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How Young People Frame 'The Other' Online: How Empathy, Experience, and Awareness Transform Allyship and (In)action on Social Media Platforms

Shawna Malvini Redden & Amy K. Way

Social media platforms offer powerful affordances and constraints—helping build relationships, while also facilitating misinformation and abuse. To understand how young people navigate online communities and allyship on- and offline, we interviewed a diverse group of 55 U.S. teens, ages 18–19, to see how they framed others regarding race, gender, and sexuality. Frames were speculative, empathetic, and education- and action-oriented, and suggest implications for improving online allyship, defining "othering" more broadly, converting passive empathy into transformative empathy, and making online spaces more inclusive. We resist the deficit-approach common to research about youth, foregrounding teens' experiences to show that online activities have transformative potential.

Keywords: Allyship; Communication; Othering; Social Media; ;Teens

Online platforms like social media offer powerful affordances for users, helping people build relationships (Way & Malvini Redden, 2020), communicate identity and community (Fox & Warber, 2015), advance support for social causes (Clark, 2019), and influence political participation (Bennett et al., 2011). The internet and social media have also helped change negative attitudes around social identities like homosexuality, enabling more acceptance for the expression of marginalized identities (Morris, 2018). But social media also facilitate the sharing of misinformation,

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including racist and marginalizing content, and social stereotypes (Dobson & Kne-zevic, 2018). In fact, scholarship describes how social media advances discrimination through "platformed racism" (Matamoros-Fernández, 2017), and can be a fraught context for women (Rodino-Colocino, 2018; Vitis & Gilmour, 2017) and those with LGBTQ+ identities (Fox & Warber, 2015). Indeed, in recent years, social media use has been associated with political polarization and conflict, especially around anti-racism, LGBTQ+ rights, and gender equity (Mathers et al., 2018). This paper investigates social media use among young people, with particular concern for how they contend with sometimes problematic identity-based content, and make sense of other users online.

Young people spend a significant portion of their time online, especially on social media and direct messaging applications (Anderson et al., 2023). It is reasonable to assume they are as susceptible to platformed racism and the spread of hateful ideologies as adults, if not more so. And yet, young people—including those for whom social media use is de rigueur and rampant—are described as more open-minded about social issues than generations past. However, does open-mindedness translate to allyship or meaningful action? It is unclear from research about youth and social media how young people specifically frame aspects of race, gender, and sexuality online, such as the experiences of those who identify differently than they do.

Of course, excellent research about young people's experiences of race, sexuality, and gender online exists. Important scholarship, for instance, describes how online spaces enable young LGBTQ+ people to negotiate identity online (Fox & Warber, 2015), as well as how young people use social media platforms to advance important social movements like #BlackLivesMatter (Hall et al., 2016), or coopt hashtags to protest police brutality (Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015). Likewise, research emphasizes how young people negotiate "respectability politics" regarding race, gender, and social class online (Pitcan et al., 2018) and how working-class youth demonstrate a "responsibility orientation" to meaning-making online (Way & Mal-vini Redden, 2020). These works make important contributions by showcasing personal experiences with race, sex, and class-based difficulties.

Given the personalized nature of social media algorithms and the phenomenon of echo chambers, people may be surrounded by content that is tailored to them or echoes their own opinions (Cinelli et al., 2021). Potential allies may not be aware of race, sexuality, and gender-based challenges online, and therefore not have the inclination or opportunity to provide support. For instance, Fox and Warber (2015) study of queer identity management and political self-expression on social networking showed that sexual minorities may silence themselves online to avoid backlash. Consequently, straight allies may not realize the types of abuse they face or be able to provide social support or bystander intervention. While one hallmark of social media is the ability to self-select into particular communities (e.g., Black Twitter, Gay Twitter, Academic Twitter, etc.), this may mean that portrayals of problematic experiences are not as far reaching. Consequently, allies may not

understand the extent of race-, gender-, or sexuality-based problems online, or even think they exist.

Furthermore, as empathy and compassion—the ability to understand, share, support, and respond to the experiences of others (Rodino-Colocino, 2018)—are important precursors to social change, we wonder the degree to which young people recognize other social identities online, especially those who are marginalized or different from their social groups. Thus, this study seeks to understand how young people frame race, gender, and sexuality online, via social media. Specifically, we interviewed a diverse group of 55 U.S. young people, ages 18–19, to reflect on the experiences of people of color, women, and those with LGBTQ+ identities online, to understand how they frame those identities, and potentially, provide support. Our framing analysis (G. T. Fairhurst, 2005) showed that young people frame others: speculatively, empathetically, and with an eye toward education and action. Furthermore, our analysis shows that framings about race and sexuality differ starkly from framings about gender. These framings point to theoretical and practical implications for improving online allyship, converting passive empathy into transformative empathy, and making online spaces more equitable and inclusive.

Theoretical Framework: Framing Analysis

We draw upon framing analysis to understand how people frame and make sense of others online, with specific attention toward race, gender, and sexuality. While framing analysis is often used to assess issue management in political communication and agenda setting in journalism (López-Rabadán, 2022), we looked first to G. Fairhurst and Sarr (1996) discussion of framing as the interpersonal management of meaning. They define framing as:

> The ability to shape the meaning of a subject, to judge its character and significance. To hold the frame of a subject is to choose one particular meaning (or set of meanings) over another. When we share our frames with others (the process of framing), we manage meaning because we assert that our interpretations should be taken as real over other possible interpretations (G. Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996, p. 3).

Framing language helps concretize, classify, organize, remember, retrieve, and compare phenomena (G. T. Fairhurst, 2005). While specifically writing about leaders' abilities to shape meaning for organizational audiences, G. Fairhurst and Sarr's (1996) attention to language, thought, and forethought as the components of framing is useful when applied to how people craft messages for their audiences on social media, which may be made up of personal contacts as well as broader publics. Thought refers to the mental models people use to frame situations, which are driven by experiences and values, and directly shape communication goals. Finally, forethought emphasizes the strategic aspects of framing and message design.

Framing is useful because it emphasizes the socially constructed nature of communication and how schema influence our meaning making and the ability to shape the meaning of others (Weick, 1995). For instance, Relational Frame Theory

articulates how people position themselves in relation to others, linguistically and contextually, through comparison, temporarily, cause/effect, or deictic relations like I-You; Here-There; Now-Then (Montoya-Rodríguez et al., 2017). Deictic framing is a critical developmental function and also relates to empathy (Vilardaga, 2009), as discussed below. Likewise, framing is generative and action-oriented. G. T. Fairhurst (2005) writes, "To the extent that uncertainty or ambiguity mark a given subject, what is real and important is often what we say is real and important" (p. 168). An associated implication is that what is real and important to us gets attention and action. Indeed, media and political framing research discusses the "framing effect" of messages, which influence people's attitudes and cognitive processing of information to ultimately generate behavioral change (López-Rabadán, 2022, p. 9).

In the context of social media, which media framing scholars depict as a "hybrid communication environment" (López-Rabadán, 2022, p. 1) that blends political and media frames, we can also see interpersonal framing at work. Social media users become framing agents as they share and comment upon content produced by traditional agenda setters (e.g., journalists and politicians). They also, as we will argue, frame and influence their communities (and themselves) online. Support for this argument derives from voluminous scholarship that emphasizes how young people position and frame themselves online (see Way & Malvini Redden, 2017), and emphasizes that youth are extremely aware of and concerned about self-presentation, audience perception, and image management (Malvini Redden & Way, 2019; Marwick et al., 2017).

Less is known about how young people frame and interpret others online, however. We know that media frames influence how people view and support others offline, generally. For instance, Langdon (2018) emphasized that media frames of the Syrian refugee crisis in the British press directly influenced how citizens felt about supporting refugees in their communities. Likewise, Bosi et al. (2022) demonstrate that young people with intolerant sociopolitical attitudes offline are more likely to voice those attitudes and engage in more political participation online. However, it is still unclear how social media framing, which blends media and interpersonal frames, operates and influences on and offline behavior, particularly for young people who live a lot of their lives online, for better or worse.

Contextualizing Social Media Activism, Allyship, & Framing

Young people spend significant time online, especially using social media platforms, with nearly half of U.S. teens using the internet "almost constantly" (Anderson et al., 2023). While offering benefits for relational maintenance and networking, social media use is also associated with considerable levels of sexual harassment for women (Rodino-Colocino, 2018), race and sexuality-based discrimination (Mathers et al., 2018; Nakayama, 2017), gender-, sex-, and race-based stereotypes (Nakamura, 2014), and other challenges. While common to blame specific platforms or online spaces for facilitating harmful content—for instance by encouraging the distillation of

complexity into bite-sized memes—individuals are implicated in the perpetuation of marginalizing materials (Dobson & Knezevic, 2018). Therefore, it is important to understand how people use social media, especially for engaging with social issues. This study focuses on older teens/emerging adults, those 18–19 years-old, in college. Among this demographic, the most-used platforms include (in order): YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, and TikTok (Gottfried, 2024).

Social Media Activism

Despite potential risks, social media use is also associated with increased levels of social support for minoritized communities, as well as raising awareness about important social issues. For example, in the spring and summer of 2020, the depths of anti-Black racism in the U.S. were brought to the world's attention in the wake of the police killings of unarmed Black people including Breonna Taylor and George Floyd (Giorgi et al., 2022). Thanks in part to social media, weeks-long protests around the world were organized to prompt police and civil reforms. Similarly, the #MeToo movement brought to light the harassment experiences of women, both on- and off-line, leading to high profile lawsuits and firings of prominent abusers in the public sphere (Rodino-Colocino, 2018).

Amid these larger social movements are criticisms of how social media encourages lazy or performative forms of activism and allyship (sometimes referred to as "slacktivism"), such as (re)posting hashtags ("hashtag activism") or adorning profile pictures with symbolic imagery in support of a particular cause (Cabrera et al., 2017). Young people are frequently the target of these criticisms that, perhaps rightly, dismiss social media campaigns for their fleeting nature and lack of genuine engagement in change. And yet, even as researchers disparage young people's social involvement online as being vain, superficial, and overly self-focused, these contributions might also represent "important contributions to the democratic process" (Jackson, 2016, p. 378).

A closer examination of these "thin" efforts at engagement with social issues actually reveals broader categories of social engagement and activism that can be understood along a continuum of participation (Zuckerman, 2014). Even as they are frequently positioned "as unformed, at risk, or apathetic," young people use various social media "to engage in advocacy and social activism that often goes unheralded, invisible until it is viewed as disruptive" (Stornaiuolo & Thomas, 2017, p. 338). The ease of participation on social media, while fodder for critique, also points to the effortlessness of disseminating ideas and finding solidarity with others who face similar forms of marginalization (Bonilla & Ros, 2015). The collective and accessible nature of social media allows young people to share ideas and information quickly, skirting traditional gatekeepers like educators or news outlets (Stornaiuolo & Thomas, 2017).

Rather than being dismissive of young people's modes of participation and engagement, we resist a deficit approach "by centering the experiences of young

people and working toward shifting public opinion and raising awareness of these forms of activism" (Stornaiuolo & Thomas, 2017, p. 346). No matter their degree of engagement, practices of self-expression over social media represent "changing repertoires of civic practice" (Bennett et al., 2011, p. 838) that should be acknowledged as potential for transformation. As such, we join other scholars who "are beginning to view these cultural practices as relevant to civic and political life, nested within a web of participatory culture where new forms of activism are possible" (Stornaiuolo & Thomas, 2017, p. 341).

Supporting young people's online activism is especially important as recent scholarship demonstrates that sharing news on social media has the possibility to prompt on- and off-line activism (Smith et al., 2020). In their experimental study of discriminatory and racist news frames, Smith et al. (2020) show that recognizing racism in online news is a motivator for advocacy intentions. Further, they note that marginalized communities often rely on activism from dominant group members, which is only possible when dominant group members are able to see and recognize discrimination. As Smith et al. (2020) research was experimental, understanding how online framing and offline activism emerge in situ is critical, especially in light of how platform algorithms and curated online experiences shape information exposure.

Allyship

An important although contested element of civic engagement and activism, both on and offline, is allyship. Defined as "The processes of affirming and taking informed action on behalf of [a] subjugated group" (Clark, 2019, p. 15), allyship generally involves those in a dominant group supporting minoritized group members with social issues. For instance, in support of LGBTQ+ rights, heterosexual people might identify themselves as "Straight Allies." Or while fighting for racial equity, people of all races might join in solidarity with Black Lives Matter or work to undermine anti-Asian hate.

Scholars across disciplines point to allies as important actors in helping advance social change. In workplaces, allies can foster inclusive environments for people with LGBTQ+ identities, which promotes beneficial career and personal outcomes (Minei et al., 2023). In social movements like racial equality or women's rights, allies have been critical in helping promote "real and lasting change" via transforming public opinion "that prioritizes the rights of the disadvantaged group over maintaining the status and privilege of the advantaged group" (Radke et al., 2020, p. 292). Meaningful allyship regularly involves "the recognition of power and privilege, and the intentional transference of these benefits to members of subjugated groups," which may look different depending on context, group, identity, or social issue (Clark, 2019, p. 530). It is also helpful when allies identify themselves and offer social support as well as "acknowledg-[ing] and legitimiz[ing] the mental load burden" for those in minoritized groups

that regularly manage trauma while trying to navigate daily life (Minei et al., 2023, p. 15).

Allyship can become problematic, however, when allies center themselves in a movement, coopt a movement's goals for personal gain, avoid acknowledging their privilege, or demonstrate symbolic allyship that is more performative than meaningful (Clark, 2019; Radke et al., 2020). The latter is especially easy in online movements and digital activism (Clark, 2019) where simply sharing online content might make a person *feel* like they're participating but without risk or meaningful action (Cabrera et al., 2017). Clark (2019) describes digital allyship as "low-risk activism" (p. 530) and, in the case of Black Lives Matter, allyship that is solely online may rely on surveilling and capitalizing on the (unpaid) labor of Black people who share their experiences of racism online, as well as opening risk for "bad actors" to coopt hashtags to criticize the movement (p. 530).

Likewise, in her analysis of Tarana Burke's "#MeToo Movement" and its commitment to "empowerment through empathy," Rodino-Colocino (2018) discusses the potential perils of ally empathy in social movements (p. 96). She describes how focusing on empathy building, especially in online contexts, may produce "passive empathy" in potential allies, which emphasizes consumption, difference, sentimentality, and separation:

> Such empathy is "passive" in that it enables oppressors, and even oppressed people, to project feelings of commonality, understanding, as well as fear and guilt rather than do the work of being self-reflexive. Passive empathy is the feeling of being in another's shoes without the risk of actually doing so (p. 96).

In contrast, Rodino-Colocino (2018) describes transformative empathy, which "promotes listening rather than distancing or looking at speakers as 'others.' It requires self-reflexivity and potential transformation of one's own assumptions" (p. 97). In this context, emphasizing distance and "otherness" is an example of "Othering," where dominant groups define and marginalize the differences between themselves and others, or objectify or commodify others (McAllum & Zahra, 2017).

Using the language of deictic framing, those who are able to frame others with less distance (e.g., I-You being more aligned than separate), have better ability to develop empathic concern, and may "experience more satisfactory psychological wellbeing and more healthy social relations" because they may "be more likely to respond effectively" in social interactions (Vilardaga, 2009, p. 181). Considering how empathy operates online for young people is critical as psychological research demonstrates clear links between empathic concern leading to perspective taking, and perspective taking leading to a reduction in prejudice and discriminatory behavior (Miklikowska, 2018).

We investigated the following research questions: How do young people frame race, gender, and sexuality online, in the context of social media? What do young people's framings of online "others" suggest about online allyship?

Methods & Procedures

This in-depth interview study builds upon a larger program of research designed to understand how young people navigate online life, including communicating identity, building relationships, and managing audiences on social media. As one of our goals as researchers is to foreground youth interests and concerns over adult/researcher concerns—responding to past critiques of research with youth (Way & Malvini Redden, 2020)—we developed the current study by addressing key questions and ideas of young people. Specifically, we brought findings from a series of interviews and focus groups to bear in new conversations, asking participants in the current study to respond to direct quotes from interviewees of their same age range from previous studies, in addition to generative interview questions. This helped us put current interviewees in conversation with ideas from peers, versus purely adult conceptions of teen online life.

Participants

We spoke with 39 women and 16 men ages 18–19, who represented a range of ethnic and family backgrounds, religions, and socioeconomic experiences. Primarily from working class families, participants were 75% non-White and lived in rural, suburban, and urban communities in the northeastern and western U.S. (see Table 1 for demographics). In the text, we offer the demographic descriptors participants used to describe themselves. Most participants were recruited from the authors' university communities. All reported regularly accessing the internet and all but two reported checking social media daily for multiple hours.

Research Design & Data Collection

After receiving IRB approval, we conducted 51 in-depth interviews ranging from 21 to 105 min, averaging 39 min, and four e-mail interviews. With participant permission, we recorded and transcribed interviews. Interviews began by querying participant expectations and asking them to describe a typical day online. Participants described the impressions they felt they made online, showed examples from their social media accounts, and responded to questions about how they choose content for various audiences and manage discursive tensions identified in past research (Malvini Redden & Way, 2019). Throughout, participants reflected upon five quotes from participants in past research projects.

In past projects (Way & Malvini Redden, 2020), we noticed important emergent themes regarding the experiences of people of color, religious people, those of lower socioeconomic means, and those who identify as sexual minorities—all identities routinely neglected in research broadly and social media research specifically (Marwick et al., 2017). To further understand those perspectives, we asked current participants to reflect on and react to a number of quotes from past participants ages 12–17, including the selections below.

Table 1 Participant Demographics

Self-Described Ethnicity	Language(s) Spoken at Home	Romantic/Sexual Attraction	Parent/Guardian Employment
1 Armenian	1 Armenian	1 Asexual	Accounting (2), agricultural mgmt, appraiser, auctioneer, cable repair dispatcher, caregiver (3), carpenter, caterer, cleaner (2), computer engineer, construction (2), cosmetologist (3), decline to state (2), doctor (4), engineer (4), Ford, flooring company, gas company, graphic designer, HVAC installer, insurance agent, K-12 teacher (7), IT/computers, lab tech, law enforcement, lawyer (3), LVN, journalist, maid, Safeway manager, military, nurse, pianist, plumbing, project manager, real estate, refrigeration tech, restaurant owners, restaurant worker, retired (4), sales/ service (7), security (2), social worker (2), stay at home mom (2), tire shop owner, truck driver (4), unemployed (3), x-ray tech, youth center manager
1 Asian	1 Bosnian	2 Decline to state	
1 Asian/Indian	2 Cantonese	49 Opposite sex	
1 Asian/Pacific Islander	30 English	1 Pansexual	
1 Black	1 English/Punjabi	2 Same sex	
1 Black/Mexican	1 hmong/English		
1 Bosnian	1 Mienh	**Religion**	
14 Caucasian/ White	1 Nepali/English	1 Atheist	
1 Caucasian/ Mexican	9 Spanish	1 Buddhist	
1 Caucasian/ Chinese	3 Spanish/English	17 Catholic	
2 Chinese	1 Tagalog	11 Christian	
2 Filipino/a	1 Ukrainian	1 Church of Christ	
12 hispanic/ Latino/a	1 Urdu	2 hindu	
1 hmong	2 Vietnamese/ Chinese	2 Islam	
2 Jewish		2 Jewish	
5 Mexican		1 Mormon	
1 Mexican/ Japanese		1 Muslim	
1 Mexican/ Filipino		14 N/A	
1 Mienh		1 Shamen	
1 Nepali			
1 Pakistani		1 Taoism	
1 Turkish			
2 Vietnamese			

Note: We include parent/guardian employment as an indication of possible socio-economic status

One quote was from "Bob," a 12-year-old Black boy from a large urban area in the Eastern U.S. In responding to the question "Is it harder for boys online or for girls?" Bob said:

> A girl because you get rated by boys, like how cute and how ugly you look, yeah like stuff like that. You get judged … If you're ugly, nobody will like you … I've seen pictures of stuff like that, they like light skins rule, light skin are better, and they say brown skins are bad.

We chose Bob's quote because of the intersections of gender and race, as well as implied heteronormativity (e.g., boys will rate girls).

Participants also considered two quotes from "Sam," a 13-year old Black girl from the same region who when asked "What is it like for boys online?" said: "I don't know. They [boys] just don't care about nothing. They'll like just post anything at any given moment … they could take a random picture and anybody think they look nice. They don't care what they['re] wearing or nothing" Sam discussed intense frustration at perceived gendered disparities in online participation—that on one hand, girls spend significant time shaping their posts to get boys' attention, and boys easily get attention despite not putting in the same effort.

As participants for the current study considered Bob and Sam's words, as well as quotes from other teens, we noted patterns in their responses. Many observed how young Bob sounded, acknowledging that "rating" others attractiveness was a definite (and difficult) trend during middle school. Many jumped from Bob's discussion of rating and Sam's complaints about gendered behavior to describe gender equity issues online. Some agreed that it's more difficult for girls and women. Others said that due to hegemonic masculinity norms, it's actually harder for boys and men. Most seemed drawn to talk about the race-related issues inherent in Bob's description of preferences for skin tone, with a number contextualizing the preferences within their own cultural group, e.g., some describing how attractiveness at their high school actually went toward those with darker complexions, some describing being fetishized as Asian women.

To enable participants to clarify these thoughts, we started to probe about gender, race, and sexuality, asking questions like "What do you think it's like for people of color online?"; "What do you think it's like for people who identify as LGBTQ online?" Questions were adapted based upon the communicated identity of the participant speaking, e.g., as many interviewees were people of color, we asked them to consider the experiences of various other cultural groups.

Data Analysis

We analyzed the data in a multi-step process that began when we started conducting interviews. Both authors listened to the audio files separately, writing analytic memos (Charmaz, 2014) to get a sense of content and key themes. After 18 interviews, we agreed to adjust the interview protocol, deleting questions that weren't fruitful, and emphasizing elements that were generative, including interactions with

past participant quotes and specific probes about race, gender, and sexuality. As we finished conducting the remaining 37 interviews, we analyzed audio files and transcripts, again writing individual analytic memos. After a period of individual data immersion (Tracy, 2019), we came together to discuss our initial impressions.

The second phase of analysis involved us both individually reviewing data, this time assessing how participants framed the experiences of others relative to race, gender, and sexuality. Using framing analysis (G. T. Fairhurst, 2005) as our theoretical guide, we conducted focused coding, looking for patterns in the ways youth spoke about the experiences of others. We identified key themes including speculation, empathy, and action-oriented framing. Then we compared how participants spoke about race and sexuality with how they conceptualized gender.

To ensure a trustworthy analysis, we followed the practice of consensus coding (Harry et al., 2005), which involved each of us reviewing data separately, then coming together to discuss categories and coding, and making changes where necessary. We also used several other strategies designed to increase quality in qualitative research, including member reflections and crystallization (Tracy, 2010), and prolonged engagement in the research context (Creswell, 2007).

Framing "The Other" Online

Throughout our participants' reflections, we noticed clear framings of "The Other" online, but not necessarily in "othering" and exclusionary language. Rather, participants engaged in three main methods of framing: empathy-driven framing; education/action-oriented framing; and supposition about the experiences of others. Below, we share three categories of framing relative to race and sexuality.

Empathy-Driven Framing

As discussed, participants were asked to share about their own experiences, reflect upon the experiences of past research participations, and contemplate the experiences of people different from themselves. One key theme of responses framed BIPOC and LGBTQ+ experiences from a place of empathy, with participants seeming to really feel for others and their challenging experiences online. Empathetic responses usually tied to experiences with friends, relatives, and personal understandings of race/sexuality discrimination. Whereas some speculation was framed from a place of personal connection, empathy-driven frames evidenced compassion more deeply. For instance, RJ, a heterosexual Latino youth, explained how his good friend from middle school is gay and how that shaped his feelings toward other LGBTQ+ people. "I love the community. I respect them. More power to them because it takes a lot for somebody to come out." Speaking about how some families disown gay kids, RJ continued, "I feel bad [when families are mean] but like I said, I respect them. I love them." While RJ's comments evidence some distance—he is separate from the LGBTQ+

community—his personal affiliation with someone from the community helped him deeply empathize.

Empathy-driven framing also came from personal experience. Tabi, a Pakistani woman who speaks Urdu at home, confirmed, "Minorities get more hate online." Identifying as such, she shared about not posting pictures of herself wearing a hijab to avoid being targeted for hate messages like some of her friends who post selfies in their religious headwear. She spoke passionately about the unfairness of her Muslim religion eliciting hateful comments online, and how it is hurtful. She also described feeling for people whose religious comments are quoted out of context and then go viral.

Also echoing empathy from personal experience, Miriam, a Hispanic woman, offered a pragmatic view that reflected the affordances and constraints of social media platforms:

> It is a lot easier for people of color to be attacked online, but it's a give and take. When you do put yourself out there, then you are expected to have people who like don't agree what you say or don't like you because of the skin of your color. You can't control what people think online … you're allowed to voice your own opinions, [and be] more powerful. But then again, you are going to get those people who, who don't like the color of your skin … it just comes with the media.

Miriam's assumption that race-based hatred is part and parcel of the social media experience for people of color shows a pragmatic empathy. While she understands and feels for others as a woman of color, she also emphasizes resignation to the consequences of online engagement for certain people.

Empathetic framings also included some disappointment and surprise. Danny described how he is proud to be Filipino and that it seems easier to be a man of color where he lives in California as compared to other less diverse locations. But he also reflected on how he has come across disturbing racist content online, such as a video of a young Black woman sharing her joy at being accepted into University of California Los Angeles:

> She was really happy … she posted "I love myself for working this hard. I made it to UCLA … I'm really proud … " And then the next half of the video, it was like some white boys like saying "Oh get this [n-word] out of our dorms." I was like "What the hell? Like even at UCLA? Why do they go there? Where do these kids go for [high] school?"

Danny seemed shocked and disappointed to remember the video, the hateful comments such a stark contrast to the young woman's excitement. Attributing the young people's racism to where they came from, as if racism was place-based, Danny seemed dismayed and surprised it could happen in such a supposedly liberal city as Los Angeles: "In general I feel like they [people of color] have it harder than people who are white. 'Cause um, I feel like just some people are like, evil." Here Danny's framing of racism as place-based emphasizes spatial deictic framing making the racism "out there" in other states feel closer and "here" in his

own home state, as a result of seeing another person of color experiencing hate online.

Matthew, a heterosexual white man, went further to pointedly condemn hatred online, saying how hate can be targeted on social media, especially toward sexual minorities:

> People in the social media world are cruel that they express such violent words with such groups such as the LGBTQ community. Some people even troll individuals and can cause depression. People need to realize that what people say online can have a huge negative impact.

Matthew's comments expressed deep empathy and concern for how the comments of trolls influenced those in the LGBTQ community both on- and offline.

Education and Action-Driven Framing

A few participants offered framings that illustrated an action-orientation perspective, with references to specific self-education that shaped how they viewed others online. These framings were tied to awareness of social issues, as well as specific actions taken to understand or acquire more knowledge to understand the struggle of others.

For instance, Jake, who is Black and Mexican, talked about LGBTQ+ experiences online: "It's getting better but it's still tough." He referenced inclusive marriage laws as a win but said LGBTQ+ people still face derogatory language online, especially in gaming. Jake explained that his best friend came out as gay, and now Jake makes a point to understand the bigger issues his friend faces, as well as to use careful language online to set an example for others: "I'm trying to be more open-minded about stuff and hearing different points of view." Jake also discussed deep concerns about racial equity and how he has gone out of his way to push against racial stereotypes online. Similarly, Danny, who is Filipino, described seeking out education on social issues.

> I wanted to be woke about stuff … I want to [tell people] that people of color really do have it harder … There's other stuff people don't talk about. Like, cause it's taboo. Like you're not supposed to talk about it, but people need to talk about it so other people can be, you know, informed.

Both Jake and Danny took their empathetic frames a step further to seek out education about social issues and to engage in action in their spheres of influence. In doing so, both young men reduced the relational I/You distance between themselves and others in their communities.

Some participants used social media as a mechanism to enhance their education and activism. Maddie, who is Mexican and Japanese, described learning about the history of racism facing the Black community via social media. "You get exposed to a lot more people than just in your community … When I was younger I feel like you only learned about racism in the history books, and like it was a thing of the past," Maddie said. "But … the news and social media [showed me] racism still is very prevalent." Maddie explained how social media has emphasized the challenges

that people of color face, especially in terms of police brutality. Maddie was one of the few who acknowledged that social media offered a place to not only find personal community but also solidarity: "There are people out there who are fighting for you."

Framing as Supposition

As they spoke about the experiences of others relative to sexuality, race, and gender, participants offered comments in three categories: uninformed supposition, supposition informed by tropes and stereotypes, and supposition informed by personal experiences/connections.

Uninformed Supposition

Many participants speculated about the experiences of people different from them in ways that illustrated lack of direct knowledge of people from outside of their particular social community, and lack of direct awareness about race, gender, and sexuality discrimination online. For instance, E, a young man of Turkish descent, said, "I'd probably say it's hard for them" referring to LGBTQ+ people's experiences online. Similarly, Mai, a Hmong community member, explained "I think it's pretty bad ... I'm pretty sure they [LGBTQ people] get bullied a lot." Likewise, Bonnie, a white woman, said, "They [people in the LGBTQ community] might experience hateful comments and posts ... not everyone is accepting of that [lifestyle]." These frames and the use of "they" illustrates assumptions about difficulties online, linguistically emphasizing deictic distance between themselves and those in the LGBTQ community.

   Similar themes of speculation emerged regarding the experiences of different racial minorities online. Thuanh, a Vietnamese woman, spoke about racism after considering Bob's quote.

> I think a lot of people think it's harder for minorities ... I know in the [entertainment] industry, a lot of dark-skinned girls and guys find it hard to find jobs ... And they do get ... hate online ... I feel for them. It sucks to be hated online because of who you are ... So I do, I think in some instances, darker-skinned people do have it harder.

Thuanh explained that on YouTube, people with darker skin seemed to get more abusive comments and had less popularity, compared to lighter skinned contributors. However, Thuanh's comments were largely speculative and she made clear distinctions between her personal experiences, saying, "It is harder for them [people with darker skin] rather than like, me ... It all depends on who you follow ... Thank God, I've never had to like, block someone." Similarly, Lauren, a white woman, said she thought people of color face more challenges online to a certain extent, "But I haven't seen it firsthand."

   Uninformed speculation seemed to relate to social media siloing and the ability to customize content and audiences, as Thuanh alluded to. Bonnie said, "I guess people of color have to deal with racism ... I don't see it." Similarly, Jon, a man of Mexican

and Filipino decent, said, "I really don't follow anyone that is gay … so I wouldn't be able to tell you [what it was like for LGBTQ people online]. Jasmine, Latina, said "I can only speak from my social media. In my feed, I don't see any negative comments or bashing toward different races," although she admitted, "I do believe that there are bad people out there that are still racist and are just full of hatred." Likewise, Myleen, who is Filipino, said "I see normal … I don't see anything bad," explaining how in her online community, which is primarily Asian, "Everyone was just the same." These siloes offer a buffering effect to young people—protecting them from abuse in some cases, but also blinding them to potential opportunities to provide social support.

Uninformed supposition occasionally involved refusing to consider others' experiences. One participant, a white woman named Courtney, refused to speculate about minoritized experiences, saying "I don't know, because I'm not a person of color." She claimed online experiences were worse for white people in relation to race, and that for LGBTQ+ experiences, "I think social media is so accepting these days, that like, it really doesn't matter." Courtney's latter comment points to our second theme, that of framing being informed by tropes and "post" sentiments.

Supposition Informed by Tropes and "Post" Sentiments

Some supposition was informed by tropes of historical and generational acceptance that illustrates some post-gay, post-racial, and post-feminist sentiments—suggesting that issues of sexuality, race, and gender are concerns of the past. For instance, Jerry, a young heterosexual Black man, speculated about the experiences of LGBTQ+ people saying, "[It's] probably tough for them [online] because we're still, as a society, we're still kind of getting used to seeing [those relationships]." But at the same time, Jerry spoke optimistically about social media's role in promoting acceptance. "Let's say you're not used to it, but you're on social media. And I guess, the more you see it, the more maybe you think it's okay." Jerry's speculation is borne out by research that shows increased exposure to positive portrayals of the LGBTQ+ community in mainstream and social media is associated with more liberal attitudes toward sexual minorities (Mathers et al., 2018).

Participants levied assumptions that because "young people" are more accepting and legalized protections exist, these problems are not really problems anymore, especially in regard to homosexuality (Morris, 2018) and blatant racism. Referencing LGBTQ+ people feeling comfortable communicating sexual identity online, Yaz, who is heterosexual and Hispanic, said "I think it's starting to get better for them" and "They're getting more comfortable with themselves." Along these same lines, Tabi, a heterosexual Pakistani woman, said "I feel like online … they [LGBTQ+ community] kind of get more love on there … I feel like people are trying to be positive." However, Tabi also reflected that some people make a "show" of supporting LGBTQ+ people online "Because they don't want to be seen as not being supportive." Tabi's comments evoke criticisms of "hashtag activism" and performative allyship, wherein people can communicate tacit support for a social cause with

minimal effort such as sharing content with a particular hashtag (Cabrera et al., 2017; Jackson, 2016)

Participants used similar "post" framings to describe racism online, emphasizing progress and generational differences. Miriam, a Hispanic woman who complained that sometimes "people make everything about race" and how people get unfairly reduced down to their racial identities, said:

> It was particularly the white older generation that didn't seem as accepting or understanding … But with our generation … we're a lot more accepting … We're coming into a society where racism is not accepted and it's looked upon as like bad. Now that people. . have social media, to have that platform, we're just like moving on.

Miriam continued, also conceding that despite not seeming as prevalent, being racist was easier online due to social media's accessibility. "It is a lot easier for people of color to be attacked online, but it's a give and take … Generationally, young people are more accepting, but it's easier to be racist online. But you can also block more easily than face-to-face." Similarly, E, a Turkish man, acknowledged racialized stereotypes about skin color, but also emphasized how things are different "nowadays," and how there is "more community" online. Miriam's and E's comments seem to be informed by tropes that minimize experiences of racism, emphasize progress, and elide the very real race-based challenges that persist online.

Supposition from Narrow Personal Experiences and Connections

Some supposition seemed to be derived from personal experience or connections with others. Participants speculated that the experiences of others would be similar to their experiences or those of friends. For instance, Jerry, a Black man, said "I feel they [people of color] have it the same as everybody else, you know?" When asked specifically, "Do you feel like you face challenges that white people don't?" Jerry replied, "On social media? No. Honestly No." While Jerry's answer left clear room for the presence of offline differences, he speculated about the experiences of others, based on his own time online.

In contrast, RJ admitted, "It's tough because of discrimination online. Times are changing, but in a bad way." RJ spoke about how platform features like character limitations on Twitter "Almost force people to choose sides … Almost like supporting POC means NOT supporting white people, and vice versa." RJ also emphasized how online communities create silos. "People have to stay, you know, people of their own kind have stayed together … " In his comments, RJ speculated that other POC may have faced the same type of discrimination he has and protect themselves by sticking together.

Jasmine, a Mexican woman, discussed how online interactions promote the fetishizing of skin color online, built on stereotypes that are reinforced by other people of color. This line of thought resonated with Vanessa, who described her challenges integrating into the Hmong community at her university. She described growing up apart from the Hmong community and facing disturbing comments from her peers about being "white washed," despite speaking the language and

growing up with the same cultural traditions. Despite sharing cultural backgrounds, speculation based upon narrow personal experience maintains deictic distance.

Narrow supposition seemed related to social media silos. People may only regularly see what's in their cultivated bubble and are less likely to spontaneously engage with other communities. And, especially for those people in our sample, most of whom are from lower SES communities, they may be less likely to engage with broader publics online (Way & Malvini Redden, 2020). Andres, a gay man of Mexican descent who spoke Spanish at home, foregrounded his experiences of being gay on social media and how online communities like "Gay Twitter" helped him avoid backlash from straight people. He emphasized the perils of assuming other peoples' experiences are similar to yours. "I feel like you have to really watch out what you're saying and just watch out for your opinions [as a straight person] … other people are not living the same free life that you are." Meaning, straight people should be sensitive because LGBTQ+ community members have more difficult life experiences on and offline.

What Framing the "Other" Can Tell Us About Empathy and Allyship

By analyzing how young people discuss and frame the experiences of others on social media, this research demonstrates the complex and varied nature of young people's activities online. Critically, our findings depict a range of engagement styles with different possibilities for transformation with each approach.

Theoretical Contributions

As young people discussed their framings of others, whether uninformed supposition, empathetic, or driven by education/action, they illustrated important opportunities for transformation. Some framing, especially the most speculative and uninformed, evidenced a lack of empathy for social concerns. In fact, sometimes when we asked, "What do you think it's like for X people online (e.g., BIPOC, LGBTQ+, women/men)?," participant answers were more self-focused than other-focused. Participants described how *they* felt about that type of content being in their feeds—whether feeling happy to see LGBTQ+ concerns getting more exposure or feeling angry about racist memes going viral. Or they mentioned the particular audience at hand (e.g., "It's great that *they're* getting more exposure")—rather than considering what being BIPOC or LGBTQ+ online is actually like. Speculative frames that were uninformed positioned participants to think more abstractly rather than about the specific humans involved, deictically keeping the personal I and other You completely separate, potentially reducing the possibility for empathic concern and perspective taking (Miklikowska, 2018; Vilardaga, 2009).

Speculative framings seem connected to self-crafted silos or algorithmic echo chambers. Silos are perhaps not surprising given the age of our participants (all were right out of high school) and their smaller social circles. And silos offer protective benefits—creating a sense of solidarity and a buffer from outside

pressures. But silos also keep people from being aware of or more easily empathetic about social issues with material and relational impacts offline. We speculate that more privileged social media users might benefit from a "status shield" (Hochschild, 1984) with online silos, with more privileged users' insular communities protecting them from even knowing about, let alone facing, the more negative experiences online.

Framing as supposition also showed that young people craft images of "the other" online, but not necessarily in negative ways. While past research discusses "othering" as marginalizing or, at the least, a negative relationship to another person or group, young people in this study spoke of others in ways that largely pointed to empathy or, at least, understanding. This finding contributes to scholarship that suggests othering "may not be inherently adversarial, but includes other variants such as admiration" (McAllum & Zahra, 2017, p. 15). For example, indigenous perspectives on othering "offers a plethora of possible Self–Other relations, which include trans-action/civility with (pakikitungo); interaction with (pakikisalamuha); one-of-us rela-tions (hindi-ibang-tao); and being one with (pakikiisa)" (McAllum & Zahra, 2017, p. 15). Although writing about voluntourism, McAllum and Zahra (2017) specifically call for research that examines how "Self-Other positioning changes" when interac-tions are mediated (p. 15).

The young people in our study—especially those who enacted empathetic frames—evidenced more empowering forms of Self-Other relations. Namely, they consid-ered what it's like online for people different from themselves in ways that showed concern, willingness to engage uncomfortable issues, and, in some cases, transfor-mative action. These considerations align with "transformative empathy" that is associated with self-reflexivity and meaningful engagement with others (Rodino-Colocino, 2018). Furthermore, as McAllum and Zahra (2017) emphasize the dynamic elements of Self-Other identities through interactions, it's important to note that Self-Other (or I-You) positioning can evolve through ongoing interaction and contemplation. As an example, young people who may have evidenced spec-ulative framings can easily leverage social media platform features to increase interactions with "others" and reduce distance between Self and Other, which may lead to more overt forms of allyship.

As such, our analysis also speaks to the literature about communicating allyship. On one hand, we could consider the speculative and empathy-driven framings showcased here as passive allyship (Clark, 2020) or slacktivism (Cabrera et al., 2017)—lacking meaningful engagement or effort at creating real and sustained change at individual or institutional levels. However, by rejecting a purely deficit approach, our findings provide a counternarrative to such easy dismissals of young people's engagement in social issues. Indeed, participant Matthew said, "I love that people are utilizing social media to engage in [social] movements. It allows their voices to be expressed … and grants them more authority to create change."

Even if these performative efforts are more passive, some "easy" allyship involves amplification of marginalized voices that can be powerful for effecting change. Clark

(2019) explains that "strategic information seeking and sharing on Twitter–particularly the amplification of marginalized voices–were key components in the development of digital allyship praxis" (p. 519). And for young people whose online presence has grown considerably since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, with nearly half admitting to being online "almost constantly" (Anderson et al., 2023), there exists many opportunities to hone digital allyship praxis. While they may not look like adult conceptions of allyship, our results show young people shifting their own behavior online to be more inclusive, changing their language, advocating for others, pushing back against perceived bad behavior online, and offering social support to others in need.

In connection with past research that emphasizes how "adults just don't understand" the social media pressures for teens, especially regarding identity management and participating in online culture and ritual (Malvini Redden & Way, 2017, p. 37), we want to emphasize that online allyship in support of perceived others is remarkable given the developmental stage of teenagers. Neuroscience research shows that teenagers have a deep capacity for empathy, but tend to focus it on those from similar backgrounds (Levy et al., 2016). However, with activities that promote dialogue and connection, teens can learn to develop empathy for others (Levy et al., 2022).

Not only do performative acts generate awareness and fuel broader conversations, we argue that even small and fleeting acts of imagining another's perspective have the potential for deeper transformation and can motivate involvement down the road, especially offline. Small acts of allyship that may seem frivolous to adults often require teens to adjust or undermine their online personae—personal brands that are carefully cultivated and cherished (Malvini Redden & Way, 2017, 2019). Critically, online information seeking and sharing might promote significant offline transformation, as research shows some young people—especially those from working class backgrounds like those in our study—keep their most important or meaningful actions offline (Way & Malvini Redden, 2020). Understanding the online empathy work of teens is crucial as psychologists emphasize that late adolescence is a critical time for developing empathy for others through dialogue and sharing, which can translate to a "proclivity for compromise and peace" in adulthood (Levy et al., 2022, p. 1).

In considering I/You and Self-Other positioning, our analysis also points to the importance of complex, intersectional research and theorizing. Intersectional research examines how certain identities, such as race, gender, and class, are marginalized, and how multiple marginalization serves to reproduce inequality in social systems (Holvino, 2010). Our participants—75% of whom were people of color—shared their lived experiences of navigating online life as people from minoritized groups. While othering and allyship are usually discussed in terms of dominant groups suppressing or supporting minoritized groups, our research shows the processes happening among minoritized groups as well. Future research should continue to explore Self-Other positioning with an intersectional focus, particularly on how to cultivate empathetic and agentic framings on and offline.

Practical Implications

Our findings suggest the need to encourage young people to participate and engage online in ways that move them from speculation and passivity to more active engagement and deeper empathy. One suggestion is for educators and guardians to encourage young people to expand online networks in ways that might disrupt comfortable silos and challenge "post" sentiments that obscure the significant and hurtful encounters marginalized groups face online. Young people could be encouraged to seek out and follow accounts of people who do not share the same identity characteristics and values that they do. Just the simple act of following different types of people has the potential to shift framings from speculation, to empathy, and even to education and action. Furthermore, as algorithms on platforms like TikTok and YouTube—those most preferred by teens—use viewing to determine prioritization of future content (Matamoros-Fernández, 2017) diversifying online activities may provide ongoing benefits. To that same end, instead of dismissing nascent acts of allyship, adults might consider how they can praise young people's easier attempts at engagement with social issues as a stepping-stone for more thoughtful and action-oriented future engagement (e.g., Smith et al., 2020).

Directions for Future Research

Participants' talk about race and sexuality differed starkly from talk about gender. While discussion about race and sexuality seemed to indicate progress, there was less acknowledgment of progress with regard to gender, specifically for women. For instance, the challenges women face about unrealistic beauty standards or emotional norms online were taken for granted as inherently female, and not socially constructed challenges connected to larger social issues. At the same time, young people challenged limiting discourses about boys and men, particularly regarding emotionality and gender stereotypes. In contrast to their comments about sexuality and race, participants' discussions about gender seemed far less speculative. Whereas people might develop more insular communities online that offer less knowledge about other cultural communities, young people seemed more confident in their understandings of gendered experiences online. While this seemed promising for shifting stereotypes about boys and men online, there still seems to be opportunities to address the challenges women and girls face. Future research should explore gender frames in more depth, especially as women experience significant harassment and discrimination online that affects wellbeing offline (Vitis & Gilmour, 2018).

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