

**For Better or For Worse**

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One minute I'm watching a dog in sunglasses making pancakes, the next I'm hit with footage from a protest on the other side of the world. This is what it's like to be a teenager on the Internet. My feed varies greatly between harmless distractions and urgent calls for justice, and somewhere in that blur, I'm expected to figure out where I stand, what I support in life, and how to "make a difference" as a citizen. In today's world, ideas of citizenship seem to be expanding beyond just voting or holding a passport, possibly including online civic activism. However, does that mean liking, sharing, and reposting make me a better citizen? Am I truly benefiting my community through my online engagement, or merely reassuring myself with the illusion of meaningful participation? Hence, this online experience has led me to pursue my research question: How does social media activism shape youth citizenship in the digital age? This inquiry is especially relevant considering how Gen Z is often viewed in extremes: we're either praised as the most politically engaged generation or labeled as screen addicts incapable of real action as citizens. It's a paradox that's hard to ignore, and one that makes this exploration feel both necessary and personal.

To begin unpacking this topic, I decided to delve into a controversial aspect of online activism: whether it is genuinely impactful or merely performative. The blog post *Slacktivism: Legitimate Action or Just Lazy Liking?* on Go Vocal by Sören Fillet was an ideal starting point as it doesn't offer a one-sided take and is filled with real-life examples. Slacktivism is a term typically used to label youth activism as lazy and ineffective (Fillet, 2023). The article is aimed at a young, socially aware audience, with its tone being conversational and not harsh, inviting the readers to think more critically about their online behaviors. Straight away, I liked how Fillet mentioned real, almost humorous, examples like the 'Save The Turtles' petition or the rainbow-

colored profile frame, because they're things I've actually seen, making the concept of slacktivism click in a more relatable way. He presents the initial argument that online involvement doesn't translate to civic action, discussing the video montage of celebrities covering the song 'Imagine' by John Lennon during lockdown. I remember that video and the second-hand embarrassment I felt as these Hollywood stars showcased their lack of awareness during times of real suffering. This example drives the notion that hashtags or posts often fall short of real change. Fillet quotes Micah White, who likened clicktivism to McDonald's and activism to a slow-cooked meal. This comparison emphasizes that empty gestures during tragedies are indeed infuriating, but does that mean we shouldn't try at all? Juliette H's point: "Turning down a kid wanting to empty his piggy bank... would be insulting, callous, irresponsible" (Fillet, 2023) presents the idea that it's unfair to shame people for doing what they can, even if it's small or online. The article then explores civil movements that were originally "born as slacktivism," (Fillet, 2023) like the BLM movement. Unlike the 'Imagine' disaster, the #BlackLivesMatter campaign quickly sparked offline action after starting as a viral hashtag. The writer highlights how such activism fueled real-world momentum and resulted in social and political shifts in the United States. Ultimately, the article offered a balanced perspective, showing me both the limitations and benefits of social media as a civic tool in our modern era.

With a better understanding of the effectiveness of digital activism, I wanted to explore a more data-driven perspective to deepen my knowledge and connect it to real-world events. The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), a U.S.-based research organization, offered valuable insight through their article *So Much for "Slacktivism": Youth Translate Online Engagement to Offline Political Action*. Written in a formal, professional tone and supported by figures and numbers, CIRCLE (2018) claims that

young people who participate politically online are also more likely to participate in person. I was intrigued, and honestly, a bit surprised, by how confidently the article showcases social media activism as a gateway to offline action. Through statistics, it underlines a strong relationship between digital activism and increased offline engagement, such as the finding that “youth who followed a candidate or campaign on social media were almost three times more likely to engage in offline activism”, 43% to 16% (CIRCLE, 2018, para. 5). Examples like the post-Parkland movement for gun violence leading to more voting teenagers also offered real-life, credible support for this claim. Yet, I couldn’t help but feel slightly disconnected as the article mostly targets an American audience, referencing Republican and Democratic dynamics that don’t necessarily translate to global youth. As someone outside the U.S., I felt somewhat excluded from the narrative. This focus on American political structure extends into its significant emphasis on voting, which becomes a central measure of civic engagement throughout the article. Indeed, voting is a core responsibility of citizenship and a clear way to contribute to meaningful social change, but does it reflect civic engagement beyond election day? Do young voters remain involved in civic life, or does their participation die down once the moment passes? CIRCLE (2018) also touches on the influence of educational institutions like universities in nurturing Gen Z’s activism. So, does this mean that civic change is mainly cultivated in such environments rather than through individual effort? This challenges an idea suggested in the first source: that anyone, anywhere, regardless of how small their effort, can spark change from the ground up.

Building on what I’ve learned about the link between online activity and youth citizenship among Americans, I turned to a broader academic source: the article *Social media and citizen engagement: A meta-analytic review* by Marko M Skoric and others, published on

Sage Journals. This peer-reviewed article encompasses findings from 22 different studies conducted between 2007 and 2013, including a total sample size of 17,763 participants, to assess how different types of social media use – expressive, informational, and relational – affect civil activity. Skoric et al. (2015) address their audience of possibly policymakers and social scientists in a suitable, formal, and academic tone. The work feels similar to the CIRCLE article; however, it is more methodologically dense and embedded with statistical language. The results of the study showed small-to-moderate positive correlations, especially for expressive usage ( $r = .41$ ), like sharing political content or opinions, and informational usage ( $r = .37$ ), like using the Internet to obtain news. Skoric et al. (2015) present a strong argument that not all social media use is equal, stressing that some forms do contribute to civic engagement, while others, such as identity and entertainment-related activities, offer little civic value. This distinction helped clarify part of the dilemma I introduced earlier: why my feed can feel both profoundly political and utterly insignificant. Another compelling idea that I found in Skoric et al.'s article (2015) is that prepping to express an opinion online, thinking through what to say and who will see it, can lead people to become more emotionally and mentally engaged in the issue. Thus, this process, called “inadvertent civic learning,” helps users develop a stronger political identity and greater awareness of their role as citizens, simply through engaging with social media (Skoric et al., 2015, p. 1834). Despite its depth, the study mostly depended on self-reported surveys, which limit its reliability, as such methods are prone to biases and inaccuracies. Still, it demonstrated that it's not the amount of online activity that matters, but its purpose; an important lens that changed the way I view teenage civic endeavors.

For my final source, I was drawn to a different kind of article; one that intrigued me and offered the opportunity to dissect a real-life scenario beyond my own cultural context: *The Long*

*Wave: 'How do you teargas a baddie?': Kenya's Gen Z Revolutionaries* by Nesrine Malik, published in *The Guardian*. Written in an urgent yet thoughtful tone, the author captures the intensity of Kenya's civil uproar while honoring the bravery and grief of the youth involved. Her audience is most likely readers who may not be familiar with East African politics, but are invested in youth movements and human rights, which explains her efforts to provide a quick background on the socioeconomic context in Kenya, the finance bill, and the historical tension between citizens and political elites. Malik opens with a bold claim that young people are changing the future of Kenya, and even Africa as a whole, immediately positioning Gen Z as powerful political agents. The article outlines how teenage protesters used platforms like TikTok, X, and Facebook to educate others about the new bill being introduced. This showed me the potential of media in terms of civic education when strategically used for the public good. The writer counters the stereotype of Gen Z hiding "behind keyboards" by highlighting the courage of several young protesters who were teargassed, arrested, injured, and even killed (Malik, 2025, para. 9). I appreciated the inclusion of such emotionally heavy accounts that reveal the true costs of civil change for some countries. I also liked how Malik weaves in the psychological motivations behind the protests, such as the "addictive sense of political belonging" that fuels the youth's persistence (Malik, 2025, para. 14). Towards the end, the mention of feminist protests later in the year indicated that the youth activism continued to evolve, with social media enabling this sustained engagement. In doing so, the article seemed to respond to questions I had previously posed about whether social media activism is short-lived or worthwhile, showing instead that passionate young people continue to engage with important issues. Overall, I found the article illustrating how social media doesn't weaken political action, but intensifies it, even in the face of opposition.

In conclusion, the question of how youth activism on social media shapes civic engagement may never have a definitive answer. Just as young people around the world differ in their contexts and motivations, so too does their use of digital platforms. I still believe that slacktivism exists and can create an illusion of participation, but this doesn't erase the real change young citizens have sparked through online networks. From reposting graphics to organizing large protests, youth have shown that digital enthusiasm can evolve into meaningful civic participation. While we've seen that this activism can be sustained and powerful, what remains unclear is whether institutions will evolve fast enough to meet this generation's demands. What is certain, though, is that social media isn't going anywhere. As it becomes more and more intertwined with how we communicate, learn, and resist, will it continue to shape youth citizenship, culture, and identity, for better or for worse?

## References

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