

FULL PAPER

Climate Protest—What is it good for? Linking news coverage on German climate movements and reader comments

Klimaprotest – was nützt er wirklich? Eine Untersuchung von Artikeln über deutsche Klimabewegungen und dazugehörigen Leserkomentaren

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Abstract: Media coverage plays a crucial role in shaping public perception of social movements. While attention-seeking protest tactics meet media selection criteria, they also risk distorting public perception. This study examines the German climate protest scene by comparing two key protest groups: Fridays for Future and Last Generation, the latter often criticized for its disruptive protest tactics. Building on the concept of mediatization, the protest paradigm, and agenda-setting theory, we analyze the mediated impact of different protest strategies on reader comments. Our quantitative content analysis includes 100 online news articles and 1,910 reader comments from three major German news sites (2019–2023). We find that articles about Last Generation focus more on protest actions and are less likely to prompt discussions about the climate issue among commentators. They are also more negative than those about Fridays for Future. However, journalistic evaluations are not directly reflected in the corresponding reader comments. These results suggest that non-normative and disruptive protest strategies could harm the discourse on climate change. Our findings are relevant for social movements and interest groups seeking to raise awareness of socially relevant issues such as climate protection and climate change. Additionally, this study contributes to understanding the dynamics between social movements, the media, and the public within the political communication system.

Keywords: Climate movement, protest strategy, mediatization, agenda-setting, content analysis

Zusammenfassung: Medienberichterstattung prägt die öffentliche Wahrnehmung von sozialen Bewegungen maßgeblich. Spektakuläre Protestaktionen erfüllen zwar die medialen Selektionskriterien, bergen aber auch die Gefahr, dass sie die öffentliche Wahrnehmung verzerren. Diese Studie untersucht die deutsche Klimabewegung anhand zweier Gruppen: Fridays for Future und Letzte Generation, wobei letztere oft für ihre disruptiven Protesttaktiken kritisiert wird. Aufbauend auf dem Konzept der Mediatisierung, dem Protest Paradigm und der Agenda-Setting-Theorie analysieren wir den medienvermittelten Effekt verschiedener Proteststrategien auf Leserkommentare. Unsere quantitative Inhaltsanalyse umfasst 100 Online-Nachrichtenartikel und 1.910 Leserkommentare von drei großen deutschen Nachrichtenseiten (2019–2023). Artikel über die Letzte Generation konzentrieren sich dabei mehr auf deren Protestaktionen und führen in den Leserkomentaren selte-

ner zu Diskussionen über das Klimathema. Sie sind auch negativer als Artikel, die Fridays for Future betreffen. Dagegen spiegeln sich journalistische Bewertungen nicht direkt in den dazugehörigen Leserkomentaren wider. Diese Ergebnisse legen nahe, dass nicht-normative und disruptive Proteststrategien dem Diskurs über den Klimawandel schaden könnten. Unsere Ergebnisse sind relevant für soziale Bewegungen und Interessengruppen, die versuchen, das Bewusstsein für gesellschaftlich relevante Themen wie Klimaschutz und Klimawandel zu schärfen. Darüber hinaus trägt diese Studie zum Verständnis der Dynamik zwischen sozialen Bewegungen, den Medien und der Öffentlichkeit innerhalb des politischen Kommunikationssystems bei.

Schlagwörter: Klimabewegung, Proteststrategie, Mediatisierung, Agenda Setting, Inhaltsanalyse

1. Introduction

Social movements, like other non-media actors, rely on media attention to disseminate their messages to the public, achieve their goals, and contribute to democratic opinion-forming (Strömbäck & Esser, 2017). Attention-seeking protest action can capture media attention. However, the more disruptive such protest actions are, the more they risk diverting focus from the actual cause, potentially leading to the delegitimization and demonization of the movement (McLeod, 2007, pp. 186–187). Therefore, a key challenge for social movements consists of finding protest forms that meet journalistic criteria of newsworthiness without detracting from their core message (Goldenbaum & Thompson, 2020, p. 198). As such, they need to adapt to the media *strategically*. This is crucial, as the public's perception, evaluation, and support of social movements, their activities, and messages depend decisively on the media coverage they receive (e.g., Brown & Mourão, 2021, p. 591), ultimately influencing the movements' social impact (e.g., Brehm & Gruhl, 2024, p. 5). Given this, studying the interplay between social movements' strategic choices and their influence on media and public discourse becomes especially relevant when pressing issues like climate change are concerned.

In recent years, two influential actors have shaped Germany's climate protest scene: *Fridays for Future* (FFF) and *Letzte Generation*¹ (Last Generation, LG). Although they advocate for similar issues, their protest strategies² differ. FFF relies on peaceful and cheerful protests and school strikes, whereas LG engages in civil disobedience and more disruptive protests, such as blocking roads and vandalizing public monuments. This has led to comparisons that reveal remarkable differences in how the protest groups are treated. For example, Kumkar (2022, p. 1) and Rucht (2023, pp. 17–25) observed that media reports frequently allege that LG's protest strategy shifts the focus away from climate issues, causing defi-

1 Now renamed to *Neue Generation* (New Generation).

2 We understand *protest strategies* as a summary of protest actions that follow a certain logic, while *protest tactics* represent specific forms of action, like demonstrations or street blockades (similarly: Doherty, 2013). Thus, we use the terms *protest tactics* and *protest actions* interchangeably. The main difference between the two is their applicability to specific protest events, which can also be referred to as protest actions, but not protest tactics.

ance rather than solidarity towards the movement and discouraging public support for the climate cause. Recent studies analyzing media portrayals of both protest groups showed that such criticisms are common. In general, journalists tend to pay more attention to LG than to FFF, but they are also more critical of LG (Dablander et al., 2025, p. 11; Meyer, Farjam et al., 2025, pp. 16–18). Furthermore, the described allegations about the negative impact of such disruptive protest strategies on public perceptions of and public discussions about the protest groups have been confirmed, at least partially, as LG faces social resistance (Rucht, 2023, p. 19). In contrast, despite receiving limited political support beyond parties aligned with their views (Berker & Pollex, 2023, pp. 768–769), FFF has gained widespread societal acceptance (Rucht, 2023, p. 17). Moreover, an examination of online discussions concerning the two protest groups indicated that LG's disruptive protests also resulted in heightened polarization of the discourse (e.g., Meyer, Pröschel et al., 2025, p. 14).

While the influence of media portrayals on public discourse is generally recognized in such research, studies establishing a direct link between the two are rare and often designed in a way that makes it difficult to trace a direct connection between *specific* media portrayals of the two protest groups and public reactions to them (e.g., Brehm & Gruhl, 2024, p. 5; Heide, 2025, pp. 985–986). We address this gap by taking advantage of interactive online media to study how readers react to different media portrayals of the two protest groups and their protests. Our case study employs a quantitative content analysis of 100 news articles and 1,910 reader comments to trace the connections between protest strategy, media coverage, and reader perceptions about the two climate movements FFF and LG in Germany. Based on this analysis, we want to answer two questions. First, how does the media craft narratives about the movements, considering their different protest strategies? As mentioned, several studies have been published on this question lately. However, this analysis is a necessary condition for addressing our second, more crucial question regarding the research gap described above: How do these narratives impact public discussions about the movements, their goals, protest actions, and the broader climate topic? In the following, the concept of mediatization, the protest paradigm, and agenda-setting theory serve as a basis for understanding the connection between protest strategy, media coverage, and public opinion.

2. Literature review

2.1 Mediatization and the communication strategies of social movements

Social movements are “sustained campaign[s] of claim making, using repeated performances that advertise the claim, based on organizations, networks, traditions, and solidarities that sustain these activities” (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015, p. 11). They aim to evoke social or political change by rallying the masses to their goal (Rucht, 2012, p. 3). This is because public support can lend weight to their concerns (Rasmussen et al., 2018, pp. 156–157). To achieve this, public attention is an important prerequisite (Hunt & Gruszczynski, 2021, p. 1027).

Although social media allows social movements to bypass journalistic gatekeepers (Hunt & Gruszczynski, 2021, p. 1035), traditional mass media (hereafter referred to as media in contrast to social media) remain crucial for attracting, amplifying, and sustaining attention to issues that shape both political (Langer & Gruber, 2021) and public (Hunt & Gruszczynski, 2021) agendas. A promising strategy for managing media attention involves either meeting their expectations or intentionally disregarding their needs and wants (Scheu, 2019, pp. 4–5). The concept of mediatization, as understood by the institutionalist tradition, describes this strategic adaptation to the selection, presentation, and quality criteria that characterize journalistic information dissemination, also known as media logic (Haßler, 2017, pp. 25–26, 82; Strömbäck & Van Aelst, 2013, p. 345). Importantly, such *strategic* adaptation to journalistic criteria of newsworthiness involves *purposeful* adaptation, meaning that it should serve to achieve the movement's goals (Strömbäck & Esser, 2017, p. 74). Avoiding media attention by deliberately refraining from communicating in a particularly media-like manner can be useful in this sense. This strategy, also known as *defensive mediatization* (Scheu, 2019, pp. 4–5), has been discussed as a possible choice for social movements in previous research (McCurdy, 2012, pp. 249–250). However, according to Strehler-Schaaf (2025, pp. 280–281), this choice is more due to negative experiences or a lack of resources than to a disregard for the importance of public communication in general. As she points out, it is possible to identify protest movements that are skeptical or cautious in their approach to the media, i.e., movements that pursue a more defensive strategy. Yet, these movements are in the minority compared to those that are more offensive. Furthermore, in her analysis, environmental movements fall into the category of media-challenging protest movements that notably adapt to media logic (Strehler-Schaaf, 2025, pp. 245–254). As a result, we focus on strategies that fall under the category of *offensive mediatization*. Since social movements rely heavily on media coverage to reach the public (Jennings & Saunders, 2019, p. 2305), their best option to increase their chances of publicity lies in adapting media logic as intensively as possible (Scheu, 2019, p. 4). As news values and routines have a significant impact on the coverage of social movements, it is crucial for these movements to follow the “rules of the ‘media game’” (Vliegert-hart & Walgrave, 2012, p. 390). This allows them to overcome their systematic disadvantages compared to institutionalized political actors with greater public access. Indeed, features of protest events, such as greater numbers of protesters and increased levels of violence between police and protesters, may lead to heightened media coverage, particularly in the short term (Jennings & Saunders, 2019, p. 2306). These features are related to news factors like relevance or reach in the former case, and damage, controversy, conflict, or aggression in the latter, which are generally influential in journalistic (and audience) news selection (Eilders, 2006, p. 11).

Thus, attention-seeking protest actions can serve as an offensive mediatization strategy and attract media attention. More extreme protest actions can increase visibility and attention (Feinberg et al., 2020, p. 1089). However, the more disruptive protest actions are, the more they also risk diverting focus from the actual cause (e.g., Smith et al., 2001, pp. 1415–1417) to “violence and disruption, de-

emphasis of the protesters' voices, and invocation of negative comments from bystanders" (Lee, 2014, p. 2737), potentially leading to the delegitimization, demonization, and marginalization of the protest movement. The protest paradigm, as "a routinized template for creating protest stories that has been naturalized through the process of journalistic socialization" (McLeod, 2007, p. 186), highlights this tension. Coverage following this pattern has remained on a high level over time (Gruber, 2023, p. 428). As such, it can lead the public to view the protests as unnecessary, as the specific way they are presented makes it difficult to understand the protesters' perspective. Additionally, Feinberg et al. (2020, p. 1106) demonstrated that protest tactics perceived as harmful to others, disruptive, or both can diminish public support for both the movement and its positions by reducing social identification with the movement. Ultimately, this may also harm the potential for mobilization.

Consequently, while there may not be a universally right way to protest in terms of achieving different goals simultaneously (e.g., garnering high levels of media attention and favorable framing), the strategic decisions made between one protest tactic and another can still make a difference (Shuman et al., 2024). McLeod's (2007, p. 194) recommendations to activists suggest alternatives for adapting to media logic while reducing the risk of falling into the protest paradigm. For example, mobilizing larger crowds (e.g., through social media) or enlisting prominent figures as supporters can be beneficial in terms of news factors such as reach or prominence, as well as elite persons (e.g., Nardini et al., 2021, p. 128). It can make the protest activities interesting for the media. Additionally, compared to more disruptive forms of protest, this kind of mobilization can effectively signal to the media that the protesting group is not just a group of deviants, making it harder to portray and marginalize them as such (McLeod, 2007, p. 194; Wouters & Van Camp, 2017, p. 451). According to Zlobina and Gonzalez Vazquez (2018, p. 245), people are more willing to participate in protests the more they perceive the protest tactic as both morally right (i.e., legitimate) and useful (i.e., effective). When comparing different protest tactics, the authors show that demonstrations as a "prototypically normative form of protest" (p. 245) are considered the most legitimate and have a higher likelihood of participation. Shuman et al.'s (2024, p. 260) review essentially confirms this, arguing that normative nonviolent protests are better for mobilization and that non-normative or violent protests tend to be more effective at advancing policy change. Thus, protest groups must consider that following the social rules of the game (e.g., through the choice of announced demonstrations) and engaging in rule-breaking behavior, which may include civil disobedience, are perceived differently and prompt different outcomes. However, normativeness is not the only dimension along which forms of protest can differ (for different categorizations, see Andrews & Caren, 2010; Camaj, 2014; Caren et al., 2020; Evans, 2016; McCluskey, 2008; Zlobina & Gonzalez Vazquez, 2018). Another common distinction is between disruptive, attention-grabbing forms of protest, such as blocking roads, and more authoritative strategies, which social movements can also consider using instead. Authoritative strategies are aimed at gaining recognition and authority, allowing activists to position themselves as experts or key representatives of a constituency (Caren

et al., 2020, p. 446). These include conventional media relations tools, such as publishing press releases or contacting reporters (Andrews & Caren, 2010, pp. 846, 854; Caren et al., 2020, p. 446). As Evans (2016, p. 43) pointed out, the use of this kind of tactics can demonstrate professionalism. This professionalism attracts journalists and helps the movement to be recognized as “a legitimate spokesman for a particular interest” (Mirowsky & Ross, 1981, pp. 178, 187). One way to reinforce this is by employing specialized personnel with the necessary expertise (Andrews & Caren, 2010, p. 854) or by providing some kind of leader (e.g., Nepstad & Bob, 2006, p. 18). Not only does this meet the media’s demands for personalization, but it also ideally provides them with a reliable communication partner. Finally, clear, concise, and coherent communication is crucial for both the media and the audience to understand the movement’s objectives (McLeod, 2007, p. 194). This is consistent with the fact that comprehensibility is a key quality criterion in journalism, to which non-media actors can also adapt and from which the public can benefit (Thoms, 2023, pp. 58–63).

However, even if a social movement is perfectly attuned to the media, there is no guarantee of success in the battle for media attention. External factors such as the political environment (Caren et al., 2020, p. 447) and “being in tune with the media agenda” (Wouters & Lefevere, 2023, p. 628) are crucial for a social movement, even though they cannot be directly controlled. Adding to this, the political orientation of the media outlet can also influence the occurrence and strength of the protest paradigm, with conservative outlets being more prone to it than liberal ones (Lee, 2014, p. 2737; Meyer, Farjam et al., 2025, pp. 16–17). Nevertheless, the strategic decisions of a social movement may still lead to differences in the journalistic reactions they evoke. As Meyer, Farjam et al. (2025, pp. 13, 16–17) demonstrated in their comparison of media coverage of FFF and LG, the disruptiveness of protest tactics is another important factor influencing the prevalence of negative framing, at least partly overriding the effect of the media’s political orientation.

2.2 The agenda-setting function of media’s coverage of social movements

As previously stated, reaching out to the media is not an end in itself, but a means to draw political and public attention to a movement’s concerns and to build support. The media’s agenda-setting function plays a crucial role in this context (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). From the perspective of communication science, the effect of the media on the public agenda (as compared to that of political actors) is of particular interest and still relevant despite the development of a high-choice media environment (Djerf-Pierre & Shehata, 2017, p. 751).³

The agenda-setting theory posits that the quantity, prominence, and tone of media coverage can increase public awareness of certain issues (traditional agenda-setting effects) or aspects of those issues (attribute agenda-setting effects; see

3 The effect of the media on political actors is more commonly studied in political science. According to Van Aelst et al. (2014, pp. 202–203), despite some general similarities, there are significant differences between political and public agenda-setting.

Kiousis, 2004, pp. 74–76; McCombs, 2005, pp. 544–547). In this way, “the media not only can be successful in telling us *what to think about*, they also can be successful in telling us *how to think about it*” (McCombs, 2005, p. 546). As Kiousis (2004, p. 76) argues, attributes can be both substantive (cognitive) and affective (emotional); the media can thus tell us not only how to *think* but also how to *feel* about an issue. Studying social movements and their coverage, both agenda-setting perspectives are relevant. First, the coverage of such protests can influence not only how the public perceives the movement itself but also the issue it is addressing. Second, regarding the protest paradigm, the emphasis that media coverage places on different aspects of protests may differentially influence the public.

Researchers have studied agenda-setting effects using different methods across different cultural contexts. Examining the relations between media content and survey data, Smidt’s (2012, p. 88) study revealed that media coverage of demonstrations related to gun control and Obama’s health care reform had an impact on public attention to these issues. Wallace et al. (2014, pp. 444–445) examined the relationship between media use and political alienation among respondents, focusing on perceptions of the 2006 protests for immigrant rights in the USA. While the study lacks content analytical data, it is suspected that how the protests were portrayed in parts of the media may have led to the negative attitudes of Latino respondents. Furthermore, Camaj (2014, p. 650) showed that attribute agenda-setting has an impact on respondents’ political participation in both institutional (e.g., voting) and non-institutional forms (e.g., demonstrations) of participation. This result is also relevant for social movements and supports the findings of Zlobina and Gonzalez Vazquez (2018), as well as Feinberg et al. (2020). It underscores the importance of a positive portrayal and, in a second step, a positive evaluation of a protest to increase the likelihood that people will join or support it. Based on an extensive literature review examining different outcomes of climate protests, Thomas-Walters et al. (2025, pp. 2–3) concluded that there is strong evidence for effects of climate protests on media coverage and public opinion, but only weak evidence for agenda-setting effects. However, Brehm and Gruhl (2024, p. 5) emphasized the mediating role of media coverage of climate protests in increasing public concerns about climate change. Nevertheless, they highlighted the importance of considering different media frames, which their study design does not address.

The rise of the Internet and the digitalization of the media landscape have created opportunities for alternative measures of the public agenda that can be helpful in this instance. Reader comments can be used to track direct public responses to *specific* news items. This highlights the potential benefits of interactive online media for studying agenda-setting effects by demonstrating how media content influences readers’ discussions (e.g., Danner et al., 2022; Roberts et al., 2002; with results contrary to general agenda-setting research findings, see Koltsova & Nagornyy, 2019). Concerning protests, Kleut and Milojevic (2021, p. 95) showed that the frames used in media coverage of the Serbian protest *Against Dictatorship* were widely echoed in reader comments. More closely related to climate change, Walter et al. (2018, pp. 213–214) found that the article’s position on the

topic seemed to have less influence on reader comments than expected. Just as Lörcher and Taddicken (2017, p. 14) write: “public discourse is provoked by journalists, but follows different patterns of perception”.

Although reader comments represent only a specific part of the public (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2017, pp. 7–8), their analysis offers an important advantage: The ability to observe direct reactions to (many) different journalistic presentations of social movements and their protests. Other methods require significantly more effort to fulfill this goal, which is why they often focus on aggregated effects of media use (i.e., through surveys) or are necessarily restricted to analyzing the effects of a few stimuli (i.e., through experiments).

3. Climate protest: The case of FFF and LG

For our case study, we compare two climate movements that are active in Germany. FFF is an international climate movement that has been active in Germany since 2018, focusing on school strikes (Buzogány & Scherhauser, 2022). Since then, it has expanded its repertoire to include other protest tactics, like demonstrations and educational events (Fridays for Future, 2024). Its main objective is to ensure that the target of limiting global warming to 1.5° C, as set out in the *Paris Climate Agreement*, is not exceeded.

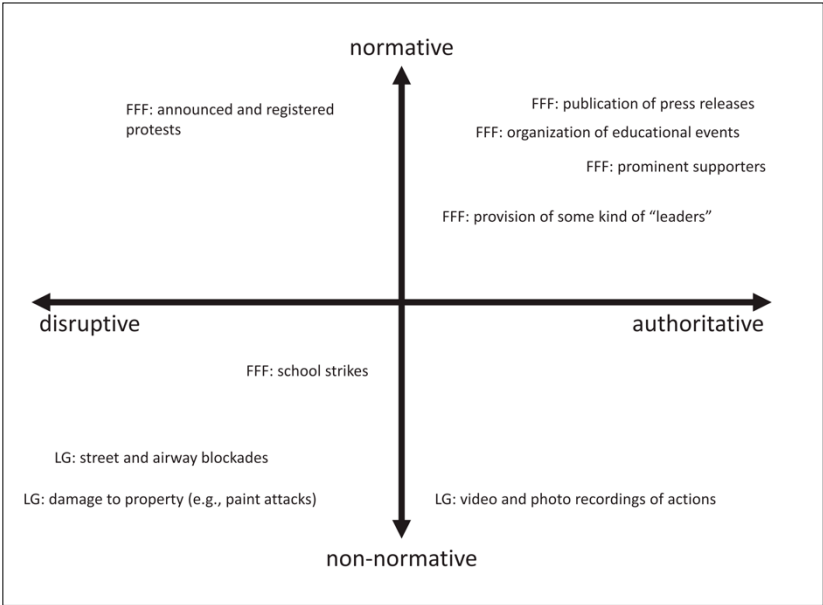
LG was founded in 2021 and has since gained public attention for its protest tactics of civil disobedience, such as blocking roads while being glued to the street or painting galleries and monuments like the Brandenburg Gate (SWR Aktuell, 2023). Their main goal is to reduce CO₂ emissions (Letzte Generation, 2024). Calling for more radical protest forms than demonstrations to shift public attention to the climate issue, the group has since been investigated by the German *Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz* (Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution). However, it has not yet been classified as extremist (Küstner, 2023).

We decided to analyze FFF and LG because they advocate for similar issues but pursue different protest strategies. While both distance themselves from violent forms of protest, they use different tactics to gain media attention. Those protest tactics may be the “driving force behind news coverage” (Boyle et al., 2012, p. 137). Figure 1 distinguishes FFF and LG according to their most prominent protest tactics.⁴ Based on the reviewed literature, we posit that the activities of the two protest groups can be situated along two dimensions: Normative versus non-normative and authoritative versus disruptive. LG’s most prominent protest actions, such as blockades and paint attacks, lean heavily toward the non-normative and disruptive end of the spectrum. FFF, on the other hand, focuses more on normative forms, which also include a strong element of authoritative tactics. Both can be considered representatives of different types of offensive mediatization, as described above. However, FFF manages to conform to media logic while avoiding protest actions that starkly trigger the protest paradigm. LG is often confronted with the accusation that their protest tactics impede understanding of

4 The placement of the activities of the two movements along the two dimensions is qualitative.

the climate issue and foster frustration, harming the cause in the end (Molter, 2023). Brouwer et al. (2022) argue that the public’s defensive reaction might be a normal response to “rebel-induced threat” (p. 6). As they explain, this can be followed up by understanding and a change of perspective under the right conditions (e.g., focusing on the audience’s self-efficacy in contributing to a more climate-friendly society). It is unclear, however, whether FFF or LG meet these conditions. Bugden (2020, p. 9) further argues that social movements may use normative (demonstrations) and non-normative (civil disobedience) tactics in a complementary way. His study found no evidence of so-called backfire effects regarding both forms of protest.

Figure 1. Classification of the most prominent tactics of the respective movement



4. Research questions and hypotheses

We assume that social movements typically adopt an offensive mediatization strategy because they depend on media attention to achieve their goals. Disruptive protest tactics may be disadvantageous due to the underlying mechanisms of the protest paradigm as well as the public perception and evaluation of related protest actions. We focus on climate protests as a case study and compare two influential actors that have shaped Germany’s climate protest scene in recent years: FFF and LG. The differing protest strategies of the two protest groups have led to comparisons, revealing notable distinctions. Therefore, our first research question is:

RQ1: What are the differences between FFF coverage and LG coverage?

As mentioned above, recent studies analyzing media portrayals of both protest groups revealed the prevalence of the protest paradigm. Due to this, LG's use of non-normative and disruptive protest tactics has been shown to have a negative impact on their media coverage compared to FFF. This results in a more negative portrayal of the movement and a stronger emphasis on their protest actions rather than their concerns. As the first step in our broader analysis, we expect to also see this in our data. Specifically, we expect the following:

Hypothesis 1.1: Articles about LG show a more negative evaluation of the movement than articles about FFF.

Hypothesis 1.2: Articles about LG provide more negative evaluations of the protest actions than articles about FFF.

Hypothesis 1.3: Articles about LG are more likely to solely focus on protest actions instead of also discussing the movement's goals and/or the topic of climate change compared to articles about FFF.

As noted above, attracting media attention is essential, but it is only the first step in building public support for a movement and its causes. Various protest strategies may lead to distinct media coverage, providing their readers with different angles to focus on in subsequent discussions. Therefore, our second research question is:

RQ2: How does the reporting style affect commentator discussion?

In this context, we are interested in the extent to which media ratings influence reader perception. Additionally, we want to know if the accusation frequently made in public discourse, that LG's protest has a detrimental effect on engagement with the climate issue, has any merit. This is in line with the assumptions of the protest paradigm, meaning that LG's disruptive protest tactics lead media coverage to focus on certain (negative) aspects of protests, thereby influencing follow-up communication through the mechanisms of agenda-setting. Specifically, we expect the following:

Hypothesis 2.1: Evaluations of (a) the movements, (b) their goals, and (c) their protest actions in articles are positively associated with evaluations of these protest attributes in reader comments.

Hypothesis 2.2: Articles that solely focus on protest actions instead of also discussing the movement's goals and/or the issue of climate change decrease the likelihood that commentators will talk about the issue of climate change.

Hypothesis 2.3: Articles that solely focus on protest actions instead of also discussing the movement's goals and/or the issue of climate change lead to a more negative evaluation of the issue of climate change in reader comments.

5. Method

5.1 Data collection and coding procedure

To test our hypotheses, we conducted a quantitative content analysis of news articles and corresponding reader comments about FFF and LG. For this, we scraped online articles from three German news sites: *TAZ*, *Zeit*, and *Welt*. These are digital offshoots of leading national publications that cover a range of editorial lines. Research has shown that editorial lines can influence the occurrence of the protest paradigm, which is why we chose to include a broader ideological spectrum with *TAZ* being left-wing, *Zeit* left-liberal, and *Welt* conservative (euro-topics, n.d.). All three news sites provide comment sections for their articles. Searching for articles using the keywords “Fridays for Future” and “Letzte Generation” yielded a total of 3,485 articles, also including opinion pieces. We excluded articles that lacked text elements or reader comments, leaving 2,477 articles. A total of 122,291 reader comments were extracted for these articles, using only the comments and no replies to comments. Finally, we omitted duplicates and articles with fewer than 20 reader comments to ensure a minimum level of engagement with the corresponding articles. In addition, we only included articles published between January 1, 2019, and September 30, 2023, for FFF and between January 1, 2021, and September 30, 2023, for LG. This resulted in a total of 1,379 articles (966 for FFF; 413 for LG) and 108,286 reader comments. There was an overrepresentation of articles from *Zeit* and articles related to FFF.

To keep the sample size manageable for manual coding, we drew a random sample. This was done in two consecutive waves. In the first step, a stratified disproportional random sampling method was used to counteract the aforementioned overrepresentation. We drew 102 articles and 20 reader comments each. Care was taken to ensure equal representation of groups and news sites at the article level. Some articles, however, were deemed irrelevant during coding, requiring a redraw. Through oversampling, the target of 102 articles was ultimately achieved. Each article was coded exclusively for the group it was drawn from during sampling. Two articles, which were extracted both for FFF and LG, were excluded from the sample.⁵ Overall, a slight imbalance in distribution between the protest groups and news sites remained in the final 100 articles (*TAZ*: $n_{\text{FFF}} = 19$, $n_{\text{LG}} = 17$; *Zeit*: $n_{\text{FFF}} = 14$, $n_{\text{LG}} = 18$; *Welt*: $n_{\text{FFF}} = 15$, $n_{\text{LG}} = 17$). A total of 1,910 reader comments were coded as relevant. These form our basis at the comment level (*TAZ*: $n_{\text{FFF}} = 368$, $n_{\text{LG}} = 331$; *Zeit*: $n_{\text{FFF}} = 253$, $n_{\text{LG}} = 328$; *Welt*: $n_{\text{FFF}} = 293$, $n_{\text{LG}} = 337$).

Three trained coders coded the material based on a codebook developed for the study.⁶ The coding categories used for the article level were also applied to the

5 Previously, articles that were drawn for both groups (a total of 55 from 1,379 articles) were assigned to one group. Unfortunately, this was done through the data wrangling process to the detriment of LG. Two of these articles, now assigned to FFF, ended up in the sample, which is why we excluded them. This only led to a small imbalance between the two groups ($n_{\text{FFF}} = 48$, $n_{\text{LG}} = 52$).

6 The German language codebook is accessible upon request.

comment level, but with necessary adjustments made to account for the differences in text types. For example, articles allow for more detailed explanations, while reader comments are often briefer, requiring more reading between the lines. In addition, readers may express opinions in their comments that diverge from the prevailing societal and scientific consensus, such as questioning the veracity of climate change. This is highly unlikely for journalists writing for the type of media analyzed. The coders' reliability was tested based on the coding of a sample of 30 articles and 120 reader comments. Four reliability coefficients were considered: *Holsti*, *Lotus*, *Standardized Lotus* (chance-correcting version of *Lotus*; Fretwurst, 2013), and *Krippendorff's Alpha*. The strictest coefficient, *Krippendorff's Alpha*, shows critical values below .67 for several variables at both coding levels (e.g., thematization of goals and climate change at the article level and evaluation of climate change at the reader comment level). However, most variables showed *Holsti* values of at least .70 at the article level, except for thematization of goals, thematization of climate change, and evaluation of goals. According to *Lotus*, these still exhibit a high level of agreement with the most frequently coded value. Thus, while better reliability values would be preferable, we consider the coding quality acceptable. Details on the variables relevant to our hypotheses, their reliability, and their distribution in the final sample are presented below and in Table A1 in the Appendix.

5.2 Measures

Focus of the article. The focus of the article was operationalized through a binary coding of the presence of three elements: Movements' protest actions, movement's goals, and the thematization of the climate change issue. The coding of protest actions depended on whether the text mentioned any protest tactics (e.g., school strikes, demonstrations, damage to property) used by the movements to draw attention to their goals. To code the thematization of the movement's goals, the text had to clearly state that it referred to the movement's demands. Accusations against political leaders, companies, or parts of society could also be interpreted as goals, as they are implicitly linked to a demand. The article was coded as referencing climate change if it discussed the topic in general terms, including its consequences and measures taken to address it. Simply mentioning the terms "climate change" or "climate protection" was insufficient. Based on this, a new variable was created to indicate whether an article focused exclusively on protest actions (1; $n = 25$) or deviated from this focus by discussing goals or the climate issue alongside the protest actions or by omitting any reference to a protest action (0; $n = 75$).

Evaluation of the movements, their goals, and their protest actions in the articles and the reader comments. Our focus is on implicit and explicit evaluations. We consider not only the author's evaluations, but also the positions or views of quoted individuals (e.g., when a politician is quoted criticizing or praising a particular goal). In other words, we consider all evaluations in the article when assessing the evaluated object. Thus, we focused on the tone of the texts and not on the valence of the events or protest actions described in them. We categorized

evaluations as negative (-1), ambivalent or neutral (0), and positive (1). In exceptional cases, a comment could be classified as unclear if it was imprecise or ambiguous (-99). Typically, the evaluation of a movement is related to the evaluation of its protest actions and goals. However, it can also be more general, underscoring the importance of separate coding.

Thematization of climate change in the reader comment. This was coded similarly to the coding on the article level (see the description under *Focus of the article*).

Evaluation of climate change in the reader comment. Commentators may provide varying evaluations regarding climate change. To assess the commentary's stance on climate change, we considered both direct and subtle assessments, including those based on specific word choices (e.g., the term "climate change" may be used neutrally, while "climate crisis" may convey a more negative connotation). The evaluation of climate change was deemed negative or irrelevant (-1) if it was denied or considered less urgent, with climate change being downplayed explicitly. A positive or relevant (1) rating was given if the crisis nature of the issue or the urgency of action was emphasized. A neutral (0) presentation lacked any explicit or implicit evaluation. Again, in exceptional cases, a comment could be classified as unclear if it was imprecise or ambiguous (-99).

5.3 Analysis

Our data has a nested structure in which reader comments are linked to articles. RQ1 and its associated hypotheses only pertain to the article level. Therefore, we tested them using regular (linear and logistic) regression models. In contrast, RQ2 and its associated hypotheses involve both levels. Because reader comments are a reaction to an article and its characteristics, reader comments on one article will be more similar to each other than to comments on another article. This lack of independence in our observations affects the results of statistical analyses, leading us to use multilevel regression models, specifically random intercept models with articles treated as random effects. Indeed, the *intraclass correlations* (ICC) estimated on the intercept-only models demonstrated the validity of this decision, as they indicated that between 27–30% of the variance of the dependent variables at the comment level could be explained by characteristics at the article level.

Dependent variables for RQ1 included the evaluation of protest movements and their actions, as well as the focus of the article on protest actions. Regarding RQ2, the analysis included the evaluation of protest movements, their goals, and protest actions, as well as the thematization and evaluation of climate change in reader comments. Article characteristics like the protest group and the news source for RQ1 and RQ2, as well as the evaluation of the protest movement, their goals, and protest actions, combined with the focus of the article on protest actions for RQ2, were included in the models as fixed effects to examine their relationship with comment characteristics. The two protest groups and the news sites were included in all models to account for any systematic differences in the results caused by these factors. We coded FFF and TAZ as reference groups and LG, Welt, and Zeit as treatment groups. Therefore, the coefficients associated with the

treatment indicators quantify the deviance of FFF from LG, TAZ from Welt, and TAZ from Zeit, respectively. For all models, we observed a significantly better fit compared to the null models. More complex models (e.g., using random slopes) were not considered, since random intercept models already reflected the theoretical considerations of the hypotheses.

6. Results

6.1 Differences between FFF coverage and LG coverage

We find that articles about LG tend to take a more negative stance on the movement compared to FFF, even when controlling for the news site from which the article originated (H1.1, see Table 1). As expected, we observe that Welt and Zeit take a more negative stance than the left-leaning TAZ, with the conservative Welt having a more pronounced negative effect on the evaluation of the protest movement than the left-liberal Zeit. The same applies to the evaluation of the protest actions of the respective movement (H1.2): LG's protest actions are rated more negatively overall than those of FFF. This could also be due to the fact that various protest actions have more positive or negative connotations overall. We therefore investigated how often the different protest actions appeared in articles about the two movements to determine which protest actions are most strongly associated with the respective protest movement: Articles covering protest actions of FFF ($n = 34$) mainly focus on strikes (53%), demonstrations (15%), or other actions (29%), while articles about protest actions of LG ($n = 51$) are dominated by stories about street blockades (69%), property damage (10%), and other actions (14%). LG's protest actions, which are much more disruptive, could therefore damage the overall impression of the movement.

Furthermore, we find that, compared to FFF, articles about LG more often focus entirely on the movement's protest actions rather than other topics such as its goals (38% vs. 10%, H1.3). This suggests that the protest strategy chosen by LG, which relies heavily on attention-generating protest actions such as street blockades or vandalism, is not as effective in placing actual demands or goals in the media coverage.

To summarize, we find evidence for all our first three hypotheses addressing the differences between FFF coverage and LG coverage (RQ1).

Table 1. Linear and logistic regression models predicting article level evaluations and focus

	Article level		
	Evaluation of movements (H1.1)	Evaluation of protest actions (H1.2)	Sole focus on protest actions (H1.3)
	<i>b</i> (SE)	<i>b</i> (SE)	OR (SE)
(Intercept)	0.76 (0.11) ***	0.51 (0.14) ***	0.11 (0.06) ***
Group: LG	-0.50 (0.12) ***	-0.53 (0.14) ***	5.32 (2.94) **
News site: Welt	-0.71 (0.14) ***	-0.55 (0.17) **	1.08 (0.65)
News site: Zeit	-0.42 (0.14) **	-0.24 (0.18)	1.22 (0.73)
<i>N</i> _{articles}	96	85	100
<i>R</i> ² / <i>R</i> ² adjusted	0.34 / 0.31	0.23 / 0.21	0.11

Notes. For H1.3, *R*² corresponds to *Tjur's R*² for logistic regressions. Values in bold are significant. * *p* < .05 ** *p* < .01 *** *p* < .001.

6.2 Media effects on commentator discussion

Turning to our second research question, where we analyze how the reporting style might affect commentator discussions, we find that, contrary to our initial hypothesis, holding protest groups and news sites constant, journalists' evaluations of (a) movements, (b) their goals, and (c) their protest actions are not related to those of commentators (see Table 2).⁷ Thus, we find no support for H2.1. Instead, the observation of Walter et al. (2018) about the lack of influence of individual news stories on the way readers comment can be confirmed in our setting. It is probable that their preexisting opinions are more influential than the evaluations they encounter when reading a specific article. We continue to see that the news sites have a (negative) impact regarding Welt and Zeit, although the latter shows no significant influence on the evaluation of the goals and protest actions.

7 Because missing values due to the coding logic resulted in different sample sizes, we did not include all article level evaluations in each model.

Table 2. Multilevel regression models predicting reader comment level evaluations

	Reader comment level		
	Evaluation of movements (H2.1a)	Evaluation of goals (H2.1b)	Evaluation of protest actions (H2.1c)
	<i>b</i> (SE)	<i>b</i> (SE)	<i>b</i> (SE)
Fixed part			
(Intercept)	0.34 (0.07) ***	0.55 (0.19) **	0.13 (0.10)
Article level evaluation of ...			
... movements	-0.09 (0.05)		
... goals		0.05 (0.15)	
... protest actions			-0.07 (0.07)
Group: LG	-0.25 (0.07) ***	-0.22 (0.16)	-0.29 (0.10) **
News site: Welt	-1.01 (0.08) ***	-1.12 (0.20) ***	-0.72 (0.11) ***
News site: Zeit	-0.27 (0.08) ***	-0.19 (0.21)	-0.23 (0.12)
Random part			
τ_{00}	0.03	0.07	0.08
σ^2	0.48	0.61	0.48
$N_{articles}$	88	43	75
$N_{comments}$	942	148	594
Marginal R^2 / Conditional R^2	0.26 / 0.30	0.26 / 0.33	0.15 / 0.28

Notes. τ_{00} = between-group random intercept variance; σ^2 = residual variance. Values in bold are significant. * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$.

Given the results associated with H2.1, the results of H2.3 are similarly unsurprising. The thematic focus of the article is of little consequence in determining how readers evaluate the issue of climate change in their comments (see Table 3). It can be concluded that the concern that the (often negative or critical) portrayal of protest actions in the media could have a *direct* negative impact on attitudes towards the issue of climate change in general is unfounded. H2.3 is not supported. Nevertheless, we continue to see a negative effect if the article and subsequent discussions are conducted on Welt, but not on Zeit.

However, the results on the likelihood of thematizing the issue of climate change in the reader comments if there is a focus on protest actions in the article (H2.2) certainly fuel the concern that the protest actions may have a cannibalizing effect (see Table 3): If the focus of the coverage is on the protest actions, climate change is less likely to be discussed in the reader comments.

Table 3. Multilevel regression models predicting reader comment level thematization and evaluation of climate change

	Reader comment level	
	Thematization of climate change (H2.2)	Evaluation of climate change (H2.3)
	OR (SE)	<i>b</i> (SE)
Fixed part		
(Intercept)	0.46 (0.08) ***	0.61 (0.07) ***
Article level solely focuses on protest actions	0.33 (0.10) ***	-0.14 (0.12)
Group: LG	0.55 (0.14) *	0.22 (0.08) **
News site: Welt		-0.81 (0.10) ***
News site: Zeit		-0.14 (0.09)
Random part		
τ_{00}	1.02	0.03
σ^2	3.29	0.45
$N_{articles}$	100	87
$N_{comments}$	1,908	473
Marginal R^2 / Conditional R^2	0.09 / 0.30	0.20 / 0.26

Notes. τ_{00} = between-group random intercept variance; σ^2 = residual variance. Values in bold are significant. For H2.2, the full model did not converge, which is why the control variable for news sites was excluded here. A logistic regression with all control variables, but without taking the multiple levels into account, yielded similar results concerning the influence of the article's focus (see Appendix Table A2). * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$.

7. Discussion

The purpose of our study was to examine the impact of two different protest strategies on media coverage and readers' reactions. From the perspective of social movements, it is important to understand whether their communication activities hinder or support their goals and causes. As public perceptions of climate protest could influence how issues like climate change are perceived and whether related policies are supported, this is also a matter of societal importance. We compared evaluations and thematic priorities in news coverage across different editorial lines and reader discussions about two climate movements that are active in Germany and differ starkly in their protest strategies: FFF and LG. While both follow an offensive mediatization strategy, LG is leaning more towards non-normative and disruptive protest tactics. Research shows that these tactics are more prone to prompt the so-called protest paradigm, with possible repercussions for public perceptions of social movements. The design of our case study allows us to draw first conclusions on the effects of media content on follow-up communication, since we rely on the most direct public reaction to media coverage,

namely reader comments. This approach provides an innovative perspective on public perception of FFF and LG. However, our findings also align with existing research.

We find that news articles report more negatively about LG compared to FFF (Table 1). News articles about LG focus more strongly on their disruptive and partly illegal protest actions and less often on the goals of the movement. FFF, with its chosen protest strategy of focusing less on disruptive protest actions, seems to place its goals more often in the reporting. These initial findings are in line with current research (Dablander et al., 2025; Meyer, Farjam et al., 2025) and lend weight to critics' claims that LG's protest strategy is failing to raise awareness of the climate issue. In contrast, a more balanced protest strategy that relies more heavily on normative and authoritative tactics appears to be advantageous for successfully placing the climate topic in news articles.

Furthermore, journalistic evaluations of the protest groups are not directly reflected in the corresponding reader comments. The overall more negative evaluation at the comment level compared to the article level indicates a more critical view of the readers than of the journalists (see Appendix Table A1). Such opinions, however, are likely to be the consequence of previous media consumption (e.g., Brown & Mourão, 2021, p. 587) and interpersonal communication. The results of H1.1 and H1.2 indicate that readers of all three news sites are exposed to a greater number of negative articles about LG compared to FFF, which, as we mentioned, comparable research supports. This is likely driving our results.

Similarly, the media's focus on protest actions does not appear to directly induce climate skepticism in readers or to attract those with relevant predispositions. As previously stated, while the individual article may be less relevant to the formation of a stable opinion, the cumulative effect of media coverage can be. The results pertaining to the effect of the focus on protest actions on readers' engagement with the climate change issue are pertinent in this context. When the coverage centers solely on protest actions, commentators are less likely to discuss climate change compared to instances where the movement's goals or climate change in general are mentioned. This suggests that coverage focused on protest actions diverts attention away from the issue. Different protest strategies and the associated forms of protest can indeed lead to different follow-up communication due to variations in their media coverage. This ties in well with agenda-setting research.

The findings of our first research question align with the protest paradigm, which has been demonstrated to be prevalent across diverse journalistic cultures (Boyle et al., 2012, p. 139), suggesting some generalizability of our findings. In the long term, a strategic emphasis on non-normative and disruptive protest actions by social movements may, in fact, have a detrimental impact on the climate movement and the climate cause. Although these can be successful in generating attention (Feinberg et al., 2020, p. 1089), they can displace a more general discussion of the issue and divert public attention from the causes and goals behind the protest (Smith et al., 2001, pp. 1415–1417), which is in line with the protest paradigm. This can hinder public understanding and support. The findings of our

second research question indicate that this is possible, as the readers' direct reaction to media coverage shows.

There are limitations to our study, offering interesting opportunities for follow-up studies. First, although our results are significant, a larger sample size at the article level would be beneficial to make more reliable statements. Recent developments in the automated analysis of texts using large language models seem promising in this respect (e.g., Kroon et al., 2024). Second, concerning intercoder reliability of some categories, our results should be interpreted with some caution. Nevertheless, the results are consistent with similar research, which supports the validity of our findings. Third, despite its advantages, studying readers' comments means focusing on a part of the public that is not representative of the population, even when considering media with different political orientations. As demonstrated in an international comparative study by Kalogeropoulos et al. (2017, pp. 7–8), the segment of the audience that comments on news is not only small but also demographically, attitudinally, and behaviorally different from the non-commenting majority. More general statements about the public agenda, therefore, depend on additional, ideally fine-grained surveys that include non-commentators. Fourth, we did not consider the influences commentators can exert on each other and on the perception of news. The perceived interestingness of a discussion influences the extent to which other commentators participate in the discussion (Hoppe et al., 2019, p. 209). Negative comments, in turn, can have a negative impact on the credibility of the article and the perceived importance of the topic (Waddell, 2018, p. 3080). This could affect our question about the likelihood that commentators will talk about the issue of climate change. Investigating these effects would require a more in-depth analysis of the dynamics in the comment sections and the relationship of these dynamics to the ratings of the article or its topic over time.

While it is reasonable to assume that people form stable opinions based on past media coverage, it would be beneficial to track changes in coverage and reader comments related to protests over time. This would be worthwhile to develop a better understanding of opinion formation processes. Combined with the inclusion of additional actors and/or climate change coverage beyond thematically related protests, it could also paint a more complete picture of what the public is learning about climate change and climate activism in general. Finally, strategic changes of movements call for comparisons within a movement. Given the influence of preconceptions not only on journalists but also on the public, the question is whether the change in protest strategy announced by LG (Marg, 2024, pp. 14–16), for example, will actually pay off or be good for absolutely nothing.

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Generative AI declaration

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Appendix

Table A1. Reliability of the variables and distribution in the final sample

	Holsti	Lotus	Std. Lotus	Krippen- dorff's Alpha	% or M (SD)	N
<i>Article level</i>						
Focus: Thematization of ...						
... goals	.64	.82	.64	.28	58%	100
... protest actions	.97	.99	.97	.84	85%	100
... climate change	.56	.78	.56	.11	52%	100
Evaluation of ...						
... movements	.81	.90	.87	.84	0.14 (0.69)	96
... goals	.57	.78	.70	.54	0.47 (0.57)	58
... protest actions	.79	.89	.85	.77	-0.06 (0.73)	85
<i>Reader comment level</i>						
Thematization of climate change	.82	.91	.82	.61	25%	1,908
Evaluation of ...						
... movements	.71	.84	.78	.65	-0.28 (0.83)	946
... goals	.84	.92	.89	.65	0.07 (0.92)	174
... protest actions	.77	.88	.83	.70	-0.38 (0.82)	608
... climate change	.72	.85	.80	.45	0.44 (0.77)	473

Notes. Reliability coefficients were calculated based on 24 articles and 113 comments that were deemed relevant. The reliability of the relevance coding was high on both levels (article level: Holsti: .93, Lotus: .97, Standardized Lotus: .93, Krippendorff's Alpha: .75; reader comment level: Holsti: .98, Lotus: .99, Standardized Lotus: .98, Krippendorff's Alpha: .79). Missing values resulting from dependencies in the coding procedure were treated as a decision and recoded with -99 to be included in the comparison of coders for all coefficients except Krippendorff's Alpha, since it can handle missing values. Additionally, evaluations were treated as ordinal for Krippendorff's Alpha. Percentage (%), mean (M), and standard deviation (SD) refer to the distribution of the original variables in the final sample (100 articles and 1,910 comments). N refers to the total number of valid cases at the article and reader comment level.

Table A2. Alternative regression model predicting reader comment level thematization of climate change

	Reader comment level thematization of climate change (H2.2)
	OR (SE)
(Intercept)	0.67 (0.06) ***
Article level solely focuses on protest actions	0.39 (0.06) ***
Group: LG	0.56 (0.06) ***
News site: Welt	0.51 (0.07) ***
News site: Zeit	0.93 (0.12)
N_{comments}	1,908
$Tjur's R^2$	0.06

Note. * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$