**“America is doomed.” / “America is saved.”: Screens, Teens, and the 2024 Election**

**By Claire Lee**

November 6th starts like any other day. I open Instagram and see my classmate’s story: “America is doomed.” I swipe right, and someone else posts, “America is now saved.” It was a stark contrast. How could two people view the same moment so differently? And how–why?– were both people’s instincts to post their thoughts on Instagram?

The 2024 presidential election has clearly struck a nerve. Throughout the day, posts flood my screen. One Instagram mutual posts about how she is “rotting in bed for hours and hours, scrolling through countless social media trying to get over it.” Another mutual posts on her Instagram story that she has “no motivation to do anything at all. This is like a nightmare come true.” One post with a short yet striking caption caught my attention in particular. It was an Instagram post of a black image captioned, “Happiest day of 2024.” Some of these posts have hundreds of comments below–and growing. Friends who get along in real life begin fighting each other fiercely online.

I find the majority of students in my school discussing politics on social media. Some threads are harmless conversations where they agree with each other’s opinions, but more violent interactions occur. Students unfollow their classmates, even their best friends online, which eventually became the “unfollowing trend.” A video on TikTok captioned “me searching up Harris’ Instagram, going to our mutuals and unfollowing every single one” goes viral. Some students would expose other students’ political beliefs, accurate or not, by posting on the school’s anonymous confessions page.

According to the National Center for Biotechnology Information, 97 percent of teenagers between the ages of 12 to 17 were engaging in at least one social media platform, and 70 percent of youth received information regarding the 2020 presidential election through social media. It played a massive role in amplifying their engagement and interest. “By using social media, students can feel relieved from the fact that they are not isolated in communication and trends, keeping track of current dynamics of the world,” Sein Heo, vice president of Emma Willard School’s sophomore class, commented. Instagram posts, TikTok videos, and X (formerly Twitter) became both their sources of information and platforms for expression.

TEENS USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA TO FORM IDENTITY BOTH SOCIAL & POLITICAL

Posting, however, is not just a simple act of sharing information; it is about building identity. "Social media is now a way to show oneself," Heo remarks. For teenagers, it is a statement about who they are and what they believe in. Dr. Miloni Shangvi, a Psychology and Outreach Associate at MPower Minds, claims that "in today's generation, youths are developing a self that resides online as they integrate technology into their day-to-day lifestyle." She adds how "their digital presence serves as an extension of their human bodies." For many teens, this may be their first time publicly expressing a political identity. Social media transforms into a battleground for debate and discussion as it gives them the tools to voice their concerns, even if they are not old enough to vote. "They are fighting for a future they will have to live in," Hyewon Jang, an art student in South Korea, says. While their inability to cast a ballot might seem like a barrier, teenagers from different generations find ways to break through and make their voices be heard. Ironically, not being able to vote makes teens all the more vocal online.

TikTok, the number one downloaded app on the App Store from 2021 to 2024, in particular, has become a platform where students can easily gain access to political information, with influencers and activists posting politics-related content. Exploding Topics reports that TikTok has 2.5 billion visits as of September 2024. This app features short-form videos targeting young teenagers and algorithm-driven videos that allow for the rapid spread of ideas, making complex topics more understandable and clear for younger audiences than traditional social media platforms. Unable to influence elections directly, many teenagers turn to the platforms for advocacy.

However, this growing reliance on social media for political engagement does not always result in positive outcomes. The influence of popular creators or influencers on social media shapes young teenagers' political views. Teenagers often look to these figures for guidance and information, adopting their views without questioning their accuracy or intent first. For example, many famous TikTok creators such as Charli D'Amelio and Addision Rae shared content encouraging voter registration or supporting specific candidates during the 2020 presidential election. They have 244 million followers on TikTok combined. Their messages had a significant impact on their young fanbase, some of whom adopted their political views or took action based on their favorite influencers'

recommendations. Such dependence on influencers blur the line between objective information and subjective opinion, diminishing the goal of trying to form an informed political identity.

The TikTok For You Page, in particular, allows teenagers to discover and engage in politics. However, the "discovery process" is not unbiased. Driven by a sophisticated recommendation algorithm, the FYP plays a pivotal role in shaping political engagement among teenagers. The algorithm tailors content to individual users based on their past interaction, watch history, following list, likes, and even the amount of time spent on particular types of videos. When it comes to the 2024 presidential election, the algorithm amplifies political content that resonates with users' perceived interests, often surfacing popular TikTok creators who may not be thoroughly informed and lack the knowledge to present nuanced perspectives. Additionally, the drive for fame or virality can prioritize striking, sensational, and polarizing content over civil discourse. Lastly algorithms on most social media platforms often create echo chambers, exposing users primarily to content that aligns with their existing beliefs while filtering out opposing perspectives. . This dynamic limits the diversity of opinions, ultimately making teenagers reinforce biases instead of challenging them.

Viral posts also oversimplify or misrepresent complex issues, leading to misunderstandings and misinformation amongst young audiences. According to a survey featuring 1000 teens conducted by the News Literacy of America, eight in ten teens on social media reported seeing posts that spread or promote conspiracy theories, and of those, 81% said they are inclined to believe in one or more of them. This means that in a class of ten students, eight of them could hold conspiracy beliefs on topics like vaccines and climate change. Such susceptibility is not limited to students of low academic achievements. A New York Times article concludes that "while many young people can detect images generated by artificial intelligence with ease, they struggle to differentiate news from commentary and advertisements and regularly encounter conspiracy theories on social media." This suggests that a teen scrolling on TikTok could watch a news clip, followed by an ad for Kamala Harris, followed by funny commentary from their favorite creator, and perceive them with the same (or similar) factuality and trustworthiness. While speaking to Education Week, Daniel Vargas-Campos, a senior program manager at Common Sense Media, mentions that "today's middle and high school students have grown up with the internet, but that doesn't mean they are innately better at identifying false information."

“Misinformation and fearmongering are not new, but social media allows people to more easily be exposed to such ideas.” says a history instructor at Emma Willard School, Michael Lorino. While teens can now simply scroll through social media to keep up with the election, not all information is correct or unbiased. To prevent misinformation or bias from consuming one’s media timeline, Crystal Herinquez Alcantara, a 21-year-old first-generation college student at NYU, comments, “I manage my social media and political engagement online by choosing to follow reputable sources and journalists who are on the ground and directly experiencing these events. I believe this approach helps me avoid consuming misinformation, as I prefer hearing from primary sources rather than third-party news outlets that may introduce their biases."

As seen through how teenagers use their platforms to express their political identity, social media cannot be defined simply as ‘entertainment’. “Social media helps adolescents to shape friendships and communication through providing a sense of community”, Lorino says. “Due to accessible communication methods, students can make small groups in social media, and it helps them to get connected to each other better,” he adds. This phenomenon is prevalent both within the school community and outside, as Lorino mentions Emma Willard School’s “class having an official Instagram account that helps students share their daily lives and interests”. Official class Instagram accounts run by students foster a sense of belonging and encourage more interaction among peers.

Consider how friendships are often forged today: friends meet for the first time and exchange social media handles. Later, they exchange direct messages on platforms and only sometimes have real-life conversations after that day. Some friends never meet in person at all and only interact online for years. Social media has become a gateway for connection, where likes, comments, and shares lay the groundwork for new friendships. “Social media helps adolescents shape friendships through providing a sense of accessible communication methods.” sophomore Vice President Heo comments, highlighting the digital world we live in today. “We got to know each other through sharing on social media, became interested, and eventually became friends.” art student Jang comments. However, the curated nature of social media content where everyone tends to post the best version of themselves, raises important questions about the authenticity of these relationships. Friendships often emerge based on carefully selected and edited images or snapshots of someone’s personality rather than a comprehensive understanding of who they are. “In some ways, it could be said that we became friends based on a fragmented view of each other,” Jang adds. She underscores a dual-edged

reality; while social media does indeed facilitate connections, they often originate from curated and incomplete portrayals of oneself. The appeal of social media does not stop at mere connection. If users are satisfied with partial images of a friend, it raises an important question: how thorough would their research on a political candidate on the same platform be? Would they take a political ad at face value simply because the post was funny? What if the creator was their friend, or the image was well-curated? This leads to how superficial appeal and entertainment value could overshadow critical thinking.

Much worse, this election cycle saw the funding of influencers directly by political parties themselves. Influencers endorsing candidates or parties without disclosing paid endorsements raises ethical concerns, blurring the line between genuine support and sponsored promotion. The Washington Post reports that people initially paid $200 for micro-influencers and up to $100,000 for influencers with bigger platforms. Notably, Adin Ross, a famous influencer with 7 million followers on Instagram, sparked outrage after giving Donald Trump a Tesla Cybertruck and a Rolex watch during his livestream. When endorsements are tied to flashy rewards, the public risks being swayed by marketing gimmicks rather than information-based decision-making.

## VALIDATION AND ADDICTIVE ALGORITHMS

Additionally, many users find themselves becoming hooked on the reactions their posts generate. "At first, it probably started as entertainment- just for 'fun,'" Jang said. "However, after posting and getting attention, people often become addicted to the reactions they receive." She added. The cycle of seeking validation creates a loop where the gratification of likes and comments reinforces a dependence on the platform. Jang explains this aspect of social media as "partly driven by a desire for recognition or self-display to some extent".

In line with this, the Association for Psychological Science shared an experiment conducted by Lauren Sherman, a researcher in the brain mapping center and the UCLA branch of the Children's Digital Media Center, which shows that receiving likes on social media activates the brain's power system, specifically the nucleus accumbens, which is associated with feelings of pleasures and reinforcement. "When the teenagers saw their photos with a large number of likes, the researchers also observed activation in regions

that are known as the social brain and regions linked to visual attention. In deciding whether to click that they liked a photo, the teenagers were highly influenced by the number of likes the photo already had." Sherman continues, "We showed the exact same photo with a lot of likes to half of the teens and to the other half with just a few likes. When they saw a photo with more likes, they were significantly more likely to like it themselves." Teens react differently to information if their posts receive more likes from people, whether they are strangers or not. For teenagers, whose brains are still developing and are particularly sensitive to attention and approval among peers, the effect creates a long-lasting profound impact on their brains. The cycle of posting, receiving likes, and seeking more validation becomes addictive, making it difficult to disengage.

At the same time, the darker side of online interactions, such as the experience of online hate, also leaves a significant impact. The same mechanisms that make likes rewarding and satisfying can amplify the pain of receiving negative comments or harassment online. According to the National Library of Medicine, social rejection such as an unwanted breakup, shares somatosensory representations with physical pain. Underlying that, many teenagers use platforms like Instagram and Snapchat as a necessity to stay connected with friends, classmates, and even family members who live far away. In an increasingly digital world, social media has become a substitute for real-life connections. This dependency often leads to overuse, where teens feel obligated to constantly check their feeds to keep up with the latest updates or maintain relationships. Jonathan Rothwell, a principal economist at Gallup, reported that 51 percent of U.S teenagers reported spending at least four hours daily on various social media platforms. Such use amounts to 4.8 hours daily for the average U.S. teen across seven social media platforms. While social media provides opportunities for engagement and interaction across the globe, it also exposes users to the risk₩s of overuse, emotional dependency and exposure to negativity.

## SOCIAL MEDIA AND INTERCONNECTEDNESS

It came to my attention that even my classmates outside the US were adding their thoughts about the election through social media. According to the Emma Willard School's official website, "diverse students from 36 countries and 20 states" represent the

school. I wonder how and why even international students were so invested in the election of the US. The answer lies in the global influence of the United States. As one of the most prominent global powers, the US is often seen as a global leader, and its political shifts can influence everything from international relations to economic stability. For many students, participating in the 2024 presidential election is not just about curiosity; it reflects an understanding of how social media amplifies this sense of global interconnectedness.

Teens worldwide gather online to consume content regarding the election, from memes to in-depth political analysis. For domestic students, social media is the fastest method to learn about what's happening in their own country and how it might significantly impact them. For international students, it is a tool that offers a chance to engage, learn, and contribute their voices to the conversation, even from thousands of miles away. A South Korean blogger reposts an economic news article saying, "With the U.S presidential election just a day away, tension in the global finance markets has reached its peak." Under that, a user comments, "It's crazy how an event from across the Pacific Ocean affects our economy." Another user replies, " The integration of social media into daily life has transformed how young people engage with major global events like the 2024 presidential election. This dynamic reflects the growing power of social media to connect individuals across borders and create meaningful interactions about the issues surrounding our world.

## LOOKING BACK TO LOOK FORWARD

Marked by a global pandemic, widespread social unrest, and one of the most impactful presidential elections in modern history, 2020 was a year that demanded attention. For those young voters voting for the first time, or choosing not to, experience provided lessons that still resonate today. For the generation that came of age in 2020, the election was not just a date on a calendar; it was a collision of crises. COVID-19 turned everyday life upside down, protests against racial injustice swept the nation, and misinformation about voting spread like wildfire. "During the 2020 election, I focused less on the candidacy and more on the Black Lives Matter protests, the Asian hate protests, and the ongoing injustices faced by minority communities-issues that truly mattered," Alcantara commented. The events of 2020 transformed how young Americans view their

role in democracy. Many first-time voters, faced with global fallout and national challenges, realized the impact of politics on their lives.

Now, four years later, these once first-time voters navigate another presidential election, carrying the lessons of 2020 and discovering meaningful ways to manage and balance social media with politics. “Majoring in Media, Culture, and Communications at NYU has been particularly helpful for me in understanding these dynamics,” Alcantara recalls. She adds, “We discuss how misinformation spreads on social media, the role of political media, the power of grassroots movements and nonprofits as sources of hope for the future, and the importance of media literacy.” The year 2020 tested young voters, but it also mobilized them. Teens in 2020 gained the ability to detach themselves from their cellphone screens, not completely relying on social media. “I believe we hold the power in our ability to look away, which is our strength,” Alcantara comments. She adds, “By turning away from distractions, we can look forward to justice.” By 2028, justice might look like a generation that learned to cut through the falsehood of social media and use it to push for real change.

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**Category**

Journalism

**Award**

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