

# Towards an Understanding of Black Girls’ Digital Activism: What the Black Girls’ Literacy Framework Reveals about the Digital Literacy Practices of Adolescent Black Girls

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*This qualitative study explored the digital literacy practices of adolescent Black girls who actively engaged on social media in the aftermath of the murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd. I employ intersectionality and the Black Girls’ Literacies (BGL) framework (Haddix & Muhammad, 2016) to analyze six qualitative interviews I conducted with adolescent Black girls who avidly used video sharing social media during that time. The data analysis aligned with the following components of the BGL Framework: Black girls’ literacies are intellectual, political, and critical. Moreover, the data analysis also revealed that Black girls espoused two different identities while using social media to address anti-Black violence: Black Girls as Educators and Black Girls as Digital Activists. The study concludes with national, district-wide, and schoolwide recommendations for policy to improve the teaching and learning of adolescent Black girls.*

**Keywords:** Adolescent Black girls, digital activism, Black Girls’ Literacies, social media, digital literacy

Research has shown that Black teens have always been at the forefront of social media usage (Pew Research Center, 2013; NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, 2017). For example, data from a 2017 survey conducted by the Associated Press—NORC Center for Public Affairs Research revealed that, Black teens use video sharing social media apps such as Snapchat and Instagram more frequently than their White counterparts, and that “Black teens are the “first-movers, in many ways [and]...it speaks to the level of embeddedness of the technology in Black youth’s lives and their willingness to move into new platforms more quickly than their counterparts” (p. 2). This data challenges the deficit narratives perpetuated by national data from high stakes testing (National Association of Educational Progress, 2022) about Black youth and their ability to comprehend and engage with complex texts. The study showed that Black youth were willing to take risks in learning new technologies, they were at the forefront of innovation and creation, and they surpassed their White counterparts in 21st century skills. Secondly, the

study showed that Black youth are the largest consumers of digital texts and, therefore, understand the nuances of these technologies in ways that most do not. These statistics have only increased since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (Pew Research Center, 2022; Common Sense Media, 2021), and also shows that Black girls' usage of social media supersedes any other demographic (Common Sense Media, 2021). Although this trend in social media usage has been identified, little research has been done to examine *why* and *how* adolescent Black girls are engaged with social media to this extent.

The goal of this paper is to begin to answer the *why* and *how* of adolescent Blacks girls' engagement on social media, using intersectionality as a guiding framework. More specifically, the research presented in this article is a part of a larger study that examines the digital literacy practices of adolescent Black girls during the COVID-19 pandemic, and in the wake of the murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd. This article focuses on one of the primary research questions from that larger study which is: How do adolescent Black girls respond to racial injustice in digital spaces?

### **Intersectionality as an Analytic Framework for Black Girlhood**

Any research that seeks to understand the ways in which Black girls engage with social media must begin from an intersectional perspective. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) coined the term 33 years ago to explain the multiple forms of oppression that Black women face, and to prevent the “. . . problematic consequence of the tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis” (p. 139). The national data that is published every year on student performance in K-12 schools is a perfect example of how institutions of power engage in practices that are detrimental for Black girls. For example, *The Nation's Report Card* reports data in the categories of race, gender, and socioeconomic status without analysis of how the categories intersect. Consequently, the implications of what the data means for those with intersecting identities of oppression are never considered or published. The “problematic consequence” of this lack of nuance in the data analysis means that Black girls' needs in schools will never be met if policies and funding are based on this type of data. In *We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom*, Bettina Love (2019) asserts that intersectionality is a necessary tool for analysis because it “. . . adds complexity to our understandings of how institutions such as public schools are oppressive in different ways to different people” (p.6). Moreover, Love contends that, “By... using intersectionality, we . . . can ask important, unanswered questions: What does this school reality mean for Black girls who are a part of the LGBTQ community, Black girls who are Muslim, Black girls who are immigrants. . .? . . .” (p. 5-6). This article considers the ways in which the intersectional identities of adolescent Black girls influenced the ways they responded to the murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd on social media.

## Literature Review

### The Digital Literacy Practices of Black Girls

On March 13, 2020, Breonna Taylor, an African American young woman, was murdered by Myles Cosgrove, a White, Louisville Metro Police officer, while she was in her home in Louisville, Kentucky. Taylor's death didn't gain national attention until months later, in the wake of the brutal murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota. In June of 2020, then Vice Presidential candidate Kamala Harris (2020) addressed the lack of attention to Breonna Taylor's murder on her Twitter account—reminding the Twitter community that Breonna's murderers needed to be brought to justice, and that Black women should not be forgotten during this critical moment in our history. Although Breonna Taylor may have been forgotten by and excluded from the mainstream media, a close examination of social media during that time revealed that she was *not* forgotten by Black girls. Instead, adolescent Black girls on TikTok, Instagram, Twitter, and other social media took hold of Breonna Taylor's narrative, and in doing so, they humanized her and became her mouthpiece posthumously.

In “Digital Communities of Black Girlhood: New Media Technologies and Online Discourses of Empowerment,” Maryann Erigha and Ashley Crooks-Allen (2020) asserted that Black girls are utilizing new media technologies to subvert and rewrite the narratives of Black girlhood that are perpetuated by the White mainstream media in the United States (p. 66). The authors concluded that Black girls in digital spaces advocate for the rights of those who are disenfranchised, empower other Black girls especially through collaboration, and create their own affinity groups that move Black girlhood “from the margins to the center of popular discourses” (p. 69). This fact was particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. The social media apps TikTok and Instagram became more popular during the pandemic (Pew Research Center, 2021), and the world turned to adolescent Black girls who use these apps as an escape from their realities (through viral dances), for knowledge about the disenfranchisement of Black people, and to learn how they can support the fight for racial justice. Although the world has leaned on adolescent Black girls to survive the pandemic, Black girls have had to fight to receive proper recognition in these digital spaces.

For example, on September 25, 2019, Jalaiah S. Harmon created the “Renegade” dance that would eventually go viral and become one of the most popular dances on TikTok. Although Harmon, a Black teenage girl, created the dance, a White teenage girl named Charli D'Amelio received the credit for it on social media. *The New York Times* (Lorenz, 2020) published an article highlighting Harmon and her accomplishments, thus explaining the deeper issue at hand—young Black creatives having their work co-opted and stolen by young White people on TikTok. Jalaiah S. Harmon is one of many Black girls who have risen to fame on TikTok but have been overshadowed and discredited by their White peers.

While adolescent Black girls post about their everyday lives in funny videos, highlight their artistry, and participate in dance challenges on TikTok and Instagram, they also use their platforms

for digital activism. Unlike their White counterparts, Black girls do not have the luxury to post content *only* for fun. Black girls are always contending with the double bind of race and gender—the constant struggle to subvert, rewrite, and fight against the deficit narratives of being a Black person and a Black woman.

Black girl content creators on TikTok and Instagram are participating in a long history of Black women's activism that, as Sherell A. McArthur (2016) stated, is rooted in “literacy practices for social change” (p. 364). The everyday literacy practices of Black girls—utilized to share Black joy, Black grief, Black history, and Black activism—are helping to educate, bring awareness to, and change the mindset of younger generations from all walks of life. As Patricia Hill Collins (2000) asserted when discussing Black women's activism, “It may be more useful to assess Black women's activism less by the ideological content of individual Black women's belief systems...and more by Black women's collective actions within everyday life that challenge domination in these multifaceted domains” (p. 203). The “collective actions within everyday life” that Collins referred to is evident in the digital activism in which Black girls participate on social media.

Jalaiah S. Harmon's experience is also a reflection of the in-school experiences of adolescent Black girls in the United States. In educational spaces, Black girls are not lauded for their creativity, intelligence, and ingenuity, but, instead, they are overpoliced and excluded from the educational environment (Sealey-Ruiz, 2016; Wandix-White, et. al, 2023). For example, data from a 2021-2022 Department of Education study revealed that Black girls are suspended at a higher rate than their White and Latinx counterparts (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). Despite this reality, as Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (2015) stated in *Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced, and Underprotected*, the data and research on the policing of Black girls in schools are scant (p. 14). Moreover, Black girls are oftentimes the victims of a colonized curriculum (Jones, 2022) that intentionally excludes the voices and history of Black people and does not tap into the ingenuity and creativity that Black girls possess.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In recent years, there has been an increase in scholarship on the literacy practices of Black girls, and the ways in which educational stakeholders can utilize this research to shape pedagogy and educational policy (Muhammad and Haddix, 2016; Sealey-Ruiz, 2016; Price- Dennis, 2016; Couvson, 2022). This increase in scholarship can be attributed to the charge put forth in the *Black Girls' Literacies* (2106) themed issue of *English Education* by Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz, Sherell A. McArthur, Detra Price-Dennis, Gholnecsar E. Muhammad, and Marcelle Haddix. This group of scholars, known as the Black Girls' Literacies Collective (BGLC), has built upon the work of their scholarly, Black foremothers, and have conducted research and developed a theoretical framework that can be used to analyze 21<sup>st</sup> century Black girls' epistemologies. According to Price-Dennis (2016), Black Girls' Literacies are:

...the multiple ways of knowing that Black girls draw on to not only read, write, speak, and act in academic spaces but that they rely on to make sense of and write their worlds... In essence, Black girls' literacies are multimodal and embody a critical stance that fosters dexterity across genres, platforms, audiences and registers... Engaging in such practices with print-based or digital texts position Black girls as active learners who consume and produce knowledge. (p. 340)

The “multiple ways of knowing” that Price-Dennis refers to is a concept that comes out of sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978; Freire, 1970; Heath, 1982; Moll et al., 1992) and places value on the ways in which literacy is used in the lives of individuals and communities. Therefore, Black Girls' Literacies are the ways in which Black girls engage with literacy both inside and outside of the classroom, and are rooted in their multiple intersectional positionalities. To support educators in designing curriculum, strengthening their pedagogy, and engaging in research and analysis of Black girls' educational experiences, Muhammad and Haddix (2016) developed the Black Girls' Literacy (BGL) framework. The framework emerged from a literature review the authors created that delineates seminal scholarship that centers the experiences and epistemologies of Black women and girls in educational contexts:

Through our synthesis of the collective literatures we came to a framework that centers Black girls' ways of knowing and engagement of literacy practices. In nearly all of the studies, we found that researchers were steadfast (implicitly and explicitly) in framing their studies around six components that served as the conduit for moving the literacies of Black girls forward. We distilled these components out from the collection of studies. (p.325)

The six components of the Black Girls' Literacy framework (“for engaging Black girls in literacy pedagogies”) are as follows:

Black girls' literacies are. . .

1. Multiple (in practice and theoretical orientations)
2. Tied to identities (coming closer to selfhood)
3. Historical (use historical frameworks to examine the literacies of Black girls and connected their practices to earlier African American people)
4. Collaborative (social and involved a co-construction of knowledge with the world and with other Black girls)
5. Intellectual (grounded in critical thought, discussions, and reflection about society and social problems)
6. Political/Critical (tied to power, misrepresentations, falsehood, and the need for social transformation). (pp. 325-326)

The Black girls' literacies framework lends itself to rich analysis and contributes to the existing scholarship in Black feminist studies and critical pedagogy; however, it is unique because it

explicitly gets at the core of how Black girls learn (which is also a significant contribution to the field of Black girlhood studies). In their exploration of the scholarship on Black girls' literacies, Muhammad and Haddix acknowledge that the field of Black girls' digital literacies (Hall, 2011; Kendrick, Early, & Chemjor, 2013; Muhammad & Womack, 2016; Price-Dennis, 2016) is still under researched. The goal of this article is to contribute to the emerging field of Black girls' digital literacies in order to improve the field of teaching and learning.

### **Methodology**

While reflecting on the increase in research on Black girls, Venus E. Evans-Winters (2019) questions the positionalities and intentions of scholars who are engaging in this work. She asks questions that every qualitative researcher of Black girlhood should reflect upon:

At such a critical time when Black girls and young women are being policed and pushed out of school, being assaulted and killed at the hands of White vigilantes and police officers, threatened by mass incarceration, neighborhood and media violence, what would be the role of the Black girl researcher? . . . With so many “knowers” of Black girls' experiences, identities, desires, and pains in the public sphere, what is the moral and ethical obligation of the academic researcher? (p.75-76)

As a qualitative researcher, the “moral and ethical obligation” that I hold myself to is centering the voices of Black girls in my research by allowing them to tell their own stories. Therefore, for this study, I employed a qualitative research approach—one that centered the voices of adolescent Black girls throughout the study. As a qualitative researcher, criticality, collaboration, rigor, and reflexivity undergird this study and my approach to collecting and analyzing data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Moreover, the research methodology I employed for this study is phenomenology. Phenomenological research acknowledges the similarities in the daily lived experiences of the research participants, and analyzes what participants revealed about those experiences (Biklen & Bogdan, 2016; Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

### **Recruitment of Research Participants**

For this study, I predetermined the criteria for the participants, which was adolescent girls (ages 14-19), who identify as Black and consider themselves to be avid users of social media. I then used the purposeful selection technique “snowballing” to identify participants. I reached out to my personal and professional networks explaining my research and was given the contact information for families who said they would be interested in supporting my research. Additionally, some of the families who agreed to participate also recommended families who met the criteria. In the end, I selected six adolescent Black girls to interview. Because I value participant voices and protecting my participants' identities, every participant was given a pseudonym. To further protect their identities, I did not use the names of any of the schools they attended.

## **Participants**

### ***Crystal***

Crystal was 17-year-old, 12th grade student in a public school that caters to students in the performing arts. In the pre-interview survey, Crystal said that she identifies as Black/African American; actively uses social media; and prefers the social media apps Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter.

### ***Bella***

Bella was a 15-year-old, 10th grade student at a public International Baccalaureate high school. In the pre-interview survey, Bella said that she identifies as Black/ Caribbean; actively uses social media; and prefers the social media apps Instagram, Snapchat, Pinterest, TikTok, VSCO, Facebook, and Tumblr.

### ***Raven***

Raven was a 14-year-old, 9th grade student at a public school for the performing arts. In the pre-interview survey, Raven said that she identifies as Black/African American; actively uses social media; and uses Snapchat, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube most often.

### ***Stacey***

Stacey was a 14-year-old, 9th grade student at a suburban public high school. During the pre-interview survey, Stacey stated that she identifies as Black/African American; uses social media frequently; and favors Snapchat, Instagram, and Twitter.

### ***Natasha***

Natasha was a 16-year-old, 11th grade student at a public school that caters to students who want to pursue careers in film and television. In the pre-interview survey, Natasha stated that she identifies as Black/African American and actively uses Snapchat, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube.

### ***Monique***

Monique was an 18-year-old, first-year college student. Monique's senior year of high school was also impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and she talked about her experience as a senior in high school in the interview. Monique attended the same independent, all-girls private school for Grades K-12. According to the pre-interview survey, Monique identifies as Black/Caribbean; is an avid user of social media; and uses Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, and Twitter.

## **Data Collection Methods During COVID-19**

### **Pre-Interview Survey and Interviews**

The participant data for this study were collected using a survey and qualitative interviews. Participants were asked to complete a pre-interview survey, on their own time, before we sat down and officially had the interview. The survey consisted of seven closed questions and five open-ended questions that were developed to identify the demographic information of the participants and to provide them with an opportunity to begin thinking about some of the topics that would be

discussed during the interview. Although the survey helped generate preliminary data, surveys in general are limited in the depth and breadth of data that can be collected (Brinkmann, 2018). Consequently, participants were asked to explain some of their survey answers in depth during the interviews in order to provide a better understanding of their thoughts and feelings about the topics.

## Figure 1

### *Pre-Interview Survey Questions*

#### Survey Questions (Pre-Interview)

- What is your name? (Your name will only be used to organize the information that is shared, but will remain anonymous in the final research project.)
- Age?
- Where do you live? (City & State)
- What grade are you in?
- Which group do identify with?:
  - Black/African American
  - Black Hispanic/Black Latina
  - Other: \_\_\_\_\_
- Do you use social media?
  - Yes
  - No
  - If yes, which platforms?
- Which platform do you use the most and why?
- What do you like to share on social media?
- Do you think social media should be incorporated into the school curriculum?
  - Yes
  - No
  - Explain your answer:
  - If you could use social media to bring awareness to any problem in society, what would that problem be?

Moreover, the qualitative, phenomenological interview was the most appropriate way for me to collect data for this study because my goal was to understand the participants' points of view as much as possible (Seidman, 2019). The interviews were semi-structured—I created a series of predetermined questions that asked participants to explain their use of social media in general and the ways they used social media during the COVID-19 pandemic—with an emphasis on the concurring social unrest that occurred. The interviews were conducted via Zoom because it is a secure platform, and all of the research participants were familiar with Zoom as a result of using it daily to log in to remote learning. I completed the coding of the data on NVivo by organizing participant quotes under the initial categories that were identified and the themes that emerged. The themes emerging from the data analysis of the qualitative interviews were as follows: *Black Girls as Educators* and *Black Girls as Digital Activists*

## Figure 2

### Interview Questions

**Interview Questions (only the questions relevant to this article are included)**

- During remote learning George Floyd, an African American man from Minneapolis, MN, was murdered by a white police officer. As a result, protests were organized around the world against police brutality.
  - Did you post anything about the murder of George Floyd, the protests, or any related subjects (e.g. police brutality, white supremacy, racism)?
  - Why or why not?
  - Do you feel like you have a personal connection to the George Floyd murder or the protests? Please explain in detail.
  
- The murder of Breonna Taylor, an African American young lady who was killed by police officers in Louisville, KY also gained a lot of attention during the pandemic.
  - Did you post anything about the murder of Breonna Taylor or any related subjects (e.g. police brutality against black women, feminism, white supremacy, racism)?
  - Why or why not?
  - Do you feel like you have a personal connection to the Breonna Taylor murder? Please explain in detail.
  
- When you hear the term digital activism, what does it mean to you?
  - Do you consider yourself to be a digital activist?
  - Why or why not?
  - Do you believe digital activism can bring about change in society? Why or why not?

If you could design a social justice campaign for your school:

- What issue would you want your school to address?
- Which social media platforms would you want your school community to use and why?
- What would the goal be of the campaign (e.g. to bring awareness to an issue, to help people in your local community)?

## Findings

### The Impact of the Murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd on Adolescent Black Girls

To understand how the murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd affected the participants, I asked the following questions: Do you feel like you have a personal connection to the Breonna Taylor and/or George Floyd murders or the Black Lives Matter protests? Participant responses were as follows:

**Monique:** (George Floyd) I feel like it did really impact me. And I feel like I do because I know people who have been racially profiled and stopped wrongly by the police that it could have ended up in that same way. And so during that time it really did affect me hearing about everything that was happening.

**Raven:** (George Floyd) That could have been anybody in my family, any of my mom's friends. That could have been anybody that I was close to. That really put everything into perspective that like, this is wrong and somebody has to change it or fix it. (Breonna Taylor) And my mom is a Black woman. My grandmother is a Black woman. I'm going to be a—oh. I am a Black woman. So just knowing that something like that can happen to just literally anybody and I'm part of a group of people that look like her really just hit really hard.

**Stacey:** (George Floyd) I do feel like I have a target in the back when it comes to that. I do feel

very personal about that because it could easily be me or one of my family members. And just because it wasn't me doesn't mean that it doesn't really hit a spot in a Black person's heart. And I could easily be put in that situation. (Breonna Taylor) I feel like I do have more of a connection to Breonna Taylor's murder than George Floyd as in I am an African American woman who could be walking down the street and have the same thing happen to me. I do feel as if it did make me more scared to even go outside in my neighborhood where cop cars come down all the time. Even though they are being friendly, they just make it an even worse situation for me.

**Natasha:** Yes, I guess because of the color of my skin and just because how we're all treated.

**Bella:** (George Floyd) Well, I mean, I am Black, and Black Lives Matter is fighting for our rights, so I definitely feel a personal connection. (Breonna Taylor) Well, she was a Black woman and I'm a Black woman. And she was just murdered in her own home, just sleeping. It just, I guess, made me realize that could hypothetically happen to me.

**Crystal:** I feel like my connection to those events are really feeling for my people and my community. There are so many things that have to change. And it's just sad to see that we are the ones that have been affected by it for so many years. I think that the murder of George Floyd and the murder of Breonna Taylor and the murder of so many Black people at the hands of those who are here to protect and serve really has an impact on every Black family because one of those people who unfortunately lost their lives could have been us. And that's the sad reality to everything. (Breonna Taylor) I think at the end of the day, I am a Black woman in America. I could have easily been Sandra Bland or Breonna Taylor because they, in terms of law enforcement, look at us all the same. They don't see our individuality. They just see a Black person, especially a Black woman, in such a vulnerable situation and they take advantage of it, so it could've just as easily been me, or my mom, or my sisters, or anyone else I knew.

The responses to these questions were the most memorable from the interviews. I remember hearing the despondence and fear in the voices of all six participants. As a Black woman, I could relate to their feelings, but I was also extremely overwhelmed by the fact that young Black girls have to deal with such anxiety because of their race. All participants expressed a connection to the murder of George Floyd because, as many of them stated, "It could be anybody" from their families or communities; however, the connection to Breonna Taylor's murder was more evident. Four of the six young ladies explicitly said, "I am a Black woman," which acknowledges a kinship with Breonna Taylor and deepens their connection to her murder. Although Stacey is used to having positive interactions with the police officers in her neighborhood, she still expressed fear of leaving her house and encountering the police because of what happened to Breonna Taylor. Crystal mentioned Sandra Bland, a Black woman who was found dead while in police custody in 2015, which situated the murder of Breonna Taylor within the historical context of Black women who have been murdered by police. By referring to Sandra Bland, Crystal suggested that she could also be killed just because she is Black and female.

### Theme #1: Black Girls as Educators

To gain an understanding of how the participants responded to the murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd on social media, I asked them if they posted anything about the murders of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, or any related subjects (e.g., police brutality against Black women, feminism, White supremacy, racism) and to explain their responses. Natasha was the only participant who did not post, and she was not able to articulate her reasons for not posting. The other participants stated that they mainly posted on Instagram and gave the following reasons for why they posted:

**Monique:** I posted about it on my stories and on my feed, on my Instagram, and then for my online magazine. During that time, I dedicated a whole issue of the online magazine, and it was talking about police brutality and talking about raising awareness and Black Lives Matter and allyship and what people can be doing to educate themselves and what people can be doing to help.

**Raven:** Yes. The whole summer when it happened, I was constantly, I won't say, arguing with people but just—I guess you can say arguing with people. And I was always putting on my Instagram story links to politicians and talking about how I felt about it, or just trying to spread as much awareness as I can. I was a 14-year-old girl. I was trying my best to be there and not just sit on the sidelines.

**Stacey:** Yes, I did. Because I felt as being one of the three Black kids that were in our school, I just felt as if I'm not going to sit back and be like, "Oh, yeah, it's fine." I am friends with a lot of White people, but I'm not going to not talk about it. And if somebody found a problem, they could definitely unfollow me.

**Bella:** Like, I didn't make my own post, but I post stuff like I repost things that other people posted like I post things on my story about it. I think it's important and I think people need to know and understand what Black Lives Matter is about and I don't know, I just think it's important and people need to be educated on social issues.

**Crystal:** I posted because I felt that I was a student in a majority White school, I needed to help educate those who didn't know about all of the things that have been happening to African Americans for so long in this country.... And also, it was just something I couldn't ignore. Being a part of the African American community is such a big part of my identity and who I am, so to stay silent would be a disservice to not only my family but to myself.

Monique, Raven, and Bella explicitly stated that they posted about the murders on their Instagram stories. According to Instagram (2024), "Stories allow you to share everyday moments and grow closer to the people and interests you care about through photos and videos. . ." Stories are easy for users to access because of their layout, and they only last for 24 hours—unlike regular Instagram posts that have to be manually removed from a user's page. The participants could not explain why they share news and information about social justice via their Instagram stories, but the multimodal nature of stories may be what is appealing to them. The Instagram stories feature

allows users to combine photos, videos, text, GIFs, music, polls, and myriad other features that enhance interest and engagement between users and their followers. When I asked the participants their thoughts on using stories in general, Monique said that young people like stories because they are not heavily edited, while Raven said that it deepens one's connections with their followers because it provides them with a sneak peek into the user's life. All of the participants said they posted about the murders for two reasons: to educate their peers about the racism and brutality that Black Americans have faced throughout history, and to speak up and express how they felt about the murders. The subtext of all of the participants' comments was that they felt they had some agency via social media. They may not have been able to protest physically, but they could engage in similar activist work digitally.

Monique stated that she used all of her social media platforms as educational tools, especially her online magazine. She felt it was important to provide her audience with the resources they needed to "educate themselves" and to support the cause. Raven laughed at herself when she explained the impassioned arguments in which she engaged with her peers during that time. Not only did she engage in conversations with them, but she also shared links to experts such as politicians to provide her peers with additional sources of information. Bella stated that she also shared myriad resources about Black Lives Matter because "people need to be educated." Stacey and Crystal stated that they felt obligated to educate their peers since they attend predominantly White schools and felt it was important that they made their stances clear to their White peers.

The participants' activity on social media aligned with recent data on Black youth and social media activism. For example, in "Activism on Social Media Varies by Race and Ethnicity, Age, Political Party," the Pew Research Center (2020) found:

Racial differences are also present *within* younger groups, with younger Black social media users being particularly likely to post hashtags or encourage others to be politically engaged. For example, 55% of Black social media users ages 18 to 49 say they posted a picture to show support for a cause in the past month, compared with fewer than four-in-ten Hispanic (37%) or white users (36%) in the same age range.

As the data showed, younger Black social media users are at the forefront of the social justice movements that occur in digital spaces.

### **Theme #2: Black Girls as Digital Activists**

When discussing the topic of digital activism, the young ladies were very knowledgeable about the nuances and pros and cons of it. I began by asking them to define the term, who they identified as digital activists, if they considered themselves to be digital activists, and if digital activism has the ability to bring about change in our society. The participants defined digital activism in the following way:

**Monique:** I think that it means being an activist, and really raising awareness, and really pushing for change, but just using a digital platform to do so.

**Raven:** Somebody that posts on social media about situations or a problem in society that needs to be fixed and somebody that—they're just very open about social injustices.

**Stacey:** I would define it as a good and bad. Good because it does outreach more, but bad as well, because it does make some situations even worse to the point where sometimes not even thinking about the families that it happened to.

**Natasha:** Bringing attention to a specific group.

**Bella:** People spreading awareness online.

**Crystal:** When I think of that, there's good thoughts and there's also bad thoughts. I think, sometimes, digital activism can be used as an excuse to be performative, since digital activism can be so easy, it can give some people a way to be like, "I'm here with you and I stand with you, etc." but not really genuinely mean it. But digital activism is also good, especially now, since we're in a pandemic. And a lot of people will not be comfortable with going out to protest, and things like that. It's good for us to sign petitions, and donate, and call our representatives, and make change through that lens.

The definitions given by Monique, Raven, Natasha and Bella of digital activism were similar: someone using their social media platform to bring awareness to injustice. Stacey and Crystal had more in-depth analyses on digital activism. They both asserted that there are good and bad things about digital activism. Stacey believes that sometimes digital activists do not consider the families who are directly impacted by the injustice and, in turn, do more harm than good. Crystal asserted that digital activism can be performative, and some digital activists want to seem like they care about an issue when they really do not.

When I asked the young ladies if they consider themselves to be digital activists, they responded as follows:

**Monique:** I don't have a huge platform to be able to reach that many people, but I really believe in using your platform to raise awareness. So I think that I've not reached that big platform yet, but I think that I'm trying to be an activist via social media.

**Raven:** Yeah, you can say that. Well, there's not much I really can do, but what I can do, I post about and I make sure that my friends and family are aware of things that are going on in society. And I am very opinionated and I make sure everybody knows my opinion.

**Stacey:** When it comes to sharing information that is very important, I definitely would post about it or talk about it. At the same time, sometimes I do feel as if it's not my story to tell or it's not my time to tell it. Sometimes, I just sit back and see how it unravels because sometimes I do see the bigger picture.

**Natasha:** Sometimes, because I work with [a women's] organization, and I am the one who posts this stuff on social media, talking about Black Lives Matter.

**Bella:** I don't really think so. I guess for me, I don't post as much about different issues.

**Crystal:** I think I consider myself to be a small part of that group. My content isn't based around activism. My content that I post is based around my life and my experiences and just being a teenager and having fun. But I do use my platform to promote activism.

What I found interesting about each participant is that even though all of their digital literacy practices on social media aligned with their definitions of digital activism, none of them fully identified as digital activists; instead, being a digital activist is an aspiration and something they are in the process of becoming.

The next question I asked the participants was whether they believed digital activism can bring about real change. Stacey was the only participant who was torn on the issue. She said that while she believes digital activism can bring about change, especially when celebrities are involved, that change is limited. Instead, she advocates for "physically making sure that things are happening not just through social media, but actually doing something that can get you higher up." She believes that digital activism goes hand in hand with grassroots activism. Monique and Raven shared specific examples of how digital activism can bring about change:

**Monique:** I think that during quarantine we've really seen that. I think it can at least bring awareness and push a different perspective that people weren't seeing before and really raise awareness. I know that a lot of infographics are going around Instagram that have different topics like why you should capitalize the "b" in Black, and so a lot of people are posting infographics like that and a lot of people are sharing those to their stories and so that's reaching a wider audience.

**Raven:** So posting about petitions to sign or spreading awareness to a situation, a lot of people are on social media, so a lot of people are going to see that. If you have four million followers and you're posting about somebody being wrongfully murdered, hopefully, four million people are going to be like, "Oh, my God. That's wrong," and are going to try and help, so that's one of the easiest ways to get a lot of people to be aware about a situation on social media.

The final question that I asked related to digital activism was about social justice issues present within their school communities. I asked them: If you could design a social justice campaign for your school what would the focus be and which social media platforms would they use to promote it? They responded as follows:

**Raven:** I feel like [I would address] the disrespect towards the LGBTQ+ community, mainly because [the majority] of the people in my school are part of that community. So, I feel like it's something that we should really focus on. (Social Media App) TikTok because I heard that kids in my age range are very opinionated, and most of them are on TikTok. TikTok has been a very open place where you can talk about your opinions. And most people agree with you, and they try to help.

**Stacey:** It would definitely be to help the people in the school community because we do have different diversities in our school. It is not only the White people in our school, but that's the only people that the school tends to look at when it comes to the bigger situation. And we do have Hispanics, and we do have Blacks, and we have people who are [Muslim], but they don't show any respect to those people. (Social Media App) Definitely Twitter and Instagram. I feel Twitter is used so much and gets to so many people. And I choose Instagram because it is there forever. You can add it to your regular profile and make it there forever and make sure that people see it whether they want to or not.

**Natasha:** Racial inequality. (Social Media App) Instagram because I see [a lot of] ideas on there, and there are different groups where you can come together and share how you feel about a certain topic.

**Bella:** I feel like a lot of people have misconceptions about what mental health issues, so just bringing awareness to it, so people who do have mental health issues don't feel as alone. And then for abortion rights, trying to change pro-life people to be pro-choice. (Social Media App) Instagram and TikTok. Instagram, mainly, because that's where I get a lot of my information when it comes to injustice and I think it's a really good way to spread information, the right information, on Instagram.

**Crystal:** I would want my school to address the biggest issue, which is the racial inequality in our school amongst the interaction between staff and students. There are many staff members in my school that cross the line and say things and do things that aren't in line with the behaviors of a teacher. So I would create a campaign for my school to address those issues and actually have repercussions for those staff members and students that have acted out of line. (Social Media App) I think Instagram because Instagram is the most accessible and I think Instagram is the most fast-paced as well.

The diversity of the participants' interests is a necessary reminder of the importance of acknowledging the intersectional identities of Black girls and creating educational spaces that nurture all of those identities. While systemic racism and police brutality are issues to which they are deeply connected, they also care about LGBTQIA+ rights, abortion rights, equality and representation for all people within the BIPOC community, and mental health awareness. Black girls need in-school opportunities to learn about and address the issues that are important, so they can be equipped to enact the change they desire to see in their communities and the world. Finally, all of the participants believed that Instagram and TikTok would be the most effective platforms to run a social justice campaign.

## Conclusion

### Black Girls' Literacies Are Intellectual, Political/Critical, and Tied to Identities

The Black Girls' Literacy Framework provided me with a critical, theoretical lens by which to analyze and understand the data. The components of the framework that aligned with the

themes that emerged from the research were Black Girls literacies are (1) intellectual; (2) political/critical; (3) tied to identities. The research question that guided this study was: How do adolescent Black girls respond to racial injustice in digital spaces? This study found that in times of racial injustice, Black girls are actively engaged in educating themselves and others about systemic racism (*intellectual*). Moreover, they go beyond educating and provide their peers and followers with myriad ways they can become civically engaged (*political/critical*). All of the data revealed that in the aftermath of the murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, Black girls shared infographics about being anti-racist, links to petitions, information on Black Lives Matter protests, and advocated for voter registration and voting rights (*intellectual; political/critical*). At the core of all of their responses was a sense of responsibility they felt as a result of their intersectional identities as Black girls (*tied to identities*).

In order for schools to become spaces in which Black girls thrive and are supported in digital activist work, national, district, and schoolwide policies must be implemented. Some of these must include:

1. The elimination of zero tolerance policies that disproportionately affect Black girls, and the inclusion of restorative practices to deal with disciplinary concerns.
2. District-wide efforts to ensure that schools in predominantly Black communities are equipped with up-to-date technology (e.g. devices, educational technology apps) in order for students to learn how to critically engage with digital texts.
3. Professional development workshops that call out biases towards Black girls (e.g. adultification bias), and instead ask teachers to engage in conversations around intersectionality.
4. Schoolwide support to develop curriculum that is rooted in critical pedagogy, encourages the use of digital texts in the classroom (Morrell, et. al, 2013), and is rooted in the multiple identities that Black girls espouse.

I want to end with a final comment from one of the interview participants—Monique. During the digital activism portion of the interviews, I asked the participants if they had ever taken a class that inspired or encouraged them to become digital activists. Monique was the only one who said yes, and her explanation of that class is below.

**Monique:** So the class was a social entrepreneurship class and we really were focusing on activists in the media. Actually, how they use their social media platforms to push for change and how they were starting businesses and nonprofits to help people in their communities, and we kind of looked at that through a digital lens. And so hearing about all of their stories and how they were changing their communities really inspired me to want to do the same, and so during the second half of the year, that's when I started my online magazine. I had that idea for a while, but that class is what really pushed me to get it up and running.

The social entrepreneurship class introduced Monique to the idea of digital activism, but it also gave her the space to explore her ideas in an authentic way. Monique is now the Founder and Editor-in-Chief of a thriving digital magazine for girls of color, and that was made possible because her school encouraged its teachers to design courses that enabled their students to see themselves as change-agents in the world. Every Black girl deserves educational opportunities like this. An understanding of intersectionality and the Black Girls' Literacy framework are needed for educators to design meaningful learning experiences that can strengthen the skills Black girls need to engage in digital activist work.

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