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“Who is ‘We’ in ‘We, the future without future?’ On generational identity and youth (digital) activism in and beyond FridaysForFuture-Rome”

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Abstract

The average global temperatures spiked in the last century and extreme climate phenomena became increasingly and dramatically common. The conditions of the planet have contributed to inaugurating a novel wave of climate activism, which sees an important contribution in young people, who are mobilizing worldwide to ask for better policies to face what has been defined as humanity's greatest challenge.

The FridaysForFuture (FFF for short) movement has especially been at the forefront of this fight. Inspired by Greta Thunberg's 2018 Friday school strikes in front of the Swedish Parliament, the movement has spread globally in a complex network of national and local groups that share common values and goals (inclusivity, intersectionality, decarbonization...) but also express their unique geographical and cultural identity as they localize the climate fight to each group's necessities. As it is already clear from the name 'FridaysForFuture,' the movement's fight is strongly connected to the generational identity and youth-based sense-makings of its members. Incipient literature on FFF has observed how especially young activists join the movement to safeguard the interests of their own generation, following the idea that older generations have doomed the planet and taken the future away from younger people. In this context, social media are privileged platforms for FFF activists, who resort to them for advocacy and awareness-raising, while also recruiting adhesions to the movement in a continuous hybridization of meanings and practices that blurs the boundaries between online and offline spaces. FFF-activists' social media usage practices are also informed by younger people's media ideologies (Gershon 2010b) and sense-makings and can therefore open windows in the unique ways young people understand social media as environments for both digital activism and generational identity-building processes.

Informed by literature addressing identity making practices, collective identity, generational 'we sense,' digital and youth activism, this thesis investigates the interplay between generational identity and youth social media activism focusing on the FFF group of FFF-Rome. This study is a multimethod qualitative research, combining a six-month multimodal ethnography (of the group's activities and its Instagram page) and semi-structured interviews to FFF-Rome activists. Consistent with an ecological approach to social media, this method allowed for the direct observation of social actions as they happened, preventing a disjunction between their contexts and individual and collective meanings. These choices were complementary with the adoption of innovative ethical standards and practices of engaged research. As a result, this thesis advocates for 'committed' research when studying social movements, favoring research appropriation by the activists and in solidarity with their fight.

Concretely, this work answers the following research questions:

1. How do FFF-Rome activists combine their generational identity with being climate activists?
2. What can the case of FFF-Rome tell us about the current generation of youth (climate) activists and, more in general, about the identity of this generation of young people?
3. How do social media usage practices and FFF-Rome's identity mutually shape each other?
4. How do FFF-Rome activists negotiate social media usage practices and norms within the movement?

Part 1 addresses RQ 1 and 2 by observing how the activists combine a generational understanding of climate activism and climate change with their own identity as young people of the 21st century. Part 2 answers RQs 3 and 4 by analyzing how the activists appropriate digital platforms as youth's 'own' channels, and how they move seamlessly between online and offline environments, negotiating architectural and technical affordances.

While different parts of this thesis answer distinct research questions, all sections are strongly interconnected and contribute to all research questions collectively. The conclusions especially highlight this bond and suggest that changes in the communicative infrastructures have essentially redefined the communicative and political practices of climate activism. It is not just the struggle that is generationally connoted, but also the communicative channels and the protest practices that accompany it. FFF-Rome activists fully legitimize digital activism and incorporate it in all phases of their struggle, intertwining social media ideologies (Gershon 2010b) with activist ideologies. In this context, social media are considered both as a means to an end and as digital spaces young people 'own' in virtue of their being young.

Keywords: FridaysForFuture, youth digital activism, identity, generational identity, social media

Introduction

The research investigates social media activism practices and identity building processes connected to youth climate activism and generational ‘we sense’ in the FridaysForFuture movement. It seeks to understand the connection between generational identity and youth activism on social media, focusing on the group of activists of FridaysForFuture Rome. The group represents one of the many international branches of FridaysForFuture, a global social movement inspired by Greta Thunberg’s Friday’s school strikes in front of the Swedish parliament. Her weekly protests against the ineffectiveness and silence of government bodies in respect of the climate crisis acquired global resonance after she started publicizing them on her Instagram page. Here, she showed pictures of herself protesting with a cardboard sign that read ‘School strike for the climate’ and invited students all over the world to do the same. What followed was a novel wave of climate change protests worldwide, which crystallized in a global social movement consisting of a huge network of national and local branches, of which FFF-Rome is a part.

The movement organizes smaller scale protests (like weekly student strikes) and biannual ‘global strikes’ for the climate (*Pic. 1*), which have moved thousands to the streets in multiple cities. FFF’s struggle is strongly connected to the generational identity and to the age-groups in which its members identify themselves. The narrative of climate change that FFF promotes is that of a universal but generation-specific crisis. According to them, climate change has repercussions on all aspects of human life and will affect every single person on the planet, but it is young people who will be penalized the most. The core idea is that older generations have condemned Earth and deprived young people of their future, leaving them to inherit nothing but bleak perspectives: a faulty economy and a planet on the brink of collapse.



Picture 1: Protest action organized for the global strike for climate of March 19, 2021. The activists are recreating a figure of Italy in Piazza del Popolo, one of Rome’s central squares, using cardboards with phrases denouncing climate change.

The studies produced so far on FridaysForFuture are still in their exploratory stage. Some authors have focused on the character of Greta Thunberg, enhancing her rhetorical devices and moral arguments (Vavilov 2019), criticizing her excessive reliance on scientific data

(Evensen 2019), or problematizing her leadership with respect to rest of the movement (von Zabern & Tulloch 2020). Other authors have analyzed the genesis of FridaysForFuture and its revindications (Schinko 2020; Maier 2019) and outlined the social composition of the movement and its ascriptive characteristics (Smith & Bogner 2019). Particularly relevant, in this sense, were the first surveys conducted on FFF, which analyzed data across different European cities during the global strikes of 2019 (Gardner & Neuber 2020; Wahlström et al. 2019). The use of social media emerges as a constitutive element of the movement. Starting from Greta Thunberg's original posts (Brünker et al. 2019), the activists have resorted to social media to share emotions and information regarding the mobilizations and the climate crisis, recruiting new people into the movement and trying to attract the attention of mass media (Reyes-Carrasco et al. 2020; Rivas-de-Roca 2020; Trimonytė 2020). While the movement is international in scope, literature depicts an image of a strictly Northern-European phenomenon. Studies on FFF especially focus on the German and Scandinavian branches of the movement and describe the Fridays¹ as mainly well-educated teenagers, usually with no prior experiences of civic engagement.

Widely understudied, the Italian network of FridaysForFuture follows many of the characteristics described so far but is also differentiated by the unique conditions that affect Italian youths and Italian social movements. In a country where the sustainable choices of citizens, businesses, and administrations still struggle to achieve acceptable results (ISTAT, 2020), it is young people who are relaunching a public debate on the theme of environmental and social sustainability, activating and catalyzing the battle for the environment and for the future. This is especially significant when we consider that environmental activism in Italy has rarely if ever been characterized by identity construction processes in a generational key (Bertuzzi 2019). Rather, it is generally associated with karstic issues (cfr. Belotti 2015; Mattei 2013) or territorial battles (cfr. Armano, Pittavino & Sciortino 2013; della Porta & Piazza 2016). Understanding how, where, and why this new battle for the climate and for the future is happening is thus essential to grasp the innovative scope of FridaysForFuture's disputes and activism practices. Studying FridaysForFuture-Rome can afford scholars a greater awareness of the age-specific social media usages, values, emotions, and activist practices that constitute the 'we-sense' of the current generation of young Italian (climate) activists. Social media platforms, in particular, play a key role: they serve as meeting places among the Fridays and act as political and communicative environments. On social media, the activists can engage in conversations with institutions and other social actors and express the needs of a specific generation by using the communicative channels that best represent it, thus drawing an inextricable connection between communicative practices and generational belonging. In this sense, social media are constitutive of both the Fridays' political practices and of their identity construction processes.

The thesis thus investigates the sense-making processes that contribute to creating the generational and collective identity of FridaysForFuture-Rome activists, thus also touching on the generational we-sense of young people in general. It recognizes social media as the privileged platforms for climate activists, who use them for multiple purposes, in a continuous hybridization of meanings and practices that blurs the boundaries between online

¹ 'Fridays' is the colloquial term that FridaysForFuture activists use to refer to themselves. It will be used throughout the thesis and its significance will be analyzed in detail in Part 3, Section 1: Being Friday.

and offline spaces. These practices open interesting windows on the mechanisms through which young people experience social media as environments in which to build and perform their generational identity. By delving into the activism of the Roman branch of FFF, the thesis also highlights differences emerging from the clash between the Northern European culture of activism that characterizes FFF when it meets Italian activism practices. By adopting an ecological approach to the study of social media and through an ‘insider’s’ perspective, allowed by the ethnographic research methods that were adopted, this thesis allows for the direct observation of social actions in their unfolding, avoiding the common disjunction between social contexts and the individual and collective meanings attributed to them and to the practices that they host.

To pursue this goal, the research adopts a multi-method research design, combining multimodal ethnography (participant observation plus digital ethnography) with semi-structured interviews. This has allowed for shedding light on the concrete experience of the activists and their decision-making processes. As a participant observer, I was an insider in the group for six months and could attest to the negotiation of platforms and the meanings which inform the use of social media by the social movement. These methodological choices are complementary with the adoption of innovative ethical standards and engaged research practices based on the respect and promotion of human rights, towards greater social justice. This redeems the ‘civic role’ (McAteer & Wood 2018) of research by considering the production of knowledge an intellectual, cognitive, and moral project capable of improving the social conditions of those concerned (Smith 2016), so that the creation and dissemination of knowledge facilitates the social transformation and democratization of knowledge itself, which is the first mission of the university. I adhered to the proposal of Nairn and colleagues (2020) to redefine informed consent as iterative, reciprocal, volitional, extending the collection of consent over time and through diversified methods to repair the discrepancy between ‘formalized’ consent and ‘everyday ethics’ (Busher & Fox 2019). An authentic bond with activists was pursued, encouraging their involvement in all phases of the study and favoring research appropriation. The goal was to commit to improving the reality of those who took part in the research, recognizing not only ethical obligations towards the academic world, but also a ‘relational responsibility’ towards the movement (Gerlach 2018) FridaysForFuture. As a result, I took part in the activities of the group during and after the field work, contributing to the organization of the protests. The results of the research have provided activists with spaces and tools to accompany and amplify their claims, promoting the social legitimization and political subjectification of the movement.

Concretely, this thesis is structured in three distinct parts. The first one is the literature review and positions this research in the academic debate surrounding FridaysForFuture, social media activism, and identity. It opens with a general introduction to climate change, addressing the severity of the issue, the policies that have been taken to address it, and their ineffectiveness, which gave rise to a novel wave of climate activism. This section is followed by a review of the literature produced so far on FridaysForFuture. It addresses why it can be considered a social movement, the main themes highlighted by current research on FFF and the main gaps in the literature. The theoretical framework that follows provides key concepts in media and digital activism studies that have informed this research in all of its phases. The unique way FFF-Rome conceptualizes online and offline activism makes any attempt to

analyze the two separately reductive. Proper theoretical foundations were therefore needed to acknowledge, on the one hand, the interconnection between online and offline realms and how this expands to digital activism and social movements, and, on the other, how to address the entire social media spectrum FFF-Rome activists interact with, and the interconnection of activist practices with media ideologies (Gershon 2010b).

Following the theoretical framework is the chapter on identity. Its aim is to provide a background to conceptualize identity in communication and social media studies, highlighting key contributions to the understanding of personal identity formation and curation in communication that are useful to the discussion of this thesis' findings. The sections on 'collective identity and digital protest action' and 'generational identity and youth' serve a similar goal. The first looks at the connection between identity and activism by taking into account both the offline and online dimensions of political action, in order to discuss how digital communication practices are not only connected to a collective sense of self but have come to effectively reshape traditional notions of collective identity. The latter provides definitions for 'youth' and 'generational identity,' two concepts that are of central importance to this thesis. It describes how this research approaches youth activism for climate by applying Mannheim's (1970) generation theory and emphasizing the connection between environmentalism, communication technology and practices, and the identity of a generation (Bolin 2019). It highlights how social media are key environments where youth can perform personal and collective identity (boyd 2011; Melucci 1996) through conscious self-presentation choices and relationships (cfr. Giddens 1991), ultimately creating distinct political narratives centered around youth cultures (Jenkins 2016; Liou & Literat 2020).

The last part of this section deals with activism. It provides a general understanding of the academic debate on digital and social media activism, underlying the high degree of complexity of digital and social media communication within social movements. It emphasizes the mutual shaping relationship between social movements and media technologies and how this extends to the activists' media ecologies, meaning-making processes, media ideologies (Gershon 2010b), collective identity, and materiality. It provides notions useful to the understanding of visual and Instagram activism and to the connection between and unique characteristics of youth digital activism and climate activism. Finally, the last section of this part discusses contemporary transnational activism for the climate and the specificities of the Italian context. It sheds light on the cultural processes that underlie the creation and diffusion of transnational advocacy networks such as FridaysForFuture and provides useful notions to understand FFF activism in Italy, highlighting the factors that influence youth's pathways to activism in the country.

The second part deals with the methods employed during this research. As already mentioned, this study is designed as a multimethod qualitative research. This prevented a disjunction between contexts of social action, collectively negotiated meanings, and individual experiences of participants. The ethnographic and ecological framework adopted for this research allowed for considering the ample social media spectrum with which activists interact, rather than focusing on a single platform. This study is also informed by an interpretive and transformative paradigm, so as to value the activists' sense-giving processes and situate the researcher as an actor of social change and committed to both the movement and the academy. Concretely, this second part discusses the added value of an ethnographic

approach to activism, examining the main characteristics of participant observation, digital ethnography, and semi-structured interviews. It concludes with a critical reflection on the ethics of doing research with activists and within social movements and how these methodological choices are complementary with the need to carry out a ‘committed’ research, in solidarity with the activists of FridaysForFuture-Rome and their fight for climate justice.

The third part is the analysis. It discusses the data gathered from fieldnotes, digital ethnography, and interviews in a holistic way and is composed of two sections. Section one deals with ‘being Friday:’ it discusses the sense-makings related to ‘being’ a FridaysForFuture-Rome activist, be them youth or generation specific. It comprises two chapters: the first one addresses what it means to belong to the movement FFF-Rome and why the fight against climate change resonates so much with its members; the second discusses the elements that come to define the identity of ‘Friday,’ that is the characteristics of the activists that militate within FFF-Rome and the identity of the movement itself, since they come to shape each other. Section two deals with ‘doing Friday:’ it discusses with how FridaysForFuture-Rome activists inhabit social media, providing not only an analysis of how activists use these platforms, but also of their sense-giving processes, the established rules, practices, and media ideologies (Gershon 2010b) connected to platform usage within the movement. This first chapter discusses how the activists perceive social media as generation-specific environments, accounting for the processes of generational appropriation of social media within the movement and of the identitary narration that this generation of activists (and youth) makes of itself as a result. The last chapter focuses on how FFF-Rome activists perceive social media as environments for activism that lend themselves to the achievement of different political objectives and enactment of different activist strategies. It analyzes the uses and political meaning of social media for FridaysForFuture activists, highlighting the norms, values, and beliefs that inform the struggle for climate justice within and beyond social media.

The conclusions sum up the main findings of this research, highlight the limits of this study, and suggest possible pathways for future research on FFF, youth activism, and generational identity. They observe how FridaysForFuture activists effectively combine a generational view of climate change and activism with their identity as young people of the 21st century, analyzing how they appropriate digital platforms as youth’s ‘own’ channels, moving seamlessly between online and offline environments. The findings suggest that changes in communication infrastructures have substantially redefined the communication and political practices of climate activism. It is not only the struggle that has a generational connotation, but also the communication channels and protest practices that accompany it. FFF-Rome activists fully legitimize digital activism and incorporate it into all phases of activism, intertwining social-media ideologies and activism ideologies. They consider social media both as tools and as digital spaces that young people ‘own’ in virtue of their being young.

Part 1 - Literature review

1. A foreword on anthropogenic climate change

Since this thesis deals heavily with the concept of climate change, a brief introduction to the topic is due. This will allow for a more comprehensive understanding both of FFF-Rome's fight as a social movement and of its generational connotation, since it is suggested by the urgency of this issue.

Concretely, climate change refers to a change in the atmosphere's statistics over long periods of time, including average temperatures and extremes (Dessler 2021). There is near-complete scientific consensus that the climate is warming and that this is caused by human activities (Malla et al. 2022; Powell 2017), making the current climate crisis one of humanity's greatest challenges (Marris 2019). Such is also the opinion of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the most authoritative international organism responsible for developing climate science and human-induced climate change assessment reports and the prime source of FFF's informative posts.

Born in 1988 from the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the IPCC has so far developed a total of six assessment reports in increasingly alarming tones. According to the 2018 report, there is "a near-linear relationship between cumulative anthropogenic CO₂ emissions and the global warming they cause" (IPCC 2018: 32), to the point that the 2021 report assumes an "unequivocal" stance "that human influence has warmed the atmosphere, ocean, and land" (Allan et al. 2021: 8) causing "widespread and rapid changes in the atmosphere, ocean, cryosphere, and biosphere" (ibid.) and triggering a sixth mass extinction event (see also Ceballos et al. 2017, 2020). Overall, the observed increase in greenhouse gasses caused by human activities since the 1750s has warmed the climate at a rate that is "unprecedented in at least the last 2000 years" (Allan et al. 2021: 10). Compared to the timespan between 1850 and 1900, the global surface temperature was 0.84 to 1.10 °C higher between 2001 and 2020 and 0.95 to 1.20 °C higher between 2011 and 2020. The IPCC and the scientific community deem human influence as the most likely driver of this change, as well as of the progressive global retreat of glaciers and the decrease in Arctic Sea ice.

All of this has resulted in drastic changes in climate extremes, such as heatwaves, droughts, tropical cyclones, and precipitations, affecting every inhabited region across Earth. The different future scenarios forecast by the IPCC according to the severity of the global warming trend are equally dire, with global surface temperatures continuing to rise for decades even under the most auspicious emission scenario, as human activities affect all the major climate system components, with some changes now being irreversible for decades or even centuries. According to the 2021 report, in order to avoid the worst case scenario, humanity must limit the rising of global surface temperatures within the 1.5 °C mark within the time-frame of the current carbon budget² of humanity. In 2018, this was estimated by the

² The amount of carbon dioxide emissions permitted over a period of time to keep within a certain temperature threshold (Carbon Tracker 2021; Dalman 2021). The "carbon budget" precisely indicates the amount of carbon dioxide that countries can put into the atmosphere without exceeding that 1.5°C. As the Fridays explain on their website, it is the "CO₂ balance that humanity can still release into the atmosphere before exceeding the limit"

IPCC at around 10 years (IPCC 2018), predicting a 66% chance of containing global temperatures' rise within 1.5 °C if global CO₂ emissions were halved by 2030 and zeroed by 2050. However, as of the 2021 report, the IPCC calculated that it is unlikely, even by adopting extreme and swift measures, to maintain the planet's temperatures within the +1.5 °C margin and that such margin might instead be reached by 2040, with the date only growing closer if emissions are not drastically cut in the immediate future. The report was considered a code red for humanity, with newspapers like *The Guardian* describing it as IPCC's "starkest warning yet" of "major inevitable and irreversible climate changes" (Harvey 2021).

The 2021 IPCC report is probably the best example of the ineffectiveness of the actions so far taken to limit human-induced climate change. International climate agreements have followed one another in the last 30 years but with limited success. The Paris Agreement is probably among the most notable. It is a pact signed in December 2015 between the member states of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change as part of the XXI Conference of the Parties (COP21). The agreement requires limiting the increase in global average temperature to below 1.5 °C compared to pre-industrial levels, as a necessary measure identified by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change to significantly reduce the risks and effects of climate change. Europe, for example, was called to reduce climate-changing emissions by 80% by 2030 and by 100% by 2035 in order to comply with the obligations of the Agreement. The agreement set no binding emission targets but rather made binding a set of procedures that countries would have to regularly reevaluate, setting increasingly ambitious goals over time. As of October 2021, 194 states and the European Union had signed the treaty and 191 states and the EU had ratified or acceded to the agreement. However, not only have the actions projected by the agreement been under debate, with most experts judging them insufficient or inadequate (Maizland 2022; Raiser et al. 2020), but the single countries have also proven ineffective in implementing them.

Despite numerous countries (including the European Union, see European Commission et al. 2021) declaring a climate and environmental emergency and making pledges to reduce emissions and become carbon neutral by 2050 or 2060, the actions taken so far to maintain these propositions have been largely insufficient. Based on information from 48 national climate plans (40% of the parties that signed the Paris Agreement), it is estimated that, as of 2021, total greenhouse gas emissions are only 0.5% lower compared to 2010 levels, which is well below the 45% or 25% reduction goals necessary to limit global warming to 1.5 °C or 2 °C within the 2050 and 2030 timeframes (Climate Action Tracker 2022).

This is consistent with the deliberations achieved in November 2022 at the COP27 (the 27th Conference of the Parties of the United Nations Climate Change Conference), held in Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt. The conference reached the goal of agreeing on a loss and damage fund for countries most affected by climate change, which has been hailed as the most important climate advance since the Paris Agreements (McGrath 2022), even if it left open question marks regarding the criteria that will trigger a payout, to how much it will amount, and where it will be coming from specifically. However, COP27's final overarching deal did not include

set by the Paris Agreement (FridaysForFuture Italia 2021). Considering the current rates of emissions, the risk is that this budget runs out before the necessary reduction thresholds have been reached.

commitments to phase out fossil fuels and included ambiguous language regarding low emissions energy, which could operate as an open door for some fossil fuels being considered green energy in the future (Rannard 2022).

2. On FridaysForFuture

It is not just the magnitude and urgency of the climate crisis that have contributed to its saliency. The involvement of actors of social change and old and new environmental social movements has definitely granted it renewed prominence on the global political and media agenda. As observed by Giugni and Grasso (2020), social movements have become a constitutive part, a ‘normal feature’ of contemporary democracies. They form a political arena where citizens can make their voices heard to try and influence power holders, affording them a more direct channel of influence than those of political parties and interest groups.

FridaysForFuture (FFF for short) is a clear example, and it is among the movements who, worldwide, has arguably achieved the greatest visibility for the issue of climate change. It was born in the summer of 2018, when the teenager Greta Thunberg began to protest every Friday in front of the Swedish Parliament to denounce the governments’ inaction toward the climate emergency. She posted pictures of herself with a cardboard sign quoting ‘school strike for climate’ on Instagram, inviting students from all over the world to engage in school strikes as a form of protest. Thousands of young people across the globe joined the initiative, thus inaugurating a new wave of protests in the name of climate justice, combining weekly Friday school strikes and bi-annual global strikes, both in public squares and on social media.

It is for these reasons that I considered FridaysForFuture a social movement as described by Touraine (1975), that is a conflict actor who, through organized collective action, contends the current leadership and proposes a life change, resisting tradition and natural evolution and, therefore, becoming the ‘guarantor’ of society’s ability to produce and transform itself. Following the interpretative scheme of Touraine (*ibid.*), FridaysForFuture can be understood as a collective subject of solidarity that allows individuals to exercise their right of citizenship and self-affirmation within an emancipatory path characterized by the principles of identity, opposition, and of totality. In the case of FFF, these would be, respectively: awareness about the material interests shared by young people and the contribution they believe they can bring to the overall social organization; the recognition of an opponent in the logics that govern environmental policies, which denies or minimizes the contribution of young people and the scope of climate change; the overall project of transformation, in a socio-ecological frame, of the socio-cultural, knowledge, and production models of our world through organized collective action.

Since it emphasizes the relational nature of social movements, Diani (1992)’s conception is also particularly useful to the discussion of this thesis. Indeed, it allows us to conceptualize FFF-Rome as a “network of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in a political or cultural conflict, on the basis of a shared collective identity” (13). Both Touraine and Diani understand social movements as involving conflictual relations and clearly identified opponents, with Diani’s definition stressing the dense informal networks linking activists together and their sharing a distinct collective identity, while Touraine emphasizes the potential of social movements to guarantee the production, actualization, and transformation of society. As a social movement, FridaysForFuture is a distinctive, historically specific form of contentious politics, combining sustained campaigns of claims making; a repertoire of specific public performances (i.e., Fridays school strikes); repeated displays of worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment; networks, traditions, organizations, and solidarities able to sustain these activities (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015).

Despite the movement being relatively young, several studies have already been conducted on FridaysForFuture, especially, as it will be addressed, in Europe. Most of these studies

come from the disciplines of communication and media studies, social movements and activism studies, and youth studies, with some analyses also coming from the fields of environmental psychology, environmental communication, and political science. The following review of FridaysForFuture literature wants to provide a survey of the academic discussion on the movement so far, in order to better collocate this study.

The oldest scholarship on FridaysForFuture has investigated the movement's genesis and core characteristics, as well as those of its members. Smith and Bogner (2019) describe it as a decentralized movement, based on local groups established worldwide which tactically combine weekly student strikes with large-scale coordinated marches. Kühne (2019) traces back the movement's genesis to the centrality of scientific arguments in backing its political demonstrations, while Schinko (2020) contextualizes it within the failure of international conferences and agreements on climate change, suggesting some 'building blocks' for supporting the social-ecological transformation that FFF is advocating for. Particularly relevant are the first surveys of the movement across countries, conducted on occasion of the March and September 2019 global strikes (Gardner & Neuber 2020; Wahlström et al. 2019). They identify the demographics of the participants across several European cities, pointing out the high presence of youth and their being motivated by a desire to safeguard the interests of their generation and denounce the wrongdoings of adults. From these surveys, FFF seems to be mainly composed of novice, well-educated teen activists who, initially inspired by Greta Thunberg, engage in FFF out of concern for their own and the planet's future and to demand political accountability from public institutions (Wahlström et al. 2019). Gardner and Neuber (2020), in particular, zoom-in on German FFF activists who participated in the two 2019 global strikes, identifying them as mainly middle-class high school and university students, with a moderate left-wing orientation, who are discontent with neoliberal policies and private companies. These results are consistent with Noth and Tonzer (2022)'s recent survey on FridaysForFuture Germany, which collected more than six hundred answers. Their data showed that respondents who placed trust in large corporations were less likely to participate in climate marches, thus suggesting a link between such trust and climate activism. Respondents that expressed the greatest amounts of concern toward the climate crisis were also more likely to participate often in the strikes and were more likely to act in an environmentally sustainable way.

Since she initiated the movement, literature has also focused extensively on Greta Thunberg's character. Brugger and Wieser (2022) reflect on the iconization of Greta Thunberg through an interpretive analysis of Instagram posts and newspaper articles covering her campaigns in 2019 to reveal how the person, consumers, and the media collaborate in co-creating a mythic Greta Thunberg persona. They draw a distinction between communication myths of 'The Heroic Greta Thunberg' and action myths, such as 'The Discovery Trip' of her character and the 'Revolution' aspect connected to FFF. Similarly, Molder and colleagues (2021) examine Greta Thunberg's rise to global prominence through an analysis of her Instagram posts from June 2018 to January 2020. They discuss how youth activists communicate climate change on social media and specifically focus on how she frames climate change as a moral and ethical issue, using hope as an emotional appeal, and visually frames motivational collective action to mobilize her audience. Vavilov (2019) also focuses on Greta's rhetoric devices and moral argumentations, while Evensen (2019) criticizes her (and FFF)'s overconfidence in data and

science as arguments against the climate crisis, since – in his opinion – it comes at the expenses of ethical and political arguments. Finally, von Zabern and Tulloch (2021) focus on German newspaper's portrayal of FFF activists as Greta's 'followers'/'fans,' diluting the scientific legitimacy of the climate dispute. It is this view specifically that, as we will see, FridaysForFuture activists are trying to resist. This is because overemphasizing Greta's relevance in FFF contrasts with the activists' desire to emancipate the movement from her 'myth'— even if she is still recognized as a significant figure for the social movement— diminishing the importance of the single activists' commitment.

Generation-specific narratives are pivotal in FridaysForFuture: the very name of the movement implies that older people have 'taken the future away' from young people, who are now fighting to take it back. Subsequently, literature has focused extensively on this aspect. Zamponi and colleagues (2022) call back to Whalstrom et al. (2019)'s survey of climate demonstrators to underline generational differences in action frames and protests in FridaysForFuture across European cities. They challenge the stereotype that sees young people as disinterested in politics, demonstrating that young protesters do not participate less in claim-based action than older cohorts, showing, on the contrary, a process of increasing politicization, leading to greater commitment in both lifestyle and political forms of participation among active protesters. Huttunen (2021) also challenges youth political disengagement narratives in a case study of Finnish FridaysForFuture activists, showing how Finnish climate activists are advocating for a better-functioning representative system with politicians who listen to their demands. Biswas and Mattheis (2021) argue that FridaysForFuture school strikes can be understood as offering a dynamic counterweight to formal education and can provide children with opportunities to self-educate, while, for adults, opportunities to learn from them. Vestergren and Drury (2022) discuss the biographical consequences for young people of participating in environmental activism such as that of FridaysForFuture, suggesting that it can have significant positive and negative consequences for the activists' personal lives. Such consequences, however, are related to the identity characteristics of the movement and will emerge through interaction with other groups (such as the police) and activists within the same movement. Beltramo (2021), on the other hand, focuses on FridaysForFuture by acknowledging minors' right to political participation and exploring the social movement as a specific participation style enacted by this generation of activists. She highlights the difficulties of the institutional system to acknowledge youth political participation, while also addressing themes of intergenerational justice and the principle of responsibility towards future generations.

Another particularly fertile branch of literature on FridaysForFuture has investigated the movement's rhetoric, discursive, and political practices. Still within FFF-Germany, Maier (2019) identifies three collective action frames of the movement, thus providing insights into its political practices. According to the author, FFF activists decompose the climate issue into diagnostic and prognostic dimensions, identifying different political issues and related solutions; they invoke climate justice as an intergenerational pact, by juxtaposing young people with older people through catchy protest signs and online cultural codes; they treat both climate change and their own engagement as transnational in scope and responsibility. Knappe and Renn (2022) analyze intergenerational justice as policies designed by young people to ensure just and fair futures, thus politicizing the future itself. Svensson and

Wahlström (2023) employ data from Wahlström et al. (2019)'s survey and explore what climate strikers of FridaysForFuture believe should be done to address climate change. They observe that, while top-down institutional changes are usually identified as the most common prognostic frame, a significant number of respondents also stress the importance of individual lifestyle changes, a position that, however, was more likely to be articulated by middle-aged and right-wing respondents than by youths or left-wing. Cologna and colleagues (2021), on the other hand, reflect on the motivations that bring young Swiss to participate in FridaysForFuture strikes, identifying as motivators: trust in climate scientists, low trust in governments, protest enjoyment, perceived success of protests, and preexisting environmentally-sustainable lifestyle choices, such as eating less meat. Wallis and Loy (2021) draw on the social identity model of pro-environmental action (SIMPEA) and theories on pro-environmental actions of children and adolescents to examine psychological drivers of pro-environmental activism in the German FFF movement. Their study suggests that perceiving friends participating in the movement, identification with others engaging in climate protection, and personal norms in the form of a felt obligation based on values were strongly related to participation in protests. Of similar advice are De Moor and Wahlström (2022), who suggest that FridaysForFuture (and Extinction Rebellion)'s climate protests might be strongly driven by a sense of moral obligation to protest, which might, in contrast, render political opportunities less central to the movement. Conversely, Lejdström's master's thesis (2021) explores activists' motivations to disengage from the movement in FridaysForFuture Sweden, identifying four key reasons: biographical unavailability as a result of other commitments in life, perceived collective inefficacy, emotions of hopelessness in relation to the movement or toward climate change, and psychological pressure to maintain high involvement rates with the movement.

Literature has also extensively analyzed FFF's social media platforms and practices. Rivas-de-Roca (2020) shows how FFF sways public opinion and encourages political action through digital media, in an attempt to attract mass media and find political support to prioritize the climate crisis into the agenda-setting. These findings also resonate in Trimonytė's thesis (2020). On the one hand, his analysis of the posts published on FFF official Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter pages confirms Maier's (2019) hypothesis of the coexistence of a diagnostic and prognostic framing. On the other, both of them appear on social media. The former emerges from the posts where activists denounce the inactivity of institutions about climate change, claim the reliability of this problem with scientific references and institutional statements, and emphasize the global scope of the issue and its daily repercussions; the latter framing, instead, appears in those posts where activists call on world leaders to declare and respond to a climate emergency, propose concrete solutions, and enhance their own actions. While using social media to promote this discourse on the climate crisis outwardly, FFF activists also experience these platforms as places to meet and consolidate the movement internally. According to Brünker and colleagues (2019), especially Instagram enables FFF's collective identity formation, since young people from all over the world can use the platform to interact with each other and with Greta Thunberg, thus experiencing solidarity, group cohesion, and emotional attachment to each other and to the issue of climate change. Herrmann and colleagues (2022) also focus on Instagram, studying hashtags to understand the global FridaysForFuture movement, emphasizing the broadness of the movement's motives (which range from climate change to lifestyle). Reyes-Carrasco and

colleagues (2020) emphasize how the whole array of practices (whether digitally mediated or not) of FFF-Salamanca are opening a space for an informal ‘learning by doing,’ where knowledge is built through the organization of guidelines, radio shows, and social media campaigns. Soler-i-Martí and colleagues (2022) focus instead on FFF Barcelona activists’ discourses on climate change on social media (specifically Twitter and Instagram), demonstrating that these are marked by a character of emergency and hope, detecting that emergency speech which references hopeful futures correlates to a greater impact of the movement’s social media posts. Finally, Belotti and colleagues (2022) analyze how FFF-Rome’s frontstage and backstage social media serve as spaces to denounce the inactivity of institutions in regard to the climate crisis and advocate for their accountability, while at the same time spreading information and scientific data about climate change. This allows the authors to show how FFF activists employ complex social media strategies across different platforms to reach age-specific target audiences.

In the wake of the COVID-19 emergency, research has also focused solely on its impact on FridaysForFuture activism. Wozniak and colleagues (2021), for example, analyze the media coverage of FridaysForFuture climate strikes across several countries, noticing a significant decrease. Haßler and colleagues (2021)’s study also found a decrease in tweets about protests and calls for mobilization in German-language Twitter communication of FridaysForFuture (FFF) before and during the lockdown. Gardner and Neuber (2021)’s focus is also on Germany, on FridaysForFuture-Berlin. Through surveys, they draw a comparison between pre-pandemic strikes and post pandemic, suggesting that, under pandemic conditions, younger, more politically engaged, and less politically cynical climate activists joined demonstrations. Protesters showed more confidence in policy-makers’ ability to make significant progress on climate change in the wake of the timely, scientifically-informed government actions taken in response to the pandemic, with younger protesters expressing uncertainty about how to simultaneously address the pandemic and the climate crisis, while most adult protesters viewed the sidelining of climate change in favor of only addressing the pandemic as unacceptable. Finally, Source and Dumitrica (2021), through qualitative social media framing analysis, compare insights from 457 posts across 29 public pages from FFF European groups to provide an analysis of social movement frames employed by FFF during the pandemic: adaptation, reframing, and mobilization.

As it is evident from the literature review above, the great majority of studies conducted on FridaysForFuture come from universities and scholars located in Northern Europe and deal with Northern European branches of the movement, especially FridaysForFuture Germany. This is not surprising since the movement originated in Northern Europe, specifically in Sweden, and FridaysForFuture Germany (as also mentioned by FFF-Rome activists) is the largest and most influential exponent of the social movement, despite FridaysForFuture being also present in multiple regions of the world. Kern and Opitz (2021) and Barbosa and colleagues (2022) offer two examples of the scarce literature on FridaysForFuture’s non-European branches. The first focuses on the discursive opportunity structure of FridaysForFuture, comparing groups in the United States and Germany. Their study emphasizes that, if climate science shapes the framing of FridaysForFuture’s climate change narrations, the differential receptivity of both countries’ political and communicative institutions for climate science’s findings affect, in turn, frame resonance. The authority of

climate science, for example, is much less favorable in the United States than Germany, explaining the different resonance of the movement (which utilizes science as a legitimating authority) in the two countries. Barbosa and her colleagues (2022) also draw comparisons but between Brazil and Germany, this time in regard to students' knowledge of and environmental attitudes toward climate change and how they correlated with frequency of participation to FridaysForFuture strikes. In both countries, both were found to be significantly correlated. The study also revealed that, compared to German students, Brazilians are more concerned about the environment and less favorable to the exploitation of nature, thus suggesting that wealth and development of a country do not necessarily correlate with greater pro-environmental attitudes. German students, on the other hand, showed greater knowledge of daily attitudes for the conservation of energy and water, and sustainability lifestyles in general.

Still largely understudied, the Italian network of FridaysForFuture follows many of the characteristics described so far. According to the analyses of Zamponi and colleagues (2022), it is mostly animated by young people under 35 (63%), with a significant number of adolescents (32.6%, of which 68% girls). These are mainly novice activists, mostly without affiliations to other organizations or collectives, who discovered environmentalism/ecologism through the lens of the climate emergency and joined FridaysForFuture to request political interventions and protect their future. Social media function as meeting places among Fridays and with activists from other social organizations, and as environments for confrontation with polluting institutions and companies: they are constitutive of the movement's struggle and identity construction practices (Belotti et al. 2022; Belotti & Bussoletti 2022).

There are specific socio-cultural, economical, and political factors influencing FFF activism in Italy. The levels of sustainability of the citizens, businesses, and administrations are still well below the European Union averages and the population's concern for the climate crisis is progressively rising, but not fast enough to generate widespread dissatisfaction (ISTAT 2020). In this context, young people are trying to reignite the public debate on climate change and social sustainability. This means that understanding how, where, and why they do it is essential to grasp the innovative scope of FridaysForFuture's disputes and activism practices, especially when considering that environmental activism in Italy is not usually characterized by generationally coded practices (cfr. Bertuzzi 2019) and is traditionally associated with local issues (such as the defense of common goods, cfr. Belotti 2015; Mattei 2013) and territorial battles (such as the NoTav and NoMuos movements and related local claims, cfr. Armano, Pittavino & Sciortino 2013; della Porta & Piazza 2016). Studying FridaysForFuture-Rome can therefore afford scholars a greater awareness of the age-specific social media usages, values, emotions, and activist practices that constitute the 'we-sense' of the current generation of young Italian (climate) activists.

This study contributes significantly to literature on FFF since it provides insights into the Roman and, at times, Italian branch of the movement. Such a contribution is particularly relevant since almost all research on FFF has only focused on the Northern European context. It addresses the cultural differences and specificities that arise when the Northern culture of activism that characterizes FFF meets activism practices that are traditionally connected to

the European South, such as the Italian ones. Additionally, this research provides novel insight into FFF (and social movements)' use of social media. While research has extensively focused on FFF's social media accounts to point out the rhetorical revindications of the movement and how they are used to encourage political participation, this has always happened from an outsider's perspective. Researchers have looked at FFF's Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook pages and analyzed their communicative appeals from the outside, focusing on posts, comments, and strategies. On the other hand, this research adopts an insider's perspective through participant observation. I joined the group for six months and conducted digital ethnography at the same time, thus observing how the very mechanisms and strategies described by previous research come to be and how they express the identity, political, and communicative needs of the movement. As fieldwork was carried out during the COVID-19 emergency, the insider's perspective of this research also enriches and informs studies on how FFF's practices adapted to the pandemic. It was carried out in a moment of crisis of the movement and of the country and, as such, it observes the activists' creative practices to keep their fight relevant. They revindicated the saliency of science in defining global crises, and increasingly incorporated and adapted online and hybrid forms of activism to the Italian context, conceiving practices that are still in use today.

3. Theoretical framework

Before delving more closely into the topics that pertain this thesis, this section refers to key concepts in media and digital activism studies that informed this research in all of its phases.

Introducing the thesis with this section appeared necessary from the early stages of writing it, because the unique way FFF-Rome conceptualizes online and offline activism makes any attempt to analyze the two separately reductive and superficial. This means that focusing on their activism would not have been possible without proper theoretical foundations acknowledging: the interconnection between online and offline realms and how this expands to digital activism and social movements; how to properly address the entire social media spectrum FFF-Rome activists interact with; and the interconnection of activist practices with media ideologies (Gershon 2010b).

Indeed, social media blur the line between what is public and what is private, with publicness online being shaped not only “by the architecture and affordances of social media” but also “by people’s social contexts, identities, and practices” (Baym & boyd 2012: 320). Far from being a “hermetically sealed” reality, in digital spaces “offline contexts permeate online activities, and online activities bleed endlessly back to reshape what happens offline” (327). The Internet and social media, then, do not determine but rather facilitate “the shift from communities to networks,” making “the networked structure of society more visible, while empowering networked individuals” (Rainie & Wellman 2012). This conception is especially valuable in a study on activism and social movements such as this thesis, because it allows us to appreciate fully how offline activism practices are increasingly intertwined with their media (and mediated) actions (Comunello & Anzera 2012; Toret et al. 2015; Vaccari et al. 2015). The old digital platform and grassroots movements’ studies’ distinction between mediated, online world, and ‘real,’ offline world is by now misleading or even counter-productive (Baym 2010; Jensen 2011), especially when we set off to study ‘mediactivism’—that is, the tactical and counter-hegemonic self-management of media rooted in the social and territorial contexts where media do intervene (Pasquinelli 2002). Consequently, the academic study of social media activism has increasingly moved on from technological determinism and from debates among techno-skeptics and techno-optimists, focusing, instead, on the impact of media usages for activism, the connection between online-offline activism, and how activists negotiate platform usage for politics, all themes that will be addressed in more detail in the following sections.

This research is therefore situated within this strand of studies, mindful of what Lim (2015) defined as the ‘fallacy of spatial dualism.’ It strives to study digital activism without treating online and offline realms differently, for example without considering digital protests as inherently separated from “the materiality of physical spaces” (Trerè 2019: 8). In doing so, this study follows the literature trend in activism studies that rejects ‘slackactivism’ perspectives, meaning that online or digitally mediated activism is not a lesser form of activism or simply a low-effort engagement (cfr. Dennis 2018; Vaccari et al. 2015). It is not possible to fully grasp the significance of social media activism for FFF-Rome without understanding digital media and political struggles as deeply intertwined and mutually shaped (see Trerè 2019) and therefore of equal legitimacy, according to a non-instrumental understanding of the relations between politics and technology. This perspective allows us to

fully conceptualize how activists are constantly hybridizing their media practices: they merge the physical and the digital, the human and the non-human, the old and the new, the mainstream and the alternative, according to their different cultural, political, and social conditions (ibid.).

Studies that consider the media/ movement dynamic as instrumental have also a tendency to focus on the use of single technologies and communication strategies by activists, rather than addressing the whole media spectrum with which they interact (see Trerè 2012). In order to address this fallacy, and consistent with its non-instrumental view of social media, this research adopted a media ecological approach to the study of social media and digital activism. This is a systemic approach to communication that understands the study of media not merely as a technological one but seeks to acknowledge the human side of communication, taking into account the changes in communication patterns in Computer Mediated Communication and the biases inherent in each medium. Barnes (2008) explains the main principles informing this approach as follows:

Technological change is not additive, it changes everything; the symbolic forms of technologies differ, leading to different intellectual and emotional biases; when the conditions in which we attend to media change, different media have social biases; and different technical and economic structures will contribute to media content biases (Barnes 2008: 16).

A media ecological study of social media acknowledges the changes in the culture that welcomes this new technology and how this medium alters the entire communication ecology of the social system, the symbolic methods “used in technology interaction” (Barnes 2008: 17) and how these influence processes of interpersonal communication. Additionally, it seeks to look at the total of the communication process and the time, space, and sensory biases of the technology (i.e., Barnes identifies a sensory bias to the internet, which can extend communication among people across time and space and prompts scholars to question, among other things, how the geographical separation of these individuals influence their communication). Looking at the totality of the activists’ communication processes has precisely been the focus of this thesis and the reason I adopted an insider’s approach. It was not possible to account for the complexity and the negotiations that informed FFF-Rome’s social media practices and needs only on the outside. All of the social movement’s social media had to be considered as interconnected since this is the way the movement also understands them: as political, communicative, and generational channels that, together, tell a story of FFF-Rome. In doing so, this thesis follows the novel strand of literature, identified by Trerè and Mattoni (2016), that applies a media ecological framework in the exploration of activism, connecting these studies with the more general literature on media and communication ecologies.

The facilitation of interpersonal relationships through the use of machines fosters the building of social networks and the network society, which is described by Castells (1996) as a culture constructed “by pervasive, interconnected, and diversified media systems,” that is a “new form of social organization” based on the network (1-2). This raises important questions about the reconfiguration and alteration of communication among people in the internet age, questions that extend to activism as well, be it online and/or offline. It prompts us to consider

how young people, universally hailed to be the prime adopters and utilizers of social media, interact with this complexity, as their peer relationships develop more and more inseparably in between offline and online environments (Stonard et al. 2014).

In order to address this complexity, and consistent with the theoretical framework, this thesis adopts the concept of technopolitics. It originates from the idea that technological artifacts have political qualities (Winner 2007), contrasting with, on the one hand, technological determinism, which see technologies as unbridled forces able to “mold society and its patterns” (122), and, on the other, with social determinism, which suggests that “technical *things* do not matter at all” (Winner 2007: 122, emphasis in original). It is Rodotà (2004) and Kellner (2001) that repurposed the concept of technopolitics to highlight more specifically the connection between the political sphere, democracy, and technology, advocating for a more non-instrumental understanding of the relationships between politics and technology. In particular, Rodotà underlines how technology not only provides politics with important tools, but how, by doing so, it alters its fundamental characteristics, providing citizens with new possibilities for knowledge and participation but making them (and their organizations) more vulnerable to oppression and surveillance, so that it becomes misleading and inaccurate to describe the relations between technology and politics as merely instrumental. Kellner, on the other hand, defines technopolitics as “the use of new technologies such as computers and the Internet to advance political goals” (Kellner 2001: 16). Using as examples the Zapatista movement and the anti-globalization movement, he focuses on the ways activists and protests have managed to expand their radical democratic agenda by using digital technologies and the Internet. He observes how digital technologies have been appropriated by progressive and conservative movements alike, including extremists and authoritarian governments.

Javier Toret and his colleagues (2015) provide further insight on the concept of technopolitics. On the one hand, they define it as “the tactical and strategic use of digital tools for organization, communication, and collective action” (Toret et al. 2015: 20), echoing Manuel Castells’ work on mass self communication (2012). On the other, they consider it as “the capacity of the connected crowds to create and self-module connective action” (Toret et al. 2015: 20). This echoes Bennett and Segerberg’s (2014) notion of connective action, which puts the accent on online communities and their features, emphasizing how they do not necessarily come to be because of geographical proximity but are rather grounded on common interests and solidarity via digital communication technologies. In Toret and colleagues’ understanding, technopolitics is based on interplatform and multilayer strategic uses of technologies by activists, thus adopting a non-deterministic view of the connection between online and offline activism strategies (Toret et al. 2015: 42).

The notion of technopolitics can aid scholars in overcoming instrumental and simplistic approaches to the connections between social movements and digital media (Trerè & Barranquero 2018). In particular, technopolitics stresses the aforementioned inextricable connection between online and offline political participation, whereby social change is always the result of the combined effort of digital and offline activism, so that “technopolitics refers to the new collective organization patterns of social movements in the network society, which can start from the web but have to transcend it” (ibid.: 9), thus understanding contemporary activism as inherently hybrid. Trerè and Barranquero (2018) observe how Southern approaches in activism studies have especially elaborated on the concept of

technopolitics in fruitful ways. They have explored in depth the interconnection between politics, social movements, and information technologies, representing a meaningful direction for activism research in general. In this context, the authors observe how especially the Spanish environment has represented a fertile ground for “innovative media practices regarding politics” but also for “the rediscovery of concepts that are able to describe and assess these changes, such as technopolitics” (Trerè & Barranquero 2018: 8). In referencing the concept of technopolitics, this research is directly following the tradition and contributing to the train of studies on Southern European approaches to activism since it concerns Italian activism. Additionally, since this research delves so heavily with identity, the concept of technopolitics proves especially valuable to center the discussion on the emotional and cultural aspects of the observed social movement. It highlights the role played by technology in “catalyzing and channeling emotions and sentiments before, during, and after mobilizations” (Trerè & Barranquero 2018: 10). As a result, it contributes to bridging two approaches to activism research, the one that focuses mainly on organizational aspects and the one that privileges an analysis of activism’s cultural and identity aspects (see also Papacharissi 2015).

As discussed, social media constitute an ecology around activists. In doing so, they enable actors of social change with the possibility to move seamlessly across digital environments according to their needs but also to the meaning they assign to the different platforms (Barnes 2008; Trerè 2019). In order to better understand these meanings, I chose to adopt the concept of media ideologies (Gershon 2010a and 2010b). This focuses on how individuals understand both the “communicative possibilities and the material limitations of” a specific medium and “how they conceive” media in general (Gershon 2010a: 283). It acknowledges that an individual’s understanding of both “language and media” will affect their³ communicative practices (284). Media ideologies are thus “a set of beliefs about communicative technologies with which users and designers explain perceived media structure and meaning” (Gershon 2010b: 3), that is to say what people think about the media they use will shape the way they use media. For example, the way FFF-Rome sees TikTok as ‘silly’ affects the way the activists use it in that they challenge themselves to create ‘alternative,’ ‘intelligent’ content for the platform.

People’s media ideologies are based on how the individual feels about a specific medium in contrast to another one, but also on the individual’s ideas about “how the structure of technology shapes the ways you can use it to communicate” (Gershon 2010b: 5) so that people’s media ideologies and practices will come to determine which aspects afforded by each different technology “becomes significant in a given context” (6). Such beliefs about media and how to use them are developed within media ‘idioms of practice,’ that is the way individuals “figure out together how to use different media” and “agree on the appropriate social uses of technology”(6), which can change over time and context, as some idioms of practice might become distinctive of a particular group or, by contrast, become widespread. The concepts of idioms of practice and media ideologies are extremely significant for this thesis, since the activists’ social media practices are strongly connotated, for them, by generation-specific sense makings. They express (and act on) multiple ideologies regarding social media usage that are specific to being young, pointing out to a stark contrast, in terms

³ This thesis uses the singular they/them as a gender neutral, inclusive personal pronoun.

of media practices, among different age-groups. This affects FFF-Rome's entire media ecology, since it informs how they decide which platforms to use according to the political goals and specific age-groups they want to intercept. The notion of media ideologies, then, allows us to pay proper attention to the ever shifting and culturally nuanced understandings of how different media shape communication and the way people approach and use media, as well as what types of communications are most appropriate for which medium (Gershon 2010a). This approach, in turn, allows us to understand the sense-giving processes that people from different groups, such as age groups, assign to different media, as well as their beliefs about how such media communicate and structure communication.

These theoretical notions have informed every step of writing this thesis. They were especially relevant during fieldwork because they encouraged me to try and grasp the entirety of FFF-Rome's activists' (social) media ecosystem and practices, how each platform plays its role and interacts with the others, with media ideologies (Gershon 2010b) and platform affordances intertwining with FFF-Rome's activism and giving rise to specific forms of political action. Likewise, these notions also helped me focus on and 'be on the look-out' for the ways FFF-Rome activists understood, grappled with, and exploited these processes, making sense of digital communication technologies (as well as how and why), assigning meanings, and coming up with proper and improper ways of using each platform and interacting with social media and with each other.

4. On Identity

This thesis deals heavily with the topic of identity but recognizes it has been most debated and analyzed by scholars across a variety of fields. Most understandings of identity usually draw a distinction between different types of identities (social, personal, gender, political, valorial...) and even notions related to personal identity begin from the assumption that the self is constituted by multiple aspects and that such aspects are then “expressed or made salient in different contexts” (Ellison et al. 2006: 418).

Philosophically, the debate around identity has effectively expressed this complexity, addressing for example the dialectic between the permanence and mutability of the self through time and contexts and its impact in the construction of one’s identity. An example is the work of Ricoeur (1990), who draws a distinction between the ‘what’ and ‘who’ of the self. The accumulation of a lifetime of experiences can be considered the “what” (identity-*idem*), that which a person consists of, while the reflexive exercise of appropriating these actions/ experiences, their recognition by the individual, constitutes the “who” (*ipse*-identity) of the self. In psychology, personal identity is usually conceptualized as one’s sense of self, whose construction and development is particularly significant during adolescence and early adulthood (Erikson 1963). It is during this phase that the individual begins a ‘search for identity’ by asking questions such as ‘Who am I? What do I believe in? What do I want to do in my life?’ therefore embarking on a journey to solidify one’s sense of the self through the testing and integration of various social roles.

As these few examples have already pointed out, offering a comprehensive analysis on the topic on identity is a complex task, whose magnitude exceeds the scope of this thesis. As a result, this chapter discusses the key contributions to the understanding of personal identity formation and curation in communication studies that are propaedeutical to this thesis’ findings. It also provides a framework to understand how collective identity, generational identity, and youth have been understood for the scope of this research.

4.1 Conceptualizing identity in communication and social media studies

Even in the fields of communication and media studies, the concept of identity encompasses various understandings, calling for broader definitions to introduce the discussion and only later going more in detail on specific aspects that will be of interest for this work.

Castells (2010)’s definition offers a good place to start as he defines identity in very general terms as “people’s source of meaning and experience,” the construction of meaning on the basis of cultural attributes (6). Bucholtz and Hall (2005)’s definition already allows us to conceptualize the contextualized quality of identity as they consider it a “relational and sociocultural phenomenon that emerges and circulates in local discourse contexts of interaction” (585-586). This means that an individual’s personal identity is locally constructed, maintained, and negotiated, while at the same time being connected to specific socio-demographic categories (age, gender, nationality...), as well as to roles and additional categorizations. Of prime importance when discussing social processes and relations, is the notion that identity can only be understood in relation to other identities: it can only acquire “social meaning in relation to other available identity positions and other social actors” (Bucholtz & Hall 2005: 598). Indeed, while addressing different approaches to the study of

socialization processes, Besozzi (2007) observes how any discussion on socialization must include an analysis of identity-making processes and the construction of forms of belonging to different groups. This is also the reason I have operated a distinction, in this thesis, between 'being' and 'doing' Friday. The identity processes that inform affiliation to FFF-Rome are inseparable from the media and activist ideologies that inform social media practices within the movement; therefore, they deserve the appropriate space to be identified and discussed before delving into FFF-Rome's social media.

Among the fundamental characteristics of identity it is possible to count: its permanence over time; unity (which defines the boundaries of a subject with respect to the outside world, and therefore also the difference between them and the other); and reflexivity (which is the recognition of the self by the subject) (cfr. Besozzi 2007). In this aspect, another important distinction is that between personality and identity. These are not synonymous, rather one refers to the other so that, in the relationship between the two, identity can be considered an autonomous entity. This calls back to Parsons and Shils (2017)'s distinction, which considers identity as a component of personality. Referring to these authors, Besozzi understands identity as something that is constructed by the subject through continuous exchanges with others during social interactions, allowing us to consider it a social product (Besozzi 2007). One of the main characteristics of identity is, therefore, relationality: it is the result of a process that arises and develops socially rather than an immediate attribute of the subject. An individual's identity, then, right from the moment it is first formed, begins to build distance with the external social reality. As a result, self-identification processes can take place through difference, as a discovery of otherness (Besozzi 2007).

A further distinction is that between personal identity, which is the result of a reflection on one's own history and on the significant aspects of one's environment, and social identity, which refers to the social and socialized component of the self. Especially referring to the latter, Besozzi (2007) retraces the development and conceptualization of identity in sociology by singling out three main branches or directions that have characterized it. The first one is the functionalist-integrationist model, which understands socialization as a process enacted by society towards the integration of the subject in everyday life and leads to the development of personalities that are stable through time. The second one, the conflictualist model, argues that the foundational model of social order aims to maintain control in the hands of the dominant classes. Socialization is therefore understood as a super-structural element which, in the Marxist interpretation, maintains production relationships (see also Burkitt 2008). Finally, the symbolic-interactionist model emphasizes the individual's ability to produce symbols, thus contributing to the inter-subjective construction of reality through communication acts.

The last model has arguably been the most influential in communication and media studies, so it is worth contextualizing further. This model has seen an important contribution from sociologist George Herbert Mead (1934), who argued that people construct and develop their self-image through the interactions with other individuals during various stages of development that allow the individual to simultaneously become aware of themselves (self-awareness) and of others. His social theory of the self contrasted with at-time popular individualistic theories that postulated the priority of the self from social processes. According to Mead:

The self is something which has a development; it is not initially there, at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity, that is, develops in the given individual as a result of his relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals within that process (Mead 1934: 135).

Symbolic interactionist understandings of identity like Mead's are rooted in a deconstructionist approach to the topic. They reject the existence of a pre-social, pre-linguistic self (Green 2007) whereby "the act of making sense of the self is simultaneously a moment of its constitution" (30). Green notes how this sociology (see Cooley 2010; Dewey 1922; Goffman 2002; Mead 1934) conceptualized the social self as fluctuating and composed by multiple identities, often without identifying a core identity to an individual. Indeed, according to Goffman (2002), all social situations involve playing multiple roles designed to suit the interactants and the context so that the sum total of an individual's (meaningful) relationships ceases to be the source of their identity and becomes a privileged stage for the individual's presentational strategies. The impact of late modernity on our everyday lives, as explained by Giddens (1991), has exacerbated these tendencies, resulting in all activities being the subject of social reflection:

The more tradition loses its hold, and the more daily life is reconstituted in terms of the dialectical interplay of the local and the global, the more individuals are forced to negotiate lifestyle choices among a diversity of options [...]. Reflexively organized life-planning [...] becomes a central feature of the structuring of self-identity (Giddens 1991: 1,5).

According to Giddens, people's identities are not only to be understood as complex and multi-faceted, but the very concept of self-identity becomes an 'inescapable issue' in late modernity, since every small choice is perceived as a conscious effort to narrate and construct the self. The self is therefore neither a product of an external symbolic system, nor something we are simply born with, nor a fixed entity for the individual to readily grasp. Rather, it is a reflexively made symbolic 'project,' thoughtfully and continuously constructed by the individual: a person's own reflexive understanding of the story of their life.

The idea of identity as something one can continuously construct through mundane every-day choices throughout one's life has been also exemplified by Dittmar (1992) in her reflections on the psychology of consumer culture, whereby material possessions have a symbolic significance not only for their owners, but also for other people with whom the owner interacts with, so that "the symbolic meanings of our belongings are an integral feature of expressing our own identity and perceiving the identity of others" (3), such as when donning a pair of couture jeans or of vintage trousers allows the consumer to don, project, and 'feel' a different kind of identity.

The significance for media studies of understanding identity as a 'doing' rather than a state of being is evident also Thompson (1995), who argued that the symbolic project of self-construction is actively realized through and from the symbolic materials available to the individual, most notably those taken from the media. He draws a distinction between lived and mediated experiences (1990), identifying the former as the face-to-face encounters in an individual's daily life, that is hands-on activities and all that which is commonly taken for

granted as 'reality' and is largely 'non-reflexive.' Mediate experience, on the other hand, results from the characteristics of the culture of mass-communication and media consumption and refers to the individual's ability to experience events that are remote from them, both in space and time, in their daily life as a 'recontextualized experience.' The individual would thus draw from their mediated and lived experiences to construct their own self, privileging one over the other according to their own values, life history, and social background. By receiving and appropriating media messages, we embark in a process of self-understanding and self-knowledge, thus helping us construct our own 'sense' of ourselves, effectively shaping our identity. This view allows us to understand media as important repositories and settings for the production of symbolic resources. They allow individuals to gain access to symbolic materials to reflexively incorporate into their 'project of self-formation.'

Following the development of the internet, scholars have explored even more extensively the relationship between identity-making and communication. Already in the 1980s, Meyrowitz (1986) observed the fracture of the interdependence between physical and informational barriers. He suggested that changes in media and in information systems may have an effect on social trends, social behavior, and identity. In particular, he argued that the advent of electronic media brings forth an emancipation of traditional communication through a 'territorial transformation' from physical to social place, since electronic media cancel physical barriers like trenches or gates, creating social spaces in which communication at a distance is possible. Similarly, Morcellini (2004 & 2013) observed how media play an important role in horizontal socialization processes, so much so that it is possible to speak of socialization without mediation, or 'self-socialization' processes. In this view, the media function as a substitute for the loss of normative and symbolic effectiveness of traditional socialization agencies (such as the church, family, school) brought forth by the late and postmodern condition introduced before. Even if such decline is not caused by the media, they are the ones to have allowed the experimentation of non-traditional forms of socialization processes, shifting the burden of socializing oneself inwards, onto the subject. The result is a communication paradox where, on the one hand, communication accelerates this process of individualization but, on the other, it must support the individual in these new contexts of rapid change.

Emphasizing the freedom to experiment without social restrictions and conditioning, the debate on online identities started off from a sharp distinction between offline and online lives (Tosoni 2004; Turkle 1996, 2006). Early academic contributions offered reflections on the so-called 'second self' as online identity was thought to be a place for free experimentation of a digital, disembodied self. Scholars emphasized how asynchronous communication allows the individual to both impersonate different roles in different moments and different roles in the same time unit across different platforms. This led Bargh and colleagues (2002) to research how, in comparison to face-to-face interactions, interactions on the internet allowed individuals to better express aspects of their true selves, that is those aspects of themselves that they wanted to express but felt unable to in other settings. It emerged how the relative anonymity of online interactions may allow individuals to even reveal potentially negative aspects of themselves online (Bargh et al. 2002).

Following these assumptions, Turkle (2006) elaborated on Goffman (2002)'s aforementioned idea that all social situations involve playing multiple roles (as if on a stage), to point out that,

on the internet, the self is not just merely playing different roles in different settings at different times, but rather comes to be decentered and exists as a multiple, distributed system. Online, the self would become a 'tethered self' that exists in many worlds at the same time and plays many roles at once, as many as the multiple tabs, or windows, open on the user's internet browser (Turkle 2006). Turkle later delved deeper into the definition of one's identity among people interacting in a digital environment (2011), arguing once again that the characteristics of a computer fit into a postmodern aesthetic and foster a postmodern sense of identity, that is one that changes according to the context and is characterized by multiplicity and fragmentation. These positions led scholars to converge on the idea of networked individualism, whereby 'individualism' recognizes the unfolding of a sociality that is now centered on the individual. Most notably, Castells (1998) observed how the information age, an age of global and local at the same time, is an era "of specific identity as source of meaning" (477). As social media are designed as places to connect with other people and form relational networks, practices connected to self-presentation and the narration of one's identity are a day-to-day occurrence for every single user.

Still, Castells (2010) calls into question these postmodern notions of the construction of identity. He argues that the rise of the network society induced new forms of social change, in virtue of the disjunction between the local and the global and "the separation in different time space frames between power and experience" (11) on which the network society is based. In particular, he reviews Giddens (1991)'s theories to operate a distinction between identity and the sociological notions of roles and role-sets (such as being a student, a teacher, an artist...). The former is a source of meaning for the social actor themselves and by themselves, and is constructed through a process of individuation. The latter are defined by the norms set forth by institutions and society. Even when identity originates from (social) institutions, such as being a daughter, the key difference would still be the internalization of an identity by the social actor and the process of meaning-construction that arises around such internalization. Roles, on the other hand, are organized around functions. Similarly, Castells also distinguishes among three forms and origins of identity building. These are noteworthy as they are propaedeutical to the discussion of the link between political contention and identity, which is at the core of this thesis. The first is legitimizing identity, which is introduced by the dominant institutions of society to extend and rationalize their domination of social actors (see also Sennett 1980), towards the generation of a civil society. The second is resistance identity, which is generated by actors whose position and condition is undervalued or stigmatized by the logic of domination. As a result, they engage in acts of resistance (see also Calhoun 1994 and Gellner 1983), leading to the formation of communes and communities (cfr. Anderson 1983). This type of identity-building is especially significant because it constructs forms of collective resistance against oppression on the basis of clearly defined identities (i.e., queer culture). Connected to this second type of identity-building is project identity, which is once again significant in the discussion of social change. It refers to social actors' utilizing available cultural materials to build identities that redefine their social positions, eventually transforming the social structure.

According to the author, we must put these three categories into question under the rules of the network society. As reflexive life-planning becomes impossible and the building of intimacy on the basis of trust is redefined, civil society "shrinks and disarticulates" (Castells

2010: 11) and “[t]he search for meaning takes place [...] in the reconstruction of defensive identities around communal principles” (11). Following this train of thought, Castells formulates the hypothesis that, in the network society, subjects “*if and when constructed, are not built any longer on the basis of civil societies [...] but as prolongation of communal resistance*” (11 emphasis in the original). This idea effectively underlines the primacy of identity politics in the network society. Since legitimizing identity has entered a crisis because of the disintegration of civil society, the social actors that resist the individualization of identity that characterizes this era must resort to cultural communes for identity-building, from which communes, new subjects, and project identities might emerge as the potential main source of change in the network society.

Another strand of contributions has further elaborated on the idea that the online self is not detached from the offline self. They have emphasized how communication technologies are always on, meaning online life is never completely detached from offline life: the two merge into a continuum. A position that reflects the hybrid social media activist practices that, as we will see, characterize FFF-Rome’s usage of social media. Most notably, these contributions understand communication technologies such as social networking sites as spaces where individuals, especially young people, create and negotiate identity (Baym 2010; boyd 2008; Siles 2012). Indeed, if social media are designed as places to connect with other people and form relational networks, practices connected to self-presentation and the narration of one’s identity are a day to day occurrence for every single user. In their framework to understand social media empirically, for example, Kietzmann and colleagues (2011) recognize ‘identity’ as the first building block of their system. Identity is a constitutive and fundamental part of the social media experience, representing the extent to which users reveal themselves (Kietzmann et al. 2011) through a variety of discourse practices and aims which vary among users and among social media platforms. Different media platforms provide differing cues for building shared social and cultural identities. Platforms can therefore be considered digital environments (boyd 2008) that offer specific affordances and constraints, which then combine with shared social norms and user practices.

When the single individual creates a profile, they do so by listing personal information and interests: “Linking up with other users of the site, and sharing [...] updates about their thoughts and activities with those in their networks” (boyd & Ellison 2007). On social media, then, users’ identities can often be “anchored in physical proximities, institutions, and shared personal relationships in daily life, thereby often mirroring offline aspects of people’s lives” (Papacharissi 2011: 147). Through social media, individuals are able to “develop a sense of themselves” by “giving opportunities for self-disclosure, which plays a role in their identity development” (147). Decisions and thoughts about how people identify themselves, the feedback received on these thoughts, and how they view their own profiles in comparison with other people’s profiles are potential factors in individual identity (Spies Shapiro & Margolin 2014: 4).

In order to better understand the negotiations that inform platform choice and communicative practices in FFF-Rome, it is important to introduce the concept of affordances. Starting from Foucault’s (1997) theorization of technologies of the self, we can observe how the single communication tools enable the user with a set of opportunities and limitations, which, in Foucault’s analysis, potentially tend to act on users’ identities in terms of power. De Certeau

(1984), on the other hand, emphasizes the freedom of expression of single individuals through the use of ‘tactics,’ through which users can reconfigure imposed meanings even in a space dominated by top-down strategies of control. These perspectives can be extended to social media usage and users contending with the limitations of platforms. On the one hand, then, we can understand social media activities (for example, writing about the self online) as producing knowledge about the self and enabling its transformation. On the other, these activities are always characterized by internalized usage norms that contribute to the construction of the user’s social and individual identity.

In a social medium, such norms can be ascribed to a platform’s specific affordances. These are defined by Norman (2013) as “the relationship between the properties of an object and the capabilities of the agent that determine just how the object could possibly be used” (2). Faraj and Azad (2012), on the other hand, emphasize the relational connection between the actor’s purposes and the capabilities afforded by technology. They thus define affordances as a “multifaceted relational structure” (254) between the technology artifact and the actor. From these understandings, we can see how, in a social network site, affordances do not dictate user behavior but do configure the environment in a way that shapes their engagement, showcasing salient issues that users must regularly contend with when engaging in these environments (boyd 2011). Contrary to social norms in offline environments, the social norms related to digital and social media platform usage can change rapidly over time (Comunello, Mulargia & Parisi 2016) and appear to be shared by smaller cohorts of people. Gershon’s (2010b) aforementioned concept of media ideologies serves as a bridge between the concept of platform affordances and constraints and user perceptions and social usage norms on the other. Media ideologies, as “people’s beliefs about how a medium communicates and structures communication” (Gershon 2010b: 21), guide users during their permanence on social networks, regardless of their inherent trueness. Such beliefs are closely connected to practices of use as people “figure out together how to use different media and often agree on the appropriate social uses of technology by asking advice and sharing stories with each other” (6).

Today, the conversation on identity expression and construction on social media is more variegated. It has shifted from whether social network sites allow for specific identity building processes and with which effects on offline identities, to how specific personal and social identities are negotiated and narrated on specific digital platforms, emphasizing the connection between online and offline lives. Scholars are increasingly investigating identity curation and identity building processes of specific groups. This is the case for the study of marginalized communities (see for example Buss et al. 2022; Hanckel et al 2019; Kasperuniene & Zydziunaite 2019; Moran & Gatwiri 2022), or for the study of specific identities, such as studying political participation by investigating voting behavior, filter bubbles, and polarization in relation with voters’ identities online (Bornschier et al. 2021; Idan & Feigenbaum 2019; Netto & Maçada 2019). The study on identity that this thesis proposes can also be collocated in this more recent strand. Rather than questioning the effect of social media communication for climate activism, this work focuses on the ways such communications are taking place, by whom, and through which negotiations. It gives saliency especially to the increasing hybridization between online and offline lives and how this extends to activism practices and the concrete lived experiences of the single activists.

This perhaps answers the preoccupation expressed by Jenkins and his colleagues (2016) when they pointed out that, especially when young people are involved (as it is the case of this thesis), scholars tended to focus more on what social media is doing to young people than to what young people are doing with social media: “So much is projected onto youth that it is often difficult to discuss what they are doing, and why, without observation being obscured by ideas of what they should or shouldn't be doing” (34). The result of policing and judging youth usage of social media as potentially dangerous and naïve contributes to seeing youth as deprived of critical agency and easily swayed by corporations, despite the contradiction. At the same time, as Buckingham (2008) had pointed out, scholars risk to over-romanticize the very concepts of identity and of youth with descriptions that emphasize freedom of identity experimentation. This is among the reasons the thesis has provided a broader discussion on identity building processes and identity. It allows for an appreciation of the nuanced and diversified academic discussion on identity, allowing us to approach the analysis with a deeper understanding that social media presence and practices are framed within the socio-cultural background of the subjects and continuously interact with their offline lives and social relations.

4.2 Collective identity and digital protest action

As it has been discussed, one's identity can be understood as a reflexive construction that happens through the narration of one's biography and the incorporation of an array of symbolic materials. This understanding of identity will be particularly valuable to discuss the single activist's identity practices connected to belonging to FFF-Rome. However, since FFF-Rome is also a social movement, thus implying collective forms of political action and identity building processes, we must also shift our focus from personal identity. In this second section we will therefore understand identity as a relationship among subjects that allows them to recognize each other (cfr. Melucci 2000) and look at the unique forms of sociability that can take shape when identity practices happen on online spaces.

Terms like mass self communication (Castells 2009), networked publics (boyd 2008), and virtual togetherness (Bakardjieva 2003) have described the publics formed on (and thanks to) digital platforms. They have provided tools and frameworks to understand the forms of sociability that happen in online spaces and how they intersect with identity and self-presentation practices. While the concept of community has a controversial history in internet studies (Bell & Newby 2016; Rainie & Wellman 2012), it is undeniable that information technologies can enable “geographically dispersed people to overcome time and distance in forging virtual communities of affect” (Chin & Morimoto 2017). By creating the term affective publics, for example, Papacharissi (2015) specifically focuses on how networked publics come together or part around “bonds of sentiment” and platforms that invite “affective attunement, support affective investment, and propagate affectively charged expression” (2). She thus defines affective publics as “networked publics that are mobilized and connected, identified, and potentially disconnected through expressions of sentiment” (8). By exploring the formation of a collective ‘we,’ the notion of affective publics is useful to understand how social media platforms enable public exchanges and connections and allow such exchanges and connections to take shape through their technologies. At the same time, the term draws attention to the extent to which storytelling, feelings, and affect play a role in bringing people together and shaping online action.

While these concepts will be useful in the course of the research, it is also important to look at the connection between identity and activism by taking into account both the offline and online dimensions of political action, as well as how digital communication practices are not only connected to a collective sense of self, but have come to effectively reshape traditional notions of collective identity. Indeed, the relationships that can be born around common interests and shared experiences on the internet are particularly strong when these mediated feelings of connectedness intersect with politics. If collective action refers to “a collective of individuals who coordinate and act together in order to achieve a common goal or interest” (Olson 1968), collective identity is a shared sense of ‘we-ness’ (Snow 2001), defined by Melucci (1995) as “an interactive and shared definition produced by several interacting individuals who are concerned with the orientation of their action as well as the field of opportunities and constraints in which their action takes place” (44).

Theorists of social movements like Melucci (1985) and Touraine and colleagues (1983 & 1987) emphasized how collective identity plays a key role in mobilizations: it defines the boundaries for group membership, motivates people to join a social movement or participate in political action, and links activists together (see also Zamponi 2018). Political participation is rooted in identity construction. As noted by Pizzorno (1966), before mobilizing as a worker an individual has to identify herself as a worker and feel that she belongs to a working class. Castells, too, observes how “the most important sources of social mobilization and political autonomy have been constructed around identity-based movements” (1998: 477). His point is specifically rooted in contemporary activism, which he defines “of global and local at the same time” and “of specific identity as source of meaning” (1998: 477). This means that in our globalized and informationalized world, the most salient social movements as well as the most salient sources of personal and social meaning are drawn from elements that constitute individual identity, such as religion, nationalism, gender, sexuality. Among these, we can also recognize environmentalism (and, by extension, climate movements) since it challenges “the prevailing values of productivism” and seeks to redefine “the relation between culture and nature, thus between economy and the human species” (Castells 1998: 479). This is because environmentalism appeals to our identity as a biological species and our identity as a part of the cosmos, in opposition to refusing such identities and ultimately destroying our species.

The dynamic process through which collective identity is constructed, strengthened, and reiterated via the use of symbols and practices includes online conversations, since they can emphasize shared purpose, values, and grievances, towards the expression of specific collective identities (Kavada 2016). This means that, while we have seen how social media platforms can play key roles in processes of identity construction at the individual level, the same can also be said for collective actors, such as social movements. Despite this connection, Gerbaudo and Trerè (2015; see also Trerè 2019) note a progressive scholarly disinterest for collective identity in contemporary protest movements, even at the expense of overlooking the cultural and symbolic features of social media activism. Such disinterest has also been paired with a disinterest for internal communication dynamics (backstage activism) in favor of external communication processes (frontstage activism).

Indeed, collective identity has become somewhat of a controversial subject among scholars since it has “fallen prey to dominant interpretations about the transformation of society and social movements resulting from the diffusion of digital technologies” (Gerbaudo & Trerè

2015: 867). Similarly, the notion of network “has been utilized as a way to explain the internal order and the coherence of social movements” almost as an alternative “to the notion of identity” (867). Bennett and Segerberg (2014)’s influential contribution, for example, considers digital media’s role as paramount in digital activism, arguing that they would act as organizing agents in digitally networked action. By changing the dynamics of political action, digital communication technologies would effectively replace the need for the construction and maintenance of a collective ‘we,’ that is for collective identities (cfr. Bakardjieva 2015). Gerbaudo and Trerè (2015) criticize this suggestion, pointing out that personal networks are not substitutive of collective identity, but rather serve a complementary role, alongside collective identity, for political action. Their stance echoes Tilly (1978)’s theorization of both network ties and a sense of belonging to a certain category of people as the two factors that prompt people toward political mobilization. It is thus paramount scholars inquire about the reshaping quality of communication technologies for digital activism, such as the construction and maintenance of collective identity on digital media (cfr. Kavada 2012; Svensson et al. 2015). By shifting the focus from the structure of the networks of communication to the symbolic processes that take place on social media, and from the nature of technological affordances to the analysis of the content conveyed through these online platforms by FFF-Rome activists, this thesis effectively follows the two authors’ invitation to examine the nature and dynamics of collective identity processes in a digital age.

In doing so, this thesis effectively places itself in the relatively new strand of studies that question the impact of social media practices on collective action and seek to analyze their complementary role in facilitating activism. One example of this strand of studies is Kavada’s (2015) paper on the constitution of the Occupy Movement as a collective actor. Kavada turns to digital platforms to study how collectives constitute themselves as actors of social movement by drawing on two theoretical approaches: Melucci’s understanding of collective identity as a dynamic, multi-layered, and open-ended process through which a group negotiates internally the means and ends of its action and draws the boundaries with its environment; and principles of CCO (‘Communication is Constitutive of Organizing),’ specifically the idea that organizations emerge in the communicative conditions of conversation and text. The author goes on to define collective action as “emerging in interconnected and overlapping texts and conversations that unfold in conversation sites with varying spatialities and temporalities in which people come together to coordinate and act collectively” (2015: 876). In the case of the Occupy movement, digital platforms like Facebook and Twitter “tended to blur the boundaries between the inside and the outside of the movement in a way that suited its values of inclusiveness and direct participation” (872). Kavada’s analysis is therefore twofold as it investigates communication processes that play a role in shaping the collective identity of the movement, while also exploring the ways in which this process occurs on a variety of platforms and physical places. What emerges is a complex picture where the design of proprietary platforms clashes with the intentions of the activists using them. At the same time, however, despite the alleged role of social media in individualizing and loosening collective action, these platforms still play a salient part in creating the collective.

Milan (2015) offers another example. She explores the impact of social media and cloud computing on collective action, towards what she defines ‘cloud protesting.’ She questions

how social media have come to redefine the materiality of collective identity processes, so that identity politics and visibility politics are inextricably intertwined, and social media become active agents able to shape “the symbolic and organizational processes of social actors” (11). Similarly, Barassi and Zamponi (2020) draw on long-term qualitative research among activists in Italian social movements and observe how the construction of identity narratives on social media is informed by the complexity of these online processes. According to the authors, social media temporalities, based on immediacy, predictability, and archivability, challenge the open-ended, contradictory and, at times, unpredictable nature of offline apolitical identity construction processes.

Collective identity thus still serves an important purpose for the understanding of political action and participation, all the more so thanks to the transformations it went through in our digital age. Processes of collective identification reflect “the technological affordances of social media, the cultural values associated with their use and the prevailing forms of social experience in a digital era” (Gerbaudo & Trerè 2015: 868). The interactive nature of social media through features such as status messages, as well as metrics such as comments and likes can be appropriated by social actors as mechanisms of collective identification, combining with cultural values such as participation and openness, which have come to characterize hacker and, by extension, internet cultures (cfr. Jenkins 2006; Levy 2001). Contemporary protest identities therefore emphasize inclusivity, multiplicity, and malleability, becoming increasingly marked by “fluidity and evanescence,” (Gerbaudo & Trerè 2015: 868), the same features that also mark digital communication practices and, at large, our postmodern culture.

4.3 Conceptualizing ‘generational identity’ and ‘youth’

Historical issues like environmentalism and social justice, which are close to FFF-Rome’s revindications, are closely linked, in sociology, to the identity of a generation. Individuals and, by extension, activists, approach social issues through a lens that is informed by a specific, historically collocated way of seeing the world. Since this thesis focuses on generation-specific sense makings and identity practices, this chapter on identity could not be concluded without providing a framework to understand concepts such as ‘generations,’ ‘generational identity,’ and ‘youth,’ which will be addressed repeatedly during the course of the analysis.

Traditionally, a generation encompasses the collective of people that were born and are living at about the same time. In this sense, it is also often equated to the period that, on average, is required for children to be born, grow up, and begin to have children themselves. The notion of generation is widely used to make sense of the differences between age-groups in society, collocating individuals within a historical time (Pilcher 1994). Mannheim’s “The problem of Generations” (1970) is considered the most systematic and developed conceptualization of ‘generation’ from a sociological perspective. In this work, the sociologist defines ‘generation’ as a social formation that arises when the youth experience the same concrete historical problems (Mannheim 1970). This notion links the construction of a set of shared meanings and symbols to important historical happenings and to an assumption of shared common life experiences. However, it is a broad definition and does not really explain how generations arise. As a result, it has been challenged by the concept of ‘cohort,’ which groups people

according to birth year, as well as with regards to the characteristics they share (Corsten 1999), allowing for a clearer demarcation among different generations. These two attempts, however, point out the main issue presented by an investigation of social generations, that is the tension between its 'qualitative nature' and 'quantitative features.' A tension between understanding social generations as distinguished by qualitative experiences and as distinguished by characteristics such as age and empirically measured time (cfr. Pilcher 1994). More recent theorizations of 'generation' have therefore tried to bridge the gap and understand the term not as a mere construction operated by the sociologist but as a multi-dimensional issue based on a shared assumption of a common life experience by the members: an identity which arises from cultural environments and discursive practices (Colombo & Fortunati 2011), thus assuming a reflexivity process at an individual and at a collective level (Giddens, Beck & Lash 1994). This is particularly relevant in a globalized world characterized by a global mediascape which offers "the possibility for young people all over the world to experience, for the first time in history, a global view of the world and, as a consequence, a global dimension of problems" (Boccia Artieri 2011: 2).

Without falling into the temptation of advocating for the existence of a global, unified generation of youth, this thesis wants to take into account the common patterns of saliency and shared experiences that arise from issues that have come to define a generation of activists, such as environmentalism (cfr. Hestres & Hopke 2017). If the 'we sense' (Bude 1997) of a generation can be described as a meaningful set of connected criteria for interpreting and articulating topics in communication (Corsten 1999), how can this 'we sense' be observed in worldwide media-based generations? The internet and social media are certainly valuable vantage points. In social network sites, the single user can observe themselves telling their own story, as well as stories of those people that they 'feel' alike (Boccia Artieri 2011). Networked practices like sharing and reproducing content, conversations, and self-presentation trigger "mechanisms of reflexivity that link an individual with a collective reality," (ibid.: 2) that is they produce a script for the generational 'we sense' which comes to be at the intersection and in between online and offline life. Colombo and Fortunati (2011) consider social media as generational environments where youth organize their technological experience in a way that allows us to speak about a generational identity rooted in cultural environments and discursive practices. Similarly, studies on social media usage in emergency contexts have shown that social media foster the social sharing of emotions, boosting identity and community empowerment (Sarrica et al. 2018). Bolin (2019) goes as far as proposing a model for analyzing social change through an analysis of generational exchanges in the media landscape as a whole, starting from the assumption that narratives about time can be rooted in media experiences. Such narratives are both descriptive and prescriptive in their retelling of generational memories, that is, they are "instructions and suggestions for how one could or should feel, what one should remember, and how one should act as a member of a certain generation" (32). These narratives are then continuously rehearsed over the years, resulting in the production of a refined formula that contains "direct inter-generational references," (32) which the author calls 'they-sense,' as well as "indirect, intragenerational confirmation" (ibid.), the 'we-sense.' The first one refers to the practice of members of a specific generation to refer to other generations by marking an 'us vs them' difference, while 'we-sense' refers to the confirmation of one's generational identity.

If the concept of generation is a complex one to define, the same can be said for ‘youth.’ Literature provides different age ranges for this category (cfr. Andretta & della Porta 2020; Cohen et al. 2012). For example, O’brian and his colleagues (2018) point out how the United Nations, in their reports, considers the term to include people between the ages of 15 and 24 but, in everyday life, there are many more nuances and views on what constitutes youth, according to cultures and roles expected of the different age groups (Fisher 2016; Ho et al. 2015). The category of ‘youth,’ then, comes to not only represent an age, rather a “developmental stage characterized by expanding capacities and broadening perspectives, alongside the personal challenges associated with moving into adulthood” (Arnett Jensen & Jensen Arnett 2012). In particular, adolescence and early adulthood are considered as a period of life characterized by experimentation and openness to different behaviors and inclinations, as well as a “relationally based social status dependent on political and historical context” (Fisher 2016: 230). Characteristics of ‘youth’ are thus specific senses of agency and responsibility, specific beliefs, values, worldviews, and expectations about the future (O’brian et al. 2018). Therefore, given the complexity and contextuality of ‘youth,’ rather than providing a definition of a specific age-group that was considered for this thesis, this work approaches youth activism for climate by applying Mannheim’s (1970) generation theory and emphasizing the connection between environmentalism, communication technology and practices, and the identity of a generation (Bolin 2019). This is because Mannheim’s theorization emphasizes the historical dimensions of social processes that happen during an individual’s youth: youth experiencing the same concrete problems can be considered as part of the same generations.

As a result, we can consider the current climate crisis as a ‘formative event’ (Mannheim 1970) shared by young individuals who are in the same life-cycle stage (i.e., adolescents and early adults), which influences and resembles their worldview, behaviors, and values (Benckendorff et al. 2012). It effectively comes to define a generation of young activists (Hestres & Hopke 2017). The resulting activism will therefore be paved, among other things, by a sense of belonging to a community of like-minded people who affirm one’s identity, which is further built through conversations and political practices on and offline (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik 2019; Marchi & Clark 2019). Such experiences and practices are rooted in the participatory practices that govern youth climate-related interactions on social media (Jenkins et al. 2016; Wang et al. 2018) and closely connected to the generational self-identification processes that being young imply (della Porta 2019). For example, high school and university students who, according to studies conducted on FFF (Boulianne et al. 2020; Wahlström et al. 2019), participate in the movement share the same stance: they demand that adults take responsibility for jeopardizing their future, pressure institutions into taking appropriate actions, and raise public awareness, with the educational context (schools and universities that young people usually frequent) playing a pivotal role in shaping such a positioning. This leads to what Bude (1997) defined as the ‘we-sense’ of a generation: we can consider FFF-activists as members of a generational cohort in that, as Corsten (1999) explains, they not only have something in common (the effects of climate change) but also share background assumptions about it (its causes and whose responsibilities they are). In drawing this distinction, this thesis shifts the focus from the differences among generations to the modes of appropriation and sense of belonging connected to social media usages and activism of individuals that belong to a specific generation.

As it will be addressed, social media, as one of youth activism's most salient stages (Liou & Literat 2020), are key environments where youth can perform personal and collective identity (boyd 2011; Melucci 1996) through conscious self-presentation choices and relationships (cfr. Giddens 1991), ultimately creating distinct political narratives centered around youth cultures (Jenkins 2016; Liou & Literat 2020). Communication technologies, the contemporary historical issue of climate change, and communication practices (like digital climate activism) are therefore defining elements of this generation of youth, thus making social media activism for climate a privileged arena to study the interplay between generational identity and youth activism.

5. On activism

As already pointed out by the literature on FFF, and as I could confirm firsthand during my observation, social media are an inextricable and pivotal part of FFF-Rome's activism. Their usage is deeply intertwined not only with the movement's genesis but encompasses all sorts of political practices within FFF-Rome, from recruiting, to sharing information about the climate crisis, to organizing online and offline protests.

This chapter thus wants to provide a background useful for contextualizing and understanding FFF-Rome's activism practices, giving particular relevance to the way they constantly hybridize online and offline activism, to the point it is no longer possible to discuss one without also including the other. In doing so, then, I am collocating this study within the strand of scholarship that approaches social media activism as a full-fledged form of contention. These platforms are not of secondary importance for activism, but serve complex and layered roles, constantly redefined by the activists and their needs. Mindful of this complexity and of the increasing porosity between online and offline environments, I will focus especially on the mutual shaping relationship between activism and digital platforms as a framework to analyze FFF-Rome's activism. The chapter also focuses on literature on youth digital activism and Instagram/ visual activism. This is to contextualize and highlight youth-specific sense-makings in social media usage for activism purposes and to situate this research within the budding strand of studies on visual activism on Instagram. In this sense, the ethnographic, insider's perspective of this study is particularly innovative as literature on Instagram activism has traditionally focused on what is happening 'on' the platform, not 'beyond the curtain.' Finally, the chapter ends with a brief excursus on contemporary transnational social movements, of which FFF is an example, to highlight the exchanges and cultural differences that inevitably arise when the fight for climate change is localized in national and local FFF groups such as FFF-Rome.

5.1 Digital activism

The transformations that have involved the communication environment in the past decades have undoubtedly redefined the mediation opportunity structure (Cammaerts 2012) of social movements, with significant impact on processes of collective subjectivization. Digital communication technologies have allowed actors of social change to develop autonomous, interactive, self-configurable networks of horizontal communication and produce mass media messages, facilitating the continuous exchange of self-produced content toward g-local audiences (cfr. 'mass self communication,' Castells 2009). Social media, especially, allow for quick, cheap, and potentially global aggregation of people around specific issues, as well as 'flash mobilization' (Earl et al. 2014). On the one hand, they facilitate access to political participation, blurring the boundaries between public and private and multiplying the possibilities for civic engagement. On the other, they enable people's connections with the practical and feasible practices that, according to Dahlgren (2009), are necessary and sufficient ingredients to engage individuals in political action, empower them, and enable them with political agency.

Early studies on the impact of social media for activism purposes have studied examples of 'technology-supported' activism (see Comunello & Anzera 2012), for instance by observing

the ways activists used text messaging to organize a revolt against former Philippine president Estrada (Rheingold 2002), or the mobilizing and organizing role of the Internet during the Zapatista movement (Castells 2010). However, it was the start of large-scale waves of mobilization in the late 2000s, such as the so-called Arab Springs and Occupy Wall Street, that turned the connection between social media and activism into a ‘hot topic’ of research. It became clear that the use of the increasingly global in scope digital platforms helped movements gain global presence and attention.

Since then, a variety of perspectives has animated the academic debate on digital and social media activism. On the one hand, scholars have put into question the value and effectiveness of digital activism (Gladwell 2010) and went as far as deeming it intrinsically ineffective or inferior to traditional activism (cfr. ‘slacktivism,’ Morozov 2009; Shulman 2009). On the other, they have advocated for a paradigm shift that sees social media as a revolutionizing factor for political action (Bennett & Segerberg 2012 & 2014; Shirky 2009). Bennett and Segerberg (2014), whose work has been broadly summarized in the previous chapter, are probably the most eminent proponents of this view. They argue that, as a result of social fragmentation and the decline of group loyalties, we find ourselves in an era of personalized politics, which means individuals’ mobilization is born from “personal lifestyle values to engage with multiple causes” (2014: 37), coordinated through digital media technologies. Social media’s role in this new environment lies in facilitating collective action, suggesting that digital platforms are generating a distinct form of protest activity, a digitally networked ‘connective action’ which uses “broadly inclusive, easily personalized action frames as a basis for technology assisted networking” (2014: 2) and results from “large-scale personalized and digitally mediated political engagement” (5).

In her critique of the authors, Bakardjieva (2015) recognizes what is perhaps the greatest merit of Bennett and Segerberg’s theory, that is the accurate emphasis on ‘personal action frames’ and the analysis of how new expressions and actions enabled by the current technological ecosystem have impacted social change. This has allowed activism to shift from a prerogative of few, highly committed individuals, to the masses, facilitating people’s engagement and participation in significant political events (see also Bakardjieva 2009) and allowing them to enjoy a sense of personal empowerment. Most notably, however, she argues against the notion that connective action, and the subsequent personalization of political expression through social media, is incompatible with collective identity and collective actions as conceptualized by Melucci (et al. 1989; 1995, see also chap. 4). According to her, social media should prompt scholars to investigate the changes they brought to collective action processes and how “personal and collective identities and action frames intersect to produce collective agents with political efficacy” (Bakardjieva 2015: 989).

This invitation reechoes that of other scholars who have also proposed an understanding of digital and social media as simply embedded in and complementary to other forms of activism. According to Gerbaudo (2012): “The crucial element in understanding the role of social media in contemporary social movements is their interaction with and mediation of emerging forms of public gatherings,” first of all the “mass sit-ins” that have become the prime symbol of contemporary social movements (5). The author revindicates the role played by social media in the development of “a choreography of assembly as a process of symbolic construction of public space which facilitates and guides the physical assembling of a highly

dispersed and individualized constituency” (5). Drawing from this conceptualization, we can understand social media activism as rarely, if ever, self-contained; on the contrary, online action and offline action are always intertwined and work in tandem to construct “an emotional space within which collective action can unfold” (Gerbaudo 2012: 5).

As a result, more recent scholarship has further investigated the relationship and interconnection between activism and digital and social media. This has made possible to highlight how the former have become more and more constitutive of activism, both in the role they play in connecting the actions undertaken by individuals and in how they allow for deep changes in the range of possible political actions and their expressions. The concept of ‘technopolitics,’ introduced in the third chapter, best highlights how the tactical and strategic use of digital tools by contemporary social movements has progressively contributed to reshaping their communicative practices and actions, rendering any distinction between online and offline realms obsolete (Toret 2015; Trerè 2019). If, as previously observed, we can understand social media as ‘additional environments’ (boyd 2011) where activists can share ideas, organize activities, and perform individual and collective identities (Khazraee & Novak 2018), they will foster the spreading of online emotional contagion, which is required for motivating and catalyzing protest adhesion (Gravante 2016). For these reasons, I have followed the scholarship of Vaccari and colleagues (2015) and Dennis (2018) in rejecting those arguments that see digital activism as a form of low-effort engagement. The analysis rather strives to approach activism by devoting particular attention to the intersections and overlaps between digital media and politics (cfr. ‘hybrid media systems,’ Chadwick 2013). Such positioning calls back to Berger and Luckmann (2018)’s constructivist perspective, which conceives communication as an action through which individuals intervene on social realities which, in turn, guide, delimit, and enable the action itself (Knoblauch 2019). This implies treating digital media as shaped by social and cultural factors, also valuing individuals’ media choices and negotiations of meaning (Williams & Edge 1996).

Following these assumptions, we must consider how activists approach different platforms or choose which platform to use for a specific goal by acting in accordance with their own perception and negotiation of digital platforms’ affordances and constraints (Nagy & Neff 2015; Norman 2013). These are the intrinsic characteristics they attribute to different platforms, which “affect their potential for engagement and solidarity” (Kavada 2012: 33), with regard to both platforms’ affordances (see ch. 4) and the ‘imagined audiences’ the activists seek to reach (Comunello et al. 2016). As we will see for FFF-Rome, through these negotiations, activists figure out together the appropriate political use of each social medium (i.e., ‘idioms of practices,’ Gershon 2010b) while expressing how and according to what criteria they conceive these platforms (i.e., ‘media ideologies’, *ibid.*). They assign instrumental and organizational functions to the different platforms, while also elaborating messages, looking for support, and building a sense of belonging (Gerbaudo & Trerè 2015). These activities involve online emotional contagion (Papacharissi 2015; Trerè & Barranquero 2018), contributing to a process of ‘identization’ (Kavada 2015) that further blurs the line between what lies outside and inside of the movement. The architecture of digital platforms and social media therefore “shapes and is shaped by practices [...] just like in physical spaces” (boyd 2011: 55). In this regard, Madianou and Miller (2013) speak of ‘polymedia’ precisely to account for how users find themselves navigating in an emerging environment of

communication opportunities in which each single medium is defined in relation to the entire media context and where people act and experience their interpersonal relationships through media choices with social and emotional consequences. These media choices are guided by the users' media ideologies (Gershon 2010b) and idioms of practice, so that digital media usage practices derive from people's habits in using and talking about the functions of platforms (McVeigh-Schultz & Baym 2015). In short, activists bend media usages to political objectives, according to social and cultural beliefs that are inherent to platforms but that can also transcend them (Belotti et al. 2022).

These assumptions allow us to approach social media not as merely instrumental or of secondary importance to the activists. Rather, the role of communication within social movements is characterized by a high degree of complexity, which underlines the mutual shaping relationship between social movements and media technologies (a media/movement dynamic, Trerè 2019) that extends to comprise activists' media ecologies, meaning-making processes, media ideologies (Gershon 2010b), collective identity, and materiality. We can understand these media practices as the building blocks of processes that concur in shaping long-term activism media logics, comprising both the protest peaks and latent stages of activism (Mattoni 2017). This conception highlights how social media are particularly suitable for the instrumental and expressive purposes of grassroots politics. They allow for the creation and sharing of user-generated content, favoring collaboration and maintaining relationships between interconnected and interdependent networks of people and communities. Social media therefore constitute a real ecology around activists, allowing them to seamlessly move across different platforms, according to the meaning they assign to each platform and their communicative needs.

Among these, we can differentiate between 'frontstage,' that is Social Network Sites, and 'backstage' platforms, that is Mobile Instant Messaging systems (cfr. Trerè 2019). The frontstage of digital activism has been the one to attract the most scholarly attention. Research on digital and social media activism has mainly focused on the 'frontstage' of digital activism, that is its external communication processes—mainly happening on Twitter, Facebook, or even Youtube—their impact in terms of visibility and social action, and also on the organizational capabilities of social media. The 'backstage' is crucial in the creation of "expressive forms of communication, the exchanges of meaning, and the construction of a new sense of belonging" (Trerè 2019: 6) within the movement, allowing scholars not only to understand the organizational aspects of a movement, but also its identity building processes. However, as observed by Pavan and Felicetti (2019), only on rare occasions scholarly attention has been directed toward how activists critically approach pervasive digital media, the potentialities and risks of these platforms, and how they problematize the inclusion of social media within their daily activities. Similarly, few studies have analyzed the implications of the adoption of digital media for the circulation of activist-produced contents: the corpus of alternative knowledge (which, for example, is constitutive of FFF activism) that takes place within social movements (Pavan & Felicetti 2019).

This leaves almost uncharted the array of practices and happenings that characterize everyday communication and negotiations *within* social movements, that is the aspects that allow them to sustain themselves over time (Barassi 2015; Flesher Fominaya 2015; Jordan 2013). These tendencies are representative of a general trend in studies of social media activism, that is

only focusing on a specific platform (like Twitter or Instagram) and/ or on a specific event (usually an extraordinary or relevant one, i.e., a ‘protest peak’ cfr. Mattoni 2017). Of course, these approaches still provide valuable insights, but they cannot account for the complexity of the whole media ecology and, therefore, communicative strategies with which activists interact and it is paramount that future scholarship addresses this gap.

This thesis is an example of a study on digital and social media activism from an insider’s perspective. Even if it focuses on the analysis of a frontstage digital platform (FFF-Rome’s Instagram page), it does so by complementing such analysis with a six-month participant observation of the group and by further enriching observations with the aid of semi-structured interviews. These two qualitative methods directly address the climate activists, thus taking into account the sense-makings connected to the entire social media ecology with whom they interact and accounting for the negotiations and media ideologies (Gershon 2010b) that inform social media usage within the movement. Fieldnotes of online and offline assemblies and events of FFF-Rome, for example, reflect FFF activists’ notions about their social media presence and activities across Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok, reflecting an effort to approach digital climate activism directly and prioritize the activists’ own social media usage practices. As a result, this thesis contributes to filling a gap in digital activism studies, giving back a more thorough and complete picture of how social media and digital platforms are concretely embedded into the practices and daily life of FFF-Rome.

5.2 Visual and Instagram activism

If, as observed by Touraine (1981) social movements are able to produce alternative futures for society through processes of social creativity, the current climate crisis has opened a new range of social imaginaries to act on and manufacture these future visions (Schulz 2016). Following Luthkallio (2013), we can understand contention as “a particularly spatial, bodily, and, indeed, *visual* form of politics” (28, emphasis in the original) because it especially relies on “the chances of being seen and recognized” (28). Disciplines like psychology and neuroscience have shown how the aid of visual stimuli like human faces or physical expressions of pain can elicit powerful emotional responses across time and cultures (Müller & Kappas 2011), allowing us to appreciate how pivotal the role of visualities is for activism practices. Indeed, the relevance of images and visuals in social movements has a long history (cfr. Doerr, Mattoni & Teune 2013) and, since this thesis employs digital ethnography of FFF-Rome’s Instagram page as a research method, it is useful to contextualize it through an overview of scholarship on the significance of visuals for social change and on visual analysis in digital activism.

Although visualities on social media do not necessarily grant prominence or legitimacy to the grievances of activists (Neumayer & Rossi 2018), the scholarship that analyzes their uses in digital activism has brought to light their relevance as tools to emotionally engage and physically mobilize people for social change. The complex mechanism of creating political images ultimately aids activists in fostering credibility and authority since it mobilizes and persuades key audiences through the construction and circulation of narratives (Bennett 2016). This relevance has been accentuated by the increasing presence of cameras, photos, and the general growth of visual culture, with an impact on political actions towards visually striking and performative forms. It is through visual messages that activists can manifest,

broadcast their cause, and recruit, allowing people outside of the movement to come to know them via images, with symbols and graphics becoming repositories of activist identities that politically position the movement and guide its public perception (Doerr et al. 2013). Images can also intensify the emotions of potential protesters around specific injustice symbols (Olesen 2020), which, thanks to their evocative and shocking power, can acquire mobilizing potential when adopted or displayed by activists. Additionally, the expressive sharing of photos allows young social media users to create collective narratives of personal experiences and concerns: a collective storytelling that fosters the formation of individual and collective identity (Clark & Marchi 2019). As a result, the alternative production and distribution of visual materials through social media and portable devices allow activists to frame protests from their own viewpoint, putting emphasis on aspects that are relevant to the identity of the movement and to a particular framing of the issues at its core, capturing those aspects of the mobilization that are considered newsworthy from an activist perspective (Mattoni & Teune 2014). This creates memories that can connect generations of social actors, allowing activists across time to revive their protest memories, but also aiding those who did not take part in those protests to “live the experience from a temporal distance, imagining and reinterpreting” those memories (ibid.: 883).

As we will see for FFF-Rome, mobilizations are now increasingly organized with online visibility in mind (McGarry et al. 2019), a further testament to the mutual shaping relationship between activism practices and media technologies and to the importance of addressing not only the visible posts and pictures on the activists’ profiles, but also the negotiations that informed the posting and the goals the pictures wanted to achieve. Studying visualities and their expressive role in digital activism can therefore aid us in understanding activists’ processes of forging common icons and slogans towards building a sense of belonging to the cause (Gravante 2016) and in how they implement strategies to catalyze the emotions required to support mobilizations before, during, and after they have happened (Papacharissi 2015; Treré & Barranquero 2018).

This is especially true when we approach climate activism as climate activists have repeatedly employed visual activism to challenge mainstream media narratives and imagery. Russell (2018) and Hopke and Hestres (2018), for instance, emphasize this hacktivist image-based strategy during the 2015 Conference of the Parties in Paris. The first focuses on the material and symbolic elements that constituted climate justice activists’ strategies to disrupt the top-down power dynamics of the summit. This has effectively led to a reshaping of narratives and meanings surrounding COP 2015, especially in terms of accountability. Hopke and Hestres, on the other hand, analyzed the Twitter coverage of the talks, comparing mainstream media outlets and activists. They highlighted how activists and movement organizations tended to visually frame climate change in a similar way, while media coverage varied by type of news organization, shedding light on the different narratives of the groups.

Indeed, the images of the environment chosen or created by activist groups and environmental NGOs usually challenge mainstream representations of nature. The latter usually present de-contextualized and idyllic scenarios, untouched by humans or alienated from any connection to human activity (Deluca & Peeples 2000) so that, by ‘framing out’ any reference to human presence, these images contribute to alighting a disconnection between humans and climate change, perpetuating the idea of nature as an idyllic, untouched realm.

Similarly, it also alimnts the notion that humans are something else from nature, a separate entity that can exist on its own and has no influence on the other. Robert Kenner (2008) refers to this as an intentional, commercial appropriation of nature, which feeds and produces a desire to gaze at nature and satisfy a particular form of ‘homesickness’ (Smith 2010), exacerbated by the alienation that characterizes the relationship between humans and nature in the Western world. Activist images, then, challenge this separation by reconnecting nature to human activities and displaying and emphasizing the impact of human life on the real world. Thanks to their ability of combining technical standards with the protests’ aesthetics and languages, such images can help enrich and widen the debate around political actions in and beyond mainstream media (Rovisco & Veneti 2017). By showcasing artworks and photographs, platforms like Instagram may influence both the availability and content of images related to climate change, while spotlighting the seriousness of environmental issues.

As a result, social media visualities can help frame climate change under an activist and proactive perspective, therefore resisting and counteracting skeptical or disinterested positions about the issue (Anderson 2017; Shapiro & Park 2018; Williams et al. 2015). The strategic use of rhetorical devices and tropes is especially useful to bring attention to climate social movements and environmental groups. This is because environmental issues tend to be drawn-out processes, while the media usually feed upon timely, highly visible events (Anderson 1991; Hansen & Cox 2015)—hence the need to attract constant attention from news channels and social media and the necessity of recurring to images as powerful attention getting devices. Furthermore, images can be easily replicated on a large scale, turning iconic experiences of dissent into exponential (Rovisco & Veneti 2017), which is the case with Greta Thunberg and her Friday school strikes, witnessed on Instagram, and amplified worldwide. The way FFF activists practice climate activism between online and offline with the aid of powerful visuals (i.e., marches, witty cardboards, creative protest actions) has definitely played a key role in making the movement known and helping it reach a wider public, bringing the topic of climate change at the forefront of the public debate.

Despite its significance, the analysis of images and image events for political communication is still a growing area of research. Notable examples are studies on the use of Instagram in electoral campaigns or by leading political figures (cfr. Filimonov et al. 2016; Lalancette & Raynauld 2019; Russmann & Svensson 2016) and the political valence of memes and selfies (Hardesty et al. 2019; Shifman 2014). Additionally, scholars have recently tackled the study of visual social media usage through the lens of the concept of ‘visibility.’ This has allowed them to not only highlight social media’s afforded political potential but also the struggles for recognition that come with it (cfr. Mirzoeff 2020; Nikunen 2019), as well as the subsequent reflections on power-relationships and struggles involved when it comes to regulating visibility, from algorithms to online aesthetic cultures (Leaver et al. 2020; Manovich 2020).

Few studies, however, analyze activists’ decision-making processes when it comes to posting content (especially visual content), such as framing strategies and decisions, imagined and desired audiences, and also the activists’ subsequent evaluation of the impact of their communication strategies. That is, few studies implement ethnographic analyses able to connect the impact of online visual communication with the offline choices that informed it. In their book entirely devoted to Instagram and visual social media cultures, Leaver, Highfield and Abidin (2020) note how future research should devote more attention to

exploring the understudied field of activism on Instagram, while Mattoni and Teune (2014) observe how activism studies have been hesitant to tackle the presence and relevance of visual data towards an encompassing conceptual framework of social movements. These understudied areas were also present in research specifically on FridaysForFuture, as it has still not focused on the visual strategies adopted by FFF activists when promoting climate-related discourses or activist perspectives in their online and offline actions. Through the course of this thesis, then, thanks to the aid of an ethnographic approach, the analysis will contribute to the academic discussion of these processes and to the growing corpus of research on activism visualities.

5.3 Youth (digital) activism and climate activism

Understanding the way young people experience and approach political action on social media is of crucial importance to better contextualize FFF-Rome's activism and its connection to the activists' generational identity. The lived experiences and worldviews that characterize the current generation of youths have been argued as striking enough to set them apart from their elders as a specific political generation (cfr. Whittier 1997) characterized, among other factors, by labor precarity, better education, and an intersectional approach to matters of social justice (Milkman 2017). The global youth climate movement too must be understood in relation to the context that shaped and enabled it. The revindications, modes of protest, and enabling factors of contemporary climate activism effectively express the 'ethos of a generation' (Eide & Kunelius 2021). The FFF movement, in particular, has emerged in a world where transnational networked communication structures are a given, an integral part of the activists' social and political imagination. As such they contribute to shaping their background assumptions about the world and political action, contributing to what they believe is possible to do to contrast climate change. This awareness, coupled with a strong connection with climate science, has effectively enabled young climate activists to construct "an authentic, generational, and temporal identity" (Eide & Kunelius 2021: 5).

Indeed, when it comes to grassroots politics, the fundamental differences between young people and adults no longer necessarily concern conflicting approaches (Winston 2013) or relations with institutional politics (Fischer et al. 2012). Rather, they have to do with people's own experiences of activism and with their social media practices, which by now mark a real 'ideological distance' between this generations of youth's struggles and those of previous generations (Liou & Literat 2020). Young people use social media 'their own way' (Fernández-Ardèvol et al. 2020), to the point that these platforms function as an actual 'generational context' (Mannheim 1970) in which young people share certain definite ways of behaving, feeling, and thinking (with respect to platforms), based on the experiences one lives during youth. Likewise, sharing a common involvement in a social movement during one's youth also creates a sense of generational communion (Glasius & Pleyers 2013): participation in the same wave of protests allows for the mixture of youth's individual experiences of the same social movement. As a result, shared cultural and communicative experiences come to constitute the defining process of a specific "social generation" (Mannheim 1970) as well as marking the boundaries among different generations, even if sometimes recurring to stereotyping mechanisms based on processes of group differentiation (Comunello et al. 2020). As it will be argued, being-young and being-social media users interplay to the point of shaping and enhancing youth activism (Belotti et al. 2022).

Literature addressing youth political participation has always been aware of the differences between different generations' ways of protesting. Historically, scholarship has branched into two main traditions. The first one observed a decrease in youth political engagement, arguing that young people might be harbingers of an incipient crisis of democracy (Bessant 2004; Furlong & Cartmel 2007). This strand of literature drew these conclusions building on youth's disengagement with traditional politics: it pointed out a general apathy towards politics and lack of political awareness (Putnam 1995), drawing comparisons for example between older people and young people's involvement and knowledge of traditional party politics (Bennett 2008; Furlong & Cartmel 2007). Conversely, a second strand of studies has advocated for the opposite, hailing young people as the developers and promoters of new forms of political participation, especially thanks to their use of digital technologies (Coleman 1999, 2006). This view tended to focus on the new ways young people express their political voice (Cohen et al. 2012; Jenkins et al. 2016; Kahne et al. 2013; Loader et al. 2014) and has become more prevalent than ever with the global COVID-19 emergency, which has seen an increase in the use of digital media due to social distancing and restrictions (Klingler-Vilenchik & Literat 2020). These two strands reflect the broader debate around models of citizenship which, in Bennett's (2008) distinction between 'dutiful' and 'actualizing' citizens, oppose practices of political participation of older generations with those of younger generations. The first belong to civil society organizations or parties, rely on the mainstream mass media to search for news, and consider voting the democratic act par excellence, while the others favor individual membership, online engagement, personal self-expression, and tend to engage in discussions around issues related to personal values.

Both branches still point at a deep disconnection between young people and traditional politics, but they give little insight into the influence networked political participation has on young people's relationship with traditional political practices. The first strand risks marginalizing the activism of young people by disregarding or diminishing the value of youth online politics and the role of digital media in youth political self-expression (Belotti et al. 2022), thus disconnecting online activism from other forms and places of participation (cfr. Bennett 2008; Kligler-Vilenchik & Literat 2018). Conversely, the second strand tends to focus on these practices but risks disconnecting them from broader grassroots youth politics. It must also be noted that what scholars have defined as 'disengagement' from traditional politics might actually be young people's political strategy to reject the status quo. Their withdrawal should then be understood as deliberate, suggesting a reconciliation between those who deem young people politically disinterested and those who advocate for youth politics being almost solely expressed through new (i.e., digital) communicative practices (cfr. Farthing 2010). Additionally, while youth interactions on social media often coincide with high engagement levels in political information and interaction, this rarely means that youth are also engaged in political production and forms of collective action (Ekström & Shehata 2016). The low thresholds for social media political interaction and participation only rarely promote virtuous patterns for offline political engagement over time. As a result, when young people participate in politics online, it is still paramount to recognize the role that factors such as their social, cultural, and psychological background play in facilitating and structuring their engagement over time. Family, friends, and schools still have importance when it comes to sensibilizing and mobilizing young people to social action (Maher & Earl 2017).

Indeed, young people's activism has shifted to an 'engaged citizenship' model (Earl et al. 2017). They use input from families, institutions, and social networks as raw material to elaborate on and develop "their own political socialization through their experiences" (ibid.: 3) rather than relying on what families and institutions might teach them on what it means to be politically involved. Digital platforms can facilitate this kind of youth political socialization by offering them with additional lines of influence (Boulianne 2015; Boulianne & Ohme 2022) or opportunities to discuss and engage with issues that matter to them (Kahne, Lee & Feezell 2013). Similarly, social media can also provide young people with horizontal and non-hierarchical spaces (Hwang & Ki 2015), generating a positive outcome on their civic and political life (Xenos et al. 2014). Influenced by what they read and see on social media, youths' political participation is thus able to be expressed both directly, through activated behaviors, and indirectly, through the generation of support (Lee et al. 2013). We can summarize, then, that young people use social media for activism in a variety of ways that range from sharing and spreading information and ideas, to provoking politicians and members of the institutions, to stirring up the crowds in order to protest and involve other parts of the civil society in the movement (Kahne et al. 2016).

This sort of political engagement thrives on self-expression and is facilitated by the affordances of digital media (Bennett 2012). Activism practices, cultural practices, and self-expression practices are closely connected, with young people's online and offline participatory politics being rooted in their socio-cultural engagement. Contrary to being a cause for disengagement, we can consider participatory and popular culture as resources around which youth can come together and mobilize (Kligler-Vilenchik et al. 2012), thus bonding digital media usage and civic engagement in a mutually shaping relationship and making it easier to translate information into action by following, forwarding, commenting, and posting on specific issues (Middaugh et al. 2017). As observed by Marchi and Clark (2021), it is therefore imperative we examine "young peoples' experiences of sharing emotions, stories, and information via social media" if we want to be able to better understand "the process of how some youth are hailed into communities that engage in political discussions and actions, as they move along a ladder of engagement toward greater participation in civic life" (13). By sharing information online on issues that matter to them, young people are expressing their personal identities and attracting like-minded audiences, processes that can ultimately allow them to recognize themselves as part of a community of individuals who share similar concerns and views (Clark & Marchi 2019).

The collaborative and participatory culture informing social media usages (Jenkins et al. 2016) invests youth activism and increases young people's self-expression, expanding the scope of their political participation along social networks, therefore converting them both into information sources and circulation channels (Hao et al. 2014). More specifically, participatory culture and politics interplay to the point of turning socially and culturally active young people into civically and politically engaged (Jenkins, Itō, & boyd 2016). When young people creatively participate in an online culture, this process ends up fostering political engagement and 'moving' them from being socially and culturally active to being politically engaged as well. On social media, youth can acquire specific skills, change their mindsets, learn as equals within diverse personal networks, and accrue non-political interests that eventually become gateways to engage in civic and political issues (Jenkins et al. 2016).

The authors even draw a comparison between the mindset of the young activist and of the fan—the quintessential consumer of popular culture. Such comparison echoes previous scholarship (van Zoonen 2005) addressing how many of a fan’s activities underline democratic politics, such as intensely investing in the text, deliberating about the quality of the text, and proposing and discussing alternatives to it. Fandom and political engagement are also both connected by the fan or the activist’s ability to imagine alternative scenarios and build communities (cfr. Ducombe 2020). Hence, online consumer and lifestyle activities are increasingly invested with political significance, encouraging young people to grow skills for political action and learn about matters they find compelling, urgent, and connected to their peers as generational matters (Cohen et al. 2012). As the participatory politics that inform youth activism put “a strong emphasis on personal and collective storytelling” (Jenkins et al. 2016: 13), the work on networked identity inherent to digital storytelling allows young people to enjoy a sense of “participating collectively and creatively in a cultural space that is greater than the individual” (Vivienne 2016: 12).

Aside from the networked communicative infrastructures (and related practices) that characterize the current generation of youth politics, youth activism is also profoundly marked by age. Gordon (2009) considers it as an axis of inequality that identifies youth as a subordinated category: age and social barriers keep young people away from institutional politics, making them feel politically marginalized and prompting them to adopt specific strategies to make their voices heard on the grievances they share. Activists thus forge communities driven by their own values and visions to resist the ageism that sees them as both cognitively and socially deficient for active political participation (Bishop 2015). In this sense, youth activism can be considered as one of the few ways young people can reclaim their political agency, express their self-determination, and forge communities driven by their own values and visions. In context, ageism refers to prejudices-based discriminations against people based on age. It comes to define not only the individual’s perception of themselves, but also the perception/ image that a society can have of a specific lifestage, both in a positive and negative sense (Comunello et al. 2022) and can be directed towards people of any age (Bodner et al. 2012). The age-based power dynamics between young people and adults that shape youth activism inform young people’s awareness of the challenges they face as activists simply by being young (Liou & Literat 2020). Even within activists’ organizations, adult activists or allies can attempt to regulate what qualifies as ‘legitimate’ political involvement, adopt patronizing attitudes, or overtly try to manage activists’ spaces and conversations. Liou and Literat’s (2020) study especially observed how young activists perceived the adults’ patronizing gaze to be critical of their use of digital platforms (cfr. Vaccari et al. 2015), which is one of youth activism’s most salient stages. Understanding the way young people experience and approach political action on social media, then, is of crucial importance to better contextualize and understand FFF-Rome’s activism and its connection to its members’ generational identity.

The global waves of crises that have come to define the last decades (Pickard & Bessant 2017) have had a significant role in shaping youth’s everyday lives and politics (Sloam 2020; Sloam & O’Loughlin 2021), from the great recession of 2007-2009 to the COVID-19 emergency and the current climate crisis. Surveys point out how especially environmental issues have risen among this generation of young people’s priorities (Sloam & Henn 2019),

which has translated in a reshaping of the political landscape of environmental movements as young people of all ages are increasingly mobilizing for the climate (della Porta & Diani 2020). Climate activism has rapidly become one of youth activism's most prominent causes (Boulianne et al. 2020), with young climate activists resorting to their own 'moral authority' as children to 'take their future into their own hands' and demand concrete action worldwide (Dobson 2019; Marris 2019), while employing social media as a privileged stage to recruit and advocate for their cause (Boulianne et al. 2020; Fisher 2016). This trend, at least as far as European countries are concerned, is informed by specific changes in young people's values and attitudes, as younger generations are increasingly envisioning more connected and equitable societies (Henn et al. 2022), even if with disparities according to their educational levels when it comes to sharing such values and translating them in political practices. Youth's positioning at the frontlines of the current wave of environmental protests is especially unique to the age we are currently living (Sloam et al. 2022). This has been possible not only through the past decades' economic and industrial transformations, but also thanks to the emergence of "highly educated, more connected, less deferential, and critical citizens who have increasingly embraced a postmaterialist worldview since the 1960s," leading many young people to reject "electorally-focused politics" in favor of "more individualized or personalized style of politics of the everyday life, using a vast array of political participation methods to engage with issues" such as digital communication technologies (ibid.: 689).

Indeed, when it comes to climate activism, social media have once again been particularly effective. They have helped young people summon and frame protests (Wang & Ye 2018), challenging mainstream narratives about the climate crisis especially during significant events (Williams et al. 2015) and connecting to peer networks to share climate-related experiences and engage more people in the fight (Corner et al. 2015). During the 2009 United Nations Conference of the Parties on Climate Change (COP15), for example, Twitter hashtags successfully thematized conversations on the platform, functioning as 'conveyor belts' between different groups and locations (Seegerberg & Bennett 2011). During COP21, in 2015, activist-spread images on social media challenged mainstream narratives on climate change (Hopke & Hestres 2018; Russell 2018), proving effective in framing the severity of the climate crisis and thereby promoting the activists' perspective on the topic, offering counternarratives to skeptic arguments (Shapiro & Park 2018). As previously mentioned, studies on FFF confirm that social media have been pivotal in networking and recruiting activists as well as in spreading protest information and concerns about the climate crisis (Boulianne et al. 2020; Wahlström et al. 2019), thus proving to be useful tools to motivate and involve the public in advocacy activities as they allow for multiple discussions on the causes of climate change and on what actions to take to mitigate its impact (Vu et al. 2020).

For young climate activists, online and offline social networks are pivotal for sharing climate-related experiences and engaging in the fight against climate change. When young people engage in conversations about climate change or merely approach the topic, they are implicitly and explicitly walking into debates that challenge the status quo's norms, beliefs, and practices regarding the issue. This includes the "economic and social norms" that are expressions of western capitalist society (O' Brian et al. 2018: 2), therefore 'dissenting' from prevailing practices regarding consumption, energy use, and power imbalances in decision-

making. This effectively overturns the assumption that young people are disengaged and uninterested in politics or in climate change. On the contrary, O'Brian and colleagues (2018) identify three different types of dissent young people engage in when advocating against climate change: dutiful, that is a reformist approach that, by working within existing power structures, aims at affecting policy changes; disruptive, which is oppositional in nature and rather attempts to redirect current policies in order to change their outcomes by contesting mainstream social norms and policy practices; and dangerous, which is a propositional approach since its aim is to create alternative systems and subvert current power structures through the active mobilization of citizens. These represent “complementary and mutually reinforcing pathways for youth to express dissent” (ibid.: 7) shedding light on the diverse strategies employed by them to reclaim agency and influence over their future and over a society whose structure and norms have failed them, thus challenging the powers and policies that keep jeopardizing their future.

As this short review exemplifies, current literature on youth climate activism has focused extensively on the hows of youth mobilizations, for example emphasizing young activists' usage of social media for networking and mobilizing purposes (cfr. Pickard, Bowman & Arya 2022; Wahlström et al. 2019). Little, however, has been written on the reasons that prompt young people to become engaged in environmental activism, not to mention who these people are and the extent to which their engagement varies across different countries and cultures (see Sloam et al. 2022). This thesis, with its emphasis on identity and focus on the Italian context, wants to shed more light into the identities of the young climate activists of FridaysForFuture-Rome, while at the same time providing knowledge in regard to the specificities of the Roman and Italian climate activism environment.

5.4 From transnational activism to the Italian context

According to Sloam and colleagues (2022), contemporary youth political and environmental activism “is undergoing a process of transformation in terms of the innovative ways in which they are— deploying new technologies as well as a reimagining of the ‘self’ and of one’s relationships with others” to the point that the authors speak of the coalition of groups and collectives leading contemporary climate change protests as a new “global social movement” (689). From nationalist movements of the eighteenth centuries to the feminist movements it is not unheard of for actors of social change to forge ties that cross national boundaries. This is the case for FridaysForFuture and, more in general, for the environmental movement (cfr. Bob 2018; Sloam et al. 2022), since the social movement has now come to constitute a global network of activists and local groups.

More generally, it is possible to notice an increasing trend in the expansion of civil societies beyond their national confines, with a subsequent impact on global level politics (cfr. Guidry et al. 2000; Smith 2002). Important changes in the global political context (such as the expanding reach and scope of international institutions) and the rise of digital communication have enabled a wide range of social actors, struggles, and events to become more widespread known and accessible to the point that, thanks to new technologies, scholars have advocated for a revolution in the transnational prospects of movements (Castells 2012). Keohane and Nye (1971) define ‘transnational interactions’ as all those interactions which happen across borders and involve at least one nonstate actor. Albeit broad, this definition has the advantage

of stressing the agency component that characterizes such interactions, despite a specific movement perceiving the inscription into a larger context as a benefit or not (Bob 2018). When it comes to the contemporary politics of protest, ‘transnational’ does not only imply a broad political reach, geographic scale, or ethics, rather it resides within how social movements “become communicated and mediated around the globe” (Hansen & Cox 2015: 202). Communication networks “and the pervasive and overlapping media ecology” (ibid.: 202) with which activists interact are the ones responsible for conveying oppositional forces and social change, regardless of the direction of such ‘scale shift,’ be it “from the local/ national to the transnational and global” or “from the transnational to the national/ local” (ibid.: 202).

However, if transnational networking and communication among movements and actors of social change is common, actual transnational movements are not. Bob (2018) in particular highlights how only environmental and social justice movements might count as truly transnational thanks to their capacity to “have raised consciousness among millions worldwide and spurred widespread behavioral changes” (122) despite the broad and at times contestable notion of the underlying concepts they stand for. Despite the rapid expansion in transnational organizing and activism, there is still little research in the impact these transnational ties can have and the extent to which these movements have been able to articulate strategic frames to motivate organization at the global level and collective action (Smith 2002). Divides between North and South especially affect solidarity within transnational social movement organizations. On the one hand, such actors have become skilled in managing differences among members; on the other, inequalities between Northern and Southern activists persist, in particular in regard to the ability of each local group to convey local concerns to global level campaigns (Smith 2002). At the same time, there is also the concern that participation in global scale activism may exacerbate diversity and conflict among these groups so that transnational groups would be especially skilled at cultivating a shared understanding of the issues at the core of their activism, but at the expense of building shared consensus regarding their responses to these issues (Smith 2002). Indeed, despite the effort of transnational social change groups to fight for greater equity and social justice, they must still work within institutional structures and cultural frameworks that might hinder their attempts to subvert structural power relations.

According to Flesher Fominaya (2016), scholars especially tend to dismiss the cultural processes that underlie the creation and diffusion of transnational advocacy networks. On the other hand, she considers these as cultural processes in and of themselves, criticizing the excessive attention in literature to macro processes, state and international relations, and local and global civil society dynamics in the study of transnational social movements, stressing reflexive, strategic aspects of activist decision-making and communication processes. Indeed, attempts to address and analyze ‘culture clashes’ between activists tend to focus on the one hand, on tensions between organizing logics, defining broad divisions within movements that overlook specific place-based movement cultures. On the other hand, when they focus on “overt, discursive, and reflexive understandings of culture” (Flesher Fominaya 2016: 5) this can conceal differences between ‘culture’ and logics of collective action. It must also be noted that a great number of case studies in literature on climate activism and youth digital activism feature US-based social-movements or activists. This further narrows their relevance

when it comes to understanding the eventual specificities of geographically (and culturally) different youth political realities. For example, while young American digital activists in a study of Jenkins and colleagues (2016) are reluctant to describe their actions as political, FFF-Rome (and FFF-Italy) activists have no such reserves and rather reclaim the political significance of their fight with full force. Reluctance, for them, is reserved to claiming their actions and grievances as an expression of a particular political ideology or party, since they pride themselves of being a-partitital. For these reasons, this thesis approaches FFF-Rome's activism by considering the variety of factors that come to influence Italian youth activism and youth's pathways to activism in this country. They cannot be ignored when approaching FFF-Rome as they not only inform the group's grievances but, most importantly, the sense and meaning making practices of its young activists.

Youth's condition in Italy is marked by a lack of effective policies to support youth's transition into adult life. High unemployment rates, an uncertain job market, and the inadequacy of the school system situate young Italians in an environment of social and economic uncertainties, exacerbated by recessions, economic, and political crises (Ambrosi & Rosina 2010; Visentin 2018). Furthermore, Italy is notoriously characterized by severe aging, with an increase in old people's social, political, and economic weight over young people's (Visentin 2018). In this climate, Italian youth is especially penalized from taking part in the political life of the country and, in turn, show high levels of distrust in political and social institutions (Istituto Giuseppe Toniolo 2017). Drawing from surveys from Bonanomi and colleagues (2018), Genova (2018) emphasizes the strong disconnection of young Italians from institutional politics: 35-40% of youth did not express a position on their political collocation on the left-right scale nor did they choose any existing party or declare any intention to vote. Less than 5% of youth declared to be 'politically engaged,' with 35% admitting a disinterest or even disgust towards politics (ibid.). Their trust in political institutions is progressively decreasing but 90% of them still claimed to occasionally debate about politics. They are convinced of the relevance of collective action for social change more than that of institutional politics, as they do not trust parties or even trade unions enough to become personally involved in them (Genova 2018). The most politically active youth prefer "weakly ideological, weakly structured, and weakly binding forms of participation" (ibid.: 3) which then grant youth a great flexibility regarding the times and rhythms of their involvement, as well as the perspectives of action. Youth up to 26 years of age are more likely to be part of a social movement than any other form of political organization, and they usually join through informal or online networks (Andretta & della Porta 2020); they are also more likely to participate in demonstrations if these touch on youth-specific subjects (ibid.). The education environment also plays an important role as it is connected to the long history of student movements in Italy, involving both high school and university students (Zamponi 2018). Grasso (2013) also found that Italians are not only more likely to be involved in protest politics than their UK counterparts, but that their level of education was directly correlated to their level of participation. This gives a new lens under which to interpret young Italians' political activities in general and FFF's grievances specifically: for example, the narrative of being a generation without future or voice, which stands at the core of the movement's identity, is further exacerbated in Italy and it is connected to decades of youth and student movements in the country.

As far as climate activism is concerned, Italian youth complain of widespread scientific ignorance, with mainstream media failing to comprehend the scientific legitimacy of climate activism (Eide & Kunelius 2021). Environmental movements in Italy date back to the end of the 19th century but assumed greater relevance only during the cycle of protests beginning with 1968, intersecting with the student movement during the 1970s (Diani 1995). While climate-related concerns have decreased since the 1980s, the tables have recently turned as the general population has grown more conscious of environmental concerns (Bertuzzi 2019). In this, however, studies note a lack of entirely youth-based social movement organizations for the environment in Italy. As a result, studies like Bertuzzi's (2019) focused on environmental organizations without delving into specific generational peculiarities, bringing forth the argument that generational belonging is not a fundamental element among the Italian environmental movements (ibid.). According to Bertuzzi, diversity among age cohorts was related more to preferred forms of action protest than generational belonging and, when generational differences arose, these did not evolve into actual fractures or unresolvable conflicts. The collective identity of these movements was thus based on shared political cultures and ideological references which, in the case of the Italian environmental movement(s), were able to overcome generational gaps.

Still, recent studies (Belotti et al. 2022) have argued for the relevance of youth-specific practices and identities in the Italian branches of FFF, thus considering these groups as an Italian youth social movement for climate characterized by a strong generational component. It must be observed that these findings might not be representative of a generational identity of Italian youth climate activists. They could also be connected to the collective identity of FridaysForFuture and the social representation of climate change, shared by the activists, that sees the climate crisis as a generational issue (cfr. Belotti & Bussoletti 2022). However, the presence of this generational component in FFF activism points to the presence of deeper identity characteristics of environment-focused social movements in Italy. This could potentially set current movements apart from the ones that preceded them, not only in terms of political practices, like Bertuzzi (2019) notes, but also in terms of the activists' understanding of social issues and their worldviews. Studying current Italian climate activism can thus open new windows into the characteristics and evolution of Italian environmental movements, of which this thesis represents a significant contribution.

Part 2 - Methods

1. An ethnographic approach

Concretely, this study is designed as a “multimethod” qualitative research (Anguera et al. 2018; Morse 2003), meaning it combines different techniques useful for answering multiple research questions that pertain to a single study (Bergman 2007), favoring only qualitative techniques (Hesse-Biber et al. 2015). I chose this research approach because it prevented a disjunction between contexts of social action, collectively negotiated meanings, and individual experiences of participants during all of the phases of the research. This allowed the research to be consistent with the ecological approach to media practices that was introduced in the previous chapter and give the proper emphasis and attention to the whole spectrum of communicative practices, age-based sense-makings and experiences of FFF-Rome activists. Such an approach allowed me to pay particular attention to the wider social media spectrum with which activists interact, especially during the interviewing and coding processes. It made it possible to analyze social media practices in a way that focuses on the single users, on the ways in which “individuals draw on a variety of commonly used communication media in conjunction with in-person contact to stay connected to their personal networks” (Boase 2008: 490).

More specifically, this study employed participant observation of the FFF-Rome group and digital ethnography of its official Instagram page, both of the duration of six months. These were later complemented with semi-structured interviews to 20 FFF-Rome activists. Such an ethnographic approach (Varis 2015) allowed for a closer understanding of the relational dimension of youth climate activism on and beyond social media, as well as the attitudes, perceptions and beliefs of FridaysForFuture-Rome activists related to both climate justice and their technopolitical experiences.

The decision to focus on the Roman group of FridaysForFuture Italy was motivated by multiple reasons. On the one hand, I am physically located and active in the territory of the Italian capital. On the other, there were reasons related to the research topics. First of all, FFF-Rome is one of the largest and most active sections of FridaysForFuture-Italy. Additionally, due to its strategic location, FFF-Rome often finds itself mediating between the political needs of activists in Northern and Southern Italy, giving rise to negotiations between different cultures of activism on a daily basis. Rome has also a vibrant history of social movements and student collectives, allowing the researcher to see how FFF-Rome manages and ties relations with other organizations of social change. Finally, the capital also hosts the headquarters of the country's main political bodies, as well as the administrative headquarters of many of the companies contested by the movement, allowing for unique in-person protests involving these organizations.

As a methodological approach, this research builds on the assumption that ethnographic fieldwork is a mode of discovery and learning (Velghe 2011) guided by “experience gathered in the field” (4) over time. Indeed, much “of what we seek to find out in ethnography is knowledge that others already have” and the researcher’s ability “to learn ethnographically is an extension of what every human being must do, that is, learn the meanings, norms, patterns of a way of life” (Hymes 2004: 13). Additionally, this thesis also follows Morse (1994) and

Thorne (2000; 1997)'s interpretive approach in discussing and evaluating the quality of findings. This means that it is the researcher and not the method (i.e., the 'recipe') guiding the mechanics of the analytic process that is ultimately responsible for driving the interpretations. Morse (1994) argues that findings do not 'emerge' in the sense of having their own 'agency,' that is, no matter how participatory the method, data do not 'speak for themselves' nor are participants able to represent their own interests with their own 'voice.' Throughout all phases of the research, I was aware that it is the researcher who ultimately has the agency and discretion to decide what will constitute data, which of those data is to be considered relevant, how they must be processed and portrayed in the course of the analysis, and through which means or media the findings are to be disseminated. I had to challenge myself to be conscious of my role as interpreter and the power-dynamics it implied in order to produce research with a 'potential for credibility' (Thorne et al. 2004) that went beyond "the artistic license of the individual author" (6).

This approach is consistent with Pollner and Emerson (1983)'s notion of ethnographic research as an occasion in which reality is created through the interaction between researcher and participants. The authors discourage analysis whose results are mere 'passive' reflections of the settings, rather they stress the influence that the presence of the researcher (never a mere observer) can have on the field. Findings always involve a specific individual acting toward something or someone, or talking to or with someone, including the researcher. Following their contribution, my work strived to notice and preserve the actual interactions and practices in and through which data were created, in order to point out the ways in which knowledge emerging from the field was socially situated. This is also in line with the adoption of a hermeneutical approach to research, so as to put emphasis not just on what people do or on what their social experience is, but rather on how they *make sense* of it, considering their actions in a holistic way (Montesperelli 2014). Understanding texts, social situations, and communication practices is that interpretative effort, almost akin to art, that, when successful, can bring closer what is distant in terms of time, geographical location, culture, and spirit, allowing the researcher to make familiar what is, otherwise, alien.

While ethnographic methods have been adopted by a wide array of disciplines, the very definition of the term ethnography has been amply disputed over the years. I considered Atkinson and Hammersley (1994)'s understanding on ethnography as especially valuable for this research. According to the authors, ethnography can refer both to a philosophical paradigm, to which the researcher can commit, and a specific research method. It is always characterized by an emphasis on the exploration of the nature of a social phenomenon and therefore contrasts research that sets out to test a preexisting hypothesis. Researchers applying this conception of ethnography tend to work with "unstructured" data (ibid.: 248) and focus on a small number of case studies, which are both the cases of this research. The "verbal descriptions and explanations" (ibid.: 248) of data analysis represent the researcher's best and most genuine effort to focus on the interpretation of meanings and functions of human actions collected during fieldwork. When adopting this qualitative method, the ethnographic researcher is called to immerse themselves in the continuative interactions of a particular social setting in order to understand and explain its members' life experiences (Jerolmack & Khan 2018), hence the need to adopt a robust ethical and theoretical approach. Ethnographic research aims at understanding the people of its study from the people's own

perspective through the “continuing and creative experience” (Okely 1994: 32) of the researcher. While the overarching goal of any research is to gain a better understanding of the researched object, in ethnographic research such understanding must be considered as the possession of “a part of the insider’s view” (Wax 1971: 11), a social phenomenon of shared meanings where the researcher comes to share the understanding of what a specific gesture or act means for the researched population. Good ethnography, then, “effectively communicates a social story, drawing the audience into the daily lives of the respondents” (Murthy 2008: 84).

For these reasons, the core challenge of ethnographic research is usually the balance between closure and critical capacity, between being an insider and an outsider to the field (Lohmeier 2014). This was the case for this research as well. While my familiarity with media and communication technologies made some parts of the research process easier, the same cannot be said for the topic of climate activism. My peripheral familiarity with this world made me more prone to ‘note everything down’ and not take anything for granted: I approached the field with an open mind as I myself was learning about the field and the activists’ world. Still, such unfamiliarity also made it harder to immerse myself in the field and become a ‘Friday,’ because I rarely felt like I was qualified enough to define myself as such. Additionally, it made it challenging to find ways to actually contribute to the group and its goals, further accentuating the sensation of ‘distance’ that so many ethnographic researchers and anthropologists inevitably feel towards their field (Dewalt & Dewalt 2011). However, some fieldnotes clearly report the use of ‘we’ rather than ‘them’ when noting down the activities of the group. An appropriation of field practices and insiders’ knowledge that attests to the success of the ethnography since I was not just a mere observer but a participant.

The table below (*T.1*) summarizes the research methods employed during this research, while following subparagraphs will provide a more thorough theoretical and methodological background of them. The interviews are also included in this section, under the umbrella of ethnographic methods, because they are often employed as a complementary method to inform fieldnotes and assumptions collected during ethnographic participant observation (cfr. Atkinson & Delamont 2010; Dewalt & Dewalt 2011; Jerolmack & Khan 2018). They were chosen as a method to answer questions that arose during fieldwork and intercept activists that were not present during the observation. For these reasons, they are an integral part of the ethnographic approach.

Method	Timeline	Participants	Average age	Gender distribution
Participant observation	6 months (10 July 2020 - 10 January 2021)	> 44	23.3 years old	23 F; 20 M; 1 X
Digital ethnography	6 months (July 2020 - January 2021)	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.
Interviews	Sept. - Nov. 2021	20	26 years old	11 F; 9 M

T.1: Research methods employed during the research and details of the participants.

1.1 Participant observation

It can be argued that all social observations are, to some extent, participative, because one cannot study the social world without being a part of it (Dewalt & Dewalt 2011). The objective of participant observation is precisely that of understanding and interpreting actions and their associated meanings (Emerson et al. 2007; Madden 2010). Through observation, following, interviewing, participating in the observed population's routines, the ethnographer aims to grasp meanings, behaviors, intentions, and interactions that might be overlooked by adopting a more 'distant' approach to the observed group.

The strength of this method thus lies in the direct observation of social actions as they happen, which makes it, on the other hand, especially challenging to understand how the underlying structures that determine such actions influence the field of observation. I was at times overwhelmed by the sheer amount of data in front of me, especially at the early stages of fieldwork, because every moment is a potential observation. For this reason, it is also imperative one decides which aspects to privilege during the observation through proper analytical choices both before and after. In this case, the inductive categories of observation decided before fieldwork were to focus on generation-specific sense makings related to digital activism and on social media usages, while the deductive categories, those decided after and not originally foreseen, were, for example, the choice to focus on the specificities of Roman activism and the contrast between different activism cultures.

The dialectical relationship or tension between intimacy and estrangement (Shah 2017), that is being an outsider or an insider of the group, is another challenge posed by participant observation. This too asks the researcher to take part in the group's activities but challenges them to maintain a degree of distance that makes the analysis of observations possible, so as not to become native. However, this hinders the researcher's ability to build genuine relationships with the participants because they might keep to themselves and be reluctant to sacrifice notetaking for participation in specific activities. Jackson (1990) refers to this struggle as 'liminality,' which is exemplified by the researcher's back and forth between being an observer and a participant, "between incorporation into the community and dissociation from it" (30). The act of notetaking is exemplary of this in-between status as it constantly reminds the researcher that they are "in the field, but not of the field" (31). For example, I wished to propose to write the 'report' of each assembly multiple times during the observation. This is an FFF practice: to write an assembly report during the assembly to disseminate it at a later moment. Writing it would have been a great way to feel included in the group and give back to it. Additionally, the more time I spent within FFF-Rome the more I internalized the culture that it was only right that everyone did report-writing, including me. Still, writing the report made it impossible to take fieldnotes so I never did. On the one hand, this definitely fed the perceived distance and sense of 'liminality' between myself and the group. On the other, though, it pushed me to find other ways to contribute to the group and participate, such as painting banners or helping arrange the chairs where everyone would sit.

Concretely, ethnographic fieldnotes (Emerson et al. 1995; Wolfinger 2002) are simultaneously data and analyses: they are a record of what is happening and a product constructed by the researcher. While some approaches to participant observation require a more structured kind of notetaking even in the field, this could have compromised the

participatory role of the researcher during assemblies. Additionally, it would have made it harder to adapt to unforeseen aspects of the field that might have emerged during observation. As a result, in order to minimize estrangement and account for all possible kinds of information, I adopted Emerson and colleagues' (1995) "participating-in-order-to-write" approach to notetaking. This approach emphasizes a direct, loosely structured, and immediate writing process already in the field, exemplified by my in-assembly notetaking. Many Fridays took notes during the assembly, so this practice did not make me stand out too much. Additionally, it allowed me to report quotes and exchanges verbatim. The main downside was the aforementioned limit of not being able to write reports.

Different types and formats of notes were taken during the fieldwork, from jot notes (single words or sentences recorded during the events) to expanded notes. The latter were the main tool used to record the observations. For example, I would write jot notes on a notebook during assemblies and, the following day, expand these notes into complete fieldnotes in a Google document, distinguishing among methodological notes— containing information on the methods used in the project, new ways to implement them and on what basis etc.— and meta-notes— representing some level of analysis and comment, such as preliminary hypotheses. I strived to record a high level of detail, such as descriptions of people, contexts, verbatim sentences, but also including, especially when notes were transcribed and expanded, my own impressions and thoughts and possible explanations for certain behaviors. This was achieved by using different columns on the same Google document to distinguish among jot notes, descriptive notes, and my own impressions of things. Following Dewalt and Dewalt (2011)'s standard, particular care was devoted toward objective record writing so that, upon being re-read in a following moment, the data would provide sufficient information as to 'bring that scene to life.'

Another essential element of participant observation is establishing a rapport with the participants, that is creating an interaction where both sides are committed to help each other achieve their goals (Dewalt & Dewalt 2011). As mentioned, participant observation is characterized by a direct involvement of the researcher in the studied scene (Atkinson & Delamont 2010), which means that I took part directly in almost all of FFF-Rome's activities during the research period. This included their online and offline assemblies, protest actions, formation and education events, social events etc. taking fieldnotes of the events as they happened, getting involved myself with the groups' activities— such as helping design the banners for an upcoming strike, joining 'working groups,' participating in Tweetstorms⁴, sharing personal know-hows and information when useful to the group's goals...—, and seeking to build a genuine relationship with the activists.

As participant observation develops over time, the researcher "gradually absorbs the big picture" and eventually the details that lead to an understanding of the people they are researching (Dewalt & Dewalt 2011). This process includes a parallel struggle towards self-observation and reflexivity, on the one hand reflecting on "the way in which the investigator experiences the setting as a participant, the particular values, and biases she brings to the setting" and, on the other, on "observation of the impact of the observer on the research setting" (80). This is consistent with Shah (2017)'s notion of participant observation as a

⁴ See part 3, section 2.

‘revolutionary practice,’ since it is not merely a method of anthropology but rather a form of production of knowledge through being and action. It forced me to question my theoretical presuppositions about the world of activism and social media, enabling the production of new knowledge that might have previously been confined to the margins or even silenced.

According to Shah, participant observation’s *holism*, that is its capacity to take into account all aspects of social life, marks it as a fundamentally democratic method. Through living with and being a part of other people’s lives as fully as possible, participant observation should make us question our fundamental assumptions and pre-existing theories about the world, enabling us to widen our understanding of the relationship between history, ideology, and action in ways that we could not have foreseen. It can help us see the underlying structures that enable dominant powers and authority to sustain themselves, and how those can be challenged. This was achieved also by understanding Dewalt and Dewalt (2011)’s notion of reciprocity as a key component to my participant observation. This included transparency when it came to explaining the goals and scope of the research or even my life story and academic career.

Traditionally, the role of the researcher may be covert or overt in participant observation: their engagement in a research might be disclosed or not to the participants. However, taking a covert participatory role in a social setting is ethical only in a restricted number of occasions, such as when the participation is mostly passive, limited to very few interactions, and happens in circumstances where explicating one’s role as researcher might compromise the possibility to participate in the social setting in the first place (cfr. Dewalt & Dewalt 2011). Overt participant observation, on the other hand, requires one secures permission from a community’s ‘gatekeepers,’ that is its leaders or most eminent members, before beginning fieldwork. This was the phase where I communicated the scope and aims of my project to the future participants. In the case of this research, it happened on July 10, 2020, when I first approached FFF-Rome during a workshop called “The school we’d want” in the Roman park of Villa Borghese.

Concretely, during the entire observation, I strived to act and behave as a member of the group FFF-Rome, to ‘be Friday’ and to ‘do Friday,’ while at the same time identifying and observing actions related to what it meant to be a member of FFF-Rome. After asking permission to take notes during events, I started noting down ‘minor’ details such as the arrangement of physical spaces and people during the assemblies, and ‘major’ aspects such as how people interacted during different situations, both among themselves and with me, the kind of vocabulary they used, their non-verbal interactions, and how these related to different situations, their activities, who tended to speak more and who less, who appeared to have more influence during discussions, how newcomers were welcomed and socialized, how decisions were made, whether there were social differences in behavior relating to age, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, social background etc. These observations, while extensive and at times redundant in the early stages of note-taking, became more specific once I developed a better understanding of the group and its rules. I still believe that being relatively new to this specific activist scene helped, especially at the beginning, since it allowed me not to take anything for granted and note down even mundane elements— even the kind of clothes activists would wear—, in order to develop an understanding of the field and its underlying processes. At times, of course, I also allowed myself to just ‘experience’

the events as they were happening. According to the situation, I prioritized either the ‘observer’ or the ‘participant’ role of the method. I tried not to be completely absorbed in the act of remembering and analyzing from the ‘outside’ as the situation was developing all around me, so as not to alienate myself from the field and the activists. All fieldnotes were collected in Italian. I translated all the excerpts from assemblies and events that were included in this thesis, providing additional explanations and footnotes to explain cultural nuances that might be lost in English.

1.2 Digital ethnography

During the same period of the participant observation, the digital ethnography (Caliandro 2014 & 2017; Hjorth et al. 2017) of FFF-Rome’s Instagram account was also taking place. The ‘multimodal ethnography’ resulting from the combination of these two methods provides a fuller and more holistic picture of how FFF activists’ everyday practices unfold in their natural settings. Indeed, my understanding of FFF-Rome’s Instagram posts was informed by the context provided by the participant observation’s fieldwork and vice versa (cfr. Varis 2015). This allowed for better representation and understanding of the decision-making processes, not just the decisions themselves, that informed social media usage within the movement. Additionally, it gives back the semiotic complexity of the field. The very data collected was multimedial in its nature— since it comprised written notes, visual designs and prompts, sounds in the case of videos, accounts of people’s actions etc.—, and in the way it was recorded— pairing handwritten and digital fieldnotes with screenshots of images and Instagram videos. This represented the very multimodality of the field as it accounted for the multiple kinds of meaning-making that allow communication to occur in the worlds I studied as an ethnographer, which made use of a variety of “modes” of communication based on “the distinctive semiotic affordances of different media” (Dicks et al. 2006: 93).

Even if the definitions are, at times, still blurry or contested in literature, digital ethnography distinguishes itself from netnography and other ethnographic methods in its scope and focus. While netnography focuses on internet users forming an online community and strives to understand their daily lives and practices, digital ethnography tends to treat the digital world as a place to extend the collection of offline data, in order to complement ethnographic research (cfr. Ardévol & Gómez-Cruz 2014; Kozinets 2015). While broad, Pink and colleagues (2016)’s definition of digital ethnography also understands it as a practice and specific methodological positioning rather than a set of rules to apply to one specific method. They follow O’Reilly (2005) in understanding it as an “iterative–inductive research that evolves in design through the study, drawing on a family of methods [...] that acknowledges the role of theory as well as the researcher’s own role and that views humans as part object/part subject” (3). They also observe how this definition is influenced by the ways digital technologies become part of an ethnography that involves “direct and sustained contact with human agents, within the context of their daily lives (and cultures)” (cfr. O’Reilly 2005: 3). Indeed, specific ethnographic activities can, to some extent, be transferred to the online world, but the ethnographic practices they stand for will have to shift as well, so that the researcher must acknowledge the differences the digital actually makes to ethnographic practice. Similarly, sociologist Christine Hine (Hjorth et al. 2017) also reflects on how the internet is increasingly embedded into diverse aspects of everyday life, meaning that the digital ethnographer might find it difficult to treat their fieldsite as “confined to a

single online space” (ibid.: 25). A reflexive dimension to ethnography, that attests for how a field is constituted by a combination of online and offline spaces, can thus allow the researcher to get a better sense of the participants’ own experience of navigating in such an interconnected space.

Indeed, when studying online environments and phenomena ethnographically, it is mandatory not to take these platforms “as self-explanatory contexts” or abstractions, but rather strive to investigate the “locally specific meanings and appropriations” (Varis 2015: 5) of the users, that is what these platforms mean for individuals. The ‘finished’ communicative products that researchers collect online are not only shaped by the online context immediately observable, but also by the offline contexts in which these digital activities have taken place (Varis & Wang 2011), since these are marked by broader socio-cultural issues that could influence certain aspects of online communication, which is the case, for example, of heavy internet censorship in certain parts of the world. Varis (2015) enriches these observations with the idea that ethnography is not as much of a method as an approach: it is not reduced to the employment of certain techniques, but it is a way of studying (digital) cultural practices within context, with specific epistemological claims. This largely corresponds with the second phase in social research on technologically mediated communication identified by Hine (2013: 7): the “growing application of naturalistic approaches to online phenomena and the subsequent claiming of the internet as a cultural context,” with ethnographic research being increasingly applied. This means that the online environments studied cannot be taken as self-explanatory contexts but need to be investigated for locally specific meanings and appropriations, hence the importance of pairing digital ethnography with other research methods, in this case participant observation and in depth interviews (cfr. Murthy 2008).

Pink (2021)’s methodology for visual ethnographic research was also followed. This means that I approached the field with a sense of the visual cultures that animate it, developing this insight from previous research and by informing myself about the participants through their own websites and contents (cfr. Pink 2021). At the same time, I was also mindful that the ethnographic use of visual images and technologies will also develop from practice-based knowledge. My background in digital media and communication studies, as a graduate student of these disciplines, provided a deep understanding of the technological field of inquiry (Pink 2021).

Concretely, I chose to consider data related to the July 10, 2020 - January 10, 2021, timeframe, namely all posts published on FFF-Rome’s official Instagram page between those dates. The Instagram posts included pictures or videos (visual elements) along with captions and hashtags (textual elements) and were considered in their integrity as units of analysis (Russmann & Svensson 2016), without giving special emphasis to either elements (cfr. Lalancette & Raynauld 2019; Tiindenberg & Baym 2017). I did not include Instagram stories in the dataset because of their volatility: when I decided that my research could benefit from digital ethnography of FFF-Rome’s Instagram page, some days had already passed since fieldwork had begun. Some stories, since they only last 24 hours, had been lost and it was challenging to find tools to archive the others manually. Post comments were also excluded from the analysis since these were rare and, when present, did not generate significant discussions or debates. When discussing this occurrence with the activists, it emerged how conversations between FFF-Rome and its Instagram audience tend to happen through direct

messages on the platform, rather than as comments on a post. This is a private form of communication that could not be investigated during this research.

All the posts were archived manually by taking one or more screenshots of every post, depending on the number of pictures and/ or videos it contained or the length of the text. Afterwards, videos were manually downloaded by means of 'it.savefrom.net' website. A total of 139 unique posts were archived, comprising 225 pictures and 27 videos, both of which, especially videos, concentrated during the 'action week' of October 2020, a particularly intense week of protests immediately preceding the global strike for climate of October 9 2020. While there is little established literature that addresses the ethics of including images and social media pictures in research, I decided to include them in the text after a reflection on the nature of FFF-Rome's profile. When users, especially young people, share information publicly online but still expect (or assume) these exchanges to be private to some extent (see Franzke et al. 2020), the researcher must respect these boundaries. FFF-Rome's Instagram page, on the other hand, belongs to a social movement and was thus conceived as a public space to spread and broadcast the movement's messages, including (and especially) visual ones. As a result, pictures are included as they appear on FFF-Rome's Instagram page. On the other hand, faces and personal information are blurred from pictures that I have taken personally during protests and assemblies and that were included in the text when relevant to the discussion.

1.3 Interviews

The final research method employed during the course of this thesis is that of semi-structured interviews to FFF-Rome activists. The interviews further contributed to understanding the data gathered through participant observation and digital ethnography and they have a long history of accompanying and complementing ethnographic methods (cfr. Dewalt & Dewalt 2011). The very practice of addressing respondents of interviews as 'participants' emerged from field approach and literature on participant observation, suggesting direct involvement of both interviewer and interviewee, equality in the research relationship, empowerment of the interviewee, and reflexivity of the researcher, who is called to recognize themselves as part of the research process and of the power relations that characterize the interviewing process (Edwards & Holland 2013; Hammersley 2012).

In particular, I chose semi-structured interviews (henceforth SSIs) (Bartholomew et al. 2000; Leech 2002; McIntosh & Morse 2015), because they can maintain a high degree of relevance to the topic at hand while remaining responsive to the participants' unique inputs. They were well-suited to address the explorative nature of the research questions and delve into the participants' unique experiences. Participants' responses were directed to specific areas of inquiry, following a preconceived scheme with specific inputs and questions that allowed for interviews' comparison by item. Some participants were naturally more keen answering this or that question and the nature of SSIs as a malleable and flexible tool allowed for these activists to branch off into their experiences, following and valuing the participants' unique input. For example, some interviews delve more deeply into the sense-giving processes of activism activated by generational belonging to a particular age group, while others are more focused on discussing social media activism or what it means to be a Friday. While the structure of the interview remained the same for every participant, activists were granted

freedom to tread on in the manner that they preferred (De Carlo 2002), branching off into additional topics if needed to maintain the colloquial conversation flow of SSIs.

I began working on an interview trace after completion of the fieldwork and the interviewing process began in the fall of 2021. Still, I anticipated my desire to organize interviews for the activists during the early stages of the fieldwork, during online and offline assemblies, and the informal conversations with the single activists that would happen before and/ or after FFF-Rome events and activities. This was in line with the ethical protocol adopted during the research, illustrated below: participants were made aware of the different phases of the research and were encouraged to ask questions about it at all times. When it was time to begin the interviewing process, I asked the moderators of the FFF-Rome WhatsApp and Telegram groups for permission to send a call for participants and, after receiving it, sent the call. The moderators were so kind as to spread the request to other working-groups of FFF-Rome as well, even groups that I was not participating in. In parallel, I also sent private messages to FFF-Rome members of these groups, both activists I had previous contacts with and activists I did not know yet, asking if they would be interested in participating. More than 40 activists were contacted, with a small portion of them replying directly to the message sent in the WhatsApp and Telegram groups. I continued scheduling and carrying out interviews until reaching a saturation point, resulting in 20 interviews. These were carried both online and offline, according to the progress of the COVID-19 emergency (and subsequent restrictions) and the schedules of both interviewee and interviewed. I do not consider this kind of data gathering a limit of this research, but rather a testament of the hybridization of research and activism practices between online and offline realms that has been at the core of this thesis' focus throughout the research. After all, as pointed out by Shapka and colleagues (2016), even if interviews conducted online, on average, take longer to complete, involve more rapport-building, and produce fewer words, data quality is substantially unaffected by the mode of data collection, allowing for comparison and unified analysis of all interviews.

The interview trace was structured around two broad dimensions of inquiry: generational sense-makings in participating in FFF-Rome; generation-based social media practices within the movement. The object of the first dimension was twofold. On the one hand, to identify and grasp self-presentation, self-disclosing, and impression management behaviors as well as meanings, practices, values, intentions, and interactions connected to being an FFF activist. On the other, to unveil frames of interpretation of being part of the FFF movement that are activated by self-ascription to a specific generational identity. The second dimension's objective was to highlight motivations, attitudes, representations, themes, keywords, and code words related to being an FFF activist and to using social media within the movement, once again with an eye to age-based sense makings, stereotypes, and practices.

Eleven female participants and nine male participants took part in the interviews. They were aged 14-64, with an average of 26 years of age, which is a few years higher than the average age (23.3) of all activists whose quotes were included in this thesis. They were mostly university and high school students, with a few workers, and from diversified socio-economic and activism backgrounds. All participants granted permission to record the interviews, which happened by means of a mobile phone when interviews were conducted in person and through Google Meet when online. All interviews were later transcribed on individual Google documents for analysis. As with the ethnographic fieldnotes, names and identifying

information were masked and each participant's name was replaced with a randomly assigned letter. All interviews were conducted in Italian. I translated all the passages included in this thesis and, when needed, included footnotes to better explain cultural aspects that might be lost in English.

2. Coding process and thematic analysis

Data gathered through face-to-face and digital ethnography and interviews were analyzed through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2022; Guest et al. 2014). This method of analysis is particularly useful to understand how a certain issue is socially constructed and understood by a given population— in this case young people's generational specific sense-makings related to FridaysForFuture-Rome activism, both in terms of belonging to the group and of using social media. In thematic analysis, the researcher refers to their existing theoretical background to identify conceptual patterns in the data, while remaining open to finding novel concepts that could enrich the existing literature (Joffe 2012). Consistent with the research methods employed during this research, thematic analysis requires the researcher to take on an 'active role' in identifying patterns/ themes, selecting which are of interest, and reporting them to the readers (Braun & Clarke 2022).

For the scope of this thesis, themes have been intended as “abstract (and often fuzzy) constructs the investigators identify [...] before, during, and after analysis” (Ryan & Bernard 2000: 780) as well as units derived from patterns like “conversation topics, vocabulary, recurring activities, meanings, feelings, or folk sayings and proverbs” (Taylor & Bogdan 1989: 131). By following the open-ended approach explained by Emerson and colleagues (1995), inductive and deductive coding were both applied. A first notetaking of the analytical insights was gathered in the in-process memos during fieldwork, then segments of notes were coded systematically by identifying and noting separated analytical categories and selecting the core themes. Afterwards, while identifying patterns and variations, codes were clustered in sub-themes and themes. In doing so, all the empirical material (fieldnotes, screenshots, and interviews) could be treated holistically within a single thematic analysis, albeit with identification marks distinguishing one extract from the other based on the setting.

Themes were established according to the weight and saliency of the specific elements and their prevalence, taking into account existing literature on the topics of the thesis. Fieldnotes and interviews were read repeatedly to identify initial codes, which were then annotated on a unified Google sheet. Patterns were formed from clustering all the codes into themes, which allowed for the description and organization of observations while interpreting aspects of the phenomenon of interest (Boyatzis 1998; Guest et al. 2011). Themes were constantly reviewed and refined until defining the most relevant ones, which are discussed in detail in the following chapters.

Following the holistic approach that informed the methodology and data analysis of this thesis, the results obtained from the different methodological approaches employed are also presented holistically. This means that the chapters dedicated to data analysis are not organized according to data type (i.e., 'data from interviews,' 'data from digital ethnography'...) rather according to the themes and subthemes that emerged from data analysis. This allows for a better understanding of the media and activist practices that inform

social media usage within FFF-Rome as they emerged from multiple sources in various moments of the fieldwork and interviews.

3. Ethical considerations

Adopting an overt and transparent approach to the field posed a few challenges during the fieldwork. For example, saying that I was a ‘university student’— and thus roughly in the same age-group and social setting of most of FFF-Rome’s core activists— elicited different, more positive responses than saying I was a ‘PhD researcher,’ which was, on the other hand, met with some diffidence as the activists tended to associate me with the world of academia and adults, and perceive my presence as exploitative. This feeling was also mirrored by my own experience as I struggled at times to balance immersion and observation and worried of being a mere top-down observer or impostor, someone who might potentially just ‘glean’ from the field what I deemed useful for my own interests— namely completing a PhD and publishing papers—, as it has been the case with research on social change and social movements.

This challenged me to find ways to prevent this from happening at every stage of the research. The ethical choices and considerations that followed are detailed in this section. In designing and implementing this research’s ethics, I am immensely grateful to the expertise and knowledge of colleagues and mentors, who have struggled with the same ethical corundum for much longer and have come up with innovative solutions. The challenges of doing research with(in) FridaysForFuture helped foster a more genuine and ethical relationship from both sides. It pushed me to challenge my own assumptions, be them political, academic, or merely social in nature, and constantly refine and adjust the way I was relating to the field and to the activists. I continuously asked myself if I was being ethical and how best to ‘give back’ to the movement at least a fraction of what the Fridays had given me. I hope that the restitution events that constellated this (and parallel) research have been, if not equal, of some value to the movement.

3.1 A situated approach

The methodological choices illustrated so far are complementary with the need to carry out a ‘committed’ research, that is in solidarity with the activists of FridaysForFuture-Rome and their fight for climate justice. Such a notion is informed by Mertens (2007)’s ‘transformative paradigm,’ which roots research practices in a direct involvement of participants in all phases of the research, the researcher’s critical engagement with issues of power and justice, and a commitment to social change. This paradigm borrows from social constructivism the idea that there are different realities shaped by social, political, cultural, and economic values, and that differential factors (ethnicity, gender, disability, sexual orientation etc.) influence the perception of what reality itself is. Knowledge production must therefore be understood as socially and historically situated and requires an interactive and trusting relationship between researchers and participants.

The adoption of qualitative methods thus enables this interactive bond and allows research practices to adapt to the cultural complexity of the field, the historical moments, and its existing power relation. As a result, research practices that are deeply governed by ethical

considerations are based on the respect and promotion of human rights, towards greater social justice. Through this epistemic posture we can redeem the ‘civic role’ (McAteer & Wood 2018) of research and of academia through the belief that knowledge production is an intellectual, cognitive, and moral project, often jerky, never complete but useful and able to expand and improve the conditions for social justice (Smith 2016). Intellectual activity, then, cannot be separated from political commitment (cfr. Mahlomaholo & Netshandama 2010), since the creation and distribution of knowledge must facilitate social transformation and the democratization of knowledge itself, which is the prime mission of universities. This holds all the more true for environmental justice (cfr. Batel et al. 2016) as it is up to the social sciences to account for the process and the commitments required for the creation of more sustainable societies.

Following these assumptions, I adhered to Boyer’s (1996) notion of ‘scholarship of engagement:’ a commitment to the movement and society, inspired by the values of reciprocity and collaboration. Boyer’s model promotes an idea of research that incorporates civic involvement practices at the stage of knowledge production, meaning that, as a researcher, I challenged myself to communicate and work for and with my communities of reference—FFF-Rome. The paragraph addressing the restitution events correlated to this research exemplifies this practice best, reflecting on how I contributed and spent my social, cultural, political, and theoretical baggage within the movement, capitalizing on my experiences as researcher and activist, albeit within different collectives. Tuhiwai-Smith (2016) defines scholars who adopt such practices as ‘fringe researchers’ who address the tensions between academia and the commitment to social and cognitive justice by mediating between the expectations of the social community one works with/ for, and the rigor and protocols of the scientific community within/ with which one works. Building on these notions but following the paradigm adopted for a parallel research (cfr. Belotti & Bussoletti 2022; Belotti et al. 2022), I prefer to consider myself as an ‘asider’ or ‘sideline researcher,’ a nomenclature that emphasizes the effort to accompany the movement’s revindications as an epistemic stance, thus overcoming the binary methodological issue between immersion and detachment, being an insider and an outsider. As it will be more extensively addressed below, the activists’ positive attitude towards knowledge-production (grounded in the scientific basis of climate change) combines effectively with genuine practices of engaged research, thus legitimizing both the struggle and the movement. This has further allowed me to capitalize on the cultural and political awareness deriving from my academic and activism background, while at the same time questioning paternalistic conceptions and practices inherent both in research and in activism.

3.2 Consent

Following the ethical protocols that informed the research, this thesis adheres to Nairn and colleagues (2020)’s proposal to redefine informed consent, overcoming the mere ‘willingness to engage’ (traditionally manifested by signing informed consent forms) in favor of an effective ‘wanting to take part.’ I pursued and nurtured a genuine and interactive bond with the activists— even before they agreed to take part in the research— to introduce it, explain it, and promote its political appropriation within a relationship of trust that went beyond the academic boundaries of this thesis. The notion of ‘micro-ethics’ and ‘research crumbs’ (cfr. Pitti 2022) draw particular attention to the important distinction between static, anticipatory

procedural ethics and the fluidity and complexity of the field. It allows for a better recognition of the moral connection between research and participants, and of research reflexivity. ‘Crumbs’ in particular refer to information shared with the researcher in virtue of the bond created with the participants. Such information can be emotionally charged and based on trust but unaware of the meaningfulness it might have for research, as if often happened during informal conversations before and especially after protests or significant events. As information ‘left behind’ and given unconsciously (an outburst, an unpopular opinion, personal feelings...), its sharing in virtue of intimacy posed unique ethical challenges that had to be addressed in a situated way, not just as data but as ethical reminders of the difference between my freedom to produce an account of the participants and the protection of their autonomy and wellbeing. To act accordingly, the ethical considerations discussed in these paragraphs were implemented, starting from the collection of consent.

Following the conceptualization of consent as iterative, reciprocal, volitional (cfr. Nairn et al. 2020), the collection of consent was spread over time and through diversified methods, taking advantage of the complementarity between individuality and community, typical of social movements, and repairing the discrepancy between ‘formalized’ consensus and ‘everyday ethics’ (Busher & Fox 2019). Regarding ethnographic activities, I verified iteratively the activists’ collective and individual desire— both tacit and explicit— to participate, while for interviews I collected an explicit, written, and individual consent form.

A first permission to do research with(in) FridaysForFuture-Rome was granted on July 10, 2020, when I approached the movement for the first time, presented myself, and asked if it was okay to take notes and start participating in the movement (overt, explicit consent). The activists all agreed and expressed various levels of enthusiasm and interest toward the research, albeit a couple of them also expressed skepticism toward academia and the institution (university) that I represented. It was a testament to the quality of the ethical and research practices to see this skepticism evolve into trust as the research progressed and both sides came to know each other better. Since that day, during the assemblies, I repeatedly introduced myself (iterative consent) and the research every time there was a round of presentations, noticing how no one opposed this or changed their attitude towards me (tacit, collective consent). On the other hand, most activists showed interest and enthusiasm for being part of a research, hoping that the knowledge produced through it might prove useful to the movement. Many informal conversations with the activists even addressed the objectives and methods of the research, thus encouraging a process of gradual appropriation of the research by the group. During the Summer of 2021, I anticipated my desire to conduct interviews and asked for permission and feedback from the most active members of FFF-Rome on how best to do this. The activists all agreed and some of them once again expressed interest toward the later phases of the research and its progress, showing excitement to participate in the interviews and share their viewpoints. They even helped my call for participants spread across chatgroups and by word of mouth.

For interviews, a written informed consent form was prepared to illustrate the research objectives, methods of participation, funding, the protection regime for sensitive data, planned dissemination and communication activities, and benefits. This document was sent by e-mail, instant messaging, or handed in person to be signed by all participants, even when they were minors. Its purpose and content were explained before signing so as to elicit

questions or doubts and remind the activists of their rights. In the case of minors, a space for double signatures was present so that they too (and not only their parents or legal tutors) could sign their participation in the research. The intention was to equate the minors' involvement to that of adults and not minimize their ability in decision-making or their voice in research (cfr. Fargas-Malet et al. 2010). Informed consent thus ceased to be a purely bureaucratic device, rather acting as a tool for the recognition of youth's political agency and the professional role of the researcher. To guarantee the privacy of the participants, fieldnotes and written excerpts from interviews are anonymized. They are distinguished by randomized alphanumeric codes (consisting of a capital letter, age when known, and gender) identifying each participant.

3.3 Giving back

This set of research practices was based on the axiological assumption that this research would not have been ethically sustainable if it had not respected and been committed to improving the reality of those who took part in it. This view expresses not only ethical obligations towards academia but also a 'relational responsibility' towards the movement (Gerlach 2018). The effort to reciprocate and give back to FFF-Rome during all phases of the research encapsulates this spirit.

Concretely, I took part in the activities of the Roman collective of FridaysForFuture during and after the fieldwork, engaging in the logistics and organization of the protests, becoming an insider, and collaborating with the movement's actions, contributing to the performance of the protests, participating in the Tweetstorms, in public performances, workshops, fundraisings, online and offline campaigns and activities. Along the way, I also reciprocated by sharing my know-hows, experiences, and reflections into assemblies and other meetings. The research outputs also provided FFF activists with additional spaces and tools for accompanying and amplifying their claims while fostering the social legitimization and political subjectification of the movement.

After the six months of ethnographic research, contacts were kept with the movement, and I continued participating in large protests or sporadic events and assemblies when possible. Overall, I tried to keep up with the movement and the connections that were born out of the observation both online and offline. This allowed me to be invited to FridaysForFuture-Italy's formative weekend in Brescia at the beginning of December 2021, an event that had not been foreseen at the time of the research proposal. Additionally, along with two other researchers involved in a parallel research on FFF-Rome, a formal restitution event/ feedback meeting was organized on December 15, 2021, at the Città dell'Altra Economia⁵. The meeting was organized with the activists and it was inserted as an upcoming event on a thematic Trello board⁶, thus following a consolidated practice within the movement. To broaden participation, it was carried out in mixed mode, so some people participated on Meet while others were present in the room. It was moderated like a typical FFF-Rome assembly, following the rules and principles analyzed in the following chapters. Some preliminary observations regarding this thesis were also discussed, especially reviewing analytical

⁵ 'City of the other economy,' a Roman space that supports and experiments with alternative economic circuits inspired by solidarity, respect for the environment, and social responsibility.

⁶ The platform that FFF-Rome activists use to schedule activities and define their agenda.

considerations that could help the activists understand how to amplify the echo of their claims— for example, by improving the relationship with very young high school students, or with corporate employees and institutional offices—, to consolidate both the social legitimacy of the climate dispute and the political identity of FridaysForFuture. In the activists' words, the restitution moment allowed them to reflect on practices they assumed as given (i.e., their social media strategies, the immediacy with which they interacted between online and offline realms), allowing them to simultaneously look at themselves from the outside and the inside. A back and forth that an activist defined as 'humbling,' since he did not think that the people and the strategies that contribute to making FridaysForFuture what it is could be of such interest. In his mind, it is the fight against climate change that usually gets this kind of attention.

As mentioned, these ethical guidelines and this entire thesis definitely benefited from FFF-activists' positive attitude towards knowledge-production and research. Activists approach climate change as a crisis that has become known thanks to scientific research and they themselves make use of science and data as tools to learn more about climate change and sensitize their target audiences. This is reflected in the readiness with which the movement translates talking about an issue into political actions. The combination of this thesis' supportive and transformative approach to research with the activists' good predisposition for knowledge-production enabled a research appropriation by FFF-activists that still keeps us in touch, with an eye to future dissemination meetings.

Part 3 - Analysis

Section 1 - “Being” Friday

1. “We are the Future without Future:” generational sense-makings in the fight against climate change

The first part of the analysis deals with sense-makings related to ‘being’ a FridaysForFuture-Rome activist, be them youth or generation specific. This first section addresses what it means to belong to the movement FFF-Rome and why the fight against climate change resonates so much with its members.

From the fieldwork and the subsequent interviews, it emerged how the element that seemed to tie the Fridays together is— even before a common albeit not univocal understanding of who a ‘Friday’ is and what they do— a genuine interest in the climate crisis and shared assumptions around it. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the cause of the movement (central conflict, cfr. Touraine 1975) is seen as intimately connected with the activists’ interests, values, but also subjectivity in what can be defined as a *generational understanding* of climate change and a subsequent *generational belonging* to FridaysForFuture and its revindications. While parallel research has addressed the generational component of FFF-Rome’s social representations of climate change (Belotti & Bussoletti 2022), the interviews conducted within the scope of this thesis especially highlighted a number of dimensions specifically pertaining to the ways generational identity and belonging to FFF-Rome intertwine. The participants all agreed that the movement is primarily composed and caters to young people. While they highlighted how this seems to be a general ‘rule’ of social movements, they also emphasized how the affinity that FFF activists feel towards the issue of climate change (and social justice in general) is predicated on specific characteristics of this generation of young people and, therefore, activists.

1.1 “It’s something about being young”

When asked if they considered themselves a ‘Friday’ the participants’ answers branched out in different directions. Belonging to the movement was connected to valorial affinity and continued participation (see part 3 chap. 2), but also, perhaps more interestingly, to age-cohort affinity.

This was especially the case of ‘older’ activists, who sometimes hesitated to call themselves ‘Fridays’ because of the age gap between themselves and the majority of FFF-Rome activists. This was the case of [B64m], who was the eldest activist I interacted with during this research. He was a regular participant in assemblies and his participation in FFF was moved by an earnest interest in climate change that traced back to his youth, when the issue was just being introduced by the scientific community. Despite these characteristics, he felt a sense of disconnection with FFF-Rome which especially fed on him being much older than the average activist. He humorously solved this conundrum by describing himself as a ‘child at heart.’ According to the activist, this made him better suited to militate within FFF-Rome, alongside teens and tweens, rather than in Parents or Teachers For Future, subsidiary groups of FridaysForFuture that are mainly composed by adults:

I still have to understand if [when we are in a group] I represent the soul of FFF or of Parents [for future]. I must say that my experience, lately, has been that I feel much better when I talk with the Fridays rather than with the Parents. I mean, when I talk with the Fridays I feel better with myself, but that's probably an issue I have: I never grew up, what can I say? I still feel like a child! ([B64m], interview).

According to [B64m], political involvement within social movements has historically been connected to younger generations and young people are the natural protagonists of activism: “It was always young people who created them, they were born from young people” ([B64m], interview). Hence why he felt more in tune with FFF-Rome's activism rather than with Parents and Teachers for Future. Being a child at heart, he wished to be more directly and strongly involved with climate activism, while the other two subsidiary groups only occasionally organize protests or demonstrations and generally serve as supportive or echo chambers for FFF's revindications. Indeed, the activist believed that the issue with this kind of youth-generated participation is that it fades with time, as individuals are “swallowed by society's mechanisms” ([B64m], interview) and begin to have less time to dedicate to social movements for a variety of reasons, such as starting a family or working a corporate job.

This view represents the first explanation of why FFF would cater so strongly to younger people: changes in social responsibilities, occupations, and, ultimately, worldviews. As [H20f] explained: “Youth have more time, more energies, while adults, when they have a family, a job, anything, really have to dedicate more energy and time and effort to say ‘I'm going to the protest, I'm going to fight, I'm walking the streets’” (interview). The courage and sensibility that characterize young FFF activists were thought to decline with age, as responsibilities and life experiences curbed a person's enthusiasm: “Probably as you get older ... the less you have seen things change the more you get used to the fact that it is right that they remain as they are” ([M20m], interview). This would fuel a ‘resistance to change’ connected to growing up that, the activists believed, makes it so that adults have a harder time joining a social movement in general or fight alongside FridaysForFuture. Since militating in a social movement implies a struggle towards a collective dream or vision, an attempt to visualize and forge better futures (cfr. Touraine 1975), adults, who have already lived a significant portion of their lives and already forged their own future, were believed to be less prone to challenge what they know and overturn their lives to pursue social change. An activist referred to this attitude as a “thickening of one's mind” that makes some adults “deeply bothered, on a psychological level, by the idea that they must change things they have done a certain way for all of their life” ([M20m], interview).

Internal and external factors concur to exacerbating this tendency. On the one hand, activists expressed the belief that, as people grow older, they “have a tendency to grow more conservative in nature” ([M20m], interview), which would make them less interested in social change and activism— which is traditionally on the progressive side of the political spectrum. On the other hand, adults may simply lack the free time or flexible working hours needed to militate consistently. [B64m] recalled how the period of time between his “25-26 until I turned 45-50” was the period he was busiest “because of my kids, my job, [I was] forced to keep my distance [from activism]” (ibid.). Of the same mind, [O31f] mentioned not being able to join FFF-Rome for a long time, despite keeping up with the group on social media, because she was still busy working at the hour FFF-Rome scheduled their weekly

assemblies. Excessive responsibilities and a busy work schedule were through to curb a person's enthusiasm and propensity to change. Older people were sometimes seen as people that had simply "given up" the fight ([Q42f], interview), or they might have a "willingness [to fight], but it's crushed by the weight of experience, of the years and years [they have tried to change but didn't succeed]" so that they were now "tired" and "with heavy shoulders" from trying ([C24m], interview). [B64m] effectively summarized this view by saying: "This is the true difference of age [...]: youth are more optimistic" (interview).

Additionally, the excessive responsibilities that the Fridays attributed to the adults' disenchantment were critically analyzed by some activists as structural problems of a capitalist society. It was not the adults' fault if they did not prioritize activism or the fight against climate change, it was capitalism that made it so that one must live to work. It was capitalism that exploited the individuals and forced them into exhausting, underpaying jobs in the name of productivity: "Businesses shut themselves from the inside and ignore the great potential that new hires might bring. [...] This greatly damages young people's mental health because they grow more and more disenchanted and dissatisfied, they believe they're not as valuable as they are" ([K22f], interview). As a result, FFF-Rome's generation-specific fight acquired a more universal connotation. The fight for social sustainability was seen as able to improve even adults' lives: "If we could create a workplace that is ecological and respectful of people we could avoid all of this" ([K22f], interview).

The generational affinity towards militating within FFF— and social movements in general— was also predicated on some characteristics that the interviewees connected with the younger phase of one's life, such as a greater open-mindedness and 'malleability': "You're not 'structured' yet, so you're ready to put yourself on the line [...]. For people in their 40s, 50s [...] it's easier to say 'well, it's too late now'" ([Q42f], interview). This malleability was connected to a future-oriented mindset, or a "desire for future" according to [C24m]. Since young people still have their whole future to plan and create, it was thought to be easier for them to put themselves on the line, challenge the system, and militate in a social movement: "When you're a teen you are braver, right? The future seems closer" ([Q42f], interview). Energy, courage, creativity, and a propensity for risk-taking and challenging oneself were all attributes that, according to the participants, helped young people forge their future and could be manifested in their belonging to a social movement: "Because they're young, they feel more involved in deciding, in taking part in the organization of their own future" ([V22m], interview). As a result, the Fridays considered their young age something that predisposed them to feel intimately called to forging the(ir) future. It was a dimension that touched their lives more significantly, since they still had all their lives to build.

Such beliefs translated into a kind of determinism. Since youth were thought to be more naturally inclined to fight for their future and join a social movement, and to possess the attributes that would allow them to do so, FFF must cater to young people first and foremost, as it would not have that much success if it turned to a different demographic: "It is youth that must really be involved [...] the strength of young people is that they're the ones who can be most sensibilized on these topics" ([V22m], interview). In the fight against climate change, then, it was essential to awaken young people's consciences, as they are more in tune with the issue and more prone to answering the call. This chain of beliefs, as we will see, informs the entire communicative (and even political) strategy of FridaysForFuture. On the

one hand, this aids the movement in solidifying its identity as a youth-centered force, mainly composed of youth; on the other, it makes it harder to involve people from other age groups or make them feel welcome. Similarly, the communicative effort to speak to youth first and foremost pushes FFF's communication to be catchy and witty, sometimes at the expenses of not being as impactful or crude as it could be, so that some participants referred to FFF's 'freshness' in communicating its messages as a form of 'ingenuity' ([C24m], interview). This perhaps referred to the creative forms of protests enacted by FFF-Rome in order to create catchy visuals and attract traditional media (cfr. part 3, ch. 4), so that protest actions were conceived with a mind to their communicative potential on social media.

Despite acknowledging these differences, the activists often called out adults as self-centered for not being sufficiently involved in the fight for the climate. According to [M20m], adults too often held the "belief to have already lived their own life" as an excuse to argue that climate change "is no longer a concern to them. [...] It is an extremely selfish position" (interview). The same argument of 'already having lived one's life' was raised by [M57f], who also commented that young people might not be subjected to this selfish belief because "the future belongs to them" (interview). This belief re-echoes what [R18f] had already expressed during an in-person assembly (11 September 2020) when a university student commented how 'nice' it was that young people were so interested in climate change. Her reply was that "we have no choice, we must be interested in this," because the climate crisis will have disastrous repercussions on young people's lives. Youth simply cannot afford to turn a blind eye to the issue: "Everything keeps tumbling down around us and we're told there's nothing we can do about it. It generates a deep, inner rage which is typical of adolescence I think, but in a world like this it's greater, you know?" ([R18f], interview).

These shared assumptions are connected to FFF's social representation of climate change as a generational issue (cfr. Belotti & Bussoletti 2022) which affects young people first and foremost. Still, they also draw a clear identitary opposition between adults and today's young people. The characteristics that make youth more prone to join social movements or militate for social justice are exacerbated by the climate crisis, which fuels an even greater 'rage' and desire (or need) to join the fight. Adults are seen as characterized by selfishness, a busy work-life schedule, a conservative attitude, and can easily overlook climate change despite being more directly responsible for it and despite having greater power to solve it. Young people, in opposition, are fueled by creativity, enthusiasm, courage, rage, and a desire to forge one's own future, thus reclaiming this fight with pride. This desire, this predisposition would originate both from the condition of being young and from a specific socio-historical momentum— which will be discussed in the paragraph below— that comes to effectively characterize a specific generation of climate activists.

1.2 "It's something about being young now"

As discussed, the generational component of FFF-Rome's activism was attributed to the general predisposition of young people to militate within social movements. Still, militating within FFF-Rome was also connected to specific sense-makings linked to being young 'now,' in this time and age. As a generational problem, the climate crisis would often be an anchoring element for such qualities to explain how belonging to FridaysForFuture was an expression of the unique attributes that being a youth in this time and age imply. These can be

summarized in three attributes that are specific to FFF's activism: 1) a novel understanding of climate change as a systemic and generational issue; 2) nowadays young people's propensity in acquiring and spreading information thanks to social media and the internet; 3) a 'youth-specific' sensibility towards social justice and politics characterizing the current generation of youth. These characteristics inform specific activist practices and manners that characterize FFF and further set it aside from other movements, contributing to defining its identity. These will be discussed in the following chapter.

It is useful to introduce this section's discussion by explaining the activists' conception of climate change, since it is propaedeutical to better understand FFF's approach to climate activism. Previous environment-centric movements lacked a holistic approach to climate change but also a generational understanding of the climate crisis as something that disproportionately affects younger generations. As such, the Fridays' words express the belief that today's young people are 'naturally' more motivated to militate for environment-centric causes:

We are one of the first generations [...] to strongly feel this issue, I mean to feel this issue of the environment as very close to us ([W26m], interview).

[We] feel [the matter] closer to our hearts, [...] [our] climate fight hasn't been about hugging trees or picking up plastic, but has looked for the root of the problem in politics. It's a different way of conceptualizing environmentalism ([U22f], interview).

The first quote exemplifies how the activists perceive climate change as a generational issue. Youth will be the ones to pay for the environmental, social, and economic costs of the climate crisis. As such, this issue is especially 'close' to young people's hearts, and they feel called to respond to this challenge since older generations are proving ineffective in addressing the climate crisis. The Fridays are thus the voice of a fight which must be understood as affecting young people's futures first and foremost. At the same time, the second quote explains how the activists understand climate change as a systemic issue. It is a socio-ecological disaster with a long history but that will have strong repercussions in the future. It touches every species on the planet and affects every facet of human life. We are all equally responsible on an individual and systemic level to solve it: 'hugging trees' is not enough, a systemic, radical change is needed.

Such an understanding of the climate crisis has been brought about by decades of environmental education in schools and the progressive awareness of society towards matters pertaining to the environment. This has made it so that the current generation of youth feel 'naturally' more in tune with such themes: "A child, since kindergarten, is bombarded with messages about how beautiful nature, plants, and environmental protection are" ([M57f], interview).

In trying to explain what makes FFF activism unique or different from other climate activisms of the past, the participants called out differences in worldviews, conceptions, and practices of activism. They drew from their activist imaginaries and their beliefs about ages of activism as examples, as well as characteristics that, they believed, characterized their own generation. For example, they would position FFF in an historical setting, as an heir to the waves of climate movements of the past. In this view, the movement's identity was argued by

opposition (or, more rarely, similarity) with previous ways of fighting for climate change. For example: “Fridays [For Future] broke through [...] because it behaves like a movement from 1968” ([F20f] interview), since it manifests the same urgency and enthusiasm for a cause. These movements are presented on a scale of increasing awareness through time, so that, while activists in 1968 would express “enthusiasm about change [in general],” FFF expresses “a request to just ‘stop,’ meaning we’re going too far” ([U22f], interview). Similarly, the effort to pursue “social justice” (ibid.) expressed by FFF is different from that expressed by 1968 movements, as the latter were more focused “on workers’ rights,” while FFF is interested “in everyone [...]: we’re pursuing a dialogue to make people understand that we’re all in this together, there is a bit of disenchantment” ([U22f], interview).

Such a view was connected to the idea that there is “an old way of doing environmentalism and a new one” ([E24m], interview). There have been “a couple of big historical moments in which perhaps environmentalism could have broken through and it didn’t” (ibid) but those fights failed because “we didn’t actually understand how much the economy and the environment [...] were connected” (ibid.). The activist’s words expressed the key idea that, in FridaysForFuture, climate change is a holistic problem that can only be solved with systemic solutions rather than individual actions. This would set the movement apart from previous ones and allow it to provide a concrete and effective solution to the issue. Of a similar mind was also [A28m], who utilized different key-words to refer to environmental activism across its ages, practices, and key beliefs. The term ‘environmentalism,’ for example, would refer to an old way of doing activism, whereby people would “hug trees or [...] advocate for endangered owls, so nothing too important” ([A28m], interview). That kind of activism did not “delve deep” in the roots of the problem, so that new generations feel the need to use different words to express their different, more nuanced view of climate activism, such as being part of a “movement that fights against the climate crisis” (ibid.). Ironically, [A28m] sometimes still used the word ‘environmentalism’ to refer to his own climate activism because he considered himself “a bit of a millennial⁷” and was used to old nomenclatures. His distinction emphasized the idea that FFF’s soul and practices are so ‘young’ that they overcame past definitions of environmental activism. At the same time, this also supported the notion that different generations are characterized by specific social and historical issues, which impact people’s sensibilities, to the point that the social struggles of a generation come to define its activism (cfr. Mannheim 1970): “People who were born in the 70s, 80s, 90s... everyone is raised in a specific system and educated within a specific system. After that, it’s hard to change one’s opinion” ([A28m], interview).

According to [E24m], for example, the climate crisis was the defining issue of his generation: “There have always been times where certain themes have received more attention. In the 70s in Italy it was abortion, divorce [...]. Right now, in our generation, we feel the urgency to fight for a cleaner planet, for a climate that doesn’t generate catastrophes, for world equality” (interview). As they have been raised in such a way, the climate crisis is therefore an issue that is much closer to today’s young people than adults, to the point that only a minority of

⁷ The demographic cohort following Generation X and preceding Generation Z. They are usually identified with people born between the early 1980s and the mid-1990s, albeit some extend ending birth years to the early 2000s (see Pirie, M., & Worcester, R. M. (1998). *The millennial generation*. London: Adam Smith Institute; DeVaney, S. A. (2015). Understanding the millennial generation. *Journal of financial service professionals*, 69(6)).

the participants saw little to no difference between climate-awareness among younger and older people. Even in this case, this counted only as long as such people were properly informed and already empathetic and interested in social justice: “I believe that among serious people [...] the perception is the same, meaning the horror of knowing that poor countries are already paying the price” ([M57f], interview). In his interview, [W26m] made the example of his parents, who grew up in a period of economic prosperity and, as such, “heard way less about these issues [the climate crisis].” As a result, they have a much harder time “challenging their ideas and changing [...], while for young people it’s easier to accept change” (ibid.).

Perhaps [D20f] expressed the perceived differences between generations best in the following excerpt. She addressed how young people feel burdened by the legacy of past generations, who have used up the planet’s natural and economic resources, and how this impacts young people’s conscience-building processes. While previous generations grew up with the expectation of living a better life than their parents, today’s young people no longer hold this hope, pushing them to fight for what is left and to mitigate the damages of previous generations with an enthusiasm and urgency that the latter simply cannot feel:

We feel on our shoulders the weight of not knowing what the planet and our lives will be like. [...] The whole Generation X⁸, baby boomers⁹... they come from a completely different world... they were born with certain opportunities, right? A world flourishing and growing. [...] It is more difficult for them to imagine everything we, if we don't act, will have to deal with. Imagine our concern, or especially that of high school students or those much younger than us, or of people who want to have children and who have to ask themselves ‘ok, so, I'm having children, but what will they have to go through?’ ([D20f], interview).

According to the activist, younger generations simply possess a greater and different awareness of the mechanisms that govern society and the subsequent challenges they will face because of its socio-economic structure— which is also the prime cause of the climate crisis. Having lived a life of prosperity and hope marked a stark contrast between ‘baby boomers,’ ‘generation x,’ and younger people. The former simply lacked this awareness, leading them to experience less of the anguish towards the future and the planet that characterizes this generation of young people.

While drawing this line between the past and present way of being an activist, the participants also exemplified what they thought to be the defining characteristics of their own generation and, most interestingly, how they were inextricably entwined with communication technologies. The communicative infrastructure constituted by the internet and social media

⁸ The western demographic cohort following the baby boomers and preceding the millennials. They are typically identified with people born between 1965 and 1980 (cfr. Twenge, J. (2018, January 26). *How are generations named? The Pew Charitable Trusts*. Retrieved January 18, 2023, from <https://www.pewtrusts.org/it/trend/archive/winter-2018/how-are-generations-named>).

⁹ The western demographic cohort preceding ‘generation x’ and usually identified with people born between 1946 and 1964. The term ‘boomer’ will appear repeatedly during the course of this thesis as a derogatory term used to identify adults or, in general, people with paternalistic attitudes and poor digital skills. It is the term FFF-Rome activists used most often when describing how adults use social media, in opposition with young people’s usages. It does not include only actual ‘baby boomers’ but also all individuals the Fridays deemed ‘older’ than themselves in terms of worldview, values, and media practices.

was seen as a demarcation point between new and old climate activism because it empowered the new generations to gain greater knowledge and awareness regarding social issues, allowing them to draw a line between the way ‘old’ people perceive and live the climate crisis and how younger people do. It also allowed them to forge and enact novel activism practices that, while available to people from all age groups, were still conceptualized as intrinsically young.

Even before delving into specific social media practices and sense-makings, the act of using social media and the internet to gain and spread knowledge and, in minor part, to do climate activism, was considered young people’s ‘own thing.’ According to the activists, it was thanks to social media that a movement like FFF could be born, because they allow for the easy spreading of the scientific information necessary to understand climate change as a systemic issue: “The Fridays see the climate crisis for what it is and they’ve only managed to share this information thanks to the internet, because you didn’t have to go to the library or listen to another person: they send you the link from trusted sources and you read it” ([A28m], interview).

The greater awareness of social issues that the participants attributed to young people was therefore thanks to “the world of the web” ([K22f], interview). As people born in the 90s and 2000s, who grew up with social media or that only spent their early years without them, this generation was thought to have “a greater sensibility for different social issues, like transphobia, who weren’t even considered before” because “the advent of social media made it so we’re no longer stuck to one type of information [...]: we try to educate ourselves” ([D20f], interview). This sensibility also derived from the previously mentioned uncertain socio-economic condition that characterizes youth nowadays. Young people “grew up more disenchanted so we ask ourselves: ‘Why are we like this? What happened? What’s wrong with the system?’ And so, we go and seek why things are the way they are” ([U22f], interview). This connection immediately linked a socio-economic condition with the use of the internet to research its nature and implications. As explained by [D20f], this generation “has immediate access to information about these issues, because no one before told us [how it’s done]— we naturally came to the conclusion [that] it [the system] was wrong” (interview). As previously mentioned, adults’ minds were thought to be harder to change and adults would be characterized by conservative values and attitudes. Young people, on the other hand, are more malleable and, with proper education, can be brought to the social awareness that the activists attribute to them. Even when “people our age lack this kind of awareness, oftentimes it’s because they lack proper information” ([D20f], interview), so social media played a key role in aiding this generation to build awareness about social issues.

[R18f]’s words were especially indicative of the idea that digital communication technologies and the contemporary communicative infrastructure contributed to building the consciousness of this generation:

We’re the first generation that really has a mobile phone that allows us to communicate with all of the world [...]. For us, everything is happening in the present and we feel it all at the same time.[...] It’s something we can’t run away from and this leads all of us to a great rage and desire to change. Some people burn out and hurt

themselves, others decide to do something about all of this. [...] I don't like having a phone [...] I feel like it's an addiction [...], but I realize that it has given me a chance to say 'this is how the world is turning, and I won't stand for it' ([R18f], interview).

This quote immediately connects the discussion to the third subtheme concerning generational affinity to the cause, which is that today's young people would possess a specific sensibility towards matters of social change, bringing them closer to the climate crisis. This sensibility derives from the combined forces of the previous subthemes: the above mentioned social and economic challenges that have characterized this generation, the awareness that climate change will affect young people first and foremost but they lack the power to do something about it, and the role of digital information technologies. This would cause a shift in awareness, bringing young people to grow up "closer to this theme [the climate crisis]" ([O31f], interview) as "an anxious generation [...], an empathetic generation, who understands the pain we share but most of all the issues we have" ([R18f], interview).

It is perhaps interesting to note that the oldest Friday interviewed during the course of this research was among the first to draw this line and seemed to be keenly aware of the differences between his climate activism generation and the current one. Such differences were noticeable at the level of the issue at hand, more so than in activism practices: "I definitely perceive a difference among age groups, not as much in the 'act' of activism [...] but in the perception [of the climate crisis]" ([B64m], interview). [B64m] took as an example people in his age group, who "go around in huge cars just to go buy cigarettes from the shop that's 50 meters from their home" displaying a lack of knowledge and awareness of the impact such choices have. The activist's frustration was exacerbated by conversations with such people, who, when confronted with the urgency of the climate fight, displayed a complete lack of care: "They say: 'But why should it matter to me? I have no children, I'm already old, when the world is gone I'll be long dead, so who cares'" (ibid.). Such examples, according to the activist, explained how, while there might be superficial differences in activism practices among different generations, it was "when it comes to how to think and feel towards certain issues [that] I see many differences" ([B64m], interview). As a result, while the 'act' of doing activism can be similar across generations, albeit varying in its practices and modes of communication, the awareness and knowledge that bring people closer to activism change, so that they might have been rarer to find in people from [B64m]'s generation and potentially higher among today's young people. [Q42f] expressed a similar opinion when reflecting on her own past as an activist. She believed that "it is not by chance that young people are the protagonists of this [wave of climate activism]" (interview). She especially noted a difference in the way young people speak about these issues: "There is enthusiasm and urgency, [...] a deeper awareness, more stable, clear, and firm. It's cutting edge and so it's able to reach everyone" (ibid.).

Of the same advice was [F20f], who also believed that today's youth display a greater awareness regarding climate change: "We are aware, and it's because we're aware that we fight, because we want a future" (interview). She even noticed a difference between herself and the way her two older sisters behaved when they were [F20f]'s age: "Since I've seen how they acted when they were my age I can say that it's just our generation, because I found myself talking to them so many times and... they just lack the same awareness and willpower. The desire to fight for something that is not the workplace but bigger [...]. [The

main difference] is the lack of awareness, because now we're so lucky to be much better informed thanks to social media" (interview). According to [K22f], this might simply be the result of an "increasing awareness through time" towards matters concerning "nature and the planet, but also human beings, and this has been carried on from generation to generation" so that "the more time passes, the more newer generations will be increasingly conscious of these themes and from them an increasingly greater change can be born" (interview).

Some activists also noted an increasing disenchantment toward activism in general: while previous generations fought for more 'concrete' matters and believed that the single square demonstrations might have an actual impact, generations of activists have grown disenchanted through time. This feeling has prompted them to enlarge the scope of their fight so that nowadays youth are asking for a systemic change against the climate crisis and embrace disenchantment as a weapon to keep on fighting rather than give up since, after all, they have already known for a long time that the single demonstrations would not solve the climate crisis:

So much has happened that has made things change [in social movements]— maybe they're no longer as aggressive or straightforward [...] we're fueled by that crumb of disenchantment that makes you understand that 'it's not like if we fight things will change' [...] but it serves the purpose of explaining things to more people ([U22f], interview).

In this way, the activists perceive that their actions have an impact in the echo that will follow them rather than in the moment. Their goal is to pursue that greater dialogue and awareness that first involved them in the climate dispute and that they now want to extend to other generations as well.

2. A Friday's ID

Aside from a generational affinity towards climate activism and the cause of the climate crisis, there were a multitude of other elements that came to define the identity of 'Friday.' By this I mean both the personal identity of the climate activists that militate within FFF-Rome and the identity of the movement itself, since they come to shape each other. While all local branches of FridaysForFuture worldwide are characterized by being a youth movement, the Italian branches, and FridaysForFuture Rome, are mainly composed of university students and usually adopt a broader definition of 'young' when it comes to defining membership, in line with Italian culture¹⁰.

In order to analyze this and other characteristics of FFF-Rome, I will tackle the identity of the movement from an Inward and Outward perspective. The first one is mainly concerned with the personal characteristics of FFF activists and their manners of behaving with one another within the movement. The latter mainly regards the attributed/ perceived and projected/ desired identities of FFF-Rome. The objective is to outline who is a Friday, who is not, and who could be.

2.1 Inward identity

2.1.1 Characteristics: who the Fridays are and how they see themselves

As previously mentioned, FFF-Rome is mainly composed of young individuals. The average age of all the activists (44) interviewed and quoted during this research is 23.3 years old, with the older activist being 64 ([B64m]) and the youngest 14 ([C14f], [T14f], and [X14f]). This is in line with the perception I developed of the average age of the dozens of other activists I interacted with or saw within the movement in the three years of this research, even if I was not always able to know their exact age. However, at the early stages of research, this came as a surprise. The picture I had acquired of FFF-Rome from the outside was that of a movement of teen climate activists. This is probably to attribute to media portrayal of the global school strikes for climate, which emphasized the adherence of high school students to the strikes. In reality, though, FFF-Rome is mainly composed and run by university students, most of which were my age at time of the participant observation¹¹.

When asked who a Friday is, many participants started their answer with the words 'a young person,' defining 'young' as anyone under 30 or, sometimes, 25 years of age. This might be because the activists, who were usually in their twenties, tended to see themselves as young and identified those in their same age group with this label. [C14f], for example, adopted a different criterion for assigning this label. She was 12 when she first joined the movement and imagined she would join a group "where everyone is [my] age, everyone young... and then they're all 20-25! [...] I thought they'd all be young and then I found myself in this universe" ([C14f], interview). Her words suggest that she considered people no longer in their teens as basically 'old.' On this topic, all the activists agreed that there were some 'older' people within the ranks of FFF-Rome and that they would inevitably become more

¹⁰ Economic and cultural aids aimed at young people in Italy (such as Youth Cards and mortgage bonuses) usually target people within the age of 18-35, while other European countries usually adopt turning 25 years old as a demarcation point.

¹¹ I began fieldwork at 24.

numerous with time since “we have a bit of an aging problem: the youngest are growing less young and we need newcomers to respect the tradition [of having young climate activists] [...] [or we’ll become] Thirty-year-olds For Future!” ([M20m], interview). Of the same advice was [P23m], who observed how FFF-Rome’s age-group of reference had shifted “from 15-29” to “19/20-29” (interview). Even so, the 25-30 age mark was recurring in the activists’ imaginary of ‘young person,’ and this was reflected in the reluctance of older participants to call themselves ‘Fridays.’ An example was [O31f], who mentioned an “anagraphic issue” in “allowing myself to identify as a Friday” (interview). Even [B64m] was very aware of being “way over quota by age, but definitely not by enthusiasm!” (interview). Moreover, the adults or older people who participate “usually put themselves in a position, so to speak, of lending a hand more than guiding. The leadership is left to the younger, who are the ones who effectively founded the movement” ([M20m], interview).

From observations, it emerged how the activists were almost exclusively Italian, although, since Rome is both a big metropolis and university city that attracts youths from various parts of Italy, a portion of the activists in FFF-Rome originate from other towns, both in Rome’s province and outside. They were also not predominantly from any specific socio-economic background. A small portion of them came from families who had always been involved with activism and social causes, while others had previous experiences with activism and political participation, such as in their high schools or with student groups in their universities. However, this was not a prerequisite to join the group and many of the most active members at the time explained that FFF had been their first experience with activism.

As a result, as underlined in the previous chapter, the main element bringing FFF-Rome activists together was an interest in the climate crisis and the underlying assumptions about it, such as the idea that it is a systemic catastrophe that is connected to the global socio-economic system of production and with all other social issues: “It’s not by chance that we say there’s no climate justice without social justice” ([B64m], interview); “climate activism means social justice and this is always reiterated, we stand for minority rights, feminism, struggles for indigenous communities... anti-capitalism in short” ([T20m], interview). This sometimes translated into lifestyle choices such as being vegan, limiting one’s plastic usage, using public transportation and bikes, or being minimum waste. Such life choices were not embraced by all activists and sometimes elicited criticism, such as from [M57f] and [B64m], with the first criticizing people who came to the assemblies in a car rather than by other means of transportation, and the latter criticizing some activists’ use of Amazon products.

In interviews, the activists also associated some specific values and characteristics to being ‘a Friday,’ such as “passion and a limitless energy” ([E24m]), “not giving up” (F20f), “pacifism [...], curiosity, and [...] determination” ([K22f]), “resilience [...]: [the ‘Friday’] is a person who’s not completely right in the head [because] they decide to fight [...] rather than living a more peaceful life” ([C14f]), “motivation [...], a desire for change” ([N21f]), “a lot of empathy” ([R18f]), “lack of judgment and [...] humility” ([Q42f]). While no specific political ideology was mentioned, it was assumed that the identity of the movement itself would be enough to attract a certain kind of people: “If one has a strongly different political ideology, it is more difficult to feel like you belong” ([D20m]). In the end, then, in order to be a Friday, it was still essential to embrace the principles of the movement, such as the aforementioned assumptions on the climate crisis “and then a whole series of [things such as] being anti-

racist, anti-sexist, anti-homophobic etc. etc. all things that are linked ... the climate crisis and all the social problems: they are all linked” ([A28m]).

While Wahlström and colleagues (2019)’s report noted a greater participation of female activists within the ranks of FFF in Europe, FFF-Rome did not appear particularly skewed, gender-wise, in any direction. Of the previously mentioned 44 contacted activists, 23 were female, 20 male, and one was nonbinary. Ethnographic fieldnotes do not observe any particular intergroup (or intra-group) dynamics where gender roles were a significant part of the exchange. The group was often striving for inclusion and equal exposure time/ visual protagonism when it came to creating Instagram posts or selecting spokespersons or referents for FFF-Rome. For example, in preparation for the climate strike of October 2020, [M20m] and [A28m] (who was usually responsible for pictures and videos), were discussing how to shoot a series of ‘video-pills¹².’ [A28m] observed that most of the videos shot so far featured female activists, so the next one should have a male speaker, but [G25f] reminded him that it was not “something to fuss about: whoever wants to do it should do it, it must be spontaneous” (5 October 2020, in person assembly). The criterion for selecting activists to be featured on Instagram thus seemed voluntary-based rather than gender based, as FFF-Rome activists trusted the egalitarian mechanisms they put in place to regulate assembly discussions and decision makings (see ‘manners’ section below) to be enough.

Interestingly, the only instance of someone perceiving the movement as heavily female-oriented was from [Q42f], who observed how FFF-Rome’s Instagram page was representative of the movement because “it shows a lot of women [...] which is a characteristic they have and that I loved, because there are a lot of girls, a lot of women speaking up” (interview). This was true, as girls and young women were featured as protagonists in many of the 139 posts analyzed for this thesis. Their presence might, however, give back a skewed representation of FFF-Rome deriving from the volunteer-based selection of individuals for the posts: whoever wanted to appear on Instagram can just by saying so, so that some people, incidentally girls, were more often featured. As [R18f] explained in an interview, referring to her experience within the ranks of UDS¹³: “Usually you just ask if anyone wants to appear in the post [...]. For example, I am in lots of posts for UDS Rome, and another face would have worked just as well, but I was available at the right time and had a desire to do it.” As it will be discussed, rather than gender-based, the main selection-criterion for visibility within FFF-Rome is age-based, showing a preference for younger individuals. For example, a 9-year-old activist, who had already left FFF-Rome before fieldwork began, is heavily featured in FFF-Rome’s posts from 2019 and early 2020. This, however, is not because of her gender but of her extremely young age, which served to reinforce the outward identity of the movement as youth-centric and work as ‘shock value.’ There was, however, one instance where the criterion of “50-50” ([X18m], 2 November, online assembly) gender balance was more rigorously upheld and that was the selection of FridaysForFuture Italy’s representatives, that is the spokespersons who represent the

¹² Extremely short Instagram educational videos on the themes of the strike. They are more extensively analyzed in chap. 4 of Section 3.

¹³ A Roman high school student collective.

movement for mainstream media. Indeed, [X18m] expressed a desire to candidate himself but, since there was already another male candidate, he said he would try again next time.

The feature of being ‘young’ was exemplified not only by age alone but also by a general affinity towards the world of education, such as universities and high schools, and in opposition with older generations or ‘boomers.’ Indeed, it can be said that another characteristic that brings most of FFF-Rome activists together is that of being students¹⁴. Such identity is present in the very first act of protest of FFF: Greta Thunberg’s Friday school strikes. These are still echoed in the bi-annual Friday global strikes for climate, the effects and causes of the climate crisis and how to best face them, in the hours chosen for the weekly assemblies— which happen during the afternoon, so that students can participate—, and in the revindications of the movement— which often emphasize the inadequacy of schools to educate young people. This connection with the world of education is emphasized outwardly during marches, in interviews with mainstream media, on FFF-Rome’s Instagram posts, in educational activities that FFF-Rome organizes within public high schools... Still, on the ‘inside,’ there happens to be a “dichotomy between schools and FFF” ([H23m], 5 October 2020, in person assembly). The movement was described by some activists as a “student movement because it is made up of [...] students, mostly from adolescence to 30 years of age” ([T20m], interview) and by others as something different: “Fridays [for future] isn’t a movement of high-schoolers. Look around, everyone: we’re not high-schoolers” ([H23m], 19 October, in person assembly). As it emerged, high school students were mostly the participants of strikes, marches, and large protest actions, but the people who came to the assemblies on a weekly basis were university students. As [R18f] effectively summarized, FFF “is conceived so [as a student movement] [...] but it isn’t properly a student movement: it is one of those revindications that students have at heart and thus becomes a part of them” (interview).

In all of the assemblies I attended during fieldwork, the majority of the participants were university students and, often, one of the themes on the weekly agenda was how to attract more high school students, how to better engage high school students, how to involve them in the decision-makings, how to be more relevant for high school students... One of the most frequent locations for in-person assemblies was the Nuovo Cinema Palazzo, a building in the Roman district of San Lorenzo occupied and self-managed by various realities of civil society from 2011 to 2020 and that was close to the city’s biggest university. While a number of activists joined the movement as high-schoolers in 2018, when it started, and grew older and became university students by the 2020s, the dichotomy between high-schoolers and university students was especially characteristic of the Roman branch of FFF. From interviews with activists who had also been part of other local groups, it became evident that all FFF groups are mainly composed of university students but that in Rome specifically it was difficult to engage high schoolers and that there was a tangible tension between the two groups. This can be imputed to the rich high school student movement substrate of the capital, so that most high schools in Rome are already ‘affiliated’ with local student groups

¹⁴ The activists used the word ‘student’ to indicate people attending high school, only more rarely those attending universities.

(such as the above-mentioned UDS or the Middle Students¹⁵, which is by far the largest), sharing manners and modes of political participation that differ greatly from the ones adopted by FFF and, by extension, FFF-Rome.

The fragmentation that characterizes Italian politics and culture, so that each region and each province has a strong cultural identity, resulted in the proliferation of FFF groups in Italy. While other countries have “a group for each capital,” in Italy “we have groups for each city and region!” ([C14f], interview), so that each group is culturally, socially, and politically connected with its territory, with FFF-Rome, and its unique challenges and characteristics, being a perfect example. While the group is not only composed of activists from Rome, it possesses a strong cultural identity. [K22f] even went as far as pointing out elements that, she observed, were characteristic of the Roman branch of FFF, such as “being more straightforward than FFF-Italy [...]: we don’t mind as much if a post is not circulating because the people who follow us [...] are people we already know and have protested with in other groups and collectives [...]. It’s the page of a single town so everything is more direct and local” (interview). [Q42f] also noticed some characteristics of FFF-Rome, specifically that of recurring to Roman dialect and wordplays during protests and as slogans: “I loved to see Rome’s ‘thugs’ protest with signs written in dialect and eccentric slogans [...]. It makes you feel all the passion that goes into this fight” (interview). Even [C14f] drew some differences, explaining how FFF-Italy has more groups in the north of the country and that these are characterized by better efficiency. She explained that in Southern¹⁶ Italy the only major group was that of Rome and it was sometimes mocked by other groups for its being “disorganized” (2 October 2020, in person event).

Such characteristics are especially interesting when taken into context. While an international movement, FFF was born in the Global North and its values and manners are affected by those of the Global North tradition. FridaysForFuture Germany, in particular, “kind of dominates all other FFF groups both in visibility and influence in the International [FFF group]” ([M20m], interview) and its example has been raised time after time during assemblies as a goal for FFF-Rome. While FFF-Germany seems to be characterized by efficiency and professionalism, some activists were also skeptical about looking up to it excessively. On the one hand, they pointed out the “cultural differences” ([L25f], 7 September 2020, zoom assembly) between Italy and Germany, as well as between the two countries’ way of doing activism. When [M20m] suggested FFF-Rome try to enact covid-safe protests on the model of FFF-Berlin¹⁷, [G25f] was quick to curb his enthusiasm: “We’re in Rome, not in Berlin!” (4 September 2020, in person assembly), meaning that organizing a protest with that kind of complex planning was unthinkable in Rome as it required a kind of discipline, precision of planning and execution, and efficiency of infrastructure that was simply not available in the Italian capital. Rome posed specific challenges to the activists,

¹⁵ It refers to the ‘rete degli studenti medi di Roma’ (Rome’s network of the middle students), the Roman branch of Italy’s largest student association.

¹⁶ In this specific instance, the word ‘south’ referred to the array of cultural and social behaviors and stereotypes that Northern Italians refer to the southern part of the country. Rome sits in the center of Italy, so it is often described as the link between Southern and Northern Italy.

¹⁷ He was referring to a specific demonstration in which different groups of activists moved in a coordinated way from one part of the city to the other, so that they could respect safety distances but still give the impression that the whole city was engaged in the protest.

first of all its “sheer size [...]: it takes an hour and a half of public transport to get to the assembly” ([A28m], interview), meaning that participation is difficult to coordinate, resulting in the aforementioned criticism from other Italian FFF groups because of disorganization. At the same time, German culture recognizes the label of ‘climate activist’ “as a sort of professional qualification: they always interview you, you’re always featured in newspapers [...]. Here we don’t have the idea that someone can just go and do activism for the climate, it isn’t seen as anything particularly significant [...]: in the eyes of the public we’re still the guys who hug the trees, clean the beaches... things like that” ([M20m], interview).

Aside from these differences, political affiliations were also a ground where it was possible to point out differences between other FFF cultures of activism and FFF-Rome. FFF-Germany is once again a good example. Its affiliation with the German Green Party has harbored diffidence in some FFF-Rome activists. While FFF-Germany activists have accepted scholarships and financial aids from the Green Party, usually destined to its Instagram page, this kind of political affiliation was unthinkable in a group from FFF-Italy, where extreme fragmentation of local politics, corruption, and youth disenchantment towards politicians and parties would elicit criticism from all other FFF-Italy groups. FFF-Rome has historically been independent from any affiliation with political parties, despite many trying to exert some influence on it over time or to exploit FFF-Rome’s fame to gain visibility and votes. The group is very proud of such independence as it is difficult to maintain. This is because the Italian capital sits at the very center of the political sphere of the country, hosting the Italian palaces of power and politicians, as well as a vibrant and historically rooted network of student unions and movements. The latter are often politically aligned, meaning that their joining FFF-Rome’s protests could be read under a political light in terms of affiliation. This is among the reasons FFF-Rome activists are so quick to profess a-partitism, so as to protect the identity of the movement from whoever wants to sway it in this or that direction of the political compass, to ‘dye’ it its own color, or to exploit it for visibility. Such a-partitism, however, fuels the dichotomy between students and FFF-Rome activists, as students that are already part of a student movement rarely identify themselves as ‘Fridays’ and might perceive the latter as ‘cold’ or overly ‘idealistic.’

2.1.2 Manners: how to behave like a Friday

Being a Friday in FFF-Rome did not just mean to possess certain characteristics, but also to behave in a specific way. The movement has put in place an extensive set of rules and manners that inform participation in assemblies, protest modalities, and interaction with other individuals, inside and outside of the movement.

While the examples that will follow were noted during the observation of FFF-Rome specifically, this etiquette is adopted by the whole international network of FFF. Of course, this is with some differences and specifics relating to culture, and the etiquette is constantly updated and negotiated during yearly international assemblies. It is also interesting to note how some differences emerged between the manners of FFF-Rome and other local student movements and groups, with the latter finding them un-intuitive and ‘foreign’ at times. Perhaps this is a symptom of how FFF’s identity is connected to Northern European modes of political participation, while Italy is traditionally ascribed to the Southern European tradition. This was in contrast with observations that activists from Northern Italy made about FFF-

Rome specifically, criticizing its lack of organization and typically ‘southern’ mode of organization, as illustrated above. FFF-Rome appears to have translated activism practices to culturally adapt them to the context of Rome. The resulting activism identity appears foreign to both Rome’s student collectives and northern-based FFF groups, attesting to its uniqueness and its efforts to bridge different activism languages.

The first principle that guides FFF-Rome is that of inclusiveness, which is the practice of listening to each person’s opinion during assemblies, but also refers to specific mechanisms of participation, so as to facilitate this process. Assemblies and online working groups (on Telegram and WhatsApp) are open to anyone who wants to be a part of them. This is true for local branches of FFF and, to some extent, to national and international branches as well. If one wants to be added to FFF-International, for example, knowing English is a prerequisite, or one could not communicate with the other activists. Similarly, groups that are devoted to the coordination of FFF and to deciding its political and ontological positioning are usually open to members that are already involved with the movement to a certain extent. I did not ask to be added to the national communication group of FFF as soon as joining FFF-Rome, both because I did not know of its existence yet and because, upon learning about it, I had the impression that one should do something to ‘earn’ it or really want to make a change. Otherwise, one would end up overcrowding an important space for coordination at the national level without having the chance to contribute anything significant to it. This impression also extended to all the other sub-groups FFF-Rome was divided in across its various social media. Still, participation was open to all and I did not record any instance of someone being denied from participating in a specific group or activity, as far as it did not challenge the group’s identity (for example by emphasizing protagonism and leadership of adults rather than youth or when it compromised FFF-Rome’s a-partitism). This, however, will be more extensively analyzed in the section about outward identity.

Assemblies are open to all those who want to “say what they think,” because “everyone’s word counts in the same way” ([K22f], 9 December 2020, online event). Each assembly opens with a round of presentations in order to integrate newcomers, with a brief explanation of how to intervene in order to level the modalities of participation, and with a recommendation to keep one’s intervention brief, so as to give everyone equal space to express themselves. As [K22f] explained during the course of an online event, activists employ codes to participate in the discussion when assemblies happen online. In the chat box, they will write “‘C’ for clarification, ‘T’ for technical interventions, and ‘F’ for when an intervention needs to be shortened” ([K22f], 9 December 2020, online event). Offline, the activists will sometimes mimic these letters with their hands, but mostly recur to raising one’s hand to ask for clarification, to intervene, or to remind someone to keep within the time limit. This is because the common practice is to ‘book’ one’s turn to take the floor. These ‘bookings’ are jotted down on a notepad by the moderator and, once their turn arrives, the activist talks for a maximum of 3-5 minutes in order to give everyone a chance to participate, often apologizing for ‘monopolizing’ the floor if they intervene multiple times during the same assembly. Similarly, consensus might be express by typing a ‘+’ in online meetings or by using the sign language applause in physical meetings, while dissent would require a ‘-’ in the chat “but it is not used much because it might hurt someone’s feelings” ([K22f], 9 December 2020, online event). The preferred action is to simply “take the floor and explain

why you don't agree" (ibid.) with what has been said. In other words, FFF-Rome activists apply an actual assembly etiquette that unfolds between online syntax¹⁸ and offline body language, informed by the principles of politeness and inclusiveness. They prioritize respect and consideration for others and invite people to have their say and get involved in the activities. [P23m] described this etiquette as "in-assembly well-being" inspired by "regenerative culture" practices regarding "not only values but responsibilities, manner of treating new-comers ... and rules" (19 October 2020, in person assembly). These practices reflect "the ideal society that the movement wishes to create, [...] in which all people are involved in the decisions that can affect their lives," such as those relating to the climate issue ([K22f], 9 December 2020, online event).

Alongside the principle of inclusiveness, FFF-Rome activists also get involved through the internal organization of the movement through a methodical, horizontal deliberative process. A weekly schedule is in place to organize meetings and protests, so that, on a typical week, Mondays are assembly days, where the group decides on the week's protests, Tuesdays are for listing the materials and resources needed for the protests, Wednesdays are for booking the squares chosen for protest with the relevant city authorities, and Fridays are for protests and strikes (19 October 2020, in person assembly). For significant protests, deliberation at the national level happens in a decentralized way as each local group is relatively autonomous but still has to follow general coordinates from FFF-Italy and FFF-International. All groups communicate with each other via Telegram and through yearly or bi-annual assemblies. Each local group is also further divided into WhatsApp working groups, which can be local, national, or international in scope, carrying out the tasks decided during the assemblies and those needed to support FFF-Rome's activism, such as its social media channels.

Cooperation, specialization, and transparency are principles that guide the work of these groups. Each of them periodically shares reports and technical documents to facilitate coordination between different cities and brainstorming of activities. This strategy allows the Fridays to engage with the movement based on their personal interests and skills, while at the same time allowing for managing different branches of the movement in an orderly manner. As explained by [K22f]: "It's a new way of organizing [...] compared to other movements, which allows for the integration of anyone [...] and for the use of the so-called 'collective intelligence.' A group of thinking heads always gives better results than a single thinking head!" (9 December 2020, online event). This strategy also leverages on young people's sociability for the creation of content, while at the same time contributing additional spaces to "learn things by discussing, chatting, having fun [...], and making friends" ([K22f], 9 December 2020, online event).

Specialization also extends to roles in the assembly. Some activists are assembly-elected referents of FFF-Rome to FFF-Italy, others have matured a great competence in topics related to the climate crisis and/or the socio-political and economic models useful to promote social justice, others still are known for their contacts and networking skills with other organizations and associations. While this is by far a non-exhaustive list, it highlights how the leadership

¹⁸ As it will be analyzed in chapters 3 and 4, the online adaptation of the assembly etiquette was mainly developed during the COVID-19 emergency, when in person assemblies could not be organized. It was, however, still in place as of the end of 2021.

dynamics of the movement do shift towards centralization through the figures of moderators and referents, but still follow a horizontal principle of ‘scattered power,’ shifting authority in a functional way, according to which Friday is more suited to respond to specific political needs. During a series of online meetings, activists even addressed each other with names that jokingly referred to these qualities: [C14f] was “the queen of social networks!”, [P23m] “[the] practical guy,” while for “technical and scientific things” one goes to [M20m] because “those bore [everyone] except him” (9 December 2020, online event). When I joined the group, [K22f] and [G25f] were the activists that welcomed me with curiosity and open-mindedness, facilitating the inclusion of fieldwork in the activities of FridaysForFuture. [E24m], [R18f], and [C14f] also expressed great enthusiasm for the research and were always keen to ask more questions, fortifying research appropriation by FFF-Rome. [M20m] was the science expert with knowledge of data and climate change and he was the main reference every time I had questions about the topic. [P23m] was always present in the territories where the climate fight was carried out and he was particularly knowledgeable on the socio-political implications of climate change. He also possessed a vast knowledge on the dynamics and history of Roman mobilizations and was an important ally in legitimizing this research. [Z19m] and [U18m], on the other hand, represented the world of high school students, fundamental for understanding their dynamics and political needs.

Another behavior that characterizes a Friday’s identity was politeness, which refers both to the attitude FFF-Rome activists strive to adopt with each other and with people outside of the movement. Politeness translates, on a first level, to using proper language during interventions. When [S18m] used a swear word to refer to school presidents’ attitude towards activism, [Z19m] jokingly called him “a princess” (10 July 2020, in person assembly) to point out his lack of manners. Even during demonstrations, the activists “always try to avoid sexist sentences, which sometimes I happened to read on cardboard signs” ([K22f], interview). Politeness worked hand in hand with the practice of inclusivity. For example, when newcomers approach the movement or when an old theme is discussed again after a long time, senior activists summarize the key points of the issue before the discussion begins, so that everyone can follow it, even those who lack extensive knowledge on the topic. Additionally, FFF-Rome’s activists’ politeness also serves to build distance between insiders and outsiders, defining the identitary boundaries of the ‘Friday.’ In this sense, FFF-Rome activists’ polite behavior at times means to delicately but coldly push unsuitable people and opinions away, in opposition to using bluntness. It can happen when negotiating activism and social media practices, fighting off paternalistic attitudes, ignorance of opinions... However, the mechanism was most often in action when adults tried to take the floor or failed to “know their place,” as [C14f] put it during the interview. This was noticeable even during interviews, when younger activists were asked about the connection between FFF activism and specific age-groups.

As mentioned, almost all of the activists explained that FFF is composed of ‘young people.’ Still, many of them quickly corrected themselves after that and specified that, within the movement, “there are also a lot of older people” whose contribution to FridaysForFuture is “precious because they have greater experience than us in activism and they have more contacts,” they are able to “see like insiders and give us proper feedback on what to do” ([K22f], interview). This narrative wants to reinforce the idea that anyone can join FFF-Rome

and be a Friday, a valuable member of the group. However, during assemblies, it was easy to perceive that older activists like [B64m] tried to contain their own enthusiasm in order to fit with the movement's engagement practices— at times with little success. On one occasion, [B64m] was explaining the technical aspects related to fund allocation in the circular economy (7 September 2020, online assembly), a topic he frequently and passionately brought to the assembly. As informed and useful as his explanation was, it was also lengthy, well exceeding the three minute mark that the activists had established as the maximum time a single person could take for an assembly intervention. When younger activists exceeded the time limit, the moderator would stop them and tell them to let other people take the floor, so as not to monopolize it, but, when it happened to [B64m], the activists had a tendency to let him finish. The same happened that day and [K22f], the referent, even thanked him for his explanations. Failing to contain the activist's enthusiasm, the group simply resigned to let him speak and graciously thank him for his insights, tacitly, however, marking a boundary between activists who were upheld to certain standards of participation and those who were exempt for various reasons.

The expected behavior of adults like [B64m] or members of 'parallel' associations, who hesitated to call themselves Fridays, was to engage in a performed shyness by avoiding to participate too intensely in the discussion, so as not to take the stage from young people. When failing to do so, FFF-Rome activists adopted a behavior of cold, quiet politeness towards them. This was the case with [B64m] and other non-Fridays, who were not interrupted when their time was up or when they failed to perform according to the correct assembly etiquette. More remarkably, in September 2020, an adult journalist and singer approached FFF-Rome and participated in a few assemblies, culminating in her asking FFF-activists to presence in the music video of her latest song. Her attitude towards the movement was very patronizing: she repeatedly praised them for what they did, calling them 'nice kids,' and focusing more on the single people than on the issue of climate change. As a result, her interventions were met with silence and FFF-activists tended to look away or chat among themselves whenever she took the floor. Even if, like with [B64m], they still thanked her after each of her interventions, legitimizing her presence, FFF-Rome's attitude simultaneously communicated that she was an outsider and unable to comprehend the movement's identity. This is to show that the rules that govern how a Friday behaves were only valid if one was (or could be) a Friday. Holding to the high, at times seemingly impossible, standard of 'the ideal Friday' was only expected of those that were implicitly believed to be able to identify as Fridays. Those who possessed, had acquired, or could acquire the right characteristics. The singer's age, attitude, and self-serving interest in FFF-Rome automatically ruled her out.

Another integral part of FFF-Rome's etiquette is one's continuity. While no one is shamed for missing assemblies or for being less involved than other people, several activists would apologize to each other, during assemblies, for not being 'active' enough. This is perhaps connected with the core characteristics of the Friday described in the previous section: resilience, energy, not giving up. This translates into an 'ideal' image of how a Friday should be and to which some activists internally compared themselves. Among embracing the groups' core principles and manners, continuity of presence seemed to be the most important aspect in allowing someone to feel like they were truly a Friday. When asked in interviews if

they considered themselves one, the activists who did not would almost always cite insufficient involvement with the movement, poor continuity of presence, or lack of seniority as reasons.

An interesting example of this mechanism was an exchange reported at the beginning of an in-person assembly (18 September 2020). Francesca Belotti, a scholar who was also carrying on research within FFF-Rome as a participant observer, was asked by an activist who she was and she replied that she had “joined the Fridays” only lately. One of the senior members ([P23m]) overheard the conversation and commented that not even him considered himself a Friday, but, if Francesca really wanted to, she could say she was one. At this point, she explained that she did not mean she *was* a Friday, only that she had joined the movement. The exchange raised the question whether [P23m] was ‘putting’ the researcher back into her place because of a general skepticism towards academia and inside researchers, or if he was simply making her aware of an internalized but rather formalized iter toward auto-identifying as Friday. After spending six months of participant observation within the movement and being more loosely involved with it for two years, I believe that the second explanation is more plausible.

During the interviews I repeatedly asked FFF-Rome activists if they considered themselves Fridays and always received mixed replies. Additionally, I was asked in turn by them if I considered *myself* a Friday and realized, time after time, that my lack of continuity of presence made it hard for me to do so. Even during the observation period, when I was more deeply involved with FFF-Rome’s activities, I noted down each occurrence of me using the pronoun ‘we’ rather than ‘them’ to refer to FFF-Rome and wondered, time after time, if this was due to a proper balance between immersion and observation, or by my internalizing and ascribing to the identitary mechanisms that regulate FFF-Rome. There were times where I was writing down notes automatically but stopped right before writing ‘we,’ because it made me notice that I was implicitly ascribing myself to the group. Other times, using this or that pronoun was more natural. Only upon rereading my notes I realized that, during the time I was most intensely participating in the group (i.e., during the action week preceding October 2020’s global strike for climate), I tended to use ‘we’ and ‘us’ to write about the Fridays.

Continuity is the principle that regulates inclusiveness, making it so that, while newcomers are welcomed, they still ‘know their place’ and do not completely take over assemblies. Attendance is not mandatory, but missing assemblies especially seemed to be something that would render an activist less of a Friday. It was the case of [Y18m] and [Z18m]. The former excused himself from taking the floor during an assembly because “I haven’t participated in an assembly since last June” (18 September 2020, in person assembly). The latter similarly apologized for missing some assemblies and commented that this was the reason he “almost cannot consider” himself “as belonging to this community 100%” (10 July 2020, in person assembly). Their discomfort confirmed that being a Friday implies being consistent in participating in the assemblies.

Still, this varied on a case to case basis. [M20m], who was also a national referent for FFF-Italy, did apologize for missing assemblies but still did not question his own self-identification as Friday, suggesting his legitimacy must be more solid than that of others. Additionally, there were a few instances where interviewees who had joined the movement

for a short time and only participated in a few assemblies did identify as Fridays, because, as they said, they embraced the movement's principles. Still, they admitted that there was a contradiction in their self-identification: "I feel a bit guilty to say I am [a Friday] because I'm not very active, but I do- I'd like to- maybe in a very 'soft' way, unaware... I love giving myself this label" ([H20f], interview).

[W26m] probably exemplified this tension best in the following excerpt, where he sums up how identifying with the group's core values is essential but it is continuity, contribution to the group, and knowledge about the climate crisis that really make someone a Friday:

Q: Do you consider yourself a Friday?

[W26m]: A little bit. Not because I don't feel for the cause, but because I believe that, before defining as something or as part of a group, one has to earn it a little. Joining a couple of meetings and using labels like 'I'm a Friday' seems a little bit exaggerated to me.[...] I will have to earn it a little bit [...]. There are guys like [K22f], [P23m] and others [...] they are an important part of the group: they organize [things], they have many contacts [...][and] knowledge [...]. I think they are the ones who can be called 'Friday.' I still cannot.

2.2 Outward identity

Who a Friday is also answers the question 'who do people outside of the movement believe a Friday is?' as well as who the Fridays want to be, and desire to be perceived as. This section therefore differentiates among different outward identities of the Friday: their desired/ projected identity, and their attributed/ perceived identity, that is how the Fridays are seen versus how they want to be seen.

This data was, once again, inferred from interviews, from identity negotiations arising from assembly discussions, from conversations with senior and junior members, Instagram posts, and, in minor part, from conversations with high school students and people who only gravitate around the movement rather than being a part of it. Since most of the data was collected from the Fridays' words and attitudes, this section, just like the one above, speaks mostly about their own experience of being a Friday and what they believe their social perception is.

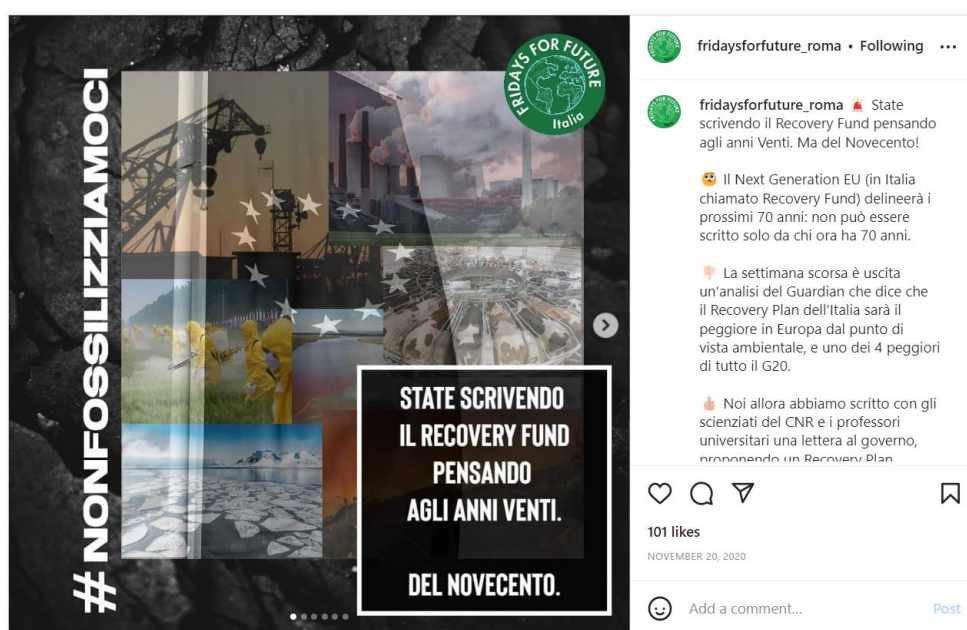
2.2.1 Desired and Projected identity: How the Fridays want to be seen

Immediately connected to the Fridays' notion of who a Friday is and how they behave is that of how they want to be seen. This desired identity is projected on the outside, to people that may or may not have a knowledge of the movement, and it is meant to form the public's opinion of FFF-Rome.

In this, visual narratives on Instagram play an important role because they are often the first contact that many people have with the movement. This is in contrast with mainstream media's portrayal of FFF-Rome (cfr. Section 3 chap. 4), as the latter lies outside of the Fridays' sphere of control and they can only influence it to a certain extent. The former, on the other hand, is the result of a series of negotiations and changes through time, albeit maintaining its core elements. From ethnography and interviews with the Fridays it emerged,

for example, how they see themselves as educators and activists. In the words of [W26m]: “FFF is responsible for raising awareness and countering the policies [...] that are not sustainable, that is, that do not work, and fight for the pursuit of climate and social justice” (interview), meaning that FridaysForFuture is animated by two forces: to educate on the climate crisis and to fight to solve it.

This is expressed via their Instagram page not only in the iterative connections with the world of science and data, but also through the protagonists and subjects of the pictures. The identity of educators is reinforced, on the one hand, through data visualizations, infographics, and informative posts, explaining complex notions or spreading facts about climate change and polluting companies; on the other, by referring to the world of education in general. This can happen through call out posts to the Italian ministers of education for their poor choices, through constant references to the world of school and education, and through the narrative that the Fridays (and youth in general) are not taught about their future and about the climate crisis, so the Fridays are here to supply that information and educate people. The post below is an example of these strategies in action (*Pic. 2*).



Picture 2: Post from 20 November 2020. The image reads: “You are writing the Recovery Fund with the 20s in mind. The 1920s.” Link: <https://tinyurl.com/mezmyccw>

The post is a comment on the European Union’s Next Generation EU (known as Recovery Fund¹⁹ in Italy) and it criticizes especially the plan for Italy. Through six infographic-like pictures, the post highlights the main issues in terms of sustainability of the measures foreseen by the plan— such as investing in non-renewable energy and fossil fuels— and advances some proposals to correct the plan before it is signed. The second picture is a direct reference to the world of education as it quotes: “Italy once again failed sustainability”

¹⁹ The Recovery Fund is the European program approved in July 2020 to support EU countries in overcoming the crisis caused by COVID-19, ensuring them the funds necessary to support economic recovery for a total of 750 billion euros. It consists of an unprecedented common debt contracted by twenty-seven European countries which will induce them to create new taxes in view of its repayment. The Recovery Fund is part of the Next Generation EU, a strategic plan with long-term time horizons with the aim of guiding the ecological and digital transition of the European Union.

referring to sustainability as if it was a school subject in which Italy failed, once again, to secure a passing grade. Additionally, the post's caption mentions how FridaysForFuture activists have "written with the scientists from CNR [National Center for Research] and with university professors a letter to the government, proposing an alternative Recovery Plan in 7 points." Through posts like this one, the Fridays present themselves as directly collaborating with science and with socially acknowledged academic entities. Their informative posts thus appear to directly reference top-edge science and, in virtue of its legitimizing authority, counter the narratives of climate change deniers but also criticize openly and with self-awareness government plans, even at the European level.

This sort of data activism is particularly evident in FridaysForFuture advocacy campaigns in relation to institutions and in its protest campaigns against polluting companies. An example of the first type is the campaign 'Back to the future' (Ritorno al futuro), which was designed during the first wave of the COVID-19 emergency as a "programmatic strategy aimed at intensifying awareness on climate issues at the institutional level" ([H23m], 20 July 2020, online assembly). As [M20m] explained, it is "a seven-point plan of requests and actions ... on many issues such as energy, construction, agriculture, land protection, water resources, and so on," whose "authority" comes from the "mammoth effort" to gather contacts "from the world of science, associationism, and activism" (9 December 2020, online event). This campaign brought the climate dispute to the attention of public opinion and institutions but also strengthened the internal commitment of those FridaysForFuture activists who engaged in the training, communication, and networking activities that gave rise to it.

The identity of 'activists,' on the other hand, refers to a series of qualities that the Fridays see as desirable and want other people to associate with them and with the movement. They strive to uphold the idea that FFF-Rome is a grassroots movement that is anchored to the people rather than to institutions or to specific political parties and ideologies. They emphasize spontaneity of participation and political action, and a-partitism. As [E24m] observed: "Everything is spontaneous [in FridaysForFuture] and it's one of the things I've always admired about them. If we're here now it's because a girl walked the streets and then a lot of other people activated themselves, they built a network, relationship [...]. Most people [within FFF] come from nothing, from below, without having other activism experiences" (interview). While [E24m]'s words emphasize the grassroots element of FFF-Rome, it is also interesting to note that, in his mind, FFF-Rome's projected identity of 'activists' does not contrast with its members' little political or activist background. In his view, the significance of the cause and the 'spontaneity' of participation are enough to legitimize the activism character of the movement. [K22f] was of a similar mind. She too revindicated the importance of activism and 'ordinary' people taking back agency: "If we ordinary people don't act, as they say, from below, we cannot expect, then, that politics will act as we want. On the other hand, we need to raise our voices, make ourselves heard" (interview).

On multiple occasions during assemblies, activists declared that FFF-Rome's actions should never compromise this identity and its independence/ autonomy. When discussing how to present the campaign 'Back to the future' in the Italian parliament, they were mindful to remember that it was an important mediatic and political opportunity, but that it should not "bring us away from being grassroots" ([J24m], 7 September 2020, online assembly).

The identity of ‘activists’ is to be protected even when there might be legal repercussions. This became evident during the action week of October 2020, when FFF-Rome activists had organized, often alongside activists from ExR²⁰, more intense protest actions than what FFF-Rome was usually known for. These included blocking the entrance of ATAC, a Roman company responsible for public transport within the city, and chaining oneself to the gates of Eni²¹. The aftermath and repercussions of these protests were discussed in an online assembly on December 14th, 2020. This was because some activists had been sued and reported to public authorities and the activists were thinking whether to contact a lawyer. [K22f] summarized the events and pointed out that the public offence in question was that the group’s protest had been unauthorized. This risked them a fee and, at most, reclusion up to six months. The report, however, had been withdrawn so, according to [J24m] it would be extremely unlikely for anyone to be prosecuted and it was just an attempt of the authorities to intimidate the movement. [B64m] agreed and commented that it was only natural that FFF-Rome’s relations with public institutions would sour when the group touched strong interests such as those of Eni. It was a way to push the activists to “abandon the struggle [and] it is even more serious when it happens to very young people who (or whose parents) are easily frightened” (ibid.) so the specter of being ‘prosecuted’ or being labeled ‘a criminal’ are just employed by officers to intimidate activists and dissuade them from the fight. In his opinion, and that of senior FFF-Rome members, FFF-Rome should keep fighting no matter what, but junior and younger members were more reluctant to participate in future protests if unauthorized. [P23m] and [M20m], albeit agreeing with [B64m], also recommended prudence, because much of FFF-Rome’s social legitimation and authority derived from being perceived as ‘vehicles of science’ rather than ‘thugs’ and ‘criminals.’ This position exemplified the complex balance between valuing the grassroots and radical side of activism, and being perceived as ‘nice kids.’ When I myself was almost reported to the police during a strike, the event definitely enhanced my social integration and legitimization in the movement. The Fridays started to perceive me as one of them rather than a mere scholar doing her research, but, as [P23m] and [M20m]’s reminder stated, the Friday is not a ‘criminal’ and must strive to tell the truth rather than to oppose police for the sake of it. This ambivalence will be discussed more in depth in the following paragraph, when addressing the identity of ‘nice kids.’

The identity of ‘fighters’ was once again reinforced by the connection between being an FFF-Rome activist and age through the narrative of the young activist, fighting for their own future. Such identity seemed to be both sought after by the Fridays and attributed to them by the media and the general public, so that each side reinforced it. According to the activists, it started with Greta and the fact she was so young: “[She is] the image, the face of FridaysForFuture [...]. Not everyone likes it but it’s inevitable and Greta is none other than a kid like me or you, actually she’s even younger” ([F20f], interview). According to [F20f] it was because of her age that Greta Thunberg was able to mobilize so many people, because of the contrast between people’s perception of youth as happy and carefree and her anger

²⁰ Extinction Rebellion. An international movement against climate change that uses nonviolent civil disobedience as a form of activism to encourage political action to solve the climate crisis.

²¹ An Italian fossil fuel giant whose headquarters are located in Rome. According to the 2020 report of the Climate Accountability Institute (https://climateaccountability.org/carbonmajors_dataset2020.html), Eni is the thirtieth company in the world for polluting gas emissions.

towards politicians and polluters, fueling the narrative that this generation is doomed. [C14f] also agreed that FFF's identification with young people is to be traced back to Greta: "She was young and she was saying 'you're taking the future from you and your children'... she always alluded to a conception of young people losing their future [...] in the collective imagination we [FFF activists] are young people" (interview). According to [Q42f], this identity was also reinforced by a connection with the world of education, because, once again calling back to Greta's first strikes: "She did something specific that is tied to the world of school [...]: it's about skipping school, it's a very precise age group" (interview). Indeed, the first protest of FFF-Rome heavily featured high school and middle school students, to the point that [Q42f] wished to participate but felt that she would not be welcome or she would feel out of place.

Another characteristic of FFF-Rome's outward identity is professionalism. It refers to the group's struggle to be taken seriously and appear competent in its scientific knowledge and reliable in its organizational dynamics. As exemplified by [S18m] during the very first assembly of fieldwork: "What matters it's also how the public perceives the movement [...] Consistency, professionalism, and fairness are also very important, or they'll completely change opinion about us and the movement" (10 July 2020, in person assembly). This ambition might be a legacy of the movement's northern culture, as the activists suggested when expressing the difference between FFF-Germany and what FFF-Rome's cultural and activist practices are. Still, it was internalized by FFF-Rome as well and became a distinctive trait of the movement.

As [M57f] commented while comparing FFF with other activist groups: "I feel they are very punctual and clear, so I feel that there is not only a lot of energy put into what they do, but also a great professionalism, which I like" (interview). Perhaps one of the most striking examples of this kind of organization was the three-day formation encounter in Brescia (Italy) for all Italian FFF groups, which happened in December 2021. This event had not been foreseen when I first began my work with FFF-Rome. The participant observation had ended months prior, but I was reconnecting with the movement in order to conduct the interviews and [M20m] proposed I came along to Brescia with the Roman group to see the national network of FFF-Italy. The efficiency of the organization of such an event was remarkable: two hundred activists from dozens of Italian collectives met in the city and took classes on sustainability, communication, etc. at the University of Brescia, with tutors and professionals appointed by the movement itself. The event was crowdfunded and each participant received a badge, meals made from produce 'rescued' from supermarkets because of its appearance or its being near the expiration date, coupons for free drinks, a detailed program of the lectures, and a place to sleep. It was interesting to see how most Fridays would appoint such an organization both to the identity of the movement and also to the fact that we were in the north of Italy, which stereotypes mark as more efficient and organized than its southern counterpart.

On the way back to Rome, [M20m] asked me what I thought of the three-day event and I could only express how impressed I was by the efficiency of the organization and how well it worked to hold together something like FFF: a huge network of local, national, and transnational groups. However, when I asked him if this model of activism had been inspired by other movements or if other Italian groups had adopted it as well, he was dumbfounded:

he said that he had never considered it something Friday-like. His answer suggested that this way of operating and maintaining a social movement like FridaysForFuture was so ingrained in the Fridays' behavior and way of interacting with each other that they no longer perceived it as something noteworthy. This was especially true for activists, like [M20m], who had only militated within FFF and did not have a history of activism in other groups, so that some differences between movements were harder to tell apart to them.

The spokespersons of FFF at the national level are also chosen because of their reliability. Even if not experts, they must convey a sense of competence and be well-informed about the movement, its revindications, climate change, and English. They must be aware of themes connected to climate change because "they could be asked questions in public and must know how to behave in these situations" ([H23m], 7 September 2020, online assembly). [C14f] even explained that activists who want to become national referents must go through a series of examinations, such as seeing how they fare in an interview, their propriety of language, and most of all their knowledge of climate science: "It's not about being the face of FFF but its voice, it's important to be aware of the responsibility" (2 November 2020, online assembly). The objective was to maintain and reinforce the movement's identity of competence by "basically picking people who'll make us look good!" ([G25f], 7 September 2020, online assembly). The preservation of competence also informs activist demonstrations as well as social media and communication strategies within the movement. The most notable case in this sense is the movement's decision whether to adopt TikTok as a new platform for FridaysForFuture, a deliberation that is analyzed more in detail in the following chapters.

2.2.2 Attributed and perceived Identity: How the Fridays (believe they) are seen

Concerning the perceived identity of FFF-Rome, it is possible to identify three main identities: one positive, one mixed, and one negative. As the public opinion of what a Friday is falls outside the scope of this thesis, data to inform this section were gathered from observation of FFF-Rome during assemblies, their interactions with other groups, and their comments and beliefs about how people perceive them.

The first identity, hinted at in the previous section, is that of being 'good/ nice kids.' It refers to the efforts to have FFF-Rome activists perceived as polite, respectful, and well-mannered, in opposition with other movements and groups in the Italian sphere, such as student movements, who are often criticized as dangerous, rude, and aggressive. In contrast, FFF activists want to be seen as 'nice kids' who do not pose a threat to the establishment. As [Z19m] commented: "The strength of the Fridays lies in their correctness and coherence, which has put the media and public opinion on their side, also in the way we mobilize [...]: they have hardly told us 'ah, the Fridays are such criminals!'" (10 July 2020, in person assembly). [E24m] explained the desirability of this identity in that people are easily intimidated by activism because of preconceptions on what activists do and how they look like. On the other hand, it is easy to find "even old people with their canes" (interview) protesting alongside FFF-Rome activists, so the public feels safer and thinks that truly anyone can walk the streets with the movement.

From the activists' words, then, the perceived identity of being nice kids has been an important asset of the movement, since it has helped it gain traction and social approval in

contrast with other groups and ways of doing activism. This identity thus sits in-between the categories of ‘how they want to be perceived’ and ‘how they are perceived.’ FFF-Rome have realized that their activism practices, revindications, and identity had molded in the public a certain perception and expectation of what FFF-Rome is. While this had, conversely, made relationships with other groups harder (as we will see in the final paragraph of this chapter) it also allowed them to achieve greater mediatic protagonism and to be admitted into places that other, more ‘threatening’ - perceived groups, were excluded from, such as the Italian parliament. It thus became desirable to be perceived as ‘nice kids,’ since it strategically awarded them a greater social legitimization.

[C14f] effectively pointed out the trade-off of this exchange during a conversation in the midst of the October 2020 action week. We were meeting up at the outskirts of Rome for a school and sustainability workshop. [C14f]’s mother had just dropped her off at the social center²² where the workshop would take place and she was still in her school uniform. She confessed she felt very out of place dressed like that in such a place²³ and would rather wear a casual outfit and organize a “more violent action,” in tune with the environment of the neighborhood. However: “The Fridays must be nice and cute” so it could not be done. In her words, the identity of nice kids appears to occasionally hinder the group’s activities, because it limits the political actions they can take and might make the single activists (like her) feel like outcasts in the very places of the city where social movements, social centers, and grassroots activities are more widespread. Still, this tradeoff is still considered advantageous as it supports the movement’s legitimization.

This identity is closely connected with an attitude of paternalism towards the movement, whereby the activists are easily dismissed as ‘just kids’ or overly praised for their efforts. It was not only the case of the aforementioned singer and journalist, but also of politicians. On multiple occasions, FFF-Rome activists received praise from Italian politicians or even ministers for ‘caring about the environment.’ Still, when it came to inviting the activists to the Preconference of the Parties in 2019, not a single FFF activist was selected. Rather, they picked Federica Gasbarro, a young woman who had previously been part of FridaysForFuture but with an authoritative approach: she spoke with the news press and used FFF’s official social media to spread her own ideas despite never having been elected as a spokesperson. She presented her personal opinions as those of FridaysForFuture, and the movement had to struggle to disentangle its public image from her shadow, since traditional media failed to understand that she was not, indeed, qualified to speak for FridaysForFuture. By choosing her to represent FFF at the PreCOP, the appointed authorities were showing once again that they

²² Centro sociale. Community center would be a close translation in English, but it would still lack the political connotation of the Italian counterpart. It refers to a particular self-managed structure linked to a countercultural network. They are often born after the occupation of a public, private, or abandoned space and they aim at giving support to minority groups or providing socially useful and recreational activities and initiatives, which are determined by the needs of the neighborhood and by the possibilities and capabilities of those who participate in and manage them. Italian social centers represent a phenomenon of extra-institutional political aggregation born from the political left and that became endemic throughout the territory, thus identifying the world of politically aligned youth counterculture. See Mudu, P. (2012). I Centri Sociali italiani: verso tre decenni di occupazioni e di spazi autogestiti. *Partecipazione e Conflitto*, 1: 69-92. DOI: 10.3280/PACO2012-001004.

²³ Uniforms are rare in Italian high schools. Most teenagers attend public schools and only a few private high schools require them to wear uniforms, fueling the preconception that only ‘rich’ or ‘posh’ children wear them.

did not understand the social movement and that they only cared about praising it to acquire social approval.

The second perceived/ attributed identity of FFF-Rome is that of being Greta Thunberg's 'followers' or 'fans.' On the one hand, the activists are the first to recognize that "everything began with Greta" ([M20m], interview) and it is from Greta that some characteristics that identify the movement even now originate, such as the strong identification with being young and the narrative of young people's future having been stolen. This view, however, can sometimes acquire a negative connotation that is strongly connected with the patronizing way FFF activists are seen as 'nice kids.' Such connotation sees the Fridays as mere 'fans' of Greta, who are simply following her lead and her example, enamored with her figure to the point of blindly replicating her steps but without really knowing what they are doing and without acquiring a proper political conscience and knowledge. [M57f] best described this attitude and commented that she also felt this at a certain point, when looking at FFF-Rome from the outside: "The majority know nothing about it [the climate crisis] and don't quite know what it is. They participate for the enthusiasm, they are fans of Greta [...]: 'Greta went there, she went here...'" (interview). Similarly, [T20m] also believed that, among the reasons people might not appreciate FFF-Rome and join its fight, was, on the one hand, the strong association they draw between the group and Greta Thunberg, and, on the other, a profound dislike towards Greta, which then extends to FFF-Rome: "A lot of people hate Greta Thunberg [...]: they feel overthrown from their role as adults who rule the world by this sassy teen who does FFF just to skip school" ([T20m], interview).

This was echoed by the discussion that animated an assembly in preparation of the global strike for climate of October 2020. On this occasion, the activists pointed out a discrepancy between FFF's inward identity and the identity that people outside the movement perceived. While the Fridays strived to pursue horizontality and be without a true leader, such identity was hard to communicate on the outside, because the public still perceived FFF as led by Greta: "What appears is that we are a movement with a leader to identify us: Greta [...]. There is no way to make the masses understand we are a horizontal social movement" ([M20m], 7 September 2020, online assembly). On another occasion, [M20m] supported the idea of electing spokespersons for FFF-Rome on the same rationale: "People don't really know what Friday is, there is a lot of confusion [...]: we look a bit like a cult" ([M20m], 19 October 2020, in person assembly). For this reason, FFF-Italy decided to periodically appoint national spokespersons, so as to facilitate communication with the media without compromising the movement's horizontality and allowing FFF to take back the power of deciding the face the public opinion identifies the movement with.

This is connected with the third and final of FFF-Rome's perceived identities, which is that of being a 'cult.' People would perceive FFF as something secretive and that keeps to itself²⁴: "On the outside they see us as a cult and don't know who to call when they have questions" ([C14f], 29 September 2020, online assembly). Because FFF lacks a true leader, there was a lack of clarity regarding who was the face of the movement. As a result, people outside of it perceive the movement as secretive, confusing, and mysterious, just like a cult: "These are

²⁴ The Italian word used in this occasion is 'setta,' which evokes secrecy and lacks the strong identification with the act of proselytism that is, instead, usually associated with the English 'cult.'

people [the Fridays] who are perhaps predominantly left-wingers, mainly of a certain age [...] ‘radical chic extremists’ as Cingolani²⁵ would say [...]: people who are very distant and difficult to get close to” ([D20f], interview). As a result they might distrust it, oversimplify its revindications, or have a harder time joining its ranks. This perceived identity is partially connected with FFF-Rome’s identification with the world of school and with young people. It reinforces the idea that one must possess specific characteristics in order to be part of FFF: those who are not students nor young do not feel like they can participate in its actions: “They see the movement is only made up of young people and everyone believes the same things about certain topics... it’s only natural people outside feel reluctant to join” ([C14f], interview).

Perhaps [Q42f], who struggled to feel accepted among FFF-Rome activists because of her age, put it best during her interview. She commented that, on the outside, she felt inclined to consider ‘being a Friday’ just “their [young people’s] own thing” as if there was “an exclusion of everyone else: both people who want to be excluded and who are, effectively, excluded” (interview). According to her, FFF-Rome appears closed off to people who wish to participate in the movement but feel excluded and people who simply do not care about the climate and so are happy not to feel like the movement involves them. When she first approached the movement, she perceived the Fridays to be very ‘protective’ of their group and its identity. She cited her first experience joining the public assembly, when she had tried to present a children’s ecology-themed book by her independent publishing house, telling them that she wanted to help the group with her trade. She felt a mixture of hostility and protectiveness: “I mean, I brought this book and they had a ‘who are you’ kind of reaction. Thinking ‘maybe this one wants to steal Friday’s name and push it her own way.’ It took me a while to make people understand that I came in peace, I just want to make a contribution and do my part” (interview). However, she also commented that the activists’ was “a motivated fear” because “perhaps they have had so much pressure, so many incursions from other people [...] so they try to be a little impartial about these matters. I understand this” (ibid.). Indeed, this identity probably derived from FFF-Rome’s reluctance to collaborate with many groups and its struggle not to compromise its inward identity and culture, in order to maintain a greater independence.

Sometimes, the activists even made fun of this identity. During a discussion on the outreach potential of FFF and how to attract new people into the movement, [M20m] ironically commented, following [K22f]’s insistence that more people join FFF, that “we’re not a cult, are we?” (7 September 2020, in person assembly), meaning that people should feel free to join FFF-Rome rather than perceive the movement as closed off. This identity can easily damage the movement, because it erodes the trust that people outside of it have of FFF-Rome but also deters more people (especially those who are not young or students) from joining it, diminishing the plurality of voices that can animate the debate.

²⁵ The, at the time, Italian Minister for Ecological Transition. He repeatedly criticized environmental activists for being too ideological and called for a slower ecological transition. Italian climate activists, on the other hand, expressed concern over the notion of a slow transition due to the urgency of the climate emergency. They also criticized the minister for his support toward increasing the use of natural gas.

2.3 A conflicting identity

Before delving into the next half of this thesis, which deals with ‘doing’ Friday, there are some elements about ‘being’ Friday that must be further addressed. It emerged, for example, how some characteristics that appear to construct the identity of the Friday are sometimes in conflict with it.

A key example was that of being students, which was analyzed in the first part of this chapter as a characteristic of the Friday. It emerged during the observation that, despite this congruence, there was an activist-practices based historical disagreement that separated students who considered themselves primarily Fridays and those who were also part of other groups and organizations. Moreover, the observation period coincided with a moment of global crisis of the movement, partially caused by the COVID-19 sanitary emergency. This further exacerbated the tension between FFF-Rome and Rome’s student movements, so that the group was in a time of profound crisis and regeneration.

One example of this tension was the definition of the date of the autumn 2020 global strike. FFF-Rome and the student movements of the capital expressed a desire to do a joint demonstration on occasion of the global strike because “Friday has always been a movement of students and young people: it’s important to demonstrate together” (11 September 2020, in person assembly). FridaysForFuture had already picked the date of September 25th at the international level for the strike but the students preferred October 9th, which had been proposed as a national strike for climate by other Italian FFF groups. Still, September 25 was the date of the global strike for climate, decided at the international level, and FFF-Rome could not change it just to follow the wishes of Rome’s student collectives, who, on the other hand, responded that “5 out of 7 collectives” would not “march the streets on the 25th” ([Z19m], 11 September 2020, in person assembly) because of internal fights that prevented them from finding a common ground to protest in the near future. After a long debate, it emerged how the main conflict was represented by the students feeling left out of the decision process: the date had been decided during an international call of FFF which, as such, did not ask for Rome’s student collectives’ opinion on when to strike. The latter perceived this method as the umpteenth example of the discrepancy between the Roman way of doing activism and FridaysForFuture-Rome, which in that occasion represented a ‘foreign’ movement adopting aseptic and alien ways of doing activism. Still, the students, on their part, did not show any significant interest in the internal mechanisms governing FFF nor in expressing a preferred date for the strike if not a couple of weeks before the event, whereby the process for picking the 25th of September as a date had begun in the Spring of 2020, immediately after March 2020’s strike.

In the eyes of the Fridays, this showed the students’ disinterest and negligence in the workings of the movement: if they were so interested in joining FFF-Rome’s protest and fighting for their cause they should have participated more in the movement. If that had happened, they would have known about the issue of choosing a date much sooner and now the two sides would not have had much to discuss. In these negotiations, questions of power arose, whereby one side and the other tried to hold their ground so as not to fall in the agenda of the other group. According to [H23m], it was best to “align” FFF-Rome with other Italian FFF groups rather than follow the directives from FFF-International: organizing a larger

protest on the 9th of October would communicate harmony among Italian FFF groups and with the Italian student movements, granting FFF-Rome greater mediatic resonance. The main issue with this plan, however, was that October is traditionally a month for student demonstrations in Italy, so FFF's strike risked to be interpreted as just another student protest. In the end, [M20m] and [K22f] apologized for the lack of communication, revindicating FFF-Rome's "good faith." They proposed a smaller, joint climate demonstration for the 25th (a flashmob) and then a future assembly to organize a larger protest for October 9th. These discussions highlighted how the teen/ school component of the movement is important in terms of public image, but can be not as incisive in the decision-making processes. Furthermore, the absenteeism of high school students in the decision-making phase at the national and international levels removed their 'negotiating power' in pushing the date of 25th of September vs 9th of October within the framework of the student mobilization agenda and in their attempt to 'absorb' FFF-Rome's march in the students' revindications for fall 2020. Such processes were reflected in the internal relations of the movement and in the decision-making processes within FFF-Rome. As mentioned, FFF-Rome, more than other FFF groups, needs to constantly negotiate with the pushes, demands, and necessities of the Roman student movement sphere.

Such struggles are played on the field of activism practices, but also on the field of group identity as FFF-Rome needs to find common ground with the students (so as not to lose a significant group of participants during strikes, but also to maintain the narrative that FFF is composed by students) without losing its identity as FridaysForFuture and becoming 'just another student movement.' When it was decided that FFF-Rome would protest alongside students on September 25th, the Fridays deliberated in the following assemblies how to participate 'as Fridays,' upholding their own agenda, which resulted in the demonstration being communicated on the outside as the day FFF-Rome announced a two-week mobilization period in preparation for October 9th national strike. They worked to un-anchor the 25th from its connotation of being solely a day for student mobilization.

This struggle to keep FFF-Rome 'its own thing' was evident repeatedly during the observation period. During our conversations, [P23m] hinted multiple times at early attempts of other collectives and organizations to 'dye FFF their own colors.' Even during the three-day workshop in Brescia, one of the topics of discussion during dinner with FFF-Rome activists was how FFF-Rome had travelled through different 'eras' of independence and identity consolidation. The first one, before I approached the movement, happened when FFF-Rome had just been born and everyone wanted to 'appropriate' Friday, especially 'the network of middle students' and FFF-Rome had to fight for its independence and identity. Moreover, it emerged that this lack of communication and cooperation between the Fridays and the students was peculiar to FFF-Rome, since other Italian groups (such as FFF-Padua, FFF-Milan, and even FFF-Brescia) were profoundly connected to student unions and would often meet in universities for assemblies. In Rome this was not possible since the university is not seen as a 'neutral' ground and FFF-Rome would have been considered a university movement rather than something independent. This resulted in some degrees of separation between students belonging to different associations and students within FFF.

During assemblies, it was always easy to spot those who belonged to either one of the groups: the students rarely participated in assemblies unless convocated or unless the topics of the

day (which were always announced beforehand) dealt with high school. They referred to the Fridays as ‘them’ rather than ‘us’ and so did the Fridays when talking about the students. One time, during an assembly specifically organized for the student collectives, the Fridays were late and, as I was talking with the students, they kept complaining about FFF-Rome’s lack of organization: “It’s an FFF-Rome’s assembly and everyone’s here except for the Fridays!” (11 September 2020, in person assembly). They used ‘them,’ ‘those,’ ‘they’ to refer to the Fridays, including a teenager who was part of a student collective but also of FFF-Rome’s official WhatsApp group, suggesting that his participation in the group did not automatically mean he considered himself a Friday. At times, it was clear that not even militating consistently within FFF-Rome was enough to sustain processes of identity self-ascriptio to the movement. Even in those cases where students had been part of the movement for long, there was a clear demarcation, for them, between being ‘Friday’ or simply going to the assemblies. [T14f] (who was also part of a students’ union)’s words are a clear example. She had just given a speech on FFF-Rome’s behalf during a protest and was now commenting on the scarce participation, arguing that, while student collectives had precise recruiting practices to bring as many people as possible to their protests, FFF-Rome was different: “*Us within Friday* can’t be like that. FFF is whoever comes to the various manifestations, so there’s no clear participation. It’s a gamble every time and *those within Friday* don’t know how to do it: *they’re* good, last year *we* were in 200k in the streets, but now it’s different. It’s bad. Yesterday *we* were only ten” ([T14f], 3 October 2020, in person assembly). [T14f] kept shifting between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ between considering herself part of the group, a Friday, and something different, marking a deep ambivalence between identifying with the group and drawing distance from it.

On more than one occasion, FFF-Rome’s activists tried to attract more students to the assemblies and piece together the rift between the two factions. At times, the assemblies were moved to places closer to high schools and to subway stations, so they would be easier to reach. Other times, assemblies were held online to facilitate participation, and on multiple occasions the activist deliberated to keep the assemblies on Mondays in the afternoon rather than move them to the weekend and in the evenings, to make them more accessible to high school students rather than workers. [G25f] expressed frustration at these practices not bearing any fruit: “There are no students [at the assemblies] and then they still ask us to negotiate the dates [of the strikes] with them. There’s no reciprocity and it’s unacceptable. Students and teens only come to the big demonstrations” (7 September 2020, in person assembly).

Another element that makes being a Friday a conflicting identity is the connection with being young. When participation is so important to keep the group and its demands alive, and when high school students are only a small portion of the participants, it is interesting to note the lengths FFF-Rome will still go to preserve its outward identity (and inward engagement practices) as a youth-centered group. This has been evident in its communication strategies, such as its Instagram posts as they almost always feature or emphasize participation of younger activists. Similarly, the pursuit of this identity was also visible in the assembly etiquette and in the hours assemblies are held. As [O31f] commented: “I’ve been meaning to join the movement for a long time and the reason I decided I could not was because I kept seeing on their Facebook page that they always held assemblies on Monday afternoons— and

at that hour I'm at work" (interview). In her opinion, this mechanism reinforces itself since "when the movement has a specific need, then it will attract people with similar needs [...]: a movement born in a way will remain like that" (interview). Still, many activists pointed out the contradiction inherent in the effort to preserve FFF-Rome's youthful connotation—especially older activists. According to [Q42f], overemphasizing FFF-Rome's identity as a youth group enables all other categories of people to do nothing, absolves adults from having caused the problem in the first place, while also taking away from the collective responsibility that we all share in solving the issue of climate change: "It's absurd that the Fridays are relegated to the young, because it's already our responsibility, of the elders, why do you also have to push it [on the young], make them do all the work? This division has really bothered me, because they [young people] started it [climate movements like FFF] but it's a collective responsibility [...]. To insist too much on this side will push you to allow others not to participate" (interview). [M57f] was of a similar mind. She acknowledged that FFF-Rome is mainly composed of teen and novice activists and that they are "very proud" of this fact, but she pointed out how this identity was "not what counts" since "the important thing is to see if one can make a dent [in the system]. For them there is this pride in being little, so of course I don't feel I'm participating in this thing, you see? [...] But what's really important is to make different decisions [for the climate], not to brag about being a genius activist on social media at 13!" (interview).

Eventually, these efforts to preserve FFF-Rome's identity are read by some activists as a tendency toward coldness and asepticism, ultimately leading to the groups' loss of relevance. [C14f] noted that FFF-Rome's effort to be neutral, horizontal, and preserve its identity leads to depersonalization "which is wrong [...]. Sometimes we remember and so we have to throw some random faces [on their social networks and to communicate with the outside], to remind people that we're people too and not a cult" (interview). She was referring to the use of social media visualities as a strategy to humanize the movement: using pictures of people in demonstrations, young people's faces showing emotions, would help outsiders perceive FFF-Rome as something human rather than an abstract entity that merely speaks 'sciency' facts. [C24m] went a little further in his critique of FFF-Rome's neutrality. He acknowledged the importance of preserving the group's grassroots identity, a self-standing, independent force, something that does not have affiliations with political parties or associations, but recognized that this code of conduct greatly diminishes the group's impact: "They [the Fridays] always say that they don't want anything to do with politics, but I don't know, it seems a bit utopian to me. [...] When I look at other movements in history, of course they brought some changes, but others have remained simply ideologies, and so maybe a help from a political side... [...] you have to give way somewhere" (interview). These activists pointed out to the complex game of negotiations required to sustain FFF-Rome: FFF-Rome's need to survive and keep its mediatic relevance must balance with its struggles to preserve its identity. It must be said, however, that my observation was circumscribed to a time of crisis of the movement and that the very marked contrast between students and FFF-Rome activists, between only addressing young people and involving adults and workers, might not be as pronounced in the movement today. Indeed, when fieldwork was at an end, it was already possible to notice efforts to better involve schools and older people in FFF-Rome activism by organizing multiple education and sensibilization events in schools. The global strike of March 2022 even saw the Fridays launch an appeal for an 'ecological workplace' along with some Italian trade unions.

Finally, it must be mentioned how ‘being’ a Friday is simply more complex than ascribing to an array of characteristics and behaviors. This section aimed at understanding and describing the identities associated with being a Friday for the sake of clarity but this effort is, of course, an oversimplification of the idea that most activists within FFF-Rome have of the ‘Friday’ as an abstract concept. Such oversimplification has less to do with the single elements that come to define this identity than with the notion of ‘Friday’ as an actual idea. Talking with the participants and with the activists during these years, I had the opportunity to challenge and discard my own assumptions about what it means to be Friday (such as gross oversimplifications like ‘all Fridays are vegan’ or ‘all Fridays are teenagers’) but also to learn of the nuances and, at times, caution, that the word ‘Friday’ elicits in them.

On the one hand, being ‘Friday’ is often understood as an ideal, a goal, an identity-in-the-making, something that cannot be attained but we must strive for. An example were [U22f]’s words when I asked her if she identified as a Friday: “Actually I don’t know [...]. I feel guilty to apply such a great ideal to myself: in the end, I never reflect it [being Friday] one hundred percent. You can always do more, so to say ‘I am’ when you ‘do’ things that do not agree with the struggle is stupid” (interview). In this conception, the ‘Friday’ is not only the ideal identity we must work towards, but something unattainable, an impossible standard to try and live up to.

The impalpable idea of ‘the Friday’ has been created through time, online and offline narrations, negotiations regarding the identity of FFF-Rome and of the international network of Fridays. As a result, not all activists recognize themselves as ‘Fridays’ in one univocal sense, nor all of them want to be a Friday, because they understand this identity as something fabricated for the masses, for the media, similar to an advertisement of the movement, a performance, a label: “No one can really say they’re ‘Friday’” ([P23m], 18 September 2020, in person assembly). There are, then, two distinct notions of what it means to *be* ‘Friday’: the act of militating within the movement, having/ acquiring certain characteristics, behaving in a specific way; and the abstract notion of ‘the Friday.’ Such a distinction was not transparent at first, as I believed that ‘being Friday’ only meant one thing, but it emerged the more time I spent within the movement and the more I analyzed my data.

Furthermore, the boundaries between one identity and the other sometimes blur, to the point that this distinction has fueled conflict in FFF-Rome, such as that between the activists and the members of Rome’s student movements, and it is not transparent to those who approach the group only on the surface level. [Z19m] was already hinting at this during my first assembly: “Even those who participate in just one strike should feel the right to call themselves a Friday. We’re all Friday” (10 July 2020, in person assembly). At first, I believed that his words simply meant that, without consistency of participation, people have a hard time considering themselves Friday and that the movement should push against this feeling, emphasizing people’s appropriation of the struggle. However, the episode where [P23m] discussed the propriety of calling oneself ‘Friday’ with Francesca hinted at a deeper dimension of this identity. This appeared to not only be an effective identity one could appropriate, but also a narrative to project on the outside and an ideal to strive for. If ‘Friday’ is a spirit, an idea more than an identity, this might explain the reluctance that even senior members have to call themselves Fridays. When asked about the characteristics of a ‘Friday,’ [A28m], who had been in the group for years, replied: “I don’t like the label ‘Friday.’ It

doesn't sound right" (interview). Likewise, [P23m]'s provocative answer to Francesca would make one question who has any right to call oneself a Friday: if not even [P23m], who had been part of the group for years both as a member and a referent, was not a 'proper' Friday, then no one could be. In reality, his reluctance to use the label simply hints at the existence of this double identity, as well as to the acknowledgement that the second way of being 'Friday,' that is the abstract identity to strive towards, is more important.

[P23m] further emphasized this distinction in his interview. When asked if he considered himself a Friday, he turned the question around and asked me, instead: "And who can consider themselves a Friday? [...] No one knows what a Friday is," showing me how simplistic it was to simply call people 'Fridays' or 'not Fridays:'

One can still say it, like when you ask the single activists [...] about the objectives, the lines of action of FFF-Rome [...]. Each one of these pieces is within FFF [...]. To be of FFF, to me, right now, means to simply 'be' [...]. It means you are a social movement person. You are something that, if you accept to join it, it's like 'I am multitudes' ([P23m], interview).

In his words, being 'Friday' means to have acquired awareness that the movement FridaysForFuture is animated by multiple forces and values and that the identity of Friday, what it means to be Friday, is equally complex, layered, and shifting. To be truly Friday, then, is to be multitudes: a social movement person who cares for social justice and knows intimately that one can never completely live up to the ideal of being Friday. Still, the presence of this ideal is exactly what keeps FFF-Rome alive: it pushes everyone to do more, to do better, not to settle. Being Friday, then, concurs to the transformation of society (Touraine 1975). It is in this struggle towards self-betterment that the betterment of society can also be attained: we should all strive to be like the 'Friday,' aware that, if such an identity could ever be attained, it would lose its value.

Section 2 - “Doing” Friday

3. The generational appropriation of digital (climate) activism

These two chapters deal with how FridaysForFuture-Rome activists inhabit social media. I chose to use the concept of ‘inhabiting’ digital spaces because it is particularly helpful in giving back the idea of social media as additional environments for FFF activism (cfr. boyd 2011), allowing not only for an analysis of how activists use these platforms, but also of their sense-giving processes, the established rules, practices, and media ideologies (Gershon 2010b) connected to platform usage within FFF-Rome.

This first chapter deals with how FFF-Rome activists perceive social media as generation-specific environments, accounting for the processes of generational appropriation of social media within the movement and of the identitary narration that this generation of activists (and youth) makes of itself as a result.

3.1 “Our” platforms

It became clear during the observation period that the usage that FFF-Rome activists make of social media is informed by a generational quality, an identification between being young, using social media, and using them well. They ascribe generational specific meanings to these platforms in virtue of being young users, thus using and speaking of social media as ‘their own:’ that is, the spaces that are mostly inhabited by young people, and the spaces that (only) young people know how to inhabit and use properly. The generationality of platforms is thus declined in terms of frequency and habit of usage, but also of appropriation, in virtue of belonging to a specific generation.

A clear example of this was in the way [L25f] volunteered FFF-Rome as communication-curators of an event where different movements and groups in Rome were planning to welcome Zapatista representatives (30 November 2020, online assembly). [L25f]’s rationale was that FFF-Rome represented the “youth component” of Roman social movements and so they could find “creative” ways to communicate to other young people who the Zapatistas were by using social media. They could “curate a communication that’s more suited to our generation, since the [Zapatista] fight was born before we were born” ([L25f], 30 November 2020, online assembly). According to her, since FFF-Rome’s identity is characterized by being young, the youth-targeted communication of the event was best suited to FFF activists. Her idea of ‘young communication’ encompassed multiple meanings. It was the style of communication (“creative ways”), the platforms (“social media”), and the target audience (young people who do not have prior knowledge of the Zapatista movement). Her words thus expressed a clear link between being young and being competent at communicating, in virtue of being more skilled with social media. FFF-Rome’s young connotation guarantees effective online communication, allowing the activists to build a bridge between different activist generations, that is those who have lived the Zapatista fight and those who have not. The following excerpts express this conception even more clearly. During the very first FFF-Rome event that I have attended, [Z19m] was talking about the different phases of creation of an Instagram post for FFF-Rome’s account and how important it was for the movement to use this space. In his words: “Basically it’s us [young people] that are on social media”

([Z19m], 10 July, in person assembly). Additionally, in an interview, [A28m] explained that FFF has a tendency to attract younger people because “Fridays was born with social media, with the internet, so there you go... the people who use the internet the most are young people.” These comments not only reinforce the age-based connotation of social media platforms that [L25f] was referencing, but they also decline it according to frequency and habit of usage, implying the generational appropriation of these environments.

The activists’ “generational” conception of communication conceives each communication channel in terms of age (cfr. Fernández-Ardèvol et al. 2020), pairing being on social media with being young. This identification reveals the media ideology (Gershon 2010b) according to which social media are considered as predominantly youth-specific tools and environments, to the point that FridaysForFuture activists, precisely because they are young, can even ‘make young(er)’ a long-standing struggle such as that of the Zapatistas. [L25f]’s considerations implicitly revealed her idea of what is the appropriate way of doing grassroots politics with and for young people. A way that refers to welcoming and streamlined communication and relational styles, otherwise absent, according to her, in the posts and meetings of other collectives.

As we will observe through the course of this chapter, this media ideology (Gershon 2010b) also carries with itself conventions about age-based ‘appropriate’ ways of using social media and specific platforms, according to the target audience. This youth-oriented conception of social media is especially evident when FFF-Rome has to interact with people from different age groups and their communication practices, such as adults in the case of Facebook and younger teenagers in the case of TikTok. In the first case (like with the Zapatistas) FFF-Rome is ‘called to’ make an old space/ old communication style younger, while in the latter it must challenge itself to communicate in an even more youthful way, so as to learn from middle schoolers and early teens and never grow into an ‘boomer-like’ movement.

While the ‘Fridays’ perceive themselves as owning certain platforms because of their being young, this reflects on their engagement with them in terms of digital activism. On the one hand, they feel a duty, a call, to use social media for activism and to use them well, to distinguish themselves from the ‘boomers’ and from other, older, social movements. On the other hand, their self-assessments in terms of social media proficiency changes according to the age-group they are comparing themselves to: they feel more skilled and effective than ‘boomers,’ but strive to keep up with even younger users’ skills.

3.2 Contrasting the “Boomers:” intergenerational dynamics of technopolitics

As part of the package of the identification between being young and using social media come a series of stereotypes and narratives regarding age-specific practices, both positive and negative.

Since FFF activists consider young people as the more appropriate inhabitants of these platforms, they have elaborated a full set of ways for dealing with older people in these settings. Such practices are especially evident when it comes to resisting and reinforcing ageism—the two strategies that are analyzed in this section. The strategy of ‘resisting ageism’ builds from the activists’ assumption that adults look down on youth activism, and especially youth digital activism, because it comes from young people and because it is a

novel way of protesting that feels both foreign and inconclusive to them. As a result, FFF-Rome activists enact practices that challenge the paternalistic idea that digital activism— and, more broadly, social media usage— is inferior to more traditional forms of political participation and can be the expression of a mature political conscience. Reinforcing agesism, on the other hand, has a double meaning. First, it refers to the way FFF-Rome embraces rather than fights paternalistic attitudes towards their activism, so as to appear like ‘nice kids’ rather than delinquents and gain more traction across a wider userbase. Second, it refers to the sense of pride in one’s own youthful usage of social media, which comes at the expense of older generations, since they are portrayed as ‘inept’ with digital technologies. These strategies then are a double-edged mechanism of stereotypes that are played on the field of digital practices and literacies.

3.2.1 Digital activism as a youth prerogative

From the beginning, it [FFF] was a mass phenomenon that focused a lot on new, fresher, and more direct communication. And boys and girls are more familiar with this communicative part on social networks. We’re more inclined to deal with it ([K22f], interview).

As mentioned, social media must be collocated in an intergenerational media environment, in which different age-groups interact with technology with different aims, by means of different strategies, and with different levels of media literacy. The example of the Zapatistas is, once again, emblematic: FFF-Rome’s proposal to utilize social media to advertise the event and to inform young people about the movement marks FFF-Rome’s activism as social-media oriented and as social-media savvy, all the while attributing full legitimacy to social media usage for political goals.

Among all other grassroots communication channels, FFF-Rome activists consider social media the most effective and consider young people, among all users, as the most skilled communicators, to the point of revindicating such platforms as ‘young people’s own.’ In the words of [U22f], there is an actual “dramatic difference in social media usage of this generation and social media usage of another,” because adults simply use these platforms to interact “with friends” and share pictures: “There is still no vision of ‘I’m using it to inform myself, I’m using it to see what the people I’m interested in are up to’” (interview). From the activists’ words, it emerged that young people are the only social media users whose skills have matured enough to allow them to forge a political conscience and curiosity that expands to their social media usage. Contrary to adults, they can use these platforms as instruments for personal education rather than mere social spaces where they can keep up with their group of friends. Digital activism is, therefore, perceived as inherently youthful because it answers to social media usages that are a prerogative of younger people.

This is evident when FFF-Rome activists compare FFF-Rome’s social media usage to that of other associations and groups who do not possess such a strong youthful connotation. Organizations such as Extinction Rebellion, Legambiente, and Greenpeace are all active in the contexts of environmentalism and climate change, but they are not characterized, necessarily, by generation-specific narratives and younger members. As a result, the Fridays believe they utilize social media “more like ‘boomers’[...]. Each movement, each association

decides which posts to make and each movement decides the target it wants to intercept [...]. If the post is for a 60-year old you won't write stuff that's too complex or technological: you'll write 'let's go clean up a park'" ([A28m], interview). [H20f] summed it up like this: "[there is a difference] at the levels of communication and the way [older people] share their ideas [...]. Adults do it more to impress, hit the people they have in front of them in that exact moment [...] while young people have an awareness of the instruments they have on their hands [...], which give them the privilege to express their thoughts to an infinite audience" (interview). According to these views, social media possess a potential for diffusion and communication that older people simply do not know how to unleash. Such knowledge only belongs to young people, who can therefore utilize these platforms to their full potential for dissemination of information and political purposes. [M20m]'s words also reinforce this view as he believed that it is social media that have "allowed the message initiated by Greta to spread so fast [...]. Without them there would probably not have been such rapid communication [...]. The chance to convey it [the message] in this way has greatly catalyzed it" ([M20m], interview). Of a similar view was also [Z19m], who, during an assembly, expressed enthusiasm at the prospect of fortifying FFF-Rome's social media presence since "you can move worlds with social media!" ([Z19m], July 10, 2020, in person assembly).

This understanding of the potential of digital technologies for activism expresses a deterministic view that hands over 'power' in the communication exchange to the platforms rather than to their usage. The Fridays, as we will see more in detail in the last chapter, oscillate between the deterministic view that platforms are the key factor in allowing political participation on a huge scale, and a more nuanced conception of social media as additional tools and spaces for activism. These conceptions can coexist as the mobilizing power of digital platforms is declined in terms of volumes of people, that is their capacity to host and, from there, intercept and activate large volumes of individuals, especially young people. A clear example is [O31f]'s statement when she explained the difference in involving younger versus older people in activism. According to her, the former are much easier to involve, on the one hand because of "reasons connected to [their] sensibility but also [their] curiosity to take an interest [in social issues]" and, on the other, because of their continuous use of "digital platforms" (interview). Indeed: "It is difficult to involve adults" because "for adults there isn't something specific at the level of social media that can talk to them" ([O31f], interview). The activist's words not only point out the fact that social media belong to young people, but also that older people do not 'possess' a digital platform and never did. Like digital migrants leaving the offline world for the first time, they simply appropriate the platforms that young people have left behind, such as Facebook, but never with a propriety sufficient to call them 'their own' with the same level of awareness that young people mean.

The effectiveness of social media activism in involving young people allows them to revindicate their political agency. Thanks to their ability to intercept large volumes of people, especially young, social media boost FFF-Rome's capability to mobilize people to the cause, in contrast with those views that see digital activism as slacktivism and that see youth political involvement as lesser when it happens online and outside of traditional contexts. FFF-Rome activists are the first to admit that digital platforms have allowed large numbers of young people to get involved with the movement and understand the emergency posed by the climate crisis. They especially use the COVID-19 emergency as an example. [C14f] and I had

multiple conversations about FFF-Rome's social media usage and she always called back to the pandemic as the moment that 'started' FFF-Rome's social media awareness. It marked the boundary between a before and an after because, when in-person gatherings and protests were no longer feasible, and when traditional news outlets were saturated by messages about the pandemic, FFF-Rome had to resort to different channels to stay alive and keep being relevant. Many activists I came in contact with had joined the movement during the pandemic because of these social media strategies. [X14f] was among them. When FFF-Rome's Instagram page promoted a campaign to create a video or a song about the climate crisis, she sent her own. It was featured on a later post, and she started talking with FFF-Rome's activists, who invited her to join an online assembly, ultimately leading to her joining the movement.

Young people within FridaysForFuture-Rome feel that they are actively and collectively engaging in the struggle against climate change precisely when they meet and become active on social media. As [R18f] explained, joining the movement requires a double effort. On the one hand, there is an individual moment of autonomous information-gathering and understanding of the climate crisis. On the other, the former leads to a collective moment of real "activation" that takes place through the groups that are created on social media. She made the example of FFF-Rome's official WhatsApp group²⁶ which "must not inform but it serves to activate, because we are [already] always informed through our mobile phones" ([R18f], 11 September 2020, in person assembly). [C14f] seconded this, expressing frustration towards those views that see young activists' political participation as lesser simply because it happens via different channels and through different practices: "Our generation is perceived as that of people who always look at their phones and do nothing the whole day" (11 September 2020, in person assembly). In the words of these two activists, online engagement and civic engagement are directly connected, revindicating the importance of social media usage for political purposes. [M20m] went even further, putting forth the idea that, thanks to social media, young people come to mature a better understanding of social issues in general and climate change more specifically:

Young people possess the characteristic to use social media and the internet to inform themselves and this [...] allows for a great possibility to study things in depth and [mature] critical thinking towards these matters. [...] Adults mostly gain information from television and traditional information sources and these do not provide good information ([M20m], interview).

In his words, social media are once again paired with young people and, in redeeming the political value of the "connective action" they enable, they indirectly also redeem youth political agency, as well as the value of the information they can provide on those platforms.

This conception allows the activists to defend themselves from those who criticize them for 'always staying on social networks.' They can contest adults' paternalistic views towards young people's levels of engagement with digital platforms and reductionist assumptions regarding their activities and communication practices. Similarly, the activists are also redeeming political participation on social media, challenging those views that see it as lesser and ineffective simply for its characteristic of being online, thus marking an ideological

²⁶ Cfr. Belotti & Bussoletti (2022).

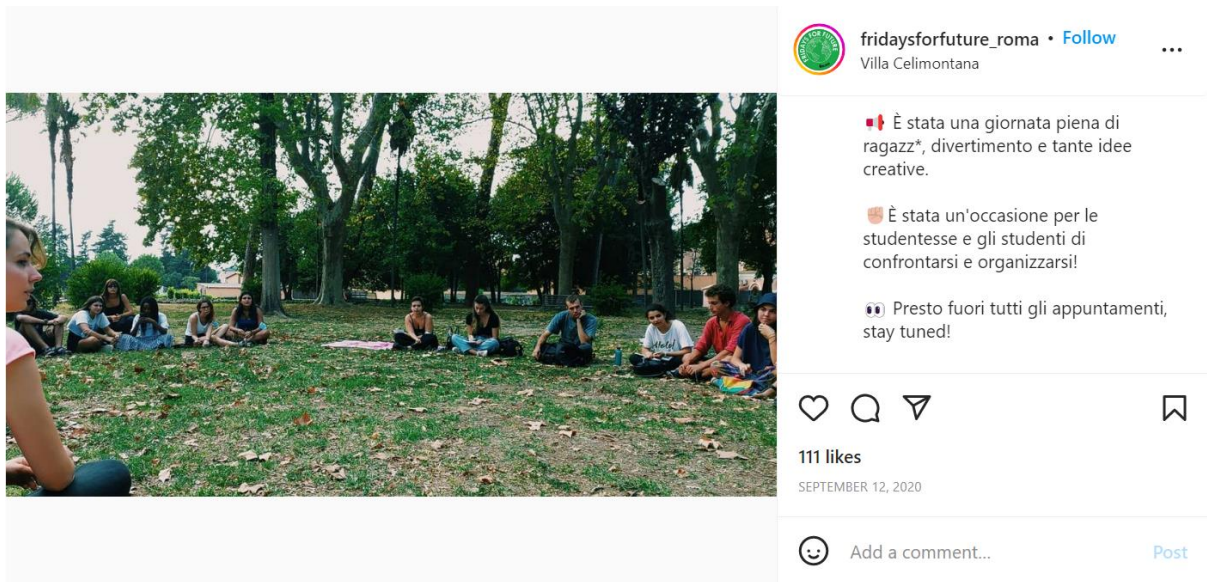
distance from activist practices of previous generations. As [K22f] had suggested, FFF-Rome activists believe that it is young people who have fully and more completely understood the political potential of social media. They know that social media make it possible to realize political activities and, from there, induce a social and cultural transformation, regardless of what adults' preconceptions might still believe. In other words, social media are conceived as privileged environments for youth activism because they are inhabited mainly by young people, who are the only ones that can use them for information-seeking, content-sharing, and to trigger actions and mobilizations that transcend online engagement

3.2.2 Just “nice kids:” age-based strategies to interact with the adults

The distinction between young people's social media usage and old people's usage comes out in full force in the political contexts that see activists of different age-groups interact. FFF-Rome's assemblies are, in this sense, a good context to observe such differences. On the one hand, they allow for the observation of how younger and older activists come to define and prioritize social media activism. On the other, they allow the observation of how FFF-Rome activism plays out on social media more heavily than in other groups, thus marking such usage with an identity connotation, as it comes to define FFF-Rome's climate activism practices.

As it has been observed in the previous chapters, FFF-Rome's identity is defined by youthfulness, which, in terms of group manners, translates into politeness, a strategy to counteract paternalistic narratives and deal with older individuals within the movement. This strategy is active within the group when it comes to interacting with older activists and organizations, but it also translates to FFF-Rome's social media usage as it comes to shape the image that the group wants to project on the outside. Even by distancing themselves from the adults' conception of online activism and political participation, which they deem obsolete, the activists still aim to create an outward image of themselves as 'nice kids.' This directly contrasts stereotypes regarding young activists and social media activism, such as that of being 'thugs' or, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, that of being only superficially involved in climate change.

FridaysForFuture-Rome's online communication strives to depict the movement as one of people who study climate change in depth and that protest in a creative and harmless way, such as with colorful cardboard signs and social media posts. An example are Instagram posts with pictures of the various activities the group organized during the action-week preceding October 2020's global strike for climate. Posts like that of September 12, 2020 and October 3, 2020 depict the activists in a circle or cohesive group in a social setting, a park in the first case (*Pic. 3*) and a social center in the other (*Pic. 4*).




Picture 3: Post from 12 September 2020. It depicts the assembly with the Roman student collectives of September 11th, in the part of Villa Celimontana. The caption emphasizes how it was a day of creativity and exchanging of ideas. It explains how it was an occasion for students and Fridays to communicate with each other and organize future protests. Link to the post: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CFC8Y7RHB18/>



Picture 4: Post from 3 October 2020. It is the third image of the post (the first two are close ups of the giant book at the center of this picture). It depicts those of us who participated in the workshop. Even if we are inside a social center and the event took place in its courtyard, the caption reads: “We organized a square workshop.”

This distinction once again emphasizes the idea that FFF-Rome is present and active in the territory of the capital: it demonstrates in the open, in the very streets of Rome. Link to the post: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CF4oysdnBGt/>

The activists are depicted as intent and composed. They are busy discussing the revindications of the strike and taking notes in the first post and writing and drawing their conception of energetic decentralization in the other. The text accompanying the posts further emphasizes the narrative of being proactive, organized, and peaceful: “No one is teaching us about the damage we’re causing [to the environment]” so “ we organized a square workshop to begin and imagine alternative ways to discuss the ecological crisis with students. We will use them as soon as we can return to the schools during assemblies and self-

managements²⁷” (3 October 2020, Instagram post). Similarly, the post from September 11 quotes “🍌 it was a day full of young people, fun, and lots of creative ideas” (11 September, 2020, Instagram post). These posts emphasize FFF-Rome’s activists willingness to study, brainstorm, and come up with new and creative solutions to face the challenges posed by climate change. They point out how the group meets in the open, in open public spaces, emphasizing its transparency and its presence in the very streets and squares of the Italian capital. At the same time, these posts also signal the group’s ‘polite’ inward identity with depictions of non-threatening activities, gatherings, and activism practices.

This online-promoted narrative goes hand in hand with offline ideas of activism. For example, when brainstorming about possible formats of protest for the October 2020 strike for climate, an activist suggested to set up an improvised classroom in the middle of a square so that she could “study for the exams” but still participate in the strike, while at the same time promoting the message that “the Fridays are studying and preparing themselves” (28 September 2020, in person assembly). Through choosing the contents to feature on their social media and in the modalities of action protests, FridaysForFuture-Rome wants to project the identity of being ‘nice kids,’ aiming to show itself as a polite, proactive movement, made up of people who are learned, serious, and creative. Such an identity strategically exploits the paternalistic enthusiasm of adults towards youth activism, such as that of the journalist and singer that was mentioned in the previous chapter. At the same time, this strategy also curbs adults’ distrust and skepticism towards activism or youth politics, in order to gather support and consensus. The styles of protest and communication of FFF-Rome support this public image, legitimizing the group in the eyes of the public opinion. [H20f] explained this process well while describing what counts as good social media content for the group and what does not: “With anger you can never convince people, so you need a more delicate and pacific approach” (interview). Too many posts featuring angry people rioting and parading down the streets with cardboard signs might have a detrimental effect for the movement and not represent its identity to the fullest. To quote [C14f], the Fridays must appear “cute and fluffy!” (2 October 2020, in person event), meaning that any kind of violent protest action or social media content is not encouraged.

This distinguishes them from other movements, who prioritize a ‘riot’ and ‘grassroots’ identification over social approval. FFF-Rome’s social media communication appears “lighter” ([K22f], interview) than that of other social movements because “we never place ourselves with an attitude whereby we must always be hostile towards someone else [...] so we stimulate people to participate in the square” (ibid.). According to the activists, this strategy sets FFF-Rome apart from other social movements and organizations because the latter tend to use social media to “only speak to people that are already interested, they use jargon and keywords only understandable by those who are already part of the collectives” ([K22f], interview). The Fridays, on the other hand, “don’t make posts that shout ‘we’re a

²⁷ In Italian ‘assemblee’ and ‘autogestioni.’ They refer to a practice common in Italian high schools. Assemblies are periodically organized by the single classes and/ or by the entire institutions as hours to discuss and reflect on issues pertaining one’s high school or the world of education in general. Autogestione is a form of student demonstration whereby students acquire a regular permit from the school’s president to decide, for a period of time, the organization of the activities to be held in the classrooms. In both cases, it is common to invite external spokespersons to give extra-curricular lectures on chosen topics. This is the case of FFF-Rome as well, who used to speak about the climate crisis in these contexts prior to the COVID-19 emergency.

grassroots social movement' [...]. We don't write everything in capital red letters" ([C14f], interview). They prefer to gather a more widespread consensus and to let the scientific foundation of their struggle speak for itself: "We want to be as neutral as possible to attract all kinds of people [...]. We strive to give information [...]: we're an information channel, we're just a vehicle for science" (ibid.). FFF-Rome's social media content thus reflects the group's attempt to gather public approval from adults, not only younger people, by means of using data and rational-sounding texts: "If we want to gain credibility in the eyes of adults we have to use rationality rather than pathos" ([F20f], interview).

These words reveal a veiled blame to other movements which, precisely because they opted for more aggressive forms of protest and communication, have lost their approval in the eyes of the public and have been pointed out as thugs and criminals. The political and media choices of FridaysForFuture have allowed it to distinguish itself from other groups by redeeming the constructive nature of youth political agency, which in turn allows the group to be acknowledged by the public opinion and widen participation. This positioning has allowed the movement to gather a strong public approval and a chance to enter places where more 'traditional' activist groups, with their closed communication practices and styles, are not welcomed, such as the Italian parliament or well-known Italian TV programs.

However, FFF-Rome's more peaceful tactics, while less disruptive, might lack in effectiveness and it might be useful to renew the repertoire of political practices, while still within the perimeter of non-violent creativity. Cultivating and maintaining the identity of 'nice kids' ties FFF-Rome's hands in terms of forms of political action and allyship with certain groups, which in turn hinders the group's growth. Additionally, these processes dampen the emotional tension that serves to animate mobilizations and earned FFF a reputation, among other social movements, as a "bougie" and "naive" group ([Y18m], interview). To cultivate an image of harmlessness and politeness in order to acquire social approval can paradoxically contribute to reinforcing the very paternalism towards youth activism that the movement set out to dispute.

An example were the interactions between FFF and the, at the time, Italian minister for Public Education Lucia Azzolina on occasion of the October 2020 strike for climate. Azzolina's predecessor had decided to promote students' participation in the previous strike by not having that day count as an absence from school. Minister Azzolina, on the other hand, not only did not renew this disposition, but congratulated the Fridays on their 'initiative' and asked them if they could organize the demonstration in the afternoon, so as not to skip that day of school (*Pic. 5*). On the one hand, she was praising the Fridays for caring about important social issues like climate change, but she was also oversimplifying and diminishing the relevance of their fight by asking that a global school strike for climate was moved to 'the afternoon,' after the school day had ended. Of course, this would deprive the demonstration from its political significance as a student strike, where students and young people renounce lectures as a form of protest towards a school and political system that does not seem to care about their future. The Fridays' response clearly points out this contradiction by mocking the minister's words: "🙄 yeah: minister Azzolina hopes that, no, she advises us, that the national STRIKE of October 9 be held in the AFTERNOON. [...] 🇮🇹 Dear minister,

on October 9 we're going to strike, not organize a 'happy gathering'" (October 6 2020, Instagram post).



Picture 5: Post from 6 October 2020. On the left, the email from the secretary of the Minister for Education. It explains that Minister Azzolina compliments the Fridays for their initiative but hopes it is organized in the afternoon so as to guarantee a larger participation. On the right is the Fridays' response. Link to the post: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CGAzJdpHcLB/>

The narrative of being 'nice kids' can further enhance the idea of 'harmless activism,' underlying the low-effort conception of digital activism in general, and of youth digital activism in particular, in a vicious circle that does little to help legitimizing the political demands of the group. As a strategic discourse directed at obtaining social legitimization, being 'nice kids' deprives FFF-Rome of certain political agency, but it gives it back to the movement in terms of political organization, managing of media coverage, and technical preparation.

In the careful strategies that guide online communication and the interactions between FFF-Rome and adults, it is easy to observe the struggle that the two groups face when it comes to communication practices in activism. FFF-Rome has to apply extra care and resources in maintaining communication with older people as the two age groups seem to be characterized by different approaches to digital technologies and activist practices. As [E24m] pointed out: "There's a generation gap, you know? [...] Communication among adults, 'boomers,' and kids isn't easy [...]: we see it in everyday life with our families, let alone on topics like this" (interview). This emerged for example in the communication channels where FFF-Rome shares news of upcoming events and assemblies. These news were usually shared on WhatsApp, on Instagram stories, posts, and, more rarely, Facebook posts. Employing specific

communication channels automatically narrows down participation to those people who have a presence on those platforms, know how to use them, and visit them frequently, which, incidentally, happened to be younger people. [M57f] complained about this and expressed how this made it harder for her to involve her peers in FFF-Rome's events "[it is important] for me to have a poster I can send to my contacts on WhatsApp or even by email, because I have friends who don't have WhatsApp because they're against WhatsApp and it's a choice they can make, so I mean, that poster for me is precious!" (interview). Similarly, she also had a hard time looking up information by FFF-Rome on their social media, as she is "old-fashioned" and "when I have to look up news on an event I much prefer a website" (interview). She criticized FFF-Rome's choice to move from a WhatsApp to a Telegram group for internal communication, because she did not usually utilize Telegram and in order to "see messages on Telegram you have to turn on notifications [...], if I don't turn them on I'll never look them up, so it's not very effective [...]. I see that lots of people like me have the same issue and that's why we kept on using WhatsApp" (interview). She was referring to FFF-Rome's official WhatsApp group, which had been abandoned by the activists in favor of Telegram not only because the latter's affordances were deemed better for FFF-Rome's purposes²⁸, but also to keep out 'boomers' who did not know how to use the group effectively, that is without "flooding" ([C14f], interview) it with messages that had little to do with FFF-Rome's internal communications and that failed to follow established usage practices within the group.

[P23m] explained that "generational differences" among members of FFF-Rome could be inferred from "different usage [of platforms]" (interview). He defined "boomer-ism" the "condition that causes a feeling of estrangement or alienation in the [users] of the group who are not part of that generation" (interview). According to him, a clear example was the use of emojis: "The 'boomer's way of using emojis is much sillier, it almost makes you smile because it's almost always excessive, repetitive, without variations... for example, in many chats you almost never see irony because the same people always use the same emojis" ([P23m], interview). Another difference he noted was in participation in the conversation, because younger activists tended to reply to messages only if they had legitimate questions or felt they could contribute to the conversation to some extent. On the other hand: "The 'boomer' generation, even when they don't participate, they feel the need to say something [...] by using emojis [...]. Like the person who always replies with clapping hands. He never says anything but he always types a clapping hand" (ibid.). In the end, the two groups' communication practices came to differ to the point of impacting the perception of contexts, forms, and roles within communication channels, such as group chats. As a result, different groups were created to distinguish 'spam groups,' inhabited by users who could not internalize FFF-Rome's communication rules, and working groups, where the activists exchanged useful information for the movement and organized future protests.

This form of technological gatekeeping has also emerged during online assemblies, as older activists had a harder time communicating via Zoom and utilizing FFF-Rome's agreed upon symbols and rules to intervene during assemblies. On one occasion (16 November 2020,

²⁸ For example, WhatsApp groups can only host up to 256 people, which is almost as many as FFF-Rome's group was counting. Telegram, on the other hand, distinguishes among private and public groups and channels, allowing up to 200.000 members.

online assembly) the assembly was joined by members of the association *2084*, men and women in their 50s and 60s who had been invited to discuss a joint demonstration. They had some difficulties with sending FFF-Rome's agreed upon symbols in the chat box to signal interventions and, in the end, instead of typing a raised hand emoji to reserve the right to speak, they simply opened their microphone and started talking. This was not in line with FFF-Rome's etiquette, but the young activists kept allowing it during the whole course of the assembly. Such challenge might also depend on this specific group's unfamiliarity with FFF-Rome's digital and communicative practices, but it was also possible to note FFF-Rome's condescending attitude towards older activists and older people in general, almost mirroring the paternalism that FFF-Rome is subjected to by adults. Rather than enforcing assembly etiquette, the Fridays allowed the members of *2084* to disregard it, in the process deeming them too old (and thus unfit) to understand Zoom's affordances and FFF-Rome's youthful manners. Such behavior, just like the polite silence with which FFF-Rome welcomed paternalistic interventions during assemblies, marks again a boundary between 'true' Fridays and 'adopted/ honorary' Fridays. This time, it was expressed through technological proficiency. I experienced this myself in a previous assembly, when [C14f] was explaining to [B64m] how to 'raise one's hand' on Zoom (12 January 2021, online assembly). Listening to her explanation, I had the impression that she was confusing Zoom's affordances with Google Meet's, but I refrained myself from correcting her because I did not want to risk being labeled a 'boomer' in case I was wrong— despite being only 24 at the time.

From these exchanges, it is possible to note how FFF-activists not only reclaim their political agency outwardly, against the adults' patronizing attitude towards youth (digital) activism, but also preserve it inwardly, when interacting with adults who participate in FFF-Rome. This echoes the generational and ideological distance that Liou and Literat (2020) identified in youth political practices as a means of 'survival' of youth politics, differentiation, and sense of pride. However, FFF-Rome's activists further expand this tendency by at the same time resisting and reinforcing paternalistic attitudes and generation-based stereotypes through communicative practices. In the imaginary of FFF-Rome, social media are tools and spaces that belong to everybody, but especially to young people. They are able to elaborate proper and improper ways of using them, detaching themselves from the patronizing view that sees such use as silly and superficial, while at the same time exploiting that same narrative to gather social approval.

3.3 Suited, Unsited, and Suitable platforms

On several occasions, activists from FridaysForFuture-Rome expressed the belief that each social media platform has its own audiences and serves to pursue specific political purposes. This differentiation only encompassed frontstage social media as they are the ones that give back the public 'face' of the group. It is also the expression of a media ideology (Gershon 2010b) that differentiates platforms in accordance to instrumentality (the political goals the group wants to reach, see Section 2, chap. 4) and audience age groups (the target demographics that FFF-Rome can reach on each platform).

When asked about their most used platform, the Fridays replied that it was Instagram, and quickly specified that it is also young people's preferred platform, contrasting it with Facebook because it was a "dead" platform ([Z19m], 10 July 2020, in person assembly). At

times, they also integrated TikTok into the discussion, as a platform that is “super popular among the super young” (ibid.). In this anagraphic stratification of platforms emerges a personal imaginary whereby Instagram stands in the middle, as the common ground and genetically proper platform of the movement, Facebook is old, out of fashion, paired with segments of the population that are not of prime interest to the Fridays, and TikTok belongs to people that are even younger than the Fridays, and so it has not been occupied yet.

It is possible, then, to outline the Fridays’ age-based media ideologies (Gershon 2010b) starting from their personal experience of social media usage. This allows them to also identify the communication styles of each platform’s user-base which, in turn, come to define the platform itself in the imaginary of the group. As young (and) social media users, the Fridays ‘intuitively’ know their peers to be on Instagram and hardly visit Facebook. As we will see, they consider this platform as inhabited by their parents, relatives, and teachers and attribute to them a verbose communication style. Starting from their lived experiences, they place each generation on each platform by combining an intra-group perspective based on similarities (between young people) with an inter-group perspective based on differences (with the adults).

This scenery has become more nuanced the more interactions I had with the activists, as questions on additional platforms like Twitter, TikTok, and Youtube entered our conversations. However, such distinction among platforms in terms of imagined age-based audiences was very homogenous within the group. Even across time, essentially all of the activists answered in accordance to [Z19m]’s initial distinction. Indeed, the single platforms were selected following a criterion of “simplicity” ([O31f], interview), meaning that they were identified and picked for their being well-known, easy to use, versatile, and able to intercept large numbers of people across age groups. Platforms such as Snapchat, for example, “aren’t used by anyone, except for Canada and the Netherlands” ([Z19m], 10 July 2020, in person assembly), rendering them of little significance for FFF-Rome. As [A28m] explained: “We try to hit all targets because all targets are affected by the climate crisis. We insist more especially on Instagram because it’s the one most used in our age range: 15-25” (interview). Social media represent, then, invitation chambers, spaces that can be used to attract people by leveraging both on personalization of content and on the emotional contagion that platforms can convey: “Our movement is made of people. Let’s show that we are many: this creates empathy with our audience [...] and engages them” ([K22f], 2 November 2020, online assembly).

As a result, FFF-Rome’s choice of platforms is informed not only by a negotiation between social affordances and technical features, but is rooted in the logic of visibility and diffusion connected to the age demographics that the single platforms are believed to reach. The criteria that bring FFF-Rome to pick a platform over another can be distinguished between the target audience it wants to intercept and the political goals the group wants to reach. Even usage strategies are molded according to the age of the perceived userbase of a platform, bringing the Fridays to communicate in a more ‘boomer’-like way on Facebook and struggling to keep up with the teens’ language on TikTok. They seem to be implying that young people prefer a streamlined and fresh communication style so they stay on Instagram because they usually communicate in this way there; adults, on the other hand, would be more verbose, so they are on Facebook because that is the way they interact on there. FFF’s

generational understanding of climate activism thus encompasses both the climate crisis and social media usage practices, so that FFF-activists revindicate the legitimacy of digital activism for climate in itself and inextricably connect political and media practices to being young.

In these sense-giving processes, platform affordances play a part as well: the centrality of stories and photos in the architecture of Instagram, for example, invites a faster, more condensed use than Facebook posts, which give more relevance to text. Consequently, in the perception of the Fridays, each platform intercepts the tastes and inclinations of the population who inhabits it. These, in turn, will vary according to the cultural contexts in which each generation has grown up and the communicative practices it has developed (cfr. Mannheim 1970). The generational conception of communication that has been discussed in the previous section, with its implications in terms of managing relationships between activists of different ages and building the movement's identity, thus extends to social media. Such feature is declined not only in terms of a generic appropriation of these platforms by young people, but also penetrates and branches out within the 'ecology' of platforms, stratifying these according to what is considered the 'typical' age of their users.

This last section therefore deals with generation-based distinctions among FFF-Rome's different social media platforms. Three macro-categories will be identified according to the age-groups the platforms intercept and the modes of communication they suggest:

- 1) Suited platforms, like Instagram. They are 'suited' for FFF-Rome in terms of the age of the perceived user-base and its communication styles.
- 2) Unsited, like Facebook. They intercept older user bases, which are a secondary audience, and are characterized by out-of-fashion communication practices.
- 3) Suitable, like TikTok and Twitter. Platforms that are not of easy classification for the movement and are not used recurringly, but whose usage can be justified because they intercept demographics that FFF-Rome is interested in. Posting on these platforms requires the longest negotiation time. It is always preceded by careful calculations and balancing of pros and cons, since these platforms' communication styles are considered to either be unintuitive or risk compromising FFF-Rome's messages.

3.3.1 Instagram

Instagram is considered to be the flagship platform of the FridaysForFuture movement and of each one of its subgroups, including FFF-Rome. As mentioned, the criteria that guide the choosing of one platform over another within FFF are political goals (see chapter 4) and target audience. The connection between desired target audience and chosen platform can be further ramified, in the case of Instagram, in three more sub-criteria: convenience, social and technical affordances, and communion between target audience and group's identity.

The first criterion is perhaps the most intuitive. In the case of FFF-Rome's Instagram account, convenience refers to the pre-existing connection between Instagram and young people. In other words, Instagram is convenient for FFF-Rome to use because it is where most of FFF-Rome's target audience tends to live, allowing the group to easily reach a large

number of young people. As [F20f] put it, Instagram is “young people’s most used social network channel” (interview). This communion between FFF-Rome and Instagram’s target user-base has allowed the group to build its most successful social media profile among all platforms: “We have almost 100.000 followers on FFF-Italy and roughly 14.000²⁹ on FFF-Rome” ([M20m], interview). Of course, this did not happen overnight but was the result of an active effort by the activists. [C14f], in recounting the genesis of the group, observed that FFF-Rome has matured a social media consciousness overtime. At the beginning, its social media strategy was solely guided by the idea that “we have to make a post because people look at Instagram” and so they “used it a bit at random” (interview). During and after the pandemic, they fine-tuned their social media strategy by utilizing Instagram’s “stories, lives, filters [...] and from there on we became more and more evolved: we learned how to make stories and post the surveys” (ibid.).

This view is somewhat in accordance with the second element that contributes to Instagram’s convenience: convenience of use, meaning that Instagram is perceived as intuitive and simple to utilize for activism purposes. This means that, by trial and error and in a relatively short amount of time, the activists managed to build an Instagram following of more than ten thousand people. Additionally, as the social medium most used by young people, Instagram’s affordances and interface were already familiar to most activists, further enhancing its convenience of use. As [E24m] seems to suggest, Instagram’s intuitiveness and immediacy went hand in hand with the convenience of intercepting FFF-Rome’s desired audience: “We use Instagram more because you put an image, you put a few short paragraphs and then ok, the post is done! It’s very immediate” (interview). During a global pandemic, especially when activists are already known to have to deal with shortage of resources, such convenience was particularly valuable. The double convenience of Instagram for the group, then, allowed it to become “a very useful instrument that is part of the movement’s DNA” ([T20m], interview).

The second criterion influencing Instagram’s adoption has to do with affordances and refers to their being particularly ‘in line’ with FFF-Rome’s target audience’s modes of communication. According to [E24m], it is easier to “make Instagram posts than a wall of text on Facebook” and “pictures are much more receptive [...]: they give back much better what FFF is all about, [...] it’s more immediate” (interview). Instagram’s focus on visualities is more apt to communicate FFF-Rome’s identity and activism than other social media. As [H20f] put it:

There is this lifestyle of young people in which ‘I don’t have much time to spend on social media and I want to read as much as possible in the time I spend there’ [...] the continuous urge to see something and then, if it doesn’t catch you immediately, you scroll. [...] The brain tells you ‘no, enough,’ [so] they have invented a way to keep up with young people: posts with images, captions. You scroll and [read] the explanation. These are posts by young people for young people, who have this idea of immediacy ([H20f], interview).

²⁹ 15.600 thousand as of January 2023.

This view suggests that the activists consider Instagram's affordances more in tune with the needs and communication practices of the specific generation they address, either because of a stronger focus on visual storytelling or for an easiness and immediacy of usage. Once again, young people are thought as the ones that understand Instagram's affordances the most and, as such, they are the natural target of Instagram posts: "The graphics [that 'boomers'] use, the content they write, the stories" are simply not incisive enough because "'boomers' don't know how to make stories or they do it badly [...]. I can tell if it is a young people's page from the way they post and how often" ([H20f], interview). [H20f]'s words point out to a substantial difference in the way young people and adults interact with Instagram's affordances: tools like Instagram stories or the platform's emphasis on visualities rather than text are more intuitive to a younger user base, while older people would struggle to adapt to such a mode of communication. Indeed, when asked about the main difference between older people and young people's way of doing activism, the same activist answered that it is: "At the level of communication and the way they communicate and share their ideas. A 20-year-old guy can post an Instagram story [...] and reach ten thousand people [...]: they are the ones that have an awareness of the tools they have between their hands" ([H20f], interview). This allows the activists to communicate as young people for young people on a young people's platform. In this view, Instagram posts must be impactful and catchy to be effective and to show that the user, i.e., FFF-Rome, understands the platform's affordances and can interact with them proficiently.

This reflects the idea that social media posts must be modulated according to the platform and respond to its affordances: "The social [medium] is made in a way and so people expect that way of writing [...]. You can't write two thousand word-posts because nobody will read them and because you can't even do it" ([A28m], interview). The frenzy that, according to [H20f], characterizes young people's consumption of Instagram content finds an answer in FFF-Rome's use of memes. They are perceived by the activists as the perfect content because they are of immediate consumption and generate high engagement rates: "People who follow us are less inclined to read complex texts so we often use memes" ([K22f], interview). As such, they are believed to be able to trick the algorithm in showing FFF-Rome's page more and more: "You always try as hard as possible to bring people in [...] [through a] meme, because maybe you see it, you remember it, it makes you laugh, and then you keep looking at the posts on the page [...]. Algorithms are stupid: you like something and it says 'oh wow this person likes the page' so it keeps suggesting it to you" ([D20f], interview). This media ideology (Gershon 2010b) brings with it age-based convictions concerning the 'appropriate' ways of using/ inhabiting social media politically, and therefore also the communication styles that are more suitable or effective with respect to the political goals that are pursued.

On the other hand, this merge between online and offline communication styles can come at the expense of the quality of the information posted. The Fridays themselves describe this generation as having exceptionally short attention spans. Posting in a way that generates engagement favors the fast-paced consumption of social media content as it bends to the logic of catchy, impactful, attention-grabbing information such as memes, stories, and reels. These, by definition, can only scratch the surface of a problem as complex and layered as climate change. According to [C24m], it is hard to delve deep into a topic on social media, both for a matter of affordances, such as the space that captions and text are allowed to take on a given

post, and for the aforementioned matter of the economy of attention: “I follow FFF-Rome’s Instagram communication and I feel it is very [...] childish, meaning it’s very simple. [...] It minimizes the issues at hand, and I know they’re hard to explain already [...], but they’re really too simple [...]. At times I don’t approve of their social media choices” (interview). According to the activist, the ‘flat’ and overly ‘simple’ way of speaking about the climate crisis on social media is inevitable because social media like Instagram have “communicative limits” (ibid.). In their struggle to be catchy and attract the attention of younger audiences, FFF-Rome can give the perception of banalizing complex matters, hence [C24m]’s impression of the movement as providing ‘childish’ communication.

Finally, the third element that contributes to Instagram being the flagship platform of the movement is the communion between the target audiences it allows FFF-Rome to intercept and the identity of the group itself. In other words, the group fights climate change with a focus on young people’s role in the ecological transition and in their future having been forgotten by institutions and older generations. As such, FFF-Rome cannot do without Instagram because, if it were to primarily focus on social media that do not mainly cater to young people, it would betray its very cause:

Instagram is the [social network] we use the most, the one that is used the most, because it’s easier to reach young people, who are the basis of our movement. And they have to be, because they represent the present but also the future of this planet’s generations. So it’s normal that as a core value [FFF-Rome] has this too, that is to gather more young people ([E24m], interview).

FFF-Rome’s target audience online is immediately and inevitably connected to the identity of the movement and to the audience it intercepts offline to join it. Hence, the choice of Instagram is not only dictated by a convenience of use and target audience it can intercept, nor is it just limited to the communion between its affordances and the modes of communication of a generation. Its usage becomes a political act in and of itself because it allows the group to speak about young people’s problems on a young people’s platform, thus reinforcing both the group’s identity and its political revindications. Doing climate activism on Instagram is inherently political because it is the best way to involve (new) young people into the fight against climate change: their ultimate fight.

3.3.2 Facebook

Facebook was perceived as Instagram’s opposite or most intuitive counterpart. It was the immediate comparison to Instagram and this distinction was predicated in terms of affordances and userbase.

In the first case, Facebook sat on the opposite side of Instagram’s perceived impact and immediacy. Where Instagram is heavy on visuals and invites fast consumption of information and catchy content, Facebook was considered more verbose and slow-paced, inviting long walls of text and fewer images. Similarly, where Instagram encouraged a more personal and individualized fruition, Facebook would favor group-interaction both at the level of comment threads and Facebook groups, seeming more akin to a ‘public arena’ than a private social media space. As [N21f] recalled, pointing out the more personal quality of Instagram vs Facebook: “When I was using [Facebook], maybe I’d share pages of activists

and stuff like that, but never a selfie of me doing something, not as much personal stuff' (interview). Similarly, [T20m] also believed that Instagram was "more personal: you take a picture, you show others how handsome you are, how cool you are, how smart, how learned... but it's always a very personal matter" (interview). On Facebook, on the other hand: "You have the option to create groups everywhere, communities and things like that, so you can have more active conversations compared to Instagram" ([T20m], interview).

Indeed, Facebook is not necessarily considered a 'worse' space than Instagram per se: its affordances might even be good to encourage discussion and participation, on which activism usually thrives. Despite all the differences in communication and in intercepted audiences, the activists still pointed out the value of using Facebook within FFF-Rome: "We told ourselves, 'we must look for the greatest number possible of people in the greatest number possible of places' so to not use a social medium, in this case, means to lose an opportunity" ([C14f], interview). As [K22f] explained: "All of the local groups [of FFF] have created both Instagram and Facebook profiles because there are still people who use it [Facebook], especially older people" (interview). These still represent an additional audience for FFF-Rome's message since, despite affecting younger people the most, the climate crisis is a universal problem and adults usually have more social, economic, and political power to act on it. All in all, however, the logic was that of obtaining the most with the least possible expenditure of resources. The limited interactions FFF-Rome has with the age groups intercepted by its Facebook page means that "on Facebook we repost the content we prepared for Instagram [...]: we don't pay too much attention to it to be honest" ([K22f], interview). As a result: "For every post we publish on Instagram there is a corresponding one on Facebook, but we don't differentiate by topic" ([M20m], interview). The Fridays have therefore kept Facebook "because it doesn't cost much, there is a button to publish on Instagram and Facebook at the same time" ([K22f], interview), meaning that resource expenditure is at a minimum and that the cost of maintaining a Facebook account is largely inferior to the benefits that the group could gain with it. The connection between the two platforms might also explain why Instagram and Facebook are so linked in the Fridays' imaginary: there are literally affordances connecting them together, further easing Facebook's use within the movement.

The differentiation that really draws the line between FFF-Rome's flagship social medium and Facebook is, once again, age-based. As discussed in the paragraph above, such distinction is intrinsically political and not merely based on convenience. Just like with Instagram, the affordances and media ideologies (Gershon 2010b) connected to the platform invite specific publics, differentiated for age-group. In the case of Facebook, then, we expect to find older audiences in virtue of their preference for "slow-paced, calmer" ([A28m], interview) communication, audiences that are not the prime target of the Fridays' message. The activists were quick to point out this distinction and draw the boundary between their own communication practices (on Instagram) versus that of the 'boomers' that were thought to inhabit Facebook: "Among young people, Facebook is used very little, also because it has less smooth graphics, it's harder to use, it bores you faster" ([U22f], interview). Here comes back the idea that specific affordances are more in line with the communicative needs and habits of a specific generation: "We're used to fast-paced and immediate information, Facebook is much slower because you have writing on top and sometimes you get images

but other times you don't [...]. Maybe an adult that uses [social media] for the first time uses Facebook because [it offers] them slower and more comfortable information" ([U22f], interview).

The distinction between younger and older people was, even in this case, lined with ageism. It pointed out once again how young people are believed to be the ones that know how to use digital platforms properly, while the adults are only able to use them in a 'cringy' and 'mechanic' way. Even when it came to Facebook, which was recognized by all of the activists as an older people's platform, the activists were of the opinion that the adults were unable to develop dignified means of communication on a platform that 'belonged' to them. This reasoning probably refers to the fact that Facebook was originally a young people's platform that young people simply abandoned to migrate to 'cooler' social media. The condition of older people as platform nomads, who did not originally inhabit any platform but simply appropriated the ones left by younger people, made it so that their communication practices were considered a 'cringy' adaptation of young people's. Emojis were considered a clear example: "Facebook is the place where you either write walls of text or you use emojis at random, and also with all of the other 'funny' abbreviations with 'cute' pictures" ([C14f], interview). Like [P23m], also [C14f] drew a clear comparison between the 'correct,' young way of using emojis and the 'boomers'' way:

Emojis placed in the correct way means that [if] we write 'There was a flooding in—I don't know—, Tivoli, and so lots of people were found beneath the rumbles' we don't write: 'There was a flooding,' water droplets, 'in Tivoli and lots of people,' emoji of people holding hands, 'were found beneath the rumbles,' emoji of rocks... [...] I mean, if I write 'home' it's not like I'll add an emoji of a house! ([C14f], interview).

As a response to these 'boomer'-like communication practices, the activists approach Facebook as ambassadors of young people's culture and communication styles and keep older people in touch with what is happening outside of the social medium: "We act as a bridge between Facebook and the rest of the world" ([C14f], interview). In the words of [H20f], it even seems as if an old platform has the power to age young users, because what truly determines youthfulness are communication practices and the ability to jump platform when the time comes. As a result: "Young people no longer use Facebook" but there are "some who still use it, and they make me laugh: [they] are people above 25 [...], those people in their twenties who did not evolve [...]. Those who are still stuck on Facebook are behind!" ([H20f], interview).

From these stereotypes and contrasts emerged a new necessity for FFF-Rome activists: learning how to talk with older people on an older people's platform without losing their identity as young people. By not changing one's communication style, one misses out on the chance to intercept different audiences: "By trying not to use it like a 'boomer' you'll intercept less 'boomers'" ([E24m], interview). It is important, then, to "learn how the platform works" ([F20f], interview) so that the activists' message can be conveyed in a different way on Facebook than on Instagram: "You can't talk to kids in high school the same way you'd talk with workers" (ibid.). However, if the Fridays were to simply mold their communication style to what they believe is that of the platform's inhabitants, it would

come at the expenses of FFF-Rome's identity and political message: "We'd have to make posts that are banal and simplistic and superficial but that's not how we do things in FFF" ([E24m], interview). The activist's perception was that on Facebook "a great number of communications are very superficial [...] many people maybe share a news story, a thing, having only read the title, and this is super negative, it doesn't go well with our way of communicating" (ibid.).

In the end, the need to maintain the group's signature communication style and identity was deemed more important than losing potential people in secondary audiences. However, some activists believed that the fact that young people were the original authors of a message would be enough to 'protect' it from becoming 'boomer'-like, even if the communication practices were to be molded, to some extent, after what they believed were of the adults': "[The message] does not lose its nature because it's still young people talking, it's not like since we have to intercept the target of fifty-year olds on Facebook then the post is written by a fifty-year old. It's still always a youth. It's the point of view of a youth as told to an older person" ([F20f], interview).

3.3.3 Twitter & TikTok

As we have seen, FFF-Rome activists consider generational belonging a factor that influences which platform people choose to inhabit and that goes hand in hand with their tastes and communication preferences. However, this reasoning does not apply to Twitter, the first of FFF-Rome's potentially 'suitable' platforms.

The difficulty in collocating Twitter within the generation-based media ecology of the movement derives from its unique affordances, which make the comparison with Instagram or Facebook more challenging, to its specific communicative practices, and variegated audiences. The activists considered it an 'odd' platform which responds well only to usage practices that, by nature, are not as in line with FFF-Rome's. As [E24m] explained: "Twitter is just something different" and, while it is important to "expand and make oneself known even in these environments," it is "much more difficult because there [on Twitter] you'll find people who are totally against you [...] and you can't do the same things you do on Instagram because it's a different target, a different social, and a different way of communicating" (interview).

Indeed, in the case of Twitter, the communicative style and affordances of the platform did not necessarily connote it in a generational way for the activists, but the tones and types of political discussion it hosts did. The platform was thought to be a "political and institutional kind of space" ([P23m], 26 October 2020, online assembly) which can specifically reach "organizations, parties, political personalities, and both non-young and non-old age groups" ([M20m], 26 October 2020, online assembly) rather than specific age-groups like Facebook, Instagram, or even TikTok. It is a type of online public debate that was considered more in line with individual adults' participatory politics than with organized youth politics. As discussed during FFF-Italy's periodic meeting: "One must be active at all times on Twitter, not just publish one post: we should Tweet FFF's view on each trending topic" (6 February 2021, online assembly). For this reason, Twitter has been an 'unknown' platform to the

Fridays for some time, being sporadically used only at the national level, through FFF-Italy official Twitter page, rather than at the local level of FFF-Rome.

The little familiarity FFF-Rome activists have with Twitter became evident when [M20m] sponsored the social medium during an assembly (26 October 2020, online) by mentioning a past *Tweetstorm*³⁰ organized by FFF-Germany. Everyone was quite surprised to discover the effectiveness of the hashtag-driven campaigns that had been organized on the platform until then. They found themselves in the apparent contradiction of having to ‘recycle’ a political space considered old with the feeling that it was ‘new,’ that is a new territory for FFF-Rome. Once again, the option of adding Twitter to FFF-Rome’s ecology of media was motivated by the limitations to public gathering imposed during the COVID-19 emergency in Italy, rather than by a specific interest in the publics that Twitter could intercept. The main challenge, for the activists, lay in reconciling the ‘youthful’ character of the platform, that is its being concise, and, at the same time, the ‘dated’ forms of action and political communication that it was believed to host and enable.

On Facebook and Instagram it was the young vs old communication styles that drove the entire sense-making process in an inter-generational key to distinguish different ‘social’ generations (cfr. Mannheim, 1970) and respective platforms. On Twitter, it was the content of the discussions that really mattered in identifying age-based political practices. Twitter users’ styles of political participation were deemed ‘adult-like,’ and the Fridays had to decide how to collocate themselves in the conversation. As [M20m] explained, the activists tried to interact on Twitter by maintaining their own communication style (humor, wordplays, incisive and catchy comments) but adapting it to the needs of the platform, that is its time-specificity and in accordance with specific trending topics and hashtags: “Twitter is most used for question-and-response, lightning-fast opinions, very brief puns on trendy topics that everyone talks about, Tweetstorms [...]. We don’t have a fixed publication schedule” (interview). On the one hand, the activists tried to respect the practices established among what they believed were Twitter’s typical users, adults, and, on the other, they challenged and contaminated them, for example with memes and Tweetstorms, which condensed their young communication styles. In this negotiation process with the platform and its rules, the Fridays try to ‘make youthful’ Twitter’s current communication style through simple and straightforward messages and using a funny language and a playful tone.

This process is akin to the negotiations that happened when debating the adoption of TikTok as a new platform, the second potentially ‘suitable’ platform for FFF-Rome. In the case of TikTok, the negotiations happened in an opposite ‘direction’ compared to Twitter: it emerged how it was the Fridays that needed to rejuvenate their own communication style, not the platform, which actually needed to be used in a more ‘serious,’ rather than a more youthful way. In distinguishing this platform from others, the Fridays did not refer to specific affordances but only to the age groups that inhabited it. This might be due to the fact that the activists themselves had little familiarity with TikTok’s affordances. The adoption of the platform within the group was very gradual and saw both opposing and proactive arguments.

³⁰ As we will discuss in more detail in Section 2, Chapter 4, Tweetstorms are online political actions by which activists simultaneously Tweet the same content from their personal accounts, provoking journalists or political figures.

Generally speaking, TikTok's main appeal lay in its identified ability to intercept very young age groups, specifically those that FridaysForFuture had difficulty reaching out to, either because they did not use Instagram enough or because they were too young to know much about FridaysForFuture. The platform was identified with "girls and boys aged 16-17: [...] it is the platform closest to them for doing politics, like, I don't know ... the Facebook of the time!" ([J24m], 10 July 2020, in person assembly). As [T20m] explained, TikTok "can reach an even younger audience than we have. Let's say that now Instagram is for generation Z³¹, Facebook is a little more for generation Y³², and instead TikTok is still for the youngest, and therefore it could expand our area of influence" (interview).

The need to create a TikTok profile was also dictated by a necessity to keep up with the times since "TikTok is overthrowing Instagram as everyone's most used social network" ([D20f], interview). According to this view, FFF-Rome must acknowledge that its audiences switch among digital platforms according to the latest trends so "if one wants to keep the message alive one has to change social media [...]. Always remaining the same leads to nothing" ([U22f], interview). The adoption of TikTok represented a challenge for FFF because of the conviction that, if FridaysForFuture were not to keep jumping platforms in order to reach young people, they would *age* as a movement, losing their identity of being young. This was evident in the way [C14f] jokingly explained to me why FFF still did not have a TikTok account in 2020: "We don't have TikTok because we're 'boomers!' We must keep up with the times!" ([2 November 2020, online assembly). According to her, if the movement failed to expand its social media presence on TikTok, then they would be just like those adults who remain on Facebook and use the 'wrong' emojis, because they refuse to adopt new communication styles and keep up with the trends.

This positive view of TikTok as the platform that can keep FFF-Rome relevant and prevent its premature aging contrasted with the opinion, held by a great number of activists, that TikTok was inappropriate, a "contested social medium" ([P23m], interview). Already in the first assembly where the topic was discussed, it was possible to notice that, while some activists were completely in favor of TikTok, the predominant view within the group was judgmental of its prevailing usage practices. It was mostly considered a "silly platform [where] you dance to the music underneath" (10 July, in person assembly). This view emerged time and time again during assemblies and during the interviews, with many of the activists expressing skepticism towards the platform and concern for FFF's reputation. As pointed out by a Friday during an assembly: "We'd lose our credibility if we started doing challenges and we'd lose the focus on the climate crisis" (26 October, online assembly), once again emphasizing the complex balance between reaching new audiences and the impact this could have when it came to communication practices online.

While, on the one hand, the Fridays identified the platform's appeal with intercepting younger audiences in a potentially short amount of time, the kind of content that is popular on

³¹ Also known as Gen Z. It is the demographic cohort succeeding millennials. People belonging to this cohort are identified as being born between the mid-to-late 1990s and the early 2010s (see Turner, A. (2015). Generation Z: Technology and Social Interest. *The Journal of Individual Psychology*, 71(2): 103-113. doi:10.1353/jip.2015.0021; Dimock, M. (2022, April 21). Defining generations: Where millennials end and generation Z begins. *Pew Research Center*. Retrieved January 18, 2023, from <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/>).

³² Millennials.

TikTok— dance challenges and memes— was not deemed in line with FFF’s politics and the activists believed it might compromise the movement’s message and its outward identity. Even if FFF were to stay true to itself, the risk, as described by [U22f], was still that of being superficial:

[Imagine] a message that has a certain weight in a 15 seconds video, when perhaps earlier there was a make-up video, then there will be one about dogs, or someone who perhaps does funny things... It could get lost in the middle and lose incisiveness or become superficial [...]. One needs to express an important concept but must also make it captivating: you could get lost ([U22f], interview).

What the Fridays believed the established way to become popular on TikTok, that is with very short videos and lots of humor, was deemed unsuitable to their identity standards: it might shift the perception people had of FridaysForFuture because it would allow to touch on the climate crisis only superficially. The predominant view seemed to be that there are advantages and disadvantages to using TikTok and the activists did not automatically rule out the platform because of their preconceptions. They emphasized, however, how it was important to use it “in the right way [...] [with] videos that have a goal, an objective, [...] that want to communicate information” ([N21f], interview), contrasting the FFF way of using TikTok with what they believed were the platform’s established user practices.

In this sense, it is also interesting to note [C14f]’s opinion of the platform as she jokingly kept calling the activists who made fun of TikTok “boomers,” pointing out how they “don’t understand anything” (10 July 2020, in person assembly). She challenged [S18m] to try and post a video on TikTok, upholding the idea that the end would justify the means, even if these were considered inappropriate for the identity of FridaysForFuture: “If your dance gets more than a thousand likes, then you will do the dance at the next strike” (10 July 2020, in person assembly). According to her, FFF must create a TikTok account or they would not be able to keep up with the times. This idea implies that, by not rejuvenating through new platforms and communication practices, FFF risks slipping into the same judgmental and paternalistic attitude that adults show towards digital youth cultures, dismissing them without really knowing them. FFF would thus appear ‘older’ than it is and, above all, lose that segment of young people to whom the fight against climate change must, instead, extend. In the case of TikTok, however, FFF-Rome’s ‘signature’ did not concern the communication style, as it was the case with Twitter, but the content. If, on Twitter, the Fridays should ‘make young’ the platforms’ political practices by applying a fresh and youthful style, on TikTok they must make the platform’s communication practices ‘mature’ by injecting climate-oriented content and issues. In one case, then, generational appropriation operates on a stylistic/ communicative level, while in the other case it is declined on a content/ political level.

The arguments in favor of adopting new communication channels also echo the prime importance of visibility (or ‘mediaticity’ as the activists call it) for FFF-Rome. Mediatic resonance is to be pursued (almost) at all costs in virtue of the magnitude and importance of the climate crisis, even when the costs might be directly affecting the movement’s outward identity. These negotiations will be analyzed in more detail in the following chapter.

4. Fighting for the planet: online (and offline) political strategies and practices

In this chapter we focus on how FFF-Rome activists perceive social media as environments for activism. Lending themselves to the achievement of different political objectives and enactment of activist strategies, FFF-Rome's social media host sense-making processes in which specific political and media practices come to define each other. This chapter then analyzes the uses and political meanings of social media by the Fridays and therefore illustrates the struggle for climate justice within and beyond social media, highlighting the norms, values, and beliefs that guide such practices.

More specifically, the different paragraphs address the relationship between online and offline activism in FFF-Rome; FFF-Rome's specific activists strategies and how they are declined across different social media to take advantage of their affordances; and FFF-Rome's approach to media ecology and diversified social media usages according to political goals and the environmental impact of a platform.

4.1 A “contiguous, surrogate square:” FFF activism on and beyond social media

During my time with(in) FFF-Rome, I had the opportunity to observe firsthand how the activists seamlessly engage in the fight against climate change between online and offline spaces. Social media are considered a territory of the movement and, therefore, they intervene in the construction of FFF-Rome as a political subject, that is its inward identity, and of its social legitimization, that is its outward identity.

The political significance of digital action for FFF-Rome and the contiguity between digital environments and physical demonstrations emerged already from the first interaction with the activists. During the workshop of July 10th, 2020, the activists were discussing how to renovate FFF-Rome's communicative practices. When [Z19m] stated that “social media activism too is a way to mobilize oneself” everyone agreed enthusiastically, suggesting the legitimization of digital activism within the group. Furthermore, when [Z19m] pointed out the flaws of FFF-Rome's Instagram page, he criticized the page for its being “not participative enough.” In doing so, he utilized the Italian word ‘partecipata,’ which traditionally refers to square demonstrations, meaning he was naturally considering social media usage as a form of mobilization, and talked about it as he would talk about a protest action. The current use of the platform was therefore out of place in that the practices of convocation and visibility in which the uses of Instagram were currently exhausted within the movement clashed with the activist's conception of the platform as a real space for mobilization. The discussion that followed focused, then, on how to best engage one of FFF-Rome's target audiences: high school students. During the discussion, the activists kept switching between calling them ‘students’ and ‘users,’ according to the envisioned activist strategies: online or offline recruitment. If FFF-Rome was discussing political participation by looking at square demonstration and traditional offline activism, its audience were students, but if it was considering social media practices, the same target became ‘users.’

As we will see, participation in protest actions was also conceived within this contiguity and mutual interference between the offline and online worlds, so that social media are experienced by the Fridays as constitutive of grassroots political practices, to the point that social media actions were described as a “contiguous and surrogate square” ([P23m], 9

November 2020, online assembly) to in-presence demonstrations. From these beliefs, we can observe how FFF-Rome perceives social networks not only as additional environments of activism, but as real territories of political contention and construction of the movement's agenda. As [P23m] stated: "Social media and physical squares are the two pillars" of FFF-Rome (12 October, in person assembly). They must coexist and cooperate, they fuel each other and keep each other alive, meaning the group cannot do without one of them. FFF-Rome' activism is thus collocated between physical squares and social media, it does not exist only in one realm and then moves to the other when the need arises: digital platforms and physical activism are inextricably intertwined and influence each other. As it will be analyzed in the following sections, even the perceived spreadability/ visibility of a physical action determines its feasibility as a form of protest.

An additional example of this interaction and interchangeability were the assemblies organized during the COVID-19 emergency. During the height of the pandemic, the group could only meet in Zoom assemblies. However, when it was allowed again to meet in person— in compliance with the distancing measures in force—, a Zoom room was still open to allow those who could not or did not want to meet in person to participate. In these cases, the computer and, therefore, those who followed remotely, literally sat among us on a chair. To ensure that the interventions were clearly audible even from home, we passed each other a mobile phone connected to the Zoom room to act as a 'microphone' for those present in person who wanted to interact with those who were online. Even the rules of intervention and management of the assembly interfered with and redefined the in-presence dynamics of the offline/ hybrid assembly. To speak, one could indiscriminately raise one's hand or send an asterisk in the Zoom chatbox; '+'s were sent in the chat box to show one's approval regarding an intervention, while applause in Italian sign language were used in presence, so that the syntax of one mode of assembly was immediately transposed into the gestures of the other. This interchangeability between online and offline assembly practices was especially evident during the first face-to-face assembly after the lockdown: the activist who had the task of collecting requests for intervention during the in-person assembly jokingly said "send me an asterisk!" to those who wanted to speak ([G25f], 4 September 2020, in person assembly), thus bridging the blurred boundary between the two realms.

Time and time again I was surprised by the easiness and immediacy with which the Fridays integrated social media in their activism practices. On one occasion, for example, as I was discussing the current demonstration with [C14f], she kept sending messages to other Fridays in different WhatsApp and Telegram groups to update them and receive feedback. She was also adding newcomers to the official WhatsApp groups and creating a new chatgroup to coordinate the next protests. During the day, she did not hesitate to call representatives of other social movements with her phone or message them on social media, even if they had never met or talked before, all the while creating stories for FFF-Rome's social media page. She explained that the page was managed by her alongside [K22f], [L25f], and [F23m] and that it was paramount to create 'cool' stories to attract people. She was proud to show me the one she had created for the demonstration: "You see? Your finger goes right on top of 'info,' so people click and come" (2 October 2020, in person event). The real challenge for the movement was not in knowing how to interact between online and offline spaces, but rather to always find new ways to engage audiences, regardless of the nature of the realms where

this happened. It goes to prove that the activists did not consider digital activism as a form of low-effort, inferior engagement but a political practice like others.

These considerations were particularly evident during the assemblies where the activists were deliberating which issues to claim during the global strike of October 2020. When discussing a demonstration in front of Eni, for example, [L25f] started thinking about the objectives and interlocutors, stating that “whatever we do, it is important to maintain the consistency of communication and aesthetic at a national level” (28 September 2020, in person assembly). She was not expressly referring to social media, but to communication in its ecology, including the corporal, physical actions deployed in the public space, those replicated and narrated on social media, and those transmitted to the press. The holistic consideration of communication on all its levels to conceive and enact a specific kind of demonstration further confirms the mutual shaping between online and offline spaces within the movement.

During the same assembly, the discussion particularly delved on the collective deliberation of which hashtag to use to launch the action week of protests. In the assembly (28 September 2020, in person), the collective brainstorming supported two main ideas. On the one hand, the need to engage audiences regarding European politics. In this regard, [L25f] said: “The hashtag must be linked to the Recovery Fund.” On the other hand, the need to capture the attention of the Italian population. In this regard, [G25f] said: “The hashtag must be in Italian because it must also reach Italian media.” In the end, it was decided for #recoveryplanet to play with the name of the European fund; a decision that was eventually also accepted by other Italian groups of FFF. The linguistic obstacle was overshadowed by the centrality of the issue of intergenerational debt and the need to position the group clearly with respect to the supranational public policies that were being discussed at the EU level. In this process of definition and immediate translation of political content into platform syntax, the movement realized the constitutive and organizing character of social media for activism. The hashtag, the platform syntax, became a political tool because it physically calls together, both in physical and digital spaces, those who want to fight for climate justice, all the while summarizing the group’s agenda in a ‘Title’ capable of identifying the movement and its fight in the eyes of the public opinion.

In these episodes, it transpires how activism practices infiltrate digital environments where, obviously, it is important to find tools that are similar to those used in the offline world. The use of hashtags responds to the logic of thematization and belonging that, in a square, is usually represented by banners. On the other hand, platform syntax insinuates itself into activism practices to the point that hashtags are replicated on banners and signs that parade in the squares (see *Pics. 6-9*), giving back that sense of ‘crowding’ that one can perceive when following hashtag-driven conversations online. As [K22f] pointed out during her interview: “Social media usage is an extension of square demonstrations” so that keywords, slogans, and claims take hold and spread seamlessly into the informal networks of activists, be they online or offline.



Pictures 6 and 7: On the left, the banner as it appeared once completed, during the assembly of October 5th, 2020. On the right, the banner as it was featured during October 2020's strike for climate in Piazza del Popolo (one of Rome's largest and most central squares), with three activists demonstrating. These pictures were taken during the research.



Picture 8: 'Recovery Planet' is used as slogan to thematize the entire day of protest and appears as title in the pictures of the strike that FFF-Rome published on its Instagram page. This is from October 11. Link to post: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CGNEBmync32/>



Picture 9: The banner is featured once again in a different demonstration. This is from December 11, 2020, to commemorate the 5-year anniversary of the Paris Agreements. The activists demonstrated in front of the Pantheon (an ancient Roman temple in the center of the capital) to criticize the little progress made so far regarding the agreements. Link to post: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CIq7HzrnjEM/>

As briefly outlined in chapter three, to this ecological view of social media as additional environments of activism and full-fledged spaces for political participation, the Fridays juxtapose the belief that social media are “paramount for an international movement” ([M57f], interview). They allow a movement to “reach lots of people and have presence” ([A28m], interview), calling back to [M20m]’s belief that social media were the force that “allowed the message initiated by Greta to spread so fast” ([M20m], interview).

The belief that “you can move worlds with social media!” ([Z19m], July 10, f-t-f workshop) hints at a deterministic assumption that sees in digital technologies an extreme power of message diffusion and audience reach. This vision may seem to contradict the notion of social media as additional environments for activism because the latter discourages the possibility to observe the relationship between media and society in the reductive terms of each one’s effects on the other. Techno-determinism, on the other hand, gives ‘power’ in the communication exchange to the platforms rather than to the users. However, among the Fridays, these two visions can coexist as the ‘power’ of mobilization, the one attributed to platforms, mainly refers to their capacity to attract and reach people: their capacity to host and, from there, potentially activate ‘worlds.’ Social media are conceived and ‘occupied’ as large and reticular places that intercept and collect widely extended basins of users to be involved in future protests. Such mobilizing power is not per se nor automatic, but must be ‘triggered’ by skilled social actors, which happen to be FFF-Rome activists, who can, if sufficiently apt, ‘unlock’ the mobilizing power of social media. The instrumentality of platforms is therefore the prelude to a refined conception of the relationship between digital

media and political struggle that looks at their mutual influence, which, in turn, concerns both political-identity performance and mediated organizational-identity processes.

To add further complexity to this scenario, the Fridays also manifested a third conception of social media. On the one hand, digital platforms are considered a ‘continuous and surrogate square’ that enrich and are embedded into every expression of FFF-Rome’s activism. On the other hand, however, the activists still maintained a distinction between the two realms at the level of emotional and human value. An example were [E24m]’s words when he commented that “in certain periods, some people have distanced themselves. Even if they follow FFF’s social pages, they like things... every now and then we meet and go out, but they can’t be active anymore because stuff happens in your life that you can’t control” (interview). In his view, liking a post and following FFF-Rome on social media did not equate, in terms of political participation, to physically being present to assemblies and protests, thus contradicting [Z19m]’s view when he said that, when it came to protests: “[People] can come to the square or post on social media” (10 July 2020, in person assembly) and thus equating online and offline responses to FFF-Rome’s call to action. [R18f] perhaps expressed this ambivalence best:

It would be nice to find more concrete things to separate social media from the movement a bit. In my opinion, social media must be a support that we have as a movement, something that can help us share [our message] but [we] cannot become ‘politics on social media.’ Even the online discussions in my opinion make no sense. It completely rips you away from what human conversation is ([R18f], interview).

Offline spaces are therefore considered to be intrinsically ‘better’ and richer from the perspective of human connection, socialization, and camaraderie, but also as more nuanced spaces that are better suited for difficult discussions and delicate topics, such as deciding the political compass and ethical guidelines of the movement.

Such value was renewed on occasion of the COVID-19 emergency, as physical meetings became impossible. In order to comply with the measures imposed by the country’s lockdown, the global strike of March 2020 took place entirely online by gathering a myriad of icons around Palazzo Montecitorio³³ in Rome, through a purportedly created fictitious geolocation service. Each icon represented a person who virtually participated in the protest without physically ‘gathering’ there: “We were all at home but we created an online service where people could take a small icon like a tree, a person with a sign, etc. and place it near Montecitorio, geolocating themselves there [...]. This thing had an unexpected success, [...] we managed to get a lot of people to participate” ([M20m], 19 December 2020, in person assembly). On the one hand, this proved that “activism, when done well, can also have a crazy resonance without doing it live,” and, therefore, “moving everything online is feasible” ([Cf14], 26 October 2020, online assembly). However, this way of protesting was dictated by extreme necessities: during the March-May 2020 lockdown in Italy it was prohibited to exit one’s home without specific permits and so it was impossible to protest in the streets. This contributed to developing and strengthening FFF-Rome’s social media presence but also to enhancing the value of physical gatherings for the group, as they were no longer an option.

³³ The seat of the Italian Chamber of Deputies.

Comparing the movement's activism in 2021 with that of the COVID-19 emergency, [E24m] expressed clear relief in the ability of meeting in person again:

You can march the streets and you can go back to demonstrating, to protest, to be all together and to have physical contact with people, because you see them as real, you know that there is another real person with you who fights for those same goals. It's not a fictitious thing inside the screen, where you maybe organize to put up a post or something else. You know that there's actually someone real ([E24m], interview).

The activist equated offline meetings to realness, while the online realm was deemed 'unreal,' despite its having real effects on the movement's protests and history, such as in terms of identity-building and recruitment. As the offline world of physical demonstrations became unattainable, it also became more desirable, creating an effect akin to nostalgia for old-fashioned, traditional forms of activism.

Overall, it seemed as if the offline realm was preferable as a context for political/ mediatic action, while social media seemed to be preferred as a context for dissemination of information and recruitment. In this sense, the two realms seamlessly interact with each other even by maintaining different roles, whereby social media usage can substitute offline actions in times of need, but mainly responds to the logics of dissemination and engagement of larger audiences, so that, once properly educated and sensibilized, new activists can join the movement:

With social media you can make noise up to a certain point, but then what matters are the demonstrations. Things are done in person in the square. [...] Social [media] communication is used above all for [...] a theoretical advancement of activists, but we also say to stimulate people to participate in the streets ([K22f], interview).

This view further contributes to connecting online and offline activism within the movement. If, on the one hand, physical activism was considered "dead" ([U22f], interview) without a social media presence able to spread it, engage new audiences, and disseminate the message of the movement, a social media presence that does not translate into physical demonstrations results sterile and equally ineffective as a form of activism. It became clear then that one must fuel the other to the point that they cannot do with each other anymore. This went beyond a simple back-and-forth between the online and offline realms: in FFF-Rome, political action simultaneously unfolds in physical places and on social media, thus bridging logics and aesthetics that are characteristic of each one respectively.

4.2 FFF's social media activism: diversified activism strategies and temporalities

The following paragraphs discuss three media strategies employed by FFF-Rome to attract and engage audiences and that respond to different temporalities of activism. The scheduling of political activities, likewise, follows a long and short-term perspective, and political objectives are calibrated accordingly. FridaysForFuture does not operate only through large-scale mobilizations, but by pacing its activities and following two speeds. Certain political activities are slow and regular (i.e., Monday assemblies, Friday Strikes, social media posting...) so as to create a constant background noise for the "maintenance of political tension and media attention" ([H23m], 4 September 2020, in person assembly). Other

activities, on the other hand, are cyclical and more explosive in nature (i.e., the global strikes, large-scale social media campaigns, national and international assemblies). They raise the tone and create a cry of protest that echoes nationally and/or internationally. These peak in occasion of the global strikes, which combine high intensity use of social media (both in terms of content production and of organizational dynamics) and are always followed by latent phases, during which the activists continue to share information and ideas and to organize protests that keep unraveling between online and offline spaces.

The first paragraph of this section thus addresses the symbiosis between activism practices and mediatic resonance through the concept of ‘mediaticity,’ showing how the first are decided in function of the other and political action is indivisible from its communication and mediatic coverage. In this sense, social media are the natural habitat of FFF-Rome’s communication insofar as they are part of a multidimensional media strategy that seems to envision activism as constituted and defined in terms of what it is able to tell about itself, and with which results. This strategy regards short-term engagement and deals with the temporal dimension of the now. The second paragraph deals with long-term engagement strategies, specifically FFF-Rome’s mission to educate its audiences, so as to eventually attract them into the movement. The last paragraph deals with visual strategies. These start as short-term engagement since Instagram posts are conceived to be catchy and attract audiences through the logic of ‘mediaticity’ (as illustrated in the first paragraph). Still, they end up being part of a long-term strategy as they constitute a corpus of visual representations of the group and of its activism that can be browsed through time as a digital archive of FFF-Rome’s climate activism. Throughout the paragraphs, it will be addressed how such strategies also serve to construct and manage the outward identity of the movement.

4.2.1 The pursuit of ‘mediaticity’ and short-term engagement

In the course of the assemblies, it emerged how FFF-Rome activists are particularly attentive to how their protest actions are framed and perceived on the outside. This attention calls back not only to a concern for the movement’s outward identity, so that, for example, they devote particular care to the press coverage of their strikes and to how they appear in the public eye. Rather, it refers to an actual activist strategy that the Fridays call ‘mediaticity.’

‘Mediaticity’ is a complex concept coined by the activists. It was used during assemblies, at times, to refer to the attention that FFF-Rome is able to receive from mainstream media like press and journalists, while other times it referred to the social media visibility of posts, pages, hashtags, or protests and was thus measured in terms of likes, interactions, follower count etc. Analyzing the entire corpus of data and keeping in mind the conversations and exchanges with the activists, I believe that the most proper definition for the concept of ‘mediaticity’ as the Friday intended it is the capability of an object of activism (a protest action, a group of activist etc.) to achieve mediatic resonance, both immediately and over time. It shares some similarities with concepts such as virality, catchiness, and spreadability, but it is broader as it embraces every realm of FFF-Rome activism, not just the online, both in terms of environments where ‘mediaticity’ is to be achieved, online and offline, and in terms of organizing protest actions in function of their perceived/ expected ‘mediaticity.’ During an assembly for example (28 September 2020, in person), when discussing the chance of chaining themselves to Eni’s gates to protest against the company, the activists raised

concerns about mass media's coverage of the event. One of them argued that if the chaining were to happen *after* the global strike, media attention would have dropped already, thus dimming the chances of FFF-Rome's demonstration getting mass media coverage for long or at all. 'Mediaticity,' then, is both a means *and* an end, a strategy and a goal: through 'mediaticity,' the Fridays can achieve political objectives, but 'mediaticity' is an objective in and of itself because it supports the movement and its actions, both in the immediate and long period. It spreads FFF-Rome's message and face to as many people as possible across as many channels as possible, and, as a result, keeps the movement alive over time. The group's visibility, then, the mediatic resonance of a protest action, is used by FFF-Rome as a way to measure the effectiveness of its activism, all the while managing its outward identity.

Even if, indirectly, it has repercussions on the long period, 'mediaticity' is especially pursued immediately before and after protest peaks, when FFF-activists follow a short-term logic of engagement aimed at obtaining the highest visibility and turnover in the shortest period possible across as many platforms as possible. The activists' short-term political strategy of engagement, then, pairs with the launch of key events like the biannual global strikes in combination with social media campaigns and media coverages to amplify their resonance. It became evident during the organization of the action week for the global strike of October 2020. There was a constant reference to organizing protest actions that could attract/ be appealing to mainstream media and at the same time be easily spreadable on social media, especially Instagram.

Indeed, one way to achieve 'mediaticity' was to conceive demonstrations and protests in function of what the Fridays believed might attract the media's attention. Numbers, for example, were considered to have high 'mediaticity.' When discussing the modalities of protest for a small demonstration at the end of October 2020, [M20m] was strongly in favor of opening it up to as many people as possible: "We won't attract any attention if it's only a few of us. Everything depends on media attention" (26 October 2020, online assembly). Protest actions should aim to involve as many people and organizations as possible in order to achieve 'mediaticity.' At times, however, numbers were not enough to grant 'mediaticity' to an event. This happened during the COVID-19 emergency, when large public gatherings were prohibited, or even during the global strikes for climate, because they happen twice a year, meaning that the event has become predictable and has lost part of its mediatic appeal. In these cases, the activists resorted to creativity to find new ways to engage the media. [J24m] was very conscious of these processes during a discussion on whether to organize a critical mass before or after the global strike for climate. He observed that "the square is the death of a demonstration" (14 September 2020, in person assembly), meaning that, if the Fridays wanted to organize additional protests for the day of the global strike, these should happen before the main demonstration, otherwise the media would ignore it: they would consider the square protest the main event and consider the day of protests concluded after it had happened. Additionally, according to [J24m], if the critical mass were to happen immediately before the square protest, FFF-Rome's social media could follow it as it intercepted the square protest, allowing the event additional "communicative outputs that make people want to join us in the square" (14 September 2020, in person assembly).

The need to be time-sensitive and bridge the temporalities of activism and media was also reflected in how the activists evaluated past initiatives and if they followed the logic of

‘mediaticity’ effectively. This was the case of “Ritorno al Futuro” (Back to the Future), an extensive campaign that FFF-Italy organized in tandem with scientists and experts from different fields to propose effective steps towards decarbonization and keeping average global temperatures within the 1.5° percentile. The campaign, although massive, was advertised at the same time the COVID-19 emergency was beginning, so that its media coverage and impact was very limited in the short-term. [L25f] lamented this, noting how “no one paid it any mind because of COVID [...] so it’s worth proposing it again” as a collection of issues to address during the October 2020 global strike (4 September 2020, in person assembly). Similarly, [P23m] (interview) observed that the “strongest content” FFF-Rome had produced was in its first year of life, even if, qualitatively speaking, “they were the worst.” According to the activist, this was due to the character of novelty of the newborn movement, so that the success of a communication did not only depend on its quality but also on its historical momentum and the potential attributed to the authors of such communication. This also implied the need to constantly renew FFF-Rome, in order to remain captivating and intercept new audiences. For this reason, the Fridays always drew a critical analysis on the effectiveness of offline protests and online communication at the end of a demonstration. As [C14f] clarified: “Always using the same method for all of the posts can become boring and [...] reduce the efficiency of the medium you [are] using” (9 December 2020, online event). The same rationale applied to street mobilizations: “After almost two years [...], going to the streets every Friday, doing the usual protests is not as attractive [...]. Are we still up with the times if we picket in front of the embassy of a country [...] that does not care about deforestation and fires? [...] Is there a better way to involve schools?” ([Z19m], 10 July 2020, in person assembly).

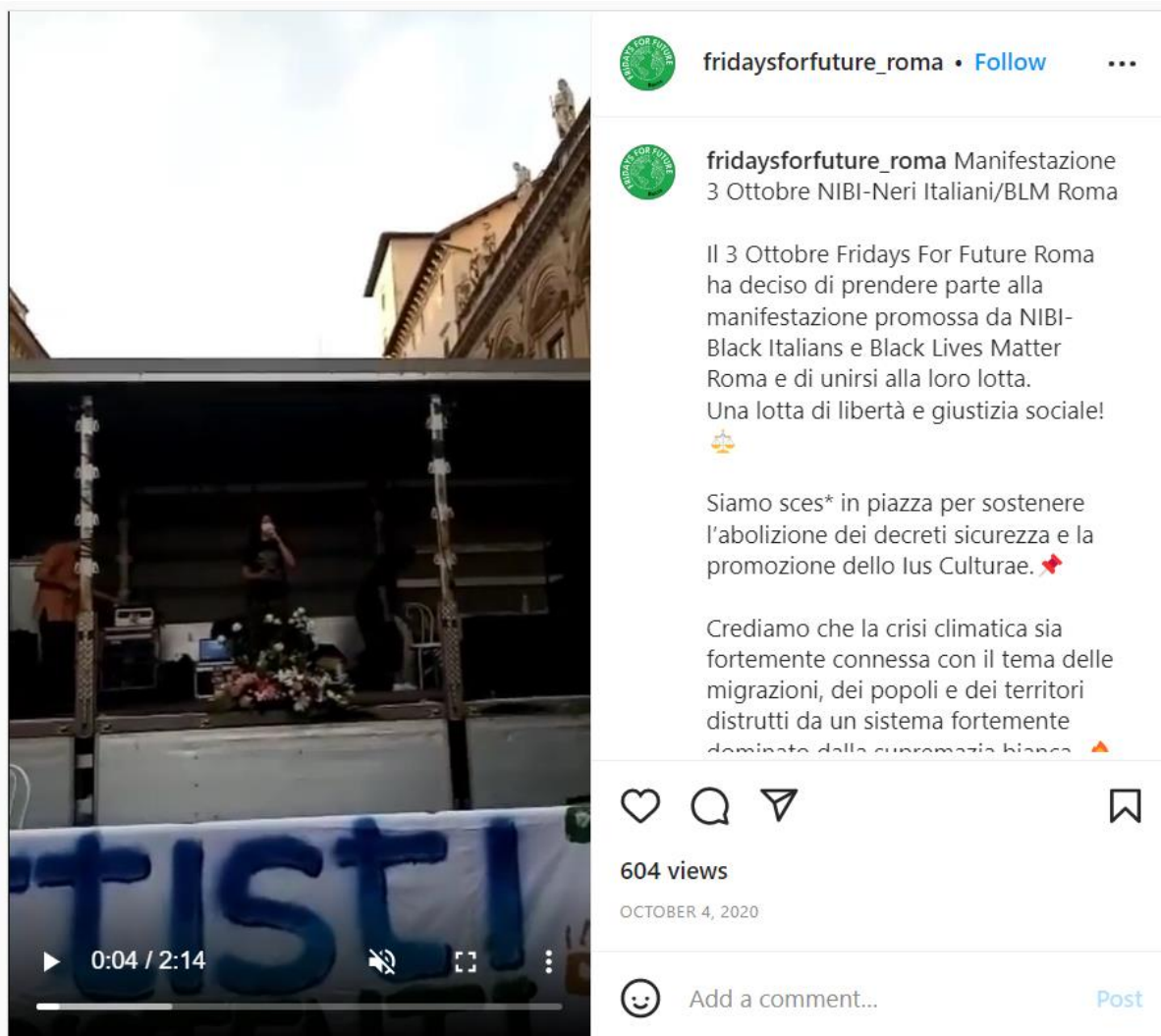
The importance of using FFF-Rome’s social media capacity to engage audiences and invite people to protests was also upheld by [G25f], who proposed to create short video pills “to post and then send to national and local media in preparation for the strike” (4 September 2020, in person assembly). Such videos, however, “must be of very high quality [...]. We need a good video maker. We need to viralize it!” (ibid.). Here, ‘mediaticity’ appeared in its double nature. On the one hand, ‘viralizing’ its social media content allows FFF-Rome to exploit media coverage to achieve the political objective of attracting more people to the square. On the other hand, the ‘mediaticity’ of the protest is a goal in and of itself that is worth pursuing by devoting resources to the creation of ‘high quality’ videos.

This continuous transfer between online communication and offline protests regulates the design of demonstrations. During an online assembly (30 November 2020), the activists, in imagining a physical protest action for a Friday school strike, also immediately fixed in mind its digital version, which, in turn, redefined how to shape the offline one. Specifically, [G25f] proposed to have several people parading along a street in Rome to compose “a long and itinerant phrase spread over various signs.” This, in her opinion, would have captured the attention of those who walked by, prompting them to read the entire sentence, sign after sign. According to [L25f], this idea was also good from the point of view of social communication and immediately proposed to realize it “along via del Corso³⁴, [so] we can shoot a video of one of us [pretending they are] a passerby who stops and reads. [...] Then we go to Montecitorio and take pictures there” (ibid.). Her idea was of transforming a parade of signs

³⁴ One of Rome’s most famous streets. It is located in the center and is notoriously full of shops.

into a catchy video that could be easily shared on social media, manifesting the osmosis between offline and online activism and between political actions and their communication. An analogous example was [K22f]'s proposal for a protest in December: "We could unfold a banner from the bridge in front of the Colosseum" because "it's a nice picture, it's symbolic" (7 December, assembly zoom).

At times, it appeared as if 'mediaticity,' when conceived as a goal, was even more important than the political achievements reached by a demonstration. This hypothesis is motivated by observation of two protest actions specifically, both during the action week leading up to the October 2020 global strike for climate. The first action was an intervention during a public square protest organized by the Italian branch of Black Lives Matter (3 October 2020, in person event). The Fridays would be present, and a spokesperson of the group would give a short speech in solidarity with the organization, reinforcing the correlation between social justice and climate justice. A general confusion surrounded the event, as it was not clear in which square exactly it would take place. Similarly, only a handful of Fridays were present and only a few of the organizers of the demonstration knew that FFF-Rome was supposed to speak during the event: the Fridays were not even included in the event's program and had to explicitly talk with the organization to know when to speak. As a result, the spokesperson was given just a few minutes for her speech, and she was introduced with the wrong name amongst the general confusion of the public. The whole action was exhausted in that short timespan: a two-minute speech haphazardly collocated at the conclusion of an independent event, after which the Fridays left. However, its resonance was amplified on FFF-Rome's Instagram page (*Pic. 10*), where it was featured in a video of the speech with an extended text, exemplifying the importance of fighting against all forms of racism. The impact of the action seemed, then, to coincide with and be limited to its existence as one more Instagram post: it was proof that the Fridays were carrying out the action week, that they were present in Rome's various demonstrations and supportive of all social justice issues.



Picture 10: Post from October 4, 2020. The post features the video of the activist’s speech. The text describes how FFF-Rome “decided to take part in the demonstration organized by NIBI - Black Italians and Black Lives Matter Rome and join their fight,” emphasizing how the Fridays joined the square protest for social justice and fought alongside other social movements. Link to the post: <https://www.Instagram.com/p/CF7NiSOiA7Z/>

An analogous example is the protest that took place the following day (4 October 2020), where the activists organized a public demonstration with a social center in front of an abandoned building in Rome’s periphery that had been used to produce penicillin. Even in this case, the protest was not particularly crowded, but some journalists were present. [M20m] gave a speech using a megaphone but, since his voice did not come out clear enough, he repeated it several times, until the enunciation was deemed good. That was because [K22f] and [P23m] were recording the event through their phones. They would use the speech to communicate it on FFF-Rome’s social media and keep recorded materials of FFF-Rome’s actions to use for future communication campaigns, media initiatives, or videos, and to send to news sources. The action, just like the one that took part the day before, was fairly simple and brief, once again its political significance seemed to be contained and end with its mediatic valence. What mattered was to record speeches and interviews with the press, gain material to spread across traditional news outlets and social media.

There was one occasion where [G25f] pointed out herself the predominance of ‘mediaticity’ and its perceived power over the immediate political relevance of activism. Upon observing

the low effectiveness of FFF-Rome's latest protests, she suggested copying some activists from Portugal. They had sued the Portuguese government for its "inertia towards the climate crisis" and proposed FFF-Italy did the same ([G25f], 30 November 2020, online assembly). Her opinion was that: "If we could only make a big fuss about something like this, we could activate 'mediaticity' and attention towards CCS³⁵ and tomorrow's article. We need to set up a mediatic case. [...] Our actions have had limited results so far, maybe this road will be more incisive" (ibid.). In proposing to follow the example of Portuguese activists, [G25f] was essentially promoting an action that was exclusively mediatic, or which political significance coincided entirely with its mediatic traction, its 'mediaticity,' which was deemed more effective than other more traditional forms of activism.

The view according to which 'mediaticity' is a political achievement in and of itself was shared among many activists but with some ambivalence, so that, at times, it still retained its function as a political means to a different end. Perhaps the following exchange between [A34f] and [M20m] exemplifies best the double nature of 'mediaticity' for FFF-Rome. During an assembly (28 September 2020, in person), [A34f] explained that: "The type of action we organize depends whether the objective is visibility, so we need short-term impactful actions, or institutional responses, so we need something more long term." Her words pointed out that FFF-Rome's actions were calibrated according to the mediatic goal they meant to achieve, meaning that 'mediaticity' could be an actual goal for the movement, not just a means to spread its messages. On the other hand, [M20m]'s reply to her comment pointed out the double nature of 'mediaticity' for the movement: "There are moments to gather participation, and others to spend it [...]. This [the action they were debating] more presumptuous action is of the second kind." He pushed to organize it in fear that "if we don't, it's like this strike isn't happening: we'll be the third news in tomorrow's newspapers, with zero influence on climate related policies." In his words, the 'mediaticity' that the movement would be able to achieve could be spent on the field of climate policies, helping the movement realize its political goals and thus acting as a strategy for FFF-Rome.

It must be mentioned that, when they had to interact with and rely on traditional media coverage, the Fridays did not have complete control over narratives and content, which means that they could achieve 'mediaticity' at the cost of compromising their identity and the meaning behind their demonstrations. As [G25f] pointed out: "Media don't know exactly what we're doing, they're like children, we have to explain everything clearly" (4 September 2020, in person assembly). She believed that news media could be easily confused by the fact that FFF-Rome was joining two protests in the span of a few days (the previously mentioned September 25 student strike and 9 October 2020's global strike for climate). She therefore

³⁵ Carbon Capture and Storage. It is an experimental technology for the capture and high-pressure geological storage of carbon dioxide emitted by industrial processes. The process makes it possible to produce 'blue hydrogen' by separating the hydrogen molecules from the carbon and storing the resulting carbon dioxide underground without releasing it into the atmosphere. Although hydrogen is an excellent alternative to fossil fuels, FridaysForFuture and various representatives of the scientific community have raised doubts regarding the production of blue hydrogen. This is because such a process does not limit the production of carbon dioxide, rather it hides it underground without considering the cost of the required technologies or the risk of release of polluting gases in the event of unexpected geological movements or damage to the containment structures. According to the activists, it would be better to invest in the production of 'green hydrogen' which, being obtained through electrolysis (i.e., essentially separating the hydrogen in water molecules from the oxygen) through energy generated from renewable sources, makes it possible to avoid polluting emissions upstream.

proposed that, if FFF-Rome wanted to “get to the media,” they should pick only one date to advertise to them as an FFF-Rome event: “We must keep in mind the form, the ‘mediaticity,’ and how to achieve it, we need it! [...] It’s difficult to be mediatically relevant every day [...]: we’re not the Venice film festival, they don’t come to us every day” ([G25f], 4 September 2020, in person assembly). A solution to the ambiguity and the lack of control in the production of media coverage, then, was to provide media with coordinated and univocal messages, so as to communicate with them in the simplest way possible. As [L25f] stated: “The communicative ensemble and the slogans must be on the same line and tone or the press will go mad [...]: let’s not waste energy on things that do not represent us” (28 September 2020, in person assembly), implying that FFF-Rome’s official communication was, at the same time, a mirror of its identity.

The proposal to nominate spokesperson for FFF-Italy stemmed from the same need: to identify and select eight to ten people to interact with the media on behalf and as representatives of FridaysForFuture. Such people would be democratically elected at the local and then national level of the movement. Each local group would select candidates and elect two to propose at the national level, which would then be elected again to identify the final spokespersons, who would be in charge for a limited amount of time before new elections. This would allow FridaysForFuture to have greater control over what the media said about the movement, as media outlets and journalists could easily identify faces to talk and ask questions to, people who would have been collectively selected by the movement as trusted and capable. This would, in turn, simplify the movement’s participation to mediatic events as it would become easier to directly invite FFF activists without having to contact the single local groups.

When the proposal was first being discussed within FFF-Rome, [J24m] expressed some perplexities towards it, as it could “go against our horizontality [...]. The best thing about FFF is that anyone can go [talk to the media], by deciding it [beforehand] in the assembly and preparing the content [of future speeches] together we lose the identity of FFF because we flatten it onto single people. Maybe it facilitates the process of participating in TV [programs] but is it so important next to the risk of losing our grassroots identity?” (7 September 2020, online assembly). [M20m] and other activists assured him that the democratic process at the basis of the elections, and the fact that the spokesperson would remain ‘in charge’ only for up to a year, was enough to protect the horizontality of the movement. Additionally, everyone could propose oneself as a spokesperson, [J24m] included. The process simply allowed FFF to maintain a certain control over who spoke on behalf of the movement, since, in the past, there had been cases when the spokespersons selected by the media were not competent or, at times, not even part of FFF. It is interesting to note that, in these debates, the goal of ‘mediaticity’ appears of such importance that is to be pursued even when it raises questions about preserving FFF’s inward identity because, in the end, a control over the narrative allowed the movement to manage its outward identity more effectively.

Such careful consideration between the risk of being misrepresented/ misinterpreted and the necessity of achieving ‘mediaticity’ was applied also to other ‘risks,’ such as the risk of being rebuked, forced to leave, or fined by the police in case of unauthorized protests. This was the topic of a discussion between [B64m], [J24m], and [M20m] (14 December 2020, online assembly). They were debating whether to enact an unauthorized protest: a sit-in of several

days in front of Eni's headquarters. They pointed out that "it is unlikely that anyone will prosecute us for such a small thing" ([B64m]) and that "without an authorization from the judge, they can't use our Telegram or WhatsApp against us" ([J24m]). [M20m], on the other hand, observed that "the psychological toll of unauthorized actions is higher than their efficacy. Mediatically they have not worked better than the authorized ones, the personal cost is higher, and it's hard to crowdfund them." While the first two activists were in favor of the protest, [M20m] was more skeptical. His opinion was anchored on the emotional and economic costs of sustaining the specific action the other activists had in mind. However, in pointing out how the previous unauthorized actions were ineffective, he referred to their 'mediaticity': they did not achieve greater mediatic resonance than the authorized protests, so it made little sense to organize them. This discussion raises the question whether the emotional and economic costs of unauthorized actions could be acceptable if they were able to achieve significant mediatic traction. Such negotiations put 'mediaticity'— both when considered as a political goal in and of itself and, additionally, as a means to additional political achievements— on a higher step than the costs of the demonstration in both material and psychological terms.

4.2.2 A mission to educate: knowledge gathering, production, and dissemination as long-term engagement

In the latent periods of activism, those in-between protest peaks, FFF-activists sustain the fight against climate change through long-term strategies. While the short-term strategy of 'mediaticity' attracts people into the movement through an invitation process aided by catchy media content and flashy protests, long-term strategies invite people through appropriation of the climate fight.

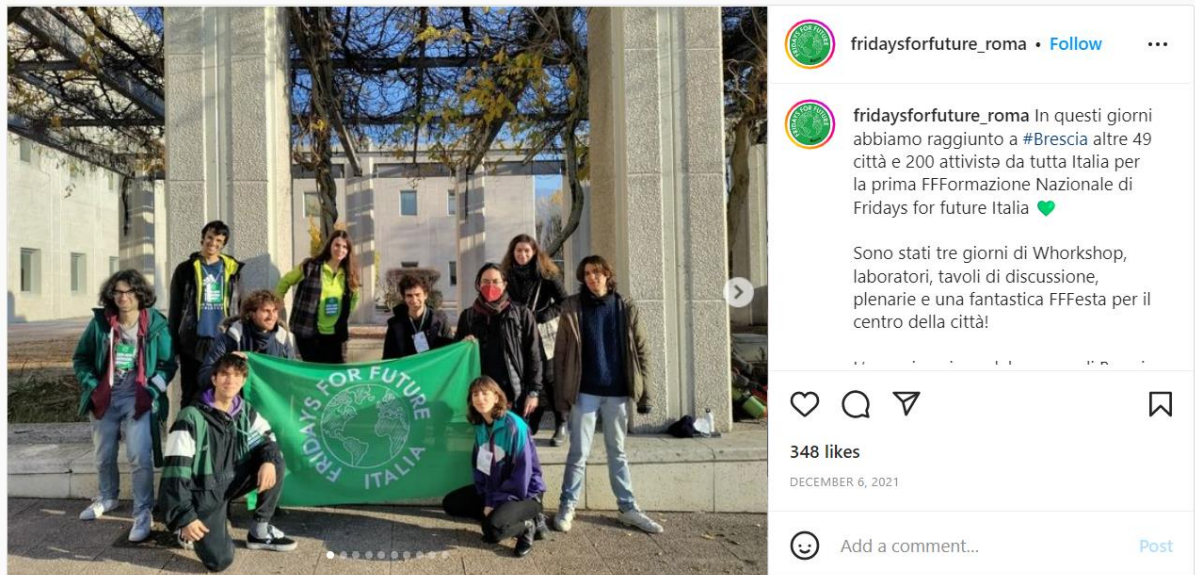
Appropriation works by sensibilizing people on the topic of climate change and progressively shaking their awareness and knowledge of the issue. The idea behind this mechanism is that, as [E16f] explained: "If you really understand what the problem is [...] and what are the consequences, [...] [then] participation [in FridaysForFuture] comes by itself" (10 July 2020, in person assembly). In order to make people 'understand' climate change and its consequences, FFF-Rome promotes and organizes educational interventions, both offline and online. The practice of producing informational content consists of a true 'education to the climate crisis' that encompasses the dissemination of content on social networks, the organization of seminars, workshops, and interventions in schools as "long-term tools of social change" ([S18m], 10 July 2020, in person assembly).

An interesting exchange in this regard took place during the assembly immediately after the autumn 2020 global strike. [Y18m] criticized the way the Fridays had organized the day of mobilization because, according to her, there had been "too many technical interventions, creating distance [among people because] the square is the moment of protest" meaning that big demonstrations must be more artistic to "give value to emotions [and] make everyone feel [...] welcomed and listened to" (12 October 2020, in person assembly). To this 'artistic-emotional' conception of protest peaks, which goes hand in hand with the logic of 'mediaticity' illustrated in the paragraph above, [F23m] added the need to foster interest in the movement through a careful work of politicization of the students because "the square does not serve to create awareness but it is a point of arrival, of demonstration" (12 October

2020, in person assembly). This strategy attracts spontaneous adhesions to FridaysForFuture in the long term, in a way that is complementary to the emotional logic of ‘mediaticity,’ calibrated on capturing the attention of future activists in the here and now. Indeed, according to [G25f], these activities are fundamental in order not to “make the actions [of great impact] limited to what they do in the now,” since “if you do not follow a situation continuously over time, in the end it is useless, your energy is wasted for nothing. Either the meaning of the action transcends the day [of protest] itself, or it is useless” ([G25f], 24 August 2020, online assembly).

This conviction extended to political participation and was among the reasons there was such a sharp contrast between student collectives and FFF-Rome. The first, despite being present at the global strikes, rarely participated in the assemblies. Still, they reclaimed the centrality of the school-based disputes in the agenda of FFF-Rome and wanted to be taken into greater consideration during protest peaks (short-term engagement) without being part of the collective long-term processes that lead FFF-Rome to build the participation around such peaks (long-term engagement). In the experience of the Fridays, this dynamic could not work because the two dimensions of political participation are intrinsically linked, to the point that one must generate the other. Without sensibilizing people to the fight against climate change (appropriation of the fight), FFF-Rome would not be able to build up a following, a name, and a reputation to crowd squares during protest peaks. However, without the magnitude and saliency of larger scale protests, FFF-Rome would lack the ‘mediaticity’ and emotional appeal to attract people also in the here and now and remain salient for news media (short-term engagement), thus allowing the movement to achieve greater political traction.

The saliency of knowledge-production and dissemination for FFF-Rome is reflected also in the great amount of energies and resources devoted to the educational mission of FFF. FFF-Rome activists periodically meet with other local groups both at the national and international level in ‘educational days’ or events which are akin to seminaries. Here, the activists can follow different ‘tables’ and lectures held by experts or particularly knowledgeable Fridays on specific topics, so as to improve their communication strategies and content. The entire three-day event in Brescia, where I was invited in December 2021, was a FFF-Italy event that collected more than 200 activists across 49 local groups of FFF-Italy (*Pic. 11*). During the three days, the activists could follow a variety of courses held by experts such as engineers, university professors, and experienced activists on topics that ranged from the latest news on the climate crisis to how to better communicate climate related data and do activism on social media. Such educational events are one of the two national events yearly organized by the movement, with the second type being regular assemblies, where the activists actively decide the political and identitary direction of the movement. The fact that FFF organizes national (and international) events both for educational and organizational purposes further attests to the prime importance of knowledge dissemination as a political instrument for the movement.



Picture 11: FFF-Rome activists at the end of the three-day formation event in Brescia. The text explains what the event is and how it was carried out. Link to the post: https://www.instagram.com/p/CXJ_k6-tbZn/

From an organizational perspective, the Fridays directly consult climate change data within a national working-group specifically devoted to searching academic papers: the ‘Science’ group. Since academic language is difficult to understand, the group scans papers and reports and seeks to translate their jargon into easily readable content for its social media: “If you speak through scientific articles [...] it is useless. [...]. A post on Instagram must use the language that is easier— I mean, more easily accessible by almost everyone” ([U22f], interview). In this sense, FFF presents itself as a mediator between science and the general public, so that its Instagram page and its other social networks assume the role of information channels where people can keep up to date with scientific reports and news on the climate crisis: “[Social media] also serve as an alternative channel to mainstream media information, which perhaps would not pick our kind of information to give it visibility” (ibid.). As [P23m] explained, since data might be “correct but incomplete” or even biased when scholars are “conservative” in their estimates (10 July 2020, in person assembly), the Fridays double-check sources and select only those they consider reliable. This is particularly evident when it comes to newspapers. In particular, the activists consider Italian newspapers a poor source for climate information since they “are financed by fossil fuel companies,” resulting in them being “one-sided, or actually [standing] on the wrong side!” ([M20m], 9 December 2020, online event). Conversely, they believe that accurate and consistent climate-related journalism can be found abroad in newspapers such as The Guardian which, according to the activists, approaches the climate crisis “using the right words” (ibid.) and refusing funding from polluting companies. Alongside social media posts explaining scientific reports, the Fridays also carry out sensibilization and educational campaigns through webinars and in schools, echoing a belief particularly alive within FFF that [S18m] expressed clearly during an assembly: “It is through education that you can solve issues in the long run” (10 July 2020, in person assembly).

The fight for better climate change communication and awareness is carried out both on the terrain of easily-accessible, reliable information, and on the terrain of counter-information, whereby the Fridays contest current narratives on the crisis and seek to remedy the

disinformation carried out by polluting companies even within schools. FFF advocacy campaigns are therefore addressed both at polluting companies and institutions. ‘Fuori Eni dalle scuole’ (‘Let’s kick Eni out of the schools’) is an example of a counter-information campaign. According to the activists, the fossil fuel giant is particularly “good at advertising itself” ([P23m], 10 July 2020, in person assembly) and making “people believe that it is becoming sustainable, [while] it is not true” ([M20m], 9 December 2020, online event). This has resulted in the Italian Ministry of Education appointing Eni as responsible for teaching environmental education in Italian schools. The Fridays contest this by coordinating protest actions against the fossil fuel giant and by organizing educational assemblies in Rome’s high schools: “We try to inform even people that are still young on what is happening, and we try to offer them a different narrative” ([U22f], interview). Conversely, the campaign ‘Ritorno al futuro’ (‘Back to the Future’) addresses institutions by providing them with high-quality data and estimates on the impact of climate change and by providing tangible solutions to implement in the short and long term to address the crisis. The campaign is also a prime example of the way science works as a legitimizing force for FFF. According to the Fridays, the campaign’s authority comes from the “mammoth effort” to collect contacts “from the world of science, associationism, and activism” ([M20m], 9 December 2020, online event).

These science-based strategies are essential to raise the public’s awareness around the climate struggle, while legitimizing FFF-Rome within a public debate that still sees many skeptics. Indeed, particular attention is devoted to the consistency and reliability of information and sources: “We try to cite reliable sources and look for studies. In short, we try to do as little disinformation as possible, otherwise it is a bit counterproductive” ([D20f], interview). The objective was to transform technical information “who would annoy anyone except [M20m]” into easily readable information “to reach as many people as possible with as much information as possible” ([C14f], 9 December 2020, online event). It is interesting to note that, even in its long-term strategy to engage audiences, FFF-Rome is still devoted to catchy communication on its social media, as it has internalized the media usage practices that govern platforms like Instagram. Since its affordances privilege high-impact visuals and short texts, FFF-Rome carries out its mission to educate audiences on climate change through infographics, data, and summaries, so that they catch the attention of as many people as possible. As [K22f] put it:

You can make in-depth posts that are interesting and even if people don't physically take to the streets with us, they still get information on a specific topic, talk about it, discuss it. So, in short, perhaps sometimes social networks are able to reach even those people we do not usually reach with our physical presence in the squares ([K22f], interview).

Anchoring their revindication to science allows the activists to legitimize their struggle and contrast climate change denialists. As a result, information production and dissemination with the public is a strategy that also reinforces FFF-Rome’s identity as a reliable, disinterested force that merely speaks the facts and that, as such, everyone should listen to and join. Climate change denial makes it all the more important to “trust numbers” because “through science it’s possible to have data that you cannot disagree with” ([K22f], interview). That of knowledge production and dissemination is thus part of FFF’s very identity as a social movement and is a testament to the interconnection between activism practices and FFF-

Rome's inward identity. According to [K22f], "calling back to science" is one of "FFF's most salient characteristics" (interview): FFF as a movement fights against climate change but also informs people on the subject. For many Fridays, the first step in the fight against climate change is to build solid climate-related knowledge by seeking and sharing accredited information on which to anchor grievances and demands. They ground their demands for political and ethical accountability in science, but reclaim the knowledge-building process as a form of activism and a strategy to gather participation. Indeed, according to [B64m], "[people's lack of] awareness" on the climate crisis is mainly caused by "a lack of information: the few information you can find is always incomplete, unclear, and never bleak enough" (interview). By addressing the correlation between lack of awareness on climate change and access to poor information, the activists emphasize the importance of knowledge as a way to contrast the issue.

It is through these processes that FFF-Rome revindicates the political value of raising people's awareness towards climate change and of knowledge production and dissemination. According to [O31f], in parallel with the struggle to bring people to the streets to protest, FFF is also animated by the goal of "sensibilizing and informing people," a struggle that is even more important "than the struggle to bring people to the streets [...] because one has to be informed and know about what one is talking about" (interview). In her view, the two souls of FFF-Rome feed each other: without knowledge, political participation would be empty of meaning, but without political participation, knowledge would not have a voice. Such awareness, according to [M20m], has been facilitated by a change in the communication paradigm regarding the quantity and quality of information relating to the climate crisis, which has recently brought the issue to the attention of the masses. Such change has been brought about by the advent of social media and the way young people have appropriated them for activism, allowing for a different communication of scientific data on climate change. Therefore, science, knowledge, and scientific dissemination— especially on social media— literally represent FFF's soul, who was born from and fights to bring a greater awareness towards climate change. This is the political goal that FFF, as a movement, has mainly been able to reach:

This was probably what generated this wave of activism in recent years, which had not existed before: a bit of a change in communication. There has always been very [...] cautious communication by scientists [...] [In climate change communication], the focus has always been on respecting nature, protecting what already exists, making it somewhat alienating, you see? You are interested in environmentalism if you are a selfless person who cares [about nature], whereas now it's much more real: now to be interested [in climate change] you must simply be a person who is interested in saving your own life ([M20m], interview).

In this sense, then, FFF-Rome is the spokesperson and at the same time an advocate of this communicative change through its continuous advocacy activities and knowledge dissemination, both directed to the general public and to governments: "The climate emergency has a lot of scientific studies [and] research behind, [which] we must constantly bring to the attention of governments because, apparently, they don't know about it" ([M20m], 9 December 2020, online event). Its mission to educate is the element that sets FFF apart from other social movements and the one field in which it has achieved the most

success. This was especially evident when FFF-Rome was interacting with other social movements. In its communications with Extinction Rebellion, for example, FFF-Rome was always calling for a moment of confrontation and for the achievement of a shared political compass, that is to actual formation days where to gather knowledge to inform future protest actions and collaborations (14 September 2020, in person assembly). This attitude calls back to a conception of FFF as a social movement where activists study, gather knowledge, reason, and deepen their understanding of things towards a long-term strategy that reinforces the activists' awareness and knowledge in order to better organize and manage protest actions and campaigns.

4.2.3 Visualities for the planet: from short to long-term engagement

Instagram visualities are perhaps one of the best ways FFF-Rome activists pursue 'mediaticity' on social media. In this paragraph, we will focus in more depth on their usage of Instagram and its affordances as a way to engage with audiences in the short term, as well as on which visual strategies they put in place to achieve this goal. As [C14f] explained herself during an online event, (09 December 2020), FFF-Rome's 'communication' group always tries to "make them [the posts] captivating and readable, because [you have to think] about all those young people who may [...] have never heard of the 'climate crisis' [. ..], of 'carbon budget,' or of the Paris Agreement."

In drawing these observations, the activists are keenly aware that the "purely scientific and very often technical things" that inform our understanding of climate change can "get boring in the long run [...] and don't immediately capture attention" (ibid.). Therefore, [C14f] explained that FFF-Rome's posts aim to "be as readable as possible," for example by using emojis often, which "make everything much more lively and fresh," or by planning "a day dedicated to memes [...] because it can be good for yourself, from time to time, to relax and have a laugh." The proposal to create short video pills for FFF-Rome's official Instagram page was an example of the Fridays' attempt to "capture" multiple people into the movement through emotional digital contagion, by showcasing an everchanging, catchy, and creative image of the movement's activities. The need to achieve 'mediaticity' connects the group's visibility to its choice of doing visual activism on Instagram.

Negotiating with affordances— such as giving young activists a face through Instagram images— allows for an emotional transmission that invites people to join the movement. As [K22f] explained, FFF-Rome's communicative efforts have always tried to "make people see that we are real people and we're not manipulated, because they always say we are, so let's say that [showing our face] is a good technique to be on social media and create more familiarity with people" (interview). Visualities can therefore play an important role in this process when they allow for the representation of FFF-Rome activists, thus humanizing the movement in the eyes of its audiences. According to [M20m], this is especially important for a social movement because these groups tend to deal with ideals and values, which exist in the abstract realm. As a result, people on the outside tend to disanchor the group from reality and have difficulty to grasp it concretely: "Very often it is difficult to see the human aspect of climate activism, especially when it becomes something too political, when we talk too much about concepts and about ideals, about goals, numbers... It is somewhat lost that the people who are behind [climate change movements] are normal people [...]: they do this [activism]

when they have time” ([M20m], interview). This echoes also [W26m]’s sentiment about the challenges of anchoring climate change in the lives of everyday people. According to the activist, climate change communication is too often about “the dead, the hectares of forests we are losing every minute, the people we’re losing every minute” thus risking that people who interact with this information “become progressively desensitized” (interview). Hence the need to “showcase the people that are within [FFF]” (ibid.).

In this conception, then, the personalization of faces and narratives of FFF-Rome’s social media posts is complementary to the group’s necessity to provide scientific knowledge about climate change. On the one hand, FFF-Rome progressively informs and sensibilizes its audience through data and facts, on the other it maintains the human face of climate activism through visualities and personal narratives, so that these two strategies of using social media for climate activism go hand in hand: “We try to alternate between informative posts and posts that serve to catch the public” ([D20f], interview). [K22f] observed, for example, that for Instagram posts to “work” they had to be “immediate, impactful: you have to see them and immediately understand the message” (interview), so the group had to comply with the requirements of the platform. In the meshes of negotiation on the two lines of climate activism, social media lend themselves above all to inviting/ attracting people by leveraging both on the personalization of contents and the emotional contagion that platforms like Instagram allow to channel. As a result, participation is encouraged by creating a visual collective storytelling that emotionally engages potential recruits through processes of identification with the cause of climate change.

FFF-Rome’s Instagram page is not only a resonating chamber for FFF-Rome’s actions and a way to attract potential activists, but also a grassroot alternative to mainstream media such as national TV and newspapers. Indeed, in the previously mentioned proposal of a demonstration in which activists would chain themselves to Eni’s gates, [J24m] pointed out that such a protest would hardly be streamed by traditional news media for more than a day and thus it would be better to spread and follow it on FFF-Rome’s “own channels” ([J24M], 28 September 2020, in person assembly) meaning Instagram and its other social networks. Consequently, FFF-Rome’s usage of Instagram visualities can be considered as a form of counter-public media for storytelling that allows the activists to control more freely the outward identity they project on their imagined audiences and, in turn, fosters the group’s inward identity.

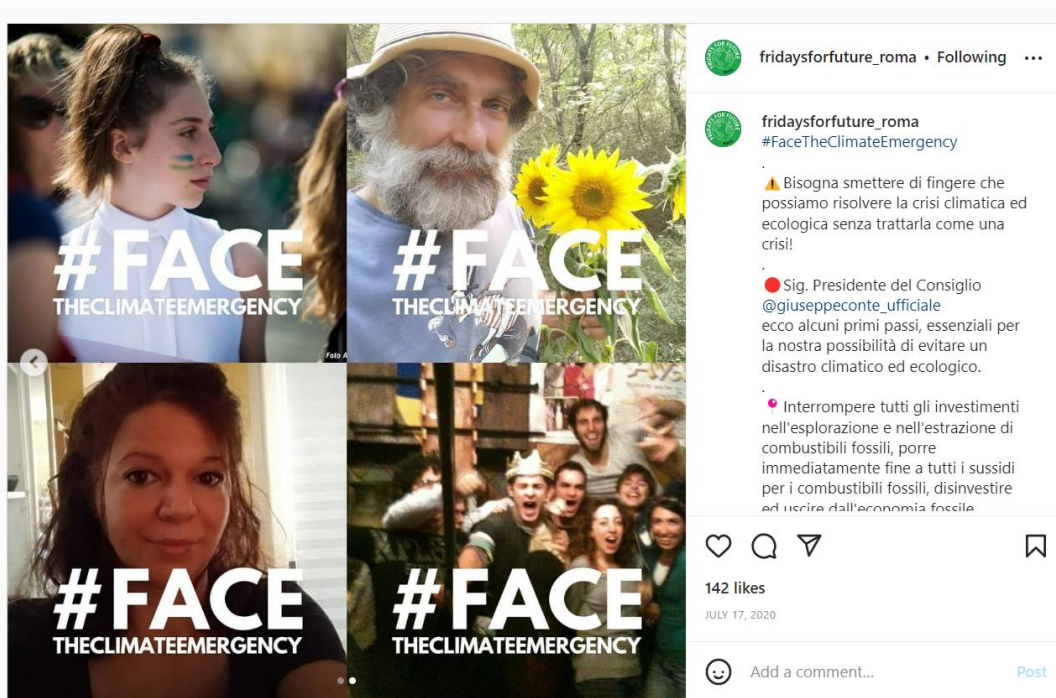
The catchiness and ‘mediaticity’ of visuals are so central for the group that they are considered the key elements that concurred to FFF-Rome’s success over time, while at the same time attesting to its capacity to renovate itself. As [T20m] observed, it is visuals such as the witty cardboard signs and pictures of large-scale protests, which were spread online and constructed in a way to reach as many people as possible, that made the movement famous and contributed to its spreading. They ended up constituting an identity characteristic of FFF-Rome, and of FFF in general: “You can recognize that a content is from FFF by the graphics, by the logo, obviously by the topic, by the theme...[...] Stuff like ‘Kenya is getting hotter than Harry Styles’ [...] these are things that people photograph easily and then they post them on social media and say ‘wow this thing is really nice hahaha’ and then share it in turn” (interview). The use of visual storytelling not only legitimizes the protests and helps

mobilize youth to the cause, but also plays a part in framing climate change according to FFF's own narratives. Visuals represent FFF-Rome's climate activism and set the group apart from other pro-ecology movements thanks to straightforward, visually appealing content that frames climate change within a kaleidoscope of grievances, which, in turn, build and legitimize the identity of the movement.

As the group's flagship platform, Instagram turns out to be a full-fledged territory for FFF's climate activism. In time and over time, in the physical and digital spaces, images crystallize FFF's grassroots politics, thus mirroring the dispute (the climate crisis) and the subjectivities (young people) that animate it. Such a form of identity curation is particularly visible when one logs into Instagram and starts scrolling through FFF-Rome's official page. Posts about protests and informative posts start to alternate and create, in their unity, a cohesive storytelling of what the movement is and does, its goals, objectives, values, people, places it has been, knowledge that informs it. This digital archive tells the story of FFF-Rome's through time. Audiences can explore past demonstrations and learn about the group's alliances, for example through posts that showcase FFF-Rome's presence in protests organized by organizations such as Black Lives Matter, Ni Una Menos etc., as well as look up facts and data on the progress of the climate crisis through past informative posts.

The activists underlined this when asked about how to create a post that could represent FFF-Rome. Most of them started scrolling FFF-Rome's Instagram page, recalling past demonstrations and political results almost in a nostalgic way, experiencing first-hand in real time the value of visuals to capture and transmit the essence of a contemporary social movement: "Images are much more receptive [...]. All the images... from the graphics to the photos of the squares, of the strikes or garrisons, of the meetings... I mean, they give the idea and the figure of what FFF is much more than a wall of text" ([E24m], interview). Images of large-scale protests and faces in particular revindicated the effectiveness of the group and its identity as a collective political force, they were able to involve and excite people: "In people's minds, when they recognize the figure, it certainly helps to empathize more with the whole group" ([R18f], interview). Visuals and texts interact with each other just like posts created for short and long term engagement do, creating FFF-Rome's story through time and images.

The activists also referred to other strategies employed by the group to attract attention through visuals. An example are their comments to the post below (Pic. 12 and 13), which was selected from FFF-Rome's Instagram page as a polysemous image that could be interpreted in several ways and potentially point to different, even conflicting, strategies of user engagement.



Pictures 12 and 13: The two images featured in the polysemous post in the order they appear on Instagram. Giving one's impression of the post was one of the interview questions. The caption emphasizes the necessity of treating climate change as a 'crisis.' The hashtag #Facetheclimateemergency was a social media campaign promoted by Greta Thunberg on her Instagram during that period. Link to the post:

<https://www.Instagram.com/p/CCwE0bInIjL/>

The activists pointed out the pun between showcasing activists' faces and the hashtag of the campaign #Facetheclimateemergency, observing once more how wordplays are a distinctive point of FFF's identity. They also observed, from a visual perspective, the contrast between individual and collective calls to action, which reflected the nature of climate change: something all individuals should care about but that requires a systemic response. Young people are clearly the protagonists of this post and this reflects the group's emphasis on new generations: the first page of the post features young faces and the largest of them is that of a

child. Only by clicking on the second page it is possible to see faces of people of different ages. [C14f], for example, admitted that “I would like to say there was no priority [in choosing where to put each image] but “the fact that the largest photo is that of the activist who is the youngest in FFF-Rome kinda makes me think ‘look, we have activists who are 9 years old!’” (interview). Similarly, [M57f] also observed that the child’s face contributed the most to the post’s overall message and to framing FFF-Rome as a youth-centric social movement: “She’s so young so it makes you think a bit about a child who grew up too fast you know? A child that instead of playing is serious, who grew up too soon because she had to face many struggles” (interview).

On the other hand, the post still expresses a collective and aggregative value because, in the end, it includes people of different ages, in different contexts, doing different things. According to [E24m], the post emphasizes diversity because it features “many different faces: adult men and women and children and teenagers” thus equalizing all the faces of the movement: “It somewhat reflects what FFF’s values are, therefore union, equality, the fact that all people are absolutely useful and necessary to fight the climate crisis” (interview). [W26m] was of the same opinion, believing that the post represented “the different realities within FFF, the different people: from the average person to the adult.”

A post that elicits such a variegated interpretation provokes questions regarding its making. A smaller portion of activists reflected on the actual realization of the pictures and how they were put together, pointing out the deliberate choices that inform FFF-Rome’s social media posts in order to make them as appealing as possible. On the one hand, activists emphasized the need to pick good quality images: “On Instagram, low quality images make the post lose its coverage, they don’t get as many visualizations” ([K22f], interview). This also applied to bright colors: “We do everything to make the algorithm suggest the post [...], so bright pictures, human faces” ([D20f], interview). This counts for good editing as well, so that the pictures would look good as an ensemble: “They were paired according to their colors, so not to put every dark photo together they were alternated with light-colored pictures” (ibid.). This effort to utilize social media affordances to create catchy content and engage audiences was at times criticized by some activists as it was seen as a limitation. According to them, FFF-Rome must keep within the boundaries of what is considered desirable, spreadable content by platforms like Instagram lest it loses its mediatic traction. However, in doing so, its communicative choices and liberties are irremediably limited, which can sometimes come at the cost of the perceived quality of the information: “Everything is super simple. I mean, simplicity is good, okay, but sometimes it’s too much” ([C24m], interview).

The case of the ‘action week’

In order to better analyze the visual strategies enacted by FFF-Rome to communicate its activism and engage with its audiences, the following subparagraphs will analyze the Instagram communication of FFF-Rome in the action week immediately preceding the October 2020 global strike for climate. That is because it was a period of especially intense Instagram activity: October 2020 was the first strike for climate following the COVID-19 lockdown and, even if restrictions on public gatherings were still in place, it was seen as a huge chance by the activists to make FFF-Rome’s voice heard again after months of online actions. Incidentally, the action week also coincided with fieldwork, allowing for the

observation and analysis of the communicative and activism needs that informed Instagram usage, as well as the real-time feedback of online activism.

During this occasion, FFF-Rome anchored the climate crisis to a series of key topics, which were translated into protest actions and witnessed via Instagram pictures. In these posts, FFF activists foster political discourses on climate change through calls to offline and online action, using visualities to represent their protests as both collective—through a focus on crowds and masses—and individual-oriented—through individualized narrations of personal experiences. They project climate change as a crisis through visual metaphors of urgency, caps-lock texts, and appeals to the future, and as a matter that concerns everyone but young people the most through the young activists' protagonism. On the one hand, then, FFF-Rome activists project their identity as students and young people as identity-building, targeting young people as a privileged imagined audience, while also addressing national and international institutions to denounce their shortcomings. On the other hand, the activists are also interested in attracting an additional imagined audience of mainstream media through eye-catching content to have them spread FFF-Rome's messages.

The visual communication of these posts is an additional testament to the continuous interaction between online and offline activism, since, as we have seen, protest actions are often imagined in terms of the 'mediaticity' they can produce. Furthermore, the posts regarding the action week allow us to see FFF-Rome's activism strategies at play. On the one hand, catchy visual elements highlight the connection between FFF-Rome, the climate crisis, and young people. It is a mechanism of invitation through short term engagement and presents FFF-Rome as a political force. Conversely, textual elements complement the posts by anchoring pictures and mobilizations to scientific data and appealing to institutions, expressing mechanisms of appropriation of the fight and invitation through long term engagement, and presenting FFF-Rome as an educational force. These strategies also reflect the previously mentioned use of Instagram as a counter-public, grassroots space for youth climate activism, where FFF-Rome can be in control of their own visual narratives of the climate crisis, of the movement's actions, and, by extension, of their outward identity.

Connecting with imagined audiences through a visual sense of belonging

The first communicative strategy is that of fostering participation through a visual sense of belonging. During the action week, FFF-Rome's posts directly invite and connect with its imagined audience through the combined effort of visual and textual elements to create posts that could be appealing for young people, communicating, and reinforcing the identity of FFF-Rome as a youth-centric social movement.

Posts mainly show groups of people and masses as the main subjects, rather than single individuals, suggesting the importance of collective actions in the fight against climate change. Additionally, political action is staged in the streets and on Instagram by valuing everyone's contribution. Even when, during videos, the focus shifts to the single activists who are talking, they still use the first person plural in their speeches, while the camera's angle is full body and includes bystanders (other activists or young people who joined the protests). *Picture 14* exemplifies this practice. This picture is a still frame from one of the 'video pills' prepared in sight of the global strike for climate. They were conceived to allow straightforward one-minute informative communication, while also serving the function of

granting the strike visibility and making sure that the group’s revindications were not misinterpreted by the media. The featured activist argues for the importance of decarbonization (the Italian text reads “let’s push for decarbonization”), while the post’s caption elaborates on the topic. Such visualities frame FFF-Rome as constituted by multiple individual and personalized experiences that can be shared through visual content on social media, thus emphasizing individualized, networked narrations of personal experiences as a way to manifest youth political action.



Picture 14: Video pill from October 4. Link to the post: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CF62XJgCJFe/>

While some activists proposed to give the pills an “amateur-like” style ([L25F], September 18, in-person assembly), FFF-Rome’s posts strived to elicit emotions and connect the movement’s audience to a common cause. As a result, instead of displaying an amateurish look, these videos were shot with utmost care, choosing a “pretty space” [Q24M] as background and the right natural light (October 5, in-person assembly). Participation in the shooting was voluntary: “Who wants to go, goes. It has to be spontaneous” ([G25F], October 5, in-person assembly), resulting in six videos featuring activists aged 19-25, mostly university students.

As explained by [C14F], it is paramount to create “cool,” eye-catching visuals to attract people’s attention “so they can come to us” (October, 2, in-person event). The slogans and banners depicted in the posts, often witty and lined with humor, provide an immediate aid to deciphering the pictures, thus serving as visual markers and additional political tools to identify the movement and sum up its revindications. Overall, the visual elements of the posts place FFF activists almost always outside, in the open, protesting in peaceful and creative ways through sit-ins, critical masses, and body performances. They are collocated in symbolically and politically “important places” ([K22F], September 14, in-person assembly) such as Rome’s central squares, close to the ‘palaces of power.’ Such choices place FFF-Rome symbolically and physically at the forefront of the climate fight.

Political discourse is thus fostered by revindicating the political value of FFF-Rome’s activism and by making use of Instagram’s visual affordances as an invitation mechanism,

appealing to young people to join FFF-Rome’s protests and social media actions. A post from September 26 (*Pic. 15*) offers two examples of FFF-Rome’s calls to action. First, FFF-Rome asks people to share the posts with two “friends” they would like to bring to the protest. Second, it encourages them to participate in the #SocialBombing³⁶ against the climate crisis by reposting FFF-Rome’s pictures among one’s stories and tagging other users. The flashy graphics, bright colors, and catchphrases of the video emphasize the urgency of the fight against climate change.



Picture 15: Opening frame of the video featured in the post from September 26, 2020. Link to the post: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CFmklDQHCPV/>

As FFF-Rome connects the climate crisis to a large number of issues, they display their understanding of climate change as something that influences every aspect of society: “[Climate] change and the [climate] crisis touch everyone” ([C14F], September 11, in-person assembly), “there is only one fight” ([G25F], September 11, in-person assembly). The first post about the global strike for climate (*Pic. 16*) introduces this understanding and sets the mood for the action-week.

³⁶ Hashtag storms during which FFF activists engage in simultaneous Tweeting or posting to make specific topics or hashtags trend.



Picture 16: The first post of the climate strike and action week, advertising the upcoming strike and its main themes. Link to the post: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CFexd2eHZGT/>

Like a banner, the post features a dense crowd of young people protesting for climate justice during a past global strike. They are holding cardboards with the trademark witty slogans. A thick green band below the picture displays written information in black and white about the upcoming strike, with a call to action reciting: “LET’S GO BACK TO THE FUTURE! LET’S INVEST IN OUR PLANET.” Together, these two visual elements immediately anchor the post to the fight for climate action, while at the same time marking FFF-Rome as a social movement that was able to move hundreds of thousands to the streets, and whose history is connected to young people, who are both the authors and recipients of its political messages. The use of hashtags (included at the end of each caption) further connects the single posts to the strike’s claims as is the case of #youthstrike4climate, which stresses the relationship between FFF’s climate activism and its imagined audience of young people. The post’s description also illustrates and expands on the single revindications of October 2020’s global strike by referring to the campaign ‘Ritorno al Futuro’ (‘Back to the Future’). The opening post of the action week sets the climate action agenda and mood for the posts to come. It serves to present FFF-Rome as a group by pointing to its history, identity, and key revindications, while also introducing the six core points of the strike. They will be the focus of the single protests of the leading action week and, in turn, of the following Instagram posts.

Throughout the action week, then, the visual and textual elements of the posts work hand in hand to introduce, explain, and sensibelize audiences about the issues of the protests. Information sharing was anchored to scientific and authoritative data fostering the group’s credibility and authority, while emotions imbued FFF activists’ narratives to support mobilizations through collective indignation for the victims of climate change. Additionally, FFF-Rome’s Instagram posts also connect the climate crisis to the world of education by emphasizing how more funds and better programs should be allocated to schools to educate young citizens and prepare them to face the challenges posed by climate change. This further emphasizes FFF-Rome’s mission to inform as a political force that can fill the knowledge gap

on climate change by educating its audience and asking institutions, local, and global leaders to take accountability.

Visualizing the climate crisis' topics as protest enactment

Instagram posts and fieldnotes account for a variegated social composition of the movement regarding age and educational environments. As analyzed, FFF-Rome's choice of doing visual activism on Instagram is strongly informed by its connection to a young audience of students. Despite the tensions between the two groups, the importance of the reciprocal support between the Roman student movement and FFF during protest peaks is shown both in the number of posts that feature students and student manifestations, in the captions that refer to the world of education, and in the fieldnotes from in-person and online assemblies.

Most of the issues anchored to the global strike referenced 'Back to the Future' and Italy's recovery plan for the COVID-19 emergency, but all of the themes, including those pertaining to the building-industry and transportation, were directly connected to the world of education. All of them were considered to "have to do" in "one way or another" with students ([M20M], September 4, in-person assembly) and they were decided during in-assembly brainstorming (i.e., "what is the first thing you think about when I say, 'climate crisis and school?'" [C14F], September 11, in-person assembly) with representatives of the Roman high school student movements. This fostered the broad climate change discourses of FFF-Rome's Instagram page as a way to emphasize how the climate crisis is a problem that concerns everyone. In doing so, FFF activists mark themselves as students but knowledge holders, inclusive but audience-specific, local but global, respectful but proactive.

Some of the youngest FFF-Rome activists are also members of the Roman student movement, and, in the early stages of FFF, this distinction was almost blurred. The post from September 24 (*Pic. 17*) is emblematic of this connection. Here, a crowd of high school students with a teenage girl shouting or chanting at the front is shown marching towards the viewer. They are carrying cardboards and banners and the writing on the image reads "WE ARE THE SCHOOL!" with a smaller line at the bottom of the picture with information on the time and place of the protest. The caption launches an appeal to "fight for our present and the future of everyone" and an invitation to sustain, along with FFF-Rome, the national student manifestation of September 25 at Montecitorio, the seat of the Italian Chamber of Deputies.



Picture 17: The second post of the global strike and action week. Link to the post: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CFh-zjZHcBT/>

The post also invokes institutions to take accountability for failing young students and cutting funds to the worlds of school and research. This reinforces the idea that the climate crisis will affect young people the most since, as the post recalls, they will “inherit this world” and as such the government should provide quality education to raise them as capable citizens. This is connected to the ‘future,’ which is one of FFF’s most recurring climate change narratives: they commonly refer to young people as ‘the future without future’ since they are those who will pay the highest price in the climate crisis. As the post from September 24 quotes, poor education means that students are given “no means to fight against all this, to say stop, to change things.” FFF-Rome’s appeal to reform school programs and fundings is thus directly connected with caring for “us kids, our lives, and our future” through curricula that include “climate education and ecological education in every aspect [of society] and under all points of view.” According to the caption, this will give young people the “instruments to understand what is happening to us and how to change it... since no one is doing it in our place.”

The fight for better education against the climate crisis is further exemplified by a connection between FFF-Rome and the Roman student movements, whereby their two distinct fights sometimes intersect during protest actions. This connection is the result of elaborate negotiations and brainstorming that happened mostly during an FFF assembly called specifically for the Roman student movements (11 September 2020, in-person), as well as in the assemblies immediately before and after it. These assemblies served to define the times and scope of the alliance, and, among the multiple topics of the global strike, they identified the three that most intertwined FFF-Rome and the movements’ fights: “public transportation, the building industry, and education” ([G22F], September 11, in-person assembly). The three topics were translated into protest actions during the action week, so FFF-Rome’s posts featured students and FFF activists protesting together on these occasions. For example, the post from October 7 (*Pic. 18*) depicts a large group of students and activists blocking the

entrance of ATAC, an Italian company that is responsible for running most of Rome’s public transport network. Its caption reads: “Together with Rome’s students.”



Picture 18: Still frame of the video that opens the post about the protest in front of ATAC. Link to the post: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CGCGHKOHUXS/>

Similarly, the students joined FFF-Rome’s global strike and took the floor twice during the event. On the one hand, FFF-Rome granted them a stage to amplify their voice and, on the other, the students populated a large part of the square, thus raising the number of protestors. Interestingly, FFF-Rome’s posts did not focus on these moments, presenting, on the other hand, a more holistic depiction of the strike as simply a square full of people. More individualized narratives were also featured, such as individual pictures of protestors holding up signs and banners. These choices are deliberate as FFF-Rome is particularly attentive to the framing and appeal of their content, following the logic of ‘mediaticity.’ Such depictions represent a desire not to portray students and Fridays in disagreement, but rather show young activists as a compact front in the fight against climate change. Careful decisions on which pictures to feature and with what order allow the activists to control more freely the outward identity they project on their imagined audiences and, in turn, foster the group’s collective identity.

4.3 FFF’s approach to social media ecology: diversified uses of platforms

As the previous paragraphs have exemplified, using visual communication on Instagram is a way for FFF-Rome to engage with its audiences in the short and long term, both through eye-catching visuals that invite participation in the here and now, and through informational posts and texts that aid people in appropriating the fight against climate change in the long term. The group, however, diversifies its social media usage in a more ramified way, which will be addressed in this section.

The following paragraphs analyze FFF-Rome’s approach to social media ecology, that is the diversified uses and media ideologies (Gershon 2010b) pertaining to the single platforms used by FFF-Rome for its frontstage activism. While Section 2, Chapter 3 analyzed FFF-

Rome's social media communication according to target audience, this chapter addresses it according to platform affordances and activism goals. To conclude, we will also delve into diversification according to activism values, in particular addressing the choice of doing climate activism on polluting social media platforms rather than their green alternatives, and what this means for FFF-Rome activists.

4.3.1 Media activist ideologies: diversified social media usage according to political goal

Building on the analysis of FFF-Rome's social media as constitutive spaces for their climate activism, it is also possible to observe how the Fridays assign specific political uses to each platform.

A striking example was the online assembly of 30 November 2020. When discussing how to best organize a demonstration, [K22f] was checking the group's Telegram and WhatsApp to share a Google Document with different proposals, [G25f] and [L25f] were discussing how to frame the protest on social media, and [O31f] was updating FFF-Rome's Google Drive with additional information and materials, all the while we were interacting on Zoom (30 November, online assembly). It was clear that during assemblies the Fridays discuss options and brainstorm, they use backstage social media to organize protest actions' logistics, publicize them on their frontstage social media and, at the same time, use these channels to sensitize and recruit new activists. It is therefore possible to identify a media activist ideology that functions as political strategy: social media are a hybrid media system on which to enact different political logics and discourses depending on the platform one is inhabiting. Social media usage is thus diversified on the basis of beliefs related to political practices which, in turn, take shape on the basis of the beliefs matured in and about social media. Since "it is not only visibility [that counts] but also being able to organize oneself to make things go 'viral'" ([M20m], 26 October 2020, online assembly), FFF-activists span across the social media ecology, adapting or forcing the consolidated idioms of practice ruling each space, leveraging the communication opportunities offered by various social media.

This thesis focused on FFF-Rome's frontstage social media strategies and profiles, thus addressing diversified activism usages of Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok. Such platforms are used (and perceived as suited) to stage the public image of the movement and communicate outward in order to reach the widest possible audience, expand the movement's traction, and sensitize citizens on the climate crisis.

Instagram

FFF-Rome's usage of Instagram is mainly directed at fostering audience's interest in the short term and creating emotional contagion, resorting to the catchiness and immediacy of Instagram's visualities: "It's a faster communication [than that on other social media], more images, more eye-catching texts, something flashy, faster, that captures your imaginary" ([Y18m], interview). As [F20f] also put it: "on Instagram we're much more... inviting, we make people want to come, so we use tones that are funnier, like with memes, and that is because we need new energy" (interview).

These techniques matured by trial and error within the movement, but also by looking up to those who already ran a successful Instagram page, even on different topics. The activists

bend the implementation of ‘influencer’ attitudes to the needs of communicating the climate crisis, in order to maximize reach and engagement: “We try to utilize the same communication that is used even by pages that are not about activism but who have lots of followers [...]. We use that same communication, but to spread different and more political messages” ([K22f], interview). The style of communication on Instagram is personalized, almost one-to-one, and is exemplified in the use of the singular vocative ‘you,’ ‘tu’ in Italian, to address people. Along with the use of surveys and Instagram stories, these strategies express single calls to action, so that the platform’s usage is differentiated from that of other social media in the ways FFF-Rome interacts with its audiences.

Interestingly, despite having a large amount of followers, FFF-Rome’s Instagram page, as [Z19m] had put it (10 July 2020, in person assembly), “is not very participated,” meaning that engagement rates are quite low, with most of them being likes but not comments. Still, FFF-Rome’s opinion on its page seemed positive, especially when they considered how it was an expression of a grassroots action since no one in the group had experience being a social media manager or content creator on large scales. Effectiveness tended to be measured in terms of reach of the single posts and calibrated according to its trends over time, favoring content and formats that had been more appreciated:

There are statistics, you can see which posts are doing better and what the coverage has been [...]. Carousels are very good. They are photos with infographics you can swipe, because we very often find ourselves having to talk about more complex topics and, when we write them in a single text, we have seen that people who follow us are less inclined to read them. So we often use memes, we say something in a funny way, and then we refer [people] to a more complete description, or the meme opens a carousel ([K22f], interview).

The platform’s affordances thus invite specific political uses: scrolling through Instagram allows for a progressively higher awareness towards climate change, the informal and personalized communication practices allow audiences to feel and get closer to the group, feeling personally interpellated, while the visual appeal of the content and the low engagement required for interaction, such as liking a post and clicking on a story to visualize it, attract and maintain people’s attention on the page. Instagram is the platform where, most likely, the main target audience’s first interaction with the movement takes place and where they are initiated and progressively educated to the fight against climate change.

Facebook

Facebook was considered the complementary platform of Instagram. While the latter is perceived as catchy and able to attract young people on an individual basis, Facebook is Instagram’s follow-up platform. Its heavier focus on text was perceived as better suited to write more informative posts and motivate FFF-Rome’s protests. This was especially true when taking into account the age-groups Facebook intercepts which, being older, might not be familiar with the necessity of striking for climate action. According to the activists, “on Facebook you can spend a bit more time writing something lengthy” ([C24m], interview) because the objective is to persuade people who might have a bias against the climate crisis: “It’s more like ‘look, here are the facts, here are the data, I’m not making this up, I’m not protesting because I want to skip school: science is saying this’ [...]. We want to gain

credibility in the eyes of adults” ([F20f], interview). The two platforms are therefore complementary, both in terms of audiences (young vs old, see chapter 3) and content (catchy vs lengthy; attractive vs organizational; personalized vs group-oriented). The audiences of FridaysForFuture can be imagined migrating from one platform to the other and from there to physical encounters, in a virtuous chain that provides contiguity between the online and offline worlds.

However, content differentiation requires a great amount of resources for the movement, both in terms of time and people involved in the creation of posts. As a result, differentiation between Facebook and Instagram posts is not always feasible. Most energies are directed toward the most successful platform, since Facebook “is dropping in terms of attention and we have an older audience, who does not interact as much” ([K22f], interview). In this sense, then, Facebook works also as a sort of resonating chamber for Instagram’s content, trying to ‘catch’ any residual ‘mediaticity’ that Instagram posts could not intercept: “The messages we try to convey on Instagram and Facebook are more or less the same [...] we are trying to differentiate the content a bit, if only the form, because obviously Instagram works better if one has a more graphic approach [...] while instead Facebook works better with long texts and it’s the one where there are more debates in the comments” ([M20m], interview).

In this way, affordances and the modes of engagement they encourage or suggest remain the main differentiating force between the two platforms. Both platforms host informative content and calls to participate in FFF-Rome’s meetings, but Facebook is characterized by affordances to create groups and events and by a stronger emphasis on discussions and conversations. This allows for “much more room for talking [...], like Reddit [...]: it’s a community-social” ([T20m], interview). It could be compared even with a social medium like Reddit, that is renowned for hosting large thread discussions and topic-differentiated forums. In this description, the differentiation between Instagram and Facebook also calls back to two different political aims: sensibilization and convocation. Instagram stories and visuals facilitate awareness raising and directly connect with young people’s lived experiences, while Facebook groups, events, and comment threads facilitate discussion, allowing the activists to advertise the ongoing activities of FridaysForFuture, answer people’s doubts with comments, and bring people to the assemblies. As [O31f] recalls, she joined FFF-Rome thanks to its Facebook group, because FFF-Rome’s assemblies were publicized by creating a different event each week: “On Facebook I could check when there was an assembly [...], I could remain updated and see when there was an event” (interview). Facebook events were useful for the same reason even for me, as the event where I approached the movement for the first time was advertised on Facebook, not on Instagram, and it is on the former platform that I was able to learn the time and place where to meet with the activists for the first time.

This function of creating new events each week for assemblies and protests had disappeared during the COVID-19 emergency, since it was impossible to meet in person. As a result, that kind of communication was only given on FFF-Rome’s WhatsApp and Telegram groups a couple of days in advance. According to [O31f], this habit was still partially in place in the fall of 2021, due to a lack of time and resources within the movement, and a general disorganization. This especially made it hard to predict with a week of notice where and when the next assembly would be and it was therefore easier to use instant communication

channels rather than creating Facebook events each time. However, this could potentially harm FFF-Rome in the long run since communicating events only through WhatsApp and Telegram “becomes something directed to people that are already within the movement, while a newcomer needs a bit of notice or they may not come” ([O31f], interview).

Twitter

Twitter’s affordances make it so that communication on the platform is public but happens at the micro and individual level of accounts’ Tweets and threads of comments, rather than being collected in groups like on Facebook³⁷. According to [B64m]’s experience of Twitter, these affordances disfavor the creation of communities. It would be challenging to create a unified cohort of followers around a FFF-Rome page, like it happens on Instagram: “I’ve never stumbled upon a group that looked like a page, a collectivity of people bonded by a common interest [...]. It’s [Twitter’s] main flaw [...] and this does not allow you to grow fast” (interview). According to him, in opposition to Facebook’s community-focus and variegated affordances, with pages created around specific interests, “Twitter doesn’t have actual groups, the equivalent of the Facebook page for, like, ‘1970s bicycle enthusiasts from Garbatella’ [...]. You won’t find stuff like that” ([B64m], interview). Twitter’s simplicity makes it a primarily political instrument, rather than one for socialization. Therefore, the activists’ usage of Twitter was mainly directed at provoking politicians and institutions: “We have a Twitter account, but we only use it to periodically shoot out stuff that could become trending” ([C14f], interview).

Rather than adapting to the existing usage practices and to what the activists believe is the affordances’ suggested mode of interaction, in the case of Twitter the activists force the existing idioms of practice through actual protest actions that characterize FFF. To address public institutions and mainstream journalism, they unleash the so-called “Tweetstorms,” also known as Tweetbombing, already mentioned in the previous chapters. These are nationwide coordinated actions happening in concurrence with a media or political event (i.e., a TV show, elections...) where the activists collectively design a Tweet or a thread of Tweets to be simultaneously Tweeted from their personal accounts at specific time intervals, usually tagging politicians and events referred in the Tweet and employing customized hashtags in an attempt to make them ‘trend’ among the topics of the day. This is to provoke widespread discussion and give real-time visibility to the movement’s grievances, while at the same time “giving more prominence to what is the global and international face of FFF [...] and creating that global awareness on the fact that [the climate crisis] is a universal issue” ([E24m], interview).

Indeed, although there is an official Twitter profile of the movement at the national level, the specificity of this use of Twitter lies precisely in the ‘bombardment’ effect that occurs by Tweeting from the personal accounts of the activists. It is an individualized, large-scale collective action that is able to “put pressure in a coordinated and consistent way” (26 October 2020, online assembly). Tweetstorms serve to “flood social networks [...] and make people feel that even at home [...] our eyes [are] focused on the moves of the political class”

³⁷ Twitter Lists and Communities have limited affordances for group interactions and the latter were only introduced on the platform at the end of 2021. Recent changes in Twitter’s ownership and user policies make the grounds for FFF-Rome’s communication on the platform even more uncertain.

([K22f], 9 December 2020, online event). A significant example of Tweetstorm occurred during the approval phase of the Recovery Fund, when the activists Tweeted the same text and the same hashtags in the same time slot to ask for a more effective allocation of the funds for the ecological reconversion, as part of the European funding program for the Next Generation EU. While in Italy the results were very modest, the action was especially effective in Germany: “They obtained that the German parliament members of the socialist and democratic groups voted against [the motion], while before [the Tweetstorm] they had said they were in favor of it, only because they had been stormed by requests and comments” ([M20m], interview).

Through this use of Twitter, FridaysForFuture activists bend the syntax of the platform to the objectives of the movement. They employ hashtagging not only to make certain themes trending but as a jumping point that ensures that their communication reaches other news outlets in function of the visibility that a trending Twitter hashtag can give them. For example, an episode of the Italian TV program “Propaganda Live” happened to host Frans Timmermans, the vice president of the European Commission’s work on the European Green Deal³⁸. FridaysForFuture-Rome activists decided to launch a nationwide Tweetstorm to provoke a televised discussion on how the newly approved CAP³⁹ reform was completely misaligned with the objectives of the Green Deal. In deciding what and when to Tweet, the activists tried to fit in the timeline of the television program in order to Tweet direct questions to the interviewee, in accordance with what he was saying at any given time. The hope was that they would be answered in virtue of their being trending and, thus, hopefully visible to who was conducting the program.

As a result, the objective of being included within Twitter’s trending topics also allows the group to widen participation even to those who do not follow the official FridaysForFuture accounts: “When the hashtag goes trending, people know that lots of people are talking about a specific thing, and so even them [those who do not follow FFF-Italy] go and see what the fuss is about” ([M20m], interview). The Tweetstorm’s effectiveness lies in the number of participants it can assemble together and its political character is substantiated in the confluence of multiple personal actions in a stream of protest that identifies the movement: “It’s amazing because everyone is Tweeting the same thing and if you’re following other Fridays you see all of you Tweeting the same thing. It’s really shocking” ([C14f], interview).

³⁸The Green Deal is a strategic plan proposed by the European Commission and signed by all member countries in December 2019. It foresees the adoption of various measures aimed at combating climate change by intervening in various sectors such as energy, industry, construction, trade, pollution, mobility, and biodiversity. The foreseen actions aim to achieve concrete objectives in compliance with the Paris Agreements on climate by 2050, with intermediate milestones set for 2030 and 2040.

³⁹The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is the set of rules that the European Union has given itself since its inception regarding the agricultural sector. In mid-2018, the European Commission presented a proposal to reform the CAP for the period 2021-2027, which was then discussed between July and September 2020 at the ministerial level. The goal was to “restructure” the architecture of European agricultural policies in terms of environmental sustainability. During the legislative negotiations between the Commission, the Council, and the Parliament, the reform fell out of line with the commitments made at European and international level on climate and sustainable development, thus losing clarity in terms of political strategy. In fact, most of the ecologically progressive points of the reform were rejected with an amendment, also due to the overrepresentation of corporate lobbies and the underrepresentation of farmers and scientists. More details were summarized in forty points in the European campaign #WithdrawTheCap, which the Fridays also joined.

TikTok

Section 2, Chapter 3 addressed the value of adding TikTok to FFF-Rome's media ecology in terms of audiences it could intercept and in terms of its 'rejuvenating' power: it could help the Fridays stay 'young' by continuously renegotiating their communication practices. Here, we address the potential of TikTok for FFF-Rome's climate activism in terms of political goals, as well as the media ideologies (Gershon 2010b) connected to TikTok usage. Indeed, the appeal of the platform for the Fridays lies in its outreach and potential for 'mediaticity': "The interaction is maximum: you can interact and do a lot of multimedia things" ([Z19m], 10 July 2020, in person assembly). Additionally, other groups and people FFF looks up to are using it effectively "and we can copy what they're doing" ([O31f], interview).

These observations concern TikTok's affordances and their potential. On the one hand, the design of the platform, which opens on the 'For you' page rather than on one's 'followed' accounts. Such a feature would "encourage you to see new people, and that's why on TikTok you grow faster" ([A28m], interview). This would allow the account to grow no matter its actual follower count because, as [S18m] explained, "the good thing of TikTok is that you don't necessarily have to follow [someone] to see the video because there are the 'For you' and therefore based on the hashtags and the sound you put, [you can intercept] a famous trend" (10 July 2020, in person assembly). According to the activists, the immediacy and catchiness of TikTok could be exploited to create content of immediate consumption on the climate fight: "In 15 seconds you can communicate something to people who have increasingly limited attention, so why not?" ([T20m], interview). As [U22f] mentioned, even the capacity of TikTok to hook its audiences on the platform could be used to FFF's advantage: "Maybe the video appears to you once [...] maybe you see one, maybe you see two, and already there you communicated something, you communicated the message" (interview).

Still, when [Z19m] argued for the value of TikTok as the platform "that is becoming the most popular among the youngest" (10 July 2020, in person assembly), the group welcomed the proposal with laughs. [P23m] simply shook his head saying: "They won't let us do it," referring to the other activists who would have to vote on the motion in an eventual future assembly. During the same event, [Z19m] tried to explain that, even if on TikTok people mostly do dance challenges, you could "decide to do much more." Still, most of the activists seemed keen in considering it just a platform where you "do dance moves to certain music," making fun of the users for their 'silly' dances and their decision to post this kind of content. They displayed judgmental attitudes towards the mainstream usages of TikTok, calling them "idiotic" and pointing out how people worth imitating on the platform, such as other climate activists, had to struggle to "make it [TikTok] as decent as possible." Their view suggests that one has to make an effort to look past the superficial and silly uses of the majority of the users, face a "first-impact disgust" and struggle to find those people "who actually use it in an intelligent way" (10 July 2020, in person assembly). During this workshop, it appeared how there was a good and bad way of using TikTok so that, if FFF decided to open an account, it would be important to "understand what to say and how to say it" ([Z19m]) because only "if used intelligently" TikTok could be "an excellent means of communication" (ibid.).

In the vision of the Fridays, then, TikTok usage practices must be renegotiated, injecting ‘serious’ and ‘appropriate’ content for a political battle like that for the climate. The intended use and therefore the re-meaning of the idioms of practice associated with TikTok (i.e., dance challenges) depended on the choices of individual users, in this case of activists, who can renegotiate these conventions according to new or different media ideologies (Gershon 2010b). Choosing this platform, which was initially blamed for the media ideologies (ibid.) connected to it, remained rooted in the logic of visibility and dissemination, making the use of TikTok a political gesture because it opposed a ‘standard’ use considered ‘idiotic’ with a proposal that is “intelligent,” both for its distance from conventional uses and for its being politically-oriented in terms of contents, objectives, and targets. Through this ‘better’ use of TikTok, the Fridays demonstrate that they are aware that “credibility is not created by the platform but by the speeches and languages that one carries on there” ([J24m], 26 October 2020, online assembly), and that it is possible to intervene in a media and political arena conceived for other age cohorts in one’s own way.

Of course, this kind of usage and the management of a successful TikTok profile represented a huge amount of resources for the movement. Not only it would have needed constant meetings to establish a communication line and practices, but, after, it would also have needed to be constantly enriched with content: “TikTok needs more time to look after it and grow, so it can’t follow the same schedule of the others [social media]” (2 November 2020, online assembly). Despite the catchiness and immediacy of its videos compared with Instagram posts, “it takes a much longer time to make a TikTok than an [Instagram] post [...]: you have to really think it through, you have to prepare it well or it won’t do well and there is so much work to do” ([P23m], interview). As an activist group, FFF-Rome (and FFF at the national level) has to deal with limited resources, both in terms of money and time to spend on a platform and people who can actually devote so much time to it: “With TikTok you should stay there all day, post three videos a day, and they have to be super-modern, topical, they have to be right- that is, if you post the video that’s trendy today but you post it tomorrow you’re already behind. No one wanted to make that commitment” ([A28m], interview).

Its adoption was discussed for a long time within the movement until a single national channel on the topic was activated. [C14f] and [A28m] recalled in their interviews that, when the official account was opened, the resources to keep it up were so limited that the account could only feature new videos once or twice a week. To deal with the limited number of people who could devote time to the account and who were willing to show their face on TikTok, videos had to be made in advance in large numbers, which prevented the page from keeping up with the platform’s fast-paced trends. In the end, the experiment was deemed unsuccessful and, after a few months, it was put on hold for the time being. As of September 2021, [A28m] described the situation as such: “If someone wants to publish something, they can go and post it, but right now we’re at around one [video] every other week or every month. It’s a sad story” (interview). It must still be noted, however, that more than a year has passed since then. In a recent public event (December 2022), [K22f] listed TikTok among FridaysForFuture social media, meaning that, eventually, the platform had taken off. This might also be due to the sedimentation of TikTok among young people’s main platforms. After the initial stage of experimentation, when only a few creators were using the platform

to post social-issues themed content, more and more users post politically charged videos, allowing FFF-Rome not to feel as out of place as it could have been one or two years ago.

4.3.2 A media ecology of ecological platforms?

At the end of this analysis, after looking at how FFF-Rome utilizes social media to spread information on and fight against the climate crisis, it is interesting to address the way the Fridays conceive and approach these platforms from an environmentally centered point of view. In fact, social media and the contemporary communicative infrastructure have an impact on the current climate crisis, raising critical points for what concerns sustainability and ethical considerations.

On the one hand, the digital world represents a substantial environmental impact on greenhouse gasses and pollution, contributing to 4% of all greenhouse gases in 2020 (Griffiths 2020) and this number is predicted to double by 2025. This includes both emissions related to the manufacturing and shipping of internet technologies, and the maintenance, powering, and cooling of devices and data centers. On the other hand, concerns also rise from an ethical standpoint as social media platforms and the business models that govern them are the expression of the same capitalism and corporatism that FFF-Rome strives to fight.

This last section will therefore address the negotiations that the Fridays put in place when approaching these platforms for activism and the criteria that guide the adoption of different social media within the movement when the necessities of the fight against climate change and its related values clash with the necessity of communicating it to as many people as possible. Thematic analysis of the interviews highlighted two main dimensions of this conflict within FFF-Rome: the first dimension deals with the anticapitalism spirit that animates FFF-Rome and its clash with the capitalist and corporate nature of social media platforms; the second regards the necessities imposed by the ecological conversion (i.e., contrasting the climate crisis) and the carbon footprint of the internet. These two dimensions can be analyzed by identifying two macro-themes: environment-oriented negotiations with social media usage and environment-oriented approach to the social media ecology. Both of these are further ramified in various sub-themes and it must be noted that the single activists could (and often did) recognize themselves in more than one position or opinion.

Environment-oriented negotiations with social media usage

Within the first macrotheme, the first subtheme we can identify is that of unfamiliarity. This refers to the lack of knowledge regarding the carbon footprint of the internet and lack of awareness of the ethical clash between the corporate model of digital platforms and FFF-Rome's ethical standpoints. Most of the activists whose experiences fell between these lines had a limited activism background, meaning that they had only recently joined the movement or were not particularly active within its ranks. As a result, the question often prompted deep reflections because it was the first time the activists had to consider the impact of their internet usage: "It's not a subject that is talked about a lot [...], I've never thought so much about this thing. Maybe I'll go and find out a little better later. As a last question it is very positive" ([C24m], interview).

Some activists also recalled that they used to ignore the impact of the internet and had never questioned its ethics before joining the movement. They put themselves in the shoes of the average person who, like them before joining FFF-Rome, might not know better: “I think that in reality the single person does not ask themselves the question ‘what impact does the mobile phone and social networks have on the environment?’ because often one does not know. This is also why I sincerely think that it is necessary to find alternatives to social networks” ([R18f], interview). Overall, they observed that the movement at large is “definitely aware of this” ([H20f], interview) but rarely if ever talks about this topic. When it happens, it is only at large, without, for example, delving into the impact of each single platform or practice (i.e., sending emails vs streaming a video): “From time to time, at the national level, I remember discussions on the environmental impact not only of social networks but also of the Internet. [...] I don’t remember talking about this with people. I think the point is: ‘it is better to reach people than not to use social media’” ([O31f], interview).

[O31f]’s words immediately connect this subtheme with the next, which is the notion of social media usage as a necessary malus. According to the activists, it would be ideal if physical protests were enough to spread FFF-Rome’s message, without recurring to digital platforms and with very limited impact and pollution. However, this is not the case, so they must negotiate pros and cons and choose the lesser evil: “It’s a bit like taking the bus, let’s say, or traditional cars to go to the place where there is an assembly. It is a necessary evil until alternative solutions are found” ([W26m], interview). This idea stems from the opinion that “everything has an impact, you must balance risks and benefits” ([D20f], interview). The benefits of bringing the climate fight on social media and exploiting its potential for communication and aggregation outweigh the impact that such practices can have on the environment: “The impact in terms of emissions that we have had with these 2-3 years of activism has been much greater than the impact that we might have had in using social networks” ([M20m], interview). This notion is also informed by the consideration that it is fundamentally impossible to pursue the same kind of ‘mediaticity’ on a place other than digital platforms and that they have become paramount of any kind of activism: “If you don’t have a social page, active social networks, you won’t go anywhere. It’s more important that people approach this world [the world of climate activism], since everyone uses social networks, rather than saying ‘ok, the internet pollutes and therefore we don’t use it’” ([D20f], interview).

When drawing these conclusions, the activists are wary of the movement’s detractors, the people who oppose FFF-Rome for the sake of being against it and do not bring any relevant points to the discussions. According to the activists, they would look at FFF-Rome’s social media and point them out as inconsistent with the movement’s spirit without critically considering the negotiations that informed their usage: “Searching for inconsistency is always a very popular route for those who simply want to be against us at all costs, like when you say ‘you’re vegan? so you never killed a mosquito?’” ([D20f], interview). This kind of sterile criticism might harm the movement in the public eye but, in the end, it can also help it spread even more awareness on the costs and benefits of doing climate activism on the internet, maybe comparing it with other, more polluting activities: “It has become impossible [...] to use the internet less [...], while on the other hand it’s very useful to avoid meat and stuff like that” ([U22f], interview).

This view was complementary with the idea that the environmental impact of social media is secondary when compared with that of other polluting activities, like [U22f]'s comment about meat consumption exemplifies. Every single human activity has an impact on the environment, so it is essential to pick one's battles: "I breathe thirty seconds and I emit CO₂. [...] To print an article in 200,000 copies in a newspaper requires paper, ink, and effort. Even assembling 500,000 people in the square always costs CO₂" ([K22f], interview). Overall, then, social media are the lesser evil not only in terms of the good they can potentially do, but also in factual terms of impact: "I believe social media give the lesser impact when you think about ways of sharing information" ([H20f], interview) and this justifies their use. When the future of the entire human race is at stake and entire ecosystems are collapsing, the usage of social media appears of limited importance: "On the one hand, yes it is true, there is an impact at an environmental level, but we can try to make people understand that, in reality, it is not the main one [...]. Before saying that social networks pollute, we can say many more things that can be improved" ([N21f], interview). When drawing these conclusions, the movement revindicates once more the importance of doing climate activism on social media and highlights the little impact FFF-Rome has had within the entire social media ecosystem:

It's not like if we didn't create those one thousand, two thousands, what do I know, 10,000 more Instagram pages it would have really changed so much. The orders of magnitude of pages that are used and videos that are played and people that join social networks are actually a lot bigger. We simply made sure that people who would have still spent their 'x' hours a day on social media visited our pages too, so we did a service to humanity ([M20m], interview).

This view is connected to the last subtheme that emerged: that of reclaiming the platforms. In this conception, FFF-Rome's social media presence is not only a necessary malus: by inhabiting these platforms for a good reason and by providing a sensibilization service to the public, they carry out a mission as a counterpublic information channel. They directly subvert the logics of the platforms by using their media ideologies (Gershon 2010b) and idioms of practice to instrumentalize fame towards a greater awareness of the climate crisis and of the impact of digital communication technologies. [K22f] effectively expresses this viewpoint when she said: "We cannot leave the most visited and used platforms for information only in the hands of those who perhaps want to convey messages that are not very environmentally sustainable or have a different ethic. [...] We can't leave social media in the hands of the capitalists" (interview). Having a social media presence, even at the price of slightly contributing to the climate crisis, is thus worth it not only because it allows the movement to reach as many people as possible and keep on existing, but also because it counterbalances the poor ethics of the platforms and of other social media creators, reclaiming them for climate activism and social change.

Environment-oriented approach to social media ecology

The second macro-theme is that of FFF-Rome's environmentally oriented approach to social media ecology. The subthemes that fell in this category deal with opting for one platform over another based on its environmental impact or ethical standpoint, as well as the activities that FFF-Rome organizes in order to spread awareness on these topics and better their own media practices.

From speaking with the activists, it became clear that almost all of them agreed on the importance of finding alternatives to social media usage based on their impact. This view expresses the idea that the current information infrastructure's environmental impact is not consistent with the movement's ideals, so FFF-Rome must make an effort to include sustainable communication solutions alongside its use of mainstream social media for activism. This view was summarized by [R18f] when she said that "movements like FFF, as well as other student movements, other activism realities, should ask themselves the question: how can I do activism without relying on social media?" (interview). The activists tried to implement this principle when creating a new website for FFF-Italy⁴⁰, opting for a website that is "exclusively based on renewable energy" ([A28m], interview). Its servers "operate on renewable energy," they are "not connected to polluting companies" and they are "very close [to us], so the information does not have to travel from one corner of the world to the next over networks, consuming energy" ([K22f], interview). Indeed, FFF-Italy's website even displays a certificate that attests to its sustainability and has an entire page dedicated to explaining how it is able to operate under limited pollution. This was considered not only a mark of pride for FFF, as it showed that it is possible to achieve sustainable internet communication, but also an important educational and ethical standpoint: "It is right to pay attention to this, because [...] if a movement in itself does not set a good example, the whole type of dialogue it tries to create is inconsistent" ([M20m], interview). Such practices answer once again to FFF-Rome's mission to inform, sensitize, and carry out actions that are consistent with its values, thus reinforcing its outward identity. However, the activists also agreed that, while it might be easier to create sustainable websites, "with social media I don't think anything can be done because [we] don't operate the servers" ([U22f], interview). As a result, desirable social media usage is connected to grassroots ownership of servers and platforms, something still unattainable when looking at large social media like Instagram or Twitter.

This kind of business model is radically different from the corporatism and capitalism that govern digital platforms. There have been attempts within FFF-Rome (and FFF-Italy) to adopt specific platforms because of their ethical stance, but with very modest results. The activists made the examples of Telegram and Mastodon⁴¹. As mentioned during an event, Telegram is "very handy because of its privacy settings, not to mention it is opensource" (9 December 2020, online event) and, as [A28m] recalls, "we first adopted Telegram in the context of an initiative for digital sustainability" (interview). On that occasion, the platform's privacy policies were compared with those of Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp. Choosing Telegram was informed not only by what was perceived as a more ethical business model, but by the presence of better policies for what concerns privacy. This was especially significant for FFF-Rome since, as a social movement, it would at times organize unauthorized protests. Exchanging messages regarding such actions on Telegram was perceived to be safer than doing the same on WhatsApp or other platforms. When FFF-Rome collaborates with Extinction Rebellion, for example, using Telegram and even safer

⁴⁰ <https://Fridaysforfutureitalia.it/>

⁴¹ Mastodon is experiencing exponential growth in terms of userbase and reach, in the wake of Twitter's recent acquisition by Elon Musk. However in 2021, when the interviews were carried out, it was still a very niche platform with a very small userbase, substantially unheard of in Italy. It will be interesting to see if, were the platform still to grow, the Fridays will once again try to establish a presence on the social medium and with which effects.

communication channels like Signal was paramount. The group is known for enacting civil disobedience so organizing such demonstrations needed to be especially confidential.

On the same note, comparisons with Extinction Rebellion's social media usage were common. This is because the group "does something different, they're also on rebellious social media, meaning free social media, open source, safe, that care about your privacy" ([A28m], interview), with an eye on "using more ethical social media, those who don't create addictions like Instagram and the world of Zuckerberg" ([T20m], interview). However, this was considered possible because of the different identities of the movements: Extinction Rebellion carries more radical ideas about how to fight the climate crisis and caters to a smaller audience. With their mission to educate and spread the message to as many people as possible while maintaining the identity of 'nice kids,' the Fridays cannot do without mainstream social media because "it is on Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, Twitter that you get things done [...]. Horrible monopolies of Mr. Zuckerberg, sure, but what can you do?" ([A28m], interview). In fact, the activists had tried to open an account on Mastodon, which [M20m] described as "an open source kind of Twitter" (interview), however the platform was "extremely niche so in practice we do not use it [...], we copy paste our posts from time to time but nobody reads them, so it is pretty much useless at this time" (ibid).

Therefore, while considerations about ethics can be taken into account in the case of websites, it is much harder to do the same when using social media platforms: "More ethical channels always carry the counterindication that they're not very followed" ([K22f], interview), thus defying the movement's attempts to reach 'mediaticity' and sensitize its audiences. Additionally, the scarce publics that FFF-Rome might intercept on ethical social media might already be informed of the climate crisis "because no one uses that kind of social media if not people who're already conscious of these issues" ([F20f], interview). In this view, then, presence on ethical social media was considered effectively useless, calling back to the necessity of using mainstream social media as a way to take back visibility and power from unsustainable uses of the platform: being the voice of reason and educational resource for all those people (the majority) who do not know better.

Finally, the last subtheme refers to the activities that FFF carries out to educate its own activists on the impact of digital communication. Experiences falling within this subtheme are complementary to those concerning FFF-Rome's social media presence as one redeeming the platforms. However, while the latter was framed within the discourse of counterbalancing the damage done by digital platforms themselves, these other FFF-Rome's activities are meant to counterbalance the damages that FFF-Rome (and the single activists) might have done while being on digital platforms. It offers thus a more individualized perspective on the environmental and ethical issues that the movement has to negotiate in its activism. Emblematic is the example of the FFF-Italy group called 'digital sustainability' which is responsible for addressing the activists' questions on these topics and preparing guidelines for the movement to limit its impact. As [C14f] explained, the group is constantly "working" on new solutions "in order to understand in which ways we can have less of an impact while using our devices" (interview). The group is currently very small, counting "four members" (ibid.) but its work is paralleled by workshops and short seminars within FFF-Italy. An example were the tables of discussion during the three-day event in Brescia, of which I had

the occasion of following two: 'How to communicate the climate crisis' and 'Digital sustainability,' which especially informed the activists on the impact of streaming videos.

Overall, then, the two themes of social media's environmental impact and the ethical considerations informing social media usage are reconciled with the necessity of spreading information about climate change. Being heard by as many people as possible is paramount and its benefits outweigh the impact of using mainstream social media rather than more ethical/ green alternatives. Additionally, FFF-Rome's presence on social media can be redeemed by a more sustainable approach to digital communication, while its mission to educate unaware audiences can potentially redeem digital platforms themselves, as they would now serve a nobler purpose.

Part 4 – Conclusions, key contributions, and limitations

This work has presented an analysis of the social media activism of FridaysForFuture-Rome. This has been analyzed through the lens of generational ‘we sense’ and the identity sense-makings connected to it, in order to identify the processes that contribute to creating the generational and collective identity of FFF-Rome’s members and how these inform (and are informed by) their social media practices.

To do so, this thesis has shed light on the identity of ‘Friday,’ addressing the characteristics and behaviors that set them apart from other activists. That is, it has operated a distinction between ‘being Friday’ and ‘doing Friday.’ In this last part, I will reconcile these two aspects and highlight the main findings and contributions of this work, as well as identify future areas of research on this topic and offer some reflections on what it meant to carry out this kind of work with(in) the Roman branch of FridaysForFuture.

1.1 A generational-specific understanding of platforms, the climate, and activism

As mentioned, the first part of this thesis has analyzed what it means to ‘be’ a FridaysForFuture-Rome activist. We have seen that the sense makings related to being an FFF-Rome activist are related to belonging to a specific generation but especially to being ‘young.’

Youth was seen as the core characteristic of the Friday. The activists drew this association explicitly when asked about who militates within FFF-Rome and who can call themselves a Friday. They also did so implicitly, when drawing lines between authentic and acceptable activism within the group. Boundaries were especially visible when it came to utilizing digital communication technologies, so that communication practices online identified specific generation-charged media ideologies (Gershon 2010b) that informed, for those that were already within FFF-Rome, identity self-ascription into the group and, for those outside, identification with the fight and with its practices. In drawing these conclusions, this thesis highlights an understudied face of contemporary Italian environmental activism, characterized by generationally-coded practices and generational belonging. Such a feature has not yet been identified in scholarship on the topic and is worth researching more in the future, in order to identify how the saliency of the climate crisis and the affordances of digital communication technologies have actually set apart in Italy, as some have suggested for other contexts (cfr. Eide & Kunelius 2021; Milkman 2017), a new political generation of activists, with innovative values, worldviews, and, of course, activist practices.

When it comes to ‘generations,’ the activists tended to draw very broad lines. They would group all ‘older’ people as ‘boomers,’ regardless of the actual generation they belonged to, and they also tended to commonly refer to themselves using the umbrella term ‘young’ rather than naming specific generations (they did, however, sometimes use the terms ‘millennial’ and ‘gen z’). Even in this case, being ‘young’ was still commonly perceived as the characteristic that set them apart from older activist generations, that is, in their imaginary, identified the activists as a generation in and of itself. As a result, that of being young was also the identity that the Fridays most strongly tried to convey on the outside, even when it made them susceptible to the paternalism of the media and the public opinion. The identity of

being ‘nice kids,’ in particular, is emblematic of such a struggle. On the one hand, media and institutions, that is the world of adults, praise the Fridays for what they are doing, but in doing so they dismiss their struggle and the political significance of the climate fight, refusing to accommodate the requests of the activists. On the other, the Fridays reinforce this identity by adopting ‘politically correct’ or more tepid forms of activism, so as not to be publicly labelled as thugs or dangerous. They can then take advantage of the identity of ‘nice kids’ as a political strategy that allows them to be welcomed into the Italian palaces of power, give greater emphasis to science and mere facts as a form of social legitimization, and maintain the public opinion’s positive perception of the movement. The social legitimization that they derive from being ‘nice kids’ deprives them of political agency on the one hand, but gives in back on the other in terms of political organization, mediatic resonance, and technical knowledge about the climate crisis.

The activists also express a strong generational belonging to the climate fight and to the way FFF-Rome approaches activism. We can say that the generational belonging that they felt was activated by two elements. First, the resonance that the climate fight has for young people, because the Fridays perceive it as something that especially impacts younger generations: older people have ‘doomed’ the planet and jeopardized young people’s future, so feeling for the climate speaks about the condition of being young in this day and age. The sensation, the knowledge of having to live through worse times and harsher climates than the generations that preceded them is something that, according to the activists, sets them apart from anyone older. It is something that adults just cannot understand, it is at the core of what it means to be young and, when this awareness is especially strong and informed, to be Friday. Second, the condition of being young and caring for the climate was also dependent on a special sensibility towards matters of social justice (among which they also identified climate change). This also was attributed to a generation-specific sensibility, matured thanks to decades of economic instability and civil rights activism, towards a progressive awareness of the faults of western capitalistic societies. In this context, the role of digital communication technologies came out in full force. It was ultimately thanks to digital communication technologies that, according to the activists, so many youth could gather the knowledge and awareness needed to mature a common worldview that speaks of the we-sense of their generation. Social media especially, with their affordances and their facilitating information dissemination, allowed for forging the consciousness of FFF-Rome’s generation, towards an even greater social justice awareness. Interestingly, the activists would stereotype younger and older people alike according to their digital media practices, perhaps overgeneralizing the ‘sameness’ of people perceived as belonging to the same age group.

The second part of this thesis has analyzed what it means to ‘do’ FridaysForFuture-Rome activism. It has highlighted how the activists’ media ideologies (Gershon 2010b) connected to using social media are profoundly intertwined with their activist and generational ideologies: the proper way of doing both shapes a specific conception of digital climate activism.

Young people are considered as the only social media users with the proficiency required to forge the political consciousness and curiosity to do digital activism ‘right.’ On the one hand, they revindicated the political use of social media as informational chambers, whereby young

people possess better digital skills and critical capacity to discern correct information and challenge mainstream narrations, in this case about the climate crisis. Adults, on the other hand, would only be able to use these channels as extensions of their social circles and as a way to keep up with friends, or risk being swayed by inaccurate information. As a result, digital activism is conceived as an essentially youth prerogative. It is inherently youthful because it requires social media skills and practices that are believed to only characterize young people. Social media are considered young people's 'own' platforms. The activists see using these platforms as both a means to an end and as digital spaces that they own in virtue of their age. As young people, they perceive themselves as 'owning' platforms like Instagram and being naturally attuned to the 'proper' way of using them. This fuels a need to use them for activism, and to use them well, lest they incur into the same 'boomer-ness' and ineptness with social media that they attributed to older generations.

Additionally, FFF-activists not only reclaim their political agency against the adults' paternalism. They also preserve it inwardly when interacting with adults who participate in FFF-Rome. The generational and ideological distance that sets these youth political practices apart from older generations' can be read as a survival strategy that differentiates youth politics and, ultimately, contributes to the sense of pride in what young activists are doing (cfr. Liou & Literat 2020). Still, the activists of FFF-Rome exacerbate these tendencies by both resisting and reinforcing paternalistic attitudes and generation-based stereotypes through their communicative practices. As mentioned, social media are spaces that belong especially to young people, who can elaborate on the proper and improper ways of using them. They therefore create different groups to differentiate among 'spam groups,' inhabited by older users who have a harder time internalizing FFF-Rome's (digital) communication rules, and working groups, inhabited by activists who are considered to communicate in the proper manner.

When it came to differentiating among old and young people's social media practices, it also emerged how social media would possess potentials that older generations simply did not know how to unleash. Such a potential was identified in the spreadability and diffusion of information and ideas, expressing a deterministic view that hands over 'power' in the communication exchange to the platforms rather than to their usage. The contradiction between this view and the notion that social media are additional environments for activism is resolved in the Fridays because the power of mobilization that characterizes social media essentially refers to their capacity to attract and reach people, that is to host and activate 'worlds'. As a result, social media are conceived and occupied as environments that can intercept and collect large numbers of users thanks to the skills of the activists. The mobilizing power of social media must therefore be unlocked by sufficiently apt users, the young activists of FFF-Rome, thus reclaiming user agency in the communication exchange. Once this power is unlocked, social media can boost FFF-Rome's capability to mobilize people for climate change, therefore directly contrasting views that deem digital activism as a lower form of political engagement. On the contrary, involvement within FFF-Rome happens through the combined effort of online and offline sensibilization. Young people learn about the climate crisis online through FFF-Rome's channels and, only when they are sufficiently aware of the issue, their engagement levels lead to a collective moment of real 'activation'

that takes place through backstage social media and participation in FFF-Rome's assemblies and demonstrations.

As digital platforms are considered the playing field of this activist generation and young people their legitimate users, FFF-Rome does not only 'occupy' public places, but it also 'occupies' digital environments. This was contextualized in a descriptive analysis, which is typical of ethnography, that accounts for how and with what logics FFF-activists move across online and offline environments, as a characterization of the movement and its strategies. The thesis especially emphasized how the activists seamlessly move across social media platforms and physical settings based on both their target audiences and their political objectives, transcending the school-centric logic that usually characterizes Italian youth social movements (cfr. Zamponi 2018). These platforms were differentiated according to the audiences they were believed to intercept and the political goals they could serve. Even usage practices were molded according to the age of a platform's perceived userbase, for example bringing the Fridays to communicate in a more 'boomer-like' way on Facebook and struggling to keep up with the teens' language on TikTok. These choices imply the preconception that younger people prefer a more flashy and immediate communication, while adults are more verbose and require a more slow-paced communication style.

As such, an ecology of platforms comes to take shape around FFF-Rome's activism where we can differentiate between suited, unsuited, and suitable platforms. The first and second are suited or unsuited to FFF-Rome's needs in terms of the user base's perceived age and communication styles. The latter are potentially suitable because of the demographics or communication styles that characterize them, but their adoption requires long negotiations because they are either unintuitive or could compromise FFF-Rome's messages. Indeed, FFF-Rome's target audience online is immediately and inevitably connected to the identity of the movement and to the audience it intercepts offline to join it. Choosing a platform over another is therefore not only dictated by a desire to intercept certain age groups or achieve certain communicative goals. It is informed by the communion between a social medium's affordances and the modes of communication of a generation. Using a young people's platform (such as Instagram) is a political act in and of itself. It allows FFF-Rome to speak about young people's problems on a young people's platform in a young people's way. It reinforces both FFF-Rome's identity and its political revindications. Such a communication is, therefore, inherently political and expresses FFF-Rome's political compass.

The contiguity and mutual interference between the offline and online worlds also extended to participation in protest actions. The Fridays conceive social media as constitutive of grassroots political practices and as additional environments for activism: a "contiguous and surrogate square" ([P23m], 9 November 2020, online assembly). Social networks are actual territories of political contention and they play a role in constructing FFF-Rome's agenda. Social media and physical demonstrations are, therefore, the two pillars onto which FFF-Rome's activism rests: they fuel each other and keep each other, and the movement, alive. As a result, FFF-Rome's activism does not exist only in one realm and then moves to the other when the need arises: it is inherently collocated across physical squares and social media. The temporality of FFF-Rome's activism expresses this contiguity. Short-term engagement is fostered through large-scale protests and/or flashy social media actions, able to achieve high

‘mediaticity,’ attracting new recruits through the emotional appeal of demonstrations. Long-term engagement is pursued by continuous sensibilization efforts in informative assemblies, workshops, and social media posts, in an effort to attract new people into the movement through education and awareness. Additionally, while visual strategies on Instagram start as short-term engagement, their impact extends on the long term as users can browse an archive of FFF-Rome’s activities through time and of a progression of the climate crisis.

The short-term logic of ‘mediaticity,’ in particular, points out how the perceived/ expected spreadability of a physical demonstration plays a determining factor in choosing it as a form of protest. This shift has already been observed in literature (cfr. McGarry et al. 2020), but the case of the Fridays allows us to grasp the details of such practice and the extent to which it can be prioritized, that is how important it is for the movement. For example, ‘mediaticity’ was still pursued even when it was pointed out that it might compromise the group’s core value of horizontality, or when the planned protest might have had legal and financial repercussions on the single activists. The group’s visibility, the mediatic resonance of a protest action, is used by FFF-Rome as a way to measure the effectiveness of its activism, all the while managing its outward identity. The Fridays understand ‘mediaticity’ as both a means *and* an end, a strategy and a goal. Through ‘mediaticity,’ the Fridays can achieve political objectives, but ‘mediaticity’ is also an objective in and of itself because it supports the movement and its actions by spreading FFF-Rome’s message to as many people as possible across as many channels as possible.

While this work has pointed out how digital platforms are embedded into FFF-Rome’s activism, the activists still maintain distinctions between the two realms. This was especially evident at the levels of emotional and human value that activism spaces can have for the movement. Offline environments were considered to be intrinsically ‘better’ and richer in terms of human connection, socialization, and camaraderie among activists. These qualities also made them more nuanced spaces that could better aid the activists to discuss difficult or delicate topics, such as deciding the political compass and ethical guidelines of the movement. Online spaces simply lacked the human ‘warmth’ and communicative cues that the activists deemed necessary for these confrontations. Once again, then, digital and physical activism were not in conflict with each other but the activists simply decided how and where to move each communication and practice according to the needs of the movement.

Finally, this thesis sheds light on the understudied negotiations that climate activists put in place when the necessities of fighting against climate change clash with the necessities of communicating the crisis to as many people as possible. On the one hand, the anticapitalistic spirit that animates FFF-Rome contrasts with the capitalist and corporate nature of social media platforms. On the other, the necessities imposed by the ecological conversion are in immediate contrast with the carbon footprint of the internet and, therefore, of maintaining a social media presence. When discussing these contrasts, the activists strongly revindicated the necessity of doing climate activism on social media. Being heard by as many people as possible was considered paramount and its benefits would outweigh the impact of using social media like Instagram and Facebook, because more environmentally-sustainable alternatives (i.e., Mastodon) are also more niche and using them would defeat the purpose of digital activism. On the contrary, the activists revindicated the political value of being on

mainstream social media exactly because of the platforms' ethical faults. These social media can be redeemed by a use such as that of the Fridays. On the one hand, because the activists can exploit their reach to promote a more sustainable approach to digital communication. On the other, because FFF-Rome's mission to educate unaware audiences is potentially redeeming digital platforms themselves, because it allows them to serve a nobler purpose and go 'against' their capitalistic, exploitative nature.

1.2 Limits and impact of the research

The greatest strength of this research is, arguably, its granularity. It represents an innovative approach to the study of digital activism on social media by adopting an insider's perspective and an ecological approach, considering the entire media ecology with which the activists interact to give back as concrete an image of their media practices as possible. As a participant observer, I was fully involved with FFF-Rome for several months and could not only attest to their activism and social media practices, but also contextualize them within the agenda of the movement, the historical momentum (i.e., the COVID-19 emergency and the implementation of the Recovery Fund) they were taking place in, the backstage negotiations and sense-makings that informed them, and their evolution through time. Such an analysis gives back not just a picture of the movement, but rather a chain of short clips in a continuous series of events that show the development, porosity, and elasticity of social media practices within a contemporary Italian social movement.

As a result, it provides a significant addition to literature on FridaysForFuture, which is still lacking in studies from Southern Europe and in ethnographic approaches. It also represents a valuable addition to the study of youth digital activism through the perspective of an Italian social movement. The research confirms some of the characteristics that Zamponi and colleagues (2022) attribute to the Italian network of FridaysForFuture, in particular its being animated by young people under 35 and their being novice activists. However, this thesis also highlighted the presence of adults within FFF-Rome and the unique ways they interact with younger people and the movement at large. It also shed light on the student component of the movement and how the identities of student and Friday, despite the school-focused and educational approach of the movement, often contrast with each other. The sense of moral obligation to protest highlighted by De Moor and Wahlström (2022) that would prompt young people to join the ranks of FridaysForFuture was also expanded on and analyzed as an actual generational sensibility that would prompt the Fridays to 'activate' for the climate crisis in the name of the future of an entire generation and, of course, of the planet.

Indeed, to the richness of an ethnographic analysis of digital activism within a social movement, this research also adds a layer regarding the saliency of climate change and social media for the current generation of youth. A layer that speaks about a generational appropriation of both, ultimately leading to an appropriation of social media activism in general. The generational specificity of the political dispute on the climate concretely molds digital platform usages for activism, so that the way in which a political dispute is perceived becomes an organizing factor with respect to activism practices and connotes a movement on an identity level, as it intervenes on meanings that the activists attribute to platform architectures and affordances. We can say that it is from the changes in the communicative

infrastructure that a new way of understanding environmental activism, in this case represented by FridaysForFuture activists, is born. This is also the reason it is born from young people and makes such a heavy use of digital platforms, because it could not be otherwise. FFF's generational understanding of climate activism encompasses both the climate crisis and social media usage practices, so that FFF-activists revindicate the legitimacy of digital activism for climate in itself and inextricably connect political and media practices to being young. The climate crisis is inevitably thought of as a battle of all and of young people in particular (also) because its meaning is negotiated in digitally mediated environments that organize relationships in certain ways and host specific cultural practices and identity affiliations.

Finally, this work applied transformative research practices (cfr. Mahlomaholo & Netshandama 2010; McAteer & Wood 2018; Mertens, 2007; Nairn et al., 2020) to the study of activism. The research protocol and practices were based on the assumption that this thesis would not have been ethical if it had not respected and committed to improving the reality of those who took part in it. Throughout the research, I challenged myself to foster research appropriation by the Fridays, be as transparent as possible regarding the research practices and methods, answer and provoke questions about this work, and overall give back to the movement as best I could beyond being a participant observer. Besides the ethical considerations on which these practices are based, this allowed for fostering an actual relationship with the activists, which greatly benefited the research and was augmented by their positive attitude towards knowledge-production. It enabled a research appropriation by FFF-activists that still keeps us in touch, with an eye to future dissemination meetings, allowing for an actual exchange of expertise and engagement. The activists were directly involved in different phases of this research just like I was directly involved in different phases of their activism. Similarly, I borrowed from their organizational practices and assembly culture to intervene with research activities in the group's agenda just as much as they were keeping up with the jargon of the discipline and this work's scientific publishing output.

As for all ethnographic research, the level of detail of this work is both a strength and a limitation. It makes it more challenging to enlarge the scope of some of this research's findings, as they are specific to one single branch of a large-scale international social movement: FridaysForFuture-Rome. While not all of the activists I came in contact with were from Rome, they were all living in the capital or nearby the city at time of the research. However, the three-day event in Brescia still allowed for a glimpse into how different FFF groups not only interact with each other, but negotiate their differences and relate to the larger international network. The ethics, values, and modes of relating to the climate crisis were essentially the same among different groups, while the main differences seemed to be at the level of protest, as different groups would adopt different modalities. The cultural, social, and geographical location of the single groups also played a major part in distinguishing them from one another. As mentioned, Rome is the largest city in Italy and its being a capital allows for protest actions to take place near palaces of power and institutional buildings, while at the same time posing unique challenges regarding the whereabouts of meeting places. The contrast between students and Fridays was also unique to the Roman group and did not appear to be a major characteristic in other cities because of their size and political

history. Future research should then enlarge the scope of this thesis, adopting a similar approach to the study of other FFF groups and climate movements, exploring similarities and differences both in the ways and cultures of protesting and, perhaps more interestingly, in the common we-sense that brings young people close to the climate fight and, more in general, to social justice. It should also address more in depth the connection between climate science and climate activism in and beyond FridaysForFuture, so as to highlight the activists' relationship with academic sources and with the scientific debate on themes related to environmentalism that are more nuanced than evidence supporting the climate crisis.

Doing fieldwork in a pandemic and limiting the observation to a period of six months also posed unique demands. A great number of assemblies had to be carried online as did some interviews. This proved challenging both from a practical and academic point of view, limiting the demonstrations and interactions that could be allowed and, as such, the chances of interacting with the Fridays and observing their practices. As the activists mentioned, however, it allowed for the development of more complex and thorough social media and digital strategies, and for their direct observation of their conception since fieldwork was carried out in the second half of 2020. Such strategies were further developed in the following years but could not be observed in detail as the fieldwork was already concluded. For example, at the end of 2022, during a restitution event related to a parallel research on FFF-Rome, it emerged how the conflict between students and Fridays might not be as pronounced as it used to be and how new social media platforms and, of course, strategies, have entered FFF-Rome's portfolio. Similarly, I presented preliminary findings of this research in a restitution meeting in December 2021, highlighting how FFF was able to easily engage and involve younger audiences, but often left older generations at the margins, unsure whether they could call the fight 'theirs.' The Fridays declared that they were aware of this and were already taking action in this regard. As a result, the subsequent global strike (25/03/2022) launched an appeal for an "ecology-focused workplace," addressing the binary opposition between work and environment and making the ecological transition a battle to be fought by adult workers as well. Future research could then benefit from a second period of fieldwork to account for these and more changes in the movement, so as to give back pictures of the movement's history through time.

Finally, it is impossible to understate the impact that this work left on the author as well. 'Being' a researcher and 'doing' Friday definitely made me question, time and time again, if I, myself, *was* a Friday, and what that entailed for the research and for myself. There were times in which I felt like an outsider and times I would think I was a Friday, times I used the word 'we' or 'us' to refer to the activists and to what they (we?) were doing. This tension was definitely more pronounced during fieldwork, where I had the chance to interact with the activists and join their demonstrations multiple times a week. During the interviews I was already feeling like an outsider because of my lack of participation. As such, it greatly surprised me to be called to join the three-day event in Brescia, and maybe even more so to realize that, once again, when I presented myself and my research, almost all of the activists seemed excited and positive towards it. They did not treat me differently or as an outsider because of it. As a testament to those days, FFF-Rome's Instagram features a post of FFF-Rome activists in Brescia, a photo in which, to my surprise, I was included as well. I had promised myself I would not take notes during the event, because fieldwork was done and

this thesis really needed to be written, but that single event still found a way in my phone's notes: "We take a lot of pictures, including that of FFF-Rome where I'm also included (I try to position myself on the side, but no one tells me not to pose or to keep some distance from the center, actually [D?m] wanted to keep me in the center)" (5 December 2021, in person event).

I would not know if this attests more to the Fridays' politeness, their positive relationship with research, or to their actual consideration of me as a legitimate Friday. In my case, the mechanism that correlates 'being a Friday' to continuity of presence is very strong and was the reason that, after fieldwork, I always replied that I was not a Friday. Still, as it happens for every research and every time a cycle comes to an end, this journey had a profound impact on my own identity. The identity of citizen, of young woman, of researcher... they were all deeply affected by it and had to come to terms with challenges and novelties which led me, even if through different paths, to a new serenity and appreciation for the instability of things and for their mutability. In a certain sense, it taught me to hope. And to wait. Activism is a testament to change, to the passing of time: it speaks of the disconnect between culture, society, and values through specific segments of the population, it speaks of marginalized or silenced groups, of anger, empowerment, resistance. Most of all, however, I believe activism speaks about resilience, patience, and imagination. There is courage in picturing alternative futures, in hoping and fighting for them, even if they may never see the light. It is faith in what tomorrow may bring, aware of the collective's ability to shape it.

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