

“A CONTRADICTION TO BEING A TEENAGE GIRL”:
IDENTITY GAPS AS CONCEPTUALIZATION
TURNING POINTS FOR GIRL ACTIVISTS

By

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Abstract

This study employed a turning point analysis to document milestones that influence the development of activist identities in young girls. All participants ($N = 19$), between the ages of 16–23 years old, self-identified as an activist and participated in activist spaces. Through an analysis of semi-structured interviews and arts-based elicitation research, data revealed several turning point events that influenced participants' activist identity development, as well as their personal definition of activism. These turning points, paired with the communication theory of identity (CTI) framework, highlighted how girl activists negotiate gaps in their activist identities by communicatively co-constructing an evolving definition of activism. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed regarding turning points in relation to identity development and gendered disparities in activist spaces.

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Chapter 1: Introduction & Rationale

In recent years, youth activism (i.e., teenagers and adolescents participating in activist causes) has become much more ubiquitous than in previous generations (Mayes & Holdsworth, 2020; Thomas, 2023; Yuen & Tang, 2023). As way of example, throughout the past decade, national headlines have chronicled the March For Our Lives teenagers mobilizing for gun control, Greta Thunberg campaigning for environmental justice, and Mari Copeny (“Little Miss Flint”) rallying for action in the Flint Water Crisis (Gecker et al., 2021; Mayes & Holdsworth, 2020; Thomas, 2023; Wong, 2015). While youth activism has long existed — such as students participating in on-campus sit-ins to fight segregation during the Civil Rights Movement and anti-war protests during the Vietnam War (Hale, 2022; Roth, 2004; Yuen & Tang, 2023) — our cultural dialogue surrounding the identity of an activist fluctuates in tandem with significant changes in our national political landscape and socialization of political actors (Gordon & Taft, 2011).

Moreover, not all youth activists experience the field in the same way. Specifically, young girls undergo a unique path to activism, distinct from both their older female and their male counterparts (Gordon, 2008; Keller, 2015; Khoja-Moolji & Chacko, 2024; Taft, 2017). As a result, the experience of the girl activist is of special interest to communication scholars concerned with how political identity is communicatively constructed, as well as stakeholders interested in recruiting teenage girls and maintaining retention of young women in activist spaces. Moreover, acknowledging girls as activists expands the parameters of how activism scholarship is conceptualized and allows for researchers to account for the ways in which marginalized voices express their activism (Linder & Rodriguez, 2012).

While the influence of both age and gender may be studied in isolation, these identity markers can also work in tandem to create a unique, specific phenomenon: girlhood. Within media studies and popular culture criticism, isolating *youth* or *adolescence* as a subject of study can favor perspectives and experiences of young men, or treat the term as a genderless phenomenon altogether (Driscoll, 2002; Eisenhauer, 2004; McRobbie, 1991; Pomerantz, 2009). Although girlhood is a subset of adolescence, girls' identities are shaped through social, cultural, and historical situations that significantly distinguish 'girls' from a broader social category, such as 'children' (Pomerantz, 2009). In specifying *girls*, I employ the label, not as a uniform category or strict parameter, but rather "as an imperfect theoretical concept" (Keller, 2015, p. 24). Therefore, this study aims to factor in intersections of identity (e.g., race, class, sexuality, etc.) by favoring an expansive understanding of the word and positioning girlhood as a self-adopted label, embraced by those who situate themselves within the subjective framework of the term.

In the same way that girlhood is an identity that is discursively produced via cultural contexts and social interactions (Bent & Switzer, 2016; Keller, 2015), to identify as an activist, a girl must also communicatively construct such an identity (Hecht et al., 2005; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Ting-Toomey, 2005). The construct of one's activist identity is a phenomenon constitutive of communication with others (Hecht et al., 2005; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Ting-Toomey, 2005). For example, familial and cultural socialization influence how young girls understand identities (Stets & Burke, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Ting-Toomey, 2005), such as what it means to be a girl, or to be an activist. In studying girls and girlhood, researchers may account for gendered subjectivities in the construction of identity (Driscoll, 2002; Khoja-Moolji & Chacko, 2024).

Additionally, past studies have found teenage girls are more hesitant to refer to themselves as activists compared to other demographics, likely as a result of how the activist identity is conceptualized (Bobel, 2007; Gordon, 2010; Keller, 2015; Taft, 2017). Standard definitions of activism broadly position the phenomenon as a means of advocating for political, social, or economic change (Corning & Myers, 2002; Klar & Kasser, 2009). However, in practice, both scholarship and mainstream representations of activist work often emphasize active political intervention (Klar & Kasser, 2009), civic participation (Inglehart & Norris, 2003), or demonstration-, boycott-, and protest-centered actions (Inglehart & Norris, 2003). As a result, both formalized academic conceptualizations and informal popular culture depictions of activism favor the experiences of adults (Inglehart & Norris, 2003; Keller, 2016; Vanner & Dugal, 2020; Walters, 2016). Traditional understandings of political participation, such as voting, lobbying, and attending protests reflect a type of participation that hinges on adult agency, capability, and mobility (Gordon, 2008; Keller, 2016).

Consequently, the term activist can feel daunting to many girls, with implicit parameters that build a seemingly unattainable standard (Bobel, 2007). The stereotypical image (e.g., “someone who marches in the street with a banner”) is foreign to someone who lacks the means and autonomy to place her body in such conditions (Bobel, 2007, p. 155; Gordon, 2008). Additionally, when the girl activist is acknowledged, she is often characterized by severe exceptionalism and heroism, a framing which can exacerbate activism’s supposed inaccessibility (Bergmann & Ossewaarde, 2020; Switzer, 2018; Taft, 2020; Vanner & Dugal, 2020; Walters, 2016). However, such reluctance by teenage girls to adopt the title of activist does not translate to a lack of activity in activist causes. Rather, girls express interest in social movements and creating change, but sometimes do so in unconventional, nontraditional ways, rendering much of

their work invisible in social movement scholarship (Gordon, 2008; Keller, 2015; Khoja-Moolji & Chacko, 2024; Taft, 2011). Given this context, young girls who self-identify as an activist — in spite of the prevailing, traditional conceptualization of activism — likely experience a unique, gendered process toward identifying with the label. The experience potentially influences both their definition of activism and their understanding of what constitutes an activist identity.

As a result, a theoretical framework that could reveal factors contributing to girls' path toward identifying as activists is the communication theory of identity (CTI; Hecht, 1993; Hecht et al., 2005). CTI posits that identity is “inherently a communication process and must be understood as a transaction in which messages and values are exchanged” (Hecht et al., 2003, p. 230). CTI also proposes that individuals develop multiple layers of identity via affiliation with social groups and communities, and they enact their identity within the context of their social markers, such as gender and age (Hecht et al., 2005). While layers of identity can align, they can also directly conflict with one other (Jung & Hecht, 2004). These instances of forming, developing, and negotiating layers of identity can serve as important turning points in the activist identity formation (Jung & Hecht, 2004). Turning points are patterns of social interactions that individuals retrospectively classify as important milestones in social phenomena, such as in their journey to adopt a particular personal identity (Yoshimura, 2017). Applying both CTI and a turning point analysis to young girls' activist stories can illuminate salient positive or negative interactions (i.e., turning points) during their process of identifying as an activist.

Taken as a whole, girl activists are a valuable population for analysis of the communicative construction of identity. Participating in activist spaces as a young girl is an aged, gendered experience, shaped by a communicative conceptualization of what constitutes activism by both activists and non-activists alike. Given the varying interpretations of the term, a study

focusing on young girls' activism within the context of identity could reveal how social interactions serve as turning points that influence girls' personal identity development as an activist. Therefore, the primary objective of this study is to document the ways in which young girls define activism and come to embrace and retain the activist label. The following chapter overviews and contextualizes three key areas of literature within the scope of the study: (a) personalized activist stories as parameter-defining, (b) CTI and identity development, and (c) turning points in identity development. The chapter concludes with the proposed research question of the study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review & Conceptual Framework

To gain insight into the ways girl activists communicatively construct their identities, this chapter reviews the key areas of literature that guide the study. The following sections (a) overview how individuals' lived experiences set and define their parameters for what constitutes activism, (b) discuss the communication theory of identity (CTI) and its role in girl activists' identity development, and (c) explain the ways in which turning points can reveal identity formation milestones. The chapter concludes with the guiding research question of the study.

Personal Activist Stories as Parameter-Defining

Defining activism through the lens of one's own experience, rather than relying solely on a rigid mainstream definition is not uncommon in activist spaces (Bobel, 2007; Compton, 2019; Cortese, 2015; Maher et al., 2020; Schermuly et al., 2021; Taft, 2017). Understanding how individuals conceptualize an activist is crucial for gauging their identification with the title, as these personalized conceptualizations shape individuals' attitudes, behaviors, and interest in activist spaces (Cortese, 2015; Maher et al., 2020; Schermuly et al., 2021). Merely expressing support for activist causes or interacting with an activist community is not sufficient justification for individuals to label themselves as an activist. Rather, many participants in activist spaces recognize a distinction between simply *doing activism* (i.e., supporting activist work) and *being an activist* (i.e., referring to oneself as an activist; Bobel, 2007). In other words, the process of identifying as an activist involves a deeply personal conceptualization of the difference between simply engaging in social movements or political spaces and fully identifying oneself as an activist. These personalized definitions influence whether individuals align themselves with the activist identity or distance themselves from it, based on their understanding of activism and its associated characteristics (Cortese, 2015; Maher et al., 2020; Schermuly et al., 2021).

As a result, the ways in which one understands the broad concept of activism can often be understood through one's personal activist entry story (Taft, 2017). Existing research shows that the way in which activists choose to recount their entries into activism is often directly linked to the way in which they define activism itself (Compton, 2019; Lyson, 2014; McGuire et al., 2010; Ruiz-Junco, 2011). When participants reconstruct their personal path toward adopting the activist identity, they provide insight into the specific dimensions, characteristics, and parameters they believe are fundamental to the identity (Taft, 2017). Consequently, when activists reflect on a journey in which they transition from *doing* to *being* (Bobel, 2007; Taft, 2017), they contextualize their personal identity (i.e., an individually defined identity) within an existing communal identity (i.e., a societally defined identity; Hecht & Philips, 2022). Therefore, an interview-based qualitative research approach serves as a valuable tool for enhancing this area of study by providing participants with the opportunity to reflect on their nuanced, individualized conceptualizations, thereby accounting for the positionality and perspective of each participant.

In recounting one's experience adopting and maintaining an activist identity, activism is framed not as a generalized, impersonal phenomenon, but rather as a highly personalized experience (Taft, 2017). For example, Compton (2019) found that when defining protest, participants placed an emphasis on their own identities and personal experiences. While most participants in the study shared a baseline interpretation of what constitutes a protest, the details and nuances of the definitions depended on participants' own history in protest spaces. Similarly, Cortese (2015) found that participants engaging in ostensibly the same LGBTQ+ activist work nevertheless varied in their commitment to the activist identity, as well as their personalized conceptualization of the identity. Often, an individual's account of their activist experience also

functions as an account of their definition of activism as a whole (Bobel, 2007; Compton, 2019; Cortese, 2015; Taft, 2017).

Moreover, personalized definitions do not exist in isolation. The anecdotal timeline in which one recounts ‘becoming an activist’ both constructs one’s personal activist identity, as well as reveals a potentially replicable trajectory toward identifying as an activist (Bobel, 2007; Linden & Klandermans, 2007; Taft, 2011). There are trends among stories and experiences that offer insights into how others may also become involved (Bobel, 2007; Linden & Klandermans, 2007; Taft, 2011). For example, Taft (2017), studied the ways teenage girls recount their own activist entry stories as mirroring standard “coming of age” narratives. Although all stories were rooted in participants’ own specific journeys, the study found an age-based pattern among participants’ entry stories (Taft, 2017). Taft found that “‘becoming activist’ stories are personal,” but “they are not merely individual” (2017, p. 28). Rather, activist entry stories serve as indications of who a subset of people categorize as belonging and fitting into a movement, and place these parameters within larger cultural contexts (Bobel, 2007; Lyson, 2014).

As a result, the study aims to build on existing research indicating that individuals’ lived experiences serve to set and define their parameters for what constitutes an activist. By adopting a qualitative methodology, the study can consequently capture and account for the nuanced and varied experiences of each participant. Additionally, by pairing such stories and experiences with CTI and turning point analysis, the study can illuminate a connection between participants’ experiences with activism and their identity formation and maintenance as an activist. The following section provides an overview of how CTI serves as a helpful framework for understanding girls’ process of identifying as activists.

CTI and Identity Development in Girl Activists

When studying how girls adopt and maintain an activist identity, applying the communication theory of identity (CTI) assumes mutual influences of girls' identity and girls' communication, emphasizing that their identity is not a *product* of communication, but rather *is* communication itself (Hecht, 1993; Hecht et al., 2003). Given that one's identity is communicatively co-constructed (Stets & Burke, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Ting-Toomey, 2005), an individual can develop layers of identity via affiliation with various groups, such as activist communities, and enact their identity within the context of their social markers, such as age and gender identity (Hecht et al., 2005). The communication theory of identity, therefore, can provide insight into how young women develop their identities in the context of age, gender, girlhood, and a societally constructed understanding of the markers that constitute an activist identity (Hecht, 1993).

As a framework, CTI (Hecht, 1993) assumes that identities have four properties: (a) *individual* (i.e., an identity defined by the individual), (b) *relational* (i.e., an ascribed identity represented in terms of another), (c) *enacted* (i.e., an identity performed for others), and (d) *communal* (i.e., a societally defined identity). By way of example, when a young girl spends time with a friend group, she is presented with an opportunity for both her *individual* identity (e.g., *I am a nice person*) and her *enacted* identity (e.g., *I say nice things to my friends*) to align with one another (Hecht & Philips, 2022). However, although layers of identity may align, they may also contrast with one another, which results in identity gaps (Jung & Hecht, 2004). An identity gap occurs when an individual feels one layer of their identity is challenged, dismissed, or contradicted by the conceptualization of another (Jung & Hecht, 2004). For example, a *communal* identity (e.g., *girls are supposed to be nice, quiet, and respectful; activists are loud,*

brash, and disruptive) can challenge an *individual* identity (e.g., *I am a girl and an activist*) (Jung & Hecht, 2004).

While the frames of identity can be theoretically separated, in practice they are interpenetrating, and as a result are consistently adjusting, overlapping, and influencing each other (Hecht et al., 2003). Past studies have explored the ways in which people negotiate identity gaps, such as avoiding (Wagner et al., 2016), adapting (Thompson et al., 2022), accepting (Maeda & Hecht, 2012), engaging (Wagner et al., 2016), redefining (Reese, 2023), relabeling (Nuru, 2014), and reframing (Maeda & Hecht, 2012) conflicting layers of identity. Because layers of identity are not separate from each other (Jung & Hecht, 2004), identity gap negotiation strategies inherently involve considering and reconciling at least two layers.

In addition to the four established frames of CTI, Kuiper (2021) argues there is a fifth frame of identity: *materiality*. The material frame attends to the physical presence of the self, accounting for both the health and physicality of one's body, as well as the territory and environments in which an individual exists (Kuiper, 2021). A materiality frame opens up the possibility of additional identity negotiations, such as conflicts between one's *individual* identity (e.g., *I feel like I am a grown-up*) and their *material* identity (e.g., *I look like a child*). Young girls who are participating in an environment ostensibly crafted for adult agency, capability, and mobility (Gordon, 2008; Keller, 2016) may use activist spaces as opportunities to reconceptualize and contend with their physical identities (Keller, 2015).

Moreover, CTI is a valuable framework for this study given the existing literature that suggests a connection between social movement participation and identity negotiation (Compton, 2019; Klandermans, 1984; Taylor & Raeburn, 1995; Whittier, 1995). For example, Compton (2019) found that applying CTI to participants connects their decision to participate in protest

with their personal identity, finding that protesters articulated the ways and reasons they engaged with social protests by explicitly placing their personal identities in connection with their protest participation.

Additionally, activist spaces can serve as personal social groups (e.g., grounds for *relational* identities), as well as manifestations of socially constructed identities (e.g., grounds for *communal* identities), and thus have the power to alter the ways in which a participant views both the world and themselves (Jung & Hecht, 2004). While this is the case for all activists, young people in particular place a major emphasis on social movements as an opportunity to develop personal identity (Keller, 2015; Taft, 2017). During adolescence, girls are negotiating their individual identity in relation to the communities they join, and identity development is highly dependent on peer messaging (Zanin et al., 2022). Often, a teenage girl participating in activist spaces is searching not only for a cause to support or for a community of friends, but also for opportunities to understand and develop her personal identity (Taft, 2017). Consequently, girl activists are undergoing adoption, negotiation, and maintenance across multiple layers of identity.

As a result, this study aims to build on existing literature by using the CTI framework to analyze how young girls conceptualize the alignment and misalignment of layers of identity and ultimately come to self-identify as an activist. Additionally, developing and negotiating these layers of activist identities can serve as important turning points in the process of identity formation and maintenance (Jung & Hecht, 2004). Therefore, the following section overviews turning point analysis and how sequences of social interactions and events can function as milestone moments in an individual's personal identity construction.

Turning Point Events in Identity Development

Young girls communicatively co-construct their identities, not in a single moment, but across a period of time and over a sequence of interactions (Stets & Burke, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Ting-Toomey, 2005). Existing research indicates that identity gaps and prolonged identity negotiation can impact long-term *personal* identity development, and that one's identification with a particular identity can strengthen or weaken as a result of positive or negative interactions or events (Wagner et al., 2016; Zanin et al., 2020). These influential moments of social interactions can serve as *turning points* in how an individual comes to understand their identity.

As a framework, turning points were theorized to identify significant interactions and events that influence the course of an interpersonal relationship, either positively or negatively (Baxter & Bullis, 1986). Rather than assuming relationships follow a uniform, sequential pattern of change, a turning point analysis instead acknowledges the irregularity and unpredictability of relationship development (Yoshiumra, 2017). For example, Surra (1987) identified turning points in partners' commitment in romantic relationships, Baxter et al. (1999) identified turning points in the development of blended families' relationships, and Becker et al. (2009) identified turning points in geographically-close and long-distance friendship relationships. Turning points are a conceptual tool that uncover the process by which a relationship can evolve by highlighting "any event or occurrence that is associated with change in a relationship" (Baxter & Bullis, 1986, p. 470).

While turning point analysis has primarily been used to examine relationship development, there is also merit in applying it to examine *identity* development. Bullis and Bach (1989), for example, found that specific turning points in the socialization process facilitated new

graduate students' understanding of their communal identity. Similarly, Zanin et al. (2022) utilized a turning point analysis to document the trajectory of athletic identity development in young girls. However, there is a limited amount of research applying turning point analysis to identity. This gap suggests an unexplored area where the application of such a framework could contribute to our understanding of identity formation and development. Utilizing a turning point analysis allows researchers to recognize how individuals understand salient, significant events in their lives (Holladay et al., 1998; Zanin et al., 2022). Often, the moments individuals classify as significant in identity development involve interactions with or messages from others (Zanin et al., 2022). By applying a turning point analysis to identity development, researchers can shed new light on the complexities of identity processes and potentially reveal insights into how milestone moments intersect with and influence individuals' identities.

In the context of young girls and activist spaces, the positive or negative ascription to significant events or interactions may determine how an individual identifies with the activist label (Zanin et al., 2022). When studying identity specifically, turning point analyses allow participants to assess the significant messages and events that they believe helped form and develop their identity (Zanin et al., 2020). Applying a turning point analysis in such contexts allows researchers to identify the communicative events that participants themselves consider essential to their identity formation, while acknowledging that such significant moments of sensemaking could manifest at any point throughout the process of identifying as an activist (Bullis & Bach, 1989; Yoshimura, 2017). Additionally, turning points are a subjective, interpretive approach, as the power to reconstruct events and retrospectively assign meaning belongs to the participants themselves, which positions qualitative methodology as a means of uncovering how girl activists undergo their identity development, change, and maintenance.

Consequently, a qualitative approach empowers researchers to entrust the participants with the agency to articulate such significant moments of meaning-making.

Taken as a whole, personalized definitions of activism, the communication theory of identity, and turning point analysis can serve as a theoretical framework to explore the ways in which young girls define activism and come to embrace and retain the activist label. Specifically, the goal of the study is to understand participants' conceptualization of the activist identity, as well as significant moments of change and sensemaking in the process of adopting and maintaining the identity. To understand such phenomena, the following section proposes the guiding research question of this study.

Research Question

This study seeks to document the ways in which girl activists conceptualize activism, as well as the significant experiences and interactions that influence them to identify as an activist. As established in the literature review, an individual's personal experience in activist spaces can shape the way one defines the concept of activism itself (Bobel, 2007; Compton, 2019; Cortese, 2015; Taft, 2017). Moreover, because an individual's identity is communicatively co-constructed over sequences of social interactions (Stets & Burke, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Ting-Toomey, 2005), pairing the CTI framework with a turning point analysis of significant milestone moments is useful to understand the nuances of young girls' activist identity development (Bullis & Bach, 1989; Hecht, 1993; Hecht et al., 2005; Jung & Hecht, 2004; Yoshimura, 2017).

As a result, this study seeks to understand how girl activists, who face an entry to activism distinct from young boys *and* from adult women (Gordon, 2008; Keller, 2015; Taft, 2011), conceptualize activism. The study aims to chronicle significant turning points that

participants describe as milestones toward identifying as an activist. To understand this process, the following research question was proposed:

RQ: What identity gaps do girl activists frame as turning points that influence how they conceptualize their individual activist identity?

Chapter 3: Method

To answer the proposed research question, this qualitative research study employed a phronetic, iterative approach (Tracy, 2018, 2020). This type of analysis alternates between existing theories and emergent readings of the data, and as a result, the process is grounded in the data itself (Charmaz, 2014). I began the data collection process with guiding research questions and conceptual frameworks, but ultimately allowed the data to guide the final research direction (Tracy, 2020). Because of emergent data, I routinely revisited and reevaluated my claims. Relying on an abductive, iterative process allowed me to continuously refine research interests and directions (Tracy, 2020).

Given the objective of the study (i.e., to document the ways in which young girls define activism and come to embrace and retain the activist label), I chose a qualitative approach, rather than quantitative, in order to gain a more holistic picture of participants' lived experiences. I gathered multiple forms of data, including a survey, semi-structured interview, and an arts-based elicitation activity for every participant, and integrated multiple theoretical frameworks to inform the analysis. Included throughout the findings are direct quotations from participants overviewing specific interactions and events they experienced in relation to their activist identity, as well as images drawn during the arts-based elicitation activity. As a result, the findings of this study also prioritize the standards of thick description, featuring "abundant concrete detail" of participants' experiences, perspectives, and positionality (Tracy, 2010, p. 843). Employing such an approach allows the study to achieve crystallization and enhances the breadth and depth of understanding regarding the research focus.

Additionally, a qualitative approach allows me as the researcher to function as an instrument of the research design, rather than remaining separate from the space (Tracy, 2020).

In doing so, I accounted for an angle of self-reflexivity, in which I can acknowledge my own positionality as the researcher by maintaining “an honest and authentic awareness of one’s own identity and research approach” (Ellingson, 2009; Tracy, 2020, p. 273). In this case, I participated in activist spaces as a young girl, and continue to work with activists today. My initial interest in this research topic began several years ago when I discovered Keller’s (2015) research on young girls running feminist blogs and identified with both the study’s participants and its findings. In addition to my firsthand experience adopting an activist identity as a teenager, I now as an adult mentor and collaborate with other young women in activist spaces and routinely witness them enact and negotiate their own activist identities. Prior to beginning this project, several of the girls I work with in such a capacity volunteered to participate in a pilot version of the study, and I used their experience and input to hone the direction of the research. The eventual research question for the study was formed through gaps in existing literature, as well as through a genuine curiosity about the young girls I was interacting with in my day-to-day life. A qualitative approach accounts for such “goals, interests, proclivities, and biases” throughout the entirety of the research process and makes space for my first-hand experience in the activist identity adoption and maintenance process (Tracy, 2020, p. 5). Additionally, my positionality as a member of the in-group allowed me to engage tacit knowledge, such as contextual understandings and taken-for-granted assumptions, during participant interviews, which facilitated a more organic dialogue and rapport building process (Ellingson, 2017; Tracy, 2020).

As a result, this qualitative, phronetic, iterative approach provided me with a comprehensive overview of my participants’ lived experiences. The following sections outline the study’s data collection procedures and the study’s data analysis process.

Data Collection

After receiving approval by the UNLV Institutional Review Board (IRB; see Appendix A), I began recruiting participants through representative and snowball sampling. My involvement in local activist organizations provided me with a readily available social network of self-identified activists, which I utilized to initiate the recruitment process. Potential participants were recruited via multiple channels, including face-to-face conversations, direct messages, and social media posts. Recruitment material featured a description of the study purpose, the participation process, my contact information, and a QR code to access an electronic screening survey hosted via Qualtrics. Individuals interested in participating could either complete the survey or reach out to me to express interest. Additionally, I often shared the study recruitment information at local in-person activist meetings and events, where potential participants could speak to me directly to ask questions and gain further information.

My initial mode of recruitment, representative sampling, allowed me to intentionally feature participants who replicate characteristics of the larger population (Tracy, 2020). For example, I deliberately recruited participants with a range of time spent in activist spaces and commitment to activist work, in an effort to avoid a singular experience. In addition to representative sampling recruitment, I relied on snowball sampling, in which I asked participants to suggest other activists who would be interested in participating. Multiple participants, upon completion of their own interview, passed the recruitment information along to their own activist networks. This allowed the study to access organic social networks and hidden populations I did not otherwise have access to (Tracy, 2020).

The preliminary survey functioned as a means of providing an overview of the study, collecting demographic information (see Appendix B), receiving consent (see Appendices C, D,

& E), and screening potential participants. At the suggestion of IRB, I pursued a consent waiver for my study. This means that rather than receive a dated signature from every participant, I instead included a page in my survey in which participants viewed the consent form and affirmed their consent in order to begin the survey. As a result, prior to responding to the survey questions, participants clicked a button acknowledging that they read the consent form and understood the study. Upon acknowledgement of the consent form, adult participants were directed immediately to the first question of the survey.

For participants who were minors, a direct, cataloged parental consent was not required per IRB's waiver stipulation. Rather, I simply needed an opportunity to explain the study to parents or guardians. Due to the nature of the recruitment process, I was able to make contact with 15-, 16-, and 17-year-old participants at in-person events in which their parents were often also present, ensuring that I could fully explain the study and answer any questions adults had about the study. Parents provided parental permission at this time. After parents provided consent, minors received the survey, which included an assent form in which they clicked a button to acknowledge that they understood the study, as well as confirmed parental consent. After completing the consent, assent, and parental permission acknowledgements, participants began responding to the survey questions. Only those eligible for the study were contacted for further involvement.

Subsequently, as part of the research design, participants followed the survey with an interview. Interviews were conducted both in person ($n = 4$) and via Zoom ($n = 15$), and all interviews were audio recorded with participant consent. At the beginning of interviews, I confirmed that participants had reviewed the IRB-approved consent form prior to our discussion. All participants acknowledged receipt and consented to being digitally recorded. I answered any

remaining questions participants had about the study prior to recording and initiating the interview. Following this, we conducted a semi-structured interview (see Appendix F) in which participants reflected on their own experiences as an activist. Finally, we closed out the interview with an arts-based elicitation activity. Both the interview and the arts-based activity occurred in the same meeting. Interviews lasted between 35 and 75 minutes, with an average length of 50 minutes. In total, I collected 16 hours of interview transcripts.

To protect participant confidentiality, all identifiable and de-identifiable information was stored in separate Google Drive folders. I maintained a master list of participants, organized by a number and pseudonym for every participant. This file was stored in a separate Google Drive folder from any identifiable information. Although the survey results initially contained identifiable information, after the interview, all data pulled from the surveys was then saved under the corresponding pseudonyms in separate Google Drive folders. Additionally, when transcribing interviews, participant names were de-identified through the use of pseudonyms. Similarly, indirect identifiers such as references to specific organizations or social media accounts were removed. In addition, when transcribing, I removed verbal fillers when the removal allowed for a more fluid reading of the transcription but did not compromise the meaning of the data. After transcribing an interview, I deleted the audio file, thereby removing any original identity markers from the interview audio file. The following sections provide a more detailed overview of the study's (a) participants, (b) interviews, and (c) arts-based elicitation activities.

Participants

Inclusion criteria required participants to (a) be 15 to 25 years old, (b) identify as a woman, a girl, or female, and (c) identify as an activist. Guided by the existing literature (see

Bobel, 2007), I made a call specifically for self-identified activists, rather than simply recruiting any young girl in activist spaces. All recruitment material emphasized that the study was targeting participants who already identified as an activist, as to ensure that participants' *individual* identity layer was that of an activist. These criteria were created to ensure that participants were able to provide information beyond their generalized interest in political action, but rather describe a full history of activist identity adoption and maintenance, as well as define activism and speak to their own process of identifying as an activist. Building on existing literature (see Cortese, 2015; Linder & Rodriguez, 2012), in all stages of working with participants (i.e., recruitment, survey, and interview), I did not provide a definition of activist or activism, instead allowing participants to share their own interpretation of the term and define their experiences themselves.

A total of 19 activists ($N = 19$) participated in the study. Participants were 16 to 23 years old ($M = 19.58$, $SD = 2.18$) and self-identified as girls, women, or female, with 17 identifying as cisgender women (89.5%) and 2 as non-binary or non-conforming (10.5%). Participants self-reported as Hispanic or Latino (26.3%), White (15.8%), Black or African American (10.5%), Asian (10.5%), Middle Eastern or North African (10.5%), or more than one ethnicity (26.3%). Additionally, participants self-reported as bisexual (42.1%), heterosexual (36.8%), pansexual (10.5%), or unsure (10.5%). Participants self-reported their educational background as some college with no degree (52.6%), a high school degree or equivalent (21.1%), less than a high school degree (15.8%), or a Bachelor's degree (10.5%). Participants self-reported as identifying as an activist for a range of five months to 10 years ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 2.43$).

When the goal of a study is to make broad realist claims (e.g., document the key barriers girls face when identifying as an activist), Tracy recommends choosing a population that “either

represents a range of behaviors or...one that is in the middle of the road” (2020, p. 86). For the purpose of this study, I opted for the former, interviewing girls whose activist identities manifested in a range of behaviors. Participants included high schoolers who had identified as an activist for only a few months, young adults on the boards of activist clubs, and college graduates working for legislators and politicians after years of experience in activist spaces. Participants’ activist accomplishments included petitioning their school principal to change the dress code, organizing school walkouts, serving as the face of legislation, and receiving honors from the White House.

Semi-Structured Interviews

For the purposes of the study, in-depth, semi-structured interviews served as a valuable means of data collection, allowing participants to share accounts, opinions, and reasonings in their own words (Tracy, 2020). Operating on the assumption that participants’ lived experiences both chronicle their paths toward identifying as an activist, as well as inform their definitions of activism (Bobel, 2007; Compton, 2019; Cortese, 2015; Maher et al., 2020; Schermuly et al., 2021; Taft, 2017), the semi-structured interviews focused largely on a timeline-based line of questioning. The interview design (see Appendix F) elicited a linear reconstruction in order to prompt participants to reflect on turning points and retrospective recollection of identity formation.

First, participants reflected on their experiences of activist identity adoption. Questions prompted participants to recount their perceptions of activism before they began identifying as activists themselves. Examples of interview questions included “*What are your earliest memories surrounding the word activism?*”, “*Prior to becoming an activist yourself, what was your understanding of what activists did?*”, and “*Think about one of the first activist spaces you*

entered. How did you learn about this space/cause? How did you gain entry?” These questions were crafted with the understanding that the way in which activists reflect on their entries into activism can provide insight into the ways in which they define activism itself, as they characterize the specific dimensions and parameters they find fundamental to the identity (Compton, 2019; Lyson, 2014; McGuire et al., 2010; Ruiz-Junco, 2011; Taft, 2017).

After reflecting on their entry into activism, participants were then directly asked to provide their own definition of activism. Questions included “*How do you think your own experience in activist spaces has shaped your definition of activism?*” and “*How would you define activism?*” This line of questioning was intentionally placed after participants provided their activist entry stories, allowing them to reflect on the anecdotes they shared and provide a more explicit definition in their own words.

Next, participants reflected on their experiences of activist identity maintenance. Example questions included “*Can you tell me about a time when you felt like your version of activism was dismissed/undermined?*” and “*Can you tell me about a time when you felt like your version of activism was embraced/celebrated?*” Such questions were crafted in an attempt to prompt participants’ underlying tacit knowledge concerning the traditional definition of activism, as well as their personal conceptualization of activism.

Building on their reflections of their current identity, participants were then asked to look ahead and explain how they believe their activist identity will be maintained in their lives. Example questions included “*How do you see your activism unfolding in the next several years?*” and “*Is your activist identity a permanent identity, or something you could one day lose?*” These questions were crafted to gain additional insight into the process of how girls retain the activist identity.

Art-Based Elicitation Research

At the end of our interview, participants were provided instructions to begin the art-based elicitation portion of the session. Incorporating arts-based research allowed the study to “access emotion, tacit assumptions, and collective sensemaking” (Tracy, 2020, p. 70). Many participants acknowledged that they had never meaningfully interrogated their activist identity adoption and maintenance process before our interview, which meant it was valuable to provide them with multiple opportunities to engage in reflective introspection. An arts-based research can function as a contemplative method of data collection, in which participants themselves also gain insight into their situation and experience (Tracy, 2020).

I asked participants to draw (a) *what they believe most people think an activist looks like*, and (b) *what they believe an activist actually looks like*. All participants were asked to draw the images in the same order and were not provided a preview of what they would be prompted to draw next. I constructed the prompts based on the understanding that an arts-based elicitation approach helps unveil the more taken-for-granted assumptions of identity characteristics (Bell & Clarke, 2014). Arts-based elicitation provided value to the data as these images illuminate the participants’ perceived “traditional conceptualization of activism” (i.e., how participants interpret the communal, relational, or enacted layers of activist identities) and the “personalized conceptualization of activism” (i.e., how participants interpret their individual layer of activist identity). The ordering of both prompts (i.e., beginning with the traditional conceptualization, followed by the personal conceptualization) allowed participants to independently reflect on how their layers of identity directly challenge or align with one another. By concluding with an activity focused on large-scale considerations about what constitutes activism, participants were prompted to reflect on the interview, and encouraged to provide their own account of what they

shared. In placing this data collection method at the end of the interview session, participants were able to reflect on our conversation as a whole, synthesizing their thoughts into succinct, visual markers.

For those participating in a virtual interview ($N = 15$), we utilized Zoom's Whiteboard feature, in which participants used the mouse or trackpad on their computer to digitally draw and write on a shared virtual canvas. Girls participating in an in-person interview ($N = 4$) were provided a tablet and stylus pen, where they wrote and drew on the touch screen surface. While all 19 participants took part in the activity, download errors resulted in one participant's second drawing not saving, as well as both drawings from a second participant not saving. Additionally, one participant created a single drawing to answer both prompts, and two participants drew more than one drawing in response to a prompt. As a result, 19 images were collected for the first prompt, and 18 images were collected for the second prompt, for a total of 37 images. In addition to the drawings themselves, as participants drew, I asked them to describe their images. These image descriptions were recorded and transcribed as part of the interview data collection.

Data Analysis

To employ a phonetic, iterative analysis, I alternated between both “emic, or emergent, readings of the data and an etic use of existing models, explanations, and theories” (Tracy, 2020, p. 209). Although I began the data collection process with a foundation of existing literature and theoretical frameworks (i.e., personal parameters for activism, CTI, and turning point analysis), I approached the study as a cyclic, iterative process and overlapped both the data collection and data analysis phases (Tracy, 2020), which allowed me to ultimately use emergent data to guide a final research direction. For example, I initially began the study heavily guided by existing literature that focused on the origins of activist identity formation and emphasized the distinction

between doing activism and being an activist (Bobel, 2007; Taft, 2017). Explicitly building on Taft's (2017) study with girl activists, I prioritized participants' activist entry stories as indicative of their conceptualization of activism as a whole. However, throughout the interview process, many participants were routinely more interested in explaining the nuances of maintaining an activist identity (e.g., the struggles of navigating adult activist spaces after years in youth activist spaces), rather than limiting the discussion to the initial process of adopting one. As a result, I continuously updated my interview guide throughout the interview process to include additional questions about how participants maintained an activist identity. I prompted participants not only to share their entry stories, but also to reflect on their experiences retaining the activist identity, as well as to look toward the future and express how they believe activism would or would not continue to manifest in their lives in the coming years.

Notably, when guiding participants to recount their activist entry stories, those with a comparatively brief time as an activist demonstrated a greater desire to focus on that particular phase of their identity formation. For those with less time identifying as an activist, their activist experiences were largely still characterized by their entry stories. However, more experienced participants had additional phases in which they reflected on the process of retaining the identity after their initial activist identity adoption. Consequently, the focus of the study evolved in tandem with the focus of the participants' insights.

To begin analyzing the data, I collected and organized participant data and materials (e.g., transcripts and images). After an initial round of participants, I began transcribing the interviews and organizing the drawings by participants. This data immersion process occurred both prior to and in tandem with the data analysis. Initially, the research questions asked: (a) How do young women's activist entry stories challenge/support traditional parameters of activism? and (b) What

events do participants describe as turning points that influenced their perceptions of their personal activist identity? As I began engaging in primary-cycle coding (Saldaña, 2011), in which I examined transcripts and discovered what information was directly present in the data, I chose to code holistically, considering the research questions and beyond, and did not limit my data analysis. Throughout the analysis I tracked all emergent information in the data, comparing the results with my existing research questions and consistently reconsidering the direction of analysis. After completing open line-by-line coding for eight interviews, I began a more focused coding process with my existing codes as I analyzed the remainder of the data.

I followed this work with second-level coding (Gioia et al., 2013; Saldaña, 2016), critically examining the first-level codes and identifying both general patterns and connections to larger theoretical knowledge. As I analyzed this data and began generating findings, I realized that my research questions required a significant rework. In a surprising turn, the findings began to indicate that the answer to RQ2 (i.e., *What events do participants describe as turning points that influenced their perceptions of their personal activist identity?*) was embedded within RQ1 itself (i.e., *How do young women's activist entry stories challenge/support traditional parameters of activism?*). In other words, the participants' evolving definitions of activism appeared to function as the participants' turning points as well, highlighting a deeper connection between the two research questions. Furthermore, after expanding the interview guide to include more emphasis on maintaining an activist identity, I found RQ1's specification of an "entry story" to be too confining and limiting the scope of my research. Consequently, I merged both questions to formulate a new, more comprehensive research question (i.e., *What identity gaps do girl activists frame as turning points that influence how they conceptualize their individual activist identity?*)

to encapsulate the intertwined nature of participants' experiences, definitions, identities, and turning points.

For the next phase of data analysis, I organized the dataset by two categories: codes that indicated girls' definitions of activism (e.g., *activism as solution-oriented* and *activism as community*) and codes that indicated instances of change, sensemaking, and identity negotiation (e.g., *overcoming self-doubt* and *learning to care*). The process was repeated until all interactions in the existing data were categorized into a code. After doing so, I found that the section of my codebook overviewing definitions of activism required a second round of organization, in order to clarify whether the definition was a retrospective conceptualization of activism or a present-day conceptualization. It was this act of dividing definitions by a “past” and “present” dichotomy when I began to realize I was also tracking evidence of change and sensemaking. In response, I decided to search the data for turning points that connected a previous definition of activism to a current definition. As a result, my section of the codebook tracking definitions ultimately fused with the section tracking turning points. For example, the codes *activism as inaccessible* and *activism as approachable* were connected via the code *embracing the community*.

Following this step, I engaged in another round of coding in which the proposed turning points were either subsumed or made more distinct from one another. For example, the *operating with no guidebook* code (i.e., instances in which participants framed activist activities as uncharted territory with no replicable models) was subsumed into the *activism as not normal* code (i.e., instances in which participants framed activism as a nontraditional pastime). Definitions and exemplars were further defined and refined through a process of constant

comparison, as I continually used an abductive approach and compared emergent data with existing theories in order to find the strongest explanations and interpretations.

After finalizing my codebook for the transcript data, I then began overviewing my art-based elicitation data. To incorporate the participants' drawings, I applied a modified version of Capous-Desyllas & Bromfield's (2018) photovoice data analysis, in which I identified what the image is depicting, how the participant describes the image, and my own interpretation of the image. To do so, I created a table in which I (a) displayed the drawing, (b) wrote a description of the drawing, (c) lifted participants' own descriptions from the transcripts, (d) described an implied meaning of the drawing (e.g., a crying stick figure described as believing "the world is out to get them" implied that the participant believed people view activists as over-sensitive), and (e) cross-referenced my existing codebook with both the girls' own descriptions of their drawings, as well as my own summary of the drawings' content. In doing so, three additional potential codes emerged that were not part of the original codebook. However, I ultimately decided that they were not robust enough to warrant their own codes in the codebook. Rather, all images were analyzed via the codebook's existing codes. After completing the analysis for the entirety of the data, the findings of the study emerged.

Chapter 4: Findings

The study's research question is as follows: What identity gaps do girl activists frame as turning points that influence how they conceptualize their individual activist identity? Guided by the current dataset and the existing literature (i.e., personal parameters for activism, CTI, and turning point analysis), I mapped participants' evolving definitions of activism in conjunction with participants' retrospective moments of identity change. This dataset revealed that the process of adopting an activist identity for young girls is characterized by significant moments of redefining and reconceptualizing in response to identity gaps. As a result, the following chapter overviews such gaps and their resulting turning points. Throughout the analysis, quotes from the semi-structured interviews and figures from the arts-based elicitation portions of the data collection are included.

In the context of girl activists, identity gaps are the “discrepancies between or among the...frames of identity” that are created, maintained, or negotiated via communication with both other activists and non-activists alike (Jung & Hecht, 2004, p. 268). Identity gap negotiations, when paired with a turning points analysis (Baxter & Bullis, 1986), highlight a connection between activist identity conceptualization and adoption. Significant moments of change and sensemaking emerged in the context of four identity gaps: (a) individual-communal, (b) individual-relational, (c) individual-enacted, and (d) individual-material. Turning points were charted, not as consecutive moments contingent on experiencing linear stages, but rather as significant moments of sensemaking that could manifest at any point throughout the process of identifying as an activist. These moments of redefining and reconceptualizing occurred consistently throughout the process of adopting and maintaining an activist identity. Additionally, not every participant explicitly experienced every gap. Rather, in accordance with

turning point analysis, these identified gaps instead represent the most common potential moments of identity change observed among participants.

Collectively, girl activists develop their activist identities by communicatively co-constructing an evolving definition of activism. Such moments of change and reconstruction are turning points in conceptualizing activism and identifying as an activist. This chapter overviews the turning points that emerged in the data in response to six specific gaps: (a) *the normality gap*, (b) *the incompatibility gap*, (c) *the likability gap*, (d) *the exceptionalism gap*, (e) *the charm gap*, and (f) *the maturity gap*.

Individual-Communal Activist Identity Gaps

An individual-communal activist identity gap is a discrepancy between one's individual activist self-image and a group-defined activist identity (Jung & Hecht, 2004). Such a gap is unique from other identity gaps present in the data, as it is not the result of interpersonal interactions, but rather a "collective level" of understanding of what constitutes activism (Jung & Hecht, 2004, p. 268). A societal definition of activism, consequently, communicates a standardized, communal identity. When a girl activist experiences a misalignment between her own self-image and a societal understanding of her identity, an individual-communal activist identity gap emerges. Two such gaps emerged in the study's dataset: *the normality gap* and *the incompatibility gap*.

The Normality Gap

One individual-community activist identity gap present in the dataset is *the normality gap*. *The normality gap* is a discrepancy between an individual's self-image as someone possessing standard levels of power and potential, and a communally constructed image of someone possessing exceptional skills and extraordinary power. Participants routinely

characterized themselves as “a normal person” and activism as “not normal.” Participants explained that, in retrospect, the societal construction of what constitutes an activist often felt alienating or unattainable, and as a result, most participants did not initially believe themselves capable of such political prowess. As 18-year old Sara explained, girls who pay attention to social movements and political spaces learn “a lot about Greta Thunberg or [other] huge activists, and that doesn’t seem accessible or achievable.” Similarly, 17-year old Aria stated:

I feel like, in a sense, if you see someone who's around your age doing something, it might help inspire you as well. But in the same token, because if it's Greta Thunberg or people who are so known on such a large scale, then it kind of feels like oh, well, *that's* activism...that's not something that I can do because I'm just, you know, a normal high school kid.

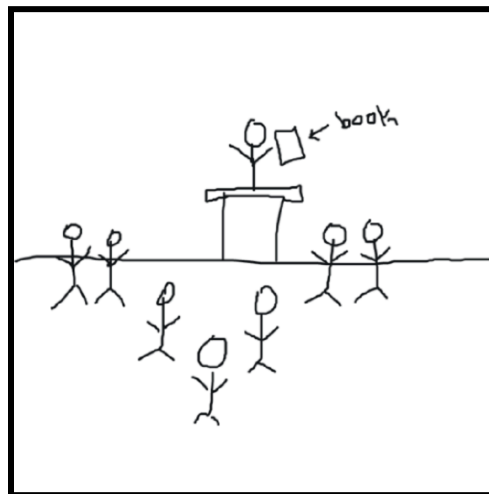
In our interview, Aria retrospectively characterized activism as something she did not believe she could replicate, even as she witnessed other teenage girls do so, because it felt inherently incompatible and out of reach as “a normal high school kid.”

Both Aria’s and Sara’s excerpts underscore the source of *the normality gap*: a discrepancy in assumed power between themselves (i.e., an individual layer of identity) and other activists (i.e., a communal layer of identity). Similarly, when prompted to draw the traditional conceptualization of an activist, many girls emphasized front-facing, inaccessible avenues of activism. Inspired by “the Women’s March, March For Our Lives, and all those other Washington marches and protests,” Kara (age 21) drew a stick figure on a stage, standing behind a podium, speaking in front of a crowd (Figure 1). She explained that, while learning to identify as an activist, she often suffered from an insecurity that she was not a “leader” on a stage with a pre-established audience. 20-year-old Erika expressed a similar sentiment, saying that some of

her initial interactions with traditional activist spaces, such as public climate protests, featured lots of “celebrities on stage,” which implicitly exacerbated the gap between how she viewed herself and how the activist platform was communicated to her.

Figure 1

Traditional Conceptualization of Activism: Kara’s Stage and Crowd



Note. Stick figure on a stage, holding a book, standing behind a podium, and speaking in front of a crowd, “which is aspirational for many young activists.”

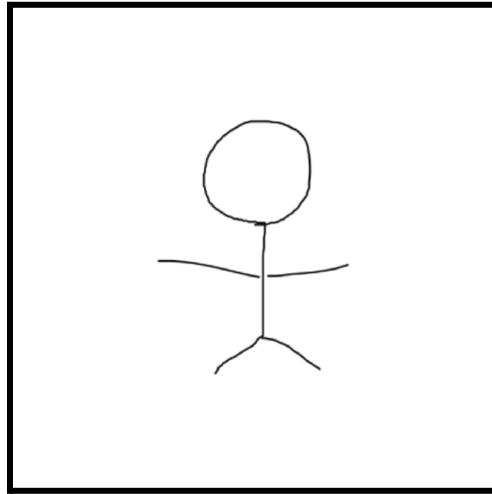
Routinely, participants explained that societal depictions of activists communicated activism as inaccessible, unapproachable, and unwieldy. Figures like Greta Thunberg were inspiring, but not replicable. Speakers at protests were compelling, but not relatable. Celebrity guests were impressive, but not accessible. As a result, when activism was communally conceptualized as extraordinary and beyond reach, participants viewed their own capacity and

power as inadequate. A socially constructed notion of what constitutes an activist identity generated feelings of insecurity among individuals who were otherwise interested in becoming politically active, but were deterred by a communal identity communicating exceptionalism. Taken as a whole, participants' individual identity (e.g., *I am a normal girl*) and communal identity (e.g., *activists are not normal*) created an individual-communal activist identity gap.

As a result, one major turning point in participants' process of identifying as an activist is reconceptualizing their definition of activism and closing this identity gap. As participants explained, such a negotiation was accomplished by meeting other activists and feeling embraced by activist communities. Sara explained that both attending an activist event where she saw "something tangible from student organizing," as well as other activists choosing to welcome her and mentor her, "made it all accessible." Similarly, Aria said that, in retrospect, "feeling included and accepted in any space [made me] feel more like oh, okay, I really can fit in. I really can do this." Kara, when prompted to draw an image of what she now personally considers activism, elected not to draw a new picture. Instead she simply pointed to the audience in her original drawing (Figure 1) and said, "Them too. The people on the floor." Other participants, when responding to the same prompt, chose to draw unadorned stick figures, describing activists as "normal," "everyday," and "typical people" (See Figures 2 and 3). As evidenced by these excerpts, girls who successfully overcome *the normality gap* do so by crafting a definition of the activist identity that is inclusive of both the impressive, famous figures, as well as the "normal," everyday people.

Figure 2

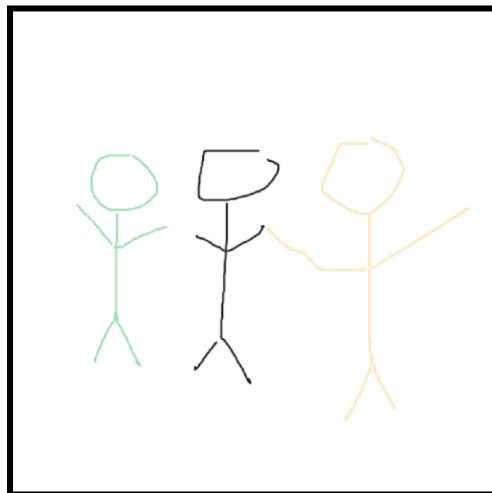
Personal Conceptualization of Activism: Sara's "All-Encompassing" Stick Figure



Note. Plain stick figure with no details, representative of "anyone and everyone."

Figure 3

Personal Conceptualization of Activism: Ashley's "Everybody" Stick Figures



Note. Three plain stick figures with no details, representative of "just people"

Because layers of identity are not separate from each other (Jung & Hecht, 2004), participants negotiated *the normality gap* by adapting their definition of activism to include both the communal identity (i.e., *activists can be extraordinary*) and the individual identity (i.e., *activists can also be ordinary*), rather than rejecting one for the other. Participants expanded their definition of activists, determining that, while the unattainable, impressive figures qualified as activists, their personal definition also encompassed accessible everyday people. These findings indicate that a major turning point for girl activists is negotiating their definition of activism by reconceptualizing its meaning from something restrictive to something accessible. Another such instance of participants' individual-communal activist identity gap negotiations is *the incompatibility gap*.

The Incompatibility Gap

A second individual-communal activist identity gap present in the dataset is *the incompatibility gap*. *The incompatibility gap* is a discrepancy between an individual's self-image as a girl and activist, and a communally constructed image that one cannot be both. Participants consistently described feeling as though they could not be viewed as both a teenage girl and an activist, which consequently created a gap between their individual identity and communal identity. As 20-year-old Haley explained, she found that "the typical activist identity is perceived as completely incompatible with the typical mainstream early college, young woman." 18-year-old Eva expressed a similar sentiment, saying, "I feel like I was able to juggle that [teenage girl] identity for the longest time, but once I received a recognition from the White House, that's when things completely flipped." Participants routinely recounted feeling as though they had to choose between being treated as a teenage girl or treated as an activist.

Such a gap manifested in participants' anecdotes in two ways. One such way was via a perceived dismissal of their activism in favor of a focus on their girlhood, such as 21-year-old Julia's anecdote in which she was told "that girls don't have a lot of self confidence, so their political opinions don't actually carry that much weight." In other words, participants recounted that a recognition of their age and gender identities superseded a recognition of their activist identities. The second way in which such a gap manifested in participants' anecdotes was the inverse: an emphasis on their activism at the expense of their girlhood. For example, Sara (age 18) described an experience in which she was interviewed for her local news station to discuss her work championing a successful legislative accomplishment. She stated:

The article, and I'll remember this forever, was supposed to be celebrating me. It was supposed to be like wow, this amazing girl. But the first line was something like, "Most teenage girls spend their weekends at the mall or hanging out with friends, but not [Sara]." And I think that did so much harm, shaping my psyche. Because I was really hurt. I actually read that and started crying because I was like, how dare you try to celebrate girls or put down other people by putting me on a pedestal...And I think it's a testament to people's perspectives on teenage girl activists that we cannot be multifaceted, because maybe I *am* doing those things. Maybe I also...go to the mall on the weekends and hang out with my friends and this is not my only identity.

Here, Sara explains how the news outlet wanted to recognize her skills as an activist (e.g., "celebrating me"), but in doing so further marginalized other teenage girls, communicating a perceived incompatibility between the standardized conceptualizations of an activist and of a teenage girl. In overlooking and downplaying the political agency of other girls her age (e.g., "putting me on a pedestal"), Sara's experience underscores the restrictive nature of the

communal conceptualization of herself and her identity, in which teenage girl activists are denied the opportunity to identify as a “multifaceted,” complex individual.

Similarly, reflecting on her participation in activist spaces, Erika (age 20) shared that her “identity as a woman, as a teenage girl, and figuring out what that meant... was inhibited by activism.” 19-year-old Paige also recalled her early work in activist spaces, saying, “It made me feel like I couldn’t be a teenage girl. It made me feel like I had to choose to be something else entirely.” Such anecdotes from Julia, Sara, Erika, and Paige highlight the perceived dissonance between their identities as teenage girls and their identities as activists, a dichotomy that not only deepened the divide between their individual and communal identities but also underscored the crucial role of communication in their activist identity development. Participants reflected that such societal norms communicate the capabilities and interests of teenage girls as incompatible with serious activism. Taken as a whole, participants’ individual identity (e.g., *I am both a girl and an activist*) and communal identity (e.g., *girlhood and activism are contradictory*) created an individual-communal activist identity gap.

Consequently, a significant turning point in participants’ paths to identifying as activists is a reconceptualization of activist identities, which helps to close *the incompatibility gap*. Participants recalled that such identity gap negotiations often involved deliberately reframing the implied incompatibility that they experienced as an opportunity for empowerment, rather than as an obstacle to their activist identity adoption and maintenance. The direct misalignment of their identity as an activist created grounds for conscious, intentional growth and strength. 16-year-old Joy described choosing to embrace acts that were “seemingly a contradiction to being a teenage girl” — rather than “running away from them” — as a pivotal moment of change. Haley also reflected that learning to speak up to others, fight for her beliefs, and claim space in an

organization was “a vehicle for self empowerment that [she] didn’t have socially as well.”

Similarly, Paige explained:

Being in these spaces, it’ll break your spirit if you let it. But I learned that [you] can’t take what people say to you and just accept it and internalize it. The truth is that it is so empowering to be in these spaces, and you can gain so much confidence and self-assuredness and confidence and the ability to believe in yourself. And I feel like teenage girls are kind of in desperate need of places like that. [It is important to] take advantage of the fact that you’re entering a space that is...inherently built to help you grow and become bigger and learn to take up space. It’s so rewarding. It’s so fun.

In other words, Paige experienced a communicatively constructed incompatibility between her activism and her teenage girlhood, but did not fully adopt, “accept,” or “internalize” this communal identity. Rather, she carefully integrated aspects of it as she conceptualized an evolving personal definition of activism. In response to *the incompatibility gap*, Paige reframed her definition of activism as an avenue for empowerment, in which experiencing the gap can give a girl “self-assuredness and confidence and the ability to believe in [herself].” Collectively, Joy, Haley, and Paige underscore how the communicative act of reinterpreting the purpose and potential of activist spaces represents an important shift in how one conceptualizes activism and an activist identity, and thereby functions as a significant moment of sensemaking for girl activists.

Again, because layers of identity are not separate from each other (Jung & Hecht, 2004), participants did not reject the communal layer of activist identity, but instead incorporated it into their individual understanding of activist identities. These findings indicate that the conceptualization of activist identities is an ongoing communicative process in which activists

continually try to make sense of significant events and interactions. Furthermore, in addition to the individual-communal *normality gap* and *incompatibility gap*, other significant turning points in girls' activist identity processes are individual-relational activist identity gaps.

Individual-Relational Activist Identity Gaps

An individual-relational activist identity gap is a discrepancy between one's personal activist identity and one's ascribed relational activist identity (Jung & Hecht, 2004). Such gaps are exacerbated by a communicatively constructed difference between one's self-concept and others' appraisals of their activist identity (Jung & Hecht, 2004). In the context of girl activists, participants experienced individual-relational activist identity gaps in interactions with both the non-activists and the other activists in their lives. When a girl activist experiences misalignment between her own self-image and an ascribed identity, an individual-relational activist identity gap emerges. Two such gaps emerged in the analysis: *the likability gap* and *the exceptionalism gap*.

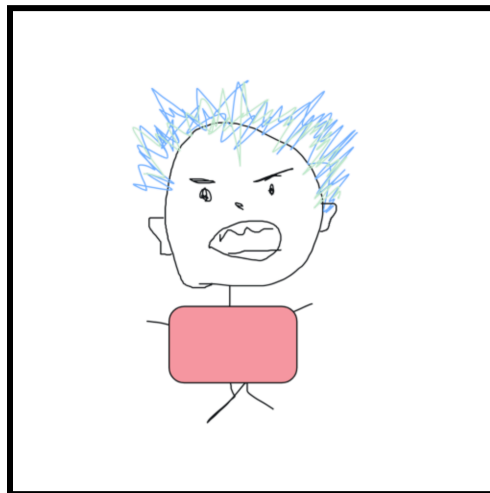
The Likability Gap

One individual-relational activist identity gap present in the dataset is *the likability gap*. *The likeability gap* is a discrepancy between an individual's self-image as someone who desires to be an activist, and a relationally ascribed image of activists as an undesirable identity. Participants routinely described the activist identity ascribed by non-activists as an obstacle to their activist identity adoption and maintenance. Throughout our interviews, participants recalled experiencing a desire to adopt or uphold a girl activist identity, but feeling as though non-activist individuals in their lives often constructed an unfavorable caricature of this identity. For example, Eva (age 18) reflected on the experience of a girl activist as one marked by "a lot of backlash from...peers, a lot of ridiculing, bullying." 16-year-old Lisa similarly framed the

experience as one in which “your peers [are] making fun of you.” Additionally, when prompted to draw the traditional conceptualization of an activist, the bulk of participants created drawings of stick figures that they characterized as angry, radical, and off-putting (see Figures 4 and 5). The figures were described as “a social outcast” (Sara) and “on the fringes of social norms” (Haley). In such drawings, participants described the source of *the likability gap*: a discrepancy in how they characterized who they wanted to be (i.e., their individual layer of activist identity) and how others characterized who they wanted to be (i.e., an ascribed relational layer of activist identity).

Figure 4

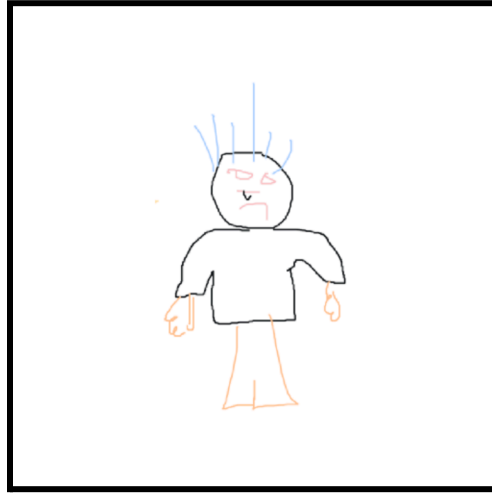
Traditional Conceptualization of Activism: Sara’s Angry Activist



Note. Stick figure with spiky blue hair, angry eyebrows, mouth open and yelling, with an appearance that “defies social norms.”

Figure 5

Traditional Conceptualization of Activism: Ashley's Annoying Activist



Note. Stick figure with spiky blue hair and an angry, frowning face, who is “crazy,” “angry,” and “always crying.”

Additionally, participants described feeling as though their emotional expressions or responses were dismissed, belittled, or mocked by others. Lisa shared that in her family, there was “a running joke” that she “was ‘the woke one’ ...destined to be crazy, with blue hair.” Participants reflected on feeling labeled as “crybabies,” (Eva), “snowflakes,” (Ashley) “unreasonable,” (Selah) or “a pain in the ass” (Paige; see Figure 6). Taken as a whole, participants’ individual identity (e.g., *I want to be a girl activist*) and relational identity (e.g., *the girl activist identity is undesirable*) created an individual-relational activist identity gap.

Figure 6

Traditional Conceptualization of Activism: Paige's Crying Activist



Note. Stick figure with two braids ("because she's a little girl, what does she know?"), crying and distressed.

As a result, one major turning point in participants' process of identifying as an activist is reconceptualizing their definition of activism and closing this identity gap. In the context of *the likability gap*, significant moments of change and sensemaking occur when reframing characteristics of the ascribed relational identity, often when spending time with other activists. 23-year-old Xiomara described undergoing a significant moment of sensemaking when she realized that although people believe activists "are angry," the truth is that "it's never anger. It's passion." She reflected on the transformative experience of entering activist spaces and gaining a new understanding of her own activism in relation to the ascribed activist identity:

In those places, I don't feel upset...I feel happy with what I'm doing. I'm proud of myself for being where I am. And usually the people around me are also proud that I

showed up, and I'm proud that they showed up. And it's a very positive environment.

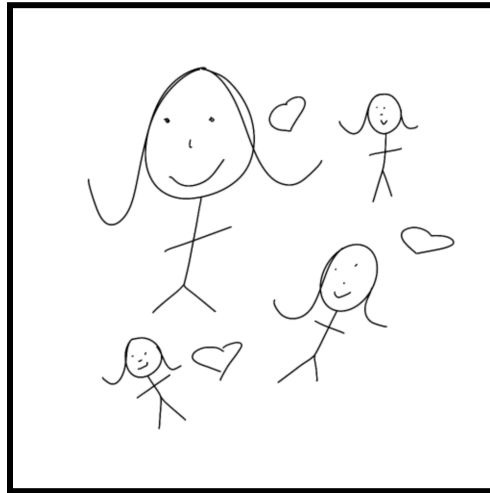
Like, of course, we're chanting and we're yelling and...seem angry.

In our interview, Xiomara underscored the transformative power of interacting with activist spaces and thereby reconsidering the connotations of activism, such as anger (e.g., “of course, we're chanting and we're yelling”). Similarly, when prompted to draw an image of their personal conceptualization of activism, participants regularly drew images of “happy and welcoming” people (Joy) and members of a “compassionate community” (Aria; see Figure 7). As exemplified by such images and Xiomara's anecdote, participants found that entering activist spaces in which they witnessed the allegedly undesirable characteristics of activism did not ultimately deter them from embracing the activist identity. Rather, individuals often found themselves gaining a deeper understanding of their own definition as they engaged in dialogue and witnessed the collective power of social movement spaces. As a result, they reframed the connotations of the ascribed relational identity from negative and off-putting into positive and welcoming.

Additionally, participants admitted that although experiencing the ascribed unlikable, undesirable activist identity was an obstacle to their activist identity adoption and maintenance, such a characterization was not unfounded. For example, after expressing frustration at the “blue hair” stereotype and its reductionist portrayal of activists based on superficial characteristics, Sara then acquiesced, “Okay, there's a lot of people with colored hair. I'm not gonna lie.” Similarly, Erika explained that the aggressive megaphone stereotype was insulting, as it reduced their activism to a simplistic and exaggerated portrayal, and then admitted, “Okay, well, I do own [a megaphone] too.” Such anecdotes highlight how ascribed activist identities do not need to be inherently false to nevertheless feel disagreeable. Rather, their harmful nature can stem from narrow and unsympathetic interpretations.

Figure 7

Personal Conceptualization of Activism: Joy's Group of Friends



Note. Four smiling stick figures, surrounded by hearts, who are “just people,” “nice,” “happy,” and “welcoming,” with “good vibes.”

Consistently, throughout participant anecdotes, ascribed anger is redefined as passion. Ascribed oversensitivity is reconceptualized as empathy. Ascribed hostility is reframed as holding oneself to principled standards. Because these layers of identity are not entirely separate from each other (Jung & Hecht, 2004), rather than reject the relational identity entirely, participants reconceptualize and recontextualize. These findings indicate that a major turning point for girl activists is negotiating their definition of activism by reframing its connotation from something off-putting to something desirable. For participants, their evolving definition of activism involves more than just expanding the substance of activism, but also expanding the attached overtones, implications, and connotations. Another such instance of participants' individual-relational activist identity gap negotiations is *the exceptionalism gap*.

The Exceptionalism Gap

A second individual-relational activist identity gap present in the dataset is *the exceptionalism gap*. *The exceptionalism gap* is a discrepancy between an individual's self-image as a serious activist, and a relationally ascribed image of a hyper-capable novelty. Participants often characterized their identity of a fully-fledged activist as being at odds with a relational identity ascribed by fellow activists, characterized by hollow, effusive praise. Often, girls viewed themselves as activists bearing the load of the issues, handling the gruntwork, and engaging in high-level strategizing. Participants also described feeling as though they had been assigned an identity, as 19-year-old Paige described it, of an "oh-so-impressive wunderkind, with no thoughts worth actually listening to." Such participants routinely characterized the ascribed, relational identity of the girl activist as a flat, two-dimensional caricature. For example, when explaining how she believed most people view youth activists, 19-year-old Sabrina drew a stick figure wearing a superhero cape and superhero mask (Figure 8). This is because, in her own words, she and her fellow youth activists were sometimes treated like "some magical creature that was going to save us all." Similarly, 20-year-old Haley explained that even well-intentioned adult activists often speak about youth activism with "a fantastical whimsy."

Figure 8

Traditional Conceptualization of Activism: Sabrina's Superhero



Note. Stick figure holding a protest sign, wearing a superhero cape and superhero mask.

Adult activists, participants explained, placed a heavy burden among the younger activists. “We were their get-out-of-jail free card,” Paige explained. “When the young people were there, they didn’t have to do anything else.” However, as participants explained, although fellow activists sometimes overwhelmed young people with too much responsibility, they also refused to engage with them on a peer-to-peer level. Many expressed a frustration at the dichotomy between all the responsibility and none of the acknowledgement. Routinely, participants underscored that not all surface-level positive encouragement and praise is actually a valuable means of supporting youth activists. Rather, such a characterization can feel “isolating,” (Julia) “tokenizing,” (Sara) and “patronizing,” (Joy), as well as “dismissive and disrespectful” (Selah) to them and their work. As a result, participants routinely characterized *the*

exceptionalism gap, in which there were discrepancies between participants' individual activist identities and their ascribed activist identities (Jung & Hecht, 2004).

Importantly, such a gap is distinct from *the normality gap* because the pressures to overperform stem not from societal or communal expectations, but rather from specific interactions with fellow activists. In characterizing such a gap, participants often named specific activists in their lives who upheld this relational identity. Participants explained that they believed this relational identity was not perpetuated maliciously, but rather was ascribed by activists earnestly attempting to support their younger counterparts. However, participants ultimately reflected on *the likability gap* and *the exceptionalism gap* with mirroring levels of disdain. Lionizing youth activists, although an ostensibly positive characterization, participants explained, can feel like a dismissal of their political agency. Taken as a whole, participants' individual identity (e.g., *I am a serious activist*) and relational identity (e.g., *I am a fun novelty*) created an individual-relational activist identity gap.

Consequently, one major turning point in participants' activist identity process is reconceptualizing activist responsibilities and closing this identity gap. In the context of *the exceptionalism gap*, as participants explained, such a negotiation was accomplished by acknowledging youth activism as characterized by both their age and their activist sensibilities. Significant moments of change and sensemaking often occur when participants collaborate with and surround themselves with other youth activists. 18-year-old Josefina reflected that she felt as though her activism was finally communicated as "strong enough" once she began working with "a group of youths." She explained:

When activists see a youth activist on their own, trying to make change, they're not seen as actually worthwhile to listen to. But if there's a group of students, and they're yelling,

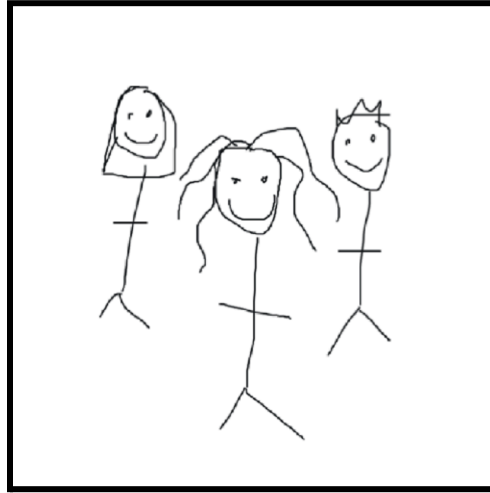
like “listen to me,” then people pay more attention to that. They're like, oh, wait, like there's a lot of them. Maybe they have something to say.

Here, Josefina underscores the connection between fellow activists observing “a lot of [youth activists]” and believing “they have something to say.” Despite being labeled as a novelty by some other activists, Josefina realized that the key to overcoming such challenges was to surround herself with other individuals who were also considered unique or different for the same reason. In doing so, she found a sense of solidarity and support that allowed fellow activists both to view her and other youth activists as exceptional, as well as to pay attention to her political acts and listen to her ideas.

Likewise, Haley reflected that the “element of solidarity” among fellow youth activists gave them “credibility” in the minds of other activists, thereby bolstering her ability to make change. Similarly, when prompted to draw their personal conceptualization of an activist, many girls chose to emphasize the importance of community. Erika (age 20), for example, drew an image of herself and her friends, explaining that she is “just one of many” (Figure 9). Lisa (age 16) reflected that interacting with fellow youth activists was “inspiring,” and that having “a group of supportive people” working in the same activist club was “the only reason people listened to me and that I was able to keep going.” Reflecting on the perceptions of their fellow activists, participants came to understand a notion of strength in numbers when exhibiting their relationally ascribed identity.

Figure 9

Personal Conceptualization of Activism: Erika's Community



Note. Three stick figures with smiling faces, “rooted in joy,” in which they are all “just one of many.”

In addition, despite lamenting a hollow characterization of youth activists ascribed to her by fellow activists, Sabrina admitted that it was still the same “people like that” who made activism “fulfilling.” Similarly, 19-year old Ashley reflected that “if you don't have a community of activists that supports you...you're going to feel like you're not an activist because nothing is happening.” Ultimately, girls did not entirely reject the ascribed identity, but rather incorporated their experiences into an evolving definition of activism.

As a result, because layers of identity are not separate from each other (Jung & Hecht, 2004), participants factored the ascribed identity (i.e., *a girl activist is uniquely exceptional*) into their individual understanding of activist identities (i.e., *I can be exceptional when I am one of many*). These findings indicate that a major turning point for girl activists is negotiating their

definition of activism by reconceptualizing its meaning as something fundamentally rooted in community and collaboration. Moreover, in addition to the individual-relational *likability gap* and *exceptionalism gap*, other significant turning points in girls' activist identity process are individual-enacted activist identity gaps.

Individual-Enacted Activist Identity Gaps

A personal-enacted activist identity gap refers to the discrepancy between an individual's self-image and how they express or present this identity in their behaviors and interactions with others (Jung & Hecht, 2004). Despite holding a particular self-concept of who they are or who they wish to be, girls can find themselves enacting a different version of their identity to the world (Jung & Hecht, 2004). When a girl activist experiences misalignment between her own self-image and her presented identity, an individual-enacted activist identity gap emerges. One such gap that emerged in the study's dataset is *the charm gap*.

The Charm Gap

A personal-enacted activist identity gap present in the dataset is *the charm gap*. *The charm gap* is a discrepancy between participants' own self-image as a fully formed activist and a restrictive, superficial activist identity that they enact in practice. Participants explained that they often found themselves performing an enacted identity of an activist that was contingent upon their age and gender rather than reflective of their activist sensibilities. Throughout our interviews, participants reflected that, even when they took events seriously and attempted to acknowledge the gravity of the social issues they were discussing, their enacted identity often appeared frivolous in nature. Participants described feeling as though they presented as "cute," (Selena) "charming," (Sabrina) and "endearing," (Joy) thereby making it challenging to be perceived as more than a superficial characterization. For example, 20-year-old Erika explained

that she spent her teenage years toted around to panels and events as the “token young person,” treated as a representative of all youth, rather than as an activist in her own right. Similarly, Haley (age 20) explained that she and her fellow youth activists “sort of begrudgingly leveraged [their] age as a tokenistic, but effective element of [their] identity.” Likewise, 23-year-old Demi reflected that as a teenager, although she “would play into it sometimes,” and strategically utilized her youth and a childlike performance as a persuasion tactic when speaking with adults, ultimately she “really wanted to break out of that...because it felt very weird.” Routinely, participants explained that their enacted activist identity, while acknowledging them as activists, was not fully representative of their individual activist identities.

An additional obstacle to activist identity adoption and maintenance that participants experienced as a result of *the charm gap* was the inherently temporal nature of such an enacted identity. Participants explained that, as girl activists, they often found themselves forced to perform an activist identity that boxed them into roles difficult to evolve past. Initially celebrated for the novelty of their youth, these tools became harder to employ as they grew up within the activist space. Sabrina, who had more than three years of continual experience as an activist, revealed that it took several instances of seeing recruitment material for the study before she decided to participate. She explained:

I remember thinking that...it’s kind of a bummer that you weren’t doing this study last year or the year before...two years ago I would’ve loved to talk about this. I thought I was so important and I was so impressive. It makes me cringe so much...I saw the story on Instagram that was looking for participants who are young and activists and I was like, well, too bad. I would’ve been a good person to interview at one point but I’m definitely not anymore.

In our interview, Sabrina described her hesitancy to participate in an interview about youth activism, despite still being only 19 years old, believing she no longer qualified as “a good person to interview.” Such an anecdote underscores the restrictive, temporal nature of the enacted identity of a girl activist. In reality, despite her belief that she was no longer the best representative for a study of this nature, Sabrina was nevertheless able to provide a comprehensive overview of her activist identity development and her personal parameters for the definition of activism. The problem was not that she had never identified as an activist, but that, as she explained, she felt as though she had “timed out” of her activist identity. As Sabrina explained, “I was cute. And I couldn’t be cute forever.”

While Sabrina was the most overt with this framing, it was not an uncommon sensation among other participants. Many expressed a frustration that their identity as a youth activist ultimately did not seamlessly transition into an identity as an adult activist. Participants described their youth as a “tool” (Demi) and “gimmick” (Erika) that they could no longer use. Furthermore, Haley reflected that as a teenager she “had this giant thing that was all [her] purpose” until she grew too old for youth activism. Haley stated, “I moved on from it and I had a big gaping hole in my life, and all I could think was, what do I do now?” Similarly, Sara reflected that her enacted girlhood activist identity resulted in her feeling “a little bit lost in adulthood.” As participants explained, when girls’ opportunities to express their activist identities are limited to superficial, constrictive performances of activism, it hinders not only their ability to express an activist identity as a youth, but also denies them the space to construct an activist identity that seamlessly follows them into adulthood. Taken as a whole, participants’ individual identity (e.g., *I am a fully formed activist*) and enacted identity (e.g., *I am a caricature of a girl activist*) created an individual-enacted activist identity gap.

Consequently, one major turning point in participants' process of identifying as an activist is reconceptualizing their definition of activism and closing this identity gap. As participants explained, such a negotiation was accomplished by reconceptualizing activism as a journey of "levels" (Julia, Sabrina, Demi) and "stages" (Paige, Joy, Kara), in which the way in which one enacts their activist identity evolves. Demi explained that she now views activism as "something at all different levels," while Sabrina reflected that her youth activism was "level one, entry level activist...but still an activist." Many participants explained that they still care about the political issues that they campaigned for as a teenager, but that they are also in the process of re-evaluating how to engage with them, now that they no longer have their teenage girlhood as a means of approaching activist spaces. However, even the participants who detailed the most struggles to retain the activist identity clarified at the end of the interview that they do not envision themselves ever fully losing the identity. Sabrina shared that she "will never reflect on being a teenager and not think about [activism]," but she "engages in a normal way now." Similarly, Haley explained that even when she is "not doing the actions, [the activist identity] is definitely permanently there."

Participants emphasized that in order to maintain their activist identity beyond teenage years, renegotiating their enacted activist identity was not just helpful, but a necessity. In other words, without an evolving definition of activism, their ability to approach issues and retain the activist identity would not evolve past their youth. This turning point underscores the complex interplay between one's individual activist identity and enacted activist identity. Namely, although participants sometimes found the enacted identity to be a slightly inauthentic caricature, the loss of the ability to perform such an identity was still difficult to overcome. When participants reflected on stepping back from activism or renegotiating their activist identity, they

emphasized a combination of resentment for having to carry the responsibilities of an adult when they were a teenager, as well as a need to reevaluate how to be an activist now that they were actually perceived as an adult.

Ultimately, because layers of identity are not separate from each other (Jung & Hecht, 2004), participants negotiated *the charm gap* by adapting their definition of activism to include both their enacted identity (i.e., *I am a young, girl activist*) and the individual identity (i.e., *I am more than a superficial girl activist*), rather than rejecting one for the other. Participants expanded their definition of activists, determining that, while their time as a youth activist qualified as activism, their personal definition also encompassed an evolving, less restrictive conceptualization of activism. These findings indicate that a major turning point for girl activists is negotiating their definition of activism by reconceptualizing its meaning from something temporary and restrictive to something capable of growth and evolution. Such findings underscore the importance for girl activists not only to craft a personalized definition of activism, but specifically an evolving personalized definition. Finally, in addition to the individual-enacted *charm gap*, other significant turning points in girls' activist identity process are individual-material activist identity gaps.

Individual-Material Activist Identity Gaps

An individual-material activist identity gap is a discrepancy between one's personal activist identity and one's "physical attributes," "health factors," and "territory and environments" (Kuiper, 2021, p. 179). As Kuiper's proposed fifth layer of identity, materiality accounts for the communicative construction of a girl's physicality (Kuiper, 2021, p. 179). Therefore, when a girl activist experiences misalignment between her own self-image and her material identity (i.e., her physical attributes, health factors, and territory or environment), an

individual-material activist identity gap emerges (Jung & Hecht, 2004, Kuiper, 2021). One such gap that emerged in the analysis is *the maturity gap*.

The Maturity Gap

An individual-material activist identity gap present in the data is *the maturity gap*. *The maturity gap* is a discrepancy between participants' self-image as an activist and a materially presented identity of a child. Participants routinely describe a discrepancy between a self-image as political actors with fully realized thoughts and opinions, and youth-contingent restrictions of how they physically appear and where they can physically enter. Participants describe a dissonance arising due to the ways in which societal expectations communicate what an activist should look like, such as someone who is physically imposing, and the ways in which they themselves presented physically, which they characterized as "small," (Selena) "short," (Demi) "girlish," (Paige) "baby-faced," (Selena) and "childish" (Joy). Haley recalled "often [attending] meetings wearing [her] mom's professional clothes" and "hesitating to wear anything youthful." Such an appearance, when paired with the environment of an activist space, exacerbates an individual-material activist identity gap.

Specifically, Participants characterize traditional, front-facing manifestations of activism, such as attending protests and marches, as dangerous and ill-advised. Participants describe the inability to drive a car or pay for transportation as an obstacle that exacerbates the adult-centric framing of activist spaces. Moreover, when participants do access traditional protest environments, they describe the experiences as "unsafe" (Lisa), "life-risking" (Zara), and "threatening toward girls specifically" (Joy). 23-year-old Demi reflected on her experiences canvassing in neighborhoods as "a very scary experience as a teenage girl" and "something a young woman probably should not have been doing." In such characterizations, participants

describe how the territory and environment of activist spaces can communicate the identity of an activist. Together, the materiality of both physical attributes and activist environments communicate an activist identity that, as participants explained, often felt alienating, and sometimes too great a risk to warrant engaging. Taken as a whole, participants' individual identity (e.g., *I am mature enough to have political opinions*) and material identity (e.g., *I look so much like a child that I do not have adult agency*) created an individual-material activist identity gap.

Consequently, one major turning point in participants' process of identifying as an activist is broadening their definition of activism and closing this identity gap. For most participants, this required them to define activism as inclusive of hidden, non-confrontational acts. 19-year-old Ashley, for example, explained that the act of simply "having these conversations at home" became a cornerstone of her activism, considering she wouldn't "feel safe" doing the same "out in the streets." She explained:

I think activism, more than anything, is not just getting out in the street. It's online. It's with your family. It's just having an opinion and really pushing forwards on that and, you know, going against the majority or going against them, whatever it is, however it is for you.

23-year-old Xiomara shared a similar sentiment, saying:

I realized it doesn't matter who you're talking to. It just matters that you're talking to somebody, that you're telling somebody and that you're spreading that word because at the end of the day, that's what activism is.

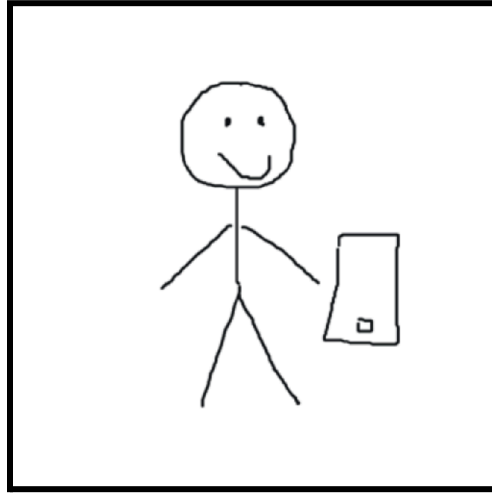
Here, both participants reflect on how they expanded their definition of activism to include private territories, such as the home. For Ashley and Xiomara, negotiating the role of the

physicality of activism emerged as a pivotal turning point in their activist identity development. Both excerpts highlight a cornerstone for many participants: defining activism as something that can manifest in the privacy of one's own home, such as via advocacy and education through digital platforms, personal reflections, or organizing efforts within their immediate social circles.

Similarly, Sabrina (age 19) and Josefina (age 18), when prompted to draw an image of what they now personally consider activism, emphasized digital participation, with Josefina explicitly noting in her drawing descriptions that the “behind-the-scenes work” was a secondary, equally necessary and “powerful” avenue to engage in activism. Such anecdotes from Ashley, Xiomara, Sabrina, and Josefina highlight how negotiating their understandings of how the definition of activism hinges on territory and environment was a pivotal moment of change and sensemaking. For most participants, negotiating their self-image as an activist and their perceived physicality in protest spaces was a defining milestone in their activist identity. 21-year-old Julia described striking a balance between “keeping at it” but also “keeping [herself] safe” as an integral part of her journey toward activism. As evidenced by these excerpts, girls who successfully overcome *the maturity gap* do so by learning to conceptualize activism as a phenomenon that is not dependent on their body, size, and physicality.

Figure 10

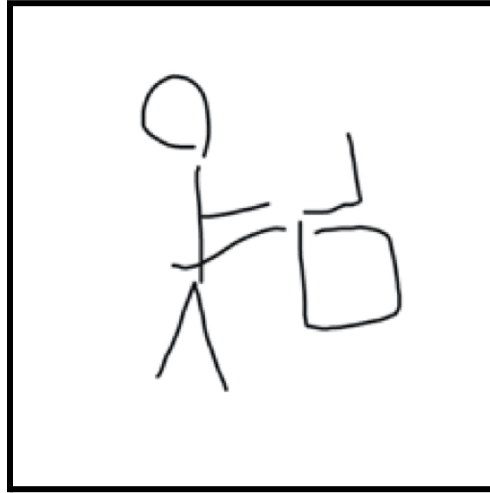
Personal Conceptualization of Activism: Sabrina's Digital Activist



Note. Stick figure with a smiling face, holding a phone (performing actions online and digitally), "just a person."

Figure 11

Personal Conceptualization of Activism: Josefina's Digital Activist



Note. A stick figure on the computer performing behind-the-scenes work, "making these events happen," and posting online.

Because individual and material layers of activist identity are not entirely separate from each other (Jung & Hecht, 2004; Kuiper, 2021), rather than reject the material identity entirely, participants reconceptualize and recontextualize. These findings indicate that a major turning point for girl activists is negotiating their definition of activism by reframing its definition as something contingent on physicality and environment to something broader and more inclusive.

In conclusion, these findings uncovered how girl activists undergo significant moments of redefining and reconceptualizing in response to identity gaps. By applying both CTI and turning point analysis (Bullis & Bach, 1989; Hecht, 1993; Hecht et al., 2005; Jung & Hecht, 2004; Yoshimura, 2017), the identity development process that emerged contextualizes how girls

develop their activist identities by communicatively co-constructing an evolving definition of activism.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This study explored how girl activists' identity gap negotiations function as turning points in the process of constructing activist identities. The research question posed in this study (i.e., *What identity gaps do girl activists frame as turning points that influence how they conceptualize their individual activist identity?*) was answered through semi-structured interviews with 19 activists, as well as an arts-based elicitation activity. A phronetic iterative analysis (Tracy, 2018, 2020) revealed that girl activists undergo turning points throughout their process of identifying as an activist by communicatively co-constructing an evolving definition of activism. The analysis identified six activist identity gaps that girl activists negotiate by re-contextualizing their definition of activism. The following sections outline the theoretical and methodological contributions of these findings, overview the study's limitations, and discuss avenues for future research.

Theoretical Contributions

The study contributes to existing literature in four ways. First, the study extends the application of the communication theory of identity (Hecht, 1993) to activist spaces. The findings build on existing literature concerning the experiences of girl activists (Keller, 2015; Keller, 2016; Khoja-Moolji & Chacko, 2024; Taft, 2011; Taft, 2017; Vanner & Dugal, 2020; Walters, 2016) by focusing specifically on the communicative influences affecting their activist identities. For example, while existing literature also indicates that age-dependent factors such as the inability to own a car or to have complete say in one's own schedule can marginalize teenagers from traditional venues of activism (Gordon, 2008), the study expands such a finding by underscoring the role of communication in constructing the activist identity as adult-centric (i.e., *the maturity gap*). Furthermore, in addition to supporting the connection between identity

and social movement participation (Compton, 2019; Klandermans, 1984; Taylor & Raeburn, 1995; Whittier, 1995), the study also extends such analysis by examining different layers of identity in relation to each other (e.g., how a communal activist identity can conflict with and inform an individual activist identity). The study's findings also underscore how activist identity is not a product of communication, but rather is communication itself (e.g., girls can communicate a performed version of their identities, as seen in *the charm gap*). This extension of CTI into activist contexts opens new paths for analyzing how identities are performed, challenged, and maintained in the pursuit of social change and political action, thereby supporting and extending both the theory itself, as well as our understanding of activism as a communicatively constructed practice.

Second, the study utilizes Kuiper's (2021) proposed fifth frame of identity and directly supports two of the three assumptions of the material frame: (a) "our physical attributes shape and influence our identities," and (b) "our territory and environments shape and influence our identities" (p. 179). The findings of this study clarify a connection between girl activists' identities and their physical appearance (e.g., size, height, clothes, etc.), as well as a connection between their identities and the physical locations in which girl activists shape such identities (e.g., in public protests, in private homes, etc.). Applying materiality into activist contexts reveals new paths for understanding how physicality operates as its own separate layer of identity, distinct from other communal, relational, and enacted layers. Acknowledging materiality as its own frame, rather than treating girls' physical attributes and environments as components of other layers of identity, further contributes to the value of Kuiper's proposed fifth frame.

Third, the study supports and extends existing literature on strategies for navigating identity gaps. Strategies identified in prior literature, such as relabeling, reframing, and redefining (Maeda & Hecht, 2012; Nuru, 2014; Reese, 2023) are present in this study. Additionally, this study also pairs identity gap negotiation with turning point analysis, extending the applicability of both frameworks. While previous research has posited that individuals can address gaps by reconceptualizing one or more of their layers of identity, this study specifically frames such an act as not only a means of closing a gap, but specifically as a significant turning point and moment of sensemaking in an individual's identity development, capable of manifesting at any point throughout the process of identifying as an activist. There is value in examining identity gap negotiations through the lens of additional theoretical frameworks, such as turning point analysis, as it offers a broader and more nuanced understanding of the complexities involved in both navigating and communicatively constructing identities. Framing identity gap negotiations as moments of change and sensemaking acknowledges that individuals communicatively construct their individual layer of identity based on their understanding and conceptualization of other layers of identity.

Finally, the study furthers the pairing of turning point analysis with identity. Traditionally, the turning point analysis framework has been predominantly used within interpersonal contexts to understand relationships (Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Baxter & Bullis, 1989; Holladay et al., 1998). However, a growing body of research has extended its applicability into identity contexts, exploring its relevance in understanding how individuals develop layers and milestones of their identities. The present study contributes to this growing body of literature by providing findings that support the value of utilizing the turning point analysis framework in understanding identity. For example, in the context of girl activists, identity gap negotiation alone would not offer a

complete view of the study's findings. Rather, a turning point analysis underscores that girls' identity negotiation moments are identifiable, significant moments of change and sensemaking that can occur at any stage throughout the process of identifying as an activist. Furthermore, by employing a turning point analysis, participants were granted the agency to reconstruct events and assign meaning, resulting in findings that track a participant-focused, nuanced development of identity adoption and maintenance among activists. Moving forward, this theoretical approach has the potential to assist qualitative scholars documenting identity development as irregular and unpredictable, marked by significant moments of change and sensemaking. By demonstrating the applicability of turning point analysis in identity contexts, the study helps to highlight its potential as a tool for understanding identity formation and development beyond the context of girl activists.

Methodological Contributions

This study contributes to the existing literature supporting arts-based research as a valuable methodological tool. Arts-based elicitation methods, such as the drawing activity featured in the study, are valuable in enhancing research methodology by uncovering insights that text alone cannot capture (Tracy, 2020). In addition, arts-based methods complement other qualitative research methods, such as interviews, by revealing the tacit knowledge that participants may not convey in words alone (Tracy, 2020). For example, including an arts-based method allowed participants to describe material components of their experience, such as the appearance of activist stereotypes and the environments of front-facing avenues of activism. Including such techniques is crucial for gaining a more comprehensive understanding of the subject matter and uncovering hidden insights that enrich the findings.

Specifically, including an arts-based approach to an activist context helps to interrogate layers of identity by providing participants an opportunity to directly reflect on their own conceptualizations of identity. For example, asking participants direct questions about their layers of identity (e.g., *How does your definition of activism conflict with a more traditional conceptualization of activism?*) is an abstract question rooted in academic literature, and potentially difficult for participants to directly answer and effectively convey their perspective. However, presenting the terms in a visual, arts-based context can make the concept more direct and understandable to participants. In their drawings, girl activists were able to directly compare their layers of identity, a level of thought process that was otherwise difficult to incorporate in conversation alone. Moving forward, this multi-faceted methodological approach has the potential to assist qualitative scholars in integrating a material perspective into their research findings, as well as allow for participants' direct comparisons of their conflicting layers of identity, enabling a more comprehensive analysis of identity adoption and maintenance.

Practical Applications

Participants of this study are not just adolescents constructing a personal identity, but also burgeoning social agents navigating their role in society, recognizing oppressive structures, and advocating for change. The findings of this study can be applied in activist spaces to explore ways to sustain and support the individuals driving social change. For example, as evidenced by *the normality gap*, when activism is communicated as exceptional and unattainable, individuals may perceive their own agency and ability as insufficient. The societally constructed definition of an activist could foster feelings of inadequacy among girls who are interested in becoming politically engaged actors but otherwise discouraged by societal narratives of exceptionalism.

Understanding these dynamics can inform efforts to make activism more inclusive and accessible to a wider range of individuals.

Although the study did not seek to justify the value of allowing girls to be activists, the findings nonetheless reveal compelling reasons to support such empowerment. Many participants recounted the process of reframing their time in youth activism as the basis for adult undertakings, such as hobbies (e.g., volunteer work and socially conscious poetry readings), college majors (e.g., political science and law), and career aspirations (e.g., journalist, public defender, and librarian). Participants expressed gratitude for their time as a girl activist for instilling “a value system” (Maria) and “work ethic” (Paige) that they can carry for the rest of their lives. Investing in girl activists, therefore, is a worthwhile endeavor with long-lasting ramifications for girls’ lives and identities, beyond their teenage years.

The findings of this study also provide guidance for retaining girls in activism as they grow into adulthood. As evidenced by *the charm gap*, the very qualities that once garnered attention and support later served to pigeonhole girl activists, creating an obstacle in which, in order to remain effective, they had to fundamentally relearn what it means to be an activist. This relearning, redefining, and reconceptualizing process involved significant change in developing new methods of engagement. As the tools and tactics that defined their early activism (e.g., charm and novelty) became less effective, they had to innovate, adapt, and redefine their activist identity. As a result, treating girl activists as equals in the activist field, as opposed to an exciting, novel concept, is crucial to validate their perspectives, maintain their involvement, and foster a more inclusive and equitable activist field.

Limitations & Future Directions

There are theoretical and methodological limitations present in this study. First, the recruitment criteria specified that participants identify as an activist, but no explicit definition or parameters for the term activist were provided. Although listed as a limitation, this decision was made strategically, with the understanding that participants would bring differing interpretations of the term. Based on the existing literature, I found a value in determining the cross-participant similarities in defining activism throughout analysis. However, there is also the potential for a much more nuanced understanding of activist identity development by differentiating participants via their specific socialization processes (e.g., those who view activism as an independent side hobby versus those who are participants and board members of activist organizations). Future research could specify a further distinction between girls who participate in front-facing, traditional activist spaces (e.g., attending protests and joining organizations) and girls who engage in traditionally private spheres (e.g., posting online and talking with family members in their home).

Moreover, this study focused on activists interested in an array of causes and social movements. Future research could instead take a more targeted approach by concentrating on specific sectors within the activist community. For instance, researchers could delve into girls' activist identity adoption process in spaces or organizations specifically dedicated to women's issues. Alternatively, future research could explore the dynamics of youth-led movements specifically. Specifically, research should attend to ways in which girls are funneled into gendered causes, as well as how organizational structures participate in these efforts. By narrowing the focus in this way, researchers could gain deeper insights into the nuances and intricacies of particular sectors within the broader activist landscape, potentially uncovering

additional activist identity development insights that do not emerge when studying a more generalized cohort of activists.

In addition to future directions suggested by the above limitations, other future research on activist identity adoption can be extended to include further specificity of demographics. For example, some participants indicated that their sexuality, race, and ethnicity also played an important role in their activist identity adoption process. Such research, in turn, could inform more inclusive and effective strategies for mobilizing support for social causes, by acknowledging and addressing the specific experiences, needs, and characteristics of activists from diverse backgrounds.

Furthermore, an additional future research direction could focus on young girls who temporarily identify as activists, but drop, reject, or transition away from the activist identity. Such research could determine whether this identity loss is related to the identity gaps that emerged in the present study. Anecdotally, throughout the study's recruitment process, two potential participants ultimately did not complete the data collection process. Both girls apologized to me and explained that in between reaching out and scheduling an interview, they had stopped engaging in activism and were no longer interested in talking. By exploring why some girls only momentarily identify as activists, communication scholars could gain additional insights into the factors influencing identity development and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how activist identities evolve over time. Such research could also shed light on the role of ongoing identity development and adaptation in maintaining or turning away from specific identity constructs.

Finally, an additional future research direction could further study the materiality angle of activist identity development. Building on the study's arts-based elicitation activity, future

research could also include more visual activities and descriptions that could illuminate the materiality associated with activism and the activist identity. Further breaking down the implications of participants characterizing activists as defying social norms in their appearance is a valuable avenue of future research.

Conclusion

This study examined nineteen young women's experiences adopting and maintaining an activist identity. The findings suggested that girls develop their activist identities by communicatively co-constructing an evolving definition of activism in response to identity gaps. These significant moments of change and sensemaking function as participants' turning points. The study builds on previous literature documenting the connection between activism and identity, as well as further contributes to our understanding by integrating the communication theory of identity with turning point analysis. Furthermore, this study makes a multi-faceted methodological contribution by utilizing both semi-structured interviews and arts-based elicitation to capture participant experience and understanding.

Appendix

Appendix A: IRB Approval Form



Social/Behavioral - Expedited Review

Approval Notice

DATE: November 16, 2023

TO: Laura Martinez

FROM: Social/Behavioral

PROTOCOL TITLE: UNLV-2023-329 Girlhood Activism

SUBMISSION TYPE: Initial

ACTION: Approved

APPROVAL DATE: November 16, 2023

NEXT REPORT DUE: December 31, 2999

REVIEW TYPE: 6. Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies. (NOTE: Some research in this category may be exempt from the HHS regulations for the protection of human subjects. [45 CFR 46.101\(b\)\(2\)](#) and (b)(3). This listing refers only to research that is not exempt.)

Thank you for submission of materials for this proposal. The Social/Behavioral IRB has approved your study. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a study design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission. Only copies of the most recently submitted and approved/acknowledged Informed Consent materials may be used when obtaining consent.

This study has been determined to be minimal risk.

A Waiver of Documentation of Informed Consent has been approved for this study.

The inclusion of children has been approved for this study.

PLEASE NOTE:

Should there be any change to the study, it will be necessary to submit a **Modification** for review. No changes may be made to the existing study until modifications have been approved/acknowledged.

All unanticipated problems involving risk to subjects or others, and/or serious and unexpected adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. All FDA and sponsor reporting requirements must also be followed where applicable.

Any non-compliance issues or complaints regarding this protocol must be reported promptly to this office.

All approvals from appropriate UNLV offices regarding this research must be obtained prior to initiation of this study (e.g., IBC, COI, Export Control, OSP, Radiation Safety, Clinical Trials Office, etc.).

If you have questions, please contact the Office of Research Integrity - Human Subjects at IRB@unlv.edu or call 702-895-2794. Please include your study title and study ID in all correspondence.

Office of Research Integrity - Human Subjects
4505 Maryland Parkway . Box 451047 . Las Vegas, Nevada 89154-1047 (702) 895-2794 . IRB@unlv.edu

Appendix B: Preliminary Survey

Demographics

1. What is your gender identity? (Please note: Cis is a term that refers to people who were born the sex that corresponds to their gender identity)
 - a. Cis Woman
 - b. Cis Man
 - c. Trans Woman
 - d. Trans Man
 - e. Non-Binary/Non-Conforming
 - f. Other (please specify)
2. What is your age?
3. What category best describes you?
 - a. White (Eg: German, Irish, English, Italian, Polish, French, etc.)
 - b. Hispanic, Latino or Spanish origin (Eg: Mexican or Mexican American, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Salvadoran, Dominican, Colombian, etc.)
 - c. Black or African American (Eg: African American, Jamaican, Haitian, Nigerian, Ethiopian, Somalian, etc.)
 - d. Asian (Eg: Chinese, Filipino, Asian Indian, Vietnamese, Korean, Japanese, etc.)
 - e. American Indian or Alaska Native (Eg: Navajo nation, Blackfeet tribe, Mayan, Aztec, Native Village or Barrow Inupiat Traditional Government, Nome Eskimo Community, etc.)
 - f. Middle Eastern or North African (Eg: Lebanese, Iranian, Egyptian, Syrian, Moroccan, Algerian, etc.)

- g. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (Eg: Native Hawaiian, Samoan, Chamorro, Tongan, Fijian, etc.)
 - h. Other (please specify)
 - i. Prefer not to say
4. What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed?
- a. Less than a high school diploma
 - b. High school degree or equivalent (e.g. GED)
 - c. Some college, no degree
 - d. Associate degree (e.g. AA, AS)
 - e. Bachelor's degree (e.g. BA, BS)
 - f. Master's degree (e.g. MA, MS, MEd)
 - g. Doctorate or professional degree (e.g. MD, DDS, PhD)
5. What is your sexual orientation?
- a. Bisexual (attracted to any sex)
 - b. Pansexual (attracted to people of all genders, or regardless of gender)
 - c. Heterosexual (attracted to people of another sex or gender)
 - d. Homosexual (attracted to people of the same sex or gender)
 - e. Queer (variety of definitions)
 - f. Unsure
 - g. Other (please specify)
 - h. Prefer not to say

Definition of activism

6. Briefly overview the social movements or political causes you are most passionate about.
This can be expansive (e.g., feminism) or specific (e.g., period poverty).

7. How long have you been an activist?

Contact

8. Thank you for your interest in this study! The researcher, Madalena Robertson, will review your response to see if you meet the eligibility criteria. If eligibility is met, she will contact you to set up an interview. Please include your name and the best contact information to reach you for scheduling.

Appendix C: Consent Form



Welcome to the research study!

Purpose of the Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to gain insight into how young women define activism and frame their activist journey.

Participants

You are being asked to participate in the study because you fit this criteria: you identify as a girl or woman, identify as an activist, and are 15-25 years old.

Procedures

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following: complete a brief preliminary survey, followed by an interview in order to answer questions about your time in activist spaces. We will overview the first time you learned about activism, the ways you have engaged in activist causes, and the activism or political causes you care about the most.

Benefits of Participation

There may not be direct benefits to you as a participant in this study. However, we hope to learn about what makes young women's and girls' interest in activism unique.

Risks of Participation

Risks to participants are minimal, but could include discussing upsetting topics, as the reasons someone is passionate about specific social movements or political causes are sometimes deeply personal. Please know that you may stop sharing information at any time if it makes you uncomfortable, and can refuse to answer a question if you would like.

Additionally, there are potential privacy and confidentiality risks associated with collecting identifiable information on potentially sensitive subject matters. You may share information concerning their line of work or social circles that could impact reputation or employability. The risk of harm will be minimized by reminding you that you may stop sharing information at any time, and the researchers will make every attempt to replace any potentially identifying information, such as name or organizational affiliation, with pseudonyms (fake names). Other identifiable potentially information, such as scenarios described, will be replaced with general descriptions.

Cost/Compensation

There *will not* be a financial cost to you to participate in this study. The study will take *less than two hours* of your time. The survey is estimated to take only 15 minutes, and the interview will last 45-60 minutes. You *will not* be compensated for your time.

Confidentiality

All information gathered in this study will be kept as confidential as possible. No reference will be made in written or oral materials that could link you to this study. You will be referred to with a pseudonym in any potential analysis. All information you provide will be used for this study and this study only. It will not be used or distributed for future research studies. Records will be stored for three years after completion of the study.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate in this study or in any part of this study. You may withdraw at any time without prejudice to your relations with UNLV. You are encouraged to ask questions about this study at the beginning or any time during the research study.

- I consent. Begin the survey.
- I do not consent, and I do not wish to participate.

Appendix D: Assent Form



Welcome to the research study!

Purpose of the Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to gain insight into how young women define activism and frame their activist journey.

Participants

You are being asked to participate in the study because you fit this criteria: you identify as a girl or woman, identify as an activist, and are 15-25 years old.

Procedures

If you agree to be in this study, you will complete a brief preliminary survey, followed by an interview in order to answer questions about your experience in activist spaces. We will overview the first time you learned about activism, the ways you have engaged in activist causes, and the activism or political causes you care about the most. The study will take less than two hours of your time.

Benefits of Participation

There may not be direct benefits to you as a participant in this study. However, we hope to learn about what makes young women's and girls' interest in activism unique.

Risks of Participation

The risks to you are minimal, but could include discussing upsetting topics, as the reasons someone is passionate about specific social movements or political causes are sometimes deeply personal. The risk of emotional harm will be minimized by reminding you that you may stop sharing information at any time it makes you uncomfortable, and you can refuse to answer a question if you would like.

Additionally, there are potential privacy and confidentiality risks associated with collecting identifiable information on potentially sensitive subject matters. You may share information concerning your line of work, organizing history, or social circles that could impact your reputation or employability. You should know that you may stop sharing information at any time it makes you uncomfortable, and you do not have to answer any question you do not want to.

Cost/Compensation

There *will not* be a financial cost to you to participate in this study. The study will take *less than two hours* of your time. The survey is estimated to take only 15 minutes, and the interview will last 45-60 minutes. You *will not* be compensated for your time.

Confidentiality

We will make every attempt to remove identifying information from the dataset by labeling potentially identifiable data, such as your name, affiliated organizations, etc., with pseudonyms (fake names) and changing potentially identifiable details. Additionally, there are potential privacy and confidentiality risks associated with collecting identifiable information on potentially sensitive subject matters. While participants may voluntarily disclose identity markers such as sexuality, it is not required in the interview process. Risk of confidentiality breach is minimal. You will be referred to with a pseudonym in any potential analysis.

Voluntary Participation

If you don't want to be in this study, you don't have to be. Remember, being in this study is up to you and no one will be upset if you don't want to or even if you change your mind later and want to stop.

Please talk this over with your parents before you decide whether or not to participate. But even if your parents say "yes," you can still decide not to do this.

I consent, and confirm that my parent also consents to my participation. Begin the survey.

I do not consent, and I do not wish to participate.

Appendix E: Parental Consent Form



Purpose of the Study

Your child is invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to gain insight into how young women define activism and frame their activist journey.

Participants

Your child is being asked to participate in the study because the study is investigating how young women's activist journeys and relationships with activism differ from other populations.

Procedures

If you allow your child to volunteer to participate in this study, your child will be asked to do the following: complete a brief preliminary survey, followed by an interview in order to answer questions about their time in activist spaces. We will overview the first time they learned about activism, the ways they have engaged in activist causes, and the activism or political causes they care about the most. The study will take less than two hours of your child's time. The survey is estimated to take only 15 minutes, and the interview will last 45-60 minutes. The interview will be audio recorded.

Benefits of Participation

There may not be direct benefits to your child as a participant in this study. However, we hope to learn about what makes young women's interest in activism unique.

Risks of Participation

Risks to participants are minimal, but could include discussing upsetting topics, as the reasons someone is passionate about specific social movements or political causes are sometimes deeply personal. The risk of emotional harm will be minimized by reminding participants that they may stop sharing information at any time it makes them uncomfortable, and can refuse to answer a question if they would like.

Additionally, there are potential privacy and confidentiality risks associated with collecting identifiable information on potentially sensitive subject matters. Participants may share information concerning their line of work or social circles that could have social impacts, such as to their reputation or employability. The risk of harm will be minimized by reminding participants that they may stop sharing information at any time

it makes them uncomfortable. The researchers will make every attempt to remove identifying information, and we will associate data with pseudonyms instead of your child's actual name, organization affiliation, etc.

Cost /Compensation

There *will not* be a financial cost to you or your child to participate in this study. Your child *will not* be compensated for their time.

Contact Information

If you or your child have any questions or concerns about the study, you may contact us at Laura.Martinez@unlv.edu or Madalena.Robertson@unlv.edu. For questions regarding the rights of research subjects, any complaints or comments regarding the manner in which the study is being conducted you may contact **the UNLV Office of Research Integrity – Human Subjects at 702-895-2794, toll free at 888-581-2794, or via email at IRB@unlv.edu.**

Voluntary Participation

Your child's participation in this study is voluntary. Your child may refuse to participate in this study or in any part of this study. Your child may withdraw at any time without prejudice to your relations with the university. You or your child are encouraged to ask questions about this study at the beginning or any time during the research study.

Confidentiality

All information gathered in this study will be kept as confidential as possible. No reference will be made in written or oral materials that could link your child to this study. Your child will be referred to with a pseudonym in any potential analysis. All information your child provides will be used for this study and this study only. It will not be used or distributed for future research studies. Records will be stored for three years after completion of the study.

Participant Consent:

I have read the above information and agree to allow my child to participate in this study. I am at least 18 years of age.

Appendix F: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Pre-activism

1. What are your earliest memories surrounding the word *activism*?
 - a. Where were you learning about activism? Seeing activists? (School, family, friends, online, etc.)
2. Prior to becoming an activist yourself, what was your understanding of what activists did? What was your understanding of what they looked like?
3. What is the first cause you remember supporting?
 - a. What about this cause spoke to you?
4. After this early experience, what is the next major milestone you recall that shaped your activism?
 - a. How did you continue to engage in activism after that?
 - b. What is the distinction?
5. Think about one of the first activist spaces you entered. How did you learn about this space/cause? How did you gain entry?
 - a. Friends? Parents? Online? Community?
 - b. What made it feel approachable?
6. What are some of the major milestones that you believe shaped your activist identity?
7. What was the time gap between when you started *doing* activism and when you started *being* an activist?
8. Some research suggests that teenage girls specifically tend to view themselves as simply “doing activism” versus actually “being an activist.” How does that align (or not align) with your experience?

- a. In that case, what do you think it takes for someone to cross that threshold and become a “real” activist?
- b. What are markers of being an activist? Age? Accomplishments?

Definition of activism

9. How do you think your own experience in activist spaces has shaped your definition of activism?
10. How would you define activism?

Activism

11. How has your experience in activist spaces been shaped by your age?
 - a. How do adult activists treat you?
 - b. How do non-activists treat you?
12. What, if any, are some aspects of your experience in activist spaces that feel gendered?
 - a. How do you think a young boy would feel in the exact same spaces?
13. Can you tell me about a time when you felt like your version of activism was dismissed/undermined?
14. Can you tell me about a time when you felt like your version of activism was embraced/celebrated?

Connection to identity

15. How do you see your activism unfolding in the next several years?
16. How important is your activist identity to you?
 - a. How, if at all, did your time in these spaces influence your career aspirations?
Hobbies? Values?
17. Is your activist identity a permanent identity, or something you could one day lose?

Arts-based elicitation

18. What do you believe *most people* think an activist looks like?

19. What do you believe an activist actually looks like?

Wrapping up

20. To wrap up our interview, what does your involvement in these activist/social movement spaces mean to you?

21. What advice would you give other teenagers looking to begin participating in activist spaces?

22. Is there anything you would like to add/clarify/expand on or anything that you feel is important for others to know about participating in activist spaces?

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Curriculum Vitae

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Education

- M.A. (expected 2024) **Communication Studies, University of Nevada, Las Vegas**
Advisor: Dr. Laura Martinez
Thesis Title: “A Contradiction to Being a Teenage Girl”:
Identity Gaps as Conceptualization Turning Points for Girl
Activists
- B.A. (2020) **Communication Studies, University of Nevada, Las Vegas**
Journalism and Media Studies (Minor)
Spanish (Minor)
-

Research

Publications

- Scott, J., Robertson, M., & Tatum, N. T. (in press). Audience analysis in public speaking: A comprehensive exploration. In S. M. Munz, A. M. Wright, & T. McKenna-Buchanan (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Public Speaking Research and Theory*. Routledge.
- Tatum, N. T., Scott, J., Robertson, M., Sidelinger, R. J., McManus, L. B., & Kuresman, K. (under review). Instructor-student communication as an instructor job resource: An application of the Job Demands–Resources model. *Communication Reports*.

Conference Presentations

- Robertson, M. (2023, November 17). *Audience adaptation: Character creation and social media customization* [Conference presentation]. NCA 2023 Conference, National Harbor, MD, United States.

Robertson, M., & Farley, K. (2023, November 16). *The relationship between girlhood activism and identity* [Conference presentation]. NCA 2023 Conference, National Harbor, MD, United States.

Honors

Spring 2024 **Misti Yang Outstanding Research Award**

Spring 2018 **UNLV Speech Competition**
Top Speech Award: “Harassment in the Workplace: NDAs and Forced Arbitration”

Teaching Experience

Courses Taught **COM 101, Communication Studies Department**
100-level Oral Communication, hybrid instruction
100-level Oral Communication, online instruction

Service Experience

To the Department

Fall 2023-present **UNLV COM Lab**
Public speaking and speechwriting coach
Serve as a COM Lab Coach, providing personalized one-on-one guidance to students in honing their public speaking skills and refining speechwriting techniques.

Fall 2023 **NCA Grad Open House**
Served as a graduate student representative for department recruitment at the National Communication Association (NCA).

Spring 2023

Graduate Student Representative on Chair Hiring Committee

Served as a graduate student representative during the departmental chair interview process, providing a student perspective to contribute to the selection of a qualified and effective chair.

Fall 2022

Basic Course Curriculum Development

Contributed to curriculum development for UNLV's Basic Course, contributing to the design and enhancement of educational materials.

To the Community

2018-present

Nevada NOW (National Organization for Women)

VP of Media

Director of Media & Technology

Serve as the Social Media Coordinator and Content Creator for a local feminist organization. Assist in shaping the narrative on contemporary feminist issues, craft compelling stories to captivate both current and prospective volunteers. Work to bridge age divides and unite members through intentional messaging to strengthen the organization's impact and outreach.

Summer 2023

Reproductive Justice Review Board

Conducted interviews with nominated local community members, as recognized by peers and fellow activists, to discern the most deserving recipient of the annual NOW Core Issue: Reproductive Justice award.

Summer 2022

Coffee Talks: Reproductive Rights

Collaborated in the planning, execution, and management of a local community event addressing the current landscape of reproductive rights, specifically tailored to engage and educate local teenagers.