‘I wanna hype my girls up always’: The Role of Peers in Young People’s Prosocial Behaviors on Social Media

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Abstract

Mainstream media and academic discussions of social media largely highlight its negative impact on youth, often overlooking the positive experiences it can foster. To better identify and support positive media use among youth, it is crucial to give equal attention to social media's beneficial aspects. This dissertation pursued two aims: first, to explore how young people use social media for prosocial reasons (benefitting others); second, to examine how peers shape each other's prosocial behavior on social media. A qualitative research design was used, involving interviews with 18 participants aged 19 to 25 in the northeastern region of the United States. Through codebook thematic analysis, I identified five themes. Young people engage in prosocial activities on social media in various ways and shape each other's behavior by increasing their capability, providing opportunities, and encouraging motivation. Other results include the role of fear as a barrier to engaging in prosocial behavior and the importance of time and place (e.g., the COVID 19 pandemic and individuals' transition to college) as important contextual influences on prosocial behaviors on social media. The findings suggest implications for research (e.g., the development of new measures of prosocial behavior on social media), theory (e.g., incorporating social media directly into the microsystem of young people's development), and practice (e.g., supporting media literacy).

Keywords: young adulthood, prosocial behaviors, social media, positive youth development, peers

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‘I wanna hype my girls up always’: The Role of Peers in Young People’s Prosocial Behaviors on Social Media

This study examined the prosocial behaviors (i.e., behaviors that benefit others) of young adults on social media during adolescence and their transition to adulthood, and how peers shape (i.e., a set of non-causal processes that influence the form of something) these behaviors. Given the substantial amount of time adolescents and young adults spend on social media, understanding how young people engage in prosocial behaviors on social media and how peers (″one belonging to the same societal group, especially based on age, grade, or status″ (Merriam-Webster, 2024)) shape each other’s prosocial behaviors on social media is critical. Prior research on the prosocial behaviors of adolescents and young adults highlights the importance of both prosocial behaviors and peer influence in their development. Still, there is a gap in the literature on understanding these contributions within the social media context during adolescence and young adulthood. This study involved 19- to 25-year-old participants who shared their perspectives and observations on their own and peers’ prosocial behaviors on social media, focusing on the present and their high school years.

Background of the Study

Adolescents’ and young adults’ lives are highly embedded in social media, which refers to digital, interactive platforms where users actively create and share content and engage with virtual communities (Moreno & Kota, 2013). Ninety-five percent of American adolescents use social media, with 46% indicating they are ‘almost constantly’ online and 54% reporting that giving up social media would be challenging (Anderson et al., 2023). In the United States, adolescents spend an average of four hours and 48 minutes daily on social media platforms (Rothwell, 2023). In a similar fashion, over 50% of individuals aged 18 and 19 spend a minimum

of four hours each day on social media (Gallup, 2023). Almost 90% of young adults use social media (Vannucci et al., 2017). Young adults under 30 use more social media platforms compared to older adults, with 74% utilizing at least five of the social media platforms surveyed (Pew, 2024).

This extensive engagement and time may cause worries among parents, researchers, and mainstream media about possible negative influences of social media. Forty-six percent of parents of teens express worry over social media use (Vogels & Wathnick, 2023). In a recent study, more than 9 in 10 parents expressed concern about their children's digital well-being and safety (Small et al., 2025). Many researchers share these concerns, and thus there are many studies focusing on the negative aspects of social media engagement, such as negative effects on adolescents' social identity (Elsayed, 2021), negative consequences for psychosocial development and well-being (Koutamais et al., 2015); negative effects on body image and disordered eating behaviors (Sanzari et al., 2023) compared to the positive aspects (Schønning et al., 2020), such as online prosocial behavior (Malti & Davidoc, 2023; Lysenstøen et al., 2021; Erreygers et al., 2018). Similarly, mainstream media and popular books primarily emphasize the adverse effects of social media (Bell et al., 2015), as can be easily observed in bestselling books such as *The Anxious Generation* (Haidt, 2024) and *iGen: Why today's super-connected kids are growing up less rebellious, more tolerant, less happy--and completely unprepared for adulthood--and what that means for the rest of us* (Twenge, 2017). Even the titles of this kind of popular book are a testimony to the negative attention around social media and youth.

However, research shows that there are benefits associated with adolescent social media use (Weir, 2023). Most adolescents report that social media has a positive impact on their lives (Rideout, 2012; Odgers et al. 2020). The benefits include making new friends and interacting

with existing friends (Lenhart, 2015), connecting to their friends' lives, showing their creative sides, feeling that there are people who can support them in tough times, feeling more accepted (Vogels & Wathnick, 2023), feeling a sense of belonging (Moreno & Uhls, 2019), finding support, and feeling less alone. Additional benefits include seeing comments celebrating a range of body shapes, capabilities, racial and ethnic backgrounds, and constellations of social group memberships (Madden et al., 2024).

Social media also supports central tasks of adolescence (Uhls et al., 2017). In online environments, adolescents can explore various identities and roles, cultivate agency and responsibility, and express themselves freely (Iwasa et al., 2023). Social media can enable youth to connect with diverse individuals (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Social media can provide young people with opportunities for prosocial advocacy, supporting adolescents' critical consciousness skills – the ability to recognize, analyze, and address oppressive and inequitable systems (Freire, 1973). Adolescents can use social media to contribute to important causes and issues (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). In other words, social media can play a vital role in supporting adolescents' needs (Lenhart, 2015), at least in part, by facilitating peer social networks and building online communities (digital networks of individuals whose interactions include commitment, connection, reciprocity, interaction, agency, and consequences [Hammond et al., 2016]).

In parallel, young adults utilize social media for a variety of purposes, benefiting from it in several ways. These benefits include facilitating microlearning experiences (Conde-Caballero et al., 2024), entertainment and access to informational and educational opportunities (Zachos et al., 2018), as well as social engagement (Kim et al., 2016).

The positive dimensions of adolescents' and young adults' social media engagement need greater attention from researchers to understand and leverage the opportunities social media

offers to adolescents and young adults, and for a more balanced understanding of social media experiences in their transition to adulthood. One positive dimension of social media engagement is prosocial behavior.

Prosocial behaviors are voluntary behaviors that benefit others (Hui et al., 2024; Eisenberg et al., 2006), including individuals (relational) and the community (civic engagement) levels. These behaviors may be costly to the individual regarding resources such as time and money (Labroo et al., 2023). Prosocial behaviors include respecting others, being kind, cooperating, sharing resources, volunteering, helping, and standing up for others (Carlo et al., 2023). However, there is no clear agreement among researchers on the definition of prosocial behaviors (Pfattheicher et al., 2022). It is also possible that in some situations, what some people may consider as prosocial may be disputed by others, and the line between prosocial, hate speech, and confrontational discourse may become blurry, including prosocial behaviors on social media. For example, young people may think that they are ‘hyping up’ their peers with reposting a friend’s post, but the content of the post may be perceived as harmful by other peers. Participants in this study did not share many ambiguous or contradictory examples. Prosocial behaviors may also depend on context, time, and place. What is seen as prosocial behavior at a specific time, place, and context may not be considered prosocial at another time, place, and context.

There are some similarities and differences between online and offline prosocial behaviors. For example, young people may help each other with their homework in school, and they can also answer each other's questions through direct messages on social media. In offline settings, they can meet with their friends to console them after losing a loved one, and on social media, they can provide comfort through messages. In addition to these similarities, there are

some differences between prosocial behaviors in offline settings and prosocial behaviors on social media. For example, the effects of prosocial behaviors in offline contexts may be easily noticeable compared to the effects of prosocial behaviors on social media (Chou et al., 2020). Another difference is the ways one can express prosocial behaviors in online settings. Compared with expressing prosocial behaviors in offline environments, those in online environments are limited (Wright & Li, 2011). The ways one can engage with prosocial behaviors may be constrained by the affordances of each platform and functions such as liking, sharing, and commenting.

In summary, benefiting others (individuals and the community) on social media is complex, multilayered, and embedded in context, time, and place, as well as in the researcher's positionality and values. I defined prosocial behaviors as those that benefit individuals and the community. In the coding process, I focused on the participants' interviews and on how they shared examples in response to questions about prosocial behaviors, and what I, as a researcher, perceived as prosocial behaviors based on this definition, previous literature, seven mock interviews I did in preparation of the interview script and my codebook, and a scale that was developed to measure adolescents online prosocial behaviors (Erreygers et al., 2018). As a summary, in this study, prosocial behaviors (benefitting others) refer to both the individual (relational) and community (civic engagement) levels.

Peer relationships are critical to adolescent development (Nesi, 2018a), and youth spend substantial time with peers across various contexts during adolescence (Blum et al., 2022). Humans have an innate need for relationships and a sense of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). During adolescence, peers become fundamental in fulfilling that need, which makes adolescents more susceptible to peer influence (Laursen & Veenstra, 2021). Peers may also

shape young people's prosocial behaviors on social media through observation and online feedback, such as giving likes (Armstrong-Carter & Telzer, 2021). The need for belonging may also contribute to the prosocial peer influence on social media.

Youth spend a lot of time with their peers during young adulthood (Veenstra & Laninga-Wijnen, 2023; Padilla-Walker et al., 2017; Swenson et al., 2008). Peers hold a significant meaning and pivotal role in the lives of young adults, contributing to their positive development (Padilla-Walker et al. 2017). Stronger peer relationships have been associated with higher levels of positive development for young adults aged 19 and 20. In this study, positive development for mid and late adolescence was measured using a multidimensional positive development measure and included predictors such as community orientation, school adjustment, relationship with peers, relationship with parents, emotional control, and personality (O'Connor et al., 2011). Peers play an important role in young adult transitions through maintaining friendships, constructing identity, and facilitating the collective pursuit of adult goals (Young et al., 2015).

Positive peer relationships have been shown to be associated with psychological well-being (Almquist et al., 2014), subjective well-being (Li & Cheng, 2015), and positive mood (Brannan et al., 2013), and pro-social character development (Jenney, 2012). Peer relationships may shape how young people engage in prosocial behaviors on social media. As peers play an important role during adolescence and young adulthood with developmental tasks, it is also important to understand their role in shaping each other's prosocial behaviors on social media.

Statement of the Problem

Given the increased social media use and the importance of peer relationships during adolescence and young adulthood, it has become very important to understand their prosocial behaviors on social media and how their peers shape their prosocial behaviors within social

media contexts. There is a gap in the literature about adolescents' (Pastor et al., 2024) and young adults' (Hui et al., 2024) prosocial behaviors on social media, especially on how peers can shape each other's prosocial behaviors (Nesi et al., 2021). This qualitative study investigated this gap.

In this study, I investigated whether peers (as a microsystem) could shape each other's prosocial behaviors on social media (as another microsystem) by increasing their prosocial capabilities, providing prosocial opportunities, and encouraging prosocial motivation. These three components are based on Michie et al.'s (2011) COMB-B (capability, opportunity, motivation, behavior) model. By providing a rich understanding of adolescents' and young adults' prosocial behaviors on social media and how peers shape those behaviors, this dissertation aims to inform programs and curricula focused on prosocial development. Additionally, it may contribute to theoretical implications, broadening our conceptualization of prosocial behaviors and peer relationships.

The study is guided by two central questions. The first main research question is: What are adolescents' and young adults' prosocial behaviors on social media? The sub-questions include: 1) In what ways did participants demonstrate prosocial behaviors on social media during adolescence and young adulthood? 2) With whom are they engaged in these prosocial behaviors on social media either directly or as the audience? 3) What are the barriers to participants' prosocial behaviors? 4) How do participants reflect on the changes in their prosocial behaviors on social media from adolescence to young adulthood? The second research question is: How do peers on social media shape adolescents' and young adults' prosocial behaviors on social media during adolescence and young adulthood?

Literature Review

Social Media as A Microsystem for Prosocial Behaviors

Adolescence is a critical period for prosocial development (Li et al., 2022). Spanning the ages of 10 to 19, adolescence marks the transition from childhood to adulthood (World Health Organization, n.d). This period is characterized by rapid development in various aspects of an individual's growth, including prosocial behaviors. Prosocial behaviors are individuals' voluntary behaviors to benefit others (Hui et al., 2024; Eisenberg et al., 2006). These behaviors may be costly to the individual regarding resources such as time and money (Labroo et al., 2023). Prosocial behaviors include respecting others, being kind, cooperating, sharing resources, volunteering, helping, and standing up for others (Carlo et al., 2023).

Prosocial behaviors have many benefits for adolescents in areas such as academic achievement (Carlo et al., 2018; Caprara et al., 2014), well-being (Hui et al., 2020), positive friendship perception (Padilla-Walker et al., 2015), positive mood (Schacter & Margolin, 2019), positive peer treatment (Stotsky et al., 2020), peer acceptance (Wentzel, 2014), popularity, and group affiliation (Sebastian et al., 2010). Prosocial behaviors are also essential for improving society's well-being (Pfattheicher et al., 2022). Thus, fostering prosocial behaviors during adolescence is vital for their positive development, specifically, and the enhancement of society more generally.

Similarly, prosocial behaviors benefit young adults. In this study, I defined young adulthood as the time between 18 and 25 years old (Bonnie et al., 2019). Prosocial behaviors are important for young adults' developmental tasks, such as reaching autonomy, achieving their own identity, and establishing positive relationships (Nowakowska, 2020). During this transitional period, prosocial behaviors increase in complexity (Zuffianò et al., 2023). The transition to adulthood also coincides with many changes such as (for some young adults) college attendance, leaving home, building new relationships, and a greater sense of

independence and autonomy (Arnett, 2007). Understanding and fostering prosocial behaviors is vital for supporting them directly and indirectly during the transition to young adulthood.

Social media can be an important setting for prosocial development (Carlo et al., 2023). Prosocial behaviors online are similar to offline behaviors in terms of benefitting others (Erreygers et al., 2018). Various forms of prosocial behaviors on social media include positive comments, support, helping people, comforting people (Erreygers et al., 2018), sharing information, standing up to aggressions, promoting altruistic causes, or collecting funds for communities in need (Pastor et al., 2024). For example, young people may write a supportive comment to a grieving friend after seeing their social media post, donate to a social cause, or like or repost a post to support a friend who is asking a question with a social media story.

Prosocial behavior has been widely studied in offline contexts, but not as much in social media contexts. By harnessing its potential to encourage these kinds of positive interactions, social media can contribute to adolescents' and young adults' caring and responsible behaviors, such as supporting one another and their communities in online environments. Research studies indicate positive associations between general prosocial media exposure and adolescent development in general (Coyne et al., 2018), including helping (Greitemeyer & Mugge, 2014) and empathic concern. However, research on adolescents (Pastor et al., 2024) and young adults' prosocial behavior within social media is scarce (Hui et al., 2024). There is a need for more studies on social media, prosocial behavior, and peer contribution to prosocial behaviors on social media during adolescence and young adulthood to identify and understand these behaviors and promote them among adolescents and young adults, thereby supporting their positive development.

Peers as a Microsystem for Prosocial Behaviors in Offline and Social Media Contexts

Research indicates that peers make a positive contribution to adolescents' prosocial behaviors (Carlo et al., 2023; Van Hoorn et al., 2016). In a study conducted with Dutch adolescents, Van Goethem et al. (2014) found a positive correlation between adolescents' prosocial behavior and their best friend's prosocial behavior (i.e., volunteering). In another study, Farrell et al. (2017) found that friends' prosocial behaviors were uniquely associated with teacher-reported prosocial behavior, even after accounting for other covariates and peer factors. In an experimental study, Choukas et al. (2015) demonstrated that adolescents showed higher prosocial behavior intention (i.e., volunteering) after prosocial endorsements from peers (confederates in the study). This effect was strongest if adolescents believed their peers would be aware of their responses. Still, these effects were sustained even when the participants were informed that their peers would not be informed about their responses. This finding highlighted the essential role of peers in adolescents' prosocial behaviors.

Given the role of peers in prosocial behavior in general, they also likely have significant potential to shape each other's prosocial behaviors through social media. Some evidence suggests adolescents utilize social media for reasons related to prosocial behaviors such as giving and receiving peer support (Gibson & Trnka, 2020). It is possible that peers can shape adolescents' prosocial behaviors on social media through observation and online feedback, such as giving likes (Armstrong-Carter & Telzer, 2021). Additionally, adolescents' heightened sensitivity to peer influence during adolescence can create opportunities for prosocial behaviors (Van Hoorn et al., 2016).

Beyond adolescence, peer relationships continue to be important during young adulthood (Padilla-Walker et al., 2017; Gardner & Steinberg, 2005). Peers hold a significant meaning and play a pivotal role in the lives of young adults, contributing to their positive development

(Padilla-Walker et al. 2017). Stronger peer relationships have been associated with higher levels of positive development among young adults aged 19-20 (O'Connor et al., 2011). Guo (2017), in a study involving 720 students from 10 universities, identified peer group acceptance as one of the significant sources of subjective support, which was critical in fostering prosocial behaviors. McGinley and Evans (2020) found, in a sample of 189 college students, that peer attachment was associated with several types of prosocial behavior: altruistic, emotional, dire, and compliant. In a study involving 125 college students, Park and Shin (2017) found that anonymous peers (confederates) positively influenced students' willingness to donate money and participate in a signature campaign. These findings indicate the importance of peers in young adults' positive development. Peers may influence young adults' prosocial behaviors on social media, and further research is needed on this topic (Hui et al., 2024).

Wright and Li (2011) studied 493 young adults to explore the connection between face-to-face and online prosocial behaviors (such as those on social networking sites, chat programs, email, and text messages). Their findings suggested face-to-face prosocial behaviors were positively associated with online prosocial behaviors, indicating a connection between online and offline prosocial behaviors. In this study, face-to-face prosocial behaviors included helping others, being nice and friendly to people who need help, supporting someone who was being excluded, and helping someone join a group. The online prosocial behaviors included saying nice things, offering help, cheering someone up, letting someone know they care about them, helping someone, and being nice and friendly to someone.

For many young people, the transition to adulthood may include a transition from high school to college, which involves numerous changes, including the formation of new social relationships. During this transitional time, peer networks and quality change, but peers still play

a significant role in development, such as how young people adjust to college during this transition (Swenson et al., 2008). Although peers can potentially shape adolescents' and young adults' prosocial behaviors in social media contexts, there is a gap in the literature on adolescents' prosocial behaviors (Pastor et al., 2024) and young adults' prosocial behaviors (Hui et al., 2024) on social media, especially in how peers shape each other's prosocial behaviors (Nesi et al., 2021). This dissertation aims to fill this gap by highlighting the perspectives and experiences of young adults through a qualitative study.

I expected that young people would use social media for prosocial purposes in many different ways, and that peers would shape their prosocial behaviors through increasing their prosocial capabilities, providing prosocial opportunities, and encouraging prosocial motivation.

Theoretical Framework

This study is broadly framed by two conceptual frameworks. The first, Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), addresses the peer and social media contexts of young people's prosocial behavior. The second framework, the COM-B model (Michie et al., 2011), is a general framework for behavior change; in this study, I apply it to the concept of prosocial behaviors to examine the aspects of behavior change (capability, opportunity, motivation, and behavior) that might be shaped by peers on social media.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) suggests that the contexts surrounding children's lives uniquely shape their development. According to this theory, development occurs through the interactions between multiple dynamic contexts in which youth are embedded. I selected this theory as one of my conceptual frameworks because it highlights the bidirectional interactions between individuals and their environments and emphasizes the

significance of time and context. Because my study focuses on prosocial peer influence, this theory is especially relevant: it identifies peers as a key microsystem that plays a major role in an individual's development through day-to-day, direct interactions. The theory's emphasis on peers was therefore a central reason for choosing it as one of my conceptual frameworks.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998) suggests that development is embedded within various systems, ranging from proximal to distal systems. These systems include the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. At the core of these systems is the developing person, each with unique characteristics. Microsystems consist of the most immediate systems with which one interacts, such as family, school, neighborhood, and peers. Mesosystems entail interactions among different microsystems, such as peer-to-peer and family-to-family interactions. Exosystem refers to the systems that indirectly affect the development of youth, such as extended family members and a family member's career change. The macrosystem includes broader sociocultural, cultural, and economic beliefs, values, and systems. The chronosystem includes time-related influences, such as broader social and historical events that occur during a lifetime.

Within the context of this dissertation, two microsystems gain particular importance: social media and peers. Both of these microsystems are deeply embedded in the daily lives of adolescents and young adults and can shape their prosocial development, both individually and through interactions between these systems.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) previously placed media in the exosystem, as television was the leading media outlet at that time, and many youth were not active media participants. As children and youth currently spend a significant amount of time engaging with media, and shaping media

spaces, media systems are increasingly becoming microsystems that they directly and actively interact with, which shapes their day-to-day lives.

The other microsystem is peers, as peers are significant in the daily lives and development of adolescents (Nesi, 2018a) and young adults (Veenstra & Laninga-Wijnen, 2023; Padilla-Walker et al., 2017). Peer relationships during adolescence and young adulthood play a crucial role, and social media is deeply embedded in the lives of adolescents and young adults. In the mesosystem, these two microsystems can interact and shape their prosocial behaviors on social media. For example, it is possible that seeing a peer's supportive comments towards a classmate can motivate a young person to engage in similar prosocial behaviors on social media.

COM-B Model

The second conceptual framework I am drawing on is the Capability, Opportunity, Motivation, and Behavior (COM-B) model, developed by Michie et al. (2011). The COM-B model is used to understand behavior and its underlying influences. According to the COM-B model, individuals need three components to manifest any behavior: capability, opportunity, and motivation (Michie et al., 2011). The model explains how behavior occurs through the interaction of these three core components. I chose this model because it is a simple, widely used, and practical tool for conceptualizing behavior and behavior modification.

The first component of COM-B, capability, refers to the essential knowledge and skills required to engage in specific behaviors, integrating both psychological and physical components to facilitate effective action (Michie et al., 2011). Capability encompasses an individual's awareness of the behavior, the associated benefits and costs of the behavior, their ability to enact the behavior, and the skills and abilities required to do so (West, 2022). Capability consists of two components: psychological capability and physical capability (Michie et al., 2011).

Psychological capability encompasses cognitive processes such as reasoning and comprehension, whereas physical capability refers to the bodily ability to perform the required behavior.

The COM-B framework posits that capabilities can be promoted (e.g., by others, through interventions) in several ways. According to Michie et al. (2011), psychological capability can be cultivated by providing knowledge and understanding, as well as supporting emotional, cognitive, and behavioral skills. On the other hand, physical ability can be developed by acquiring the necessary physical skills. Capability is an important element to understand and influence individuals' behaviors in the COM-B model. I suggest that peers can positively shape the prosocial capability of adolescents and young adults on social media. For instance, adolescents and young adults can learn about a social cause through a peer's post (i.e., to promote their knowledge), which they can use to engage in prosocial behaviors on social media.

Opportunity, the second part of the COM-B model, plays a crucial role in understanding and influencing individual behavior. Opportunity refers to external factors (i.e., outside the individual) that facilitate behavior. Opportunity consists of two key components: social opportunity and physical opportunity (Michie et al., 2011). Social opportunity refers to the cultural environment, including language and concepts, that influence behavior. Physical opportunity refers to tangible environmental features that facilitate a particular behavior.

According to Michie et al. (2011), social and physical opportunities can be attained through environmental modifications. Opportunity encompasses the normality of behavior within a particular environment and individuals' access to social networks, means, time, and place necessary to enact the behavior (Weist, 2022). Understanding and enhancing both social and physical opportunities may support promoting positive behaviors in individuals. I suggest that peers can positively shape the prosocial opportunities of adolescents and young adults on social

media. For instance, a peer's post can influence prosocial norms for treating peers experiencing a loss, which adolescents and young adults can use in their own prosocial social media posts.

Motivation, the third component of COM-B, is a complex internal (i.e., within a person) process that influences behaviors. Motivation consists of two components: reflective motivation and automatic motivation. Reflective motivation, as described by Michie et al. (2011), involves plans, evaluations, and decision-making processes, whereas automatic motivation encompasses emotions, impulses, and habitual processes.

Within the COM-B framework, motivation can also be promoted (e.g., by others, by interventions). According to Michie et al. (2011), reflective motivation can be encouraged by value alignment, rewards, and by evoking emotions associated with it. Automatic motivation can result from associative learning, which triggers emotions and impulses related to the behavior, as well as from imitative learning and habit formation. Automatic motivation can be promoted by focusing on those aspects. Understanding reflective and automatic motivation is essential for understanding and influencing behaviors. I suggest that peers can positively shape adolescents' and young adults' prosocial motivations on social media. For instance, a peer's post can motivate them to decide and engage with similar prosocial behaviors on social media.

These three components of the COM-B model influence behaviors both independently and through their interactions with one another. The COM-B model is a general behavior influence model, rather than a prosocial behavior model; however, I suggest that it can be applied to understanding how peers shape adolescents' and young adult's prosocial behaviors on social media through increasing capability (psychological and physical), providing opportunities (social and physical), and encouraging motivation (automatic and reflective) for adolescents' prosocial behaviors in their transition to adulthood. According to ecological systems theory,

peers are located at the microsystem level and are crucial to the development process. Using the COM-B model to understand prosocial peer influence on social media can offer insight into those influences.

The Current Study

Prior research on adolescents and young adults underscores the importance of prosocial behaviors, peer influence, and the growing role of social media in their lives. Yet, little is known about how young people engage in prosocial behaviors on social media or how peers shape those behaviors. To address this gap, this dissertation had two aims: (1) to explore young people's prosocial behaviors on social media, and (2) to examine how peers influence one another's prosocial behavior in these spaces. Eighteen participants aged 19–25 were interviewed and shared their experiences, perspectives, and observations of their own and their peers' prosocial behaviors. I anticipated that young people would use social media for prosocial purposes and that peers would shape these behaviors by increasing prosocial capabilities, providing prosocial opportunities, and encouraging prosocial motivation.

Method

Design

This study employed a qualitative research design utilizing semi-structured interviews to explore young adults' prosocial behaviors on social media and how their peers shape their prosocial behaviors on social media. A qualitative approach was employed to gain in-depth insights into these behaviors from the participants' perspectives. I obtained Institutional Review Board approval for this study from Tufts University's Social Behavioral and Educational Research Institutional Review Board, ensured informed consent, and prioritized participant confidentiality.

Recruitment

As my focus was learning about the prosocial behaviors of participants on social media during the transition to adulthood, I limited the study sample to individuals aged 18 to 25. Other eligibility criteria included: having at least one social media account, being located in the United States, having access to an internet-enabled device, providing consent to audio and video recording, and being fluent in English.

I used convenience and snowball sampling methods to recruit participants given their high level of feasibility. Participants were recruited through several methods in July and August 2025: posting of recruitment flyers around the Tufts campus, sending emails and flyers to Tufts faculty to share the study with their students, and asking participants to provide information about the study to other people they know who may be eligible and interested in participating.

Interested participants were directed to Qualtrics to complete several forms and provide consent to participate in the interview study. Prior to completing these forms, they were asked to confirm that they met the eligibility criteria. The consent form outlined the study's purpose and procedures, as well as confidentiality, data protection, and privacy measures. It explained that participation was voluntary, that participants would need to consent to be audio and video recorded, and that pseudonyms would be used for publication purposes. Participants were given the option to provide their own pseudonym. The consent form asked about participants' willingness to be re-contacted (in the case of follow-up questions or a lack of clarity in the recording or transcript) and provided compensation information and contact information. The demographic survey included their names, email addresses, ages, gender, and racial/ethnic self-identification information, their highest level of education, and their parents' highest level of education.

Participants

Sixty-three participants completed an interest survey that described the study, emphasized its voluntary nature, listed the eligibility criteria, and collected demographic information. Using these criteria, my advisor and I determined that 18 participants were sufficient to invite to the interviews. The participants' ages ranged from 19 to 25 years old (M = 20.7). There were two participants who identified as cisgender males, 12 participants who identified as cisgender women, three participants who identified as non-binary, and one participant who did not provide information. Most participants were either enrolled in college currently or had completed college recently. One participant did not indicate their education level, and one other participant indicated high school as their highest level of education. Table 1 provides detailed information about the participants' demographic information.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Information

ID	Self-Identified Gender Identification	Self-Identified Racial-Ethnic Identification	Education Status	Parental Education
P1	Woman/Non-binary	White	Some college	Some graduate degree
P2	"Meh"	Black/Ntv American/ French	Some college	Some graduate degree
P3	Woman	Micronesian, Pacific Islander	Some college	Bachelor's degree

P4	Female	South Asian	Some college	Some graduate degree
P6	Female	White	High school graduate	Some graduate degree
P8	Women	White	Some college	Bachelor's degree
P9	Female	Asian	Some college	Bachelor's degree
P10	-	-	-	-
P13	Socialized as a woman	South Asian/ brown	Some college	Some graduate degree
P14	Women	-	Some college	
P17	Female (she/her)	White	Some college	Some graduate degree
P20	Female	White	Some college	Some graduate degree
P21	Male	Indian	Some college	Bachelor's degree
P18	Female	Asian/Indian	Some college	Bachelor's degree

P29	Woman	White/Jewish	Some college or bachelor's degree	Some graduate degree
P26	Female	Hispanic	Some college or bachelor's degree	Less than high school
P33	Man	Yapese/ Pacific Islander	Some college or bachelor's degree	Some college
P19	Nonbinary	Asian Korean American	Some college or bachelor's degree	High school graduate

Interview Procedure

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Three people conducted the interviews: two doctoral students and one undergraduate student. They received extensive training in interview methods and met together often as a group during the time that data were being collected. At the outset of the interview study, interviewers reminded participants about the purpose of the study and asked for their verbal consent. Appendix A provides details on how prosocial behaviors were defined to participants and the content of the questions. The interview

script asked questions about 1) participants' prosocial behaviors on social media, and 2) the peer influence on their prosocial behaviors on social media. Each interview session took place on Zoom and lasted approximately one hour. Interviewers provided a debriefing at the conclusion of the session. Each participant received a $25 Dunkin' Donuts e-gift card sent via email upon completing the interview.

Transcription, Verification, and Deidentification

The recordings were transcribed by a professional transcriber. Once the transcriptions were completed, the research team assigned a unique ID to each participant's data. Then, I verified the match between the voice recordings and the transcriptions and de-identified the transcripts. Two research assistants performed three verifications in total as a way to confirm the data verification and de-identification process. For the data verification process, I listened to all the interviews and compared them with the transcripts. I deleted repeated phrases and comments that were unrelated to the content of the study, such as 'um', 'uh', 'like', 'mm-hmm', 'yeah', [silence], [paused], [laughs], [chuckles], [sneezes], [crosstalk], [inaudible]. I changed the 'interviewee' and 'ID numbers' to 'respondent'. I de-identified the school names, names of university clubs, names of universities, names of countries, friend names, locations, dates, organization names, job titles, and social media addresses by replacing them with categories such as [name], [school's name], [workplace name], [name of colleague], and [best friend's name].

Positionality

As a researcher, I recognize that my identity, experiences, and worldview shape the way I approach this qualitative study. I identify as a developmental scientist, a children's and adolescents' media professional, a fourth-generation "educator-to-be" in my family, an

international student, and a woman of color. These aspects of my background deeply inform my interest in exploring young people's positive media experiences.

My experiences interacting with and teaching young people at Tufts University, as well as engaging with many young people during my graduate studies, have given me insight into how social media is an essential part of their lives, with both positive and negative aspects. I am particularly attuned to the positive influence of social media, which can offer us all ideas for improving young people's lives. Although this perspective enhances my ability to do this dissertation work, I acknowledge that my interpretations are influenced by my positionality (which is the case for any researcher). I am committed to honoring participants' voices and perspectives, and I tried to ensure that their narratives are represented authentically and respectfully.

My goal was to amplify their lived experiences within the broader context of their social media experiences. This positionality statement is offered in the spirit of transparency, and in recognition that all research is situated within and shaped by the experiences, identities and values of those who conduct it.

Analysis Plan

Thematic analyses represent a flexible, iterative, and reflective process for identifying meaning and generating codes and themes grounded in the data, researchers' expertise, and theoretical assumptions without being constrained by specific theoretical frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2021). There are several types of thematic analyses. I chose the codebook form because it allows for a structured, consistent, and systematic coding process that begins with a predefined codebook, which can be adapted to account for aspects of the participants' responses that were not captured in the original set of codes (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

External Auditor

In many types of qualitative analysis, including thematic analyses, agreement and consistency among coders are not considered indicators of quality. Instead, Braun and Clarke (2021) suggest that thematic analysis, as a form of qualitative inquiry, is subjective and encourage that the interpretations are grounded in the data, complex, and nuanced. However, involving an external auditor may facilitate the refinement and development of new themes and deepen their interpretation. Therefore, after the initial coding, I engaged an external auditor to review codes based on the codebook I developed from both *a priori* codes and emergent themes. The external auditor was a local doctoral student working in my lab, and she had previously worked on qualitative research projects but did not have any prior experience in media studies. Her role was to review the codebook, apply the codes to interview transcripts from two participants, and provide perspectives. After she finished coding those two transcripts, she shared her feedback with me, and we met to discuss her insights. Among many things we discussed were other potential codes that could be incorporated, such as 'doing the right thing' or other people involved in the prosocial behaviors, but these were not reflected in the responses of most participants. Another code she suggested was related to 'enablers' of prosocial behavior. This question was not part of the aims of my dissertation. However, the interview questions included other people and things that have shaped their prosocial behaviors, which I plan to examine in another paper. After our discussion, I decided there was no need for any fundamental changes to the codebook or coding strategy, and our discussion allowed me to gain a better understanding of my codes and insights into the data.

In employing my codebook thematic analysis, I followed procedures as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2020, 2021). I followed the six analytical steps of thematic analysis that

they recommend (2006, 2021) to identify themes and patterns to ensure rigor and transparency of the study. These steps include familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, identifying and reviewing themes, defining them, and reporting findings. In the data analyses process, I took notes about the steps, noted any changes, and discussed with my advisor. I used NVIVO software (Lumivero, 2023) to facilitate this process.

Data Analysis Steps

The initial codebook was prepared based on the literature and my research questions. I also used some early insights I gained while refining the interview questions based on mock interviews with seven participants. During this process, I took notes of the codes and initial themes I noticed. The codebook was further refined after finalizing the data collection process and following the six steps suggested by Braun and Clarke (2021), as described below.

Step 1: Familiarization with the data

In this step, I listened to the audio recordings of the interviews and read the transcribed data. I read and re-read the interviews to become familiar with the content and context of my data. During this step, I took notes of the topics and patterns I observed.

Step 2: Generating initial codes

As described above, initial codes were generated based on the literature, research questions, and the trial interviews. As I engaged in step 2 (generating initial codes) by applying those initial codes to all of the interview transcripts, the codes evolved. The evolution of the codes is depicted in Table 2 below, which indicates the codes prior to the study, after coding interview transcripts from five participants, and at the end of coding the last interview transcript. The excerpts were coded with multiple codes where necessary.

Table 2

The Evolution of the Codes

Themes	Codes at the beginning	Codes after coding 5 transcripts	Codes at the end
Type of Prosocial Behaviors	Saying nice or friendly things to someone Saying nice or friendly things about someone Helping someone or offer to help Cheering up someone Letting someone know that you like him/her Letting know that you like something Complimenting or congratulating someone	Cheer up someone Comfort of console someone Compliment of congratulate someone Help someone or offer to help Let know that you like something Let someone know that you like him or her Say nice friendly things about someone Say nice friendly things to someone Include them through tagging Other Positive comments	Helping other's Cheer up or hype up someone Comfort or console someone Compliment or congratulate someone Contributing to social justice Relational reasons DMing people Include them through tagging Leaving positive comments Posting, reposting and sharing a story

Themes	Codes at the beginning	Codes after coding 5 transcripts	Codes at the end
	Helping someone with his/her school work Supporting someone Comforting or console someone (Erreygers et al., 2018)	Posting or sharing a story Reposting stories or posts Sharing information or spreading awareness Showing or telling someone you think about them Social justice, raising awareness, advocating for local or global events, Leveraging privilege	
Reasons for Prosocial Behaviors	Self image Empathy Social approval Peer influence Online communities Social movements Influencers' influence	Empathy Influencer influence Online communities Peer influence Self-image Social approval Social movements	
With Whom?	Close friend Distant friend	Celebrities, athletes Close friend	Peers Community

Themes	Codes at the beginning	Codes after coding 5 transcripts	Codes at the end
	Parent Siblings Other family members Influencers and content creators Teachers and mentors Celebrities, athletes and public figures	Community members, Distant friend Influencers and content Creators Other family member Other people on social media Parent Siblings Teachers and mentors	Other people connected on social media that they don't know in the offline settings Family
Barriers	Parent Peers Platform features Privacy concerns Other	Changes in Relationships Family Other Parent Personal Platform Features	Fear What other people would think
Peer Influence		Capability Opportunity Motivation	Capability Opportunity Motivation

Step 3: Searching for themes by collating codes

In this step, I identified six initial themes and patterns that I observed in relation to the participants' prosocial behaviors on social media and how peers shape their behaviors. There was considerable overlap between the of the initial themes I originally created, Type of Prosocial Behaviors and Reasons for Prosocial Behaviors, so I combined them and created an initial theme of Categories of Prosocial Behaviors on Social Media. The third initial theme was Barriers to Prosocial Behaviors on Social Media. The fourth initial theme was Transition to Young Adulthood**,** which included participants' reflections on transitioning from adolescence to young adulthood, including their reflections on prosocial behaviors.

Step 4: Reviewing Themes

In the fourth step, I reviewed the themes in relation to the data to refine them and ensure they accurately represented the data. I examined whether the themes I initially identified reflected the broader themes and patterns I observed in the interviews. After initial categorization, I reviewed my themes in relation to research questions. At the end of this process, I concluded that there were five main themes that better captured the insights the participants had shared. The main themes were:

1. Young people and their peers engage in various types of prosocial behaviors on social media, mainly with their peers.
2. Many different types of barriers prevent or limit participants' prosocial behaviors on social media.
3. The COVID-19 pandemic was a unique time for social media use, including prosocial media use.

4. Transitioning to college provides a unique socialization experience that shapes social media use, including prosocial media use.

5. Peers play an important role in shaping participants' prosocial behaviors on social media through increasing capability, providing opportunity, and encouraging motivation

The first four themes addressed the first research question, and theme five addressed my second research question.

Steps 5 and 6: Defining and naming themes with clear descriptions and writing the report.

In Step 5, I defined and named the themes, developed clear descriptions, and identified relevant examples. These descriptions and examples appear in written form (for Step 6) in the Results section of the dissertation.

Results

Below, I present the findings of my study in relation to the research questions.

Research Question 1. What are adolescents' and young adults' prosocial behaviors on social media?

The first Research Question included four sub-questions, which were addressed through four themes. Below, I provide detailed information about these four themes and provide examples.

Sub-question 1: In what ways did participants demonstrate prosocial behaviors on social media during adolescence and young adulthood?

Theme 1: Young people in this study and their peers have engaged in various types of prosocial behaviors on social media, mainly with their peers. The theme illustrates the wide range of types of prosocial behaviors on social media, which were closely tied to the different kinds of reasons for engaging in them. All participants reported engaging in prosocial

behaviors on social media or observing their peers engaging in prosocial behaviors on social media, citing numerous reasons for doing so. Table 3 presents the subthemes and codes under this theme. Examples illustrating the codes and themes can be found in Appendix B.

Table 3

Subthemes and Codes for Theme of Types of Prosocial Behaviors on Social Media

Subthemes	Example Codes
Wanting to support other people	Helping others and helping someone Cheer up or hype up someone Compliment or congratulate Comfort or console
Wanting to contribute to social justice or making a change through prosocial behaviors on social media	Contributing to social justice
Engaging in prosocial behaviors for friendship initiation or maintenance	Relational reasons
Engaging in prosocial behaviors that are social media platform specific examples	Leaving positive comments Posting, reposting, sharing a story DMing people Include them through tagging

Subtheme 1: Wanting to support other people. This subtheme captures ways young people aim to benefit others or communities. Within this subtheme, adolescents described a number of ways to support other people, listed in the order representing frequency.

Helping others. This code incorporates helping behaviors such as fundraising or donating. More than half of the participants shared engaging in prosocial behaviors to help others, and this was the most prevalent code. Participant 06 described how their friend encouraged donations for another friend's father's medical treatment by actively posting and commenting on social media:

> "I guess there were also always people who were, like, fundraising for things. like, I'm remembering one girl at my high school, I think her dad had some kind of disease or some cancer or something, and she was, like, posting stuff about fundraising, GoFundMe's for him and we got our whole high school to do a whole fundraiser for him. But, just like, commenting on those posts and then also, like, donating yourself. But then also, like, making other people know that you donated so that they would also want to donate as well".

The participant explains that they posted and commented on social media to support fundraising efforts. They also mention that seeing donations from peers can encourage others to contribute, providing an example to both Research Question 1 and Research Question 2.

Cheering up or hype up someone. 'Cheer up or hype up someone' was another code that formed this subtheme. Participant 02 described engaging in prosocial media to "hype up" her friends, a term reflected in various participants' answers, indicating showing support for peers by cheering them. Participant 02 explained in her response that she aimed to hype up her friends by leaving positive comments on their posts or stories, bringing more attention to their accounts.

> “I definitely participated in that because I wanna hype my girls up always. And, definitely, positive comments and, compliments and stuff like that under people's posts or, like, putting someone else's post on my story if I'm like, "Wow, this is really amazing. I need other people to see this." That's considered a huge compliment, I think, and brings more attention to their post and more traffic to their account”.

On social media, leaving positive comments on their posts and resharing others’ stories to 'hype up' someone is another example of prosocial behavior. According to the participant, such support for peers’ posts helps them gain attention from other peers.

Complimenting or congratulating. This code comprises praising others for their successes, such as for their behaviors or relationships. Participant 04 mentioned how they observed their peers congratulating each other's academic or professional successes on Sidechat app in their college or on LinkedIn:

> “So, there's like, this specific app, it's called Sidechat… people post what someone else is doing and, like, an accomplishment and being like, "Wow," like, "Look at this or that." And, like, I do see people interact and being like, "Oh, this is such a big accomplishment." Or when someone gets, like, a return offer from, like, an internship, people will post and, like, congratulate them and stuff. Or even, like, nowadays, LinkedIn, it's very nice to see people, like, congratulate others and, like write a little, like, a nice message like, "Oh, I saw you at this time to this time and you've grown so much within these months," and share, like, a core memory with them in, like, an academic or professional setting. So, it's very nice to see”.

In this quote, participants discuss witnessing peers congratulating each other’s successes through commenting positively on others' posts.

Caring about people and community. A primary reason that participants reported engaging in prosocial behavior on social media was related to their concern and care for others. For example, participant 33 reported engaging in prosocial behaviors on social media because they had strong social support and wanted to extend this to others who did not have the same opportunities:

> "this is like a rough time," and I'm like, "maybe I just need to like show someone that I care." Because I was really lucky during my high school era, and I was always constantly surrounded by people, whether it was family or friends. But I knew that like there were people like not as fortunate as me to like have at least one other person by their side. So, I'm like, "Oh, let me like show them some love, even though it's like from a distance".

By 'liking' posts on social media, the participant was able to extend the feelings of care and support they personally felt from family or peers to other people on social media.

Participants discussed their use of social media to connect with and support their communities. For instance, participant 08 highlighted that social media enabled communication and interaction within the college community during a significant incident:

> "And then it's also just been great to sort of have the college community, and when things happen sort of at school, everybody can be a part of it. I know we had that big issue with one of our students getting deported, and so that was-- Not deported. She didn't get deported. She's back. Amazing. But that was a big thing that was going on social media, and so it was really great to sort of see everybody rallying around our community."

The participant explained that social media played a key role in helping the community unite during challenging times.

Comforting or consoling. This code encompassed providing emotional support and solace to others during difficult times. For example, participant 29 provided comfort by leaving comments on the posts of peers who were grieving the loss of a classmate:

> "Well, I know you mentioned that, like, this can involve, like commenting, condolences on someone's post and that kind of thing. Like, a classmate of mine from high school passed away last year. During that time, like, I was sort of, like, reaching out, commenting more on, you know, friends' memorial posts that they made, and, like, showing more support, with people that I hadn't talked to in a while".

In this example, the participant supported peers who were grieving through comments, which also led to reconnections with other friends. This indicates how prosocial behaviors on social media can have positive implications for offline relationships.

The examples above illustrate the many ways that participants engaged in prosocial behaviors to support other people, ranging from helping others to 'hype up' their friends.

Subtheme 2: Wanting to contribute to social justice or make a change through prosocial behaviors on social media. This subtheme includes codes that indicate striving for social equity and justice, fairness, advocacy, and standing up against aggression. Almost all participants reported engaging in prosocial behaviors on social media related to contributing to social justice through sharing information and raise awareness.

Participant 21 noted that people use social media to share information to raise awareness about major global events:

> "It's like, you know, something big happening, something big is happening in the world, they want to spread that information".

In addition to global events, participants used social media to promote awareness of local events. For example, participant 04 shared:

> "in terms of like what else was going on in the world, like just raising awareness through social media of what's going on, whether that's like Black Lives Matter, COVID, or any other support."

Young people brought up a variety of local social justice issues they engaged in on social media, such as Stop Asian Hate and school shootings. For instance, participant 19 shared:

> "Black Lives Matter movement, like Stop Asian Hate. I feel like those were the two, like, big ones that, like, people in my community really cared about. And--also, a lot of queer rights, things of that nature."

Similarly, Participant 21 talked about how they mostly shared about school shootings and being pro-choice on social media: "Mostly school shootings and pro-choice stuff…the black squares".

In addition to sharing information to raise awareness, some participants also sought to drive change. For instance, participant 10 explained how they started using social media for activism:

> "I think…2020, 2021, a lot of, like, the Black Lives Matter movement, it was, like, really big. And in [location] …and also COVID protests and things like that were very big…so I would say that social media, I started using it more as, like, as time had progressed, I had started to use it more as a … platform that I could kind of be an activist. Just because I feel like for me, it was genuinely putting myself at risk…my young adult life where I like to be civically engaged, where I think social media has been used in such a positive way to share really important information. And I think that all started also during when I was in high school…I would say that that was more pro-social because it benefited so

> many other people, but if you probably asked another group of people, they'd be, like, "This is terrible. You shouldn't be sharing this kind of information."…but I would say that now it's more important than ever and it's. I view it in such a positive way and I try to repost and share and, like, yeah, help as much as I can, whether it means, like, sharing people's GoFundMes, sharing, like, mutual aid things".

The participant expressed both a desire to create change and an awareness of the risks associated with using social media for social justice advocacy. Participant 20 described leveraging social media to promote civic engagement and raise awareness:

> "In terms of, posting about, causes, I feel like the main reason was just to raise awareness, and, bring certain causes to people's attention-not even just, like, in trying to, like, I don't know, get people to do something or, sign a petition or anything like that. Just, making people think more about something."

These reflections highlight that some participants engaged in prosocial behaviors on social media to create change.

One method of using social media for systemic change was to offer educational opportunities to others. Participant 03 illustrated this by describing their desire to create positive change in their community and how they leveraged social media to support individuals who did not have the same educational advantages as they did:

> "I think I do this because I am one of the only Micronesian from, my community back home who is actually going to college 'cause a lot of them just get high school diplomas and just work. Which, if that's what you wanna do, then do it. But I am one of the only ones who is actually going to college and with the intention of furthering my education with a post-secondary degree. So I think that's why I feel very inclined to post things like

> that for my family to see because, you know, they just don't have the resources and the accessibility to be educated like I am, and I think I kind of feel like I have an obligation to use the educational privilege that I have to spread awareness to people who might not know that they are entitled to certain rights back home. So, yeah. I think that's why I do that."

These examples demonstrate how participants leveraged social media to support social justice: sharing information to raise awareness of local and global issues—from Black Lives Matter to school shootings—and seeking to inspire change by educating others and engaging in online activism. They also shared the perceived risks associated with engaging in and contributing to social justice efforts on social media.

Subtheme 3: Engaging in prosocial behaviors for friendship initiation or maintenance. This subtheme represents participants' prosocial behaviors driven by instrumental relationship motives. Participants used social media as a tool to initiate, maintain, or improve relationships, which is reflected in the relational reasons code. More than half of the participants mentioned engaging in prosocial behaviors to strengthen their relationships. Participant 06 described how she left positive comments to initiate new friendships and reinforce existing ones.

> "because I wanted people to see that I was commenting and that I cared about things. and be like, "Oh, [name] said this," or, "Oh, that's so sweet. Oh, she's like a nice person, I'd want to be friends with her." which sounds very shallow to say, but that was back in high school. But, 'cause I kind of wanted to be friends with everybody and I thought that was one of the ways to get people to notice you and get people to think like, oh, you're a good person, is if you said this, or oh, you're trying to, like, raise up other people. So, I think that's probably why I did it. And then obviously on, like, other friends' posts, I would do

> it just because, like, I wanted, like, reinforce those friendships that we already have and, yeah, in that sense."

The participant described engaging in prosocial behaviors on social media to build new friendships and sustain relationships.

Similarly, participant 04 shared that she commented in a positive way on her friend's post on social media to express that she is a 'real friend' and to preserve her friendships:

> "I guess one, just being supportive and a good friend. And two, I guess to keep that friendship or something, like for certain people, like if your friends don't comment, like, to them, it's like, "You're not my real friend," or something. I don't know. And in high school, I feel like when you're a lot younger, that's how you, like, go about things and friendships and, like, show that, "Oh, this is my friend.".

The participant's response and wish to maintain their relationship highlight the importance of peer norms and peer influence in shaping young people's prosocial behaviors on social media.

Subtheme 4: Engaging in prosocial behaviors that are social media-specific. Many participants provided insights about how young people engage in prosocial behaviors specific to social media, such as commenting on posts in a positive way, posting or sharing content, reposting and sharing stories, sending direct messages (DMs) to peers or family, and tagging other's.

Commenting on posts in a positive way. Leaving positive comments on other people's social media posts is the most common code for this subtheme. All participants mentioned commenting on posts in a positive way. For example, participant 17 commented on posts in a positive way on a content creator's posts:

> "I have actually been posting more positive comments, like if I see something on TikTok or Instagram and I'm like, 'Oh. Maybe if I comment--" Like I've been learning how to crochet, for instance. I'm like, "Oh. Like, I use this pattern that you put out here and I love it." Like, something like that. And people-- like the creators of the post, typically engage with it. So, it's been really positive."

The participant's response indicates how leaving positive comments on other people's posts can be a way to compliment them.

Posting, reposting, and sharing a story. Almost all participants mentioned posting or sharing a story; it was the second most frequent code in this theme. For example, participant 19 described their observation about how others shared donation links in their posts on social media:

> "I would say they were posting for, mutual aid or, like, community members, people who are, like, struggling financially, like a lot of GoFundMes. I feel like that's very popular."

This quote indicates how posting can be used as a tool to help others.

Reposting, which means resharing another person's post, was another code within this subtheme. For example, participant 4 described a lot of reposting related to Black Lives Matter:

> "I would definitely say in high school, at least when I was in high school, a lot of the Black Lives Matter movement was happening. So, there was a lot of reposting, supporting small organizations, and just, like, spreading the word. So, I would say that was like a big thing I would remember."

This example indicates the overlap between various prosocial behaviors and how posting and reposting can be a way to benefit the community and contribute to social justice. Seeing these posts may inform other peers and encourage them to repost.

DMing people. This code was about participants' prosocial behaviors via the DM (direct message) function on social media. Participant 02 described using DMs to share videos and memes as a way to build positive connections. They also explained how sending outfit options via DMs helped friends with their choices, showing their care and support:

> "I mean, if someone asks a story-asks a question on their story, then the way to demonstrate that you care about that person is by, responding to their question. Like, you're in tune with their life. If they're like, "Oh, girls, like, which outfit do I choose?" and you swipe up and say, "Number two," or you'll click the button that they posted and say number two, it means you're watching and, actually engaging with their content. So that's another way to demonstrate that you care about someone. What else? I think that's kind of it. But, DMing people, like, reels and, memes and stuff being like, "This is just like that thing you said at brunch the other day," you know? That's also just another way of communicating with people".

As reflected here, the participant used DMing others to show care and maintain relationships, indicating the overlap between relationship-related motivations and prosocial behaviors on social media.

Include them through tagging. Although many participants did not provide examples of tagging other people in posts, Participant 02 provided two examples. They explained how they posted a story and tagged their friend to raise funds for their sick cat:

> "I have a post on my story of my friend [name], his cat's really sick. And so, I, have reposted, "Help [friend's name]," like, "Raise enough money to get his cat surgery." But then I've also posted, like, my little sister 'cause she just had a cute little post where she

went to The Cape. So, I tagged her, and I said, "Look at my sister," with, like, exclamation points."

The participants' responses suggest that tagging others can be used as a way to show care, help others (through raising funds), and compliment others, indicating an overlap in various prosocial behaviors.

In this study, participants engaged in various social media-specific prosocial behaviors to show care for others, contribute to social justice, and help others. As shown in the examples above, social media-specific prosocial behaviors may allow young people to engage in various types of prosocial behaviors at the same time by using social media tools.

Sub-question 2: With whom are they engaged in these prosocial behaviors on social media, either directly or as the audience?

Participants were asked about whom they engaged in the prosocial behaviors they mentioned on social media, who the audience was, and/or who was involved in addition to them. Their responses could be categorized into four subthemes in order of prevalence: 1) peers, 2) community, 3) other people connected on social media that they don't know in the offline world, and 4) family. Table 4 indicates the subthemes and the codes related to this theme:

Table 4

Subthemes and Codes Related to Whom Participants Engage in Prosocial Behaviors with on Social Media

Subthemes	Example Codes
Peers	Peers
Community	Community

Other people connected on social media that they don't know in the offline settings	Other people connected on social media that they don't know in the offline settings
Family	Family

Subtheme 1: Engaging in prosocial behaviors with peers or having them as the audience. This sub-theme portrays the prosocial behaviors participants engaged in with their peers including close friends, and distant friends, all of which were codes in this subtheme. Young people most frequently engaged in prosocial behaviors on social media with their peers compared to other communities, other people connected on social media that they don't know in the offline world, and family. For example, participant 06's response described their peers' (in school or back home) engaging in prosocial behaviors with their peers:

> "…they were engaging with, like, all of our other peers in high school, other friends, in sports if we, like, played against other schools, then, like some of these people would follow each other, so then other schools, obviously you would interact with, some of them had friends from back home if they moved a lot."

Many shared peers, similar to those of participant 06, either served as the individual's audience or participated in prosocial behavior with them on social media.

Subtheme 2: Engaging in prosocial behaviors with the community or having them as the audience. This subtheme covered engaging in prosocial behaviors with the community such as communities in school, community at work, at college and other settings, demonstrating that prosocial social media behaviors either engaged a community directly or treated a community as

the intended audience. Community was the second most common group, after peers, with which young people engaged in prosocial behaviors on social media. Participant 13 talked about school community and college community in addition to their peers:

> "So I think of like followers who are still broadly in my community online and like how I sort of described, people from my immediate like surroundings and high school and family and extended family and aunties and uncles and cousins and, even then when I went to college, like, peers and friends of friends".

Similar to participant 13's insights, other young adults discussed their experiences within both online and in-person communities. The participants highlighted how each environment influences prosocial behavior on social media, underscoring the importance of both contexts.

Subtheme 3: Engaging with other people connected on social media either directly or as the audience. Young people also engaged with others they met on social media either by participating in prosocial behaviors on social media with them or by having them as an audience. These "other people" were the third-most-common group with whom young people engaged in prosocial behaviors on social media either directly or as the audience. For example, participant 14 talked about connecting to new people on social media through prosocial posting:

> "It was a new level where it was like, "Okay, I'm posting these things that I care about," and then it was also a new level where I was meeting more people on social media, so making more social media friends, which I think is another aspect of this. Like, many people I haven't met in person, whether they live outside the country, whether they live in the country, but we're never in the same city at the same time. It was interesting 'cause it was, like, more exploration with meeting new people, and learning about new things in a way that I would have never had been able to without social media….when I was posting

> something related to, like, work I was doing, or a panel I spoke on during that time in college, I feel like it was for the world in a sense. Where it's, like, I wanted as many people to see it as, like, humanly possible. Like, you want people to, like, see what you're posting, in attempt for them to care about what you're posting."

Some participants, as illustrated by the response above, shared that social media provides a unique environment enabling them to interact with anyone and engage in prosocial behaviors.

Subtheme 4: Engaging in prosocial behaviors with family or having them as the audience. Only a few participants engaged in prosocial behaviors with family on social media, such as participant 13:

> "I think obviously, followers, and then to dive more into like who that is, would be, like immediate community, like around me, so like school friends, aunties, uncles that are around, family friends, and then family that is far away".

Engaging in prosocial behaviors on social media was less frequent with family than it was with peers, members of the community, or new acquaintances met online.

Subquestion 3: What are the barriers to participants' prosocial behaviors?

Theme 2: Many different types of barriers prevent or limit participants' prosocial behaviors on social media. Barriers in this context are defined as internal or external factors that prevent or limit the participants' prosocial behaviors on social media. All participants indicated various barriers they experienced themselves or observed in their peers. Participants most frequently reported that fear prevented them from engaging in prosocial behaviors on social media. The second most common code was what other people would think.

Table 5

Subtheme and Codes for Barriers to Prosocial Behavior

Subtheme	Example Codes
Thoughts and emotions preventing or diminishing prosocial behaviors	Fear What other people would think

Sub-theme: Thoughts and emotions preventing or diminishing prosocial behaviors. This sub-theme captures considerations, judgments, beliefs, concerns, and feelings that stopped or reduced their prosocial behaviors on social media. Participants reported various ideas and feelings that prevented or limited their prosocial behaviors on social media. The most frequently reported barrier was fear, followed by concern about what other people would think.

Fear. This code was primarily for safety and security, such as being physically or digitally harmed or losing a job. Participants felt fear for various reasons, including fear of engaging with social media about social justice matters in the current political context, fear of retaliation from institutions they were affiliated with (e.g., their schools), and digital harm such as doxxing or some people hacking into their accounts.

Some participants shared that the current political context influenced their decision not to engage in any form of prosocial behavior on social media, especially regarding Palestine and Israel. Participant 09 shared:

> "I would say mainly with LinkedIn, just because sometimes people have political posts and or just posts in general, and some of those posts are posted by people that might be, like, for example, my CEO of my company, or I would see my CEO engaging in, posts that I would be too afraid to engage in for the opposite view. Like, I have used LinkedIn for prosocial in terms of, like, fundraising for a person to build more wheelchairs, but I would not use it for example, anything related to Palestine because I've seen that other

> people have liked posts on LinkedIn and then had their offers rescinded, getting fired, and just, like, I don't know, dealing with the repercussions because of, I don't know, engaging with that content."

This participant's reflection indicates how they were cautious about not posting anything related to Palestine, as they have seen others suffer negative outcomes, such as being fired or losing job offers, simply for sharing such content on social media, indicating how the political context can create fear, which can prevent young people's prosocial behaviors on social media. This reflection may suggest how the political climate can be a barrier to young people's prosocial behaviors.

Similarly, participant 20 described several fear-based factors they believe limit or prevent their peers from engaging in prosocial behaviors, including posting about Israel and Palestine. The fears they shared included surveillance by universities and governments, policing on specific issues, and worries about future employment.

> "Definitely, I'd just say, like, surveillance. Whether it be through, like, a university, or, like, the government. Because I know, like, now there's, like, efforts, like, policing how people post about, like, the Israel-Palestine conflict. I know that that's, like, been a huge part of, like, whether people post about something or not. And then that's kind of, like, subjective whether or not that's, like, pro-social, but, like, also in terms of, like, job searching or, like, whether schools, like, want to enforce, like, someone is allowed to post about this, then, like, that's definitely something that I feel like affects, like, what people might want to post."

This reflection suggests how institutions such as universities and governments may play a role in preventing some prosocial behaviors on social media by creating fear. In another example, participant 08 shared:

> “I think in high school, it was fear of what your peers would think about you. And then as you get older and, you know, government changes, it's more actual palpable fear of maybe what I'm gonna be posting eventually is gonna come back and haunt me sort of thing. I think around that time you were seeing people get-- And I don't know how true these reports are, but there were reports of people getting stopped at airports and officers demanding to see your phone and what your history was. And again, I don't know how true that was, but even reading it and it not being true, I think, puts fears in your mind. And so, I think that was where a lot of that was coming from, just 'cause that was, I think, initially how the member of our community was found, to begin with, just speaking out about something. And so, it makes it more difficult now when you-you're living in a more censored environment to want to speak your mind."

Participants’ responses indicate that the fear from institutions may not be limited to the present but also extend to the future, as they shared that they were afraid it could affect them later.

The fear was not only related to institutions but also to experiencing digital harm connected to the current socio-political climate. For example, Participant 08's response also demonstrates that the fear of being doxxed in the current social environment inhibited their peers’ prosocial behaviors.

> “I would say maybe in the case I was talking about earlier with our student. Again, I think I said I only said one thing, and a lot of people said more, like a lot of people reposted things multiple times. But in that case, it was nerve-wracking because I had a lot

> of friends who were like, "Yeah, I support her, but I can't say anything because what if I get doxed or something?" And so me being connected very closely to the international community, I think I also kind of had that fear as well. And so, it definitely has to do with a lot of fear."

Similarly, participant 29 shared how they were afraid to share on specific issues because of the fear of doxxing:

> "I have been hesitant to post about it, and have sort of just been, like, supporting it, like supporting individual families in Palestine, like, through other people's GoFundMes, because, it can-- I don't know. Socially, I think I've been afraid of, like, the-- I mean, a lot of this could just be, like, irrational, but I've just seen other people get, like, doxxed or, like, literally threatened, for, like, posting that kind of stuff, and I'd rather just, like, jump straight to the action rather than, posting about it."

These examples suggest that fears concerning physical, digital, and work-related safety may act as barriers to young people's prosocial behaviors. Participants described several reasons for their hesitation to engage in prosocial activities on social media, including worries about being monitored, being afraid of doxxing after posting about social justice issues, and facing school, governmental, or employment-related consequences. The examples indicate how fear is a complex, multifaceted obstacle shaped by the prevailing sociopolitical climate, influencing young people's willingness to engage or not engage in prosocial behaviors on social media.

What other people would think. Participants frequently reported feeling concerned about how others would perceive and judge them, which prevented them from engaging in some prosocial behaviors. Participant 06's observations of their peers showed how this concern prevents young people's prosocial behaviors on social media: "I think also they just don't wanna

say anything that they would regret or other people would see, and misinterpret for something." In addition to being misunderstood, some participants showed concerns about being perceived as wrong and not knowing enough. For example, participant 33 explained that their peers were often discouraged from engaging in prosocial behaviors on social media due to concerns about being judged as wrong:

> "I think it's, like, the judgment from, like, the other people. Especially if, like, we'd post something and someone would say we're wrong, it's like having to defend our stance, and just like, the feeling of, like, "Oh, this person is a lot more, like, intelligible than me, but I'm not as informed. What happens if they say something and I can't, like, refute it?" So I guess the confrontation of, like, having to debate the topic is something that would, like, deter my fears from, like, posting, or even, and even myself. College is full of smart people".

Participant 06 explained how considering comments from acquaintances they don't know well affects their willingness to engage in prosocial behaviors on social media. They mentioned concern for being judged or appearing 'creepy,' which seems to discourage prosocial behaviors on social media:

> "I guess I'm thinking from my perspective, like, if I reposted something and then some person that I don't know super well commented on it. I guess it's not that deep. I wouldn't think too much of it, but I would just think to myself, like, "Oh, what is their ulterior motive?" Like, "Why are they looking at my profile? Why are they interacting with me?" Not in a mean way, but just, like, "This is interesting." Like, we've never talked before. So I guess I'd be worried about them thinking that I was being, not like creepy, but just

> like trying to enter their circle, I guess, in that sense, for no reason. But I guess at the end of the day, it's actually pretty harmless. But just like the overthinking of it all."

This quote demonstrates that participants considered how they would think themselves in a similar situation, which prevented them from engaging in those behaviors out of fear of being judged. The experiences shared by participants 06 and 33 illustrate that being misunderstood, feeling judged, and being perceived as not knowledgeable by others were additional sources of barriers. These concerns, in turn, reduced participants' prosocial behaviors on social media.

Participant 21 shared how what their peers would think became a barrier to their prosocial behaviors on social media: "I guess that's like the biggest inhibitor for me specifically or for my friends, 'cause I would also make jokes like that." Similarly, participant 06 shared their observations that what other people would think played a barrier role in their friend's decision to comment on another peer's social media:

> "one of my friends started dating another guy, but then another one of my friends also liked the guy at the same time, so it was complicated whenever he would post things and they would want to comment on his stuff. And then they were always, like, texting me and asking me, "Oh, should I say this? Oh, should I say that?" Knowing that the other person would see it. And then obviously if someone says something, and then that would mean- that would have, like, underlying connotations to it, or people would read into it. A lot of overthinking that did not matter whatsoever. But 'cause, like, liking someone's post, even just doing that, would, like, speak volumes voles in a situation like that. That was, like, a petty situation, but yeah. For that reason, like, she, like, wouldn't interact with any of his stuff even though they were really good friends."

These two examples may suggest that what their peers would think about them may be a barrier to young people's prosocial behaviors on social media.

Participant 08 explained that they were careful about what they shared on social media, being aware that future employers might check their accounts. They also have friends with differing political opinions and were worried about upsetting them with certain posts:

> "I'm very cautious about what I'm posting on social media just 'cause you're always-- I mean, I have a private account, but even so they tell you about future employers are gonna look at your social media, and I have a lot of friends, I think, politically who are on separate sides. And so, I was always very cautious about not wanting to make people angry, necessarily, in what I was saying. I think as I've gotten older, I've stopped caring."

This example illustrates how social judgment can overlap with fear and may prevent some prosocial behaviors on social media.

In summary, participants' thoughts and emotions, such as fear and concern about what others would think of them, prevented some prosocial behaviors on social media. Some of these barriers were related to the current socio-political climate, whereas others were related to interpersonal factors, such as balancing friendships.

Subquestion 4) How do participants reflect on the changes in their prosocial behaviors on social media from adolescence to young adulthood?

Theme 3: The COVID-19 pandemic was a unique time for social media use, including prosocial media use. This theme refers to participants' reflections on their social media use during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the pandemic as a distinct period in shaping social media behaviors, including prosocial behaviors. Participants shared that they

engaged in prosocial behaviors on social media to maintain relationships, show support, and contribute to social justice-related matters.

Some participants reported observing an increase in people's social media use during the COVID-19 pandemic, including themselves. For example, participant 01 shared "I think everyone was just so constantly online". Similarly, participant 04 told: "cause, everything was shut down. The only thing you could really do, even before, like, just going on walks, social distancing, was be like on social media". Some participants also said that they used social media extensively during that time. For example, participant 01 shared how they "used social media a lot of the time" and participant 10 said: "Because it was also COVID, I, 100% immersed myself in just social media". These comments may indicate that during the COVID-19 pandemic, social media became more prominent in some people's lives.

Participant 19 observed that prosocial behaviors on social media increased during the COVID-19 pandemic:

> "I would definitely say a lot of people posted things about, like, maybe not fundraising, but like, maybe mutual aid or things like that in high school. Especially, during my first and second year, it was COVID, so it was like a lot of people were online...When it was during COVID, people were kind of behind a screen, so it's a lot easier to be an advocate, and also that's like the social norm, I would say, during that time. But now I think that the shift has happened, people don't really-- so like, some people don't really care that much anymore".

The participant also noted that the COVID-19 pandemic fostered an environment that promoted greater prosocial behaviors on social media, like engaging in social justice efforts

shaped by the social norms of that period. However, they also observed a reduction in these behaviors after the pandemic ended.

Some participants reported engaging in prosocial behaviors to maintain positive relationships during the pandemic. For example, participant 04 shared how they left positive comments on their peer's post to show support: "like even just commenting on their Instagram posts or checking in through Instagram and just let them know that, 'Oh, I'm still here. I'm checking in. And like, it really definitely helped when I feel like COVID dialed down and people were going back to school. So, it was like reconnecting in person after just like keeping in touch on social media".

The participant's response demonstrated how their prosocial behaviors on social media helped preserve their relationships during a time when in-person ways of preserving relationships were less available. Some participants also described how they and others used social media to show support during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, participant 17 explained that their peers received significant positive support through encouraging comments, and receiving such messages themselves made them feel appreciated and loved.

> "…when we were so connected to our phones, especially during the pandemic, I think I saw a lot of people commenting on people's posts. My peers were getting hundreds of comments from people and it was just, like, almost the primary way to engage with people at that time, other than texting or calling them, because, real human contact was so limited then during the pandemic, so people were commenting. There was a lot of, like, reposting other people's posts. If my friends reposted my posts, on VSCO or something, I was like, "Wow, they-they love me so much."

Participant 10 described how, during the pandemic, their friends used social media as an opportunity to share positive memories about a friend who passed away and grieve together, at a time where it was not possible to engage in those prosocial behaviors in person:

> "I think on a on a positive note, what a lot of me and my friends did when we found out that he was passed away is, we- you didn't just hear it through word of mouth, right, because it was during COVID, so it was everybody posting very light-hearted memories- and just kind of, you know, like, saying "Rest In Peace," being able to kind of vocalize and share these memories even if it wasn't at a specific place, specific spot, specific time, right…and then sharing memories and things like that. So, I think in a way, I don't know, social media in a way kind of makes you feel a little relieved. So, like, collective grieving across multiple platforms, it seems like, and certain platforms served some functions. Like, Facebook was more informational, whereas Snapchat was more for, like, the videos and the memories, that's awesome".

This collective grieving experience on social media was another example of how young people supported each other during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participants described engaging in or observing others engage in prosocial behaviors, such as sharing information and raising awareness, as ways to contribute to social justice during the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, participant 13 shared:

> "I think during COVID, obviously I'm sure you've been through this multiple times with people, but, lots of social justice movements happening around then, around COVID, surrounding COVID, and surrounding, anti-Black violence, and I think I was like reading things, being like, "Yeah, this resonates," and then learning from it and also posting it,

commenting. I think reposting social justice-based things, positive messaging on my stories, and then also, commenting on friends' posts".

Similarly, participant 04 shared that they tried to use social media "in terms of like what else was going on in the world, like just raising awareness through social media of what's going on, whether that's like Black Lives Matter, COVID". These two participants provided examples about Black Lives Matter. Similarly, participant 10 said: "I think, like, in, 2020, 2021, a lot of, like, the Black Lives Matter movement, it was, like, really big".

As reflected in these participants responses, the COVID-19 pandemic overlapped with some historical events such as Black Lives Matter protests, which may be also related to increased prosocial behaviors on social media such as sharing information or raising awareness to contribute to social justice.

The COVID-19 pandemic marked a unique period and context for young people's social media use and prosocial behaviors. Some participants' responses suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic may have created a specific environment that shaped young people's prosocial behaviors on social media. Young people may have turned to social media to express prosocial behaviors when in-person engagement was not possible. Furthermore, the convergence of major events such as Black Lives Matter movement likely fueled an increase in social justice-related prosocial behaviors on social platforms.

Theme 4: Transitioning to college provides a unique experience that shapes social media use, including prosocial media use. Some participants talked about transitioning to college in relation to 1) changes in what they share on social media and 2) changes in their development.

Changes in what they share on social media. Several participants discussed how their social media sharing habits shifted after starting college. Some participants described how, as their context changed, they used social media to support student clubs and their activities, and that the content they shared changed accordingly. For example, Participant 01 reflected on how their prosocial behaviors on social media changed as they adapted to a different setting and community:

> "when I went to college, it became, a lot more community-based because also, when you go to college, it's like a lot smaller of a community, if that makes sense. -I feel like a lot of the time, instead of, like, posting information about, a specific, global event, I would just post, like, stuff that's going on in my community, if that makes sense. Which I still did in high school, but, like, I would post more informational posts, I guess, or I would repost them in high school rather than college, where I feel like I did a lot less of that."

The participant reflected how, at college, their engagement focused on their community rather than global events. They also shared how, in college, they observed their peers more explicitly expressing their opinions:

> "I feel like my high school peers, it's still very social-based, where, everyone just posts, their friends and whatnot. But I feel like as I come to college, it's like the peers I have now, and especially, some of the peers that I have back home have gone to college, I feel like they're more, like, outspoken in what they want to believe, and a lot, and good and bad, honestly".

Changes in their development. Some participants shared that their reasons for using social media changed in relation to their development, after they started college. For example, participant 08 said:

> "I don't necessarily think they've changed, but I think the motive behind them has changed. Just in sort of being a high schooler, you're very focused on what everybody around you is thinking, versus in college, as you get older, I think, for some people, for me at least I don't really care anymore. And so a lot of the driving behavior behind what I would do on social media when I was younger was about, who's gonna see this, what are they gonna think of this, is this okay, is this gonna come back and somebody's gonna say something weird about what I put on social media? Versus now I more think about what's important to me in what I wanna put out there."

Similarly, participant 21 also shared how peer judgment on social media decreased as they moved to college compared to high school:

> "In terms of, pro-social behavior, I guess, in college, you're less judged than in high school because it's college, so, a lot of people just, they just post, like, you know, they just, like, say, like, "Oh, this person is so nice," like, oh, and put, like, pictures of other people in their story. Like, it's a lot less judgy than high school where everything is, like, taken more seriously".

Participants reflected that their engagement with social media shifted after moving to college. They noted that they cared more about others' opinions in high school than they do now in college. They shared that during college, they focused on what they wanted to express on social media and what was important to them.

These examples indicate that transitioning to college shapes the content young people share on social media, and their social media use is shaped by their change and maturation.

Research Question 2: How do peers on social media shape adolescents' and young adults' prosocial behaviors on social media?

This research question was addressed by the last and final theme.

Theme 5: Peers play an important role in shaping participants' prosocial behaviors on social media through increasing capability, providing opportunity, and encouraging motivation.

This theme illustrates three ways that peers can shape each other's prosocial behaviors on social media. Almost all participants provided examples of how they think peers have shaped their prosocial behaviors on social media. In their answers, I found examples of encouraging motivation, increasing capability, and providing opportunities, ranked in most frequent to least frequent. Accordingly, participants' answers aligned well with the COM-B model discussed in the introduction, which confirmed my initial expectation that peers can shape each other's prosocial behaviors by increasing capabilities, providing opportunities, and encouraging motivation.

Motivation. In the COM-B model, motivation refers to internal factors (automatic and reflective), such as emotions, inspiration, encouragement, decisions, values, beliefs, and emotional processes. In the social media context, peers can motivate each other's prosocial behaviors when they find value alignment in their peers' posts or feel emotionally rewarded by interactions with them. For example, if a peer shares a social justice post, another peer may feel they share similar values and may feel more courageous about sharing related issues on social media. Young people may also feel an emotional connection to what their peers share, which can motivate their prosocial behaviors on social media. For example, they may feel upset after a peer shares a social media post about children dying of hunger in some parts of the world, which may motivate them to share fundraising posts on social media. According to participants in my sample, peers' prosocial behaviors on social media provided inspiration and encouragement for

their own prosocial behaviors. Participants also shared how shared values and emotions shaped their motivation for their prosocial behaviors on social media.

Participants shared how their peers inspired them to engage in prosocial behaviors on social media. For example, participant 19 shared how their peers on social media motivated them to speak up more: “I get a lot of, like, inspiration to speak out and speak up for my peers, or, like, not for my peers, for, like, community members through my peers”. Participant 17 also described how they feel inspired by their friends by “just seeing what they're posting on their stories about current events…really interesting, and something that I also wanna get way more engaged with, so it is also very inspiring”. Participant 3 explained how seeing a peer use their large platform to promote educational equity inspired them to post similar prosocial content on social media:

> “One thing I've noticed is that I have a friend who has a pretty big platform. She's really accomplished. She also, like me, posts about political stuff. And she has, in the past, used her platform to talk about, you know, equality in education and stuff like that, so I think I got really inspired by her to post things. And I just got to meet her this semester, so-- And we got really close because of that, so I love her. Love that girl. Love her so much. Yeah, so I think that's, a person who is a peer of mine who really inspired me to keep posting the stuff I do and behaving the way I do.”

The person also shared that they admired their friend, which can be considered a mechanism by which peers encourage each other’s prosocial motivation. The participant also shared that this social media experience shaped their prosocial behaviors in offline settings, suggesting a possible link between their online and offline prosocial behaviors.

Participants not only found inspiration but also felt encouraged by observing their peers’ prosocial behaviors on social media. For example, participant 01 said, “I feel like it kind of

makes me, like, more encouraged to, post about stuff." Similarly, participant 03 shared: "I just feel very, very encouraged to post, like, awareness and activist-related things, because people at [name of the university] would always, my story, and/or, re-share what I posted, so it definitely gives me more courage to post these things." In this example, peer validation seemed to shape the motivation for the participants' prosocial behavior, which may be one of the mechanisms of encouraging prosocial behavior.

Within the COM-B model, values play a crucial role in motivation. Responses from several participants demonstrate that alignment of personal values can encourage motivation for engaging in prosocial behaviors on social media. For instance, participant 03 shared "I guess it was just really encouraging to be more active. It was just really nice to see that people care as much about the same issues that I do". Similarly, participant 04 shared:

> "I would say, like, a lot of my friends and I share, like, very similar core values. It doesn't have to be, like, anything religious or anything, but like, more, like, it would be more so, like, ethical values and stuff, like what we deem from right to wrong. So, I think that definitely helps. And it's very, like, if my friend is posting about something that I necessarily don't know of, but we have similar ethical values, I definitely will, learn and get educated on that through her".

The participant's reflection demonstrates that shared values can motivate young people to learn from peers' prosocial behaviors on social media. These instances also suggest that similarity with peers might influence participants' prosocial behaviors on social media.

Emotion is another factor that can shape motivation. In my study, only one participant explicitly described the impact emotions had on her motivation for prosocial behaviors.

Participant 1 shared that they felt emotionally affected and connected to the experiences expressed by their peers:

> "I may have seen, some people posting and I considered them as a peer that I, wanted to, or just, like, someone who I, you know, viewed as a little bit, favorable. And so in order to replicate the things that I found favorable in them, I would share and then other things is because, like, these posts, they have a way of, stirring an emotional connection and an emotional reaction. I think it's the answer is similar to high school, where I saw other people doing it that I, viewed as, like, responsible, and so I felt like maybe I should also take the initiative. And then also I felt like these posts had an emotional reaction with me, so I felt the need".

The participant's response indicate that they admired their high-status peers and wanted to emulate their prosocial behaviors on social media, which may be considered mechanisms by which peers encourage motivation for prosocial behaviors on social media.

The participants' reflections above provide some examples of how peers may encourage motivation each other's prosocial behaviors, such as through giving inspiration, encouragement, and through value alignment and emotions. Some developmental mechanisms, such as admiration, peer validation, similarity, peer status, and emulation may explain how peers may encourage motivation.

Capability. In the COM-B model, capability refers to knowledge and understanding. On social media, peers can teach each other prosocial knowledge (such as information related to climate justice) and digital skills (such as launching fundraising campaigns). Participants in this study provided various answers that can be considered as an example of increasing peers' prosocial capability on social media. Participants shared how their peers' social media posts were

an important source of knowledge, a way to gain awareness about current issues, and a context in which to learn prosocial behaviors.

For example, Participant 04 explained that through their friends' posts, they expanded their knowledge on topics they were previously unfamiliar with:

> "I would say, like, a lot of my friends and I share, like, very similar core values. It doesn't have to be, like, anything religious or anything, but more like, it would be more so, like, ethical values and stuff, like what we deem from right to wrong. So, I think that definitely helps. And it's very, like, if my friend is posting about something that I necessarily don't know of, but I, like, we have similar, like, ethical values, I definitely will, learn and get educated on that through her".

In this example, similarity with the peer in terms of values also contributed to increasing their prosocial capability. Participant 2 shared: "Like, if someone posts something, then I'll like-- that I didn't know, like, I'll read about it", indicating how peers' prosocial posts helped them to gain knowledge. Similarly, participant 17 mentioned how their main source of news was their friend's social media posts.

> "People at [name of the university] are so active in terms of politics, and especially online with sharing things. I know [name of a friend] is amazing. I get a lot of my news from [name of a friend]."

In this example, the participant expressed admiration for a peer, which may have contributed to their awareness.

Some participants shared reflections on how their peers' posts helped them deepen their awareness and broaden their perspectives on issues happening in the world. For example, participant 19 shared: "I think it helped me learn a lot about what's going on just in the world and

in my community". In a similar vein, participant 08 said that "It's definitely increased my awareness for what is, I've always been aware of what's going on in the world around me, but I now feel that I am able to hear from a lot of different perspectives on things and that could be whether it be in class or just literally learning from people on social media". These two examples illustrate how peers can increase awareness of one another regarding current local and global issues.

Participants also shared how they learned about prosocial behaviors and considered engaging in them by observing their peers' prosocial behavior on social media. For example, participant 02 shared, "…just by watching other people do that and seeing them use social media as a really powerful fundraising tool. And I was like, "Oh, damn. This is smart. I'm gonna also go do this." This also indicates that their peers modeled prosocial behaviors, such as fundraising, to them on social media. The participant shared that they admired and wanted to emulate their peers' prosocial behavior, which may be some of the mechanisms explaining how peers encourage each other's motivation.

Participant 06 shared how observing their peers' prosocial behaviors helped them learn that they can also engage in those prosocial behaviors, as they had not considered these behaviors as an option for themselves before:

> "And specific things I'm thinking of are like when people would post things about, like, volunteering at, an animal shelter or food pantry or something. And back in high school, I didn't automatically know that that's something that like you should be doing or, like, that was, something that people were doing in their free time. So that would make me think like, "Oh, like, should I be doing that? Should I be engaging with these things?" So that would make me self-conscious and feel like I'm not doing things that I should be doing."

In this example, peers modeling prosocial behaviors may be one way individuals may increase each other's prosocial behaviors on social media. The participant's response illustrates a link between prosocial behaviors in online and offline settings. The example also relates to providing prosocial opportunities and encouraging prosocial motivation: the person learned about the possibility of engaging in prosocial behavior through external factors and felt encouraged to do so. Similarly, capability, opportunity, and motivation may overlap in how peers shape each other's prosocial behaviors. The participant's reflection also indicates some of the mechanisms by which peers can increase each other's capabilities. For example, the person's reflection indicates how they wanted to 'fit in' and signals to the peer social norms. Participant 06's response also indicates that their peers' prosocial behaviors can also provide an opportunity for young people's prosocial behaviors, in addition to increasing their capability. These responses indicate how peers can model prosocial behaviors to one another, increasing each other's prosocial behaviors, and how capability, opportunity, and motivation can coexist and shape prosocial behaviors on social media.

In summary, these examples illustrate that peers can increase each other's prosocial capabilities by sharing knowledge and modeling skills on social media, and that mechanisms such as similarity, admiration, emulation, a desire to fit in, and peer social norms may play a role.

Opportunity. In the COM-B model, opportunity refers to external factors that shape or prompt behavior, such as social cues and cultural norms. Within the social media context, peers can create social norms and expectations by what they post and repost. For example, peers can create online communities on social media to advocate for various issues, and can join career networks and other groups. In this study, participants shared how their peers modeled some

behaviors that created expectations and social norms about prosocial behaviors on social media, providing new opportunities for their peers.

Some participants talked about how their peers provided prosocial opportunities by modeling and setting peer norms. For example, Participant 06 shared:

> “Other people will post things that are positive and, they'll post pictures with their friends and be like, "Oh, I love this person so much. They're amazing." And then that'll make me think like, "Oh, I haven't hung out with my friends in a while," or like, I don't post things like that, even though I do appreciate my friends and I do care a lot about them. That's not something that, like, I share on the internet like that. So that makes me think about that”.

In the same line, Participant 17 described observing their peers’ prosocial behaviors and wanting to fit in:

> “I mean, I feel like us all as humans, we are social creatures and there are people who wanna, really stand out. But for me specifically, I don't know, I've always, craved kind of fitting in, which is strange. But, I don't know, I kind of don't see that as, like, a bad thing necessarily. So, I think I definitely have mimicked what I've been witnessing on social media”.

The person also shared how they emulated their peers’ prosocial behaviors on social media. As reflected in participant 17’s answer, ‘fitting in’ to peer norms may be an important mechanism of peers providing prosocial opportunities to each other.

The examples participants provided suggest that peers may shape each other's prosocial behaviors on social media by providing opportunities through modeling, setting peer norms, and

expectations. As peers interact with this type of content on social media, they can emulate the prosocial behaviors of their peers to 'fit in' and conform to peer norms on social media.

Summary

I identified five themes in response to the two main research questions I had: 1) Participants engage in various types of prosocial behaviors on social media, mainly with their peers, 2) Many different types of barriers prevent or limit participants' prosocial behaviors on social media, 3) The COVID-19 pandemic was a unique time for social media use, including prosocial media use, 4) Transitioning to college provides a unique socialization experience that shapes social media use, including prosocial media use, and 5) Peers play an important role in shaping participants' prosocial behaviors on social media through increasing capability, providing opportunity, and encouraging motivation.

In relation to research question 1, my themes indicate that young people engage in a variety of prosocial behaviors on social media but also encounter multiple barriers that can limit or prevent these behaviors. According to Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998), time (chronosystem) and context both shape how young people use social media and engage in prosocial behavior. For instance, both the COVID-19 pandemic (time) and college experiences (context) influenced participants' online prosocial actions. The findings also reveal that prosocial behaviors on social media may motivate similar behaviors offline, with important implications for youth development and societal well-being. The fifth theme underscores how peers play a critical role, increasing capability, providing opportunities, and encouraging motivation for prosocial behavior. Overall, the five themes I identified in participant responses highlight the importance of peers, time, and context, with also highlighting the coexistence of barriers to young people's prosocial behaviors on social media. The next section discusses these

findings and the themes in relation to theories and academic literature on prosocial development, peer relationships, and social media.

Discussion

Although social media often receives attention for its negative aspects, its potential advantages can be harnessed and maximized, such as young people's prosocial behaviors on social media. Peers play a crucial role in the lives of adolescents (Nesi, 2018a) and young adults (Padilla-Walker et al., 2017; Gardner & Steinberg, 2005), and young people spend a lot of time with their peers during adolescence (Blum et al., 2022) and young adulthood (Veenstra & Laninga-Wijnen, 2023). Understanding how young people use social media for prosocial behaviors and how peers shape each other's prosocial behaviors is a promising avenue for identifying those positive behaviors to support young people's positive media use, and positive peer relationships, as well as for designing future research studies. Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to first to explore how young people use social media for prosocial reasons (benefitting other people and their communities); second, to examine how peers shape each other's prosocial behavior on social media.

I had two research questions. The first concerned young people's types of prosocial behavior on social media, and the second concerned peer influence on those behaviors. Using codebook thematic analyses (Braun & Clarke, 2022). I identified five themes related to those research questions. Those themes are discussed in the following section.

Research Question 1: Types of Prosocial Behaviors

Findings for Research Question 1 show that participants and their peers engaged in diverse prosocial behaviors on social media, though some barriers limited or prevented these behaviors. Participants described the COVID-19 pandemic as a unique context for social media

use—including prosocial behaviors—and some discussed how transitioning to college creates distinctive experiences that shape how young people use social media, including for prosocial purposes.

Theme 1: Young people and their peers engaged in various types of prosocial behaviors on social media, mainly with their peers. Participants reported engaging in or observing their peers engaging in many different types of prosocial behaviors on social media for various reasons, including supporting others, contributing to social justice, and making a change. Their prosocial behaviors included commenting, sharing, and resharing posts, and DMing. The participants mainly engaged in those prosocial behaviors with their peers. The findings related to this theme confirmed two patterns suggested in previous studies: 1) There are many ways young people use social media for positive purposes, and 2) Peers play an important role in young people's prosocial behaviors on social media.

The many ways of using social media for prosocial purposes. Earlier studies indicate that most adolescents view social media as having a positive impact on their lives (Odgers et al., 2020) and that using social media provides opportunities and a positive impact on young people through social connection and the acquisition of new information (Weir, 2023). In my study, participants reported engaging in prosocial behaviors, such as leaving positive comments on to preserve and initiate new friendships and staying in touch with friends through DMs. Participants also shared how prosocial behaviors on social media, such as sharing information about university club activities or posting and resharing donation links for a friend whose family member was undergoing a medical treatment, and social media activity about a student who was about to be deported, created a sense of community and unity in their communities. These findings were in line with previous studies, which suggested that social media allows young

people to maintain existing friendships and gain new friends (Lenhart, 2015) and to feel part of a community (Moreno & Uhls, 2019).

As depicted in Table 2, I began coding participants' prosocial behaviors on social media by first developing my initial codebook based on the items included in Online Prosocial Behaviors Scale (Erreygers et al., 2018). During the coding process, I observed that some of these items, such as helping someone or offering help, and complimenting or congratulating someone, matched my data; others, such as helping someone with his/her schoolwork, did not. In addition, I identified several types of prosocial behaviors, such as contibuting to social justice, which were not part of the measure. This finding may be related to the historical separation in the literature between prosocial behaviors and civic engagement domains. In my study, however, participants tended to perceive and present these behaviors together and frequently mentioned contributing to social justice when they were asked about prosocial behaviors broadly. This finding may also depend on time and context, suggesting that prosocial behaviors on social media are shaped by the contemporary sociopolitical environment.

The differences between the scale items and my findings may also be related to how I asked my questions. In my study, I asked about participants' prosocial behaviors using open-ended questions. This approach allowed them to share their experiences without being guided by specific items. However, if I had directly asked them about certain behaviors, participants might have reported other behaviors. For example, although none of my participants reported using social media to help with their peers' homework, it is possible that if I had specifically asked whether they help their friends with homework, some might have said yes.

These findings have empirical implications. To accurately assess prosocial behaviors on social media, measurement scales should consider the full variety of these behaviors. If some

types are excluded, participants may underreport their prosocial behaviors, which could lead researchers to miss the multilayered and complex nature of such behaviors because these are not specifically asked about.

Other researchers have identified a need to advance measures to promote young people's prosocial behaviors and to incorporate additional forms of prosocial behavior, such as social justice activism and speaking up (Armstrong-Carter & Telzer, 2021), and my findings support that call. In relation to Theme 1, I identified four main subthemes, each accompanied by several codes, which describe how participants and their peers engage in prosocial behaviors on social media: 1) Supporting others; 2) Contributing to social justice or driving change through online prosocial acts; 3) Initiating or maintaining friendships through prosocial behaviors; and 4) Platform-specific examples of prosocial behaviors. These prosocial behaviors ranged from supporting friends to supporting communities, and there was a lot of variety among them. Future measurement tools can incorporate the subthemes, such as social justice activism and related activities, into the design of their items, as they indicate distinct domains of prosocial behavior.

The importance of peers. Previous studies have demonstrated the importance of peers in adolescents' (Nesi, 2018a) and young adults' (Padilla-Walker et al., 2017) lives. Previous research also indicated how young people spend a significant amount of time with their peers during adolescence (Blum et al., 2022) and young adulthood (Veenstra & Laninga-Wijnen, 2023). My findings reiterated the important role of peers in young people's lives, both generally and on social media specifically. In my study, participants overwhelmingly reported engaging in prosocial behaviors on social media with their peers, including close and distant friends, schoolmates, and peers in various settings. Peers played a role as either an audience, a subject, or in encouraging prosocial behavior on social media. During adolescence, peers become very

important in satisfying one's need to belong (Pfattheicher et al., 2022), and young people are very susceptible to peer influence. It is possible that this developmental process contributed to the importance of prosocial peer influence on social media.

Participants mentioned engaging in prosocial behaviors such as leaving comments to 'hype up' their friends, resharing peers' posts to draw attention to them, sending comforting DMs to friends after the loss of loved ones, and congratulating peers on their success on LinkedIn. These positive interactions occurred in both directions, as participants reported feeling motivated to engage in prosocial behaviors on social media by observing their friends' prosocial behaviors, such as helping others, raising funds, and sharing about local and global events, among other ways. As positive peer relationships contribute to young people's positive development in areas such as psychological well-being (Almquist et al., 2014) and pro-social character development (Jenney, 2012) in offline contexts, it is possible that prosocial behaviors towards peers may also support young people's positive development.

Although young people reported engaging in many prosocial behaviors, they also shared many obstacles they faced that reduced or prevented their prosocial behaviors on social media, as the next section discusses.

Theme 2: Many different types of barriers prevent or limit participants' prosocial behaviors on social media. Young people in my study shared many different types of barriers that constrained or stopped their prosocial behaviors on social media, related to thoughts and emotions. Factors such as fear and what other people would think played a barrier role in young people's prosocial behaviors.

In my study, a surprising finding was that fear was the most common barrier to young people's prosocial behaviors on social media. This fear encompassed many layers, including

surveillance by schools, institutions, governments, peers, family, and the future of employment. Participants reported worries about their sense of safety and protection from harm in physical and digital settings. Some of these concerns related to current events, whereas others were future-oriented, such as employment concerns. Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998) suggests that development occurs within interactive systems and highlights the role of various systems, including the macrosystem and chronosystem. Participants' reflections in this study highlighted the importance of the larger context and systems, such as the government, the current political context, and time, in shaping young people's prosocial behaviors. The participants were interviewed in August 2025. Participants' reflections on fear may be related to the socio-political context at that time and context, and to events affecting various communities, especially in the New England region of the United States, where the interviews were conducted and where many participants lived and attended school.

The second most common barrier was what other people (peers, community) would think. These concerns related to being judged, perceived in a specific way, misinterpreted, or looked down upon. During adolescence, sensitivity to social information, including reward and threats, and peer norms, is heightened (Backes & Bonnie, 2019), and peer influence (Van Hoorn et al., 2016) becomes more prominent. With change and maturation, the influence of social reward slowly decreases throughout young adulthood (Bonnie et al., 2015).

Other research has identified different kinds of barriers to prosocial behaviors on social media, including the ephemeral nature of social media, the abundance of advertisements (Lou et al., 2022), limited knowledge (Lou et al., 2024), inconvenience, financial cost, information overload, privacy, the permanence of information (Fatkin, 2015), and anonymous sharing (Lane & Cin, 2018). In my study, I did not identify many of those barriers, but identified other barriers

(such as fear), which is one of the contributions of this study. However, future studies can explicitly ask participants whether these elements constrain their prosocial behaviors in social media settings. It would be worthwhile to conduct a study on how fear is diminishing young people's prosocial behaviors on social media and how it affects individuals with various social group constellations.

In contrast to barriers, other factors may facilitate or promote young people's prosocial behaviors on social media. Previous studies identified some facilitators of prosocial behaviors such as public sharing (Lane & Cin, 2018), concrete and authentic messages rather than abstract ones (Kapoor et al., 2023), trust and the type of influencers (informers than entertainers) (Zhao et al., 2024), follower receptivity, source credibility, wishful identification, parasocial relation with followers, and congruence (between influencer and cause, follower and cause, and between different causes) (Lou et al., 2024), warm language (caring, sincere, helpful, empathetic) (Gerrath et al., 2024), homophily (such as values, attitudes, and background (Bu et al., 2022)), lower follower count (Pittman & Abell, 2021), non-sponsored posts (Kapoor et al., 2023), and nurturing trust (Lou et al., 2024).

Zhao et al. (2024) found that consumers were more likely to buy green products when they were endorsed by influencers (individuals with large groups of followers on social media who endorse brands and products; Lou & Yuan, 2019; O'Connor et al., 2022) who have shared informational content, versus entertaining content, on social media. Similar to influencer-follower relationships, if a peer posts only entertaining content, they may have less prosocial impact on adolescents than peers who post more informational content. Future studies can explore which types of content hinder and facilitate peers' prosocial influence.

For this dissertation project, I did not specifically examine the facilitators, such as other things (e.g., platform features, social environment) or people (e.g., influencers, family) who facilitate young people's prosocial behaviors on social media. However, these questions were included in my interview, and I plan to examine them later. Some factors (facilitators) that affect how much media actors (like influencers) impact audiences' prosocial behaviors may also be relevant when considering prosocial peer influence. Understanding the facilitators can help determine how peers promote prosocial behaviors, especially in relation to what might hinder them. Future studies can both ask about the facilitators and the interactions between barriers and the facilitators of young people's prosocial behaviors on social media.

Theme 3: The COVID-19 pandemic was a unique time for social media use, including prosocial media use. Some participants shared how the pandemic was a unique time for social media use, including prosocial media use. These findings mainly indicated two patterns: 1) During the pandemic, there was a noticeable increase in social media use, including prosocial behaviors, and 2) These increased social justice prosocial behaviors overlapped with some social justice movements, such as Black Lives Matter. Participants shared about engaging in prosocial behaviors on social media to maintain relationships, support others, and contribute to social justice through sharing information and raising awareness.

These findings align with the literature indicating that social media was extensively used by young people during the COVID-19 pandemic (Cinelli et al., 2020; Lisitsa et al., 2020). The participants' responses suggest that during the COVID-19 pandemic, there was an increase in young people's prosocial behaviors on social media related to social justice. In the literature, these behaviors are sometimes named 'online civic engagement'. Civic engagement can refer to both 'political and prosocial contributions to society' (Schoon et al., 2025). Studies suggest that

during the pandemic, this form of prosocial behavior (online civic engagement) increased among young people (Schofield, 2024; Wilf, 2023).

This increase may be related to restrictions on in-person civic participation and the overlap between significant historical events, such as Black Lives Matter protests, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants' reflections highlight the importance of considering time and context, as emphasized in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). My study suggested that both time and context play significant roles in shaping development, particularly in shaping prosocial behaviors on social media. Future theoretical and empirical work addressing young people's prosocial behaviors on social media can incorporate more explicit information about time and context to more accurately account for these behaviors.

Theme 4: Transitioning to college provides a unique socialization experience that shapes social media use, including prosocial media use. In addition to the pandemic, another important contextual influence on participants was their transition to college. In my sample, 15 of 18 participants had some college education or were currently enrolled in college. Participants reflected on their transition to college and how their social media behaviors changed over time as they moved to a new context. Although the examples participants provided were limited, they still offer some ideas about how young people's social media engagement may change as they start college and how this change affects their prosocial behaviors on social media.

Some participants in this study reflected on how they had changed between high school and college. In high school, they shared that they cared deeply about what others thought of them, which influenced what they chose to share on social media. In college, however, they described a shift toward prioritizing their own preferences and sense of self. They reported focusing more on who they were and what they wanted to express, and placing greater

importance on their own values, wants, and needs rather than on others' opinions. This pattern likely reflects the broader process of identity development, a key developmental task in adolescence that continues to be important in young adulthood (Arnett, 2004).

Although the transition between high school and college is not linear, there are some developmental differences between students at these educational stages, such as progressive developmental changes in identity formation (with some regressive changes) during young adulthood (Klimstra & van Doeselaar, 2017), including increased commitment. Identity commitment refers to dedication to one's personal values. Participants reported prioritizing their values in their social media engagement during young adulthood, which indicates commitment.

Autonomy is an essential need during adolescence and young adulthood. During adolescence, autonomy becomes a very salient need, and it continues to develop during young adulthood, a period characterized by transitions that encourage autonomy (Inguglia et al., 2015). Moving to college, for example, requires young people to have greater autonomy and to take on new roles and responsibilities, which may be related to differences participants indicated related to their prosocial behaviors on social media. For example, young people reported that they posted and reposted on social media more frequently to support university student clubs during college compared to high school.

Future studies can compare how participants with and without a college education (socialization) engage in prosocial behaviors on social media and how similar and different they are. As college may provide young people with a new community and new opportunities for prosocial behaviors on social media, it is worthwhile to conduct a comparative study. Longitudinal studies following youth from high school through college can examine how the types of prosocial content they engage with on social media change over time.

Research Question 2: Peer Influence on Social Media

I identified theme 5 in relation to my second research question. The findings of this study suggest that peers play an important role in shaping young people's prosocial behaviors by increasing capabilities, providing opportunities, and encouraging motivation through various developmental mechanisms.

Theme 5: Peers play an important role in shaping participants' prosocial behaviors on social media through increasing capability, providing opportunity, and encouraging motivation. My study showed that peers play an important role in shaping young people's prosocial behaviors, and the COM-B model fits well for understanding prosocial peer influence on social media. Although the literature on peers' role in shaping young people's social media behaviors is limited, there are some studies that indicate a possible positive effect. Some evidence suggests young people utilize social media for prosocial purposes (e.g., Gibson & Trnka, 2020). My study's findings were in line with those of a few other studies.

One of my studies' contributions was applying the COM-B model to how peers shape young people's prosocial behaviors on social media. In doing this, I provided examples from participant interviews showing how peers may increase capability, provide opportunities, and encourage motivation. Additionally, I identified developmental mechanisms and processes that may explain how these influences occur, which include peer norms, peer validation, conformity, similarity, role models, admiration, emulation, and peer status.

Participants frequently expressed a desire to 'fit in,' highlighting how peer validation and adherence to peer norms on social media play a key role in their prosocial behavior. Research indicates that youth who display more prosocial behaviors are generally more accepted by their peers (Wentzel, 2014). Thus, the wish to be accepted and included by peers may motivate young

people to engage in prosocial behaviors on social media. Moreover, heightened sensitivity to peer influence during adolescence may further create opportunities for such prosocial behaviors (Van Hoorn et al., 2016).

Social cognitive theory suggest that people pay more attention to models similar to themselves (Bandura, 1986). People can more easily remember and reproduce the behavior when they pay closer attention. Accordingly, observing similar peers' behaviors may increase the likelihood of imitating them. The similarity hypothesis (Bandura, 1986; Yancey et al., 2002; Zirkel, 2002) indicates that adolescents may choose role models based on various similarities in culture, gender, ethnicity, and race, among other variables. Overall, the research literature suggests that having a role model who shares similar qualities such as gender, race, and ethnicity (Bryant & Zimmerman, 2003; Zirkel, 2002), interest (Lockwood & Kunda), background (Han et al., 2023), experience (Strasser-Burke & Symonds, 2020), and identity, beliefs, and desires (Klimstra et al., 2023) can positively impact adolescents and support them in envisioning their future selves by showing them what is possible. Some participants in my study reported that having values and interests similar to those of their peers encouraged them to learn from those individuals and engage in prosocial behaviors, as it increased both their motivation and their capability. Although such instances were not very frequently mentioned, future research can explicitly investigate the role of value similarity in how peers influence young people’s prosocial behaviors on social media.

Young people can get inspiration, learn from, and imitate the behaviors and attitudes of others who can be considered role models (Hurd et al., 2011). Many types of people can be role models; different terminology has been used to distinguish various types. Role models can include parental and nonparental figures such as family members, friends, public figures, media

personalities, peers, and friends. A robust body of literature shows considerable support for role models' positive and negative influences on adolescence (Hurd et al., 2010). There are varied conceptualizations about the definition of role models (Hurd et al., 2010; Yancey et al., 2002). Role models are people considered worthy of emulation and imitation (Feldhusen & Pleiss, 1995) who behave in a way deemed worthy (Hurd et al., 2011). Role models are also defined as people who are admired and looked up to (Yancey, 2002). They are considered exemplary people worth identifying with (Yancey et al., 2011). Strasser-Burke and Symonds (2020) suggested that people deliberately turn to others to learn about their roles and want to be like their role models. There might or might not be a personal contact or a relationship between people and their role models. However, according to Yancey et al. (2011), an emotional attachment between the individual and the role model is expected.

The concept of a role model is related to, but distinct from, that of a mentor. Although some studies use "role models" and "mentors" interchangeably (Hurd et al., 2011; Strasser-Burke & Symonds, 2020), these terms are not synonymous. Whereas a role model is a more general term, mentors can be considered a specific type of role model. They guide and support younger people in areas they have experienced during a particular time. They have an explicit purpose (Strasser-Burke & Symonds, 2020) and interact closely with their mentees (Zimmerman et al., 2002). However, being a role model does not necessarily involve mentorship. Some role models inspire rather than provide support and guidance. Adolescents can look up to role models even if they do not have any personal interaction with them (e.g., distant peers).

In my study, participants expressed admiration for several of their peers, often emulating or aspiring to emulate the behaviors of those they perceived as high-status. Although participants did not explicitly name these individuals as their role models, their accounts suggested that some

peers may serve as role models and shape prosocial behaviors on social media. Future research could delve deeper by directly asking participants about their peer role models and by investigating how peer role modeling interacts with peers' influence on young people's prosocial behaviors within the COM-B model.

I used two conceptual frameworks for my study: Ecological systems theory and the COM-B model. Ecological systems theory was helpful as it highlights bidirectional interactions, context, and time. However, it did not adequately explain the mechanisms of prosocial peer influence on social media, such as why and how peers shape each other's prosocial behaviors in these environments. The COM-B model provided a simple, organized way to examine behavior and behavior change. However, it is difficult to distinguish the components of the COM-B model, such as capability, opportunity, and motivation, from one another, which represents a weakness of the model. Overall, my two conceptual frameworks offered a useful foundation for this study, but they also had limitations that suggest the need to extend or rethink these frameworks.

This study presents important theoretical implications. Although some frameworks explain peer influence on social media (e.g., Nesi et al., 2018a, 2018b), they overlook prosocial behaviors. Future theories could address this gap by incorporating prosocial behaviors into peer influence models, particularly within the social media context. The COM-B model may offer a promising starting point. Expanding future models to include barriers and facilitators, such as those identified by youth in this study, who often described factors that limited or prevented their prosocial behaviors on social media, can deepen our understanding. Integrating these aspects allows for a more nuanced view of how peers shape each other's prosocial behaviors on social

media. It is not possible to fully capture the mechanisms and processes of prosocial peer influence without knowing what prevents and facilitates it, and then the interactions within those.

This study also has empirical implications. Future studies can directly ask about the developmental mechanisms and processes identified in this study, such as peer norms, peer validation, conformity, similarity, role models, admiration, emulation, and peer status (high-status peers). Using these studies' findings, future studies can develop measures reflecting the COM-B model and the mechanisms and processes through which peers shape each other's prosocial behaviors. For example, future measures can include items such as ‘my friends inspire me to repost fundraising posts on social media’, reflecting the motivation component of COM-B, and ‘I learn about various topics through my friends on social media,’ which would represent capability. Developing a measure of prosocial peer influence on social media that specifically addresses the components of the COM-B model would allow researchers to test specific hypotheses derived from the model and would also provide empirical evidence for re-thinking existing theoretical models.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although the results of this study have important theoretical, empirical, and practical implications, they should also be interpreted in light of its limitations. These include limited attention to race, ethnicity, gender, and other social group memberships; a narrow age range; the importance of historical time; potential differences across social media platforms; and the use of a single theoretical model to investigate peer influence.

One limitation of the study is that it did not explicitly address aspects of participants’ social group memberships and positions and how those may shape how they engage in prosocial

behaviors on social media. These are important to consider due to issues of representation and differences in social media use.

Although mainstream media is defined by misrepresentations (Sealey-Ruiz & Greene, 2015), underrepresentation (Klein & Shiffman, 2009), narrow representations (Orr et al., 2019), stereotypes (Ward, 2004), and invisibility (Fryberg & Townsend, 2008) regarding race and ethnicity, social media can provide an opportunity for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) for positive representations and prosocial opportunities. Research has documented the detrimental effects of underrepresentation and misrepresentation of Black, Latino, and Native American youth in mainstream media in the United States. These negative influences include lower levels of self-esteem and academic performance, reduced feelings of agency, dissatisfaction with one's appearance, narrow professional aspirations, unfavorable feelings about one's ethnic-racial group and community, and heightened concerns about social perception (Rogers et al., 2021). These negative portrayals of one's ethnic/racial group may limit relatable prosocial examples for diverse youth communities.

Social media may provide a unique prosocial opportunity for adolescents as they can gain access to peers who look like themselves, providing similar inspirational prosocial models. The relationships adolescents form on social media can provide comfort, especially if their identities and social groups are overlooked in mainstream media (Hoffner & Bond, 2022). Integrating these dimensions into a future extension of the study can provide more nuanced information on young people's racially and ethnically diverse experiences on social media, their prosocial media engagement, and their influence on peers.

BIPOC and White youth have varying media experiences in terms of screen time, opportunities, participation, and representation. For example, Hispanic/Latino and Black

adolescents tend to spend more time on social media than their White counterparts, which may impact the degree of prosocial influence from peers. According to Common Sense Media (Madden et al., 2024), there is a notable difference between Black and White adolescents in reporting the importance of social media for drawing inspiration from others in social media. Black adolescents use social media more than their White counterparts to explore educational and professional avenues and express their creativity. All these varying experiences can influence the degree of prosocial impact of peers on adolescents' prosocial behaviors. As mentioned above, young people from various constellations of social identities spend varying amounts of time on social media and engage with it in different ways. Similarly, young people's engagement with social media and the prosocial influence of their peers may differ across various regions and locations. Although my study did not specifically look at how race, ethnicity, and geography can play a role in young people's prosocial behaviors on social media, it is important that future studies incorporate race, ethnicity, and other diversities into the study design to have a more nuanced understanding of how young people use social media for prosocial purposes.

This study also did not directly examine how gender influences young people's prosocial behavior on social media. A review study by McCoy et al. (2019) suggests that although there is no consistent large difference between females and males in susceptibility to peer influences, adolescent males are often more susceptible to risk-taking behaviors. The differences in risk-taking may shape young people's prosocial behaviors and prosocial peer influence on social media, similar to offline contexts.

Some research studies suggest other gender differences in young people's prosocial behaviors in offline settings, with females engaging in prosocial behaviors more frequently

compared to males (Fabes et al., 1999). In addition to frequency, another study suggested that girls give more importance to prosocial behaviors than boys (Beutel & Johnson., 2004). The differences in frequency and importance given are also observed in the developmental pattern of prosocial behaviors during adolescence. Van der Graaf et al. (2018) found that, for boys, levels of prosocial behavior increased between 14 and 17 years and then slightly decreased thereafter. On the other hand, for girls, prosocial behaviors increased until age 16 and decreased slightly after that. Other gender differences with regard to prosocial behavior include older female adolescents exhibiting higher social responsibility and altruism than younger male adolescents (Pastor et al., 2024).

However, in online settings, the relationships between prosocial behaviors and gender are inconclusive. Research indicates some gender differences in adolescents' social media use as well as in prosocial behavior. For instance, one study showed that adolescent girls spend more time on social media than boys (Rothwell, 2023). Some researchers, however, did not identify any gender differences in online prosocial behaviors (Wang & Wang, 2008; Wright & Li, 2011). Recent studies indicate that social media plays an important role for marginalized youth by creating opportunities for their personal growth and affirmations of their identity; at the same time, it also presents negative experiences for them, such as online harassment (Madden et al., 2024).

My study sample was small and mostly consisted of participants who identified either as cisgender women or as nonbinary. Accordingly, the sample lacked sufficient gender diversity to analyze gender differences in detail. However, future versions of this study can integrate questions related to gender and examine the kinds of gender differences in prosocial behaviors on social media.

Another future study can incorporate more explicit attention to age. There is research evidence of age differences for peer influence on prosocial behaviors in general. In one study, Van Goethem et al. (2014) found significant age differences between older and younger adolescents in terms of peer influence on volunteering behaviors. This study showed that as adolescents age, the influence of friends becomes more crucial in their decision to volunteer. Research also indicates differences between younger and older adolescents regarding social media use, exposure, and experiences (Anderson & Jiang, 2018; Madden et al., 2024). It is possible that there may be differences in terms of prosocial peer influence between younger and older individuals.

My study included participants between the ages of 19-25, and the interview included questions about both young adulthood (their current age) and retrospective questions about adolescence (their high school years). Participants shared reflections on how they engaged with prosocial behaviors on social media during adolescence and young adulthood in different ways. Future studies can conduct a comparative study, including both adolescents and young adults in their sample, and explain how peers shape each other's prosocial behaviors on social media across age groups. Future studies can also follow adolescents through the transition to adulthood to investigate different developmental trajectories in prosocial social media use and how peers influence this process.

As with any research, my study was carried out during a specific period (summer 2025), so the findings may not generalize to all study samples or other research contexts. Historical differences over time are important to consider. As social media platforms and their associated contexts and norms continually evolve, so do the ways in which young people engage with them change. Some findings from this study may be relevant for future research, whereas others may

not. Consequently, the study's results should be considered in light of the current time and context.

Another limitation of the study was the limited attention to the link between online and offline prosocial behaviors. Although this topic was not explicitly asked about in the interview, some participants' responses suggested a link between online and offline prosocial behaviors on social media. They shared that observing their peers' or others' prosocial behaviors on social media encouraged them to engage in prosocial behaviors on social media, and that being a recipient of a prosocial behavior had implications for their offline prosocial behaviors. For example, a participant shared that observing people posting and reposting local actions about the BLM movement on social media motivated them to attend BLM protests. However, the examples were limited and not substantial enough to form a theme.

In my study, fear was one of the most frequently mentioned, complex, and multilayered barriers to young people's prosocial behaviors on social media. Future studies can explore how fear shapes the relationship between online and offline prosocial behaviors. Social media may provide some young people with prosocial opportunities that are inaccessible in offline settings because they fear retaliation from institutions. At the same time, fear of being doxxed for engaging in certain forms of prosocial behavior online—such as supporting various social justice causes—may prompt young people to favor offline prosocial engagement over social media–based actions. Future studies may explore the role of fear in the link between various online and offline prosocial behaviors.

Offline prosocial behaviors often yield visible, immediate effects, contrasting with the more ambiguous outcomes of online participation, whereby individuals may perceive their digital interactions as meaningful despite a lack of substantial benefit to others (Chou et al.,

2020). However, online prosocial behaviors can also be a precursor to offline prosocial behaviors by providing opportunities for mental rehearsal (Hui et al., 2024; Myrick, 2017), thereby enabling individuals to envision potential offline behaviors. Similarly, online prosocial behaviors may motivate offline prosocial behaviors. After engaging in online prosocial behaviors, people may engage in offline prosocial behaviors to mitigate the gap between what they share online and their behavior in real settings (Hui et al., 2024). Some studies suggest a connection between offline and online prosocial behaviors (such as those on social networking sites, chat programs, email, and text messages).

My findings showed that some participants indicated how observing others' prosocial behaviors encouraged them to engage in prosocial behaviors in offline settings. There is a need to explore in greater depth the link between prosocial behaviors on social media and offline prosocial behaviors, especially within the context of prosocial peer influence, which can be studied in future research.

Another limitation is that this study did not specifically focus on understanding how different media platforms, along with their affordances and constraints, may affect young people's prosocial behaviors. Participants reported mostly using Instagram and TikTok and sometimes shared their opinions on how these platforms served different purposes. Although differences among social media platforms were not part of this dissertation, a future study could examine how young people use them differently and what this means for their prosocial behaviors on social media.

Finally, this study specifically focused on using the COM-B model to understand peer influence on prosocial behaviors. There are other ways to look at peer influence, such as direct and indirect peer influence on prosocial behaviors (Van Hoorn, et al., 2016), peer status and

group centrality (Choukas-Bradley et al., 2015), and peer pressure (Dagorn, 2025) on prosocial behaviors. Future studies can also examine prosocial peer influence at the group level and study peer groups within the social media context. Although some theoretical frameworks examined peer influence at the group level in the social media context, they did not focus on prosocial behaviors or prosocial peer influence (Nesi et al., 2018b). Future studies can explore the various aspects of prosocial peer influence, both at the individual and group levels, and how it shapes prosocial behaviors by using different theoretical models to frame the investigations.

Finally, I did not include negative aspects of peer influence (peer pressure) on social media, as they were not part of my research questions. Although participants primarily discussed positive peer influence in my study, a few discussed peer pressure on social media. Future studies can explicitly ask about peer pressure and whether and how it may be related to how young people engage in or avoid certain prosocial behaviors on social media.

Implications

By building on prior research on prosocial behaviors and peer relationships more generally, this qualitative study aimed to explore young adults' experiences, perspectives, and observations of their own and their peers' prosocial behaviors on social media and how peers shape those behaviors. The findings could contribute to the literature on adolescent and young adult development and to media studies through their theoretical, empirical, and applied insights.

One implication in the realm of theory is that this study addressed a gap in the theoretical literature regarding how peers shape each other's prosocial behaviors on social media. This study's findings indicate that the COM-B model (Michie et al., 2011) fits well and can be integrated into theoretical models explaining how peers shape each other's prosocial behaviors through increasing their capability, providing opportunities, and encouraging motivation for

prosocial behaviors on social media. Future theoretical models can also incorporate the COM-B model to understand other forms of peer influence beyond prosocial behaviors.

The findings of this study can also offer insights for rethinking and extending Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). This theory positions peers within the microsystem and media within the exosystem in the context of individual development. Microsystems refers to the direct interactions and immediate environments that surround a person's development. They shape development through bidirectional relationships. The exosystem consists of indirect influences on development. Bronfenbrenner's theory originally located media within the exosystem, viewing it as a more distant influence.

However, both the literature and participants' interviews in my study show that social media is central to young people's lives. On this basis, I suggest that social media should be considered part of the microsystem. Social media is inherently dynamic: young people both influence and are influenced by social media spaces. As a microsystem, social media is also highly sensitive to time and context, perhaps more so than other microsystem settings. Given its importance, prevalence, and the amount of time young people devote to it, social media may be positioned within the microsystem as one of the key systems shaping their lives. Future theoretical models could offer extensions to ecological systems theory, with a more detailed explanation of the interplay between peers and social media, the processes and mechanisms of these interactions, and how these dynamics affect young people's prosocial development.

My study also offers empirical implications. Theme 1 highlighted the diverse nature of young people's prosocial behaviors on social media. This result suggests that existing measures can be broadened and new ones developed by including behaviors such as speaking up and

raising awareness. Because participants frequently discussed these behaviors and provided detailed examples, it's crucial to incorporate them into present and future assessment tools. Incorporating these subthemes and their corresponding codes into questionnaire development can help more fully capture the full range of prosocial behaviors.

This study also holds practical implications for professionals dedicated to fostering young adults' positive development. Its findings may inform educators, media producers, and programs that foster adolescents' and young adults' positive social media engagement by using insights into the prosocial behaviors they reported engaging in on social media and the ways in which their peers shaped those behaviors. Professionals may use these findings to develop digital media literacy curricula that capitalize on the meaningful contributions of their peers on each other's prosocial behaviors on social media. When doing this, the curriculum developers can model many different ways to engage in prosocial behaviors on social media through incorporating developmental mechanisms and processes such as peer admiration, peer status, peer role modeling, and similarity.

Conclusion

The development of young people's prosocial behavior is increasingly relevant in the social media context, where distinct opportunities arise for fostering positive social interactions. Multiple actors, such as peers, parents, influencers, and celebrities, may shape adolescents' prosocial behaviors on social media. This dissertation focused explicitly on the prosocial behaviors of young people and their peers on social media, seeking to address the gap in the literature by illustrating how young people use social media for prosocial purposes, and how peers can shape adolescents' prosocial behaviors by increasing their prosocial capability, providing them with opportunities, and encouraging their motivation.

Appendixes

Appendix A: Interview Script and Questions for the Prosocial Spark Project

Introductions and Confirmation of Consent

Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in this project. I am interested in better understanding what young adults think about prosocial behaviors on social media. This study will ask questions about your prosocial social media behaviors, and your peer's contributions on your prosocial social media behaviors. Prosocial behavior is defined as things that benefit others, and in this case we are interested in prosocial behaviors on social media. Some examples include writing a supportive comment to a grieving friend after seeing their social media post, donating to a social cause, or liking or reposting a post to support a friend asking a question in a social media story. These are only a few examples, and there are many other ways of engaging in prosocial behaviors on social media. Do you have any questions at this moment about what prosocial behaviors are?

1. To start, would you like to tell me a little bit about yourself?

Thanks for introducing yourself. I will share a bit about myself [shares name, pronouns, and how the interviewer is connected to the study. [Example: My name is X. I use she/her pronouns, and I am a PhD student in the Child Study and Human Development department at Tufts University. We are interested in young people's prosocial behaviors on social media and the people who shape their prosocial social media behaviors. Thank you very much again for signing up – I am genuinely interested in whatever you share with me today!] This interview is expected to last approximately one hour and is completely voluntary. You can take a five minute break, skip any questions, or stop at any time.

2. Do you have any questions at this point?

I am going to type your participant ID number in the chat. Could you change your name that appears on the screen to this number? This way, your name will not appear in the recording."

I would like to record this interview so I can go back and review the things that you said. You told us in the online form that you would be okay with me recording this interview but I wanted to ask one more time before we begin.

3. Do you still give me permission to video and audio record this interview?

[If the participant does not provide consent (if they did not read instructions in the consent form about permission to record): "Thank you for letting me know. We have decided not to interview those who do not provide permission to record. Recording is necessary so we can go back and thoroughly understand participants' experiences. Your study session will end here, and I will delete your consent form. If you change your mind in the future, please feel free to reach out to us. Thank you for your interest in our study.]

Thank you very much for giving me permission to audio and video record. Let us begin. Let's start with some questions about your prosocial behaviors on social media. Remember, prosocial behaviors are behaviors that benefit others. If you're unsure whether something fits the definition of prosocial behavior, we can discuss that further at any time.

Section 1 [Participants' prosocial behaviors on social media]:

Questions about adolescence:

1. First, I want you to think about your high school years and answer the following questions based on your experiences during that time. Can you recall any instances where you used social media in ways that can be considered prosocial, benefitting others?
    a. Can you provide more details?

   b. What was that experience like? What do you remember from that experience?) [If the participants share multiple examples, start from one of them and ask about details and then move to the next example]

2. Who did you engage in these behaviors with? In other words, who was the recipient or intended audience of the prosocial behavior?
3. If you could put yourself back in your high school mindset, why do you think you engaged in these behaviors in the examples/issues you have shared? [If they already have shared some reasons, ask them to expand].
4. Do you remember/have other similar examples of your prosocial social media behaviors that you would like to share?
   a. [If the person shares an example related to emotions, experiences, thoughts, or motivations, please ask a follow-up question. Inquire whether there have been other times when they felt similar emotions or had similar thoughts, particularly in relation to engaging in similar prosocial behaviors on social media].
5. If you could put yourself back in your high school mindset, why do you think you engaged in these behaviors in the examples/issues you have shared? [If they already have shared some reasons, ask them to expand].
   a. Who did you engage in these behaviors with? In other words, who was the recipient or intended audience of the prosocial behavior?

Which social media platforms did you use during high school for those behaviors?

Questions about young adulthood:

6. Now, let's think about your current experiences after high school and answer the following questions based on your current experiences. What are some instances that you used social media in ways that can be considered prosocial, benefitting others?
    a. Can you provide more details? (What was that experience like)? [If the participants share multiple examples, start from one of them and ask about details and then move to the next example]
    b. Who did you engage in these behaviors with? In other words, who was the recipient or intended audience of the prosocial behavior?
7. Why do you think you engaged in these behaviors in the examples/issues you have shared? [If they already have shared some reasons, ask them to expand].
8. Do you have other similar examples of your prosocial social media behaviors you would like to share?
    a. [If the person shares an example related to emotions, experiences, thoughts, or motivations, please ask a follow-up question. Inquire whether there have been other times when they felt similar emotions or had similar thoughts, particularly in relation to engaging in similar prosocial behaviors on social media].
9. Why do you think you engaged in these behaviors/issues in the examples you have shared? [If they already have shared some reasons, ask them to expand].
    a. Who did you engage in these behaviors with? In other words, who was the recipient or intended audience of the prosocial behavior?
    b. Which social media platforms do you use for those prosocial social media behaviors?

Questions about transition:

10. Let's think about now compared to high school. Comparing yourself now to your high school self, do you think your prosocial behaviors on social media have changed?
    a. How? What is similar and different?
    b. [If they are different, why do you think this change happened? If they are similar, why do you think they are similar?]

Section 2 [Peer effect on social media]:

11. Now, I'd like to ask you some questions about how your peers shape your prosocial social media use. When I say peers, I mean people of similar age or position as you are, such as friends, classmates, coworkers, and neighbors. They can be people who are close or distant to you.
    a. [If necessary, please remind the participant that we are interested in what they remember or what their perspective or observations.]

Questions about adolescence:

12. First, I want you to think about your high school years and answer the following questions based on your experiences during those years.
13. Can you share some examples you remember from your peer's prosocial behaviors on social media during high school?
    a. Can you provide more details?
    b. Who did your peers engage in these behaviors with? In other words, who was the recipient or intended audience of the prosocial behavior?
    c. In the example you have shared why do you think your peers have engaged in those behaviors. [If they already have shared some reasons, ask them to expand].
    d. Which social media platform do you remember your peers used in those examples?

Questions about peers contribution:

14. How did your peer's prosocial behaviors on social media, such as posts, likes, or comments, shaped your prosocial social media behaviors during high school?—positive or negative?

Questions about young adulthood:

15. Now, I want you to think about your experiences after high school and answer the following questions based on it. Can you share some examples of your peer's current prosocial behaviors on social media?
    a. Can you provide more details?
    b. Who did your peers engage in these behaviors with? In other words, who was the recipient or intended audience of the prosocial behavior?
    c. In the example you have shared, why do you think your peers have engaged in those behaviors? [If they already have shared some reasons, ask them to expand].
    d. Which social media platforms do your peers use for those examples?

Questions about peers's contribution:

16. How have your peer's prosocial behaviors on social media, such as posts, likes, or comments shaped your prosocial social media behaviors currently?—positive or negative?

Questions about transition:

17. Now, let's think about now compared to high school. How do you think your high school peer's prosocial behaviors compared to current peer's prosocial behaviors on social media is similar or different?
    a. Why?
    b. Comparing your current self to your high school self, how differently or similarly are you affected by your peers' prosocial behaviors on social media?

c. How come this change happened?

Ending

18. Thank you for answering all of these questions. We're nearing the end of our time. Is there anything else you would like to share about your prosocial behaviors on social media, past or present?
19. Is there anything else you would like to share about your peer's prosocial behaviors on social media, past or present?
20. Is there anything you want to ask me in our remaining time together?

Debrief

These are all the questions I have for you. Thank you for participating in this interview. I appreciate you sharing your stories and experiences with me. By the end of this study, I aim to better understand young adults' prosocial behaviors on social media, their peers' prosocial behaviors and other factors and people who shape their prosocial behaviors.

You will get a $25 Dunkin Donuts gift card by receiving an e-gift card sent to the email address you provided.

Sometimes, interviews like this can bring up complex emotions. If that has been the case for you and you would like some support, you can seek out support services from your school or trusted adults in your life. You can also call or text the Massachusetts Behavioral Health Help Line at (833) 773-2445. If you have any questions or concerns about the study, please feel free to the study team dice@tufts.edu or the principal investigator, Sara Johnson, at s.johnson@tufts.edu. You can also contact the Tufts Institutional Review Board at sber@tufts.edu or (617) 627-8804 if you have any concerns.

Appendix B: The Codebook

Themes	Subthemes	Codes	Example	Participant
Young people in this study and their peers have engaged in various types of prosocial behaviors on social media, mainly with their peers.	1-Wanting to support other people	Helping others Cheer up or hype up someone Compliment or congratulate Comfort or console	"I would comment on people's posts, primarily just because, it's a nice thing to do and I wanted to hype up my friends."	02
	2-Wanting to contribute to social justice or making a change through prosocial behaviors on social media	Contributing to social justice	"In terms of, like, posting about, like, causes, I feel like the main reason was just to, raise awareness, and bring certain causes to people's attention, not even just, in trying to, like, get people to do something or, sign a petition or anything like that. Just, making people think more about something."	20

	3-Engaging in prosocial behaviors for friendship initiation or maintenance	Relational reasons	“I guess one, just being supportive and a good friend. And two, I guess to keep that friendship or something, like for certain people, like if your friends don't comment, to them, it's like, "You're not my real friend," or something. I don't know. But in high school, I feel like when you're a lot younger, that's how you go about things and friendships and show that, "Oh, this is my friend”.	04
	4-Engaging in prosocial behaviors that are social media platform specific examples	DMing people Include them through tagging Leaving positive comments	“I would say they were posting for, like, again, mutual aid or, like, community members, people who are, like, struggling financially, like a lot of GoFundMes. I feel like that's very popular.”	19

		Posting, reposting, sharing stories		
With Who?	1-Engaging in prosocial behaviors with peers.	Peers	“they were engaging with, like, all of our other peers in high school, other friends, in sports if we, like, played against other schools, then, some of these people would follow each other, so then other schools, obviously you would interact with , some of them had friends from back home if they moved a lot.”	06
	2- Engaging in prosocial behaviors with community	Community	“I think of like followers who are still broadly in my community online and like how I sort of described, people from my immediate like surroundings and high school and family and extended family and aunties and uncles and cousins and, even then when I went to college, like, peers and friends of friends”.	13

	3-Engaging with other people connected on social media that they don't know in the offline world	Other people	"when I was posting something related to work I was doing, or a panel I spoke on during that time in college, I feel like it was for the world in a sense. Where it's, like, I wanted as many people to see it as-as, like, humanly possible."	14
	4-Engaging in prosocial behaviors with family	Family	"I feel like that really depends on the person. I feel like in general the audience it would just be, like, friends, family, and mutual friends".	20
Many different types of barriers prevent or limit participants' prosocial behaviors on social media.	Thoughts and emotions preventing or diminishing	Fear What other people would think	"I'm very cautious about what I'm posting on social media just 'cause you're always, I mean, I have a private account, but even so they tell you about future employers are gonna look at your social media, and I have a lot of friends, I think,	08

	prosocial behaviors		politically who are on separate sides. And so, I was always very cautious about not wanting to make people angry necessarily in what I was saying. I think as I've gotten older, I've stopped caring.”	
Pandemic is a unique time for social media use, including prosocial media use.	-	-	“I would definitely say a lot of people posted things about, like, maybe not like, fundraising, but like, maybe mutual aid or things like that in high school. Especially, during my first and second year, it was COVID, so it was like a lot of people were online.”	19
Transitioning to college provides a unique socialization experience that shapes social media use,		Changes in what they share on social media Changes in their development	“I think I was much more insecure in high school and didn't have any friends. And I was like, "I need everyone to like me all the time." so I think in high school I commented more on other people's posts and didn't think as much about like	06

including prosocial media use.			what they would think of me, just casting lines everywhere. But then in college, I'm much more, much more thoughtful in that sense, and good at maintaining relationships but also being aware of like how my online presence can be translated into, like the real world."	
Peers play an important role in shaping or pressuring participants' prosocial behaviors on social media through increasing capability, providing opportunity, and encouraging motivation	Peer influence	Capability Opportunity Motivation	"I mean, I feel like us all as humans, we are social creatures and there are people who wanna, like, really stand out. But for me specifically, I don't know, I've always craved kind of fitting in, which is strange. But, I don't know, I kind of don't see that as, like, a bad thing necessarily. So, I think I definitely have mimicked what I've been witnessing on social media".	17

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