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Authors

Wray-Lake, Laura

Saavedra, J

Wilf, Sara

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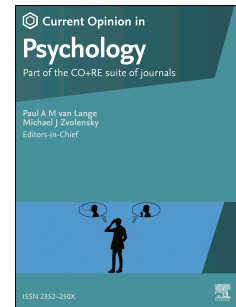
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Youth Civic Development amid the Pandemic

Sara Wilf, MPA, Ph.D, Laura Wray-Lake, Ph.D, J.Abigail Saavedra, M.S., Ph.D



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Youth Civic Development amid the Pandemic

[Corresponding author] Sara Wilf, MPA, Ph.D. student, University of California Los Angeles

337 Charles E Young Dr E, Los Angeles, CA 90095

swilf@ucla.edu

Laura Wray-Lake, Ph.D., Professor, University of California Los Angeles

337 Charles E Young Dr E, Los Angeles, CA 90095

wraylake@luskin.ucla.edu

J. Abigail Saavedra, M.S., Ph.D. student, Arizona State University, School of Social and Family Dynamics

PO Box 873701, Tempe, AZ 85287-3701

AbbySaavedra@asu.edu

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Highlights

- Youth civic development was catalyzed and constrained during the pandemic.
- Social media became the primary space for youth civic engagement during lockdowns.
- Online civic engagement exposed youth to vicarious trauma, racism, and radicalization.
- COVID-19 and racism were dual pandemics shaping racially minoritized youth's civic development.
- Civic engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic had mixed impacts on youth wellbeing.

Abstract

During the COVID-19 pandemic, youth experienced abrupt closures of in-person spaces that were vital for their civic development, like schools and community organizations. Social media became the primary context for youth to make their voices heard and mobilize around important sociopolitical issues like anti-Asian racism, police violence, and elections. However, youth experienced civic development in different ways during the pandemic. Some youth gained a critical awareness of societal inequities, while others were radicalized into far-right ideologies. Racially minoritized youth experienced

vicarious trauma and racism while civically engaging in 2020, and their civic development must be viewed in the context of the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and structural racism.

Journal Pre-proof

1. Introduction

This review paper describes how the civic development of adolescents and young adults was shaped in profound and perhaps long-lasting ways from the events and circumstances of 2020 [1]. Civic engagement refers to individual and collective actions to address issues of public concern, as well as corresponding values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge [2]. Civic engagement in adolescence has lasting impacts on youth's engagement in their communities and politics well into adulthood [2]. Therefore, understanding youth civic development during the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic is a critical area of research. We focus primarily on United States (U.S.) youth given that civic engagement is highly contextualized, and 2020 was a tumultuous political moment in U.S. history. However, since the COVID-19 pandemic is global in scope and impact, we also incorporate some non-U.S. studies as additional evidence.

The onset of COVID-19 led to abrupt disruptions in everyday contexts and opportunities for young people [3], while at the same time exposing U.S. society's pre-existing racial inequities in many areas [4], including health [5] and education [6]. After a spike in anti-Asian racism and the police murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, white supremacy and COVID-19 became recognized as dual pandemics [7,8]. These events took place in a moment of heightened political polarization and a contentious U.S. presidential election. Young people's civic engagement was constrained and catalyzed in different ways, and youth's experiences differed based on social identities and background. Ultimately, youth were agentic in creating new ways of being civically engaged to support their families and communities and to challenge systems of inequity and oppression.

1.1 COVID-19 Ruptured In-Person Civic Opportunities

Research before 2020 had emphasized that schools, community-based organizations, peers, and families offer access to civic opportunities for young people to discuss political and social issues, build a sense of belonging, and exercise their voice to develop civic agency and action [2]. During the pandemic, many youth experienced abrupt closures in the everyday settings where they accessed civic opportunities. Youth from less advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds had greater difficulty accessing high-quality internet to participate in remote learning and online civic actions [9] and may have taken on additional responsibilities at home or had to accompany their parents to work, further limiting their access to civic spaces [8, 10,]. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing structural inequities such as poverty and unemployment [4,11] and led to increased levels of racial trauma for racially minoritized youth [12,13].

Some teachers instigated innovative ways to facilitate students' civic engagement during remote learning in the U.S. [14,15]. For example, high schoolers in New York reflected on how their social studies teachers created spaces for classroom discussions that responded to current events, such as George Floyd's murder, in a way that incorporated young people's own social identities and lived experience [10]. Yet

overall in 2022, U.S. eighth graders' scores on the national civics assessment declined for the first time since 1998, perhaps because during remote learning lower-performing students had less access to the technology and teachers needed to support their civic learning [15]. Families were still a source for civic socialization, yet the extent to which they were interested in and able to provide this role likely varied considerably. Despite the lockdowns, community organizations often became vital spaces for vulnerable families [16] and involved young people in local civic opportunities such as distributing food [17, 18].

In May 2020, after George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and other Black people's murders by police, youth across the world coordinated and engaged in the Movement for Black Lives (BLM). Some youth felt limited in their ability to protest in-person due to health concerns around COVID-19 [19]. Thus, even when in-person civic opportunities were available during the pandemic, some youth felt unable to participate. Youths' in-person civic engagement also differed by their racial and ethnic identities and experiences of marginalization. In interviews with 27 racially diverse young adults in the spring of 2020, Quiles and colleagues (2023) found that due to their perceptions of police violence as a greater public health threat than COVID-19, some Black and Latinx youth viewed participating in the BLM protests as a matter of survival and therefore were willing to risk infection [11]. Thus, youth had different motivations for, and engaged in, different types of civic actions during the pandemic depending on their racial and social identities and experiences.

1.2 Social Media Became a Primary Civic Context

During the pandemic, social media was the only available civic space for many youth who could not access in-person contexts [20] and youth were more engaged online than in-person [21]. Youth raised their critical reflection of structural inequities due to increased time spent on social media during the pandemic [10,11,21], as well as to exposure to different perspectives nationally and globally [22]. For instance, in a participatory mixed methods study with largely Latinx and immigrant high schoolers, youth described how social media during the BLM protests was a space for education about anti-Black racism and reflection on their own community's experiences with racism [10]. Social media also allowed youth to participate in important sociopolitical events, like the BLM movement [23], without worrying about risking their family's health. Youth utilized social media as a platform to be heard on political issues, bypassing structural barriers to their political participation like the voting age [24]. In many cases, youth merged their in-person and social media civic engagement to achieve broader goals, such as mobilizing voters in Singapore's national elections [25] or protesting police brutality through the EndSARS campaign in Nigeria [26]. Although social media allowed youth to continue engaging with social movements despite the lockdowns, these virtual processes also faced challenges. For example, a study of young climate activists in Spain found that the Fridays for Future movement struggled to maintain

engagement online, as media attention was re-directed towards pandemic-related issues, and the movement's followers seemed to lose interest in participating in online-only actions [27].

Over the course of 2020, youth developed new forms of civic engagement on social media that reflected a greater focus on allyship, mutual aid, and promoting mental health and wellbeing. For instance, studies around the world documented youth using social media to educate themselves [10,11,25] and their peers on topics such as the root causes of societal inequities [19] and safety during COVID-19 [28]. Youth also used social media to coordinate mutual aid to individuals and grassroots organizations in the U.S. [11] and globally [29,30], and to increase their allyship in support of the BLM movement [10,20]. On social media, youth practiced self-care and emotionally supported others in managing pandemic fears and anxieties [31,32], and created spaces for collective healing [33]. During 2020, some youth viewed providing emotional support as a part of their online civic engagement [20]. Furthermore, some youth became more engaged in anti-racist actions online during the pandemic. For instance, one study found that whereas some African Australian youth avoided posting anti-racist content for fear of backlash prior to the pandemic, after George Floyd's murder, they were more open to posting about their experiences of racism and called out white supremacy and performative allyship on social media [34].

However, social media also exposed young people to misinformation [35], vicarious trauma [12,23,33], racism [10,36,37], and radicalization [38]. As misinformation about vaccines and the COVID-19 virus spread on social media [35], far-right groups promoted theories that the pandemic was a "deep state hoax" to radicalize youth [38]. Far-right radicalization online during the pandemic was global. For example, Banaji found that activists across India and Brazil were radicalized into pro-fascist beliefs [39]. Research must continue investigating how social media can both support and detract from youth civic development in the service of a more equitable and just society.

1.3 Dual Pandemics Shaped Racially Minoritized Youths' Civic Engagement

The COVID-19 pandemic coincided with the ongoing public health threat of racism [8], exacerbating existing systemic inequities in mortality [4], financial instability [40], and lower quality healthcare access [5] among communities of color relative to white people. In addition to the trauma of the pandemic itself, racially minoritized youth contended with direct and vicarious racial trauma that affected their wellbeing and civic development [8,37], especially online [33]. High percentages of Asian American youth faced spikes in anti-Asian racism [41], including increased online racial discrimination. In one study of over 650 Chinese American youth and parents conducted in the spring of 2020, nearly half of youth reported being directly targeted by COVID-related racism online, and half of youth and their parents reported in-person racial discrimination [12]. Black youth grappled with anti-Black racism, police violence, and vicarious trauma from

viewing viral videos of police killings of Black people [4,7,12,33]. A longitudinal daily diary study from March to November of 2020 found that Black adolescents reported increases in online racial discrimination during the pandemic, which was linked to poorer mental health [36]. Latinx communities also dealt with inhumane Immigrations and Customs Enforcement detentions and xenophobic rhetoric from politicians like then-President Donald Trump [5]. In one cross-sectional study in fall 2020 with over 400 Black, Indigenous, Asian, and Latinx youth aged 15-18, over 90% of youth reported experiencing vicarious racism online [37]. Both the pandemic and its exacerbation of racial injustices contributed to higher rates of psychological distress among Black, Hispanic, and Asian American high school students relative to white Americans [42].

News about and personal experiences with these inequities prompted heightened civic development for racially minoritized youth, spurring their critical reflection about racism and structural inequality [10,11]. Racially minoritized communities, and especially youth, increased their online and offline civic engagement as a coping response to challenge oppressive systems [23] through becoming involved in protests; educating themselves and others online about BLM, anti-Asian racism, and social determinants of health related to the pandemic; and engaging in family conversations about COVID-19-related discrimination [10,19,43]. However, for some racially minoritized youth, civic engagement during the pandemic negatively impacted their wellbeing. For instance, a qualitative study with 17 Black undergraduate women found that participating in the BLM movement on social media made them vulnerable to racism and harassment, as well as vicarious trauma through viewing videos of anti-Black violence on their timelines, which had negative repercussions for their wellbeing [33]. Continued research is necessary to understand how the pandemic may have uniquely shaped racially minoritized youths' civic engagement and wellbeing, and under what conditions civic engagement helped racially minoritized youth heal from the dual pandemics of 2020.

2 Conclusion and Future Directions

The pandemic had a negative and sustained impact on young people's mental health and wellbeing [44]. This was particularly true for racially minoritized youth, who shouldered inequitable burdens from health and economic repercussions of the pandemic while facing spikes in racial discrimination and a societal reckoning with police and white supremacist violence [12,33,45]. How, then, did civic engagement play into the story of the COVID generation?

Based on emerging research reviewed in this paper, we propose that civic engagement during the pandemic—the majority of which took place online—was a way that young people could find belonging and community [46,47], gain a critical awareness both of societal inequity and of their own positionality vis-a-vis marginalizing systems [11,19], and find a sense of purpose and meaning in collective action. However, civic engagement during the pandemic also heightened exposure to online

harassment, vicarious trauma and racism, and negative or false information [33,48,49]. Policy discussions around limiting young people's social media usage should also consider what youth gain from online civic engagement, especially when they lack access to in-person civic opportunities.

Research is urgently needed to understand how civic engagement during the pandemic may have played a role in young people's mental health and wellbeing, as research shows mixed effects [50,51,52]. Future scholarship must also closely consider the role of structural racism when exploring youth civic development amid the pandemic [53]. Racism and discrimination can catalyze and detract from racially minoritized youths' civic engagement [54], yet racism is highly detrimental to youth mental health, wellbeing, and academic success [33,36]. Due to COVID-19's outsized impact on exacerbating structural inequities in communities of color, policy efforts should explicitly address structural racism and its role in inequitable access to health, education, employment, and other critical resources [4]. Further, policymakers should involve youth in decision-making about COVID-19 recovery efforts, because young people have a valuable perspective about how best to support their communities. Finally, political polarization has been increasing since the 2016 election, and was exacerbated by COVID-19 and white supremacist violence in ways that make civic development during this time distinct for youth based on their political contexts and beliefs. Scholarship should explore these issues in more depth to understand the current and long-term implications of the events of 2020 on the civic development of young people from different backgrounds.

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Denotes special interest

** Denotes of outstanding interest

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In this participatory research study with 12 immigrant youth ages 13 to 15, the authors demonstrate that the fear, loss, family separation, and boredom of the COVID-19 pandemic took a toll on youths' mental health. During the Black Lives Matter protests, youth gained a critical awareness of structural racism on social media and in school and educated their families on anti-Black racism.

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Interviews with 27 young adults in the U.S. found that youths' critical reflection and action differed by racial and ethnic identity, with Black and Latinx youth reporting greater engagement in education and raising awareness. Youths' decision to participate in in-person protests depended on whether they viewed COVID-19 or racism as a bigger threat. The authors argue that definitions of critical action should be expanded to include caring for vulnerable community members through mutual aid and community building.

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In a national cross-sectional survey with over 700 college-age students in the U.S., the authors found that critical reflection about societal inequities, as well as critical action, were associated with anxiety. Associations between critical

consciousness and hopefulness were differentiated for Asian American and LGBTQ+ youth.

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