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"If I weren't an activist, I'd buy an old Nokia and I'd be OK": Youth wellbeing, digital media, and activism

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Abstract

For youth activists, digital media are a central tool for awareness raising and mobilisation. At the same time, the pressure to be constantly connected and the negative responses one can encounter through social media, can be significant stressors on youths' well-being. Drawing upon a year-long critical comparative ethnographic research project with Fridays For Future youth climate justice activists in Czechia and Hungary, this paper analyses the multifaceted role of digital media in youth activists' wellbeing. On one hand, youth activists encountered varied psychological, social, and physical challenges connected to digital media use, which caused stress and contributed to burnout. On the other hand, they individually and collectively developed diverse coping strategies and mechanisms, as well as digital literacy, which were supported by the movement's community of activists. This in turn strengthened their resilience and positively contributed to their wellbeing. Ultimately, the youth activists' wellbeing appeared to rely on their own ability to constantly balance between the many challenges encountered related to digital media use for activism, and the resources required to deal with these challenges. Our findings carry important implications for supporting youth activists' wellbeing.

Contents

Introduction

In the past few decades, digital media have become an essential tool for youth around the globe to exercise their civic voice, agency, and rights. While this tool for activism was at first uncritically welcomed and celebrated (*e.g.*, in the case of the Arab Spring, see Lynch, 2011), over time scholarship has come to see the civic potential of digital media for activism as multifaceted and, at times, problematic. On the one hand,

when youth use digital media for activism this contributes to their immediate civic goals such as networking, mobilising, raising funds, lobbying, and taking action (*e.g.*, Jenkins, *et al.*, 2016; Mihailidis, 2020), as well as to their civic learning and development (Bennett, 2007). On the other hand, there is an omnipresent societal apprehension regarding the role of digital media in youths' lives and wellbeing [1] (Smahel, *et al.*, 2020). Such concerns may be particularly relevant to youth engaged in activism, as activism has been found to play both positive and negative roles in youth wellbeing (Conner, *et al.*, 2021). Specifically, Conner, *et al.'s* (2023) mixed method research discovered that expressing civic views online can be exhausting and self-injurious to young activists, due to rude and hateful responses that some receive. However, more research is needed to explore the multifaceted role of digital media in youth activists' wellbeing, while considering different contexts, and using varied qualitative and ethnographic methodologies that help bring young people's lived experience to the forefront.

Building on a year-long critical (Madison, 2020) and comparative (Simmons and Smith, 2019) ethnographic research project conducted in Czechia and Hungary in 2022–2023, this paper provides an in-depth analysis of young activists' lived experiences in terms of wellbeing while using digital media for activism. To do so, we focused on the youth-led climate justice movement *Fridays For Future* (*FFF*). Over the research period, we took part in and observed various online and in-person events, and conducted 18 individual and three groups interviews with youth activists, most of whom were under 18 years old. While wellbeing was not the original focus of the study, this aspect repeatedly emerged in our data, and we soon recognised it as a central issue within the experience of youth activists. Moreover, whereas some experiences were similar among the Czech and Hungarian youth activists, other aspects differed and were locally contextualised.

This paper thus contributes to our understanding of the relationship between activism, digital media, and youth wellbeing by bringing to the forefront the lived experiences of young activists. Moreover, our focus on central and eastern Europe (CEE) brings to light an understudied regional context, which may illuminate distinct aspects in terms of the challenges youth activists face — and the ways in which they cope with them.

Literature review: Youth activism, digital media use, and youth wellbeing

Youth wellbeing

Individual and societal wellbeing has become a major concern within numerous disciplines and sectors. The World Health Organization considers health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being," (World Health Organization, 2024a) and, within that, mental health as "a state of well-being in which an individual realises his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to his or her community" (World Health Organization, 2024b). Building on this definition, our key argument is that youth civic engagement and activism can play a complex role in wellbeing: it can be a stressor, but also a source of resilience. For instance, UNICEF's guidelines [2] consider civic engagement as "individual or collective actions in which people participate to improve the well-being of communities or society".

Wellbeing in youth is a central topic of concern, one that is also considered in relation to the use of digital media and social media (*e.g.*, Burr, *et al.*, 2020). Yet despite an increased interest in wellbeing, scholarship often lacks a shared understanding of what this concept constitutes (Smits, *et al.*, 2022). Here, we adopt the see-saw approach of Dodge, *et al.* (2012), which centres on the balance between an individual's resources and the challenges one faces (see Figure 1). They explain that:

> Stable wellbeing is when individuals have the psychological, social and physical resources they need to meet a particular

psychological, social and/or physical challenge. When individuals have more challenges than resources, the see-saw dips, along with their wellbeing, and vice-versa. [3]

Figure 1: Conceptualization of wellbeing (Dodge, *et al.*, 2012).

Such an understanding of wellbeing emphasises its dynamic and contextual nature, as well as the agency and active role young people play in their own and others' wellbeing. Furthermore, since our methodology is one that centres on youth activists' lived experiences, we are specifically interested in *subjective wellbeing*, *i.e.*, how people perceive and evaluate the quality of their own lives (Diener, *et al.*, 2009). This is in line with the view of youth as competent and capable social actors, actively co-constructing their own lives (Tisdall and Punch, 2012), their own wellbeing included.

To further hone in on what wellbeing entails, studies preoccupied with children and youth have suggested various dimensions, while acknowledging that these are non-definitive, and constantly evolving (Ben-Arieh, *et al.*, 2014; Diener, *et al.*, 2009). For instance, based on a multi-sample mixed method study of adolescents (10–24 years old) and young adults (25–30 years old), who were also co-creators of the model, Green, *et al.* (2023) proposed the multidimensional wellbeing in youth scale (MWYS). The five components of adolescent and youth subjective wellbeing that they identified include: 1) having impact, purpose, and meaning; 2) dealing with stress and worry; 3) family relationships; 4) self-confidence; and, 5) feeling respected, appreciated, and loved (Green, *et al.*, 2023). In this paper, we use this framework to guide our understanding of how youth activism may connect to wellbeing both positively and negatively. We have chosen this framework, rather than those focused directly on activists' wellbeing (*e.g.*, Ballard and Ozer, 2016) or digital wellbeing (Büchi, 2021), as it offers a more holistic view on youth wellbeing, one that puts the participant at the centre.

Wellbeing in youth activism and digital media use

Young people have long been central to activism and social movements, and have played an important role in shaping global protests. Earl, *et al.'s* (2017) review of youth activism claimed that this work shares an emphasis on youth agency, on the challenges that youth may face while interacting with wider organisations and institutions, as well as the unique aspect of youth activism *vis-à-vis* adults. Youth climate activism has been particularly gaining traction, as climate change is a topic that young people consider as central to their identity (Katz, *et al.*, 2021) — also since it is one that affects them disproportionately more than it does adults. As we'll further detail in the choice of our case study, the *Fridays for Future* movement has been a particularly salient example of youth climate activism (see, *e.g.*, Boulianne, *et al.*, 2020).

Moreover, research on youth activism has often centred on use of digital media, including the use of mobile phones for communicating and documenting action, use of the Internet for gathering and disseminating information, or the use of social media to connect to other activists as well as to outside audiences (see, *e.g.*, Jenkins, *et al.*, 2016). Indeed, youth activists tend to be early adopters of novel digital media strategies with the aim of speaking to a youth audience (Kligler-Vilenchik and Literat, 2024).

At the same time, we are still lacking a deeper understanding of how using digital media as part of their activism relates to young activists' sense of wellbeing. One of the reasons this question is a challenging one to answer is that engaging in activism through digital media can both contribute to youth wellbeing (for instance, by strengthening young activists' sense of self-efficacy), as well as be a significant stressor (for instance, when being exposed to negative reactions online, or being expected to always be connected). Specifically in the context of climate change, research has shown a relationship between this topic and wellbeing, as some young people even suffer from climate anxiety — a feeling of dread and distress associated with worrying about the future of the planet (see Burke, *et al.*, 2018). At the same time, being engaged in climate activism may help young people channel their concern into action, thus contributing to their wellbeing (Kligler-Vilenchik and Literat, 2024).

The multidimensional model proposed by Green, *et al.* (2023) helps us break down the relationship between youth activism and wellbeing. Within this model, a first dimension of youth wellbeing focuses on *having impact, purpose, and meaning*. In this sense, contributing to society, as well as helping and having a positive impact on others, is beneficial to adolescents' wellbeing, because during these years "the need to contribute is particularly significant" [4]. Such a need is at the root of youth activism (Budziszewska and Głód, 2021) and in this sense, engaging in activism can positively contribute to youth wellbeing. Moreover, using social media can encourage this aim (Bakker and de Vreese, 2011), as digital media allow young people to gather information on controversial social issues, as well as to promote their activism (Chon and Park, 2019). At the same time though, youth activists may experience 'activist guilt': feeling guilty that they are not doing enough, or feeling hopeless due to a lack of progress (Conner, *et al.*, 2023, 2021).

The second dimension of youth wellbeing discussed by Green, *et al.* (2023) refers to *experiencing stress and worry*. For youth in general, school performance is the most common major source of stress (Anniko, *et al.*, 2019). For youth activists, the stress of activism (see *e.g.*, Hisam, *et al.*, 2017) comes on top of additional life stressors. Indeed, Budziszewska and Głód's (2021) in-depth interviews with youth climate activists from Poland emphasise the struggle the youth activists experience when trying to balance activism with other spheres of life such as education. Youth activists also often experience mental fatigue, exhaustion, and episodes of burnout (*e.g.*, Ballard and Ozer, 2016). Digital media plays a role here. Studies focused on digital media and general youth wellbeing point to burnout and depressive symptoms from intensive or excessive use (Salmela-Aro, *et al.*, 2017). In the context of activism, the accessibility of information through digital media can lead to youth being overly exposed to worrying content about societal issues and problems, which can lead to anxieties around politics (Caporino, *et al.*, 2020) or climate change specifically (Brophy, *et al.*, 2023). Some scholars thus ask "whether the growing rise of mental health issues in adolescents (*e.g.*, depression, anxiety) can be attributed to technologies such as social media" (Burr, *et al.*, 2020).

Green, *et al.'s* (2023) third dimension, family relationships, relates to adolescents' need for a secure and safe environment (Green, *et al.*, 2023), confirming previous research indicating that family relationships play a crucial role in adolescent wellbeing (Navarro, *et al.*, 2017). In terms of youth activism, much past research examined the linkage between the activism of parents and the activism of their children, arriving at mixed results (*e.g.*, Zawadzka, *et al.*, 2018). Yet climate change, and the *Fridays For Future* (*FFF*) movement specifically, pose a significant shift here. As the *FFF* movement began with school strikes, it centred the question of power relationships between "adults" (parents, school principals, teachers) and "children" (or minors) in youth activism (*e.g.*, Mattheis, 2022). Considering this also exposed adults as having a possible negative influence on youth activists' wellbeing. For instance, media representations of youth activists tend to reproduce existing power structures and delegitimise youth political actions (*e.g.*, Huttunen and Albrecht, 2021). Research by Vochocová, *et al.* (2024) analysing online media

representations of *FFF* youth activists suggested that adults exclude youth from the public sphere by denying youth activists an expert position, and by ascribing them so-called aberrant values. In fact, in our research, family relationships did not come up as a significant dimension in relation to activists' digital media use — which is in and of itself an important finding that will be further explored later in the discussion.

Indeed, Taylor (2011) emphasised that we need to keep asking "which relationships and contexts are generative of individual wellbeing". If youth activists are not treated as equals, are not being included in decision-making, and are being denied voice and agency, then they are not receiving the conditions beneficial to their wellbeing. This connects to the fourth dimension of youth wellbeing, self-confidence, which consists of youths' self-esteem, agency, and identity (Green, *et al.*, 2023). For youth activists, self-esteem and a sense of agency can be enhanced by learning and practising skills such as communication and public speaking, time management and planning, strategic thinking, or leadership (Budziszewska and Głód, 2021). In contrast, their self-confidence may be threatened by, for example, activist guilt, or encountering negative responses online, as mentioned earlier. Digital media are seen as playing a fundamental role in youths' civically and politically oriented agency, as it enables new forms of engagement and activism (Bennett, 2007; Earl, *et al.*, 2017). However, some suggest that both contemporary culture and digital media are failing to fully achieve their shared democratic and participatory potential (Jenkins, 2019) — perhaps due to the high demands this form of participation places on young participants, particularly young activists.

Research, however, also consistently shows that youth activists see their experiences as something that has taught them resilience (Downton and Wehr, 1998), emotional adjustment (Pancer, *et al.*, 2007), and strategies for coping with work overload and stress, *e.g.*, paying attention to self-care, or setting boundaries around time spent on social media (Conner, *et al.*, 2023, 2021). As the most important coping strategy, and as one of the main advantages of belonging to an activist community, youth activists mention the possibility of connecting with others and supporting each other (Conner, *et al.*, 2023; Harré, 2007). This additionally nurtures their sense of connectedness (Montague and Eiroa-Orosa, 2018), while positively contributing to their wellbeing. These peer relationships and feelings of belonging fall under Green, *et al.'s* [5] dimension of *feeling respected, appreciated, and loved*. In their focus groups with adolescent human rights activists, Montague and Eiroa-Orosa (2018) found that making friends, working on shared goals, and belonging to a group of like-minded people contributed to youth activists' wellbeing. Digital media can play a central role here, both in creating — and sometimes in harming — intimacy and relationships during adolescence (Livingstone and Sefton-Green, 2016).

The present study thus aims to unpack the complex relationship between youth activism, digital media, and wellbeing through an in-depth ethnographic study. Our case study focuses on a central issue of youth concern — that of climate change, and on the most prominent youth-led movement pursuing it — *Fridays for Future*. The movement, started by Swedish activist Greta Thunberg, had a reverberating effect throughout the CEE region as well. With hundreds of mostly elementary and high school students joining the movements in both Czechia and Hungary, this offered a perfect occasion to comparatively explore youth activists' experience of digital media and wellbeing, within the same movement but in differing sociocultural and political environments.

Methodology

Critical and comparative ethnography: Fridays For Future in Czechia and Hungary

This paper is part of a larger research project, aimed at ethnographically exploring youths' experience of activism and digital media. The topic of wellbeing emerged as a central concern for youth activists, leading us to the following research question: *How do youth activists experience the relationship between their use*

of digital media for activism and their subjective wellbeing? We address this question through a critical and comparative ethnography, focused on youth activists from *Fridays for Future* Czechia and Hungary.

We focus on these two countries for a number of reasons. First, the countries share a similar path after the fall of communism, which includes an instant transition to capitalism (Kalmar, 2022) that greatly influenced the socio-economic status of their citizens. These divisions then led to a rebellion against liberal values, and the rise of the so-called illiberalism (Laruelle, 2022). In the context of these broader socio-political conditions, research by Vochocová and colleagues (2024) discovered that in both countries, youth climate justice activists are being discursively excluded from the public sphere in two ways: by referring to *normative roles* suitable for children and youth, and through using *value-based labelling — i.e.*, referring to them pejoratively as liberals (in both countries), leftists and (neo)marxists (in Czechia), and pro-global and Western elites (in Hungary).

Value-based labelling also helps to illustrate differences in the contexts between the two countries. In Czechia, there is a prevailing negative attitude towards anything reminiscent of socialism and communism, while at the same time there is a continuous perception from the communist past that sees youth activism as a form of rebellion (Kárníková, 2024). When it comes to global and other international issues, public opinion is highly polarised, which applies also to climate justice, which further polarises the already divided public and deepens cultural wars (Vochocová, *et al.*, 2023). The leading political parties in Czechia recognize climate change as an issue, however, the level of attention they pay to it and the agendas they have in relation to it vary as greatly as the public opinion.

Hungary, under the regime of Viktor Orbán, has experienced a highly segmented and politicised public sphere, where the state tries to control media pluralism and freedom of opinion through the structure of financing (Polyák and Szávai, 2018). This, in turn, also influences public debates on the climate crisis, which is again highly politicised and brought out of the scientific realm (Vancsó and Kovács-Magosi, 2024).

Within these complex contexts, *Fridays for Future* Hungary and Czechia were established. The global movement *Fridays for Future* started in 2018, after then-15-year-old activist Greta Thunberg protested in front of the Swedish Parliament to demand climate action. Her protest inspired millions of young people around the world, who started national and local chapters of the movement. *FFF* Hungary (HU) was established in February 2019, and it is based mostly in the capital, Budapest. At the time of research it had approximately 20 active members who organised various events, from strikes to school visits, with around 50 sporadic participants. *FFF* HU was active on a number of digital media platforms: they have their own Web site as well as Facebook and Instagram accounts — all run by youth activists. *FFF* Czechia (CZ) started with more than 10,000 Czech youth joining the global strike in September 2019. At the time of research, participants estimated that there were around 60 very active members on a national level, and more than 500 sporadic participants. *FFF* CZ is a national movement, but it has a number of local branches too. They use various social media platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Slag, and Signál. Although *FFF* CZ and HU consider themselves youth movements, with most of the members below 20 years of age, membership is open to all participants interested, and thus age ranges of activists participating in our research vary.

To gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experience of youth activists in these two countries, we conducted a year-long (February 2022 — January 2023) critical and comparative ethnographic research. Our approach was critical, as it began with the ethical responsibility to address injustices that youth activists often face. We were attentive to power and inequality, ultimately wishing to make a contribution that leads toward “greater freedom and equity” [6]. It was ethnographic as the first two authors, as observers or performative witnesses, did the ground work within “a sustained, body to body, environment” [7]. It was comparative as we were building our argument through the analysis of two cases, “tacking back and forth between cases to identify either similarities or differences in the processes, meanings, concepts, or events across them in the service of broad theoretical arguments” [8].

In practice, our comparative approach was operationalized through regular meetings and debriefs with the teams doing fieldwork in the two countries for sharing experiences and thoughts on the process. In both countries we also closely collaborated with our Youth Expert Board (YEB), which we established prior to the field research as a consultancy board of youth activists, three from each country. The YEB members knew each other through joint Central-Eastern European *FFF* initiatives and events, which further allowed us to consult with them on our comparative findings.

Field research and data analysis

Our fieldwork included a multi-sited ethnography with shorter-term periods of field research, during which we incorporated the perspectives of social actors by observing a range of online and offline events such as demonstrations, organisational and recruitment meetings, gathering weekends, and more. For further details about the ethnographic field research (both offline and online) please see Table 1. The digital ethnography data did not provide findings that were relevant to the topic, and is discussed elsewhere (Neag and Nainová, 2024).

Here, our focus is on the data gathered through on-site observations, summarised in Table 1, and in-depth individual and semi-structured group interviews, summarised in Table 2. The 18 individual interviews (henceforth abbreviated as II; seven in CZ, eleven in HU) were conducted in person as well as online during the entire fieldwork period. Some were arranged in advance, others were conducted without prior planning during the observations. Three semi-structured group interviews (GI) were conducted at the end of the field work and were informed by the data gathered through proceeding observations and individual interviews. These aimed at eliciting youth activists' reflection on (1) the role of digital media in their individual and collective activism, (2) their own media and digital literacy knowledge and skills, and (3) the role of youth activism in their wellbeing. The first group interview (GI1) involved four *FFF* CZ activists; Group interview 2 (GI2) included three *FFF* HU activists; and Group interview 3 (GI3) included three CZ and three HU core members of *FFF* who were also the members of our Youth Expert Board.

The research participants for individual and group interviews were selected through snowball sampling with the help of our YEB, while aiming for diverse participants in terms of their demographic characteristics (age, gender, geographical location) and the level of involvement in *FFF*. Table 2 includes further information about the participants. Future research could also account for research participants' ethnicity and their social and educational background.

Table 1: Summary of events observed.

Fieldwork		**Online/in person**
Czechia	Observation of strikes in Prague and Dresden (Germany)	In person
	Observations of two national gathering weekends — Prague and Brno	In person
	Observation of CEE international strike + CEE international weekend in Prague (*FFF* HU included)	In person
	Online observations of meetings, recruitment calls, and educational events	Online
	Digital ethnography on Instagram with	

	five activists	Online
	Online observations of official CZ social media pages	Online
Hungary	Eight *FFF* strikes in Budapest	In person
	Observation of four FFF meetings and workshops	In person
	Digital ethnography on Instagram with four activists	Online
	Online observations of official HU *FFF* pages	Online

Table 2: Summary of interview participants.

Country	Number	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Youth Expert Board	Individual interview	Group interview	Digital ethnography
Czechia	P1	Veronika	17	female			X	X
	P2	Petr	17	male		X	X	X
	P3	Karolína	17	female			X	X
	P4	Nela	17	female				X
	P5	Elena	16	female			X	X
	P6	Martin	19	male	X	X	X	
	P7	Marta	17	female	X	X	X	
	P8	Thea	20	female	X	X	X	
	P9	Roza	16	female		X		
	P10	Eva	17	female		X		
	P11	Dana	20	female		X		
Hungary	P12	Laura	17	female	X	X	X	X
	P13	Anna	17	female		X	X	X
	P14	Erika	17	female		X	X	X
	P15	Nóra	17	female		X	X	X
	P16	Liza	17	female		X		
	P17	Juli	16	female		X		
	P18	Misi	30	male	X	X	X	

	P19	Rita	19	female		X		
	P20	Nelli	24	female		X		
	P21	Babett	23	female		X	X	
	P22	Kata	18	female	X	X		

Strict legal and ethical standards were adhered to, and ethical clearance was received from Charles University's Ethics Committee #2022/1. The research materials like information leaflets and written consent forms for youth participants were translated into Czech and Hungarian and all necessary details about the research were explained to the participants. During the interviews, the participants were made aware of their rights and the possibility to terminate their participation at any time. The researchers also paid attention to nonverbal cues indicating any possible discomfort. During the observations, significant care was taken not to disturb the events. However, the youth activists were very welcoming, often inviting the research team to join them. Consequently, the research team engaged in ongoing reflections on subjectivity, power relationships, and other potential issues that may have arisen during the fieldwork (Madison, 2020).

We applied hermeneutic reading to the data analysis and interpretation (Alsahig and Coyne, 2021). Responsive and dialogic engagement with the research texts (interview transcripts, observation notes, photographs, and screenshots) was at the heart of our approach, constantly moving back and forth between parts and the whole, as well as between the data from one country and the other. This approach allowed us to account for cross-nationally overlapping as well as differing contexts (do Amaral, 2022) of the youths' lived experience of activism, digital media, and wellbeing. Importantly, though, our aim was less to contrast the experiences of activists in the two countries, and more to use the two contexts to gain a richer understanding of their joint overall experience. This is in line with Simmons and Smith's (2019) approach, taking into consideration the inherent complexity, ambiguity and sometimes, incoherence of multiple cases, opening "new possibilities for theorizing in ways that are productively different from single-case ethnography" [9]. The hermeneutic reading of our data, however, was also intuitive and empathetic, because even a "rigorous human science is prepared to be *soft, soulful, subtle*, and *sensitive* in its effort to bring the range of meanings of life's phenomena to our reflective awareness" [10].

In what follows, we present our findings through four of the five dimensions of youth subjective wellbeing identified by Green, *et al.* (2023): 1) having impact, purpose, and meaning; 2) dealing with stress and worry; 3) feeling respected, appreciated, and loved, and, 4) self-confidence. As briefly mentioned before, *Green et al.'s* (2023) fifth dimension — family relationships — did not appear meaningfully in relation to digital media within the research study, a finding we consider again in the discussion. To fully address our research question, we consider within each dimension how using digital media as part of their activism both supported, and challenged, youth activists' wellbeing.

When citing the participants in the following section, we use pseudonyms, while referring to their participant number and the form of interview that they participated in. To be consistent with the *FFF* HU and CZ values as observed in our research, we generally refrain from labelling participants through age and gender, as participants repeatedly objected to having their thoughts and feelings be read through this lens.

Czech and Hungarian youth activists' lived experience of digital media and wellbeing

Having impact, purpose, and meaning

In this dimension, we consider the extent to which activism through digital media was able to provide youth activists with a sense of purpose and the feeling that they can contribute to society and have a positive impact on others. However, we also examine which aspects of digital media use for activism can obstruct a sense of self-efficacy.

For the youth activists, digital media played a central role in how they first learned about climate change (*e.g.*, reading news from green NGOs on Facebook) and began making individual choices that reflected that attitude (*e.g.*, becoming vegetarians and vegans after watching online documentaries) even before joining the movement. Likewise, most youth activists learnt about the national chapters of *FFF* for the first time through social media. Upon joining, digital media continued to be central to their initial as well as continuous involvement, as Eva (P10, II) describes:

> "I got in touch [through Facebook] with the local group from [small Czech town] and they told me, ok, so simply come [to a Zoom meeting] on Monday, we'll send you a link, so go on that link, and that was it."

Having information about the movement easily accessible online, and making joining *FFF* easy, was helpful for youth. Being worried about climate change alone was stressful, but joining a movement alleviated that feeling, as Misi (P18, GI3) described in his group interview: "I was alone with my fears and my concerns, and now I am no longer [alone]." This aspect of the power of togetherness was something the movement actively communicated online. Martin (P6, GI3) explained in his group interview how in *FFF* CZ "We're trying to ... show them that they're not alone in ... [things] they care [about]."

Indeed, many activists described finding a sense of purpose and meaning in activism. Through their work with the movement, they came to gain a sense of self-efficacy; to believe that they could make an impact, while using digital media to do so:

> "I take as an advantage [of digital media] the incredible outreach that it has because we can inform or mobilise people all over the world ... within days and hours ... And at the same time, being able to ... arrange different meetings and stuff like that, that's amazing." (Petr, P2, II).

At the same time, the ability to access unfiltered information about climate justice, which often conveyed the message that there was little or no improvement achieved, obstructed their sense of impact. Many shared experiences of activist guilt, the sense that, as Thea (P8, GI3) described, "maybe you are not doing enough or you feel like it's not enough."

In their attempt to make a meaningful impact in terms of climate change, the youth made abundant use of social media. They developed strategies for using varied features afforded by digital media (*e.g.*, use of text, images, videos) to reach different demographics to inform and educate. They used TikTok to reach the youngest, Facebook for older audiences, Instagram to reach their peers, and Twitter to speak to the media. Social media also enabled youth to expand their activist connections beyond the movement, by following other activists and being inspired by them. It also offered a possibility to have an effect even beyond the movement, as they posted about other societal issues such as children's or women's rights, or the war in Ukraine. Some also used social media to document their activism. For instance, Laura (P12) posted about her trip to the European Parliament together with other CEE activists to urge politicians to take urgent steps around the climate crisis. Alongside giving them purpose and meaning, the possibility to gain support and positive feedback through social media, including from adults, also positively contributed to their wellbeing. As Martin (P6, GI) described: "we have some super fans who [comment] like under every second post." Of course, social media can also be the source of negative reactions, a point that will be further discussed under the dimension of stress and worry.

Finally, while digital media were a central tool for the movement's organisation and internal communication, the youth agreed that — in terms of feeling a sense of purpose and belonging — it was crucial to balance digital communication with personal, face-to-face contact. They found that meeting in person was always more effective and beneficial to everyone's wellbeing. The memory of COVID pandemic lockdowns often loomed, as this was a period where participants felt it was hard to keep the movement alive and maintain a positive mood.

Some aspects of the two national chapters differed in regards to taking part in digital vs. face-to-face activism. In Czechia, some activists felt that the size and the complexity of *FFF* CZ made it difficult to stay active and involved in the movement beyond the *FFF* in their town. Eva (P10, II) confessed: "It is really happening a lot online [and] I still haven't learnt how to make a meeting on Zoom ... I'm lost in all the groups and chats on Slag ... It makes more sense to be involved in the local *FFF* where we can meet easily in person." In Hungary, in contrast, the movement was significantly smaller, with no local chapters and with all the core members being based in Budapest. Thus, digital media were not a necessity, nor an obstacle, to those we observed and interviewed. In fact, Anna (P13), who was a main organiser for *FFF* HU, did not own a smartphone, while Liza (P16) made a conscious choice not to be on social media.

Dealing with stress and worry

In this dimension, we highlight how the youth activists experienced varied stressors, many of which were related to use of digital media, as well as how they developed and applied varied coping strategies, both on the individual level (discussed in this dimension), and on the collective level (discussed under the fourth dimension).

Among the main stressors was the young participants' feeling that their activism required them to be online, connected, and always "on" — more than they would have preferred if they weren't activists, and more than they considered good for their wellbeing. Activists mentioned negative aspects on both a physical and a mental level:

> "During our social media campaigns, I'm on my phone like twenty-four-seven, so my eyes hurt like crazy." (Marta, P7, GI3)

> "Even if you are, like, resting, you sit on the couch, but you are overwhelmed with everything, [so] that you cannot rest." (Martin, P6, GI3)

Beyond the need to be constantly connected, a significant stressor — one that had young participants truly worried and even scared — were the negative and hateful responses they received online. Elena (P5, II) said that when using social media for activism, "there's an awful lot of stress, hate." The activists felt that social media put them on display, as if they had to be constantly careful not to give the media or the public anything that they could pick up on: "we're afraid that, you know, people might, you know, say that we preach things that we do not do ourselves." (Misi, P18, GI3)

National context played a role in this sense. The Hungarian youth activists highlighted that, given the significant polarisation around an anti- vs. pro-governmental axis, they needed to be very careful about sharing content critical of the government: "we need to stay very far away from partisanship." (Erika, P14, II) At times, young activists in both countries experienced discouragement by the public, not only online, but also during their face-to-face events and strikes. For instance, during the Czech national strike in May 2022 in Prague, when the youth activists chanted "people over profit", a man passing by at the parade shouted in response: "we don't want young communists". While this occurred both in Czechia and in Hungary, the Czech *FFF* activists seemed to feel the pressure to perform well publicly considerably more than their Hungarian fellow activists. In a group interview including participants from both countries, Laura (P12) from Hungary said to the Czech activists: "we are more relaxed about [our public performance]

because we know that the media does not really care".

Furthermore, Czech activists experienced more severe instances of online hatred, including verbal online attacks directed against them specifically, both in press and on social media, including in personal messages. This is illustrated in two longer quotes, both from 17-year-old Czech activists. The first was, at the time of the research, the most visible *FFF* CZ youth activist; while the second quote is from a participant who was just appointed as *FFF* CZ's young spokesperson:

> "People, like, started telling me to die and stuff like that, and writing horrible comments on my personal Instagram ... And, of course, you know that if you share publicly that you are, for example, queer and then something like in Bratislava [a shooting incident in a queer club] happens, you don't feel good about what it can bring. And suddenly you know that people around you know, and that if someone has called you before to tell you to die, that's not a good feeling." Karolína, P3, GI2

> "I don't want to [read comments], but I kind of have to because it's still beeping on my phone because of coordinating everything and it's like, sometimes we are like laughing about it and it's like, okay, they are calling us ... non-gender ... but then ... I'm like seen in newspapers and in podcasts ... some journalists are following us ... on personal accounts on Twitter and Instagram ... so we just have to be, like, a bit careful ... and trying to be, like, so professional ... forgetting we are just activists, children, and young people ... instead, trying to be really serious ... putting so much work in this, we are like burnt out ... and these people are still like talking, they're like threatening us to stop breathing." Marta, P7, GI3

As Thea (P8, GI3) summarised it, and many Czech activists agreed: "it affects you differently if the negative comments are against *FFF* or against you personally, if it is you the person [that is] being attacked — that is very hard."

Given these stressors, the thought of disconnecting from social media altogether came across their mind several times, but their activism made this hard:

> "I sometimes get the feeling that I spend too much [time] on Instagram and I want to delete it for, I don't know, a couple of weeks, but then I'm just like, okay, but how will I then send or post stories about upcoming events with *FFF*?" (Kata, P22, GI1)

> "If I could walk away from social media or digital spaces in general, I would do it now. Because I know that if I weren't an activist, I'd buy an old Nokia and I'd be OK." (Karolína, P3, GI2)

Since disconnecting from digital media was not considered feasible for most young activists, they instead took individual as well as collective steps to protect their own and/or other members' wellbeing. Individual strategies included rationalising, and trying to see the positive side of things:

> "Negative comments means we reached out of our green bubble." (Misi, P18, GI3)

> "Any confrontation with people helps me to develop my arguments." (Petr, P2, II)

Moreover, learning when not to respond and defend themselves and/or the movement was also an important coping strategy: "I also don't feel any need to fight for my opinion in any way… it's more useful to put that time into something else." (Veronika, P1, II) As additional coping mechanisms, some strictly separated their personal and public social media accounts, some learnt to express themselves differently on diverse platforms based on how friendly and safe they perceived them (*e.g.*, prioritising Instagram over Facebook), while others adjusted what they saw on their social media accounts to be "more positive", "feminist", or "funny".

All in all, the ability to develop coping mechanisms was important for participants' self-confidence, which will be explored in the next dimension.

Self-confidence

In this dimension, we consider young people's self-esteem, agency, and identity. Being engaged in activism provided youth with multiple opportunities to learn and develop in varied spheres — here, we focus primarily on gaining digital literacy skills, and their role for activists' self-confidence and self-esteem.

Importantly, participants ascribed some of their growing digital literacy simply to maturing with age: "I started when I was 14 and now I'm almost 18, so that's a part of development." (Karolína, P3, GI2) Yet being engaged in activism and in the movement had, according to them, provided them many and varying opportunities to develop and learn. Petr (P2, II) summarises the areas of digital literacy in which he feels he improved:

> "The constant reflection that we had in *Fridays*, we take much pride in that because every step we took, we asked ourselves if ... we've done what we could have done ... and always factored it in the future."

An additional digital media skill Petr mentions benefitting from is information retrieval: "I like getting new information ... from various online gadgets and tools ... [it] is such a powerful skill ... it has more of a mind-benefiting effect ... I grow tremendously by doing that."

Digital media enabled activists to follow other activists and movements, as a way of educating themselves: "I follow Greenpeace and the Rainbow Movement and I click through all the stuff they have there and the workshops and I really enjoy it." (Eva, P10, II) Observing peers in their use of digital platforms inspired youth activists, and raised their confidence to do so as well: "It did help me to see other people posting about this ... and so it gave me more confidence to post or do something like that myself." (Anna, P13, II) However, seeing others doing things better online or being more active online also made some of the youth activists doubt themselves:

> "I actually found out that I'm not very good at it [promoting an activist related event online] and that I don't know how to do it. Whether from a visual point of view, such as when I create some infographics or events, so I can't actually do that at all. And I didn't really know how to address those people, so it was very amateurish, I would say. I looked at how the social networks of Dresden Fridays are, and they are nice, quite." (Roza, P9, II)

Additionally, in both countries, *FFF* engaged in proactively educating members. For instance, the *FFF* HU

Web site included an online handbook on how to organise strikes, with a special section on how to publicise the event on social media platforms. Within the WoW ("vzdělávání o víkendu" meaning "education during weekend") event organised by *FFF* CZ, one of the lectures focused on writing an effective social media post. Youth activists reported mostly enjoying learning about digital and social media, and that feeling a sense of progress was satisfying: "I don't know if there is anyone who reads [my social media posts], but it feels good." (Anna, P13, II) Moreover, there was a general sense of self-confidence and personal growth, which came from improving digital skills and knowledge, some of which activists saw as transferable to their everyday lives: "I love how I'm learning and improving." (Eva, P10, II)

Feeling respected, appreciated, and loved

In this dimension, we consider the extent to which youth activists feel heard, seen, and have the sense that they are within a supporting and encouraging social environment. In youth activists' experiences, the main focus here was on peers. Participants developed and maintained relationships with other youth activists, both online and offline, that played a profoundly positive role in their wellbeing. At the same time, these relationships were not without complications, and maintaining them required individual and collective attention.

The collective atmosphere in the movement was described by the youth activists through terms like spiritual togetherness and feeling of safety. This did not happen on its own, but rather, there were collective mechanisms in place to create a supportive environment. For instance, care was taken among the members to use digital media in a way that would lighten the mood. Such a positive vibe stood out, *e.g.*, Hungarian *FFF* posts included pictures of them hugging each other; or the Czech *FFF* had a friendly 'online hummus argument' during which they posted videos arguing which hummus flavour is the best (*e.g.*, carrot or coriander?). The importance of laughing together was repeatedly observed both online and in person, and was also confirmed during the interviews by the activists.

Beyond keeping a positive vibe, the *FFF* CZ and HU members paid specific attention to the topic of wellbeing. Digital media were important here in affording the possibility of "sharing all kinds of emotions" (Karolína, P3, GI2) between the activists. For instance, being connected through mobile phones and social media allowed activists to always be able to reach out when feeling overwhelmed with activist guilt, climate anxiety, overload with information and work, and/or negative reactions to their activism: "I think it's important for people who think about an important issue to be surrounded by people who think the same way and who can help each other." (Erika, P14, II) At the same time, there were instances in which digital media seemed counterproductive for intimate sharing. Illustrating this, during the CEE gathering weekend in Prague, which was organised by Czech *FFF* but also included the Hungarian activists, there was a session devoted to sharing of feelings — during which participants were not allowed to use mobile devices or laptops, and were asked to stay present, focused, and sensitive towards others.

The same weekend event also included a designated 'awareness team', whose role was to focus on the wellbeing of participants. Posters with photos of the team-members and their contact details were posted online, as well as hung physically on walls. The focus on wellbeing in this event was not unusual. Laura (P12) said about Hungarian *FFF* meetings, occuring online and in person: "We have a circle time at the beginnings of meetings where everybody shares how they are doing." In general, *FFF* CZ and HU youth activists were in the habit of checking in on each other, not only during events or when someone reached out to them, but also on a regular basis. This collective endeavour, in turn, also shaped individual attention to wellbeing. As Karolína (P3, GI2) summarised: "I feel like it's only with *Fridays* that I started thinking about wellbeing."

A final important aspect to mention in terms of appreciation and respect has to do with inclusivity. *FFF* of both countries took much pride in being tolerant, open, equality-driven, and accepting of all. Activists were repeatedly observed discussing how they could reach out to wider youth demographics, *e.g.*, youth from ethnic minorities in Hungary, or youth from vocational schools in Czechia. At the same time, though, these very values of inclusivity and equality had to be shared among members as a prerequisite to feeling

included and welcome. We did observe instances in which those inclined to radical opinions and actions, who shared them on social media, were treated with caution in the movement. Among members, it seemed a well-known fact that these activists did not feel as comfortable in the movement as those sticking to moderate activism.

Discussion and conclusion

This critical and comparative ethnographic research with youth activists involved in *Fridays For Future* Czechia and Hungary provides a deeper understanding of how youth activism through digital media both contributes to, and burdens, activists' subjective wellbeing. Within each of the four wellbeing dimensions raised by Green, *et al.* (2023) which were present in our research, we witnessed youth activists navigating and negotiating their uses of digital media in a way that benefited their activism, while allowing them to maintain their wellbeing. Central here was the understanding that using digital media for activism can also be a source of strength and resilience. Still, finding this equilibrium was a constant challenge-one that at times seemed even unachievable — because the requirements of active engagement in activism were often in opposition to what the activists perceived as healthy digital media use habits.

For instance, activism was often perceived to require digital media use that can be intensive or even excessive (Salmela-Aro, *et al.*, 2017), or resulted in experiencing heated responses and hateful content that can discourage and delegitimise activists' opinions and actions (Huttunen and Albrecht, 2021). Such negative experiences contributed to young people's exhaustion and episodes of burnout (Ballard and Ozer, 2016), mental and physical problems (Šmahel, *et al.*, 2015), and anxieties about climate change and politics (Brophy, *et al.*, 2023; Caporino, *et al.*, 2020). There were times where, to protect the movement and themselves against negative responses, they were straining — and restraining — themselves more than they thought should be required from adolescents trying to contribute to a better society. At the same time, youth activists were encouraged by the strong belief that through using digital media for activism (Chon and Park, 2019), they could positively contribute to society and make an impact around climate change, a topic that's so central to them (Fuligni, 2019; Budziszewska and Głód, 2021; Katz, *et al.*, 2021).

Acknowledging this, the youth activists engaged in a constant effort, both on the individual as well as the collective level, to balance the see-saw of wellbeing (Dodge, *et al.*, 2012). As Weinstein [11] similarly concluded in her qualitative study with adolescents: "the emotional see-saw of social media use is weighted by both positive and negative influences." Being attentive to wellbeing and self-care has been described as a defining characteristic of "Gen Z" (Katz, *et al.*, 2021), and the *FFF* CZ and HU activists seemed to reflect this. They were developing coping strategies (Conner, *et al.*, 2023, 2021), including attempts to find an optimal balance between connectivity and disconnectivity (Abeele, 2021; Abeele and Nguyen, 2022). The more they gained a sense of resilience and emotional adjustment (Downton and Wehr, 1998; Pancer, *et al.*, 2007), strengthened their social ties with other youth activists (Harré, 2007; Montague and Eiroa-Orosa, 2018), and developed digital literacy skills (Kahne and Boyer, 2019), the more they seemed capable of countering the challenges they faced with appropriate resources. The pursuit of wellbeing was therefore mostly in the hands of the youth activists, including support from the movement — which basically means from their peers.

While this puts much agency on young activists, many of whom cope with laudable resilience, we should not accept this status quo. Indeed, it is worrisome that in maintaining the sense of equilibrium in relation to digital media use in activism, youth activists were so heavily depending on themselves and their peers. There was no mention of adults or formal institutions playing a positive and supportive role in this process. It is telling here that the fifth dimension discussed by Green, *et al.* (2023), *family relationships*, was virtually non-existent in activists' experiences of media and technology. Some of the activists mentioned their families and adults, *e.g.*, teachers, in relation to activism and wellbeing, but never in the context of digital media use. In general, adults (*e.g.*, of the general public) were mentioned more as a source of stress

and worry, than as a source of strength and support. This is concerning for many reasons, but especially given the extent and the extremity of hate that some of the activists encountered online, as found in our research as well as in previous studies (*e.g.*, Conner, *et al.*, 2023; Vochocová, *et al.*, 2024). It may be that adults and teachers are less able to support youth activists specifically in the context of digital media use, as this is an arena where young people may be more fluent than man adults; it may also be that the specific topic of climate change is one where intergenerational gaps are more apparent (see Katz, *et al.*, 2021). In any case, while much research and practice hopes to encourage political and civic engagement among youth (Rainsford, 2017; Neag, *et al.*, 2024), while stressing the digital and media literacy skills and knowledge needed for it (Martnes and Hobbs, 2015), it seems we are not yet providing young activists sufficient support in terms of balancing between empowerment, agency, voice — and the maintaining of wellbeing.

Our examination of youth activist wellbeing in the context of digital media use further highlights the importance of the role of the wider sociocultural, political, and geopolitical environment. Not only do we focus here on a context that is understudied — that of Central and Eastern Europe — we also compare between the Czech and Hungarian contexts to obtain a fuller understanding of how activists' experiences are embedded within broader structures. For instance, the Czech youth activists encountering more hateful reactions online could be explained by the greatly polarised public opinion about youth political participation and climate change, where part of the public views climate activists pejoratively as leftists and socialists. Yet it may also reflect the generally hostile online environment in the country, as existing research shows that one fourth of Czech children and youth (age 12–16) encounter hate messages that attack certain groups or individuals on a monthly basis-amounting to the second-highest percentage among 20 European countries (Šmahel, *et al.*, 2020). Vochocová's [12] qualitative analysis of online discourse about underaged activists in Czechia further warns that the "violent expressions go beyond the extreme or far-right political circles, but has [now] penetrated mainstream discussions around youth actors, who are singled out and mocked". While the Hungarian activists experienced less negativity online, this can be partly explained by the public's lack of interest in the topic of climate change (Neag, *et al.*, 2024) and overall lack of media interest in the civic sector (Polyák and Szávai, 2018). The Hungarian activists also admitted to trying to stay as apolitical as possible, in order not to come into the crossfire of the ruling party. Indeed, the current 'illiberal democracy' (Kalmar, 2022) propagated by the government leaves little room for direct dissent.

It is important to note that while the youth activists that we observed and interviewed within our research seemed to represent a rather successful story of resilient youth, with elaborate coping mechanisms, there is a selection bias in play, as we only interviewed those who persisted with their activism, and did not drop out in spite of challenges and difficulties. Among them, only very few activists were able to do meaningful activist work without taking on some of the burden that intensive digital media use entails. Our participants were generally able to balance the pros and cons of digital media uses within their activism — though many learnt this lesson the hard way. Given that these youth activists had to rely heavily on their individual resilience, as well as the youth community (Pfaff, 2009), this begs the question what happens to those who do not find the equilibrium, who do not recover from burnout, or who leave activism feeling too discouraged to ever be civically and politically engaged again. This is an important question for future research on youth wellbeing, digital media, and activism to explore. While we highlighted here the experiences of those activists who chose to keep engaging in activism, and were willing to take on the risks involved in doing so, we are aware that this is a specific experience. Building on our endeavour here, we hope that future studies can bring to the fore further diversity in youth activists' experiences, not only in terms of their demographic characteristic but also in terms of the interaction between the macro-level contexts in which they are operating and their micro-level choices in terms of media use.

The crucial question that we must keep asking is how we as a society can best support the wellbeing of youth who use digital media for activism. Engaging in activism during adolescence may play a crucial role in the political and civic socialisation processes throughout the lifetime (Bacovsky and Fitzgerald, 2023). Moreover, the digital skills and knowledge developed through activism, as discovered in our research, are transferable to the youths' everyday lives penetrated with digital media (Šmahel, *et al.*, 2020), and thus useful beyond their activist endeavours. While being involved in activism may positively contribute to

youth wellbeing during this formative period (Conner, *et al.*, 2021), negative experiences could likewise deter youth from further engagement. From the standpoint of participatory democracy and building a better future, we want to support youth activism in an equitable way — not only for the most resilient youth, but ideally, for all youth.

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Notes

1. Well-being is the preferred U.S. term; in this paper, we mostly use wellbeing, which is the more prevalent U.K. term, except in direct quotes.

2. UNICEF, 2020, p. 12.

3. Dodge, *et al.*, 2012, p. 230.

4. Fuligni, 2019, p. 331.

5. Green, *et al.*, 2023, p. 10.

6. Madison, 2020, p. 5.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Simmons and Smith, 2019, p. 341.

9. Simmons and Smith, 2019, p. 344.

10. van Manen, 1990, p. 18, *emphasis in original*.

11. Weinstein, 2018, p. 3,597.

12. Vochocová, 2023, p. 415.

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