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Article

The “Greta Effect”: Networked Mobilization and Leader Identification Among Fridays for Future Protesters

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Abstract

Drawing on walking interviews with 19 Fridays for Future (FFF) activists in Germany, this study focuses on Greta Thunberg by researching strikers’ perception, identification, and online networking practices with the movement’s central figure. With respect to protest mobilization and collective identity formation, this study finds that participants primarily identify with Thunberg via her class standing. While male activists highlight Thunberg’s gender as a mobilizing factor, female and non-binary activists often dismiss it, thereby distancing themselves from FFF’s feminized public image. Participants believe that Thunberg’s disability gives her an “edge” to generate media attention for FFF, calling it an asset to the cause. Although all participants engage with Thunberg via social media, many downplay her leadership role in the movement. Similarly, local organizers actively use Thunberg’s posts to build up their own online networks while routinely emphasizing FFF’s leaderlessness. The findings thus nuance assumptions about identity-based mobilization, explore the construction of networked leadership, and chart digital organizing practices in a transnational youth climate movement.

Keywords

climate activism; Fridays for Future; Greta Thunberg; identity formation; intersectionality; networked leadership; protest mobilization; social movements

Issue

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1. Introduction

In launching the transnational youth climate movement Fridays for Future (FFF), Greta Thunberg has mobilized a generation. Thunberg’s School Strike for Climate is FFF’s trademark event, drawing millions of young activists to the streets worldwide (Teune, 2020). In media reporting on the movement, journalists have been speaking of the “Greta effect,” a term that symbolizes Thunberg’s key role in generating a transnational climate movement that mobilizes youth all over the globe. As the initiator and face of the movement, Thunberg herself—an 18-year-old Swede with Asperger’s syndrome—is very present in the international media: In 2019, Thunberg was named “person of the year” by *Time Magazine*, an accolade not shared by many, particularly given her gender and age. She is routinely invited as a keynote speaker

at high-profile political events, has become an authority on climate crisis activism, and represents a new generation of activists.

Girls and young women become hyper-visible in the visual representation of FFF’s activities in international journalism (Hayes & O’Neill, 2021). Correspondingly, news articles around Europe have been running headlines such as “girls claiming world power” (de Velasco, 2019), stating that today’s eco-girls belong to “generation Greta” (Drury, 2021). This type of movement coverage—often accompanied by pictures of girls holding protest signs—overemphasizes gender and age as the two key factors in Thunberg’s mobilization effect, ignoring other aspects of Thunberg’s identity that youth activists might actually identify with more.

FFF brands itself a youth movement with global appeal that transcends identity politics. However, FFF is

not free from identity-based mobilization, as it specifically draws from a student activist base. Thunberg herself is a young, middle-class, white female with a diagnosed disability. Certain aspects of Thunberg's identity get pushed to the fore in public discourse and her figure has been under scrutiny ever since she gave her passionate "how dare you" speech at the UN Climate Summit in 2018. This appearance also cast the spotlight on Thunberg's self-organized school strike in Stockholm, spurring FFF collectives in every country across the globe (FridaysforFuture.org). Thunberg thus emerges as an intersectionally-branded leader in the media—her age, gender, and disability are discussed as playing together to mobilize youth activists. Ryalls and Mazarella (2021, p. 449) study how US and UK journalists construct Thunberg's persona, arguing that they simultaneously depict her as "exceptional *and* fierce *and* childlike," fostering the public's fascination with her. Indeed, a recent study found that 45% of strike participants assigned Thunberg a key role in their decision to join the movement (Wahlström et al., 2019) and another suggests familiarity with Thunberg impacts the intent to take collective action (Sabherwal et al., 2021). What remains to be explored is whether young activists join FFF because of their gendered identification with Thunberg and what role digital communication plays in this process.

As a youth movement, FFF organizers use the affordances of social media to engage with adherents. A look at FFF's social network across platforms reveals the attention paid to Thunberg's digital communication: As of spring 2022, Thunberg's follower tally on her official social media accounts nears 23 million, with 3.6 million on Facebook, 14 million on Instagram, and 5 million on Twitter. Her posts routinely receive upwards of 60 thousand interactions, making her a key node in FFF's digital network (see also Boulianne et al., 2020). While scholars credit Thunberg with a leadership role in the movement (Olesen, 2020; Sorce & Dumitrica, 2021), we know little about how FFF activists assess her role, how and why they identify with her, and how they network with her. Scholarship is needed that addresses the so-called "Greta effect" by speaking with protesters about their personal connection to Thunberg, nuancing perceptions of her role and motivational quality. This study builds on walking interviews with FFF strikers in a university town in Southern Germany. It seeks to address three central research questions:

RQ1: How do activists understand Greta Thunberg's role in FFF?

RQ2: How does Greta Thunberg's identity (age, gender, class, race, and disability) mediate motivation to join FFF?

RQ3: How is Greta Thunberg's online communication used in FFF's networking practices?

To ground this research, I explore interdisciplinary theoretical observations about networked leadership, leader intersectionality, and collective identity formation in social movements.

2. Networked Leadership and Identity Formation in Social Movements

FFF understands itself as a decentralized, grassroots movement, marking its presence in the public sphere via the power of "bodies in the streets" during their signature action: the Friday school strike. As their overarching social movement master frame, FFF engages the "environmental justice frame" (Čapek, 1993, p. 5). The movement notably capitalizes on the "future" narrative to engage youth. The plea to secure a livable planet for forthcoming generations transcends geographical areas, political boundaries, and cultural groups. In their study on depictions of protesters in German newspapers, Bergmann and Ossewaarde (2020) argue that journalists offer paternalistic reporting that trivializes young climate activists, thus underscoring the prevalent assumption that youth are apolitical and join FFF to skip school. However, age anchors FFF followers, drives the movement's "collective identity" (Polletta & Jasper, 2001; Tilly, 2002), and underscores the importance of identity formation processes for identification with activist campaigns (Terriquer, 2015).

Even though the movement does not officially proclaim a formal leader, Thunberg is the initiator of the weekly strike phenomenon that spurred the global youth movement. Scholars discuss social movements by looking at leadership as it connects to communication practices and mobilization efficacy. Melucci (1996) offers a typology of social movement leadership around a leader's central tasks: to define objectives, provide the means for action, maintain the structure, mobilize the support base, and maintain and reinforce the identity of the group. These tasks can also be accomplished in the digital space, though the very nature of grassroots networking on social media challenges its directionality. Indeed, Castells (2012, pp. 2, 229) argues that online networks help "movements spread by contagion" with online interactions as a key "component of...collective action." Van Laer and Van Aelst (2010) assert that new social movements actively incorporate digital actions into their repertoire, with digital communication as *the* channel for movements to become transnational. Though more pessimistic about the role of everyday users, Isa and Himelboim (2018) explain that some Twitter users become social mediators who amplify a cause and act as bridges in social movement network structures.

Thunberg's social media accounts are central to the agenda of the movement and play an important role for national and local collectives. A framing analysis by Sorce and Dumitrica (2021) shows that during the Covid-19 pandemic, Thunberg's posts were shared to

nearly every FFF country group on Facebook, establishing her as a key voice of the movement across Europe. Thunberg's public communication to her social media audience continuously underscores the urgency of the climate crisis by providing shareable posts. Though scholars have long argued that pure digital engagement with activist followers can weaken identity-based mobilization in movements (Benford & Snow, 2000), Thunberg harnesses the reach of social media. Thunberg thus forms a "core actor" (Isa & Himelboim, 2018) in FFF's digital network, while her role can be understood more closely with what Gerbaudo (2012, p. 18) terms "soft leadership" employed to "choreograph the assembly" of youth activists.

Gerbaudo (2012) understands soft leaders to perform one important core task when using social media: choreographing. In choreographing, these leaders use social media to "direct people towards specific protest events" by "providing participants with suggestions and instructions about how to act," which creates an "emotional narration to sustain their coming together in public space" (Gerbaudo, 2012, p. 12). Networked followers become the assembly, a conceptualization that relates to what Hardt and Negri (2004) previously theorized as the "swarm" of a social movement. Both Shirky (2008) and Castells (2012) dismiss centralized movement leadership in networked social movements by arguing that technology allows organizing without formal direction. Indeed, Hardt and Negri (2017) see leaderless movements as a product of historical developments toward more democratic representation. For FFF, it is fair to say that the movement is not a digital social movement but a network-supported one with a strong analog protesting history. Importantly, the movement draws on what Olesen (2020) terms Thunberg's mediated "iconicity."

Thunberg has long reached celebrity status as a person of public interest. While celebrity protest communication can reroute activists' attention on personal stories and sensationalized media coverage (Poell et al., 2016), this engagement can also increase the mobilizing power of mediatized movement leadership. As Gerbaudo and Treré (2015) argue, media representation and social media engagement with activist leaders fosters connection to the core messages of a movement. Relatedly, Poell et al. (2016) found that the role of leadership communication in social movements through social media is pivotal to activist branding and success. In employing Della Ratta and Valeriani's (2014) term "connective leadership," they argue that social media administrators fulfill arbitrator roles by creating or sharing posts that can set the agenda for a social movement. As an individual who creates an online community around her digital presence, Thunberg can thus be conceptualized as what Bakardjieva et al. (2018, p. 908) call a "sociometric star" in protest leadership. Indeed, Olesen (2020) highlights the performative aspect of Thunberg's social media communication, underscoring that she has become synonymous with the FFF movement.

A second strand of scholarship engages questions of identity work through communication in social movements. Issues of collective identity formation in activist groups permeate specific agendas. The question of how identity gets constructed within a social movement was a central concern for Melucci (1996): He asks who protesters really are and what issues they rally around. Melucci found that having personal connections to a cause that link with experience, culture, and identity drive protest mobilization and the feeling of belonging to the group. In feminist scholarship on coalitional movements, authors underscore the importance of bridging social differences to create more inclusionary activist spaces (Carillo-Rowe, 2008; Chávez, 2013). At the same time, becoming involved in a social movement can build a new or reformed sense of self. Correspondingly, Snow and McAdam (2000, pp. 46–47, 49) argue that identity formation processes occur on multiple levels, including "identity work," which connects to the self-concept in activist context; "identity convergence" with existing sociopolitical inclinations; and "identity construction," where interests of various individuals become aligned as a result of being part of an activist group. Digital media can be used to call attention to activist issues and put it on the agenda of individuals from various backgrounds who might otherwise not have an opportunity to link up with social movements. In networked contexts, the way that potential adherents get addressed and how they personally connect with activist agendas without feeling included becomes important.

3. Intersectionality and (Digital) Activism

FFF positions their activism as a global necessity, reframing the climate *change* narrative to alert the public about an imminent climate *crisis* that will affect everyone, everywhere. This message has universal appeal: It could, theoretically, mobilize any person with a sensibility toward environmental issues. As noted by Collins and Bilge (2020, p. XX), the histories of disenfranchisement in many global political movements connect to how individuals "see themselves as part of a broader transnational struggle." In social movement scholarship, the question of personal identification with a cause becomes important. In their early work, Klandermans and De Weerd (2000) discuss "social identity" as a factor for protest participation. A feminist reading of this conceptualization unveils that a monolithic understanding of social identity ignores how identity markers such as gender, race, or nationality mediate group cohesion and identification with a cause.

Movements consider their constituency in their issue framing and mobilization techniques. Skilled organizers should be aware that they engage with a diversity of individuals with varying backgrounds. Intersectionality sees the co-construction of identities as integral to understanding our social world, our experiences, and our convictions. Yet, feminist media scholars have critiqued a

lack of sensibility towards intersectionality by activist organizers, for instance in the 2017 Women’s March in Washington, the Black Lives Matter movements, as well as digital empowerment campaigns like #MeToo (Jackson, 2016; C. Rose-Redwood & R. Rose-Redwood, 2017; Trott, 2020). Intersectional scrutiny calls out inclusivity in campaigns that are tied to both sociopolitical issues and specific identity markers, such as gender or race. In discussing FFF—and Thunberg specifically—Collins and Bilge (2020, p. XX) assert that intersectionality is key to understanding “youth activism in which digital and social media figure prominently.” Thus, an intersectional sensibility in activist engagement strategies is crucial. Roberts and Jesudason (2013, p. 313) study allyship between gender, race, and disability groups and argue that a focus on “movement intersectionality” fosters cohesion and solidarity across followers. This includes making adherents across causes feel included by acknowledging and validating identity-based lived experiences. For instance, FFF in Brazil was successful in linking up with indigenous groups by amplifying the violence of government extractivism and ethnic marginalization of their peoples. In including this perspective, indigenous activists such as Txai Suruí are now prominently featured as global, intersectional voices in the movement (Brooks, 2021).

While existing scholarship discusses Thunberg as a movement leader and central mobilizer for FFF’s climate activism, scholars have not yet examined how FFF activists relate to Thunberg and how they network with her. An intersectional perspective to the popularity of Thunberg affords insight into the multilayered identifications protesters hold with both the cause and its mediated leader. Intersectionality here does not concern the diversity of the protesters themselves but rather seeks to point to various dimensions of Thunberg’s mediated identity that become of importance to protesters. Studying these elements will bring nuance to simplified understandings of the prototypical young, female FFF activist who “receives social significance via their identifications with figures such as Greta Thunberg [or] Louisa Neubauer” (de Velasco, 2019). Building on leadership and identity formation literature in social movements, this study aims to bring nuance to the simplistic characterization of youth activists under the spell of the “Greta effect” by asking how activists identify with Thunberg, what role they assign her, and how they network around her digital communication.

4. Method

To address networked mobilization and leadership identification in the FFF movement, this study builds on 19 walking interviews with students at the University Climate Strike Week at a university in Southern Germany in late autumn of 2019. I attended the climate breakfast in the student lounge on Tuesday morning. During this first event, I met two of the local FFF chapter adminis-

trators, Adrian and Katharina. I explained the nature of my research and asked them if they would encourage attendees to speak with me about their experiences with FFF. Seeing me converse with administrators prompted some students to inquire about my research, which led to some volunteering to be interviewed. Throughout the week, I went to different events, introducing myself to student activists and engaging in informal conversations about their journeys with FFF. At Friday’s main strike event, 19 FFF followers agreed to be interviewed while marching for climate justice.

The interviewees included nine women (ages 16–24), eight men (ages 16–26), and two non-binary identifying individuals (ages 19 and 22). On average, participants have been involved with the FFF movement and the local chapter for six months. I also interviewed three students who attended an FFF event for the first time and three coordinators/administrators, who have each been with the local chapter since it was founded in 2018 (see Table 1). While the study participants are not particularly diverse in terms of their own sociodemographic makeup, they represent typical FFF strikers in Germany, where the majority of activists are higher educated and ethnically quite homogeneous. Though interviewees share much similarity with what the movement looks like across Western Europe, the data can only tell the story of these young climate activists in this particular context. Consequently, the study design does not hope to infer generalizability and while the sample is a good size, the stories do not account for FFF movement adherents at large.

Walking interviews are often used in urban geography scholarship (Evans & Jones, 2011) and have found application in other disciplines, where the atmosphere, surroundings, or specific location become important (O’Neill & Roberts, 2019). The walking takes the stringency out of the sit-down context and allows for a more natural conversation that can draw from the atmosphere. Given the activist occasion, the walking interview method enabled interviewees to embed their responses into storied contexts that provided insights into their ongoing engagements with the cause while feeding off the energy of like-minded bodies in the streets.

Each interview lasted around 20 minutes and was conducted using a loose interview protocol containing nine open-ended questions. The protocol included tour questions (“What motivated you to become involved in FFF?”), structural questions (“What role does Greta’s gender as a female activist play for you personally?”), and devils-advocate questions (“Following Greta on Instagram is not really knowing the real person—how does interacting with her online connect you to her?”). These different question types (based on Lindlof & Taylor, 2017) allow interviewers to ask both open-ended and more targeted questions on particular experiences or attitudes. Overall, the protocol was designed to generate personal stories about the intersectional dimensions of their own protest mobilization. Specific questions

Table 1. Overview of study participants.

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Student (Major)	Time Involved in FFF
1. Adrian	18	Male	High school	15 months (administrator)
2. Anna	20	Female	University (geography)	10 months
3. Carsten	21	Male	University (biology)	6 months
4. Christine	18	Female	High school	12 months
5. Daniel	16	Male	High school	6 months
6. Denise	24	Female	University (accounting)	7 months
7. Fred	26	Male	University (geography)	2 months
8. Jana	17	Female	High school	First time attending
9. Jonas	23	Male	University (physics)	4 months
10. Katharina	20	Female	University (political science)	15 months (administrator)
11. Lisa	16	Female	High school	First time attending
12. Loris	24	Male	University (German)	2 months
13. Luca	19	Non-Binary	University (sociology)	First time attending
14. Marie	21	Female	University (medicine)	11 months
15. Matthias	17	Male	High school	9 months
16. Nadine	18	Female	University (geoecology)	4 months
17. Sascha	22	Non-Binary	University (education)	8 months
18. Sven	25	Male	University (geography)	15 months (administrator)
19. Theresa	19	Female	University (English)	7 months

also targeted the use of social media to keep up with the movement and the role of Thunberg as FFF’s central figure.

The conversations with interviewees centered Thunberg as a motivator for participation, with particular attention paid to Thunberg’s identity markers (age, gender, race, class, and disability). Thunberg’s use of social media to provide direction for the movement and mobilize for action was discussed in relation to her digital networking practices alongside her mediation in print, broadcasting, and social media. Upon verbatim transcription, the interview data were imported into the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA. Via two rounds of inductive coding, key statements were extracted and clustered to form six codes (gender, race, class, age, dis/ability, network practices) and further abstracted into three larger categories (see also Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019). This process generated the three key themes that dovetail with the study’s three central research questions—Greta as a mobilizer, identifying with Greta, and networking with Greta.

5. Findings and Discussion

The University Climate Strike Week was designed to bring together students, academics, and members of the local community. The four-day program featured open discussions about climate justice, a feminist roundtable on reproductive rights as it connects to environmental justice, a workshop on climate communication, a practical unit on planting, a documentary screening, and a sustainability lecture—to name a few. Next to daily events, the action week culminated into the Global Day of Climate Action on Friday, with a large strike through

the downtown area, drawing 7,000 strikers. The events were advertised on the local FFF website and across regional social media accounts (Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter).

5.1. Greta as a Mobilizer

During the tour question period, which sought to generate a story about the interviewees’ personal mobilization experiences, three individuals specifically mentioned Greta Thunberg as a reason for joining the cause. Adrian, an 18-year-old high school student who has been involved in the local chapter for 12 months explains:

I knew a few students from my school who went to FFF meetings here on campus. I was intrigued, I mean, I feel passionate about the environment....I kept reading about Greta Thunberg and how she is telling politicians what they do not want to hear. That was also a push and I said: “Okay, this week, I am going to the FFF meeting.”

Since then, Adrian has evolved to becoming a local administrator, organizing strikes and events, such as the University Climate Strike Week. He notes: “We try to offer something for everyone—lectures by experts, a climate breakfast—and for those who cannot attend in person, we live stream to Instagram.”

Anna, a 20-year-old geography major reacted defensively when I asked about Thunberg, telling me that the “issues of the movement are bigger than one person.” Three more female activists proceeded to actively downplay Thunberg’s role for FFF. Nadine explains: “We don’t need Greta or anyone else at the top to tell us that the

climate crisis is here.” Jana notes: “We owe her, yes, but now FFF is everywhere and all of us count just as much.” Sven echoes this in explaining how the local chapter is organized: “We do not have a formal leader even in our organizational team. Here, we like that everyone can say what they think, and everyone can make decisions equally.”

With this assessment, the protesters seem to latch on to FFF’s public image of a transnational, grassroots, and—for the most part—“leaderless” movement (see also Gold, 2020). However, when pressed on the issue with follow-up questions such as “How do you think the movement would develop if Greta Thunberg stopped being involved?,” all 19 interviewees credited her personally with the movement’s success in building such a large supporter base. This supports Sabherwal et al.’s (2021) findings that familiarity with Thunberg affects students’ desire to become involved with climate activism.

5.2. Identifying With Greta

At the Friday strike, many participants carried signs, a few even had a picture of Thunberg with her slogans such as “there is no planet B.” Thunberg has been able to mobilize global youth for climate activism, making age a key factor in FFF’s public image. While many university employees and townspeople also participated in the Global Day of Climate Action on this particular occasion, the strikers were predominantly students. To a certain degree—and in this specific context—this contrasts Sabherwal et al.’s (2021, p. 329) findings that “familiarity with Greta Thunberg did not affect younger and older adults differently.” In asking what role Thunberg’s age played in public discourse, Daniel, a high school student who has been involved with FFF since the spring explains his frustration: “Greta is young, yes, but...that doesn’t mean she doesn’t know what she is talking about. We [youth] are constantly underestimated.” Similarly, Lisa, who goes to the same school as Daniel and marches for the first time explains: “Just look around...Young people everywhere. We know what’s at stake and we are here to say ‘do something!’” Daniel’s response dovetails with studies about journalistic treatments of protesters, in which they are downplayed, disparaged, and trivialized due to their age (Bergmann & Ossewaarde, 2020; von Zabern & Tulloch, 2021).

When asked about Greta’s identity as a young female, other females and one non-binary student were quicker to discard gender as a mobilizing factor. Christine, a high school student explains her feelings around gender norms: “I think it’s expected of girls to have an idol or someone to look up to, so for me, I don’t think it matters that she is a girl.” Theresa elaborates correspondingly:

Look, I am all for diversity in all areas. I am really pro-woman, women standing up is great because they were not allowed to do this for such a long time, yeah but for me, I don’t care that she’s female.

Indeed, Hayes and O’Neill (2021) have found that in media reporting of climate protest events, journalists mostly feature young, female FFF protesters. When I pointed to this rather feminized public image of the movement—with many mediatized national leadership figures being female—most female study participants did admit that they might not have participated to the same degree if the “face” of the movement was male. Indeed, male study participants were more likely to highlight Thunberg’s gender, arguing that it is important to support female political leadership. Fred, who has been involved with the local chapter for about two months responds energetically: “I find it extremely important that Greta is a girl, it sets an important counterpoint to how politics has been done up to this point!”

When asked what aspects of Thunberg’s identity participants personally identify with, it is not gender but rather elements pertaining to class that get highlighted. Sascha explains: “She is not a celebrity or one of those rich people suddenly interested in climate. She is a girl who was tired of waiting around for others to do something.” Jonas also notes that “the fact that she is middle-class is part of the narrative,” and Carsten elaborates:

Personally, I think she got famous because her protest was so simple, it was a normal girl from a pretty...average family...with no activist network or money just doing what she believed was right, she is like one of us, this resonates with our students here, I mean, locally—it’s an international story, Greta is a citizen representing our class and the message is global.

Protesters are often fascinated that Thunberg was able to pull off such a large-scale campaign without excessive financial resources, highlighting her class background. It is precisely by bringing together environmental issues with social equality demands that builds the environmental justice movement—and class is an important layer of identification with this master frame (Cutter, 1995). In terms of “identity construction” (Snow & McAdam, 2000), Thunberg’s class-standing resonates strongly with the local FFF community; although there is less difference to bridge (Carillo-Rowe, 2008) since university students in the Global North share proximity to her own middle-class.

While media reporting hails female participation, Thunberg’s disability is a much-contested element of news media reporting (Ryalls & Mazzarella, 2021; von Zabern & Tulloch, 2021). Participants in this study noted across the board that they take note of her different communication style but disagree with naming it a “drawback” for the movement. Rather, they understand her disability as a factor that gives Thunberg an “edge” (Marie), something that is needed to generate attention for FFF and the cause. Luca explains:

Well, I don't know what it's called but I—you saw it in that “how dare you” speech....I mean, that seemed almost like an outburst....In the media, it gives her something special and the media always need something special to report about it.

Denise similarly notes: “I mean, it is a good story, right [chuckles]. The kid with Asperger’s saving the planet.” Matthias recalls a tweet by Thunberg (2019), in which she explains how her condition is her “superpower”:

When haters go after your looks and differences, it means they have nowhere left to go. And then you know you're winning! I have Aspergers [sic] and that means I'm sometimes a bit different from the norm. And—given the right circumstances—being different is a superpower. #aspiepower

The insights provided by interviewees support the notion that Thunberg’s disability makes her exceptional in the minds of followers—it is not a deficit but rather, an advantage (see also Ryalls & Mazarella, 2021).

However, study participants seemed acutely unaware of the privilege that comes with Thunberg’s whiteness and how this aspect of her identity provides advantages. To that end, Ryalls and Mazarella (2021, p. 444) argue that “Thunberg’s whiteness marks her as idealized and exceptional, as the icon of the global climate change movement.” In the context of protest participation, C. Rose-Redwood and R. Rose-Redwood (2017, p. 654) argue that “whiteness often serves as the unspoken norm that goes unnoticed by those who benefit the most from white privilege.”

5.3. Networking With Greta

As we marched from the train station along the main campus roads and back towards the town square, I observed many strikers take pictures and videos of the protest march, immediately sharing them to social media. Among the 19 study participants, every single interviewee follows Greta Thunberg on at least one social media channel. Figure 1 details the social media reported by the interviewees: eight interviewees engaged with her content across all three platforms while 11 followed her both on Instagram and Facebook. When asked if strikers engaged with Thunberg’s social media communication (including liking, sharing, or commenting on status updates, pictures, videos, shared articles, etc.), Loris illustrates: “I like her posts because she has a way of putting things that really makes you think ‘This is urgent, the climate crisis is happening now.’” This testimony relates closely to Hwang and Kim’s (2015) findings that social media engagement promotes the intent to participate in social movements, highlighting the core role of networked communication practices in contemporary social movements.

In mentioning Thunberg’s popular tweet in which she calls her disability a “superpower,” Matthias explains that he recalls seeing it featured on the local collective’s page. The tweet’s metrics yield that it was prominently shared by FFF followers worldwide, suggesting that Thunberg’s disability is not only tolerated but amplified and instrumentalized to boost movement publicity. This underscores Boulianne et al.’s (2020, p. 216) observation that Thunberg’s messages on Twitter “were widely circulated, liked, and commented upon.”

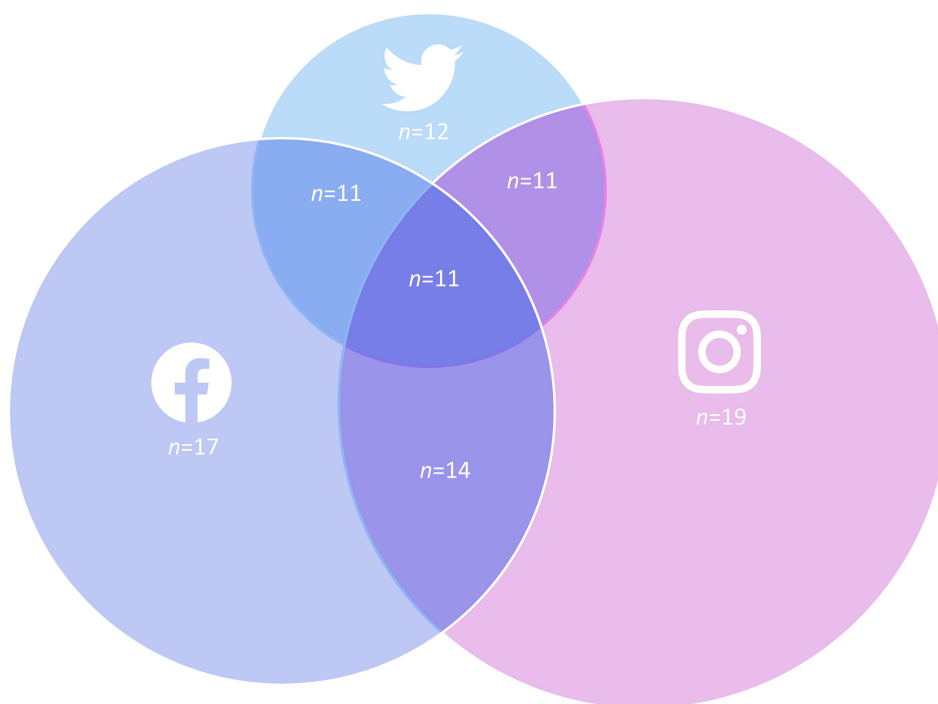


Figure 1. What social media platform do you follow Greta Thunberg on (Instagram, Facebook, Twitter)?

Two of the local administrators point out that they often share posts by the national collective (FFF Germany) and Thunberg. Sven recalls: “We do share Greta’s posts...well, most of them, actually [laughter].” Katharina comments that they “sometimes tag” Thunberg, though she is aware that she probably will not see their post in her daily sea of mentions. They do so, she elaborates, to connect to local events or find “good quotes” to use in their online graphics. Here, organizers explain that local FFF chapters capitalize on Thunberg’s sociometric impact—a term that refers to the “high social capital and connectedness of the people who emerge as network movement leaders” (Bakardjieva et al., 2018, p. 908). Perhaps this networking practice makes local FFF chapters what Isa and Himmelboim (2018, p. 3) call “non-elite actors,” with the potential to become important social mediators in the overall digital FFF network.

Indeed, Sorce and Dumitrica (2021, p. 8) assert that Thunberg’s posts act as a “central discursive driver” for the movement, crediting her with developing keyframes, messages, and slogans that get picked up across FFF collectives in Europe. In that sense, networking with Thunberg creates an increased sense of collective identity through “affordances for discourse” (Khazraee & Novak, 2018), in which followers (individuals or groups) can co-perform her messages and share their own stories alongside Thunberg’s topic prompts. Taken together, the charted networking practices echo Olesen’s (2020) argument that followers use platform affordances such as commenting and sharing to connect their own activism to the cause and feel even more connected with Thunberg—a quintessential quality of networking in social movements that moves beyond the oft-critiqued passive post-reception and duplication.

6. Conclusion

This study sought to provide insights into how FFF activists gauge Thunberg’s role in FFF, how they connect with her identity, and how they interact with her online. Adherents in the FFF movement credit Thunberg with creating a movement that allows them to become politically active and take charge of their futures. While journalists overemphasize female participation in FFF, the interviews yield that female strikers are often more critical of Thunberg’s central role. In discussing Greta as a mobilizer, interviewees were reluctant to name her the movement’s leader, some even downplayed her as a mobilizing factor altogether—although, when asked more closely, the majority credits Thunberg as a central figure in the transnational youth climate scene. Gold (2020) reflects this assumed leaderlessness in her study of youth climate activists. In digital social movements, online followers often subscribe to a leaderless movement that is organized horizontally (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013) in which they can become “enthusiastic networked individuals” (Castells, 2012, p. 219) without taking direction from arrowheads.

While strikers downplay Thunberg’s leadership role, they all follow her social media communication on at least one platform. Followers keep up with Thunberg through her own networked communication practices on social media platforms, in reading about her in journalistic texts, or by watching videos about her. The networking patterns of social interaction with Thunberg by study participants moves beyond what Gerbaudo (2012) terms “soft leadership” in (online) social movements and more towards what Della Ratta and Valeriani (2014) posit as “connective leadership.” The practice of FFF organizers to retweet or share Thunberg’s post or tag her in local events and announcements supports the idea that her mobilizing power is being harnessed to push the movement’s online visibility. Yet, in the specific cultural context of this study (Germany), face-to-face interactions remain crucial in the maintenance of a collective identity and fostering identification with the cause.

Intersectional frameworks are present “in the discourses of self-identification among protesters” (Collins & Bilge, 2020, p. 166), and this becomes clear in participants’ stories about what elements of Thunberg’s identity they connect to. While FFF routinely performs intersectional awareness (Sorce & Dumitrica, 2021), the backgrounds of study participants suggest that—in the German context—the follower base remains quite monolithic. Individuals with migration backgrounds or non-European ethnicities remain conspicuously absent from the local FFF group. Interviewees were all white, highly educated, and from middle-class backgrounds. Perhaps this explains why participants valued Thunberg’s own class-standing to such an extent.

In providing qualitative insights from walking interview data, the study is able to offer a closer look at the motivations of individuals to join a movement based on a mediated leadership figure. Theoretically, the findings point to the key role of leadership in decentralized transnational movements, underscoring the value core figures such as Thunberg bring to popularizing and propelling a social movement cause. At the same time, the findings challenge notions of FFF as a feminized social movement by including additional perspectives of how movement adherents identify with the intersectional identity of leaders such as Thunberg. In addition, the article provides evidence on the importance of digital communication and online networks for FFF as social media has become a key channel for organizers to spread movement messages and conversely, for followers to keep up with movement developments. While the research was conducted before the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, the subsequent forced digitalization of FFF’s strike events during governmental lockdowns across Europe further cements the key role of online networks in social movements (Sorce & Dumitrica, 2021).

In line with qualitative epistemology—and to reflect on my own stance in the research process—it is worthwhile to note that my sensibility towards feminist ideals, intersectional inclusivity, and environmental concerns

has certainly shaped the topic selection, methodological choices, and reading of the research material. While this perspective has afforded valuable insights into movement mobilization around collective identity formation and leadership identification, three limitations of this study include the particular geographical and cultural context, smaller sample size, and brevity of the walking interviews. The generated insights can nuance assumptions about the “Greta effect” but cannot capture the intricacies of collective identity in the larger FFF movement (see also Fominaya, 2010). Additional in-depth conversations or even an ethnographic approach to studying FFF collectives over a longer time span will benefit our current understandings of youth climate activism. For digital activism research in particular, the findings underscore the theoretical value of studying the imaginations of leadership and identity-based identification from the perspective of movement followers, an area that merits further exploration.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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