

Article

Comparing the Costs and Benefits of Activism for Girls with Different Sexual Orientations and Racial and Ethnic Identities

J. Abigail Saavedra ¹, Jerusha Conner ^{2,*}, Elan Hope ³ and Emily Greytak ⁴

¹ Department of Psychology, University of Nevada Las Vegas, Las Vegas, NV 89154, USA; jeanabigail.saavedra@unlv.edu

² Department of Education and Counseling, Villanova University, Villanova, PA 19085, USA

³ Policy Research Associates, Troy, NY 12180, USA; ehope@prainc.com

⁴ American Civil Liberties Union, New York, NY 10004, USA; egreytak@aclu.org

* Correspondence: jerusha.conner@villanova.edu; Tel.: +1-610-519-3083

Abstract: In recent years, girls and young women have become particularly visible as leaders of activist campaigns and social movements. Drawing on data collected from an ACLU summer program for youth activists and advocates, this study explores the costs and benefits cisgender girls incur as a result of their activism. The findings reveal that although girls report more benefits than costs overall from their activism, the costs are correlated with the number of marginalized identities they hold. Queer Black girls report the greatest overall costs from their activism, and queer Multiracial girls report the highest rates of burnout. Queer White girls report significantly greater overall costs and problems as a result of their activism than heterosexual White girls, more burnout than heterosexual Black girls, and more empowerment than heterosexual Latinas. Informed by intersectionality and the PVEST framework, implications for supporting the sociopolitical action of girls with different social locations are discussed.

Keywords: youth activism; burnout; empowerment; girls' activism; PVEST



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1. Introduction

Activism has long been understood as a risky undertaking [1,2]. Even seemingly low-risk actions, like signing a letter or a petition, can bring high costs, especially for polarizing or controversial issues. In a recent example, Harvard University students who were members of campus organizations that signed onto a letter supporting Palestinian rights experienced considerable costs. Their names, photos, and personal information were released on websites and appeared on a billboard truck circulating campus [3]. Job offers were rescinded, and prominent businessmen called on other business leaders to ensure these named students were never hired [4]. Several doxed students feared for their safety on campus [3]. These repercussions may not have been borne equally among all the students whose organizations initially signed the letter. Speaking to *Teen Vogue*, one Harvard student activist said, “It is not lost on us that there’s an extreme level of anti-Blackness that has come with the doxing” [3]. A letter signed by more than 400 alumni criticizing the Harvard administration for not doing more to support the affected students described the “public doxing campaigns threatening students [as] primarily targeting marginalized students who are Palestinian, Black, Arab, South Asian, Muslim, undocumented, and/or international” [5]. Although the letter does not single out women, it seems plausible that those who wear a hijab may have been especially vulnerable to harassment and intimidation on campus at that time due to the visibility of their Muslim identity [6]. Focusing on cisgender girls and young women, this study examines whether those with multiple minoritized identities incur greater costs from their activism than those with more privileged identities; it also compares the benefits they derive from their activism. The study draws from intersectionality theory [7,8] to conceptualize how the intersections

of systems of oppression (e.g., racism and heterosexism) may bring positive as well as negative consequences for youth across different social locations [9–12].

The early 2020s represent an opportune moment to study girls' activism. On the one hand, it is a time of increasing power and possibility for girls and women, especially for Black women in the United States. In 2020, the first female and bi-racial Black and Indian Vice President in the history of the U.S. was elected to office. Many analysts credited the organizing efforts and voter turnout of Black women for propelling Biden–Harris to victory [13]. Shortly thereafter, in another first for Black women, Ketanji Brown Jackson was confirmed to serve on the Supreme Court of the United States. On the other hand, it is a time of growing precarity for women and girls, as the rights they had counted on for generations are being stripped away, sometimes by other powerful women. The rushed appointment of Amy Coney Barrett to the Supreme Court, in the waning days of the Trump administration, set the stage for the overturning of *Roe vs. Wade* [14], which had upheld women's reproductive rights for nearly 50 years. Under the banner "Moms for Liberty", women have led successful pressure campaigns to compel school boards to ban books from school libraries and classrooms and to restrict how teachers can address topics of race, gender, and sexuality [15]. Like any other demographic, women are not monolithic and have different patterns of political and civic activities. Specifically, White women have been increasingly supporting Republican candidates over the past decade, whereas Black and Latina women have consistently overwhelmingly voted Democrat [16,17]. The rise in the visibility and power of women of color has been accompanied by concerted efforts to restrict women's and girls' rights, including their bodily autonomy and their right to pick up a book from their school library. Questions abound about how girl activists navigate the exigencies of this moment and whether some girls, who, in addition to their girlhood, experience oppression due to racism and heterosexism, are incurring more costs and more benefits than others as they engage in activism.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Girls Activism

Although girls have a long history of leadership in social movements [18,19], girls' activism has attracted considerably more interest over the last decade. One of the pre-eminent scholars of girls' activism, Jessica Taft, recently observed: "Ten years ago, I wrote that girl activists were largely invisible in both academic literature and public discourse. . . Now, in 2019, these statements are clearly no longer true. . . Girl activists have rapidly gone from being a present but basically unrecognized political force to celebrated cultural figures" [20] (p. 2).

The heightened attention to girls' activism is no doubt fueled in part by corporate and non-governmental organizations' messages about "girl power", as well as by the media fetishization of "hopeful and harmless" girl heroes, like Malala Yousafzai, Camila Vallejo, Ahd Tamimi, and X Gonzalez [20]. However, evidence also suggests that girls are participating in protests at higher rates than boys, particularly within the climate justice movement [21]. Some research has highlighted "the Greta effect", noting how Greta Thunberg has, through her own example, introduced and inspired legions of young women and girls to climate and social justice activism [22]. In the U.S., the #MeToo movement and the Women's March of 2017 may have also played key roles in catalyzing the activism of a new generation of young women, much like the current battles at the state level over abortion access and reproductive freedoms in the wake of the Dobbs decision are doing today. Whatever the reasons for the increased prominence of girls' activism, it is clear that young women and girls are highly engaged in various activist efforts and causes.

Research has illuminated several facets of girls' activism. Work has addressed their motivation for becoming activists [23,24] and the particular methods and tactics they use, including blogging [25], manifestos [26], and peer education [27]. Scholarship has also critically examined the role of adults in supporting girls' activism [28,29]. Relatively little work has focused on elucidating the unique benefits girl activists derive from their

engagement in activism or the costs they suffer; however, some studies do illuminate negative and positive aspects of their experiences through the lenses of gender, race, and sexual orientation, as we discuss below.

2.2. Costs and Benefits of Activism

Scholars have offered different definitions and frameworks to conceptualize the costs and benefits of activism; however, most understand civic participation to have “material, social, or psychological consequences” [30,31]. The material costs of activism can range from having less time and energy to devote to professional pursuits or academic responsibilities to more serious threats to physical safety, including being subjected to beatings, tear gas, and arrest and imprisonment as well as ensuing financial and legal troubles [32,33]. Social costs involve strained or lost friendships and frayed family relations [34]. Psychological costs include emotional tolls from stress, burnout, and guilt, in addition to adverse consequences for the participants’ mental health and wellbeing [32–35]. On the flip side, the benefits of activism encompass strengthened social ties and social capital, which in some cases can be parlayed into professional networks and opportunities [36,37]; enhanced knowledge and skills, including leadership and public speaking skills; and stronger feelings of empowerment, efficacy, purpose, and identity [10,33,38].

Given the potential for activism to have adverse or beneficial effects on participants, it seems logical that activists might engage in a cost–benefit analysis to inform their participation; however, research shows that the costs rarely outweigh the benefits. Almanzar and Herring explain, “If the goal is ‘worth it’ then the risks and costs of activism become somewhat irrelevant: they are willing to suffer for the cause” [39] (p. 127). In his study of student activists engaged in the divestment movement, Hirsch found that “protesters often respond to threats of repression by developing a greater willingness to ignore personal costs in favor of the collective struggle” [40] (p. 244). Similarly, in another study, although considerably more youth activists reported that their activism negatively affected their psychological well-being than those who cited a positive effect, all remained committed to continuing their activism and persevering despite the costs [11].

Although all youth activists may face some costs, some youth risk more severe costs than others. Undocumented youth activists risk the possibility of deportation for themselves or family members [41]. Youth of color risk a greater likelihood of facing harsh repression tactics, including suspension or expulsion from school and arrest and incarceration than their White counterparts [42]. LGBTQ+ youth risk greater stigma, social backlash, and threats to their physical safety than cisgender, heterosexual youth [43]. Whether these marginalized youth also derive greater benefits from their activism than their more privileged peers is somewhat unclear in the research base.

Research on girls’ experiences in activist spaces highlights particular challenges arising from encountering sexism, racism, and heterosexism. For instance, some co-educational, youth-led social movement spaces are shaped by sexism, as boys and young men dominate conversations and leadership roles, relegating girls and young women to the margins [23,44]. Joe Curnow analyzed how young women’s efforts to challenge and change their marginalized status within a student organization contributed to their stress and required additional labor [44]. Similarly, Barnes draws attention to the extra (and often painful) work Black girl activists have had to undertake to call out the inherent racism in their erasure from depictions of the youth climate justice movement [45]. Barnes’s analysis reveals the toll it takes on these young Black women to make the allegations of racism and withstand the backlash and undermining that inevitably unfold, even when they secure apologies. In her study of Black girls’ experiences in a racial justice organization, Assan adds another layer of intersectional analysis. Her findings show how forming friendships and community with others who “contended with intersections of racism and sexism in their lives” [27] (p. 12) allowed participants to feel a strong sense of belonging and safety; however, these benefits did not extend to the LGBTQ+ girls in this group, who did not perceive the same levels of acceptance as their cisgender, heterosexual counterparts. These

studies reveal how sexism, racism, and heterosexism shape youth activists' experiences within and beyond their activist groups, underscoring the need for intersectional analyses of the costs and benefits of activism for young women.

Research examining the costs and benefits of political participation and activism by gender identity specifically, however, turns up mixed findings. Conner and colleagues found no statistically significant difference between cisgender boys' and girls' reports of the costs and benefits of activism; however, they did find that nonbinary youth and transgender youth reported more costs than their cisgender peers as well as more benefits than cisgender male youth [46]. Other research has similarly found no differences by gender identity in either the positive or negative effects of activism on youth psychological well-being and mental health [10,47]. Yet, Oosterhoff and colleagues found that adolescent girls reported more costs (greater mental health issues, friendship problems, and familial problems) and more benefits (greater pride/self-expression and empowerment/sense of purpose) as a result of their involvement in politics compared to boys [33]. Differences between cisgender and transgender youth in this study were not specified [33]. Furthermore, the extant research has generally not examined differences among transgender and non-binary youth, grouping them together regardless of identity (male, female, nonbinary, etc.).

Studies examining differences in the reported costs and benefits of activism by race and ethnicity also yield disparate findings. Oosterhoff and colleagues, for example, found positive effects of activism for Black youth (greater familial benefits and fewer familial costs) and negative effects (fewer friendship benefits) for Latiné youth [33]. Meanwhile, Hope and colleagues found activism to be protective of mental health for Latiné but not Black college students in predominantly White institutions [48], but using a different sample, Ballard and colleagues found the reverse [49]. Their research showed activism to be negatively linked with well-being for Latiné, White, Asian, and Hawaiian/other race youth but not associated with well-being for Black youth. Maker Castro and colleagues found a negative association between activism and socioemotional health for Asian youth but not for other ethnic/racial groups [50]. Still, other studies show no significant differences in either the mental health impacts or the costs and benefits of youth activism by race and ethnicity [10,46].

Contradictory findings also characterize the research on the costs and benefits of activism for youth of different sexual orientations. Some studies show greater costs for youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer (LGBQ) relative to youth who identify as straight or heterosexual [33]. Tolls on mental health are especially pronounced for LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer) youth activists of color [51]; however, other studies show activism to be linked to better mental and physical health outcomes for LGBTQ youth [52,53]. One study finds LGBQ youth activists report significantly more costs *and* more benefits than their heterosexual activist peers [46]. Still, other studies find no significant differences in the costs and benefits by sexual orientation [10].

Taken together, the findings from extant research suggest that the relation between activism and costs and benefits for youth of different gender identities, ethnicities and races, and sexual orientations may depend on the nuances of the particular outcomes investigated. Additionally, there is a need for more research that investigates the costs and benefits of activism for youth more holistically rather than in terms of their discrete identities.

3. Theoretical Framework

In her Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST), Dr. Margaret Beale Spencer posits that children and youth develop within contexts that convey net vulnerability—a combination of risk and protective factors—which influences their development and long-term life outcomes [54,55]. These risks and protective factors vary based on social location (e.g., race, sex, and sexual orientation) and the sociocultural norms that invoke stereotypes, bias, and marginalization based on these social locations. These variations in net vulnerability must be considered from an intersectionality lens, wherein interlocking systems of oppression within and between group hierarchies inform the risks and protective factors that individuals experience [7,56]. For example, the schooling experi-

ences and academic development of girls vary based on racial and gendered stereotypes about intelligence, emotion, and conduct [56–58]. These interpersonal interactions and racialized and gendered institutional policies manifest as disparities in discipline, suspensions, and academic expectations [59–62]. Furthermore, the felt experiences of these risk factors in education will be nuanced and vary depending on each girl’s social location and their own meaning-making of their identities and encounters with oppression [56].

Spencer and colleagues further theorize that risk factors are stressful, and to cope with these stressors, youth develop reactive coping responses [54,55]. Reactive coping responses can be adaptive in ways that support positive development or maladaptive. Activism, and other forms of sociopolitical action, have been proposed as an adaptive coping response within the PVEST framework [63]. In this way, participating in activism may reduce the stress associated with sociocultural risks, and the outcomes of activism may result in structural changes that remove the risk factors entirely. Following our example of girls’ experiences in schools, students may protest unjust disciplinary policies at their local school board. This experience may reduce feelings of helplessness and hopelessness and increase a sense of purpose, flourishing, and other well-being indicators. Furthermore, the school board may adapt its discipline policies, which removes the risks from the school environment and decreases net vulnerability. Although within the PVEST framework, activism is positioned as an adaptive coping strategy, it is possible that the costs of activism contribute to net vulnerability. Furthermore, aligned with an intersectionality perspective, the adaptive nature of activism as a coping response may vary given one’s social location [56]. Hope and colleagues’ DART model for classifying critical action extends this contention, arguing that critical action, inclusive of activism, can be considered in terms of the domain of the action, the actor completing the action, the risk conveyed by acting, and the target or intended result of the action [64]. In this model, the effects of activism for youth activists would then depend not only on what the activist is doing and the intended result of activism but also on the identities of the actor and the consequences and experiences of those identities within our current structures of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and other co-conspiring systems of oppression [64].

4. The Present Study

Responding to the call for more research that addresses the social locations of youth activists in relation to the costs and benefits of their activism, this IRB-approved study (UCLA 22-001642) explores three focal research questions:

- (1) Is there a relation between the number of marginalized identities cisgender girl activists hold and the costs or benefits of activism they report experiencing?
- (2) How do cisgender girl activists of different races and sexual orientations compare with regard to the overall costs and benefits of their activism?
- (3) Do cisgender girl activists of particular races and sexual orientations experience specific costs (i.e., burnout and problems) or specific benefits (i.e., pride/self-expression, empowerment/purpose, and enhanced family relations) to a greater or lesser extent than cisgender girl activists with different social locations?

This study focuses on girl activists because of their growing prominence in youth-led social movements and youth-centered activist organizations. Given that research has consistently found that transgender youth, including transgender girls, face more hostile environments and have poorer mental health than cisgender boys and girls [27,43,46,51–53], this study focuses on cisgender girl activists in order to specifically examine differences based on race/ethnicity and sexual orientation. It seeks to extend the body of research on cisgender girl activists and elucidate nuances in their experiences according to their race and sexual orientation.

5. Methods

This study draws on survey data collected across two waves of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) weeklong summer program for youth known as the National

Advocacy Institute (NAI). The NAI is open to youth between the ages of 15 and 23. Participants learn about the NAI through social media advertising, outreach from local ACLU affiliate chapters and ACLU program staff, and word of mouth. The weeklong institute is intended to build participants' skills and knowledge as advocates and activists. It includes workshops, keynote speakers, time in affinity and homeroom groups, and social events. There is an application and a program fee; however, scholarships are provided to those with financial need. Two voluntary surveys are sent electronically to all participants one week before and following the NAI. This study draws on the 2021 and 2022 pre-surveys and limits the analysis to those respondents identifying as cisgender girls. Only 2021 data were used for the 18 respondents who attended the NAI and completed the pre-survey in both years.

5.1. Sample

A total of 585 respondents identifying as cisgender girls (i.e., they selected "cisgender" and "female" on multiple choice questions asking about their gender) completed the survey in 2021 or 2022. A small share of these respondents ($n = 15$) selected cisgender, female, and nonbinary or gender-fluid identities on questions about gender. Hereafter, we use the term "cisgender girls" to encompass all participants who identified as cisgender and female, including those who indicated additional identities as nonbinary or gender fluid. Of the sample, 77% were high school students, 18% were college students, 2% were in graduate school, and 2% were not currently enrolled in school; data on age were not collected. With regard to race and ethnicity, 9% identified as Monoracial Black, 7% as Monoracial Latina, 42.5% as Monoracial White, 17% as Multiracial, and 24.5% as another racial identity (i.e., Asian, Arab or Middle Eastern, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and American Indian, Native American, Alaska Native, or Indigenous). Forty-nine percent of respondents identified with an LGBTQ sexual orientation (i.e., gay/lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, or asexual), and 51% identified as straight or heterosexual. (Participants who identified as non-heterosexual are referred to as "queer" hereafter.) Nine percent indicated that they have a disability. Among the respondents who reported their family's yearly household income, 19% had a family income less than USD 50,000, 19% had a family income between USD 50,000 and USD 100,000, and 62% had a family income above USD 100,000. 25% of respondents did not know their family income. The respondents came from 43 U.S. states, the District of Columbia ($n = 4$), and outside of the United States ($n = 6$).

The respondents ranged in their experience with activism, with 20% just beginning their activism with the NAI and 70.5% involved for a year or more. Sixty-nine percent of respondents reported ongoing engagement in one or more social issues. Among these respondents, 92% reported engagement in three or more issue areas, and the mean number of issue areas was 6.63 ($SD = 4.00$). Among those who reported engagement with at least one specific issue area, most reported engagement in racial justice issues ($n = 308$; 53%) and women's rights and gender justice issues ($n = 285$; 49%). Although it was not asked in 2021, a question in the 2022 pre-survey asked respondents which of the following they felt applied to themselves: activists, allies, advocates, organizers, volunteers, and change agents. Forty-three percent of the 2022 respondents identified as activists. This finding aligns with the literature, which shows that youth, and girls in particular, are less comfortable identifying as activists, even when they are deeply immersed in social movements and the work of activism, often because they feel they have not accomplished enough yet to deserve the title of activist [24,65,66].

5.2. Measures

In addition to collecting demographic information, the survey included several questions about youths' experiences as activists. This analysis focuses on the costs and benefits of activism.

5.2.1. Costs of Activism

The costs of activism were assessed using a 12-item scale, adapted from a previously validated scale of political costs [33,34]. Our adaptations to Smith and colleagues' political costs scale [31] included the creation of new items based upon exploratory findings from focus groups with prior NAI participants, through which we identified relevant costs for our target population. We changed the words "politics" or "political" to "activism" or "activist" in several items, and we created seven new items, including "my activism has created problems for me with my peers", "my activism has created problems for me with the police", and "I have experienced harassment due to my activism". In these questions, along with other survey questions using the word "activist", we explicitly note that in using the word "activist/activism" we are referring to actions taken to make social or political changes, regardless of how the respondent identifies. In addition, 21 items were dropped from the original scale in the interests of parsimony and relevance. The response options ranged on a seven-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The responses were averaged to create a variable of overall costs. Because the scale was heavily adapted, we ran exploratory factor analyses with the 2021 sample and confirmatory analyses with the 2022 sample, which are described in detail below in the analytic approach section. Across both samples, the overall scale had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.86, and the individual subscales had Cronbach's alphas between 0.84 (for items relating to burnout from activism) and 0.81 (for items relating to problems from activism).

5.2.2. Benefits of Activism

The benefits of activism were assessed using an adapted version of Oosterhoff and colleagues' 12-item political benefits measure [33]. Following Oosterhoff and colleagues [33], we used three subscales: pride/self-expression (6 items, $\alpha = 0.86$); empowerment/purpose (3 items, $\alpha = 0.92$); and enhanced family relationships (2 items, $\alpha = 0.67$). In three items, we amended "political views" to read "political and social views". We also changed the words "politics" or "politically" to "activism" or "activist" in seven items. As with the costs of activism, the response options ranged on a seven-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree, and the responses were averaged to create a measure of overall benefits ($\alpha = 0.85$).

5.3. Analytic Approach

Because we included many new items on the costs-of-activism scale, we began by examining the significance of the correlations among items and their common variance in the 2021 data ($n = 540$) using the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) test and Bartlett's test of sphericity. We then conducted an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) in SPSS version 29, using the maximum likelihood with robust standard error estimation and varimax rotation. Guided by Kaiser's criterion, we retained EFA factors with eigenvalues greater than one. We also used the interpretability of obtained factor solutions, the internal consistency of obtained factors, and fit indices to determine the best solution. We retained items with loadings above $|0.40|$ and without significant cross-loadings. Next, we conducted the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) in STATA SE 16 using the 2022 sample. The Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) were all assessed according to the following guidelines: goodness-of-fit: CFI > 0.95 , SRMR < 0.06 , and RMSEA < 0.08 [67].

To evaluate the relation between marginalized identities and the costs and benefits of activism, dummy variables were created for the following categories: sexual orientation (LGBQ = 1), ethnic-racial identity (person of color = 1), disability (disability = 1), and socioeconomic status (low income, defined as family income less than USD 50,000 = 1). These dummy variables were then summed to determine the total number of marginalized identities. Bivariate correlations were then run with this variable and the costs and benefits of activism.

ANOVAs were used to explore the differences in the costs and benefits of activism among eight different groups, all of whom identified as cisgender girls or young women: Black heterosexual, Black queer, Latina heterosexual, Latina queer, White heterosexual, White queer, Biracial or Multiracial heterosexual, and Biracial or Multiracial queer. Only Black, Latina, White, and Multiracial girls were included in these analyses due to small subsample sizes for girls of other racial identities. Additionally, we assessed the net benefits versus costs of activism by subtracting participants' average costs from their average benefits, and we compared the eight groups using ANOVAs.

We shared the preliminary findings with seven members of a Youth Advisory Board. These youth, who had previously participated in the NAI and completed the surveys used in this study, were compensated with a USD 20.00 gift card for offering insights into the meaning and implications of the findings. Their reflections inspired us to emphasize the role of intersectionality more in the introductory framing of our study and to add further nuance to our discussion of the results. By incorporating their observations and attending to their feedback, we strengthened the impact validity and credibility of our work.

6. Results

6.1. Factor Analysis on the Costs-of-Activism Scale

Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant for the costs scale, $\chi^2(66) = 2318.17, p < 0.001$. Additionally, the KMO value was 0.88. Significant correlations were found for all items. The factor analysis results suggested a two-factor solution as the best fit for the 12 cost items. The goodness-of-fit test was significant, $\chi^2(43) = 177.89, p < 0.001$. Factor 1, *burnout*, consisted of five items, and factor 2, *problems*, consisted of seven items. Item factor loadings ranged from 0.45 to 0.79, above the 0.40 cutoff, with one item, "I have lost sleep because of my activism" loading onto both factors. Table 1 presents the results of the EFA.

Table 1. Costs of activism: exploratory factor analysis (N = 540).

Factor Name and Items	1	2
Factor 1: Burnout		
I have felt tired as a result of my activism.	0.204	0.681
I have felt depressed as a result of my activism.	0.275	0.765
I have lost sleep because of my activism.	0.403	0.585
I have felt hopeless as a result of my activism.	0.215	0.740
I have felt guilty for not doing enough in my activism.	0.074	0.555
Factor 2: Problems		
My activism has created problems for me with my family.	0.467	0.209
My activism has created problems for me with my peers.	0.451	0.295
My activism has created problems for me with academics/schoolwork.	0.461	0.332
My activism has created problems for me with the police.	0.461	0.127
I have experienced harassment due to my activism.	0.793	0.141
I have experienced identity-based discrimination due to my activism.	0.731	0.161
I have had traumatic experiences due to my activism.	0.699	0.169

The results of the CFA indicated that the two-factor structure of the Costs of Activism scale demonstrated a good fit for the data in the 2022 sample. For each subscale, we constrained one item equal to 1 ("I have felt tired as a result of my activism" for *burnout*; "My activism has created problems for me with my family" for *problems*). The two factors were allowed to correlate. The two-factor solution provided a poor fit to the data, with $\chi^2(53) = 113.09, p < 0.001$, CFI = 0.890, SRMR = 0.078, RMSEA = 0.102, and 90% CI = [0.076, 0.128]. Next, we examined the modification indices, which indicated that two pairs of items on the *problems* factor should be correlated. We then correlated "My activism has created problems for me with my peers" with "My activism has created problems for me with academics/schoolwork" and "I have experienced harassment due to my activism" with "I have experienced identity-based discrimination due to my activism".

We then ran the modified two-factor solution, and it provided an adequate to good fit to the data, $\chi^2(51) = 84.94$, $p = 0.002$, CFI = 0.938, SRMR = 0.069, RMSEA = 0.078, and 90% CI = [0.047, 0.107]. The hypothesized model was compared to an alternative one-factor model, which demonstrated a poor fit to the data, $\chi^2(54) = 217.82$, $p < 0.001$, CFI = 0.700, SRMR = 0.115, RMSEA = 0.167, and 90% CI = [0.144, 0.190]. The likelihood ratio test indicated that the modified two-factor solution provided a significant improvement in the model fit ($\chi^2(3) = 132.87$, $p < 0.001$). Thus, the modified two-factor model was retained.

6.2. Main Analyses

Among the participants, the total number of other marginalized identities (i.e., by race, sexual orientation, disability, or socioeconomic status) ranged from 0 to 4. A total of 18% reported no other marginalized identities (aside from gender), 50.2% reported one other marginalized identity, 24.4% reported two other marginalized identities, 6.8% reported three, and 0.4% reported four. The total number of marginalized identities was significantly correlated with the costs of activism ($r = 0.34$, $p < 0.001$) but not the benefits.

Overall and within specific social location categories, cisgender girls report experiencing higher average benefits than costs of activism. On average, the cisgender girls report benefits of 5.94 ($SD = 0.71$) and costs of 3.48 ($SD = 1.15$).

Table 2 presents the mean scores and standard deviations for the dependent variables for each identity group. The ANOVAs revealed no significant differences in the average benefits across the groups; however, there is a significant difference in the mean costs, with queer White girl activists reporting higher costs ($M = 3.74$; $SD = 1.11$) than heterosexual White girl activists ($M = 3.08$; $SD = 1.03$, $p = 0.002$).

For the benefits of activism subscales, we found significant differences between the groups with respect to expression benefits and empowerment benefits. There were no significant differences in the familial benefits of activism. Next, we examined Tukey's honest significant difference post hoc test. Tukey's test revealed no specific significant differences for expression benefits. The group difference closest to the significance threshold ($p = 0.05$) was between heterosexual Black girls ($M = 5.99$; $SD = 0.84$) and queer White girls ($M = 6.50$; $SD = 0.59$, $p = 0.06$). For the empowerment benefits, we found that queer White girls reported significantly higher empowerment averages ($M = 6.48$; $SD = 0.77$) than heterosexual Latina girls ($M = 5.59$; $SD = 1.10$, $p < 0.01$).

The two costs of activism subscales also revealed significant differences among the groups. Heterosexual Black girls reported significantly less burnout ($M = 3.77$; $SD = 1.62$) than both queer White girls ($M = 4.77$; $SD = 1.35$, $p < 0.05$) and queer Multiracial girls ($M = 5.28$; $SD = 1.26$, $p < 0.05$). In addition to reporting more burnout than heterosexual Black girls, queer Multiracial girls reported higher average burnout scores than heterosexual Latinas ($M = 3.54$; $SD = 1.57$, $p < 0.05$) and heterosexual White girls ($M = 4.20$; $SD = 1.39$, $p < 0.05$). Queer Latinas reported higher average problem scores ($M = 3.48$; $SD = 1.26$) than heterosexual White girls ($M = 2.29$; $SD = 1.06$, $p < 0.05$). Queer White girls also reported higher average problems scores ($M = 3.00$; $SD = 1.23$) than heterosexual White girls ($M = 2.29$; $SD = 1.06$, $p < 0.01$).

Finally, differences emerge across groups when we compare the average benefits minus the average costs. Heterosexual White girl activists reported higher net averages ($M = 2.95$; $SD = 1.13$) than queer White girls ($M = 2.36$; $SD = 1.20$, $p < 0.01$), queer Multiracial girls ($M = 2.02$; $SD = 1.12$, $p < 0.05$), and queer Black girls ($M = 1.57$; $SD = 0.76$, $p < 0.05$; $F = 3.85$, $p < 0.001$). Heterosexual White girl activists reported the highest net averages, and queer Black girls reported the lowest, followed by queer Multiracial girls.

Table 2. Costs and benefits of activism among cisgender girl activists of different ethnic–racial identities and sexual orientations.

	Benefits Mean (SD)	Costs Mean (SD)	Expression Mean (SD)	Empowerment Mean (SD)	Familial Mean (SD)	Burnout Mean (SD)	Problems Mean (SD)	Net Benefits to Costs
Heterosexual Black	5.75 (0.72)	3.01 (1.21)	5.99 (0.84)	5.92 (0.86)	4.60 (1.50)	3.77 (1.62) ^{a,b}	2.50 (1.21)	2.73 (0.76)
Heterosexual Latina	5.63 (1.04)	3.10 (1.39)	6.03 (0.90)	5.59 (1.10) ^a	4.73 (1.74)	3.54 (1.57) ^b	2.79 (1.43)	2.53 (1.15)
Heterosexual White	6.03 (0.74)	3.08 (1.03) ^a	6.29 (0.75)	6.35 (0.89)	4.91 (1.39)	4.20 (1.39) ^c	2.29 (1.06) ^{a,b}	2.95 (1.13) ^{a,b,c}
Heterosexual Multiracial	5.82 (0.80)	3.51 (1.12)	6.20 (0.85)	6.12 (0.92)	4.21 (1.48)	4.66 (1.35)	2.69 (1.22)	2.32 (1.16)
Queer Black	5.69 (0.50)	4.11 (0.85)	6.06 (0.83)	6.15 (0.67)	3.83 (1.32)	4.98 (0.92)	3.49 (1.12)	1.57 (0.76) ^c
Queer Latina	6.06 (0.31)	3.99 (1.10)	6.58 (0.40)	6.61 (0.44)	4.00 (1.28)	4.71 (1.19)	3.48 (1.26) ^a	2.07 (1.06)
Queer White	6.10 (0.60)	3.74 (1.11) ^a	6.50 (0.59)	6.48 (0.77) ^a	4.32 (1.55)	4.77 (1.35) ^a	3.00 (1.23) ^b	2.36 (1.20) ^a
Queer Multiracial	5.89 (0.83)	3.88 (1.19)	6.16 (0.96)	6.18 (0.96)	4.45 (1.59)	5.28 (1.26) ^{a,b,c}	2.87 (1.37)	2.02 (1.12) ^b
<i>F</i>	1.85	4.24 ***	2.53 *	3.32 **	1.69	4.04 ***	3.58 **	3.85 ***

Note. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, and *** $p < 0.001$. Superscripts represent groups that significantly differ from one another in post hoc tests. Within each column, groups differ from those with which they share a letter.

7. Discussion

Activism is difficult work and has been well documented as a risky endeavor, with the possibility of social, psychological, and physical consequences [33]. At the same time, benefits from activism can accrue to both the individual pursuing justice and the communities for which they are fighting [10]. In the current study, we explore variations in the costs and benefits of activism for queer and heterosexual Black, Latina, Multiracial, and White cisgender girls. Each of the eight groups reports more benefits than costs on average. This aligns with prior work that has found that on average, youth activists report more benefits than costs from their activism [46]. Comparing groups of girls to one another, we found evidence of differences in how queer and heterosexual girls experience the costs of activism, with some nuanced variations in those experiences by both sexual orientation and race. Our findings also suggest that there are few meaningful differences in the benefits of activism, as reported by adolescent girls with different sexual orientations and from different racial backgrounds. These findings are partially consistent with past research that found no statistically significant differences in the costs and benefits by race, despite finding heterosexual youth reporting fewer costs *and* fewer benefits from their activism than their queer counterparts [46]. Our findings also build on theorizing by Hope and colleagues, who, in their DART classification system for critical action, posit that the actor—*who* is doing the activism—is an important component of understanding youth activism experiences alongside the *what* and *why* of activism [64]. The current study digs more deeply into these findings, examining young cisgender women and girls' identities by sexuality and race, as they relate to the costs and benefits of activism. Viewed through the lenses of PVEST and intersectionality [7,8,55,56], our findings highlight the complexity and variation in how cisgender girls experience the costs and benefits of activism and how these experiences vary by race and sexuality. Concrete data about variations in these experiences provide a timely response to the increasing visibility of cisgender girls' activism across a variety of contemporary social issues.

7.1. Different Types of Marginalization and Different Costs

The queer cisgender girls (of all racial backgrounds) in our sample reported the highest costs of activism compared to heterosexual cisgender girls. When considering the overall costs, all queer girls reported more costs than all of the heterosexual girls, with queer Black girls reporting the highest overall costs. We also found a statistically meaningful group difference in the overall costs of activism, where queer White girls reported more costs than heterosexual White girls.

We then considered two types of costs, burnout and problems, and the patterns of group differences were more nuanced for each specific cost of activism. For burnout, queer Multiracial and queer White girls reported more burnout than heterosexual Black girls. Queer Multiracial girls also reported more burnout than heterosexual Latina and heterosexual White girls. Prior research similarly suggests that Multiracial activists experience monoracism within social movements, and their experiences with microaggression and exclusion may contribute to costs such as burnout [68,69]. Because burnout involves mental and physical health symptoms, it is especially relevant to considerations of how the costs and benefits of activism impinge on youth activists' health. However, more work is needed to understand the reasons for these disparate findings and the extent to which they reflect the influence of the social location on youth activists' experiences, given the heterogeneity that is likely within this subgroup.

Similar to burnout, queer cisgender girls reported more problems with family, peers, school, police, and harassment than heterosexual cisgender girls. In this case, queer Latinas and queer White girls reported more problems than heterosexual White girls. Of note, heterosexual girls of color (Black, Latina, and Multiracial) reported more problems than heterosexual White girls, though these differences were not statistically significant. The most consistent trend for the costs of activism is that heterosexual White girls experience the least costs from activism. Furthermore, queer girls, by and large, are experiencing

the most costs from activism and consistently more than all heterosexual cisgender girls. These findings align with PVEST [55], such that the net vulnerability that queer girls experience in their activism may be higher than that of heterosexual girls. Furthermore, among queer girls, queer girls of color tended to experience more costs than their White counterparts. Incorporating intersectionality, the risks of activism may be exacerbated when we consider experiences of sexism and heterosexism alongside experiences of racism. Future research can build upon this work by not only considering identification—which group someone identifies with—but also the meaning that girls make of their identities and their experiences of oppression [56]. By considering the variations in experiences of identity and oppression, we can better determine when and why particular costs of activism are more pronounced for some girls than others.

7.2. Different Types of Marginalization and Similar Benefits

In our sample, Black, Latina, Multiracial, and White queer and heterosexual cisgender girls all reported high and similar levels of overall and specific benefits of activism. Furthermore, the number of marginalized identities that the girls in our sample held was not associated with their reported benefits of activism. This finding is promising in that, for girls, activism provides benefits in terms of empowerment, pride, self-expression and enhanced family relationships. Overall, girls are not reporting disparate experiences of the benefits of activism by race and sexual orientation. This finding builds on previous research that found that girls can experience new and expanded friendships and a sense of belonging in organizing spaces focused on racial and gender justice [27]. With regard to empowerment, there was one group difference where queer White girls reported more feelings of empowerment than heterosexual Latinas. It is possible that this difference in feelings of empowerment is due, in part, to the unique sociopolitical issues in which Latina girls may be engaged [70,71]. It may also be, in part, due to feelings of empowerment that queer White people might experience in LGBTQ+ organizing spaces [72]. This finding is unique among the other benefits of activism and worth exploring, as empowerment is recognized as a fundamental component of sociopolitical development and a key factor related to ongoing and future activism [73]. Overall, however, it is possible that the benefits of activism may be experienced more universally than the costs for adolescent girl advocates and activists.

7.3. Limitations

Our findings may reflect the limitations of this study. We admittedly had small sample sizes, especially for queer girls of color. It may also be the case that overall scales and even subscales mask subtler differences in the unique costs borne by girls with specific social locations (e.g., potential differences among Black queer girls, such as bisexual and pansexual girls relative to lesbian girls) [74–76]. Future research might assess particular costs, such as problems with police or trauma, to see if these are shouldered disproportionately by queer (including disaggregation of queer identities) and heterosexual girls of color. In addition, qualitative or mixed methods work can examine whether the costs and benefits assessed in this study are of comparable relevance to girls with different racial identities and sexual orientations. Studies have highlighted other benefits (such as belonging to a group of like-minded peers) and costs (such as racial battle fatigue) [13,77] that our scales do not capture. Furthermore, our small sample size of girls who identified as both cisgender and nonbinary or gender fluid limited us from examining their potential unique experiences. This is not only a limitation of the current study, but also of much of the research on girls and on transgender/nonbinary youth in general. Future research that disaggregates by gender identity among girls (e.g., transgender girls, nonbinary girls, etc.) and that disaggregates by gender identity among transgender and nonbinary youth (e.g., transgender boys, nonbinary, gender fluid girls, etc.) would be a key next step to better understanding the complex interplay of various gender identities, along with race/ethnicity and sexuality.

Additionally, though the wording of our items did tie costs and benefits directly to their activism (“due to” or “because of my activism, I have . . .”), our cross-sectional data do not allow us to stipulate a causal relationship between the dependent variables of costs and benefits and the independent variable of being an activist; it is possible that the higher potential benefits of activism experienced by current activist girls may influence some girls to become activists. Future research on the motivation and activist origin stories of girl activists can specifically interrogate the allure of potential benefits or costs.

Finally, we did not examine whether the activists are engaged in activism that directly targets the types of oppression they experience most directly, such as racial justice, immigrant rights, or LGBTQ rights. Participation in activism closely related to one’s own experiences could make particular identities they hold visible and salient and may convey particular risks [77] compared to participation in issue-based activism, such as climate justice, in which marginalized identities may be less directly relevant and revealed. Such analyses, however, are complicated, because many youth today are engaged in multiple movements and causes, so the costs and benefits of their activism may vary according to the specific contexts in which they engage at any one point in time. As the youth on our Youth Advisory Board reminded us, the costs of their voting rights activism may be minimal compared to the costs associated with their pro-Palestinian rights activism. Future work on costs and benefits could be more attuned to the interplay between these contexts and their actors’ social locations. Additionally, future work could advance understanding of the experiences of activists by teasing apart what Youth Advisory Board members described as the micro (momentary, small-scale) versus the macro (longer-lasting and impactful) costs and benefits of their activism.

7.4. Implications for Sustainable Sociopolitical Action and Future Research

Our findings offer a preliminary and exploratory understanding of the differential costs and benefits of activism for cisgender girls, yielding several important implications for activism researchers, community organizers, and activist organizations. First, given how cisgender girls across groups reported higher benefits of activism than costs, researchers and community organizers can examine and implement strategies and contextual supports that amplify benefits, especially for those most susceptible to risk. Previous qualitative research with Black girl activists suggests that despite the harms that lead to and derive from their activism, girls’ narratives about their activism give prominence to the benefits that sustain their involvement, like a deepened sense of purpose, radical self-love, sisterhood and friendships, and effecting positive change in their communities [78]. Organizing spaces can highlight these benefits by creating meaning-making opportunities that emphasize long-term individual, social, and community-level benefits of activism. Organizations can also prioritize opportunities for activists to build upon these benefits, such as social events or mentorship programs that foster leadership development and positive relationships among people who share identity-based experiences (e.g., by race and sexual orientation) and values [78].

Although activism entails some level of risk, various features of community organizing spaces may help buffer and mitigate such risks for girl activists. First, programs that foster girls’ self-awareness about healthy boundary setting with their activism, coupled with organizational practices that set appropriate expectations for youth involvement, may help mitigate activist burnout. Youth activists face pressures to be constantly engaged in learning, community participation, and planning related to their activism, and avoiding such excessive pressures on their time, labor, and emotional availability may protect against burnout [78,79]. Second, adults play an important role in mitigating the costs of girls’ activism. Organizations should evaluate how their youth–adult partnerships emphasize youth’s agency [80] while discerning when to absorb risks—especially related to burnout, emotional labor, and problems with law enforcement, school, and interpersonal relationships—on behalf of youth. Lastly, given that activism can challenge social power at relational, institutional, and ideological levels, organizations should provide activists with

multiple avenues for engagement to sustain activists' involvement while balancing out the costs incurred from forms of activism that disproportionately contribute to burnout [73].

When considering organizational features that can mitigate the costs of activism, researchers and organizers can also direct attention to which youth those organizational features serve. Research has found that organizations' structures and features can facilitate activism and create spaces that holistically support young people from marginalized communities, but at the same time, organizations can be culprits in creating environments that imbue costs [74,77–81]. Additionally, other factors such as activists' critical consciousness and social connectedness may interact with organizational features to produce differential costs and benefits for youth at different social locations. Continued research comparing the experiences of youth activists across different identities and within different organizational structures is warranted.

As the current sociopolitical climate continues provoking activism to redress social injustice, understanding the experiences of girls—who are at the forefront of these social movements—remains imperative for youth activism researchers. The current study represents an important step in considering how intersecting systems of privilege and oppression shape the costs and benefits associated with cisgender girls' activism. Our findings and future research on the costs and benefits of activism help identify possible areas of intervention to maximize benefits and mitigate risks, particularly for activists from minoritized communities, ultimately sustaining activists' efforts for social transformation.

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