Youth-powered or empowered: How self-determination theory can help us better understand youth media dynamics with adult facilitators during the pandemic

ABSTRACT
Youth media literature celebrates youth voice but rarely discusses the power dynamics between adult mentors and youth. This case study explores these power dynamics in cultivating trust between teenagers creating community media and their adult mentors on Chicago’s South Side. The authors identified three

KEYWORDS
media literacy
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self-determination themes relating to these power dynamics between the youth and adults in the production process during the COVID-19 pandemic: (1) generating routines to foster a sense of competency; (2) having a sense of belonging by creating caring interactions; (3) allowing participants to voice their opinion to increase their sense of autonomy. Being Black teenagers in the middle of the pandemic along with the social unrest was challenging. Creating their own media for a specific target audience in their community, instead of a cable TV channel, supported the youth’s sense of power to come intrinsically and not from the adult facilitators.

INTRODUCTION

Youth represent the next generation that will lead society as they learn about social structures of power and examine their own voice. While good intentions drive youth development initiatives, including youth media, the logistics, liability laws, and the wish for a professional end-product cause the responsible adults to use their power to dominate the process and its outcomes (Blum-Ross 2015). In direct contrast to the premise of youth learning responsibility and leadership, youth media like other youth development initiatives suffer from misuse of the term empowerment. According to Jennings et al. (2008), genuine youth empowerment happens only within a welcoming space of equitable responsibilities with adults and strong community connections. While adults do possess the power, a true emancipation process, especially with vulnerable youth who suffer societal oppression, must have equitable and inclusive practices. By creating a courageous space where youth are genuinely equal and have the responsibility to succeed and fail, instead of a safe space provided by a protecting adult, youth can meaningfully grow towards liberation. The challenging balance between genuine equity and inclusion and the power possessed by the adult organizer is at the heart of this study to offer a better understanding of these delicate and critical dynamics in youth media.

This article introduces a case study of Teena Sloane-Hendricks’s mentorship of GenZ Tribe, part of her practicum in the civic media MA programme. The Black teenagers from Chicago’s South Side created this media production and named it to amplify their voices and gain more political power through creative media during the COVID-19 pandemic.

First, we will introduce the concept of youth media as part of community and alternative media. Second, we will examine the power dynamics of youth media as a process and product of civic engagement. Third, we will offer a practical framework to address power relations within youth media teams, adult instructors and the outside community. This civic media framework can help adults who are media activists or media producers in a community to apply more equity and inclusion in their process of production as they work together with youth to fight towards social justice.

YOUTH MEDIA AS COMMUNITY AND ALTERNATIVE VOICE

Youth media has long been part of community and alternative media, starting with local radio shows and magazines and later moving to include local TV as equipment became more accessible (Goodman 2003). The term youth media refers to both the process and the product of adolescents’ and young adults’ work on producing media regarding topics of their concern to a local audience (Friesem 2019). While some high schools include journalism courses
instructing media production, many youth media initiatives take place outside of school in local community centres (Dhal 2009). It is in these settings that teenagers learn to use media production as a form of civic engagement in their community to address local issues forming their own community and alternative media (Tyner 2003).

Community media attempts to encompass the relationships between communities and media technologies. Rodríguez (2021) outlines community media as grassroots media, controlled and produced by community members for other fellow community members, outside of commercial and public structures. Autonomy is a central feature of community media because it originates in civil society, independent of political and government agendas. The goal of community media is to meet local needs regarding information and communication, rather than to generate profit. As opposed to dominant commercial and public media’s one-way communication process, community media promotes two-way communication between producers and receivers. This allows for diverse voices to simultaneously be shared and heard (Rodríguez 2021). With a participatory process, community media typically allows any community member to become a media producer, including youth.

Youth feel alienated from formal civic action in political structures, such as voting, but identify their contributions to their community as important (Levine 2008). Kennelly (2018) explains that encouraging youth towards formal civic action dominates the current efforts of youth engagement. However, these efforts offer little to youth that live ‘on the extreme margins of our liberal democratic societies’ (Kennelly 2018: 7). Levine (2008) argues that many issues guided by societal norms cannot be combatted by traditional government intervention or civic participation. He examines the importance of teaching youth media creators to be more effective in public domains by understanding their audience. Through cultural production that persuades and contests, the youth are civically engaged. The issues that youth media creators face in this civic process lie in the reception of their work by their audience or lack thereof. Hauge (2014) argues that instead of celebrating hopeful social change as the process of youth media, the focus should be on the ways the youth engage in storytelling, and how youth move into and negotiate movement with their community space and politics. Our case study showcases how a group of teenagers built enough trust to move away from the cable network towards a YouTube channel with their authentic storytelling to better represent their interests and community. As we explain in the findings, the power dynamics of the group rejected the adult mentors’ advice to follow industry standards.

**POWER DYNAMICS IN YOUTH MEDIA**

When analysing films created by inner-city youth, Blum-Ross (2015) argues that although the films displayed stereotypical representations, these projects were successful because the goal was for youth to learn the process of media creation, rather than focusing on the product. Arguing that the goals of a youth media project should match the way the project is facilitated, Rogers et al. (2010) found that while youth video productions have the potential to reinforce stereotypical representations, video production serves as a place in which youth can represent complex subject positions and challenge assumptions about youth, gender or ethnicity. They also found that the intent to address these societal topics came from the youth themselves, not the facilitators.
Kennelly (2018) found that, because of a focus on the final product of the work, facilitators controlled the editing and production of the youths’ films, using their positions as adult members of the ‘middle class’ to re-represent the words of the youth participants to appeal to their target audience. Kennelly argues that although the adult facilitators made the ultimate decisions, the films still respect the youth’s autonomy and represent them, but questions if the representation deviated too far from their true experiences.

Youth activism researchers have identified that the strain on these relationships stem from the conflicting ideas that this work belongs entirely to youth, vs. viewing youth activism and media creation as a collaborative space for both youth and adult perspectives (Liou and Literat 2020). The presence of more adults provides resource availability, at the same time the adult presence can overshadow the authentic voices of the youth participants (Boggs et al. 2017). To cultivate trust in youth media, facilitators must navigate the complex dynamics of building these relationships that are impacted in every encounter with youth participants. To do this, facilitators must create an environment that supports risk-taking (Goodman 2003).

Facilitators of youth media may be afraid to challenge the youth’s work for fear of not centring the youth’s own voice (Blum-Ross 2017). Blum-Ross defines three types of facilitators in youth media. First, ‘guides’, who focus on teaching basic technical skills and the emotional and physical safety of youth participants. Second, the ‘collaborators’, actively place themselves as members of a team along with the youth participants and intervene with the production of youth media more than guides. Third, the ‘mentors’ intervene the most in the process and act as experts, teaching youth participants how to create content that is high-quality and reaches an intended audience. Mentors also place the most focus on media literacy.

Regardless of the role a facilitator takes on in the youth media co-creation process, it is essential for facilitators to cultivate trust and build relationships with not only the youth participants, but also the community (Burke et al. 2017). Goodman (2003) explains that building connections within the community is part of gaining social capital, social organization which consists of trust, networks and norms that help to foster mutually beneficial relationships. This social capital, when combined with the political capital of the adult facilitator, is more likely to result in a sustainable youth media project.

**SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY**

In order to provide a sustainable youth media project, youth need to have intrinsic motivations to pursue this demanding endeavour. Self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci 2000) provides a theoretical framework of three human needs to cultivate intrinsic motivation: sense of competency, sense of belonging and sense of autonomy. Within media practice, self-determination theory offers a lens to identify the potential of engaging with media to satisfy basic psychological needs of competence, belonging and autonomy (Przybylski et al. 2010). Pienimäki (2019) showcases how self-determination theory can help us to better understand the trust-building of youth-at-risk in Finland through media practice. She describes a media project that first increases sense of competency of the marginalized youth, followed by autonomy and sense of belonging. Similarly, Burke et al. (2017) describe how youth can have the shared vison to work together and acquire the mastery of using media to
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convey their message. However, they explain how the lack of youth agency can fail the media project.

Both Goodman (2003) and Herring (2008) note that youth are typically distrustful of authority, especially corporate media sources like advertisements and broadcast news where the youth do not feel they are accurately represented. Young people are uncomfortable being told who they are by adults in marketing, even if they believe the representations to not be entirely false (Herring 2008). And yet, youth media creators often replicate, rather than challenge, stereotypical media representations (Blum-Ross 2017). Youth seek to set themselves apart from adult constructions that they view as inauthentic or manipulative and therefore base their trust of information on their relationship with the source within the community. Seal (2018) explains this two-way trust in the context of youth-conducted peer research. Youth media have the potential to utilize institutions and members of their communities for the communities’ own development, as well as build social capital for the youth producers even after the conclusion of the project (Goodman 2003).

Especially with youth that feel marginalized by society and adults, self-determination theory offers a psychological framework to understand power dynamics and trust-building (Pienimäki 2019). The theory divides the intrinsic motivation and personal needs into three different areas that are part of the media practice (Friesem 2015): increasing the sense of competency by learning to produce media; fostering a sense of belonging by working within a group of peers; promoting their sense of autonomy by making their own choices to impact their audience. Therefore, this research posed the question: what are the power dynamics that promote the self-determination of participants in youth media as a community and alternative voice? More specifically, we wanted to examine the practices of cultivating trust between adults and adolescents on Chicago’s South Side during the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure the impact and sustainability of the youth media project.

METHODS

The purpose of this case study is to explore the process, challenges and opportunities of cultivating trust between adults and youth who collaborate on a community and alternative media project. For this research, we examined the work of one group of Black youth producing a community video on Chicago’s South Side during the COVID-19 pandemic. We chose to apply case study methodology (Merriam 2001) as a qualitative research design because of the unique access that Teena Sloane-Hendricks had to the youth media group combining interviews, ethnographic reflections and analysis of their media texts. All three authors engaged in a participatory research design of the case study to ensure trustworthiness of the data while contributing to this study as we explain in the next section.

CONTEXT OF STUDY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

In 2019, Teena assembled a group of seventeen youths between the ages of 17–19. The teenagers wanted to call their youth media work – GenZ Tribe. Teena aimed to work in collaboration with Black Entertainment Television (BET) on this initiative. Initially, BET planned to provide a platform for alternative voice for the Black and Chicago’s South Side youth on local and national TV. However, as described in this study, the youth wanted more autonomy and decided to publish their work on YouTube, as an alternative and community
voice without the restraints of the cable network. Teena organized the GenZ Tribe group prior to her enrolment and graduation from the civic media MA programme. As part of her practicum, she documented her work by writing ethnographic reflections under the supervision of Yonty Friesem. To address any issue of coercion, the collaborative work on this research article began after Teena graduated from the programme. In addition, Charlotte Duff, who did not know Teena prior to the research, conducted all research interviews with the youth and Teena.

Our participatory research design was approved by our college’s Institution Review Board (IRB) that oversees ethical procedure of research human subjects. The four teenagers interviewed are three females and one male, ages 17–19, Black and live in Woodlawn on Chicago’s South Side. All youth names have been changed to pseudonyms for confidentiality and research started only after the youth, as well as their legal guardians, signed on consent forms to participate. To keep ethical guidelines and trustworthiness of data, Charlotte conducted the interview with the four teenagers, whom she was closer in age and had no prior relationships with. Charlotte also interviewed Teena and communicated via e-mail with an executive from BET to provide another point of view. As stated previously, Charlotte and Teena had not previously communicated before the interviews to prevent coercion of the data.

While this qualitative case study provides only the subjective viewpoints of the instructors and four young adults, it also allows unique access to the delicate process of cultivating trust. The nature of an educational case study is to support the work of educators in a place where the researchers have no control and access to data is sensitive (Merriam 2001). We addressed the issues of researcher positionality by having Charlotte conduct the interviews as a neutral researcher. Moreover, all three authors collaborated after Teena graduated from the programme to prevent coercion. Of the four youth participants interviewed, two are children of Teena who were the core leaders of the youth media group. While the family relations between Teena and her two children could impact the study, it also provided unique access and established trust that is rare in the study of youth media. We applied the following methods to address the threat to data trustworthiness: triangulation, member checking and thick description. We triangulated the information from the interviews to ensure the information about the events and the dynamic was correct. Adding youth member checking (Fraenkel et al. 2012) allowed the young adults to reflect and correct any misrepresentation of their work and to have the power over their representations. To address the question of generalizability of the findings to other settings, we offer transferability (Patton 2015) by providing a thick description of the case study.

**DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS**

Charlotte conducted two interviews with each teenager (once via Zoom and one over the phone). To validate the information, the youth reviewed the description of their responses as part of member checking methods. Similarly, Teena provided additional materials, including her ethnographic reflections on the work, the pilot episode created by the youth (initially submitted to BET in September 2020) and raw footage of their work and process to explore how the work of cultivating trust impacted production.

We applied thematic analysis (Boyatzis 1998) to examine the transcripts of the interviews, Teena’s ethnographic reflections and the video footage.
Both Yonty and Charlotte first reviewed the transcripts and coded each to express recurring patterns observed separately. Once gathering and comparing the codes, we were able to categorize three themes that emerged from the data. Following our literature review, we examined how the three human needs of self-determination theory can explain the process of cultivating trust through the themes: competence, belongingness and autonomy. To verify the trustworthiness of the data along member checking, Yonty and Charlotte also coded the video footage separately. When we compared the codes, we found evidence in the video footage of the youth expressing, either by their descriptive narration or by their aesthetic choices, how they demonstrated sense of competency (tone of voice, camera movement, approaching interviewees); sense of belonging (group shots of the production team, filmed in-group discussions); sense of autonomy (stated in videotaped reflections, aesthetic choices contradicting the advice of the adults). The following analysis provides a thick description for each theme to provide insightful access to the delicate group dynamic.

FINDINGS/RESULTS

We identified three self-determination themes relating to the power dynamics between the youth and adults in the production process during the COVID-19 pandemic: (1) generating routines to foster a sense of competency; (2) having a sense of belonging by creating caring interactions; (3) allowing participants to voice their opinion to increase their sense of autonomy.

Generating routines to foster a sense of competence

In the spring of 2018, Teena brought a group of about fifty high school students to visit the BET office in Chicago as part of a school programme. Being the adult mentor, Teena and her daughter CeeCee organized a monthly meeting in person that became the GenZ Tribe after school programme. For the next three years, this core group of seventeen to twenty students from the same school meet at the BET office every other month and additionally every month at another location to create content together. Before every meeting, Teena provided the participants with an agenda via e-mail. These agendas included information about what would be discussed in the meetings and how the participants should prepare by brainstorming ideas on chosen topics.

When meeting at the BET office, office staff would speak to and lecture the youth in the BET office conference room. The participants would also have lunch in the BET office that day. The group would occasionally split their discussion groups by gender to allow for different types of conversation. The participants explained that without these meetings and lessons from BET, they otherwise would not have the knowledge of the industry or the professional competency they gained from learning in this setting. CeeCee shared how this experience helped her with her leadership skills by taking on the role of a co-host for their production and being responsible for part of the internal communications for the group. She described how she learned how to communicate in a way that allows her to hear the voices of both the facilitators and her peers, sometimes serving as a channel for communication between the two.

In one disagreement between the facilitators and participants, the youth discussed new ideas for segments they wanted to add to their video episodes.
The youth felt that their episodes were too serious and needed more comedic elements. With already showcasing segments about topics such as sports, dance history and music history, the youth thought adding segments such as skits or pranks would add this element that they saw as missing. LaRue suggested adding skits, while Barb and CeeCee suggested the idea of adding a game segment that included pranks. These ideas came from the youth’s own media consumption, as they saw ideas like these becoming popular with their age group and target audience on social media.

Barb described how, with guidance from the two facilitators, she learned to communicate effectively with executives in the professional environment, and how she learned to work with peers and navigate conflicting opinions without undermining them. And yet, when the youth asked the facilitators about distribution and target audience, they were met with unclear answers and a request to rely on the professional judgement of the adults. Although this reassured Barb and the group that their ideas were still being heard, this interaction did not provide the youth with a space to increase their competency and confidence in their communication and professionalism skills.

The participants describe their routine changes after the pandemic as affecting their relationships with both the facilitators and their peers. After seeing peers not in attendance at virtual or smaller in-person meetings or lacking motivation to contribute to discussion during meetings, CeeCee observed that a lot of peers lost motivation to continue their work when the pandemic began.

**Belonging and creating caring interactions**

The participants, referred to as CeeCee, LaRue, Barb and Jordyn (pseudonyms) in this article, note that, before the COVID-19 pandemic, there was often clashing of opinions in their youth media group. However, these disagreements did not change their sense of belonging. CeeCee described how the BET executive discussed the topic of loyalty to the group. She shared that this conversation made her realize how important it was for her to keep the group, which she referred to as family, together.

At first, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the youth participants became frustrated because they were unable to meet. As a result, this created feelings amongst the youth that the facilitators did not listen to what they were trying to communicate as much as they had previously. In her interview, Teena noted the youth’s resentment of not being able to be together. After eventually transitioning to online video sessions, the youth participants felt that they had significantly less time with the BET executive.

When they began meeting again, they noticed differences in the group dynamic, and felt that they needed to relearn how to be together. They also credited this to their own isolation in their homes, and only socializing with those they lived with for a long period of time during the COVID-19 lockdown. The youth participants also spoke about how more recently they have been discussing deeper topics relating to politics, and this caused there to be fewer ‘fun’ moments while meeting with the group. LaRue spoke about how after the lockdown some group members began expressing opinions on political issues that he and the rest of the group did not agree with, causing new tensions. As a result of those tensions, some of the group members stopped attending meetings.
CeeCee felt as though these peers were planning to just keep their names attached to the project to see if it was successful, but not contribute to the work. She would frequently try to communicate with the group through a group messaging chat but would often not receive any response. When these members did attend meetings in person, when the group was able to film again safely, these peers were silent during many conversations. To try to solve this issue, the group members who were heavily involved began to choose topics ahead of time that they wished to discuss. These brainstorming sessions helped the situation, and members who were less active began to participate more frequently. At one point, an issue did arise among the group when one participant voiced a desire to discuss ‘politics’. The majority of the group did not wish to discuss this, because they felt this topic was too heavy, and that the discussion would not be relevant by the time the work would be published. CeeCee observed that this participant became emotional and frustrated with the group’s response to this subject and called the previous topics they had discussed ‘childish’.

**Allowing voice to increase sense of autonomy**

During their media creation process, the youth participants navigated conflicting opinions between themselves and the facilitators. In one disagreement, Teena and the participants clashed over opinions on how to use different media outlets for their work. Prior, the participants and facilitators agreed that they wanted to publish their content through a traditional TV network. However, due to the pandemic, the participants’ ideas about this began to change. The youth noticed that not everyone their age watched TV and so they became more interested in posting their content on social media. LaRue and the other boys in the group suggested the streaming site Twitch, while CeeCee and few others suggested YouTube. The group also discussed using Facebook or Snapchat because these social networking sites now have their own shows published on their platforms. When asked by the BET Executive, the participants did not have a complete idea of what they wanted to do, while Teena remained committed to the idea of publishing the work via television.

Teena viewed this disagreement as stemming from the youth’s fear of censorship on traditional TV networks and an incomplete understanding of these different media channels. Explaining that, for example, using profanity would be prohibited on television, and explaining to them how liability works regarding the prank segment. Teena suggested the idea that BET could distribute for them on both social media and TV, but the youth still feared censorship with this. The youth also did not feel that BET’s current media, which they do not consume, accurately represents them. The disagreement was never resolved when the pandemic began because of the importance of focusing on finishing their pilot episode. Teena shared that the youth now wish to create their own platform instead of publishing their work going forward. Along with their media content, they would also like this platform to include merchandising.

The youth participants began to feel frustrated that their voices were not being heard, because their new solutions were also shut down. At this time, the youth felt that every idea they had was being shot down and that they were not allowed to take risks. CeeCee was chosen by the group to serve as a liaison to explain to her mother how the group did not feel heard. CeeCee explained that she was chosen to do this because of her proximity to her mother, and her
understanding of how to effectively communicate with her. She described this as an example in which she would take the language she used with her peers and translate it into a language that would be more effective when speaking with her mother, the adult facilitator. She shared that this allowed her to improve her communication skills, specifically regarding how to specialize in communication with different groups of varying ages and opinions.

In a separate disagreement between participants and facilitators, the youth clashed with Teena in regard to deleting old footage. The footage depicted the participants dancing together at a younger age, three years previously. Teena wanted to keep this footage because it showed the participants growth and personality, while the participants saw the footage as not representative of them and not contributing to their work. In this disagreement, the participants expressed their frustrations and conflicting opinions to Teena and were able to agree to remove the footage.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the participants described being able to express their opinions more easily when meeting in person together. After transitioning to meeting virtually, Teena met with some of the participants without the BET representative. The participants shared that it was more difficult to express their opinions in this atmosphere because these meetings did not always include every member of the group. They also described the feeling that there were some conversations that they could not have through these online video meetings because not all voices were present. And yet, as a way to regain their voice and agency, the group decided to publish their pilot episode on their newly established YouTube channel instead of officially be part of BET TV network. This choice to be a genuine voice of their community without the adult censorship as they perceived it, demonstrates how the youth had the autonomy to switch from the planned TV network broadcast to online alternative publication.

Barb described how she learned to always bring alternate solutions to changes that she wanted to make when having disagreements with the facilitators. She shared one example of this, in which she and Jordyn set aside three to four hours to brainstorm ideas for how their pilot episode could be laid out. They came up with three possible ideas and brought these ideas to the facilitators. In this example, the facilitators did not move forward with any of these ideas. Barb described this as a disappointment to her and shared that the rejecting of ideas from facilitators before they are pitched to their peers does not happen a lot, but it does every so often. CeeCee also described her internal conflict throughout the experience both in person and virtually, in which she censored what she said at times because of her relationship to her mother. CeeCee viewed working with her mother as a strength and a weakness at times because she did not always feel she could express her opinion without it becoming a personal disagreement. LaRue, however, felt that he was consistently able to express his opinions both before and during the pandemic, despite his relationship to his mother.

**Parental approval and engagement**

Outside of conflict between the youth and their peers during this time, Teena also navigated parental concerns from both parents of participants and herself. In one example, Teena was required to remain in constant contact with one member of the group’s father. However, the participant, a girl under the age of 18, was still unable to attend many meetings even with
Teena’s communications because her parents would, seemingly purposefully, frequently schedule doctor’s appointments during meeting times.

Another parent, a mother, called Teena over the summer, voicing her fears that her son would be in danger travelling to meet with the group. As a Black parent, Teena has experienced the constant concern of safe passage for her children, especially her Black son, through the area because of gang lines. Teena described how Black boys in this area know where these gang lines are, but still must cross them, and how public transportation can make travel more difficult because they may have to go out of their way to avoid danger. For example, if a bus stop is located between the main arteries of these lines. Teena described how although these concerns are constant, due to their own work schedules or other aspects of life, many parents cannot transport their children to events with required attendance, such as school. So, asking parents to allow their children to travel to an additional optional event, like GenZ Tribe’s group meetings, adds additional stress and fear for parents, making them reluctant to have their children participate. After the killings of George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery, and the civil unrest in summer 2020, these mothers’ fears increased. One mother described a balancing act of letting her son be independent when he could be hurt. Teena noted that during the civil unrest, Black kids became more of a target for not only the gangs, but also for the police, increasing parents’ concerns and their reluctance to allow their children to attend meetings.

**DISCUSSION**

In this case study, the facilitators took on Blum-Ross’s (2015) defined role as ‘mentors’. Both facilitators intervened in the media production process frequently when discussing the final product, and taught the participants about professionalism, the media field and creating content with the goal to reach their intended audience. By taking on this role, the facilitators centred the project’s focus on product. As a result, the facilitators and participants frequently disagreed throughout the media creation process. These disagreements also led the youth to depart from the initial BET project and create their own community and alternative media through YouTube. Although this impacted the group dynamic, the strength of the relationships between the youth participants and the facilitators allowed some of the youth to still feel comfortable expressing their opinions in this process.

**Competence: Generating routines**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the switch to online created frustration among the youth as they were unable to meet in person together and unable to film as a group, pushing their timeline back significantly. By ensuring that these routines remained as similar as possible during this time, the participants felt that they could still work to the best of their ability on the project, and some felt as though not much changed at all. Teena’s commitment to communication with both the participants and their parents allowed for group members to remain connected that otherwise likely would have dropped out. It is important to highlight that the data did not provide evidence of increased competency in media creation. However, these routines provided the youth opportunities to express their confidence in their abilities to articulate and create media for their community. Similar to the experiences of youth-at-risk in Finland (Pienimäki 2019), the work around professional media production...
enhanced the youths’ technical and rhetorical skills when challenged by the adult–teenager dynamics.

**Belonging: Creating caring interactions**

The presence of adults can increase opportunities and resource availability, their presence can also overshadow the youth’s voice (Boggs et al. 2017). Teena’s position as a facilitator and a parent to two of the group members impacted the entire group dynamic, while balancing the difficulty it added for CeeCee, who also often served as a liaison between the facilitators and participants because of her unique position. The initial collaboration with BET offered access to resources and knowledge the youth would not otherwise have up until the pandemic began. Through caring interactions with the youth, Teena and the BET executive were also able to build strong relationships with the group and help to establish their sense of belonging together from the start. Therefore, when the pandemic and quarantine started, there was a strong foundation to continue the work. The group built social capital through these relationships that were based on trust, networks and norms. The sense of belonging also increased with the routines of shared experiences and having similar backgrounds that created a comfortable and safe space to express themselves. By having a sense of belonging, the youth intrinsically were motivated to create media for their community. This was demonstrated by their loyalty to their own voice and changing their plan from publishing through BET to publishing their own work on their YouTube channel.

**Autonomy: Finding own voice**

The youth participants’ fear of censorship regarding using these traditional broadcast platforms likely stems from this distrust. In the disagreement regarding adding new segments including sketches and pranks to their episodes, CeeCee shared that the youth felt that their voices were not being heard, and that they were not allowed to take risks. Goodman (2003) recommends an environment that supports risk-taking to cultivate trust and navigate the complex dynamics of these relationships. Revisiting this unresolved disagreement and allowing more space for risk-taking could allow for the youth to gain more agency in their work, and to cultivate more trust in these relationships. When the trust in these relationships was tested, and the youth felt they did not have voice or agency in their work, they turned to a group liaison – CeeCee, and as a group decided to publish their work on YouTube. This trust is crucial to the youth media creation process, establishing genuine community and alternative media.

**CONCLUSION**

Power dynamics in youth media production have the potential to inhibit the work of youth participants when they feel that adults are controlling and directing the process (Liou and Literat 2020). The youth’s goal in this case study was to use their public voice to persuade their audience. To be effective with their civic engagement, it was vital for facilitators to teach how to reach their target audience (Levine 2008). However, this resulted in frequent disagreements. When examining these disagreements, they seemed to truly stem from the consideration of two different audiences. While the youth focused on what they thought would work best for reaching others their age, the facilitators focused
on what would be best received and promoted by the different platforms that they would use. This unique case study allowed us access to these delicate group dynamics and to explore the ways youth media can and should better address adult–teenager tensions as part of community and alternative media.

Although centring the voices of youth is vital to this work, youth media creators often replicate, rather than challenge, stereotypical media representations. When this happens, facilitators of youth media can be afraid to challenge the youth’s work for fear of not centring the youth’s own voice (Blum-Ross 2015). With the impact of the quarantine due to COVID-19 conflict arose in group belonging because some participants wanted to discuss current events, and others did not want to discuss heavy topics. Future research should examine the dynamics of escapism, civic imagination and community engagement within the youth media movement. While being Black teenagers in the middle of the pandemic and social unrest was challenging, the creation of media to specific target audience in their community offer sense of competence, belonging and purpose. These are the three factors that supported the youth sense of power to come intrinsically and not by the adult facilitators.

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Teena Sloane-Hendricks is a youth media arts specialist with focus on civic engagement. Her goal is to help young people foster more confidences through the power of engagement with and for youth. Since graduating from Columbia College Chicago with an MA in civic media, Teena is now working on a project called ‘Generation Z’. The civic media project has now elevated to an opportunity for youth to produce media programming along with building a brand, including merchandising.

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