

Youth Artivism: Exploring an International Magazine at the Frontiers of Art and Activism

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Abstract

The issues regarding youth empowerment have risen to international pertinence as youth voter turnout rates and civic engagement reach an all-time low worldwide. This paper first examines possible solutions to low civic engagement across the globe by reviewing the literature concerning this topic, then closely documents the development of a youth-led initiative to empower youth through creative expression. The paper subsequently discusses this project's outcomes and proposes a solution that combats the issues at the core of this issue. This project and the initiative's internal structure were modeled off of other literary magazines that work towards amplifying the voices of youth worldwide. Results imply that humanities-based efforts to drive civic engagement and empower youth voices may instill a sense of importance amongst the youth, as extrapolated through qualitative research methods. Efforts to expand and replicate this project are ongoing, as evidenced by the addition of the magazine's blog and collaborations with other literary magazines. This study contributes to understanding the constructs and solutions linked to youth empowerment and high civic engagement.

Keywords: Youth empowerment, voter turnout, youth activism

Introduction

Decreasing civic engagement rates amongst the youth pose an issue in our increasingly democratic world, as displayed by Japan's most recent Upper House election. This election not only exposes the dark future of Japan's democracy—with teen voter turnout at 31% (Kyodo, 2019)—but also necessitates the need for a quick, actionable solution to mend the fragmented social fabric of Japan's youth. After all, it begs whether Japan can even be considered a democracy with disaffected voters consisting of the majority of the population. Below is a review of the solutions regarding the above topics.

Possible Solutions

At the crux of this issue today is the lack of youth empowerment, as many studies support (Symonds, 2020). As noted by Alexandria Symonds of The New York Times (2020), one possible solution may be to provide the youth with the information necessary to vote and register. In our digitalized age, this usually comes in the form of massive social media campaigns to increase youth voter turnout; in fact, it was reported that Vote.org received over 200,000 new voter registrations nationwide following Taylor Swift's call to action during the US 2018 mid-terms (Youngs & Rumble, 2018). That being said, it has been noted that celebrity-driven efforts are usually futile (Holbein & Hillygus, 2020). Others, such as

Silatech CEO Sabah Al-Haidoos, state that the youth must be treated with humility (2018) to instill a sense of importance in them. Other proposed solutions include encouraging youths to follow their passions and to emphasize that their political voices matter. Exactly how this translates into concrete votes is left unsaid.

The Present Initiative

There were several flaws to the aforementioned solutions, especially framed within the context of the pandemic. For one, many physical barriers are present in these plans, as they require face-to-face interactions and large gatherings. In addition, many perpetrate messages that are good in intent but are arbitrary and do not offer concrete, actionable steps. Therefore, the initiative's goals are three-pronged:

1. To empower youth through creative expression (includes visual art, literature, music, multimedia) in a way that is accessible
2. Provide a safe space for young artists and creatives, particularly from BIPOC populations
3. Amplify secondary headlines that do not meet the thresholds of what is generally viewed as "breaking news" but hold the same significance

Every one of these three organizational objectives has normative underpinnings; youth empowerment may lead to higher interest in political affairs, and the inclusion of marginalized communities may break many barriers that disincentivize the youth from voting. Finally, amplifying lesser-heard headlines may raise awareness about a broader range of issues around the world and aid the youth in becoming global citizens.

Methodology

Design

To increase rates of youth civic participation through creative expression, the project at hand aims to lie at the intersection of literature and politics and is branded as a magazine that amplifies the youth's political

voices. Though its organizational structure was modeled off of traditional publishing companies' hierarchy ("Organizational," 2018), the magazine promotes values of egalitarianism and meritocracy simultaneously, offering opportunities for promotion and enabling access to essential documents to many if not all of its staff members. This, combined with much transparency regarding the magazine's activities and a largely team-based structure (Quain, 2019), the magazine strived to promote a healthy psychosocial work environment ("Healthy," 2017). As evidenced by several studies, one can reap both neurological and social benefits if in an environment where a team-based model—as well as a high level of transparency—is promoted (Martirosov & Moser, 2020; (Riverin, Li, Naimi & Strumpf, 2017; Whitfield & Michele, 1996). That being said, it is noteworthy to state that these studies outline scenarios in the traditional 9 to 5 workplace as well as in primary care—in which case the magazine's success with these models may not be as easily translated.

Participants

First founded by a group of three high school freshmen in October of 2020, the magazine's staff has since expanded to nearly 20 on its editorial team, all from different academic institutions and cities worldwide. Recruitment for its outreach team is ongoing, and three members sit on its executive board. The staff primarily consists of those in the 13-19 demographic—this was intentionally done to foster a tightly-knit work environment that promoted relationship closeness, which was found to correlate with age (Ketchell, 2018; Nikitin & Freund, 2017). Efforts to promote diversity are also made, yet are not the deciding factor in hiring a staff member. As displayed by decades-long research on diversity, this component is key to improving productivity, enhancing social responsibility, and fostering a tight-knit workplace (Wentling & Palma-Rivas, 1998). Therefore, workplace diversity was almost a given, though its extent was somewhat amorphous at the beginning. Clearly stated on the magazine's Editor Application Form (Appendix A) reads the following:

"Please note that we do not discriminate on the basis of race, sex, gender, or sexual orientation. Though we do look at each applicant's past experiences and resume, these materials simply help us make a better-informed decision. What is most important to us is the amount of passion and commitment that is conveyed through your responses to the short-answer questions."

As evidenced by the passage above (included in the application form), the magazines put a greater emphasis on each individual's commitment to the missions and goals of the initiative, instead of where the applicant fell on the broad spectrum of demography and race. Though the goal of diversity may be apparent in the magazine's internal structure, perhaps what is more noticeable is the value of equality and merit-based success.

Materials

Working in a primarily online environment, the founding team—which consisted of 3 members all from different corners of the world—met once every two weeks for a 45-60 minute meeting to discuss critical internal affairs, as well as strategize about the magazine's outreach efforts on social media. Google Meet, a video-communication service, was employed throughout all the team's meetings. Efforts to increase the team's access to content such as daily planners and presentation slides were also made; as identified by the Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks, this is one component that is crucial in improving engagement and productivity in online environments (Meyer & McNeal, 2011). Contact with other staff members was made via email and a Discord server, a community-based instant messaging platform.

Efforts to experiment and interact with various organizational tools such as Notion and Slack were made. Yet, the team remains heavily reliant on the Google Cloud Platform as of February of 2021. More specifically, Google Forms, Spreadsheets, and Mail are most often

used for collaboration and communication. Issues that were commonly identified by the staff members regarding platforms other than that of the Google Cloud were the lack of instant communication as well as the high learning curve. The website was built on Wix, which offered web development services such as a website template and an SEO expert. Tools to measure visitor retention and traffic by location were also provided, which gave the team insight into which outreach campaigns were effective. The first issue of the magazine, hosted on Yumpu, a web-publishing service, was also promoted on the following platforms before and after the launch of its first issue: Instagram, LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter. Accompanied by engaging graphics and captions, the outreach team strived to drive engagement and discussion surrounding the magazine, whose benefits are evidenced by a plethora of studies (Dessart, 2017; Erdoğan & Çiçek (2012); Smith & Gallicano).

Recruitment

Contrary to most young initiatives' recruitment process, recruitment was purely based on an individual's interest in the magazine. A social media campaign was conducted to spread the news of the open positions. Applicants were administered an online application that consisted of the following: 1) 9 items that gaged the experience and commitment level of each applicant, 2) A mandatory sample of one's work, and 3) an optional space to place their resume. The team was also cognizant that younger applicants may not necessarily have constructed a resume yet and therefore put little emphasis on this aspect of the application.

Following a staff member's acceptance to the magazine, additional instructions, along with a sheet listing specific roles and responsibilities, were emailed to them.

Implementation

Overview of The Global Youth Review

As the name implies, the Global Youth Review is an international literary and arts magazine that strives to amplify traditionally marginalized voices in literature and art and seeks to empower youth through creative expression. Branded as a magazine for the youth and by the youth, it remains active on nearly all popular social media platforms, perhaps with its Twitter handle being the most active. Currently read in over 350 cities in 50 countries (Figure 1), its readership reached over 13,700 nearly two months after the release of its first issue. Though it is unclear what exactly skyrocketed the magazine into the literary community, it is definitive that the conglomeration of many variables fused to create a massive readership in just a couple of months. Below is an examination of 2 variables that may have contributed to *The Global Youth Review's* international success.

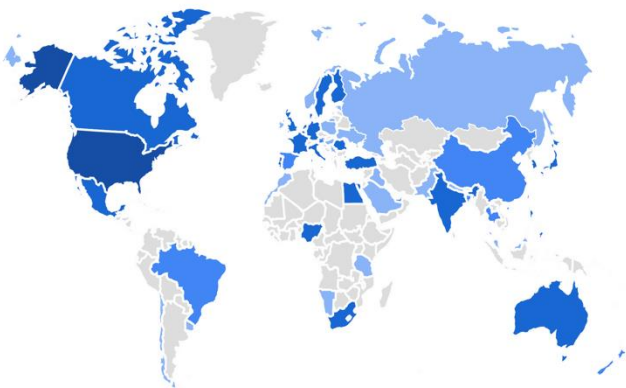


FIGURE 1. A display of the various countries where the magazine is read. Color intensity indicates more readers.

The Underlying Philosophy

The magazine's appeal may have been birthed from its core philosophy of amplifying youth voices. As stated continuously throughout its promotional materials, *The Global Youth Review* views words and art as a powerful tool one can utilize to amplify their voices and bridge cross-cultural divides amongst people. Celebrating excellence in writing and art, the magazine seeks to display the very voices that will drive our generation forward and empower these individuals through creative expression. As stated on its website, *The Global Youth Review's* founding date closely follows the apex of the riots and protests against the proliferation of white supremacy and racism for a reason:

"Inspired by the unrest in cities caused by the spread of hegemonic narratives, we young individuals decided to found a literary magazine to uplift intersectional voices and spread cultural awareness. Using words as a vehicle with which we unify and empower young voices, our mission is to combat divisive narratives and bridge cultures, people, and ideas together."

Riding the wave of the #BlackLivesMatter protests, which rose to international prominence in June of 2020 (Taylor, 2021). conversations surrounding *The Global Youth Review* may have emerged out of the heightened awareness of race-related matters around the globe.

The Editorial Process

Another factor that may have fostered the magazine's worldwide growth may be its prioritizing of strong writer-editor and editor-editor relationships. The main goal underlies the editorial department is to establish a strong connection between our submitters and our editors. Fig. 2 is an example of the structure the team has adopted in order to maintain a strong relationship between its contributors and editors. Through the addition of free, personalized feedback and an average response rate of three weeks, the magazine places a strong emphasis on the connection

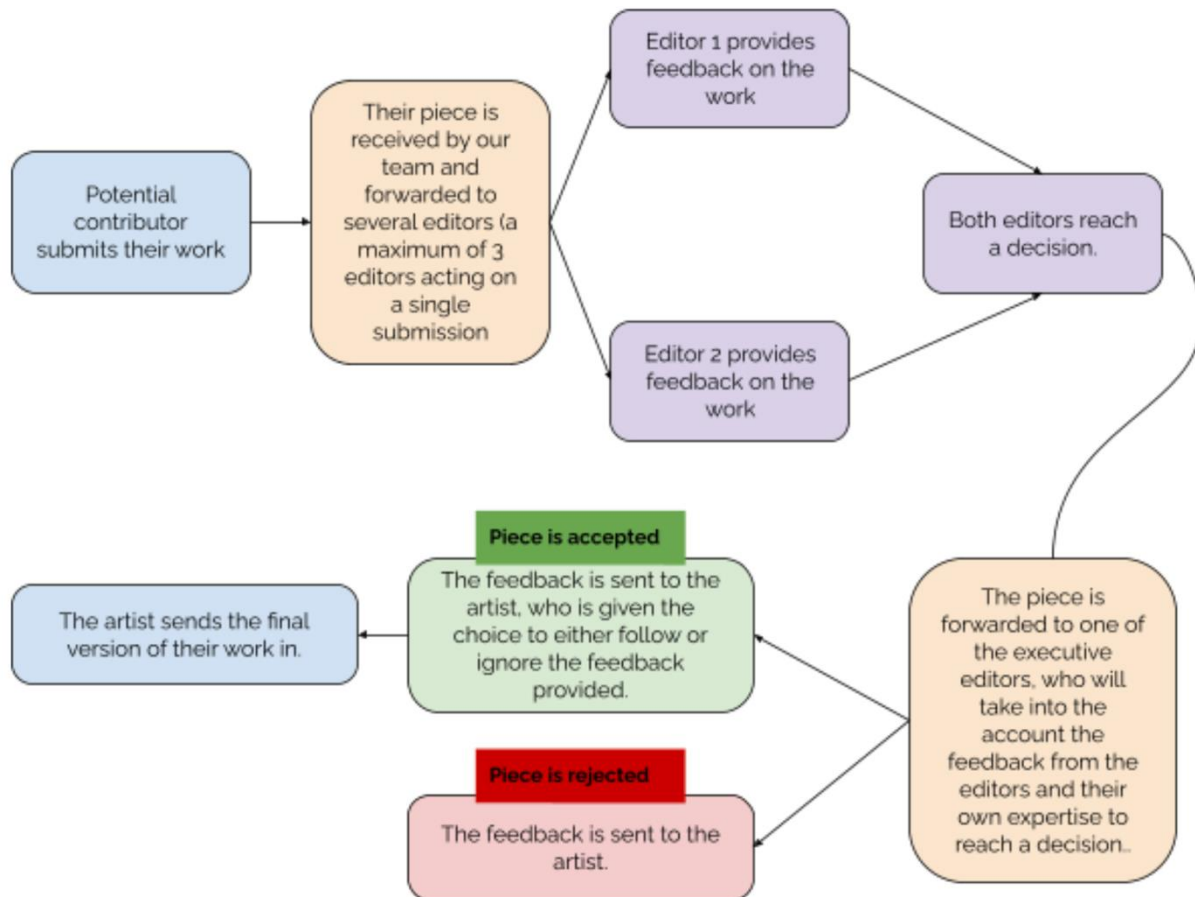


FIGURE 2. Internal workflow structure of The Global Youth Review.

between the contributor and editor. Not only may it drive artists to submit more of their work, but it also prompts them to establish a stronger relationship with the magazine. However, this strong bond is maintained through the pre-publication process and continues during promotions of the magazine. Following a spaced-out schedule, contributors and their works are featured on various social media platforms after publication.

Social Media and Publicity Effectiveness

The final and most probably the most significant contributor to *The Global Youth Review's* success may be its use of social media. Social media campaigns were abundant and were used chiefly for the following events: 1) spreading the word about open calls for submissions, 2) promoting a new issue, and 3) notifying writers about important deadlines for submissions. Posts were strategically spaced out so that a user's feed

would not be overcrowded—leading to higher engagement and, eventually, more interactions between the user and the magazine. That being said, social media was one of the only ways through which word regarding the magazine could be spread, considering that the world is collectively amid a worldwide pandemic. Additionally, the increased time on screens during the COVID-19 pandemic (Colley et al.; Sultana et al., 2021) may have contributed to the magazine's rising social media presence.

In addition, a "snapshot aesthetic," or images portraying products as if they were taken by the average consumer, was employed and tested as they were found to increase publicity effectiveness (Colliander & Marder, 2018) though it is unclear to what extent they increased engagement. Through harnessing the power of social media—proven to be especially effective during COVID-19—the magazine was able to

garner 149,000 Twitter impressions in its first 4 months and a cumulative 2,000+ followers across all social media platforms.



FIGURE 3: *The Global Youth Review's* first issue.

Discussion

Future Considerations

Though the magazine has yet to gain significant prominence in the literary world, much can be learned from *The Global Youth Review*—all of which could potentially aid the scientific community in their understanding of youth activism and contribute to the ever-expanding world of knowledge concerning the literary arts and youths. Firstly, it can be learned that youth empowerment can come in many different forms—not only that of activist groups and service-based activities. Literature and art may also play a significant role in this effort, as evidenced by the strong reaction to the magazine, as well as its large readership. Secondly, the

fusion of art and activism, especially during the pandemic, has become another form of communication and unification, transcending physical barriers and enabling everyone to experience and honor the same art, writing, and music.

Replicability and Expansion

Presently, the magazine is continuously making efforts to widen its reach and spread awareness of the goal of empowering youth voices. For instance, executive board members have attended various conferences to spread the word, the most recent one being The Young Writers' Initiative's Write-a-thon, where the founder (Sena Chang) was a panel speaker that presented the magazine to an audience of 100.

Not only limited to the realm of social media, but *The Global Youth Review* has also made efforts to expand the genres they publish; for instance, a "Multimedia" category has been added in the site's "Submissions" page, enabling artists to submit virtually any medium of art, whether it be pottery or a short film. Additional materials have been provided in this paper's appendices, should it be the case that someone wishes to replicate the magazine and follow the exact same processes that the magazine did.

Addressing Youth Activism

At the crux of the magazine lies the jewel of youth activism, a term that refers to the intersection of art and activism. To the magazine's founding members, it is considered the very engine of it, fueling issue after issue of the magazine.

At such an early stage in the magazine's founding, it is not conclusive as to whether there is a direct link between activism and political engagement; to alleviate this issue, several interviews featuring submitters and staffs that identified as BIPOC were conglomerated in order to gain further insight into this relationship. A founding member, when prompted to comment on *The Global Youth Review* and its role in empowering youth, replied, "I believe that GYR has been effective in driving civic participation because our issues address issues such as P(art) of the Soul (Fig. 3) addresses self-expression. I

feel like in our current society, self-expression is slowly becoming more widespread, but many people still do not really express themselves. Through that particular issue, it helped people express themselves through their submissions!"

Evidently, activism may not only be vital in empowering youth and driving civic engagement amongst communities—it may also drive a sense of confidence within the younger population. A submitter from the magazine's inaugural issue felt the same, stating that they had gained a "sense of identity" after their work had been published; furthermore, they noted that they had a "heightened awareness of local political affairs" after getting the opportunity to learn about the magazine's missions and values. Though this relationship between activism and political engagement is premature to say the least, these two variables seem not unrelated, as extrapolated through these narratives.

Conclusion

At the present moment, there is a dearth of literature pertaining to literary magazines, especially that of the digital nature. This paper carves a corner of knowledge into this void, increasing awareness of a potential solution to lessened civic engagement amongst the youth.

This initiative is ongoing in its efforts to raise youth participation in civic affairs and amplify the youth's political voices. However, it is difficult to quantify its exact contributions in this area. Many submitters and staff members have expressed great joy and glee when notified of their acceptance. However, it would be outlandish to assume that this behavior would translate directly into higher voter turnout or a sudden need to engage in local politics. That being said, along with many other staff members, I feel as though we have already left a tiny indent upon the literary community through our global efforts to empower youth through activism. What excites us is not an upwards trajectory of social media followers but what's to come in the next chapter of *The Global Youth Review*.

After all, progress is always made through small efforts such as these, which exist amongst

a plethora of other initiatives—all united in the common goal of empowering youth and driving forth a generation of civically engaged leaders.

Acknowledgments

The founding of this literary magazine would not have been possible without the help of Talha and Helena, as well as my outstanding staff members, who continue to work tirelessly towards our collective goal of amplifying youth voices. Thank you, finally, to my parents, who have provided me with nothing but the creative freedom to explore the literary world in its entirety and pursue my academic endeavors.

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Appendix

Appendix A

Editor Application Items

Survey was conducted digitally using Google Forms, a survey administration app.

1. Email address and name
2. Age
 1. 13-18 years old
 2. 19-25 years old
 3. 26 and over
 4. Rather not say
2. Social media handles (if any)
3. What position(s) are you interested in?
 - a. Poetry Editor
 - b. Prose Editor
 - c. Visual Art Editor
1. How would you describe yourself as a writer/artist? (MAX 200 words)
2. How do you determine if a piece of writing/art is of high quality?
3. Please provide examples of your work in the position(s) you are applying for (a maximum of 3 pieces of poetry and prose and 5 pieces of visual art).
4. Submit your cover letter or resume. We do not expect all our applicants to have these materials on hand. However, if you feel that a resume/cover letter will help us make a more informed decision, please consider uploading a file.
5. Is there anything else you would like for us to know?

Appendix B

Email Correspondence with Editors (Sample)

Dear [redacted],

Attached is "[name of piece]," which you'll be expected to act upon by the 8th of February. You'll be expected to 1) read through the piece, 2) provide detailed commentary to the writer of this piece, 3) recommend rejection or an acceptance, and 4) attach your commentary and recommendation at the bottom of this email.

For your recommendation, we would suggest that you also write a couple of sentences about why you chose to reject or accept it, though this is entirely up to you. This will simply aid us in understanding your decision.

Thank you for your enthusiasm, and feel free to contact us with any questions!

Sincerely,
The Global Youth Review

Appendix C

Email Correspondence with Submitters (Sample)

Dear [redacted],

Thank you for trusting us with your lovely submission. We reviewed your work with honor and enjoyed it very much. Although we felt that your request had lots of potentials, it was not the right fit for us at the moment.

Though you may be naturally disappointed at this news, we wanted to praise you for having the bravery and courage to submit your work with us.

We sincerely wish you the best in placing your work elsewhere. Other publications that are looking for pieces like yours are the following:
[redacted]

Most sincerely,
The Global Youth Review