Digital Performance Activism Amongst High Schoolers - Caused by Laziness or Conformity?

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ABSTRACT

An increasingly popular trend in today's digital age has been the use of social media to garner greater support for social change. While activism itself is beneficial, there is a harmful derivative known as performance activism. This phenomenon occurs when an individual supports a cause to elevate their social clout, rather than being devoted to the issue. Consequently, surface-level activism arises and the problem at hand isn't actually solved. Since existing research has explored the effects of performance activism (especially among adults), this study scrutinizes the causes of performance activism amidst teenagers. The hypothesis of this research is that high schoolers' engagement in digital performance activism is primarily a result of lacking the time, because students are genuinely interested in civic engagement, but do not have (or make) time to act upon it. Through a mixed-methods survey design and random cluster sampling of over 300 Bay Area high school students, it is concluded that a lack of time is the primary cause of performance activism in the youth. This study contributes to the current state of research by optimizing high schoolers' social media usage to promote efficient activism, altering how companies advertise their humanitarian efforts to the youth, and serving as a didactic way to maximize societal impact while minimizing the individual's cost of contributing. Furthermore, this research serves as a steppingstone to future studies pertaining to youth conformity, activism, and social media.

Introduction

Gone are the days when social media was limited to the radio, television, and news station. The widespread domination of the internet over the last decade has bridged those from all walks of life, throwing its tentacles far and wide - socially, geographically, and emotionally. An associated trend has been the use of social media to garner greater support for social change. In fact, the Pew Research Center shares that 36% of social media users showed support for social causes through the media [1]. While this in itself is advantageous to solving global problems such as racism, political unrest, and poverty, there is a harmful derivative of using social media for activism.

   This rising phenomenon is called performance activism (also known as slacktivism or virtue signaling), which is when someone supports a cause to elevate their social clout, rather than being devoted to the issue. The consequence of this is surface-level activism, in which the issue isn't actually solved; In other words, people have a misconception that they are making a difference through superficial contributions, when they are really interfering with the true movement. On a psychological basis, virtue signaling occurs because people want to prove to others that they are benevolent, so that the individual is regarded more highly as selfless and impactful [2]. Simply put, with performance activism, individuals stroke their own back to inflate their ego and satisfy their need for recognition. Digital slacktivism pertains to such actions that are displayed through social media platforms like Instagram and Tik-Tok. Common examples of digital performance activism include mere reposts of humanitarian crises, exaggerations of minor good deeds, and social media biographies that contain references to activism without the individual having related concrete actions. To compare, some meaningful methods of social engagement are petitions, walk-outs, and protests.

Purpose of Study

At a macro level, this study's primary goal is to answer the following research question: Is Bay Area high schoolers' performance activism on social media primarily caused by lacking the time to meaningfully contribute to a cause? By determining the unexplored causes of high schoolers' engagement in digital slacktivism through a diverse youth sample, teenagers can optimize their social media usage to promote utilitarianism and efficient activism. This would also influence how companies advertise their charity to high schoolers, to garner greater support from the youth for their mission. In addition to filling the gap enumerated below, this study will encourage future research pertaining to social media, activism, and the growing link between the two.

Definitions and Assumptions

To answer the aforementioned research question, it is essential to define some terms. Performance activism occurs when someone supports a cause to improve their public image, rather than caring about the issue. Social media refers to the platforms of Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Reddit, and Snapchat, apps commonly used by high schoolers. "Lacking the time" is defined as being too busy with other extracurricular or school-related activities to devote adequate time for activism. Youth norms refer to the actions and beliefs of most teenagers in the Bay Area. The hypothesis of this study is that high schoolers' engagement in digital slacktivism is primarily a result of lacking the time, because students are genuinely interested in civic engagement, but do not have (or make) time to act upon it.

Contextualizing Gap in Research

There is an absence of impactful research on performance activism's causes - both of their effects have been focused on. Furthermore, related experiments have primarily included Caucasians, women, and adults. This research will address slacktivism's causes, and focus on teenagers who are diverse in age, gender, and ethnicity. It is important to understand the current state of research regarding performance activism, which revolves around discussing its positive and negative effects. The following texts were selected by the reputation and relevant experience of the researcher, comprehensiveness of the methodology, and the broader implications of the research to academia.

Adeline Koh, an associate professor of digital humanities at Stockton University, elucidates that slacktivism doesn't necessarily limit one's impact, since communities of people are created to induce revolutions. These movements, backed by a colossal following with a focused goal, are inherently impactful. With the sheer reach of social media, such campaigns can gather support from people with distinct backgrounds and perspectives [3].

Antero Garcia, a Stanford associate professor of youth learning, and Nicole Mirra, an assistant professor of urban education at Rutgers, share a different benefit of performance activism: Hashtags are one form of slacktivism which is extremely efficient for the youth to amplify their concerns. The simplicity and popularity of hashtags enable teenagers to quickly post images or texts in a specific community. The researchers posit that slacktivism is fundamental to civic engagement since it encourages the fluidity and flexibility of a movement. They believe that performance activism is an innovative method of supporting social causes which need to be harnessed and promoted, as society must adapt to the new methods of civic involvement [4].

Similarly, Johanna Hartelius, a published associate professor in communication at the University of Texas at Austin, refers to the recent Black Lives Matter protests which spurred an increase in posting black squares on social media to show solidarity for African Americans. She discusses her opinion on the controversy about whether or not such actions are considered slacktivism. Some may argue that simply posting what most others post doesn't contribute meaningfully to a cause. Others might contend that in doing so, a larger community with a common focus is established. Hartelius supports the latter perspective, declaring that social media induces transformative dialogue which can induce tangible benefits to tackle the issue [5].

Alternatively, Hersinta Suroso, a doctor of internet studies at Curtin University, and Adithiyasanti Sofia, a communication and program strategist for an environmental organization, determine that slacktivism is beneficial to cost-effectively communicate with others. Their research concluded that online participatory culture has become increasingly common, which actively encourages low-risk and smaller actions. It is inconclusive whether these smaller actions can regularly foster achievement for humanitarian issues. Nevertheless, Suroso and Sofia find that local environmental activism can be successful with social media and slacktivism, as the use of hashtags attracts younger generations to spread awareness and make donations [6].

Kirk Kristofferson from the University of Chicago Journal of Consumer Research reveals that helping behavior is shaped by two key motives: the desire to display a positive image to others and uphold one's own values. According to the author, engaging in token support like slacktivism causes people to contribute less because they feel as if they have already helped enough. In his experiment with 93 undergraduates observed in two different settings, Kristofferson concluded that acts of token support done in private are more likely to be followed up with greater contributions than acts done in public, suggesting how performance activism does more damage than benefit. Since virtue signaling always involves public display, individuals who partake in such token support are less likely to maintain their social contributions afterward [7].

Similarly, René Glas from the Amsterdam University Press contends that the rise in performance activism points to society's focus on the feeling of being involved in a social cause rather than meaningful action. He believes that protests voiced through the media seem to prioritize the "disruption of social order" over a concrete goal. In more common terms, virtue signaling comes into direct conflict with the adage, "Actions speak louder than words." Glas exemplifies this by referring to how today's youth engage in selfish slacktivism, which aims to fulfill their personal feeling of contributing to society [8].

Alternately, Dennis McCafferty with the Communications Association for Computing Machinery focuses on the controversy surrounding the efficacy of online activism. He points out that slacktivism undoubtedly garners more attention, but whether or not this translates into concrete impact is up for debate. McCafferty calls upon experts like renowned author Malcolm Gladwell to argue that social efforts are only successful when a personal stake in the consequences of their effort is established. However, performance activism only covers the topic shallowly to form weak relationships between movement organizers and followers - this does not pull on the hearts of followers sufficiently to induce meaningful civic engagement. McCafferty lastly alludes to Tufts University sociology professor Sarah Sobieraj, who conducted research on numerous activist organizations which revealed that internet activism has had a negligible impact on the public's support for related causes. Furthermore, such internet groups seemed to have an "infatuation with technology with little to show for it" [9].

Johanna Hartelius argued that the social media reposts regarding Black Lives Matter were effective by inducing transformative dialogue. However, Lauren Ashe, an expert writer on social justice and politics, has an opposite perspective regarding #BlackOutTuesday, where 29 million people posted black squares in support of African American equality. While the hashtag movement's initial intention may have been positive, the results were adverse - meaningful donations and petitions were drowned out by the colossal reposting of black squares. Instead of signing crucial petitions to bring justice to George Floyd, people resorted to simply posting what everyone else posted, as if this was enough to alleviate racism. Hence, overloading the media with superficial activism poses dire consequences for the effort [10].

Likewise, Dana Rotman from the University of Maryland's Computing Systems Department investigates the extent to which slacktivism raises awareness, and whether increased awareness leads to concrete action. He posits that people who partake in digital activism often exaggerate their contributions when sharing them through the media, which doesn't induce practical social change. Performance activism's lack of authenticity may impede achieving desirable social outcomes [11].

In revisiting the current state of research, it is conspicuous that virtue signaling is considered as inherently advantageous to some, but threatening to others. Its benefits include spreading awareness to induce revolutions and positive change while creating a community with a common goal and encouraging youth engagement. Slacktivism's

drawbacks are the prioritization of feeling good instead of actually doing something of value (meaningful actions like fundraising or petitioning), reducing the number and extent of future contributions, and interfering with the main purpose of a movement. The negatives of performance activism outweigh the positives since the aforementioned researchers refute each of its benefits. In summary, significant research has been published on slacktivism's effects, which some believe to be beneficial, and others, damaging. However, the causes of virtue signaling remain unknown, and this study will shine a light on these drivers.

Methods

This subject coincides with the constructivist worldview, as it relies on qualitative research and interprets individuals' beliefs about the world. To study how different levels of busyness correlate with activism, a mixed-methods research design is optimal to gather qualitative and quantitative responses via a survey. The survey included quantitative questions concerning the number of times one engages in slacktivism, hours of free time, and hours of social media time per week. Qualitative questions were also asked regarding the high schooler's grade, sex, race, political leaning, social media preferences, and methods of engaging in performance activism.

A random cluster sampling method was used, where each teachers' classes represented one cluster. The procedure began with making a list of all teachers at the Bay Area high school, labeling each teacher with an integer. The study then used a random number generator 12 times to select 12 integers, and match these integers with the labeled list of teachers. These teachers' classrooms were the sample, producing approximately 360 students, assuming there were roughly 30 individuals per class. After distributing the same survey to each of the 12 classes via a QR code connecting to an anonymous Google Form, 304 responses were gathered.

A random cluster sample reduces variability by being more representative of the student population (including individuals of different ages, gender, ethnicities, and academic interests). It is optimal to have such a large sample size (304 students) because this satisfies the 10% condition, where the sample is no larger than 10% of the population size (~3400 students). A survey is the best tool to collect information, as it can be distributed efficiently and can be taken quickly, which reduces the burden on the responder while gathering large amounts of specific information from a large sample. With a random sample, the results can be generalized to the wide range of high schoolers across the United States. Hence, this procedure gathers a diverse group of students that can model global perspectives to a fair extent.

A comprehensive document of the research study was submitted to an Institutional Review Board (IRB). This study was later approved by the IRB committee.

Mitigating Confounding Variables

Before scrutinizing the social media information provided by the 304 respondents, it is essential to determine whether the sample of 304 students in this study is an accurate representation of the entire population of American high school students.

Grade level is the first confounding variable because teenagers tend to spend more time on social media and engage in activism as they increase in grade level. This can be explained by their stronger desire to form social networks, while having pursued history/government courses that encourage participation in global issues. The 304 surveyees hailed from 9th through 12th grade, showing how this study mitigated potential variability resulting from grade level.

Gender can be another confounding variable since males and females have distinct social media and activism patterns. Females tend to spend more time on social media and are more likely to be engaged in social causes. Approximately 54% and 42% of the respondents in this study identified as female and male, respectively, with the remaining 4% stemming from those who declined to answer or identified as non-binary. These proportions are fairly

consistent with the gender distributions of the population of high schoolers because it provides a mostly even split. Hence, this method also mitigates the effect of gender being a confounder.

Ethnicity can be a major confounding variable since different races and cultures have varying perspectives about social media and activism. While some cultures emphasize the importance of the individual, others encourage the formation of a community. So different ethnicities would be more or less likely to spend resources to uplift other groups. The respondents of this study represent a multitude of ethnicities, with the major groups being Caucasian, African American, and Asian. These results are fairly consistent with the demographics of the United States, and more specifically, the Bay Area.

An individual's political leaning has a tremendous influence on their perspective of staying engaged in the community by using social media for humanitarian efforts. Generally speaking, Democrats tend to prioritize social welfare programs more than their Republican counterparts. To account for political affiliation being a lurking variable associated with the data measured, the sample included students who had distinct political leanings. Teenagers who identified as a Democrat, Republican, or Moderate were all surveyed in proportional amounts.

By employing a large sample, the data from this study is representative of the United States population of high school students. The effects of confounding variables like grade level, gender, ethnicity, and political stance are mitigated by using a random cluster sampling method to increase the diversity of the sample within each of these variables.

Results

This study determined that the most-used social media platforms amongst teenagers were Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, Twitter, and Reddit, with 85%, 49%, 44%, 28%, and 27% of surveyees, respectively, using the app at least three times per week.

When asked to choose one or two methods of engagement in slacktivism that were most commonly observed, 291 respondents selected "reposting humanitarian crises." "Showcasing minor donations" and "sensationalizing good deeds" were the next most popular types of engagement in performance activism, with 98 and 92 selections, respectively.

87.5% and 12.5% of students surveyed followed pre-existing support and initiated original support, respectively, when engaging in virtue signaling. Approximately 70% of respondents answered "zero", 20% selected "once", 6% chose "twice", and the remaining 4% responded "three or more times" when asked how many times they partook in online slacktivism per week.
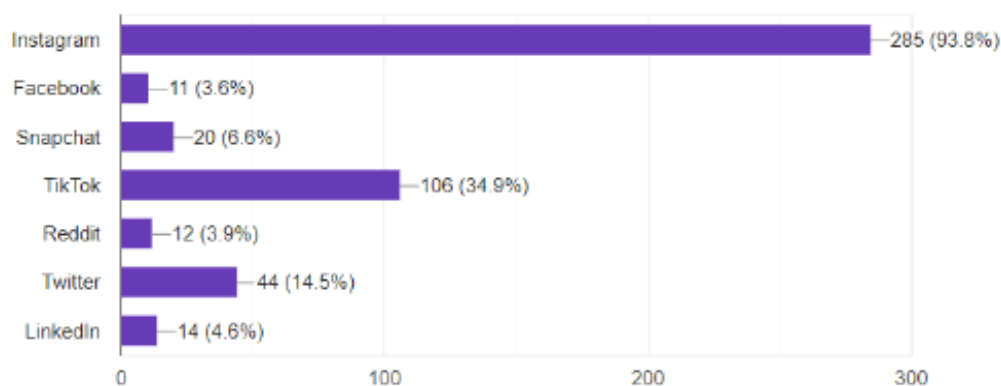

Figure 1. Most common social media platforms for performance activism

According to Figure 1, when asked which social media platform did students notice the greatest amounts of performance activism on, Instagram was the most popular response with 285 counts. There are drastically fewer selections for the next most popular apps - TikTok and Twitter - with 106 and 44, respectively.
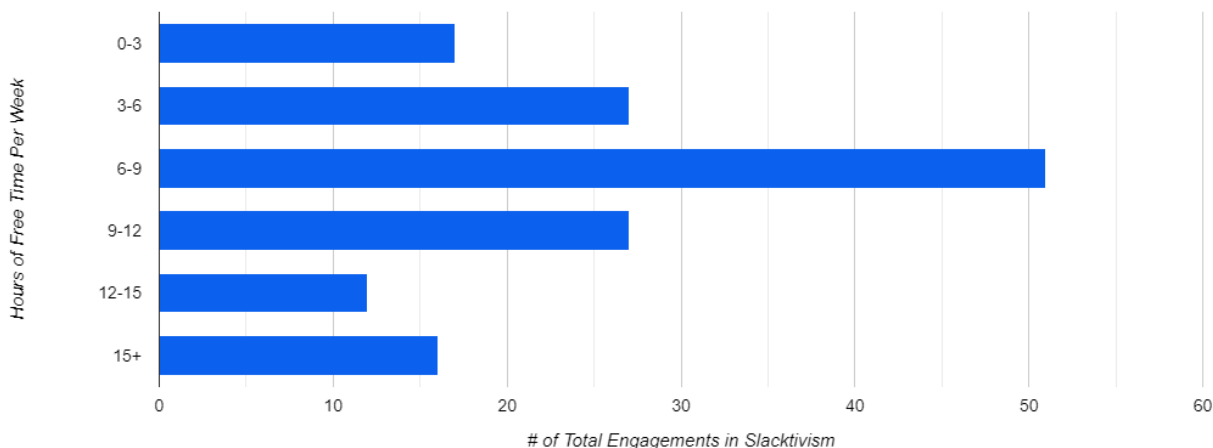

Figure 2. Free time versus the frequency of slacktivism per week

Figure 2 models an approximately normal distribution because it is unimodal, fairly symmetric with no outliers, and follows the bell-curve shape. As students have more free time, they tend to engage in slacktivism a greater number of times. The increasing pattern of participation in performance activism only lasts from zero to nine hours of free time per week. Afterward, the number of engagements decreases when high schoolers have more than nine hours of free time per week.

Political affiliation also seems to play a role in one's involvement in performance activism: A whopping 34% of Democrats engaged in slacktivism at least once a week, compared to 23% of Republicans.

Discussion

85%, 49%, 44%, 28%, and 27% of surveyees used Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, Twitter, and Reddit, respectively, at least three times per week. This shows the sheer magnitude of youth who are actively using social media. Students seem to be more interested in apps like Instagram and Tiktok which foster personal connections with their friends through sharing photos and videos, unlike apps like Reddit which emphasize anonymously joining communities. Regardless, a significant majority of high schoolers from all grades, genders, and ethnicities are involved in such social networking sites.

"Reposting humanitarian crises" was the most common category of performance activism observed by high schoolers at 291 counts, elucidating how mere reposts seem to be very popular amongst high school students. An interesting characteristic of reposts is that they don't require the individual to spend much time and effort, which could mean that a lack of time is the primary driver of youth slacktivism. The next most common types of engagement in performance activism were "showcasing minor donations" and "sensationalizing good deeds" with 98 and 92 selections, respectively. In comparison with reposting, sharing one's small donations and acts of kindness both require significantly more time and effort. This is because individuals must actively seek out a philanthropic cause, participate in that organization either through financial or non-monetary assistance, and then spread the word through the media. Therefore, from this statistic alone, it seems that lacking the time to fully devote oneself to a social issue is the main cause of performance activism amongst the youth.

Another related statistic is that 87.5% and 12.5% of respondents followed pre-existing support and initiated

original support, respectively, when engaging in performance activism. This again clarifies how a lack of time may be the predominant force in encouraging youth slacktivism. Starting a novel method of participation in a social issue demands far more creativity and time because the individual must strategize what to post (ex: image, text, petition), whom to target, and when is the optimal time to post. On the other hand, following an already-established type of engagement simply means the individual "copies" what the majority is doing.

Approximately 70% of teenagers answered "zero", 20% selected "once", 6% chose "twice", and 4% responded "three or more times" when asked how many times they participated in online slacktivism per week. The vast majority of students aren't involved in superficial activism, but it is important to note that teenagers are likely to choose responses that make themselves look better. Therefore, it is highly likely that more than 30% of high schoolers engage in performance activism on a weekly basis. As previously explained, the drawbacks of performance activism outweigh the benefits. Consequently, it is concerning that about a third of students join slacktivism campaigns. What is arguably more problematic is that a vast majority of teenagers aren't aware that they are involved in this harmful method of artificial activism. Due to the sheer strength of the herd mentality, students effortlessly follow the crowd of claimed activists. With such a large following, high schoolers are provided with the false notion that they are truly making a difference in the world. In reality, they are making few concrete contributions, and simultaneously obstructing real activism by drowning out the core message of the original cause.

As per Figure 1, Instagram was the social media platform where performance activism was noticed the most at 285 counts. TikTok and Twitter had much fewer selections with 106 and 44 counts, respectively. When synthesizing the information from this visual with the data concerning the most popular social media platforms, there are key similarities and differences. Some commonalities are that Instagram and TikTok are the most popular for social media usage and slacktivism, with Instagram being the overwhelming majority. While Snapchat was the third most used app, it was the fourth most used platform for engaging in slacktivism, overtaken by Twitter by about 24 responses. Overall, these results are promising, as they provide consistency and accuracy in student responses by validating other data points - apps that had the greatest general usage logically also had the largest portion of performance activism.

According to Figure 2, the number of hours of free time versus the frequency of slacktivism per week models an approximately normal distribution. Teenagers logically engage in virtue signaling more when they have more spare time. However, this direct relationship only continues from zero to nine hours of free time per week. When high schoolers have more than nine hours of idle time, the number of engagements in slacktivism decreases . Students with this much spare time likely contribute more meaningfully to a social cause, thereby not engaging in performance activism. These individuals could be the people leading larger, more impactful, initiatives such as petitions, walk-outs, and protests. Alternatively, these students may simply have other interests aside from social media and activism. Nevertheless, it is more important to consider the data from zero to nine hours of free time per week, as significantly more teenagers have about this much idle time, in comparison to the number of teenagers with over nine hours of free time.

Aside from the amount of time an individual has, political affiliation seems to affect one's involvement in virtue signaling: 34% of Democrats engaged in slacktivism at least once a week, compared to 23% of Republicans. Generally speaking, Democrats tend to support and be more involved in social justice issues than Republicans. Hence, this discrepancy of 11% between Democrats and Republicans is rational. Nevertheless, one's engagement in virtue signaling can't be attributed solely to political ideology because of the vast generalizations set forth by the political spectrum.

Conclusion

The data in this study ultimately approved the hypothesis that the primary driver of digital performance activism in high schoolers is a lack of time. Specifically, three data points reiterate why this is the case: Reposting humanitarian crises (little time required) is three times more common than both showcasing minor donations and exaggerating good deeds (both demand far more time); Students are seven times more likely to follow others in slacktivism (requires less

effort) than initiate original support for a movement (demands more time and planning); The amount of free time versus amount of engagement in virtue signaling follows a positive association from zero to nine hours of free time per week (typical of most Bay Area high schoolers).

This study successfully addressed the gap in research by identifying the cause of slacktivism in a varied youth sample. Prior research has only focused on the positive and negative effects of performance activism, primarily through adult samples that aren't diverse in ethnicity or gender. Because this study investigated an issue that hasn't been explored before, the results cannot be directly validated or weakened by previous studies. Nevertheless, when synthesizing the implications of the data from this study with prior research, it is essential to understand that virtue signaling presents more dangers than benefits to society. Namely, performance activism results in superficial contributions which hinder the movement, and causes the individual to be less likely to engage in future activism.

Looking at the bigger picture, in such an academically rigorous environment (like many Bay Area high schools), students are often overloaded with their academic and extracurricular involvements. As a result, they have less time to devote to their other interests, some of which may pertain to activism. Since tackling a social inequity demands a colossal amount of resources (ex: time, money, and connections), it is almost inevitable that the youth choose to partake in surface-level activism. Many of these students are extremely involved in their communities and do have a passion for activism, but likely don't have enough time (or willpower) to make it a priority.

This study calls into question some flaws in the Bay Area's competitive educational system, such as overloading young students with schoolwork, which may discourage them from pursuing other passions like social justice. More research needs to be conducted to determine how students can master the art of time management to make community involvement a priority. Enabling high schoolers to lead and follow social efforts would foster greater amounts of civic engagement as they grow older.

Additionally, this study also shines light onto society's concerning normalization of narcissism, especially amongst the youth. Teenagers who use social media are more likely to develop narcissistic personalities and antisocial behavior [12]. People should be contributing to social causes because they sincerely have empathy for the less-fortunate and really want to use their resources to help those in need. Instead, individuals engage in activism for the wrong (selfish) reasons, such as wanting to appeal to the rest of society via a heightened public image. Many high school students seem to use social media not for forming closer relationships with others, but to fulfill their desire for recognition. Looking forward, more research is needed regarding the causes of narcissistic behaviors in teenagers, and how they could be alleviated. Therefore, this study serves to support humankind's efforts to optimize societal impact through efficient activism - this starts from helping others for the right reasons.

Limitations

The first limitation to this study is that it employed a surveying method, through which a causal relationship cannot be certainly established between a lack of time and one's engagement in virtue signaling on social media. Unlike an experiment which utilizes a highly controlled environment by including a control group and mitigating confounding variables to a great extent, a survey doesn't account for extraneous variables to as much of an extent. Consequently, it is difficult to draw a cause and effect relationship between busyness and digital slacktivism.

An additional drawback to the general surveying method is that it did not demand voluntary participation from students, so individuals who responded to the survey likely wanted to voice their stronger opinions. As such, individuals with more moderate beliefs may not have responded to the survey, as this topic was not of interest to them. Hence, the data may be biased to high schoolers with more extreme opinions regarding social media and superficial activism.

Acknowledgements

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