

Research articles

Youth digital activism, social media and human rights education: the Fridays for Future movement

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Abstract

This article examines the social media activity (Twitter) of the youth-led ‘Fridays for Future’ climate movement during the transition from in-person to online strikes early in the Covid-19 pandemic. Our aim was to identify possibilities and challenges for human rights education in youth digital activism. The research question of the study was to explore whether and how the digital environment serves as an educational space for learning about, for and through human rights. Adopting a digital ethnography, we analysed over 9,400 posts in 2020 and 2022, examining the extent to which activists’ understandings of civil, political and socio-economic rights—particularly peaceful assembly, freedom of expression, the right to a healthy environment and adequate standard of living—developed. Findings reveal the responsive, inclusive, and experiential nature of peer-to-peer learning in a social movement and our discussion considers how digital activism might support future human rights-based digital learning.

Keywords

Digital environment, social movements, digital ethnography, peaceful assembly, experiential learning

Introduction

In 2022, the youth-led climate movement Fridays for Future (FFF) organised more than 700 protests worldwide as part of their global climate strike. Global protests and massive mobilisations of children and young people have been the trademark of FFF, even though the movement only started with Greta Thunberg skipping school on Fridays to protest outside the Swedish parliament, demanding urgent action against the climate crisis. Four years later, FFF has over 14 million people participating in different actions and mobilisations organised by children and young people (Fridays for Future, 2022). A core goal of the FF movement is to raise awareness about the climate crisis to foster actions that will limit global warming (Fridays for Future, 2022). This emphasises the educational agenda of the movement. This paper aims to explore the contributions of this social movement in raising awareness of climate-crisis-related human rights among young people.

The informal spaces for human rights education (HRE) that emerge in social movements can provide unique educational possibilities, even though the opportunities granted by these spaces are often overlooked. Social movements demonstrate how rights cultures emerge and evolve in social contexts (Clément, 2011) and the everyday world of social activism can promote the learning of rights (Choudry & Kappoor, 2010). If our goal is to design and implement HRE initiatives that are meaningful, contextually relevant and lead to significant social and political transformations, it is necessary to examine the learning processes that occur within social movements. This paper presents the findings of a digital ethnography that explores the experiences and lessons learnt within the youth-led climate movement FFF during its transition from an in-person mobilisation to an online strike, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. The key research question of the study was to analyse the digital activism of the FFF in order to explore whether and how the digital environment serves as an educational space for learning about, for and through human rights, and discuss the opportunities and challenges for HRE that result from digital activism.

The learning processes captured in this paper are historically relevant, as the Covid-19 pandemic drastically hindered the participatory rights of children and young people (Mallon & Martinez Sainz, 2021). We also consider the impact of digital technologies in the repertoire of actions available to social movements (Melgaço & Monaghan, 2018). Since restrictions on social gatherings and interactions reduced the possibilities for children and young people to seek social change through their involvement with grassroots movements, the FFF digital strikes provided a unique opportunity to reach a wider audience and exercise unprecedented influence in public debates.

Literature Review

Climate change and grassroots movements

Climate change is one of the most pressing crises of our time but, unlike other societal issues, the strategic actions required to address it are far from settled or agreed upon. Even though most countries have accepted the scientific evidence for the need to reduce carbon emissions, none of them has yet committed to the radical yet necessary laws and policies to keep global warming within the 1.5 °C limit (Walsh, 2021). The disparity between rhetoric and action by governments around the world, particularly those in the Global North, is what detonated the fast growth of the FFF grassroots movement (Bartoli, 2022). Grassroots movements are enablers of social, political, and cultural change by ‘purposively and strategically’ acting mostly outside established political and institutional channels (Johnston 2014). Some grassroots movements, such as the anti-government protests and uprisings of the Arab spring in the early 2010s, are mostly political. Other movements primarily seek cultural change. FFF, since its emergence in 2018, has worked in both dimensions, simultaneously demanding action from governments and policymakers while seeking to shift beliefs about the climate crisis and motivate individual and collective behaviours in response. FFF has been successful in raising awareness about the climate crisis, and also in changing international human rights law (Daly, 2022). Even though FFF is one of many environmental movements in recent decades, its global reach and the fact it is led by children and young people who use digital technologies make it an exemplary case of youth activism in the digital era.

Youth digital activism and peer-based actions

Many forms of activism in these digital spaces are still connected to in-person forms of political participation, such as protests or voting. However, others are fundamentally digital in nature, with varying degrees of alignment to human rights values and the rule of law (Sorrel, 2015). The emergence of digital technologies has introduced fundamental changes in political participation and has expanded practices beyond traditional forms of civic and political life (Kahne et al., 2014). Easier and faster access to information, a greater facility to create and disseminate content or to communicate with others, as well as the possibility to organise collective actions or campaigns from afar, are just a few of the changes. Digital technologies have generated not only new ways of political participation but have also created new spaces that enable greater accessibility and ease of action (McPherson et al., 2019).

The new participatory politics facilitated by these technologies promotes interactive, inclusive, and peer-based actions in which individuals and groups can effectively raise their voices, engage in public deliberation and influence decision-making (Allen & Light, 2015; Kahne et al., 2014; Martinez Sainz et al., 2020). Even though emerging technologies have broadened participation, digital activism also reflects in-person inequalities and discrimination, as shown in digital divides regarding political participation (Schradie, 2018). In

the case of children though, digital technologies have created new possibilities for participation (Livingstone et al., 2019), enabling greater political and civic engagement. Their capacity to exercise their rights and citizenship have radically changed and the spaces, structures and mechanisms available for their political participation have expanded. In the case of children and young people, digital technologies and the changes in political participation these enable are key to countering the marginalisation and exclusion they often encounter. These changes empower them as active citizens.

Activism & human rights education

There is increasing evidence that social media can serve as an effective learning space for human rights among adults, including academics and practitioners (Kim, 2011; Kiwan, 2020; Zanatta et al., 2019). The digital environment allows interactions that can facilitate organic learning opportunities and the critical dialogues that lead to HRE that relates to participants' experiences and contexts. If this is also the case for children and young people, and digital technologies help them to develop a 'rights competence' or 'rights consciousness' (Birnhack & Perry-Hazan, 2021)—one that develops not only a knowledge of their rights but the capacity to articulate their activism to work for rights and make the corresponding legal and political claims—then these digital spaces require further examination. As Jerome and Starkey (2021) argue, one of the central purposes, but also key challenges, for HRE is to effectively build children's capacity to participate in society and empower them to be active citizens through the development of knowledge, skills and attitudes that enable the exercise of their rights.

This paper examines the youth-led FFF climate movement and its transition from in-person mobilisations to an online strike, as a result of the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic. It looks at the cause promoted by the movement—climate action—as well as the interactions and collective performances of its members (Johnston, 2014) before, during and after the move towards the digital environment. The paper focuses on the opportunities the climate strikes, both in-person and digital, provide for teaching and learning about political as well as economic, social, and cultural rights. Thus, the analysis focuses on specific rights: the right to peaceful assembly (UDHR article 21, UNCRC article 15; ICCPR article 21) and freedom of expression (UDHR article 19; UNCRC article 13; ICCPR article 19); the right to a healthy environment (UNHRC 2021); and the right to an adequate standard of living (UNCRC article 27).

Research design

Ethnography has been widely used as a method to research social movements (Della Porta & Diani, 2006), as it allows us to capture people's experiences, activities, relationships, and interactions within and beyond the movement itself. However, since digital technologies are so intertwined with everyday life, it is important to design research that takes into account

this digital component to explore the actions, relationships, values and identities of social movements. The current study adopts a digital ethnography (Pink, 2016) and uses digital technologies to collect and analyse archival materials of climate activists who self-recognise as members of the FFF movement. The focus is on the shift towards a digital strike, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the social restrictions imposed. The aim is to examine the implications of this transition for these young people's activism and the peer-to-peer learning of rights in the digital environment.

We collected data from Twitter under hashtags #FridaysForFuture and #ClimateStrikeOnline on three separate dates: a) 28th February 2020 – the Bristol Climate Strike before COP25; b) 6th March 2020 – the Brussels Climate Strike; and c) 13th March 2020 – the first online climate strike. We also collected retrospective posts two years after the first online strike, including threads and online interactions that discuss the experiences and lessons learnt by young climate activists during the transition. These posts were shared organically and, therefore, show matters that were and are important to them about lessons learned in the digital environment. While there are other social media platforms used by young activists, including Snapchat or TikTok, we wanted to focus on a platform that was central to the FFF movement (Haßler et al., 2021) that would also allow us to: 1) identify FFF members; 2) explore their engagement with the movement; 3) explore their interactions among themselves and others outside the FFF movement. There are ethical concerns about research that uses Twitter data (Williams, Burnap & Sloan, 2017), particularly regarding rigour, scrutiny of ethical panels and anonymity. The current study was subject to a full ethical assessment by the university, according to established protocols regarding the collection, analysis, and dissemination of the data to protect the anonymity and privacy of children and young people. We anonymised posts by removing all usernames, handles, metadata and geospatial location so children and young people or the organisations they work with could not be identified. In cases where content could still be identified, we used paraphrased quotes instead of verbatim ones; and finally, we created generalised groupings of data and provided detailed descriptions of quotes, videos, or photographs after removing identifying information. All decisions regarding the data adhere to the Non-Maleficence and Best Interest of the Child Principles of Children's Rights (UN, 1989) and follow ethical practices for research involving children (Powell, Graham & Truscott, 2016).

The sampling criteria applied to the data used hashtags; only users employing these hashtags were coded and all coding was done by hand. Using MAXQDA, all tweets using #FridaysForFuture and #ClimateStrikeOnline were collected for the chosen dates, one week apart, in the run-up to Covid lockdown in the UK. The data were cleaned and those written in English were selected for analysis. This produced a data set of 9,403 tweets which were coded deductively using a framework agreed upon by the researchers. This framework was created

upon the initial coding of tweets which provided initial categories. Coding followed an iterative process which included coding: i) the surface content of a tweet; ii) the type of link posted, if any; iii) the content of the posted link. The resulting coding framework was then used to conduct an analysis of retrospective posts two years later. This included threads and online interactions under the same hashtags that discuss the experiences and lessons learnt by young climate activists during the transition.

Findings

The shift to digital strikes: collective actions and audiences

The tweets collected during the first Climate Strike Online demonstrate that it was possible for the key elements of the FFF movement to continue with the move towards the digital environment. In particular, the digital space allowed the development of a shared identity as climate strikers and fostered a sense of belonging to the movement, even if striking alone or joining remotely and performing collective actions. Many of the participants posted photos of themselves with placards and signs similar to the ones used in in-person protests following Greta Thunberg's call to join the digital strike as Covid19 restrictions on social gatherings were put into force:

So keep your numbers low but your spirits high and let's take one week at the time.
You can join the #DigitalStrike for upcoming Fridays- post a photo of you striking with a sign and use the hashtag #ClimateStrikeOnline!

Other members of FFF provided more information on how to participate in the digital strike and several emphasised the goals of the collective action, which included raising awareness and keeping momentum. Creating a sign in support of climate action and then posting a photo while holding it became a distinguishing feature of the online strikes. This action was a direct adaptation of showing up at in-person strikes with signs and placards in support of the FFF movement. The posts as a form of collective action served different purposes and reached a variety of audiences, including other activists and members of FFF, governments and policymakers, and finally the wider public. Although the actions were the same, the messages targeting other members of the FFF movement helped to foster a collective identity and belonging while emphasising the ideas that 'We are all in this together' and 'No one strikes alone':

We'll have to find new ways to create public awareness & advocate for change that don't involve too big crowds...

Even in the face of trials, it's inspiring to see people still fighting. Every protest can be adjusted, & I hope that this shows that an online presence matters, not just when everyone's impacted, but when only disabled people need it. No one strikes alone.

But who is the climate movement? Certainly not @GretaThunberg alone. Our leaders have proven their inability to listen to the science and treat crises as crises. So we must show them the way. It has to be you. It has to be every single one of us.

The content posted by participants in the digital strike was also intended to reach a wider audience, with the explicit goal of raising awareness of the climate crisis. This educational purpose, teaching others about the climate crisis, was realised by three clear actions: sharing and circulating information; creating content; and engaging in discussions. The information commonly shared by the activists included scientific reports, graphs and images, videos, and news articles. In contrast, the content created included photos, most of them with protest signs and placards, videos and images that translated scientific evidence, such as the 1.5 °C limit, into lay terms - for example.

Climate education to the public during a #ClimateStrike is always key for us! We are all in this together, and together we can get ourselves out of this mess! We let people know why we are out here fighting and how they can be part!

This is why I have decided to write [...] our voices are the most powerful tools we have to enact change. When we can no longer raise our voices in the streets, as we have before, we must find new and novel ways of making ourselves heard. [...] I will write about a different aspect of climate breakdown every day, discussing both my own personal experiences and the scientific and political facts that I have learnt and am learning.

The primary goal of raising awareness was a distinctive and prominent feature of the digital strike. The actions performed by the FFF during the digital strike created a space in which members of the movement and the general public could learn about the crisis, its scientific basis, and its environmental and social implications, as well as the possible solutions and actions. By transferring its activity to the digital environment, FFF created two different spaces for the informal learning of rights. First, a space for individuals within and beyond the FFF movement to learn about the right to a healthy environment. Second, a space for members of FFF to learn about and for their rights to peaceful assembly and freedom of expression by taking action and participating in the strikes.

Right to a healthy environment: education about human rights

The UN General Assembly has ratified a resolution that recognises the human right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment (UN, 2022). This makes explicit the immediate and future threats that climate change and environmental degradation pose, and the negative impacts on human rights as a result of the unsustainable management and use of natural resources, loss of biodiversity and unmitigated pollution. Even though this resolution was adopted months after FFF activists moved toward digital strikes, the information they shared

and the content they created is aligned with the resolution's concerns and premises. FFF activists focused on educating people about the right to a healthy environment, despite not labelling this as such, and emphasised the negative impacts of pollution and fossil fuels on the environment and the loss of biodiversity. They also discussed the urgency of adopting sustainable lifestyles and policies for the development and use of renewable energy and greener modes of transport. A common phrase used among activists was: 'Be part of the solution, not the pollution'.

Climate education and awareness-raising about the right to a healthy environment were key goals of actions promoted and collectively performed by the FFF movement. Activists shared not only scientific reports but also book recommendations and resources, suitable for different ages, to learn more about the climate crisis:

If you are inspired by the #FridaysForFuture #ClimateStrike movement, you can check these books for teens on how to get involved in environmental activism.

A pedagogy of hope for your elementary and middle school children? You can read *Tears at bedtime: are children's books on the environment causing climate anxiety?*

The information they shared and created reflected their views about the role of education in addressing the climate crisis and the urgent need to 'educate people' on how to best take action. 'Education is how we secure the future', a phrase used during the digital strike, emphasises the role of education as a form of climate action itself and as a means for FFF to gain further support. The digital strike recognised the educational value of the digital environment, but members of the FFF movement also exploited the educational opportunities of the strikes, emphasising that 'Not all education happens in the classroom':

#FridaysForFuture helps kids to engage with climate science that is not being taught in school and prepare for terrible challenges foisted on them by the adults that have squandered their future.

What if we science teachers got connected with [environmental] movements—for example #FridaysForFuture—and helped teach the public about the #ClimateCrisis? How might we help amplify our students' voices?

Before, during, and after the shift to the digital arena, many of the activists made connections between the content and purposes of the climate strikes and existing educational spaces, such as the formal curriculum and the classroom. For example, educators encouraged learning about the right to a healthy environment by linking the content and information produced by the social movement to the curriculum and pedagogical classroom practices:

Read up on climate and social justice issues, then share what you've learned online with your friends & family, so they can also benefit from the time you spent learning.

Heading to the school with a special lesson on wildlife loss and sustainable poetry to remind my first-year students of #FridaysForFuture.

A history curriculum that focuses on climate change should explore concepts like “development”, and assumptions about what “progress” looks like.

#Schools Should Integrate #ClimateChange Into The #Curriculum

The informal educational opportunities granted by the digital environment to the FFF movement allowed for a comprehensive approach to teaching and learning about the right to a healthy environment. The information shared by the strikers and the online discussions generated by their posts facilitated a wider focus not only on knowledge about climate change but also on its economic, political social, cultural, and ethical dimensions. Youth activists often draw connections between climate change and human rights.

I feel like we still don't understand the climate crisis in its full effect. At its heart it's a human rights crisis, and a crisis of empathy that we think those lives aren't worth acting for. Understanding its causes and solutions starts with science, but it ends with justice.

It harms the climate, but also fracking compromises: Safe and clean drinking water; Human health; Food; Housing; The environment.

These are human rights and to protect them, we need a #GlobalBanOnFracking.

You cannot separate climate change from human rights. The climate crisis is inherently a social justice issue.

Right to peaceful assembly and freedom of expression: education for human rights

The right to peaceful assembly protects non-violent gatherings of groups and individuals for specific purposes. People have the right to express themselves collectively and participate in shaping their societies (ICCPR, article 21). Even though this is an individual right, it can only be exercised collectively due to its inherently associative element (UNHRC, 2021). Strongly connected to the right to peaceful assembly, children and young people also have a right to freedom of expression, which includes seeking, receiving and imparting information and ideas via any available means or media (UDHR art 19; UNCRC art 13; ICCPR art 19). The digital strike allowed the FFF movement to expand the repertoire of individual and collective actions that

enable them to exercise these rights.

Despite the restrictions imposed on social gatherings to mitigate the Covid19 pandemic, climate activists were committed to adapting the climate strikes and making the most of the digital space. With the use of dedicated hashtags such as #ClimateStrikeOnline, #DigitalStrike and #FridaysForFuture, participants could show their unity and common purpose. These hashtags allowed activists to show their commitment to the movement and gain wider support from individuals outside. The digital space allowed them to exercise their right to assemble collectively, despite being isolated.

You will see me and many others striking from home on Friday with
#ClimateStrikeOnline

In quarantine at home - striking for future. #ClimateStrikeOnline

Climate striking from home today #DigitalStrike

Staying at home... but still striking!

Earth is no virus. While we stay home alone to protect the vulnerable from
#Covid_19 let's unite in the #ClimateStrikeOnline to protect those vulnerable to
climate change.

The digital strike provided an opportunity for individuals unable able to attend in-person protests to participate in the FFF movement. This greater access was particularly important for children who previously might not have had the means and support to skip school to attend strikes, or children and young people with disabilities. Even though a significant number of the participants in the digital strike were simply transferring their actions into the digital space, this space allowed many to be involved in the FFF movement for the first time.

Day 1 of my #climatestrikeonline This is Week 7 of my 2020 weekly climate strike.
You may be by yourself striking today but you are never alone in the battle for
climate justice!

Before I never had the chance to go to a real strike so this is perfect to show my
support #ClimateStrikeOnline

Just want to show my support! I haven't taken part in any events before but you
gotta start somewhere #ClimateStrike

Today I am doing my first #DigitalStrike to support climate activists all over the world
that fight for a stable climate.

The digital space became one in which individuals with and without prior knowledge and experience of protest and political action could learn about their right to peaceful assembly and freedom of expression through their involvement in the digital strike. Thus, the shift to digital by the FFF not only allowed for ‘new ways to create public awareness & advocate for change that don’t involve too big crowds...’ (@Greta Thunberg, 2020); it also uncovered untapped opportunities for the experiential learning of rights.

The FFF movement and its members developed content and materials to teach the power of non-violent civil disobedience, how to take part in the digital strike, how to get started, how to amplify the message, how to keep safe while striking, and how to create alternatives beyond the in-person strikes (Fridays for Future, n.d.). Local branches also created digital toolkits. These provided not only practical actions, such as posting photos and information, signing petitions, or joining other grassroots organisations, but also explained the rationale underpinning the FFF movement, scientific evidence on the climate crisis, and why protests and other forms of activism were important. All the materials were designed to support individuals and make it easier for them to be involved and provided clear understandings of the cause—climate crisis—and the collective actions of the movement—school strikes, mobilisations and protests—even if these were now conducted in the digital space.

The experiential learning opportunities provided by the strike allowed many members of the movement—long-serving or new ones—to develop the necessary skills to organise collective actions within and beyond the digital space. The digital strike also helped participants to develop skills to express their views and to seek, receive and disseminate information or ideas on matters that affect them, such as the climate crisis. Furthermore, it facilitated the creation of a network larger than the FFF movement itself, in which individuals could gain further knowledge, skills and competencies regarding their rights to peaceful assembly and freedom of expression. This network was not limited to children and young people, which meant that intergenerational processes of teaching and learning became part of the digital strike.

We stand in loving solidarity with the #ClimateStrikeOnline & #DigitalClimateStrike happening today fighting for #ClimateChange & #EnvironmentalJustice led by bright children & youth all around the world.

Young FFF activists not only had a clear understanding of their right to peaceful assembly but also acknowledged that taking part in protests led to learning. They emphasised the education they gained from protesting, particularly in juxtaposition to their school and classroom learning. Participants in the strikes, both in-person and online, regarded the protest as an accessible yet meaningful form of expressing their views and raising their voices. The climate strikes for them were a useful channel of political participation and a way for children and young people to advance social change.

We learn by protesting. [We learn about] science, politics, economics, society, speaking, the system, [community] organisation, and much more. The fact that children will die or become refugees as a result of the climate crisis feels more important than classes.

What these [adults] gatekeeping children's strikes don't understand is marching in the streets in absolutely the best education.

While we are currently restricted in our analogue interaction it is even more important that we continue participating in our democracy and stand up for our values.

Every little change we make has a ripple effect. Together we make the world better because others notice when we act and make their own small changes.

Intergenerational activism: education through human rights

Even though FFF is a youth-led movement, the data collected demonstrates a significant engagement of adults and their active participation in the climate strikes before the shift. Such involvement included parents taking their children to the in-person strikes, teachers using the strikes in their lessons, as well as members of community organisations and activists from other environmental movements amplifying the strikes. An example of such intergenerational support was evident when trade unions joined the school strikes to show their support for FFF.

Sorry my daughter is not at school today, she is in the town centre for the #ClimateStrike learning about protest.

I'll be taking my daughter to the climate strike on Friday, we're catching the train as I usually would to deliver to Bristol.

What a day full of learning experiences not to forget for her and me #ClimateStrike

'The time for change is now'. Children and youth are leading the Global #ClimateStrike today and were joined by teachers, trade unionists, community groups and citizens in #Bristol to call for climate action.

With the shift to the digital space, adults' engagement continued. Members of the FFF encouraged adults to actively participate in the digital strike asking them to join but also to demonstrate their support in real life by advocating for climate action in channels of political participation that exclude children - such as voting for parties and candidates advancing green policies.

Adults working from home today, please take a moment to show your support for

the climate school strikers who've moved their protest online!

The choice is simple. You either vote to protect the future of younger generations or you vote for mass climate breakdown. You need to make the right choice.

#FridaysForFuture as an example shows that our kids are well educated and brave enough to show us to take a leap. We need not only encourage but also support this young generation. We must create opportunities to show their engagement and support their acts.

Adults not only expressed their support for the movement during the online strikes and its claims. They actively engaged in actions similar to those that children and young people pursued: posting photos with their signs, sharing information, and engaging in online discussions. Many continue to support their children's in-real-life actions:

Once again, the kids are leading (this time, showing us how to engage in protest and activism in an era of #COVID—19).

They [policymakers and companies] didn't listen to the scientists; now they have to listen to the kids. Keep it up kids! #ClimateActionNow #FridaysForFuture

Children should not be the ones picking up our trash, both metaphoric and literal. This is why adults need to join #FridaysforFuture.

However, not all the intergenerational discussions were supportive and many of the interactions between adults and young people were highly confrontational. FFF members highlighted a number of negative experiences – some adults mocked the strikes or youth activists' responses to the climate crisis, and there were coordinated attacks and online harassment. Many of these experiences started before the digital strikes but were amplified with the increased online presence and collective digital actions of the movement.

Dear Greta et al. and #FridaysForFuture! Please educate yourself not only about the agent #SARSCoV2 that causes the disease #COVID19, but also about the #IPCCCO2Hoax - thank you!

Children need to spend less time moaning and striking about climate change and more time taking numerate subjects, to end up skilled at how to mitigate its ever present impacts. We have enough moaners with Greta Thunberg

[response] — [...] It is funny that the people who say they should focus on education are the ones who need to go back to school.

Children and young FFF members constantly called out the attacks by adults, emphasising the

discriminatory messages used to discredit their actions and the movement. Their responses show how participation in the strikes also helped to empower children and young people and helped them to value the impact and significance of political participation.

Activism isn't a walk in a park. It's a stumble through a dry and rocky and hostile gorge with thorns and scorpions behind every stone. But the destination is so worth it. We've been boycotting outside school for 6 weeks now.

The assumption that we [young people] don't know what we're doing is quite frankly ridiculous. Most people involved in #FridaysForFuture are highly intelligent, hard-working, globally-aware individuals who try to ensure that our activism doesn't adversely impact their education.

I really question adults' logic, those who think it is OK to strike for better pensions but think children should not strike for a better future.

Before the shift to the digital environment, young activists of the FFF movement understood the significance of protesting and mobilising as a form of political participation. Such significance was indeed framed as a matter of human rights, and when they encountered resistance towards the strikes—both in-person and online—they interpreted it as a violation of their rights.

Discussion and conclusion

Grassroots movements provide unique opportunities for HRE, for both directly participating activists and bystanders. The study reveals the similarities of the digital strikes with other social movements that function not only as a mechanism for participatory politics but also as an educational space. We see the same informal processes of teaching and learning occurring in the different actions and interactions. The FFF climate strikes, both the in-person ones and the digital assemblies, enabled collective action frames (Johnston 2014) and collective guidelines for interpreting the climate crisis. They provided motivation for and shaped collective action. Posting photos with a sign and using the same hashtag enabled FFF members to continue their activism online, support the cause, and reinforce their membership. The findings show that FFF participants gained knowledge about climate change, corroborating Daly's (2022) argument that this movement is a catalyst for 'climate competence' for children and young people. However, participants rarely frame their claims for climate action as a matter of human rights or explicitly name their right to a clean and healthy environment. Even though FFF members recognised the relationship between climate change and different human rights at risk as a result of this global crisis—the rights to health, clean water, housing, etc.—the information shared and content created did not look specifically at these rights or mechanisms that can be accessed for their protection. Thus, findings indicate that despite the

connections made between climate change and human rights, ‘climate competence’ does not necessarily translate into ‘rights consciousness’ (Birnhack & Perry-Hazan, 2021). Similar to previous research that has already pointed towards the possibilities of activism for HRE (Hall, 2019) the findings of this study emphasise the need for HRE and how it might benefit social movements, helping them to gain the ‘rights consciousness’ that will allow them to effectively identify the lack of climate action as a violation of their right to a clean and healthy environment, and to assign responsibility on governments and corporations for the violation of these rights.

As far as learning about the right to a clean and healthy environment is concerned, findings show that the learning processes identified in the activists’ interactions focused on concrete examples of what a right to a healthy and clean environment encompasses—clean air, clean water, access to natural resources, and the protection of natural resources for future generations. These findings reveal that activism and participation in grassroots movements can work as collateral human rights learning situations (Isenström, 2021), in which it is possible to develop values, attitudes and behaviours essential for human rights, despite the scarce reference to the right to a healthy environment or limited knowledge of their legal frameworks. However, in relation to learning about their right to peaceful assembly and freedom of expression, the findings show the potential social media has to develop experiential learning opportunities. In line with the principles of Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) (Kolb, 2015), these opportunities build upon their engagement with and interactions within the social movement. In accordance with ELT, learning happens through the process of knowledge creation through a cycle of concrete experiences, reflection, and experimentation (Kolb, 2015). Although the potential of experiential learning in HRE has been previously identified (Hopkins, 2011; Lundy & Martinez Sainz, 2018; Tibbitts, 2005), the findings of this paper show that experiences within and mediated by the digital environment can also facilitate learning that centres children’s experiences and their environment.

The findings are also consistent with previous research that has shown that learning that results from participating in social movements can be more self-directed, self-controlled, and rewarding than more formal and structured educational opportunities (Kim, 2011). The learning the young activists developed, about both the climate crisis and the right to peaceful assembly, is meaningful because it was led by their interests, often contextualised, and connected to their everyday lives. The continuum of possibilities of digitally-enabled activism (Earl & Kimport, 2011) allows different forms of engagement and participation in social movements. Previous studies have shown the advantages of online actions, particularly for validation of activist work and as motivators for sustained action (Gong, 2015). The present study supports this work by showing how the different actions during the climate strike of those involved in FFF facilitated affirmative interaction and community-building, while

increasing the awareness of the movement. Since the commitment by the UN General Assembly to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment (UN, 2022) was partly the result of constant pressure from activists and environmental social movements, including FFF, this study provides further evidence of the impact digital activism in social media can have in legal and social reform, as has been previously proposed by Steinberg (2016).

However, the present study shows that the learning opportunities facilitated by online activism are not restricted to online interactions or digital spaces and that they reinforce the hybrid nature of the right to peaceful assembly as a result of digital technologies, as previously identified by McPherson et al. (2019). Digital technologies are increasingly mediating and facilitating dynamic forms of gathering that create a continuum between online and offline actions for social change rather than assuming a clearly defined distinction. Activists who participated in the digital strikes by posting their offline climate actions—for example, picking up litter from the beach or planting trees—show the hybrid or blended ways in which the FFF could protest and express their views. Although this hybrid nature can raise questions regarding what counts as meaningful participation, it is evident that participation in assemblies will continue to adapt and expand the available repertoire of social movements. The pedagogical challenge for HRE is to adapt to emerging forms of political participation and develop strategies that build the knowledge and capacity needed to respond to them.

The actions organised by the FFF movement provided experiential learning opportunities for children and young people, demonstrating to them the importance of their status as rights-holders in real-life situations. The strikes, both in-person and online, showed young activists how to exercise their rights online and offline, thus creating meaningful spaces for HRE that focus on their present rather than future status as citizens (Jerome & Starkey, 2021). The right to peaceful assembly is dependent on the realisation of a broader range of civil, political, economic, and cultural rights, as well as the right to HRE. This interconnection of rights represents a pedagogical challenge in HRE that has been previously identified (Martinez Sainz, 2018); however, the digital environment makes it possible to transform this challenge into an opportunity by educating *about* rights *through* the process of exercising those rights. By doing so, HRE recognises the present and evolving capacities of children and young people as citizens and encourages them to learn about rights as part of the process of active engagement and participation in peaceful assemblies. Activism not only helps them to raise their voice on matters that affect them but provides them with a mechanism to participate in the production of knowledge (Kiwani, 2020). Rather than waiting for children and young people to have all the necessary knowledge about rights before they engage in social or political actions, this approach fully recognises them as agents of social change, thanks to their status as present citizens (Jerome & Starkey, 2021).

Finally, the study highlights the potential of activism, in particular digital activism, for intergenerational dialogue and collective action. The digital space facilitated the interaction between young activists and adults wanting to support the FFF movement and their claims for climate action. Peer and intergenerational interactions can foster knowledge exchange and capacity-building, creating spaces for HRE that not only provide education about rights and for rights but also that help in the development of collective identity and connections with the larger community. Such spaces enable members of the grassroots movements to develop a coalitional agency (Jerome & Starkey, 2022; Bajaj, 2019) to collectively fight for the rights of all. The digital environment makes it possible for children and young people to establish global connections and become part of a global movement that leads to large-scale collective actions and worldwide mobilisations. A pedagogical challenge to be considered for the creation of such an intergenerational network for HRE is the safeguarding and protection of children and young people from harmful content and interactions online. HRE should not only equip young activists with the skills to protect themselves online but make sure that learning spaces—including digital spaces—are safe and that the rights of everyone are respected within them.

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