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ABSTRACT

Young people today are immersed in digital culture: often considered savvy navigators of online ecosystems and adept at using everyday technologies to share, create and express. These technologies are often seen as social and personal tools instead of spaces for meaningful participation. This paper shares the results of an investigation in young people's attitudes towards popular social communication modalities – memes and hashtags – for civic purposes. The study employs Emerging Citizens: a suite of digital literacy tools and accompanying learning content that teach people of all ages how to critique and create hashtags and memes. This inquiry explores how young people perceive memes and hashtags as relevant avenues for civic expression, and the impact that a digital literacy intervention can have on youth attitudes. An analysis of the student experience using the Emerging Citizens tools and reflection of their creations finds that digital literacy interventions impact young people's perceptions of popular social modalities for civic impact.

Introduction: young people and civic expression online

Young people today have arguably more avenues for civic expression than ever before. The contemporary digital landscape offers a range of platforms, technologies and modalities for the creation, sharing, and distribution of information. Research has shown that young people are consuming a majority of their daily news and information in these spaces (Boczkowski, Mitchelstein, & Matassi, 2018; Dunne, Lawlor, & Rowley, 2010; Webster, 2010). While once organized in neat and linear structures, today the means for information creation, distribution and reception have been upended. Mobile technologies and predictive algorithms, alongside platforms that prioritize sharing and expression over consumption, have created an ecosystem where people are always connected and continually open to new forms of expression through online communication tools (Lane, 2020). While the impacts of this new ecosystem have been debated at length over the last decade or so, what's increasingly clear is the heavy use of social networks and technologies for personal and public expression (Boyd, 2014; Palfrey & Gasser, 2016; Twenge, 2017).

Research has shown how vast the use of popular social technologies are among younger demographics in particular (Smith & Anderson, 2018). In the United States, 97% of teens reported using online platforms (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). While the use of these platforms vary, young people rarely diverge from the most popular platforms (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Usage of social networks primarily focus on personal interactions and engagement, but also includes consuming diverse information and supporting public causes. Platforms have also led to more creative forms of communication, where expression through videos and images are now as common written posts (Kligler-Vilenchik & Thorson, 2016). Hashtags and memes have also become more present as communication modalities for young people. As more time is spent in non-linear and participatory online spaces, young people adopt fluencies with alternative communication forms to signal affiliation, connect with others, and express ideas (Gleason, 2018).

The implications of this shift are worth considering. On the one hand, young people are embracing creative storytelling via social platforms to express opinions, share information, and support causes. Hashtags have been activated to gather people and coalesce movements around equity in public schools, workers rights, land disputes, and to protest inequality and oppression (Margetts, John, Hale, & Yasseri, 2015; Tufekci, 2017). Memes have anchored communication initiatives for community reform, and helped to bridge digital and physical spaces for civic activism (Mina, 2017; Morton, 2017). On the other hand, these new communication forms call in question whether or not they are helping empower civic expression and participation, or sowing seeds of division and divisiveness that are seen in many online spaces today (Vaidhyanathan, 2018). However complex the implications online civic participation are, what's clear is that emergent communications, like hashtags and memes, are now an integral part of the mediated lives of young people. They serve to expand the boundaries for online communication and participation, and introduce dynamic and engaging modes of political expression. These forms of communication have the potential to bring more young people into political and civic processes through connective, relatable and engaging content. Memes and hashtags have been integral in recent national elections in the United States, where they became prominent forms of electoral activism for and against presidential candidates (Heiskanen, 2017).

This paper explores the attitudes of young people towards memes and hashtags as tools for meaningful civic and political expression. To explore attitudes, this study deployed a digital literacy intervention with 93 young people from ages 13–16 in four public schools in greater Boston, Massachusetts, USA. In six participating classrooms, students engaged in activities to observe their attitudes towards online platforms for civic engagement. They were then introduced to online tools that allow young people to create memes and hashtags around civic topics. The tools, part of the *Emerging Citizens* online digital toolkit, allow young people to create memes and hashtags alongside each other, and then vote on the creations they deem most effective or resonant. These tools were deployed in the classrooms, and their creations were recorded by researchers for analysis. At the conclusion of the classroom facilitations, debrief dialogues were conducted to explore perceptions of memes and hashtags after engagement with the Emerging Citizens tools.

The findings of this study show that young people generally perceive these forms of communication ineffective beyond their use for personal and non-serious expression. However, the research shows potential for young people's perception of hashtags and

memes as civic tools to shift after participating in creation-based digital literacy exercises with the Emerging Citizens tools. Participants demonstrated a playful resistance through their creations of hashtags and memes, and in the debrief expressed reluctant engagement with memes and hashtags for civic expression. Implications from this study point to a need to introduce young people to the civic potential of emergent online communication forms at formative stages of their political maturation. Interventions like the one in this study have the potential to impact youth attitudes towards popular communication forms, from negative and anti-civic to a healthy skepticism and participatory disposition. Specific attention can be paid to creation-based practices as effective interventions into assessing the impact of digital communication environments on young people's attitudes towards media and civic expression.

Memes and hashtags in online civic life

Research on young people and expression in digital culture shows the potential that social technologies have for increased engagement in daily civic life (Fahmy, 2017). Jenkins et al. investigate how young people appropriate digital platforms and popular culture for civic action taking, and highlight their capacity to use creative communication techniques for political expression and advocacy (Jenkins, Shresthova, Gamber-Thompson, Kligler-Vilenchik, & Zimmerman, 2018). Similar research shows young people embrace 'hybrid activism', where they integrate online tools with physical protest to express and advocate for causes (Milošević-Đorđević & Žeželj, 2017). These new practices reflect a shifting landscape for how we define expressive civic practices, and the forms of communication that contribute to such practices. Earl, Kimport, Prieto, Rush, and Reynoso (2010) question, in light of new emergent forms of political and civic communication, what counts as civic expression and how young people perceive social networks as spaces for such expression. This paper focuses on two particular forms of online communication – memes and hashtags – that are particularly present in the information realities of young people, and that have increasing presence in our contemporary online political and civic communication landscape.

Memes and hashtags have emerged as key delivery tools for expression in digital culture. Memes, generally defined as elements of culture that are passed between individuals,[1] are particularly resonant in their role as cultural signifiers that promote counter-narratives to dominant political norms (Applegate & Cohen, 2017). Memes have particular impact in their collective capacity to circumvent information gatekeepers and cultivate collective identity to support alternative narratives and subcultures (Wark, 2015). Recent research finds that memes have ushered in new forms of effective participatory culture that push against dominant forms of political communication (Ross & Rivers, 2017). There is increasing evidence that shows memes have the capacity to impact political communication on national and local levels (Dean, 2019).

Memes emerged in the political mainstream in the US 2004 and 2008 US Presidential elections. Graeff (2015) highlights the power of memes as 'cynical' forms of political participation that offer space and power to networked communities. Graeff invokes 'impure dissent'[2] to argue that memes are not an explicit form of civil disobedience against the state, but rather they '[flaunt] morally or politically objectionable content, which can lead to its dismissal by others'. Memes, and meme sharing, in this context, 'indicates

there is something worth paying attention to in that moment. Maybe it is just funny. Maybe it is a little too true, which underlies the humor and implores us to pass it on' (Graeff, 2015). This type of 'cynical political participation' supports Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) logic of connective action, where loosely coordinated groups use networks to organize and activate social movements that 'coexist with their adoption and exploitation by professional political organizations' (Graeff, 2015). This was clearly evidenced by President Trump's use of the widely popular Pepe the Frog meme to bolster his campaign and connect to a younger audience.

Pepe the Frog was a popular online zine character, who Applegate and Cohen (2017) see as a 'rare meme – rare as a productive force of cultural appeal for those who can deftly communicate the grammar and syntax of the meme, but also in its function as a mode of visual communication' (p. 95). As Pepe the Frog grew in popularity, he became a relevant meme, used by celebrities and online groups to share humorous reflections, daily opinions, and counter cultural narratives. In the runup to the 2016 Presidential elections, Pepe's growth led to his co-optation by alternative right online networks and more extreme political actors online. The Pepe character became engulfed in a cultural battle between his creators, supporters, and the groups that co-opted Pepe for extremist political objectives. Pepe reflects the power of the Meme to inherently amplify messages, 'giving individuals the ability to appropriate content to shape and contribute their own values or beliefs around an issue' (Jenkins et al., 2018, p. 6). Pepe's case, while extreme, reflects on the potential of the meme, through subversive communication, to amplify, distort, and disrupt traditional forms of political expression and communication.

Shifman (2013) articulates three main purposes that memes serve in digital culture. Memes act as (1) 'cultural information that passes along from *person to person, yet gradually scales into a shared social phenomenon*', (2) memes *reproduce by various means of imitation*, and (3) memes are diffused *through competition and selection* (pp. 364–365). These attributes help to connect the power of memes to the information spaces that young people are predominately engaging with in present digital culture. As this research shows, the subjects of the study were all familiar with memes and were engaged regularly with memes as part of their online communication environments.

Research into hashtags finds that they have emerged as reliable curators for information, online conveners for social movements (Demirhan, 2014), spaces for robust networked protests, and mechanisms to support campaigns focused on virality (Tufekci, 2017). Hashtags also play a key role in the development of collective identity: bringing diverse communities of interest together in dialog and interaction (Flesher Fominaya, 2010; Milan, 2015). While hashtags have become ubiquitous in their deployment across social networks and platforms, they have particular resonance in their support of large scale social movements. The widely known #blacklivesmatter movement has been a particular focus of study for the impact that hashtags can have on how young people participate in contemporary civic movements. Carney (2016), building on the Habermasian concept of the public sphere (Habermas, 1989), articulates the ways in which hashtags provide signs of contestation and struggle for online politics (Carney, 2016). These signs, or mythologies (Barthes, 1972), are symbols that provide space for meaningful conversation and dialog to exist. They also can be co-opted by groups intent on participating

or reframing discussions, which Carney points out in her analysis of the #blacklivesmatter and #alllivesmatter hashtags around the events in Ferguson, Missouri, in the summer of 2014. Hashtags, according to Yang (2016), provide 'narrative agency' where, 'Within this temporal framework, individuals contribute to the co-production of narratives by hashtagging their personal thoughts, emotions, and stories' (p. 13). Personal information sharing becomes central to the feeling of connective identity and pursuit of shared goals in online networked spaces.

Hashtags also align with Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) connective action framework, whereby diffuse groups of loosely connected individuals can create civic impact through hashtags. In this conceptualization of the term, the hashtag becomes a space active audience participation, where people can at the least participate in conversations with very little effort or transaction costs (Kreiss, Meadows, & Remensperger, 2015). While debates continue as to the impact of hashtag activism versus real world action-taking (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Freelon, McIlwain, & Clark, 2016), it is clear that hashtags have the potential to bring diverse voices and groups together in support of a cause, to engage in advocacy, and to engage in political discourse and rhetoric across divides, physical, cultural and ideological.

Young people are particularly fluent in using hashtags. Research shows that 'digital natives' (Prensky, 2001) demonstrate proficiency in following and using hashtags to express affiliation or interest in topics (Gleason, 2018; Pickard & Bessant, 2018). In this study, we explored how young people perceive hashtags as impactful forms of civic expression. These attitudes, this study posits, may impact the use of hashtags and memes for young people in an increasingly digital culture for political and civic life. As the findings below show, young people perceive hashtags as having the potential for significant civic impact, but distance themselves from engagement with the creation or use of hashtags.

Digital literacy and attitudes towards civic engagement

The digital competencies – or literacies – associated with savvy technology use traditionally include the skills that learners gain through critique and creation of content in digital environments (Boechler, Dragon, & Wasniewski, 2014; Rheingold, 2012). Digital literacy, as a term, incorporates the foundations of media literacy – critique, deconstruction, analysis, reflection and production – as they apply to the norms of digital environments like the web, platforms and social networks (Buckingham, 2010). Studies on digital literacy interventions focus on not only the ways in which people use technology, but also the cognitive, social and emotional skills that are needed to navigate robust online spaces (Alkali & Amichai-Hamburger, 2004). These studies point to a need for new skill sets that focus on the participatory potential of technologies, that reflect the networked spaces where young people spend much of their online time (Jenkins, 2009).

Core attributes of digital literacy interventions are creation-based practices (Hobbs, 2017). Research has shown that active creation of content can help young people identify intent and objective in media texts (Reyna, Hanham, & Meier, 2018). Research has also shown that young people in creation-based digital literacy programs increase self-reported engagement with civic practices (Kahne & Bowyer, 2017). Hobbs, Donnelly, Friesem, and Moen (2013) found that secondary students who

participated in a digital literacy intervention revealed positive outcomes in terms of increased knowledge of media's impact on democracy, and willingness to participate in civic practices.

This study employed the Emerging Citizens digital literacy toolkit[3] to explore how a digital literacy intervention built around the creation of memes and hashtags impacted student attitudes toward memes and hashtags as impactful tools for civic and political expression.

The emerging citizens tools

Emerging Citizens is a suite of digital tools and learning content that teach people how to critique and create media through participatory practices with popular forms of communication. Each tool incorporates content that encourages users to engage with culturally and politically relevant topics that affect their daily lives while focusing on a specific digital modality: Hashtags and Memes. The tools are designed to engage young people in the act of creating, making and reflecting through connecting digital creation to real world skill sets and pressing cultural issues. In this study, we employed two Emerging Citizens tools, *Hashtag You're It*, and *Meme Machine*.[4] These two tools were chosen because they both employ forms of communication that are common on social networks and are used regularly in political expression online.

Hashtag You're It is designed for creative hashtag creation. In this tool, users are exposed to real tweets about relevant social and civic issues. The hashtags in these tweets are left blank. Students are asked to come up with hashtags to fit the tweet. They are not allowed to enter the real hashtag if they know it. After all students have created a hashtag, they then vote on the hashtag they think is real. Points are awarded based on how many votes a user receives for their hashtag. The real hashtag is also included in the answers, and students are rewarded points for guessing the real hashtag. This tool helps students think through the assumptions – personal, social and political – that go into creating a hashtag, and considerations for resonance and engagement in powerful hashtags.

Meme Machine asks students to create memes based on signifiers, like gun control, gender equity, climate change, social justice, and health. In this tool, students have 90 s from the revealing of the signifier to select a meme background and inserting text. In each round there are ten popular meme backgrounds for students to choose from. Once all students create memes, they are then asked to vote on the meme they like best. Students who receive votes get points to signal the most resonant memes. The tool requires students to find culturally relevant narratives and place them into meme form to communicate around an issue of political significance.

For young people, hashtags and memes are central communication and expressive modalities within their social networks. Young people use hashtags regularly to follow topics of interest, signal affiliation, and support causes (Loader, Vromen, & Xenos, 2014; Vromen, Xenos, & Loader, 2015). Memes, in the same context, are highly engaging forms of visual content that young people often engage with within and across social platforms. Based on the widespread use of memes and hashtags for political communication, civic expression and social movements, this study explores (1) the perception of young people towards memes and hashtags as civic tools, and (2) how these perceptions

influence the creation of memes and hashtags, and their evaluation of these tools as means for valuable civic expression.

Research background: a digital literacy intervention

Participants

This study deployed the Emerging Citizens tools and digital literacy curriculum with 93 young people in four schools in greater Boston, Massachusetts, USA. The schools were chosen based on connections the researchers had with teachers and access to classrooms. Of the 93 participants, 54% were female. Thirty-nine-percent identified as Hispanic or Latino, 27% identified as White, 12% identified as Asian/Pacific Islander, 11% identified as Black or African American, 8% identified as Other and 2% identified as Native American. Students ages ranged from 13–16, with 7th, 8th and 9th grade classes being utilized for the study.

A baseline questionnaire was distributed at the onset of each class visit, to inquire into social media use and levels of engagement in networks. The results fall in line with national surveys that show teen engagement with social networks (Smith & Anderson, 2018). When asked about social media use, not surprisingly, the top platforms used are YouTube (67%), Snapchat (62%) and Instagram (46%). Behind these, students reported significantly less daily use of Facebook (22%) and Twitter (11%). In terms of devices used, students reported the smartphone as their overwhelming preference (77%). This maps neatly to their familiarity with memes and hashtags, as these modalities are suited for mobile technologies and the smartphone platform. Tablets (4%) and Desktops (3%) are quickly becoming antiquated technologies for this population.

Just under half (46%) of the students in this study use social media consistently throughout the day to connect with friends and family. This use, however, is seen as highly personal. Fifty-eight-percent of participants indicated that they do not share information with social networks about social issues that they care about. Sixty-five-percent do not follow political, social or civic issues through social networks. And while a majority of the participants believe that social media expands their world view, a significant majority (74%) of participants believe that their voice on social networks has no effect on civic or political issues.

Results like this echo past studies that show gaps in how young people perceive the value of social networks beyond personal communication and information sharing (Mihailidis, 2014). This also supports past research that shows gaps between uses of networks for civic purposes by young people and their perceptions of such networks as ineffective for civic purposes (Mihailidis, 2018). For the purposes of this exploratory study, the questionnaire established high engagement with social networks by the student participants, and their attitudes towards social networks and platforms as largely personal.

Process

To collect data, the study employed an exploratory design, which involved a digital literacy intervention into six classrooms across four classrooms in greater Boston. The participating

classes, civics and social studies courses, and one afterschool learning program, were mandatory for the students, and covered level-appropriate topics about government, citizenship and democracy. Facilitations happened over 1–2 class periods at each participating school, depending on the time block of the class and the number of available courses. Class sizes ranged from 11–23. All students participated, and consent was obtained from parents/caretakers.

In a typical class of 40–50 minutes, the first 10 minutes were reserved for playful introductions with the students and the brief descriptive survey. After the survey, classes engaged in an ice breaker activity in which students were given statements and asked to signify their answers by positioning themselves to a side of the classroom that aligned with their views.[5] Once a statement was posed, students would signal their response and the facilitator would engage in short dialog to inquire further into the student views. This activity, detailed below in the findings, helped the facilitators gauge student attitudes towards social networks.

The facilitators then divided the students into groups of 4–8, and presented a brief overview of memes and hashtags. This presentation provided students with basic information on these communication forms, and included interactive portions where students were asked if they recognized certain popular memes and hashtags. Students were asked questions about how memes and hashtags are created and used. Students were then introduced to the Emerging Citizens toolkits, and the *Hashtag You're It* and *Meme Machine* tools. Facilitators then used the tools with their groups, capturing their creations and probing into why they created what they did. Facilitators documented key insights and feedback throughout the facilitation. As the conclusion of the class session, a debrief was facilitated within groups. Groups were asked questions that included, 'Which tool do you think could be more effective to share stories: memes or hashtags?', 'How do memes impact the way we understand news and current events?', 'How can hashtags be used to create social change?', and 'How might we make the most impact in your community using these communication forms?'

Analysis

Responses were captured through observation and notetaking by the facilitators. Detailed notes were collated, cleaned, and used to glean insights and emerging narratives across the facilitations. Researchers utilized grounded theory to isolate and identify emerging concepts, trends or narratives from the observations. 'Grounded theory methods provide systematic procedures for shaping and handling rich qualitative materials' (Charmaz, 1996, p. 28). In this approach, the researcher '[derives] his or her analytic categories directly from the data, not from preconceived concepts or hypotheses' (p. 32). Common methods embedded in grounded theory are participant observation, interviewing and the collection of artifacts or texts (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). For this study, participant observation and the collection of texts were used to identify the emerging narratives found in the data.

Observations were conducted in each classroom, and these notes were collated and coded by three researchers, to ensure consistency across the codes. The approach was open coding, where the researchers segment the data into groups and build thematic categories to better understand emerging themes from the intervention (Lindlof & Taylor,

2017). During the open coding process, patterns in the data emerged around frequency, similarities, and validation. These patterns were used to categorize the data from observations both in the introductory discussions and debrief at the conclusion of the facilitations. As many categories as possible were identified, then refined after the data was further collated. Consistency in codes was apparent, with only minor categorical differences, which were resolved through refining the categories. This is a function of grounded theory where, data was segmented into short sequences or clusters of words, and conceptual framing was attached for clarity (Flick, 2018).

In addition to open coding of the observations, collection of artifacts from game play were used to identify emerging themes and narratives around the memes and hashtags that students created. In total 126 memes and 104 hashtags created by students were analyzed across the four schools. A coding process was created to identify intent in their creations. This process followed the same open coding and refinement process as the observations. Patterns that emerged included: humor/sarcasm, straightforward/literal, and avoidance/trolling. General consistency was found across patterns, with some difficulty in coding memes and hashtags that were not decipherable. These were removed from the analysis process.

From the open coding and refinement process, three general patterns emerged: *civic negativity, playful resistance,* and *reluctant engagement.* The first theme emerged from the opening activity, where students were quick to refute the capacity for social media to have civic and political value. Students did acknowledge that platforms were relevant to how they understand contemporary political issues, but not in any way how they engage politically. The second theme emerged from the artifacts, which showed the subjects in this study created memes and hashtags with the aim to playfully engage peers, while also making a point about the issue at hand, or subverting the issue entirely. These playful dialogs showed keen savvy in content and form creation, which also brought about interesting observations about existing political knowledge. The third theme, emerging from the debriefs, found emerging narratives that support a more accepting and open response towards the potential of memes and hashtags, and online platforms, as spaces for robust civic expression and engagement in civic life.

Limitations

This study was designed as an exploratory investigation into student attitudes and dispositions around a digital literacy intervention. As such, we did not implement controls or quantitative measurements into the study. A formal classroom environment can impact the ways in which young people express political ideas and signal affiliations with certain topics. Peer posturing can impact how students choose to respond to questions and prompts, and thus impacted the behaviors of the subjects in this study. In the opening activity, for example, students may have been signaling their affiliation to align with peers rather than their real attitude toward the prompt. Classroom facilitations were not recorded, to maintain a sense of comfort in the classrooms. Taking notes helps to gather key information, but the breadth of engagement is minimized, as is the ability to use participant quotes in the findings. Because the researchers had limited time in each classroom, some of the conversations and full engagement around the tools were limited or constrained. The data that was collected did provide valuable

insight for how young people understand and create popular social modalities for civic purposes. Further, the grounded theory process allows us to identify emerging narratives but not to generalize or infer from these themes beyond this inquiry in itself. Young people have a myriad of ways to engage in their political and civic environments. This study aims to offer insight into how young people perceive popular online communication modalities for political and civic expression.

Findings: youth attitudes towards civic expression online

Research Question 1: How do young people perceive memes and hashtags as civic tools, and how do these perceptions influence their critique and creation of memes and hashtags as means for civic expression?

Based on classroom facilitations with young people around hashtags and memes, this study identified three emerging themes – *civic negativity, playful resistance* and *reluctant engagement* – around their attitudes towards popular online communication forms for civic expression, and their own creation of memes and hashtags around relevant political issues. The findings discuss these three themes in more detail.

Civic negativity

Students in this study articulated reluctant and negative attitudes towards social networks in general, and specifically towards their role in political and civic dialog. In the ice breaker activity, students were asked about social media preferences and perceptions through the following statements:

> I participate in online dialog with social media, I share information on social media, I can trust information on wikipedia, I can trust news on social media, my voice matters on social media, I can make a difference using social media, and I use hashtags and memes to follow trends on social media.

Across the participating classrooms, students were almost unanimously negative towards the civic potential of social media. In response to the 'I can make a difference using social media' prompt, over 80 of the students moved to the 'no' side of the classroom. To justify their position, students mentioned not having enough followers to make an impact, people not caring what young kids have to say, and the general toxicity and rudeness of online behavior. They saw their voice as largely irrelevant in popular tools like YouTube, Instagram, Twitter and Facebook.

The statements that dealt with trust garnered similarly negative results. Roughly 70 of the students believed wikipedia was not trustworthy, and approximately two-thirds of students signaled that they can't trust the news on social media. These preferences were supported by statements centering around the lack of authority around who can post, and how the sites are monitored in general. Students mentioned their communication being personal, and noted that because of advertising, it was hard to trust what news is credible versus what news is not. Students also did not regularly share information via social networks, supporting research that shows high levels of passive information consumption on social media (Pagani, Hofacker, & Goldsmith, 2011). Of the 93 participations, approximately two thirds signaled that they rarely share information, and when they do it

is personal, and not public. A number of students expressed slight optimism around being able to support causes through amplifying expression, but did so through shallower modes of engagement, like re-sharing, liking, or supporting with emojis.

Students across the classrooms believed that using social media exposed them to more information about the world, but they did not perceive this as impacting their ability to participate in daily civic life. When given the statement 'my voice matters on social media', approximately 70% of the students moved towards the 'no' side of the classroom. The debrief included comments about how their voice is only valuable to their friends and parents. Others remarked about how big social media companies are just hoping to advertise to them. Such responses seem justified at a time when large scale social networks are increasingly commodified spaces of extraction that are less about healthy and robust dialog, and more about data hoarding and targeted advertising (Taplin, 2017).

The final prompt in the opening activity about hashtags and memes was met with less negativity. In response to *I use hashtags and memes to follow trends on social media,* the student preferences were scattered across the classrooms. Many stayed in the middle of the classroom, signifying neither a strong preference for yes or no. Debriefing these preferences led to conversations where students discussed following hashtags and enjoying the humor of memes, but not classifying them as having value for politics or civics. Hashtags were used for following interesting threads about gaming, sports, or fashion trends, while memes were simply about humor. Only a small portion of students had ever created a meme before, and a small number of students expressed starting or actively contributing to hashtags.

The overall reluctance of students towards social media is not surprising. Young people have been increasingly exposed to the commodification of the platforms, and are aware of their volatility with regards to political co-option of the spaces (Taplin, 2017). A few of the students mentioned President Donald Trump and fake news as reasons to not be able to trust these sites. Their dispositions towards memes and hashtags was less uniformly negative, but still showed some hesitancy about such forms of communication as politically relevant.

Shifting from signaling preferences to creating memes and hashtags introduced the potential of creative production as a form of embracing memes and hashtags for explicitly civic purposes.

Playful resistance

The students in the study transitioned from the ice breaker activity to the Emerging Citizens tools, where groups of 4–8 students collectively created memes and hashtags around prompts that asked them to consider current political issues. The prompts were randomly generated for each engagement, and included six core categories: race, gender rights, gun control, climate change, health, and education. These categories were pre-selected in the creation of the Emerging Citizens platform. In *Hashtag You're It*, students attempted to create resonant hashtags for real tweets with hashtags removed. Upon creating the hashtags, students then voted for the hashtag they thought was real. In the *Meme Machine* facilitations, students created memes that addressed the topic that appeared. Upon creation, students then voted for the meme they found most resonant. In total 126 memes and 104 hashtags created by students were analyzed across the four schools. Patterns that emerged from the analysis were, humor/sarcasm, straightforward/literal, and avoidance/trolling.

Memes

In the open coding of memes, humor/sarcasm was the most frequently deployed tactic. Humor/sarcasm was identified through the intent to poke fun, subvert normative views and call to attention contradictions. This was coded into 76 of the memes included in the study. The students found memes that made them laugh in a relatable way to be most effective in grabbing attention. Resonant memes mixed humor and sarcasm to highlight injustices or point out hypocrisies (See Figure 1).

The other main tactics used in the creation of memes were straightforward and literal messages (Figure 2). Of the memes analyzed, approximately 45 were coded for straightforward/literal and as such employed relatable commentary with a more direct messaging style. Straightforward/literal memes relied on the meme image to create emotional resonance, and not necessarily the text. These memes tell a direct story by integrating pointed language with familiar and engaging visual images.

Lastly, when students were unsure of the content or topic that was generated, they reverted on occasion to either avoiding the issue or trolling classmates (see Figure 3). These creations reflect a natural resistance to the prompt, but in a playful and humorous way. They also used trolling tactics, calling out peers and friends through the creation process itself. Instead of just sitting out, students were interested in content creation and facilitating a humorous experience for their classmates. The interplay between the civic and personal that is embedded in social networks was also embedded in the creation of memes. In the debrief, students mentioned enjoying these as they 'lightened' topics and connected them to a particular classmate that they could laugh with.
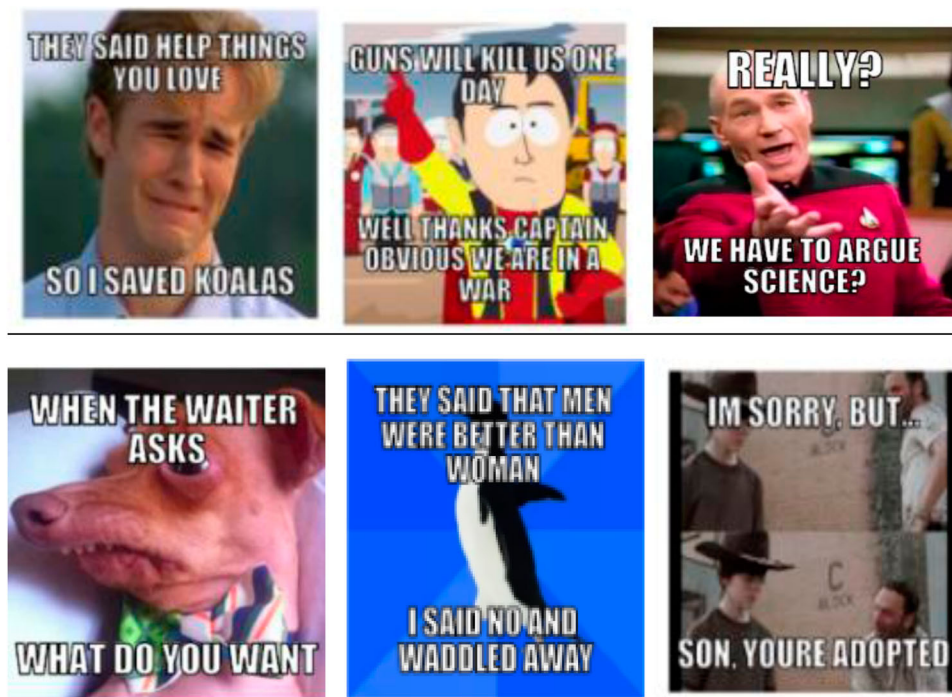

Figure 1. Memes that employed humor/sarcasm.

Figure 2. Memes that use straightforward/literal tactics.

Student engagement with memes reaffirmed the idea of a playful resistance. The majority of content created called out political injustices and called into question social issues. The overall sentiment towards memes, articulated during the debrief, was that each meme 'has a personality' that can be matched with a caption and sentiment to create compelling or insightful commentary. Students relied on day to day experiences and knowledge of current events to create memes. References to President Trump, for example, were popular in memes created across the schools. At the same time, students mentioned repeatedly that the entertainment value needed to make memes resonant can distract from the truth. This made them skeptical of relying on memes as a trustworthy information source.

Hashtags

In the analysis of hashtags across the classroom facilitations, a similar distribution of tactics were used in the creation process, with straightforward/literal text being significantly more prominent than humor/sarcasm. This is likely due to the lack of flexibility with regards to content orientation and presentation for hashtags. Students also engaged in avoidance/trolling when they were unsure about the topic or refused to engage. In one instance, students were tasked with creating a hashtag for a tweet that dealt with gender equity (See Figure 4). In this particular example, none of the participants identified the real hashtag but created insightful and engaging content to complement the provided tweet.

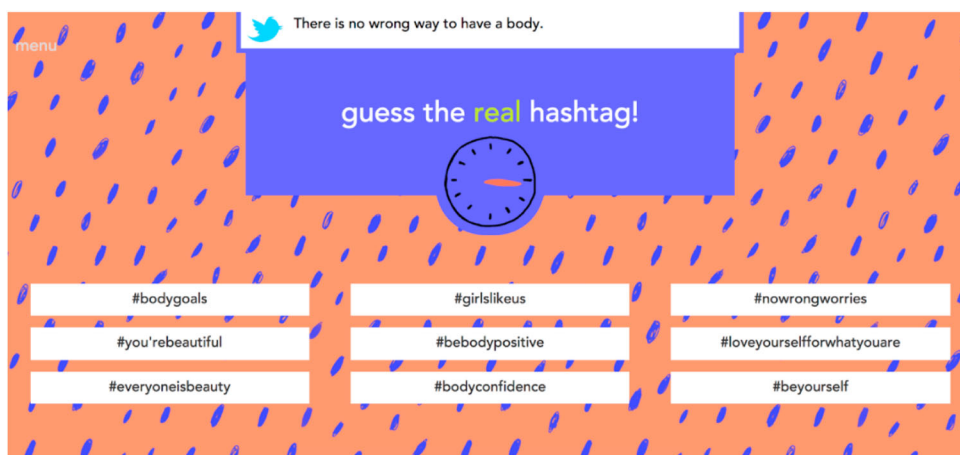**Figure 3.** Memes that were not relevant to topic.

Figure 4. Tweet creations for *Hashtag You're It*.

Overall, there was less humor incorporated into the student hashtags. Of the hashtags analyzed, less than 30%, were identified as using humor. Hashtags were bold and direct, and articulated clear calls to action. Figure 5 shows a curation of Hashtags created around the topic of gender rights, where text reflects positive and direct messaging, with a clear objective.

The use of avoidance and trolling was present in the hashtag constructions. Entries to this end included the hashtags, '#idk, #stfu, and #peoplethesedays'. Hashtags included peers' names, school names, and other references to their school. This approach, while not directly engaged with the issues, shows a willingness to localize content and engage in playful interactions, rather than simply not participating.

In the small debrief between use of tools, students were confident in their ability to create resonant hashtags. Hashtags were easier to create than memes, and they could find short and broad words to support the tweet. Students were more positive towards

Figure 5. Sample curated created hashtags about women's rights.

the civic potential of hashtags, citing that they weren't always humor driven, and that created a sense of seriousness. Students also thought of hashtags as long lasting because they 'stick in your head more as a phrase', which created a sense of resonance. It is interesting to consider that students see humor and sarcasm as antithetical to seriousness in civic life. Hashtags also create general cohesion, the students noticed, as curators of diverse and dynamic content.

The analysis of the classroom facilitation around creating memes and hashtags shows a playful resistance in how young people use these communication forms for civic expression. The meme format provided more opportunity to use humor and sarcasm, while hashtags led to content creation that was straightforward/literal, but both included content that resist or refute the social and political norms that students understood or conceived. Across the facilitations, students acknowledged the challenges inherent in attempting to create resonant content through memes and hashtags. Both modalities serve different purposes as communication tools. Memes have the power to offer subversive cultural commentary and offer playful alternatives to dominant communication structures. While skeptical of the real potential civic impact of memes, students commented in the debrief that the experience made them want to keep creating memes and found value in the challenge of resonant content in the meme format. Students found *Hashtag You're It* less challenging, but did think hashtags had more civic potential and could garner great engagement with political issues.

The third theme from the study emerges from debriefs conducted in the last portion of the facilitation. Students reflected on their experience creating memes and hashtags, and their attitudes towards these digital communication forms for civic engagement. Students found the experience fun and engaging, and challenging at the same time. They acknowledged the impact that a good meme can have, but were skeptical about the potential of the memetic form: one image with little content can provide commentary but little beyond. Hashtags, on the other hand, were seen as the more potentially impactful communication tool, as they had the ability to serve as anchors for movements and collectors of diverse opinions.

Reluctant engagement

At formative stages of development, youth traditionally are not invited into the normative functions of politics (Wattenberg, 2015). In recent studies, researchers have found that young people function through an expanded understanding of political participation that prioritizes social change, activism and advocacy over formal mechanisms like voting, volunteerism, military duty and taxes (Dalton, 2008). The debriefs explored perceptions of young people towards the civic potential of memes and hashtags, in light of their engagement with the Emerging Citizens tools. The debriefs were designed not to find concrete change in opinion or attitude, but rather to reflect on how this experience affected attitudes towards hashtags and memes.

Framing questions for the debrief asked which technique was more effective for civic expression, memes or hashtags? If memes/hashtags had the potential to impact politics? What did this experience make you think about social networks and platforms for civic engagement? Student discussions highlighted the potential for an intervention like this study to 'nudge' (Thaler & Sunstein, 2009) attitudes towards popular digital

communication forms as meaningful tools for civic expression. Students acknowledged that funny and engaging memes around serious topics can happen, and preferred to create these over hashtags. They questioned the meme format as delivering credible political commentary. Hashtag creation was easier than they anticipated, and a majority of students believed that hashtag were a more effective way to raise awareness and build calls to action.

In their debrief, students were not ready to declare these techniques as valuable catalysts for social change. They saw the advantages memes and hashtags have to spread information, carry engaging messages, be funny, and be easy to find. But because these forms of communication exist largely in social networks, students in this study saw their potential for impact as limited. Students mentioned that in networks people will start taking advantage, being mean, taking things out of context, and showing anger, no matter what the content is.

Engagement with the Emerging Citizens tools was strong. The students were routinely positive about their experience creating hashtags and memes. At three of the classrooms, teachers mentioned using the tools repeatedly during student choice time. While they were reluctant in their affirmation of the tools, the students in this study were able to see how their ideas, opinions, and existing knowledge impacted what types of content they created. While they struggled to build memes and hashtags, they had fun doing so. Student attitudes were reluctant towards the potential of these tools to have civic impact, but they acknowledged that they were interesting, engaging, and could draw attention to issues that mattered.

While this study cannot point to measurable outcomes, it shows the potential of a digital literacy intervention to nudge attitudes towards popular digital communication forms as avenues for meaningful civic expression, dialog and engagement. While the platforms may be prohibitive, the modalities are not.

Implications for digital literacy and youth civic expression in digital culture

The implications from this exploratory study show a need to develop more avenues for young people to embrace connective technologies and digital communication forms for civic purposes. The intervention in this study shows the potential to nudge perceptions about the value of technologies for civic engagement. In 2012, Howard Rheingold wrote, 'The future of digital culture-yours, mine, ours-depends on how well we learn to use the media that have infiltrated, amplified, distracted, enriched, and complicated our lives' (p. 1). This study explored how a digital literacy intervention based on active creation can shift attitudes about popular digital communication forms that present in daily information and communication norms for young people. Providing opportunities for students to build content in playful and engaging ways can lead to greater acceptance of the range of applications for social communication modalities.

Future studies can build on this by designing controlled experiments that assess attitudes and behaviors before and after the intervention. Studies could also choose one civic theme (i.e. gun control, environment) and explore existing knowledge of that theme alongside content creation through the Emerging Citizens platform. Lastly, future studies may spend more concentrated time with subjects, to more rigorously assess

their existing activities in social networks and with memes and hashtags, and how that impacts their content creation and perception of these tools.

Memes and hashtags are modalities that can build robust civic cultures, which Jenkins et al. (2018) see as 'preconditions to political action' (p. 257) where young people can 'articulat[e] shared identities or values, [foster] greater knowledge and awareness of political issues, encourag[e] civic conversations, or [model] civic practices' (p. 257). This study attempts to better understand the ways in which young people can support robust civic cultures through the creation of popular social modalities for explicitly civic purposes. The potential to widen the perception of these tools for young people can create avenues for expression and engagement that is more civically relevant to young people in digital culture.

Notes

1. The term meme was coined in 1976 by the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in his book, *The Selfish Gene*. Dawkins (1976). The selfish gene. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
2. Shelby (2015) introduced the concept of impure dissent in exploring the role of hip hop in counter narratives and political activism against powerful institutions.
3. See: https://emergingcitizens.org/
4. The Emerging Citizens platform includes a third tool, WikiGeeks, which helps young people learn to navigate hyperlinked information online. That tool was not used in this study.
5. This activity is commonly referred to a 'Move with Your Feet'.

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