

Gender and Instagram Activism in Teenagers: Social Discourse in a Digital Age

Gabrielle Liu Heuer¹ and Matthew Macomber^{1#}

¹Lake Washington High School

#Advisor

ABSTRACT

Social media activism—posting or reposting ideas, images, or words surrounding different social movements—has swelled in recent years with the growth of the internet. Teenagers have begun using their social media accounts to share their opinions and current events related to issues they deem important. This study had two main aims: to assess factors that influenced high school-aged teenagers’ motivation to post activist content on Instagram, and then to explore how those factors differed between genders. A survey was distributed to students at a midsize high school in Washington state that collected participants’ (n=114) demographic information, willingness to post activist content, and motivation levels to post about five popular issues. Results were analyzed by identifying key themes in qualitative responses and categorizing them using the preexisting Scale of Motives for Using Social Networking Sites (SMU-SNS). It was found that nonbinary and particularly female teenagers were more likely to post activist content than male teenagers. Participants indicated that relation to personal identity, personal/public knowledge on the issue, and perceived severity/importance of the issue were main reasons for posting activist content. Further analysis showed these themes fell under the SMU-SNS categories of Social Connectedness, Information, and Self-expression. These conclusions have great significance for public health organizations and social justice movements looking for teenagers willing to engage in this form of advocacy, suggesting they should tailor activist content for Instagram Stories and that they need to look for alternative ways to get male teenagers involved.

Introduction

America was experiencing a very turbulent political climate in June of 2020 as a result of the death of George Floyd, a Black man who had been a victim of police brutality. Amid protests and calls for justice came a tidal wave of internet activism. For the first time, I witnessed a significant portion of my high school-aged peers engaging in the Black Lives Matter movement by reposting information, art, and sayings from the movement. Some even wrote and documented their own thoughts. On June 2nd, dubbed “#blackouttuesday”, there seemed no limit to the number of teenagers who posted blacked out squares on their respective Instagram accounts in support of active protests and the movement’s goals. This activity became so ubiquitous that to *not* participate seemed to become a political statement in itself. The social network of teenagers had been mobilized—and their activism for various causes has and continues to find a place on Instagram.

Existing literature has theorized why young individuals use social media—much of which is relatively self-explanatory—generally focusing on the motives of maintaining relationships, entertainment, and seeking information (Pertegal et al., 2019). Furthermore, there is convincing evidence to indicate gender has a strong influence on teenagers’ motivations for using social media. Past teen-led organizations and campaigns have also shown teenagers have the capacity for both online and offline activism. However, there has yet to be a comprehensive study to determine how these topics intersect—no current understanding of what motivates teenagers to participate in social media movements like #blackouttuesday or how motivations might differ between genders. This gap in knowledge holds many

possibilities for further research, although it seems immediately pressing to understand: “To what extent is gender related to high school-aged teenagers’ choice and motivation for posting activist content on Instagram?”

Beyond simply contributing to our knowledge of social media and adolescent digital society, drawing connections between gender and motives for activism on Instagram may pave the way for similar studies on other social media platforms. Additionally, findings would be beneficial for various social movements and public health organizations to harness the power of youth activism, helping them find teenagers willing to educate and spread awareness to their following, which might be more responsive to information from a peer. The extensive potential implications of this research, along with its limitations and areas for future study, will be explored further in this paper.

Literature Review

Adolescent Motives for Posting on Social Media

Analyzing the general motives of teenagers posting on social media is paramount to understanding why some engage in social media advocacy. Adolescence is a stage where self-expression, personal identity, and relationships with peers are crucial for development (Barbovschi et al., 2018). Since the growth of social media sites in recent years, teenagers have turned to these platforms to counteract insecurities surrounding identity and connection with others. While it may seem that users have free reign to post whatever they like, it is important to note that content shared by teens usually reflects the social norms of their peers.

Research indicates that teenagers use social media for varied purposes, including Social Connectedness, Following and Monitoring Others, Social Recognition, Self-expression, and Seeking Information (Pertegal et al., 2019). Different demographics of adolescents, furthermore, sway toward certain motives. For example, it is known motivations for social media-use on Instagram vary highly by gender (Yi-Ting & Sheng-Fang, 2018). However, generally speaking, teenagers on social media “purposefully share content to appear interesting, well liked, and attractive” (Yau & Reich, 2019, p. 196). Success at this objective is measured by audience engagement such as likes and comments (Yau & Reich, 2019). This way, teenagers “increase the status of profiles in a group of peers, in a mutually reinforcing, visible, relatively stable manner” (Barbovschi et al., 2018, p. 270). Surveyed teenagers across all age groups, especially girls, shared the sentiment that maintaining a social media presence is a laborious process (Yau & Reich, 2019). However, characteristics of social media users do seem to be effective in achieving at least some of those motives, as adolescents who do *not* engage in social media at all were found to be less popular than their social media-using peers (Schwartz et al., 2021).

Social Media for Communicating with Teenagers

Using social media to communicate information related to public safety, activism, and current events to teenagers has been an effective strategy employed by various institutions, allowing for the “timely access to a wide variety of topics with dynamic interaction beyond traditional interface media” (Sobowale et al., 2020, p. 2). This is because an overwhelming majority of teenagers use social media; according to a 2018 survey, 71% of Americans aged 13-17 use Instagram alone (Schaeffer, 2021). Recently, organizations such as the Center for Disease Control (CDC), the World Health Organization (WHO), and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) have created accounts on platforms such as Tiktok, Youtube, and Snapchat for the sole purpose of sharing safety information surrounding COVID-19 with adolescents (Sobowale et al., 2020). Teenagers themselves are well-positioned to promote habits such as physical distancing amongst their peers, as they have gone through similar social isolation in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, which notably “aligns with the adolescents’ desire to portray themselves in a positive light” (Sobowale et al., 2020, p. 5). This is a confirmation of the previously discussed motives of teenagers on social media. Indeed,

research suggests that “public health authorities can create precrafted messages for adolescents to repost as their own” (Sobowale et al., 2020, p. 4), allowing teenagers to see and share important information with their fellow peers.

While this applies specifically to the COVID-19 pandemic, it represents a greater movement of journalism and the spread of ideas to digital platforms as the internet has grown in usage (Švecová, 2017). Social media is increasingly becoming a primary source of news for young people (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2019). One study of high school-aged students indicated that a quarter of those surveyed got most of their news from social media (Anderson, 2020). As such, news organizations have had to adapt their content for these platforms by tailoring it to be more visually appealing, often with photos and videos. A key new wave of digital storytelling is ephemeral journalism, or content that is characterized by its brevity. Stories, or Story Mode, have been adopted by most major social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat, allowing an individual or organization to share brief photo, text, or video content that will disappear after some time, usually twenty-four hours. In this way, quality journalistic content is interactable, informal, and authentic. This explains why ephemeral journalism through Stories is one strategy that news organizations are utilizing to target content at youth, who are likely to frequent these platforms and may have short attention spans (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2019; Švecová, 2017). Teenagers are also avid users of the Story function for similar reasons, as viewing them creates a shared experience between viewer and poster that would only be possible had the viewer seen the Story while it was available (Fonseca, 2019). Additionally, Instagram Stories require “less commitment and alleviate pressure to post highly polished or on-brand content” (Fonseca, 2019, p. 220). In other words, the temporary nature of Stories allows for more casual and personal content.

Activism and Teenagers

Teenagers have historically been conduits for information and social change. Organizations such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency Youth Preparedness Council, Teens Take Charge, and the Youth Power Coalition are led by teenagers, showing the age demographic’s ability to advocate and inform (Sobowale et al., 2020).

However, social media has allowed for the growth of a truly international community of adolescent activists. This can be witnessed in the countless cases of hashtag activism regarding social movements such as #CropTopDay, where participants protested female-targeted dress codes in schools (Keller, 2019). Other examples include the #Me-Too movement and #BlackLivesMatter (Muldoon et al., 2019; Yang, 2016). These hashtags intend to educate the public and rally those involved in their respective causes. For black girls, hashtags like #BlackGirlMagic and #Black-GirlGenius have become a means for them to “assert empowerment to the celebration of Black womanhood and girlhood” (McArthur, 2016, p. 371).

Social media has additionally become a forum for American political discourse, which of course emulates the visually appealing and entertaining qualities of ephemeral journalism. Following the election of Donald Trump in 2016, there was a surge of political memes to criticize the Trump Administration (O’Meara, 2018). Memes in this case refers to “the propagation of items such as jokes, rumors, videos, and websites from person to person via the Internet” (Shifman, 2014, as cited in Lewis, 2016, p. 2). These memes displayed familiar pop culture character quotes set in the context of Trump’s actions as president, with viral examples including Cher Horowitz from *Clueless* commenting on Trump’s immigration policies or parallels between a Trump speech and Bane’s words from *The Dark Knight Rises* (O’Meara, 2018). Whatever the application, this demonstrates that internet memes, a humorous, ‘not serious’ mode of media used by adolescents—have been relevantly utilized for genuine political discourse and activism.

Teenagers have become experts at representing themselves through social media, a skill which lends itself to an intuitive knowledge of *where* to post information. For example, a teenager involved in #CropTopDay indicated that Facebook was a platform with an older, more conservative audience, where potentially controversial opinions would be unwelcome (Keller, 2019). Meanwhile, platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat were considered more favorable for those political messages, as their audiences might be younger, more progressive, or sympathetic and involved in feminist movements themselves. As such, the teenager made the strategic decision to post political

content on the latter platforms. This ability is known as perspective taking, which older adolescents are particularly competent at (Yau & Reich, 2019).

Based on a 2020 survey, 83% of high-school-aged students do not share political content on their social media accounts (Anderson, 2020). When asked, those students indicated that sharing potentially controversial content could have negative effects on social status, leading to debates perceived as pointless and even losing friends with differing views. Reasons given by the minority of those who *did* share political content usually amounted to the fact that they felt very strongly about certain issues like police brutality and reproductive rights. As teenagers recognized that social ostracization could be a consequence of being politically active on social media, some turned to secondary accounts on Instagram “referred to as their ‘Spam’ or ‘Finsta’ accounts, which they use to share and post to a much smaller number of select friends” (Anderson, 2020, p. 173). These secondary accounts “serve as private spaces on the internet where they can post illicit content, connect deeply with close friends, and share more nuanced representations of themselves than might appear on their real Instagrams” (Charmaraman et al., 2021, p. 2). Among a more selective and familiar audience, students were more comfortable sharing political content, again demonstrating the skill of perspective taking (Anderson, 2020). In summary, existing research implies that teenagers are strategic in choosing where, when, and to whom they share content with to achieve its desired effect.

Methods

To appropriately explore a culture among active teenage Instagram users that engage in social media advocacy in order to determine their specific motives, and particularly the effect of gender on them, a mixed method ethnographic study was conducted. Such is the distinction of ethnographic studies from other approaches: “The focus of investigation is on the everyday behaviors of people in the group, with an intent to identify cultural norms, beliefs, practices, social structures, and other patterns” (Leedy et al., 2019, p. 231).

Data were gathered in a brief survey on Microsoft Forms that was unlikely to take longer than ten minutes to complete. Survey questions were modeled after those of previous studies on adolescent social media habits and motives, utilizing Likert scales and open-ended follow-up questions (Charmaraman et al., 2021; Karatsoli & Nathanail, 2020).

The survey link was distributed to the entire student body via school email and participation was purely voluntary. Study participants were gathered from Lake Washington High School (LWHS), a midsize public high school located in a highly affluent area of Washington state with 1,798 enrolled students ages 14-18 as of October 2020 (“Washington Median Household Income”, 2022; “Enrollment Report”, 2021). Lake Washington School District, of which LWHS is part of, indicated the ethnic demographics of the school as 13.3% Hispanic/Latino, 0.2% American Indian/Alaskan, 14.9% Asian, 2.5% Black/African American, 60% Caucasian, and 9% Mixed Race (“Enrollment Report”, 2021). Compared with 2021 national statistics, LWHS enrolls significantly higher numbers of Caucasian and Asian students while enrolling significantly lower numbers of African American and Hispanic students (“Back-to-school”, 2021). Furthermore, LWHS enrolls a slightly greater number of boys (53%) than girls (47%) as of the 2019-2020 school year (“Lake Washington”, 2021).

Following an initial voluntary consent form, the survey was composed of three sections. The first sought to ascertain demographic information including gender, age, and race. Beyond the necessity of knowing the respondents’ gender to this study, this information was helpful in determining whether the sample size was representative of LWHS’ student body. The second section collected information about social media habits surrounding Instagram activism. This included identifying whether participants were frequent Instagram users, if they were willing to post activist content on their accounts, and how they would post the content (with the choice between Stories and posts). After each quantitative question, there was an open-ended field for them to justify their responses. The third section determined the motivation levels of participants to post about popular activist movements—Racial Justice, Feminism, Climate Change, Public Health, and Gun Debate—through a five-point Likert scale. Finally, participants were given the

option to explain their motivation levels for each issue in open-ended fields. For specific survey questions, see appendix A.

Participation in the survey was totally anonymous to ensure the objective analysis required by standard ethnographic research, and particularly relevant for this study due to the participants being peers of the researcher (Leedy et al., 2019). After survey responses were collected over an approximate two-week period, they were securely stored in a password-protected Microsoft Excel file.

Qualitative survey question responses were thoroughly read to identify common themes across genders, then quantified by number of times every theme was mentioned by each gender. These themes, which were essentially specific motivations to post (or not post) activist content, were then categorized using the updated Scale of Motives for Using Social Networking Sites (SMU-SNS), which separates general motives for young individuals using social media into nine groups: Dating, New Friendships, Academic Purposes, Social Connectedness, Following and Monitoring Others, Entertainment, Social Recognition, Self-expression, and Seeking Information (Pertegal et al., 2019). Due to the fact this study was only focused on adolescent motives for posting activist content on Instagram, some of those categories, such as Dating and Entertainment, were less feasibly related to an individual's choice to engage in activism.

Results

The survey had 114 total participants. Approximately 68% of those respondents, or seventy-eight people, considered themselves frequent Instagram users, which is proportionally accurate to national statistics on teenage Instagram use (Schaeffer, 2021). Furthermore, fifty-two of those seventy-eight would consider posting activist content on Instagram, accounting for about two-thirds of surveyed Instagram users.

The race of participants was relatively accurate to LWHS' enrollment percentages: 62% survey respondents were Caucasian, 19% were Asian/Asian American, 9% were mixed race, 4% were Latino/Hispanic, 2% were Black/African American, and 2% were American Indian/Alaskan. Meanwhile, the sample also included representation from all possible ages at LWHS: 9% of respondents were 14 years old, 33% were 15 years old, 25% were 16 years old, 20% were 17 years old, and 11% were 18 years old.

Out of all surveyed, 54% of respondents identified as female, 35% identified as male, and 11% of respondents identified as "Other", comprised mainly of nonbinary people. For convenience purposes, they will be referred to as nonbinary for the rest of the study. Of the forty-seven participants that identified as female and frequent Instagram users, thirty-nine indicated they would consider posting activist content on the platform—about 83%. Meanwhile, only five out of twenty-two participants that identified as male and frequent Instagram users indicated they would consider posting activist content on Instagram—approximately 23%. Seven out of nine participants that identified as

other” for gender and as frequent Instagram users indicated they would consider posting activist content on Instagram—about 78%.

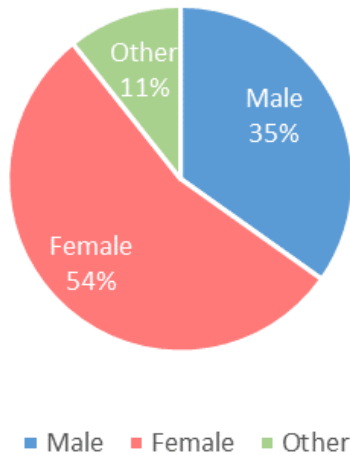


Figure 1. Gender of total survey participants.

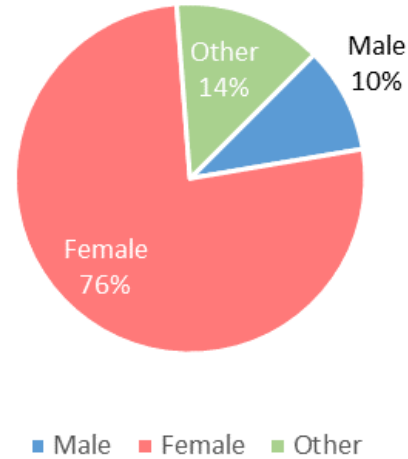


Figure 2. Gender of survey participants who indicated willingness to post activist content.

It must be noted, first and foremost, that genders of total survey participants (illustrated in Figure 1) were disproportionately more female compared to district enrollment numbers for LWS (‘‘Lake Washington’’, 2021). Also, Lake Washington School District does not publish nonbinary student percentages, but given that nonbinary adults make up less than 1% of America’s total population, it seems logical to assume nonbinary people are also overrepresented in this sample (Wilson & Meyer, 2021). That said, the quantitative data strongly indicate that a majority of teenage girls and nonbinary people would consider posting activist content on their Instagram accounts. Meanwhile, an equally conclusive majority of teenage boys would *not* consider it at all.

Motivations for Not Posting Activist Content

This curious disparity between genders was investigated further through qualitative questioning. When teenagers were asked why they would not consider posting activist content on their Instagram accounts, five main themes were identified, shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Reasons for not posting activist content by gender.

Reason	Example(s)	No. of Times Male Participants Mentioned	No. of Times Female Participants Mentioned	No. of Times Nonbinary Participants Mentioned
Controversiality	"My uncle who has very differing political opinions follows me and will definitely get offended" "Mostly because it would start a political debate with some of my friends and I don't want that with ALL my friends."	4	1	0
Not Passionate or Not Caring at All about Activist Issues	"It's none of my business" "Don't care"	4	0	0
Perceived Efficacy	"I worry a lot about accidentally spreading misinformation, as a lot of stuff on social media is incredibly biased and made to make people upset. Also, I think that a lot of times, those posts are just performative activism with no action actually being taken by the poster, so it feels ingenuine."	7	5	1
Doesn't Fit with the Content of a Personal Account	"My Instagram is for my baseball and [personal] life. It is not good to run political things on an account that showcases yourself in a sports way."	3	2	0
Doesn't Post Any Content on the Platform	"I don't really post much"	2	0	1

Note. If a participant's response clearly fit multiple themes, it was counted for each of them. Additionally, some responses were edited to be grammatically correct for greater coherence.

Across all genders, there was a repetitive concern that engaging in Instagram activism was performative, not effective, or likely to spread false information; as shown in Table 1, it was by far the most common reason given for why individuals would not consider posting activist content. This motive was followed by fear of backlash from one's community and lack of fit with personal account content in terms of commonness.

Motivation Levels for Posting about Specific Activist Issues

Participants were asked how motivated they were, on a five-point Likert scale, to post about certain issues. These were Racial Justice, Feminism, Climate Change, Public Health, and Gun Debate. On every single issue, the data indicated some positive amount of motivation, with either "very motivated" or "somewhat motivated" being the most common

response. The movement the most participants answered “very motivated” for was Feminism, while the issue with the most varying answers was Gun Debate, shown in Figure 3.

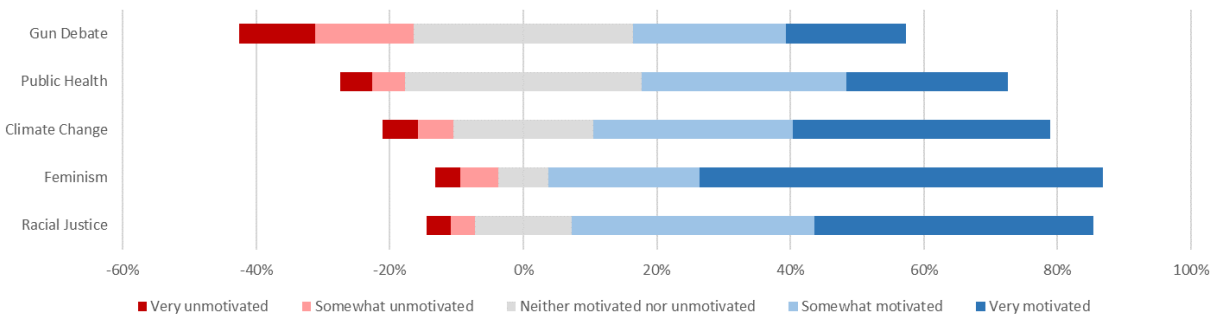


Figure 3. Total participants’ motivation levels to post about activist issues.

Figure 4, Figure 5, and Figure 6, on the other hand, compare how levels of motivation break down when viewing the responses from male, nonbinary, and female teenagers. Like Figure 3, all genders showed positive levels of motivation for all five issues, with Gun Debate being the least motivating issue.

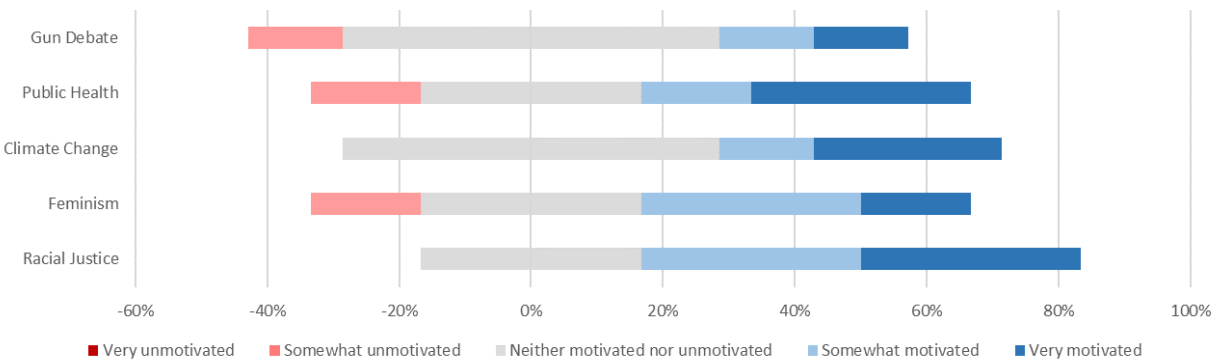


Figure 4. Male participants’ motivation levels to post about activist issues.

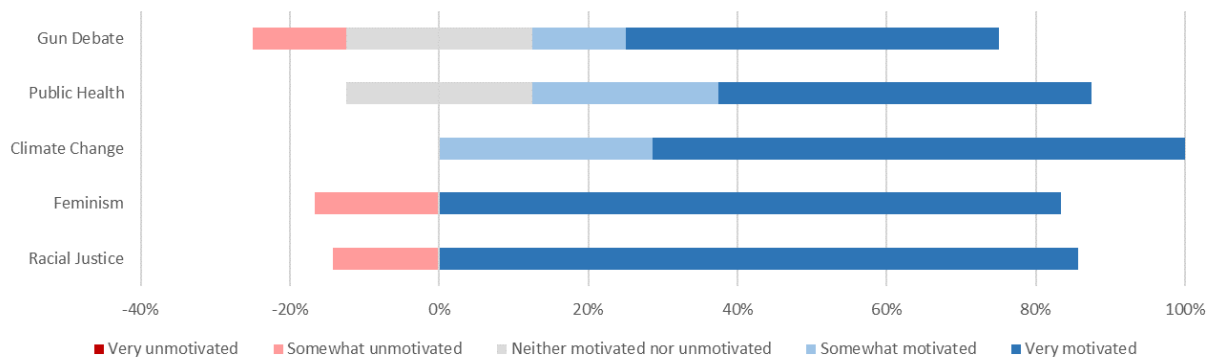


Figure 5. Nonbinary participants’ motivation levels to post about activist issues.

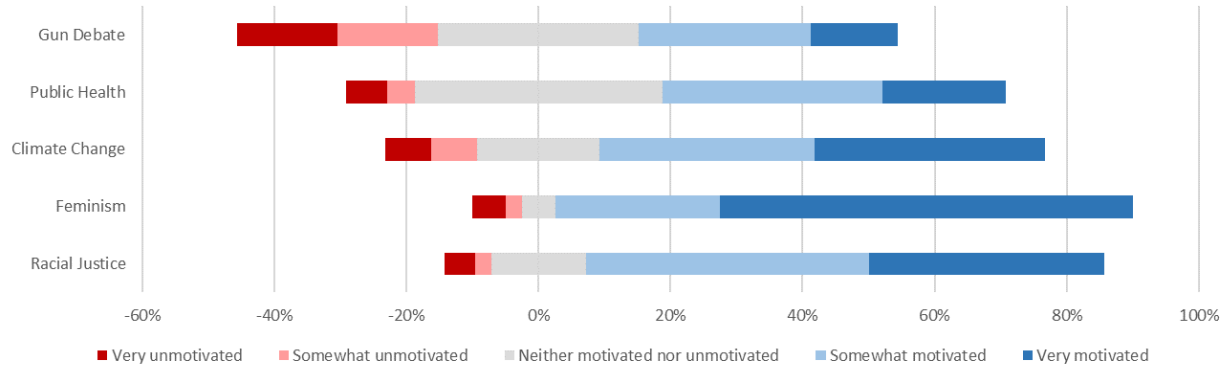


Figure 6. Female participants' motivation levels to post about activist issues.

Immediately noteworthy about these data are the overwhelmingly high motivations of nonbinary participants to engage in Instagram activism on all issues. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Feminism was the most motivating issue for female teenagers. For male teenagers, it was Racial Justice.

Personal Motivations for Posting Activist Content

The most common reason for why participants reported higher levels of motivation to post about certain issues was either a personal vested interest in the topic due to past experiences and identity or an impersonal belief in the prevalence and severity of the issue, making it necessary to spread awareness or take action. The former manifested itself particularly strongly in the issues of Racial Justice, Feminism, Gun Debate, and Climate Change. Some Black or Asian individuals, for example, had a greater motivation to post about Racial Justice. The same was true for female teenagers and Feminism. As all surveyed were high school students, many were understandably motivated to post about Gun Debate, particularly school shootings.

Table 2. Factors influencing motivation level for posting activist content by gender.

Factor	Example(s)	No. of Times Male Participants Mentioned	No. of Times Female Participants Mentioned	No. of Times Nonbinary Participants Mentioned
Relation to Personal Identity	"I'm black so racial justice is important to me." "[COVID-19 and public health] is not as big of a worry of mine since I'm not at risk" "Climate change is something that most youngsters, most people with social media such as Instagram, support. As gen-z myself I feel very comfortable posting about Climate Change."	7	49	8
Personal/General Public's Knowledge	"I know a lot about this so I try to share it" "I feel like there are a lot of misconceptions [about COVID-19]"	13	45	8

	<p>posted online, so it's good for there to be better things posted.”</p> <p>“Gun control is super important, but I would be less motivated to share than some other issues just as I don't feel like I have the most background knowledge on this topic.”</p>			
Perceived Severity/Importance	<p>“It's a really serious issue that needs to be paid attention to, because it won't go away”</p> <p>“Women are a significant part of our population and feminism is extremely important.”</p>	8	60	13
Past Experiences of Self/Others	<p>“The amount of misogyny and sexism I see day to day is insane, and things need to change”</p> <p>“I am very motivated to post about racism because I have experienced racism.”</p>	2	17	3
Controversiality	<p>“Important, and less so sort of inherently political”</p> <p>“I would be more hesitant to post about this because my more conservative family follows my personal account and I want to avoid confrontation like the plague.”</p> <p>“I will almost never post about Covid because I will be judged by my friends, family and it might get taken down and my account may get deleted.”</p>	3	20	0
Personal Enjoyment Level	<p>“I also like sharing my opinions online.”</p> <p>“It's important but I wouldn't post about it as much, I get really bad climate change anxiety from focusing on that too much”</p>	1	13	1
Perceived Efficacy	<p>“I am a big supporter of gun regulation however I feel like social media circulation is not the best way to promote change with this issue.”</p> <p>“It's important to spread awareness, and I'm trying to support others in any way I can. It can also help educate people”</p>	6	26	9

Table 2 demonstrates how most factors could be positive or negative in their effect on an individual’s motivation level and how the factors were represented in specific genders. Perceived Severity/Importance was the most influential factor in female and nonbinary teenagers, while Personal/General Public’s Knowledge was the most influential factor for male teenagers. Generally speaking, Perceived Severity/Importance, Relation to Personal Identity, Personal/General Public’s Knowledge, and Perceived Efficacy were the most referenced factors for all genders. The mean motivation levels across genders for specific issues on a five-point scale (one being ‘very unmotivated’, five being ‘very motivated’), using the same calculation method as Karatsoli and Nathanail (2020), are shown below in Table 3.

Table 3. Mean motivation to post activist content by gender.

Activism Issue	Mean Motivation to Post of Female Participants	Mean Motivation to Post of Male Participants	Mean Motivation to Post of “Other” Participants
Racial Justice	4.1	4.2	4.57
Feminism	4.41	3.6	4.57
Climate Change	3.9	4	4.71
Public Health	3.67	3.8	4.43
Gun Debate	3.08	3.4	4.14

Stories vs. Posts

When asked to choose between posting an Instagram Post (content that remains on one’s account forever or until the individual chooses to remove it) and an Instagram Story (only viewable for twenty-four hours), forty-six participants indicated they preferred a Story, while only five preferred a post (four female, one male). Based on these results, it appears gender does not have a significant effect on the choice between posting ephemeral content and permanent content: a vast majority of teenagers prefer Stories. When asked why, a social aspect to posting activist content was revealed.

Table 4. Reasons for posting ephemeral content.

Reason	Example(s)	No. of Times Mentioned
More Casual/Less Stressful than a Permanent Post	<p>“Because it would disappear after 24 hours and is more casual than a regular post”</p> <p>“I don’t want to bombard peoples feed and if I post a story [then] I can post about more things and different important issues verses posting all the time.”</p> <p>“Less stressful way to share my opinion, no comments or likes”</p> <p>“It’s obnoxious to post something if you aren’t doing something concrete about it.”</p>	7
Does not Infringe on Aesthetic/Content of a Personal Account	<p>“Because it highlights something I care about, but doesn’t necessarily become a part of my profile, or a part of my identity just because I support the movement.”</p> <p>“I tend to care too much about how posts look on my feed.”</p>	15

	“I guess aesthetic reasons (sounds bad, I know) but also more people view Stories and I can still save them in a highlights, that being said I do not post much, as I know a lot of it is performative activism and don’t want to look like I am only doing it to ‘fit in’”	
Convenience of Reposting Content of Others	“It would mostly be reposting content from others, which is easier to do on a Story!” “It is usually verified accounts that have the best graphic organizers or graphs/statistics of things relating to activism, and it’s easier to put those posts in a story than to make your own and have to check your research for accuracy.”	13
Relevancy	“Most everything that I would post is a current issue and would not be relevant in several months. For issues that are more long-lasting, I might post it”	6
Higher Viewership	“More people view it.”	9

While aforementioned survey questions assessed motivations and motivation levels for posting about specific activist content, asking participants why they’d prefer a Story to a post revealed that online self-representation and taking the perspective of their audience was highly relevant to how they posted content. Posts were regarded as carrying more ‘weight’ and more work to craft than a Story. As one of the few that preferred a post over a Story put it: “When you put it on your story, I believe it shows care, but it could show a type of embarrassment meaning you wouldn’t post it permanently.”

Discussion

This study had two main aims: to assess factors that influenced high school-aged teenagers’ motivation to post activist content, and then to explore how those factors differed between genders. For the former, it was found that individuals’ motivation levels were influenced by practical, advocacy-related, and social factors. Based on those identified factors, it is the researcher’s recommendation that social media advocacy fall primarily into the categories of Information, Social Connectedness, and Self-expression on the adolescent Scale of Motives for Using Social Networking Sites (Pertegal et al., 2019).

The motive of Information is defined loosely as when adolescents use social media to collect information on current events or topics of interest to an individual. However, this study has demonstrably shown that a desire to be the one *sharing* information also falls under that category, especially when it comes to social media activism. In addition to wanting to spread reliable information on activism issues, surveyed teenagers utilized perspective taking by considering what their following might already know about the topic, which also influenced their motivation levels. Meanwhile, the motivation of Social Connectedness was also present in the data. Many indicated that their choice to post was influenced by controversiality, societal importance of the issue, or its relation to their personal community: people they shared age, gender, and race with. Finally, Self-expression was perhaps the most self-explanatory motive found; teenagers wanted to share their opinions and feelings about politics and social movements.

When gender entered the picture, it became clear that female teenagers are far more likely to post activist content than their male peers. This is consistent with a broader study on young adults, which indicated “young women

are more likely than young men to report one or more kinds of political activity over the past twelve months”, including online activism (Galston, 2018, paras. 7). Nonbinary Instagram users also seem to be more inclined towards social media activism than male teenagers. These findings align with what is currently known about how gender affects social media-use motives: female teenagers are more likely to use social media for Information and Social Connectedness purposes than male teenagers, which accounts for why female teenagers were so much more likely to post activist content.

For specific activist movements, there were some observable differences in motivation levels between genders. Nonbinary participants exhibited a higher mean motivation to post about all five issues than female and male participants, though particularly on the issues of Climate Change, Public Health, and Gun Debate. Interestingly, the mean motivation levels between male and female teenagers on different movements were very similar except for Feminism, where female teenagers expressed greater motivation ($m=4.41$) than male teenagers ($m=3.6$). This was likely due the importance of Feminism to the personal identity of female teens, as many indicated in their open-ended responses.

Limitations

Although information drawn from this study’s findings hold intriguing possibilities for future research, its limitations must also be noted. As previously mentioned, the demographics, particularly gender, of survey participants were not representative of the LWHS student body. In part this was due to the relatively small sample size of this study, as the survey was completed on a voluntary basis. Furthermore, time and resource constraints, such as an eight-month research deadline, prevented a wider net from being cast for primary informants outside of LWHS. The school also resides in a predominantly left-leaning area of Washington, which likely influenced teenagers’ measured motivation levels to post about certain issues for this specific sample. It seems plausible the theories generated from this research are applicable for teenagers as a whole, but to absolutely confirm the findings, a far greater study with a similar method should be conducted in the future, possibly with a national scope. At this point in time, this study should be viewed as an exploratory foray into a field where much remains to be learned.

Conclusion

As America enters an increasingly digital age, social media will continue to play a role in activist campaigns across the nation, allowing teenagers the opportunity to participate by raising awareness or offering their own opinions on different issues. Based on this study’s findings, organizations seeking for their social media content to be shared by America’s youth should target female and nonbinary teenagers, who are much more motivated than their male counterparts to repost such content. These organizations and researchers in the field also need to consider alternative ways to get male teenagers involved in activist issues. Also, activist movements that desire to create content that can be reposted by teenagers should design their materials for the Instagram Story mode rather than permanent posts. Social media activism—whether it be sharing important information, expressing one’s beliefs, or advocating for change—might be many teenagers’ first participation in American democracy (Anderson, 2020). Therefore, any knowledge to be gained in this is field relevant to future American political and social discourse.

Acknowledgements

To my research advisor, Dr. Matthew Macomber: thank you for your constant guidance and support.

References

- Anderson, D., EdD. (2020). U.S. High School Students' Social Media Use and Their Political Socialization. *Communication Today*, 11(2), 166-175. Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.kcls.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/u-s-high-school-students-social-media-use-their/docview/2467350608/se-2?accountid=46>
- Back-to-school statistics*. (2021). National Center for Education Statistics. <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=372>
- Barbovski, M., Balea, B., & Velicu, A. (2018). Peer-ing in the Online Mirror: Romanian Adolescents' Disclosure and Mutual Validation in Presentations of Self on Social Media 1. *Revista Romana De Sociologie*, 29(3), 269-286. Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.kcls.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/peer-ing-online-mirror-romanian-adolescents/docview/2168095088/se-2>
- Charmaraman, L., Hodes, R., & Richer, A. M. (2021). Young Sexual Minority Adolescent Experiences of Self-expression and Isolation on Social Media: Cross-sectional Survey Study. *JMIR Mental Health*, 8(9) doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.2196/26207>
- Enrollment Report*. (2021, October). Lake Washington School District. <https://www.lwsd.org/about-us/enrollment-report>
- Fonseca, C. (2019). The Insta-Story: A New Frontier for Marking and Engagement at the Sonoma State University Library. *Reference & User Services Quarterly*, 58(4), 219–226. Retrieved from <https://web.s.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?vid=6&sid=2a4690b7-796b-4393-8c28-18af288324fe%40redis&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWwhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#db=asn&AN=139336737>
- Galston, W. (2018, January 10). *Data Point to a New Wave of Female Political Activism that Could Shift the Course of US Politics*. Brookings. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2018/01/10/a-new-wave-of-female-political-activism/>
- Karatsoli, M., & Nathanail, E. (2020). Examining Gender Differences of Social Media Use for Activity Planning and Travel Choices. *European Transport Research Review*, 12(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12544-020-00436-4>
- Keller, J. (2019). "Oh, She's a Tumblr Feminist": Exploring the Platform Vernacular of Girls' Social Media Feminisms. *Social Media + Society*, 5(3). <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/2056305119867442>
- [Lake Washington High School enrollment statistics]. (2021). National Center for Education Statistics. https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/schoolsearch/school_detail.asp?ID=530423000674
- Leedy, P. D., Ormrod, J. E., & Johnson, L. R. (2019). *Practical Research: Planning and Design* (12th ed.). Pearson.
- Lewis, K. (2016). A Review of "Memes in Digital Culture." *Digital Humanities Quarterly*, 10(2) Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.kcls.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/review-memes-digital-culture/docview/2555208603/se-2>

- McArthur, S. A. (2016). Black Girls and Critical Media Literacy for Social Activism. *English Education*, 48(4), 362-379. Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.kcls.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/black-girls-critical-media-literacy-social/docview/1808335107/se-2?accountid=46>
- Muldoon, K., PhD., Smith, G., M.Sc, Talarico, R., M.Sc, Heimerl, M., M.Ed, McLean, C., M.Sc, Sampsel, Kari, M.D., F.R.C.P.C., & Manuel, Douglas, M.D., F.R.C.P.C. (2019). A 15-year Population-based Investigation of Sexual Assault Cases Across the Province of Ontario, Canada, 2002–2016. *American Journal of Public Health*, 109(9), 1280-1287. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2019.305179>
- O'Meara, J. (2018). Meme Girls Versus Trump: Digitally Recycled Screen Dialogue as Political Discourse. *Velvet Light Trap*, (82), 28-42. Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.kcls.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/meme-girls-versus-trump-digitally-recycled-screen/docview/2098276890/se-2?accountid=46>
- Pertegal, M.-Á., Oliva, A., & Rodríguez-Meirinhos, A. (2019). Development and Validation of the Scale of Motives for Using Social Networking Sites (SMU-SNS) for Adolescents and Youths. *PLoS ONE*, 14(12), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0225781>
- Schaeffer, K. (2021, October 7). *7 Facts about Americans and Instagram*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/10/07/7-facts-about-americans-and-instagram/>
- Schwartz, D., Fritz, H. L., Kelleghan, A. R., Ryjova, Y., Omary, A., Taylor, L. M., & Luo, T. (2021). Adolescents Who Are Nonusers of Fashionable Social Networking Platforms. *Cyberpsychology*, 15(3), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.5817/CP2021-3-7>
- Sobowale, K., Hilliard, H., Ignaszewski, M. J., & Chokroverty, L. (2020). Real-time Communication: Creating a Path to COVID-19 Public Health Activism in Adolescents Using Social Media. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 22(12). <http://dx.doi.org/10.2196/21886>
- Švecová, M. (2017). Journalism on Social Media: How to Tell Stories and News to Young People. *Ad Alta: Journal of Interdisciplinary Research*, 7(2), 216–218. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=asn&AN=127243146&site=ehost-live>
- Vázquez-Herrero, J., Direito-Rebollal, S., & López-García, X. (2019). Ephemeral Journalism: News Distribution Through Instagram Stories. *Social Media + Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119888657>
- Washington Median Household Income City Rank*. (2022). USA.com. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=asn&AN=127243146&site=ehost-live://www.usa.com/rank/washington-state--median-household-income--city-rank.htm>
- Wilson, B. D.M., & Meyer, I. H. (2021, June). *Nonbinary LGBTQ Adults in the United States*. Williams Institute. <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/nonbinary-lgbtq-adults-us/>
- Yang, G. (2016). Narrative Agency in Hashtag Activism: The Case of #BlackLivesMatter. *Media and Communication*, 4(4). <http://dx.doi.org/10.17645/mac.v4i4.692>

Yau, J. C., & Reich, S. M. (2019). "It's Just a Lot of Work": Adolescents' Self-Presentation Norms and Practices on Facebook and Instagram. *Journal of Research on Adolescence (Wiley-Blackwell)*, 29(1), 196–209.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/jora.12376>

Yi-Ting, H., & Sheng-Fang, S. (2018). Motives for Instagram Use and Topics of Interest Among Young Adults. *Future Internet*, 10(8). <http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/fi10080077>