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ONLINE YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN SINGAPORE

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Online Youth Civic Engagement in Singapore
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ONLINE YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN SINGAPORE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Online civic engagement has gained a new momentum during the COVID-19 pandemic. With the limitations imposed on physical outreach events, many youths strategically tapped the affordances of popular social media platforms like Instagram, Twitter and TikTok to discuss civic issues and mobilise like-minded youths to support their causes. In recent years, there has been increasing research on understanding the nature of youth advocacy and activism in the online space in Singapore. However, they have primarily examined specific online movements and the use of older social media platforms like Facebook. Moreover, they have mostly focused on the perspectives and experiences of youth content creators supporting these movements but not that of general social media users who encountered such content either incidentally or intentionally.

This report presents the findings of an exploratory study conducted by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) on the nature and characteristics of online civic engagement among youths in Singapore. The study was conducted in two phases. Phase One of the study consisted of a content analysis approach where we examined 418 posts belonging to 35 youth content creators aged between 18 and 35 years old. During the content analysis conducted from January to March 2021, we examined the types of issues that were popular among these youth content creators, and the nature of their interactions and engagement strategies used. In Phase Two, we conducted four focus group discussions (FGDs) with 31

youths who were content creators and social media users between 18 and 35 years old. These FGDs, which were conducted between June and July 2021, examined how and why youths engaged with myriad issues online.

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1) What issues galvanise today's youths?
2) What are the motivations and aspirations behind youths' engagement?
3) How do youths engage with civic issues online?
4) What challenges do youths face in online civic engagement?

The key findings from Phase One (content analysis) are as follows:

1) We found eight types of issues that youth content creators were actively advocating for in the online space. These were: (1) community issues; (2) environmental issues; (3) gender and sexuality issues; (4) jobs and finance issues; (5) mental health issues; (6) politics and governance issues; (7) race and religion issues; and (8) other issues (i.e., issues that did not neatly fall into any of the earlier seven categories). These issue categories were not mutually exclusive owing to their intersectionality.
2) Youth content creators were primarily driven by the value of self-direction, which made up 67 per cent of all posts; followed by benevolence, at 39.5 per cent; and security, at 25.8 per cent. This suggests that youth content creators exercised agency, independence and had a desire to improve the welfare of people in society.
3) Almost 80 per cent of the posts discussed local issues and events, suggesting that youths were primarily interested in issues within the local

community. While text was unsurprisingly the predominant message element in online posts, illustrated text and pictures were observed to make up a substantial part of their online messaging as well.

4) About 70 per cent of the posts deployed the use of diagnostic frames, meaning that they identified specific problems in their posts. More than half of the posts identified specific solutions in response to the problems identified in the posts. This shows that youth content creators were not just active in highlighting problems, but also in seeking possible solutions to overcome them.
5) Youth content creators relied on four types of engagement strategies to interact with social media users. These included creating content to: (1) share information; (2) call for action; (3) get people to share personal experiences; and (4) express solidarity.
6) Among the eight set of issue categories identified, posts that discussed issues pertaining to the environment, jobs and finance, and mental health were more likely to have a call for action (e.g., adopting self-care rituals, recycling and joining an event).

The key findings from Phase Two (FGDs with content creators and social media users) are:

1) Youth content creators were driven by diverse motivations and aspirations. Their experiences in schools and interactions with people from various backgrounds taught them the importance of creating a space for alternative views and perspectives to be heard. Some content creators, especially those who had experienced discrimination, wanted to build

greater solidarity for people in their community. They aspired to create safe spaces for minorities to share their experiences and also rectify certain media narratives on such communities. Despite their varying backgrounds and experiences, all of them were motivated to raise more awareness on key social issues among people, which could help in creating concrete changes in the real world.

2) Social media users interacted and engaged with civic content in the following ways: (1) keeping updated on civic discourses on various online platforms; (2) sharing and commenting online on important topics; (3) engaging in intimate and private discussions with friends and family; and (4) organising or participating in offline, physical events when possible.

3) Youth content creators faced several challenges when creating greater visibility for their content. Due to the echo chamber effect, they felt that much of their content only engaged those who already had a vested interest in the topics they were advocating for. Content creators who mainly used Instagram were concerned that their content was not reaching out to newer groups of audiences, such as older people who were more inclined to use Facebook. Other problems highlighted by content creators included having to deal with negative comments and criticisms from detractors, and at times, the threat of legal repercussions. For social media users, they expressed similar fears over being harassed or "cancelled" for expressing alternative perspectives on a topic. Many were concerned about dealing with immense scrutiny and judgement from others online and hence preferred to simply just distance themselves from public engagements.

4) Social media users were extremely wary over the spread of false information online, especially on sensitive and contentious issues, and therefore reiterated the need to constantly verify information that they come across, such as through fact-checking.
5) To most youths, being “woke” meant being aware of social injustices. Some felt that woke culture had helped push “out-of-bounds” markers (OB markers) for sensitive issues and challenge outdated mindsets and attitudes, such as intolerance and prejudice against the queer community in Singapore. However, some also noted that the term “woke” was also used as an insult in an attempt to stifle alternative views in society. As such, most content creators were hesitant in adopting the label “woke” to describe themselves and their work online. Some social media users also spoke about how woke culture has paved the way for cancel culture, which can be toxic and may not offer concrete solutions to key social issues.

In line with these findings, we make the following recommendations:

1) **Expand conversations on sensitive issues.** Currently, government agencies such as the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY) and the National Youth Council (NYC) support a wide range of community and social causes through the provision of financial resources and mentorship support. However, these efforts are primarily centred on supporting more mainstream causes like helping low-income families, improving the welfare of migrant workers, and protecting the environment. Although these causes are important, our study has shown that youths are increasingly interested in talking about issues and engaging with causes

that are more sensitive and contentious in nature. These include wanting to discuss racism, sexism and critiquing certain state policies and legislations — for example, the death penalty in Singapore. Although the discussion of such issues may be difficult, it is important for policymakers to continually engage youths and build stronger relations with them. While such issues may not be pertinent in the current moment, they may receive more attention in the future due to evolving social norms. In addition to this, they should also look for ways to involve youth content creators or groups discussing civic issues in more closed-door discussions and public events.

2) **Leverage youth content creators to act as trusted intermediaries.** In recent years, the government has been actively trying to connect with younger citizens and learn their views on key issues and topics. This has been achieved through their public conversations and dialogue sessions involving youth organisations, leaders and citizens. Such platforms are extremely crucial as they provide youths with a much-needed space to share their concerns with stakeholders. However, our findings also revealed that these platforms tend to be limited and exclusive in nature. Moreover, some youths, especially those who were in the workforce, were hesitant about voicing out their thoughts publicly. They feared that participating in such conversations, especially on sensitive and contentious topics like race and religion, may adversely affect their reputation and employment opportunities. As such, interacting with content creators anonymously becomes a preferred option for them. Therefore, to reach out to these people, it would be useful to leverage

content creators through collaborations and partnerships. Perhaps these content creators can be given greater opportunities to facilitate and mediate public dialogues on sensitive issues.

3) **Equip youths with civic engagement techniques.** From our findings, it is evident that youths will continue to be engaged in online discussions and events pertaining to key civic issues. The number of online groups and movements will continue to grow across even more social media platforms. Hence, it is important to ensure that they are equipped with the relevant knowledge and skills on effective civic engagement techniques (e.g., knowing how to effectively utilise platform features, considerations to bear in mind when engaging in sensitive topics, content creators' burnout, laws and regulations pertaining to the internet). Currently, social media platforms like TikTok have partnered with the government to educate content creators on how to create content on mental health. Similarly, more of such workshops need to be conducted to teach youths about online civic engagement. Experienced facilitators, youth leaders and other experts can be brought in to lead these workshops.

4) **Strengthen school programmes on digital literacy and community engagement.** Youths expressed fears over repercussions from expressing alternative views online, such as online backlash from netizens, harassment and being "cancelled". This showed their lack of confidence and knowledge in tackling such problems. Therefore, existing curriculum in schools needs to be expanded to educate students on new and evolving trends like cancel culture. Moreover, more content has to be designed to enlighten youths on alternatives to cancel culture should they wish to hold

certain individuals and organisations responsible for contributing to a problem. Finally, as online civic engagement continues to evolve, the Values in Action (VIA) programme that is currently taught to all students in primary and secondary schools, junior colleges and Millennia Institute needs to be expanded to account for emerging civic issues and social media-based advocacy work that youths are interested in being a part of.

ONLINE YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN SINGAPORE

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of youth civic engagement in Singapore

Youth civic engagement refers to the "participation of young people in activities that address the concerns, interests, and common good of a community" (Brady et al., 2020, p. 2). Many of these activities are driven by youths' desire to make positive and meaningful changes in society. Some common examples of civic engagement activities include voting in elections, volunteering with non-profit or government-affiliated organisations, writing and signing petitions, and donating to social, political or environmental causes (Smith, 2013).

In Singapore, there is an active and vibrant civic engagement culture among youths. For example, according to the 2019 Youth Survey by the National Youth Council (NYC) involving over 3,000 respondents between 15 and 34 years old, 88 per cent said that they had participated in at least one type of civic activity such as donating money to a cause, attending events and discussions (held online or physically) relating to social issues, or engaging with online content to learn more about current issues (National Youth Council, 2021). This is more than a 20-percentage point increase from 2016 where 65 per cent of youths said they were involved in civic activities. Such increased involvement in civic activities among youths can be attributed to the government's efforts in promoting volunteerism and community engagement among citizens through national

initiatives like the SG Cares Movement (Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, 2022).[1]

Two main types of civic engagement are prevalent among youths in Singapore (Kwan, 2021). The first is a more traditional or conventional form of civic engagement that is largely based on organised political and community work. Examples of these activities include voting in elections and volunteering for community, grassroots or non-profit organisations. In Singapore, values such as community involvement and social responsibility are taught to students as early as when they are in primary schools through the Values in Action (VIA) programme (Ministry of Education, 2022).[2] The second, which is an increasingly popular form of civic engagement especially since the onset of the pandemic, involves the use of online and social media platforms to advocate for causes of interest, such as those relating to race and religion, gender and sexuality, politics and governance, and the environment. This has also been referred to as digital activism and advocacy by scholars (Karatzogianni, 2015; Postill, 2018).

Various online and social media platforms have provided youths with the space to create, curate, consolidate and share knowledge on local and global events (Kwon, 2020; Kwan, 2021). Media scholar Jenkins and his colleagues define such

[1] SG Cares is a national movement that was officially launched on 13 January 2018 to encourage and support more ground-up initiatives and volunteering opportunities for people. It is championed by the SG Cares Office and co-led by the National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre (NVPC) and the National Council of Social Service (NCSS).

[2] The Values in Action (VIA) programme (previously known as the Community Involvement Programme) aims to nurture socially responsible citizens who can make meaningful contributions to the community. The VIA programme is part of the curriculum for all students studying in primary and secondary schools as well as junior colleges and centralised institute.

activities as a form of “participatory culture” where youths show “strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations” and have “some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices” (Jenkins et al., 2006, p. 3).

Given their adeptness in digital technology, many Singapore youths have also actively experimented with various online and social media tools and platforms to improve the lives of people around them (Zhuo, 2019; Chew, 2020). For example, during the pandemic in 2020, the government introduced many swift changes to existing regulations and assistance schemes. To help fellow Singaporeans keep updated on the latest regulations and schemes, a group of students from the Law faculty at the National University of Singapore (NUS) designed a website called COV-AID, which functioned as a one-stop information portal (Teng, 2020).

1.2. Concerns over online civic engagement

The Singapore government has been actively engaging with youths to learn about the different issues that this segment of the population is concerned about. It has also provided various platforms for youths to offer their suggestions and policy recommendations through avenues such as the Youth Action Plan[3] and the Youth Conversations programme (SG Youth Action Plan, n.d.; National Youth Council, n.d.).[4] However, some are unable or unwilling, for various reasons, to

[3] The SG Youth Action Plan was launched by the Ministry of Communications and Information (MCI) and the National Youth Council (NYC) in 2019 as platform for youths to share their ideas on what they envision Singapore 2025 to be.
[4] The NYC launched the Youth Conversations programme in 2019 as a platform for youths in Singapore to discuss issues of concern and to co-create solutions with their peers as well as the government on key problems that they were concerned about.

participate in such conversations, and have instead sought other ways such as using social media to share their views. This has been a concern for some politicians, who have expressed fears over the potential for such conversations, especially on sensitive topics like race and religion, to snowball into serious disagreements and conflicts (Lai, 2020; Ong, 2021). In addition, there are also fears over the rise of online mobs and vigilantes that engage in online harassment, trolling, bullying and doxxing of people. Such incidents can have severe repercussions on their physical safety and mental well-being (Tam, 2018; Dodgson, 2020; Heng, 2020; Karthik, 2022).

Online conflicts can also easily spillover into the real world and disrupt existing racial, religious and social harmony. In addition, some people, including youths themselves, are also growing wary and fearful over the influences of what is often perceived as “western world approaches” like woke and cancel culture that have manifested themselves in various social media platforms (Lai, 2020; Ong, 2021; Teoh, 2021). The term “woke” has its origins in the history of the African-American community’s struggle against racial prejudice (Romano, 2020; Widmer, 2020). It is also heavily associated with the larger “Black Lives Matter” (BLM) movement across America (Bunyasi & Smith, 2019). In May 2020, the murder of African-American citizen George Floyd by a White police officer Derek Chauvin in the city of Minneapolis saw the term gaining greater popularity in the media and in various public discussions on racism faced by the African-American community (Jan et al., 2019). During the one-year anniversary of Floyd’s death last year, his brother called for people to “stay woke” and continue to fight against racial inequality in

society. In recent years, the term “woke” is also used widely to refer to one’s awakening to a broad range of social unjust and discrimination, apart from racism (Rahman, 2021; Romano, 2020; Widmer, 2020). Some examples of these include abortion rights, environmental justice, marriage equality and free speech. The term is also used to describe people who identify themselves as liberals or have progressive views on such topics (Romano, 2020).

In Singapore, the influence of such global movements has helped to spark more open and candid discussions on problems such as systemic discrimination and oppression in the local context. For example, in 2020, a Twitter account called “Brown Lives Matter”, inspired by the BLM movement, was created to raise awareness on the experiences of minority citizens in Singapore.[5] While such conversations are important in promoting greater understanding and empathy among the different communities living in Singapore, there have also been some fears and criticisms against how woke culture can be used as a tactic to police and alienate people with alternative views and lead to greater levels of polarisation in society (Lewis, 2020; O’Hagan, 2020). Cancel culture has been described as a bi-product of woke culture, and it refers to the public calling-out, shaming or boycotting of individuals or organisations perceived to be contributing to social injustice (Romano, 2020; Banaji, 2021). In recent years, many well-known personalities ranging from politicians to entertainers have been “cancelled” by fans and brands online for displaying socially irresponsible behaviours. Some examples of these include local influencer Wendy Cheng (more commonly known

[5] See https://twitter.com/brownmatters_sg.

as Xiaxue),[6] British author J. K. Rowling[7] and American actor Johnny Depp (Nazren & Lee, 2020; Aviles, 2019; Blistein, 2021). Acts of "cancelling" can adversely affect people's personal reputations, relationships and careers. The topic on woke and cancel culture will be covered in greater detail in Chapter 8 of this report.

1.3. Research objectives

Existing studies on online civic engagement primarily focus on the different ways in which youths use social media platforms to advocate for causes. Such studies have mostly taken a case study approach to look at how specific platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter) were used to mobilise supporters online and their impact on specific causes and movements (e.g., Me Too movement, Black Lives Matter movement). However, they have not paid much attention to the motivations and types of engagement strategies and tactics employed by youths in designing and disseminating their content online. In addition, much of these existing studies have mostly focused on the perspectives of content creators who use social media for civic engagement purposes. There is a paucity of research that has looked at the experiences of social media users who interact with such content.

[6] In 2020, an individual anonymously publicised some of Xiaxue's old tweets made over 10 years ago, which were racist and xenophobic in nature. As a result of the online backlash against her, brands that she was working with, such as Caltex and Fresh, ended their partnerships with her.
[7] On December 2019, author of the popular Harry Potter series J. K. Rowling earned backlash from the online community after she tweeted in support of British researcher Maya Forstater who posted transphobic tweets. In June 2020, Rowling was once again embroiled in controversy after she made a transphobic tweet reflecting her disapproval over an article, which used the phrase "people who menstruate".

This study, conducted over two phases, seeks to understand the nature and characteristics of online civic engagement among youths in Singapore. Phase One of this study involved a content analysis of online and social media posts belonging to 35 youth content creators. These youth content creators managed social media pages advocating for various civic issues and causes (e.g., climate change, gender empowerment, minority rights). Phase Two of the study involved four focus group discussions (FGDs) with youth social media users and content creators. This study aims to answer the following questions:

1) What issues galvanise today's youths?
2) What are the motivations and aspirations behind youths' engagement?
3) How do youths engage with civic issues online?
4) What challenges do youths face in online civic engagement?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Overview of existing research on online civic engagement

There is a growing body of research on the topic of online civic engagement and activism locally (e.g., Singapore youth's civic and political participation in the General Elections in 2020), regionally (e.g., Thailand's Free Youth campaign in 2020) and globally (e.g., Me Too movement) (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2018; Mendes et al., 2018; Sinpeng, 2021; Kwan, 2021). Many past studies have traditionally used the content analysis approach to study and understand the different types and forms of content created and disseminated by people online (e.g., podcasts, tweets and TikTok videos); their engagement strategies and tactics to overcome challenges such as state censorship or repression; as well as the spillover effects of online advocacy and activism in the real world.

2.2. Forms and types of online civic engagement

Scholars have conceptualised and operationalised activities and behaviours relating to civic engagement in many different ways. In his study on Singaporean youths' civic and political participation during and beyond the General Elections in 2020 (GE 2020), Kwan found that youths typically engaged in a mix of conventional (e.g., voting in elections) and non-conventional activities, which mostly involved internet-based activities. These non-conventional activities mainly included consuming content (e.g., reading and evaluating government policies, watching debates and broadcasts and reading party manifestos, and talking about key political events with friends and family) and producing content

(e.g., condensing political content to simplify complicated information using social media and internet tools, corresponding with political leaders, and conducting in-person education projects) (Kwan, 2021).

In another study on the role of digital media in the GE2020, researchers identified five types of citizen-generated online content, ranging from creating and sharing information, connecting with others online to mobilising them to take specific actions. These included posting content such as: (1) general explainers; (2) issue-specific explainers; (3) opinion expression; (4) calls for action; and (5) entertainment (Soon & Neo; 2021). Another study, which examined the use of Facebook among activists online, outlined five criteria of internet activism and engagement as follows: (1) collection of information; (2) publication of information; (3) engaging in dialogue with others; (4) coordinating actions; and (5) lobbying for decision makers (Warren et al., 2014).

2.3. Scepticism over online civic engagement: All talk but no real action?

Some media scholars say that online and social media civic engagement is inferior to traditional civic engagement in terms of their status, impact, and ability to create tangible changes in society (Shulman, 2004; Gladwell, 2010; Halupka, 2014; Kristofferson et al., 2020). Traditional civic engagement activities like physical rallies and protest marches require the active participation and commitment of people in-person. This makes their contributions highly visible in the public arena, lending their actions greater legitimacy. Online civic engagement activities, on the other hand, allow people to make tokenistic or

passive contributions to ongoing causes or issues. For example, they can simply change their Facebook profile pictures to show support for a cause without even having to leave the comforts of their homes (Christensen, 2011). Therefore, some detractors have dismissed online activism as being ideal for a “lazy generation” (Morozov, 2009).

Others also argue that online activism contributes towards a culture of “performative” or “optical allyship” (Levine-Rasky & Ghaffar-Siddiqui, 2020). In her work (2019) on White allyship in digital spaces, Clark highlighted how the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter served as an important resource guide for White activists to learn about what was happening on the ground. However, at the same time, it has also been used by White activists to educate themselves at the expense of the Black community’s unpaid labour and suffering, and them protesting on social media using hashtags devalued the experiences and work of the oppressed communities and activists who were fighting from the ground. Other scholars have also used terms like “slacktivism”, “clicktivism”, “feel-good patting” and “armchair activism” when questioning the impact of online civic engagement (Christensen, 2011; Knibbs, 2013; Tostevin, 2014; Schumann & Klein, 2015).

Another central critique of online civic engagement focuses on the lack of structure of online groups. In his analysis on social media activism (2010), American writer Gladwell highlighted that unlike physical groups, social media groups are usually built upon weak ties because they mostly consist of strangers.

The lack of a clear and strong leadership figure further impedes them from carrying out meaningful engagements. It also becomes extremely challenging to coordinate members, handle conflicts, gather ideas, suggestions, and mobilise resources (Gladwell, 2010).

Online civic engagement has been criticised as fulfilling people's narcissistic appetites for attention, thereby undermining the real value of online causes and movements (Zhao et al., 2008; Stein, 2013; Wilson, 2018). According to Goffman's *Impression Management Theory* (1959), people tend to deliberately curate a socially desirable personality when they know there is a visible group of audience watching them. Existing studies highlight that social media offers a conducive public platform to do this by curating themselves as highly sophisticated individuals to their followers usually consisting of close friends, family members and colleagues (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Konrath et al., 2016). This is done by changing their profile pictures to show support to popular causes like the Black Lives Matter movement or publicly liking, sharing or commenting on pages dedicated to socio-political causes. However, studies have found that they may not actually be as interested to engage with such causes beyond social media and are likely to bail out in the event of a commitment (Konrath et al., 2016). For instance, people chose to participate in online campaigns such as the ALS bucket challenge because of their fear of missing out on the latest social trends, as opposed to being motivated by the intention to support the cause (Schumann & Klein, 2015; Konrath et al., 2016).

2.4. Clicking for change: Creating subtle but steady changes

Despite prevailing criticisms, a large volume of literature points to how simple online activities such as tweeting, uploading videos of unjust events, and making content go viral have enabled socio-political movements and campaigns like Me Too[8] (2006) and Stop Funding Hate (2016)[9] to receive global attention and create positive changes.

Online and social media platforms are a low-cost way for people from various backgrounds to have their voices heard. Unlike traditional civic engagement activities, their barriers to entry are relatively low. They also do not have to go through the hassle of interacting with formal political institutions and community groups, which may require security checks and tedious registration processes (Castells, 2012; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). In many societies, youths have little or no opportunities to directly influence or challenge their existing socio-political landscape with the exception of voting. Other community or social platforms such as volunteer groups are usually over dominated by adults in power, thereby restricting leadership and changemaking opportunities for youths (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; O'Donoghue & Strobel, 2007; Taft & Gordon, 2013).

[8] The Me Too movement was first started by Tarana Burke, a sexual assault survivor, to break the silence on sexual abuse, assault and violence. It soon evolved into a global movement where survivors used the phrase #MeToo (and other variations) on social media to share their experiences and even publicly name their perpetrators. The movement has been successful in exposing such crimes committed by high profile individuals like Harvey Weinstein. The Me Too movement remains active in present day.

[9] The Stop Funding Hate campaign was started by writer and human rights activist Richard Wilson in 2016 to put pressure on certain British newspapers that were seen as using fear and division to sell more newspapers. The campaign gained over 70,000 likes on its Facebook page during the first three days of activity and its launch video was viewed over 6 million times.

Social media has allowed youths the freedom to explore other viable ways to perform and actualise their citizenships and rights without relying too much on their government or official channels. Moreover, exploring non-state affiliated avenues also means that they have more freedom to critique those in power. This is not possible within a traditional or state-affiliated institution. This is demonstrated by Sinpeng's (2021) work on Thai youths involved in the Free Youth protest. She analysed over 2,700 tweets on the protest and found that most youths participated in the movement to challenge the old and authoritarian government that denied youths of their democratic rights. Interviews with some of the youth participants found that they decided to protest through Twitter rather than formally engage with their political leaders because they felt that they were dismissed by the latter because of their age.

Online and social media civic engagement is also especially useful to those from marginalised backgrounds such as Black or minority women, undocumented youths and queer communities (Brown et al., 2017; Hanckel & Morris, 2014). Online spaces help marginalised and underrepresented groups to forge greater solidarity among one another, which helps their mental and physical well-being. For example, some scholars studied content posted on the popular "My Stealthy Freedom" Facebook page run by Iranian women. The private group serves as a platform for Iranian women to secretly resist against the mandatory veiling laws. By posting and sharing images of themselves without their headscarves, many Iranian women have been able to shape an alternative identity for themselves that is not conscripted by patriarchy (Khazraee & Novak, 2018).

Online and social media platforms also offer youths, especially those living under strict state surveillance and control, the space to design and disseminate content deemed as provocative and critical by the government. Through an understanding on the different ways to manipulate social media content such that it bends but not breaks any existing boundaries, youths can actively critique the state without getting into too much trouble. For example, in her study on Cambodian youths' use of Facebook posts, Lee (2018) found that many Cambodian youths safely mobilised the socio-political consciousness of their audience through attractive visuals, carefully worded captions, use of puns and wordplay, and a neutral tone to express their dissatisfaction with certain policies. Other studies showed how powerful humour and memes, when used strategically, can help people challenge the status quo without facing too much of legal repercussions (Makombe & Agbede, 2016; Soh, 2020).

2.5. Existing gaps and limitations

As seen from the above, much of the existing literature on online civic engagement tends to be largely Western-centric with limited focus on Southeast Asian countries. In Singapore, there have been growing research on youth activism and engagement. However, they tend to focus on older social media platforms like Facebook. However, in recent years, newer social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok and Twitter and even instant messaging platforms like WhatsApp, Telegram and Discord are becoming increasingly popular choices for youths to create and share civic content. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap

through a holistic analysis of how different social media platforms are used to create and share content and their impact on youths.

Another limitation of existing studies is that they focus mainly on the perspectives and experiences of content creators. For example, such studies have looked at the interactions and engagement strategies that content creators rely on to fulfil their objectives. However, there is little focus on the attitudes and responses of social media users who may either incidentally or deliberately come across such content. It is also unclear if there are certain groups of users who may tend to engage more with such content as compared with others, and the possible reasons for the varying levels of engagement. As such, this study elicits the perspectives and experiences of both content creators and social media users.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Phase One: Content analysis of civic engagement posts

Phase One of the study examined the nature and characteristics of online posts. We conducted a content analysis of online and social media posts belonging to 35 content creators between the age of 18 and 35 years old, who were based in Singapore at the time of data collection from January to March 2021. A total of 418 posts published during the period between 1 January 2019 to 31 January 2021 that were publicly available on online (e.g., blogs, websites) and social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and TikTok) were collected and coded.

3.1.1. Sample of content creators

An initial list of content creators was drafted upon four inclusion criteria as seen in Table 1. We selected content creators based on the following criteria.

Table 1: Inclusion criteria for content creators for Phase One

No.	Inclusion criteria	Definition
1.	Age of content creator	• Between 18 and 35 years old.
2.	Nature of content	• Online or social media accounts belonging to non-profit organisations (NPOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs), civil society organisations, and businesses were excluded from the sample.
3.	A minimum of 70 per cent content on online or social	• Content creators must have at least 70 per cent of their online content dedicated towards civic issues.

	media accounts to be related to civic issues	• Types of civic issues included (but were not restricted to) were on topics pertaining to gender equality, racial discrimination, mental health issues, environmental issues, and issues on sexuality; these could be local, regional or global issues.
4.	Online presence	• Content creators needed to have an active online presence from 1 January 2019; this was to ensure the currency of their online engagement.

To locate content creators who discussed civic issues online, we used a combination of keyword searches and snowballing of civic engagement accounts belonging to youths. Examples of keywords used included “Singapore”, “politics”, “environment”, and “LGBTQ+”. We also used keywords pertaining to trending local events and actors at the time of data collection like “Raeesah Khan”, “general elections 2020” and “brownface Singapore” to identify suitable content creators. In order to ensure that we covered as much content creators as possible, we used different permutations of keywords for searches on different social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and search engines like Google and Yahoo!). We also looked at trending local and international movements and issues online during the period to conduct the keyword searches. Using this method, we developed an initial list of 112 content creators who met the inclusion criteria and their respective social media handles. These content creators were primarily active on social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and TikTok. We also collected data from their accounts on other online platforms and messaging apps (e.g., blogs, websites, Spotify podcasts and Telegram).

We then ranked the list of content creators by the average number of followers across the platforms and sorted in descending order to develop four quartiles in follower distribution. The final sample consisted of 35 content creators — all 28 entities in the 25th percentile of the ranked accounts, and seven from the remaining 75th percentile. This was to account for the most viral content creators in the online engagement ecosystem. We selected 12 posts from each of the 35 content creators to account for diversity in terms of the time period, online platforms and, where applicable, discussion issues. We were able to select 12 posts from each account, with the exception of one content creator, who had only started actively producing civic engagement-related posts since July 2020, thus resulting in a collection of 10 posts from that particular account. Using this method, a total of 418 online posts from 35 content creators were collected for analysis. We coded and analysed all posts manually. Given that this is an exploratory study, the 418 posts that we coded and analysed were useful in providing us with some preliminary insights on online civic engagement among youths in Singapore.

3.1.2. Coding framework and content analysis

The data collection and content analysis took place from January to March 2021. All online posts collected were subjected to a thorough coding framework. The intercoder reliability score among the three coders was 0.82.[10] The coding

[10] Intercoder reliability is used to measure the extent to which two or more coders agree on how to code a content. The percentage of agreement, a technique to assess agreement between coders was best suited for a nominal dataset like ours. While there are differing levels of agreement among researchers on the exact range of values that reflect a strong agreement among coders, it has been generally agreed that any score above 0.8 reflects a nearly perfect agreement (Allen, 2017).

framework was informed by existing studies on civic engagement, which used the content analysis approach.

Existing studies used common variables such as geographical locations, message elements, mentions of media and organisations (e.g., the government) and engagement or mobilisation strategies found in content created and shared online (Smith et al., 2015; Ray et al., 2017; Khazraee & Novak, 2018; Boulianne et al., 2018; Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019).

Understanding the values (i.e., belief systems) of youth content creators was also deemed as crucial in understanding their motivations and aspirations for being involved in online civic engagement. In our study, we relied on Schwartz's identification of 10 universal values that were recognised to be common across various culturally diverse groups and societies to locate the underlying motivations behind youth's online civic engagement activities (Schwartz, 2012). Based on this, we coded for the presence of values like achievement, benevolence, conformity, hedonism, power, security, self-direction, stimulation, tradition, and universalism.

We also adopted the approach of some studies that coded for the explicit mention of problems (i.e., diagnostic frames) and solutions (e.g., prognostic frames) (Harlow, 2011; Khazraee & Novak, 2018). Coding for diagnostic frames was based on the identification of a problem and supported by open-ended coding of the problem itself, its cause(s), and the actor(s) involved. Coding for prognostic

frames was based on the identification of a solution and supported by open-ended coding of the solution itself, the actor(s) who are believed to be able to solve the problem, and the specific action(s) leading to a desirable outcome.

We conducted two main forms of coding: (1) binary coding[11] and (2) open-ended coding. We then analysed the data in the following ways:

1) Descriptive statistics to provide the top-line findings on each variable to identify emerging patterns in the data.
2) Binary logistics regressions to predict the likely relationship between different categories of issues and different variables that were used.
3) All quantitative variables were analysed using the IBM SPSS Statistics software.
4) Where possible, qualitative data was coded and analysed using grounded theory.

3.2. Phase Two: Focus group discussions with content creators and social media users

To better understand the motivations, aspirations and values, online behaviours and engagement strategies of content creators and social media users, we also conducted focus group discussions (FGDs) with content creators and social media users between the age of 18 and 35 years old.

[11] This was done by for the presence or absence of a variable using 1 or 0, respectively.

3.2.1 Respondent profiles

A total of four FGDs involving 31 youths (aged between 18 and 35 years old) were carried out by an external vendor in June and July 2021. The youths who participated in the FGDs were grouped according to their education background and current life stage (i.e., whether they were studying or working). The four FGD groups comprised of the following: (1) content creators; (2) working adults; (3) youths who were still studying in universities or junior colleges (JCs); and (4) youths who were still studying in polytechnics or Institutes of Technical Education (ITEs). Table 2 shows a summary profile of respondents who took part in the four FGDs in Phase Two. To facilitate in-depth discussions, each FGD only consisted of six to nine respondents and lasted for about 90 minutes. For the full profile of youths who took part in the FGDs, refer to Appendix 1.

Table 2: Profile of Phase Two respondents by gender, ethnicity, education, housing, and current life status (e.g., working or studying)

Demographics		**Number of respondents**
Gender	Male	16
	Female	15
Ethnicity	Chinese	17
	Malay	6
	Indian or Others	8
Education	ITE	4
	Polytechnic	9

	JC	1
	University and above	17
Housing	HDB 1-3 Room Flat	4
	HDB 4-5 Room Flat or Executive Apartment	22
	Private housing (condominium, landed property)	5
FGD group type	FGD 1: Content creators	7
	FGD 2: Social media users • Working adults (i.e., youths who had already graduated from universities, polytechnics or ITEs).	9
	FGD 3: Social media users • Youths who were still studying in universities or JCs.	7
	FGD 4: Social media users • Youths who were still studying in polytechnics or ITEs.	8

During the recruitment, we ensured that there was a diverse mix of respondents in terms of their gender, ethnicity, and for content creators, the types of causes they were advocating for (e.g., socio-political, environment, race and religion). All respondents were reimbursed with $50 as a token of appreciation.

3.2.2. Data collection and analysis

The FGD guide for social media users was developed based on four key themes that are relevant to our research questions, as follows: (1) social media usage

patterns; (2) online and offline engagement activities and behaviours; (3) impact of content on social media users; and (4) response to woke culture in Singapore. The FGD guide for content creators was similarly based on the following four themes: (1) characteristics of online civic content; (2) civic engagement strategies used; (3) role as social media content creator; and (4) response to woke culture in Singapore. Due to the safe-distancing measures implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic, all four FGDs were conducted virtually via Zoom. Upon completion of the FGDs, we coded and analysed the transcripts. Based on this, we identified the following five meta-themes and various sub-themes as presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Meta-themes and sub-themes identified from FGDs

No.	Meta-theme	Examples of sub-themes
1.	General topics of interest	• Motivations and underlying reasons for being interested in civic and non-civic related issues and topics. • Attitudes towards different types of issues.
2.	Topics of interest pertaining to civic issues and events	• Motivations and reasons for being interested in specific civic issues and events. • Aspirations and goals towards creating content on such civic issues and events. • Types of values motivating the creation of content on such civic issues and events.
2.	Key information sources online	• Sources that are perceived to be credible and appropriate to learn from about civic and non-civic issues. • Attitudes and perceptions towards such sources.

		• Similarities and differences in terms of information sources used across the different youth profiles.
3.	Types of engagement activities and strategies	• Different types of online engagement strategies and their rationale. • Different types of offline engagement strategies and their rationale.
4.	Impact of social media content on self and society	• Positive impact of using social media for civic engagement. • Negative impact of using social media for civic engagement. • Challenges faced by content creators in using social media.
5.	Perceptions and attitudes towards woke culture	• Definition and understanding of woke culture. • Perceived benefits or harms of woke culture in Singapore. • Relevance of woke culture in Singapore. • Impact of woke culture in Singapore.

In the following chapters, we present findings from the content analysis, supplemented by responses gathered from the FGDs.

4. CIVIC ISSUES GALVANISING YOUTHS ONLINE

This chapter examines the different types of civic issues that youths were interested in, the problems that youths identified and their proposed solutions to tackle them.

The content analysis found that majority of the online posts focused on local issues and events, which made up 77.3 per cent of the sample. Posts with a regional focus made up 12.7 per cent, while posts with a global focus only made up 5.3 per cent of the sample.[12] This shows that while youths' interests in civic issues were not confined to a particular geographical space, they were the most vocal about issues within their society. The following section will delve deeper into the nature of these issues.

4.1. Popular issues driving online civic engagement

The range of issues mentioned or discussed in the social media posts could be grouped into eight categories: (1) community issues; (2) environmental issues; (3) gender and sexuality issues; (4) jobs and finance issues; (5) mental health issues; (6) politics and governance issues; (7) race and religion issues; and (8) others (i.e., issues that did not neatly fit within the seven categories). These eight categories were determined based on the content featured in the sample of 418 social media posts.[13] Table 4 provides more details on the eight categories of

[12] The total percentages for geographical focus of posts do not add up to 100 per cent as one post could be tagged to more than one geographic focus.
[13] The issues tagged to each post were not mutually exclusive. For example, if a post discussed topics like Section 377A and women's rights together, it would be tagged under the issue

issues identified. Images 1 to 6 are examples of some of these issues.

Table 4: Details on the eight categories of issues identified in online posts

No.	Issue category	Scope
1.	Community	Lives and livelihoods of different communities (e.g., migrant workers) as well as community and ground-up efforts (e.g., volunteering and fundraising events, donation drives).
2.	Environment	The environment (e.g., climate crisis, global warming, excessive plastic consumption) and efforts to mitigate environmental problems (e.g., tips on recycling and reusing materials, making lifestyle changes).
3.	Gender and sexuality	Gender equality, sexual harassment and violence, and LGBTQ+ issues (e.g., LGBTQ+ empowerment, sexual crimes, glass ceiling for women at the workplace).
4.	Jobs and finance	Employment and finance-related information (e.g., career progression, corporate policies and culture, financial literacy).
5.	Mental health	Mental health issues and efforts to raise greater awareness (e.g., self-care tips, government's efforts to promote mental well-being in schools, managing conditions like anxiety and depression).
6.	Politics and governance	Political events, laws, policy changes and reviews, and the legislative system (e.g., General Election 2020, ban on personal mobility devices in Singapore in 2020, abolishing capital punishment).
7.	Race and religion	Minority rights, racial and religious discrimination, and related concepts such as Chinese and White privilege.

categories of politics and governance, and gender and sexuality. This method of issue tagging was deliberately chosen to account for the intersectionality between various issues.

8.	Other issues	Content that did not fit within the above seven categories (e.g., misinformation, capitalism).

Image 1 (community): A tweet that provided information on how Singaporeans could support the migrant worker community, which was adversely affected by the spike in COVID-19 cases in dormitories in April 2020.

Image 2 (environment): An Instagram carousel post[14] that provided information on debunking common climate change narratives.

Image 3 (gender and sexuality): An Instagram carousel post that provided information on how to be effective allies to people from the queer community on digital platforms.

[14] An Instagram carousel post is a feature that allows users to include a maximum of 10 images in a single post.

Image 4 (jobs and finance): An Instagram post that contained information on how young professionals in the tech sector can work towards increasing their salaries

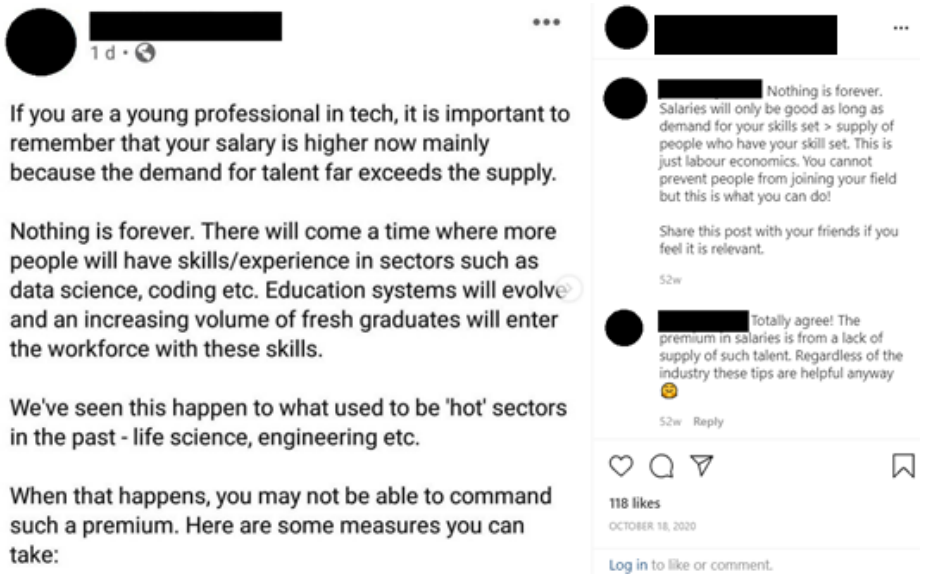


Image 5 (race and religion): An Instagram post that discussed problems such as the discrimination of Chinese nationals, White supremacy, and anti-Asian racism.

Image 6 (multiple issue codes): A Facebook post that discussed community issues, gender and sexuality issues, politics and governance issues, and environmental issues.

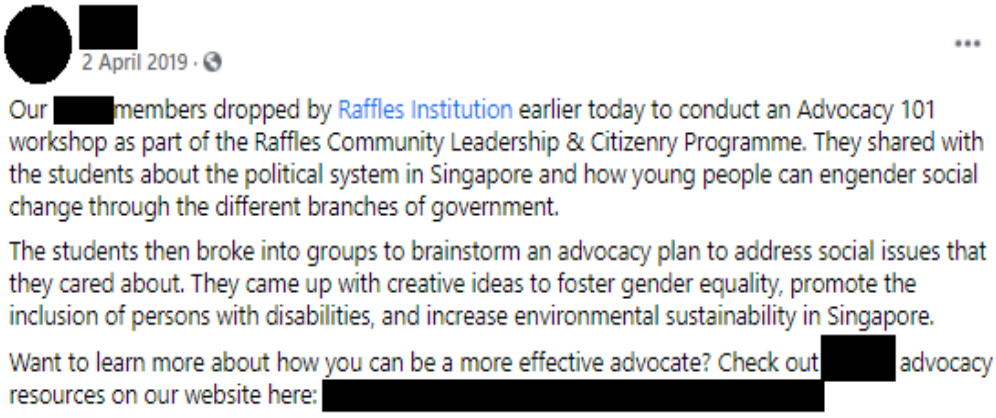
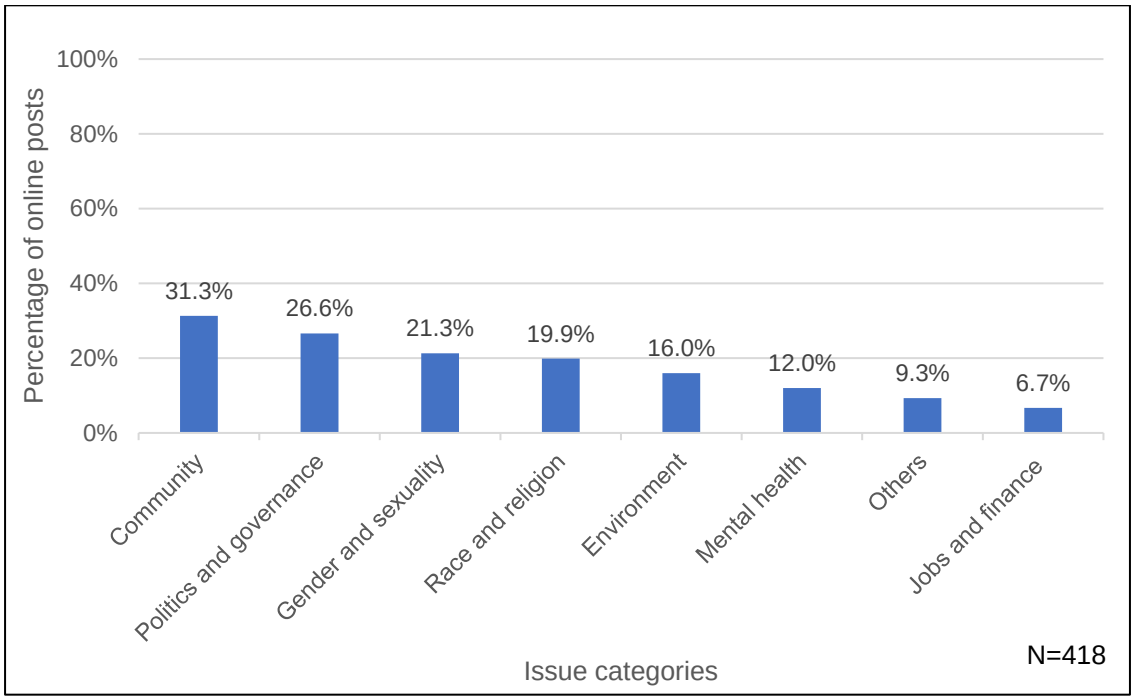


Figure 1 shows the percentage breakdown of the sample posts based on the categories of issues.[15] Youths mostly discussed community issues (e.g., raising awareness on migrant workers' problems, promoting volunteering and fundraising events), with posts on these issues making up 31.3 per cent of the sample posts. This was followed by issues pertaining to politics and governance (26.6 per cent); gender and sexuality (21.3 per cent); race and religion (19.9 per cent); and the environment (16 per cent). Issues relating to jobs and finance were least discussed as they constituted only 6.7 per cent of the posts analysed.

[15] The total percentages for issue category posts do not add up to 100 per cent as the categories were not mutually exclusive. One post could be tagged to more than one issue category due to the presence of multiple issues.

Figure 1: Percentage of posts across the eight issue categories in online posts



The popularity of community issues could be attributed to the time period during which the posts were published online by the content creators (i.e., 1 January 2019 to 31 January 2021). During this period, issues such as migrant workers' rights, mental health, and physical safety were being hotly debated in the local and international media (Tan, 2020; Kathiravelu, 2020). The spike in COVID-19 cases among various migrant worker dormitories had also brought greater attention to this community. In addition, the pandemic also highlighted the plight of vulnerable communities in Singapore, such as those from low-income households and the homeless. Various ground-up initiatives and movements were launched to address some of these problems. During this, social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook played a critical role in the recruitment of volunteers and organisation of donation drives.

Issues pertaining to politics and governance could have garnered attention online because of the election fever that swept Singapore in July 2020. Many young first-time voters shared their excitement on their social media platforms. Moreover, youth-led civic groups like The Twain Have Met (an Instagram account dedicated to the discussion of current affairs) and Community for Advocacy and Political Education (CAPE) (a student-led group run by Yale-NUS and NUS students) were actively creating and sharing content on the election. They produced content on the political parties contesting in the election, parties' manifestos, and voting guides to help first-time voters make informed choices.

Similar to the findings from the content analysis, the FGD with content creators also showed how they were interested in advocating for a variety of civic issues. Table 5 presents a list of issues that content creators in the FGDs had been actively advocating for on their social media.

Table 5: Examples of the different topics that content creators discussed or advocated for online

No.	Content creation themes	Examples
1.	Politics and governance	• Historical events (e.g., history of AIDS in Singapore). • Foreign policy and political events and happenings.
2.	Race and religion	• Issue of Muslim women and the *hijab (*headscarf).[16] • Racism against minorities in Singapore.

[16] Prior to November 2021, Muslim nurses in the public healthcare sector in Singapore were prohibited from wearing their headscarves at the workplace.

		• Empowerment of minority communities.
3.	Gender and sexuality	• Issues relating to Muslim women. • Liberation of sexual minorities (i.e., members of the queer community).
4.	Environment	• Impact of climate change on society. • Unequal impact of climate change on different segments of society.
5.	Mental health	• Awareness of mental health conditions like depression and anxiety.
6.	Intersectionality	• Race, ethnicity and sexuality (e.g., being queer and Brown in Singapore). • Race, gender, and class (e.g., income inequality among Muslim women in Singapore).
7.	Broad range of issues	• Popular and trending issues on social media (e.g., case of a dentistry student who physically attacked his former girlfriend in 2019,[17] local celebrity Jade Rasif's complaint against the Ministry of Manpower for providing insufficient updates when her foreign domestic

[17] In May 2019, a dentistry student from NUS entered his former girlfriend's apartment without permission and physically attacked her after their breakup. He was given an order by the court to undergo a 12-day detention order and complete 80 hours of community service. Many netizens felt that this sentence was disproportionately light compared with the harm that he had caused, and called for a review of such cases, especially when they involve offenders from higher education backgrounds (Awang, 2020).

		helper tested positive for COVID-19 in 2021.[18] • Issues that received less attention in mainstream media (e.g., a former Member of Parliament calling someone on his Facebook page a "snowflake" after a disagreement).[19]

4.2. Identification of specific problems and actors

To understand content creators' opinions towards issues and events, we coded for the presence of diagnostic frames in their social media posts. As mentioned in Chapter 3 (Methodology), diagnostic frames help to locate specific mentions of problems, their causes, and actors involved in contributing to the problems.

About 70 per cent of the posts deployed the use of diagnostic frames, meaning that problems and their causes were discussed.[20] Table 6 shows examples of specific problems raised by content creators based on the eight issue categories.

[18] In May 2021, local celebrity Jade Rasif uploaded a series of Instagram stories about her interactions with MOM pertaining to her new helper's shortened Stay-Home-Notice (SNH), COVID-19 diagnosis, and absence of quarantine orders for close contacts. This situation escalated when MOM responded to her posts, calling them "inaccurate". After a series of heated exchanges and investigations, MOM acknowledged the validity of her posts and issued a public apology (Tan, 2021).

[19] In June 2021, the People's Association (PA) had used Singaporean Sarah Bagharib's wedding picture as part of a Hari Raya decoration without her permission. Ms Bagharib expressed her frustration over the incident and accused PA of being racist on her Instagram page. The issue was eventually resolved after PA issued an apology for using Ms Bagharib's wedding picture without permission. However, it refuted her claims of the PA committee being racist. Former Minister of Parliament, Mr Amrin Amin supported PA's stance, which earned him some backlash on his Facebook page. He also disagreed with a comment made by a netizen and called the latter a "snowflake" — a term used to refer to someone, mostly a young person, as being too sensitive. (Daud, 2021).

[20] We coded for the presence of diagnostic frame when a post explicitly mentioned a problem. They also carried out open-ended coding, which identified the causes and actors involved in the problem. One post could be tagged under multiple categories of issues due to the intersectionality of some issues. This means that the diagnostic frames for some posts could overlap among the eight issue categories. For example, a discussion on sexual abuse of women by religious leaders would be a problem identified in both posts about gender and sexuality as well as race and religion.

Table 6: Examples of problems raised in online posts

No.	Issue category	Examples of specific problems raised
1.	Community	• Migrant workers' difficulties with the justice system due to language barriers, their status as transient workers, and economic circumstances. • Digital divide between students from low-income families and students from high-income families.
2.	Environmental	• Business deals with companies that contribute to the climate crisis. • Contamination of recycling bins in Singapore due to the lack of awareness of how to recycle correctly.
3.	Gender and sexuality	• Male producers of local podcast group OKLETSGO making sexist, lewd and misogynistic remarks in an episode that was publicly aired.[21] • Lack of safe and inclusive spaces for queer students in schools. • Increasing cases of domestic violence in Singapore.
4.	Jobs and finance	• Platform workers like delivery riders being unable to find better-paying jobs in Singapore. • People not being able to negotiate for higher salaries due to their lack of knowledge and negotiation skills. • Lack of financial literacy knowledge among young graduates.

[21] In June 2021, the producers OKLETSGO, an online podcast which featured discussions on a wide array of topics in Malay, uploaded an episode that featured lewd, sexists and misogynistic comments about women. The episode sparked an uproar among many, including President Halimah Yacob who called for the producers to publicly apologise for their tasteless content. (Mahmud,2020).

		• Rising levels of unemployment among people in Singapore due to the pandemic.
5.	Mental health	• Heightened stress during election season due to exasperation, confusion and tensions over information clutter. • Singaporeans not going for therapy or counselling due to fears of stigma and potential discrimination at schools and workplaces. • Pandemic-induced depression and anxiety because of the effects of social isolation.
6.	Politics governance	• Ban on PMDs in Singapore, which particularly affected delivery workers from lower socio-economic status. • Lack of racial diversity among political candidates who were contesting in the general elections in 2020. • Capital punishment in Singapore's judicial system. • Criminalisation of homosexuality under Section 377A[22] in Singapore's penal code.
7.	Race and religion	• Use of brownface in an advertisement by NETS to represent an Indian character in 2019. • Minorities being turned away from job interviews because of preference for Chinese employees. • Chinese Singaporeans being xenophobic towards mainland Chinese nationals especially during the start of the pandemic in Singapore.[23]

[22] At his 2022 National Day Rally speech on 21 August, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced that Singapore will be repealing Section 377A of the penal code.
[23] This was also when the virus was initially referred to as the "Wuhan virus" because of its perceived origin.

		• Prevalence of racism even within minority communities.
8.	Other issues	• Influencers promoting the capitalist system and consumerism in their content. • Spread of misinformation regarding COVID-19 transmission rates leading to unnecessary panic and fears among people.

4.3. Identification of solutions

We also examined the types of solutions proposed by content creators to solve the problems that society faces.[24] Slightly more than half (56 per cent) of the posts identified specific solutions in response to the problems identified in the posts. This suggested that youth content creators were not just interested in highlighting issues that they deemed were important but were considering possible solutions to address them. Table 7 provides some examples of the solutions raised by content creators.

Table 7: Solutions recommended in online posts

No.	Issue Category	Examples of problems	Examples of solutions
1.	Community	• Migrant workers' difficulties with the justice system due to language barriers, their status as transient workers, and economic circumstances.	• Make regular monetary donations to support NGOs that work with migrant workers in Singapore. • Donate laptops and education materials for low-income students.

[24] To achieve this, we coded for the presence of solutions proposed by content creators in their posts.

		• Digital divide between students from low-income families and students from high-income families.	• Participate in fundraisers and donation drives.
2.	Environmental	• Business deals and partnerships with companies that contribute to the climate crisis. • Contamination of recycling bins in Singapore due to the lack of awareness of how to recycle correctly.	• Educate people how to reduce, reuse and recycle items. • Raise awareness on the urgency and implications of the climate crisis. • Call for oil and gas companies to be punished legally for contributing to rising pollution levels.
3.	Gender and sexuality	• Male producers of local podcast group OKLETSGO making sexist, lewd and misogynistic remarks in an episode that was publicly aired. • Lack of safe and inclusive spaces for queer students in schools. • Sexual abuse by religious leaders in minority communities; increasing cases of domestic violence in Singapore.	• Encourage people to speak out against sexual harassment or violence. • Educate people how to be effective allies for their friends who face gender or sexual discrimination. • Create support systems in schools and workplaces for women. • Have proper enforcement of laws protecting women in the domestic and public spheres.

4.	Jobs and finance	• Platform workers like delivery riders being unable to find better-paying jobs in Singapore. • People not being able to negotiate for higher salaries due to their lack of knowledge and negotiation skills. • Lack of financial literacy knowledge among young graduates. • Rising levels of unemployment among people in Singapore due to the pandemic.	• Educate young working adults on how they can groom themselves and their skills. • Educate people with the knowledge on what to do in times of unforeseen circumstances like recessions. • Equip people with financial literacy knowledge.
5.	Mental health	• Singaporeans not going for therapy or counselling due to fears of stigma and potential discrimination at schools and workplaces. • Pandemic-induced depression and anxiety because of the effects of social isolation.	• Reduce stigma in schools and workplaces against mental illness. • Provide affordable healthcare support to people with mental health conditions. • Engage in regular self-care rituals like exercising, doing art and listening to music.
6.	Politics governance	• Ban on PMDs in Singapore, which	• Encourage people to sign petitions or write

		particularly affected delivery workers from lower socio-economic status. • Lack of racial diversity among political candidates who were contesting in GE 2020. • Capital punishment in Singapore's judicial system. • Criminalisation of homosexuality under Section 377A in Singapore's penal code.	letters to their respective MPs reflecting on-the-ground sentiments to policy changes. • Call for the decriminalisation of capital punishment. • Call for the decriminalisation of Section 377A.
7.	Race and religion	• Use of brownface in an advertisement by NETS to represent an Indian character in 2019. • Minorities being turned away from job interviews because of preference for Chinese employees. • Chinese Singaporeans being xenophobic towards mainland Chinese nationals especially during the start of the	• The government to relook existing policies that may be discriminatory towards minorities. • Encourage minorities to speak up against racism in schools and workplaces. • Educate non-minorities on how to be better allies for their minority friends.

		pandemic in Singapore. • Prevalence of racism even within minority communities.	
8.	Other issues	• Influencers promoting the capitalist system and consumerism in their content.	• Encourage people to rethink about their support and patronage towards certain influencers, brands and corporations online who promote harmful behaviours and ideas.

This chapter has examined some of the common topics and issues that youth content creators in Singapore have been keenly discussing online in the recent years. It has shown how youths raised greater awareness on such topics and issues by highlighting specific problems and the possible solutions that might solve those problems. The following chapter will examine the factors that motivate and drive them to create such content online.

5. MOTIVATIONS, ASPIRATIONS AND VALUES OF CONTENT CREATORS

5.1. School and personal experiences shape civic engagement

Content creators' education background, in terms of their school subjects and school environment, played a salient role in shaping their advocacy work online. For example, Respondent 3, a male content creator who focused on socio-political issues, shared how his experience studying history inspired him to create content relevant to the subject. Studying history not only helped him gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of historical and political events, but also identify the gaps in people's knowledge regarding these events. Hence, he aspired to create socio-political content, particularly historical content, in a fun and engaging way for people to better understand and appreciate historical events and issues.

> *"I am studying History. One of the things I realised is that many people do not know the historical background or why certain things are the way they are in Singapore. Particularly with regards to political history or things like foreign policy. It is one of those things that keeps coming up and I thought that trying to share a bit more about or understanding more about the background of such policies would be useful when we are trying to discuss the problems with such policies…"* — ***Respondent 3, male, content creator (socio-political issues)***

Likewise, Respondent 7, a male content creator who focused on socio-political issues, talked about his experience studying in an art school. He said that being

in an art school allowed him to meet and interact with people from diverse backgrounds. This culture of socialising with diverse groups also allowed him to learn and engage with people on various issues. He deemed this a likely reason why his content covered a wide range of issues, from the *hijab* controversy to the strangulation case involving a dentistry student.

Content creators who focused on race-related issues (e.g., racism, minority rights) highlighted the impact of their personal experiences with racism as a major driving force that shaped their online civic engagement activities. They were aware of how their personal experiences were a part of the larger collective experiences of other minorities as well. Hence, they felt a greater sense of responsibility and ownership towards publicly speaking up about race issues — not just for themselves but for fellow racial minority members as evident from the following quote.

> *"For some of us, the fact that it affects our everyday life, the fact that it will affect our work, our job, and the way we communicate with other people, our mental health and all of these things. So, I think that is a huge motivation in itself, because you are not just thinking about yourself, you are also thinking about the most marginalised person in the room with multiple intersectional identities, and how they are navigating their life in Singapore."* — ***Respondent 2, male, content creator (race issues)***

Similarly, Respondent 6, a male content creator, regarded racism as a personal fight because of its direct impact on his life, such as the loss of opportunities and

him feeling pressured to “Chinese-ify” himself to feel accepted in Singapore. Although he was interested in advocating for various issues, he eventually decided to focus on race-related issues on his Instagram page.

5.2. Create safe spaces for minorities

Some content creators, mainly those who focused on issues pertaining to race and religion, expressed their frustration over the perceived lack of safe spaces for minority communities to share their experiences. Based on his observations, Respondent 2, a male content creator, felt that this was mainly because Singaporeans were generally afraid to publicly speak up on such issues. He regarded this lack of safe spaces for minority communities as a problem as it also affected their overall well-being. Respondent 4, a female content creator who focused on Muslim women issues, shared similar sentiments. Hence, she started an Instagram group for them. The key objectives of creating such safe spaces were not only to create more inclusivity and visibility for minority communities but also to empower them sufficiently to share their experiences.

> *“I used to study counselling and theatre, so I always encounter people’s lived experiences and how something can affect them, emotionally and mentally and psychologically and I did not really see that online. I also think that that is because you know… it’s Singapore and people are afraid to speak up and that’s extremely valid. So, I think that the lack of people sharing their own experiences was why I started it.” —* ***Respondent 2, male, content creator (race issues)***

> *"I think along that, we try to reach out to specific groups of women for them to write their stories, to share their experiences. We have also conducted writing workshops with Daughters of Tomorrow[25] as well. We worked with some of the women there to help them shape their stories so that they can share what they want to say. I think for some of them it was quite cathartic because you get to express yourself and go through your emotions as well."*
>
> — ***Respondent 4, female, content creator (Muslim women issues)***

5.3. Re-present media and state representations and public narratives

Some content creators felt that some local media sometimes mis-presented certain incidents. For example, Respondent 2, a male content creator, who focused on race issues, alluded to a controversial forum letter published on 13 April 2020 by *Lianhe Zaobao*, Singapore's largest Chinese language newspaper, which attributed the infection spike in migrant workers' dormitories primarily to the cultural habits and practices of South Asian migrant workers (e.g., eating with their hands).[26] He said the incident was a "trigger point" for him and led to him speaking up against racism online. As such, his Instagram page aimed to provide a more balanced representation of minority and marginalised communities in Singapore. Likewise, Respondent 4, a female content creator who focused on Muslim women issues also felt that mainstream media (i.e., legacy media) more often than not only focused on the views and experiences of the majority communities. She felt that the perspectives of minority communities like queer Muslims were often under-represented.

[25] A registered charity organisation that works with underprivileged women in Singapore.
[26] See https://www.zaobao.com.sg/zopinions/talk/story20200413-1045089.

"Last year, when we began, the way South Asian migrant workers were being treated was just disgusting and I think there was a local Chinese newspaper called Lianhe Zaobao that came up with an op-ed[27] that said that the reason why South Asian migrant workers were getting affected by COVID was because they eat with their hands, they hold hands, they sit on the floor and stuff like that… because I think that every Indian person or South Asian person, regardless of their citizenship or whatever, has very similar cultures and I do not think it was right for a national Chinese newspaper to go out and put that statement out there like that, and I think that was also a trigger for us to begin this." — ***Respondent 2, male, content creator (race issues)***

"It is similar for us because we looked around and realised there wasn't a space for Muslim women to share their issues you know and talk about their lived experiences. You always hear in mainstream media about the majority perspective so you don't hear... you know. For example, LGBT Muslims, or just very specific examples that everyday Muslim women go through, like microaggressions as well." — ***Respondent 4, female, content creator***

On the topic of representation, some content creators also talked about how the state's official narratives on certain historical events and communities have been limiting and disempowering. As such, some content creators felt that this can undermine people's learning opportunities to independently explore alternative

[27] This was a forum letter, which the respondent referred to as an op-ed during the FGD.

perspectives and narratives of such events. For example, Respondent 3, a male content creator who focused on socio-political issues, said that this has created a perception among people that any attempts to study or question state narratives on key historical and political events can be seen as being provocative.

On the same topic, Respondent 6, a male content creator who focused on race related issues, felt that the state's historical narrative taught to students tended to valorise the British. Local communities, in particular, minority communities, have been largely sidelined in state narratives. He felt that such one-sided presentation of Singapore's history was "disempowering" for minority communities. Hence, this inspired him to create content on what he described as "Brown empowerment" where minorities could understand and appreciate the true value of their culture.

5.4. Advocate for change offline

As mentioned earlier in the literature review (Chapter 2), online civic engagement and activism have been criticised by some as being passive or tokenistic. However, our study shows that content creators were motivated to translate their online activities and engagement into actual changes as well. To do this, a small number of content creators used their social media pages to connect with policymakers with the aim of influencing decision-making pertaining to issues that youths were concerned about. While they acknowledged the government's efforts in trying to include youths in more conversations and dialogues on policy issues, they felt that such efforts might not always be effective. For example, based on

his personal experience attending such dialogue sessions, Respondent 7, a male content creator who focused on socio-political issues, felt that such efforts often sidelined the voices of the online community.

> *"Every time I go there [dialogue sessions organised by government organisations], it is a certain type of people, or a certain subset, or a certain group of people who would attend government talks and government sessions. And the opinions, when I listen to those sessions, are very different from what I am getting online and what I am reading online and what people are telling me online. I mean by definition, they are engaging young people. However, the opinions that I see on social media do not really get translated, so I thought maybe that is what I can do."* — ***Respondent 7, male, content creator (socio-political issues)***

To do this, he used platforms like Instagram and Clubhouse to conduct his own engagement sessions with the online community and to gather their sentiments on hot issues. Such online engagements had also led to content creators like him to become involved in closed-door sessions and discussions organised by policymakers to discuss those issues. The same content creator also believed that the informal ground sensing he conducted regarding the light sentencing of a dentistry student involved in a strangulation case led to the review of the penalty framework in 2020, which again showed the spillover effect of online civic engagement in the real world (Wong, 2020).

The same respondent also shared how some social media users, especially working adults, were extremely wary over their digital footprints. Although many

of them might be keen on sharing their thoughts and opinions on certain issues, they might be afraid to do so because of the perceived negative repercussions. This is especially so when engaging with sensitive topics pertaining to race and religion or politics. As such, he hoped to use his platform to elicit and convey the views of such overlooked groups to policymakers.

> *"With sensitive issues like this [ban on Muslim women wearing headscarves at work], not a lot of people are willing to put their name behind their words. Sometimes a lot of people tell me "Oh because of my job, I am not able to comment on certain things online, but since you are doing that, here is what I feel about it. If you can, help me amplify what my thoughts are."* ***— Respondent 7, male, content creator (socio-political issues)***

5.5. Self-direction, benevolence, and security: Top three values driving online civic engagement

The term "values" is often assumed to be a synonym for the term "motivations". However, scholars like Schwartz (2012) have argued that values are more than just motivations. They reflect an individual's belief system (i.e., what he or she thinks is right or wrong) and they serve as guiding principles that influence the types of actions and behaviours that he or she might choose to embody. In his work, Schwartz also defined values as being able to provide "predictive and explanatory power in the analysis of attitudes, opinions and actions" and "reflect major social change in societies and across nations" (Schwartz, 2012, p. 261).

To find out which values underpinned online discourse, we applied Schwartz's identification of 10 basic human values across all societies in the content analysis

(Schwartz, 2012). Table 8 provides a detailed breakdown of the ten values and their definitions.[28] See Images 7 to 11 for some examples of various social media posts and the values manifested.

Table 8: Breakdown of Schwartz's 10 universal values and their definitions

No.	Value	Definition
1.	Self-direction	• Independent thought, action-choosing, creating, and exploring (e.g., being creative, having the freedom to explore and choose one's own goals, being independent).
2.	Achievement	• Personal success through demonstrating competence according to social standards. • Achievement values demonstrating competence in terms of prevailing cultural standards, thereby obtaining social approval (e.g., being ambitious, successful, capable, influential).
3.	Power	• Social status and prestige, control or dominance over people and resources (e.g., having social capital, wealth, authority).
4.	Hedonism	• Seeking self-pleasure or sensuous gratification. • Such values derive from organismic needs and the pleasure associated with satisfying them (e.g., being self-indulgent, seeking pleasure).
5.	Benevolence	• Preserving the welfare of those with whom one is in frequent personal

[28] Using these definitions, we carefully studied the content presented in the different posts and coded for the presence of these 10 values.

		contact (e.g., an in-group, such as being friendly, mindful, forgiving, honest towards an in-group).
6.	Universalism	• Understanding, appreciation, tolerance, and protection for the welfare of all people and for nature (e.g., being broad-minded, spiritual, believing in social justice).
7.	Conformity	• Restraint of actions or behaviours which may upset others or violate existing social norms and expectations (e.g., being obedient, self-disciplined, polite, loyal, responsible, honouring parents and authority).
8.	Stimulation	• Organismic need for variety and stimulation in order to maintain an optimal, positive, rather than threatening, level of activation (e.g., novelty, excitement, challenge).
9.	Security	• Safety, harmony, stability of society and relationships, and of self. • Some security values serve primarily individual interests (e.g., clean); others wider group interests (e.g., national security).
10.	Tradition	• Respect, commitment and acceptance of the customs and ideas that one's culture or religion provides (e.g., showing a respect for tradition, old systems, practices).

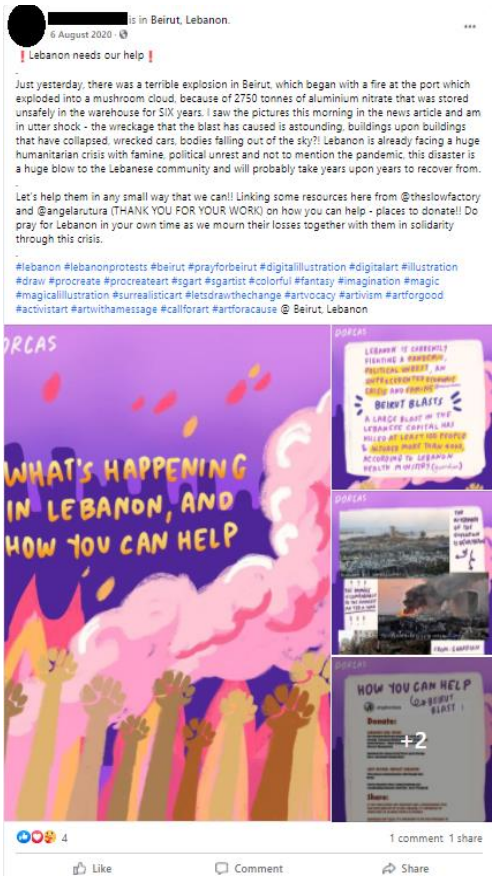
Image 7 (self-direction): An Instagram carousel post about actions that people can take to help friends who are struggling with mental health problems.

Image 8 (power): An Instagram carousel post showing how privileged groups tend to be less affected by the impact of environmental problems compared with underprivileged groups (e.g., people living in poor countries).

Image 9 (benevolence): An Instagram carousel post showing kindness and support to fellow survivors of sexual violence.

Image 10 (universalism): An Instagram carousel post about how the wildlife fire in Paraguay damaged air quality and natural habitats.

Image 11 (security): A Facebook post about how the humanitarian crisis in Lebanon affected the lives of people in the region.

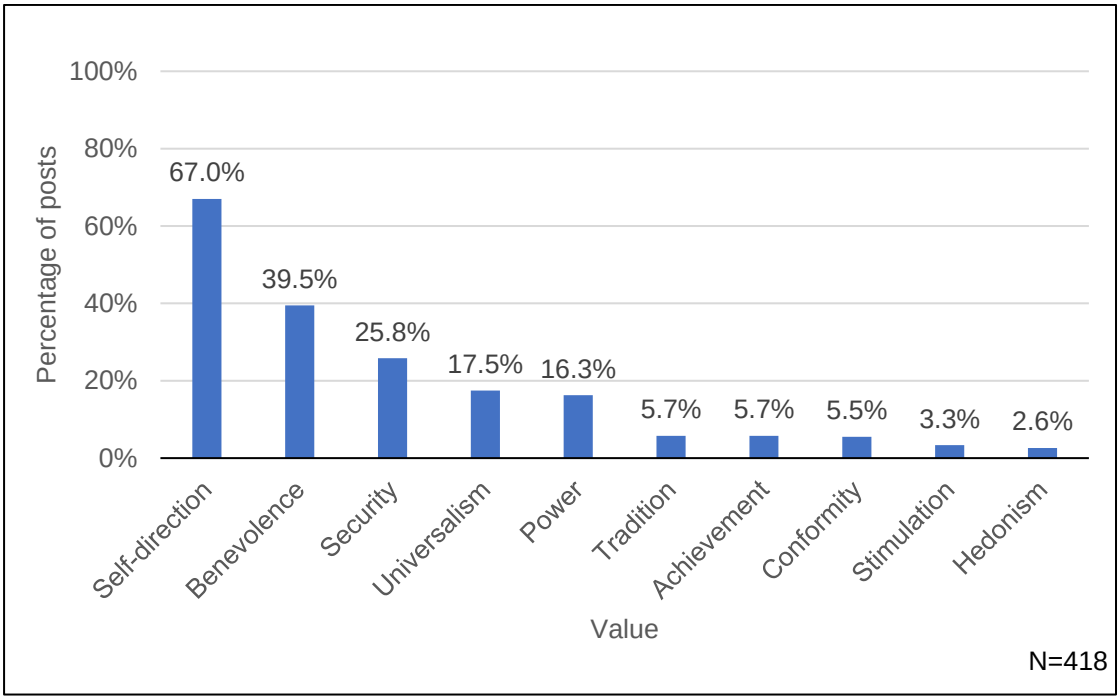


Based on the content analysis, self-direction was the most common value observed, making up 67 per cent of the posts. This was followed by benevolence (39.5 per cent); security (25.8 per cent); and universalism (17.5 per cent). See Figure 2.[29] The top two values of self-direction and benevolence were observed in nearly seven and four out of 10 posts, respectively. This suggests that youth content creators were motivated by a sense of agency, independence and desire to improve the welfare of people in society. Values like tradition, achievement,

[29] The total percentages for values found in posts do not add up to 100 per cent as they were not mutually exclusive. One post could be tagged to more than one value due to the presence of multiple values.

conformity, stimulation, and hedonism appeared in less than 6 per cent of the posts each.

Figure 2: Values identified in content creator's posts



The findings from the content analysis on the values underpinning online content creation were supported by the FGDs conducted with content creators. They demonstrated initiative, conviction and clarity of mind when deciding on the topics they wanted to focus on and the engagement strategies they felt could help them achieve their objectives. For example, some content creators shared that they were interested in a wide range of issues. However, based on their personal reflections and understanding of the existing civic engagement landscape, they only chose to focus on certain key issues or changed the scope of their advocacy.

> *"I have advocated for a wide variety of issues when I started my advocacy journey. So, I did mental health… I did environmentalism. For a while I was*

talking about how race intersects with architecture as well and the relationships between that. But moving forward in my advocacy, I really wanted to focus on a particular topic in order to go more in depth." — ***Respondent 1, female, content creator (environmental issues)***

"And trying to understand the psyche and how to engage with individuals, especially young teenagers and young men who are growing up and how they are perceiving communism, leftism, liberal ideas, and then how they kind of get enamoured by the incel ideology, alt right ideology, 4Chan and 8Chan. So that is the kind of stuff that I am interested in. It is kind of far away from the work that I actually do. But yes, on a personal level, that is the stuff that's closer to my heart." — ***Respondent 5, male, content creator (socio-political issues)***

The value of self-direction among content creators was also evident from the ways they tried to empower and mobilise specific communities whom they were advocating for. For example, Respondent 4, a female content creator who focused on Muslim women issues, said that apart from creating a safe space for Muslim women to share their experiences, her group also took the next step of building their independence and confidence by organising writing workshops for them. Similarly, Respondent 6, a male content creator who focused on race issues said that he created an Instagram page for minority communities to share their personal experiences with of behaviours that promote racism in social settings. By allowing followers to provide their own inputs on relevant topics, such

content creators instilled them with a greater sense of agency and independence to create some form of change.

Content creators in the FGDs also wanted to create a better society for everyone. For example, Respondent 1, a female content creator who focused on environmental issues, said that she did not only hope to raise awareness of the climate crisis but also to shine the spotlight on marginalised communities (e.g., the low-income groups), who are most likely to bear the brunt of the global warming crisis. Similarly, Respondent 5, who dedicated his account to socio-political issues, chose to highlight a variety of issues on his social media so as to amass “critical traction” for the particular issues. Although he referred to his motivation as “strategic” given his focus on virality, his aim of wanting to highlight stories that were not featured in mainstream media, reflected a sense of civic responsibility in wanting to ensure that important events and issues were being spoken about. These examples show how universalism is another key value shaping Singapore’s youth civic engagement landscape online.

This chapter has shed light on the factors that motivated civic engagement among youths. The findings show that most youth content creators were driven by their personal experiences as well as a belief and desire to raise awareness of marginalised communities and issues, so as to generate positive outcomes such as influencing policy decisions and creating a more inclusive society.

6. HOW CONTENT CREATORS ENGAGE WITH CIVIC ISSUES ONLINE

In this chapter, we identify the characteristics and features of content created and disseminated by youths online. We will also examine the ways in which these youth content creators gathered people's sentiments on various civic issues, crowdsourced content ideas from the online public, and built a strong network of support with fellow creators. In addition, the chapter will also look at four key messaging strategies that were common among online civic engagement posts. From our FGDs with content creators, we also got a more nuanced understanding on the types of considerations that they had in mind when designing their content.

6.1. Gather sentiments and crowdsource content ideas from the ground

Instagram was a popular medium for both content creators and social media users, with the former relying on the platform's reach to connect with and even crowdsource content ideas from the online community. Almost all content creators in the FGD used Instagram as their primary medium to engage with their followers and fellow content creators online due to its ease of usage and large audience base. For example, Respondent 7, a male content creator whose content primarily focused on socio-political issues, said that Instagram had a "really wide reach". Similarly, Respondent 6, a male content creator whose content focused on race issues, used the words "easy", "accessible" and "straightforward" to describe Instagram. Other than for reach, Instagram was also found to be useful for content preparation as well as co-creation with followers. For example, Respondent 4, a female content creator who focused on Muslim

women issues, talked about how her group used Instagram to reach out to people and to encourage them to send their writings on chosen topics and issues.

Beyond Instagram, other content creators like Respondents 3 and 7, both of whom focused on socio-political issues, also used Twitter and newer platforms like TikTok and Clubhouse that have been gaining traction among youths in recent years. Through these platforms, they conducted discussions, held online polls and encouraged people to contribute by sharing their thoughts and views through the comments section.

> *"Another way that I tried to expand beyond just like Twitter was to start a TikTok account, I find [that] TikTok is very visual based."* — ***Respondent 3, male, content creator (socio-political issues)***

> *"Similarly, with the tudung issue, [name redacted] and myself held a Clubhouse session, and we asked people to come on to give their opinions, their sentiments on the issue and [name redacted] brought in the people behind Lepak Conversations[30] as well."* —***Respondent 7, male, content creator (socio-political issues)***

6.2. Build networks with other content creators

Content creators were especially popular among fellow content creators themselves, possibly because they were already quite familiar with one another.

[30] Lepak Conversations is an online group founded by two youths which aim to discuss issues impacting the Malay community in Singapore.

During the FGD, they listed a wide range of fellow content creators and advocates on whom they often relied when wanting to learn more about new or unfamiliar topics and issues.

For example, they relied on individuals and groups like BYO (Bring Your Own Bottle), Bottle SG and No Ordinary Protest for environmental and sustainability issues; Minority Voices, Beyond the Hijab and Lepak Conversations for race issues; Left.sg for political issues; Muslim Girl and Cultural Points for race and religion issues; The Healing Circle, Kuasa and SG Brown Queers for LGBTQ+ issues; Aleesha Khan, for mental health issues; and Orang Laut for the history of *orang laut* in Singapore. This sense of familiarity with fellow content creators reflected the presence of a tight-knitted community in the online space. Moreover, it also showed how the online space functioned as an informal education network for content creators to seek, spread and share new knowledge and resources on a variety of topics and issues.

6.3. Four engagement strategies to attract followers

We also coded for the presence of four engagement strategies derived from existing research on online civic engagement. The term “engagement strategies” here refers to the ways in which content creators tried to get the online community to be aware of and interact with their content. It also refers to the ways in which content creators tried to mobilise people to take specific actions to achieve a desired outcome for a cause. The four engagement strategies included: (1) sharing information; (2) calling for action; (3) sharing personal experiences; and

(4) expressing solidarity.[31] Table 9 provides more details on these four engagement strategies and the types of actions that made up these strategies found during the content analysis of the posts.

Table 9: Four engagement strategies found in online posts

No.	Variable	Definition	Examples
1.	Share information	Share information relating to an event, issue, resources, or individuals, groups and organisations involved.	• Share information about an event (e.g., time and venue of a political rally, announcement of a new policy). • Share information about a topic (e.g., statistics on the impact of climate change). • Share resources on a topic (e.g., consolidated list of environmental organisations that people can follow to learn more). • Share information about individuals, groups, or organisations relating to the event, or topic (e.g., background of climate change organisations, details on founders and volunteers).
2.	Call for action	Encourage or guide people to embody practices and behaviours	• Call to sign a petition. • Call to join an event (physical or virtual).

[31] Coding for engagement strategies was not mutually exclusive. This means that a post could have one or more of the four engagement strategies stated above.

		that support a cause or event.	• Call to write to a Member of Parliament (MP). • Call to vote for political party (ruling or opposition party) or candidate. • Call to join a challenge (e.g., ALS ice-bucket challenge, doing push ups to raise awareness on mental health in Singapore). • Call to change to a common profile picture (e.g., a profile picture designed to support the Black Lives Matter Movement). • Call to engage with online content (e.g., like, share or comment). • Call to volunteer/donate to a cause. • Call to share personal experiences (e.g., asking for followers to make submissions to content creators based on their experiences with discrimination). • Call to adopt new practices (e.g., engage in self-care, call out sexual harassment in schools,

			adopt environmentally conscious practices).
3.	Share personal experience	Share personal experiences with an event/incident, topic or people or actors involved.	• Personal experiences with an event/incident. • Personal experiences with the topic of discussion. • Personal experiences with the actors involved.
4.	Express solidarity	Express support for an event, cause or people.	• Show solidarity to specific events, causes or people.[32] • Show general encouragement.[33]

6.3.1. Share information

Information sharing was coded based on whether posts in the online sample provided information on: (1) events; (2) topic; (3) resources; and (4) people or actors involved. In the sample, 73.6 per cent of the posts shared information of some kind. More than half of all posts (51.9 per cent) specifically shared information on events such as political rallies and fundraisers, followed by information on topics such as healthcare policies (37.6 per cent); information on individuals such as political party leaders (30.1 per cent); and information on resources such as helplines on mental health organisations in Singapore (18.7 per cent). See Figure 3 for a breakdown of the type of information shared in online

[32] Posts that expressed solidarity to specific causes used more empathetic language. For example, they contained phrases like “We know what you are going through” and “We will always stand by minority communities in Singapore”.
[33] Posts that expressed general encouragement were broader in their appeals. For example, they contained phrases like “Do not give up”, “You got this” and “Go Singapore!”

posts[34] and Images 12 and 13 for some examples.

Figure 3: Types of information provided in posts

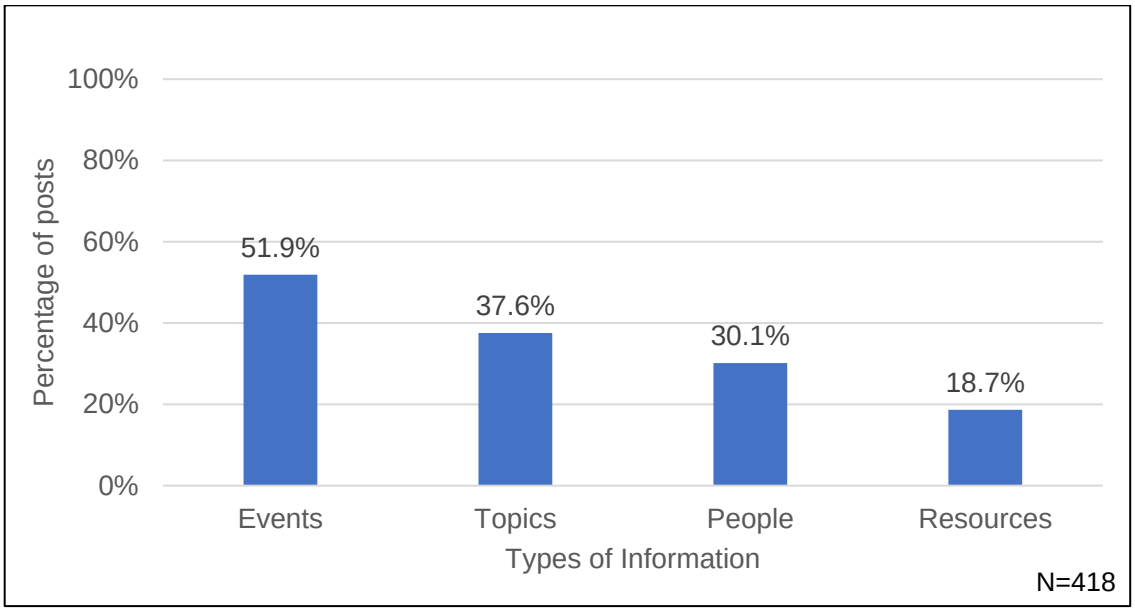


Image 12 (information on event): An Instagram carousel post that provided information on the impact of the Australian forest fires in 2019.

[34] The total percentages for the types of information shared by the online posts do not add up to 100 per cent as they were not mutually exclusive. One post could be tagged to more than one type of information.

Image 13 (information on people): An Instagram carousel post introducing June Chua, co-founder of the T Project.

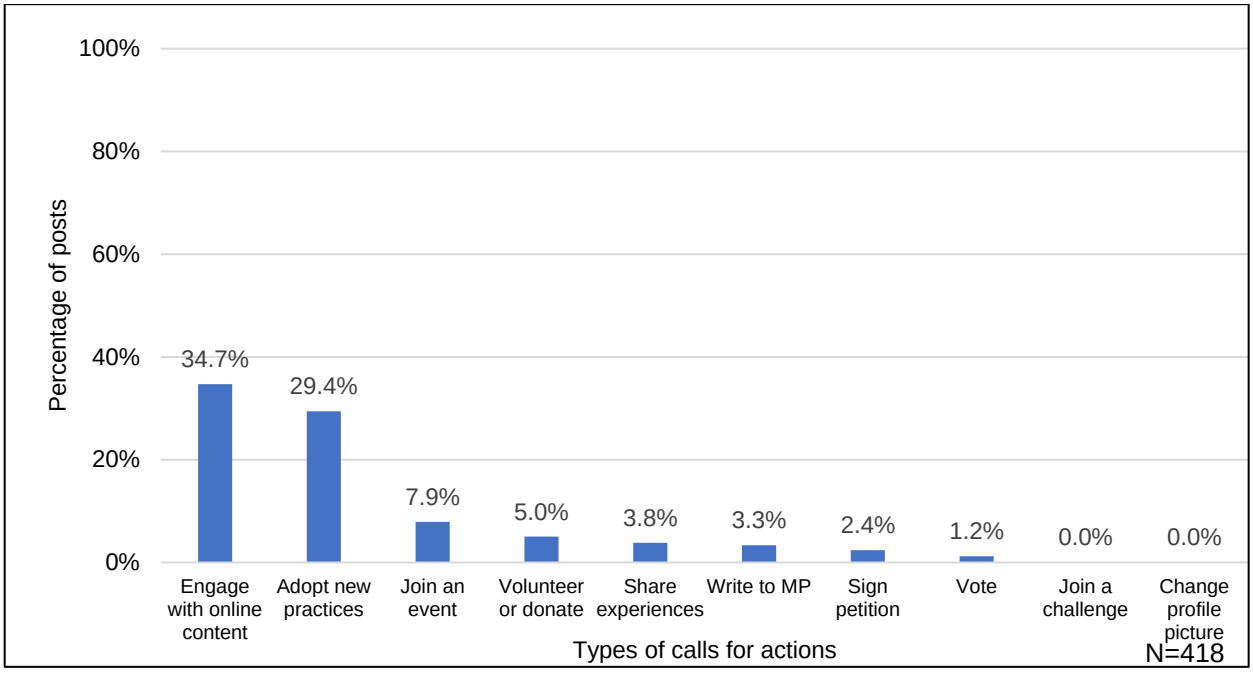
6.3.2. Call for action

We coded for 10 different calls for actions in the sample of online posts that content creators used to mobilise their followers. They are: (1) engage with online content (e.g., like, share or comment on post); (2) adopt new practices; (3) join an event; (4) volunteer or donate; (5) share personal experiences; (6) write to an MP; (7) sign a petition; (8) vote; (9) join a challenge; and (10) change profile picture. Overall, 59.5 per cent of posts in the sample contained some form of a call for action.

As presented in Figure 4, content creators commonly encouraged people to engage with their online content, such as by encouraging them to comment on or share their posts, making up 34.7 per cent of the overall sample. This was followed by the call to adopt new practices, such as self-care and teaching

readers how to become better allies to marginalised communities, making up 29.4 per cent of the sample. Posts that encouraged people to join an event followed at a distant third, constituting 7.9 per cent of the sample. The rest of the calls to action were less common, each constituting 5 per cent or less of the sample. [35]

Figure 4: Types of calls for action featured in online posts



Apart from having a better understanding on which particular calls for action were popular among content creators, we also wanted to know which types of issues were more likely to involve specific types of action. We thus conducted binary logistic regressions with the eight issues as the independent variables and the 10 calls for action as dependent variables, with the results presented in the following sub-sections.[36] See Appendix 2 for the regression analyses.

[35] The total percentages for call for action do not add up to 100 per cent as they were not mutually exclusive. One post could be tagged to more than one type of a call for action.
[36] The regression model for predicting any calls for action was significant at 0.1 per cent level of significance. Refer to Figure A in Appendix 2 for the full results of the binary logistics regression.

Adopt new practices for better environment, jobs and finance, and mental health-related outcomes

Posts which discussed issues pertaining to the environment, jobs and finance and mental health were more likely to call for people to adopt new practices that would create positive changes and manage existing problems (e.g., deteriorating environmental conditions, unemployment and underemployment, rising suicide cases in Singapore).[37] From our sample, we identified that environmental posts primarily called for individuals to adopt environmentally-friendly practices, such as bringing reusable bags and utensils to school or work, and switching to a meat-free diet. Jobs and finance posts mainly encourage individuals to be aware of workplace injustices and job insecurities, while mental health posts encourage people lend a listening ear to their loved ones, engage in self-care practices, or seek professional help when they need it. See Table 10 for some taken from various online posts.

Table 10: Examples of new practices highlighted in online posts discussing mental health, jobs and finance and environmental issues

No.	Issue	Example of messages found in online posts which encouraged people to adopt new practices
1.	Environment	• *"REDUCE unnecessary consumption. Buy only what you need, choose products with less packaging. REUSE things till death and lastly, RECYCLE if you can."* • *"Been trying to be more consistent with my BYOs and it's heartening to see my friends start to BYO*

[37] The regression model for predicting the call to adopt a new practice was significant at 1 per cent level of significance. Refer to Figure B in Appendix 2 for the full results of the binary logistics regression.

		too. But I often get the question that it 'doesn't matter cos I'm just one person'. But I came across a post by @tabaogirl showing how she used Qtally to count the disposables she saved and got inspired to do the same. I think by quantifying our efforts, we measure our impact. After all, we can't manage what we don't measure! Swipe right for a preview of how the app works (I also included the disposables that I do take for comparison's sake)."
2.	Jobs and finance	• ***"****If you are worried about job security and are thinking about how you can prepare, here are some steps you can take to cushion the impact on you and your family: (1) Have at least 12 months' worth of emergency funds; (2) Start investing consistently; (3) Create another stream of income, don't just depend on one source; (4) Continue to grow your knowledge & upskill; and (5) Keep networking online and offline."* • *"Check out sites like Glassdoor, Payscale, Salary.sg to see whether your low salary is unique to your organisation. If it's below the minimum range, then you might want to consider a new workplace. If it isn't, then it might be a broader market demand problem (see above). If you can't beat them, become them. Set up your own company, or become self-employed. Maybe even become the change you hope to see."*
3.	Mental health	• *"Social media is a very unpredictable place to be. With all the chaos, the shouting, the noise, whether right or wrong, moral or immoral — we have a choice. All of us are in a different headspace, at different stages in our lives, experiencing different things. With all the non-stop heavy fire since what I felt was COVID, let's choose to protect ourselves first. We have the power to own our steering wheel.*

		Delete, unfollow, mute those that are not serving you. Follow those who are. Trust yourself that you can unmute or follow again when the time comes. Meanwhile work on yourself to get into a healthy space." • *"Here's how to respond when a friend comes to us for help: (1) Be present emotionally and physically; (2) Lend them your ears; (3) Do not discount their experiences; (4) Encourage them to seek professional help early."*

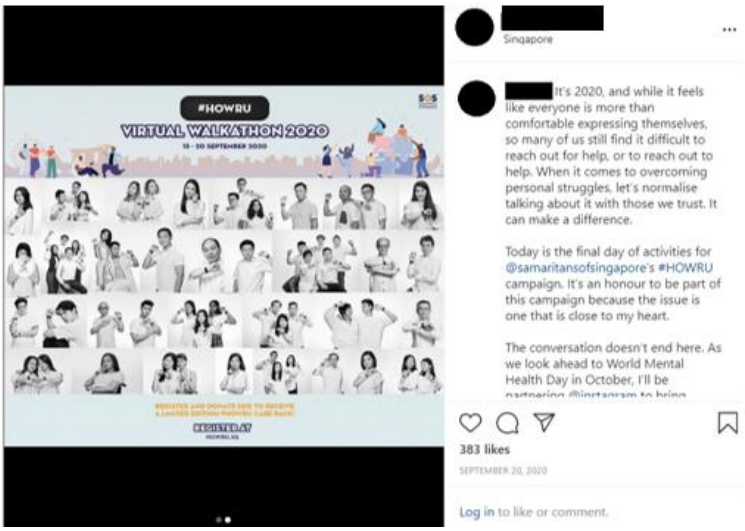
Join an event for causes relating to the environment and mental health issues

Posts that discussed environmental and mental health issues were more likely to call for people to join an event.[38] From our content analysis, we identified that environmental events primarily included climate rallies, talks and sustainability panels as shown in Image 14 while mental health events included wellness campaigns and workshops as shown in Image 15.

[38] The regression model for predicting the call to join an event was significant at 5 per cent level of significance. Refer to Figure C in Appendix 2 for the full results of the binary logistics regression.

Image 14 (environment; join an event): An Instagram post encouraging people to attend an event featuring a musical performance by local artist Inch Chua as well as a sharing session by veteran world explorer Robert Swan and his son Barney Swan.

Image 15 (mental health; join an event): An Instagram carousel post encouraging followers to participate in a virtual walkathon organised by Samaritans of Singapore (SOS).



Volunteer or donate to build a better community

The regression analysis found that posts that discussed community issues were more likely to encourage followers to volunteer or donate to a cause.[39] See Image 16 for an example. This suggests that civic engagement efforts for the community tend to come in the form of volunteering or monetary contributions. It is likely that these two solutions are perceived to be the two best ways to help communities compared to other actions.

Image 16 (community; make a donation): A Facebook post encouraging people to donate their Singapore Rediscover vouchers to migrant workers.

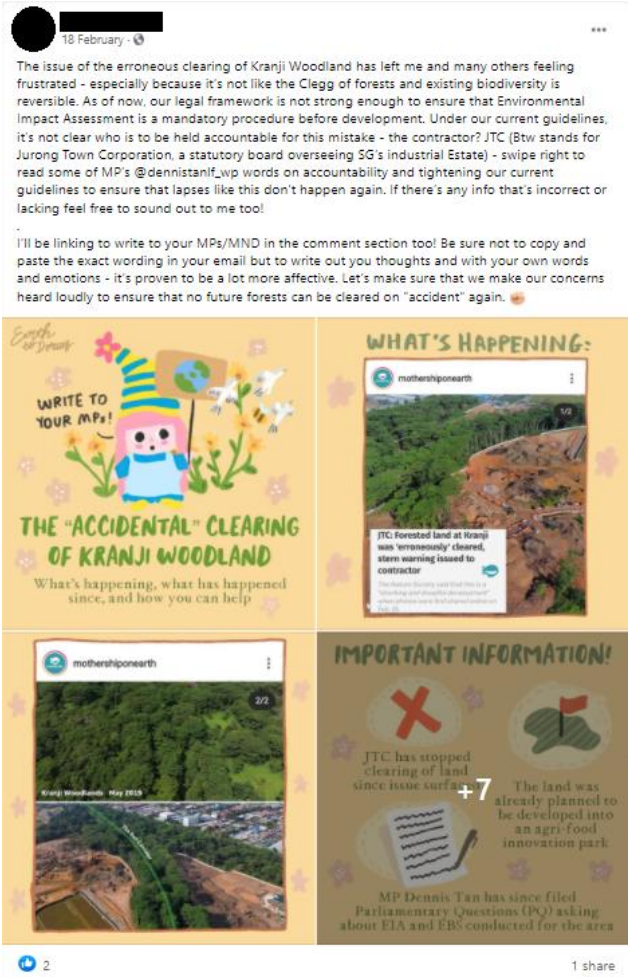
[39] The regression model for predicting the call to volunteer or donate was at 1 per cent level of significance. Refer to Figure D in Appendix 2 the full results of the binary logistics regression.

Write to MPs to tackle environmental, politics and governance issues

The regression analysis found that posts that discussed environmental, politics and governance issues were more likely to encourage readers to write to MPs about such issues.[40] As elaborated in Chapter 4, some of the problems that were identified under the category of politics and governance issues included the PMD ban, criminalisation of homosexuality, perceived unfairness in holding elections, and censorship, while environmental posts highlighted the problems of climate change and excessive consumption. Solutions to address these problems will require extensive manpower, financial resources and above all, legislative power and enforcement, which are beyond the capacities of ground-up online civic groups. Therefore, writing to MPs is perceived to be an important way for people to make their concerns known to those with authority. Image 17 is an example of how content creators encouraged their followers to join them in writing letters to relevant MPs. On top of crafting email templates for their followers to use, many content creators also provided clear instructions on how to send these emails to political leaders or relevant organisations.

[40] The regression model for predicting the call to write to their MP was significant at 0.1 per cent level of significance. Refer to Figure E in Appendix 2 for the full results of the binary logistics regression.

Image 17 (environment; write to a MP): A Facebook post on the accidental clearing of parts of Kranji Woodland that was home to multiple animals and bird species, calling for followers to create more awareness on this issue by writing to their respective MPs.

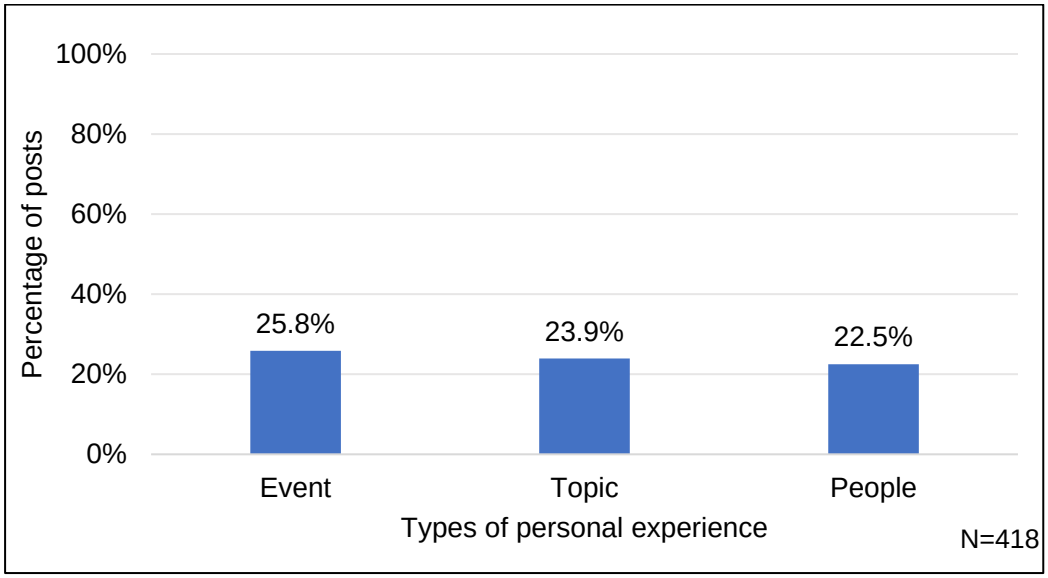


6.3.3 Share personal experiences

To understand the types of personal experiences that were being shared, we coded the online posts for experiences relating to specific events, actors and topics of discussion. Without distinguishing the type of personal experiences being shared, we found that 43.9 per cent of the posts in the sample was based on personal experiences. As shown in Figure 5, approximately one out of every

four to five posts shared personal experiences about an event, specific topic or with specific groups of people.[41] Taken together, the findings suggest that content creators tap on personal experiences as an important type of content.

Figure 5: Types of personal experience shared in online posts



6.3.4. Express solidarity

Posts that expressed solidarity constituted the lowest percentage of our sample, making up only 25.9 per cent of the sample. Under this category, we distinguished between expressing solidarity to a specific cause or issue and general encouragement. See Table 11 for examples of both types of solidarity.

[41] The total percentages for sharing of personal experiences do not add up to 100 per cent as not all posts shared personal experiences about events, topic or people.

Table 11: Examples of messages expressing solidarity to specific causes and general messages of encouragement in online posts

No.	Expression of solidarity	Example of messages found in social media posts
1.	Solidarity to specific causes	• *"Here's our affirmation for our fellow minorities: You are seen! You are loved! Your pain is valid! And you are not alone! ✊💔."* • *"#westandwithraeesah #istandwithraeesah."*
2.	General encouragement	• *"Everyone can play a part to combat the spread of COVID-19, including you!"* • *"Be proud of your greater commitment to dismantling systems of oppression and justice, and showing empathy and care to one another, You got this. You are the best."*

With reference to Figure 6, more than half (55.6 per cent) of all posts expressed solidarity to a specific cause, while 46.3 per cent used general encouragement.[42] Images 18 and 19 are examples of how content creators show solidarity to a specific cause or as a general form of encouragement respectively.

[42] The total percentages for expression of solidarity do not add up to 100 per cent as they were not mutually exclusive. One post could be tagged to more than one type of solidarity expression.

Figure 6: Types of solidarity expressed in online posts

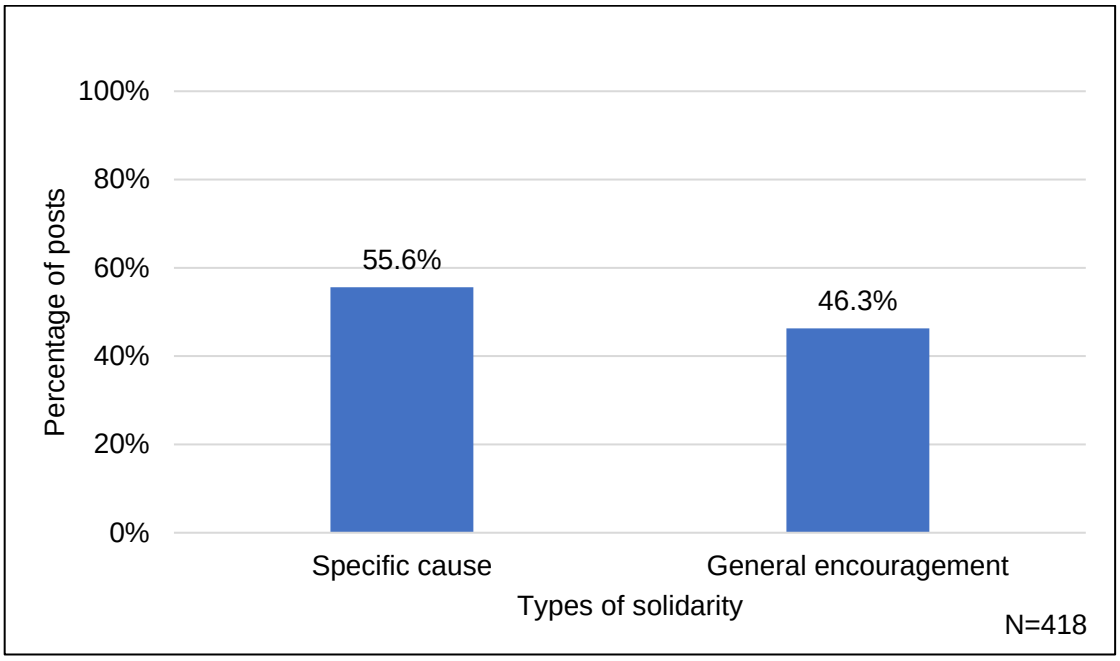
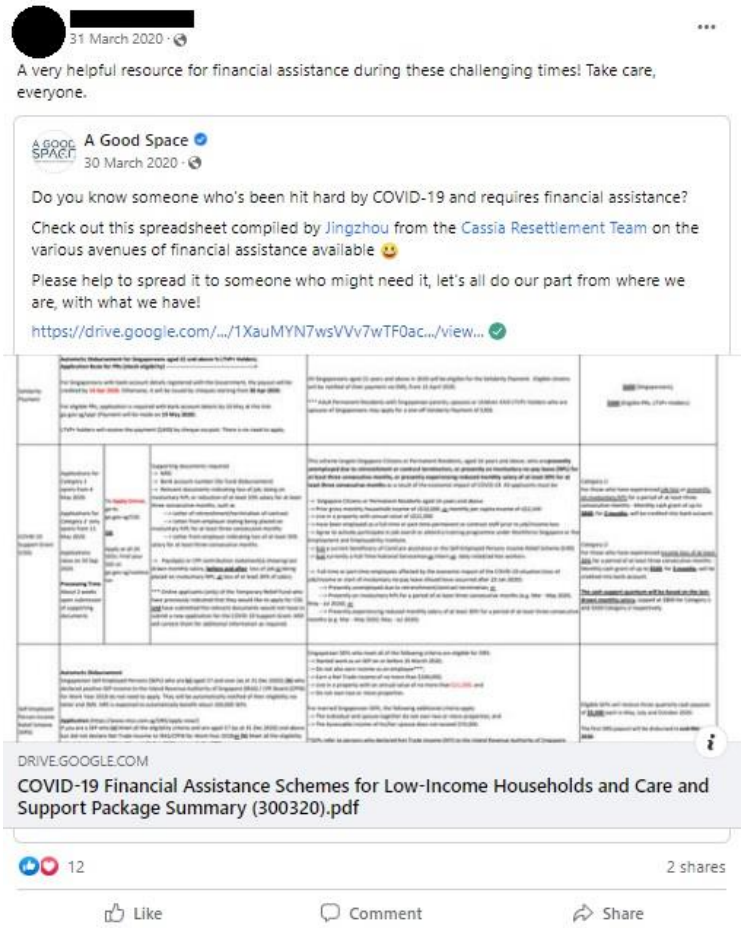


Image 18 (expression of solidarity — to a specific cause): A repost of an Instagram post by AWARE Singapore, expressing solidarity with people living with HIV/AIDS.

Image 19 (expression of solidarity — general encouragement): A Facebook post offering general encouragement and support to everyone affected by the COVID-19 pandemic; the post also shared resources (e.g., a spreadsheet providing an overview of financial assistance available) to help people in need



This chapter has given an overview of the different ways in which content creators tried to engage social media users to read, share and interact with their content. Building a strong engagement strategy plan was extremely essential for content creators, as it not only helped to increase the visibility of their content and build a wider audience pool, but also ensured that people were taking some form of desired action — ranging from adopting new practices to writing to important

stakeholders to help create tangible changes in society. The next chapter focuses on how social media users engaged with content on their social media feeds.

7. HOW SOCIAL MEDIA USERS ENGAGE WITH CIVIC ISSUES ONLINE

In this chapter, we seek to understand how social media users engaged with civic issues publicly and privately. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the term “engagement” here refers to the ways in which social media users interacted with social media content. It also includes their actions and reactions in relation to the content they encountered online. The first section of this chapter provides an overview of how social media users sought information online while the second section delves deeper into how they interacted with these accounts and engaged with the content.

7.1. Youths follow friends, media outlets and government sources online

Youths typically relied on a wide array of sources ranging from their friends and family members to local and international media outlets to stay abreast on trending topics and events. They also sought information from these sources either via face-to-face interactions or by following their social media accounts, especially for media outlets. This enabled them to get information in a quick and timely manner.

7.1.1. Interpersonal networks

As anticipated, most social media users followed their friends more than any other groups on their social media accounts. Apart from providing personal life updates, friends also served as important information nodes in the online space. Many respondents shared how they were often directed to important issues and events

that they were previously unaware of, through their friends' social media reposts or sharing. Some also highlighted the importance of friends when it came to not just learning about new issues but also in carrying out in-depth discussions about them online.

> *"So that is how I know of all these social issues and so on. And if not, I have, like most of my friends. They also post and then we will have our own discussion and debates about the particular issues."* — ***Respondent 30, female, polytechnic student, social media user***

> *"In terms of local issues, I mostly get a lot of information on Twitter because, my mutuals would be liking a lot of discourses, [such as] racial discourses or academic discourses. That is why I am exposed to more perspectives and regarding our local issues."* — ***Respondent 17, female, university student, social media user***

7.1.2. Media outlets

When it came to news consumption, social media users followed legacy and non-legacy media outlets[43] on platforms like Facebook and subscribed to notifications from them via instant messaging platforms like Telegram. Through this, they could get timely information on important updates, for example, changes in social distancing measures during the pandemic.

[43] "Legacy media" refers to media sources which have an institutionalised or formalised structure. They are also often affiliated with powers of higher authorities such as the government and corporations (Chomsky, 1997; Soon & Goh, 2021). On the other hand, "non-legacy" media refers to those which have only a digital media presence.

> *"Recently it has been for COVID news because I actually use Mothership through Telegram Channel. So, it is kind of easy to keep track of the news and everything. It will send in a notification, then I will read it through the notification. If I am interested then I will click to see. So, the recent issue is like COVID and I kind of read it every day now, especially on the cases and [am] hoping that the dine-in will open soon" —* ***Respondent 12, male, working adult, social media user***

> *"For instance, recently in terms of engaging with these issues… I also subscribe to Mothership on Facebook, and I like reading the articles because for instance, for COVID, I will give you an example, the MOH briefing because I used to get that earlier at the WhatsApp notification for that." —* ***Respondent 14, male, working adult, social media user***

Many respondents felt it was important to read local legacy media sources such as *The Straits Times* and Channel NewsAsia. Nevertheless, some social media users also felt that local legacy media outlets sometimes did not sufficiently present specific individuals and issues. For example, Respondent 25, a male social media user studying in a polytechnic, described news from *The Straits Times* and Channel NewsAsia to be "tilted". To resolve what he perceived to be information gaps, respondents like him turned to alternative or non-legacy media sources to get a more comprehensive and balanced picture of a situation.

> *"Why I am interested in these issues is because I think like it is good to have alternative media sources to learn more about the underlying issues that are often, maybe not in the local media, like maybe* Straits Times *that*

they do not usually cover." — ***Respondent 18, female, university student, social media user***

"In Singapore, especially during the GE period, I actually checked a lot about what opposition politicians had to say, because I agree with some of the rest like [in] the mainstream media, that they may be painted in some way. So, I guess it is always best to have a look at what they actually say and then form a kind of balance opinion or a more credible opinion… instead of just taking it from one side or the other." — ***Respondent 21, male, university student, social media user***

Only a few respondents like Respondents 17 and 22 included foreign news outlets in their media diet — for example, *The New York Times*, *South China Morning Post*, BBC, *The Economist*, and the *National Geographic*. Overall, youths' news consumption habits indicated a keen interest in both local and international affairs, which are makings for an informed citizenry.

7.1.3. Government sources

Besides news outlets, some respondents also followed both local and international government sources and agencies. These included accounts of politicians, ministries, statutory boards and embassies. They followed such sources to know the governments' perspectives on key issues pertaining to international relations. Others also spoke about the importance of updating themselves with essential information that came from direct government sources. This was usually when seeking information on constantly evolving and volatile

events like the pandemic. Some also looked out for any announcements or calls for help put out on social media platforms like Twitter by government agencies such as the Singapore Police Force. This was so that they could contribute or offer assistance when needed.

> *"I follow some think tanks, embassies and certain government agencies and people inside it, but to get a perspective of what they have. Occasionally I also check out opposition politicians' pages and stuff like that to see what [are] the other views. I think two of the biggest I guess most prominent pages I follow are the US Embassy page and the Chinese Embassy page, and actually I do notice that they are very big on promoting their soft power on those websites."* — ***Respondent 21, male, university student, social media user***

> *"I also followed the Singapore Police Force Twitter account. So that I can see the updates on the new crimes, which is happening in Singapore. I get the updates of what kinds of crimes they are dealing with, and what are the accidents. Some of us may be a witness but we do not want to take action about [the crimes or accidents]. Like I can play a part also if maybe the accident I have witness before or something you know, so from there."* — ***Respondent 27, female, ITE student, social media user***

7.2. How social media users engaged with online content

The following section examines the different ways in which social media users engaged with content that they came across on their social media feed. These engagement activities were both passive and active in nature.

7.2.1. Being aware of civic discourses on online platforms

Some social media users, especially those who were already in the workforce, regarded the act of reading netizens' comments as a form of engagement with important issues. While some of them said that they read them for entertainment purposes, others also said that they saw netizens' comments as a way to help them better understand the public's views and sentiments on major events such as the rising cases of COVID-19 infections in Singapore, as seen from Respondent 14's quote. In a way, similar to some content creators, social media users were also engaging in their own forms of sentiment analysis by reading the views of others online, although in a more informal and passive way.

> *"So, I also like reading and sometimes also like not just for entertainment, but for out of curiosity as well. So, for instance, when we have been having single digit cases for a number of months, and then recently, they increased to double digits, so at that time also I was reading through comments to just also to see what people feel about this."* — ***Respondent 14, male, working adult, social media user***

> *"I am actually quite similar… I will read the comments and like try to see what other people viewpoints. But I also do take it offline like in a more*

private setting to discuss with my friend like 'Oh hey, did you see like this person comment on this?'" — ***Respondent 16, female, working adult, social media user***

7.2.2. Share and comment online on civic issues

Across all the FGD groups, social media users generally said that they engaged with important and relevant online content by reading and forwarding them to others who might be similarly interested in them as well. Our FGDs showed that different groups of social media users had different types of topics and issues, which they deemed interesting and important. For example, working adults mostly shared or forwarded latest updates on COVID-19 policies, information on housing and finance-related content to their friends and colleagues mainly on closed-messaging platforms like WhatsApp and Telegram. Other social media users, especially those who were still studying (e.g., in polytechnics and ITEs) shared a wide array of information, ranging from motivational quotes and stories to local and international crises.

Some social media users were very active in engaging with civic issues online. They showed a keen interest in not only disseminating content to others, but also in sharing their personal thoughts and opinions on such issues. Similar to content creators, these social media users believed in promoting meaningful discussions on civic issues by bringing to light diverse perspectives and views of others. As such, apart from simply liking or sharing social media content, these users would also write captions, post and share comments through the interactive features

available (e.g., quote tweet function on Twitter, comment function on Instagram). Others such as Respondent 19 also talked about the importance of not only sharing one's personal views on a topic but also being receptive in hearing what others have to say as well.

> *"So, my way of engaging is usually, I repost this story and also at the same time give opinion to it. So, it is a caption so it can be like a short caption or anything, but it depends on like how well am I… how well do I know about the issue."* — ***Respondent 30, female, polytechnic student, social media user***

> *"Yeah, of course I gave my inputs [on the BLM movement] on my Instagram story... I do engage, encourage open discussion like after I put my thoughts… and I strongly believe in constructive discussion for you to be open about it, for you to be when you talk about it, you must be genuinely be willing to accept criticism or feedback, in a way."* — ***Respondent 19, male, university student, social media user***

Although such social media users saw the importance of including their personal reflections when sharing civic content online, they also exercised caution when doing so. For example, Respondent 30, a female polytechnic student, said she would include her personal reflections in an online post only if she had some understanding on the particular issue or topic under discussion. This was because she did not feel it was appropriate to write something that could be "filled with factual errors". This was echoed by Respondent 29, a male polytechnic student who said that although he liked to talk about socio-political issues with

his friends, he preferred to only do so after gaining some awareness and understanding on such issues. Therefore, he would first find out more before sharing any content or opinions online. Similarly, Respondent 28, a male ITE student, also said he refrained from reposting or commenting online in case he unintentionally spread false information online, especially for topics or issues that he did not have much knowledge on. Hence, this suggests youths exercised some responsibility when discussing civic issues instead of jumping onto the bandwagon to discuss trending topics.

> *"I will definitely share the posts that I talk about… political or social issues to my friends because I want to share them, I want to talk about it with them. But when I repost on my story I do, I will only post it when like... [Respondent 30] said, like when I really know the issue. When I really understand it, because I do not want to be the type of person who posts and like not know it right?"* — ***Respondent 29, male, polytechnic student, social media user***

> *"Because if I don't have a strong knowledge on the subject, it may become false information and I may be misleading to other people as well. I think it is not really the best."* — ***Respondent 28, male, ITE student, social media user***

Some social media users also chose to engage with their friends and followers online by taking advantage of the interactive elements such as polls and quizzes found on social media platforms like Instagram. For example, Respondent 10, a

female working adult, shared how she would leverage Instagram's poll feature to conduct simple surveys in order to understand public reactions on certain topics.

7.2.3. Preference towards more intimate, closed-group, face-to-face discussions on civic issues

Besides public-facing online platforms, social media users also shared how they would turn to private, instant messaging platforms like WhatsApp and Telegram, as well as face-to-face conversations, for discussions with friends and family. This was primarily because they feared that engaging in public discussions may lead to online disagreements and backlash, especially if they were sharing unpopular or alternative views or sentiments on a topic. Hence, the climate of sensitivity in the social media space was a deterrent that limited their online engagement, making some hesitant and unwilling to post their comments online.

> *"I feel that if you are putting a different viewpoint on that particular post, you may get attacked sometimes. And yeah, and then it is just not nice to be putting out your views like that, so even if I have [a] strong opinion of what I think regarding the post, same thing as the rest, I will share personally, with my friends or family, instead of on the post."* — ***Respondent 8, female, working adult, social media user***

> *"So, I do not comment because to be honest I don't see the point behind it. Even if I have a valid point, I would not comment on social media because no two people can agree on anything on social media so even if I write something which I might think is an innocent comment, there will be*

> *20 other people who find it offensive in some way, or 20 other people who have a different viewpoint. So, then it just gets out of hand, it gets out of control." —* ***Respondent 14, male, working adult, social media user***

Similarly, Respondent 23 also mentioned how instead of openly engaging with civic issues on Instagram, he would take screenshots of interesting articles or content which he would privately forward to his friends and discuss. This was to avoid any "bad reaction" from people online.

> *"Personally, for me, I will just screenshot anything I see or forward the message from like Mothership or whatnot into my friends' Tele[gram] groups I have, or send it to individuals and then we just discuss about the matter ourselves. We don't take it to Instagram. I mean sometimes it explodes. It has quite a bad reaction and you don't know, you're just sharing your opinion and most people are open, but these kinds of things really do spread and people may take it wrongly." —* ***Respondent 23, male, university student, social media user***

Besides using instant messaging platforms, some respondents also preferred to send direct messages privately to their friends or people whom they were following on their social media accounts, if they particularly resonated with any of the content that was shared. This indicated their strategies in protecting their privacy even on public-facing social media platforms.

"Maybe I will reply them saying that 'this is what I thought as well' or something like that. But I would DM them, so it is not public." — ***Respondent 9, female, working adult, social media user***

"The discussion with my friends normally takes place when we reply to the stories or it is just like a normal [face-to-face] conversation that I sometimes bring upon with them." —***Respondent 30, female, polytechnic student, social media user***

Working adults expressed more caution and wariness over their digital footprint when compared with other FGD respondents who were still studying. This was because as employees, they had the additional pressure of having to preserve their image and reputation both offline and online, for fear of repercussions to their employment. This was especially so for those who were connected to their colleagues on social media platforms. Their every action, be it liking a political meme or changing their profile picture, can be visible to others in their professional network. Hence, they had to "think twice" when it came to publicly engaging with content pertaining to socio-political issues. This is evident from the following quotes.

"It is more of like, maybe for me the concern is more of a whether my viewpoint, my personal viewpoint, is it fair or is it appropriate for me to share, given that... because… I have colleagues in my friends' Facebook friends. So, they might think that I am leaning towards a kind of view… because I'm in the public service, it might not be so convenient for me to share all this information or my thoughts to be, in the public arena, online

public arena." — ***Respondent 9, female, working adult, social media user***

"For us, as a working adult, whatever you comment you got to think twice. What I do is usually I read. If I really need to discuss this, I will just take it offline and share on WhatsApp groups with my friends and we just talk in the WhatsApp group itself." — ***Respondent 11, male, working adult, social media user***

7.2.4. Organise and participate in physical events

For a small number of social media users, the knowledge and information gained online on key socio-political issues also inspired them to take offline actions that aimed to make a meaningful contribution to an on-going cause. For example, Respondent 27, a female ITE student, and her friends created stickers based on the hashtag #FreePalestine on social media and used the money collected to help Palestinians affected by the crisis.

"There is an issue outside Singapore called 'Free Palestine'… My friend came up with the idea of creating stickers of #Free Palestine to share awareness on it. So, the money that he collected was used as a fundraiser. So, we did it together as a group and we [are] still collecting these funds as there are still issues going on there." — ***Respondent 27, female, ITE student, social media user***

Similarly, Respondent 21, a male university student, shared how he organised a book club discussion as part of his co-curricular activity (CCA). The discussion

was based on the film, *Hidden Figures*, which focused on racism in the US. Through the film, which delved deep on the topic of racism in America, he tried to also discuss racism in Singapore's context.

> *"Last month, my group had this discussion which we did on Hidden Figures. So, I tried to bring attention to my readers about [the] history of racism in the US, and even some subtle points within the Hidden Figures movie itself. It highlights the achievements of these Black women at a time where most women were not employed, and when most Black people did not really have high education or couldn't be employed…. Yeah, during some of the discussions we also like try to bring it like, how does it relate to Singapore?"*
>
> — ***Respondent 21, male, university student, social media user***

Although such activities and events organised by social media users might be small in scale, they illustrate the influence social media platforms have in inspiring change and mobilising people to take action in the offline space.

8. CHALLENGES OF ENGAGING WITH CIVIC ISSUES ONLINE

As shown in the earlier chapters, social media plays a vital role in helping youths access information, share their knowledge and engage with a wide range of civic issues. At the same time, there are also some challenges that adversely affect people's online experiences.

8.1. Prevalence of "armchair critics"

While some social media users acknowledged the internet's potential in raising awareness on various issues in a quick and timely manner, they were sceptical about its possibility of creating tangible changes in society. They felt that a bulk of online activities were confined to simply just raising awareness on key issues, but not in creating actions to manage or solve them. For example, Respondent 20, a male university student, described social media as a space for "slacktivists" or "armchair critics" to show passive support for trending causes. While it provided the starting point for people to learn more about various causes, it did not require much commitment from users to follow-up or engage actively with the causes.

> *"I was just thinking when you raise awareness of an issue, then I think that is just the first step. But I do not think many people go to the next step where you do something like a call to action."* — ***Respondent 17, female, university student, social media user***
>
> *"The impact should not be overstated, which is that I think this is something that [Respondent 17] brought up earlier, which is that there tends to be a*

lot of unchecked criticism or armchair critics going on in social media and it is easy to be a slacktivist right? I mean the cost of being a slacktivist is way lower than to be a committed activist." — ***Respondent 20, male, university student, social media user***

8.2. Echo chambers and exclusion of certain demographics

Some youths, especially content creators, also recognised the limitations of social media due to echo chambers that limited the visibility of their content to a certain group — those who were already interested in the causes that the content creators advocated for. In addition, they also recognised that their interaction was mainly with younger audiences, specifically those under the age of 45 years old. This was because Instagram — a platform particularly popular among the younger demographic to create and share information — was their primary platform. Therefore, content creators found it challenging to reach out to the middle-aged and older segments of society.

*"For me, it is really important that it does not become an echo chamber, because I think that is a tendency to happen, especially on Instagram. You can see that the same people who are speaking up are also the same people who are sharing all of the posts. There is a fear that I have… that it never reaches the people who actually need to see this information, unless the people who are advocating for this are also talking about it in real life to their friends and family." —****Respondent 1, female, content creator (environmental Issues)***

"We do reach a lot of people who are 35 to 40 [years old], but I am not sure if we are reaching anyone who is older than that. I think that maybe people who are slightly older are usually more on Facebook, but that is not a space that we really want to get into, so yeah, I think if you want to look at the population or the age group that you are looking at then for sure, you are able to reach a huge young audience. But I am not sure about people who are much older." — ***Respondent 2, male, content creator (race issues)***

8.3. Threats and backlash

Some content creators also shared how social media could become a double-edged sword. To ensure that they reached a wide range of people, many content creators' accounts were public. Sometimes, they encountered negative responses and backlash, especially from those who held a different view or perspective on the issues discussed. During the FGD, content creators, especially those who focused on race issues, shared their experiences managing negative messages and comments by such detractors. For example, Respondent 4, a female content creator who discussed issues faced by queer Muslims on Instagram, spoke about the instances where her group's intentions were questioned by people. Similarly, Respondent 2, a male content creator who focused on race issues, had his posts being reported to the police by a netizen, forcing him to seek legal assistance.

"Every year, we have to battle all these [questions] like are you promoting the LGBT agenda in the Muslim community? So, I guess we get a little

negativity as well. So, we will try to… I don't think it is a step back, but to be very wary as well. But I am glad to see that it has not stopped us from putting the content that we are doing." — ***Respondent 4, female, content creator (Muslim women issues)***

"I think another challenge when you are online would be facing threats of people calling the police on you, it has happened to us twice. So, like trying to navigate that and also getting legal help, thankfully pro bono. Also understanding what your rights are and how you can go about continuing this." — ***Respondent 2, male, content creator (race issues)***

The backlash faced by some content creators had caused mental and emotional stress for them. Yet, like what Respondent 4 mentioned in the earlier quote, such challenges have not quelled their desire to raise awareness on what they felt were important issues in the Singapore society.

Some social media users also alluded to how public platforms allow for people's every move, such as liking, sharing and commenting on content, to be scrutinised and judged by others. They expressed fears over being publicly cancelled or "flamed" online if they provided any alternative views or deviated from mainstream beliefs and values. They were concerned that such public judgement may have negative repercussions on their future careers and interpersonal relations as reflected in the following quotes.

"I realise like some of them [people on social media] would be like why are you not posting this yet? Or say oh you ignore all these kinds of things. So,

it is quite harsh and can also cause people to feel a bit outcast. But they fail to understand that maybe these people do not feel comfortable to talk about it. Or maybe they are doing their own part outside, like [Respondent 27]. She mentioned that even she does not post often. But she is actually doing like a campaign. Like selling the stickers and so on." — ***Respondent 30, female, ITE student, social media user***

"A lot of my friends are very worried, that is why they will just keep to themselves because of the online social climate now. Whenever you post an opinion that is not the majority opinion, most of the time you will get backlash, especially online. It is very impactful, and it can even affect your job opportunities in the future." — ***Respondent 29, male, polytechnic student, social media user***

8.4. Biased discourse and misinformation

There was a prevailing sense of caution, hesitance and even fear among many social media users when it came to navigating social media platforms. Although they shared how social media raised their knowledge on myriad issues, many of them were also aware of how such content may be biased, malicious, fake or unverified — all of which could have adverse effects on individual and societal well-being. For example, Respondent 11, a male working adult, shared his concerns over falsehoods pertaining to the pandemic on social media. Similarly, Respondent 14, a male working adult, shared about how he felt that some non-legacy media sources like *The Independent Singapore* and *The Online Citizen* often carried racist and xenophobic tones in their reporting. He expressed worry

over how such reporting styles could influence readers to similarly adopt racist and xenophobic attitudes in their encounters with others.

> *"I have encountered articles, which are completely fake. So, especially during these COVID times. You know, so many articles and new[s] sites have been bashed because they did not verify their sources and they just published things without reviewing or doing proper background checks… So, without doing that [reviewing], you can pass on that information, and I've witnessed friends forwarding random things." —* ***Respondent 11, male, working adult, social media user***

> *"So, to give you an example, there are these two pages, one is IndependentSG, one is The Online Citizen. If you read the comments over there and just their style of reporting, I feel it's really, really bad because it's just... it's extremely xenophobic…, it does have a really negative impact on society because you are encouraging those feelings." —****Respondent 14, male, working adult, social media user***

To circumvent this problem, many social media users stressed the need to "not take things at face value" and to engage in independent research, fact-check and verify the information that they encounter especially on social media platforms.

> *"We need to be cognisant of what we see on social media, to fact-check as well and also have our own viewpoints and not just jump on the bandwagon." —* ***Respondent 18, female, university student, social media user***

> *"So, you have to understand that whatever you read online can never be taken at face value. You have to research and you have to take your own time and effort to look at other perspectives before you have your own opinion."* — ***Respondent 29, male, polytechnic student, social media user***

Other respondents, especially those who were still studying in universities, like Respondents 17 and 20, were also mindful of how digital and social media platforms operated, such as the ways in which algorithms curated information to readers, and the impact of echo chambers increasing people's confirmation biases. Hence, such prior knowledge made them more sensitive and cautious towards the online content that they read.

> *"I'm also wary like what some people have mentioned about skewed perspectives as well. So, we must always fact-check. We should always cross-check with other sites and read deeper into the issues before jumping to conclusions."* — ***Respondent 17, female, university student, social media user***

> *"I mean YouTube thrives off algorithms like these, right? The algorithm is decided, it's designed in such a way that we do engage with issues that are sufficiently polarizing to keep ourselves, to keep us engaged."* — ***Respondent 20, male, university student, social media user***

8.5. Heightened sensitivity over woke and cancel culture

As mentioned in the introduction (Chapter 1), the use of social media by youths to advocate for civic issues has come under scrutiny in recent years, particularly in terms of the impact of woke and cancel culture on society. The term “woke” which primarily revolves around the idea of being awakened to social unjust has often been used to describe youths who are vocal about sensitive topics and issues on social media (Chiu, 2019; Ong, 2021). Despite its origins being rooted in ideas of social justice, woke culture has received backlash in recent years, even from some youths themselves (Teoh, 2021; Wong, 2021), who see it as promoting bullying and harassment in the online space.

While youths from all FGDs mostly defined woke along the lines of being “awakened”, “aware” or “attentive” to various forms of social unjust happening around them (e.g., discrimination against racial and sexual minorities in Singapore), some provided a more action-oriented definition of woke culture. These include engaging in discussions on pertinent socio-political or environmental issues with friends and family, carrying out independent research on how problems like the poverty gap and inequality affected people as well as critically reflecting on one’s actions. Content creators and youths studying in universities and JCs displayed a greater understanding on the historical and political discourses surrounding the term, noting that the term “woke” originates from “African American vernacular English” (Respondent 2), and associated with “critical theory” (Respondent 21).

Given its orientation in social justice, some content creators and social media users felt that woke culture has helped to push certain “out of bounds” markers (OB markers), which they felt had been limiting public discussions on sensitive topics like race and religion. For example, Respondent 3, a male content creator who focused on socio-political issues, said that sensitive topics and issues in Singapore have traditionally been confined to closed-door discussions organised by the government. However, social media platforms have helped to move such discussions away from state-managed platforms, making them more inclusive in nature. Similarly, another content creator, Respondent 1, also shared how even politicians are now increasingly interacting with such civic content in order to build greater levels of interaction and understanding with the younger generation.

> *“I think from a historical perspective, one of the impacts I see would be the very noticeable erosion of the so-called OB markers that have defined the way that we speak about sensitive issues in Singapore. Things like race, religion, have always been seen as an OB marker, something that only certain qualified, invited, people are allowed to speak about behind closed doors. I think in the past few years, the discussion about race, religion has effectively demolished the OB markers.”* — ***Respondent 3, male, content creator (socio-political issues)***

> *“You can see, even a lot of politicians are like engaging with our content. It is a little bit intimidating, but you can see that increasingly, people in power are interested in what people have to say.”* — ***Respondent 1, female, content creator (environmental issues)***

Although the FGD respondents had a largely positive attitude towards the term "woke", many expressed discomfort when asked if they would like to be associated with woke culture. This was because they felt that the original meaning of the term woke has been lost in today's context. Content creators, in particular, were uncomfortable with the label because they felt that the term has been used to denigrate people perceived to be easily offended by sensitive issues. For example, Respondent 1, a female content creator who focused on environmental issues, said that she would "internally cringe" if someone called her "woke". Others like Respondents 2 and 5 felt that the term "woke" was now being used to "invalidate people" and their lived experiences as well as to stifle people's opinions. Similarly, a small number of social media users felt that youths' ability to create meaningful changes has been thwarted because of the ways in which terms like "woke" have been misused by people. For example, Respondent 21, a male university student, talked about how the term "woke" now has a "cultural baggage" attached to it and impedes youths' attempts to create any positive change in society.

Some respondents also alluded to how woke culture can amplify differences in society. As people often choose to support a particular stance or viewpoint, they expressed fears of its ability to cause greater levels of polarisation in society. When not handled carefully, such polarisations can lead to more intolerance, animosity and an unwillingness to accept criticisms in the online community.

> *"I think those are the things that I'm afraid of, those sensationalism, is something that I'm afraid of and because we're living in a post-truth world,*

> *I'm also afraid of like polarisation sometimes. I think it's very important for us to acknowledge where all of us stand on the political viewpoint, on social issues, environmental issues. It is so important. I'm afraid that we can't converse in a way that is very understanding of each other."* — ***Respondent 1, female, content creator (environmental issues)***

> *"Maybe and not, you know, people are taking different sides in terms of racism so there are people would say that it's right and it's wrong and it just divides people instead of uniting people."* — ***Respondent 8, female, working adult, social media user***

This chapter has highlighted the challenges of engaging with civic issues on social media, such as slacktivism, echo chambers, threats, misinformation, and the pros and cons of woke culture. Some of these challenges have nudged social media users to private communication platforms, such as instant messaging platforms. Nevertheless, in the face of challenges, some youths have also taken on the responsibility of fact-checking and conducting independent research before posting content online, which are commendable strategies for maintaining digital hygiene.

9. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the online youth civic engagement landscape in Singapore. The affordances of social media platforms, coupled with the conditions of the prolonged pandemic, has made the online space a fertile ground for youths to explore and experiment with digital advocacy. While traditional forms of civic engagement activities like volunteering and donating to social causes will continue to remain prevalent among youths in many societies, including that of Singapore, it is also important to pay close attention to the range of causes and types of engagement activities that youths are geared towards in the online space. As presented in the literature review, some traditional civic engagement activities may be exclusive and limited in nature for youths. More often than not, existing organisations tend to have a prescribed cause that they focus on, and have their own set of hierarchies and regulations. This means that youths have little say in key decision-making processes.

In contrast, owing to its low barriers of entry and accessibility, the online space provides youths with greater levels of agency and freedom to engage with new forms of civic issues and engagement activities. Therefore, it is likely that we will see the active growth of more online civic groups and movements on more social media platforms in the future. Some of these causes may already be attuned to the government's areas of focus (e.g., reducing income inequality, maintaining racial and religious harmony, improving the welfare of migrant workers) while others may be more complex and controversial in nature. Despite the challenges

in reaching a middle ground for some of these causes, it is important to effectively engage youths in productive discussions on such causes.

Overall, this study found that youths in Singapore have a strong desire to advocate for marginalised communities and issues. Their skilful use of social media, coupled with their offline engagement strategies, have enabled them to make contributions to the society. This study reinforces the need for the government to continue with existing efforts in engaging youths, such as through networking and dialogue sessions especially when discussing sensitive issues like race and religion. However, the study also highlighted that youths today are no longer just interested in identifying problems and relying on external stakeholders like the government to come up with timely solutions. Instead, many of them have taken on the responsibility of carefully researching the problems, solutions and shortcomings of such solutions. In addition, some youths are also increasingly interested in co-creating solutions with relevant stakeholders when possible.

The findings from this study have implications for existing engagement efforts with youths. From our analysis, we have identified that the perceived lack of safe, inclusive and meaningful spaces for youths to speak freely, especially for those from marginalised backgrounds, was a top concern among many. Other common problems highlighted by youths included dealing with a hostile online climate — especially when discussing sensitive topics like discrimination, fears over their physical safety and mental well-being, and repercussions on future employment opportunities. The following set of recommendations focuses on improving

existing communication and feedback platforms available for youths, equipping youth content creators and social media users with the skills needed to navigate the social media space, and improving relations between the government and youths wanting to engage in sensitive topics.

9.1. Expand current conversations on "non-traditional" or "non-conventional" causes

Currently, the government offers a plethora of volunteering opportunities for youths interested in various community-related causes. These efforts are largely spearheaded by government agencies like the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY) and the National Youth Council (NYC). Since their inception, these institutions have been actively involved in designing programmes to help promote service learning through workshops, build necessary knowledge and skills among youths to conduct ground-up projects as well as network with other like-minded youths interested in similar causes. For example, NYC's Youth Corps Singapore, which was launched in 2014, has provided over 20,000 local and overseas-based volunteering opportunities for youths so far (Youth Corps Singapore, n.d.). Similarly, other programmes such as the Youth Expedition Project (YEP)[44], National Youth Fund[45] and the National ChangeMakers Grant[46] also offer extensive financial and mentorship support for youths wanting to initiate

[44] The Youth Expedition Project (YEP) is a service-learning programme by Youth Corps Singapore that seeks to encourage youths to make a difference both at home and overseas. The YEP involves communities in Asia, with a focus on the ASEAN region, China and India

[45] The National Youth Fund (NYF) aims to support ground-up initiatives and efforts that champion community and social causes through partnerships with Youth Sector Organisations.

[46] The Young ChangeMakers (YCM) is a youth programme that aims to encourage and empower young social innovators in the grant making process and support other youths to take action to benefit the Singapore community and society.

local and overseas-based community projects.

Such initiatives are certainly steps in the right direction, as the online posts we have collected were found to be driven by values such as self-direction and benevolence, meaning that content creators were driven by the desire to uplift the well-being of people around them through their independent efforts. Nevertheless, findings from our study showed that youths are increasingly not just interested in traditional community initiatives that focus on more "straightforward" or "mainstream" causes, which many of NYC's events already support. In addition, they are increasingly interested in engaging with more sensitive topics and issues involving fringe groups, such as migrant workers' welfare, gender equality and the acceptance of same-sex relationships and marriages.

Given how some of these issues are complex in nature, it may be extremely challenging to discuss them publicly. The government is perceived by some youths as being quick to dismiss those who show a desire to engage with such issues, especially those that are associated with culture wars (i.e., cultural conflicts arising from opposing views and perspectives) from some Western countries (Ang, 2021). However, there should be continual efforts to understand alternative perspectives and engage these groups, especially those on the fringes, in existing conversation and dialogue series as some of their perspectives can value-add to existing discussions. Moreover, given the rapidly changing socio-political climate, issues not as pertinent today may become more pressing in the future. For example, environmental issues did not receive much attention

a few years ago. However, today, the government has been actively allocating various resources and funds to promote sustainability in various sectors and industries. Similarly, the living and working conditions of migrant workers in Singapore have been heavily scrutinised by activists and civil society organisations like TWC2 long before the pandemic. However, it was only during the height of the pandemic when many civic groups, including those led by youths themselves, banded online together with various NGOs to put pressure on the government to improve the living conditions of migrant workers. During the pandemic, more people have participated in the online “Humans Aren’t Cargo” movement to highlight the unsafe conditions in which workers are transported between their dormitories and workplaces in lorries.

The government can rethink its existing youth networks and programmes to better engage with such youths wishing to engage more with “non-traditional causes”. This can be done by inviting more youth content creators and groups to closed-door discussions or public events to learn more about their perspectives. It may not be easy to find a middle ground between youths and existing policies designed to safeguard the interest of the wider community when discussing such topics. Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, conversations and civic activities (e.g., fundraising) pertaining to such issues will not only continue to become more prevalent online, but more urgent in the future. Therefore, the government should look for ways to work amicably with youths to achieve desirable outcomes in society.

9.2. Leverage content creators as trusted intermediaries

In recent years, the government has adopted a more consultative approach when engaging citizens in Singapore. More citizens now have opportunities to express their frank opinions on certain social issues and national policies. Such feedback-gathering have taken place through avenues like Citizens' Panels, community dialogue sessions initiated by civic groups and organisations like the government's Emerging Stronger Together conversation series and the upcoming Forward Singapore exercise (Goh 2019; Sin, 2020; Goh 2022). During the pandemic, many of these conversations have taken place virtually, which have allowed more people to participate in them as compared with a physical setting. To ensure that youth voices are also captured in these sessions, agencies like the NYC and MCCY have also organised programmes such as the SG Youth Action Plan in 2019 where a total of six face-to-face discussions involving 377 youths were carried out to better understand youth's vision for 2025 (Government of the Republic of Singapore, 2020). In these sessions, youths worked together in groups on key problems that they were concerned about and proposed feasible solutions to tackle them. Similarly, in July 2021, the National Environment Agency (NEA) launched the *NEA Youth for Environmental Sustainability* programme in partnership with NYC's youth corps to support youths interested in sustainability issues (National Environment Agency, 2021).

Although such programmes are extremely important in giving youths a space to voice their concerns and aspirations, our FGD findings suggested that they may only be reaching out to certain segments of the youth population. In addition, we also found that young working adults were less keen on engaging with civic

issues publicly or participating in government-initiated conversations. This is because they felt that such conversations did not provide them with adequate privacy and anonymity. They feared that sharing their views publicly during such government-initiated conversations might adversely affect their careers, especially when engaging with sensitive issues. Therefore, some youths preferred to express their opinions to youth content creators or their interpersonal networks (e.g., friends), such as through Instagram polls, Clubhouse discussions and online forums.

As such, more can be done to leverage youth content creators as trusted intermediaries to connect policymakers with the online youth community. This can be done by forming collaborations with influential content creators and conducting deeper and more frequent ground sensing through them. For example, several MPs have been guests on content creator Joel Lim's Instagram series ("Political Prude") where they discussed topics ranging from mental health to the criminal justice system.[47] Such efforts need to continue on emerging platforms like TikTok, Instagram and even Discord. Moreover, there is also a need to widen the scope of discussion to cover sensitive issues (e.g., race and religion), as these are issues that youths are concerned about. Existing dialogue sessions could also be modified to allow youth content creators have a greater role in leading and moderating such discussions. Reducing the presence of government-affiliated members on panels can provide a greater incentive for

[47] See https://www.instagram.com/limxjoel/ for details.

working adults to be more involved in such discussions, making the civic engagement landscape in Singapore more inclusive in nature.

Currently, there are also some feedback channels run by agencies such as REACH Singapore, which utilise closed-messaging platforms like WhatsApp for outreach. However, interested users must complete a form where they have to provide their personal particulars such as their names, last four digits of their NRIC number and occupation, which can be a major deterrent for many (REACH, n.d.). Moreover, they also have to consent to REACH's extensive list of terms of use before they can join the group. The lengthy registration process, coupled with the need to provide the government with personal particulars, is likely to act as a deterrent for many youths, especially working adults who fear repercussions on their employment. As such, the government can consider developing more anonymous feedback channels, such as through group feedback sessions via content creators of social issues, which would provide a safe space for youths.

9.3. Equip youths with civic engagement techniques

As seen from the findings of our study, youths in Singapore choose to speak about causes close to their hearts on social media platforms, mainly Instagram, because of its wide reach and appeal. However, not all youths may possess the same level of knowledge and skills on how to meaningfully engage their followers on such social media platforms, much less on the ground. Moreover, as social media platforms become increasingly cluttered with copious amounts of content, some youths may find it challenging to keep up with them. Therefore, it is

important to provide them with adequate knowledge on how to effectively use such platforms and engage with social issues online and offline. This can be done by collaborating with popular platforms like TikTok and Instagram to run various courses on these aspects. For example, in May 2021, TikTok launched its Youths for Good initiative in collaboration with the MCCY, NYC and MOE. Involving 160 young content creators, the programme equipped them with video production skills using TikTok to raise awareness on mental health issues in Singapore (Ng, 2021). Other initiatives putting youths at the forefront of community initiatives include the Interact Club of Sembawang, which was set up in June 2022 to provide mental health support for youths, amongst other initiatives (Yong, 2022).

Similarly, more workshops and courses can be conducted with content creators focusing on popular issues such as race and religion, the environment, and other socio-political issues. Our FGDs showed that many content creators and social media users were especially interested in discussing race issues with people around them. This is possibly because the pandemic has further amplified and brought to light instances of racist and xenophobic events to the public. As mentioned earlier, such discussions on race and religion are not always easy to carry out. Immense attention and care are needed to ensure that people who engage in these conversations put aside their stereotypes before engaging with others. In addition, there is also potential for such conversations to turn sour or cause misunderstandings. With social media making it easier for people to call out racism, one can no longer avoid having difficult conversations about race. Hence, it is time for the government to expand existing education programmes to

cover meaningful and productive online civic engagement. This can be done by working closely with experienced facilitators, mediators and experts who are part of existing movements and organisations that promote social harmony in Singapore, such as OnePeople.sg[48] and hash.peace.[49] Apart from effective engagement strategies and knowledge on the different platform features, youths should also be taught about challenges arising from social media use, such as trolls, criticisms, and content creator burnout.

9.4. Expand school programmes on digital literacy and community engagement

Many social media users across our FGDs stayed away from public discussions online due to their fears over being "cancelled" or "flamed, especially when commenting on sensitive issues. However, some youths might still view "calling people out" as a way to hold people accountable for their actions. For example, in October 2021, the co-founder of Night Owl Cinematics (NOC) Sylvia Chan was called out online for creating a toxic work culture (Lee, 2021). However, this led to an online boycott of NOC. The controversy also led to more debates on how "naming and shaming" people online pave way for cyber harassment, which affect people's mental health and well-being. Today, many still have different opinions on how and whether to "call out" or "call in" people who display socially inappropriate behaviours (Choo, 2022).

[48] OnePeople.sg was established in 1997 to promote racial harmony and social cohesiveness through various community programmes and initiatives in Singapore.
[49] hash.peace is a youth advocacy movement established in 2015 to promote greater social harmony in Singapore.

It is important to educate youths on what it means to seek accountability through other ways such as communicating directly with relevant stakeholders (e.g., ministers, professional bodies like the Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices to carry out investigations), instead of launching vicious attacks on social media pages of individuals and organisations. In recent years, the government has explored new ways to help students navigate the cyberspace in a safe and conducive manner. For example, under MOE's Cyber Wellness in Character and Citizenship Education curriculum, students in all primary and secondary schools as well as Junior Colleges and Millennia Institute are taught about topics such as cyber use, cyber identity, cyber relations, cyber citizenship, and cyber ethics (Ang, 2022). In 2021, the MOE also expanded its CCE programme to account for the changing social media environment, such as the rise of influencers, bullying and cancel culture. The revised curriculum aims to build more resilience and empathy among students as well as strengthen their competency to navigate the digital space safely (Ang, 2022).

Such efforts must be continually developed to take into account of the evolving media landscape. However, there should also be more efforts to expand these programmes to youths who have already left the education system. This can be done by including more public messaging and advertisements on the television, radio and electronic noticeboards that are found in the lifts of many public housing estates. In addition, as mentioned earlier, content creators can also be effectively used to disseminate important digital literacy guides (e.g., managing cyberbullying, types of online harms and repercussions, how to respond to disagreements respectfully).

Besides digital literacy programmes, schools can also educate their students on online civic engagement through the Values in Action (VIA) programme. Previously known as the Community Involvement Programme (CIP), it is offered by all primary and secondary schools, as well as junior colleges and the Millennia Institute. The current rendition of the programme places a larger emphasis on the inculcation of desired values among students on top of physical outreach and community involvement (Ang, 2018). Through the curriculum, students learn about community needs and design targeted initiatives that can be subsequently implemented. Examples include organising charity events and day camps for student care centres (Lim, 2017). As our content analysis has shown, many social issues explored in the online domain revolved around community issues. Therefore, the VIA programme can be an opportunity to introduce students to social issues commonly discussed online. See Table 12 below for a summary of the recommendations proposed.

Table 12: Summary of recommendations proposed

No.	Recommendation	Key points under recommendation
1.	Create more inclusive civic engagement platforms for youths wanting to engage in “non-traditional” or “non-conventional” causes.	• Expand government-affiliated civic engagement programmes and activities to include difficult, contentious, and controversial issues. • Invite more youth content creators and groups to participate in closed-door discussions and public events.
2.	Leverage youth content creators to act as trusted intermediaries.	• Expand collaborations and partnerships with influential youth content creators to lead discussions.

		• Leverage content creators to understand the online public sentiments and also to ensure the privacy and anonymity of concerned youths.
3.	Equip youths with techniques for content creation on civic issues.	• Offer training and workshops for youth content creators who wish to discuss civic issues in a meaningful and productive way on social media platforms. • Forge partnerships with social media companies, mediators, facilitators, and experts to offer mentorship and guidance to youths on the ways to discuss difficult topics online respectfully and constructively.
4.	Expand school programmes on digital literacy and community engagement.	• Expand existing media literacy curriculum in schools to talk about evolving social trends such as cancel culture. • Impart students with the necessary skills and knowledge on the alternatives to cancelling people and organisations online which may have contributed to certain on-going issues. • Incorporate such information in public messaging and advertisements to also educate youths who may have already left their schools. • Expand the scope of the Values in Action (VIA) programme in schools to include newer causes (e.g., gender

		empowerment, migrant worker welfare, mental well-being) that youths are increasingly interested in. • Ensure that such relevant knowledge and soft skills are also being taught to youths who have left schools or are already in the working force through effective public messaging and collaborations with content creators.

In conclusion, it is evident that the key towards building a strong and healthy online civic engagement landscape in Singapore is by working with both youth content creators who focus on civic issues in Singapore and social media users who engage with such content. Findings from our study have shown how content creators are important players in gathering public sentiments that might be overlooked in official government engagement efforts. While they may initiate uncomfortable conversations and engagement on certain topics and issues, many of these content creators are solution-oriented individuals whose primary objectives revolve around raising greater awareness and seeking viable solutions to social issues. On the other hand, social media users should be reassured of their privacy and taught digital hygiene practices that will allow them to participate in advocacy in a constructive manner. Moving forward, youth actors and policymakers need to work together to create a stronger civic engagement landscape in Singapore that is inclusive, meaningful and effective in fostering positive changes in both online and offline spaces.

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APPENDIX

Appendix 1: Profile of FGD respondents in Phase Two (FGDs)

Respondent no.	Gender	Highest education level	Ethnicity	Housing type	Area of expertise (only applicable to content creators)
FGD 1: Content Creators					
R1	Female	Polytechnic Diploma	Chinese	HDB 4 – 5 Room Flat or Executive Apartment	Environmental issues
R2	Male	Undergraduate Degree	Indian	HDB 4 – 5 Room Flat or Executive Apartment	Race issues
R3	Male	Undergraduate Degree	Indian	HDB 4 – 5 Room Flat or Executive Apartment	Socio-political
R4	Female	Postgraduate Degree	Malay	HDB 4 – 5 Room Flat or Executive Apartment	Muslim women issues
R5	Male	Postgraduate Degree	Chinese	HDB 4 – 5 Room Flat or Executive Apartment	Socio-political issues

R6	Male	Undergraduate Degree	Indian	HDB 4 – 5 Room Flat or Executive Apartment	Race issues
R7	Male	Undergraduate Degree	Chinese	HDB 1 – 3 Room Flat	Socio-political issues
FGD 2: Social Media Users (Working adults)					
R8	Female	Postgraduate Degree	Chinese	HDB 1 – 3 Room Flat	
R9	Female	Undergraduate Degree	Chinese	HDB 4 – 5 Room Flat or Executive Apartment	
R10	Female	Polytechnic Diploma	Chinese	HDB 4 – 5 Room Flat or Executive Apartment	
R11	Male	Polytechnic Diploma	Chinese	HDB 4 – 5 Room Flat or Executive Apartment	
R12	Male	Polytechnic Diploma	Chinese	HDB 4 – 5 Room Flat or Executive Apartment	
R13	Female	Nitec / Higher Nitec	Chinese	HDB 4 – 5 Room Flat or Executive Apartment	
R14	Male	Postgraduate Degree	Indian	Private Housing	

				(Condominium, Landed property)	
R15	Female	Postgraduate Degree	Indian	Private Housing (Condominium, Landed property)	
R16	Female	Undergraduate Degree	Indian	HDB 4 – 5 Room Flat or Executive Apartment	
FGD 3: Social Media Users (University and JC students)					
R17	Female	Undergraduate Degree	Indian	HDB 1 – 3 Room Flat	
R18	Female	Undergraduate Degree	Chinese	HDB 1 – 3 Room Flat	
R19	Male	Undergraduate Degree	Malay	HDB 4 – 5 Room Flat or Executive Apartment	
R20	Male	Undergraduate Degree	Chinese	Private Housing (Condominium, Landed property)	
R21	Male	Undergraduate Degree	Chinese	Private Housing (Condominium, Landed property)	

R22	Female	GCE 'A' Levels	Chinese	HDB 4 – 5 Room Flat or Executive Apartment	
R23	Male	Undergraduate Degree	Indian	HDB 4 – 5 Room Flat or Executive Apartment	
RGD 4: Social Media Users (Polytechnic and ITE students)					
R24	Female	Polytechnic Diploma	Chinese	HDB 4 – 5 Room Flat or Executive Apartment	
R25	Male	Polytechnic Diploma	Chinese	HDB 4 – 5 Room Flat or Executive Apartment	
R26	Female	Polytechnic Diploma	Chinese	HDB 4 – 5 Room Flat or Executive Apartment	
R27	Female	Nitec/Higher Nitec	Malay	HDB 4 – 5 Room Flat or Executive Apartment	
R28	Male	Nitec/Higher Nitec	Chinese	HDB 4 – 5 Room Flat or Executive Apartment	
R29	Male	Polytechnic Diploma	Malay	HDB 4 – 5 Room Flat or	

				Executive Apartment	
R30	Female	Polytechnic Diploma	Malay	Private Housing (Condominium, Landed property)	
R31	Male	Nitec/Higher Nitec	Malay	HDB 4 – 5 Room Flat or Executive Apartment	

Appendix 2: Binary logistic regression modelling the effects of issue

Type and presence of call for action

Figure A: Odds ratios of binary logistic regression model on effects of issue type on presence of any calls for action

Variables	**Model*** **
Community	1.547
Environmental	**2.233***
Gender & Sexuality	1.475
Jobs & Finance	**2.841***
Mental Health	**3.587****
Politics & Governance	1.199
Race & Religion	0.602
Others	**2.294***
Intercept	0.855
N size	418
Nagelkerke R Square	0.091
Degrees of freedom	8
Chi-square	29.270
Note: *p < .05. **p< .01. ***p< .001	

Figure B: Odds ratios of binary logistic regression model on effects of issue type on call to adopt new practices

Variables	**Model****
Community	1.212
Environmental	**2.130***
Gender & Sexuality	1.274
Jobs & Finance	**2.648***
Mental Health	**2.820****
Politics & Governance	0.589
Race & Religion	0.962
Others	1.839
Intercept	**0.283*****
N size	418
Nagelkerke R Square	0.078
Degrees of freedom	8
Chi-square	23.533
Note: *p < .05. **p< .01. ***p< .001	

Figure C: Odds ratios of binary logistic regression model on effects of issue type on call to join an event

Variables	**Model***
Community	1.753
Environmental	**4.658****
Gender & Sexuality	2.155
Jobs & Finance	1.703
Mental Health	**4.471****
Politics & Governance	0.892
Race & Religion	0.675
Others	1.847
Intercept	**0.032*****
N size	418
Nagelkerke R Square	0.088
Degrees of freedom	8
Chi-square	15.955
Note: *p < .05. **p< .01. ***p< .001	

Figure D: Odds ratios of binary logistic regression model on effects of issue type on call to volunteer or donate

Variables	**Model****
Community	**6.799*****
Environmental	3.015
Gender & Sexuality	0.677
Jobs & Finance	1.160
Mental Health	1.173
Politics & Governance	1.203
Race & Religion	0.971
Others	0.000
Intercept	**0.017*****
N size	418
Nagelkerke R Square	0.156
Degrees of freedom	8
Chi-square	22.007
Note: *p < .05. **p< .01. ***p< .001	

Figure E: Odds ratios of binary logistic regression model on effects of issue type on call to write to MP

Variables	**Model*** **
Community	1.380
Environmental	**6.338***
Gender & Sexuality	1.602
Jobs & Finance	1.532
Mental Health	4.029
Politics & Governance	**17.458****
Race & Religion	0.000
Others	0.000
Intercept	**0.004****
N size	418
Nagelkerke R Square	0.283
Degrees of freedom	8
Chi-square	31.165
Note: *p < .05. **p< .01. ***p< .001	

Appendix 3: About the authors

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