

“We Need You to Listen to Us”: Youth Activist Perspectives on Intergenerational Dynamics and Adult Solidarity in Youth Movements

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This study aims to surface youth perspectives on their own activism, their experiences of age-based power dynamics in activist spaces, and their understandings of adult allyship. Using semistructured interviews and innovative participatory visual methods that invite youth to create and discuss original memes, we investigate these questions from the perspective of 10 youth activists involved in counterhegemonic organizing movements in the United States. Our analysis reveals that youth activists feel fundamentally misunderstood along multiple dimensions, including the practice of activism in online and offline spaces, the meaning of young people’s participation in activism, and their desires or expectations in terms of intergenerational allyship. By highlighting the key frustrations experienced by youth organizers and the solidarity practices that they desire from adult allies, this research contributes to a bottom-up understanding of youth activist praxis in relation to larger cultural discourses and adultist systems, while identifying practical implications for intergenerational support.

Keywords: youth activism, digital activism, social movements, allyship, solidarity, intergenerational relationships

In recent years, youth activism has become highly visible throughout the world. From the global School Strikes for Climate to the Anti-ELAB movement in Hong Kong, from Gaza border protests in Palestine to the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women movement among First Nations peoples, youth have been at the forefront of organizing grassroots and online movements to effect change at all levels. In the U.S., in movements such as #BlackLivesMatter and #NoDAPL, young people have been catalysts for social change—leading rallies, marches, die-ins, and hunger strikes, as well as creating community organizations, political education workshops, and new media campaigns in support of their visions of justice. While the U.S. has a rich history of youth activism, recent figures (e.g., Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning

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and Engagement, 2020) show that youth activism is only growing in scope and significance in the current political climate.

Nonetheless, despite this increase in prominence and visibility, youth perspectives on their own activism are often undervalued, devalued, or silenced altogether (Clay, 2012; Gordon, 2009; Taft, 2011). Although there is an emerging recognition that age-based power dynamics affect youth in organizing communities (see Gordon, 2007, 2009; Taft, 2011, 2015), little has been published on how youth themselves experience these dynamics in activist spaces. Furthermore, although a growing body of scholarship has explored the pathways to youth activism (e.g., Bishop, 2015; Clay, 2012; Conner & Rosen, 2016; Erlick, 2018; Ginwright, 2010; Kirshner, 2015; Prettyman & Gargarella, 2013; Taft, 2011), few studies explicitly narrow in on the role of adult allies within these trajectories. There is a need to better understand how youth in activist spaces might want or need support from adults, instead of framing adult support as both a given and a good in and of itself (Kwon, 2013). Additionally, in critical adult discourses about youth and youth power specifically, scholars have identified "an ongoing and unresolved tension" between, on the one hand, the idea that an activist movement belongs entirely to youth, and, on the other hand, the concept of youth activism as "a space of intergenerational dialogue" (Taft, 2015, p. 465) where both youth and adult perspectives are valued. However, with few exceptions (Gordon, 2007, 2009; Taft, 2011, 2015), there is limited research documenting youth perspectives on this tension, and their thoughts on what effective intergenerational dialogue might look like.

Our work aims to address these multiple but related gaps by surfacing youths' own perspectives on their activism and on the age-related power dynamics inherent in this context, as well as, importantly, youths' ideas of intergenerational allyship and solidarity.² In doing so, we start from the acknowledgement that youth "have the best vantage point for understanding what they need for securing a healthy, safe, and productive existence" (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2006, p. xx) and should be considered and consulted as experts on the systems, institutions, and practices that influence their lived experiences. More specifically, in the context of activism, youth activists are driven by their own visions and theories of justice, and have their own complex ideas about what activism is and how it is practiced (Gordon, 2009; Jenkins, Shresthova, Gamber-Thompson, Kligler-Vilenchik, & Zimmerman, 2016; Taft, 2011).

Given this context, our research therefore aims to surface youth perspectives on their own activism and their experiences of power dynamics in activist spaces. In doing so, we also seek to understand how

² In activist contexts, "allyship" and "solidarity" are understood differently. These differences have been discussed widely across social movements and activist spaces, as well as in blogs, commentaries, op-eds, etc. For the purposes of this article, we understand the distinction between allyship and solidarity as outlined by Black Lives Matter cofounder Alicia Garza in a 2016 interview with Move to End Violence. Whereas allyship often "lacks meaning" because self-proclaimed "allies" do not engage in enough meaningful action to change structural conditions for those most impacted by systems of oppression, "solidarity" is more continuous, involved, risky, "fierce," and hands-on. Those who act in solidarity with marginalized groups are "taking responsibility for . . . the power that we hold to transform our [collective] conditions" and "risk social standing, ambition, and acceptance" in order to "upend the status quo" (Garza, quoted in Move to End Violence, 2016).

youth conceptualize adult allyship with regard to alleviating the effects of these power dynamics. Methodologically, in addition to interviews, we use participatory visual methods to examine these questions alongside youth and center their voices within the research process. Our findings paint a rich picture of youth activism, including their perceptions of individual and collective youth power, their experiences of and ideas around solidarity, their needs and challenges, and their thoughts on how adults might best support them in their efforts. Significantly, these findings reveal that youth activists feel fundamentally misunderstood along multiple dimensions, including the practice of activism in online and offline spaces, the meaning of young people's participation in activism, and their desires or expectations in terms of intergenerational allyship.

Youth Activism: Between Agency and Adulthood

Youth activism is one of the few ways that young people under the age of 18 can enact self-determination, demand sociopolitical recognition, and command cultural clout (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2006; Gordon, 2009; Taft, 2011; Tuck & Yang, 2014). At the same time, the practice of youth activism is necessarily anchored in age-related power dynamics, which shape the aims, praxis, and possibilities of youth activism in significant ways. Here, we offer an overview of youth activism in its sundry contexts of practice, with a particular focus on the ways in which age-related power inequities come to bear on these dynamics.

Mapping Youth Activism, Offline and Online

Youth activists reject the idea that when young people "engage in dissident and radical politics," their actions are merely "generational rebellion, or 'just a phase'"; instead, these moves are treated "as substantive, meaningful political action" (Taft, 2011, p. 49). Youth activists recognize their own lack of political and economic power as reasons to use resistance and organizing for social change (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2006), and they see their social location as reason to form community with peers for activist purposes (Bishop, 2015; Erlick, 2018; Ginwright, 2010; Gordon, 2009; Kwon, 2013; Taft, 2011).

Youths' pathways to activism have been well documented in the academic literature. They include educational and formative experiences—such as participation in political education and anti-oppression workshops (Bishop, 2015; Clay, 2012; Ginwright, 2010; Taft, 2011), access to counternarratives and storytelling (Erlick, 2018; Ginwright, 2010; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2006), or being entrusted with social responsibility by peers and adults (Conner & Rosen, 2016; Ginwright, 2010)— as well as relational factors, such as a sense of belonging to an activist community (Bishop, 2015; Conner & Rosen, 2016; Erlick, 2018) or relationships with activist mentors and role models (Clay, 2012; Ginwright, 2010). Across this literature, scholars have shown that to effectively engage in activism, youth need (1) a community of like-minded people who affirm one's identity, (2) conversations that build one's political language and identity, and (3) resources to build on one's identities. Inherent to the ethos of youth activism is that the process of "becoming activist" (Bishop, 2015) is nonlinear and never complete; rather, it is an ongoing, reflexive process that enables youth to constantly consider their praxis, interrogate larger sociopolitical dynamics, and envision new activisms (Bishop, 2015; Erlick, 2018; Freire, 1992).

Contemporary youth activism takes place on digital platforms as much as in physical spaces (Bennett, Freelon, & Wells, 2010; Erlick, 2018; Zuckerman, 2014). Social media provides an important

platform for youth activists to mobilize and collaborate (Erlick, 2018; Jenkins et al., 2016), and youth involvement in online interest-based communities (e.g., fan cultures, gaming) has reinvigorated their sociopolitical imagination and stimulated both political talk and civic action (Jenkins et al., 2016; Kligler-Vilenchik, 2015; Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2018). Although these youth might never meet in a shared physical space, online participation allows young activists to develop organizing skills, learn about the experiences of those they might otherwise not come in contact with, and co-construct a collective civic imagination (Jenkins et al., 2016). The experience of content production in digital spaces (e.g., making and sharing videos, GIFs, and memes) also allows youth to create a distinct political narrative that is not necessarily beholden to participation in organizational and electoral politics or adults' dominant narratives, and that in fact centers youth cultures (Erlick, 2018; Jenkins et al., 2016; Kligler-Vilenchik, 2015). Furthermore, research shows that youth who participate in these online communities are also likely to support one another's activist projects offline as well (Jenkins et al., 2016).

Adulthood and Age-Based Power Dynamics Within Youth Activism

Age-based power dynamics both catalyze and shape the practice of youth activism. Significantly, youth describe their experiences in digital activist spaces, as well as physical activist communities and organizations, as making up for opportunities that they lack in schools and in their physical communities (Bishop, 2015; Clay, 2012; Gordon, 2009; Jenkins et al., 2016; Kwon, 2013; Taft, 2011). At the same time, the enactment of youth activism in practice is necessarily shaped by adulthood, which is understood as "the oppression experienced by . . . young people at the hands of adults and adult-produced/adult-tailored systems" (LeFrançois, 2014, p. 47). Adulthood expects and rewards youth obedience and simultaneously pathologizes youth critique and rebellion (J. Bell, 2000; Love & Phillips, 2007), reinforcing power dynamics between young people and adults—including in activist communities (Gordon, 2009; Taft, 2011, 2015; Taft & Gordon, 2013).

Although adulthood impacts people of all ages, one of its greatest areas of impact is on compulsory school-age youth, who exist in and between many "sites of control" and are unable to meaningfully participate in social, cultural, and political processes (Boggs, 2011). Given this context, some compulsory school-age adolescents become involved in activism to redress feelings of distance and alienation from curricular content in schools (Taft, 2011), exclusion from political processes (Conner & Rosen, 2016; Kirshner, 2015; Taft, 2011), and frustration with adult control over their autonomy and self-expression (Gordon, 2007, 2009; Taft & Gordon, 2013).

However, even within activist and organizing spaces, youth activists experience intergenerational, age-based power dynamics and struggles, often at the hands of adult activists and "allies." Because of adultist systems and norms, adults structure the spaces, facilitate the conversations, and dictate the material conditions for youth activists. Relationally, adults also attempt to regulate what qualifies as "political" and therefore "legitimate" in both digital and physical forms of activist participation, often belittling youth activism with an "it's been done before" attitude (Clay, 2012) and erasing or reducing media-based youth activism to "clicktivism" (Jenkins et al., 2016). Furthermore, youth activists have reported that adults often theorize youth activism through a "discourse of exceptionality" (Gordon & Taft, 2011, p. 1506; see also Gordon, 2009; Taft, 2011) or judge youth organizing based on their own "idealized cultural image" of activism (Clay, 2012).

Within youth organizing literature particularly, young people identify the adultism of older activists as an inhibiting factor in the development of their activist praxis (Clay, 2012; Gordon, 2009; Taft, 2011). Taft's (2011) research with young female activists across the Americas found that these youth activists "not only [saw] themselves as different from adults for reasons of age and generation, but . . . also [suggested] that these differences [made youth] more effective" (p. 61) in some aspects of social movement activism and organizing. Similarly, in Clay's (2012) work with youth of color in U.S.-based hip hop education spaces, young people articulated that they "organize better" than adults do because the events they plan are "less rigid, more about open discussion and less formal" (p. 106). Youth organizers noted that not all adults actively engage in patronizing and adultist behaviors, but that young people are generally more skillful at collaboration and listening to each other (Taft, 2011).

Understanding youth perceptions on their own activism and specific needs for adult support is particularly important because adults and youth can mutually benefit from more cross-generational interaction and collaboration in activist spaces (Kirshner, 2015). When youth activists need support in either youth-led or youth-only groups, adults can help by advocating for institutional resources and support, volunteering adult-specific labor for youth-led actions (e.g., driving youth to rallies), sharing institutional knowledge (e.g., how to apply for grants), and providing experience-based guidance when youth activists run into challenges (Taft, 2011). In turn, adults can learn from youth new tactics and theories to further their own activist praxis and awareness (Gordon, 2009; Taft, 2011, 2015). Mutually supportive cross-age relationships, as well as horizontal intergenerational activist communities, can thus nurture and strengthen social movements irrespective of the particular context of action (Kirshner, 2015).

Methods

Participants

In this study, we focus on compulsory school-age youth as a demographic that embodies the age-related power dynamics discussed in the previous section. As explained there, young people in this age group are not yet of the age to participate in "traditional," "duty-based" (Dalton, 2008) civic practices; they are subject to, but not participants in, the creation of rules, norms, and spaces that dictate the bounds of their social, political, and cultural behaviors.

Participants were recruited by sharing social media posts on Instagram and Facebook directly with youth activist collectives, adult activist networks, and adult facilitators who have supported youth activists through educational, cocurricular, or extracurricular activities.

A total of 10 youth activists responded to this call and participated in the research (see demographic breakdown in Table 1). The age range of participants was 11–18 years, with an average age of 15. Three of the youth activists identified as Black, two identified as Asian/American, one identified as Latinx, one identified as Native American, and three identified as white; among the activists of color, two identified as mixed race. In terms of gender, five of the students identified as male, four as female, and one as genderfluid. The 10 participants lived in a variety of locations across the U.S. and were part of social movements ranging from school integration, climate change, LBGTQ+ advocacy, indigenous sovereignty,

and antiracist organizing. Although time involved in activism was not a specified selection criterion, each of the participants had been involved in organizing for more than one year.

Table 1. Overview of Participants.

Name/ Pseudonym	Age	Pronouns	Racial / Ethnic Identity	Geographical Context	Organizing Issue
Benji	13	he/him	White	Urban, NYC	School integration
Ger	14	she/her	Latinx, Venezuelan	Urban, Midwest	Democratic school design
Justin	17	he/him	Asian Canadian	Suburban, Northeast	LGBTQ+ visibility and justice
Kam	18	they/them	Multiracial, Black	Urban, NYC	LGBTQ+ visibility and justice
Kiana	11	she/her	Black	Urban, NYC	Youth employment and racial justice
MD	16	he/him	Black	Urban, NYC	Racial justice
Ohitika	18	he/him	Native American, Oglala Lakota	Rural, South Dakota	Climate justice, permaculture systems
Simi	16	she/her	Multiracial, Asian American	Suburban, Pacific Northwest	Racial justice
Toby	16	he/him	White	Urban, NYC	School integration
Veronica	12	she/her	White	Urban, NYC	School integration

In line with our approved Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol, we had planned to use pseudonyms for all participants. However, half of our participants resisted this approach, wanting us to use their real first names and include the names of their organizations; this was seen as a way of owning their activism and promoting the causes that they were involved in, particularly to adult audiences. As such, we submitted an IRB modification to provide youth the option to use their real first names or pseudonyms, as well as the option to include the real names of their affiliated movements or organizations. We then had youth and parents re-consent to the research process, stating their preference. Therefore, in this study, Ger, Kam, MD, Simi, and Kiana are pseudonyms (selected by the participants themselves), while the rest are not. Although this approach conflicts with recommended protocols in research with youth, we argue that it is more important to prioritize youth requests in this respect, especially given this study's focus on the ways that adultist systems limit youth agency.

Data Collection

Before our interview with the activists, we invited them to create a meme (see Figure 1) about how they believe they are viewed as youth activists by a variety of adult and peer audiences, including themselves. This approach was based on the popular "What People Think I Do/What I Think I Do" meme (KnowYourMeme, n.d.). We modified this meme with the title "Youth Activist," and used the subcategories of "teachers," "parents," "friends," and "society."

Participants were told that they could change any of these categories into a different group or audience, if they so desired. In filling out the meme template, participants used a combination of popular images and stock photos found online, as well as their own photographs and drawings, to represent the dynamics between youth activists and other audiences. The use of this participatory visual method was meant to facilitate a more nuanced inquiry into our research questions, allowing youth to reflect creatively on their own (perhaps implicit or subconscious) perspectives on different audiences and elements of their activism. In line with the recommended approach in participatory visual research (see Banks, 2001; Literat, 2013), participants had the chance to narrate their process and choices in a follow-up interview, as described later.



Figure 1. "What People Think I Do/What I Think I Do" meme template used in this research.

After creating their meme, youth activists participated in a semistructured interview. Because our participants were geographically dispersed throughout the U.S., we conducted the interviews remotely, using a mutually convenient video call platform (e.g., Google Hangouts, FaceTime, Skype, etc.). Interviews lasted for an average of 70 minutes. In the first portion of the interview, we engaged with participants in a conversation about their activism, their experience as youth organizers, and their ideas and experiences of both solidarity and power dynamics in activist spaces (see Appendix, Table A1). In the second portion of the interview, activists walked us through the meme they created, discussing their thought process behind selecting or creating the image they used in each square of the meme. After their think-aloud, we followed up with them using a series of questions about how the individual images they selected and the meme at large represented power dynamics that manifest in their activism (see Appendix, Table A2).

Data Analysis

Our analysis consisted of three consecutive and iterative processes. First, we examined each participant's data, taking notes, pulling key quotes, and developing brief summaries; in doing so, we paid close attention to both the interview data and the visual data in the form of the youth-created meme, as well as to connections between them. Next, inspired by grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), we read across the data, identifying recurring concepts and patterns, such as "tokenism," "social capital," or "use of online tools." Finally, by reflecting on the data as a whole, we coalesced these subthemes into three emerging themes related to youth understandings of their own activism, as well as three themes related to the question of what makes an adult ally. We discuss these themes, including representative quotes and images, next.

Findings

"I'd Like to Think I Do a Lot More of the Flashy Stuff": The Everyday Actions of Youth Activism

Most of the activists specifically mentioned that although the "idealized cultural image" (Clay, 2012) of activism suggests that activists attend marches, protests, and rallies, the means to practice activism are much more multitudinous, and not necessarily as "flashy," in Toby's words. They include "all the daily things that you do to make the world better" (Ger), such as "speaking to other people" (Ger), "self-research and self-change" (Ohitika), "visibility" (Kam), "making surveys and forms" (Toby), community building, teaching friends and family members about systems of oppression, being a role model or mentor to others, and giving feedback to peer activists. Given that the logistical and community-building elements of organizing are becoming increasingly digital, youth activists described much of their everyday activism as taking place online, on their phones or computers.

This was visualized in several activists' memes as well. While talking through her meme (Figure 2), Simi articulated that although "what she thinks she does" as an antiracist activist within her school and community is "pretty badass," "what she actually does" on a daily basis is read articles, text and e-mail to organize other activists online, and "get mad" about social inequities.



Figure 3. Toby's meme.

When talking about the centrality of digital media in their activist practice, multiple youth noted that adults' views on the Internet and social media—particularly those of teachers and parents—are an impediment to their organizing. Ger, whose activism revolves around democratic school (re)design, explained that the Internet is a "really really good place to learn things that . . . your parents or your school won't teach you." However, because adults see online participation as "just for fun" (Ger), youth activists often have to justify their Internet use to adults, who have not necessarily experienced the Internet as "an important tool for organizing" (Simi). Simi, Toby, Ger, and MD specifically captured this point in their memes. For instance, in the "what my parents think I do" box of her meme (see Figure 4), Ger chose a picture of two babies with an iPad and explained,

Most of the time, my activism, I spend it on the Internet. Like either researching, seeing the news, watching some protest videos. . . And my parents see me as just, like, doing nothing there, and oh just spending my time there, or playing, or just looking up Instagram. . . . Most of the people that didn't grow up with technology do not really see it, and that's why they think we're just playing games or whatever. Because they don't know how to make the most out of it.



Figure 4. Ger's meme.

MD, an antiracist activist and artist, also depicted cell phone and laptop usage in his meme, noting particularly that adults often misinterpret digital technology as potential for distraction, rather than for activism. When speaking specifically about what his teachers think he does (see Figure 5), he explained,

I chose the image of a Black boy on his phone, kind of to represent . . . the distraction of social media. Because I see a lot of teachers and representatives in my school be really strict about cell phones and cell phone usage in school because [they think] only two to three things happen on a phone, whether it's texting, Instagram, or streaming something. Like that's the only thing that happens on our phones, when a phone can be used as a real tool to spread a message.



Figure 5. MD's meme.

Simi elaborated that "most of the things [she's] done" in her activism would not be possible without her phone or the Internet, which is difficult for her parents to understand. For her, digital technology

is my political activism. This is my music. This is my art. This is where I'm sending out, selling things, getting things, communicating with people, learning. . . . This is where I hear about all the things I'm passionate about . . . not in this town, but in the world, [and it's] accessed through my phone.

***"People Are Calling It Cute . . . and It Just Demeans the Whole Thing":
Youth Perceptions of Adulthood in Activist Contexts***

Many of the frustrations expressed by youth activists—like the slow-moving nature of institutions, politicians' and bureaucrats' evasiveness and inaction, the difficulty of balancing activist work with other commitments, or having time to prioritize mental health and avoid burnout—transcend age and have been identified in the activist literature not specific to youth (see Chen & Gorski, 2015; Cox, 2011; Gorski, 2019). However, in addition to these more general concerns, most youth activists' frustrations related to issues of age, including both formal age-related obstacles (e.g., not being able to influence politics through voting or running for office) and informal interpersonal dynamics characterized by adulthood.

Among the latter, youth activists frequently mentioned adults who have fixed mindsets about youth and youth power (Kiana, Kam, Justin, Benji, and Toby) and adults who talk around their questions or requests (Benji, Toby, and Simi). Indeed, many youth activists brought up experiences of frustration around

adults talking around their work or trivializing it in adultist ways. For example, Simi mentioned how adults generally patronized her activism, belittling it as “cute”:

I’ve had the little comments where people are like, “Oh, that’s cute.” Like, “Oh that’s adorable and stuff, that you want to, like, make change.” [But] it’s just, it’s gotten to a point where high schoolers, and elementary schoolers, and middle schoolers have to get on stage or a podium and just scream to Congress how we feel—and people are calling it “cute” and stuff, and it just demeans the whole thing.

Benji, who organizes with Integrate NYC, a youth-led organization that fights for integration in New York City public schools, echoed these feelings and brought up experiences in which adults reacted to his activism “differently” than they did with adult activists, such as in meetings with the mayor’s office, the city’s department of education, or school officials:

There’s a lot of, sort of, babying and like, being super nice and thinking that we are ignorant and we don’t know a lot and we’re not going to give a lot of pushback. When in reality, I find that students give some of the most pushback out of activists.

Reflecting on his own experiences, Justin similarly stressed that adults should take youth seriously without youth needing to code-switch into adult norms, such as “speaking professionally” or having to always present evidence upfront in order to be listened to.

Some activists accompanied their frustrations with “what not to do” advice for adults wishing to be in solidarity with youth. For instance, Ohitika and Justin mentioned that adults should not attempt to promote activists’ work only when it has interest convergence (D. Bell, 1980) with their own. Justin mentioned a meeting he had with a school administrator in which

[the dean] said he’d love to feature me on the magazine of the school or whatever, and . . . it was clear to me that he was only just using that to make the school look better, when the school wasn’t supporting me at all when I was just first starting out. I think that’s something that is really disappointing, where adults just try to reap the benefits of young activists’ work to either make their institution look better or to say, “Hey, look at this thing that *my* students are doing.”

Ohitika, who is a Native environmental activist working on permaculture systems, similarly asked adults to stop tokenizing Native youth for personal gain or for their nonprofit work. He called out adults who participate in performative solidarity (“trying to use Native youth as their ‘star’ Native”):

Like, they post about us to show they’re this woke organization, so they can get clout on social media and be like, “Oh look at this, we’re supporting this!” and then later, [the attention] dies down when it’s not in their interest.

What Makes a Good Adult Ally?

Youth recalled adults in their lives who have been good allies to them, including what qualities new allies who wish to be in solidarity with youth could learn from these adults. Although a few participants brought up practical considerations that they want adults to adopt—paying youth the same amount as adults when inviting them to share their stories, knowledge, or experiences, or making sure that youth are provided the funds to bring a trusted friend or family member with them when asked to speak at events—the focus was overwhelmingly on emotional and relational aspects of solidarity. Three general themes emerged across their experiences and advice: "listening," "learning," and "doing (or not doing)."

Listening

For youth, the most common characteristic of a good ally is listening to youth and being empathetic when listening. Activists mentioned that listening signals a first step of reciprocity and mutuality between youth and adults; according to both Benji and Toby, adults who listen to youth activists demonstrate that they recognize youth power and may act in solidarity with youth as equals. There was some variation across activists' opinions on how a good ally demonstrates listening and listening well, though most youth emphasized the significance of openness and sincerity in relation to listening. Toby described effective listening as encompassing follow-through ("the biggest way that someone could be a listener is by . . . coming up with things to do based on what I just said"). In contrast, Ohitika, Kam, Veronica, Kiana, and MD mentioned that a good listener does not necessarily need to give advice or have a way to solve the issue at hand, but simply affirms youth in their experiences and frustrations as part of their listening.

Most youth mentioned that their personal adult allies are people who have consistently shown up for them and built relationships of trust and care with them over time. These are reliable individuals whom youth activists can turn to, ask for help, be vulnerable with, and get advice from when they need it. Allies embody openness and sincerity in relation to listening. For instance, Ohitika noted that he turns to his allies—Native poets like himself—who have demonstrated over time that they are "willing to talk it out and afterwards they're able to joke around." For Ohitika, the mutuality between adult allies and youth activists is rooted in this "duality" (e.g., "[allies] can be serious and then they also can be real"), which makes him feel like he is seen holistically.

Like Ohitika, youth activists expressed that oftentimes, allies are people who share common racial, ethnic, gender, and/or sexuality identities with them, which affirm youths' experiences and identities. For instance, Kam, who is involved in LGBTQ+ activism and the ballroom scene in New York City, mentioned feeling supported by their house grandfather, who is also Afro-Latinx and queer:

I look to my gay family, like my grandfather. My gay grandfather . . . teaches me a lot about the ballroom, about being a person, about literally anything through his stories. [My allies are] mainly from my gay family right now because they are gay, they are on that spectrum, they live that life.

Similarly, Simi's physical education teacher, Ms. D, was "the only non-white teacher at [her] middle school." Growing up in a predominantly white town as a person of color, Simi identified with and experienced

solidarity from Ms. D because “she has experience [with racist comments and microaggressions], and she is able to understand and have conversations and empower” her students because of it. Simi says that by openly sharing aspects of her life, opinions, and politics with her students through her “down-to-earth,” “funny,” and “kind” personality, Ms. D communicates that “we’re all on the same level tier.”

Learning

Youth also suggested that adults who want to be in solidarity with youth movements educate themselves on the particular issue in question before trying to insert themselves into the role of an ally. For instance, although listening was seen as a crucial solidarity practice for allies, Toby added that “if [adults] are not educated, they won’t know what to do with the information they just gathered from listening.” Significantly, participants suggested that adults can do this by “learning from youth . . . and how we are fighting. I think it’s important to really learn from youth and look at what youth are doing” (Benji). In the same vein, Veronica, who organizes with Integrate NYC alongside Benji, shared the principle of “real representation”—a guiding theme in their youth-led group that refers to centering the voices of members who are most affected by an issue or social injustice. In practice, “real representation” also translates to the need for adults to listen to and learn from youth:

[The issue of school integration] is affecting me [as a young person] so I should put my foot forward first. . . . [Adults should] back up and let us go forward. Trust us with what we think because it’s affecting us and we know what we want to have changed.

Once adults educate themselves around these issues by listening to youth and centering their perspectives and experiences, allies can also help educate other adults in their networks. Simi, Kam, Veronica, Benji, MD, Justin, and Ger all mentioned the importance of adults educating other adults—and specifically, adults taking youth activists’ messages to “places we can’t get into” (Simi), whether it be to their workplaces to recruit other adults to attend a rally, or to policy makers as voting constituents. Justin also noted the importance of allies sharing youth movement messages on their social media platforms to raise awareness and spread calls for resources to new adults who are outside youth activists’ reach.

Doing (or Not Doing)

For youth activists, actionable support from allies can manifest in a variety of ways. For instance, Kiana, Ger, and MD all found value in adult allies who spent time finding resources and opportunities for them—such as applicable scholarships, events, groups, and community service and speaking opportunities. Alternatively, Justin, Kam, Benji, MD, and Toby recalled adult allies who contributed their context-specific skills or knowledge to further their activist goals. For example, in starting Love to All Project, a queer teen-run clothing line and publication, Justin received a lot of business-specific advice from his sister who was attending business school. When he had trouble processing the intense amount of police brutality happening to Black men, MD’s mother, who is a social studies educator, was able to provide historical context about racism, white supremacy, and systems of oppression in the U.S. and “a better understanding of how to challenge the system.”

Complementing the significance of listening, youth activists stressed the importance of asking youth directly about their needs for support—understanding that the needs of individual youth activists are different and can change day-to-day or week-to-week. This includes the desire not to be supported at all. Rather than taking the need or desire for adult support for granted, Veronica advised asking for youth consent about whether they want to be supported. Similarly, Justin mentioned that it is important for adults to "not take it personally" if youth do not want an individual adult's presence or allyship at all: "Sometimes youth might have bad experiences with people who identify similarly as you, and just respect that and don't push yourself on youth to be an ally."

In line with this perspective, a number of youth activists said that the simplest way adult allies can demonstrate solidarity is by learning how to decenter themselves and stepping out of the way of youth organizers. Benji argued that his best adult allies "are very good at letting the youth lead" and "make it very clear that, if the adults are ever getting too in the way, to tell them and to keep them accountable." He added that these allies understand that

youth have been influential throughout history in making change. I think if adults really learn to step out of the way of youth, youth can accomplish a lot. We're not held back by job restrictions and whatnot, and I think we're just more willing to speak our minds and really get mad, and sometimes we can be more powerful [than adults].

Discussion

Using a mix of more traditional methods (interviews) and newer, participatory, visual ones (meme-making), this research aimed to surface youth perspectives on their own activism, including their experiences of power dynamics in activist spaces, and to better understand how youth activists perceive adult allyship. While this study echoes many of the findings within the existing body of youth activism research—such as youth activists' feelings of tokenization and patronization (Clay, 2012; Gordon, 2007; Taft, 2011); their self-defining in opposition to adults (Gordon, 2007; Taft, 2011, 2015); the embodied significance of relationships with mentors who identify similarly to themselves (Clay, 2012; Ginwright, 2010); and adults' misunderstandings about digital organizing (Erlick, 2018; Jenkins et al., 2016)—it also adds to this growing body of literature in significant ways.

By eliciting youth activists' experiences and perspectives on their own activism, we were able to foreground young people's keen understanding of their praxis in relation to larger cultural discourses and adultist systems. Youth are deeply aware that they are perceived by adults, and society at large, in very specific ways; these perceptions are often at odds with young activists' experiences and self-conceptualization. Young people in this study expressed a sense of being fundamentally misunderstood—in terms of the practice of activism (organizing is not just the flashy stuff; the digital world is a key site, used in specific ways), the meaning of young people's participation in activism (their ideas and visions are real and well developed, not just "cute"), and intergenerational allyship (youth do not always want adults involved; youth want adults to listen rather than tell them what to do and how to do it).

In terms of the practice of activism, youth expressed an awareness that their experiences challenge the "idealized cultural image" (Clay, 2012) of activism; the reality of their organizing was composed of

smaller, less “flashy” everyday actions that help to move their youth collectives forward. This takeaway emerged in interviews, but especially in youths’ memes, which elicited these (self-)representations in powerful, symbol-laden ways. Importantly, the memes also emphasized young people’s awareness of adult attitudes toward digital technology, and their feeling judged and patronized by adults for using technology despite its centrality to their organizing. Youths’ perceptions of dismissive and paternalistic attitudes around digital technology—and the ways these are shaped or perhaps compounded by generational differences in Internet use (see, e.g., Taipale, Wilska, & Gilleard, 2017)—provide directions for further research on how adults can better understand and support the increasingly significant role of technology in youth cultures such as organizing.

Regarding the meanings of youth participation in activism, young people acutely felt that their activism was not fully understood or always respected; they often felt that their involvement in activist movements was trivialized, belittled, or tokenized. Given this context, youth expressed a desire for adults to recognize the physical and emotional labor that youth activists contribute to social movements and to give them the space to enact their visions of the future using youth-led tactics and strategies. These points speak directly to adults needing to challenge and unlearn adultism as a system of oppression, changing their everyday behaviors and interactions with youth and treating them as equals.

In describing their visions for intergenerational allyship, youth activists stressed the momentousness of relational and emotional solidarity, as compared with material and transactional forms of support. Youths’ ideal partnerships with adults are rooted in mutuality, trust, and care. Although dominant culture places value on material goods and transactional practices or relationships, the highest value “resource” for youth activist praxis was having allies who listen to and affirm youth, who consistently show up for youth, and who believe in youth power. Importantly, in the eyes of youth activists, relational forms of solidarity necessitate continuous action and long-term inquiry on the part of adults, as well as the willingness to step back and decenter themselves with respect to youth activist movements.

This study also presents a few important limitations. First, in both collecting and analyzing this data, we acknowledge our own positionality as adult researchers in this work. Our age, along with our connection to established institutions of power (i.e., higher education), brings dominant forms of power into our work with youth activists and rightfully raises skepticism among youth who are organizing in counterhegemonic ways. Although we identify as activists outside our role as scholars, we recognize that our positionality influences both how our participants interact with us and how we approach our research.

From a methodological perspective, although the meme-making and elicitation activity provided a rich basis for youths’ implicit understandings and perceptions to emerge in a self-reflective fashion, it also proved to be somewhat challenging in practice. Whereas some participants found the activity to be very engaging and exciting, others found the task difficult because of the need to reduce their experiences to one stand-in image. One participant specifically requested to opt out of creating the meme and to instead have a one-on-one conversation about the power dynamics at play in the meme. Furthermore, although this particular meme template was well known from our perspective as adult researchers, many youth had not directly experienced the meme at the height of its popularity, so the format was unfamiliar to them. Several participants expressed doubt as to whether they “did it right”; this is a common concern in participatory visual research (Literat, 2013), and some youth might have felt more comfortable or empowered creating a different artifact

of their choice. Although the use of such creative methods holds exciting potential, future research might experiment with the design and implementation of participatory visual methods that have a lower perceived barrier and are more deeply anchored in youth contemporary cultures.

Finally, it is important to note that our findings are grounded in the cultural context of the U.S. and are particular to the demographics and sociocultural experiences of this sample. Taking up our call to center youth activist voices, future research can cast a wider and more diverse net and investigate similar questions across different demographics and contexts of activism, including different ages, social movement topics, or specific categories of adult allies. Furthermore, additional research can follow "successful" youth–adult activist relationships across contexts—ideally in a longitudinal manner and using participatory research methods that engage them as research partners—and expand on the ways in which youth activists have experienced successful intergenerational solidarity from adults.

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Appendix

Table A1. Semistructured Interview Protocol.

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- What does activism mean to you? Why is it important to you?
 - What was your journey to activism? (i.e., How did you get involved in activism?)
 - How do you practice activism now? How do you think you've changed since you started your activism?
 - As an activist in these contexts, what are some ways you have power/feel powerful? What are some ways in which you feel you lack power/feel constrained?
 - Who is someone you admire for their activism and why?
 - Tell me about an adult you know whom you appreciate for being an ally to your activism. What does that person do that makes them a good ally?
 - Tell me about a peer you appreciate for being an ally to your activism. What does that person do that makes them a good ally?
 - Tell me about a successful experience you had in your activism—what made it successful?
 - Tell me about a frustrating experience you had in your activism—what made it frustrating?
 - How do you think that older activists in your life view you as an activist?
 - What don't they understand? What do you want them to know?
 - If you could tell older activists one thing that they don't realize about your activism/about you as an activist, what would it be?
 - What are some ways you want to be better supported in your activism?
-

Table A2. Meme Creation and Interview Protocol.

Remember that meme that was going around a while ago about how you think others view you, versus how you view yourself? Here are some examples. In this activity, I want you to create a version of that meme, using the template below, to get at how others view you as a youth activist and how you view yourself and your activism. You can use visuals from the Internet, from your own social media or photo/video library, or create your own visuals onto the squares provided.

Then, in our interview, we will have a conversation about how you decided to make your meme, using the following questions (and anything else you'd want to add)!

Follow-up interview questions:

- Tell me about how you made your meme, and the decisions you made while making your meme. How did you go about choosing or making the visual in each square?
 - Which of these boxes did you struggle with creating the most? Why?
 - Which of these boxes do you feel best encapsulates how other groups see you, as a youth activist?
 - How do these groups' views present challenges to your activism?
 - How do these groups' views support your activism?
 - Tell me about the process you went through to distinguish the "what I think I do" vs. "what I actually do" boxes.
-