Article

Black Youth Rising: Understanding Motivations and Challenges in Young Adult Activism

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Abstract: Black young adults participate in activism to challenge and transform oppressive systems. In this qualitative study, we employed thematic analysis and used the framework of sociopolitical development (SPD) to explore their motivations and challenges to participation amid the COVID-19 pandemic and the summer of 2020 in the United States. Semi-structured interviews with 22 Black young adults in early 2022 revealed that social identities, sense of legacy, impact, and morals drove their participation. Further, contending with systemic oppression, impact, harm, and working with others challenged their participation. This study holds valuable insights for stakeholders as they support and empower young Black activists navigating social justice efforts in our dynamic and evolving sociopolitical landscape. Further, this work highlights the enduring tradition of activism within the Black community and emphasizes the need to empower young Black activists as change agents in the pursuit of a more equitable society.

Keywords: black young adults; activism; sociopolitical development; qualitative research

1. Introduction

Black young adults continually confront multifaceted layers of oppression and inequity [1–3]. Rooted in systemic racism, economic disparity, microaggressions, and various forms of discrimination, their lived experiences not only sculpt their interactions with oppressive systems but also cultivate an environment for activism [4]. Conner and Rosen [5] conceptualize activism as a wide range of practices intended to challenge and change existing social institutions. This activism, rooted in a history marked by resilience and advocacy for social justice and civil rights, is a testament to Black people's commitment to understanding and challenging oppressive structures within and beyond their communities [6,7]. During the COVID-19 pandemic and the Summer of 2020, Black young adults reignited a tradition of activism, underscoring their influential role in shaping historical social justice change [8,9].

Scholars offer varied perspectives on activism, emphasizing its role in addressing oppression and injustice through a spectrum of channels, including individual, interpersonal, collective, and digital efforts [10–12]. Examples of activism captured in the literature include organizing protests and demonstrations, engaging with political officials, volunteering, using social media platforms to build a sense of community and advocate for social justice efforts, creating art that centers on underrepresented narratives, and teaching about and producing scholarship on social justice topics [10–12]. This multifaceted approach reflects the ingenuity and resilience of Black youth who, despite facing exclusion from traditional avenues of change, ingeniously navigate various modes of activism to engage in meaningful social transformation [4,13]. By recognizing the adaptive nature of activism, this study adopts Conner and Rosen's [5] expansive definition, as a wide range of practices intended to challenge and change existing social institutions is used in this study.

The aim of this research study is to explore the multifaceted relationship between sociopolitical development and the motivations and challenges faced by Black youth participating in activism, particularly against the backdrop of significant sociopolitical events such

as the Summer of 2020. This period, characterized by protests ignited by the tragic deaths of Black individuals such as George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and others, left Black youth grappling with the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and systemic racism [14–17]. These events served as a catalyst for many participants' activism, profoundly shaping their priorities and intensifying their dedication to confronting systemic racism and oppression. The surge in activism witnessed during this period mirrors historical patterns seen in the initial wave of the Black Lives Matter movement, highlighting how acute instances of racial injustice can trigger heightened activism.

This study not only explores the motivations and challenges faced by Black young adults in activism but also examines the critical role that activism plays in their healthy development. Research suggests that activism can foster a sense of empowerment, agency, and identity development among Black young adults [4,13,18,19]. By actively participating in efforts to address social injustice, these individuals not only challenge oppressive structures but also cultivate resilience and critical thinking skills [4,20]. By examining the intersection of sociopolitical development and activism among Black young adults, this study seeks to shed light on the transformative potential of activism in promoting holistic well-being and empowerment within marginalized communities.

1.1. Black Young Adults' Activism

Young adulthood, typically spanning from 18 to 29 years of age, is a critical phase for participation in activism [21–23]. This developmental period is characterized by instability, self-focus, identity exploration, and opportunities to gain financial, social, and political autonomy [1,22]. As Black young adults navigate this phase and gain autonomy, they often find avenues to engage in activism that aligns with their values and interests [24]. This exploration fosters the development of social and political identities, heightening awareness of racial inequality and systemic oppression [25,26]. Furthermore, young adulthood is marked by increased civic and political engagement, providing opportunities for Black young adults to participate in social and political movements and effect change in their communities [21].

Black young adults' activism is a response to inequitable systems that shape their lived experiences [4,27,28]. Systemic exclusion from political life, such as the institution of slavery and colonialism, Jim Crow laws, and present-day inequitable laws and practices propelled Black individuals to assert themselves politically via group demonstrations, policy advocacy, and using community and political organizing to effect social change [29–31]. Black young adults continue this legacy of activism through social movements like Black Lives Matter and Say Her Name, which consists of social media advocacy, grassroots organizing, and protests to address ongoing issues such as racism, poverty, sexism, and queerphobia [32,33].

1.2. Theoretical Framework

Sociopolitical development offers a perspective to comprehend how Black young adults understand and respond to various systems of oppression, illuminating their motivations and challenges on their journey toward activism [34]. Sociopolitical development theory (SPD) is a framework encapsulating the acquisition of knowledge, analytical skills, and emotional depth to comprehend societal influences, challenge power structures, and actively pursue a more equitable society [4,23]. SPD theory draws from Freire's *conscientização*, or critical consciousness, which refers to marginalized individuals gaining an understanding of the historical, social, political, and cultural context of oppression, how it shapes their lives, and their capacity to transform that reality [35].

Rooted in developmental, community psychology, and empowerment literature [34,36], SPD has implications for healthy development. Black individuals are exposed to societal messages and experiences that lay the foundation for their understanding of society and their positionality within it [34,37,38]. Oppressive social structures can disrupt their development, and scholars have described SPD as an antidote for the oppression of Black people

that promotes their ability to maintain a positive sense of identity and effectively heal from and resist racism [13,27,37]. Additionally, activism can serve as a form of collective healing, as Black young adults come together to address shared experiences of oppression and work toward collective liberation [13]. By examining Black young adults' activism experiences through the lens of SPD, a greater understanding can be gained regarding the personal and contextual factors that shape engagement with activism, including motivations and barriers that influence participation.

1.3. Motivations

Identity plays a pivotal role in how Black young adults engage in activism [39,40]. Ginwright and James [38] posit that the identities youth hold, and the unique positioning of those identities within systems of privilege and oppression, play a role in how they engage in activism. For example, Hope and colleagues [18] found that a higher exposure to cultural racism, defined as the historical and cultural dominance of one racial group over another majority group at the cost of others [41], was linked to an increased inclination among Black adolescents and young adults to participate in more risky forms of activism (e.g., engaging in physical confrontation at a political rally specific to the Black community). Literature exploring identity-related motivations for activism has primarily focused on racial identity and found that Black young adults who have a positive connection to their race are more likely to participate in activism to challenge systemic racism, promote social justice, and uplift their communities [18,25,26,42–45]. Further, multiple, intersecting identities (e.g., gender, sexuality, class, ability) can also shape activism efforts by influencing the issues Black young adults prioritize and the strategies they use to advocate for change [46,47].

Exposure to past activists and social movements via diverse educational channels (e.g., school, family, social media) has significantly influenced and maintained the dedication of young adults to activism. This aligns with SPD's focus on nurturing critical social analysis among youth, empowering them to challenge societal norms and structures. The profound connection of Black youth to the struggles and endeavors of past activists appears to bolster their identification of ongoing challenges faced by their communities, thereby serving as a motivating force driving their participation in activism [12,48]. The educational exposure of Black youth to their history can inspire their ongoing engagement. A thorough exploration of Black young adults' motivations to participate in activism can contribute to the development of strategies to support and amplify their voices in the ongoing struggle for social justice and equity.

1.4. Challenges

Black young adults are pivotal in advancing social justice and equity through activism. However, they grapple with various challenges that can impede their engagement. Foremost among these challenges is burnout, a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion that can arise from prolonged involvement in activism [49]. Among Black activists, burnout is particularly pronounced due to their unique experiences with systemic racism, microaggressions, and exposure to trauma [49]. For many Black young adults, activism is closely tied to their identity and purpose. They may feel deeply responsible for advocating for their communities and fighting against oppression. As a result, when they experience burnout or feel disconnected from their activism work, it can significantly impact their sense of identity and purpose [49]. Additionally, Black young adults may face pressure to be strong and resilient in adversity, making it challenging to take breaks from activism and prioritize wellbeing when needed [49].

Further, persistent threats of violence impact Black young activists' participation as they assess the risks associated with their engagement [50–52]. The constant threat of violence and harassment from law enforcement and white supremacist groups poses a pressing concern, exemplified by the nationwide protests following the death of Michael Brown in 2014 and of George Floyd in 2020 [9]. In addition to the threat of physical violence, Black young adults also experience harassment and intimidation when engaging

in activism online [52]. While social media platforms are powerful tools for activists to connect and disseminate information, they provide a fertile environment for hate speech and targeted harassment. As Black young adults use social media to organize, mobilize, and educate their communities, they may be subjected to racist comments, threats, and doxxing, negatively impacting their activism. The persistent threat of violence can significantly affect Black young adults' mental health and impact their capacity to participate in sustained activism [49,53]. Exploring Black young adults' challenges associated with activism can provide insight into how to encourage and support participation across their lifetime.

1.5. Present Study

Research that examines Black young adults' activism experiences and perspectives is crucial to support and empower these advocates for change and foster their healthy development. Rooted in sociopolitical development theory [4,37,54], this investigation provides a thematic analysis of 22 in-depth interviews with Black young adults in the United States to examine what motivates and challenges their participation in activism. While there has been growing interest in studying activism among Black young adults [18,40], few studies have sought to directly examine their activism perspectives, motivations, and challenges [55,56]. Understanding the diversity of perspectives among Black young adults can inform researchers and practitioners on how to better support their activism and promote their overall well-being. As society grapples with systemic oppression, it is imperative to honor, support, and amplify the voices and efforts of Black young adults in their tireless pursuit of a more equitable and just future for themselves and their communities. The current study sought to answer the following research questions:

(1)   What motivates Black young adults' participation in activism?
(2)   What challenges Black young adults' participation in activism?

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants

Detailed descriptions of the participants are in Table 1. The study participants were 22 Black or African-American-identified young adults between 18 and 25 years old who had engaged in activism between 2020 and 2022. Three participants identified as biracial or multiracial (i.e., having two or more racial group memberships) [57]. Most of the participants identified as women (64%), while the remaining participants identified as men (18%) and gender-variant, non-conforming, and non-binary (18%) [58]. Most lived in the South (73%), followed by the Midwest (14%), the Northeast (9%), and the West (4%). Undergraduate students made up most of the sample (36%), followed by doctoral students (23%), professionals (23%), and master's students (18%).

Table 1. Participant demographic information.

Pseudonym	Status	Identities Disclosed	Activism Participation
Diamond	Doctoral student at a midwestern PWI	Black, cisgender, heterosexual, working-class, Kojic woman	Co-organized the unionization of graduate student workers for COVID-19 accommodations
Mya	Master's student at a southern PWI	Black African American, middle-class woman	Co-organized a campus sit-in for a university professor's wrongful termination
Trevor	Doctoral student at a southern PWI	Black, cisgender, Christian man	Attended city protests during the summer of 2020
Brianna	Undergraduate student at a southern PWI	Black, cisgender, queer, first-generation Ghanaian-American woman	Used photography to document and report campus protests

Table 1. *Cont.*

Pseudonym	Status	Identities Disclosed	Activism Participation
Halle	Doctoral student at a midwestern PWI	Black, Mexican, cisgender, low-income, first-generation, Christian woman	Taught an undergraduate psychology class rooted in Black history to undergraduate students
Candace	Master's student at a southern PWI	Black, cisgender, middle-class woman	President of Black Student Union and co-organized a civil rights trail on campus
Reese	Doctoral student at a midwestern PWI	Black, low-income, Christian, non-binary person	Co-organized policy change efforts for tenants' rights with a local nonprofit organization
Tiyanna	Professional in higher education at a northeastern PWI	Black, cisgender, queer, able-bodied, non-traditional, Christian woman	Attended protests and demonstrations
Mike	Undergraduate at a western university	Black, cisgender, heterosexual, middle-class man	Refurbished and provided computers to Black youth interested in tech using an online platform
Jordan	Professional at a nonprofit organization in the South	Black, Jamaican, queer, working-class non-binary person	Co-organized for police abolition, against the school-to-prison pipeline, and for queer and trans liberation with a local grassroots organization
Brandon	Master's student at a southern PWI	Black cisgender man	Co-founded an organization focusing on education, community, and mental health for young Black men
Taylor	Undergraduate student at a midwestern PWI	Black, first-generation, Kenyan, gay, non-binary person	Led high school social justice club
Kiara	Undergraduate student at a southern HBCU	Black, cisgender, plus-sized, spiritual woman	Advocated and lobbied in state government for reproductive rights through school/nonprofit organization partnership
Deja	Professional in K-12 education at a southern public school	Black, cisgender, queer, working-class woman	Taught social justice methods to high school students
Sky	Undergraduate student at a southern PWI	Black, cisgender, heterosexual, lower-middle class, spiritual woman	Created and posted social justice content on social media
Anna	Professional at a nonprofit organization in the South	Black, Creole, cisgender woman with lived mental health experience	Advocated in city and state government for disability inclusion
Elise	Master's student at southern PWI	Black, cisgender, low-income woman	Serving as a DEI committee representative for their graduate program
Simone	Undergraduate student at a southern PWI	Black, cisgender, heterosexual, middle-class woman	Attended local protests during the summer of 2020
Brittany	Undergraduate student at a southern PWI	Black, cisgender, queer woman	Co-organized a protest advocating for COVID-19 accommodations at high schools
Amber	Doctoral student at a southern PWI	Biracial, Black, cisgender poor woman	Attended local protests during the summer of 2020 and co-organized a collective day of rest for Black graduate students
Sean	Undergraduate student at a southern PWI	Black, cisgender, Christian man	Co-hosted a podcast to discuss local and national issues of racism and politics and volunteered to work for a historical political campaign

Table 1. *Cont.*

Pseudonym	Status	Identities Disclosed	Activism Participation
Cory	Professional at a nonprofit organization in the South	Black, trans, lesbian, non-binary person	Founded a mutual aid grassroots organization that serves local Black and Brown trans and gender-non-conforming people

Note: PWI = predominantly white university; HBCU = historically Black college and university.

2.2. Procedure

Convenience and snowball sampling were used for recruitment, leveraging listservs from youth-serving community-based and activist organizations (e.g., Black Youth 100, Southern Coalition for Southern Justice), social media platforms (Twitter, GroupMe), and peer referrals. Prospective participants were required to complete a nine-question screener survey to determine their eligibility, providing demographic information, including age, race, gender, and education, along with a brief description of their activism work. Selection criteria were based on study eligibility requirements related to age, race, and duration of activism involvement. Additionally, participants were chosen based on the content of their activism description, which needed to include at least two sentences with active verbs and reference at least one action consistent with activism literature [10–12]. Eligible participants received an informed consent form outlining study details, risks, benefits, confidentiality measures, and rights. All study procedures were approved by NC State University's Institutional Review Board.

The one-hour interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom between January and March 2022 and led by the first author [59]. The interview protocol included 30 open-ended questions. Participants, prompted by the protocol, shared their activism experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Following the interviews, participants received $50 Amazon gift cards via email. Audio recordings were transcribed using Zoom's service and later cleaned by the first author for readability. Data de-identification and pseudonyms protected participant confidentiality. Data were stored in a password-protected, encrypted file for security. Participants reviewed findings via member checking to involve participants in co-constructing the interpretation of their lived experiences. In April 2022, 21 out of 22 participants were presented with initial themes and 11 returned feedback. Participants were prompted to assess the report's completeness, coherence, and representation of their experiences [60]. Through this process, participants provided valuable input on emerging themes, aiding in refining and clarifying data interpretation. All respondents resonated with the identified themes, affirming that the findings validated their experiences and paths as Black youth activists. All study procedures were approved by the host institution's Institutional Review Board.

2.3. Analysis

Data for this study consisted of 22 interview transcripts. Dedoose 9.0.86 aided data management, coding, and organization. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns within the qualitative data [61]. Data analysis began during data collection. Immediately after each interview, the interviewer generated a memo listing potential codes, themes, and personal reflections to engage in reflexivity [62]. Transcripts were cleaned while listening to the audio, followed by open coding to identify general categories within each transcript. Insights from existing activism literature guided the author's investigation of Black youth adults' motivations and challenges related to their participation in activism [20,39,40]. Next, the author conducted another round of coding to group codes into themes, identifying connections and contradictions across the codes, supported by analytic memos [63,64].

2.4. Researcher Positionality

Considering positionality and engaging in reflexivity are crucial components of qualitative research [65]. The researcher's experience as a Black woman and a first-generation college and graduate student attending predominantly white institutions from middle school through postsecondary education profoundly shaped her path toward activism. Engaging with student organizations and pursuing African American Studies in college deepened her understanding of activism, especially amidst the Black Lives Matter movement. This movement, along with the events of the Summer of 2020, significantly influenced her research journey and pursuit of this study. The researcher discovered a personal connection with many shared experiences relayed by the interviewees. Given her proximity to and passion for this subject, she applied reflexivity to critically analyze her identity and interactions with the participants during interviews and data analysis.

3. Results

This study delves into the experiences of Black young adults involved in activism during the COVID-19 pandemic and the Summer of 2020, marked by widespread protests following the killings of Black individuals such as George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery by current or former police officers in the United States [14]. Amidst these events, the pandemic spotlighted long-standing systemic inequities disproportionately affecting Black and Brown communities [66]. Rooted in sociopolitical development theory [4], this study endeavors to unravel (1) What motivates Black young adults' participation in activism? and (2) What challenges Black young adults' participation in activism? For many participants, the pandemic spurred their activism, reshaping its focus and urgency. Participants shared their motivations and challenges, revealing interconnected themes. Key motivations encompassed (1) social identity, (2) legacy, (3) impact, and (4) morals and responsibility. Challenges included (1) contending with systemic oppression, (2) impact, (3) harm, and (4) working with others. See Table 2 for a summary of the themes.

Table 2. Theme names and definitions.

Research Question	Theme	Description
What motivates Black young adults' participation in activism?	Social Identity	Social identities (e.g., race, gender, class, ability, sexuality) being a justification for participating in activism with the goal of assisting one's own community or other marginalized communities
	Legacy	Mention of a personal connection to or interest in past activists, social movements, and historical social justice moments in relation to why they do activism work
	Impact	Personal or external changes that participants have noticed because of their activism work
	Morals and Responsibility	Moral obligation and responsibility to participate in activism
What challenges Black young adults' participation in activism?	Contending with Oppression	Acknowledgment of the targets of their activism work being social and political issues that are ingrained in systems of oppression (e.g., racism, sexism, classism)
	Impact	Thoughts about the potential long-term impact of activism work
	Harm	Threats or experiences of physical harm while participating in activism
	Working with Others	Experiences working with other individuals and navigating different political ideals to participate in activism

3.1. Research Question #1: What Motivates Black Young Adults' Participation in Activism?

Black young adults engage in activism for various reasons, and the motivations for their actions are complex and multi-layered. Participants shared a range of factors inspiring their engagement in activism, including their social identity, sense of legacy, desire for impact, and commitment to morals and responsibility.

3.1.1. Social Identity

All participants described how their social identities influenced their social and political interests and their activism engagement. They saw their participation in activism as a method to address systemic inequities that they and their communities faced. Most participants reflected on at least two identities, one being their Black identity. Cory, a Black trans-non-binary lesbian and young professional at a nonprofit in the South, shared,

> I began, towards the beginning of the pandemic, a mutual aid grassroots organization that primarily serves Black and Brown trans- and gender-non-conforming folks in my hometown with fundraising to cover expenses like rent, utilities, and gender-affirming things. All the isms and ias: racism, classism, sexism, transphobia, and homophobia align with my intersections and mean a lot to me because it's my experience.

Sean, a Black Christian man, and undergraduate student at a southern university, centered his identities in his interests and activism work.

> I learned from an early age that being Black is a social and political issue. Being Black and Christian, I'm very proud of it because there's a long history of the Black church to be proud of. I think that being Black makes me keener on paying particular attention to and putting my efforts toward issues of racial inequity, disparities, and justice. I think that being a Christian gives me a moral compass and guides me through that process.

Cory and Sean illustrate how their social identities played a crucial role in shaping their social and political interests as well as their engagement in activism. Cory's multiple identities and lived experiences inspired them to use activism to address the systemic inequalities that impact them and their communities. Similarly, Sean's identity as a Black man and Christian shaped his interests in racial equity and activism work. Sean's understanding of the historical context of racial inequality and the importance of the Black church in African American culture gave him a strong moral compass for his activism work. These examples highlight the intersectionality of participants' experiences and identities where multiple forms of oppression and discrimination intersect and compound. The participants' descriptions of how their social identities influenced their social and political interests and activism demonstrate the interconnectedness of identity and social justice issues. Many participants recognized that their experiences and the experiences of their communities were shaped by systemic inequalities and discrimination that were often rooted in oppressive systems. As a result, they were drawn to activism to address these injustices and bring about change. This demonstrates how individuals' social identities can serve as a powerful tool for understanding and addressing social injustice. It also highlights the importance of acknowledging and understanding the intersections of social identities to better inform and motivate social justice efforts.

3.1.2. Legacy

Participants expressed being inspired and motivated by past activists and historical moments (e.g., Civil Rights and Black Power movements, Summer of 2020) and learned about activism from family, school, and personal research. The examples of activism they found contributed to their idea of what activism is, past strategies, and how to persevere through challenges. Brandon, a Black man, and master's student at a southern university, began a book club with friends centering Black men's mental health, which evolved into a

nonprofit organization. He reflected on how turning to philosophers of the past fortified his activism efforts.

> I'm reading different philosophers like Marcus Garvey and Jawanza Kunjufu to see the ways that they've done things. Kunjufu has some outdated things, but there are still great things to take away in terms of supporting one another as Black men. It's inspiring to know that there are people that believe in what I'm trying to do.

Similarly, Halle, a Black and Mexican woman and doctoral student at a midwestern university, was motivated to participate in activism as a research scholar and teacher by learning about Black history as an African American Studies major in college. "Reading Assata and learning about the Black Panther movement created the spirit of revolution and rebellion in me. Just learning about Black history fueled my passion and my fight".

Taylor, a Black, gay, and nonbinary undergraduate student at a university in the Midwest cited past social movements that they learned about while in an extracurricular high school club as motivation for their continued activism work.

> The thing that keeps me motivated is to think about people who have done activism work in the past, like the people who were protesting for ACT UP in the 80s. They didn't see the fruits of their labor as it was happening. Change happened later down the road. Now, AIDS isn't a death sentence anymore. Just because I'm not seeing the benefits of what I'm doing now doesn't mean that it won't eventually help someone.

Overall, the examples of Brandon, Halle, and Taylor illustrate how individuals involved in activism draw on the activism work of past activists, historical figures, and social movements for inspiration and guidance. By learning about the history of social movements and studying the works of past activists, individuals can gain a better understanding of what activism is, how to participate, and how to overcome challenges that arise.

3.1.3. Impact

The impact of activism, both personal and external, motivated many participants. Some saw the effects of their work through policy changes, like Brittany, a Black queer woman student who successfully organized virtual classes during the COVID-19 pandemic in her high school.

> I think about the campaign I led in high school against my school board. We literally got to see that policy reversed which was really cool and rewarding.

Others found the impact of their work through direct feedback. Jordan, a Black and Jamaican, queer, non-binary professional in the South, mentioned this as a motivation for their activism.

> The most rewarding thing has been people telling me that I've impacted their life in some way, or they remember something that I said at a training or workshop and they used it in their life, or they were able to tell their family and share with people.

The impact of activism work on individuals can be profound and multifaceted. Participants found it rewarding to see the impact of their activism work, whether it was through external policy changes or personal feedback that can contribute to personal growth and development. This impact motivated them to continue their activism efforts and be a part of something larger than themselves.

3.1.4. Morals and Responsibility

A subset of the participants saw activism as a moral duty driven by the obligation to combat systemic oppression and create a better world. Activists recognize a moral obligation to their community and future generations. This commitment is especially

strong among those who have experienced oppression, like Mya, a Black woman and master's student who engaged in protests in 2020.

> I think that we're so privileged that our ancestors fought for us so that we are no longer in chains or segregated. We're not going through *that* type of oppression, but we are still oppressed. We're making our own history which is exciting. Just in my lifetime, there have been some historical Black moments. We're not just sitting around.

Mya exemplifies how Black young adults embrace their role in a larger historical narrative. She acknowledges progress while recognizing the ongoing work needed. This perspective highlights the importance of recognizing the historical context in which activism takes place and the intergenerational responsibility that drives it.

Many participants drew motivation from their religion, seeing it as a source of social justice values and a responsibility to enact positive change. For example, Diamond, a Black graduate student, linked her religion to her activism.

> My being raised as a Black Protestant person influences how I see my moral obligations to society. I recognize the privileges that I have and use these to benefit others who may not have the same social standing.

For some participants, this moral component was strongly linked to issues of religion and spirituality. Participants' religious beliefs and practices have served as a driving force for their activism work, providing them with a sense of moral grounding and a framework for social justice. They see their activism as not only a political act but also as a spiritual one, rooted in their responsibility to create a more just and equitable world.

3.2. Research Question #2: What Challenges Black Young Adults' Participation in Activism?

In addition to sharing their motivations for participating in activism and the things that support their participation, challenges related to activism work were also shared by participants. The main challenges that were shared were contending with systemic oppression, gauging impact, suffering from harm, and working with others.

3.2.1. Contending with Oppression

Participants frequently highlighted the daunting nature of oppressive systems, citing the substantial time, energy, and emotional labor they invest in their activism. They also mentioned experiencing fatigue, disappointment, and hopelessness when their efforts did not yield the desired impact. For instance, Trevor, a Black man, and doctoral student at a southern university, shared his perspective.

> With protests, you do the thing, but then it's really it's in the hands of the entity you are trying to influence. We can stand on the steps of Washington and scream our heads off, 'Black lives matter!' but it doesn't necessarily change the fact that there are people in government that believe Black Lives Matter means that white lives don't. So, that's tough.

Trevor's comment underscores that while forms of activism such as protests can raise awareness and pressure those in authority, ultimate decision-making power remains with those in positions of power. This can be disheartening for activists, who may perceive their efforts as ineffectual. Additionally, activists confront internal challenges alongside external obstacles. Activism demands emotional and mental resilience, compelling individuals to grapple with uncomfortable truths about themselves, their communities, and society. This burden is often intensified for marginalized individuals directly affected by the systems they strive to confront. Tiyanna, a Black queer woman, and young professional in higher education in the Northeast, reflects on her experiences at her institution.

> It was the summer of 2021 and I just felt broken. I was constantly speaking up, taking action, and doing something, but got to the point of realizing this place is so messed up. Why even engage?

For marginalized individuals who are personally impacted by the systems they are working to dismantle, the emotional and mental toll can be particularly high. As Tiyanna explained, she eventually reached a point where she felt broken and questioned the value of engaging in activism altogether. Tiyanna's reflection highlights the emotional overload that can result from constantly speaking up, taking action, and confronting the injustices in one's community or workplace.

3.2.2. Impact

Participants were motivated by their activism's impact but also grappled with measuring it. Brittany, a Black queer woman and undergraduate student at a southern university, shifted from protesting in high school to campus organizations during college and questioned the effectiveness of her new involvement. Brittany remarked,

> I think the challenging part is sometimes you don't see how you're impacting things. Currently, I feel like I don't come into contact with any of the people who could potentially be impacted by my work. Sometimes it can be hard to feel like it matters or it's not performative.

Graduate student participants, including Reese, a Black nonbinary doctoral student at a midwestern university, questioned the effectiveness of their activism within their institutions, notably within diversity and equity committees. Reese pondered the impact of their activism in their neighborhood versus the diversity and equity work in their graduate school.

> I feel like if you don't make change and assess that change, then it's just a committee that stands with nothing. There are a lot of committees that exist just because. The question should be, what has the committee done to improve XYZ?

Black young adult activists continue to work tirelessly to create change in their communities and institutions, driven by the hope of making a tangible impact. However, as Brittany and Reese's experiences demonstrate, the nature of activism can make it challenging to see the fruits of one's labor.

3.2.3. Harm

Harm, including physical violence during protests and online threats, was a significant concern among participants. These experiences underscore the intricate and frequently hazardous nature of activism for Black young adults. Deja, a Black queer woman and young professional in the South, shared,

> During the summer of 2020, I went protesting here in my city and experienced police brutality that sent me into a very deep spiral. I decided at that moment, activism, cool. I could find a different way to do it.

Further, Brianna, a Black and Ghanaian, queer, undergraduate student at a southern university, said,

> I got a death threat and he was threatening to hunt me down to extinction if I didn't stop speaking out, and so navigating that was interesting. Dealing with that, I'm like do I want to keep doing this work when people are threatening to kill me and my family?

Participation risk extends beyond physical harm and can encompass professional repercussions, as some participants also reported their jobs being jeopardized due to their activism efforts. Halle, a Black and Mexican woman and doctoral student at a midwestern university, shared,

> I had a grad student visit my class and question my teaching. They were like, 'This is not correct. Why are you teaching evolutionary psychology like this? This field is not based on racism'. Even that conversation alone, that junk hurts! Why did you go to my supervisor and tell on me, as if I'm telling students the wrong

parts of history? Just because it's not the history that you want to hear doesn't mean that it didn't exist and doesn't still impact us...

Halle's experience is an example of how an individual's activism can be challenged and how they can be intimidated by other professionals. For some Black young adult activists, their livelihoods are at risk due to their activism work. This risk is not just limited to physical harm but can also include professional consequences. As such, it is important to recognize and address the challenges faced by Black young adult activists to support and protect their rights and well-being.

3.2.4. Working with Others

Collaboration emerged as a challenge in activism, especially within collective efforts. Participants faced difficulties in navigating disagreements and differing political perspectives, highlighting the complexities of working toward common goals. Anna, a Black and Creole young professional at a Southern nonprofit, shared her experiences working on various local committees.

> The hardest part of activism is giving space to intersecting values and ideals. How can you agree with someone on something and disagree with them on something else? Wanting to work with people on your shared goal and keeping different temperaments and politics away from things is probably the hardest part.

Collective activism work can be a daunting task for many activists, as it involves working with others who may have different perspectives and opinions. Anna's experiences illustrate the challenges that come with working with a group of individuals with intersecting values and ideals. Jordan, a Black and Jamaican, queer, non-binary young professional working at a nonprofit in the South, echoed this sentiment. When reflecting on collaborating with other activists on organizing work, Jordan said, "At times, it's a challenge interpersonally between folks that have different opinions. Smart, intelligent, caring people disagree, and sometimes because we're activists, we disagree so much harder politically".

The challenge of finding supportive and like-minded individuals was identified specifically by young professionals in the sample. This is a notable finding because it suggests that the availability of supportive communities may be more limited in professional settings than in colleges and universities which may provide Black young adults with more opportunities to connect with other like-minded individuals.

These findings emphasize the multifaceted nature of challenges faced by Black young adult activists and underscore the importance of addressing these challenges to support their well-being and foster a more inclusive and equitable environment, particularly in professional settings where building supportive communities for activism can be more challenging.

4. Discussion

This study, where the author conducted in-depth interviews with Black young adults in the United States, aimed to explore the motivations and challenges influencing their engagement in activism. This study makes several contributions to the literature on Black youth activism. First, this study fills a gap in the existing research by directly examining Black young adults' perspectives on their activism work. It acknowledges the limited attention given to understanding their experiences and seeks to add a nuanced exploration of their activism [55,56]. Further, by recognizing Black young adults as integral leaders in transformative social change and emphasizing the importance of examining their activism [6,7], this study advocates for the promotion, support, and sustainability of their activism efforts.

The study findings reflect the broader context of the Summer of 2020. The surge in activism during the Summer of 2020 can be understood within the context of the previous waves of activism for racial and social justice, such as the emergence of the Black Lives

Matter movement in 2013 [13]. These historical movements have instilled a collective memory and consciousness within Black communities, inspiring a continued commitment to challenging systemic injustice [48]. The tragic deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery served as stark reminders of the persistent violence and discrimination faced by Black individuals, triggering a renewed sense of urgency and mobilization among Black young adults.

The Black young adults engaged in diverse forms of activism, including grassroots organizing, direct action, advocacy, and community building. Their activism encompassed a wide range of issues such as social justice, racial equity, LGBTQ+ rights, education, healthcare, and economic justice. Some participants organized protests, sit-ins, and demonstrations to demand systemic change and raise awareness about pressing issues like police brutality, racial discrimination, and LGBTQ+ liberation. Others focused on community organizing and advocacy efforts, collaborating with local organizations to address issues such as tenants' rights, disability inclusion, and reproductive rights. Additionally, some participants used creative methods like photography, social media, and podcasting to document and amplify marginalized voices and experiences, fostering dialogue and mobilizing support for social justice causes. Moreover, many of these young adults spent substantial time in predominantly white institutions (PWIs) where they confronted unique challenges and opportunities in their pursuit of social justice. Their activism not only addresses pressing social issues but also highlights their experiences as agents of change in their communities.

4.1. Motivations

Motivations for Black young adults' activism engagement included social identity, legacy, impact, morals, and responsibility. Participants' social identities, including race, gender, sexuality, class, and ability, significantly influenced their activism efforts, aligning with research highlighting the influential role of identities in activism engagement [20,34]. Scholars have posited that the significance individuals assign to their social identities shapes their attunement to social injustices and power imbalances in society [54,67]. Identity-based experiences provide a lens through which Black young adults can critically examine social structures, institutions, policies, and practices [25,26]. Activism empowers them to actively challenge and dismantle oppressive systems that affect their communities [45]. In addition, participants grappled with belonging to multiple marginalized groups and noticed how their communities and the issues that affect them need to be highlighted. These findings align with intersectionality literature, which highlights how socially constructed identities and systems of oppression intersect to create distinct experiences and ways of being [46,47]. It may be that Black young adults' intersecting identities will urge them to advocate for those specific communities in their activism. This connection underscores the transformative influence of an individual's social identity, often forged through encounters of oppression, as a catalyst for propelling their active engagement in pursuit of social justice [20,25,68].

This study illuminates the role of past activists and historical figures in shaping the activism of Black young adults. This finding resonates with an essential characteristic of SPD—critical social analysis—where youth pursue knowledge, especially historical and sociopolitical insights, which informs their challenge of prevailing social structures [4,34]. Participants' exposure and connection to past activists and social movements through diverse educational mediums such as their families, school, and social media significantly influenced their interest in and commitment to activism, amplifying Black young adults' identification with their communities' struggles and serving as a motivation for their activism. Several scholars suggest that Black history knowledge serves as a vital psychological resource, particularly for Black individuals facing racial injustice and adversity [69]. Black young people's engagement with historical narratives of cultural strength and resistance contributes to their understanding of the society they live in and its past and

their sense of agency to challenge societal norms and advocate for positive change in their communities [48].

Participants were motivated by the belief in the tangible impact of their activism, reinforcing the pursuit of a more equitable society. The impact of their activism efforts, both personal and external, reinforced their motivation to persist despite challenges, aligning with SPD's focus on continued sociopolitical engagement [34]. A moral responsibility to address systemic inequities and discrimination was evident among participants, driven by personal beliefs and a sense of societal duty. Some participants linked this moral aspect to religion and spirituality, echoing historical ties between religious beliefs and social justice movements within the Black community [69–72].

4.2. Challenges

Challenges for Black young adults' activism included contending with oppression, impact, harm, and working with others. Participants highlighted the exhaustive time, energy, and emotional labor that they emitted in their contention with oppressive systems, which can take a toll on their mental and emotional health. This aligns with scholarship on the burnout experienced by racial justice activists [49], underscoring the importance of addressing the psychological impact of activism on individuals. Participants also mentioned facing resistance from individuals and institutions in their activism, which can make achieving progress slow and difficult. This resistance can hinder activists' efforts and contribute to feelings of frustration and disillusionment. Addressing the psychological impact of activism on individuals is crucial for sustaining the momentum of Black young adults' efforts in the face of resistance.

Harm was another challenge that participants mentioned, both in-person and online. Harm further complicated their activism work and impacted activists' mental health and sustainability. Participants recounted instances of physical danger during demonstrations and harassment and abuse on social media platforms, highlighting the risks associated with activism. These experiences not only impact activists' mental health but also influence their future participation in activism. This echoes literature exploring the psychological strain that individuals experience when anticipating threats or harm associated with their activism efforts [51,73]. Anticipatory stress arises as activists anticipate and prepare for these potential risks, knowing that their activism may expose them to harmful situations. Understanding the harm that activists undergo as well as how they navigate stress and risks associated with their participation is essential for supporting activists and their wellbeing.

Participants grappled with the dual role of gauging the impact of their activism work. While the belief in the tangible impact of their activism served as a motivator, participants also encountered the challenge of accurately measuring the outcomes of their activism. They wrestled with questions about the effectiveness of their activism within institutional frameworks such as campus organizations and diversity committees, highlighting concerns about their activism being performative or lacking lasting change. This relates to the literature on the complexities of measuring social change and activism efficacy within institutional contexts [74]. While the belief in the impact of their activism work was a significant motivator, the challenge of gauging this impact underscored the ongoing struggle faced by activists in determining the effectiveness of their efforts.

Navigating collaborative efforts with other activists was presented as a challenge to activism efforts in the study, particularly for young professionals in the sample. This challenge may be due to the different priorities and demands of professional settings compared to college and university environments. In professional spaces, the hierarchical structure may discourage or limit opportunities for activism. There may also be fewer opportunities to seek out individuals who share similar social justice goals [75]. As Black young activists continue to navigate these hurdles, it is imperative that they are provided with support and resources to ensure their wellbeing and the sustainability of their transformative social justice work.

5. Limitations

The present study, while shedding light on the activism experiences of Black young adults, faces notable limitations. Primarily, the sampling method's reliance on convenience and snowballing techniques may have introduced selection bias, potentially limiting the representation of diverse perspectives within the Black activist community. Recruitment solely through youth-serving community-based organizations and social media platforms might have excluded individuals not engaged in these networks but are still doing transformative activism work, affecting the study's inclusivity and generalizability. Most participants being students could potentially overshadow the viewpoints of Black young adults engaged in low-wage jobs or not pursuing higher education. Moreover, while participants were primarily from the South, the distribution across other regions was limited. This geographic skew could restrict the generalizability of findings and insights obtained, as regional differences in activism experiences and socio-political contexts might not have been fully explored or represented.

6. Future Directions

Future research endeavors should prioritize exploring effective coping mechanisms for the emotional and mental health challenges faced by activists, extending beyond academic settings to encompass activists from various backgrounds and vocations. Additionally, it is imperative to investigate strategies fostering supportive, collaborative environments conducive to sustained activism across a spectrum of settings, such as community organizations, vocational institutions, and grassroots movements. To comprehensively understand factors influencing activism among Black young adults, future studies should embrace broader sampling strategies, encompassing individuals employed in low-wage jobs, those involved in community activism, or those currently unemployed. Inclusive sampling will illuminate challenges faced by different segments of the Black young adult population outside the academic sphere. Moreover, employing longitudinal studies that track experiences over time will offer nuanced insights into the evolution of sociopolitical development and the impact of education, work, community involvement, and grassroots activism on sustained engagement, enriching our understanding of Black youth activism across diverse backgrounds and occupations.

7. Implications

This study sheds light on the multifaceted experiences of Black young adults engaged in social change, providing critical insights that can influence strategies and practices within activism. The findings gleaned from this study serve as guiding principles for fostering effective engagement in social change efforts while promoting the healthy development of Black young adults. Empowering Black young adults as proactive agents of change is imperative not only for driving impactful societal shifts but also for fostering their personal growth and well-being. Initiatives such as training programs, workshops, and mentorship initiatives play pivotal roles in equipping them with skills like community organizing, advocacy strategies, and coalition building [76].

Creating spaces for dialogue, learning, and mentorship from experienced activists is essential for skill-sharing and fostering a supportive environment for Black young adults. These spaces should encourage reflection on navigating activism efforts within institutions that perpetuate systemic oppression and may seek to co-opt or undermine movements for social change, such as universities, government, corporations, and nonprofit organizations [77]. Additionally, they should provide guidance for building alternative systems of support and governance, such as mutual aid networks, cooperatives, and community-based initiatives [76,78]. Such engagement aligns with the tenets of sociopolitical development theory, emphasizing the significance of collective learning, mentorship, and dialogue in advancing social change [34,54]. Through spaces that promote youth activism, individuals can exchange knowledge, enhance skills, and collectively work towards social justice goals.

Activism often exacts a toll on the mental, emotional, and physical well-being of Black young adults [49]. Interventions addressing burnout are paramount for ensuring their sustained engagement and overall well-being. Tailored mental health resources, including counseling services and therapy, should be easily accessible. Collective care practices such as peer support groups and community-building activities can provide avenues for activists to connect, share experiences, and collectively address burnout [79]. Prioritizing mental health within activist communities not only supports the well-being of individuals but also enhances the sustainability of activism efforts.

Incorporating avenues to learn about past activists and social movements in educational curricula is pivotal. This inclusive approach not only offers a comprehensive understanding of past struggles and victories in the ongoing fight for social justice but also fosters pride, resilience, and motivation among Black youth, integrating them into a legacy of activism. Moreover, this study underscores the enduring tradition of activism within the Black community, showcasing that the struggles faced by Black young adults today are part of a continuum. Their responses to oppression build upon the work of their ancestors who fought for liberation and social justice, shaping significant social and political movements in the United States. This comprehensive understanding aids in developing more impactful strategies to empower them as change agents, thus amplifying their voices in the pursuit of a more equitable and free society.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Institutional Review Board of NC State University (protocol code 23981 on 29 September 2021).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available upon request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to the potential inclusion of sensitive information about individuals or entities. Confidentiality agreements or privacy regulations prevent their public disclosure.

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