

Youth
Research:

IDENTITY, CULTURE, & ISSUE ADVOCACY



Project Background & Objective

The cultural context around equity is changing. Initiatives that once drew wide agreement are now met with pushback and debate — especially among younger generations who are still forming their views. Many organizations that focus on social justice, diversity, equity, and inclusion haven't fully adapted to this changing landscape, creating space for other voices to influence how a rising generation thinks about these issues.

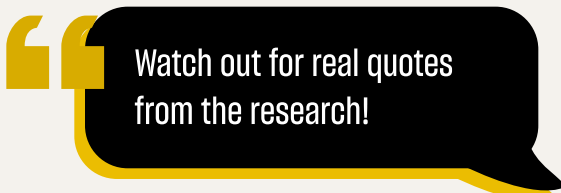
Young people still want diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice, but the language used by many philanthropies, nonprofits, and political groups over the last decade is no longer working. Effective communications and advocacy mean meeting young adults where they are — understanding how they see the world, how they connect with one another, and how ideas spread in their communities.

To model this, we wanted to understand how youth develop their worldviews and social identities.

RALLY partnered with Gen Z research expert Rachel Janfaza (founder of The Up & Up) to conduct focus groups with tweens, teens, and young adults (ages 11-21). Together, we examined existing data on the attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors of Gen Z and Gen Alpha.

These conversations explored their experiences, knowledge, values, and needs around identity, race, gender, religion, politics, and the American Dream. We spoke to young people across more than a dozen states and DC, from major cities like New York, Los Angeles, Boston, Miami, and Chicago, to rural and suburban communities in Wisconsin, West Virginia, Texas, and Arizona.

By uncovering barriers, motivators, and opportunities, we aim to understand how to talk about identity, culture, and issue advocacy in ways that connect with the next generation.



Watch out for real quotes from the research!

KEY TAKEAWAY #1

Young people embrace fluidity, and their sense of identity goes well beyond their race, ethnicity, gender, orientation, faith, or other matters of heritage. Their sense of identity is social and cultural.

Depending on the situation, different aspects of their identity come to the forefront, shaping how they see themselves, how they see others, and how they think others see them. These social and cultural identities influence how they experience and respond to different environments, sometimes more than their more inherent traits.

So, when I'm at [my H.B.C.U.] school, I'm surrounded by other Black people. But when I'm in my hometown, there's very few of us. Or when I'm in my internship, I think there's three Black people in the whole company. So I feel like sometimes my blackness isn't as forefront when I'm with other Black people.

SO WHAT?

Many advocacy and communications strategies have relied too much on inherent identity (like race, ethnicity, and gender) and not enough on social or cultural identity, such as family role, occupation, place-based affiliations, or hobbies and interests. We need to recognize that people's beliefs are shaped by these social or cultural influences. Advocacy and narrative change work should explore connecting with young people through their cultural and social identities.

KEY TAKEAWAY #2

Young people are attracted to conversations that don't fit a fixed script about any one aspect of their identity.

They are eager to avoid being pigeonholed into one identity, and recognize that their identities intersect in ways that shape their experiences and how they move through the world. Young people don't necessarily hold certain beliefs or values because of their identity. This awareness influences how they navigate inclusion, belonging, and what parts of themselves matter most on any given issue or personal value.

SO WHAT?

Recognize that people want to hear different narratives and new ideas. Don't use stale identity-explicit messaging that can come off as pandering, disconnected from their more nuanced experience, or unimaginative about the future.



KEY TAKEAWAY #3

How youth form their identity varies by gender.

Among middle schoolers (ages 11-14), young boys tend to ground their social identity in interests and hobbies, while young girls more often anchor their social identity around gender, racial identity, faith, or family roles.

SO WHAT?

Explore putting values in the context of youth and young adults' interests, hobbies, family dynamics, and everyday experiences.



KEY TAKEAWAY #4

Younger generations have less enthusiasm around DEI, but not because they don't value it.

Gen Z and Gen Alpha do not (yet) perceive institutionalized racism as much as older Americans; however, they do value authentic conversations about race and diversity, and are discouraged by the retreat from DEI. At the same time, they often perceive DEI efforts as overly performative. To them, the work can even feel counterproductive when it seems basic, insincere, or not worthy of their trust because the institution itself isn't trustworthy.

SO WHAT?

Advocate for DEI and social justice by highlighting the “why.” Explain it in terms of present-day values and future outcomes, not just past wrongs that may not feel connected to today's experiences and social communities.

Diversity can be applied to anything really. I feel like race is the most common way diversity is used, but it's a lot more than that. It's also culture, nationality, even your personality. There are many different things that make people diverse.

KEY TAKEAWAY #5

Faith can be a strong identity anchor for young people.

Among young people across ideological lines, faith and religion — for those who hold it — is stepping in where civics and politics fall short. Faith and religion heavily shape how young people see themselves and the world around them. Spiritual framing is also not a partisan signal for them in the same way it often is for older generations, meaning young people of faith can hold diverse viewpoints that don't always align with what is generally perceived as a "religious issue."

SO WHAT?

Don't assume that faith-based narratives are only effective for advancing conservative ideology. Explore spiritual or faith-based framing for a variety of issues and audiences.

I would say my faith is the core thing that shapes my identity. I feel like it allows me to have inner reflections. It allows me to be more empathetic, selfless, and because of that, I start to see myself not just as an individual, but I start to understand where others are coming from. And it really does drive me to be a person that's more compassionate and wants to help and actually better society.

KEY TAKEAWAY #6

It's not politics youth reject —it's partisanship.

College students often view issues as a reflection of personal values — not just a matter of opinion. Because social issues are their primary entry into politics, political stances signal morals, character, and what someone is willing to tolerate or protect. Disagreements feel high-stakes and emotional, and advocacy on these issues is inevitably seen as political. But what young people dislike about politics isn't the debate — it's the polarization and oversimplification that come with partisanship. In fact, they see organizations that pretend issues aren't political as disingenuous. They hate platitudes just as much as they hate silence.

“People are too polarized, and when people are so polarized, I feel like nothing gets done. It just makes everything worse for everybody. I feel like if society, especially in a political sense, wants to improve, people need to be more willing to compromise and not be so polarized with their ideals.”

SO WHAT?

Stop trying to avoid political or ideological debate. It's not possible to connect with youth without addressing their need for a vision. In fact, they are more likely to reward thoughtful confrontation rather than diluted conversation. The goal should be to bring people into debate without divisiveness, not pretend there isn't a debate at all.

KEY TAKEAWAY #7

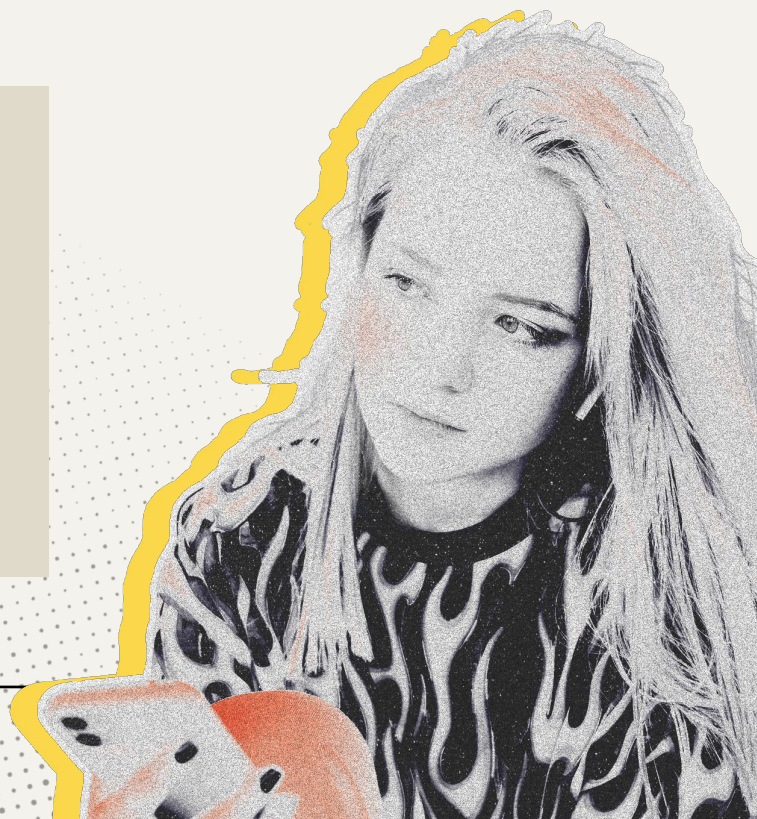
Young people are desperate to fix how people treat each other.

When asked what they want to change, college students focus less on policies or systems and more on empathy, compassion, kindness, and love — signaling a desire for a whole cultural shift, not just a political one. Many find today's political conversations too divisive or performative to engage with, even if they care deeply about social issues. They tune out combative dialogue but engage when discussions feel authentic, empathetic, nuanced, solutions-oriented, and different from what they heard before.

I hate when people tune something out just because it's something they don't agree with. I feel like that's one of the biggest issues now.

SO WHAT?

Avoid framing debates as “us vs. them” or “left vs right” and focus on shared desires and values. To engage this generation, don't just show your policies — show your willingness to engage those who are different from you.



KEY TAKEAWAY #8

Relying on partisan virtue signaling alienates youth.

Too often, advocacy leans on virtue signaling rooted in partisan labels, including imagery and language choices, when young people don't identify with rigid political categories. Overemphasizing partisan identity risks alienating them or flattening their perspectives. Young people are looking for answers, solutions, and reasons. They are turned off by the 'sport' of politics.

I just wish people would take politics seriously. There's no such thing as perfect politics. Like, no one's going to have a perfect agenda. No one's going to have the perfect person to vote for. But I think choosing not to vote or not to be aware of what's going on in the world is very selfish.

SO WHAT?

To build authentic engagement, foundations should move beyond signaling and focus on the substance of issues. Instead of assuming youth hold a value — or imposing the value on them — explain the reason 'why' behind the value.

KEY TAKEAWAY #9

Young people are still civically and politically engaged, even if it looks different in a new age.

Young people are turned off by partisan politics, and aligning with a single party or candidate feels too restrictive. However, they still see political and civic engagement as essential — it just looks different than it used to. They don't see traditional avenues like voting, protests, and marches as the only way to engage. Young people have a more expansive view of what civic and political engagement means. It often shows up in more private and personal ways, or in smaller social circles, like in conversations with friends, personal viewpoints, reading and sharing information, etc.

I think we really just need to bring back empathy. For me and a lot of people I know it's never left. But for a lot of people, especially people who are making important decisions, it's completely gone. Bringing back empathy would change so much in our world. It would allow people to be open-minded and to think more clearly.

SO WHAT?

Young people want expansive and personal ways to engage with the issues they care about that go beyond traditional methods. The massive protest matters to them no more than the group chat. Instead of pressuring youth and young adults to participate in one way, offer youth different on-ramps to take action.

I feel like the American dream for Gen Z is just vast, like very different from previous generations due to everything that has happened: from the pandemic to recessions to inflation. There are so many factors as to why Gen Z can never ever achieve this American dream. The American dream is definitely an illusion, but even for the ones who do want it, I feel like it's so unattainable because of the rising costs and everything. I mean people can't even afford to buy a house. So, I doubt we'll ever really get to the American dream.

To schedule a research briefing or 1:1 conversation about this research or communications strategies to reach young people, please contact info@wearerally.com.

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