

MOBILIZING A CROWD OF SARDINES: MEDIATED FRAMING DYNAMICS IN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS' EMERGENCE

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Abstract

Research on framing has devoted attention, in the last decade, on social movements and on how they use frames to mobilize consensus, gain resources and build and consolidate their identity. However, the ongoing meaning construction process of the social movements' and how it is mediated by social media is not investigated in-depth from an empirical point of view. Furthermore, the role of the crowd in these processes is still less known. Our research addresses these two main gaps by looking at the dynamics of a social movement emergence and of its mediated framing processes. We develop a longitudinal case study of the Italian social movement of "6000 sardine", that scaled-up quickly and successfully online and by flash mobs organized in more than 125 cities in Italy and abroad in just a few weeks. Our study aims at contributing to the understanding of the framing mechanisms at play during the early phase of a movement development, putting central stage the role of social media and the crowd.

Keywords:

Social movements; framing; social media; crowd; multimodality

INTRODUCTION

Since the *Arab spring* movements, the emergence of global social movements like *Occupy wall street* or more recently *Fridaysforfuture*, *Extention Rebellion* addressing societal issues both onsite and online has drawn attention on the ways in which these entities engage in purposeful collective action, facilitated by social networks such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. It has been suggested that social media enact a collective action formation, playing a key role well beyond the one of facilitating the spread of a message and the coordination of activists (Bennet and Segerberg 2012). Still we know very little on digitally mediated collective action formations. More specifically our focus is on the framing process by which social movement mobilize resources, and the interplay between the framing processes and digital social media.

We delve on the literature on framing in social movement to fill two gaps. First we aim at developing a more in-depth view on the ongoing meaning construction process of the social movements' and how it is mediated by social media, not investigated extensively from an empirical point of view. Second, our aim is to analyze the crowd as a key actor in the processes.

Thus, our research questions are the following: What are the mechanisms underlying the mediated framing dynamics in social movement emergence? What is the role of the crowd in mediated framing dynamics of emerging social movements?

Through a longitudinal case study, we analyze the Italian social movement of “6000 sardine”, born November 14 2019 and that it scaled-up beyond any expectations in a few weeks (130 flash mobs organized in Italy and abroad, more than 280.000 followers of the movement Facebook homepage). We have been studying its framing dynamics on a day-by-day basis, for the first three months of its life.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The emergence of social movements addressing societal issues like *Occupy wall street* or more recently *Fridaysforfuture* and *Extention Rebellion* has drawn attention of scholars in management and organization studies to the ways in which these entities engage in purposeful collective action, facilitated by social networks such Facebook, Instagram and Twitter (Bennet and Segerberg 2012). In particular, research has shown how social movements mobilize consensus, acquire resources and build and consolidate their identity by molding interpretations

of activists and third parties through frames (Benford & Snow, 2000; Cornellissen et al. 2018; Furnari 2018; Lee et al. 2018; Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986).

Frames or “schemata of interpretation” enable individuals to “locate, perceive, identify, and label” the world around them (Goffman 1974). They are indeed cognitive stocks that collect social knowledge (Benford & Snow 2000, Meyer & Höllerer 2010, Meyer et al. 2013). Frames, and in particular visual frames, are fundamental in sensemaking because they suggest a central organizing idea for understanding events related to the issue in question (Gamson & Lasch, 1980). Also, they convey symbolic meanings through myths and metaphors (Hertog & McLeod, 2001). Images have been found to be powerful framing tools as they are less intrusive than words and therefore they require less cognitive load (Gamson & Lasch, 1980). Frames evoke a central organizing idea that provides a meaning to the events related to the issue in question (Gamson, 1981).

Most of existing studies on framing and social movements have focused on frame alignment conceived as a unidirectional top-down communication process between framers (SMO) and audiences (Benford & Snow, 2000; Giorgi, 2018). Less attention has been paid to the ongoing processes of collective meaning making through which social movements construct and communicate their core messages in interaction with their activists. This is an important omission for at least two reasons. First, social movements today have to learn how to navigate the high seas of internet when mobilizing actions and resources. Indeed, the interaction between framers and audience has been recently very much amplified by social media such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, as key channels of communication and organization which movements have to leverage nowadays. As it has been highlighted, new forms of social movements, digitally mediated, differ from many conventional social movement protests with identifiable membership organizations (Bennet & Segerberg 2012). The social movements digitally mediated, are driven by a logic of “connective action” (Bennet & Segerberg 2012), they scale up quickly and delve on the easy-to-personalize action frames. Related to the need for investigating the interaction between framers and audiences, the role played in this ongoing process by social media such as Facebook or Instagram over time is still less known (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Poell et al., 2015).

Related to the need to dig more in depth on the dynamics of the strategic framing in social movements (Lee et al., 2017; Klein & Amis, 2020; Reineche & Ansari, 2020), contextualizing it in the high seas of social networks, a second gap in the literature is the still overlooked role of the crowd. Recent studies have looked at the relationships between social movements and civil society on the one hand, and the corporate world on the other hand (de

Bakker et al. 2013). Accordingly, scholars have called for a cross-fertilization of organization studies and the study of social movements (Davis et al, 2008). What seems to be missing is a focus on the role of the crowd as a key actor in social movements.

The analysis of the crowd, defined as “the distributed, online, virtual, diverse, anonymous/pseudonymous, and fluid set of individual participants whose engagement with a website is materially configured by the algorithms at work on that site.” (Orlikowski et. al., 2015:21), has gained traction in studies on crowdsourcing (Boudreau & Lakhani, 2013), platform organizations and open source communities (O'Mahony & Lakhani, 2011). Yet, we still do not know how social movements mobilize crowds and maintain identification through mediated framing.

Taking a processual view on framing in social movement emergence, our study wants to address these gaps and put forward the debate on strategic framing as a mediated collective meaning construction and examine the role of crowds in this process. We will focus on the movement's emergence stage, when, given its newness liabilities, framing plays a strategic role for the movement's survival and growth.

Thus, our research questions are the following: What are the mechanisms underlying the mediated framing dynamics in social movement emergence? What is the role of the crowd in mediated framing dynamics of emerging social movements?

To address these research questions, we developed a longitudinal case study of the Italian social movement of “6000 sardine”. Born in November 2019, it scaled-up beyond any expectations in a few weeks (130 flash mobs organized in Italy and abroad, more than 280.000 followers of the movement Facebook homepage). We have been studying its framing dynamics on a day-by-day basis, for the first three months of its life.

METHOD

Coherently with the explorative aim of our research and its processual view, we adopted a qualitative approach based on a longitudinal case study of a highly successful social movement in Italy, at its emergence stage. Indeed, we conducted an in-depth longitudinal case study of the movement, named “6000 Sardine” by the four founders, that was formally born on November, 14th 2019 with the successful first event – flashmob in Bologna (Italy), which gathered 6000 people in a just one week of organization and promotion. Born as a regional reaction to the far-right (Lega) leader, Salvini, willing to “free Emilia-Romagna from the left” in the regional elections of January 2020, the movement was characterized by an exceptionally

fast growth, and in just three months it acquired a high national reputation and international visibility.

We have been investigating the social movement framing dynamics on a day-by-day basis since its inception and during its rapid growth, taking both the perspective of the framers and their different audiences onsite and online. We have been monitoring the online activity via Facebook and Instagram, the interactions with the activists and local organizers, the organization of key events: flash mobs (FLMBs) in 130 cities in Italy, Europe and USA. We have also analyzed the reactions of opponents and supporters and how the movement has been depicted by news. Newspapers coverage has been analyzed from a qualitative and a quantitative point of view (Factiva). The latter analysis has been conducted in order to obtain a preliminary understanding of the resonance magnitude of the *6000Sardine* movement in the general media.

Research setting

The *6000 Sardine* is a successful case of social movement emergence. Sardines is indeed a powerful frame based on a visual and conceptual metaphor to signify the aim to squeeze in a square (as in a sardine can) a crowd of people larger than the one that right parties could cram.

The effectiveness of the movement's framing process is witnessed by some key outcomes see table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Data collection

To address our research question, we conducted a longitudinal case study. We started to collect data the day after the initial and successful event in Bologna that inaugurated the movement, in November 14th, 2019 and we kept collecting data until May 30th, 2020. This temporal observation allowed us to reconstruct the movement from its emergence, but also to monitor its evolution over time. Observational data and interviews were collected primarily during the first five months, whereas the news and social media data were collected for the entire period of analysis.

As far as semi-structured interviews, we first conducted extensive interviews with the founders of the movement. In particular, one author opened and maintained a continuous dialogue with one of the founders from the occurrence of the early events, providing us a rich and exclusive eye of the framer perspective. We asked founders to narrate why and how they

conceive the mobilization and to describe the main actions they undertook. Another crucial question revolved around the name of Sardine and its history. Direct interviews and phone interviews lasted between 30 minutes to 3 hours. They were all audio-recorded and transcribed ad verbatim.

While the phenomenon of flash-mob was exploding in Italy and internationally, we interviewed local organizers in Italy and Europe to collect information about the main reasons to participate and to organize the local events. The protocol of our interviews aimed to answer our initial research question and was theoretical driven (Alvesson, 2003).

We also collected observational data during key events. Indeed, the two authors participated to flash-mob in Treviso and Venice, to collect interviews, field notes, and images. One of the authors was exceptionally allowed by the founders to participate to the national event occurred in Rome in which Italian and European organizers gathered together to discuss and share ideas about the future steps of the movement, after the successful flash-mobs. The event, in which media and journalists were not allowed to participate, was particularly rich for our analysis since it permitted us to observe how the local organizers coordinated with the founders, but more importantly, how they discussed about the identity of the movement.

Finally, in order to provide reliability and validate our coding, we collected secondary data, such as newspapers, news, social media, and internal documents. In particular, we collected newspaper articles from quality national and international newspapers, such as *Repubblica*, *Corriere della Sera*, *The Guardian* and *New York Times*, *Huffington Post*. The selection of the outlets covers both conservative and more liberal political editorial line to capture how media framed the movement. We also collected data from social media, namely from Facebook and Instagram, as the two mostly used social platforms by the founders since its inception. We constantly monitored the founders' Facebook group and the local organizer groups. In particular, we collected information about the number of followers, comments, and images. Finally, we included internal documents such as power point, the manifesto, and notes provided by the founders. Table 2 provides detail on our data sources.

Data analysis

Consistently with grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 2008), we followed an inductive and iterative approach made by three steps. We started with first-order open coding of interviews, field notes from observation, social media posts, and news to identify the main key empirical themes. The analysis was a recursive process, using the vast array of data to test our insights. For instance, when the first coding of metaphors

related to sardine and derived from images and texts, we shared the coding with the founders to validate the analysis.

Secondly, we gradually collapsed our codes into first-order categories and these categories were subsumed under second-order themes by arranging data around them and theory-driven explanations. We finally established overarching theoretical dimensions (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton, 2013).

Insert Table 2 about here

Insert Figure 1 about here

FINDINGS

The movement's inception

Mattia Santori, an Italian young researcher felt the urgency to counter the Lega's (right party) aggressive political campaign in his region, Emilia Romagna (historically related and managed by the labour party (PD)), due to the planned regional elections in January 2020. The 7th of November he met his three closest friends Andrea Garreffa, Roberto Morotti and Giulia Trappoloni and together they decided that they had to show up in a way that should have had more visibility, than the Lega leader's Salvini rally, planned at an indoor sports arena in Bologna, with the capacity to accommodate about 5,700 people.

The main aim of the founders was to cram 6.000 people in the highly symbolic central square of Bologna, at the Crescentone (a corner of the square) where the rectangular shape resembles a sardine can. The action was meant not to be sponsored by any party and to arise a civic and transversal protest against the aggressive, racist and fascist language and politics of Lega and far right alleys.

As firsts step, the founders ideated an event - the flash mob - to gather a crowd in a given date and place (14.11.2029 - Bologna). Contextually, they created a symbol to mobilize action - the Sardine - a visual and conceptual metaphor to transfer from the "source": a shoal of sardine onto the "target": a crowd of activists, the idea of participating in such a high number to the flash mob, that the crowd squeezed in a square would have resembled a *sardine can*.

As a second key step, they went online opening a Facebook webpage and then an Instagram one, both named *6000Sardine*, to gather participation and broadcast live the event. The first flash mob, notwithstanding it was organized out of the blue and in just one week, was a huge success and the square was crowded beyond any expectations, gathering more than 10.000 people (Fig. 2).

After this event they realized that it could have been replicated in other cities of Emilia Romagna. Indeed, the news of the great success of the flash mob in Bologna spread quickly giving the group high visibility on internet and in the newspapers. This visibility ignited Facebook local groups keen to organize a flash mob in their own city, under the same umbrella, thus embracing the same metaphor and values of the *6000 Sardine* movement.

Notwithstanding the fact that the four friends did not planned to organized more than some flash mobs in their own region, they had to start to govern something larger and more complex than expected, namely a social movement based on a network of almost 100 FB groups and 280.000 followers (considering just the *6000 Sardine* Facebook home page) that quickly blossomed in the web adopting the same name. On the other hand, they had to start to deal with opponents and media related and, in general, to exploit the media attention.

Insert Figure 2 about here

Strategic framing mechanisms

Framing by call to action

The inception of the movement life coincided with the organization of the first flash mob in the founders' city Bologna. Instead of presenting themselves, four unknown friends, the movement organizers chose to frame their idea and the motivation behind it, by a *call to action*. Differently from an assembly or a march or a sit-in, typically chosen by other movements like Occupy or Fridays for future, the action was a *flashmob*, a fancy and large public gathering at which people perform an unusual or seemingly random act and then disperse, typically organized by means of the Internet or social media. The *call to action* was promoted through facebook (FB), and since the flashmob had a clear temporal (not more than 1 hour) and physical perimeter (the Crescentone corner of Piazza Maggiore) it was registered lively, scaling the impact of the both onsite and online crowds.

As the 6000Sardine Facebook page newly opened stated the 14 of November

“DO TAKE PART TO THE FIRST FISHLIKE FLASH MOB OF THE HISTORY... Crescentone can host 6000 people. Squeezed people indeed, but nowadays is better to stay close than loose each other. Do not believe in it? How many times would you have put your face on it and then you gave up? How many times did you have a stomach ache while reading those comments to a Lega post? How many times did you say -This can not be true?- Now it is time to change the inertia of the populist rhetoric, to show that numbers counts more that bullying, that brains are more important than gut instincts, and people counts more than social accounts”

“We ask you 20 minutes of your time to save the next 5 years of YOUR future.”

In this very first *6000Sardine call to action* we can recognize the ‘core framing tasks’ of Snow and Benford (1988). By a ‘diagnostic framing’, *6000Sardine* identified the problem of racism and fascism and assigned blame for it to the Lega party; and by a ‘prognostic framing’, they offered the tactic to witness a different way to be citizens by gathering as a crowd, silent, respectful and playful like fishes in a fresh sea water. This *6000Sardine* framing bears resemblance with an “adversarial issue frame” since it focuses on a concrete target for action and draws a demarcation between the categories of ‘we’ and ‘they’ (Furnari 2018: 330).

Social media helped to mobilize activists and to magnify the messages of the event, through the live video and post flash-mob pictures shared by the *6000Sardine* FB home page, and through the posts of activists.

In the framing process of *call to action* framers leveraged on both *cognitive and emotional resonance* in order to build on experienced personal connection of the activists with the frame (Giorgi 2018: 716). The framing process leveraged on the cognitive resonance to build a “fit with audiences’ extant cognitive orientations, schemas, or understandings” (Giorgi 2018: 716), while the emotional leverage, was meant to create as an alignment with audiences’ feelings and desires.

Since the audience was very large and diversified, the symbol of *Sardine* helped to channel, in the simplest and most effective way, the very action required from activists: be present, be numerous, squeezed all together. *Sardine* was first of all a symbol of a peaceful collectivity. Second, the metaphor was used also as acronyms to cognitively convey the values of the movement, SARDINA means: Solidarity; Accoglienza (hospitality); Respect; Diritti umani (human rights); Inclusion; Not violence; Anti-fascisms (Fig.3).

Insert Figure 3 about here

This multitude of people in the squares are well represented... the initials of each word of the Sardine acronyms are exactly the values in which people with a functioning brain and a beating heart believe. (post of Activist FB 24.11.2019)

In summary, the metaphor of the 6000 sardines conveyed the core features of an antagonistic stance: anti-Salvini, anti-fascism, anti-racism, enacted by a safe and peaceful flash-mob.

The metaphor also appealed to the crowd's feeling (emotional resonance) of being free from the bullying approach and language of Lega and its leader, like a fish finally swimming in a fresh clean water. The flashmob was conceived as a very playful and safe event, where people of different ages, status, nationality, families with children, could show up, meet others, enjoy speeches, dances and music about inclusiveness or solidarity. To reinforce the frame, conveyed by FB, the founders suggested that the Sardine symbol should also be made by the organizers of a local event, to be gifted to anyone who did not bring her own sardine (fig 3).

Activists immediately reacted and embraced the metaphor, physically bringing their own hand-made *sardine*, crafted according to their own sensitivity and capabilities at the first flash-mobs and at the following ones (Fig. 4). They also used FB after the flash-mob, to post their own pictures and different representation of Sardines, like the post of a children with a paper made sardine, with the caption "Little sardine" .

Insert Figure 4 about here

Each flash mob was organized in a way to mix cognitive resonance, by reading some quotes from the Italian Constitution, and emotional resonance, not only with sardines. Music was a very important leverage of feelings to frame values. Traditional songs associated with partisan's resistance, such "Bella ciao", were sung to reinforce the message of anti-fascism. Likewise, the national anthem - often deployed by the far-right rhetoric to convey the populist message "first Italy and Italians", was sung during the flash mobs to remind of the inclusivity of the Italian constitution.

Notwithstanding a same format suggested by the founders each flash-mob was customized bottom-up by the organizers. It has been enacted in each place according to personal sensibility and local culture, for instance, the name of sardine was adapted to local dialect, each group choose some music (for instance Italian singers vs Beatles) and molded the speeches and choose speakers according to the understanding of the Sardine values.

Framing by identification

Founders leveraged on frames to build the social identity of the movement and relate it to the activists' self-identity of activists (Creed, DeJordy, & Lok, 2010; Creed et al., 2002). In their effort of meaning construction, over the first weeks, the founders established "an adversarial in-group/out-group distinction between 'us', the group that shares a worldview, and 'them', who are responsible for the problem and/or promote counter-frames (Gamson, 1992; Lefsrud and Meyer 2012: 1480).

First of all, a linguistic frame was embodied in the Manifesto posted just a few days after the first flash mob. The Manifesto was clearly a mean to root the movement identity in a set of explicit values and beliefs and to align with them the groups of supporters' communications, posts, and comments. At the same time, The Manifesto was meant as a response to opponents that started to attack the movement. Thus, by the Manifesto, a clear distinction between "we" and "them" was established (Gamson, 1992). However, the meaning construction process and self-identification of the activists, delved much more on the metaphor than on the Manifesto. The acronyms was reiterated too, both online and onsite, helping to share the same values, an activist comment on FB about the acronyms was "What a list of wonderful words. Happy to be a sardina" (activist post on FB, 27.11.2019)

After the first event, the number of FB groups adopting the Sardine name grew quickly, and activists started to use the metaphor as a multimodal tool, that allowed them to adhere to the worldview provided by the founders by flexibly developing their own interpretation and self-definition. Social media, specifically FB, were invaded by pictures and posts about Sardines. They helped to accelerate the sharing process of the visual representations.

Indeed, the rich conceptual domain of the sardines metaphor allowed activists to project a set of different dimensions of the source to the movement's identity to frame the differences between movement-us and the far-right parties-they. Some chose the clean water of the open sea vs dirty and steady water (far-right parties), others picked the Sardine feature of being silent and not violent vs the physical and verbal violence of the shark - Salvini; others projected other

meanings on the movement identity such as being powerful and fearless as shoal of sardine or being free (fig.5).

One post of some activists with a picture of them with a big Sardine draw, was “ *Le saraghine (regional customization of the official italian name of Sardine) are full of Omega 3 that help the heart... for this reason Saranghine have a big and strong heart and they will not be tie up. Do you bring with you a Saranghina with an heart ?*”

Moreover, the multimodality of social media allowed to visualize these dimensions, and to reproduce them as physical symbols when activists gathered during the flash-mobs, as part of their own interpretation of being a Sardine member, finding show that the customized adoption of the metaphor, according to each person’s personal sensitivity, helped the activists to perceive the movement’s essence as self-defining (Ashforth et al. 2008).

One activist posted the phrase “*Come on guys, do not step back. Let’s stay very close to each other and no one can hurt us* “. (activist FB post 19 nov 2020) together with a picture of a sardine can. The reply of another one was “*may I use your picture as my profile picture?*”.

Identity was very quickly reinforced by the immediate and strong adverse reaction of the far-right parties leaders such as Salvini, and the newspaper aligned with them. They started to challenge the movement itself and the founders by media and by social media. As Dutton states (1996: 243), “Distinctive organizational attributes often remain hidden to members until the organization's collective identity is challenged (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Fiol, 1991) or until some precipitating event calls organizational actions or performance into question”.

The opponent Salvini (well known to effectively exploit the power of social media) used the same representation, sharing a cat eating a sardina (Fig.5).

“*Salvini also dedicates to the spontaneous initiatives that are being repeated in the Italian squares. First dedicating a playful thought to them: «I prefer kittens to sardines that eat sardines when they are hungry». However, in front of the numbers from Bologna and Modena, he expresses interest in the young organizers of the events that will be repeated in the coming weeks from Turin to Palermo. «I like these guys - also highlights the League leader with a bit of irony - they give value and importance to my every presence. On the next occasions I propose to go there and say hello and to thank them. I can't wait to hug them»*”. (Salvini, Lega Leader. Corriere della Sera, November 20th, 2019)

Insert Figure 5 about here

The attention of people participating in huge numbers, the pictures published on Facebook of very crowded squares (fig. 6) enhanced the sense of distinctiveness, since no other national movement was able to mobilize such a large crowd, apart from the *Fridays for future* of Greta Thunberg. More than this, no one was able to document the gathering in such effective and scalable way. Since the flashmob unfolding is confined within the boundaries of a square in each city where it was organized, organizers could take the same picture of each squares-flashmobs and share them iteratively. Together with these pictures, the opening page of the Sardine's Facebook profile, for several days, posted the long list of events already organized and of those planned in the following days (Fig.6). This list, beyond its practical aim to communicate where to go and to legitimize events as officially part of the Sardine activity, acted also as a symbol of distinctiveness, signaling the diffused and well rooted character of the movement in Italy and abroad.

Insert Figure 6 about here

“Sorry, I don't speak Italian.. but, your explosive new movement is fantastic. So, powerful, creative, forcefully communicating the message of hope, unity, fraternity to the rightwing haters. Please come to UK!! We need your European help.... Brilliant...Thank you”
(Activist FB 25.11.2019)

Social media amplified the identification process bottom-up, each comment posted in the home page of Sardine allowed followers to define their self through the movement values.

Moreover, in a social identification process “greater contact with the organization increases a member's perceptual readiness (Bruner, 1957) to categorize and define him- or herself as a member of this social group.” (Dutton et al. 1996: 247). Notwithstanding the fact that the “tenure” in the movement was, for most of the activists, just of a few days, the integration of digital and physical engagement accelerated the “contact” with the movement, since the exposure to the movement life was actually magnified by Facebook reporting the flash mobs just closed, comments of news, pictures, designs, personal stories, etc..

Insert Figure 7 about here

The identification process was reinforced by the project of *room offer*. In order to host activists coming to the big event planned the 19.01.2020 in Bologna, the movement launched a two-way online questionnaire, by which “Sardines “willing to come as well as those living in Bologna willing to offer a room can leave name and data, in order for the organizer to match room demands and offers. This process was framed as “*Sardines host Sardines*” and meant to foster a process of community building.

Framing by structuration

Actions activated by the movements have been indeed reproduced in a way that allowed a progressive stabilization and institutionalization of main practices and features of the movement and local groups. At each structuration step, founders aimed at aligning frames and structure.

A first step was to translate the metaphor in a visual representation (fig.8): 10 sardines sharing an empty speech bubble, allowing each local group to fill it with the name of the city and the preferred statement to promote its flash mob (fig. 8). This *6000Sardine logo* was then patented; this move was forced by the urgency to protect it from those willing to delve on it for other initiatives. Indeed, the founders understood how powerful the frame was as a mobilizing and structuring tool.

Insert Figure 8 about here

Framing the key action of being physically together by a flash mob was an effort to structure the activists’ behaviors according to the idea of inclusiveness (every age, gender, ecc was welcomed) and joy. A set of simple but coherent rules and advises for organizing a flash mob, very much aligned with the framing of the movement, from how to communicate it, duration and content to be delivered during the flash mob. The picture of the crowded squares was indeed a way to elicit the agency of the crowd within the meaningful structure of the square. Moreover, the flash mob embodied a clear format explicitly identified by the founders and transmitted to the organizers seeking advices and rules.

As the groups grew bottom-up on FB, they started to contact the founders to ask for information, and rules. The founders developed a three-step approach. First, they checked that the groups organizer was aligned with the main aims of the movement, not being member of

any political party and not interested to target the flash mob in any political way. After a first contact by mail of Facebook, the very first interchange was mainly managed by a personal phone call of one of the founders, as one of them stated “we searched a human touch beyond the digital contact as the “human touch” is part of our values of the group and the movements”. Thus, the selection and coordination processes, managed by a personal contact, allow to channel one of the key frames that was “engage yourself personally, being physical present and active”.

Furthermore, the flash mob enactment played an important role in the framing by structuration. The replication of the format, although personalized according to the local style and aims, on a vast scale allowed the reproduction of the repertoire of a set of the movement practices (before, during and after the flash mob), in other words it allowed encode and reproduce shared patterns of behavior and interpretation (Allaire and Firsirotu,1984).

Insert Table 3 about here

CONCLUSIONS

Our research provides an original in-depth understanding of strategic framing at the inception of a social movement organized by the means of social media.

Our findings suggest that the movement’s mediated framing is based on three distinct and interacting mechanisms. The first mechanism is *framing by call to action*, as a process of energies, commitment and resources mobilization where social media are used as a two-ways communication channel and a coordination means to gather crowds.

A second mechanisms is *framing by identification* as a sensemaking process that helps activists to develop a sense of belonging to the movement, since they start to incorporate the characteristics, they attribute to it, into their self-concepts (Dutton et. al., 1994). In this context, social media promote the storytelling, e,g, by documenting flash mobs through pictures of the crowd, groups and individual participants.

Finally, we suggest that mediated framing in early stages of a social movement’s life might play the function of enacting a reciprocal relationship between actions mobilized and structures, such as “rules and resources, recursively implicated in the reproduction of social systems” (Giddens 1984: 377). When frames resonate and align with activist values, preferences and believes, and are enacted by events participation, they are quickly reiterated through the social media dialogue between framers and audiences. Therefore, a third

mechanisms of framing dynamics if *framing by structuration* as a process of repetition and institutionalization of actions mobilized, that helps to find continuity and legitimation. Social media favor this process by creating a correspondence between the physical and virtual agoras.

Our findings show how the crowd plays a central role in the mediated framing process, since movements have to find frames that can flexibly address the dialogue and the preferences coming from a very differentiated crowd. At the same time, the critical mass of the crowd supports and amplifies the effectiveness of the framing process. Moreover, as regard to the landmark event of the flash mob, that is a highly symbolic, but potentially ephemeral display, the movement is able to connect several flash mobs through storytelling. The key actor here is the crowd. The square places boundaries around a potentially formless crowd and the sardine becomes the face of a potentially faceless crowd.

Finally, our findings point to the role of multimodality in framing processes mediated by digital social media. Indeed, the strategic framing of *6000Sardine*, mobilized a repertoire of symbols, images, pictures, videos, songs, and other material and visual tools, which favored interaction on social media and supported a collective co-construction of meanings “to compete, communicate, form identity and organize activities” (Boxenbaum et al. 2018: 59).

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TABLE 1 The 6000Sardine movement's effectiveness

DIMENSIONS OF EFFECTIVENESS	Data
Activists mobilised	
Participants to first Flashmob in Bologna	6000 people
Average participants to main Flashmobs in Italy	3000-6000 people
Participants to the national Flashmob in Rome - Italy	100.000
Facebook Group Administrators and Facebook page organisers participating to the first national meeting held in Rome	150
Events organised	
Flashmobs in Italy	116
Flashmobs abroad (New York, Washington, San Francisco, Boston (USA), Amsterdam, Berlin, Paris, Dublin, Anvers, Copenhagen London, Edinburgh Helsinki and Madrid)	14
Facebook visibility	
Followers growth in the first two weeks	0 up to 73.345 followers (21.11.19)
Likes growth in the first two weeks	0 up to 66.767 likes (21.11.19)
Followers after three months from the launch of the page – 14.11.2019 - 13.01.2020	280.000
Likes after three months from the launch of the page – 14.11.2019 - 13.01.2020	256.000
Instagram visibility	
Followers growth in the first two weeks	0 up to 28.000 followers (21.11.19)
Followers after three months from the launch of the page – 14.11.2019 - 13.01.2020	64.000
News visibility	
Articles published on Sardine by Italian newspapers in the first 3 months – 14.11.2019 - 12.01.2020	8829
Articles published by Italian newspapers in the first 3 months – 14.11.2019 - 12.01.2020	436
Crowdfunding campaign “Welcome back on high seas”	
Number of days to reach the target of 50.000	3

Source: data collected by authors on FB

TABLE 2 Data sources and their use in the analysis.

DATA SOURCE	TYPE OF DATA	USE IN THE ANALYSIS
Primary data sources		
Observations (18,5 hours)	<i>Field notes from attendance to flashmobs and the movement first key event - the first national meeting (4,5 hours).</i> From November 2019 to January 2020, the first and second authors spent a total of 7 hours of non-participant observations, attending three flashmobs , observing organizers and participants in action. On the 15 of December the first author was granted unique access to the key and closed meeting between founders and group organizers. She spent a total of 4,5 hours of participant and non-participant observation at the first national meeting of the founders and the local group organizers (more than 150 people).	Build detailed narratives of the key event of flashmobs; get a deep-dive into specific critical event of framing; analyze dialogues and interactions in real-time; triangulate and supplement interpretations from interviews.
Interviews (14 interviews – 11 hours)	<i>Semi-structured formal interviews (14 interviews).</i> Interviews lasted, on average, between 30 and 90 minutes, three were conducted with one of the founders of the movement, one with a member of the coordination team, 9 with the organizers of the local flashmobs , webpage in Italy and abroad. and were focused on deepening aspects related to the framing process of the founders and the perception of the local organizers. Other interviews were conducted with activists during flashmobs.	Build detailed narratives on the framing process. Integrate, support and triangulate observational data, reconstruct informants' understanding of events
Post on Facebook and Instagram (200 documents)	<i>Post on Facebook.</i> Since the first week of the movement life on social media the activity and posts of the original webpage has been monitoring on a day-by-day basis, relevant posts of the main page were downloaded as well as several relevant comments posted in the main page. (14 November 2019 – 14 January 2020) – downloaded about 200 pages with different contents (posts, pictures, comments, graphics, videos)	Support, integrate, and triangulate evidence from interviews and observations; deepen specific aspects of the framing process triangulate.
Crowdsourcing campaign	<i>Crowdsourcing campaign.</i> Monitoring of the crowdsourcing campaign launched the 23 rd of December 2019 and to be closed the 16 th of January	Support, integrate, and triangulate evidence from interviews and observations; deepen specific aspects of the framing process
Secondary data sources		
Video interviews of founders (23 interviews)	<i>Video interviews with one of the founders and spokesman of the movement.</i> One of the founders acted as spokesman of the team and was invited to several news and tv shows. We collected this set of interviews over the first three months from the inception.	Support, integrate, and triangulate evidence from interviews and observations; deepen specific aspects of the framing process
Videos interviews of prominent opponents and supporters (7 videos)	<i>Video interviews with political opponents, supporters and key speakers.</i> Different prominent speakers were interviewed by tv shows and news to collect reactions and opinions on the emerging movement 6000 sardine	Reconstruct how the frames of the movements have been perceived and interpreted by prominent opponents and supporters. Support, integrate, and triangulate evidence from interviews and observations;
Videos on flashmobs (10 videos)	<i>Video interviews and descriptions of flashmobs</i> The video were made by journalists reporting during selected flashmobs, some of them are integrated with interviews to participants, organizers and founders.	Support, integrate, and triangulate evidence from our interviews and observations on the event of flashmob; deepen specific aspects of the framing process
Articles on the movements (946)	<i>Articles published by Italian and international newspapers on the movement and the founders</i> 946 Articles from key newspaper have been downloaded and analysed. The articles describe the movement, its emergence, the reasons of its growth, some of them embody interviews to one or more founders, and third parties	Support, integrate, and triangulate evidence from interviews and observations; deepen specific aspects of the framing process

FIGURE 1 Timelime of flash mobs (FLMB) organized and followers on social media FB and IG

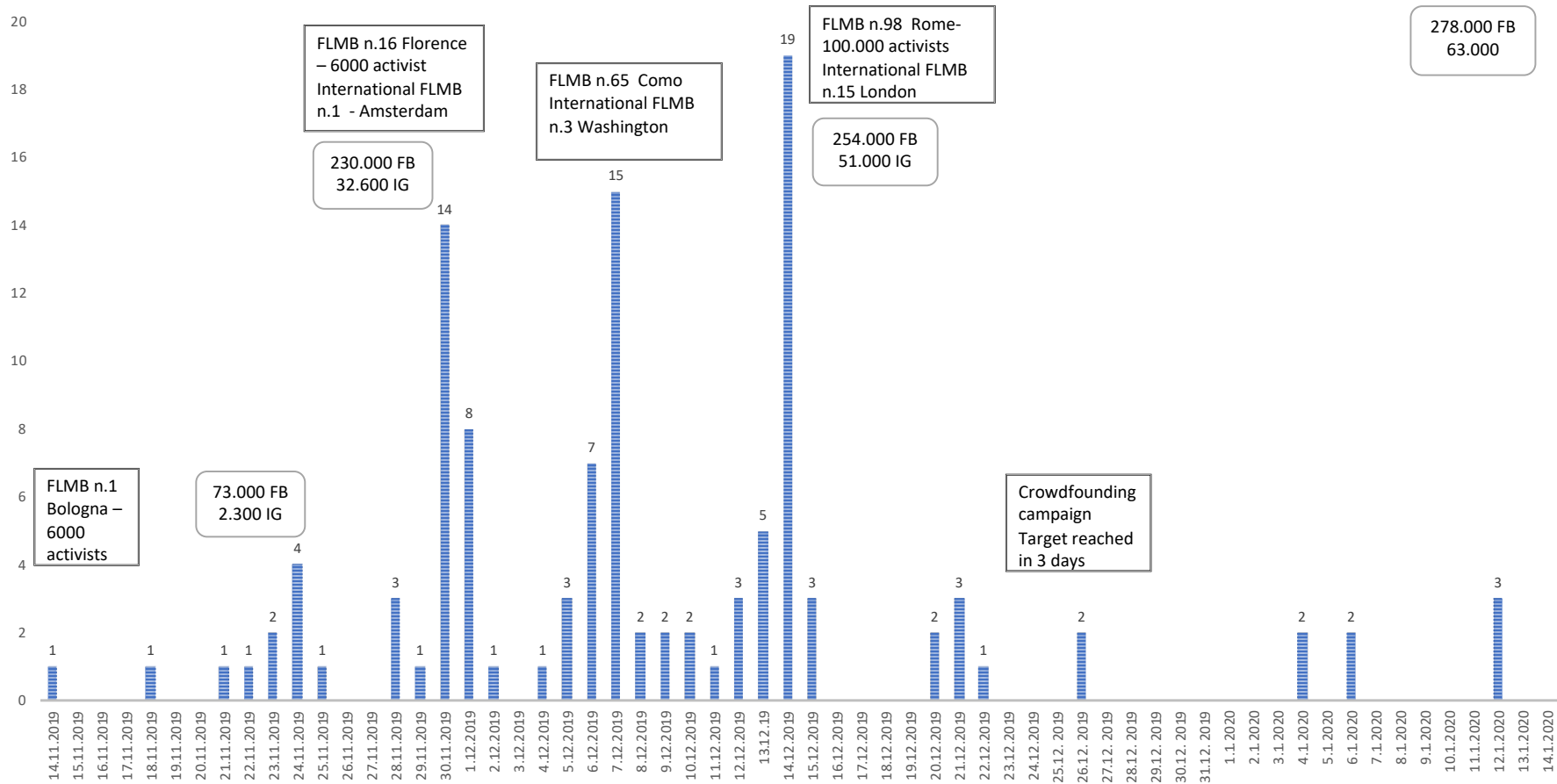
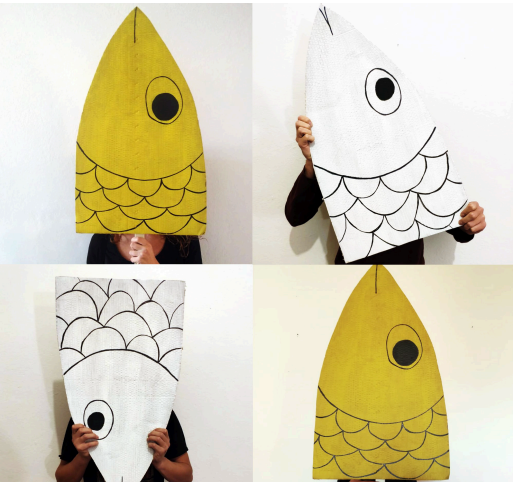









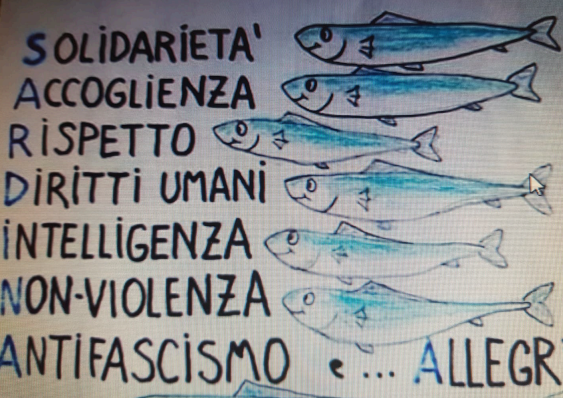


FIGURE 2 The movement first public appearance: flash mobs in Bologna – 14.11.2019 and crowd squeezed in other squares

The Four founders	First Flashmob	Landmark pictures of crowd squeezed in squares
		

Source: 6000Sardine Facebook 2019

FIGURE 3 The Sardine acronyms customized

The official acronyms	Acronyms adopted by Sardine di Genova 27.11.2019	Acronyms adopted by Sardine Savonesi 29.11.2019
<p>Solidarietà </p> <p>Accoglienza </p> <p>Rispetto </p> <p>Diritti </p> <p>Inclusione </p> <p>Non Violenza </p> <p>Antifascismo </p>		


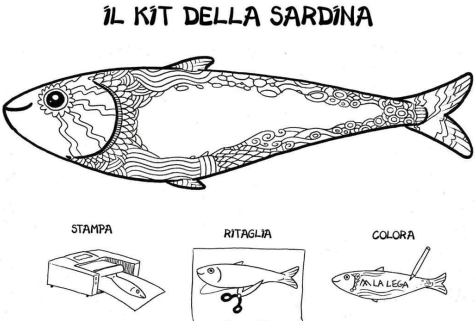





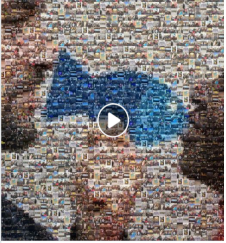
Source: 6000Sardine Facebook 2019

FIGURE 4 The Sardine visual metaphor enacted and personalized by participants to flashmobs.




Source: One author's pictures at Flashmob in Treviso and Rome

FIGURE 5 The mediated Sardine visual metaphor - enacted and personalized by Facebook activists and opponents

<p>19.11.2019 activist</p> <p>Je suis una Sardina</p> 	<p>19.11.2019 activist</p> <p>IL KIT DELLA SARDINA</p> 	<p>20.11.2019 activist</p> 	<p>24.11.19 opponent</p> 
<p>31.11.19 activist</p> 	<p>1.12.19 activist</p>  <p>LE SARDINE BERLIN</p>	<p>31.12.19 activist</p> 	<p>31.12.19 6000Sardine founders</p> <p>Non ci bloccherete certo ora che siamo appena usciti dalla bialla. Benvenuti in mare aperto. Buona navigazione. #6000sardine</p>  <p>0116 Commenti: 424 Condivisioni: 981</p>

Source: 6000Sardine Facebook 2019

Fig 6 Official plan of flashmobs - 6000Sardine FB page and flashmob pictures taken by organizers



#LITALIANONSILEGA

#EVENTIUFFICIALI


6000 sardine
21 novembre alle ore 12:30 ·

Le piazze si trasformano in mari pieni di sardine!
Questi sono gli eventi ufficiali che coloreranno l'Italia intera nei prossimi giorni!

- 21/11 Sorrento
- 22/11 Palermo
- 23/11 Reggio Emilia
- 23/11 Perugia
- 24/11 Marsala
- 24/11 Rimini
- 24/11 New York
- 24/11 Fiorenzuola
- 25/11 Parma
- 28/11 Genova
- 28/11 Verona
- 28/11 Piacenza
- 29/11 Mantova
- 30/11 Firenze
- 30/11 Napoli
- 30/11 Ferrara
- 30/11 Treviso
- 30/11 Amsterdam
- 30/11 La Maddalena
- 30/11 Monfalcone
- 30/11 Pesaro
- 30/11 La Spezia
- 30/11 Rovigo
- 30/11 Cosenza
- 01/12 Benevento
- 01/12 Padova
- 01/12 Avellino
- 01/12 Milano
- 01/12 Taranto
- 01/12 Ascoli Piceno
- 04/12 Savona
- 04/12 Ravenna
- 06/12 Cagliari
- 06/12 Siena
- 10/12 Torino
- 12/12 Forlì
- 14/12 Roma

Di seguito il link degli eventi ufficializzati:
<https://www.facebook.com/pg/6000sardine/events/>

Le sardine che con grande passione e impegno hanno organizzato in autonomia un evento locale, possono scriverci per coordinarci e ufficializzarlo a 6000sardine@gmail.com.



Bologna

Modena

Reggio Emilia

Palermo

Perugia

Fiorenzuola

Rimini

Parma

Genova

Fig. 7 Framing by identification – Atlantic Sardine and Sardine at Mount Appennini

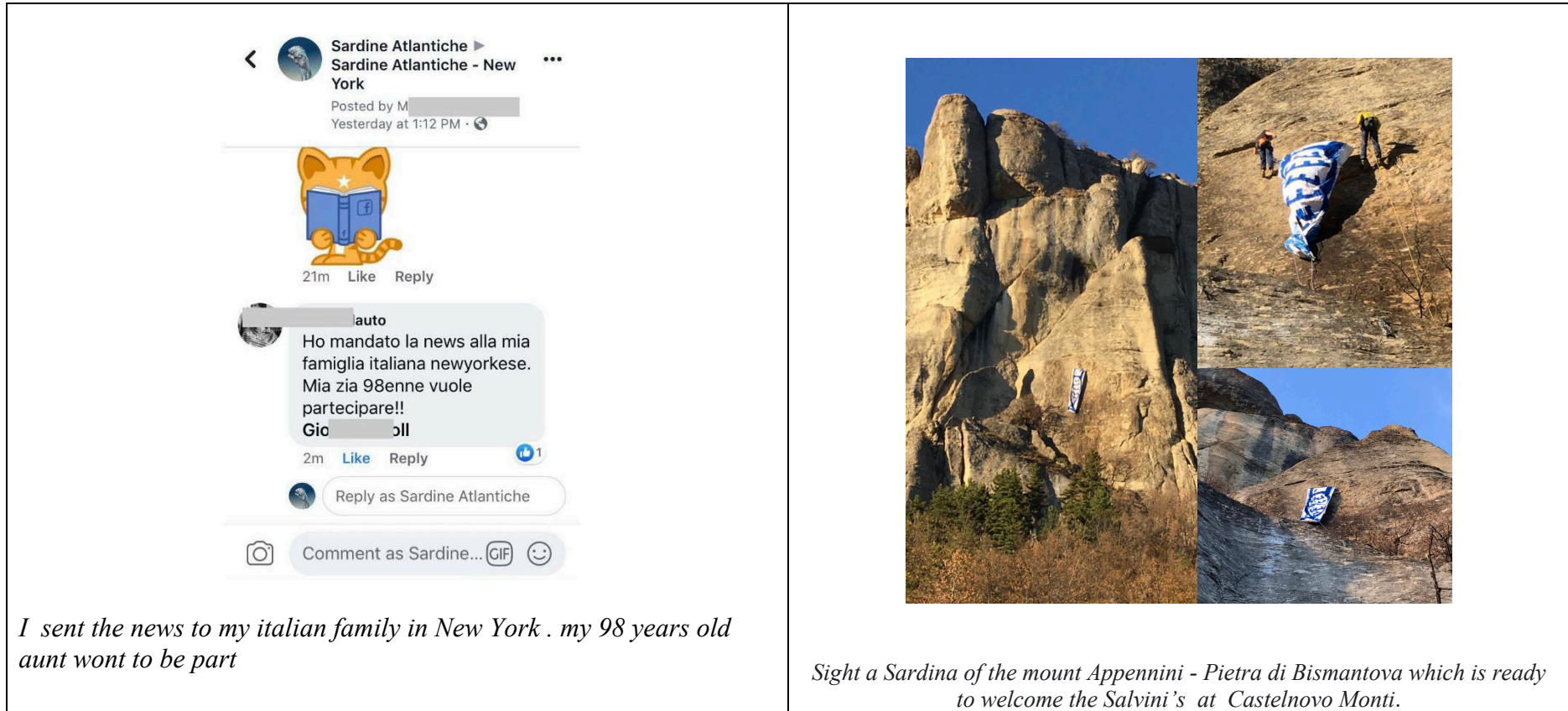
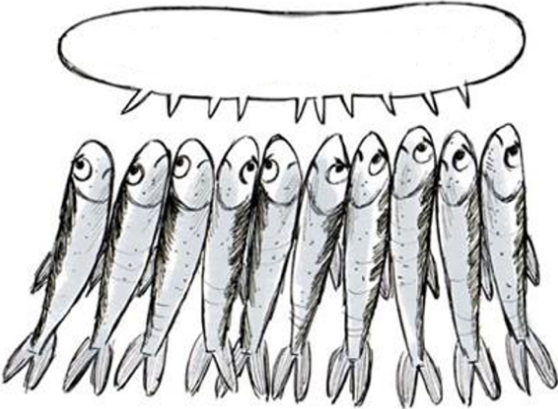



FIGURE 8 The Sardine visual metaphor

<p>The patented “brand” – 22.11.19 EUIPO</p>	<p>The use of the Sardine visual metaphor in one of the early flashmobs</p>
	

Source: 6000Sardine Facebook 2019

Table 3 Strategic framing mechanisms in 6000Sardine social movement emergence 14.11.2019 – 14.01.2020

SECONDO ORDER – FRAMING BY CALL TO ACTION	
FIRST ORDER	Selected Evidence on First-Order Codes
LEVERAGING COGNITIVE RESONANCE	<p>“From the beginning we have identified ourselves not so much in the word as in the narrative a fundamental resource that shapes reality. The gesture of ringing the intercom as Salvini did, which disturbed us all, is also an expression of a way of narrating society. But we have decided to oppose that move with silence”. (Andrea Garreffa. <i>La Lettura</i>, March 3rd, 2020)</p> <p>“A great merit of the Sardines has been to bring the web back to a public function capable of affecting real processes: from accounts to people, from virtual to physical square. The fate of politics, I think, is played out on building a community through direct encounter” (<i>Corriere della Sera</i>. March 3rd, 2020)</p>
LEVERAGING EMOTIONAL RESONANCE	<p>“Sardines were born precisely from the accusation of an evident manipulation of the truth. Matteo Salvini had come to Bologna and said that one hundred thousand people attended his rally in Piazza Maggiore. But such a crowd does not enter that space materially. So we invited citizens to meet with us in Piazza Maggiore to show how the truth of physical bodies can disprove altered information. And the participants told us: finally, we no longer feel alone. Therefore, it was not specific political content that gathered around us many people, but metapolitical factors: a meeting in empathy, in the relationship between different people, in the call to human rights. And the starting point was the need to restore the truth” (Giulia Trappoloni. <i>La Lettura</i>, March 3rd, 2020)</p> <p>“Three points remain: the empathy between the bodies in the public space, which leads to discovering the truth; creativity and gratuity, alternatives to the capitalistic model, the consumer society and manipulations of power; a politics that responds to populism by enhancing democratic rules, but presenting itself in new ways to involve those who feel excluded” (Mattia Santori. <i>La Lettura</i>, March 3rd, 2020)</p>
FRAMING BY IDENTIFICATION	
FIRST ORDER CODES	Selected Evidence on First-Order Codes
ADVERSARIAL IN- GROUP/OUT-GROUP DISTINCTION	<p>“We wanted to organize the appointment anyway and we claim that it is not a demonstration against. The sardine movement is made up of people who have their own ideals and thoughts” (Local organizer. <i>Corriere della Sera</i>, November 20th, 2019)</p> <p>“Salvini also dedicates to the spontaneous initiatives that are being repeated in the Italian squares. First dedicating a playful thought to them: «I prefer kittens to sardines that eat sardines when they are hungry». However, in front of the numbers from Bologna and Modena, he expresses interest in the young organizers of the events that will be repeated in the coming weeks from Turin to Palermo. «I like these guys - also highlights the League leader with a bit of irony - they give value and importance to my every presence. On the next occasions I propose to go there and say hello and to thank them. I can't wait to hug them»”. (Salvini, Lega Leader. <i>Corriere della Sera</i>, November 20th, 2019)</p>
SELF-DEFINITION BY MULTIMODALITY MEANS	<p>“How did the "sardine" symbol come about? “We wanted to beat Salvini in a symbolic place. We chose the Crescentone in Piazza Maggiore. If there were many of us, we should have been tight. Like sardines, indeed”. (Mattia Santori. <i>Corriere della Sera</i>, November 17th, 2019)</p> <p>“However Silvia Avallone [a writer] is right, I think the Sardines were born just when we got our hands dirty by cutting out the paper fish. When we gave our ideas a material form” (Mattia Santori. <i>La Lettura</i>, March 3rd, 2020)</p>

CONTACT REITERATION	<p>“Subscribers to the “Sardine di Roma” Facebook page are multiplying, exceeding 88,000 in two days. Administrator Stephen Ogongo, a journalist from Kenya and founder of the anti-racist movement “Cara Italia”, said in his speech on Radio Cusano Campus that he was surprised by the constant growth in membership: “We will have to find a very large square, capable of containing a large number of people. It will be a historic moment that will lead people to live an atmosphere where there is no hatred. We want to beat Bologna, Rome is the capital, a beautiful city where love must reign”. (Local organizer. <i>Corriere della Sera</i>, November 22nd, 2019)</p> <p>“I sent the news to my Italian family in New York. My aunt who is 93 want to participate” (FB activists – 24.11.2019)</p>
SECONDO ORDER – FRAMING BY STRUCTURATION	
FIRST-ORDER CODES	Selected Evidence on First-Order Codes
STABILIZATION OF PRACTICES AND BEHAVIOUR	<p>“We are full of requests - explains Mattia Santori, the spokesman for the four guys who launched the flash mob of the" sardines "-. First, we decided to register the logo and to file the domain to prevent others from appropriating it without our knowledge”. (Mattia Santori. <i>Corriere della Sera</i>, November 17th, 2019)</p> <p>“We will not repeat the naivety of Bologna. The other evening, for example, we had prepared 500 "sardines" which were snapped up in three minutes. We had 5,000 prepared, you know what image we would have given ... Then there will be a stage, a more structured organization. We are better prepared”. (Mattia Santori. <i>Corriere della Sera</i>, November 17th, 2019)</p> <p>“Dear populists, you finally understood it. The party is over”. This is the opening of the manifesto of the “sardines”, the anti-Salvini movement born from the Bologna flash mob. The text was published on the Facebook page «6000 Sardine», which jumped to almost 90,000 followers. “For too long - the authors wrote to the populists - you have pushed your most loyal followers to insult and destroy the lives of people on the net. For too long we have left you free. Now you have awakened us. We have understood that we are many, and much stronger than you”. (The founders. <i>Corriere della Sera</i>, November 22nd 2019).</p>
LEADERSHIP EMERGENCE	<p>“Sardines don't exist, people exist. We are surprised by the fact that many people have been ready to wear a mask, in the positive sense of the term, to play a social role like Sardine. There is a strong need to belong to a group, compared to which the title [of the book: “<i>Sardine do not exist</i>”] sounds like a warning: let's not forget that we are primarily people. The name basically doesn't count. We called ourselves Sardines, we could have been Salmon or Ibex. [...] We don't provide answers, we want to generate questions, starting with the most important: and now?” (Andrea Garreffa. <i>La Lettura</i>, March 3rd, 2020)</p> <p>“The name Sardine has so far been linked to the face of the founders, with our faces. By saying that “They do not exist” [the book title] is a way to go out from a condition of leadership that we were not looking for, even if we eventually took it on. From now on, Sardines are no longer just us: all those who wish can be a leader” (Giulia Trappoloni. <i>La Lettura</i>, March 3rd, 2020)</p> <p>“We currently have a structure based much more on trust and merit than on democracy, which is not bad, but if they ask us who we were chosen from, or who decided who goes to television or write texts for Sardines, the answer is that everything happened by chance. Today we have about 120 referents in Italy and about thirty in the rest of Europe, whose legitimacy derives from the fact that they were quicker to launch an event on Facebook” (Mattia Santori. <i>La Lettura</i>, March 3rd, 2020)</p>