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Visualizing climate activism on social media: How does Fridays for Future Germany picture climate action?

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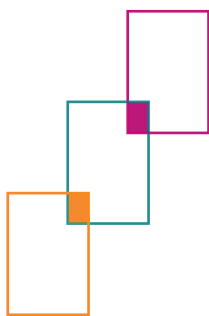
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David Shim

Visualizing Climate Activism on Social Media – How does Fridays for Future Germany Picture Climate Action?



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David Shim

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Preface

When Greta Thunberg started her protest for climate activism as a young female student in front of the Swedish parliament in August 2018, nobody could have imagined that this spontaneous engagement would lead to a push for a broader and global climate protest movement – under the label Fridays for Future – which continues to this day. It is not only a prime example for the power of narratives, which can also originate from stories or actions of ordinary citizens, but also a strong case for the increasing significance of visuality and visual storytelling in world politics. In this research paper, David Shim explores how Fridays for Future Germany visually conveys the politics of climate change to a wider audience. Having worked on the role of visuality in politics, he is interested in the visual dimension of this new kind of climate activism and aims to analyse the movement's visual self-representations as strategies of legitimation. Such a visual-oriented view contributes a new perspective to recent debates on communication, social movements and political narratives, as most scholarship places emphasis predominantly on how Fridays for Future is perceived and represented in mainstream media outlets. In doing so, David analyses various images in depth and shows how the movement is appealing through visual storytelling by representing itself as encompassing, proactive, urban and gender-aware. This research paper contributes an interesting empirical example to our current focus on practices of (de-)legitimation in global cooperation at the Centre for Global Cooperation Research. It further affirms the need for greater attention to the role of visuality and narratives in issues of global cooperation as one of the most promising current research avenues across the disciplines.

Frank Gadinger (Editorial Board)

Visualizing Climate Activism on Social Media – How does Fridays for Future Germany Picture Climate Action?

David Shim

1 Introduction¹

This paper explores how Fridays for Future Germany (FFFG) visually conveys the politics of climate change to wider audiences. It rests upon the assumption that visualization, via the movement's various social media channels, is central to its climate activism (see also [Mattoni and Teune 2014](#); [McGarry et al. 2020](#)). FFFG, hence, can be considered an ideal-type of visual activism, in which 'the visual is marshaled in the service of wider political efforts' ([Bryan-Wilson, González and Willsdon 2016: 5](#)). While visual activism draws on debates at the intersection of art history, performance and visual culture, I use the term here more modestly to point out the importance of visual imagery for activist purposes.

Recent scholarship from different fields including environmental communication, media studies, political science, social movement studies and research on future climate imaginaries and narratives has discovered the global climate movement Fridays for Future (FFF) as a distinct subject of study. One of the reasons why FFF has received heightened scholarly attention, not to mention its political and societal recognition, is arguably its tremendous success of mobilizing millions of people around the world to fight global climate change. No other climate movement before has mobilized such a sheer quantity of people. Hardly anyone could arguably ever imagine the scale of this climate activism when the movement started with the school strike of a young female student, Greta Thunberg, in front of the Swedish parliament in August 2018.

Only one year later, in September 2019, the current height of the movement, six million people in thousands of cities and towns across the globe took to the streets to demand greater action against climate change. According to a spokesperson of FFF, the Global Week for Future was the 'biggest ever climate mobilization' (Taylor, Watts and Bartlett 2019). Also, referring to the impact of the movement on German climate change policies, former German

¹ This paper is part of my 2021/2022 Senior Research Fellowship 'Visual Narratives of Climate Change' of the Käthe Hamburger Kolleg / Centre for Global Cooperation Research in Duisburg. For valuable research and editorial assistance on the project and the paper, I would like to thank Gilda Mazilu, Lars Venema, Gijs de Vries, Laurenz Krumbacher, Kasia Lukowska and Hisham Alghamdi.

Chancellor Angela Merkel admitted that ‘they certainly drove us to speed up’ (Eddy 2019).

How did FFF achieve such an exceptional degree of legitimacy in global climate politics while, simultaneously, there were various attempts from the far-right to the liberal spectrum to deligitimize their activism (Frankfurter Rundschau 2019; Pötter 2020)? For instance, Christian Lindner of the liberal party, now German minister for finances, once said that climate protection should be left to the professionals. Furthermore, in the course of the Covid-19 pandemic, governments around the world have imposed strict measures to cope with the global health crisis. In particular, the prohibition of large gatherings in public spaces in combination with the imperative of social distancing and far-reaching lockdowns have taken a heavy toll on FFF’s visual and visible activism. Among others, these impediments gave rise to question the legitimacy of the climate movement in times of other pressing issues and needs (Haßler et al. 2021).

This paper builds on climate change communication scholarship (Nerlich, Koteyko and Brown 2009; DiFrancesco and Young, 2010; Schneider and Nocke 2014; Gammelgaard Ballantyne 2016) and visual social movement studies (Doerr and Teune 2013; Neumayer and Rossi 2018; McGarry et al. 2020) with the aim to contribute an analysis of FFFG’s visual activism. Put differently, it explores the visual dimension of FFFG’s climate activism. This suggests turning to the movement’s visual self-representations instead of, as other studies have done, examining how it is represented by others such as mainstream media outlets (e.g. Hayes and O’Neill 2021). The focus on imagery produced or endorsed by FFFG promises to give insights into its strategies of self-legitimation. These include, as the empirical discussion will show in more detail, portrayals of a movement that is encompassing, proactive, urban and gender-aware. The paper recognizes FFF as an essential actor in the visual communication of climate change imaginaries and narratives. This implies that visibility and visualization play crucial roles in the (self-)legitimation of FFF in debates about global climate governance. Furthermore, given the outstanding position of FFF in the attention economy of climate change, it is important to examine how it visualizes, that is, by extension, creates awareness of the much-discussed global climate crisis.

To further examine FFF’s visual activism, I will first engage with the current scholarship focusing on the movement in more detail in order to carve out the paper’s particular contribution. The second part presents the paper’s research design. Afterwards, the third part scrutinizes certain, recurring visual patterns in FFF’s visual activism and provides an interpretive reading of the implications of certain ways of seeing and showing climate change. Lastly, the conclusion puts the findings in a wider political context.

2 Fridays for Future as a Research Subject *sui generis*

As a relatively new subject of study, FFF has been examined from a range of disciplines and areas of research. These include communication and media studies (Drieschova 2021; Haßler et al. 2021; von Zabern and Tulloch 2021), environmental studies (von Wehrden, Kater-Wettstädt and Schneidewind 2019; Boucher et al. 2021; Hayes and O'Neill 2021; Sorce and Dumitrica 2021; Sisco et al. 2021; Wallis and Loy 2021; Noth and Tonzer 2022), research on imaginaries and narratives of the future (Marquardt 2020; de Moor 2021) as well as social movement studies (Haunss and Sommer 2020; de Moor et al. 2021; Hunger and Hutter 2021; Svensson and Wahlström 2021). This body of scholarship addresses a wide spectrum of questions.

One line of research examines the attitudes, behaviours and motivations of FFF activists (Wahlström et al. 2019; Boucher et al. 2021; Wallis and Loy 2021; Noth and Tonzer 2022). An important finding concerning the sociology of FFF is that the attitudes and actions to address climate change vary by demographic group (Boucher et al. 2021). For instance, younger activists were more likely to be vegetarian or vegan than older environmentalists and female activists based their purchasing decisions more on climate or environmental considerations than male activists. Other scholars contend that FFF represents new forms of climate activism in that its messages are politically more neutral ('listen to science') and therefore easier to accept by larger audiences (see also Marquardt 2020). Moreover, FFF would address mainly local and national governments compared to previous climate movements which instead targeted non-state stakeholders such as corporations (de Moor et al. 2021). Another strand of research discusses the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the activism of the climate movement (Haßler et al. 2021; Hunger and Hutter 2021; Sorce and Dumitrica 2021). It finds flexibility in the ways in which FFF continues to engage with and mobilize its supporters; examples are online-only as well as hybrid protests. Furthermore, researchers noted that FFF established a link between the global climate crisis and the ongoing global health crisis under the hashtag 'fighteverycrisis' (Sorce and Dumitrica 2021). More recently, the movement discursively linked Russia's invasion of Ukraine to its fight against climate change, arguing that renewable energy bears tremendous geopolitical significance; that is reducing energy dependency from Russia via the expansion of renewable energy would enhance energy sovereignty.

The movement's reference to the rhetoric of crisis prompts scholars to ask about its climate imaginaries (and narratives of the future (Marquardt 2020; de Moor 2021). While the study of (post-)apocalyptic narratives in FFF promises to give insights into the movement's strategies and tactics, exploring climate imaginaries reveals its competing ideas about the future social and po-

litical order. What all these studies on communication, framing, imaginaries and narratives of FFF have in common is their analytical focus on language and text-based sources and materials. Using a diverse set of methodological approaches ranging from computational social science to qualitative methods, current scholarship, certainly for good reasons, analyses news articles, interviews, official documents and speeches by FFF representatives and groups.

This paper contributes to a central and under-researched aspect of current studies of FFF, namely its visualization of climate action. For despite the rich literature on visual climate change communication (DiFrancesco and Young, 2010; Manzo 2010; O'Neill and Smith 2014; Schneider and Nocke 2014; Painter, Kristiansen and Schäfer 2018; Born 2019; Culloty et al. 2019; Boykoff, Daly and McAllister 2021; Hayes and O'Neill 2021) and scholarship, which has pointed out the nexus of contentious politics and visual imagery (Philipps 2011; Doerr and Teune 2013; Rovisco and Veneti 2017; Neumayer and Rossi 2018; McGarry et al. 2020), an analysis of the ways how FFF puts its climate action to work in images, surprisingly, has not been done so far. While the former body of research seeks to examine how images help in disseminating knowledge about the issues and implications of climate change, the latter shows how protest movements have used images and symbols for expressing their goals and identities, mobilize supporters and generate a wider visibility in media or political circles for their concerns. Bringing together these debates is one of the aims of this paper.

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While some scholars have examined visual representations of FFF protests (e.g. Hayes and O'Neill 2021), they have concentrated on externally-produced depictions of the movement in media outlets. Visual self-representations have not been the subject of study so far. An exception is Molder et al.'s (2022) study of Greta Thunberg's Instagram account in which they use visual and textual elements to examine how Thunberg frames the fight against climate change as a moral and ethical issue. What they find is that Thunberg uses emotional appeals of hope as a way to motivate collective action. The neglect of FFF's visual narratives and imaginaries is surprising because images and imagery are pivotal in the movement's climate activism. At the same time, studies on social movements, which have previously highlighted the role of images in protest have yet to turn to the global climate movement. While this might be due to the novel character of the FFF movement, in even one of the most recent and most comprehensive studies on the aesthetics of contentious politics (McGarry et al. 2020), examinations of the visual politics of climate or environmental groups are missing. Other protest movements such as the Turkish Gezi Park protests, the US Black Lives Matter or Occupy Wall Street seem to resonate better within this field of study.

Elsewhere, I have sought to examine the visual climate storytelling of FFF (Shim and de Vries 2021). Climate narration seems to be a more effective way

of conveying the often scientific-heavy and jargon-loaded language of climate science to broader audiences (Bloomfield and Manktelow 2021). Embedding climate change into a story that corresponds better with the day to day experiences of individuals, visual climate storytelling of FFF is enhanced through strategies of simplification (using images to make climate change more accessible), personalization (producing self-made videos and performances to narrate climate change) and individual action (using images to showcase climate action and protest).

There is a range of examples exemplifying the centrality of visual imagery for FFF, which the empirical analysis section will show in more detail. One example is the famous mass demonstrations which culminated, as mentioned in the introduction, in the year 2019. These global mass gatherings not only signified the growing demand to take action against climate change on an international scale; they were significant visual events themselves, which produced iconic images for audiences around the world. In this vein, the paper adds to current scholarship on the representation of climate change in visual media as well as images and social protest, a discussion of FFF's visual-based activism.

3 Research Design

The discussion of FFFG's visual activism is informed by a critical approach towards visual methodology (Rose 2016). This means, for instance, to take images, visualization and visibility seriously: they not only reflect or are illustrative of political contexts but are themselves political as well as politically significant. Hence, the importance to discuss visual imagery and visibility. I will address the site of visual production, that is the self-representations of the climate initiative and thus not its external depictions as other scholars have done (see e.g. Hayes and O'Neill 2021; von Zabern and Tulloch 2021). The focus on the self-portrayal of FFFG is an acknowledgement of the movement's central role in the production of climate visuals (Schneider and Nocke 2014) and thus, how the issue of climate change is (to be) understood and acted upon by public audiences.

To put it differently, I will ask what FFFG wants us, its audience, to see of its activism. This implies posing broader, additional questions about what is (not) shown and how and what implications arise from certain ways of seeing and showing climate activism. Images play a crucial role as they make contentious politics visible or invisible and therefore knowable or unknowable. The empirical discussion is, hence, informed by scholarship which has inquired the politics of visibility and invisibility (Brighenti 2010; Martschukat and Niedermeier 2013; Friis 2015; Chouliaraki and Stolic 2017; van Vereen 2018). In particular, this paper seeks to explore the ramifications of the ways

how climate action is made visible/visualized to public audiences by FFFG. What are the recurring visual patterns in FFFG's visual activism? How do persistent visual practices work to normalize certain understandings of climate change? I will thus not highlight the analysis or impact of individual pictures, but seek to discuss particular patterns of visibility (Blaagaard, Mortensen and Neumayer 2017; Chouliaraki and Stolic 2017). In the case of this paper, visibility is constructed and conveyed through photographs of popular dissent. Therefore, I will examine FFFG's protest photography, which means to stay close to the content of the images themselves. The guiding questions include: what is shown in the images?, how are certain elements of the images arranged?, how are objects and persons positioned in relation to each other and in relation to the viewer?, what is happening in the images and what are the depicted people doing? (Shim 2014: 56). I will also provide an interpretive reading of what follows from particular visual patterns and the movement's conditions of visibility.

FFFG directly engages with public audiences via its social media presence. This includes for instance Facebook, Flickr, Instagram, Telegram, TikTok, Twitter and YouTube. The sheer quantity of images produced and circulated on these social media platforms, not to mention the multiplicity of actors of this decentralized and highly fragmented climate initiative, poses significant challenges for researchers to discuss and better understand FFF's politics of visibility (see also Blaagaard, Mortensen and Neumayer 2017 who focus on the allocation of publicity due to cultural and social capital). In fact, FFF are multiple movements and initiatives fragmented on, for instance, national, regional and local levels. In order to make meaningful statements about the movement's visual activism, I will focus on one particular medium, Flickr, which hosts the official picture gallery of the German branch of FFF. The channel features approximately 600 photographs as of January 2023.

Flickr is a good example of a visual media platform and therefore suitable for the study of visual climate activism. Furthermore, FFFG's Flickr account, which was created in 2019, functions as a visual archive of its protest activities. In this way, it documents the activism of FFFG for a public audience in a user-friendly way. Photographs are sorted according to events in so-called 'albums', and showcase pictures of global, national or regional protests. Interested parties such as the media or the general public can easily access and download imagery for free at different resolutions; something which is a special feature of Flickr when compared to other social media platforms (and perhaps one of the reasons why FFFG has a Flickr presence at all). FFFG's channel has been accessed over 350,000 times according to its own count since it went online. The accessibility is an additional advantage in terms of research practicalities as it facilitates the analysis of the movement's visual rhetoric. Given the target audiences, i.e. the press and the general public, it can reasonably be assumed that photographs are carefully taken, selected and presented to outsiders. In this way, the Flickr images provide valuable insight

into the kinds of climate visibilities the movement wants audiences to see of their activism. Moreover, while the image-sharing website was more popular in the 2010s, the very fact that FFFG presents its protest images on Flickr and considers the website a suitable tool to showcase its visual activism makes a discussion of such images worthy of analysis.

It is also important to note that images posted on Flickr (e.g. [here](#), [here](#)) also appear on other social media sites, such as Instagram (e.g. [here](#), [here](#)). This cross-media appearance of climate action suggests that specific visual patterns and narratives are transmedial. Therefore, the politics of climate visibility, that is the manner in which the movement visualizes climate action, takes place across social media platforms. The German branch of FFF is one of its most successful offshoots, mobilizing hundreds of thousands of supporters, thus suggesting far-reaching political and societal impact.

4 Visualizing Climate Activism

In this section, I will focus on recurring patterns in FFFG's visual activism on Flickr. As mentioned above, the general guiding questions are what do they want us to see and what are the implications of such ways of seeing and showing climate activism? FFFG's visual activism is characterized by an emphasis on, first, showing masses of people, second, public/urban spaces and, third, female and young activists. Each pattern will be discussed below.

4.1 *Mass of people*

The emphasis on showing large-scale protests is apparent in FFFG visual activism. Figure 1 shows a protest march on the occasion of so-called Global Climate Strikes on 25 March 2022. In the city of Aachen, activists and supporters gathered that day to 'uproot the system' and to emphasize that people and not profit should be prioritized, both popular global slogans of the climate movement. The picture shows people in action, that is people who take action; they are on the move, hold banners and posters and wave their flags. The photograph is defined by a sense of density. The tight pictorial frame focusses on massed ranks, who are flanked by an avenue of trees. Other examples of the movement's protest photography are demonstrations with references to local or national environmental issues (e.g. 27 August 2021 [#NichtWieInNRW](#)). The focus on masses of people is certainly not surprising given the fact that the climate movement mobilized millions; a perhaps exceptional feat. Therefore, observers of FFF are familiar with images of mass protests. Yet, it should be noted that such large-scale protests, which arguably draw more followers than other environment-related protests and move-

ments, are significant visual events for the climate initiative. In other words, they play an important role for the activism of FFF. Research has shown that these mass demonstrations have a pronounced impact on the attention of the general public on the issue of climate change (Sisco et al. 2021). For instance, seeking information about climate change on the internet has increased significantly since 2019, when global mass protests reached their peak. These mass protests, hence, draw enormous attention to the issue of climate change. Even though the heightened attention seems to be short-lived, the mass rallies generate a global awareness comparable to international political events such as the United Nations Climate Change Conferences (ibid. 5–6). Images arguably help to convey a sense of scale of these climate protests.



Figure 1: a picture conveying a sense of scale of a FFF protest (source); © Fridays for Future Deutschland

Another example to illustrate the importance for FFF of presenting mass protests to public audiences is that of the Covid-19 related restrictions on public gatherings. In the wake of the ban on public assembly, particularly in 2020 and 2021, no mass protests could take place. Hence, no images of large crowds could be circulated. Instead, creative forms of protests (e.g. large-scale banner and street paintings, FFFG 2020) in combination with smaller gatherings, in which activists were shown to practice social distancing, could be seen during the lockdowns. During the pandemic, which includes also the non-visibility of mass protests, discussions emerged about the legitimacy of the

climate movement in the face of other unfolding crises (Haßler et al. 2021). At least for a moment, it seemed that the subject of climate change had fallen behind societal debates on public health.

Another function of the visibility of large-scale protests is that it helps to sustain the narrative that FFF is practising grassroots democracy – one of the central founding principles. Research on the legitimacy of global governance institutions has claimed that actors ‘make explicit associations between themselves and commonly perceived sources of legitimacy, such as the purported democratic credentials, technocratic standards, and fairness of a governing institution’ (Bäckstrand and Söderbaum 2018: 109). Moreover, this body of research has also suggested that the rise of private actors, non-governmental organizations and transnational networks could lead to the loss of democratic oversight, casting doubt on the legitimacy of such agents (Steffek 2009: 314). In particular, the democratic credentials of the climate movement, its purported openness, inclusivity and wide reach, are arguably the main sources of legitimacy, which endow its political claims with a certain degree of authority. In other words, mass protest are intertwined with its visibility as well as legitimacy in the case of FFF.

4.2 *Urban space*

Virtually all climate protests of FFFG take place in cities. Often, these iconic mass demonstrations are held at or close to landmark buildings and areas in urban space, including the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin (see Figure 2), the Frauenkirche in Munich (e.g. [here](#)) and the City Hall Marketplace of Hamburg (e.g. [here](#)). This emphasis on the city might suggest a negligence of other spaces and sites for the movement’s climate activism, such as rural areas and communities. Especially when seen in the light of various reports indicating the heightened vulnerability of rural areas and communities in the Global South to the effects of climate change, such a potential misalignment of perceived relevance raises a number of questions including to what extent other places and regions are considered less relevant for concerns of climate justice (Huq and Adow 2022; IPCC 2022). The greater visibility of urban space arguably also plays a role in how activists of FFF are perceived in the wider public realm – namely as middle-class, mobile, progressive, well-connected, well-educated and young as opposed to backward, conservative, impoverished, isolated, old and static (see also Boucher et al. 2021; Haunss and Sommer 2020). This kind of visibility corresponds to criticism by former activists, who have accused FFF of exclusivity and practising a form of elitism (Traub 2020). Scholars have pointed out that forms of exclusion also depend on the visibility of certain groups in the urban, public space in that those groups, who are visible on the street, retain their rights to participate in public life

(Sezer 2020). Thus, the visibility of specific groups in public space is also a political issue.



Figure 2: protest taking place in urban space (source); © Fridays for Future Deutschland

4.3 Female/young (white) activists

FFFG's visual activism foregrounds a visibility of young and female protestors. A good example is the collage of pictures in Figure 3. It shows young women in the frontline of protest marches. The top picture shows leading figures of the climate movement such as the Swedish activist Greta Thunberg and the German activist Luisa Neubauer. The ranks are closed; the protestors raise their fists; they are determined to demand change. The collage also illustrates the heightened sensibility of the movement's members for the concurrence of multiple global crises: they not only take action against climate change, they are also considerate of each other in the face of the, at that time, ongoing Covid-19 pandemic by wearing medical masks. In this way, they reflect(ed) the majority opinion of society, which held that masks protect oneself and

others, and which is one of FFF's central mantras: listen to science – whether it is climate science or pathogenic/biological science.

The visual emphasis on young women corresponds with sociological studies of the movement, which find that one of its peculiar features are female youth activists (Boucher et al. 2021; Noth and Tonzer 2022). For some scholars, the focus on the agency of young women implies a shift in the way how climate change related issues are portrayed in the public realm (Hayes and O'Neill 2021). While climate activism, particularly in mainstream media outlets, would have been viewed from the perspective of a protest paradigm, a media frame which depicts activists as socially deviant, it is now considered a matter of intergenerational justice (see also von Zabern and Tulloch 2020; Knappe and Renn 2022). Images, foregrounding female protestors, play a crucial role in this framing (Hayes and O'Neill 2021). Climate justice's relation to time and age is another important factor. The debate is imbued with questions of generational equity between age groups who have lived beyond their ecological means and younger cohorts who have to bear the ensuing costs. The emphasis on young, female activists and leaders by FFF also aptly stands in contrast to traditional forms of leadership – old, male – in many countries around the world.

The portrayal of intergenerational justice and the question of how future generations have to cope with the effects of climate change can sideline another meta narrative prevalent in FFF's climate change communication: climate justice between the Global North and Global South. Essentially, if climate justice is solely seen and portrayed as a matter for future generations, also reinforced by prevalent images of youth protestors, it can obscure the fact that areas and people in the Global South, both in the past and in the present, were already affected by changes to the climate. While the focus on the future, prominently captured in the climate movement's name itself, suggests that climate change can still be avoided or coped with, if necessary action is taken, for the most affected people and areas, usually in the Global South, climate change has always been a reality.

The question of climate justice between the Global North and Global South touches upon a related subject in climate activism, that is racism and the lack of diversity in such movements. This is not meant to delve deeper into the important debate on how the diverging impact of climate change highlights the pre-existing division along racial lines. Others have done this more fruitfully (e.g. Ituen and Tatu Hey 2021; Sealey-Huggins 2018; Williams 2021; Yarde 2022). Here, I only seek to point out the apparent importance of assessing the visibility of diversity and inclusion within contemporary climate activism (see also Cardoso Vasconcelos and Groneweg 2021; Opitz 2019). This is also one of the reasons why a visual emphasis on white activism, such as in Figure 3, can be problematic (see also Grünlicht Milieu 2022; Malkowski

2022).² Arguably the most famous example of rendering non-white climate agency invisible is Ugandan activist Vanessa Nakate, who was cropped from a press photo with other well-known, albeit white, female protestors. Standing next to, among others, Greta Thunberg and Luisa Neubauer, who attended the 2020 World Economic Forum, Nakate, as the only non-white and non-European, was left out by the Associated Press (AP). Later AP apologized to Nakate and republished the original photo. Another example is Tonny Nowshin, a Black, indigenous and people of colour (BIPOC) activist, who, six months after Nakate, was excluded from pictures shared on social media by Greenpeace Germany (Nowshin 2020). Nowshin stated that she was visible in plenty of protest pictures. However, none of the photos featuring her were chosen for publication. Only pictures featuring her fellow female protestors, all white and some of them from the FFF movement, were circulated.



Figure 3: generic pictures highlighting white, female youth agency (sources: [top](#), [middle](#) and [bottom](#)); collage made by the author; © Fridays for Future Deutschland

² This is not to suggest that the official picture gallery of FFFG completely lacks a diversity focus. Some protest photographs do show non-white climate agency (e.g. [here](#)) even though they are rare.

Greenpeace Germany later issued a statement in which it responded to the accusation of racism (Greenpeace Germany 2020). It apologized and vowed to learn from the incident. Both episodes are good examples which point to the importance of seeing and showing racial/ethnic diversity in visualizing contemporary climate activism. Visibilities are hence crucial for how we understand climate action.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have sought to examine how the German branch of FFF visually mediates climate action on Flickr. The goal was to shed light on how climate movements make their activism visible to broader audiences. I found that FFFG's visual activism is defined by highlighting the agency of masses protesting in urban space as well as, if we zoom in on the crowd, young female, white activists. It should be mentioned, however, that there are notable exceptions in the way how FFFG portrays diversity in its protest photography. For instance, on the occasion of the 25 March 2022 Global Climate Strike FFFG has presented a greater geographical variety of climate protest from around the world including Bangladesh ([here](#)), the Philippines ([here](#)) and Sierra Leone ([here](#)). It also included the depiction of BIPOC activists during climate protests in Germany ([here](#)). Pointing out the particular visibility of protest is important because seeing climate action is tantamount to knowing climate action. It is precisely the controversy about more diversity in the representation of environmental activism, which acknowledges the importance of this connection between ways of seeing and ways of knowing.

To better understand the visual narratives and politics of climate change communication, future research should explore the concept of transmediality further. Transmedial representations of climate change seems to suggest that images and narratives about climate change are not necessarily connected to a particular medium, say, social media, but transcend those boundaries reaching into the spheres of art, film, music, etc. Another strand of prospective research could assess how certain images and stories about climate change travel across different media so as to have an impact on audiences and how certain narratives achieve cross-medial dominance and establish, reinforce or challenge forms of hierarchies. Further questions to be asked include whether climate visibilities, which reach beyond different media, unfold the same effects in different cultural or political contexts.

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Abstract

This paper examines the visual dimension of climate activism by exploring how Fridays for Future Germany (FFFG) uses visual imagery to convey the politics of climate change to wider audiences. The author argues that FFFG is an ideal-type form of visual activism in which visual imagery is central to its climate activism. The paper builds on climate change communication scholarship and visual social movement studies to contribute an inquiry about FFFG's visual activism. The focus is on FFFG's visual self-representations, which promises to give insights into its strategies of self-legitimation. The empirical analysis identifies recurring visual patterns in FFFG's visual activism and provides an interpretive reading about the implications of certain ways of seeing and showing climate change. The conclusion puts the findings in a wider political context, highlighting the importance of visualization in the (self-)legitimation of FFFG in debates about global climate governance.

Keywords: *Fridays for Future, visual activism, climate change communication, environmental communication, social movements, imaginaries/narratives, visibility*

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