and enabling a certain level of shared understanding of how the world should be understood and acted upon (Hess & Sovacool, 2020; Jasanoff & Kim, 2015; Oomen et al., 2022). Following this definition, the media analysis clearly revealed how CCCs have been publicly performed in the media over the years.

From this viewpoint, strategic climate court cases embody a phenomenon that has arisen and proliferated, gaining attention, and evolving into a more widely accepted and normalised form of climate activism. This way, the imaginary gained collective resonance among society. Lastly, regarding its institutional embeddedness, the phenomenon of CCCs can be considered institutionally stabilised, with the judiciary playing a significant role in facilitating – and acknowledging the belief of – a world where citizens can hold governments and polluting companies accountable. This way, it can be argued that CCCs also have the potential to shape a new or revised understanding of forms of social life and social order.

### 5.1.2. Conclusion for sub-question 2

SQ2 explored how CCCs inspire individuals in a way that opens up the possibility space for (further) climate action. In answer to this question, the results for SQ2a revealed in the first place that CCCs open up the imagination space by revealing new ways of thinking and of (potential) doing. This involves the expansion of the imagination regarding the possibilities for action, creating a novel understanding of ‘what could be done’. Here, I distinguished three dimensions through which individuals’ imagination space was opened up as a result of the CCCs. In all these aspects, a fresh understanding and awareness of climate (in)justices come to light. Firstly, within the dimension of political agency, the CCCs led individuals to believe that they can take more matters into their own hands than previously believed. Moreover, CCCs challenged the notion that private companies are beyond accountability and highlighted that these companies and governments can be taken to court by small groups of citizens. This expanded imagination shapes the possibilities for action in the present. Secondly, in terms of climate accountability, the expanded imagination prompts a responsibility shift regarding climate action and unveils a direct link between the climate crisis and human rights, underlining the moral urgency of climate action. Thirdly, the dimension of climate futuring highlighted that CCCs stimulate imaginative thinking and give rise to new visions of the future and ideas about how society can be structured.

Secondly, RQ2b unveiled that CCCs can elevate the emotional energy experienced by individuals, leading to greater enthusiasm, empowerment, and personal strength. This, in turn, results in an increased sense of agency and a newfound understanding and sense of ‘what I can do’. Thus, whereas the expansion of the imagination alone seems insufficient in spurring climate action, an increased level of emotional energy can provide people with the required sense of empowerment and motivation. While – in line with the theory – an expansion of the imagination alone seems not to be enough to spur climate action, an increased level of emotional energy equips individuals with the necessary sense of empowerment and the motivation to take action. In essence, while expanding one's imagination opens up new possibilities for action, it is the emotional energy that transitions individuals from merely recognising these possibilities to feeling confident and motivated to act upon their expanded imagination. In conclusion, SQ2a and SQ2b confirm that CCCs do lead to inspiration at the individual level by broadening the perceived scope of possibilities for further action and providing individuals with

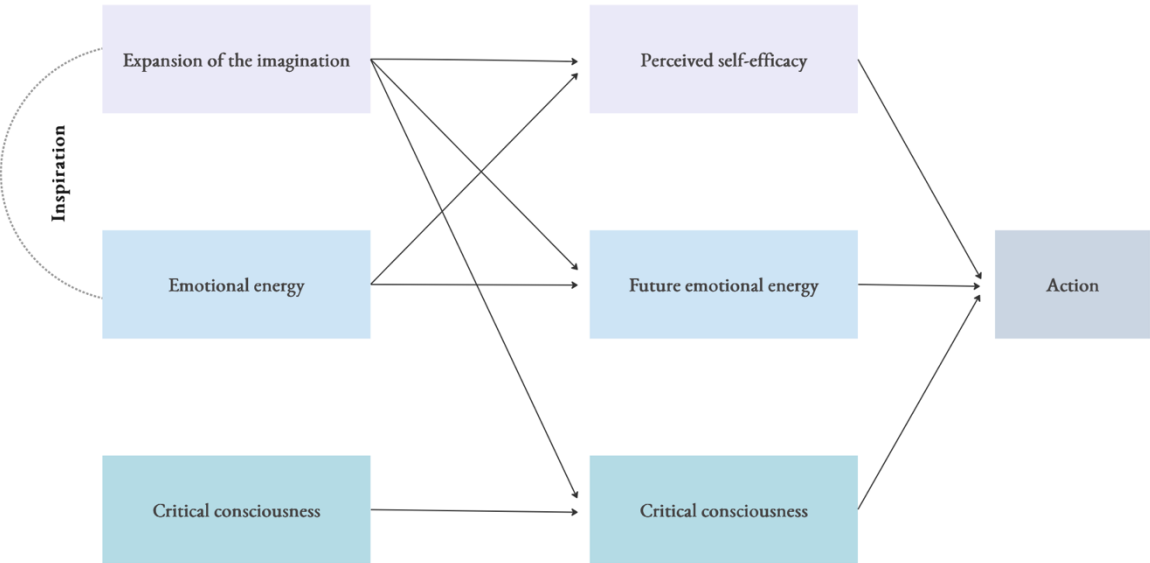
heightened emotional energy. The following paragraph elaborates on how this inspiration translates into motivating further climate action and introduces a theory on preconditions for inspiration and subsequent preconditions for action.

Delving deeper into these conclusions, I recognised that the expansion of the imagination together with an increased level of emotional energy play a role in (1) enhancing individuals' perceived self-efficacy, (2) elevating their future emotional energy levels, and (3) nurturing the development of their critical consciousness. To start, the expansion of the imagination – particularly the development of a novel understanding of climate accountability – contributes to an increased sense of injustice and the development of (more) critical consciousness. As Summers-Effler (2002) argues, this includes a realisation that your concerns stem not solely from within you but are also due to how society is organised. It involves the recognition that 'it is not your fault' and has thereby the potential to increase a sense of agency/empowerment and motivate resistance. Additionally, the results for SQ2 revealed that both the expansion of the imagination and heightened emotional energy levels foster the expected or anticipated future emotional energy, which refers to the likelihood of individuals experiencing high emotional energy levels in the future. Feeling hopeful and empowered in the present, and thus feeling able to act upon new possibilities for action, seems to reinforce motivation. Consequently, emotional energy not only empowers individuals to act, but the anticipated future emotional energy resulting from these actions also serves as an additional motivator for action. These findings align with Summers-Effler's (2002) results, who describes this as a feedback loop of high emotional energy.

Furthermore, besides the fact that the expansion of the imagination is supporting the development of critical consciousness among individuals, it has been previously argued that a certain level of critical consciousness regarding the issue – in this case addressing the climate crisis – is a prerequisite for CCCs to expand the imagination and fuel emotional energy. Hence, if someone is not concerned about global warming, they are likely to be less sensitive to be touched by the discovery of CCCs, and to find inspiration and motivation in CCCs. Therefore, I perceive critical consciousness both as a result of the expansion of the imagination, as well as a basic requirement for this expansion of the imagination and heightened levels of emotional energy, and thus, for action.

To summarise, these findings are represented in Figure 5. On the one hand, Figure 5 illustrates that CCCs inspire individuals by expanding their imagination and providing them with emotional energy. Moreover, critical consciousness is depicted as an initial requirement for inspiration. Hence, these three factors on the left side in the figure could be seen as the *preconditions for inspiration*. From these conditions, several preconditions for action are identified, encompassing perceived self-efficacy, the prospects for future emotional energy, and (further increased) critical consciousness. These aspects on the right explain how – as concluded upon this research – inspiration translates into (climate) action. Thus, Figure 5 could be placed into the conceptual framework (Figure 2) to elaborate on and provide a

more detailed explanation of the arrow from ‘inspiration at the individual level’ towards ‘prospects for climate action’.



**Figure 5.** Linking processes of inspiration (i.e., expansion of the imagination and emotional energy) to action, illustrating the distinguished preconditions for inspiration (left) and action (right) and their interrelationship.

5.1.3. Conclusion for sub-question 3

The in-depth interviews uncovered that respondents recognise the phenomenon of CCCs as constituting an imaginary. Although this precise term was not explicitly used, the characteristics of an imaginary are recognised, and their relevance is highlighted. Therefore, the new imaginative possibilities that arise from the discovery of CCCs are not just mere fantasies; they are underpinned by a broader societal movement that enables new ways of thinking and acting. Besides this recognition, respondents also stress the importance of an imaginary as being an imaginary, as they personally feel institutionally, publicly, and collectively supported by it in their beliefs, values, desires, and related climate emotions. Subsequently, the results showed that people feel excited and motivated by this discovery, which increasingly supports the expansion of the imagination and further inspires them to act upon the imaginary. As respondents experienced this impact of CCCs themselves, they also emphasised how the imaginary of CCCs can lead to, and might already have led to, a shift in the public narrative on climate responsibilities and climate action. According to respondents, this is to a great part achieved via institutional acknowledgement and public attention. The shifted public discourse shapes an updated understanding of forms of social life and social order. In this light, CCCs instil a novel collective understanding of what is illegal, and what is morally just. Altogether, these impacts support further inspiration and motivation, extending beyond the activists themselves, also inspiring and motivating

others outside the climate movement. This way, the imaginary reinforces itself. First, an imaginary develops: CCCs created a new public imaginary (SQ1), expanded the imagination of individuals, and provided heightened levels of emotional energy (SQ2). Secondly, people act upon the imaginary, which contributes to the spreading of the imaginary, and strengthens its institutional embeddedness and public performance. Subsequently, the imaginary becomes increasingly collectively held, which fuels the experienced level of widespread support again. Without repeating, this contributes to the continued expansion of the imagination and inspires further climate action again. Thus, inspiration at the individual level flows back to both the individual and the collective level, fuelling the ‘imaginary-loop’. This figurative loop illustrates a dynamic and mutually reinforcing relationship between inspiration at the individual level and the public imaginary at the collective level. This process aligns with the final arrow depicted in the conceptual framework (Figure 2), representing the relationship between inspiration at the individual level and the imaginary at the collective level.

## 5.2. Discussion of the results and their theoretical implications

### 5.2.1. Sub-question 1: Imaginaries

This paragraph provides a more comprehensive exploration of the conclusion for SQ1 and its implications for the conceptualization of imaginaries. First, I discuss my findings of how the CCCs’ imaginary developed over time in relation to how an imaginary develops according to Jasanoff and Kim (2015). Second, I provide a comprehensive exploration of my conclusion that strategic climate court cases can rightfully be categorised as an imaginary. In doing so, I draw comparisons between the CCCs’ imaginary and other more widely acknowledged technical imaginaries, as well as other imaginaries that lean towards a more practical or action-driven orientation. Third, I briefly reflect on the method used to answer SQ1.

#### ***Development of an imaginary over time***

Regarding the development of imaginaries, Jasanoff and Kim (2015) suggest a four-stage framework for imaginary development, including *origin* (i.e., imaginary comes into being), *embedding* (imaginary becomes embedded within some groups), *resistance* (imaginary is challenged and tensions are highlighted) and *extension* (“a situated re-embedding in order for translated imaginaries to take root and flourish in new soil” (p. 326)). Although the results for SQ1 do not fully match these four theoretical phases and their suggested linear sequence, elements of origin, embedding, resistance and extension can all be recognised in the development of the CCCs’ imaginary. However, these elements as uncovered in this research do not strictly adhere to a rigid sequential progression, but embedding, resistance and extension rather blend into each other, creating a more fluid narrative.

### *Defining strategic climate court cases as an imaginary*

When it comes to defining a phenomenon as an imaginary, Milkoreit (2017) has highlighted the challenges that arise. She argued that “many scholars have claimed to have identified imaginaries of various kinds, and observed their manifestations in written text, decisions, objects, and institutions. But there is no single location of the imaginary in its entirety, and its existence, also its content, seem to depend on the perceptions of the individual observer.” (p. 6). Hence, the boundaries of what can and cannot be qualified as an imaginary are not set in stone.

To critically discuss the findings of the current research, it is useful to compare the CCCs’ imaginary to other imaginaries that are widely acknowledged in scientific research, like ‘the smart city’ and ‘the circular economy’ (Fratini et al., 2019; Ghosh & Arora, 2022; Hollands, 2008; Kovacic et al., 2019; March, 2018; Sadowski & Bendor, 2019). Through this comparison, it becomes evident that there are notable distinctions and deviations. One important difference is that the CCCs’ imaginary, besides the fact that the emphasis is not on technology, is more rooted in concrete actions in the present, rather than primarily focused on envisioning a future state. In contrast, imaginaries like the smart city and the circular economy often revolve around broader concepts of how to structure society and the economy, often adopting a design-oriented approach. However, these well-recognised imaginaries, particularly the smart city, are sometimes criticised for displaying a somewhat privileged perspective, where technological solutionism is presented as the way to tackle existing problems, reflecting a vision of the future that is foremost upheld and acknowledged by the technocratic class (March, 2018; Smallman, 2020). For example, the smart city imaginary is argued to overestimate the transformative power of technology and economic efficiency, and to underestimate or completely ignore the most pressing contemporary problems such as poverty, discrimination or inequality (Hollands, 2015; March, 2018).

In essence, strategic climate court cases represent a specific strategy of climate action. Therefore, the imaginary of CCCs is a more practical and action-driven oriented imaginary. Although less widely acknowledged, previous scholars have defined similar practical imaginaries, such as imaginaries of ‘electric vehicles’ (Mutter, 2021), ‘ethical meat’ (Johnston et al., 2022), and ‘nuclear energy’ (Bayer & Felt, 2019). For example, Mutter (2021) explored the narratives and themes related to electric vehicles and their role in achieving a fossil fuel-independent future in Sweden. In alignment with Jasanoff and Kim's (2015) definition of imaginaries, Mutter (2021) categorised electric vehicles as a distinct imaginary. Interestingly, the author emphasised the coexistence of alternative visions within the context of a fossil fuel-free future. For example, actors may advocate for other renewable fuels like biofuels, and some groups may even disagree with electrical vehicles in general, leading to contested visions and desires. As Mutter (2021) acknowledged, one could argue that the coexistence of alternative visions within the fossil fuel free future make this imaginary of electric vehicles somewhat contested. Nevertheless, the study revealed that varying perspectives and imaginaries on the pathways to attain a fossil fuel-free future can coexist under the consensus on the overarching goal of achieving carbon neutrality (Mutter, 2021). This notion aligns with one of the observations derived from my media



analysis, which pertains to the ongoing debate surrounding the role and position of the judge, questioning whether a judge is, and should be, permitted to intervene in policy matters and private sector actions. Hence, although I conclude that CCCs can be regarded as an imaginary, I acknowledge that to some extent, advocating for this imaginary requires an activist (or at least a climate conscious) stance. Given this perspective, it is in my eyes conceivable that the imaginary of strategic CCCs may undergo a transformation in the coming years, shifting towards a more future and design-oriented approach with a focus on climate justice, or that an imaginary on climate justice will emerge, where the imaginary of CCCs can be part of, as one of the pathways to achieve climate justice.

In summary, CCCs constitute a practical and action-driven imaginary, differing from other, more widely acknowledged design-oriented imaginaries. In comparison to imaginaries like the smart city or the circular economy, the CCCs' imaginary is a more concrete and defined imaginary that offers a practical solution for addressing the climate crisis and enforcing more far-reaching climate measures, thereby enriching the perceived possibilities for climate action. In contrast, when CCCs do not yield the expected results or when governments and companies persistently appeal, this practical orientation might also diminish the CCCs' imaginative power. This stands in contrast to more robust future-oriented and design-driven imaginaries like the smart city, which may endure even in the absence of tangible progress. This raises a compelling area for potential future research, exploring whether action-driven imaginaries are more susceptible to potential collapse compared to more design-oriented imaginaries.

### ***Reflection on utilising a media analysis to identify the development of an imaginary***

Lastly, reflecting upon the methods used to answer SQ1, I contend that media analysis can prove useful to study the formation of an imaginary over time. However, it does have limitations in providing in-depth insights, as will be discussed in section 5.4 on the methodological contributions of this research. Notably, the media analysis benefited most from examining news articles and the comments on Nu.nl, while Twitter data and comments on Facebook and Instagram proved less useful, due to their brevity. Additionally, the examination of comments on social media posts by the SMOs included in this research led to comments predominantly originating from the followers of these pages, involving a bias that impacts the data. Nevertheless, I believe that the social media comments in general – also on Nu.nl and under Tweets by the NOS – mostly represented strong opinions against or in favour of CCCs, which is consistent with the body of research on social media analyses (see for example Pearce et al. (2019), who specifically studied climate change imaginaries on social media). This polarisation may have created an imbalanced representation of the offline public discourse since the perspective of more moderate voices was lacking. This limitation can be seen as problematic, as I believe that the less publicly vocal opinions also shape an imaginary. For instance, the media analysis of the Fossilvrij case highlighted that both media coverage and comments were scarce, as if the case went unnoticed. As discussed in section 4.1, I contend that this quietness also provides insights into the formation and potential embedding of an

imaginary, although these ‘quiet voices’ can only be explored at the personal level. A media analysis can merely observe its presence rather than comprehensively study it.

### 5.2.2. Sub-question 2: Individual imaginations, emotional energy and inspiration

The results from SQ2a and SQ2b not only confirmed the relationships outlined by the arrows in the conceptual framework (Figure 2) between ‘climate court cases’, ‘inspiration’, and ‘prospects for climate action’, but also led to a more in-depth explanation for how these relationships function and provided insights into the mechanisms behind the arrows. In this light, I perceive the profound interconnection between imagination and emotional energy – especially in motivating action – as the most important finding of SQ2. The primary aim of this research was to uncover how processes of imagination can be linked to action and sustainability transformations, which was addressed as a research gap by Hawlina et al. (2020), Moore and Milkoreit (2020), and Riedy and Waddock (2022). Against this background, I argue that emotional energy can be seen as the *emotional engine* that propels imagination and inspiration for action.

Although in this research I initially addressed imagination and emotional energy independently to reveal their relevance, it has become evident that they are deeply intertwined when explaining the role that imagination can play in transformations and change. Therefore, I discuss the more in-depth exploration of the results for SQ2a and SQ2b together, situating the findings within the established body of literature. Hence, I highlight areas where my results align with prior insights and where they introduce fresh perspectives.

#### ***Emotional energy as the ‘emotional engine’ that propels imagination and inspiration for action***

##### *1) Contribution to the existing body of literature: emotional energy versus transient emotions*

Previous scholars already highlighted that emotions play an important role in linking imagination to action (e.g., MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012; Milkoreit, 2017; Moore & Milkoreit, 2020; Pigott, 2018; Pereira et al., 2019). However, as outlined in Chapter 2, these studies focused on – what Collins (1990) defined as – transient emotions, i.e., short-term, dramatic, and disruptive emotions, such as joy, fear, and anger. As previously argued, the current literature provides mixed results on the impact of these types of emotions (Alacovska & Holt, 2023; Fritsche & Masson, 2021). Some studies proposed that positive emotions serve as a source of support for action (e.g., Pigott, 2018), while others contended that they might diminish the likelihood of action (e.g., Van Zomeren et al., 2019). Against this background, I introduced the theory by Collins (1990) and Summers-Effler (2002), who differentiated between transient emotions and emotional energy, as a long-term emotional mood that highlights the role of agency, hope, enthusiasm, personal strength, social connectedness, and critical consciousness in explaining motivation for action. In line with the theory of Summers-Effler, the results of this study imply CCCs contributed to the experience of high emotional energy levels, thereby motivating action.

This way, this research introduced a novel lens for studying the role of emotions in bridging the gap between imagination and action.

## *2) Placing the results within the existing body of literature*

The findings on how emotional energy, in contrast to specific transient emotions, can effectively bridge the gap between imagination processes and prospects for (climate) action can be situated within the existing body of literature. For example, Geiger et al. (2021) previously studied how people feel when they think about taking climate action. Their findings indicated that hope, which resonates with a sense of high emotional energy, strongly predicted greater intentions to act. In contrast, anxiety, and helplessness, which can be associated with low emotional energy levels, were found to not exert a strong predictive power for action. Besides, a recent qualitative study conducted by Marczak et al. (2023) explored the range of emotions experienced by highly concerned Norwegian citizens in relation to climate change. While participants expressed particularly negative emotions such as anger, fear, hopelessness, and sadness, they also reported positive emotions, like love, joy, excitement, energy, and hopefulness when discussing collective climate action and hopeful initiatives by SMOs and other activists. This aligns with my findings, suggesting that CCCs bring about feelings of high emotional energy, including excitement, energy, and hopefulness. According to Marczak et al. (2023), people even view these positive emotions as having the power to balance out the difficult ones. Moreover, in line with earlier findings of Van Zomeren et al. (2019), Marczak et al. (2023) highlighted that a sense of emotional injustice or anger against this source of injustice can be strong motivators for collective action.

In regard to this, it is worth noting that negative emotions, such as anger, can coexist with high emotional energy levels (Summers-Effler, 2002). However, this research focused on positive emotions accompanying high emotional energy levels, as strategic climate court cases were primarily associated with feelings of happiness, excitement, hope, and empowerment. Nonetheless, a recent study by Gregersen et al. (2023) on the role of emotions in supporting climate activism revealed that anger emerged as the most powerful emotion for driving climate action. The authors compared the impact of anger with sadness, fear, guilt, and hope. Consistent with the theory on emotional energy, anger is considered to be an 'active' emotion compared to fear, sadness or guilt. Moreover, the authors found that the identification of a responsible actor is central to anger. Considering this, I found that CCCs contributed to a shift in perceived responsibilities, moving from a focus on individual citizens and their behaviours to attributing significant responsibility to powerful entities such as government and industry actors. In the study by Gregersen et al. (2023), several respondents (31 percent) attributed their anger to specific entities responsible for climate change, such as politicians or industry actors. Interestingly, respondents also frequently referred to "people" or "humanity", suggesting that their anger is partly self-directed, although there was no evidence of people blaming themselves as individuals. These findings resonate with the observed shift in the public narrative on climate accountability in the Dutch and Swiss contexts over recent years, as illustrated by several respondents in my study. Moreover, these findings

align with the theory proposed by Summers-Effler (2002), who argues that attributing the blame for negative emotions and the loss of energy to the environment or others, rather than to oneself, is crucial for the development of a sense of injustice. Hence, one could argue that someone who is not angry about climate change and the role of governments and industrial actors in causing it, might not experience the same amount of emotional energy and a corresponding sense of justice upon learning about strategic climate court cases. I believe that this sense of anger can also be observed in my data. Although this anger is not directly related to CCCs, it serves as a preliminary emotion that lays the foundation for the (further) development of critical consciousness and a sense of injustice, which, in turn, fosters the expansion of imagination prompted by CCCs and fuels the experience of high emotional energy. I would argue that individuals who lack anger regarding climate change and the lacking actions of governments and industrial actors in mitigating it, may not experience the same expansion of their imagination and the same heightened emotional energy upon discovering the possibilities presented by strategic CCCs.

### ***The potential consequences of false hope and disappointment***

Following these insights, the question arises once more about the potential consequences if CCCs, as a novel form of climate action, were to fail. While anger can serve as a powerful motivator for resistance and subsequent action, the scenario of governments and companies not acting upon the courts' verdicts raises my concerns about the possibility of the hope initially associated with CCCs transitioning into false hope, leading to disappointment. Disappointment tends to give rise to feelings of frustration and powerlessness, which often results in a state of inaction, where individuals are demotivated to take further action (Byrka et al., 2021; Huber, 2022; Martinez et al., 2011). Thus, although this study demonstrated that CCCs generate positive emotions and a heightened sense of emotional energy, it is essential to acknowledge the potential risks, including the possibility of a backfire effect if the actual impact of these cases falls short and results in disappointment.

### **5.2.3. Sub-question 3: Linking imaginaries and individual inspiration**

SQ3 investigated the relevance of the imaginary of CCCs for expanding the imagination and inspiring action at the individual level, addressing the research gap as proposed by Davoudi and Machen (2021) in the Chapter 1, who argued that the interactions between individual imagination processes and collective imaginaries are underexplored. In this light, this research revealed that respondents acknowledge the concept of strategic climate court cases as constituting an imaginary. Also, the relevance of this was shown, as respondents stressed that they feel institutionally, publicly, and collectively supported by this imaginary in terms of their beliefs, values, desires, and climate-related emotions. As a result, this recognition that CCCs go beyond mere fantasies and represent more of a collective belief system, fuels excitement and motivation for further climate action. Moreover, the research findings indicated that CCCs have influenced the public narrative on climate responsibilities

and climate action. This transformation is attributed to a significant extent to institutional recognition by an objective authority like the judge and media attention. This changed public discourse shapes a revised understanding of social life and social order, impacting perceptions of legality and moral justice. This collective shift in understanding is, according to the respondents of this research, believed to support further inspiration and motivation, also extending to individuals outside the climate movement.

The main findings for SQ3 offer a relevant contribution to the existing literature. To begin with, the results provide additional evidence that supports and deepens the understanding of the results of SQ1. It demonstrates that CCCs cannot only be defined as an imaginary based on a media analysis, but that people also perceive and engage with this imaginary, and that it provides them with an additional basis for action. This aligns with other imaginaries, like the circular economy, which also serves as an actionable idea in which people can participate, collaborate, and receive funding. Consequently, the acknowledgment by respondents that CCCs are institutionally established, publicly enacted, collectively embraced, and provide a shared understanding of social life and order supports that CCCs can indeed be defined as an imaginary.

Furthermore, the more conventional understanding of imaginaries revolves around the idea that it encompasses an image or a future vision, such as an image of America, or ‘the American dream’ (Hamscha, 2013), or notions of ‘sustainable growth’ (Strand et al., 2018) and ‘the digital future’ (Tafdrup, 2020), often conveyed through movies or fiction (Hamscha, 2013; Milkoreit, 2017). However, the findings of this research delve deeper into this understanding by introducing an additional layer which involves the question: "Is the idea potent enough to inspire action and participation?" In essence, it questions whether the idea has the power to motivate individuals to actively contribute to building and spreading the imaginary. Moreover, according to Jasanoff and Kim (2015), imaginaries not only define the possible spaces for action, but also include a sense of the rightness of action. This additional layer of interpretation is also reflected in the results for SQ3, as the findings revealed that an imaginary’s institutional embeddedness and public performance provide individuals with the validation and support to act upon an imaginary. This, in turn, leads to a growing collective embrace of the imaginary. In this light, one respondent (R9) emphasised that the idea that there is an enforceable right to climate protection is such a powerful idea in his eyes, that it needs advocacy. He described that he felt a calling to take this advocating role for strategic climate court cases. This way, this research demonstrated the practicality and the significance of studying imaginaries. Concludingly, discussing how to build and strengthen a specific imaginary with individuals may thus be much more meaningful than previously believed.

### ***Exploring the meaning and relevance of ‘collectively held’ within an imaginary***

As argued in Chapter 2, the notion of an imaginary being ‘collectively held’ can be considered somewhat vague, as an imaginary essentially exists within the minds of individuals. Therefore, with this research,

I also sought to explore this dimension of the imaginary, aiming to gain deeper insights into what 'collectively held' includes and its significance in terms of expanding the public imagination.

Remarkably, the findings from SQ3 highlighted the relevance of individuals' beliefs of what others believe and are likely to do. Imaginaries seem to fulfil an important role in strengthening such 'second order' beliefs, which become stronger when individuals see that the imaginary gets more and more resonance and is spreading. Here, the perceived collective consensus regarding an imaginary seems to support individuals in the expansion of their imagination, the emotional energy they experience, and their motivation to act. This finding aligns with prior research. For instance, Mildenerger and Tingley (2019) studied how individuals' perceptions of others' beliefs impact their support for pro-climate policies. They found that individuals were more inclined to support such policies when they believed that others would also support them. Additionally, Jachimowicz et al. (2018) provided experimental evidence for the causal effects of second-order beliefs on energy conservation. Their study demonstrated that people are more likely to conserve energy when they believe that other members of their community support this norm, and this effect is stronger than a first-order belief in the importance of energy conservation.

However, in addition to these cognitive aspects of 'collectively' held imaginaries, I would argue the collective dimension of imaginaries also encompasses an emotional component. I base this argument on both the insights from my research and speculative considerations. To give an imaginary life, it is essential that people form an emotional connection to it, and that it holds collective importance for both individuals and groups. During my interviews, I noticed that respondents are motivated to act upon the imaginary of CCCs because they deeply care about the phenomenon and the underlying issues it addresses; they feel that it matters to them. Consequently, it is unlikely for anyone to embrace and perform an imaginary if they do not genuinely care about it.

In summary, my results thus indicate that the second-order belief that CCCs are gaining recognition and acceptance among a wider public, coupled with the emotional resonance of an imaginary and the profound sense that it holds personal and societal importance, supports further inspiration and motivation to act. Hence, the collectively held aspect of imaginaries underscores the importance of exploring higher-level, collective-individual psychological and emotional processes that influence how people respond to an imaginary.

### 5.3. Theoretical implications

The above paragraphs already discussed the theoretical implications and additions per sub-question. However, what do these findings altogether add to the literature and how does this research in general extend the current theoretical insights? The following paragraph provides a summary on how this research adds to the research gaps as outlined in the introduction of this research and places the findings

in the context of the three analytical dimensions by Moore and Milkoreit (2020), as previously outlined in Chapter 2.

In summary, this research introduced the concept of emotional energy into the literature on imagination and imaginaries, successfully connecting both concepts to processes of inspiration and motivation for climate action. By doing so, I explored a novel approach to bridging the gap between imagination and action, thereby addressing a recognized research gap emphasised by several scholars concerning the dynamics of imagination in driving societal change (e.g., Hawlina et al., 2020; Moore & Milkoreit, 2020; Riedy & Waddock, 2022). The study's outcomes highlight the importance of not only looking at the role of certain transient emotions in imagination processes – as previous research on this subject has yielded mixed results (e.g., Alacovska & Holt, 2023; Fritsche & Masson, 2021) – but also considering values, motivations, desires, feelings of empowerment, critical consciousness, and hope. Furthermore, the research actively linked imagination at the collective level (i.e., imaginaries) to individual processes of imagination and inspiration. This unveiled the emotional engine of imaginaries, shedding light on the interplay between individual and collective dynamics. Additionally, the study has unveiled the developmental path of an imaginary, how it takes root – both in the media and in the minds of individuals –, becomes vested, and is actively built and spread by individuals who feel supported by it. Overall, this study provided new theoretical insights that contribute to understanding the role of imagination processes, together with heightened emotional energy levels, in inspiring climate action.

### ***Three analytical lenses for studying the role of imagination in transformative change***

Lastly, based on a review of the existing literature on imagination processes, Moore and Milkoreit (2020) outlined three analytical dimensions and a subsequent research agenda for understanding how imagination can drive transformative change. As detailed in Chapter 2, this research aimed to enhance the understanding of the transformative role of imagination processes and imaginaries while contributing to these three (interrelated) theoretical dimensions. Therefore, the following paragraph aims to discuss how the findings of the current study can be placed within and contributed to the analytical dimensions of Moore and Milkoreit (2020) to understand the intersection between imagination and transformation.

Firstly, Moore and Milkoreit (2020) argued that imagination processes, through both understanding the present and envisioning the future, have the capacity to envision possible alternatives and to bring about shifts in the institutional contexts, resources, power structures, norms, and values towards these alternatives. Consequently, they assert that imagination facilitates the development of a sense of the self in relation to the envisioned alternatives, creating a present sense of purpose and agency. Against this background, Moore and Milkoreit (2020) stressed the need for further research “to understand this link between imagination and emotion and its role in generating or suppressing transformative change” (p. 8). In response, I proposed a novel sociological operationalisation of

'inspiration' in relation to climate action, whereby inspiration was defined as a combination of the expansion of the imagination and increased emotional energy levels, which, in turn, foster a perceived sense of self-efficacy, increased prospects for (future) emotional energy, and heightened critical consciousness, all of which support the potential for (further) action.

Secondly, Moore and Milkoreit (2017) underscored the causal role of imagination processes in transformative change, although acknowledging that both imagination and transformations are challenging to reduce to linear cause-effect analyses. In line with this challenge, this study could not establish evidence for a causal effect of imagination since causal relations could only be determined through an experimental research design (Bryman, 2016). However, considering these methodological difficulties, Moore and Milkoreit (2020) called for studies that connect the individual level and the collective scale encompassing shared future visions, collective behaviour, and institutional change (Moore & Milkoreit, 2020). While I have studied the effect on collective processes on individuals, I did not study the reverse relationship, i.e., the effects of individual imagination processes on collective behaviour and institutional change. This might be an interesting avenue for further research, studying for example how individuals' imaginative processes collectively impact and contribute to changes in society, collective behaviour, and institutions. However, studying the causal relation between imagination and transformative change or between the individual and collective levels of imagination, remains difficult in sociological research due to the difficulties in excluding the effects of confounding variables and uncertain directionalities.

Thirdly, Moore and Milkoreit (2020) addressed the relevance of studying how individuals share their imagination with others and how groups communicate their shared values and future visions to new group members or other groups, identifying how new norms become adopted and how social identities emerge. They highlighted three distinct information flows in this: from an individual mind to another individual mind or a group, those from a group to an individual and those between and among groups. However, prior research on these dynamics focused particularly on communication activities and methods to study how imaginative ideas and imaginaries are shared (Moore & Milkoreit, 2020).

My research did not address these aspects but did expand upon the input and feedback that individuals receive from their surroundings and did explore how social dynamics and group membership affect individuals' processes of imagination, their experienced emotional energy levels, and their subsequent motivation to act. For instance, the results of this study uncovered the importance of a sense of belonging for individuals to feel empowered and motivated to stay involved in a movement and to act upon their expanded imagination. Moreover, the results revealed how individuals are affected by their second-order beliefs of what others might think and believe.



## 5.4. Methodological contributions

This study demonstrated the relevance of conducting multilevel research into imaginaries. While interviews are a common method to study individual processes of imagination (Herbert, 2021; Vervoort et al., 2022) or emotional energy (i.e., (McCarthy & Glozer, 2022; Milne & Otieno, 2007; Summers-Effler, 2002), most studies on imaginaries rely on textual analyses. Hence, multi-level research on imaginaries that combine a (higher level) textual analysis with (bottom-up) interviews with individuals is still quite unique. There are exceptions, such as a study by Spyrou et al. (2022), who combine in-depth interviews and focus group discussions on imaginaries, or a study by Ballo (2015), who – like this research – combined a document analysis with in-depth interviews. However, most studies on imaginaries have conducted analyses of media items, (e.g., Ferrucci & Petersen, 2018; González-Vélez, 2002; Pearce et al., 2019), policy documents (e.g., Mutter, 2021), or literature (e.g., Herr, 2022) to analyse narratives, frames, and associations. In this light, I would argue that some of these studies are difficult to differentiate from a discourse analysis, as the research process may appear quite similar. To some extent, one could also argue that the media analysis for SQ1 can be seen as a discourse analysis, studying the use of language and associations related to a certain phenomenon in written texts.

However, against this background, I posit that studying a phenomenon – in this case strategic CCCs – through a lens of imaginaries has proven highly valuable, which became evident by moving beyond a mere text analysis, setting up a multi-level study. This relevance is clearly demonstrated when comparing the findings for SQ3 to those of this study for SQ1.

To start, the results for SQ3 revealed that imaginaries extend beyond a mere image or discourse related to a particular phenomenon. This study highlighted that imaginaries encompass a broader embodiment, incorporating an emotional context that can evoke feelings of support and motivation. As a result, imaginaries can provide support and trust, both on an individual level and at the larger, societal scale. I would argue that this broader embodiment of imaginaries cannot be observed when one solely conducts a text analysis. By incorporating additional methods, such as in-depth interviews, focus groups or workshops, one can offer more-holistic perspective of an imaginary, taking into account the normative (i.e., ‘what is right) and emotional dimensions of imaginaries like images, values, desires, and emotions.

Moreover, building on the insights from SQ3 in addition to the findings for SQ1, I would argue that solely examining imaginaries from a higher-level, textual perspective may lead to overlooking two critical aspects of the interaction between the ‘self’ and the ‘greater context’. This includes understanding (1) how the imaginary serves as inspiration and motivation for individuals at the personal level, and (2) how individuals can influence and support the development of the imaginary (i.e., the ‘self-replicating aspect’ of imaginaries). Hence, I believe that a media analysis can provide valuable, but limited insights, while multi-level research can offer deeper insights of both the individual and social dynamics inherent in imaginaries.

Ultimately, I would even question the nature of an imaginary without emotional resonance. Based on the insights from SQ3, I would speculate that imaginaries that lack an *emotional load* could be considered dead, or lifeless imaginaries, as suggesting that individuals might no longer be inspired anymore to act upon the imaginary. Consequently, an imaginary would stagnate in its development and spreading. Eventually, it is at the individual level where ‘the imagination’ takes place and where imaginaries are vested. Imaginaries ‘live’ the minds and hearts of individuals, although animated by shared understandings. To me, this realisation once again underscores the relevance of research into imaginaries at the personal level. I firmly believe that only through a multilevel research approach, one that encompasses the exploration of individual processes of imagination and inspiration, as well as collective imaginaries, utilising both a top-down textual analysis and a more personal, bottom-up perspective facilitated by methods like in-depth interviews, could unveil the wider and interrelated dynamics of imaginaries. Hence, multilevel research substantially contributes to the understanding of the multifaceted nature of imaginaries and their pivotal role in (sustainability) transformations.

### 5.5. Limitations and avenues for further research

In addition to the limitations previously discussed in the context of the specific research questions, such as the polarisation bias in social media comments and the inability of this research to establish a causal link between imagination processes and actual action or sustainability transformations, there are several more general limitations that need to be addressed.

#### *Selectivity of respondents*

Firstly, an important limitation of this research is that I only interviewed a select group of people, namely climate activists. All respondents were to some extent involved in the process of a climate court case or were at least touched by this new form of climate action. While this decision was carefully considered, for the reasons previously explained in Chapter 3, I am well-aware that this affects the data. Ultimately, missing voices cannot influence what is imagined (Moore & Milkoreit, 2020). Concentrating solely on the cognitive-emotional reactions of climate activists in relation to CCCs introduces a bias, implying that CCCs possess the unique ability to expand individuals' imagination and increase their emotional energy. Although this can still be true, it is important to recognise that this probably not applies to everyone. Consequently, this impact of CCCs may not be universally observed among all individuals in the Netherlands and Switzerland. In fact, I even believe that it is plausible that most Dutch and Swiss citizens do not experience this impact. Therefore, one could rightfully question to which extent the imaginary of CCCs can be considered a vested imaginary. However, against this background, it is important to stress that different groups of people can have different, and sometimes even conflicting, imaginaries, depending on their shared set of ideas concerning the present and the future (Milkoreit, 2017). Considering this, I would still argue that CCCs can be defined as an imaginary, even though

individuals from dissimilar groups with contrasting perspectives might not classify CCCs as such or offer another interpretation to it. In the end, social imaginaries are always dynamic and person-dependent; they can change of time and might differ among groups (Milkoreit, 2017). Nevertheless, future research could study the imaginary of climate court cases in a broader context, adding an analysis on whether and how CCCs affect and inspire people outside the climate-activism spheres.

### ***Perceived motivations or descriptions of actions afterwards***

This study is limited in its ability to directly link imagination processes and inspiration to concrete actions, since this study relied on respondents' self-reported motivations for action or their retrospective descriptions of actions, rather than observing and analysing imagination and emotional energy and its immediate impact on motivation and subsequent action in real-time. To address this limitation, future research could consider employing methods such as diary studies or autobiographical data, which could provide more immediate insights into how a particular phenomenon contributes to an expansion of the imagination, the experience of emotional energy at that moment, and whether this translates into increased motivation for action and eventual actions. For example, autobiographical research uses personal experiences of a researcher to enrich our understanding of social or cultural phenomena, drawing on a researcher's own life history and utilising a first-person narrative to offer unique insights into the cultural, societal and collective influences shaping their personal experiences (Harder et al., 2020).

### ***A study situated in the western context***

Thirdly, this research is situated in the context of two Western societies, which significantly shapes the interpretation of the CCCs' imaginary (Chhetri et al., 2022). Hence, the imaginary of CCCs as described in this research, should be placed within the geographical understanding of a western and rich context. For instance, the CCCs imaginary emphasises a shift in climate responsibility from individuals to governments and industrial actors. However, it does, for instance, not address the broader responsibility of wealthy Western countries towards the Global South, which is rooted in colonial relations and the historical exploitation of the Global South countries. I believe that this broader perspective involves a story that demands attention, as it highlights the actual culprits behind the climate crisis. While it is often stated that we are all responsible, reports from Oxfam show that, over the past 25 years, the carbon impact of the top one percent of the wealthiest people was twice that of the bottom fifty percent (Berkhout et al., 2021). Therefore, the shift in climate responsibility and the emerging understanding of climate justice due to strategic CCCs in Western societies only represents a partial change, leaving larger and more fundamental realisations unaddressed. Hence, it is good to consider the findings of this research from a colonial perspective and to recognise that the burden of historical and current emissions is unfairly distributed, not only within countries, but also between countries (Gregersen et al., 2023).

Notably, in the past year, a remarkable development has unfolded in the context of strategic CCCs. Small island nations, including the Bahamas, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, Antigua, and Barbuda, have initiated legal action against high-emitting countries to protect their oceans (McVeigh, 2023). If successful, the case would necessitate reductions in carbon emission and the protection of marine environments already damaged by CO<sub>2</sub> pollution. This can potentially become a turning point in climate law and climate action, compelling developed countries to take responsibility for their past and present polluting practices at the expense of small island states and potentially more countries in the global South in the future (ClientEarth, 2023). This would provide an intriguing avenue for further research, delving into how these cases might expand the imagination and inspire climate action within a broader, cross-cultural context.

### *Explicit focus on the ‘opening up’ of public imagination spaces*

This thesis addressed how climate court cases *open up* the public imagination. However, as discussed in Chapter 2, sustainability transformations require not only the making of new ideas, but also the unmaking of problematic existing institutions, practices, power structures, and imaginaries (Feola, 2019; Feola et al., 2021). The findings of this research sometimes touched upon the effects of unmaking. For example, the realisation that neither governments nor companies are immune, also entails the ‘closing down’ of the idea that they cannot be held accountable for inadequate climate action and thus challenges existing power structures. Hence, processes of ‘opening up’ and ‘closing down’ are interconnected and often operate in tandem. However, the emphasis on the ‘opening up’ of new imaginative spaces may have led to a somewhat focused approach when studying the role of climate court cases in expanding the imagination. For subsequent research, I therefore propose an explicit emphasis on both dimensions of imagination: creating new ideas and beliefs and dismantling existing ones. This could potentially provide an even more comprehensive understanding of the transformative impact of CCCs, or any other subject of study.

### *Note on the use of Jasanoff’s definition of imaginaries*

Lastly, while the definition of imaginaries by Jasanoff and Kim (2015) is widely used and very valuable, concerns have emerged about academic pressure on PhD students working under Professor Jasanoff to conform to her specific terminology and definitions related to sociotechnical imaginaries (Vinsel, 2022). I believe it is important to keep these allegations in mind when basing a study on this particular definition.

## 5.6. Implications for practice

As argued in the introduction, the findings of this study can be highly relevant for Dutch and foreign social movement organisations, climate activists, and politicians. In general, this research underscores the importance and potential impact of expanding one's imagination, experiencing heightened emotional

energy, and cultivating shared imaginaries. In light of these insights, I want to emphasise the critical role that social SMOs, climate activists or maybe even green political parties can play in actively managing these imagination processes and emotional energy levels, as they can serve as powerful drivers for climate action. SMOs have the capacity to support the broadening of individuals' imaginations and to stoke the emotional energy within a movement or campaign. Regarding this imagination, SMOs could for example collaborate with artists on generating and sharing images on imagined dystopian and utopian futures and could actively develop the stories and narratives required to further expand people's imagination. SMOs could thus actively build these processes of imagination, thereby expanding individuals' possibility spaces for action.

Additionally, SMOs could try to proactively manage the emotional energy levels within a movement or a campaign. For example, Fossilvrij NL actively claimed their success in the ABP case after ABP announced that they would divest from the fossil fuel industry. This celebration was subsequently accompanied by feelings of pride, empowerment, and a sense of agency, effectively fuelling the emotional energy of engaged activists, as was demonstrated by the results for SQ1. Furthermore, SMOs can leverage each other's successes to expand people's imaginations, boost hope, and foster a greater sense of agency. The findings of this study illustrated that Milieudefensie actively pursued this approach by capitalising on the hopeful outcomes arising from the Urgenda case, and similarly, the KlimaSeniorinnen drew inspiration from the success of the Dutch court cases and harnessed these successes to instil hope and energy in their own efforts.

The active management of imagination processes and emotional energy levels – for example via internal and external communication channels – can prove valuable, particularly in moments when emotional energy wanes, and frustration threatens to take over (Jasper, 1998; Van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2017). Social movements and activist campaigns naturally go through phases characterised by higher and lower emotional energy levels. In these low-energy phases, the study's findings suggest that SMOs could focus on enhancing a sense of belonging among activists, and that it might help to celebrate successes, although small, to reinvigorate emotional energy. I would add that SMOs could potentially also use this knowledge when strategic CCCs are on the edge of failure due to a perceived lack of impact, and senses of false hope and disappointment might emerge, as speculated in paragraph 5.2.2.

Moreover, the results for SQ3 revealed that there is potential value in strategically thinking about how one can build and disseminate a social imaginary that is institutionally stabilised, publicly performed, and collectively held. This research has unveiled how individuals find a sense of validation in these shared imaginaries, and that people feel supported by it in their beliefs, values, desires and (climate) emotions. It underscored the profound impact this sense of support can have on individuals, positively influencing their motivation to act upon the possibilities they see and the futures they believe in. Given this, SMOs could for example try to proactively build new narratives and then take steps to ensure that they become increasingly institutionally stabilised – whether through legal means, policy

measures, or the allocation of resources –, publicly performed through media attention and campaigns that can reach a wide audience, and ultimately, collectively held through consistent repetition and reinforcement over time. Such a new narrative could for example be built around the previously mentioned current court cases by small island states.

## 6. Conclusion

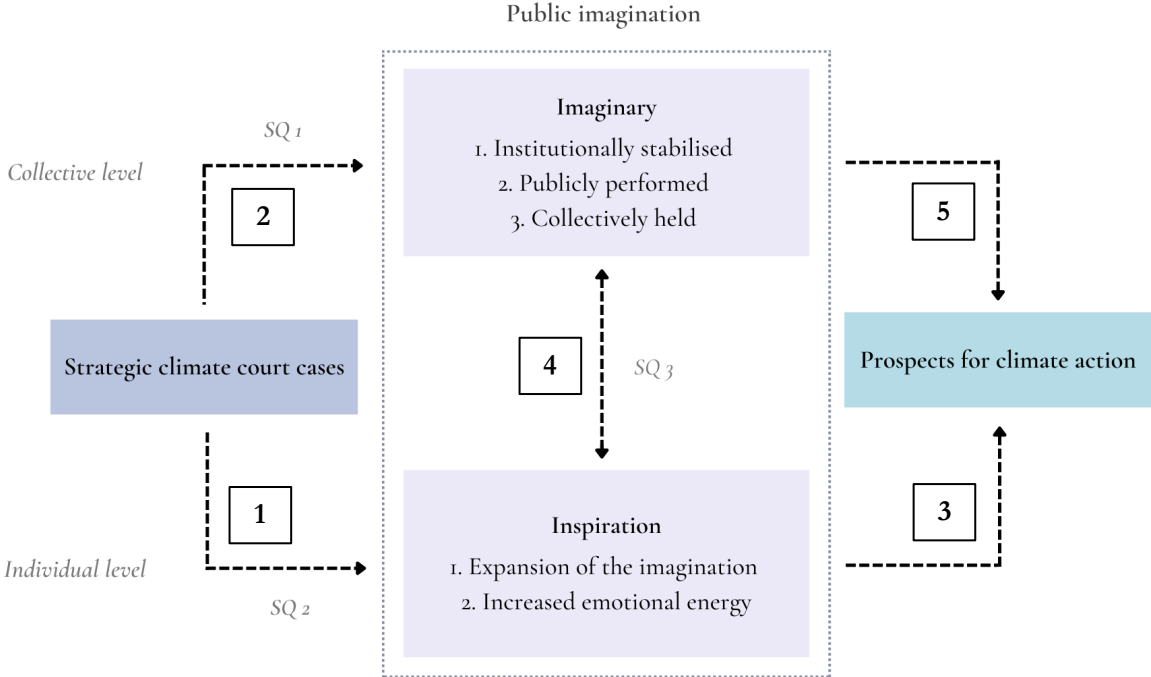
This study's aim was to provide empirical data on whether and how strategic climate court cases can expand the individual and collective imagination and inspire subsequent climate action. The research question read: *How do strategic climate court cases open up the public imagination in a way that has the potential to inspire climate action?* Here, the public imagination is understood as the combination of (cognitive-emotional) processes of imagination in individual minds and collective imaginaries that are shared within a group or society.

By conducting a media analysis and 25 in-depth interviews with Dutch and Swiss climate activists, the study's findings reveal that climate court cases open up the imagination space at both the individual and the collective level. At the individual level, CCCs expand the imagination of individuals through new realisations and beliefs about activists' political agency, climate accountability, and potential systemic changes, offering new possibilities for action (arrow number 1 in Figure 6). At the collective level, the media analysis unveiled the development of public associations and shared beliefs regarding CCCs, also emphasising a shift in the perceived responsibility for climate change from individuals to governments and polluting industrial actors. It also highlighted a newfound understanding of how citizens and SMOs (the Davids) can, and increasingly will, assert control over governments and corporate giants (Goliaths) by using strategic climate court cases (arrow 2).

Moreover, climate court cases are found to contribute to the experience of high levels of emotional energy (arrow 1), which is found to be a crucial aspect in linking processes of imagination (i.e., seeing new possibilities for action) to further climate action (i.e., feeling empowered and able to act upon these possibilities). High emotional energy levels – which resonate to feelings of enthusiasm, personal strength, agency, hope, self-confidence, a sense of social connectedness, motivation, and feelings of empowerment – can be seen as the emotional engine for subsequent action, providing individuals with the required equipment to act upon the new perceived possibilities for action arising from their expanded imagination (arrow 3).

At the collective level, this study concludes that strategic climate court cases can be considered an imaginary: being institutionally stabilised, publicly performed, and collectively held and shaping a shared understanding of forms of social life and social order (arrow 2). In addition to the media analysis, the in-depth interviews uncovered the individual-collective dynamics of the CCCs' imaginary (arrow 4). Here, the interviews revealed that respondents (in their own words) recognise the imaginary of CCCs as such and uncovered the relevance of this, since the imaginary (being institutional embedded, public performed and collectively held) provided them with a sense of validation and support for their beliefs, values, desires, and emotions. This further supported individuals' expansion of the imagination and their

emotional energy levels, thus fostering the prospects for climate action again (arrow 4 and 5). Conversely, addressing the arrow's direction from the individual level toward the collective level (i.e., the imaginary), this study revealed that inspiration and motivation at the individual level support the development and spreading of an imaginary. Consequently, the imaginary becomes increasingly collectively held, thereby inspiring more and more people, ultimately reinforcing the imaginary (arrow 4).



**Figure 6.** Conclusions for conceptual framework



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## Appendix A

**Table 3**

Overview of the items included in the media analysis

<b>Urgenda vs. Dutch government</b>			
<b>(U1) Announcement by Urgenda to start a court case against the Dutch government</b>	<b>5 news articles</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. NOS (NOS, 2015a)</li> <li>2. De Telegraaf (De Telegraaf, 2012)</li> <li>3. De Volkskrant (Trommelen, 2015a)</li> <li>4. Nu.nl (Nu.nl, 2015a)</li> <li>5. NRC (Luttikhuis, 2013)</li> </ol>	<p>23 June 2015</p> <p>10 Nov. 2012</p> <p>13 April 2015</p> <p>14 Apr. 2015</p> <p>17 Dec. 2013</p>
	<b>2 social media posts by Urgenda (no press release available)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facebook post (U1) (Urgenda, 2012)</li> <li>• Twitter post (U1) (Urgenda, 2013)</li> </ul>	<p>14 Nov. 2012</p> <p>21 Nov. 2013</p>
	<b>Comments</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ No comments on social media posts (lack of data)</li> <li>▪ No comments on article by Nu.nl (lack of data)</li> <li>▪ 2 comments on article by NOS via Twitter (lack of data)</li> </ul>	
<b>(U2) Urgenda won the case against the Dutch government</b>	<b>5 news articles</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. NOS (NOS, 2015b)</li> <li>2. De Telegraaf (De Telegraaf, 2015)</li> <li>3. De Volkskrant (Trommelen, 2015b)</li> <li>4. Nu.nl (Nu.nl, 2015b)</li> <li>5. NRC (Schreuder, 2015)</li> </ol>	<p>24 June 2015</p> <p>24 June 2015</p> <p>24 June 2015</p> <p>24 June 2015</p> <p>25 June 2015</p>
	<b>2 social media posts by Urgenda + press release</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facebook post (U2) (Urgenda, 2015b). Top 20 comments selected out of 69 comments)</li> <li>• Twitter post (U2) (Urgenda, 2015a). Top 20 comments selected out of 34 comments)</li> <li>• Press release (U2) (Urgenda, 2015c)</li> </ul>	<p>24 June 2015</p> <p>24 June 2015</p> <p>24 June 2015</p>
	<b>Comments</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ 40 comments on social media posts</li> <li>▪ No comments on article by Nu.nl (lack of data)</li> <li>▪ 4 comments on article by NOS via Twitter (lack of data)</li> </ul>	
<b>(U3) Urgenda won the case in High Court</b>	<b>5 news articles</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. NOS (NOS, 2018b)</li> <li>2. De Telegraaf (De Telegraaf, 2018)</li> <li>3. De Volkskrant (Smit, 2018)</li> <li>4. Nu.nl (Nu.nl, 2018b)</li> <li>5. NRC (Van Santen, 2018)</li> </ol>	<p>9 Oct. 2018</p> <p>9 Oct. 2018</p> <p>9 Oct. 2018</p> <p>9 Oct. 2018</p> <p>9 Oct. 2018</p>
	<b>3 social media posts by Urgenda + press release</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facebook post (U3) (Urgenda, 2019a). Top 20 comments selected (out of 591 comments)</li> <li>• Twitter post (U3) (Urgenda, 2018a). Top 20 comments selected (out of 22 comments)</li> </ul>	<p>20 Dec. 2019</p> <p>9 Oct. 2018</p>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Instagram post (U3) (Urgenda, 2019b). Top 20 comments selected (out of 54 comments)</li> <li>Press release (U3) (Urgenda, 2018b)</li> </ul>	20 Dec. 2019
	<b>Comments</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>60 comments on social media posts</li> <li>Top 20 comments on article by Nu.nl (U3)</li> <li>18 comments on article by NOS via Twitter (U3) (lack of data)</li> </ul>	9 Oct. 2018
<hr/>			
<b>Milieudefensie vs. Shell</b>			
<b>(M1)</b>	<b>5 news articles</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>NOS (NOS, 2018a)</li> <li>De Telegraaf (Van der Schoot, 2020)</li> <li>De Volkskrant (Reijn, 2018)</li> <li>Nu.nl (Nu.nl, 2018a)</li> <li>NRC (Luttikhuis, 2018)</li> </ol>	4 Apr. 2018 20 Dec. 2020 4 Apr. 2018 4 Apr. 2018 4 Apr. 2018
	<b>3 social media posts by Milieudefensie + press release</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Facebook post (M1) (Milieudefensie, 2018b). Top 20 comments selected (out of 193 comments)</li> <li>Twitter post (M1) (Milieudefensie, 2018d). Only 4 comments (lack of data)</li> <li>Instagram post (M1) (Milieudefensie, 2018b). Only 3 comments (lack of data)</li> </ul>	4 Apr. 2018 9 Oct. 2018 4 Apr. 2018
	<b>Comments</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Press release (M1)</li> <li>27 comments on social media posts</li> <li>No comments on article by Nu.nl (lack of data)</li> <li>No comments on article by NOS via Twitter (lack of data)</li> </ul>	12 Apr. 2018
<hr/>			
<b>(M2)</b>	<b>5 news articles</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>NOS (NOS, 2021a)</li> <li>De Telegraaf (Van der Schoot &amp; Timmer, 2021)</li> <li>De Volkskrant (van de Weijer, 2021a)</li> <li>Nu.nl (Nu.nl, 2021a)</li> <li>NRC (Luttikhuis &amp; Van der Walle, 2021)</li> </ol>	26 May 2021 27 May 2021 26 May 2021 26 May 2021 26 May 2021
	<b>3 social media posts by Milieudefensie + press release</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Facebook post (M2) (Milieudefensie, 2021b). Top 20 comments selected (out of 122 comments)</li> <li>Twitter post (M2) (Milieudefensie, 2021e). Only 14 comments (lack of data)</li> <li>Instagram post (M2) (Milieudefensie, 2021c). Top 20 comments selected (out of 414 comments)</li> <li>Press release (M2) (Milieudefensie, 2021d)</li> </ul>	26 May 2021 26 May 2021 26 May 2021 26 May 2021
	<b>Comments</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>54 comments on social media posts</li> <li>Top 20 comments on article by Nu.nl</li> <li>Top 20 comments on article by NOS via Twitter</li> </ul>	
<hr/>			
<b>Fossielvrij NL vs. ABP</b>			
	<b>No news articles</b>	Lack of data	

<b>(FV1)</b> <b>Announcement by Fossilvrij to start a court case against ABP</b>	<b>3 social media posts by Fossilvrij NL (no press release available)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Facebook post (FV1) (Fossilvrij NL, 2021b). Only 1 comment (lack of data)</li> <li>Twitter post (FV1) (Fossilvrij NL, 2021d). Only 6 comments (lack of data)</li> <li>Instagram post (FV1) (Fossilvrij NL, 2021c). Only 11 comments (lack of data)</li> </ul>	<p>29 June 2021</p> <p>21 Sept. 2021</p> <p>29 June 2021</p>
	<b>Comments</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>18 comments on social media posts</li> </ul>	
<b>(FV2)</b> <b>Announcement by ABP to stop investing in the fossil fuel industry</b>	<b>5 news articles</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>NOS (NOS, 2021b)</li> <li>De Telegraaf (Krajenbrink, 2021)</li> <li>De Volkskrant (Van de Weijer, 2021b)</li> <li>Nu.nl (Nu.nl, 2021b)</li> <li>NRC (Pelgrim, 2021)</li> </ol>	<p>26 Oct. 2021</p> <p>26 Oct. 2021</p> <p>26 Oct. 2021</p> <p>26 Oct. 2021</p> <p>26 Oct. 2021</p>
	<b>3 social media posts by Fossilvrij NL + press release</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Facebook post (FV2) (Fossilvrij NL, 2021f). Only 15 comments (lack of data)</li> <li>Twitter post (FV2) (Fossilvrij NL, 2021h). Only 5 comments (lack of data)</li> <li>Instagram (FV2) (Fossilvrij NL, 2021e). Top 20 comments selected (out of 44 comments)</li> <li>Press release (FV2) (Fossilvrij NL, 2021g)</li> </ul>	<p>26 Oct. 2021</p> <p>1 Dec. 2021</p> <p>26 Oct. 2021</p> <p>28 Oct. 2021</p>
	<b>Comments</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>40 comments on social media posts</li> <li>No comments on article by Nu.nl (lack of data)</li> <li>Top 20 comments on article by NOS via Twitter</li> </ul>	

## Appendix B

**Table 4**

Overview of the respondents and interview details

<b>Respondent number</b>	<b>Respondent details</b>	<b>Date</b>
Respondent 1	Man, 59 years old, Utrecht, working in IT, activist at Fossilvrij NL (joined Fossilvrij shortly after the ABP-campaign)	08-03-2023
Respondent 2	Man, 45 years old, Utrecht, teacher/researcher at the Hogeschool Utrecht, activist at Fossilvrij NL (joined Fossilvrij shortly after the ABP-campaign)	10-03-2023
Respondent 3	Woman, 30 years Old, Sneek (Friesland), pastor, activist at Fossilvrij NL and Christian Climate Action (joined Fossilvrij shortly after the ABP-campaign)	10-03-2023 (online)
Respondent 4	Woman, 55 years old, Arnhem, primary school teacher, Fossilvrij NL, Extinction Rebellion, Fridays for Future, Milieudefensie	17-03-2023 (online)
Respondent 5	Man, 27 years old, Utrecht, consultant, Fossilvrij NL, Extinction Rebellion	18-03-2023
Respondent 6	Man, 45 years old, Utrecht, teacher/researcher at Hogeschool Utrecht, Fossilvrij NL, Extinction Rebellion (joined FV during – and because of – the ABP-campaign)	23-03-2023 (online)
Respondent 7	Man, 54 years old, The Hague, human rights advisor at UNICEF, Extinction Rebellion	29-03-2023
Respondent 8	Man, 27 years old, Amsterdam, sustainability consultant, Milieudefensie (worked at the court case against Shell)	30-03-2023
Respondent 9	Man, 40-45 years old, Amsterdam, legal counsel at Urgenda (worked at the court case against the Dutch government)	31-03-2023 (online)
Respondent 10	Man, 55 years old, Utrecht, teacher, and researcher at Hogeschool Utrecht, Fossilvrij NL	31-03-2023
Respondent 11	Woman, 35-40 years old, Utrecht, teacher, and researcher at Hogeschool Utrecht, Fossilvrij NL (joined FV during – and because of – the ABP-campaign)	05-04-2023
Respondent 12	Woman, 47 years old, Amsterdam, former senior communication advisor for the Shell court case at Milieudefensie (worked at the court case against Shell)	05-04-2023 (online)

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Respondent 13	Woman, 28 years old, Amsterdam, researcher of the Shell court case at Milieudéfense (worked at the court case against Shell)	05-04-2023
Respondent 14	Man, 34 years old, Amsterdam/Brussel, former press officer during the Shell court case at Milieudéfense (worked at the court case against Shell)	14-04-2023
Respondent 15	Woman, 23 years old, Utrecht, student, Extinction Rebellion	1-5-2023
Respondent 16	Woman, 74 years old, Dürnten, Switzerland, cultural anthropologist, KlimaSeniorinnen (one of the board members)	4-05-2023 (online)
Respondent 17	Woman, 69 years old, Zürich, Switzerland, artist, and pedagogue, KlimaSeniorinnen	26-05-2023
Respondent 18	Woman, 79 years old, Zürich, Switzerland, psychotherapist in treatment and counselling for persons with alcohol use disorders, KlimaSeniorinnen (one of the founding members)	14-06-2023 (online)
Respondent 19	Man, 21 years old, Utrecht, student, Extinction Rebellion	14-06-2023
Respondent 20	Woman, 22 years old, Utrecht, student	14-06-2023 (online)
Respondent 21	Woman, 73 years old, Basel, Switzerland, adult educator, KlimaSeniorinnen (one of the board members)	22-06-2023
Respondent 22	Woman, 65-75 years old, Arlesheim, Switzerland, anthropologist in agriculture and food, KlimaSeniorinnen	22-06-2023
Respondent 23	Woman, 68 years old, Basel, Switzerland, social worker, and founder of a women's shelter, KlimaSeniorinnen	24-06-2023
Respondent 24	Woman, 71 years old, Zürich, Switzerland, former elected parliament member of the canton of Zürich and later on worked in the field of sight and hearing loss at old age, KlimaSeniorinnen	28-06-2023 (online)
Respondent 25	Man, 43 years old, Zürich, Switzerland, campaigner at Greenpeace, one of the initiators of the court case by the KlimaSeniorinnen	28-06-2023 (online)

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## Appendix C

**Table 5**

Interview scheme, English version

Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can you first tell me something about yourself? <i>(e.g., city of residence, (former) profession, age)</i></li> <li>• Do you identify yourself as an activist? Why, and since when? <i>(e.g., other activist activities earlier in life)</i></li> <li>• When relevant: When did you join Urgenda/Milieudéfensie/ Fossielvrij/the KlimaSeniorinnen? How did you get involved? Why did you decide to join?</li> <li>• How do/did you like it, at Urgenda/Milieudéfensie/Fossielvrij/ the Swiss KlimaSeniorinnen? What do you like most about your movement?</li> </ul>
Climate court cases	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When was the first time you heard about strategic climate court cases?</li> <li>• Do you remember what you thought about strategic CCC back then?</li> </ul>
Asking for a phenomenological description of CCCs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can you close your eyes for me, and describe what ‘pops up’ in your mind when you think about climate court cases? – in general, and when you think about case X (specific case)?</li> <li>• How would you define/describe ‘climate court cases’ as a sort of new tool in climate activism? <i>(And what makes CCCs different from other tools)</i></li> <li>• Which feelings do you associate with the court case by Urgenda/Milieudéfensie/Fossielvrij/the KlimaSeniorinnen? – <i>Use of the feelings grid</i></li> <li>• How do you feel since court case X started? – <i>Use of the feelings grid</i></li> </ul>
Experienced emotions and feelings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can you remember how you felt when you found out that it is possible to sue a government/corporate company for not doing enough to prevent further global warming? – <i>Use of the feelings grid</i></li> <li>• Can you remember how you felt in the beginning of the whole process? <i>(e.g., Were you sceptical? Did you see the case as something serious, or more as something like a PR stunt?)</i></li> <li>• When relevant: How do you feel now since you joined the movement by Urgenda/Milieudéfensie/Fossielvrij/the KlimaSeniorinnen?</li> <li>• What did/does it mean to you, to be part of the movement now against the Dutch government/Shell/ABP/the Swiss government?</li> </ul>
Open questions about CCCs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you believe that the court case by Urgenda/Milieudéfensie/Fossielvrij/the KlimaSeniorinnen has an inspiring effect? In which way(s)? How?</li> <li>• Are/were you inspired by another, prior court case? How?</li> <li>• How do you perceive the societal impact of climate court cases <i>(e.g., the ‘broader effect’ of CCCs?)</i></li> <li>• Did the climate court case(s) change something in the prospects for action you experience?</li> <li>• Has the climate court case and the whole journey of the court case changed something in the amount of hope you have for the future? <i>(e.g., how much hope do you have, are you hopeful?)</i></li> </ul>

## Appendix D



**Figure 7.** Feelings grid. Obtained from M. Brackett (2019). *Permission to feel: Unlocking the power of emotions to help our kids, ourselves, and our society thrive* (First edition). Celadon Books.

## Appendix E

Code tree revealing the applied codes in Nvivo12 (analysis of the media items).

Code	Files	References
Associations	0	0
Associations after 2015	0	0
Fossilvrij vs ABP & ING	0	0
CCC = Trend (others will follow)	5	8
Decision ABP =	0	0
Brave	1	1
Disappointing	1	8
Pressure from society and FV	9	16
Sceptical about effects	2	4
Inspiration	0	0
Inspired by earlier court cases	2	2
Inspiring others	2	2
Leverage effect	1	1
Others will follow	1	1
People want to join (take action)	1	4
Power to the people	1	1
Signal to others	3	3
Mention of emotions	0	0
Courage	1	1
Gratitude for actions by FV	1	3
Happiness	3	17
Victory	6	7
Notions of the future	3	6
Milieudefensie vs Shell	0	0
CCC = Basis for more action (step forward)	3	10
CCC = Broader impact	4	6
CCC = Ground-breaking	8	25
CCC = PR stunt	2	2
CCC = Promising case	3	7
CCC = Sceptical about results	5	15
CCC = Trend	5	8
CCC = Unjudicial	3	18
Inspiration	0	0
Inspired by Urgenda	8	14

Code	Files	References
Others will follow (basis for more action)	8	23
People want to join or joined (take action)	1	6
Signal to others	1	1
Mention of 'institutionally stabilised'	0	0
Celebrating the rule of law	1	1
Mention of emotions	2	4
Gratitude for action by Milieudefensie	1	7
Happiness	1	15
Hope	1	2
Proud	1	2
Relief	1	1
Tears of happiness	3	3
Notions of the future	2	12
Fear about the costs	2	12
Future generations	1	1
Urgenda - High court decision	0	0
CCC = Basis for more action	4	9
CCC = Historic case	5	9
CCC = Inspiration (others will follow)	2	9
CCC = Unjudicial & not democratic	3	15
Dissatisfaction (2)	1	5
Futuring (2)	2	6
Effects of climate change	4	4
Fear for the costs of measures (2)	1	9
Future children and grandchildren	1	1
Hope	1	3
Mention of 'institutionally stabilised'	1	1
Celebrating the rule of law (2)	3	5
Mention of emotions	0	0
Emotional, touched	1	1

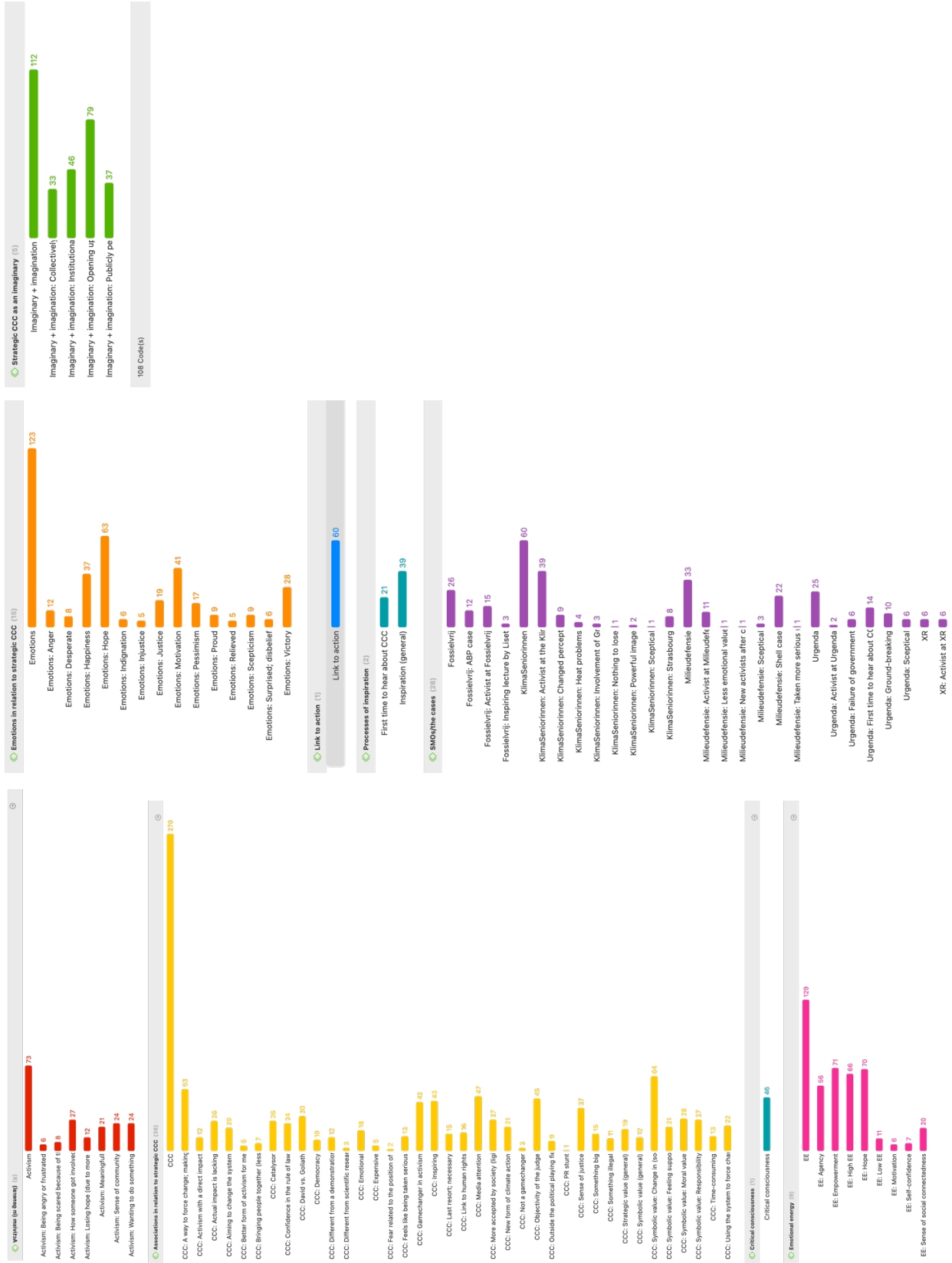


Code	Files	References
Gratitude for Urgenda's actions (2)	1	13
Happiness (2)	3	14
Pride	2	3
Victory - David vs. Goliath	4	4
Associations before 2015	0	0
CCC = A brave act	1	1
CCC = Act of desperation (final step)	4	8
CCC = Exceptional and new	1	1
CCC = Mainly symbolic value	2	4
CCC = PR stunt	1	1
CCC = Sympathetic initiative	1	1
CCC = Unjudicial & not democratic (1)	1	2
CCC = Unnecessary (and costly)	1	1
CCC = Won't stand a change (sceptical)	3	8
Associations in 2015 (after the win)	0	0
CCC = Waste of taxpayer money	1	1
CCC = Ground-breaking	9	22
CCC = Inspiring	3	6
Who's next (call for more CCCs)	3	7
CCC = Radical & far-reaching	2	2
CCC = Something to build on (achievement, now more)	5	8
CCC = Unjudicial & not democratic (2)	2	4
Futuring (note of the future)	1	4
CCC = A step forward	2	5
Hope	1	1
Mention of 'institutionally embedded'	0	0
Celebrating the rule of law	3	4
Citizens are protected by the court	6	7
Mention of emotions	3	6
Happiness	7	18
Proud	1	1
Tears of happiness	2	2

Code	Files	References
Victory	3	9
Sceptical	3	4
Cases	0	0
Fossilvrij	0	0
1) Announcement of court case ABP	0	0
Comments (FV1)	1	10
News articles (FV1)	1	3
Social media posts (FV1)	3	3
2) Announcement ABP to stop investing in fossil fuels	0	0
Comments (FV2)	1	43
News articles (FV2)	5	29
Social media posts (FV2)	5	7
3) Fossilvrij and ING	0	0
Comments (FV3)	1	1
News articles (FV3)	0	0
Social media posts (FV3)	4	5
Milieudefensie	0	0
1) Announcement of court case	0	0
Comments (M1)	1	19
News articles (M1)	5	39
Social media posts (M1)	5	7
2) Winning the court case	0	0
Comments (M2)	1	87
News articles (M2)	6	50
Social media posts (M2)	5	11
Urgenda	0	0
1) Announcement of court case	0	0
Comments (U1)	1	2
News articles (U1)	5	32
Social media posts (U1)	1	1
2) Winning the court case	0	0
Comments (U2)	2	37
News articles (U2)	6	44
Social media posts (U2)	3	10
3) Final decision by High Court	0	0
Comments (U3)	1	52
News articles (U3)	5	39
Social media posts (U3)	5	10

# Appendix F

Code tree revealing the applied codes in ATLAS.ti (analysis of the in-depth interviews).



## Appendix G

### Informed consent form and additional information sheet

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#### 1. Informed consent form (interview)

In this study I want to learn how climate court cases function as a public phenomenon that inspires imagination and action. Participation in this interview is voluntary and you can quit the interview at any time without giving a reason and without penalty. Your answers to the questions will be shared with the research team/my supervisors (dr. Joost Vervoort and dr. Jeroen Oomen). I will process your personal data confidentially and in accordance with data protection legislation (the General Data Protection Regulation and Personal Data Act). Please respond to the questions honestly and feel free to say or write anything you like.

Everything you say or write will be confidential, and can be anonymised. This means that I do not publish your name. However, if you have no objection, I would like to include your gender, age and professional situation to provide a little bit more context to/insight in the data I collected.

I confirm that:

- I am satisfied with the received information about the research;
- I have no further questions about the research at this moment;
- I had the opportunity to think carefully about participating in the study;
- I will give an honest answer to the questions asked.

I agree that:

- the data to be collected will be obtained and stored for scientific purposes;
- the collected, completely anonymous, research data can be shared and re-used by scientists to answer other research questions;

I understand that:

- I have the right to see the research report afterwards.

**Do you agree to participate?**     Yes     No

## 2. Additional Information Sheet (interview)

### Introduction

You are invited to take part in this study on the inspiring and motivating effect of climate court cases as a relatively new form of climate activism. The purpose of the study is to learn how climate court cases function as a public phenomenon that inspires imagination and action. The study is conducted by Nina Breedveld who is a student in the Msc programme Sustainable Development, Earth System Governance at the Department of Sustainable Development, Utrecht University. The study is supervised by dr. Joost Vervoort and dr. Jeroen Oomen.

### Participation

Your participation in this interview is completely voluntary. You can quit at any time without providing any reason and without any penalty. Your contribution to the study is very valuable to us and we greatly appreciate your time taken to complete this interview. We estimate that it will take approximately 45 minutes to complete the interview. The questions will be read out to you by the interviewer. Some of the questions require little time to complete, while other questions might need more careful consideration. Please feel free to skip questions you do not feel comfortable answering. You can also ask the interviewer to clarify or explain questions you find unclear before providing an answer. Your answers will be noted by the interviewer in an answer template. The data you provide will be used for writing a Master thesis report and may be used for other scientific purposes such as a publication in a scientific journal or presentation at academic conferences. Only patterns in the data will be reported through these outlets. Individual responses can be used as quotes to illustrate a research result. The transcript of your individual responses will not be presented or published.

### Data protection

The interview is also audio taped for transcription purposes. The audio recordings will be available to the Master student and academic supervisors. We will process your data confidentially and in accordance with data protection legislation (the General Data Protection Regulation and Personal Data Act). The research results (the final report/Master Thesis) will be shared with Irene Guijt (Oxfam Great Britain) and Fossilvrij NL.

Audio recordings will be deleted when data collection is finalised, and all interviews have been transcribed.