

## Uncovering Protest Paradigm Effect Processes: Representations and Perceptions of Media Protest Coverage Among Greek Youth

ALEXANDROS VLAZAKIS

APHRODITE BAKA

Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece

Youth political participation is intertwined with the complex and antagonistic relationship between the media and contentious political stakeholders. The present study focuses on discussions among young Greek people about public protest coverage by the media and their implications for political participation. Five focus groups were organized with the participation of young adults (mean age = 23 years) with various protest experience. Our thematic analysis highlighted 4 themes according to how protest coverage was represented in the focus groups, as (1) causing negative emotions, (2) doubt-triggering (3) a device of ideological support toward the status quo, and (4) a space of information promoting political participation when alternative media are involved. This article analyzes the content of the focus groups and discusses the perceptions of the youth on the role of the media in contentious politics as well as their implication for shaping the involvement of the youth in collective action and political participation.

*Keywords: media, protest paradigm, system justification, political participation*

Political participation is intertwined with the complex and antagonistic relationship between media and contentious political actors (Boulianne, Koc-Michalska, & Bimber, 2020). More specifically, young people's political participation through institutional channels or unconventional forms such as protest is determined by the participatory spaces and resources available as well as young people's perception of politics and political actors (Soler-i-Martí & Ferrer-Fons, 2015). In this conflictual context, social movements and protesters try to use media coverage of their collective actions as a political resource to mobilize social actors to support their often radical and anti-systemic demands (Della Porta & Diani, 2006) whereas the media promote an institutional and product-based logic that supports the system propaganda (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Kilgo & Harlow, 2019). The present study aims to explore the ways young adults in Greece depict this controversial relationship in discussions on media public protest coverage as well as their implications on status quo justification and/or support of public protest.

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Alexandros Vlazakis: vlazalex@hotmail.com

Aphrodite Baka: abaka@psy.auth.gr

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### Media Representations of Public Protests

A large body of interdisciplinary literature has studied the patterns and typologies of protest coverage by the media (Chan & Lee, 1984; Kilgo & Harlow, 2019; McLeod & Hertog, 1992, 1999), the framing processes and devices used by the media (Dardis, 2006; McLeod & Detenber, 1999; McLeod & Hertog, 1995), and the alternative stance of new digital media toward protest coverage (Camboni, 2020; Galis & Neumayer, 2016). Protest coverage by mainstream media tends to be negative and one-sided, delegitimizing, marginalizing, and demonizing protesters through journalistic practices that represent protesters as deviants or as an isolated minority (McLeod & Detenber, 1999). Furthermore, media protest coverage employs frames that emphasize protest violence and conflict relying on accounts and sources from the official authorities that support the status quo. This pattern of stereotypically covering and framing protests has been described as the *protest paradigm* (Chan & Lee, 1984; McLeod & Detenber, 1999). The protest paradigm has also been characterized as a mechanism of social control (McLeod & Hertog, 1999) and status quo maintenance (Detenber, Gotlieb, McLeod, & Malinkina, 2007) and is the result of both hegemonic ideologies and economic structures as well as personal journalistic biases, conventions, and practices. Nevertheless, while traditionally mainstream media such as television and newspapers are found to systematically ignore or negatively frame protest events, alternative and online media not only cover protests in a more extensive, accurate, and direct way (Fisher, 2018; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012) but also facilitate the creation of social networks of collective action mobilization (Kassem, 2013). Jiang, Jin, and Deng (2022) discern between two “camps of scholars regarding whether social media has avoided the protest paradigm or, through accelerated communication, expanded its influence” (p. 3). Recent studies have recognized protest paradigm typologies in alternative and online media (Poell, 2014); however, others have also focused on the mediation opportunity for audience interactivity with protests and protesters, offered through the unmediated and self-controlled communication as well as technological advances in online media and social networks (Harlow & Johnson, 2011; Harlow, Salaverría, Kilgo, & García-Perdomo, 2017).

The importance of the protest paradigm lies not only in recognizing the patterns and mechanisms of stereotypical protest coverage by the media but also in its effects on audience perceptions concerning protests. Several studies have reported that the protest paradigm negatively influences audience perceptions about protest, collective action awareness, and political mobilization (Arpan et al., 2006; Boyle & Schmierbach, 2009; Detenber et al., 2007; Kilgo & Mourão, 2021; McLeod, 1995; McLeod & Detenber, 1999). High-intensity protest paradigm frames focusing on conflict, violence, and protest delegitimization influence how audiences adopt a critical stance and lower support toward protests at cognitive, emotional, and motivational/ideological levels (Boyle, 2021). However, the study of protest paradigm effects on audiences is still limited and lacks taking into consideration important factors that may also influence audience perceptions of protests, such as controlling political and ideological self-placement, prior attitudes toward protests, or past protest experience (Arpan et al., 2006).

According to Detenber and colleagues (2007), audiences’ exposure to the protest paradigm leads to audience “accessibility bias” (Iyengar, 1990), a cognitive heuristic process that reinforces reduced information processing by audiences, leading them to process mainly the most accessible information, which is protest violence and deviance. Besides, through protest paradigm framing, specific aspects of the protest

event become more salient and visible than others. This selective visibility leads to the disproportionate increase of the attention and importance attributed to the aspects highlighted by protest paradigm (Higgins, 1996). Overall, it is mechanistically clear how exposure to the protest paradigm leads to cognitive biases that affect one's perceptions of political participation. In addition, although understudied, the effect of protest paradigm on audiences' emotional reactions has recently drawn the interest of research, which focuses on the ways delegitimizing frames reduce audiences' protest engagement and mobilization through decreased emotional reactions (Kilgo & Harlow, 2021) as well as through promoting "distinctly disadvantageous feelings toward the groups involved" (Stamps & Mastro, 2020, p. 5).

System justification motivation is another psychosocial factor identified as important in hindering willingness to participate in public protests, thus enhancing the effects of the protest paradigm. According to the theory of system justification, people acquire incentives to justify and rationalize existing social arrangements through social learning processes (Jost & Hunyady, 2003). Justifying and idealizing the status quo is often used as a mechanism for underprivileged social groups to manage various stressors (e.g., the feeling that social order is difficult to change and that the individual has little-to-no control over it; Jost, Nosek, & Gosling, 2008) by promoting the convenient feeling that despite what they experience, the social context is stable, understandable, predictable, and fair (Jost & Hunyady, 2003). The system justification theory has been used to study a range of political and social phenomena of political participation, including the willingness to protest (Jost et al., 2012), protest participation (Badaan et al., 2018), the support for political systems (Wang & Kobayashi, 2021), and collective action (Osborne, Jost, Becker, Badaan, & Sibley, 2019). Findings from research on the relationship between system justification motivation and political participation indicate that system justification "undermines support for progressive forms of protest" and "inspires opposition to or backlash against progressive activists and others who are seen as challenging the societal status quo" (Langer et al., 2019, pp. 16–17).

As discussed earlier, both protest paradigm framing and system justification contribute to the discouragement of engagement in participatory politics. However, previous research both on the effects of the protest paradigm on audiences and of system justification motives do not explore the extent to which these two factors are recognized by audiences—not as observed effects through structured conditions but as dialogically constructed processes—and the implications of such a recognition. The present study explores the ways in which these two mechanisms are included and discussed in youth focus groups dealing with media coverage of protests and their implications for political participation in Greece, a country with a long-standing history of protests.

### **Aim**

The present study focuses on the ways in which media protest coverage is discussed among young students. The relationship between the media and public protests, especially with reference to media mediation and framing processes as well as their effects on the perceptions of the protests, has been examined across various sociopolitical contexts. In addition, cognitive, emotional, and motivational/ideological factors adversely impacting political awareness, mobilization, and participation have been proposed and examined. However, what has not been extensively explored is how the media representation of protests is received and understood by audiences. The aim of our study is to provide the space for young participants to reflect on and discuss the ways

they perceive the role of media (traditional/mainstream and new/alternative) in protest coverage and its effects on themselves, concerning protest mobilization and political participation in mass public political/social protests. We decided to focus on young university students in their early twenties (age range: 22–25 years) as new forms of collective citizenship have been shaped since 2010 through youth participation and new media technologies, as well as the new generation's critical view toward social dominance and status quo maintenance (Pickard, 2019). Greece is a special case in point because the generation who lived through the sociopolitical events of the 2010s developed a perception of active political participation in the aftermath of the en masse student protests, which have been part of the wider wave of protests in Greece following the 2008 Athens riots. Besides, this is the generation shaping the future of public participation in democratic processes following a decade of political uncertainty and democratic backsliding.

Due to the participants' age and protest experience, the focus discussions revolved around the anti-austerity protest cycle of 2010–2014 in Greece, the 2015 Yes/No Greek bailout referendum, and protests from the student movement. The anti-austerity protest cycle—from the heavy protests following the second bailout program in February 2012 to the mass rallies of the "Yes/No" campaigns during the 2015 referendum—was characterized by the complete alignment of mainstream media to hegemonic interpretations of the crisis and austerity measures (Nikolaidis, 2015), the appropriation of corporate social media, such as Facebook and Twitter (Galis & Neumayer, 2016), and the rise of cooperative journalism (Siapera & Papadopoulou, 2016) and alternative media as a means of counter-information, diversity, and inclusion as well as direct mobilization (Lekakis, 2017).

### **Materials and Methods**

The data for the present study were obtained through focus group discussions. Focus groups were used as a research technique due to their advantage of offering participants the opportunity to express their personal views on the topic of research as well as participate in the dialogical reconstruction of the social object of interest in the context of a group interaction. In addition, focus groups were chosen as they would offer multiple meanings and meanings revealed by the participants on the topics discussed, thus allowing the researcher to explore why an issue is prominent in the discussion as well as what makes it important (Acocella & Cataldi, 2021).

Five focus groups took place in May 2020 in Thessaloniki, the second most populous Greek city, with the participation of 26 university students aged between 20 and 25 years (mean age = 23 years, mean number of participants per group = 5). The majority (65.3%;  $n = 17$ ) of participants were female and 34.7% ( $n = 9$ ) were male. Eleven participants (42.3%) had prior experience in participating in a protest event at least once in their life. Participants were recruited from among different students' political organizations through convenience sampling as initial participants were asked to refer a group of three or four acquaintances of similar age to the focus groups. Researchers included students from young political organizations across the political spectrum of left-right. This snowball sampling is well used in social research as a sampling procedure focusing on the reliance on networking (Parker, Scott, & Geddes, 2019), which was assessed as extremely useful in building focus groups of people of the same age and interested in discussing the topic of research.

The discussions in the focus groups lasted from one and a half to two hours and were semi-structured and based on open questions eliciting participants' perceptions of public protests (the term was left undefined by the researcher) and their coverage by the media. An example of how such open questions were phrased is "What is your opinion on the media coverage of protests?" or "What do you think/feel when you watch/read news about protests?"<sup>1</sup> Participants were free to express their views, thoughts, beliefs, or even recollections on the topic of media protest coverage in Greece and discuss them to reproduce the process of shaping a mutual understanding of the issue in this specific group. Despite the fact that a range of variables has been identified affecting the audience perceptions of media protest coverage, such as protest experience, media trust, and media consumption, the present research focused on mapping the topics that emerged from the discourse of participants on media protest coverage rather than exploring specific variables' effects. Although conceptual and ideological differences in terms used to describe public protest have been recognized in previous research (Kananovich, 2022), the present research intentionally did not focus on a specific protest event or group as this was beyond the scope of this research and would restrict the answers of participants on the topic discussed.

The focus group discussions were transcribed with pseudo-anonymization involving replacing the participants' names with artificial identifiers. The thematic analysis six-phase approach, as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2012), was used as a method of data analysis to identify, discern, organize, and reconstruct the content of the focus groups. We adopted a purely qualitative and interpretative approach to identify and analyze patterns in youth's discourse that not only describe the ways they perceive the complex relationship between media and protests but also provide a rich level of interpretation of the core perceptions of youth on political engagement. The researchers independently created initial codes from the focus group transcriptions, exploring participants' dialogues on how protest coverage by the media is conceived by them and how this affects their perceptions of topics of broader political interest than the protest itself. For example, codes such as "fear," "distress," "violence," "war movie," "turbulence," and "loss of control" were created to mirror participants' accounts of their feelings when watching news on protests, a topic brought up spontaneously in all focus groups. Being similar in meaning, these codes were classified under the main theme of "Negative emotions toward protest."

## Results

Across all focus groups, protest media coverage was presented as being important in shaping the audiences' political participation and collective action mobilization. Participants mainly focused on the effect of protest coverage on audiences' negative attitudes toward conflictual phenomena and political involvement. However, positive effects of media protest coverage on audience were also discussed. Our thematic analysis highlighted four themes used by participants when discussing the media coverage of protest. The first theme, "Negative emotions toward protest," describes how protest framing by mainstream media is conceived as responsible for negative emotional responses toward protests and unconventional political participation. The second theme, "Doubt-triggering against collective action," presents participants'

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<sup>1</sup> The focus groups discussion guide is available in the supplementary file (<https://www.dropbox.com/s/8udw22odtguk0rx/SUPPL%20FILE%20-%20Focus%20Groups%20Discussion%20Guide.docx?dl=0>).

views on the cognitive effect of protest framing, which leads to them adopting a doubtful stance toward collective action events, while the third theme "Ideological support for the status quo" describes how content from the focus groups is used to elucidate how participants view protest framing as a tool that facilitates the reproduction of the dominant ideology and serves as a system justification device. Finally, the fourth theme, "Alternative media and participatory politics," explores how alternative media are represented as spaces of unmediated information and collective action dissemination and networking.

### ***Negative Emotions Toward Protest***

The first theme focuses on how the participants' discussions on media coverage of protests placed emphasis on repetitive images of violence and conflict and demonizing the protesters evokes strong negative emotions, defined mainly as distress and fear.

Coordinator: Would you like to describe the first thing that comes to your mind when you come across news concerning protests?

Natalie: I think it's all about the images they present to us. I mean it's like it is directed action. Some protests are depicted like war movies, the camera zooms into barricades, with blood, wounded people, and clashes. Sometimes I feel the same thing, a sense of disgust due to this live-action, and overly depicted violence. And that's why I prefer not to watch news on protests. (FG3)

In this extract, Natalie discusses how she feels when she watches news on protest events. The images she recalls focus only on violent protest events and their conflictual character; it is interesting that Natalie recognizes media coverage of protests as resembling a "war movie" with protesters presented like unknown, hooded men thirsty for violence, unknowingly pointing out two salient characteristics of the protest paradigm. Mainstream media representations of protest violence as a fierce conflict between armed opponents have also been recognized in similar studies (Stott & Reicher, 2011; Zamperini, Menegatto, Travaglino, & Nulman, 2012), and, similarly, evoked a feeling of mixed repugnance and stress, which was compared to the feeling of watching violent war images.

Coordinator: When you come across news concerning protests, what is it that draws your attention?

Andrew: I believe that in the era of the Internet, we should cross-check our information on protests, from different media sources, and use it with our own critical thinking because not all media produce truthful and unbiased news. What I try to pay attention to is what is the cause in the core of this demonstration/protest and to what extent I consider it fair. That's why I'm trying not to be influenced by this one-sided coverage by the television and newspapers, to protect myself, but it's really difficult. It is really difficult to do so, you cannot always control it, because, sometimes, this feeling of fear conquers you. It's the feeling that things may take a bad turn in just seconds and that you may find yourself in violent chaos and have no control over it. And in the end, this image and this feeling are stuck in your head. You know, the image that protests are not safe places and that bad things can happen to you if you just find yourself in a protest. (FG1)

In addition, participants referred to the emotion of fear instilled by the depiction of protest as anger-fueled political turmoil. As shown in the above excerpt, the media are divided in terms of their objectivity, factuality, nonpartisanship, and their ability to offer different views when covering public protests in conventional (television, press, radio) and nonconventional (social media, Internet sites, forums) media. In both this and the previous excerpts, Natalie and Andrew recognized the impact of media coverage of protest events on their attitudes regarding protest support and mobilization and referred to the negative feelings evoked by the intensity of visual depictions of protest violence. Andrew eloquently describes this "inner conflict" of recognizing protest paradigm characteristics, such as the unreliability of the media to provide trustworthy and objective information on the topic of public protests, but being unable to overcome the effect of protest framing on the impression he is ultimately left with regarding protests. In the above excerpt, fear is mentioned by Andrew as an adaptive emotional response to the feelings of loss of control and fear of physical threat in what the media present as the inexplicably chaotic environment of protest violence. These feelings were cardinal elements in how Andrew describes media coverage of protests and are both recognized as factors that demotivate partaking in collective action in two ways: (a) by deterring them from further seeking information from other news sources, thus enhancing accessibility bias (Boyle & Schmierbach, 2009) as described by Natalie in the first excerpt; (b) by instilling the audience with a fear of participation in protest events as Andrew highlights.

### ***Doubt-Triggering Against Collective Action***

The second theme focuses on the cognitive implications of the stereotypical coverage and framing protests by mainstream media as undermining the utility and objectives of protests. Even when participants expressed positive perceptions toward participation in collective action and its utility in democratic societies, they did point out that being bombarded with protest-framing stories may affect their views on collective action.

Coordinator: Do you think that the media may influence opinions about protests?

Emma: The way the incidents (in protests) are presented in the media, it is very difficult to understand what really happens and shape your own opinion. . . It's like you are always searching for which truth is true. And it's very easy to start believing that if protests were something useful, we wouldn't hear all this stuff every day. I don't know . . . what you are left with in the end is frustration toward anything related to protests.

Chloe: To me, the worst consequence of the negative coverage of protests by the media is that it acts like a poison: They slowly make you doubt your own thoughts, your own beliefs. When you see images of violence and riots, when you only listen to ordinary people talking exclusively about the negative aspects of protests, you start asking yourself, "What if this is what truly happened?" although you may know that it cannot be true, at least to the extent it is presented. You become what they want you to become, and you think "It's these hooligans again, these extremists, who only care about riots and rampage." (FG1)

In the above excerpt, Emma and Chloe present two different accounts of the cognitive effects of protest framing. They attribute the doubt caused by protest framing to different factors. For Emma, discerning the information that is real is a frustrating "do-it-ourselves" (Pickard, 2019, p. II) process. Trying to discover "which truth is true" within the mainstream media propaganda and chaotic online sources may

act as a demotivating factor for further engagement with the topic and lead to general apathy toward politics. On the other hand, Chloe describes a slow-burning effect caused by the media protest framing instilling uncertainty and disbelief regarding the real intentions of protests and protesters, especially when talking about protests on controversial social issues or protest events that disrupt everyday social life. Chloe recognizes protest paradigm characteristics, such as the emphasis on the marginalization and delegitimization of protests and the invocation of public opinion causing her to doubt her own views on collective action as a process of unmediated political participation necessary for social change. This dialogue brings forward the recognizable effects of media coverage on how participants think about protests and interpret information about them, criticizing the role of collective action as a socially useful process, criminalizing the protesters' tactics, and attacking their objectives.

### ***Ideological Support for the Status Quo***

One more theme that is used when talking about protest media coverage is how it fulfills the ideological function of promoting social stability and system justification.

Olivia: With the aid of the media, protests, and demonstrations are presented by the elite as something that is deeply antisocial. TV news only shows "ordinary people" criticizing protests. News presenters and media commentators only tell us what they are told to present us as what "truly" happened. The police never do anything wrong. It is protesters who are presented as radicals, extremists, and threats to the way we conceive democracy.

Ava: I agree. The media try to make us believe that protests are not a political expression. Protests are rather presented as an opportunity for some groups of people to riot. This is how the whole process is depoliticized and presented to the audience—as just rioting, looting, and so on. They distort protesters' voices and actions and make us believe that it is their fault that we feel afraid to demonstrate and express our beliefs.

Olivia: No, this is not the case. The media show that in all this there is no political expediency, but it is just incidents of violence that happen for other reasons. . . . And the message behind all this, what they want to make us believe is that "you can't gain anything from protesting—the house always wins." (FG4)

In this excerpt, Olivia talks about the interests of the mainstream media overlapping with those of political and economic elites, something recognized as a key element in why the media portray social change in a negative light and support the status quo. However, she also seems to shift the focus of the debate to the ideological influence of how the media cover the demonstrations. In her first quote, Olivia tries to formulate her argument on how protest framing aims to give a deep political and ideological dimension to the social subject of protest: The dimension of non-conflict, based on the belief that active forms of political participation such as demonstrations are a threat to the consensual character of modern democracies. While Ava tries to interpret Olivia's argument and understands protest framing as a process of depoliticization, of removing the political character from protests and shifting the focus of public interest away from the causes to the consequences of collective action, Olivia returns to clarify her argument. Though not doing so explicitly, Olivia recognizes several protest paradigm characteristics in the role of the media as a mediator of political life: The journalistic practices of the mainstream media relying almost exclusively on accounts



provided by official authorities, excluding the voices of protest organizers and participants, distorting the aims of protesters by presenting them as hooligans and deviants who thrive for violence and seek social collapse, as well as exonerating the often provocative role played by the police in violent incidents, which were conceived as a justification of the system, support of the status quo, and challenge to the radical character of public protest. Ava and Olivia's arguments are aligned with what protest paradigm literature has recognized as the social control function of protest paradigm, which "helps to maintain the status quo by disparaging threatening ideas" (Boyle, 2021, p. 4). Based on the detection of a connection with the critique of crowd psychology by Neville and Reicher (2018), it could be also supported that the abovementioned themes of the protest paradigm enhance the traditional crowd psychology perceptions toward protests and protesters, thus serving to "protect the status quo by pathologising those who gather together to challenge injustices and inequalities" (p. 250).

### ***Alternative Media and Participatory Politics***

The final theme concentrates on alternative online media that were discussed on several occasions as the only sources of comprehensive information about the protest events as these were the sources of information, which the participants resorted to if they managed to overcome the initial negative emotions from the stereotypical negative coverage by conventional media.

Coordinator: You mostly talk about the way TV channels cover protest events. Do you only watch the news regarding protests on TV?

Victoria: You know, especially when talking about protest events, the image from the TV is very strong and it's not easy to set it aside and search for the true events, but the Internet gives you the opportunity to learn what happened firsthand. It's up to us to use this opportunity to change the way we see things and it's up to protest groups to use it to clarify their motives and actions. (FG2)

In this excerpt, Victoria compares mainstream with alternative media in terms of how they cover protests. Alternative media are not presented as objective "per se" but rather as an evolving information space that offers "the opportunity" for audiences to be liberated from the information control exerted by mainstream/traditional media and actively engage in the evaluation of multisource information and for protesters to establish a direct dialogue with the audience without the mediation from the mainstream media.

John: Although my generation questions the information offered by mainstream media, older people do not have easy access to the Internet, and that is why they still trust the traditional media, and are, thus, prone to their misinformation. But we see that this situation is starting to change, especially after the 2015 bailout referendum protests. Even older people are now aware and more critical of them and do not watch TV to get informed about collective action events, as they did five or six years ago. (FG5)

In this excerpt, John highlights the difference between mainstream and alternative media and compares the generational effects of conventional media protest coverage. At first, he justifies the old

generation for not being familiar with the new opportunities offered by the Internet, but then he presents an individual's quest for information and the desire to avoid misinformation from protest framing as a process of political and civic awakening for both the younger and the older generations. According to John, this process is no longer subject to social constraints such as the knowledge gap among generations and the difficulty faced by the older generation in catching up with technological advances. John represents the new information world as a rapidly developing environment in which political participation is a matter of personal effort. We could explain this perception of the media effect on the topic of protests and political participation as a third-person effect, with younger people believing the media exert greater persuasive influence on older people than on themselves (Paul, Salwen, & Dupagne, 2000), or we could also attribute it to the shift of the younger audience from the dominion of traditional media to new, participatory, and inclusive-for-all forms of information in the dawn of the social media era, which coincides with the post-2008, new-social-movement era in Greece.

At the same time, participants in all focus groups acknowledged specific factors that encourage the quest for information on protest events in alternative sources, beyond the news stories offered by mainstream media.

Bill: I believe that nowadays the role of television is more obvious than ever. Younger people no longer believe what they see on television as gospel. Even people who don't know anything about the Internet try to get informed through other, independent media; they have woken up. There have been several incidents in the last years on how protests are covered by the media, which made us realize that they are deceiving us, so we have to take the bull by the horn and try to figure out what happens right here, right now from live videos, tweets, anything that can give us a complete, not just a fragmented image.

Iris: For me, there are many things that make us think beyond the image of protests shown by the TV. Sometimes it's a matter of timing, when the issue of a protest is "hot" or controversial, you might want to learn more about it and use sources from the Internet or read the comments in a post. If it is also something that affects your everyday life, you will have the ongoing motivation to get a comprehensive range of information, bypassing the conventional media, and use every source available. (FG2)

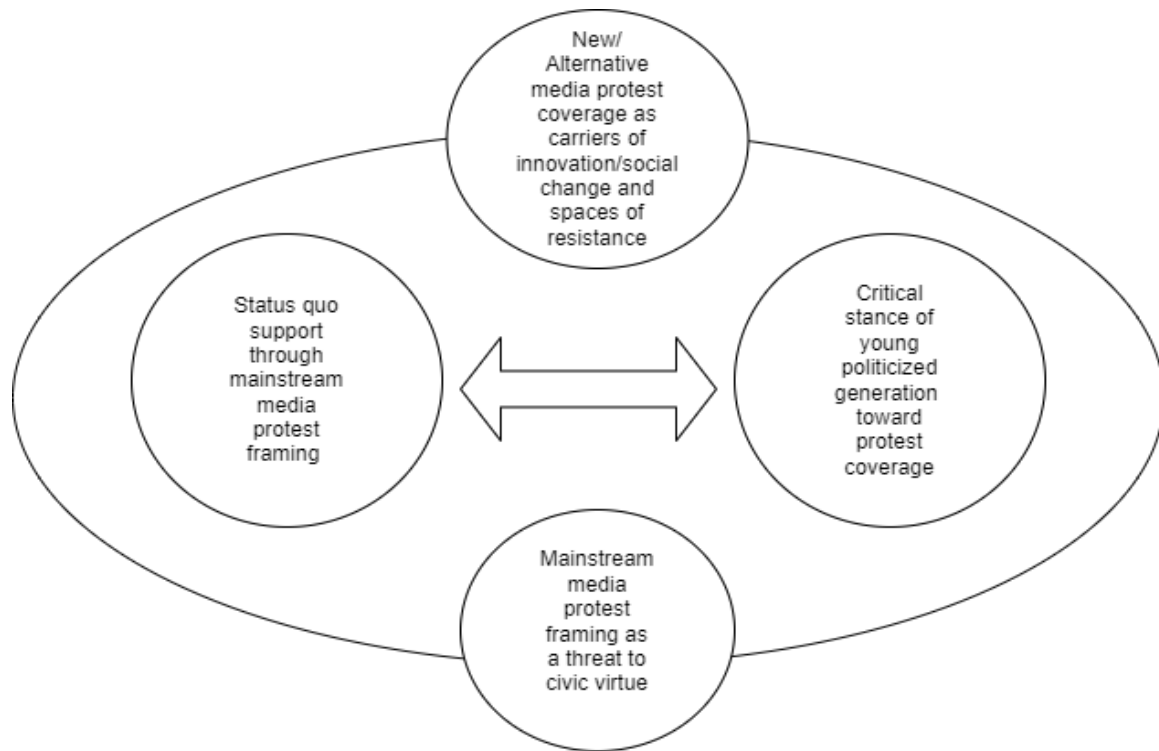
In this excerpt, Iris and Bill discuss how the realization of protest framing by the mainstream media system brings out not only reaction and resistance but a new perspective that includes both active information and civic engagement. Following the logic of the awakening analogy used by John, Bill also believes that the new generation is able to recognize the pattern of stereotypical media coverage and protest framing and stand critically against it.

In addition, Iris reveals how the systematic stereotypical coverage of protests and demonstrations as either violent or a form of social deviation becomes in itself a factor that heightens young people's interest in the cause of a protest event. The negative and one-sided coverage of controversial social issues, such as protest events, when continuous and blatant, seems to overcome any negative emotions and arouse interest in finding out what exactly happened in protests. Bill was extremely passionate when speaking about how his generation is trying "to take the situation in our hands and try to figure out what happens 'right here,

right now.” Bill’s words can be interpreted as characteristic of the willingness of young people in Greece to reappropriate the content of political life bypassing any emotional, cognitive, or ideological obstacles. For Bill, protest framing by the media is seen as such an obstacle, which breeds negative attitudes toward further involvement with new forms of civic participation.

### **Discussion**

The present study aimed to describe the content of discussions concerning media’s protest coverage among young students and the ways they unveil youth’s perceptions of protest mobilization and political participation. Protest media coverage is discussed first on the basis of an antithesis. This antithesis lies between two poles: The first one is mainstream media, which is seen as a means of supporting and justifying the status quo through the use of protest framing. The second pole is the critically thinking and resistive young generation, which recognizes and overcomes the media manipulation of its emotions and opinions. Second, as seen in most of the excerpts above, alternative media are seen as spaces for resistance and social change promotion by the young people themselves whereas mainstream media as a means of system justification and status quo support (Figure 1). We assume that the bipolar structure of this representation is rooted in the nature of the Greek sociopolitical context and political culture in which this generation’s sociopolitical identity was shaped, in a decade marked by an economic crisis, massive protests, the emergence of new social movements, mistrust toward traditional political institutions and the media, as well as the demand of reappropriation of active and direct political participation beyond the tactics and strategies of the old movements (Karyotis & Rüdiger, 2018).



**Figure 1. Schematic depiction of protest media coverage representation.**

Across all focus groups, mainstream media were presented as a corrupted, almighty apparatus of manipulation of emotions and cognition against collective action support and participation. Thus, the participants were critically aware of the processes and mechanisms through which media coverage of protests attempts to influence their perceptions of the protest. Individual political ideology, prior attitudes toward protests, and protest experience did not seem to have an effect on this critical view of mainstream media coverage. The power of the media in shaping the way participants perceived collective action was recognized in their discussions as lying in two factors. The first is the fear expressed by them that the mainstream media system, due to its ease of accessibility and established dominance in the Greek public sphere, may be the main source of information shaping the opinions of the older generation on the topic of collective action support. Second, the coverage of events by mainstream media, which falls within protest paradigm framing, especially with the emphasis on protest violence and conflict imagery, is recognized as having an effect on evoking negative emotions (mainly distress and fear) around protests and acts as a deterrent to further involvement. In the focus groups discussions, it was claimed by participants with more liberal political views that the extensive depiction of protest violence is instrumentalized by the media to hinder collective action and participatory politics. Excessive media coverage of protest violence not only provokes negative emotions toward participation but also raises doubts about the aims and intentions of the participants and the utility of social movements. However, as discussed in the focus groups, an interesting and indirect effect of this media coverage strategy is that it is so strong and visceral that although

the audience is cognitively aware of the distorted protest coverage, they are not able to limit its negative effect on participatory politics.

The discussions concerning media coverage of protests also reveal how young Greeks interact with media involvement in contentious politics and the ways in which these interactions affect their perceptions of collective action and political participation. Our analysis of the main themes emerging from the focus groups shows that participants talk about the effect of protest coverage on their perceptions based on the antithesis between mainstream and alternative media. Negative framing of protests by the mainstream media, according to protest paradigm characteristics, is represented as a mechanism of amplifying accessibility bias (Boyle & Schmierbach, 2009) through negative emotions and cognitive distortions and hindering involvement and participation in contentious politics by casting doubts on the objectives, utility, and tactics of social movements and protests.

The contribution of the present study to the field of protest research is to show that people perceive the effects of protest framing not only as emotional responses or cognitive processes (Detenber et al., 2007) but also as factors shaping ideologies, which increase people's tendency to defend, bolster, and justify aspects of the status quo (Jost, 2020). In our study's findings, participants recognized the status quo support provided by the way the media cover and represent protest events. The critical perceptions of young people toward the media's continuous and obvious negative framing of system-challenging collective action lead them to discern a twofold ideological function of this process. The first ideological function is the reproduction of the dominant discourse against collective action: Framing protests as marginal, violent, ineffective, and threatening to social stability is recognized as a mechanism to divert the public from collective action mobilization by evoking negative emotions and cognitive doubts (Langer et al., 2019). The second ideological function of this process, observed in participants' discussions, is that the media address the system-justifying motives of the audience through protest framing as a mechanism that depoliticizes protests, depicting the existing sociopolitical arrangements and forms of civic engagement as the only viable pathway for the future of society (Wang & Kobayashi, 2021).

Discussions in the focus groups emphasized the role of alternative media in changing protest coverage and its perceived effects. Galis and Neumayer's (2016) characterization of alternative media as newfound "autonomous islands" in the sea of mainstream media epitomizes the participants' representation (p. 6). Participants recognize the role of alternative media outlets both as a mechanism of counter-framing mainstream media narratives, through real-time protest coverage, collective journalism, and anti-reports, as well as a tool of active and direct collective action mobilization through social networking and promotion of cyber-activism. In an era of low trust toward mainstream media in Greece (Kalogeropoulos, Rori, & Dimitrakopoulou, 2021), younger people perceive themselves as more able to recognize media framing and seek alternative sources of information. However, they also perceive alternative media as not powerful enough to challenge the dominant coverage of protest events by traditional media such as the television. This ambivalence toward the role of alternative media in Greece's contentious political environment, independent of prior individual protest experience or attitudes toward protests, is also described in Ferra's (2018) research as well as in Galis and Neumayer's (2016) study. The latter concludes that despite the rise of new media as a media opportunity structure for social movements and collective action in post-2008 Greece, they did not manage to prevail against the influence of the mainstream media system but rather developed "fragmented (online) sub-public spheres"

(Ferra, 2018, p. 270). However, in our research, the discourse of young people indicates that alternative media's communication space is perceived not only as a place for resistance practices through technology against the dominion of mainstream media (Cammaerts, 2012) but also as a new paradigm toward collective action coverage, which improves the quality of public debate (Kalogeropoulos, Suiter, Udris, & Eisenegger, 2019). Participants in the focus groups also reconstructed the concept of the audience, describing it not as a mere recipient of information but as an active contributor. Young Greeks in our focus groups claimed that they sought information from other sources, less conventional but more direct, inclusive, and reliable to create and use new, alternative spaces of political activity. The participants recognized that alternative media are the new era's spaces of resistance against mainstream media omnipotence both for the audiences, by offering them alternative interpretations challenging mainstream narratives, and for the social movements and protest participants, by offering them a space to communicate directly with the audience and present their accounts on controversial incidents in protest events.

The majority of participants, regardless of their protest experience or individual media consumption, adopted a critical view of the mainstream media and their ideological role in shaping political life and defending the status quo. We argue that the critical approach of mainstream media as shown by most participants should not be interpreted as based on political partisanship and bias or simple distrust toward the media. The ability of young people to recognize and criticize traditional media's mechanisms of influence on political life unveils not only the media literacy of the 21st-century audiences but also the renegotiated identity of active citizenship with novel political ethos, evaluative thoughts, and new demands. The critical approach of young people toward mainstream is a main characteristic of their effort to reappropriate their role as active citizens who show a renewed interest in politics, contradicting the notions of an alienated, non-politicized youth and highlighting their demand for new ways of civic engagement and political participation. Our conclusion is that our findings lead us to assume that the Greek youth may have formed a new perception of what constitutes political action, by criticizing traditional sources of political influence such as the mainstream media and bottom-top, self-regulated processes of information forged by the previous decade of socioeconomic crisis, the rise of populism and new social movements, the fragmentation of the media system, and the rise of alternative media. This "common heteropolitical habitus" (Kioupkolis & Pechtelidis, 2018, p. 289) shifts toward new, unconventional, and unmediated forms of participation, such as protest, and tries to overcome the recognized influence of oligarchic mainstream media system, which "sets limits to the news agenda and the reporting of controversial issues which could potentially undermine the credibility of the political world" (Papatheodorou & Machin, 2003, p. 52).

The limitations of the present study should also be recognized. Our intention was to describe the way protest events are covered by the media and the effects of this coverage on broader spheres of political behavior through the lens of the younger Greek generation. The target population used in this research was young Greeks, a population consisting of individuals of heterogeneous backgrounds and identities. Our methodological approach focused on bringing together these antitheses to reconstruct the discourses of the young Greek generation on the topic of interest with as much diversity as possible. However, we do not claim that it is representative of such a difficult-to-define population. In addition, it is recognized that a variety of factors such as personality traits, ideological differences, political preferences, levels of media consumption, and protest experience could have attributed to the shaping of audience perceptions concerning protest by media coverage. However, taking into consideration this wide range of variables did

not fall within the scope of the present research as it was decided that our study should emphasize determining mainly how young people stand toward media protest coverage rather than shedding light on specific aspects of the topic under discussion, which can be the subject of future research. The lack of previous research on the representations of protest coverage led us to use a qualitative approach to map, at first, the thematic areas of interest, as they spontaneously emerged in the focus groups. By qualitatively describing and reconstructing the way the young Greeks talked about media coverage of collective action, we do not claim that the present research enables/facilitates broad generalizability of our results. However, what the present study hopes to contribute to is detecting the diversity of the different voices of young people in Greece regarding the role of the media in covering public protests and how they claim to affect their views on political participation and the future of democracy.

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