

As digital activists, teens of color turn to social media to fight for a more just world

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When it comes to social media use among young people, very often the concern is about potential harm.

Parents, policymakers and others worry that [online platforms](#) like Instagram and TikTok may [compromise children's privacy](#), [threaten their safety](#), [undermine their mental health](#) and make them susceptible to [social media addiction and cyberbullying](#), among other problems.

Then there are the seemingly never-ending series of [dangerous and deadly internet "challenges"](#)—such as the "[blackout challenge](#)" and the "[choking game](#)"—that encourage kids and teens to record themselves performing perilous acts online.

While concerns about the potential pitfalls of [social media](#) platforms are valid and should be taken seriously, they can also overshadow some of the more positive ways that [young people](#) in general—and young people of color in particular—are using social media. As I found in my dissertation—"[#OnlineLiteraciesMatter](#)"—some young people are using social media to develop their identities as activists and to push for a more just society. In short, they are using [social media platforms](#) to engage in what I refer to as "digitized activism," taking on issues such as systemic racism and seeking racial justice.

My study adds to a growing body of research that has found young people of color can bring about change when they [learn to use digital tools to explore social issues](#) and use those tools to [stand up for their beliefs](#).

Fighting online for social justice

For my study, I followed six young activists between the ages of 14 and 18 across the United States. I picked them through online recruitment efforts. I searched for various hashtags to find them, sent direct messages, or left comments on their posts to engage with them online.

Four of the teens identified as Black and two identified as Latina. I

looked at their activism on platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Twitter and TikTok. All of the young activists used at least one of those social media platforms for various lengths of time—from one to six years.

Each young person in my research represented a [case study](#). I interviewed each one. I also created my own social media accounts to observe their social media posts and engage with them in the same online spaces. I examined their social media posts over a period of three months.

They often reacted to what was going on at the time of the study, which I conducted in 2021 after the [takeoff of the Black Lives Matter movement](#) in 2020. As a result, they were concerned with social justice, civil unrest, police brutality and a global pandemic. They were also concerned with increased hardships experienced by culturally and linguistically [diverse communities](#), which often are disproportionately affected by these issues.

The young people in my study addressed a variety of subjects. Some of the subjects they took on could be seen through the hashtags they used, such as #systemicracism, #climatejustice and #mentalhealth.

New narratives

They also used social media to educate others through self-expression and to challenge what they saw as society's negative views of young people. They placed on a major emphasis on storytelling, as evidenced in hashtags such as #blackstoriesmatter, #teenwriter and #blackwriter. An overarching theme was a push for change. Their identities were reflected in hashtags such as #blackyouthvisionaries and #changemakers. They made clear that they see social media as a way to represent their values.

"Everything I do online is a reflection of the person I am, and I always want that image to be true to myself," 18-year-old Laura told me in an interview. I used pseudonyms for all of the young people in my study. "Anyone who has been in a classroom or organization with me knows that I am outspoken and I always need to offer perspectives that I think are crucial to a discussion relating to social justice and I do the same online. Everything I post is a show of my values."

Higher education appeared regularly in the young people's self-expression and activism.

For instance, Samirah X., age 14, told me how she was inspired by the protests that followed the police killing of George Floyd to write a script for a movie called "You Change."

"I take acting very seriously and enrolled in classes at a local community college—Introduction to Filmmaking, where I studied directors, and Screenwriting, where I learned basic screenwriting skills like formatting, developing characters, and their motives," Samirah told me.

Laura, the 18-year-old, tweeted about how her posts about her college classes "are pretty insightful and really push my classmates to challenge their current ways of thinking and I'm really proud of myself for that."

As young people of color, they stressed the need to infuse their concerns into broader causes that don't always take communities of color into account.

"The climate justice movement cannot just be advocating for preservation of parks and saving endangered species. It must be Intersectional," Laura wrote in an Instagram post. "We have to recognize that Black and brown communities worldwide are being disproportionately disadvantaged because of air and water pollution,

food insecurity, and more."

What matters most

Sometimes, they used simple statements to call attention to the issues they see as being of paramount concern.

One of the teens in my study wrote simply:

- My [mental health](#) matters
- My representation matters
- My music matters
- My joy matters
- My art matters
- My future matters.

The teens made clear that they believe in the urgency of taking action now.

"With this generation, we are not going to wait, if we are tired, we are going to work for it, if we want something to happen we will work on it," 16-year-old Dakari wrote in a post on YouTube and Instagram. "Stubborn, we don't want to wait until we are older to do stuff."

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