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“That’s How Revolutions Happen”: Psychopolitical Resistance in Youth’s Online Civic Engagement

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Abstract: *Aims:* This paper aims to describe forms of online youth civic engagement that center the experiences of youth with historically marginalized identities and documents ways that youth are civically engaged. *Demographics:* Twenty U.S.-based, digitally active youth ages 16-21 years old were interviewed. Seven participants (35%) identified as female, nine (45%) as male, and four (20%) as gender nonbinary. Twelve (60%) identified as a first or second generation immigrant. *Settings:* Youth were recruited through youth-led movement accounts on Twitter and contacted via Direct Messaging. *Methodology:* Semi-structured interviews were conducted with youth between March and September 2020, a period spanning the outbreak of COVID-19 and rise in participation in the Black Lives Matter movement. *Analysis:* Inductive Constant Comparative Analysis was used to document forms of youth civic engagement on social media and understand how youth ascribed meaning to their civic engagement. *Findings:* Framed by literature on critical consciousness and psychopolitical resistance to oppression, findings highlight three forms of online youth civic engagement: Restorying, Building Community, and Taking Collective Action. *Implications:* These findings indicate that, for youth with identities that have historically been marginalized, social media is an important context to be civically engaged in ways that resist oppression and injustice.

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3 I think young people are sort of mastering the medium in a way and they're combining a
4 lot of different entertaining aspects in order to get people to be active. [Young] people are
5 blending comedy and music with politics and issue activism. And that's something that
6 just isn't happening anywhere else. I mean, in what world — I can't ever imagine my
7 parents, you know, combining Old Town Road and dancing with a rationale for
8 supporting single payer health care. That's what's happening.
9 - Roger, 21
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12 Youth civic engagement, a multidimensional concept that encompasses youth's skills,
13 values, knowledge, and behaviors that emphasize community and politics (Wray-Lake et al.,
14 2017), is increasingly being studied on digital platforms and social media (Jenkins et al., 2018;
15 Kahne et al., 2015). Indeed, social media has emerged as a new type of civic space, like a city
16 hall or public square, where activism takes place, and is a "medium, tool and context" for youth
17 civic engagement (Mainsah, 2017, p. 2). Social media is an important context for youth's civic
18 engagement, with 97% of adolescents using at least one platform (Anderson & Jiang, 2018), and
19 recent social movements led by young people heavily utilizing social media (Carney, 2016;
20 Zimmerman, 2016). In line with research on youth activism (e.g., Gordon & Taft, 2011), youth
21 on social media are politically socializing their peers, often with little-to-no adult interference
22 (Zimmerman, 2016). Given the importance of civic engagement to youth, their communities, and
23 society (Ballard, 2019), and especially during COVID-19 when social media became the primary
24 space for youth civic engagement (Yazdani et al., under review), it is critical that educators,
25 policymakers, and scholars understand how young people are civically engaged on social media.
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45 This study explores forms of online youth civic engagement with qualitative data from 20
46 U.S. youth who are actively engaged online, centering young people with historically
47 marginalized racial/ethnic, immigrant, and religious identities. In this study, marginalized
48 identities refer to groups that historically have been denied rights or resources, and have
49 experienced psychological, inter-generational trauma and exploitation (Prilleltensky, 2003). We
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focused on adolescents ages 16-25 years old because this time period represents a process of growth and reflection wherein young people explore and begin to define their civic identities, values, and attitudes, and is a key developmental period for research on civic engagement (Wray-Lake & Syvertsen, 2011). Inductive analyses of in-depth, semi-structured interviews were used to explore youth’s online civic engagement in their own words. Findings are not intended to represent the experiences of all young people, but rather to shed new light on forms of online civic engagement that are meaningful and empowering to youth.

Youth’s Online Civic Engagement

The youth civic engagement literature identifies many ways that young people are civically engaged to improve communities and society. Common measures of youth civic action encompass engaging in community- or service-oriented behaviors, staying informed about political issues, participating in elections, protesting, and community organizing (Garcia & Mirra, 2021; Wray-Lake et al., 2017). Although research over the past decade has increasingly focused on online youth civic engagement (e.g. Kahne et al., 2015), there is still no agreed-upon conceptualization of civic engagement in online spaces. Quantitative scholarship has offered important insights into correlates of online civic engagement, finding associations with youth’s awareness of inequality, prior political involvement, and experiences of discrimination, and that correlates differ by youth’s racial and ethnic identities (Bañales et al., 2020; Hope et al., 2019). However, deductive scholarship does not reveal which forms of online civic engagement are most meaningful to youth themselves. Further, there is scant research on youth’s civic actions such as allyship (Lee et al., 2020) and activism (Rhoades, 2012) in the online context.

Qualitative research has shed light on the ways in which youth combine civic engagement with community building and emotional support online (Jenkins et al., 2018; Jenzen,

2017; Kelly, 2018; Nicholls & Fiorito, 2015; Seif, 2016; Zimmerman, 2016). Emotionally supportive relationships, and empowering communities, may be particularly important during adolescence when young people develop their social identities (Mitic et al., 2021). For instance, George Mwangi et al. (2018) analyzed posts and interviews from the “I, Too, Am” campaign where Black students documented microaggressions at their institutions. In addition to exposing and protesting discrimination, the campaign fostered community, belonging, and healing among the activists. George Mwangi et al. (2018) noted that the campaign was highly focused on relationships: “[students] were able to interact with one another by posting encouraging words and support, engaging in dialogue about the campaign and racial issues happening in broader society, and providing additional resources for coping with racism” (p. 158). These studies describe youth’s agency in building online communities that simultaneously promote wellbeing and activism, and point to the important role that behaviors to improve psychological wellbeing — such as emotional support and healing — can play in youth’s online civic engagement.

Several of the abovementioned studies incorporate interview data, yet scant inductive qualitative studies have positioned youth as experts to answer the question: “What is online civic engagement?” Inductive qualitative research is a useful method to explore how young people find meaning in their own civic engagement, and can uncover new forms of civic engagement that scholars otherwise may not recognize (Wray-Lake & Abrams, 2020). Qualitative research incorporating interview data has explored how youth utilize social media to challenge narratives and educate their peers on structural oppression (George Mwangi et al., 2018; Kelly, 2018; Reynolds & Mayweather, 2017; Shresthova, 2013; Zimmerman, 2016), focusing on historically marginalized youth’s agency in resisting oppression and building empowering collective identities. In these studies, social media emerges as a unique space for young people to engage in

youth-led civic action online, often entirely free from adult oversight. These important studies focus on youth mobilizing around specific causes and social movements, but scholarship is still needed to illuminate additional forms of online civic engagement and their meaning to youth.

Critical Consciousness and Psychopolitical Resistance

Whereas civic engagement is a broad term that encompasses youth’s actions to improve society, the term resistance is a narrower concept that reflects the civic strategies of youth holding historically marginalized identities (Anyiwo et al., 2020). Critical Consciousness (CC) is a framework for understanding how historically marginalized youth gain an awareness of inequality and motivation to resist oppression (Freire, 1973). Freire (1973), an educator who worked with rural communities in Brazil, conceptualized CC as a process of coming to awareness about the structural nature of inequality and one’s own position within systems of oppression, thereby gaining the agency to take collective action to dismantle oppressive systems. Scholars of youth civic engagement have theorized CC as a process involving three reciprocal dimensions of critical reflection, motivation, and action (Diemer et al., 2021), and some qualitative work has utilized CC as a frame to study youth’s online civic engagement (Carney, 2016; Kelly, 2018). These studies found that social media enabled youth to gain a sociopolitical education they could not access in school (critical reflection), and develop critical motivation to enact strategies for group wellbeing as well as to resist oppression and injustice.

In the CC literature, critical action is often measured as political protesting, organizing, and advocacy to change unjust policies (Diemer et al., 2021), although other scholarship has broadened critical action to include creative expressions like music and art, boycotting, and anti-racist and healing work (Anyiwo et al., 2020; Aldana et al., 2019; Carmen et al., 2015; Ginwright, 2010, 2015; Hope et al., 2019). The concept of psychopolitical resistance, which

originated in community psychology, complements research on youth's CC by continuing to expand and deepen conceptualizations of critical action to center psychological wellbeing as a form of resistance to oppression (Ginwright, 2015; Prilleltensky, 2003, 2008). In articulating the importance of research focusing on both psychological and political resistance, Prilleltensky (2003) wrote that "the well-being of individuals depends on psychological health as much as on political structures," and detailed forms of action towards liberation that emphasized developing relationships and a positive cultural identity (p. 196). Thus, psychopolitical resistance calls for recognizing civic actions that improve individual, relational, and collective psychological wellbeing, such as deconstructing harmful norms and engaging in collective healing (Prilleltensky, 2008). Psychopolitical resistance and CC perspectives together offer a more inclusive conceptualization of critical action and thus a robust lens through which to understand online civic engagement. These perspectives can offer important insights into the ways that youth from marginalized groups resist oppression online.

Restorying as Psychopolitical Resistance

Developing positive narratives about one's identity is an important part of youth's development (McLean & Syed, 2019), and can support civic engagement (Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015). Youth holding historically marginalized identities often face harmful societal narratives during this process, prompting them to challenge, reframe, and create new narratives that reflect and affirm their multiple and layered identities and experiences (Watson & Knight-Manuel, 2017). Stornaiuolo and Thomas (2017) have defined these actions as restorying, "a process by which young people reshape narratives to reflect perspectives and experiences that have been routinely marginalized or silenced" (p. 346). Restorying can include redefining and affirming personal identities in response to oppression or stigma, telling personal stories to

counter dominant or historical narratives, and imagining more equitable and just futures.¹

There is a rich literature on youth’s use of social media to challenge and reframe narratives. First, youth are using social media to restory their identities to counter oppressive narratives (Kelly, 2016; Perera et al., 2021; Reynolds & Mayweather, 2017; Seif, 2016). For instance, Gross’s (2017) study of the #IfTheyGunnedMeDown hashtag on Twitter found that Black youth were “displaying publicly their complexity, contradictions, code-switching aptitude, and inability to be pinned down to a single category or identity” (p. 422), in effect enacting resistance online by asserting a unique self and countering harmful stereotypes. Gross (2017) described the public and collective nature of social media as a powerful way for youth to present themselves in ways that defied harmful narratives, with the potential to be retweeted and seen by many others. Second, youth use personal storytelling to document their personal experience and to restory prejudice or stigma. For example, DREAMer youth told personal stories online to center their immigrant experiences, counter anti-immigrant rhetoric, and mobilize others to support their movement (Seif, 2016; Zimmerman, 2016). Activism, a combination of art and activism, has also been used as a tool for personal storytelling to drive political change (Rhoades, 2012), and has been documented online with young Arab protest singers who disseminated music on social media to circumnavigate governmental repression (Nabil, 2020). Third, restorying can imagine more just and equitable futures (Watts et al., 2003). In studying African American youth’s in-person community organizing, Ginwright (2010) argued for an expanded definition of youth civic engagement that encompassed “revolutionary hope and radical

¹ In this study, restorying encompasses counter-storytelling, a methodological tool based in the experiential knowledge of people of color that amplifies personal narratives (Solózano & Yosso, 2001) and acts as empirical testimony about oppression to counter their erasure or silencing in mainstream discourses (Reynolds & Mayweather, 2017). Because this study includes white youth, and because not all youth may view challenging narratives as a methodological tool, this study uses restorying as an umbrella concept for challenging narratives that encompasses counter-storytelling.

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3 imaginations” (p. 78), recognizing youth’s creativity and agency in imagining new norms and
4 narratives. In sum, restorying constitutes an act of psychopolitical resistance to oppression in
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6 which youth use social media to build an empowering and efficacious collective identity,
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8 challenge and reframe narratives that cause psychological harm, and imagine new narratives.
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12 **The Present Study**

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14 This study qualitatively explored how a sample of 20 young people ages 16 to 21 practice
15 and find meaning in their online civic engagement, with a focus on youth holding historically
16 marginalized racial and ethnic, immigrant, and religious identities. The primary research
17 question we explored, directly addressing a gap in the literature, was: How do young people
18 describe their online civic engagement? The secondary research question was: How do young
19 people ascribe meaning to their and others’ online civic engagement? This study used critical
20 consciousness and psychopolitical resistance as frames to explore when and how youth described
21 their online civic engagement as resistance to oppression. As digital organizers and activists for
22 whom social media was a core aspect of their civic engagement, youth were positioned as
23 experts to reflect on their own online civic engagement as well as that of their peers (Schelbe et
24 al., 2015). Viewing youth as experts with political interest and agency counters ageist stereotypes
25 and acknowledges the history and achievements of young people in social movements (Gordon
26 & Taft, 2011). This study addresses a lack of inductive, qualitative research that positions youth
27 as experts to describe their online civic engagement. Further, this study addresses a gap in the
28 literature exploring when youth view their online civic engagement as resistance to oppression.
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49 **Method**

50 **Participants**

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52 Twenty young people ages 16-21 years old ($M_{\text{age}} = 19$) who currently lived in the U.S. and
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spoke English were interviewed. The age range was chosen to explore online civic engagement during adolescence and the transition to adulthood, which are ripe periods for formative civic experiences, growth in autonomy, and identity development (Wray-Lake & Syvertsen, 2011). Most participants ($n = 12$, 60%) were 19-21 years old. The study was IRB approved and followed ethical guidelines for research. Oral consent was obtained for youth 18 and older, and written parent/guardian permission and oral assent were obtained for youth under 18.

The sample reflected a range of ethnic and racial, immigrant-origin, and religious backgrounds (see Table 1). Eighteen participants (90%) were youth of color and two (10%) were white. Seven participants (35%) identified as female, nine (45%) as male, and four (20%) as nonbinary. Ten participants (50%) were part of non-majority religions in the U.S. including Islam, Sikhism, and Judaism, and 12 (60%) identified as immigrant-origin. Participants resided in 10 different states, eight of whom (40%) attended high school and 12 of whom (60%) attended college. The sample was not chosen to reflect political ideological diversity, and we did not ask youth about political ideology.

Participants were recruited through the “Following” tab on youth-led movement Twitter accounts and contacted through Direct Messaging on Twitter. Youth-led movement accounts included March for Our Lives, Sunrise Movement chapters, and Black Lives Matter chapters. Chapter accounts were chosen in different locations of the U.S. to ensure regional diversity. Participants were contacted if they had Direct Messaging enabled on their Twitter profile and posted about civic issues (43% response rate). This strategy enabled purposive sampling based on gender and racial/ethnic identities. Youth of color were oversampled to explore online civic engagement that centered youth holding racially and ethnically marginalized identities.

Table 1. Participant Profiles

Pseudonym	Racial/ethnic identity	Gender identity	Other identities	Age
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Mike	White/ European	Male	First generation American	16
Aisha	Black / Asian	Female	Muslim	17
Jen	Asian	Nonbinary	Chinese American	17
Leah	White	Female	Jewish	18
Navi	Asian	Male	Punjabi and Sikh	18
Juliana	Latinx	Female	Second generation American	18
Jamal	Black	Male		18
Mark	South Asian	Male		18
Safiya	Sudanese Black	Female	First generation American; Muslim	19
Lee	Black Caribbean	Nonbinary	First generation American; Queer	19
Ahmad	Arab American	Male	First generation Palestinian immigrant	19
Pelilia	Filipino/White	Female		19
Taz	South Asian	Female	Queer; Muslim	20
Saba	South Asian	Nonbinary woman	Queer; Muslim	20
Jeffrey	Asian /Pacific Islander	Male	Second generation American; Muslim	20
M	North African Muslim	Male	First generation American	20
Kayla	Korean American	Female	Second generation American	21
Roger	Black	Male		21
Sam	Desi/ South Asian	Nonbinary	Syrian Christian; Queer	21
V	South Asian	Male	Second generation American	21

Note: In the interviews youth were asked to state their racial/ethnic and gender identities as they would like them to be reported in this paper, which is why some racial/ethnic identities reflect national origin. Pronouns used to quote youth in the paper reflect pronouns specified by youth in the interviews or on their social media accounts.

Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by the first author from March through September 2020. Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic, increased engagement in the Black Lives Matter movement, and the 2020 elections were contextual backdrops for this study. Phone interviews lasted between 45-60 minutes and participants were given a \$10 stipend. Interviews were transcribed using Otter.ai, and transcripts were coded in NVivo. After the interview, most participants provided a pseudonym and reported gender, racial/ethnic, and any other identities; five were not available after the interviews and the authors chose their pseudonym.

In the interviews, participants were asked to describe their online civic engagement journey, how they and other youth were civically engaged online, and their perceptions of how to categorize or ascribe meaning to different forms of online civic engagement. Youth were also

asked to describe ways that young people were civically engaged online that they thought adults should recognize. Youth were not given a definition of civic engagement. The first author wrote a memo after each interview detailing emerging forms of online civic engagement. To thank participants for their participation and celebrate their activism, all youth were sent a video via Twitter Direct Message describing study findings in which they were also invited to send feedback prior to publication (no feedback was received).

Analysis

This research utilized the Constant Comparative Analysis (CCA) method, an iterative and inductive qualitative methodology, to center participant voices in exploring how youth make meaning of and experience online civic engagement (Fram, 2013). The goal of CCA is to develop themes representing aspects of participants’ experiences that are shared. The first author memoed directly following each interview to reveal emerging forms of online civic engagement that were common to multiple youth (Fram, 2013). Memos were discussed with the second author in weekly meetings that also explored reflexivity and potential bias.

Because youth were positioned as experts in this study, member checking was utilized so that participants could confirm and expand upon emerging forms of online civic engagement described by their peers (Creswell & Miller, 2000). For example, in early memos, the first author noticed that all participants had mentioned challenging narratives and using personal storytelling. After discussion with the second author, the interview protocol was modified to include the questions: “Previous participants said that challenging narratives/ telling personal stories online is a form of civic engagement. Does this resonate with you? Why or why not?” To reduce bias, these questions were added at the end of the interview protocol, although in a few cases, they were asked earlier if the participant raised the topic themselves. The themes and sub-themes of

challenging narratives, personal storytelling, building community, allyship, emotional support, and holding people accountable were all incorporated into the member checking portion of the interview protocol by the 10th interview. In some cases, member checking revealed new categories; for example, youth brought up self-love after being asked about challenging narratives. Envisioning new futures and activism emerged as sub-themes through memoing.

This iterative process of memoing, member checking, and discussing emerging themes with the second author led to an initial codebook detailing forms of online civic engagement. The codebook used youth's own terminology whenever possible, such as activism and holding people accountable. Once the interviews were transcribed, the first author began coding in NVivo version 12.6.0 by immersing herself in each data unit and applying codes to sections of text. Saturation for emerging forms of online civic engagement was determined when at least half of the sample mentioned the form as meaningful, or when fewer youth mentioned the form but described it as highly meaningful to their online civic engagement to resist oppression (such as activism and self-love). Once coding was finished, the first author wrote longer memos detailing the three overarching themes, which all youth mentioned as meaningful, and to begin grouping sub-themes. Although building community and taking collective action were mentioned explicitly by youth, the concept of restorying was not. However, while grouping sub-themes the authors noted that all four sub-themes of restorying that emerged in the interviews could fit into one larger theme of challenging, re-framing, and creating new narratives. Extant literature on restorying was used as a sensitizing concept to group the four sub-themes (Storaiuolo & Thomas, 2017). Extant literature on critical consciousness and psychopolitical resistance were used to support the grouping and meaning-making process.

Researcher Positionality

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As white researchers from privileged educational backgrounds, we must carefully consider our positionality in researching youth with historically oppressed identities. These youth have long been non-consensual participants in projects led by white researchers. We endeavored to avoid extractivist or colonialist research, for example by deferring to participants’ own words and experiences wherever possible, and by involving participants in the research process (as exemplified in Korteweg & Bissell, 2016). The interviews used an open conversational approach to build rapport and comfort, and the flexible interviewing style positioned youth as experts of their own experiences. However, we acknowledge that power dynamics inherent in our identities as white researchers from an elite university may have led to inadvertent silencing of participants or biasing their responses in ways we did not anticipate and were unable to discern. In our research, we view youth as experts and we strenuously seek to avoid generalizing experiences across youth who share a racial/ethnic background or other identity.

Findings

Youth ascribed different levels of meaning to their online civic engagement in ways that reflected their personal identities and unique experiences. Psychopolitical resistance to oppression emerged as a central frame for youth’s online civic engagement, although not all youth used the term “resistance” to describe their civic actions online. Through inductive analysis we identified three themes that all youth mentioned in their interviews, shown in Figure 1: Restorying, Building Community, and Taking Collective Action. Sub-themes reflected the diverse ways that youth were engaged; for example, youth might build community through emotional support or allyship.

Figure 1
Forms of Online Civic Engagement

Restorying

Participants described restorying as a broad form of online civic engagement that was centered around psychopolitical resistance to oppression. Within restorying, sub-themes of online civic engagement included personal storytelling, challenging and reframing dominant narratives, envisioning new futures, and self-love. Youth emphasized that these forms of restorying were part of their efforts to educate others, offering a deeper perspective than simply raising awareness about the existence of an issue. Restorying was a powerful way for youth holding historically marginalized identities to oppose harmful norms and stereotypes, affirm and empower others with shared identities, and reframe historical narratives.

Personal storytelling. Half of youth described personal storytelling on public social media platforms, viewing it as a galvanizing force for building social movements. Indeed, youth described personal stories as the building blocks for change because they could simultaneously raise awareness about issues, change people's views, and mobilize them towards action. Leah, an 18-year old white Jewish female, explained: "I think sharing stories like that...is paramount to...organizing, I mean, I can't think of any successful movement that wasn't built around people's personal experiences and the empathy that came from people sharing those personal

experiences.” Youth believed that personal storytelling could humanize otherwise abstract topics, like climate change, and make tangible the impact of experiences like gun violence in ways that could shift views and mobilize action. Moreover, sharing these personal stories online meant that youth’s audience for their posts could reach national and global levels.

A main goal of personal storytelling online was to promote empathy and awareness among the general population, not just youth’s followers. Kayla, a 21-year old Korean American female who used personal storytelling to promote empathy and challenge stereotypes, emphasized that online platforms could help her reach people within and outside her community:

Storytelling, I feel like is another big aspect of being organized and civically engaged. A lot of people are able to disseminate different kinds of stories. And like, get people to empathize and feel for a certain cause through having a personal narrative...Personally for me, I'm in different communities, like one that you've probably seen a lot on my Twitter is my Asian American identity, my Korean American identity, especially right now in these times. And I think that the reason why I share my story and why I believe it's important is because not everybody can identify with me...just telling my story is in part, like being proud of who I am and showing other people that they can be proud of who they are too, within the community. And also spreading information, teaching others and gaining allies and others outside the community.

Juliana, an 18-year old Latinx female, saw personal storytelling about her Latinx identity as a way to educate others about their own place within oppressive systems. She also emphasized that online platforms were the best way to spread this message to other young people:

When I identify as a Latina, I acknowledge my difficulties, but I also acknowledge my privilege. And there are a lot of white passing Latinos who need to understand that as well...And so that's something that I have always acknowledged...someone who is a white Latina is not going to experience the same thing as someone who is a black Latina... this [social media] is really the best way to reach out to youth. We do get the stigma that we're always on our phones, but for a lot of reasons. Whatever reason that may be on their phone, we can always use that to our advantage. And we can really make it something positive and educational. And that's what a lot of youth activists do.

Juliana and Kayla both described telling their personal stories on social media as a way to promote empathy and awareness among their followers, but also to reach larger audiences

outside of their community to create wide-spread societal change.

Personal storytelling was also a way to challenge and create new narratives about youth's identities. Speaking to stereotypes about Asian American youth being politically apathetic, Kayla said: "By sharing the stories [of Asian American youth being politically engaged], I feel like we'll be invited to more progressive changemaking spaces...that's one of our goals, is to show that we are a powerful force in the country." For Kayla, sharing these stories on social media enabled Asian American youth to be seen as a powerful and agentic political force. Sam, a 21-year old Desi/ South Asian nonbinary person, said they were dispelling harmful narratives by being "radically transparent" online about a stigmatized health condition. Sam felt a moral obligation to share their story to challenge stigmas and create new empowering narratives, which they acknowledged was easier to do on public social media platforms. Both Sam and Kayla used personal storytelling on social media to build an empowering collective identity.

Challenging and reframing dominant narratives. A majority of youth described using social media to tell new versions of history that challenged what they were taught in school. Youth reframed and highlighted new historical narratives on social media to build awareness of structural oppression and injustice, using online platforms like virtual classrooms where they could educate their peers about the historical roots of social and political issues. Safiya, a 19-year old Sudanese Black female, described the process of learning about and then reframing historical narratives on social media as a critical aspect of her civic engagement to resist oppression:

Within my experiences [as a Black immigrant] I never fit in, in my school... So I kind of took to online and I learned so much about myself, I learned that there were other girls just like me, I learned that I'm not alone, I learned about Black history I learned about systemic structures in America that are, the reason things are the way they are... I think that it is so important to understand systemic structures and social oppressions...so that you can have a true understanding of it. Like I would not understand social oppressions, systemic injustices against Black communities, if I didn't understand the slave trade. So it just goes way back...you have to tie it back to the roots... I also am actively constantly

posting resources for people to educate themselves about matters, politically and socially. So I think the biggest thing that I can do for other people is to offer education and to offer insight on matters that maybe they haven't been educated on. Or maybe they have not been exposed to. Encouraging dialogue, encouraging discussion and new thoughts.

For Safiya and others, restorying historical narratives was a way to resist dominant narratives that erased important history related to present-day oppression. Ahmad, a 19-year old Arab American male, explained that this type of restorying could occur through videos as well: “[The Tik Tok videos where youth retell history] are trying to kind of rewrite what the colonial agenda wrote in our history book[s], so it’s more of an awakening of what somebody believes to be true and they just have the opportunity to tell.” Restorying history on social media was an empowering way for youth to educate their peers and participate in national dialogue.

Youth also reframed dominant narratives by challenging the way the media covered social and political issues. Lee, a 19-year old Black Caribbean nonbinary person, spoke to the Black Lives Matter movement’s use of hashtags to challenge dominant narratives:

[We are] using those hashtags to bring to light tons of things that are going on in the U.S. government or internationally that has been hidden due to the pandemic...for POC [people of color] organizers and other organizers who are marginalized in any way, they will also [use] hashtags...to bring to light things that have been hidden because of other quote unquote news worthy topics, like the Black Lives Matter movement has done it.

Lee and others saw hashtags as a powerful way for marginalized groups to collectively challenge and reframe media narratives to advance their causes for social and political justice.

Changing social norms, particularly around mental health, was a common goal of challenging dominant narratives online. Jamal, an 18-year old Black male, spoke about youth’s intentionality in changing societal stigma around mental health:

Some of the norms that we have, that a lot of the younger generation thinks, they kind of need to be phased out, like the way that we talk about mental health, the kind of stigma that's around it...So it's something that's kind of changing, where we challenged those norms on purpose, so that we can reach a point where we can talk about them openly.

M, a 20-year old North African Muslim male, primarily used social media to challenge social norms. Speaking to stereotypes of gender dynamics in Muslim countries, M said:

My social activism isn't me trying to interact with people, it's more about getting that message out there and having people think about it...sometimes it can be a joke that in itself has meaning of social norms or challenging narratives. It's not about interacting, it's about putting that one grain in their head so they can start to think about it.

For Jamal and M, social media was a space where youth could challenge social norms with a broad audience, either on their own or as part of a collective effort. For some youth, reframing dominant narratives was a primary way to use social media for civic engagement.

Envisioning new futures. Less than half of youth used social media to imagine a better world, but those who did connected their visioning work to movement building and youth's agency throughout history in creating new avenues for change. Youth described social media as a unique space in society where they could have a voice in the creation of new social norms and ideas. Jamal explained how envisioning new futures was part of his online civic engagement:

This kind of talk of, this is how it's always been, this is how we've done things...as a group of young people, that irks you, and you kind of fight back against that as much as you can, because at some point slavery was how things had always been, and at some point racism was how things had always been. So you kind of start to question how much of the system we should keep and how much of it is flawed. If you're trying to do a homework assignment and you can't figure out the problem, at some point you start over, because your mistake might have been way further at the beginning than you thought.

For Jamal, a leader in the Black Lives Matter movement interviewed in September 2020, envisioning new futures was a critical foundation for youth to fix structural issues that previous generations were unable to solve. He explained that the work to imagine new futures was happening online and offline, but that social media was increasingly where societal debates were happening and therefore was the most impactful space for youth to make their voices heard.

Self-love. A distinct form of restorying that emerged with several female and non-binary youth was the concept of self-love, which was tied to having a marginalized identity or

appearance. Taz, a 20-year old South Asian female who grew up in a white-majority area and was bullied for her appearance, posted photos of her body to challenge racism and fatphobia:

These things that we were told that were bad about ourselves, like my fat brown thighs -- I don't have a thigh gap, I wear shorts, even though my thighs are big as fuck, it's things like that, I think is pretty revolutionary, and just a form of self-love.

Taz's description of self-love, in which posting a selfie was a "revolutionary act" in the context of historic oppression, highlights the nuance and complexity of psychopolitical resistance.

The idea of self-love as a form of civic engagement resonated strongly with Safiya, who struggled finding spaces to explore her identity as a Black immigrant. She explained that Black female influencers, including other immigrant women, empowered her to love herself:

[Some influencers are] like, I love my brown skin, my brown skin empowers me, I've gone through trials and tribulations within my brown skin and now I've learned to love myself. I can relate to that...[influencer name] was one of the first Black girls that I've seen on the internet who was just like effervescently herself. And she had these radical quote unquote, views and she was like, in love with herself.

For Safiya and Taz, social media was a safe space where they could engage with empowering, affirmative content and express their identities to challenge Eurocentric beauty norms. Both youth were clear that loving aspects of themselves that did not align with these norms, particularly on public platforms like Twiter, was a powerful form of resistance to oppression.

Building Community

Building community was important to all youth because it led to the relationships and networks necessary to galvanize civic action. A majority of youth described building community itself as an inextricable aspect of their online civic engagement; indeed, Saba, a 20-year old South Asian non-binary woman, explained that organizing was inherently a form of community building: "when you organize, you organize with other people. You don't organize on your own." Similarly, Mark noted that building community was a form of resistance to historic

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3 oppression: “One of the ways you organize out of a dependency state or a dependency on a
4 corrupt system is you organize as a community. And social media, the online world, is a
5 community in and of itself.” Youth explained that online platforms had become particularly
6 important during COVID-19 lockdown orders, and that all community building work, including
7 introductory trainings and planning events, had moved online. We identified two sub-themes that
8 were meaningful to youth in building online communities: emotional support and allyship.
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11 **Emotional support.** The majority of youth described emotional support as closely tied to
12 their online community building efforts. Emotional support included taking care of oneself (or
13 encouraging others to take time for their mental health), providing affirmation and support to
14 others, and creating collective healing spaces. Youth emphasized that emotional support was the
15 foundation for online activist communities, particularly because digital organizing could be
16 lonely work. In addition, youth who were unable to access emotional support from their family
17 or peers at school (particularly queer and nonbinary youth) noted that emotionally supportive
18 online communities were critical for their wellbeing and online civic engagement.
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21 For a minority of youth, practicing self-care through supportive online communities
22 emerged as a core aspect of their resistance efforts online. Mark argued that this type of self-care
23 was a form of resistance to failed governmental systems:
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26 The reason why many of us have trauma or are struggling with mental health issues, it’s
27 because of failures of this state. And so when we take care of ourselves, when we give
28 ourselves that time, it is an act of resistance...me taking care of myself, me taking care of
29 my mental health is being civically engaged, because it puts me in a healthier place to
30 fight harder later. So I think those kind of communities, those moments where you feel
31 most at ease, the moments where you feel heard, are acts of resistance, because you’re
32 talking about the real issues that we face as a society, you’re identifying with parts of
33 yourselves that have been fought against by the system that we’re in.
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36 Mark believed that taking care of himself, including spending time in supportive online
37 communities, was critical civic work that resisted failures of the state. Similarly, Sam explained
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that engaging in online fandom communities was a form of self-care that they called “radical:”

Fandom is very much at its heart about community and one of the radical self-loving things that I've done in the past few years is to be very open about the fact that, because I do this work [activism], I need an escape, and for me that's always in fandom...I try not to make my Twitter all about politics if that makes sense, politics is everything...but basically even just me using the same account to talk about why I love Percy Jackson that I use for political advocacy, I think it's really important.

For Mark and Sam, online communities — whether activism or fandom — were places to practice self-care. Moreover, both youth linked this self-care to resisting oppression.

Youth described providing and receiving relational emotional support from peers as a way to sustain their online civic engagement, but not necessarily as a form of civic engagement in and of itself. Pelilia, a 19-year old Filipino/white female, echoed other youth when she explained: “even though obviously it's an online community that does stuff online, it's really nice to have that support system. Because I'm sure as you know, activism can be very tiring....so it's nice to have that support just to know that you're not the only one like that.” For Pelilia and others, digital activism could be lonely, and receiving emotional support from peers was an important part of their online community building. However, Jamal was the only young person who addressed whether this type of relational emotional support was civic engagement:

There are people that are also educating people and raising awareness at the same time as they're also giving others support...I think that the emotional support side of things can be completely separate if that's all you're doing. But it's something that fits into civic engagement way more often than you would think.

Nearly all youth in this study described emotional support as meaningful, particularly in online spaces that could often feel isolating, but only Mark, Sam, and Jamal viewed self-care or relational forms of emotional support as forms of online civic engagement.

Youth were more unified in describing collective healing spaces online as part of their online civic engagement to counter the psychological effects of oppression. Taz explained:

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3 I was just in a discussion the other day with other queer trans people of color from across
4 the state. And we just had a conversation about love and intimacy and it was set up by a
5 nonprofit that works for queer trans people of color. And so that was very healing and
6 supportive and like, I need that when I'm at home because I don't feel the queer love at
7 home because my parents don't know, and so things like that seem very nice.
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10 Taz found healing and affirmation in having a safe space to have conversations with other queer
11 people of color, and described this space as a part of her online civic engagement. Similarly,
12 when asked whether emotional support was a part of her online community building, Aisha
13 described online healing circles and group chats where youth who worked on gun violence
14 prevention could connect and support one another, particularly during COVID-19:
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17 I'm in this group chat for students who work in gun violence prevention organizations.
18 And basically they offer like, resources to help you throughout this point in time, a lot of
19 people are having really bad mental health days and issues due to the quarantine and not
20 being able to interact with other people as much.
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23 Aisha, Taz and others described these intentional healing spaces as important sources of
24 emotional support for a number of reasons: they gave youth a safe space to discuss, process, and
25 heal from traumatic experiences, helped build deeper personal relationships, and could provide
26 resources for youth to take care of their own psychological wellbeing. Moreover, queer and
27 nonbinary youth who had not disclosed these identities to their families described these
28 intentional spaces as extremely important for their wellbeing and civic engagement.
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41 In addition, some youth described less formalized online communities built around
42 historically marginalized identities as spaces where youth could both find and provide emotional
43 support around shared experiences. Roger, a 21-year old Black male, explained the complex
44 ways these communities merged humor with healing, support, debate, and activism:
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50 I think some of it [online Black communities] is a solidarity thing. Sometimes, it's just as
51 simple as poking fun at something that we all know is ludicrous. And it's not a call to
52 action. But it's all of us getting together and meeting to laugh, because it just seems so
53 ridiculous that we're dealing with whatever particular thing it is whether it's, you know, a
54 microaggression that we always hear from our well-meaning white friend or some trope
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that seems to keep popping up in a TV show that we want to like, because all the people we know like it, but it's still offensive, but you can't bring it up or else you're too sensitive. And then sometimes it is kind of like a network activism kind of thing, talking about what we need to do in order to move the ball on this particular issue, because there are a lot of different activist groups that kind of weave themselves throughout just casual discourse online. So it's all solidarity all together.

For Roger and others, online communities based on a shared marginalized identity were safe spaces to counter the psychological effects of oppression. However, whereas some youth like Mark and Taz explicitly tied emotional support to resistance, and viewed emotional support as a form of online civic engagement, other youth like Roger appeared to view emotional support as a facilitator or positive byproduct of building online communities for civic engagement.

Allyship. Allyship was mentioned by half of youth and was especially prominent in interviews conducted after the spring 2020 surge in Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement participation. Navi, an 18-year old Asian male who was interviewed prior to spring 2020, described allyship he received when non-Sikh people expressed support online:

There was a horrible terrorist attack in Kabul, where a Sikh temple was attacked...and then seeing online like Muslims...or people of other identities, just supporting, saying that they stand with the community, and that I can text them if I need anything...and all these different things to show their support, I think are extremely important in social justice.

Receiving public support from people who did not share his Sikh background was meaningful to Navi. Allyship could also occur within ethnic communities, as when Saba posted a photo wearing the clothing of her ethnic group and was bullied by people from that group for being too dark-skinned. Saba described allyship happening when others from the group defended her on Twitter: "They were in a position of power [because of their light skin and facial features], and they took the time to reaffirm me." This experience, Saba said, "made me feel super powerful," particularly because it occurred in the public space of social media and she did not personally know the people who were defending her. Allyship was thus described as public affirmation and

support for Saba and Navi's wellbeing after a negative event or personal experience.

Saba and others distinguished allyship from emotional support because of historic power relationships between the individuals giving versus receiving support. Saba explained that many allies defending her on Twitter were lighter-skinned members of her ethnic group in positions of higher power than she was as a multi-ethnic darker-skinned person. Similarly, Jeffrey, a 20-year old Asian and Pacific Islander male, explained that allyship was civic engagement when the person providing defense comes from an "opposing" group with higher social power:

There are instances where a group comes to the aid of an individual because that individual's being politically attacked, maybe their identity is attacked. And they're advocating against that and defending the individual. I think that, especially if it's coming from an opposing group, that's a form of civic engagement.

In this way, youth viewed allyship as distinct from emotional support when one individual supported another person or group in the context of historic oppression and power dynamics.

A key feature of allyship was amplification, or when youth shared content authored by people holding historically marginalized identities to raise awareness, educate others, and share resources. Amplification was a primary method of allyship particularly on social media, where platforms enable youth easily to retweet and share content from other accounts. V, a 21-year old South Asian nonbinary person, said that since the spring 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, he noticed "more of a push towards people using their social media platforms intentionally to amplify certain issues and causes." However, youth also associated amplification with allyship prior to May 2020; for instance, Kayla explained her allyship as a Korean American in relation to the Black Lives Matter movement: "My approach to galvanizing the Black Lives Matter movement is by retweeting or interviewing somebody else within that movement and not me talking about my experiences as a Black person. I can't do that." Safiya, also interviewed prior to May 2020, said that amplification was about stepping back so that people from marginalized

groups had space to be heard: “for any movement to be truly inclusive, you have to highlight and value and prioritize the voices of communities who are experiencing severe oppression. We need to be uplifting the voices who are struggling.” Youth viewed amplification online, through retweeting or sharing content, as a key aspect of allyship wherein people used their privilege to create more spaces for historically marginalized groups to be recognized and heard.

Saba, who was interviewed in September of 2020, had a more nuanced definition of allyship that included what she referred to as “accompliceship.” Saba saw accompliceship as taking substantial risk by using one’s power and privilege to stand in solidarity with others: “Allyship is kind of like an entryway into reaffirming people and empowering them to use the voice that they have ... and accompliceship kind of takes the next step from that. Like you’re doing things that could potentially put your work or any other aspect of what you do at risk.” She gave an example of a white person tweeting about racism at their workplace to keep their Black colleagues safe while holding their employer accountable. Thus youth’s conceptualization of online allyship appeared to be evolving in tandem with the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement.

Taking Collective Action

Youth participated in collective action through myriad creative methods, including holding people in power accountable and activism. Importantly, many youth described taking collective action online as integrated with, rather than separate from, offline methods to achieve social or political change. For instance, Taz described using social media to circulate an online petition listing student demands to improve her university’s sexual misconduct procedures, then printing out a physical copy of the signatures and delivering it to her university’s president in person (an act that was filmed and shared on social media). Youth described taking collective action online as participating in an event or campaign initiated by an organizing group or

individual (including webinars, email banking, tagging accounts, using hashtags, tweet storming, digital striking, and signing petitions), or taking other decentralized action online to further a cause (including sharing GoFundMes to support Black Lives Matter activists, creating infographics or videos about a cause, or encouraging people to register to vote). Digital organizers in the sample described their efforts to organize and coordinate online collective actions as deeply intentional and strategic, often taking months to train teams of digital volunteers and create resources like toolkits and infographics to plan a single day of action.

Although sub-themes in this section could be an individual act — for instance, a young person might tag their Senator in a tweet to hold them accountable — youth saw this theme as meaningful collective action because it described young people coming together across vast distances to challenge injustice and create change. In this way, even when not part of an organized campaign, individual acts were seen as contributing to a greater collective effort. Moreover, even individual acts took place in the public space of social media, so youth's followers who were not themselves part of these collective efforts were engaged as spectators. Youth viewed collective action as the primary way to create policy change and to gain media attention, particularly in the face of structural barriers to youth political participation such as the voting age and ageism around youth's political agency. Ultimately, the public space of social media allowed youth to make their collective voices heard and speak directly to those in power.

Holding people accountable. Almost all youth described holding people accountable as a form of collective action, explaining that it forced adults to pay attention to young people's views and political agency. "There's so many negative stigmas surrounding young people using social media," Navi explained, "when in reality many of us are using it to educate our peers and help us get involved and hold our politicians accountable." Holding people accountable could

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3 take many forms on social media, from tagging a politician to using a hashtag to get a topic
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5 trending. Safiya explained these actions as “how you get, you know, things happening. That's
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7 how revolutions happen.” Youth who did not have the money to travel, or whose parents did not
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9 let them attend protests, found special meaning in being able to hold people accountable online.
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11 During COVID-19, when many youth were unable to participate in Black Lives Matter protests
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13 in person, social media was an indispensable tool to continue holding people accountable.
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17 Youth explained that the ability to hold people accountable online was a fundamental
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19 shift in power dynamics for young people. Describing March for Our Lives, Navi noted that
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21 Parkland students changed the political culture in the U.S. by holding politicians accountable:
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24 They've [Parkland students] done a lot in terms of changing our political culture. So that
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26 politicians are no longer people who are above us. Rather, they're people who work for us,
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28 and we have to hold accountable. And they inspired a lot of young people to not be afraid
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30 to hold their elected officials accountable, whether it's in person or whether it's on Twitter.

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32 Navi's description of holding elected officials accountable is notable given that he and many of
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34 his peers are too young to vote. Mike, a 16-year old white, first-generation European male,
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36 described organizing online with the climate justice movement to hold politicians accountable
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38 and change legislation despite his inability to vote. Mike noted that “change doesn't only come
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40 from the government, it also has to come from businesses and corporations and everyday people.
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42 So I think that change can come in many forms.” Thus, social media allowed youth to hold
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44 individuals and institutions accountable through collective actions, creating new norms around
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46 youth's political power and forcing elected officials and others to listen to their opinions.
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48 **Artivism.** A minority of youth mentioned artivism, which Navi defined as “when you
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50 incorporate art into your activism and share messages using art,” but these youth saw artivism as
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52 an essential part of online civic engagement and, for some, their resistance to oppression. Types
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54 of artivism that youth mentioned included memes, Tik Tok videos, infographics, paintings,
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3 poems, and music. Particularly online, where youth saw visuals as the most effective way to
4 convey information and catalyze action, activism was a powerful tool. Navi noted that “Memes
5 and humor are probably the number one way to connect with teens and young people.”
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10 Mark and Leah both described activism as a way to resist and heal from oppression. Mark
11 explained that his art “revolved around the advocacy work I was doing, and also was a way to
12 express the ways I was feeling about society in the moment or the ways I was feeling oppressed
13 by society in the moment...it became a really useful tool for healing.” In this way, activism was
14 part of Mark’s internal journey towards healing as well as his external-facing activism. Similarly,
15 Leah described how an online forum that centered art was a core way to mobilize other young
16 women to join a local women’s organization: “We had open mics, we had discussions where we
17 would talk about the female experience, talk about body image, we went to legislative
18 conferences to talk about the work we were doing. We had a website, it was a blog, and we had
19 girls from all over [city] who were contributing, writing, photography, art that talked about their
20 experience as a woman. And it was it was really amazing.” For Leah and Mark, online activism
21 was empowering and healing, and supported their broader civic engagement.
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37 Activism could be a way to take civic action by honoring people, as Mark explained:
38 “[The arts] are important in our everyday lives, they capture people’s attention, they help us heal.
39 But also they help honor people. And I think, in this specific space, so often we’re faced with the
40 need to honor people we’ve lost, to honor really good work.” For instance, youth described how
41 activism was used to create digital portraits of other young activists to honor and recognize their
42 work. These portraits were shared by other young activists around the world, creating a sense of
43 community despite borders. Navi also viewed activism as a tool to honor victims of gun violence:
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54 [In an activism campaign] so many young people around the country created songs or
55 poems, or speeches surrounding gun violence prevention and honoring the 47 young
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people who are on average victims of gun violence every single day. People will also use music and slam poetry, all these different things to increase civic engagement, and a lot of them are surrounding spreading messages and spreading personal experiences.

Thus, youth viewed activism as a meaningful form of online civic engagement that buttressed other forms of digital organizing while providing youth with space for healing and resistance.

Discussion

This study used inductive, qualitative research with youth from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds to explore how youth describe and find meaning in their online civic engagement. Findings demonstrate that youth engage in psychopolitical forms of resistance on social media through restorying, building community, and taking collective action, highlighting youth’s agency and creativity in online resistance. All youth mentioned these three overarching themes as core aspects of their online civic engagement; however, not all youth viewed the themes and sub-themes, particularly emotional support, as resistance to oppression. Youth described social media as a type of civic space that enabled them to connect with others, defy ageist stereotypes, and civically engage at national and global levels. Our findings contribute new understanding about online civic engagement, particularly forms exercised by youth to resist oppression, that the public can celebrate, research can further examine, and practice efforts can support.

Psychopolitical Resistance as a Frame for Youth’s Online Civic Engagement

Oppression has both physical and psychological effects (Prilelltensky, 2003; Watts et al., 2003), and our work provides further evidence that social media can be an important context for youth to counter the psychological effects of oppression (George Mwangi et al., 2018; Kelly, 2018; Reynolds & Mayweather, 2017). The majority of youth recounted personal experiences of oppression and around half explicitly tied their online civic engagement to resistance. Youth in this study emphasized that resisting the psychological harms of oppression — whether by

restorying harmful narratives, providing emotional support to others, or engaging in collective healing spaces — was core to their online civic engagement. Rich descriptions of youth's online civic engagement from this study push future scholarship to consider personal acts of resistance that can happen within individuals, such as self-care, or that are relational, such as providing emotional support, as forms of online civic engagement. The findings echo past work showing that youth are meeting their own and others' psychological needs through online civic engagement (Hope & Spencer, 2017; Kelly, 2018; Zimmerman, 2016). Youth's descriptions indicate that psychopolitical resistance is a useful frame to study online civic engagement, particularly for youth who have personally experienced oppression.

Our findings raise an important question for the field about whether and when youth consider online behaviors to be resistance. We found, for example, that providing emotional support was not viewed by all youth as a form of resistance, or that youth viewed emotional support as resistance depending on the context. Thus, certain facets of psychopolitical resistance online may be difficult to define and measure quantitatively because not all youth see these behaviors in the same way. However, many youth saw the theme of restorying, as well as the sub-themes of emotional support and activism, as powerful ways to resist oppression. Mixed methods research could illuminate when youth view their online civic engagement as resistance.

Restorying is a Meaningful Form of Psychopolitical Resistance

Restorying was a powerful tool for youth to resist structural oppression by telling their personal stories, challenging societal narratives, re-writing history, and imagining future worlds that are more just and equitable. Youth described restorying as a primary way to counter the psychological effects of oppression, reflecting prior research on youth using social media to shape societal narratives (Carney, 2016) and reframe stigmas and stereotypes (Gross, 2017;

Shresthova, 2013; Zimmerman, 2016). In particular, this study highlights the importance of self-love as resistance for youth of color in the context of Eurocentric beauty norms (Perera et al., 2021). Future quantitative research measuring online civic engagement should incorporate restorying as a primary form of resistance.

Online Community Building is a Foundation for Taking Collective Action

Youth identified building community as a core aspect of online civic engagement, explaining that social movements could not happen without these relationships. Indeed, several youth equated digital organizing with community building online. Moreover, youth explicitly tied relational aspects of online community building, such as amplifying marginalized groups and providing emotional support, to resistance. These civic actions were particularly meaningful for youth from identities that are stigmatized or for whom in-person community building may be unsafe. These findings align with research showing the importance of online communities for LGBTQ and undocumented youth (Jenzen, 2017; Seif, 2016) and documenting the importance of online community building in empowering, unifying, and mobilizing resistance efforts (Reynolds & Mayweather, 2017; Zimmerman, 2016). This study also highlights the importance of allyship in community building online, both within and across racial and ethnic groups, adding to literature documenting youth’s in-person solidarity work (Lee et al., 2020).

However, building community is understudied as a form of, rather than a facilitator or byproduct of, youth civic engagement. Scholarship has long recognized community building as a core aspect of youth’s civic engagement, such as examining how connection to community predicts future civic engagement (Mahatmya & Lohman, 2012), or proposing a dynamic and reciprocal relationship between youth’s civic engagement and community building (Brennan et al., 2009). Some research does view community building in and of itself as a form of civic

engagement (Hyman, 2002), but traditional civic engagement measures do not include community building (Garcia & Mirra, 2021), including online (Bañales et al., 2020). This discrepancy may be because youth themselves may not always view community building online as civic engagement. Social connections and peer relationships that provide youth with emotional support, and feelings of belonging and acceptance, are known to foster health, mental health, and identity development in adolescence and young adulthood (Mitic et al., 2021). Thus, youth's efforts on social media to build community and offer emotional support to others is contributing to their own, and their peers', healthy development. Future qualitative research is needed to untangle when youth view community building itself as resistance, and when it may be a byproduct or facilitator of their civic efforts online.

Taking Collective Action

Youth viewed taking collective action as a meaningful way to civically engage online because people in power were more likely to listen if many youth came together to demand change. The public aspect of social media, as well as the potential to have a message heard by thousands or even millions of people, encouraged youth to take part in collective actions. Youth saw holding people accountable as a critical way to enact justice, and viewed activism as a form of collective action that could educate others while providing space for healing from the psychological effects of oppression. Taking collective action online allowed youth to defy ageist stereotypes about youth apathy or political inefficacy, and provided a pathway to voice political opinions heard even if they were unable to vote. These findings align with literature documenting youth taking collective action online (Carney, 2016; George Mwangi et al., 2018; Gross, 2017; Zimmerman, 2016), bringing additional insights about how youth hold people accountable and use art for change, to build community, and as a form of personal healing. This

theme also underscores a unique aspect of social media spaces, which reduces barriers to organizing across borders and makes larger-scale political actions more accessible to youth.

Implications for Theory and Research

This study’s findings that youth viewed psychopolitical resistance as a meaningful form of online civic engagement has implications for scholarship that defines and measures youth civic engagement. This implication is particularly relevant for the CC literature, which could benefit from a stronger focus on actions to improve individual and collective psychological wellbeing (Carmen et al., 2015; Ginwright, 2010). Traditional measures of youth civic engagement focus on individual actions such as voting or volunteering (Garcia & Mirra, 2021), and measures of online civic engagement and CC also center youth’s individual actions, such as sharing political information or signing e-petitions (Bañales et al., 2020; Diemer et al., 2021; Yankah et al., 2017). In contrast, this study aligns with prior research highlighting the importance of collective actions (Mainsah, 2017) and building online communities in youth’s online civic engagement specifically to resist the psychological effects of oppression (George Mwangi et al., 2018; Kelly, 2018). Future research should embrace forms of psychopolitical resistance, such as envisioning new futures, as civic engagement.

In addition, the time period in which data collection occurred revealed differences in youth’s online civic engagement following COVID-19 lockdowns and the increase in participation in the Black Lives Matter movement. Social media likely became an even more central space for youth to engage in critical civic actions during these tumultuous times (Yazdani et al., under review) but social media had been exponentially growing as a civic space prior to 2020 (Kahne et al., 2015). This study should be viewed as part of a continuing conversation exploring youth’s online civic engagement. Inductive, qualitative research will continue to be a

valuable method to understand how the forms of online youth civic engagement detailed here may have changed over the course of 2020, and how youth's conceptualizations of key ideas like allyship and holding people accountable may continue to evolve.

Finally, this study revealed that some youth may not differentiate between their online and in-person civic engagement, reinforcing previous scholarship that social media is another civic space where these actions take place (Carney, 2016; Mainsah, 2017). However, social media may also spark unique forms of civic engagement, as youth described feeling more free to challenge dominant narratives and had greater access to supportive communities in digital spaces. Future research could examine when and how online civic engagement is distinct from in-person civic engagement by asking youth these questions directly.

Limitations

This study may be limited due to the characteristics of young people in the sample. For example, the recruitment strategy targeted youth formally affiliated with organizations such as March for Our Lives, and all youth described themselves as highly civically engaged online. Youth civically engaged in ways that are not focused on activism or organizing may have described other types of online civic engagement. This sample is certainly not representative of all youth and our findings do not represent an exhaustive list of all types of online civic engagement, although the interviewers did ask youth to describe their peers' online civic engagement to ensure the findings were more broadly applicable. In addition, all three of the overarching themes appeared in every interview, enhancing the rigor of the findings. Despite this limitation, our findings indicate ways that scholarship can broaden conceptualizations of online youth civic engagement to include psychopolitical resistance.

Second, this study did not recruit young people based on specific demographic

characteristics, and many historically marginalized groups (for instance Latinx youth, youth with disabilities, and transgender youth) were not well represented in this sample. We also did not recruit based on political ideology, with the result that the majority of youth reported supporting liberal causes such as gun control and creating pathways to citizenship for undocumented residents. A more systematic exploration of how young people representing these demographic groups and conservative political ideologies use social media for civic engagement would add further depth and nuance to our understanding of online civic engagement.

Conclusion

Young people are civic actors who use in-person and online methods to make significant contributions to politics and society. To support youth’s online civic engagement, it is critical to understand how youth themselves define and ascribe meaning to their engagement. There is a lack of inductive, qualitative research that positions a racially and ethnically diverse group of youth as experts to describe what online civic engagement means to them. This gap in the literature could result in quantitative research that does not consider important but understudied aspects of online civic engagement for youth holding historically marginalized identities, such as providing emotional support or self-love. This study can encourage adults to see and appreciate young people as leaders, especially in online spaces, and as having visionary power in creating new social norms and narratives. We echo previous scholarship calling for more expansive and inclusive definitions of youth civic engagement (Garcia & Mirra, 2021), as well as centering youth in social movements (Ginwright, 2010; Gordon & Taft, 2011). Future scholarship and youth-focused programming should incorporate the digital world as a central civic space and recognize psychopolitical resistance as an important lens to study youth civic engagement.

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