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#fighteverycrisis: Pandemic Shifts in Fridays for Future's Protest Communication Frames

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ABSTRACT
This qualitative social media framing analysis captures the discursive engagement with COVID-19 in Fridays for Future's (FFF) digital protest communication on Facebook. In offering comparative insights from 457 posts across 29 public pages from FFF collectives in the European Union, this study offers the first analysis of social movement frames employed by FFF during the pandemic. By coding all Corona-related messages across collectives, we chart three framing processes: adaptation (compliance, solidarity), reframing (reclaiming the crisis, nexus between climate and health), and mobilization (sustained involvement, digital protest alternatives). We discuss our findings alongside social movement framing theory, including frame bridging and scope enlargement to accommodate the pandemic topicality into FFF's environmental master frame, and frame development by FFF movement leaders. This study thus provides key insights into discursive shifts in social movements brought on by external crises that threaten to marginalize the cause and demobilize adherents.

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Since Greta Thunberg's first protest in 2018, Fridays for Future (hereafter FFF) has become transnationally recognized for its iconic climate activism – the Friday school strikes. Over the past two years, followers around the globe have taken to the streets to raise awareness on climate change and urge political leaders to drive progressive environmental policy. As a youth movement, FFF is very active online. In Europe alone, national collectives have their own websites and social media pages across platforms such as Twitter, Instagram and Facebook. Additionally, regional FFF organizers offer localized digital resources, including regional social media pages and instant messenger groups. Traditionally, FFF has utilized online communication to inform about the climate crisis, share news articles of interest, coordinate protests, and advertise strike dates. Social media was thus not employed as a site for activism but rather, to communicate for offline participation. Nevertheless, platforms such as Facebook are important in the framing and circulation of its key message.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, however, FFF organizers were forced to adapt their physical events and move to the online space (Sorce & Dumitrica, under review). As disruptive events, crises re-focus public attention to crisis management and the search for solutions (Birkland, 1998), thus bringing opportunities for new social movements (Della Porta, 2020a, 2020b), but also forcing existing ones to adapt and assert their cause as worthwhile. In this study, we examine FFF's digital environmental protest communication in order to assess how the movement articulates the relationship between the environment and global health.

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We employ a qualitative social media framing analysis of 457 Facebook posts across FFF collectives in Europe, the FFF International hub account and Greta Thunberg's (hereafter GT) official page in order to identify the key discursive shifts in FFF's protest communication as it relates to the Corona crisis. By coding all Corona-related messages in the sample, we synthesize three framing processes (adaptation, reframing, mobilization) in FFF's pandemic protest communication. These discursive shifts position the climate change in relation to the virus, reclaim the former as the biggest threat to humanity and revalidate the movement's mission and agenda in order to renew engagement with the cause. We discuss our findings alongside social movement framing theory, including frame development by movement leaders and changes in the master frame to accommodate the pandemic topicality. Overall, this study showcases how movements adapt to global shifts in public attention that threaten to marginalize their cause and demobilize their constituents.

Literature review

In Europe, FFF has attracted much interest from journalists, media organizations and political actors alike. As a transnational youth environmental activist collective, FFF rallies around the "future" narrative, seeking to make environmental issues relevant to every young person around the globe. FFF draws from the historical "environmental justice frame," with its social justice goals such as democracy, participation, and solidarity (Čapek, 1993). In line with recent transformations of this master frame, FFF also engages with how climate change and nature "create the conditions for social justice" in a global context (Schlosberg, 2013, p. 38). Furthermore, through its transnational organizational structure, FFF reflects the increased integration of globalization within the environmental movement. This translates into a recognition of the necessity to act in a "vertical" manner that goes beyond national, geopolitical milieus and towards a transnational activist sensibility (Walker, 2009). In that sense, activists put local environmental concerns into a global context, connecting to transnational climate change issues (Reber, 2021).

A growing number of studies has also addressed youth environmental activism (Gallay et al., 2016; O'Brien et al., 2018). While youth-driven discourses coalesce around environmental justice, scholars have commented on the intersectional (Terriquez et al., 2018) as well as anti-capitalist (Bertuzzi, 2019) collective action frames within contemporary environmental youth movements. In the spirit of cross-issue activism and transnationalization, the discourses of youth environmental activism also resonate with other social justice collectives, including anti-racist (Bullard, 1993), LGBTQ or labor rights (Almeida, 2019) agendas. Importantly, scholarship has pointed to the important role of communication in environmental activism (Ackland & O'Neil, 2011; Gulliver et al., 2020). For FFF, a comparative study based in fieldwork at protests articulates the salience of social media as a key information channel for protest activities (Wahlström et al., 2019).

The study of FFF's environmental activism, however, remains rather limited, with existing work focusing on the functions of social media platforms, (digital) action repertoires, and the representation of the movement in legacy media. Boulianne et al. (2020) examine the transnational connections across FFF collectives through the use of hashtag activism, identifying four main functions: provide information, give opinion, articulate blame, and mobilize for online/offline engagement. Similar to Olesen (2020) argument about GT's central role in the movement, Boulianne et al. (2020) found that posts with #Schoolstrike4climate often re-circulate GT's messages.

Focusing on the shift from the school strikes to digital activism during the Corona shutdowns in Europe, Sorce and Dumitrica (under review) examine the transformation of FFF's repertoire of action. Online, the movement engaged in four types of actions: digital contention, education, community engagement, and partnership development. The study found varying levels of professionalization across the FFF groups in Europe, suggesting that the movement missed several opportunities of capitalizing on platform affordances.

Finally, the news coverage of FFF school strikes has also received attention. In their analysis of press reporting about FFF strikes in German online newspapers, Von Zabern and Tulloch (2021) show that 60% of articles frame climate change neutrally and 30% frame climate change as an intergenerational injustice. They argue that journalists do cover the protests, however, frequently downplay student activism and depoliticize the youth strikes. Goldenbaum and Thompson (2020) also analyze FFF media coverage in German legacy papers and come to a similar conclusion. They echo that the actual demands of the movement become overshadowed by superficial reporting about protest events.

While these studies provide insights into FFF, the goal of this article is to identify how FFF frames their messages at a moment when public attention is captured by a competing crisis – that of COVID-19. Existing literature on crisis and social movements discuss how crises spur social movement formation (Della Porta & Pavan, 2017; Geha, 2019), omitting how existing social movements become affected by crises that threaten to divert attention. Understanding the crisis framing processes of FFF can thus shed light on how movements attempt to remain relevant in times of crisis.

Theory

To understand how FFF copes with the major shift in public attention brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, we turn to framing approaches in social movement theory. Frames focus our attention on specific aspects of an issue and tie them together (Snow, 2013). Through this interpretive task, frames aim to create resonance with larger publics. In the context of social movements, frames are discursive mechanisms that construct the contentious issue at the heart of the movement, the identity of the participants, and the means of acting to address issues. Or, as Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993) put it, “a frame is a central organizing idea, suggesting what is at issue” (p. 118). Frames are thus combinations of linguistic choices and selection processes that aid in the creation of particular narratives of social reality (Entman, 1993). Given our interest in how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected FFF, framing processes provide a relevant framework for analyzing the movement’s protest communication on social media.

In social movements, framing processes serve various functions: they amplify the cause, attract supporters, and challenge political opponents. For Melucci (1996), framing processes are crucial to constructing a movement’s “we” by aligning supporters behind common forms of political action. “Collective identity frames” help bystanders to recognize themselves as part of a movement (Diani, 1992), while “collective action frames” reflect the shared understanding of the issue, define the culprit, articulate demands, and mobilize for action (Gamson, 1992; Melucci, 1996). Gamson (1992) conceptualizes three key frames in collective action, an injustice frame (the unacceptable situation), an agency frame (collective action’s ability to change the situation), and an identity frame (“us” against the political opponent). In a similar trifecta, Snow and Benford (1988) argue that frames define the issue at stake (the diagnostic frame), propose a solution (the prognostic frame), and offer reasons to join the cause (the motivational frame). Through such “signifying work,” movements use frames to “assign meaning to and interpret, relevant events … to mobilize potential adherents … to garner bystander support, and to de-mobilize antagonists” (Snow & Benford, 1988, p. 198).

However, the production and circulation of frames is not always transparent (Hart, 1996). First, the development of collective identity and action frames within the movement blends ad-hoc formulations with strategic intent. For instance, frames are often generated by movement leaders (Benford, 2005), though the very nature of leadership has changed alongside digitally mediation and decentralized activism (Bakardjieva et al., 2018; Gerbaudo, 2017). For FFF, GT has been an iconic leadership figure relying upon social media to turn followers in her transnational network into co-performers of her key messages (Olesen, 2020). By linking individual stories to GT’s messages, social media enable frame alignment.

Frame development, however, never takes place in a vacuum. Movements draw from other movements, building upon their existing “master frame.” Master frames are schemes of interpretation that "frame grievances and goals" (Swart, 1995, p. 468). Snow and Benford (1992) explain that they have to bear interpretive breath and flexibility, allowing for adaptation in diverse cultural contexts as to avoid losing mobilizing power. Master frames emerge when "collective action frames influence the focus and direction of other movements within the same time or space" (p. 1510).

Furthermore, movements are challenged by other public actors, such as journalists or politicians. Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993) articulate the complicated framing "dance" between movements and the media. Media coverage remains an important form of amplification, a source of legitimacy, and a means of enlarging the scope of social movements. Frames therefore must remain dynamic and respond to challenges by actors within and outside of the movement (McCurdy, 2012). Frame generation and circulation are thus part of the wider discursive struggles over meaning-making.

Importantly, frames are also linked to the discursive opportunity structures of the moment, or the "ideas in the broader political culture believed to be sensible, realistic, and legitimate and whose presence would facilitate reception of specific forms of collective action framing" (McCammon, 2013, p. 1). As a global pandemic, COVID-19 has brought along a new, shared vocabulary (e.g. "flatten the curve" or R-number) and magnified specific topics (e.g. crisis management, vaccination debates, etc.). The discursive opportunity structure associated with the pandemic, we argue, brings into stark relief the dynamics entailed in social movement framing processes. While crises may function as catalysts for the emergence of social movements (Della Porta, 2020a, 2020b; Della Porta & Pavan, 2017; Geha, 2019), we know much less about how global rapid crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, impact existing movements. Building upon Hart's (1996) early note that little is known about how "frames get made" (p. 95), we ask how FFF has responded to the pandemic on a discursive level in their digital protest communication.

Method

We focus on the early phase of FFF's protest communication during the Coronavirus crisis across the 27 nations of the European Union, ranging from the time that the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic (March 12, 2020) to the first transnational event that was held digitally, the Global Climate Strike (April 24, 2020). This key period in FFF's discursive adaptation to COVID-19 allows us to assess the ways in which FFF has initially coped with the pandemic, up to the point where a new protest repertoire was established, and digital strike events became routine across the EU. We focus on the public Facebook pages of the FFF national groups in the EU ($N = 799$) along with GT's personal page ($N = 58$) and the official "Fridays for Future International" hub ($N = 77$), yielding a total of ($N = 934$) posts for analysis over the six-week sampling period.

From this corpus, we subsequently filtered all posts that explicitly mentioned the pandemic, the Corona virus, or COVID-19 ($N = 457$). While other social media channels were used across the national chapters, Facebook was the only platform used by all groups under study, thus allowing for comparative insights. Facebook's automatic translation function already provided English-language posts for all pages and our multinational research team had proficiency in eight languages. To clarify idiomatic expressions, we relied on native speakers. To code, sort, and generate the frames, a two-staged qualitative social media framing analysis (Foley et al., 2019) was employed.

We took an inductive approach and reversed the typical direction of coding (Entman, 1993; Matthes & Kohring, 2008) to center the posts' discursive elements. First, each researcher read all posts referencing COVID-19 for three national FFF Facebook pages, recording key words and repetitive phrases through which FFF organizers communicated about COVID-19. The comparison of these findings generated the coding frame used in the second round of analysis (Table 1). This coding frame was used by a team of two coders to assess all 457 COVID posts from the 29 FFF pages. The coders were also instructed to look for additional aspects and we added one frame to

Table 1: Framing processes and components.

Framing process	Adaptation	Reframing	Mobilization
Frame Components	• FFF will comply with government regulations • Flatten the curve • Stay Home • Solidarity with Europe(eans) • Solidarity with vulnerable groups • Solidarity with essential (care) workers • Solidarity with the people around you • Corona measures are positive for climate change	• Listen to the scientists and experts • Normal was a crisis • Every crisis is a crisis • Climate crisis is the biggest crisis • Corona shows that governments can act quickly • Climate crisis causes pandemics • Capitalism causes climate crisis and pandemics • Hijacking the pandemic terminology • Corona is not positive for climate change	• Do not forget about climate crisis/ climate crisis does not take a break • Show the same dedication to climate crisis as to Corona • Corona bailouts/measures need to be green (do not fund polluters) • Stay involved in the movement • Being in quarantine does not mean we cannot fight the climate crisis

mobilization. In the final stage – and informed by the literature on social movement framing (Benford & Snow, 2000) – the researchers clustered the frame components in Table 1 under three overarching framing processes: adaptation, reframing, and mobilization.

The first framing process (adaptation) includes the frames compliance and solidarity; the second framing process (reframing) includes the frames that reclaim the crisis and forge a nexus between climate and health; and the third framing process (mobilization) includes the frames that seek to offer digital protest alternatives and sustained involvement in FFF. We chose the term "framing processes" over "framing stages" as adaptation, reframing, and mobilization did not appear chronologically or insular over the sampling period. Instead, they frequently overlapped, with some posts displaying multiple frames (e.g. reasserting the importance of climate change while mobilizing for a digital strike). Understanding posts and their framing processes as interlinked strategic communication practices affords more nuanced insights into FFF's overall discursive patterns on Facebook.

Findings

The COVID-19 restrictions imposed by European governments forced FFF to rethink its main form of action – the Friday school strike – and engage with the new discursive opportunity structure created by news about the novel Corona virus, the COVID-19 pandemic, surging outbreaks and infection rates. Figure 1 visualizes the topics of posts across the FFF collectives in the EU in ascending order from the least communication about COVID-19 (Ireland) to the most communication about COVID-19 (Italy). During our sampling period (March 12-April 24, 2020), 49% of overall messages incorporated the pandemic topicality.

Another insight about the importance of the pandemic emerges from the hashtags employed by FFF collectives in their posts. While some collectives used hashtags in their native language ($N = 48$), most FFF accounts opted for English-language hashtags ($N = 235$) as visualized in Figure 2. The network graph is arranged akin to a European map, mimicking the geographical location of each country collective, while putting transnational accounts (GT and FFF International) above the rest. The line and node thickness denote frequency. The English language hashtags included references to the pandemic itself (#coronavirus or #covid-19) and virus containment measures (#stayhome, #socialdistancing, #quarantine, #flattenthecurve, #staysafe), while also popularizing (new) movement slogans (#fighteverycrisis or #treateverycrisislikeacrisis). Facebook pages with a

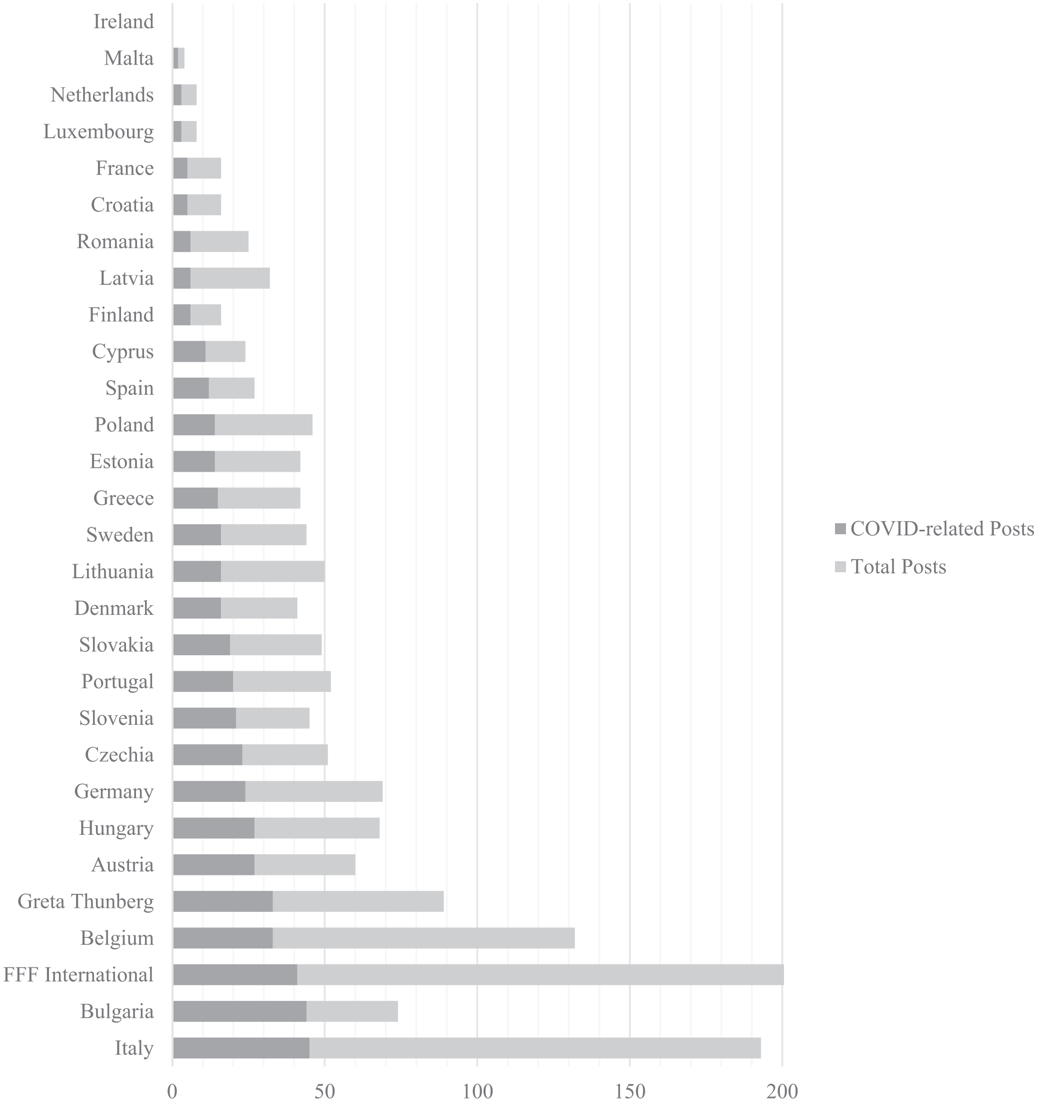

Figure 1. Thematic focus of Facebook posts during sampling period.

greater number of posts overall, such as GT's account, figure prominently into the hashtagged emphases in FFF's Corona discourse.

The following section systematizes the digital protest communication during the pandemic across three key framing processes – adaptation, reframing, and mobilization – while offering examples from the 29 FFF Facebook pages under investigation.

Adaptation: reacting to COVID-19

With the World Health Organization's declaration of COVID-19 as a pandemic, various European FFF actors began to speak about the virus in early March of 2020. One of the first changes in FFF's protest communication stemmed from the need to suddenly replace the weekly school strikes with digital alternatives. For movement organizers, talking about COVID-19 entailed announcing that followers should partake in digital strikes. Upon announcing the shift to digital action, various

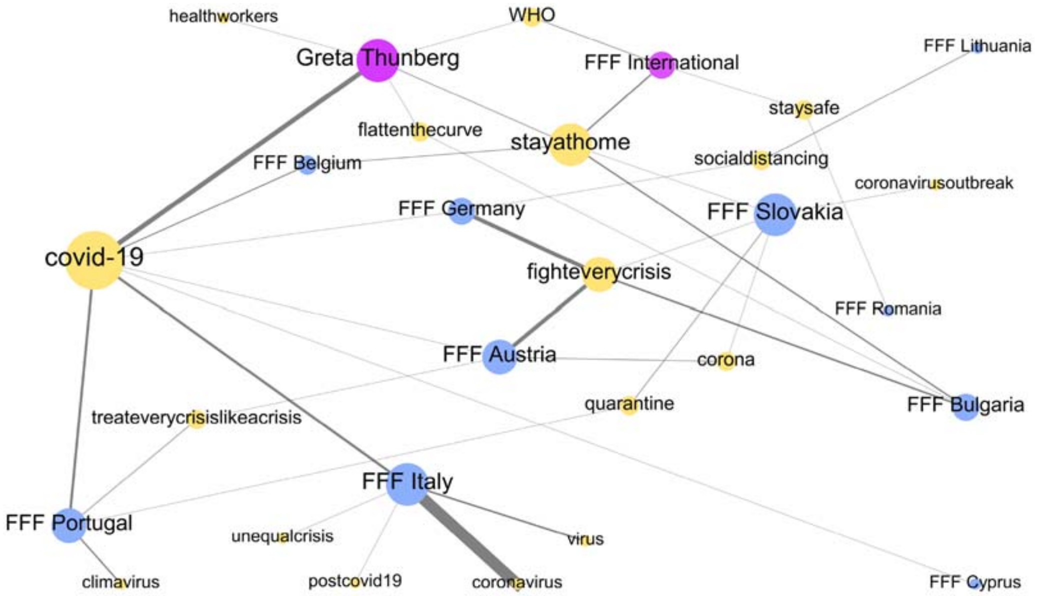
healthworkers
WHO
Greta Thunberg
FFF International
FFF Lithuania
staysafe
flattenthecurve
stayathome
FFF Belgium
socialdistancing
coronavirusoutbreak
FFF Germany
FFF Slovakia
covid-19
fighteverycrisis
FFF Romania
FFF Austria
corona
quarantine
FFF Bulgaria
treateverycrisislikeacrisis
FFF Italy
FFF Portugal
unequalcrisis
virus
climavirus
postcovid19
coronavirus
FFF Cyprus

Figure 2. Network graph of English-language hashtags employed by FFF collectives on Facebook.

national FFF collectives emphasized that this is not the end of the fight. On March 11, GT takes the opportunity to remind her followers to "keep your numbers low but your spirits high." This is echoed across other FFF posts such as "we're staying at home but we keep fighting the climate crisis" (FFF International) or "our voices won't be silenced because of Corona, we just have to adapt" (Austria).

Indeed, adaptation is the key word that captures the early framing process of FFF's pandemic protest communication. Adaptation occurs through communication frames of compliance and necessity alongside the moral imperatives of responsibility and solidarity. In order to maintain an activist identity, FFF had to keep up a certain level of contention in order to encourage followers to remain active in the digital phase. Yet, compliance with the government regulations was a top-down discursive move, initiated by GT's declaration that "in a crisis, we change our behaviour and adapt to the new circumstances for the greater good of society." In response, 20 out of 27 national FFF collectives shared posts with a compliance frame, including statements such as "stay at home" (Romania), "wash your hands" (Finland), or practice "social distancing" (Germany). FFF had to carefully adapt the compliance rhetoric against its – normally contentious – relationship with local governments, as their failure to prioritize environmental policy remains a core FFF critique. One meme from Belgium captures this unique association: "How bad can it be? Even climate activists are urging you to listen to the government."

Negotiating compliance against FFF's criticism of the government was enabled by the moral necessity frame. On March 11, 2020, GT shares the iconic "flatten the curve" infographic, a post that inaugurates a series of posts by FFF collectives encouraging followers to contain the spread of the virus. This was achieved by linking the wider advice to "stay at home" with the moral imperative of care for others. For instance, GT tells her followers to "Act responsible, your actions can be the difference between life and death." A few days later, she posts a picture of herself at home, asking people to take care of each other and using the hashtag #StayAtHome. The following week, the idea of concern for others re-emerges, as GT posts a video of herself sending "all my love and support […] to everyone who is working at the frontlines to keep the rest of us safe" and hashtagging it #TogetherAtHome. Such posts frame compliance to the COVID-19 regulations as a moral imperative of care for the other.

Solidarity re-emerges across the sample in localized forms. Bulgaria posts about how the pandemic shows who is truly valuable in society – namely care, services, and the public sector frontline workers. Hungary similarly asks followers to stay home to ensure the functionality of their fragile healthcare system. Various FFF chapters articulate solidarity with the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on groups such as indigenous people, the homeless, the elderly, or those who already have an underlying health condition. This is also reinforced when GT reminds FFF followers that, while they are young and may not feel the symptoms, they still have a moral obligation of preventing passing the virus to the vulnerable groups. In some cases, local FFFs engage in resource mobilization to collect donations for refugees in Moria (Belgium); the homeless (Czech Republic) or the newly unemployed during the pandemic (Bulgaria).

Importantly, FFF popularizes pandemic discourses that emphasize the need to follow recommendations by scientists. The measures become justified as FFF publicizes two core beliefs in relationship to the virus containment measures – first, FFF prides itself in rearing responsible young citizens who act in solidarity with others; second, FFF urges followers and governments alike to listen to experts. In total, 56 individual posts by 13 national collectives discuss the importance of "listening to experts." However, FFF uses this frame to underscore their own beliefs and practices, which prominently centers the plea to listen to climate experts and environmental scientists about the urgency of the climate crisis. Compliance with the measures thus became an act of social responsibility and solidarity, but also an act of listening not to governments per se, but to scientific expertise.

One outlier here has been an early positive articulation of the Corona measures as beneficial to the fight against climate change. Posts out of Bulgaria, Cyprus, Hungary and Italy hailed travel restrictions, cars off the roads, people in home office, or precautionary self-quarantine as positive for the fight against climate change. Several FFF collectives saw them as an opportunity for nature to heal and for governments to invest in eco-friendly energy sources.

Reframing: reclaiming the crisis under COVID-19

As soon as FFF collectives across Europe began communicating more routinely about the pandemic, organizers reclaimed the crisis as climate related. This allowed them to re-associate the crisis narrative with the movement. An overt reframing emerges in late March and early April, as collectives hijack the pandemic terminology to reposition climate change as the "most important" crisis. FFF Poland appropriates the virus containment plea for hand hygiene in order to warn followers that we should not let politicians "wash their hands of responsibility for the climate crisis!" The FFF International hub posts a funny meme about the hoarding of toilet paper with the caption "oil is currently a worse investment than toilet paper," aiming to divert attention back to the environment. Several national collectives also instrumentalize terms and slogans of the pandemic. Italy hashtags posts with #climavirus, Portugal posts about "living in times of a climate pandemic" and Cyprus appropriates the common infographic about overloading the healthcare system with the tagline "flatten this curve, too."

In addition to this reappropriation, FFF collectives also decouple the crisis terminology from COVID-19. This is done by signaling that there were other crises before COVID-19 and that these crises will still exist after the pandemic has been managed. Many posts about "longing for normalcy" critique that this nostalgia ignores critical climate issues. A central discursive driver in the FFF network about normalcy was a *Talks for Future* YouTube event with GT, Diarmid Campbell-Lendrum and Naomi Klein on March 27. Naomi Klein says in this video:

> There is a lot of talk about returning to 'normal' after the COVID-19 outbreak. But normal was a crisis. … Normal is a crisis. Normal doesn't allow you to have a safe future … . what Greta and so many of you have been calling for … is to treat a crisis like a crisis … the Coronavirus is a crisis - but it is not the only crisis that we face.

Shortly after this event, 14 FFF collectives appropriated the "normal was a crisis" tagline, using GT's hashtag #treateverycrisislikeacrisis (Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, Portugal, Slovakia and Spain).

A key narrative move in FFF's protest communication about Corona is to re-associate the crisis narrative with climate and the movement. In its strategic communication, FFF has (re)branded climate *change* as climate *crisis* to underscore the urgency. The rhetorical saturation of the Corona crisis globally has diverted attention from the crisis at the heart of FFF's activism. GT writes: "The climate and ecological crisis is the biggest crisis humanity has ever faced." FFF collectives across Europe make a point to emphasize the "hierarchy" of crises with a series of recurring messages such as "The ecological crisis is the greatest threat mankind has ever faced" (Finland), "If there was no climate crisis, COVID would be our worse fear, but since there is the climate crisis, this is the biggest crisis" (Romania) or "After COVID, we have to face the much bigger climate crisis" (Denmark).

Finally, climate crisis is recovered as a facilitating factor of pandemics. FFF collectives connect several environmental aspects to the emergence and spread of COVID-19, including air pollution (Italy), global warming (Lithuania), overpopulation (Hungary), capitalism (Portugal), food industry (Bulgaria), animal habitat loss (Spain) or the destruction of biodiversity (Austria). These narratives also connect to the idea that in times of crisis, governments can institute policy quickly, providing FFF collectives with an opportunity to re-claim their contentious role and criticize the lack of political action against the climate crisis. On the day the WHO declares COVID-19 a pandemic, the German FFF page posts: "right now we see that when there is a will, a crisis can be fought." Denmark picks this up multiple times in their protest communication, such as "Politicians can treat a crisis as an emergency – they just have to want it." Organizers critique that effective and quick crisis management is not extended to their cause, which is why FFF's activism needs to go on.

Mobilization: calling for action despite COVID-19

During our sampling period, the majority of posts referencing the Corona virus, COVID-19, or the pandemic also included a call for action. FFF collectives continuously reminded followers that the movement still exists despite the pandemic and urged their social media community not to forget about their cause, the movement and its mission. An important rhetorical choice across such posts was to remind followers about the importance of FFF as a movement and the cause it represents despite the fact that COVID-19 has dominated public discourse.

A total of 18 pages, including GT and FFF International encourage followers to remember the climate crisis. Posts such as "because of Corona, other problems got forgotten, but that does not mean that they are gone" (Czechia), "climate crisis is still there and we're still fighting" (Slovenia), "the climate crisis does not go on vacation and does not quarantine" (Italy) or "we will write a letter to the Minister, telling him that the climate crisis doesn't take a break because of COVID" (Netherlands). The function of these posts tie into a series of messages that urge followers across Europe to show the same dedication to the climate crisis as the public shows Corona. For instance, Portugal asks: "Why does the climate crisis does not get as much attention as Covid?" while Poland asserts that "we must take the climate crisis as seriously as the pandemic."

The call to refocus on the climate crisis is coupled with the specific request to take advantage of the new digital strike alternatives. FFF International explicitly states "our protest is not cancelled because of Corona, just as the climate crisis is not." Such calls also speak to the specific condition followers across the EU might find themselves in due to pandemic outbreaks, including national shutdowns, house confinement, or quarantine mandates. National collectives post messages such as "even though we're in quarantine, we must fight! The fight for climate justice goes on" (Portugal) or "we will strike even though we can't go outside" (Italy). Belgium even shares tips on "how to keep fighting the climate crisis during quarantine," while Denmark offers a video with "10 things to do during the shutdown." These posts seek to keep the FFF community engaged with the movement and the cause despite virus containment measures. The digital alternatives provide a key opportunity to highlight collective identity and provide an activist atmosphere while engaging the COVID-19 thematic. In the following section, we discuss our findings using social movement framing theory to show how FFF's protest discourse has changed alongside the pandemic.

Discussion

When the COVID-19 pandemic forced FFF off the streets, the movement had to rapidly respond to shifts in public attention that threatened to marginalize their cause and demobilize their adherents. The movement adapted its communication to the new discursive opportunity, drawing on pandemic fears, concerns, and vocabularies to develop mobilizing appeals for followers. While these framing processes brought about new tensions (such as maintaining a critical stance towards the government while advising compliance with its measures), FFF also seized the opportunity to assert their goals (i.e. re-positioning climate change as not only urgent, but also solvable if governments act). Overall, however, FFF's framing processes under the crisis remained oriented primarily towards existing followers. In that sense, we argue the movement took a backseat to larger public discussions on the pandemic, orienting its efforts towards re-building collective action frames among its collectives and towards re-mobilizing supporters.

The framing mechanisms through which FFF has accommodated the pandemic topicality showcase the dynamic of frame making and development (Hart, 1996) under adversity. This suggests crises are not merely "vibrant catalysts" for new forms of citizen mobilization (Della Porta, 2020a), but also discursive opportunity structures (McCammon, 2013) for existing ones. Yet, the extent to which a movement can take advantages of crises on a discursive level may remain limited. In the face of new adversities, movements have to stay relevant, stretch their master frame, build their collective identity, and re-negotiate collective action frames amongst adherents.

FFF's protest communication during the pandemic reveals several discursive and strategic framing mechanisms. First, by engaging in frame articulation about a health crisis, FFF combines disparate events and information to create a new angle to their movement. Subsequently, FFF's protest communication bridges climate and health within its "future" narrative in a move to connect to a prevalent public issue (Benford & Snow, 2000) while resonating with followers. Second, the incorporation of health communication frames into FFF's pandemic activist discourses (e.g. practice social distancing, wash hands, cover mouth and nose, quarantine if ill) further ensures frame resonance with the public (Swart, 1995) and enlarges the movement's scope (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993). Taken together, these discursive framing activities have expanded FFF's "environmental justice master frame" (Čapek, 1993) by flagging public health as a layer of climate change. FFF adds this component to others (e.g. waste management, pollution, deforestation, energy) that have since been incorporated into said master frame (Schlosberg, 2013), while showcasing their youth-driven, intersectional sensibility (Terriquez et al., 2018) towards vulnerable groups in the pandemic.

From a strategic framing standpoint, FFF seeks to align movement followers by amplifying existing values (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 624). FFF does this by rhetorically connecting to familiar calls for "solidarity" and to "trust science." Instead of speaking to these tropes in a climate-specific context, framing Corona-related messages in familiar movement rhetoric enables the movement to resonate with topics that have received media coverage (e.g. recognizing hospital staff or valuing virologists).

In addition, our analysis shows FFF's framing work as rather top-down. Despite the seemingly transnational, decentralized character of the movement, FFF's new pandemic slogans reveal a hierarchical directionality, where local collectives take direction from movement leaders. Slogans are part of a movement's frame punctuation (Benford & Snow, 2000), and popular slogans often come to symbolize the movement in public memory. During the pandemic, key phrases such as "treat every crisis like a crisis" (GT) become supplemented by new slogans about the pandemic;

e.g. "normal was a crisis" (Naomi Klein). While hijacking the pandemic terminology proved to be a productive framing strategy that was taken up quickly across collectives, our data shows that FFF followers in Europe often simply replicate messages from opinion leaders. This suggests leadership remains an important driver of social media framing (Bakardjieva et al., 2018; Benford, 2005) and echoes research about GT's central rhetorical role in the movement (Boulianne et al., 2020; Olesen, 2020). Ultimately, the prevalent top-down communication patterns raise questions on whether FFF is able to generate dynamic messages without reliance on key figures.

In engaging the Corona crisis narratives, FFF has thus primarily re-appealed to followers by repositioning the importance of the cause in a time of adversity. In doing so, FFF communicates that a youth environmental movement does have something to say about health crises, continuing to ask for a political role on behalf of young activists. However, while FFF actively performed framing work to make a connection between the pandemic and its existing master frame, collective identity frames, and central movement values to existing adherents, the movement took a backseat in the public framing of the pandemic.

Conclusion

This study offers the first comparative look at the networked protest communication of an important environmental youth movement with high levels of global publicity – FFF. Via qualitative social media framing analysis of 457 posts by 29 Facebook pages across Europe, we have sought to study FFF's digital protest communication under Corona. We have found that FFF collectives in Europe dominantly engage with the pandemic on social media and chart three framing processes: adaptation (fostering compliance and solidarity), reframing (highlighting the climate crisis, reclaiming the crisis), and mobilization (calling for participation and sustained engagement with the cause).

The key theoretical insights include that FFF widens the scope of their existing environmental justice frames to accommodate the Corona crisis topic at the forefront of the global public's agenda. They do so in order to reinsert themselves into the conversation and to divert attention back to the movement, for FFF understands the "crisis" narrative as their own. In addition, the grassroots orientation of contemporary social movements tips in favor of movement leadership, as evidenced in the generation of new frames and slogans by central arrowheads (notably GT and Naomi Klein).

We can speculate that FFF's heightened contestation with health, immunology, and virology will subside once the pandemic has gotten under control and the iconic action repertoire can resume. In spring of 2021, as most of Europe has entered the third "Corona wave," FFF has once again been moved off the streets. As such, collectives will continue to grapple with the COVID-19 pandemic – also as a competing global crisis.

When looking at the narratives about the Coronavirus, COVID-19, and the pandemic comparatively, we see phases with more intensity across the EU sample. For instance, countries such as Italy, who were forcefully impacted early on started their Corona protest communication sooner than other FFF collectives, who seemed to wait for the official "go" from GT. This also helps explain why some country groups embraced the topic more prevalently than others.

Overall, FFF's three framing processes in the pandemic have both benefits and drawbacks. For instance, FFF's use of the moral responsibility frame can potentially construct new alliances with different sympathetic groups. Furthermore, the frame of rapid crisis management offers FFF new discursive material to hold governments accountable, by reminding followers that drastic policy action is, indeed, possible. Yet, we should also ask how far can frames be stretched until they lose their coherence and thus their mobilizing power. Indeed, FFF's reframing processes worked to re-position climate change as equally important to the pandemic. The success of this signification work is still unfolding.

Further research investigating movements' reframing work during crisis is needed to contextualize FFF's pandemic discourse. Ethnographic or interview-based projects could shed light on how followers engage with the discursive opportunities opened up by the pandemic. Since our study focuses on Facebook, further research could investigate FFF's cross-platform communication to investigate on how movement followers engage across social media. Finally, the adaptation, reframing and mobilization processes we have outlined here could serve as the foundation to study how collectives' organizational structures and resources impact their protest communication practices.

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Data availability statement

This paper draws on original empirical data gathering and analysis and does not draw on published data sets.

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