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The Politics of Friendship in the Lives of Black Girls and Girls of Colour in Scotland

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Submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

University of Edinburgh

School of Social and Political Science

Department of Sociology

2024
Declaration
I declare that this thesis has been composed solely by myself and that it has not been submitted, in whole or in part, in any previous application for a degree. Except where states otherwise by reference or acknowledgment, the work presented is entirely my own.

Thalia Thereza Assan
January 2024
Abstract
Friendship is usually perceived as wholly separate from, and even alien to, structural inequalities and power relations. This research contests the aforementioned assumption by interrogating the politics of friendship in the lives of Black girls and girls of colour in Scotland. By ‘politics of friendship’ I am referring to the ways that friendship is affected by, contends with and challenges structural inequalities and power relations. The thesis brings the sociology of friendship into conversation with Black feminist thought, youth studies and girlhood studies to analyse how participants’ experiences and understandings of friendship politics were informed by intersections of ethnicity, gender and age.

The thesis is based on an ethnographic study with girls, aged 14-20, and youth workers in an anti-racist youth work charity in Scotland. Fieldwork was conducted from September 2020 until November 2021. It included participant observation in the organisation’s girls’ groups and youth club; workshops based on creative methods conducted with the girls’ groups; and in-depth interviews with some of the girls and youth workers.

I argue that in some cases friendship interactions and bonds can involve oppression and hinder political engagement. They therefore require complex navigations of structural power relations. At the same time, I contend that friendship ties, concepts and practices can be politically affirming when they can counter processes of othering and outcomes of injustice. Moreover, friendships can help challenge inequalities and cultivate activism for social change.

The politics of friendship analysed in this thesis refine sociological theorisation of how friendship is formed, fostered and ended, the ways it is idealised and practised and the positive, negative and ambivalent experiences this relationship can entail. Additionally, the politics of friendship illuminate some of the ways that oppression, particularly racism, manifests in personal relationships and everyday life. They also shed light on the significance of friendship to youth activism. Finally, this research helps bring scholarly attention to the experiences and perspectives of Black girls and girls of colour in Scotland.
Lay Summary

Friendship is usually seen as completely separate from, and even contrasting with, systematic inequalities and power relations between groups. This research challenges this idea by examining the politics of friendship in the lives of Black girls and girls of colour in Scotland. By ‘politics of friendship’ I am referring to the ways that friendship is impacted by systematic inequalities and power relations but can also help to confront them. The thesis brings together academic scholarship on the sociology of friendship, Black feminism, youth and girlhood. It analyses how participants’ experiences and understandings of friendship politics were informed by the connections between ethnic, gender and age identities and inequalities.

The thesis is based on an ethnographic study with girls, aged 14-20, and youth workers in an anti-racist youth work charity in Scotland. The study was conducted from September 2020 until November 2021. It included observation and participation in the organisation’s girls’ groups and youth club; workshops based on creative methods (like writing and creating maps) conducted with the girls’ groups; and in-depth interviews with some of the girls and youth workers.

I argue that in some cases friendship can involve oppressive behaviour and hinder political participation. Friendship interactions and bonds can therefore require complex navigations of systematic power relations. At the same time, I contend that friendship ties, concepts and practices can be politically affirming when they can counter processes of othering and outcomes of injustice. Moreover, friendships can help challenge inequalities and cultivate activism for social change.

The politics of friendship analysed in this thesis refine sociological understandings of how friendship is formed, fostered and ended, the ways it is idealised and practised and the positive, negative and ambivalent experiences this relationship can entail. Additionally, the politics of friendship illuminate some of the ways that oppression, particularly racism, manifests in personal relationships and everyday life. They also shed light on the significance of friendship to youth activism. Finally, this research helps bring scholarly attention to the experiences and perspectives of Black girls and girls of colour in Scotland.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

We read books together, share articles (basically pretend we are intellectuals)

We have rants, share our ‘unpopular opinions’

Expand out realities

Demi and I want to dismantle anti-blackness and internalised oppression

We are trying to create space in the world for BIPOC [Black, Indigenous and people of colour] to come together to learn about their history and how events of the past effect our lived experiences. -Marina

I thought we were gonna be friends forever or for a very long time and then Black Lives Matter came… -Cece

The first quote is a text created by Marina during a writing workshop, when I asked participants to write about a friend (real or imagined) with whom they undertake social actions and aim to create change. Later in the fieldwork, when I interviewed Marina, I asked her who Demi (the friend she had mentioned in the text) was. Marina replied that she had made the person up but ‘I guess we could insert that name for anyone at IYS because there’s always different people on different projects’. Intercultural Youth Scotland (IYS in short) is an anti-racist charity that supports young Black people and people of colour in Scotland and seeks to engender together with them social change regarding issues that affect their lives. The second quote is the beginning of a story that Cece shared in a different workshop, about her friendship with a girl at school and how it ended due to the friend’s racism.

These two quotes provide a glimpse of a few of the friendship experiences and perspectives of the Black girls and girls of colour, aged 14-20, who participated in this study. They illustrate, or at least hint at, some of the highs and lows of friendship, the ways it is imagined and lived and how amazing, but also heartbreaking, it can be. Yet
to more fully and clearly understand these friendships, another, perhaps less intuitive, lens is required – a political lens, one which brings into focus structural inequalities and power relations. The politics of friendship are the focal point of this thesis. I conceptualise the ‘politics of friendship’ as the ways that friendship is affected by, contends with and challenges structural inequalities and power relations and how it relates to efforts to enact social change. While the above quotes might seem to illustrate how the politics of friendship can be easily categorised as either negative or positive, in the thesis I also aim to show their complexities.

1.1. The study context
The politics of friendship explored in this thesis were shaped by the institutional and social spaces that participants frequented. Contrary to the myth of Scottish exceptionalism and prevalent claims made in public and political discourse, racism and its intersections with other forms of oppression exist in Scotland, not just in relation to the country’s past involvement in slavery but also in the current day (Sobande & Hill, 2022). Many of the participants in this study spoke of being the only Black girl or girl of colour in their class or one of only a handful in their year. In the 2020 Scottish school census (Scottish Government, 2020), about 1.5% of female pupils identified as Caribbean/Black or African, 4.5% identified as Asian (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Chinese or other), 0.5% identified as Arab, 1.5% identified as Mixed, 0.6% identified as other and 89% identified as White.¹ The term ‘Black people and people of colour’ is used in this thesis because this was the term used by IYS and the suitability of this term for the study and its limitations will be discussed in a later chapter.

Research about the experiences of young Black people and people of colour in Scotland is scarce (Hill & Sobande, 2019; Kennelly & Mouroutsou, 2020, p. 27). The small number of studies conducted on this topic found that many of them felt that peers and staff at school did not understand their culture, heritage or background (Guyan, 2019) and that it was not possible to discuss race and racism in school (Kennelly & Mouroutsou, 2020). The opinions of participants in these studies diverged on whether schools and Scotland as a whole were welcoming, diverse and safe spaces (Guyan,

¹ About 2% of female pupils marked ‘Unknown’ or did not disclose their ethnicity. The distribution of ethnicity for female and male pupils together is almost identical to that of the female pupils.
Be that as it may, young Black people and people of colour reported experiencing racism and other forms of oppression in Scotland, including from school peers. They developed strategies to contend with such behaviours yet also tended to dismiss them in order to feel a sense of belonging (Hopkins et al., 2015; Kennelly & Mouroutou, 2020). Studies conducted in English schools with Black girls and girls of colour have shed light on the intersecting forms of racism and sexism they faced from staff and peers and how they critiqued and resisted these oppressions (Aujla-Jones, 2022; Showunmi, 2017).

In contrast to Scottish schools, IYS was attended almost exclusively by young Black people and people of colour and it was explicitly committed to anti-racism and anti-discrimination. The organisation was founded in 2019 and provides youth work, education programmes, employability and mental health services as well as engages in advocacy. The study focused on several IYS youth work programmes and activities, namely the girls’ groups, youth club and special events.

Youth work is a practice of informal education that seeks to facilitate young people’s learning and development and is anchored in the needs, experiences and interests of the young person. Youth work caters to those aged 11-25 and the participation of young people is voluntary (Batsleer, 2008; Youthlink Scotland, 2005). In Scotland, youth work practice has existed for over 150 years (Fyfe et al., 2018) and it is based on the radical approach of emancipatory education (Jeffs et al., 2019). The significance of youth work has been recognised in national policies yet it also suffers from a reduction in resources (Fyfe et al., 2018). Some youth work provision is universal, meaning it is open to all young people (Fyfe et al., 2018) while other provision is culturally- and/or gender-specific in order to affirm young people who belong to socially marginalised groups by enabling them to discuss and contend with issues that are important to them on their own terms (Batsleer, 2008; Batsleer & McCarthy, 2019).

In addition to learning and development opportunities, youth work has been found to provide young people with safe spaces, and a sense of social inclusion and belonging (Fyfe et al., 2018; Ord et al., 2022). Youth workers are crucial to the success of all of these processes and outcomes and they do so by developing meaningful, trusting relationships with young people and engaging in dialogue with them (Batsleer, 2008;
Youthlink Scotland, 2005). Studies conducted in Scotland and other European countries have noted that one of the things young people value the most in youth work is that it enables them to form and strengthen friendships (Fyfe et al., 2018; Ord et al., 2022). However, friendship receives very little attention in European youth work policy (Ord et al., 2022) and youth work scholarship (Delgado, 2016, p. 25). This study addresses this scholarly gap by bringing to the fore the significance of friendship in youth work. Moreover, while most studies conducted with Black girls and girls of colour in the UK tend to focus on their experiences in school, this thesis will demonstrate the importance of studying their experiences in a youth work setting.

1.2. Theoretical framework
The field of the sociology of friendship has countered the popular perception that friendship is a private and purely chosen relationship by analysing how it is shaped by and embedded in social structures, contexts and norms (Adams & Allan, 1991; Blatterer, 2013; Davies, 2019). Sociologists of friendship have also explored the principles and positive characteristics ascribed to friendship, including equality, reciprocity and support (Allan, 2003; Budgeon, 2006). However, sociologists have also adopted a critical perspective that interrogates the gaps between the ideals and realities of friendship and the negative experiences it can entail, such as power relations (Heaphy & Davies, 2012; Pahl & Spencer, 2010; Smart et al., 2012). Following this sociological approach, I seek to shed light on the ways that structural inequalities shape and play out in friendship. This topic, especially in relation to ethnicity and racism (and its intersections with other systems of power), has been under-researched in the sociology of friendship. This thesis sets out with a working definition of friendship as a relationship between social peers that is ideally perceived and experienced as voluntary and highly positive. However, as the thesis progresses the use of a political lens will generate a more complex, and less intuitive, understanding of friendship.

To examine the politics of friendship in participants’ lives, this thesis also draws on Black feminist theory, youth studies and girlhood studies. Black feminist theory interrogates the structural marginalisation that Black women face and the ways they challenge it. It does so by centring their lived experience and attending to intersecting
systems of oppression in their lives, including race and gender (Bryan et al., 2018; Collins, 2000; Mirza, 1997b). Black feminist scholars have shown how communities and various personal relationships are vital for the survival, empowerment and resistance of Black women (Goins, 2011; hooks, 2014; Kelly, 2020). The politically affirming potentials of friendships have also been found in some studies conducted with youth from diverse ethnic backgrounds (e.g. Harris, 2016; Reynolds, 2007).

Youth studies and girlhood studies scholars who support a sociological approach foreground the perspectives and experiences of young people and girls (respectively) while examining how their lives are shaped by systematic inequalities and the agency they employ to contend with these inequalities (e.g. Brown, 2013; Wyn, 2015). Girlhood studies scholars have shed light on painful and complex aspects of friendship and how structural power relations shape girls’ conflicts (Brown, 2013; Hey, 1997). Finally, Black feminists, youth and girlhood scholars have called to reconceptualise dominant scholarly definitions of activism and political participation, which do not acknowledge the myriad and everyday political engagement of Black women, young people and girls (e.g. Collins, 2000; Pickard, 2019). The role of friendship in youth activism has received little scholarly attention, though a few studies indicate it can be significant (Kelly, 2018; Taft, 2010, 2017). Additionally, there is a dearth of studies about the friendships of Black girls and girls of colour (George, 2007, p. 115) and of youth of colour in general, especially outside of a deficit perspective and a focus on the negative outcomes of such friendships (Delgado, 2016). This study aims to begin to fill these gaps.

1.3. Research questions and methodology

To examine the politics of friendship, this study is centred on three research questions:

1. In what ways is friendship politically affirming?
2. How do structural power relations play out in friendship?
3. What is the role of friendship in challenging inequalities and in youth activism?

These questions were explored through an ethnographic study conducted from September 2020 until November 2021 with 15 members of the IYS girls’ groups and a number of the IYS youth workers. Fieldwork included participant observation in two
IYS girls’ groups, the IYS youth club and special activities and events organised by IYS; workshops based on creative methods with members of the girls’ groups; and in-depth interviews with some of the girls and youth workers. The study was designed to foreground participants’ perspectives and experiences of friendship and the political as well as how the two intersect in their lives. It also strove to engender meaningful and enjoyable research engagements for participants.

1.4. Thesis contribution
This thesis makes a contribution to the sociology of friendship as well as Black feminist theory, youth studies and girlhood studies, by bringing these fields into conversation with one another in order to examine the politics of friendship in the lives of Black girls and girls of colour in Scotland. I interrogate how ethnicity and racism (along with other intersecting forms of oppression) inform and play out in friendships, a topic that has received little attention in the sociology of friendship. In doing so, I generate novel insights into some of the ways that friendship is formed, cultivated and navigated, how it is conceptualised, idealised and practised and the positive, negative and ambivalent experiences this relationship can entail.

Moreover, this thesis significantly addresses the understudied topic of friendship in youth activism, by examining the myriad ways that friendship and activism were entangled in the lives of participants. In turn, this produces a better understanding of the activism of Black girls and girls of colour and challenges neoliberal individualising public narratives about girls’ activism (Bent, 2016; Edell et al., 2016). The thesis also helps to shed light on the political capacity of friendship to engender solidarity and contend with structural inequalities and power relations. It therefore contributes to Black feminist theory, where friendship has received less conceptual attention compared to other relationships.

Finally, this thesis directs much-needed scholarly attention to Black girls and girls of colour in Scotland, where public discourse and research often render them invisible by ignoring intersections of race and gender and denying the existence of racism (hill & Sobande, 2019; Sobande & hill, 2022). By foregrounding participants’ views and experiences, I provide a nuanced account that goes against shallow and negative depictions of Black girls and girls of colour that are prevalent in academic, media and
public policy discourses in the UK (Ludhra, 2015; Meetoo, 2021; Palmer, 2016). This thesis therefore augments recent endeavours to render the fields of youth studies and girlhood studies more diverse and intersectional.

To be clear, I am not arguing that friendship was the sole meaningful or political relationship in the lives of the study participants. Moreover, personal relationships are complex and do not always fall into only one category or fit a specific label. These issues will be addressed in the thesis when relevant. However, I contend that it is important to focus on the understudied topic of the politics of friendship as it generates unique sociological understandings about friendship, including the ways it can perpetuate injustice yet also challenge it, and about the relational and everyday aspects of the political. Moreover, studying the politics of friendship generates a deeper understanding of the lives of Black girls and girls of colour in Scotland.

1.5. Thesis structure
In Chapter 2 of the thesis, I review the four main scholarly fields that inform the study – sociology of friendship, Black feminist theory, youth studies and girlhood studies. I point to the aspects of friendship politics that these fields have shed light on or alluded to as well as relevant gaps in the literature. In Chapter 3, I describe the methodology of the study. I discuss my fieldwork site, the methods I utilised, my positionality and relationships in the field, ethical issues I contended with during fieldwork and how I approached data recording and analysis.

The next three chapters of the thesis present the findings and analysis of the study. In Chapter 4, I interrogate friendship ties, concepts and practices in IYS. I show how friendship with other young Black people and people of colour in IYS engendered for participants a political sense of belonging, authenticity, understanding and safety. I then conceptualise three types of friendship and friend-like relationships that participants formed in IYS and supported their engagement with the anti-racist organisation.

In Chapter 5, I explore how participants navigated structural inequalities and power relations within and through their friendships. I focus on racism and other forms of oppressive behaviour that participants experienced in some of their friendships and
examine the strategies they utilised in response, how this informed their friendship preferences and what enabled recognition of such behaviour. Additionally, I analyse how participants contended with gendered power relationships through their friendships and the collective settings of the IYS girls’ groups. I also briefly consider structural power relations that were largely left unspoken in IYS group settings yet were likely navigated by participants in more implicit ways.

In Chapter 6, I examine how friendship and activism were entangled in participants’ lives. I discuss how their political engagement was inhibited by some friendships and encouraged by others and how activism cultivated friendships. I then explore the wide range of participants’ activist practices and how many of these practices were undertaken together with friends. I then focus on participants’ online activism and their critical pedagogy activism, shedding light on the interpersonal aspects of these activist practices.

In the conclusion chapter, I summarise the main findings and analysis of the thesis by answering the three research questions that guided it. I also highlight the scholarly contributions of this thesis, address its limitations, provide suggestions for future research and share a few final thoughts.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this chapter, I present the four main scholarly fields that inform the study and with whom the study engages in scholarly conversations and contributes to: sociology of friendship, Black feminist theory, youth studies and girlhood studies. These fields are not wholly discrete and there exists some overlap between them. The overlap between youth studies and girlhood studies (in relation to the topics of this study) is so significant that I discuss these two fields together.

I begin by discussing the sociology of friendship, which serves as a theoretical starting point for this study. I also point to gaps in this literature regarding the politics of friendship, particularly those that Black girls and girls of colour may engage in and contend with. As a result, I turn to Black feminist theory and its consideration of how intersections of structural inequalities, especially those relating to ethnicity and gender, shape the lives of Black women. I then turn to youth studies and girlhood studies to consider the unique experiences of this life stage. I discuss the ways that these three fields have interrogated the topic of friendship and its political aspects as well as the conceptualisations of the activism of Black women, youth and girls, respectively. I also shed light on the aspects of the politics of friendship that are still missing in these scholarships.

2.1. The sociology of friendship

Since the end of the 20th century, sociological research on friendship has grown significantly and cohered into a small field, thus countering the dominance of the study of family and sexual relationships in the social sciences (Budgeon, 2006). The fairly recent interest in friendship seems to stem, in part, from perceived social changes in post-modernity. Some sociologists, such as Anthony Giddens (1991), have argued that familial relationships have become less important in late modernity in comparison to intimate relationships such as friendships. However, there is not enough empirical evidence to back this claim (Davies, 2019) and sociologists have shown that family ties are given different meanings, that in some cases there is a suffusion between friendship and kinship ties and that friendship has also been important in the past (Jamieson et al., 2006; Pahl & Spencer, 2004).
A sociological focus on friendship challenges the dominant conception that it is a solely private relationship (Eve, 2002) and shows that it is embedded in and shaped by social structures and contexts (Adams & Allan, 1991; Davies, 2019). Moreover, sociological studies have shown that friendship is a meaningful and committed relationship in people’s lives, thus countering sweeping claims about how intense individualisation processes in late modernity have rendered personal relationships shallow and insignificant (Jamieson et al., 2006; Spencer & Pahl, 2006). Sociologists have also explored how friendship is tied to people’s sense and narratives of self. Through connections with others, one learns about oneself, others and the world (Budgeon, 2006; Smart et al., 2012). Relatedly, friendship can also engender ontological security (Cronin, 2014).

This study examines how the politics of friendship relate to, yet sometimes also challenge, dominant sociological characteristics and conceptualisations of friendship. The defining characteristic of friendship, in both popular and sociological understandings, is its chosen and voluntary nature (Budgeon, 2006; Giddens, 1991). Friendship’s achieved status sets it apart from ascribed relationships such as kin or colleague (Jamieson, 1998; Pahl & Spencer, 2004) and unlike romantic relationships it is relatively un-institutionalised and less subjected to cultural scripts (Blatterer, 2013; Eramian & Mallory, 2020). Additionally, sociologists have positively characterised friendship as a relationship that is based on reciprocity, trust, loyalty and equality and engenders a sense of belonging (Allan, 2003; Blatterer, 2013; Budgeon, 2006). Friends support, affirm and confide in one another, feel comfortable and authentic with each other and have shared history and interests (Policarpo, 2015; Spencer & Pahl, 2006). Importantly, these are often ideal characteristics of friendship and not all are fulfilled in practice (Spencer & Pahl, 2006) or given the same amount of significance in people’s conceptualisations of good and intimate friendship (Policarpo, 2015). Moreover, Liz Spencer and Ray Pahl (2006) have argued that people can have different types of friendships, which are differentiated according to the qualities one attributes to the friend, the roles that the friend plays in one’s life and the level of commitment felt towards one’s friend.

A core argument made by sociologists of friendship, which this study supports, is that friendship formation is shaped by social structures and cultural contexts. Homophily is often an organising principle of friendship, meaning that people tend to become friends
with others whom they share social similarities with, for instance in identity categories of gender, race and ethnicity, class, age and life stage (Allan, 2003; Davies, 2019). Forming and sustaining friendships across differences in identity categories can be challenging. For example, scholars have shown that heterosexist ideology and cultural norms often subject friendships between heterosexual men and women to negative judgements, which can also restrict their formation (Blatterer, 2013; Chaudhry, 2022; Rawlins, 2008).

Recently, more critical sociological perspectives on friendship have emerged. However, what seems to be largely missing is an interrogation of how ethnicity and racism, along with other intersecting forms of oppression, inform and play out in friendship. Sociologists have challenged the overly positive framing of friendship in sociology and called to interrogate the gaps between the ideals of friendship that people hold and the realities of friendship they experience (Heaphy & Davies, 2012; Pahl & Spencer, 2010). In particular, sociologists have begun uncovering the negative aspects of friendship, that is the difficulties, ambivalences and power struggles that friendship can entail, how it can be perceived as binding and is not terminated easily or without consequences (Heaphy & Davies, 2012; Smart et al., 2012). Moreover, hardships in and painful experiences of friendship need to be analysed sociologically, with attention to the socio-cultural ideals, practices and discourses that shape these relationships (Eramian & Mallory, 2020; Lahad & van Hooff, 2022). To explore how these complex experiences may relate to structural inequalities and injustices, this study focuses on the friendships of Black girls and girls of colour in Scotland.

Finally, it seems that most studies that explicitly seek to contribute to the sociology of friendship are conducted with adults. In their highly influential study, Spencer and Pahl (2006) state that they ‘focused on adult friendships, rather than friendships among children, adolescents, and in old age, since these have been the subject of many other studies’ (p. 2). While there have been sociological studies of children and adolescents’ friendships (as will be discussed later in this chapter), they are not often drawn on to inform more general sociological understandings of friendship and seem more confined to fields such as childhood and youth studies, education and social policy. This might be due to the structural marginalisation of children in society (Wyness, 2019). Including research with children and adolescents expands the field of the sociology of friendship significantly (Vincent et al., 2018, pp. 9–10). My project will
demonstrate how studying girls’ friendships engenders a more nuanced sociological theorisation of this relationship. In order to attend to the ways that ethnicity and gender play out in how Black girls and girls of colour experience and understand the politics of friendship, this study also engages with Black feminist theory.

2.2. Black feminist theory

Black feminism is an activist and interdisciplinary intellectual movement that fights for social justice and seeks to deconstruct structural inequalities (Mirza, 1997b, 2015). Black feminist scholars link theory and practice together and conceptualise them as affirming and liberating (Emejulu & Sobande, 2019; hooks, 1994). In the UK and other Western countries, Black feminism interrogates how Black women have been and are currently discriminated against, othered and pathologised and points to the repeated attempts to silence them and render their perspectives and experiences invisible (Emejulu & Sobande, 2019; Mirza, 1997b). Simultaneously, Black feminism sheds light on how Black women individually and collectively challenge the oppression they face and enact social change (Collins, 2000; Young, 2000). Black feminist research centres and valorises Black women’s lived experiences and the alternative knowledge they produce through these experiences, which are vital to their survival and resistance strategies (Brown, 2021; Collins, 2000; Emejulu & Sobande, 2019). Black feminism contends that the personal is political and vice versa (Mirza, 2015; Phoenix, 2016). In this study, Black feminist theory enabled the exploration of not only the lived experiences of Black girls, who were a significant majority of the study’s participants, but also those of girls of colour (see also Ludhra, 2015). This thesis draws chiefly and explicitly on Black feminist theory. However, at times it also draws explicitly and implicitly on broader feminist literature, including in the methodology.

Intersectionality is a key analytical framework in Black feminist theory. It has been employed to understand the ways that intersections of systems of power, including gender, race, class and migrant status come to bear on the lives of Black women (and other people) and perpetuate inequalities (Crenshaw, 1989; Mirza, 2015). This study recognises the significance of an intersectional approach and employs it when relevant. However, it does not figure prominently in the analysis for two reasons: First, while intersectionality has shown that identities cannot be reduced to one or more
dimensions that simply relate to one another in a hierarchical or additive manner (Mirza, 2015), identities are dynamic and there can be contexts when a certain form of oppression, for instance racism, is experienced as more dominant than others (Obasi, 2019). This was often the case for participants in my study. Second, age has been under-theorised in intersectional scholarship (Collins, 2021b) yet it was often central to participants’ politics of friendship.

I will now discuss Black feminism in the geographical context of this study and then focus on the two main topics in Black feminist scholarship that the study engages with.

2.2.1. Black British feminism

Black British feminism originated in the struggles and activism of women who immigrated from postcolonial Africa, the Caribbean and the Indian sub-continent starting in the 1950s (Mirza, 1997b). These women faced the ‘triple oppression’ of structural racism, sexism and capitalism in arenas such as the workplace, education, health and welfare systems and fought against it (Bryan et al., 2018). One key example is the Black Supplementary School Movement that was led by Black women and either provided Black children with the formal education they did not receive at schools, taught them about their history and Black role models or did both. These schools were spaces of belonging where blackness was centred and validated (Mirza, 1997a; Reay & Mirza, 2001).

Starting from the 1970s, Black women formed their own political organisations and groups, in response to the sexism they experienced from men in the Black Power movement, the racism they faced from White women in the women’s movement and the marginalisation of their issues in both movements. In their autonomous groups, women shared their experiences of oppression with others who understood them and organised together to challenge structural inequalities (Bryan et al., 2018; Phoenix, 2016). In the 1970s and 1980s, Black women and women of colour formed coalitions and organisations under the strategy of political blackness, whereby they all identified as Black to foreground the commonalities in their struggles as non-White people in Britain and their shared commitment to fighting against such injustices (Mirza, 1997b; Sobande & hill, 2022). However, there were also conflicts in the groups relating to race and ethnicity as well as sexuality and the strategy of political blackness came under
much criticism, including for obscuring the unique forms of oppression that Black women face. In Scotland, political blackness is still employed by some organisations in varying degrees (Phoenix, 2016; Sobande & hill, 2022). However, in the context of this study, I prefer the lens of Black feminist theory over political blackness because the latter inhibits more complex understandings of identities and political coalitions while the former is more relevant to participants’ politics of friendship, where their gender also played an important role and where (some) differences relating to ethnic identities were recognised.

Black feminists in Europe have criticised the tendency within their circles to uncritically apply Black feminist theory that was developed in the US in order to understand the experiences of Black women in Europe (Emejulu & Sobande, 2019; Obasi, 2019). Admittedly, the scholarship of Black American feminists and transatlantic conversations have been central to Black British feminism (Phoenix, 2016; Young, 2000) whose proponents found resemblances between their own experiences and those of their counterparts, though they were not identical (Bryan et al., 2018). However, to fully understand and validate the experiences of Black women in Britain, it is important to take into account the British context, for instance the high institutionalisation of the class system in Britain, the differences between the UK and the US in how social hierarchies were organised under slavery (Young, 2000), how blackness is understood differently in each context and the liberation and anti-colonial struggles that took place in Europe (Emejulu & Sobande, 2019). Moreover, the Scottish context is not identical to the English one - Scotland has a higher percentage of White population and a much lower percentage of people of colour\(^2\) and the

\(^2\) See the table below, based on ethnicity data from the 2011 UK census (Office for National Statistics, 2011) and Scotland’s census (Scottish Government, 2011):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scotland</th>
<th>Percent of the general population (rounded)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian, Asian British or Asian Scottish</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African Caribbean or Black</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed or other</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scotland</th>
<th>Percent of the general population (rounded)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian, Asian British or Asian Scottish</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African Caribbean or Black</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed or other</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>England</th>
<th>Percent of the general population (rounded)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian or Asian British</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/African/Caribbean/Black British</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed or other</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ethnicity data from Scotland’s 2021 census is not yet available publicly.
existence of both Black people and racism in the country is often questioned or denied in research and public discourse (Sobande & hill, 2022).

Furthermore, simply importing an American-centred analysis to Black British feminism implies that notions of race and racialisation\(^3\) are unfamiliar to the European experience (Emejulu & Sobande, 2019). Instead, bringing to the fore the British (and European) context reveals how the enslavement of African people and processes of colonialization were central to the industrial revolution and the making of Europe (Bryan et al., 2018; Emejulu & Sobande, 2019; see also Bhambra, 2007). Black people and people of colour immigrated to Britain due to their centuries-long connection to the nation and became part of the workforce, yet their significant role in shaping Britain is unacknowledged (Bryan et al., 2018). Black British feminism challenges racist and excluding conceptualisations about who is part of the ‘European story’ (Emejulu & Sobande, 2019) and who is seen as British (Mirza, 2015).

In this project, I attend to literature on local Scottish and British contexts when I can. However, I also draw on Black feminist research outside of these contexts when I find it echoes or helps illuminate my findings. I also do so because structural racism and other factors have led to a scarcity of Black scholarship in Britain (Anim-Addo, 2014) while existing research on Black people and blackness mostly adopts a racial deficit perspective (Palmer, 2016). There is a particular need for research that foregrounds the perspectives and experiences of women and young people who belong to Black communities and communities of colour in Scotland (hill & Sobande, 2019; Kennelly & Mouroutsou, 2020, p. 27). Relatedly, Black scholarship, including Black feminist thought, has been largely ignored in sociology, where much of classical theory is based on White supremacist and masculinist assumptions (Luna & Laster Pirtle, 2021; see also Tyler, 2018). However, Black feminism has much to contribute to sociology (Collins, 2021a). This thesis seeks to address some of these absences.

\(^3\) Racialisation refers to socio-political processes of differentiation that are based on socially constructed notions of race and the centring of whiteness, thereby stereotyping, othering and de-humanising those who are not White (Aujla-Jones, 2022; Weheliye, 2014).
2.2.2. Homeplace and friendship

Black feminism emphasises the importance of community and relationships based on love, support and care (Anim-Addo, 2014; Luna & Laster Pirtle, 2021). Black feminist scholars have shown how, before and after immigrating to the UK, Black women and women of colour formed support networks where they devised survival and resistance strategies (Carby, 1997). Relatedly, bell hooks (2014) has shed light on how, beginning from slavery, domestic spaces cultivated by Black women provided political homeplaces for Black people. hooks describes homeplaces as safe spaces where Black people affirm and care for one another, learn to love and respect themselves and become subjects. In this way, homeplaces allow Black people to heal from the oppression they are subjected to in White supremacist societies. The homeplaces that Black women construct enable the formation of communities of resistance and political solidarities. Moving outside the domestic sphere, Lauren Leigh Kelly (2020) has shown how Black girls in a White-dominated US high school fostered homeplaces by spending time together and bonding in the school library and by creating virtual group chats for the Black students in their year. In these homeplaces, Kelly’s participants felt that they could be themselves, affirm one another’s humanity, speak about the racism they experienced in school and learn to navigate it together.

The concept of friendship has received relatively less attention in Black feminist theory compared to other relationships. However, there are a number of exceptions that underscore how politically affirming friendship between women who belong to marginalised ethnic groups can be: Marnel Niles Goins (2011) argues that friendships between Black women can constitute homeplaces. Goins analysed how these friendships enabled participants to express themselves freely, understand and validate each other’s experiences of racism and affirm one another’s sense of self. Black women’s friendships thus empower them and challenge the injustices and marginalisation they face. Friendship ties between Black girls also contributed to the enactment of homeplaces in Kelly’s (2020) study described above, though Kelly does not elaborate on these bonds much. In contrast, Kenly Brown (2021) foregrounds friendship in her study of Black girls. Brown argues that the participants contended with structural violence and exclusion through their friendships. These relationships were ‘a lifeline and a way to be seen in a world when feeling overlooked’ (p. 203). Visibility also appears in Cynthia B. Dillard’s (2019) theorisation of close friendship.
(being ‘friends-friends’), along with mutuality and respect. Dillard argues that such a relationship generates knowledge and joy that help contend with oppression and can also engender allyship across differences. Similarly, feminist scholars of colour have noted the political potential that friendship characteristics hold for generating positive connections across inequalities (Chowdhury & Philipose, 2016; Lugones & Rosezelle, 1995), with some even framing such friendships as a form of social activism (Banerjea et al., 2017).

This political significance of friendship is also echoed in Ego Ahiawe Sowinske and Nazmia Jamal’s (2019) description of the powerful bond they formed through their participation in a feminist organisation, which made them feel seen. Sowinske and Jamal’s account stands out in the Black feminist studies of friendship I described for being the only one set in a UK context. My project will interrogate the friendships that participants formed with other young Black people and people of colour and their political significance as homeplaces in light of participants’ experiences of racism and racialisation in Scotland. Sowinske and Jamal’s (2019) account of activist friendship also stands out from the other studies because it acknowledges the painful breakdown of their relationship. Sowinske and Jamal attest that, at the time, they found it difficult to speak of and navigate the difficulties they experienced in their friendship and activist community. This might explain why such accounts are relatively rare in the aforementioned studies. I will unpack how silences around friendship conflicts and difficulties also figured into my study and what these silences might indicate.

It may also be that friendship is underexplored in Black feminist theory because Black people often conceptualise the relationships between them in kinship terms (for example Anim-Addo, 2014; Obasi, 2019). The political significance of the terms ‘sister’ and ‘brother’ began when enslaved people had to create new families in place of those they were violently separated from. By signifying a connection to and respect for Black people, kinship terms challenged the racist ways in which White people addressed them (Lugones & Rosezelle, 1995). In contrast, the use of the term ‘sisterhood’ by White feminists to describe the bond between all women was criticised by Black feminists and feminists of colour as it reflected and reproduced White women’s denial of their complicity in the subjugation of other women (hooks, 1995; Lugones & Rosezelle, 1995). Because the participants in my study also had close relationships with young people who did not share the same ethnic identity as them and because
they experienced structural inequalities and power relations in some of these relationships, I find the term ‘friendship’ more fitting as a key concept. Nevertheless, I also touch on instances where participants employed kinship terms to convey the strength of certain friendship bonds.

2.2.3. Reconceptualising activism

This study supports the Black feminist reconceptualization of activism. Black feminist scholars have critiqued social science researchers for theorising activism through a masculine lens which focuses on public and highly visible actions such as protests and riots as well as participation in formal political organisations such as parties and unions, which often excluded Black women (Collins, 2000; Mirza, 1997a). Patricia Hill Collins (2000) influentially argued that because Black women usually did not have the resources and opportunities to transform institutions, their activism mostly centred on struggles for group survival. This latter form of activism includes strategies of everyday resistance and is just as vital for engendering social change as the former. In the UK, Heidi Safia Mirza (1992, 1997a) has explored how Black girls and women resisted in quiet and subversive ways by fighting to obtain an education for themselves and their children, thereby opening up career opportunities. Mirza argued that by doing so they defied racist expectations. In Julia Sudbury’s (2005) pioneering study of Black women and women of colour’s activist organisations in the UK, members of these organisations criticised formal political institutions for not addressing their needs, alienating and excluding them. Sudbury argued that the activism of Black women and women of colour was aimed not just at the state and White audiences but also at their own communities and themselves. These aforementioned scholars reconceptualised the definition of activism to acknowledge the politically transformative actions of Black women.

Building on Collins’ arguments, Kelly (2018) has analysed how Black girls undertook everyday activism by forming a community, developing socio-political awareness and navigating the oppressive landscape of their school. Kelly argues that practices of critical resistance that Black girls engage in are often not recognised as such in scholarly and public discourses of activism. My study examines the role of friendship in the everyday activist practices that participants undertook. These practices, along
with other aspects of participants’ friendship politics, were also related to their age. This study therefore also engages with youth and girlhood studies.

2.3. Youth and girlhood studies

This project supports the sociological approach in youth studies, which conceptualises youth (and childhood) as a socially constructed life phase and considers the myriad contexts - social, cultural, political, economic and so on - that shape the experiences of youth and how those change across time and space (Furlong, 2012; Wyn, 2015). Youth studies is an interdisciplinary field that emerged in the UK and the US in the 1950s within developmental psychology. In the 1970s it began focusing on youth cultures of leisure and resistance (Wyn, 2015). Scholars in this field interrogate issues that are specific to youth, explore how young people experience more general social phenomena and/or focus on youth to understand the processes and effects of social change (Furlong, 2012). Sociologists examine how the lives of young people are impacted and constrained by structural inequalities, for example those relating to gender, race and class, and their agency in contending with these inequalities (Furlong, 2012; Wyn, 2015). In this way, scholars also seek to challenge dominant negative portrayals of youth and their cultures (Gallacher & Kehily, 2013; Wyn, 2015).

Similar to the sociological approach in youth studies, girlhood studies scholars perceive girlhood as a social construct by illuminating its ever-shifting meanings and lived experiences in relation to various contexts (Aapola et al., 2005). The interdisciplinary field of girlhood studies emerged in the 1990s, in part as a critique of the marginalisation of girls, not just in society and popular culture, but also in youth studies and women’s studies (Kearney, 2009; Mitchell, 2016). Scholars in this field focus on the unique perspectives and experiences of girls and by doing so have shed light on new topics and issues (Aapola et al., 2005; Lipkin, 2009). An influential precursor to girlhood studies, Angela McRobbie (1978) offered a gendered and spatial lens on youth subcultures, arguing that in contrast to adolescent boys’ public subcultures, adolescent girls located themselves in private ‘bedroom cultures’, where they can express themselves, spend time with friends and teach each other heterosexual norms.
In examining the complex politics of friendship that girls contend with and engage in, this study seeks to go beyond the two dominant and problematic neoliberal discourses that currently construct girlhood. The first depicts girls as being ‘at risk’ and the second celebrates ‘girl power’ (Aapola et al., 2005; Mandrona, 2016). The first discourse is particularly employed to negatively characterise girls of colour from working-class backgrounds, while the second discourse is positively employed to characterise White middle-class girls (Brown, 2013; Desai, 2021). In contrast to these individualising discourses, girlhood scholars have called attention to the structural inequalities and power relations that shape girls’ experiences (Bethune & Gonick, 2017) and how girls as a distinct and diverse group are discriminated against yet also possess agency to shape the worlds they live in (Mandrona, 2016). This study follows this line of inquiry by examining how structural inequalities shape the friendship experiences and understandings of Black girls and girls of colour but also how they resist these inequalities through their friendships.

2.3.1. Diverse girlhoods
An intersectional approach is needed to fully understand girls’ lives and agency (Lipkin, 2009). Until recently, girlhood studies have mostly focused on White middle-class girls from Western countries and paid little attention to the analysis of issues such as race, coloniality, class and queer identity (Cann et al., 2018; Desai, 2021). The field of youth studies faces similar issues (Cooper et al., 2021; Harries et al., 2016). This study addresses some of these issues by focusing on Black girls as well as girls of colour, most of whom were South Asian.

Black girlhood studies is a relatively new field, existing mostly in the US, which centres the lives of Black girls. It challenges the ways that much of academic research and public policy frame Black girls as a problem and devalues them (Brown, 2013). By speaking and listening to Black girls, scholars seek to understand how Black girls survive structural violence and engender social change, while affirming their humanity and foregrounding their knowledge and critical thinking skills (Brown, 2013; Kwakye et al., 2017). Both older and more recent studies conducted with Black girls in English schools have shown how, in contrast to their White peers, they were perceived by teachers as troublesome and aggressive and were subsequently disciplined and
excluded (Mirza, 1992; Showunmi, 2017). Additionally, studies have shown that Black girls are more constrained in embodying femininity compared to White girls and are subject to hypersexualisation in schools and other spaces (Ringrose et al., 2019; Showunmi, 2017). The racism that Black girls experience at school in the UK and the US necessitate the creation of safe spaces in these institutions, where they can spend time with one another, share their experiences and discuss them critically without being judged or misunderstood (Kelly, 2020; Showunmi, 2017).

Turning to South Asian girls in the UK, dominant discourses in academia and the media have tended to stereotype them. They are portrayed as oppressed, well-behaved, passive and caught between two dichotomous cultures: the East – their community and tradition – and the West – British liberal values. In contrast, foregrounding the perspectives and experiences of South Asian girls, employing an intersectional lens and attending to inequalities sheds light on their agency and critical views and affords a more nuanced understanding of the marginalisation they face (Ludhra, 2015; Meetoo, 2021). Although the above studies focus, respectively, on South Asian girls and Black girls, they show how their lives and outlooks are not homogenous but rather heterogeneous (Kwakye et al., 2017; Ludhra & Jones, 2009).

While most of these studies interrogate the experiences of Black girls and girls of colour in school, this study focuses on a youth work settings and the significant experiences that participants had through youth work provision, especially those relating to friendships and peer relations. Nevertheless, the project also attends to the friendship experiences of participants in school (and other settings) and how they relate to and differ from those of youth work.

2.3.2. Friendship

Critical sociological and ethnographic studies counter shallow and vilifying academic depictions of the friendships of young people of colour, and adolescent peer relationships more generally, as carrying a potentially negative influence on one’s behaviour and prospects (Delgado, 2016; Wyn, 2015). Girlhood studies scholars have recognised the significance of friendship in girls’ lives and the topic is therefore relatively common in this field (Aapola et al., 2005; Lipkin, 2009). However, the friendships of young people of colour, including girls, are understudied (Delgado,
2016; George, 2007, p. 115). Hernán Cuervo and Johanna Wyn (2014) argue that a metaphor of transitions is central to youth studies yet is in danger of espousing a deficit perspective. They advocate for the complementary use of relational metaphors, specifically belonging, to foreground the importance of relationships in young people’s lives and better understand inequalities.

Findings from sociological and ethnographic studies of young people’s friendships echo some of the findings in the sociology of friendship, which has tended to focus on adults. In some areas, these studies also shed light on topics that the sociology of friendship has not fully explored yet. In Sarah Winkler-Reid’s (2016) ethnographic study of girls’ friendships in an ethnically diverse secondary school in London, girls spoke of their friendship as based on sameness, closeness, understanding and enabling self-expression without judgement. Friendships are also an important space where girls construct identities and negotiate femininities together (Aapola et al., 2005; Hey, 1997).

Studies on friendships between young people from marginalised ethnic and racialised groups, especially those belonging to the same group, imply that these relationships can be politically significant. These friendships are perceived by participants to be based on a mutual understanding of their home life, cultures (Bergnehr et al., 2020) and experiences of racism (Harris, 2016; Reynolds, 2007). They provide young people with support in the struggles and exclusion they face (Harris, 2016; Meetoo, 2021). Same-ethnic friendships also enable young people to cultivate their ethnic identity and create a sense of belonging (George, 2007; Reynolds, 2007) while friendships between youth from different marginalised ethnic and racialised groups can engender solidarities (Harris, 2016). Nevertheless, this is not to imply that merely sharing the same ethnicity provides enough basis to form a friendship (Scholtz & Gilligan, 2017).

At the same time, studies have shown that young people also experience friendship difficulties, conflicts and painful breakups. These studies allude to the negative aspects of friendship politics by interrogating how girls judge their friends based on gendered, classed and racialised criteria (Hey, 1997; Winkler-Reid, 2016). Moreover, two studies briefly noted that some young people of colour in Scotland encountered racism in everyday comments and jokes made by their friends (Hopkins et al., 2015; Kennelly & Mouroutsou, 2020). Prejudice stemming from structural inequalities can
also limit the formation of friendships (Anderson & Holmes, 2023; Hey, 1997). Scholars have also pointed out how fighting among girls, which is seen as a private issue, is actually shaped by structural power relations (Brown, 2003; Brown, 2013). This study explores how the politics of friendship encompasses positive, negative and ambivalent friendship experiences, including in relation to participants’ activism.

2.3.3. Political participation and activism
To explore the role that friendship plays in youth activism, I must first address scholarly debates on the political engagement of youth. In the 21st century, there has been a popular claim that young people in the West are politically apathetic and disengaged and thus threaten Western democracy (Manning, 2014). Youth and girlhood studies scholars have sought to unpack and contest this claim. Chilla Bulbeck and Anita Harris (2008) remind us that historically young people are often blamed for societal problems and that the possibility that adults are similarly disengaged is not studied, although they are responsible for the current socio-economic conditions. Studies that foreground young people’s perspectives, especially qualitative ones, have shown that many young people distrust formal political institutions because these institutions do not listen to them or address their needs and interests (e.g. Harris et al., 2010; O’Toole, 2015). Moreover, socioeconomic structures and inequalities shape opportunities for political engagement (Bulbeck & Harris, 2008). Specifically, traditional political spaces in the UK are highly gendered, racialised and classed, which renders them much less accessible to girls and young people who belong to marginalised communities (Rogan, 2023). Nevertheless, there was a relatively high voter turnout of young people in the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, where those aged 16 and 17 were also allowed to vote, in the 2016 European Union membership referendum and the 2017 UK General Election, a phenomenon which has been termed the ‘youthquake’ (Pickard, 2019).

Beyond formal political participation, studies have also shown that young people, including girls, are involved in and lead social movements (e.g. Clay, 2012; Taft, 2010). Recent examples of social movement leaders include Malala Yousafzai, Vanessa Nakate, Greta Thunberg and X González. Nevertheless, young people also face significant barriers to their participation in social movements. They have limited
unsupervised and unstructured time, which constrains their ability to organise (Clay, 2012). They suffer from reduced spatial mobility and are subject to parental restrictions, with girls also facing sexism in social movements (Gordon, 2010). Structural racism erects further barriers to social movement participation, as young people of colour do not have many spaces where they can freely congregate (Clay, 2012) and protesting can entail larger safety and other kinds of risks for them than for young White people, which is why some avoid climate striking (Walker & van Holstein, 2023). Girls of colour, in particular, are marginalised in social movements (Brown, 2013). Moreover, their contribution to such movements is often rendered invisible by academic and media discourse, for instance when the Associated Press cut out Ugandan climate activist Vanessa Nakate from a photo she posed for with other climate activists, who were all White and from the Global North (Vanner & Dugal, 2020). These findings help explain why both formal political participation and social movement activism were not the main forms of activism that participants in my PhD project undertook. As a result, this thesis largely does not engage with the field of social movement studies and how it relates to the politics of friendship.  

Most relevant to the findings in this study is the convincing argument made by youth and girlhood scholars that rather than being politically apathetic, young people address the socio-political issues they care about by engaging in informal and everyday political practices in both the private and public sphere, for instance through their lifestyle choices, making political statements through art and engaging with political content on social media (e.g. Harris et al., 2010; O’Toole, 2015; Pickard, 2019). Youth engage in everyday political practices not only due to social, political and technological changes but also because these are forms of engagement that are often more accessible to them than traditional politics and activism (Pickard, 2019; Rogan, 2023). These practices are often framed as ‘individualised’ actions not in the sense that they are self-serving but rather because they are personalised to fit young people’s views (Pickard, 2019) and are embedded in relationships (Manning, 2014). Based on these

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4 While a relational approach has been gradually adopted in social movement studies, the focus has been on social networks of individuals, organisations and other actors who work collectively to address a specific issue (Edwards, 2014). However, I am more interested in relationships between individuals and how those relate to their political engagement. Additionally, the concept of networks does not account for the emotional dimensions and the significance of ‘connectedness’ in people’s meaningful relationships (Smart, 2007, p. 7).
findings, many youth and girlhood studies scholars have advocated expanding the
definition of political engagement beyond participation in formal political institutions
and foregrounding the definition in young people’s perspectives and actions in order
to recognise the diverse ways in which they seek to enact social change (e.g. Pickard,
2019; Taft, 2014).

Based on Black feminist theory’s reconceptualisation of activism, the calls of youth
and girlhood studies scholars to expand the definition of political participation and the
perspectives and experiences of the participants in my study, I define activism as
efforts to enact social change on a personal, interpersonal, community/local, national
and international level. In reviewing the aforementioned literature I have found that
expanded scholarly definitions of activism and political participation largely overlap,
especially in the practices they encompass and their political goals. I have chosen to
use the term activism (over political participation) to counter the lack of scholarly
recognition for the everyday activism that Black girls and girls of colour undertake
(Kelly, 2018).

Friendship has not figured prominently in scholarship on youth activism. This might be
partially explained through the critique made by girlhood studies that the public
discourse that celebrates girls such as Malala Yousafzai and Greta Thunberg as
exceptional activists is based on an individualising, neoliberal approach that obscures
their activist and support networks and the collective actions they are involved in. To
counter such narratives, these girlhood scholars explored the significance of
intergenerational ties in and for girls’ activism (Bent, 2016; Edell et al., 2016).
However, there is little research into how young people’s peer relationships can enable
them to enact social change (Holmes, 2016, p. 11). A small number of studies have
pointed to the importance of friendship in various forms of youth political engagement.
Jessica K. Taft’s (2017) ground-breaking research with activist girls in social
movements in North and Latin America has shown that friends and peers can
encourage girls’ entry into activism. Moreover, Taft’s (2010) participants formed close
friendships with other activists which created a sense of solidarity and companionship
that in turn sustained their activism. For many participants in Taft’s study, activist
friends replaced ‘old’ friends who were not interested in activism (Taft, 2010).
Programmes and studies of youth political socialisation tend to focus on the role of
adults rather than peers and friends (Gordon & Taft, 2011; Levinsen & Yndigegn,
yet friends play a vital role in shaping young people’s political opinions and sustaining their various forms of political engagement (Manning, 2014) and activist youth attest they mostly engage in peer-based political socialisation (Gordon & Taft, 2011). At the same time, young people are less likely to engage in political discussions with friends who are not interested in socio-political issues or whose views are distant from theirs (Ekström, 2016; Levinsen & Yndigegn, 2015). Lastly, Kelly’s (2018, 2020) research with Black girls illuminates how participants cultivated their critical consciousness and engaged in everyday activism in school through their bonds of sisterhood and friendship. My study augments challenges to individualising, neoliberal narratives of girls’ activism not by assuming that their friendships simply lead to activism but rather by exploring the various ways that friendship and activism were entangled in their lives.

2.4. Conclusion

In this study, I draw on the sociology of friendship, Black feminist theory and youth and girlhood studies to sociologically explore the politics of friendship in the lives of Black girls and girls of colour in Scotland. I use the term ‘politics of friendship’ to refer to the ways that friendship – including its realities and ideals, practices and conceptualisations, joys and hardships, aims, experiences and outcomes – is shaped by, contends with and challenges structural power relations and inequalities and how it relates to efforts to enact social change.

In this chapter, I have shown how the sociology of friendship has challenged the notion that friendship is purely chosen and positive, calling to examine the gaps between its ideals and realities and the negative experiences it can entail. This thesis builds on the sociological approach and findings of this field. However, since there is relatively little attention in the sociology of friendship to the ways that ethnicity and racism play out in friendships and to the friendships of children and adolescents, I also draw on Black feminist theory, youth studies and girlhood studies. These fields enable me to explore how intersecting systems of oppression and identity categories of race, gender and age shape the experiences and perspectives of the Black girls and girls of colour who participated in this study, especially in relation to their personal relationships and activism.
Bringing all four scholarly fields together sheds light on how friendship can offer affirmation to people who face oppression, involve painful experiences as well as power relations that are shaped by structural inequalities and play a role in activist engagements. These are the aspects of the politics of friendship that this thesis explores in depth. It therefore contributes to the sociology of friendship, Black feminist theory, youth studies and girlhood studies, helping to fill important gaps in their literature.

Almost all the studies discussed in the literature review are qualitative. This indicates that such methods are particularly fruitful for exploring the abovementioned lines of inquiry. In the following chapter, I will discuss the qualitative methods and more broadly the methodology that I designed to study the politics of friendship.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Following the study’s research questions and the aims of Black feminist theory (Collins, 2000; Mirza, 2015) and girlhood studies (Aapola et al., 2005; Lipkin, 2009) to centre the experiences and perspectives of Black girls and girls of colour, this project was designed as an ethnographic study that incorporated participant observation, creative methods and in-depth interviews. Black feminists layla-roxanne hill and Francesca Sobande (2022) have argued that ‘More research is needed that is qualitative and methodologically innovative to provide an outlet for the words and worldview of Black women and women of colour in Scotland’ (p. 118), in contrast to research that seeks to quantify and measure the Black Scottish population (Sobande & hill, 2022). Qualitative methods have also proved useful in enabling study participants to overcome cultural pressures to idealise their friendships and produce complex depictions of their relationships instead (Davies & Heaphy, 2011; Smart et al., 2012). Additionally, youth scholars have argued that discourses of political apathy are often based on a narrow understanding of politics as formal engagement which is then measured through quantitative methods. In contrast, these scholars have advocated for the use of qualitative methods that foreground young people’s own understandings of the political and their political actions (Manning, 2014; O’Toole, 2003).

Beyond exploring its research questions, a central aim of the study design was to engender meaningful, enjoyable and beneficial engagements for the participants. One of the ways I did so was by interacting with the girls similarly to the ways that the youth workers engaged with them and working closely with the youth workers, as I could see that young people in IYS connected to the youth workers and drew much meaning and joy from being part of the organisation. Relatedly, I trusted that the youth

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5 Originally, and in accordance with political and ethical commitment to feminist research and children’s rights, I wished to conduct research that was more distinctly participatory (e.g. Davidson, 2017; Horgan, 2017; Moore, 2018). However, this was not feasible, partly due to the constrictions of a PhD project, which is to take place in a relatively short period of time and be led solely by the PhD student. It was also my impression that the participants were quite busy and would not have wanted to significantly engage with the research beyond the IYS activities and programmes that they were taking part in anyway. For many of these reasons as well as the fact that I myself am not a Black woman and that the capacity of this research to affect social change is likely low, it also does not strictly adhere to the ideals of Black feminist methodology (Collins, 2000; James, 2021; Luna & Laster Pirtle, 2021). Therefore, and in recognition of what was more feasible and under my control in this PhD project, I focused my efforts on making participants’ experiences of the research as positive and significant as I could.
workers had intimate knowledge of the young people’s needs and interests and that
the organisation was experienced in working with young Black people and people of
colour in a respectful and impactful manner. Following in the footsteps of IYS, I sought
to provide participants with opportunities to express their views and share their
experiences in ways which validated them. Throughout this chapter, I detail how I
worked to make the girls’ experiences of participation in the research significant.

In this chapter, I first provide an overview of my fieldwork. I then discuss the methods
I designed and how I employed them to investigate the study’s topic and research
questions. This is followed by an interrogation of the ways that my positionality and
the relationships I formed with participants shaped the fieldwork and data co-
production. Next, I discuss the key ethical considerations that I contended with in the
study. Finally, I describe how I approached data recording and analysis.

3.1 Fieldwork overview

The study’s fieldwork site was Intercultural Youth Scotland (IYS) - an anti-racist charity
that supports young Black people and people of colour in Scotland, brings them
together and seeks to engender social change regarding issues that affect their lives.
I chose to conduct research in IYS for several connected reasons: First, it allowed me
to explore the experiences and perspectives of Black girls and girls of colour in
Scotland, who are under-researched outside of a deficit perspective (hill & Sobande,
2019; Palmer, 2016). Second, the emphasis IYS placed on cultivating spaces for the
young people to get to know each other and socialise enabled me to learn about
participants’ friendship practices and dynamics. Third, because the organisation’s
youth work provision included discussions of ethnicity, racism and other forms of
oppression with the young people, it was more feasible for me to discuss these
complex issues with participants in relation to their friendships. Fourth, the social
justice orientation of IYS and the youth work setting allowed me to interrogate political
engagement beyond spaces such as social movements and formal political spaces,
which are less accessible to Black girls and girls of colour (e.g. Rogan, 2023; Walker
& van Holstein, 2023) and thereby shed light on their everyday activism, which often
goes unrecognised by scholars (Kelly, 2018). Thus, IYS provided fertile ground for
interrogating the politics of friendship. I will now detail the specific youth work programmes and activities that the study focused on within IYS.

3.1.1 IYS programmes
Fieldwork took place in two IYS girls’ groups as well as the weekly youth club and special events, in which many members of the girls’ groups participated. The IYS girls’ groups were first set up to support Black girls and girls of colour in achieving the Duke of Edinburgh Award, an award that young people can obtain by volunteering, developing a skill, engaging in physical exercise and undertaking an expedition over a certain period of time. Additionally, the IYS girls’ groups aim to provide Black girls and girls of colour a space to spend time together, speak about their experiences and undergo processes of individual and collective empowerment. The groups had about 20 members altogether. During my fieldwork, girls’ group sessions included various social games; activities like yoga, creating quizzes about one’s culture and hosting a radio show; and workshops on topics such as women’s rights around the world and individual and community goal setting. Sessions were usually between 1.5-2 hours and occurred once a week or once every 2 weeks.

The IYS youth club was a mixed-gender space that ran for about 2 hours every week and was attended by around 10-25 young people each session. In contrast to the girls’ groups, it was less structured and was mainly intended as a space where the young people could freely socialise, listen to music, and dance. During the youth club, the IYS youth workers sometimes organised social games as well as various workshops, for instance meditation, rap writing and storytelling. The sessions usually ended with an ‘open mic’ where the young people and the youth workers could sing and perform in front of the other attendees. These activities reflect the emphasis that IYS placed in its youth work provision on enabling young people to cultivate their interest and skills in performing arts. I also attended many of the special events organised by IYS. These events, such as the Scotland in Colour Festival, often centred on providing young people with a platform to showcase their creations and talents.
3.1.2 Study participants and terminology

The study was conducted with 15 girls who participated in the IYS girls’ groups and with the youth worker who led these groups and the youth club. The study engaged with two additional youth workers through interviews. Additionally, there were six IYS youth workers, volunteers and staff members who were occasionally present at the youth club or the girls’ groups whose consent to be included in the study I obtained though they were not central to it.

The terminology I chose to use in this thesis is often meant to render complex situations and identities more legible. However, it is far from perfect or fully precise. Some of the IYS youth workers and volunteers were quite young and could themselves fall under the definition of ‘young people’. Moreover, some of the young people who participated in the girls’ groups were initially framed as volunteers by IYS, because the charity only worked with young people up to 18 years old (at a certain point during my fieldwork this was changed to 24 years old). There was also one member of a girls’ group who was also a part-time IYS staff member (though the youth worker told me that this member would have attended the group even if they were not paid to do so). However, I use the terms ‘young people’, ‘girls’ and ‘participants’ to refer to those who I felt took part in IYS programmes and activities mainly as attendees and whose experiences and perspectives I foreground in the study. I use the term ‘IYS youth workers, volunteers and staff’ to refer to those whose engagement with IYS programmes was (or was perceived by me) more defined by their responsibility towards running these programmes.

The girls who participated in the study were between 14 to 20 years old. More than two-thirds were of African or Caribbean heritage and some of them were of mixed ethnic background. The other girls were of South Asian or Middle Eastern heritage and one was White. While IYS catered to young Black people and people of colour, some of its programmes, including one of the girls’ groups, were open to young people of all ethnicities as long as they were committed to anti-racism. Some of the study’s participants were born in the UK while others immigrated there with their families, including from other European countries. Of the girls who mentioned or discussed their religion, most were Christian and a few were Muslim or Sikh. The IYS youth workers and volunteers were all Black people or people of colour.
The term BAME (Black Asian and Minority Ethnic) which has been prevalent in UK public discourse, policy and research has been criticised by Black feminists for homogenising different ethnic and racial groups and especially for erasing the unique experiences of Black people, including anti-blackness racism which people of colour who are not Black may also be complicit in perpetuating (hill & Sobande, 2019; Sobande & hill, 2022). IYS uses the term ‘Black people and people of colour’ because they find that the term BAME fails to account for structural racism and instead focuses on minority rights and ethnicity (IYS Ambassadors & Assan, 2021, p. 11). Based on the above reasons and the fact that most of the participants in the study were Black, I use the term ‘Black girls and girls of colour’ to refer to participants and ‘Black people and people of colour’ to refer to everyone who was part of IYS. I do however recognise that these terms are not faultless as they are also in danger of homogenising differences, particularly in relation to the variety of intersections of race and religion, which are flattened in popular UK discourses that solely equate Islam with South Asian and Middle-Eastern identities and heritage (Jameela, 2021). However, as I will later discuss, religion was a topic that participants hardly brought up. Moreover, the term obscures the fact that one of the participants was White. Nevertheless, I do not want to use the more general term ‘girls’ as the study largely focuses on the politics of friendships of girls who belong to marginalised ethnic and racialised groups.

Lastly, I use the term ‘girls’ rather than ‘young women’ because some of the participants were relatively young and because some of them preferred this term when describing themselves. Additionally, by interrogating the politics of friendship through the experiences and perspectives of girls, I hope to challenge the popular association of girliness with shallowness and immaturity (Nicholls, 2019). However, this term is not completely accurate, as one participant came out during fieldwork as non-binary. When I spoke with this participant about their inclusion in the study, which focuses on girls, they replied that it was fine by them since they were a woman when they joined. After the fieldwork concluded, I asked the participant if it would be okay to refer to the study participants as ‘girls’ while noting that the research also included non-binary people. They replied that they did not mind and that I should do what I think is best. However, at a later point, when I began disseminating findings, another participant suggested that I use a more gender-neutral term. Therefore, while I still centre girls in
the framing of the study, I sometimes use the term ‘young people’ for the purpose of inclusivity.

3.1.3 Fieldwork timeline and activities
My fieldwork took place from September 2020 until November 2021. I began my fieldwork with an IYS girls’ group that was formed in the first lockdown, around March 2020, and met weekly. I will refer to this group as the Senior Girls’ Group. In mid-November, due to dwindling attendance, IYS decided to suspend the group’s sessions. In March 2021, the Senior Girls’ Group resumed its session and I continued fieldwork with the group until April 2023. During the fieldwork period, I conducted participant observation in 12 sessions of the group as well as facilitated seven workshops with them based on creative methods.

As the Senior Girls’ Group suspended its sessions relatively early into my fieldwork and I was unsure if and when it would resume, in November 2020 I joined another IYS girls’ group, which had recently been formed at a school and was facilitated by the same youth worker who ran the Senior group. This second group, which I will refer to as the School Girls’ Group, met once every 2 weeks (though sometimes less frequently, mainly due to timetabling and communication issues with the school). I conducted participant observation in three sessions of the School Girls’ Group and facilitated four workshops with the group. I concluded fieldwork with the School group in April 2021. Additionally, I conducted participant observation in six sessions that IYS organised for members of both the Senior and School groups who were training for the expedition segment of the Duke of Edinburgh Award. I also had three meetings with the youth worker who ran the girls’ groups where we discussed plans for sessions and topics I wanted her input on, such as members’ engagement with my study and the history of IYS.

Furthermore, from September 2020 until April 2021 I conducted weekly participant observation in 23 sessions of the IYS youth club, which many of the members of the Senior Girls’ Group attended. From April 2021 to November 2021, my participant observation purposefully became more sporadic because I felt that I had largely reached data saturation through this method but wanted to keep in contact with participants. In that time period, I conducted participant observation at eight additional
occasions at IYS, including recordings of a radio show organised by members of the Senior group, visits to the youth club and special events organised by charity. I also conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with six girls and three IYS youth workers.

3.1.4 In-person, online and outdoor settings
Since fieldwork occurred during the Covid-19 pandemic it required constant adaptations. The biggest impact was in terms of the settings in which IYS, schools and the study operated following the changes in the Scottish Government’s Covid-19 regulations. When fieldwork began in the autumn of 2020, the Senior Girls’ Group and youth club took place in person. After a few months, when the second national lockdown was announced in the winter, IYS activities moved online and were conducted through video communication platforms. In the spring, activities were allowed to take place outdoors and later returned to the in-door IYS premises. The School Girls’ Group took place either entirely online or in a hybrid fashion, with the youth worker and myself joining from our homes and the participants joining from their school through a shared device. Most of the study was therefore conducted online.

As a researcher, I largely found online fieldwork to be frustrating and limiting. First, the lack of physical co-presence and shared materiality made it harder (though not impossible) to generate a felt sense of togetherness and engage in a flowing conversation (Abdul Rahim & Walters, 2022; Collins, 2020). This was also due to problems that myself and IYS members experienced with technical equipment and internet connection, which meant that some members could not (or understandably chose not to) turn on their cameras and/or microphones. Moreover, participants usually had their microphones muted when they were not speaking and at times they were unable to use the microphone or were distracted by the presence of others in the household. Additionally, although participants sometimes nodded or smiled while others were talking, I often found it hard to discern what exactly they were reacting to. Communication and conversation flow were particularly strained when the School Girls’ Group was in a hybrid format, as the girls were wearing masks and sharing one laptop, which made it harder to interact and form connections with them. This was likely also because the youth worker and I had not met the School group in person.
beforehand (see also Collins, 2020) and because the school setting generated a more didactic environment.

A second issue with online settings was that they were missing in-person elements which could have potentially produced significant insights for my study. When IYS activities occurred in person I could observe who participants chose to sit next to and interact with. I could also observe the more spontaneous interactions that occurred before and after sessions of the girls’ group, in contrast to online settings where members simply logged on when the session began and logged off when it concluded. Thirdly, online settings restricted or altogether prevented the participation of some IYS members, due to problems with internet connection and technological equipment as well as the lack of private and safe spaces in their homes. The digital divide likely meant that those who were most marginalised in terms of socio-economic background were most negatively affected (McBride & Ralph, 2020). Nevertheless, over time some of the above difficulties became more manageable and meaningful engagement, connections and co-presence were fostered. This outcome, along with personal Covid-19 safety concerns and later a short-term geographical mobility limitation, was why I decided to conduct the interviews online.

One significant benefit of online settings was that young people who did not live in Edinburgh were able to join IYS activities and therefore the study. Some of these new members lived in even less ethnically diverse areas of Scotland and therefore had somewhat different experiences and understandings of friendship politics, which greatly contributed to the study. Online settings also made it easy for me as a researcher to record the voices, expressions and gestures of participants. I did not and would not have attempted such a scale of documentation in in-person settings, as this would have been quite complex and likely would have felt much more intrusive and distracting for participants. Many of the affordances and limitations of online settings I experienced during fieldwork were also noted by the IYS youth workers, as they pertained not only to young people’s participation in my study but also to their participation in IYS programmes in general. I will detail how the girls and youth workers experienced the different settings in the empirical chapters.
3.2. Methods
To interrogate the politics of friendship in the lives of Black girls and girls of colour, the study was conducted through an ethnographic approach, whereby the researcher is immersed in other people's lives for a significant amount of time (Bailey, 2020). Ethnography enables the researcher to explore how participants act in, give meaning to and construct their social worlds (Emond, 2005; Hammersley, 2013). The ethnographic approach enabled me to gradually unpack participants’ friendship politics, many of which would not have been discernible without an extensive research engagement, development of trust and foregrounding of participants’ experiences and perspectives. Relatedly, the data that this study produced did not previously exist in the field, waiting to be ‘collected’, rather it was co-constructed through my engagement in the field with participants (Emond, 2005; Hammersley, 2013). To clarify, this study is ethnographic in the sense that I spent a relatively long period of time with the participants in IYS. However, because most of the study was carried out online due to Government Covid-19, ethnographic elements such as non-verbal observations were not very accessible. Therefore, the data is mostly presented in quotes rather than ethnographic vignettes. I will now detail the three specific methods utilised in this ethnographic study: participant observation, creative methods and in-depth semi-structured interviews.

3.2.1 Participant observation
Fieldwork began with participant observation, the most common method in ethnography, in which a researcher observes and participates in the activities of a certain group (Bailey, 2020). I chose to begin the study with participant observation in the youth club and girls’ groups so that I could get to know the young people, youth workers and volunteers at IYS more informally, compared to the interviews and workshops that I conducted later, which were more structured and positioned me more clearly as the facilitator and researcher. Participant observation was also critical in studying IYS as an important context for participants’ relationships and political practices (Heath et al., 2009).

As ethnography necessitates that participants grant you access to their lives (Emond, 2005), negotiation of such access is often a key issue in ethnographic studies (see for
example in Heath et al., 2009). However, in this study I received access relatively easily, as IYS was a small organisation that needed volunteers. While IYS was a gatekeeper of the field, they fully supported me in conducting the study. Additionally, because the IYS programmes I participated in were regularly attended by volunteers, my presence as an adult was not out of the ordinary. I felt quite welcome by many of the young people in IYS while the rest seemed disinterested in me but were never hostile. As I will discuss in a later section, this relatively smooth access was also partly due to my gender and (perceived) ethnic identity.

Participant observation can be undertaken on a continuum starting from only engaging in observation to participating fully (Bailey, 2020; Emond, 2005), with youth researchers often moving back and forth on the continuum during fieldwork (Heath et al., 2009). In the youth club, I undertook volunteer activities such as helping to set up before the young people arrived, serving food and drinks and cleaning up after a session concluded. There were a few times when my presence was crucial, as there was a requirement for a certain number of adults to attend for the youth club to operate. I was also grateful to be given tasks to undertake at the youth club, as the young people mostly freely socialised with one another during the session and I was often unsure how to approach them. I experienced this uncertainty especially at the beginning of the fieldwork and because the youth club was also attended by people who were not members of the girls’ groups and therefore were not participants in my study. While at first I thought that I needed to be ‘cool’ for the young people to relate to me, I realised with time that sharing how I sometimes felt awkward or unsure of myself in social situations at IYS was an experience that some of the participants also felt and we were therefore able to bond over it. However, I still had ethical reservations about how much to participate in the youth club, as I did not want to take away from the precious time that the girls had to socialise with other young Black people and people of colour, which was a key reason why they attended IYS. Therefore, beyond my activities as a volunteer, I often engaged in observation at the youth club, together with short conversations with participants.

It was easier for me to conduct participant observation in sessions of the girls’ groups, as those were centred on workshops and discussions, though this too necessitated some navigation. At first, I tried to mostly observe, as I did not want to take up space or intervene too much. Yet, after a while, I realised that participating was more fitting
as the girls might dislike it if I simply observed them (Emond, 2005). Moreover, the youth workers and volunteers regularly participated in IYS activities. As I will show in later chapters, this encouraged the young people to participate and cultivated spaces that were more egalitarian and dialogical. As a researcher, I too wanted to cultivate such spaces and even felt that it was more ethical to share some of my views and experiences with participants, as they shared so much in my presence and with me (Edwards et al., 2016). As fieldwork progressed, I developed relationships with participants and gained their trust (Emond, 2005). I felt more confident in my place in the girls’ groups from a methodological and ethical perspective. Additionally, due to the characteristics of youth work provision in IYS and because I was usually not given complex or onerous tasks as a volunteer there, I largely did not experience tensions between my volunteer role and my researcher role. The exception was the few times when I had to undertake a volunteer task that restricted my ability to simply spend time with the young people and observe their interactions.

Conducting participant observation enabled me to observe social dynamics in IYS. It thereby contributed to my understanding of the ways that friendship was experienced as politically affirming and the role it played in participants’ activism. Moreover, participant observation played a central role in my integration into the IYS community, assisted me in establishing rapport and trust with participants and sustained our bonds throughout fieldwork. In turn, I believe that this deepened participants’ engagement with the other methods I employed in the study (Heath et al., 2009).

3.2.2. Creative methods
To further unpack the politics of friendship, I facilitated workshops with the girls’ groups that were based on various creative methods. The use of creative methods, especially visual ones, has become quite popular in research with children and young people in the last few decades. In contrast to early idealised notions, such methods do not offer participants a better and more direct way to tell their stories and express themselves, as their creative outputs (like their verbal responses) are shaped by conventions and social contexts (Buckingham, 2009). Instead, the rationale for utilising creative methods in this study was that it could generate unique insights about the research topic that the other methods I employed might not produce, as well as provide an
enjoyable way for participants to engage in the research (Lyon & Carabelli, 2016; Thomson, 2008). I used a variety of creative methods so that I could investigate different aspects of friendship politics and because focusing on one method could have constrained participants, as not everyone feels comfortable and sees themselves as skilled in every medium (Buckingham, 2009; Lyon & Carabelli, 2016).

The workshops explored how participants understood and experienced the following topics and the connections between them: Meanings and practices of friendship; socio-political issues and actions; identities; the political; difficult friendships; friendship in activism; and participation in IYS and the girls’ group. Some workshops were centred on one creative method while others incorporated several methods. A large portion of each workshop was dedicated to a discussion of these topics based on the creative outputs that participants produced but also going beyond the outputs. The conversations that unfolded in these workshops were most important to me in terms of data (see also Eldén, 2012; Rogers, 2017). I also analysed the textual outputs that participants produced but not the visual outputs, as I felt I did not have the necessary skills to do so.

In addition to addressing the research questions, there were several considerations that I had to take into account when designing the workshop. As most scholarship on creative methods published at the time was based on in-person delivery, I had to adapt the methods to the affordances and limitations of online settings. Coupled with the fact that attendance in the girls’ groups was not uniform, I decided that the only physical materials that the workshops would require were ones that participants already had in their homes (such as pen and paper). Fluctuation in attendance also meant that I designed each workshop as a standalone, rather than an ongoing project.

I designed a total of seven workshops, all of which I conducted with the Senior Girls’ Group and four of which I conducted with the School Girls’ Group. Workshops that were conducted with both groups were adapted between the first and second delivery, based on reflections about the effectiveness of the first delivery and differences between the groups. I also piloted the first two workshops with a group of my friends, which enabled me to refine them before delivering them to participants. I was unable to pilot the other workshops because by that point the pace of fieldwork had become
too intense. However, I did send the groups’ youth worker the plan for each workshop in advance so that she could look over them and make suggestions if needed.

The creative methods I facilitated in the workshops were:

- An adaptation of co-centric mapping, where participants were asked to draw the significant relationships in their lives (Eldén, 2012; Spencer & Pahl, 2006) as well as how those relate to socio-political issues they care about (see images 1-2).
- An adaptation of photo-elicitation (Luttrell, 2010; Rogers, 2017), where participants were asked to pick photos from their phone cameras and/or social media accounts according to various prompts.
- Asking participants to come up with words to describe themselves and how they believe others describe them (see image 3).
- Reading and annotating excerpts from news articles and social media content.
- Watching a video together.
- Collectively creating word clouds (see image 4).
- Writing texts according to various prompts (e.g. Davies & Heaphy, 2011), such as ‘A friend is...’, ‘How do you speak up?’ and ‘It’s the future! You are old and successful so you are writing an autobiography – the story of your life. What would you write about the girls’ group?’.
Image 1 – mapping activity: relationships and socio-political issues

Image 2 – mapping activity: relationships and socio-political issues
My aim was that the workshops would be a continuation of the safe spaces of the IYS girls’ groups so that they could enable participants to speak about their experiences and engage in critical discussions, thereby contributing to their personal and collective development (see also Edwards et al., 2016; Showunmi, 2017). I believe that such processes were facilitated by the fact that the workshops were framed by IYS as
sessions of the girls’ group and because the groups’ youth worker also participated in them. Additionally, at the beginning of each workshop, I told participants that the aim was to gather their views on the topic and that there were no right or wrong answers to the questions I asked.

At the conclusion of each workshop, I asked for participants’ feedback, including if there were parts they did not enjoy. The fact that I only received positive feedback does not mean that they necessarily had no negative feedback (and there might have been different reasons why they chose not to provide such feedback). However, what is of note is the kinds of positive feedback I received. A comment that repeated itself was that participants appreciated the opportunity to think and speak about the workshop topics as well as listen to what other members of the group had to say. With regards to the photo-elicitation, some of the participants said they enjoyed looking at the photos and reminiscing and one participant said that the photos helped guide the conversation and keep her focused. To me, this is an indication that (at least some of) the participants found it meaningful and enjoyable to take part in the workshop.

3.2.3. Interviews
After I concluded the creative methods workshops and the intense period of participant observation, I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with six of the girls. There were several reasons why I undertook interviews. First, the interviews generated insights about my research questions that I could not gain through observations and brought individual perspectives more into focus (Flewitt, 2014; Lamont & Swidler, 2014). This was critical as participants often refrained from explicitly disagreeing with one another in the collective setting of the girls’ groups. Relatedly, the interviews also enabled some of the participants to discuss more sensitive and complex experiences that they did not feel comfortable doing in group settings. Second, the interviews enabled me to expand on and refine themes that came up in workshops and participant observation and follow up on things that participants said and did that were not clear to me. Third, the interviews allowed me to explore the research questions with girls who did not attend all the workshops or who found it harder to fully express themselves in the groups. Scheduling the interviews at the end of the fieldwork meant that I had by then a good rapport with participants, gained their trust and could hopefully put
them at ease, all of which are important conditions for interviewing (Flewitt, 2014; Legard et al., 2003). The interviews were especially significant in bringing out the negative and more ambivalent aspects of the politics of friendship, not only in relation to how structural inequalities play out in these bonds but also what prevents friendship from being politically affirming and how friendship can hinder activism.

I also conducted interviews with three IYS youth workers. The aim of interviewing youth workers was to better understand their perspectives and roles in IYS as well as how they understood the politics of friendship in the lives of the young people they worked with. The interviews were necessary in this case because the participant observation and creative workshops foregrounded the girls’ perspectives and did not afford me many opportunities to interact with the youth workers.

The interview guides were crafted based on themes I identified in the data up to that point and issues that I found more appropriate to ask the young people and youth workers individually. With the young people, the interview focused largely on their involvement in IYS in general and the girls’ group in particular and their experiences of friendship in and political engagement through IYS programmes and activities. With the youth workers, the interview mostly focused on the work they undertook in IYS and specifically how they supported the girls’ relationships and activism in the organisation. Once each interview concluded I reflected on how generative the questions were and refined the interview guide accordingly.

During the interview, I sought to balance between maintaining its structure and asking the questions that I prepared ahead of it but also remaining flexible by following up on what interviewees said and being responsive to what they seemed most interested in discussing (Legard et al., 2003). I adopted some of the key principles in taking a feminist approach to interviewing, namely establishing common ground but also acknowledging differences between myself and the interviewees (DeVault & Gross, 2012) and emphasising reciprocity in the interview encounter (Oakley, 2016), which in my case mostly took the form of validating interviewees’ experiences. Like with the workshops, I emphasised at the beginning of the interview that there are no right or wrong answers.

I offered all the girls who took part in the Senior Girls’ Group the opportunity to be interviewed, except for two who attended very few of the group’s sessions and my
workshops and I therefore had little interaction with them as well as suspected that they would not be interested in further engaging with the study. Six young people agreed to be interviewed. Most of those who declined said that they were too busy while others did not give a reason or did not respond to my message. I did not invite members of the School Girls’ Group to be interviewed as I spent relatively little time with them and they had only recently joined IYS. I also interviewed the youth worker who facilitated the girls’ groups and two other youth workers who had worked with young people (some of whom were participants in the study) in various IYS programmes, including the education programme in schools and the activism programme. The interviews were conducted through the Zoom video communication platform and ranged from 83 to 123 minutes.

3.3. Positionality, relationships and power

Feminist thinkers have argued that research, including the production of data, is shaped by the identities and positionalities of the researcher and the participants as well as the relationships they form with one another. Accordingly, they have advocated for a reflexive approach that attends to such issues, including matters of power and privilege (Emond, 2005; Hamilton, 2020; Moore, 2018). Some scholars argue that shared identity with participants produces better data since outsiders supposedly cannot understand the realities of participants and participants will feel less comfortable with them. However, I side with scholars who challenge the notion of sameness and contend that research across differences is valuable and that reflexivity is required to examine how differences and similarities play out in knowledge production (Heath et al., 2009; Taft, 2007). Relatedly, Patricia Hamilton (2020) argues there is a need for a Black feminist intersectional approach to reflexivity, which examines how research is shaped not by one social identity category but by complex

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When the Senior Girls’ Group suspended its activities shortly after the beginning of my fieldwork, I had looked into other possible groups in IYS to undertake research with. I initially considered both the School Girls’ Group and the IYS activism programme but decided on the former because the activism programme was mixed-gender and its schedule was quite packed, which meant that I probably would not be able to facilitate workshops there. Moreover, I had already established a relationship with the youth worker who ran the School group and knew that she would find my presence there helpful whereas I was not sufficiently familiar with the youth workers who ran the activism programme and suspected my presence there might be cumbersome.
interactions of these categories and recognises that positionality is also contextual. Throughout my fieldwork and beyond it, I was heavily engaged in a reflexive practice to interrogate how such issues informed my research. I will share the main insights and conclusions that I arrived at.

3.3.1. Differences and similarities
When I was exploring potential fieldwork sites in the first year of my PhD studies, I attended an event by IYS. After the event concluded, I approached the founder of IYS to introduce myself. During our conversation, the founder noted that all the people who attended the event (of whom there were few) were people of colour. I expressed my surprise to her, explaining that I had never been called a person of colour before and that back home, in Israel, as a Jewish person of European descent, I am considered White. The study’s participants, with whom I was open about my nationality and ethnic background, had differing understandings of my ethnic identity. Some participants told me that they considered me White and some told me that they considered me a person of colour, with a few explaining that this was because I am from Israel. It is also possible that I was perceived as a person of colour, or at least not clearly perceived as White, because I shared with many participants other commonalities that are often related to ethnic identities: I was an immigrant in Scotland with immigrant parents who sometimes found it hard to express myself in English and was unaccustomed to and even perplexed by British social norms. Some of the participants were themselves immigrants, while many other participants’ families had an immigration background. I also felt like a foreigner in Scotland due to my Jewish religion, an experience which might have somewhat resembled that of participants who belonged to minoritised religions and participants who felt that their Christianity was not the same as that of White people. This demonstrates how research positionality is contextual (Hamilton, 2020). The complexity of this issue meant that I cannot ascertain all the exact ways that this positionality shaped fieldwork.

Still, I was acutely aware of the fact that, unlike the young Black people and people of colour in IYS, I did not have a history of experiencing racism and instead enjoyed the privileges of whiteness (Nayak, 2007). I recognised that complex racialised power relations existed between myself and the participants and engaged in ongoing
reflection to try and discern how they might have shaped our research engagements and relationships. I strove to show participants solidarity regarding their experiences of racism and racialisation by listening to, validating and supporting them (Taft, 2007; see also Heath et al., 2009, pp. 41–42). That some participants spoke critically and even negatively about White people in my presence was an encouraging indication that, whatever they perceived me as, I had gained their trust and they felt comfortable discussing some of the difficult and sensitive issues relating to how ethnicity and racism shaped their lives, though not necessarily all of them. In my empirical chapters, I will discuss more broadly how participants’ understandings of ethnic and racialised identities, along with anti-racist and anti-discrimination commitments, informed their politics of friendship in IYS and outside of it.

Another meaningful identity social category that shaped my positionality in the field was age, or rather that I was an adult who was conducting research with young people. During fieldwork, I was careful not to assume that I knew what the current experience of youth was simply because I had been a young person in the past, especially considering that age intersects with other social categories whom I do not necessarily share with participants (Heath et al., 2009; Taft, 2007). Rather, I employed the ethnographic approach to listen to and respect the experiences and perspectives of young people and learn what was important to them (Emond, 2005). When writing my fieldnotes after IYS activities concluded, I often interrogated whether my interactions with participants and the ways I understood their practices and views reflected adultism - the systematic and everyday oppression of young people, whereby they are infantilised, romanticised and over-victimised (Douthirt-Cohen & Tokunaga, 2020).

In my fieldwork, I sought to go against the conventional power relations that exist between adults and young people in educational settings, which was somewhat ingrained in me through my experiences as a school pupil and as an employee and volunteer in various educational settings. While as an IYS volunteer I was not put in positions of great authority over the young people, I still attempted to distance myself from embodying an authoritative position. I strove to embody the position of ‘adult friend’ who cultivates positive relationships with young participants (Fine & Sandstrom, 1988). This did not happen immediately but rather was the result of a learning process, which was helped by the fact that the IYS youth worker who led the youth club and girls’ groups also cultivated friend-like relationships with the young people.
Additionally, as I will show later in the thesis, the girls and youth workers engaged in dialogical critical pedagogy practices in IYS. While I was eager to learn from participants, it took me a while to shake off the ethical concern that my engagement reflects a hierarchical pedagogical approach and learn how to partake in a pedagogical dialogue with participants similarly to the youth workers (see also Edwards et al., 2016).

A significant commonality I had with most of the participants was our gender identity, though again this did not mean that we had the same experiences of growing up as girls (Mandrona, 2016). Still, my gender identity enabled me to take part in the girls’ groups. Participants said that in the girls’ groups, unlike mixed-gender IYS activities, they could speak freely about certain issues that affected them (such as periods and sexual abuse), engage in more personal and in-depth discussions and share a common understanding as girls, and particularly as Black girls and girls of colour. While my ethnic identity was ambiguous, I am certain that if I identified as a man I would not be able to participate in the girls’ groups. Lastly, my middle-upper-class background differed from participants’ working- and middle-class backgrounds. However, the ways that differences in our class backgrounds shaped our interactions and relationships were not clear enough to me (perhaps also because there was no explicit discussion of class differences in IYS settings) and were possibly less significant than the differences and similarities I have detailed above.

3.3.2. Understandings of and relationships in the research

Beyond social categories of identity, my interactions with participants and the co-construction of data were also shaped by my researcher role and how participants perceived the study. As I discussed earlier in this chapter, I was not always sure how much to participate in IYS activities. This methodological dilemma in many ways stemmed from recognition of my positionality and potential power relations in the field. In the context of contributing to the discussions that often unfolded during IYS activities, I was wary of ‘influencing’ participants and thus ‘biasing’ the data. At the same time, I was aware that such concerns somewhat contrasted with my rejection of the notion of research as purely objective (Hayes et al., 2021; Moore, 2018). Moreover, such concerns problematically conceptualised me, the adult researcher, as all-
powerful and the young participants as devoid of power and agency, when in fact there are complex power negotiations between adults and young people in the research setting (Davidson, 2017; Holland et al., 2010). My methodological misgivings about participation lessened as the fieldwork progressed. However, they did not fully dissipate and I took care to contribute to discussions only after participants had the opportunity to express their views first.

During fieldwork, I also took on the role of researcher in a few small projects run by IYS (I first did this as a volunteer and later as a part-time paid position). Some of the girls who participated in my PhD study also participated in these projects and in general, many young people in IYS took part in consultations and reports that the organisation conducted. On the one hand, I believe that these additional research engagements increased participants’ trust in me. In one of the sessions of the Senior Girls’ Group, a participant praised me for the work I had done on an IYS research project. On the other hand, it seemed that participants sometimes thought that my PhD research resembled other IYS projects they were involved with, whose main outcome was a report and which were explicitly directed at stakeholder engagement. Some participants spoke of how important it was for them to contribute to my research, although I had made no claims about the project’s potential to enact social change. Relatedly, I sometimes had the impression that participants saw themselves as representing IYS in our research engagements. They spoke very highly about the organisation and even when I asked them in our interviews whether there was anything they disliked about IYS, most replied negatively. While in some respects this is a limitation of the study, it is also generative, as it reflects how important the organisation was in participants’ lives and how important it was for them to portray it positively to me and the potential audiences of my study (see also Taft, 2010, p. 197).

Despite complex power relations and some notable differences between us, I feel that I have formed meaningful relationships at least with some of the participants. This was especially evident to me at the end of the last workshop I conducted with the Senior Girls’ Group and at the end of the findings workshops, which occurred several months after fieldwork had concluded. In both these cases, I and some of the participants spoke about the positive experiences that we had in the research and were visibly emotional about its conclusion. The youth worker who attended the findings workshop, who was the new facilitator of the girls’ group, later told me that it was clear that I had
formed ‘amazing’ relationships with the young people. I see these meaningful relationships as another way in which participants could have benefited from being in the study. I certainly felt that forming such relationships enriched my own research experience.

3.4. Ethics
Before the commencement of the fieldwork, the study was approved through the ethical review process of the School of Social and Political Science at the University of Edinburgh. However, ethical considerations have informed this study since its inception and will continue to play a significant role in the future, as I disseminate its findings. I agree with Niamh Moore and colleagues (2021) who argue that research always involves risk. This is in contrast to a paternalistic approach of harm avoidance in research, which feminist, indigenous and childhood scholars have critiqued for assuming a hierarchical relationship between the supposedly powerful researcher and vulnerable research participants. Alternatively, Moore and colleagues advocate for an ‘inventive feminist ethic of care-full risk’ that engenders responsible and accountable practices (2021, p. 180). Such an approach is particularly appropriate in research with young people under 18 years old, as they are usually considered a vulnerable population in need of protection. At the same time, childhood scholars have argued for acknowledging and respecting young people’s agency in research (Hammersley, 2013; Tisdall, 2011). I adopted these perspectives in my study and in this section I will discuss the key ethical considerations and dilemmas I contended with.

3.4.1. Informed consent
I obtained informed consent directly from the young people because myself and IYS, whose youth workers had pre-existing relationships with the young people and an intimate knowledge of their lives, deemed them as having the capacity to do so. Scottish Law provides in such cases a solid justification for children to consent on their own behalf to participation in research (Tisdall, 2011). As the study was conducted under the framework of IYS and adhered to the IYS’ clear and robust safeguarding policy, the organisation and I decreed that there was no need to obtain parental consent. The presence of youth workers in my participant observation and creative
workshops provided another safeguard (Tisdall, 2011; see also Pickles, 2020). While youth workers were not present in the interviews, the young people could still turn to them afterwards if they needed to. Additionally, at the conclusion of the interview, I provided participants with the contact information for mental health support services (Johnson & Rowlands, 2012, p. 109).

In the first number of sessions of the girls’ groups that I attended, I explained to the girls the purpose of the research, what participation entailed and how the data will be used. I made it clear that participation is voluntary and that declining to participate would not prevent taking part in the sessions of the girls’ groups or my workshops. I also informed the girls that they are free to change their minds about their participation and that they can ask for things they said or done to be withdrawn (as long as I have not published them by the time of the request). I then handed the girls a participant information sheet which repeated this information and a consent form for them to sign if they wished. I repeated this process whenever a new member joined the groups, which meant that most participants heard the explanation multiple times. I also emphasised some of these key points at the beginning of each workshop and interview. Thus, informed consent was negotiated on an ongoing basis and the girls were given opportunities to resist participation (Davidson, 2017).

There were a few members of the girls’ groups who declined to participate in the research and a few participants who declined to be interviewed, which indicates that the young people (or at least some of them) did not feel pressured to participate. There were a few instances when young people did not immediately sign their consent forms yet also made no other indication that they did not want to take part. I consulted with the youth worker on whether she thought this meant they declined to participate, asking her to speak with some of them privately to ascertain their interest. Lastly, there was one young person from the School Girls’ Group who did give her consent yet hardly participated in my workshops. I had a strong sense that she was not interested in engaging in the research. I reflected on this issue during the writing-up stage and made the decision not to include data that concerned her, of which there was little due to her lack of engagement.

I undertook similar practices to the ones stated above when negotiating consent with the youth worker who led the girls’ groups and youth club as well as the two additional
youth workers I interviewed. I also obtained oral and written informed consent from six IYS youth workers, staff members and volunteers who were occasionally present at the girls’ group or the youth club and a boy who jokingly attended one session of the Senior Girls’ Group. While I still provided a similar explanation about research participation, in these cases securing consent was not an ongoing process but rather a more focused conversation. Consent was also obtained from IYS as an organisation and the school where one girls’ group took place. As mentioned earlier, I had undertaken other research projects with IYS, in which several of the participants from my study were also involved. I asked these participants whether they agreed for me to include what they had said in those research projects in the data of my own study and they replied affirmatively.

3.4.2 Discussing sensitive issues and reporting concerns
Friendship is not usually a topic that is considered sensitive from a research ethics standpoint. However, as the study progressed, I realised the different ways that it can be experienced as sensitive by participants and therefore required additional care on my part as a researcher. For example, a few months into fieldwork when I designed a workshop on friendship in IYS, I was aware that some participants were relatively new to the organisation and might not have had the opportunity to develop meaningful friendships there. Therefore, when I asked participants to send me pictures that represented this topic, I explained that this includes not just photos but also images from the internet that represent what they hope or imagine friendship in IYS will be like.

Friendship might have been an especially sensitive topic in the context of this study. As I will discuss in the empirical chapters, some participants had painful experiences in their friendship, especially of racist behaviour by friends. I learned about these experiences not just from stories that participants shared but also from their silences when these topics came up (DeVault & Gross, 2012). When asking for participants’ feedback at the end of each workshop, I often asked whether there were any topics or questions presented in the workshop that they thought people might not want to discuss. Some had pointed to the topic of negative friendship experiences. However, some participants had openly shared stories of such experiences. Throughout
fieldwork, I tried to ensure that participants did not feel pressured to divulge painful and traumatic experiences of any kind. For example, at the beginning of each interview, I emphasised to the interviewee that they do not have to answer all the questions. I even suggested two simple phrases that the interviewee could utter (‘Let’s move to another question’ and ‘I’d rather not talk about it’) to make it easier for them to refuse to answer a question (Yeo et al., 2014, p. 187). One interviewee did indeed make use of one of the phrases because they did not want to provide an answer to a specific question. Relatedly, in writing up this study and disseminating its findings, I sought to avoid pain narratives which are common in social science research conducted with people who belong to socially marginalised groups (Tuck & Yang, 2014). However, I still wonder whether I could have done more to minimise risk to participants while exploring these topics.

At the same time, participants might have also benefited from being able to discuss complex experiences of friendship and other topics, especially when they did so collectively and realised that others also had similar experiences (this will be discussed in-depth in later chapters). In one case, engaging in such a discussion also brought to the fore a serious issue which IYS were then able to address: In a workshop I conducted where a youth worker was also present, a participant spoke of a significant difficulty a friend of theirs was facing, which affected them too. After the workshop concluded, the youth worker asked that I fill out a child protection form detailing the incident and I did so. The youth worker later informed me that she had followed up on the issue and it was being dealt with. I acted according to the safeguards of the study, which required that I report to the youth workers if I learned that participants or someone they knew were at risk of harm. This principle aimed at protecting participants yet potentially stood at odds with respecting their confidentiality and autonomy (Emond, 2005; Hammersley, 2013). When I originally designed the study, I planned, if possible, to inform the girls if I ever had to report something they said or did to the youth workers. However, such an approach did not seem necessary in this case, as the girl shared the issue she was facing in the presence of a youth worker.

There were also a few instances when a participant made a casual comment to me which did not convey a serious risk of harm yet based on my experience working and researching with young people, I believed it might have indicated the possibility of harm. I told the youth workers about these comments because I knew they were
intimately familiar with participants’ lives and that in some cases harm is only revealed when many small comments or actions are examined together. I did not inform the participants that I told the youth worker what they had said because I did not want to give too much weight to their comments (which might turn out to be meaningless), make the participants think I view them solely through the lens of being at-risk (Desai, 2021) and blow the situation out of proportion. There was also one instance where a participant told me in our interview about uneasy interactions they had with some of the other young people in IYS. This also did not fall under the category of risk of harm yet I could tell the young person was bothered by it, so I spoke with them about potential solutions to the issue and encouraged them several times to speak with one of the youth workers. These cases demonstrate grey areas and complex considerations of reporting ethics in studies with young people. The key principle that guided the decisions I made in these cases was caring for the holistic well-being of participants. I hope I did right by them.

3.4.3. Naming and anonymising
The girls, youth workers and volunteers who took part in the research were given a choice of whether they wanted to be named or anonymised in the study. Feminist scholars have argued that anonymity can sometimes harm participants rather than protect them, as it can deny them ownership of their words, especially when they seek public recognition. Blanket anonymization should therefore not be the default approach, but rather different options should be explored, taking into account participants’ wishes and other ethical considerations (Boutwell & Guhad, 2015, p. 89; Moore, 2012). This approach seemed especially pertinent in this study, as research and public policy often render Black girls and girls of colour invisible by ignoring intersections of race and gender (hill & Sobande, 2019; Sobande & hill, 2022) and there is a lack of recognition of Black girls’ everyday activism (Kelly, 2018). The significance of naming became even clearer to me when participants created beautiful texts during the workshops and I felt that their authorship of the texts should be recognised. I also asked participants who wished to remain anonymous to pick their own pseudonym, which enabled them to convey aspects of their identity if they wanted to. Relatedly, I wanted to use IYS’ real name as I felt that the organisation deserved recognition for its work and that if policy-makers and practitioners engage with my
findings and find them relevant then naming the organisation will make it easier for them to get in touch with it. I discussed this matter with members of the IYS Senior Leadership Team, who gave their approval (without which I would not have done so).

At the same time, I continued to reflect on whether naming participants could cause them harm. For example, what if a potential employer will come across the critical opinions they expressed in the research? A study in the US found that posting on issues of racism on social media can hurt the employability prospects of Black people (Howard et al., 2020). Or, what will happen if one of the participants’ peers or friends recognises themselves in a story shared by a participant which casts them in a negative light? To try and ensure that participants were making an informed decision as possible, at the end of the final workshop and the findings workshop I initiated a discussion about issues of naming and anonymity and shared my concerns with participants. I also confirmed participants’ choice on the matter at the end of each interview. Following these discussions, some participants who initially wanted to be named decided they would rather be anonymous, while others insisted they wanted to be named. One participant changed her mind because she did not want others in IYS to identify her. In this case, anonymization will not necessarily guarantee such an outcome because much of the research occurred in a group setting so others might remember what this participant has said, done or created. To try and somewhat mitigate this issue, I used two different pseudonyms for this participant so that not all of her quotes will be identified with her in the case one of them is. I also anonymised participants who did not take part in any of the discussions on anonymity and whose initial choice I was not able to confirm again.

While writing up the thesis I again revisited my ethical commitments, as I knew that once I published my findings I would have no control over how they would be interpreted or used. I therefore decided to only use participants’ first names. To ensure the anonymity of those who did not want to be named and because Scotland’s marginalised ethnic groups are very small in size and therefore their members can be potentially easily recognised, I also made no mention of participants’ ages, specific ethnicities and (in most case) their religions. However, I am aware that this choice risks homogenising the participants and limits analysis of the ways that these aspects of their identities shaped their politics of friendship.
Moreover, as the responsibility in this context ultimately lies with me, there were some specific quotes that I anonymised even when they were attributed to participants who wanted to be named, as I felt that their content was potentially too sensitive or controversial. This solution is not perfect but is meant to strike a balance between honouring the wishes of participants as they expressed them during the research and protecting them from potential harm that engaging in the research might cause them in future.

3.5. Data recording and analysis
With participants’ permission, I recorded the workshops, interviews, a number of sessions of the girls’ groups and several one-on-one conversations with the groups’ youth worker. I transcribed each recording shortly after it was made. I also asked participants to send photos of the creations they produced in the workshops, though I only treated their textual aspects as data as I did not have the skills to analyse the visual aspects. I wrote short field notes while doing participant observation in the youth club, IYS events and other girls’ groups’ sessions and afterwards expanded on the notes to create thick descriptions, which form the basis of the analysis (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Throughout this thesis, block quotations are verbatim unless written as an ethnographic scene. Quotation marks also denote verbatim quotes.

As mentioned, some young people participated in the sessions of girls’ and my creative workshops but not in the research. I therefore excluded them from my fieldnotes and transcriptions. This made me somewhat uncomfortable, as it felt like I was erasing their existence (from the fieldnotes), but I respected their wishes. Following the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the Data Protection Act 2018 and the University of Edinburgh’s data protection guidance and regulations, I stored the electronic data on my university OneDrive, which is password protected and only accessible to me, and I stored the physical data in my locked flat.

Analysis is both a distinct stage of and an ongoing process in research (Rossman & Rallis, 2017; Spencer et al., 2003). Throughout the fieldwork, I reflected on the co-constructed data that I amassed and wrote analytical notes (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). These reflections and notes informed the design of the workshops and interviews as well as the conversations that I struck up with the youth people, volunteers and youth
workers during participant observation. After fieldwork concluded, I engaged in a thorough reading of my fieldnotes to identify key themes and concepts and developed categories based on my theoretical framework (e.g. ‘friendship difficulties’ and ‘girlhood’) and the data itself (e.g. ‘youth work as friendship’ and ‘safe space’). I then coded the fieldnotes and interpreted the data. This process was not linear – while I was analysing the data I often returned to the fieldnotes and transcriptions and then changed or refined the categories accordingly (Rossman & Rallis, 2017; Spencer et al., 2003).

In March 2022, 4 months after fieldwork concluded, I invited all the girls and the former and current youth workers of the girls’ groups, to an online workshop to explain and discuss the study’s analysis, initial findings and dissemination plans. Attendees were given the opportunity to write anonymous feedback on the initial findings, which I then read aloud and invited further reflections and comments. I also produced a document with the initial findings and guided feedback questions, which I sent to the two youth workers I interviewed and offered to send to those who could not attend the workshop and those who did but wanted to further engage with the findings.

Out of the 15 young people who took part in the study, nine attended the workshop. They engaged critically with the initial findings and made helpful suggestions for additions. They also noted some agreements and disagreements with specific findings, which provided a fuller and more heterogeneous picture (as discussions in the girls’ groups sometimes tended towards consensus). The atmosphere of the workshop was joyful, as it also served as a reunion between the participants themselves, because by then the School Girls’ Group had concluded and many had left the Senior Girls’ Group for various reasons, and between myself and the participants.

Toward the end of the workshop, I explained to the participants that it is mostly other academics who will engage with the outcomes of the study and that while I hope it will help enact change in relation to the issues they brought up, I do not whether this will happen. We then discussed who outside of academia should have access to the findings and how, though I made it clear that I would not be able to guarantee such engagements due to time and funding constraints. An idea that we came to and seemed most feasible to me was the creation of Instagram posts. As I was writing up
the thesis, I crafted posts for a dedicated Instagram account where I share key findings according to specific themes in an accessible language.\footnote{https://www.instagram.com/gfsc_research/} Before I uploaded each post, I sent it to participants who wanted to take part in the Instagram project, to gather and incorporate their feedback. I also shared the posts on my Twitter account. In addition to disseminating the findings to a wider audience, I find that crafting social media posts is another way to make participants’ research engagement meaningful and it allows me to retain a connection with them. The Instagram project is still ongoing.

### 3.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed the methodology that the study is based on. I argued that qualitative methods, and specifically an ethnographic approach, were most suitable for exploring the politics of friendship in the lives of Black girls and girls of colour in Scotland. Additionally, I demonstrated throughout the chapter how I strove to and often seemed to succeed in engendering meaningful, enjoyable and beneficial engagements for participants.

I introduced the fieldwork site – girls’ groups, youth club and special events in Intercultural Youth Scotland (IYS) - as well as key demographic information about the study’s participants. I also reflected on the challenges and benefits of conducting much of the research online. Next, I detailed each of the different methods I designed and employed – participant observation, creative methods and in-depth semi-structured interviews – and how they served to address the research questions.

I then reflected on the ways that the data was shaped by my positionality, especially in terms of my age, ethnic and gender identity and researcher role, and the relationships I formed with participants. In terms of ethics, I discussed how I approached and navigated informed consent, friendship as a sensitive topic, disclosure of concerning information and choices regarding naming and anonymity. Lastly, I described how I recorded and analysed the data, including a workshop where participants gave feedback on initial findings. In the next three chapters, I will present the study’s findings and their analysis.
Chapter 4: Friendship Ties, Concepts and Practices in IYS

In this chapter, I explore participants’ friendship ties, concepts and practices in the context of IYS. In the first section, I take up bell hooks’ (2014) work on homeplaces to examine how friendships in IYS, especially with other young Black people and people of colour, cultivated spaces where participants felt a sense of belonging, understanding and safety. These friendships were political as they countered participants’ experiences of othering, racialisation and racism in White-dominated spaces such as school. In the second section, I conceptualise three major types of friendship and friendship-like relationships that participants formed in IYS and supported their engagement with the anti-racist and anti-discrimination organisation.

4.1. Homeplace friendships and homeplace through friendship

The first radio show recorded by the members of the Senior Girls’ Group was about growing up as Black girl or girl of colour in Scotland. One of the questions that participants discussed was whether felt they were between two worlds. Rama shared:

Before I had IYS… I felt like an outcast because obviously my friends didn’t fully understand my culture, my religion, just the way I was because of my upbringing. But meeting people and being part of a community that you can relate to and understand you - now I feel much more included. But before it was confusion because I felt like I had to act a certain way to fit in with them as well.

For Rama and many other participants, engaging with IYS enabled them to cultivate friendships that engendered a sense of understanding, belonging and safety. Black feminism advocates for community and relationships of love and care (Anim-Addo, 2014; Luna & Laster Pirtle, 2021). The support systems of Black women and women of colour were vital to their survival, before and after their immigration to Britain (Carby, 1997). In particular, scholarship on the friendships of Black women and girls showcases how their bonds provide them with recognition, affirmation and support in the face of historical and structural violence (Brown, 2021; Goins, 2011).

In the context of youth work, research in Scotland and other European countries reveals that one of the most significant experiences that young people had through
youth work provision and in youth work settings was creating and strengthening friendships. For this reason, ‘[f]or young people, friends and friendship are at the very heart of youth work’ (Ord et al., 2022, p. 315). In contrast, friendship receives very little attention in European youth work policy (Ord et al., 2022) and youth work scholarship (Delgado, 2016, p. 25). Some of the youth workers told me that while bringing young Black people and people of colour together and creating a community were some of the purposes of their work in IYS, friendship was not an explicit organisational goal. Nevertheless, they hoped that friendship ties would develop through the social environment they cultivated in IYS and they sometimes actively encouraged their formation. This chapter begins to illuminate the significance of the youth work setting to the friendship politics of Black girls and girls of colour.

The monumental importance that IYS had in the girls’ lives must be understood in the context of the structural inequalities and power relations they experienced in other spaces, which they often contrasted, both implicitly and explicitly, to IYS. Many girls described feeling othered, isolated and unable to fully express their cultures and identities in most spaces in Scotland, especially school, because they experienced racism from their peers, the dominant culture and curriculum were White and they were either the only Black girl or girl of colour in their year or one of a handful. This echoes findings from the little research that exists on the experiences of Black students and students of colour in Scottish secondary schools. Students of colour were othered and experienced everyday racism in peer and school interactions (Hopkins et al., 2015; Kennelly & Mouroutsou, 2020) and girls especially felt that teachers were not aware of the challenges they faced due to discrimination and that their culture, heritage and background were not understood by teachers and peers and not included in the curriculum (Guyan, 2019). In a study conducted with adolescent Black girls in a predominantly White school in the US, their experiences of racism, being othered, dehumanised and isolated were exacerbated because of their small numbers (Kelly, 2020).

In contrast to White-dominated spaces such as school, IYS was attended almost exclusively by Black people and people of colour and taking part in its activities.

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8 However, in one of these studies (Hopkins et al., 2015), most of the participants still largely perceived school as a safe space and Scotland as a nation that is accepting of diversity, especially in contrast to England. These apparent contradictions merit further study.
enabled them to befriend one another. When IYS moved its activities online due to Covid-19 government regulations, young people from more remote and even less diverse areas in Scotland were able to join IYS activities and meet others like them. However, some of those who attended in-person activities could not join at all or as much because of internet or equipment issues or the presence of other household members. Online settings therefore opened up friendship opportunities for newcomers yet potentially disrupted such relationships for those who could no longer participate.

In the context of the structural inequalities that shaped participants’ lives in Scotland, their engagement with IYS, an anti-racist organisation, along with the friendships and connections they formed through the organisation, were politically affirming. hooks (2014) theorised homeplaces as domestic safe spaces constructed and guided by Black women where Black people were seen as subjects rather than objects, affirmed and cared for one another and thereby learned to love and respect themselves. Homeplaces constitute political acts of resistance as they enable Black people to heal from the pernicious effects of racist and sexist oppression. Goins (2011) applied the concept of homeplaces to characterise Black women’s friendship groups, arguing that they are often ‘sites of empowerment and resistance from oppression’ (p. 531). Relatedly, Kelly (2020) explored how Black girls cultivated homeplaces in a predominately White school by spending time together and bonding in the school library and by creating virtual group chats for the Black students in their year. Kelly thus argues that homeplaces can exist beyond the domestic sphere. Following this scholarship, in this section I explore how participants’ friendships with other young Black people and people of colour constituted homeplaces. I also argue that the friendships formed in IYS contributed to the construction of the organisation as a homeplace. The concept of homeplaces brings to the fore the political significance of these friendships in participants’ lives.

4.1.1. Shared racialisation

Many participants felt that their friendships and relationships with Black people and people of colour were different from their friendships with White people. They imbued these friendships with positive and validating meanings. In an interview conducted
towards the end of the fieldwork, I asked Faith, who is Black, if her friendships in IYS were different than those she had in other places, she replied:

I have friends in athletics that we both love running or we both love jumping and we both love other things of course. You’re never gonna understand what it’s like being abused racially but it’s not your fault, you know what I mean? I just know you’re not gonna understand it because you’ve not been through it. …But then there is another friend of mine or someone else who might not be my friend but then they’re Black and I’m like ‘Okay, I know you understand me, I didn’t even have to speak to you’ and then when we start talking then I might feel closer to you sooner because you understand more aspects of my life altogether then someone else. …I feel like in IYS because we’re all Black and minority people that grew up here or grew up in another country and then moved here, we all know we’ve been through the same stuff or similar stuff.

Faith felt that, unlike in her friendships with White people, she has a shared understanding with other Black people and people of colour based on their experiences of racism and racialisation. For Faith and other participants, these experiences are so pervasive and dominant in the lives of Black people and people of colour in Scotland that a mutual understanding between them is perceived as a given and therefore does not have to be explicitly discussed. Similarly, Black participants in studies conducted in the US and England described sharing a powerful understanding with their Black friends that was based on their experiences of racism, which meant that they could discuss issues of race and racism without needing to explain themselves or temper their emotions (Goins, 2011; Kelly, 2020, p. 460; Reynolds, 2007). While these studies point to a shared understanding among Black people, Faith and other participants spoke of a shared understanding that exists between Black people and people of colour in Scotland who have, as Faith argues, ‘been through the same stuff or similar stuff’. This view somewhat resembles the organising strategy of political blackness, which was used to foreground the commonalities in experiences of oppression and activist goals between Black women and women of colour (Mirza, 1997b; Sobande & hill, 2022), although in my study participants of colour did not refer to themselves or were referred to by others as Black. Similarly, in a study conducted with young people from diverse ethnic backgrounds in Australia, participants spoke of
forming friendships and solidarities with one another over shared experiences of racism (Harris, 2016).

Faith attested that a mutual understanding with other Black people and people of colour enables her to grow closer to them as friends. This corresponds to the principle of homophily in friendship – the tendency for friendship to form between people who share certain similarities and commonalities, for instance in their experiences, interests, values and structural positions such as class, race and gender (Allan, 2003; Davies, 2019). Graham Allan (2003) argues that when friendships are based on similarity in structural positions they help constitute the self by ‘recognizing the individual as more than the sum of the structural positions they occupy, yet in the process attesting to the relevance of those structural positions for their identity’ (p. 4). This takes on a political significance in homeplace friendships, where Black people are humanised and affirmed, thus challenging the ways their subjectivities and lives are shaped by structural inequalities (Goins, 2011; hooks, 2014; Kelly, 2020), not simply structural positions. For the participants in my study, interactions and friendships with other young Black people and people of colour were affirming homeplaces also in the sense that, unlike in many interactions with White people, they did not have to engage in taxing and sometimes traumatising labour to prove that racism exists and harms them.

Since IYS activities were attended almost exclusively by young Black people and people of colour, participating in IYS afforded the girls plenty of opportunities to create friendships based on mutual understanding. The girls also brought to IYS some of the friends they made outside of it (mostly young Black people and people of colour) so they could spend time and participate in activities together, which further cultivated their friendship bonds. Moreover, friendship potentials and bonds contributed to participants’ experience of IYS as a social setting where they felt understood and free to express themselves. Faith succinctly described this feeling when she said: ‘When I walk into the [IYS youth club] or IYS, I feel like you can just be yourself’ and the girls often spoke about the positive ‘vibes’ they felt in IYS, which some said were especially felt when activities were in-person. Close friendship is often associated with notions of authenticity, acceptance, comfort and lack of judgement of the self (Goins, 2011; Spencer & Pahl, 2006; Winkler-Reid, 2016). Jennifer Mason’s (2018) theorisation of powerful personal connections as energetic affinities that go beyond the connections
themselves illuminates how homeplace friendships in IYS also played a part in the enactment of IYS spaces as homeplaces (hooks, 2014). As homeplaces, IYS and the friendships that were cultivated in the organisation were politically affirming because they made participants feel understood, accepted and free to express themselves. They therefore provided a refuge from and countermeasure to the harsh realities many participants faced in White-dominated spaces in Scotland, such as schools, where structural and everyday racism as well as processes of othering and racialisation were prevalent. In this sense, IYS resembled Black supplementary schools, which were politically transformative spaces where blackness was seen as positive and children felt a sense of belonging, pride and freedom to be themselves (Reay & Mirza, 2001).

4.1.2. Sharing culture/s
Participants from the School Girls’ Groups and the Senior Girls’ Group had differing views on whether their racialised and ethnic identities impacted their friendships. Members of the Senior Girls’ Group often spoke about how their racialised and ethnic identities related to their friendships as well as the difficulties they sometimes experienced in their friendships with White people. When I asked members of the School Girls’ Group, shortly after it was formed, whether being a girl of colour affects their friendships, they were adamant that it does not, with Melissa asserting: ‘I don’t think colour makes any difference to who I’m close to’. Additionally, two participants recounted how they were the only person of colour in their respective friends’ groups for a while and they did not see this as an issue. Nevertheless, they did speak of shared experiences and understandings with young Black people and people of colour, which created a connection that Sidrath described as a ‘click’ and Melissa termed ‘allyship’.

A few months into the fieldwork, in a private conversation I had with Asha, the youth worker who led both groups, I asked her why she thought that members of the School Girls’ Group had different views on this matter compared to members of the Senior Girls’ Group. Asha explained:

With the girls from IYS [the Senior Group], they’ve chosen to come to a space that is BIPOC [Black, Indigenous and People of Colour] only or they have that drive to be part of that culture… They see all that positive
energy that comes from being around other Black and PoC people so I think that does start to matter to them that the people they spend time with are of colour… And I think for our girls’ group at the school they are younger… But I do expect a change at some point, where for [a girl of South Asian descent], her life is gonna be very different from [a Black girl] but not as different as it is gonna be from a White girl because her family upbringing means that she will have to connect to lots of arranged marriages and that kind of cultural thing. It’s not something a White family can connect to as much as a Black family might because they have subtle similarities.

Asha’s explanation, that with time the girls from the School group will share more in common with each other than with White girls because of cultural and familial expectations and demands, points to another shared similarity that girls could speak about and bond over in IYS. In one of the workshops, Sonia, who is of South Asian heritage, attested that she preferred to be friends with other Black people and people of colour:

Because our parents have got the same amount of strictness. …We’re not allowed [to go out] every weekend like [White people] are so it makes sense just to be with people who can get the same jokes as you as well.

Likewise, in Tracey Reynolds’ (2007) study, many Caribbean young people in England recalled how they first felt different from White friends in adolescence and therefore pursued the company and friendship of other Black children in secondary school (see also George, 2007). Moreover, in one of the workshops on friendship, Cece explained that with your friends you can relax, express yourself more and feel less restricted than in the presence of family members. In this sense, because IYS was an organisation catering to youth it also provided participants with a refuge from intergenerational tensions that they experienced within their families and communities, a homeplace outside of (or as an alternative to) their family homes. Furthermore, in contrast to age segregation in school (Wyness, 2019, p. 174), the girls befriended people who were slightly older and younger than them in IYS, and this was partially facilitated through shared experiences and similarities in culture and family life.
Importantly, participants did not see their cultures as simply restricting, and their ability to relate to others in IYS was not solely based on similar negative experiences. For example, Faith, who is Christian, spoke of the importance of being able to make friends of the same religion who genuinely believe in God and for whom religion is an important part of their lives. In the opening quote of this chapter, Rama described feeling a sense of belonging in IYS because she met people who understood her culture, religion and upbringing. hooks (2014) begins her theorisation of homeplace by describing the journey to her grandmother’s place as a girl and the ‘feeling of safety, of arrival, of homecoming’ she experienced when she got there (p. 41). These accounts demonstrate how belonging is produced and navigated through relationships, among them close friendships (Cuervo & Wyn, 2014; Kuurne & Vieno, 2022). Migrant girls from Syria and Iraq in Sweden preferred the company of other migrants and friends of the same ethnicity because they did not need to explain their family life and culture to them (Bergnehr et al., 2020) and close friendships between young people in England with a shared ethnicity cultivated their sense of belonging and ethnic identity (George, 2007; Reynolds, 2007). Attending IYS and befriending other young Black people and people of colour enabled participants to openly share and joyously celebrate their ethnic identities, cultures and religions, something which many of them did not feel able to do in White-dominated spaces such as school. Homeplace friendships and spaces can therefore contribute to Black British feminism’s political aim ‘to reveal the normative absence and the pathological presence of a group of racialised women collectively assigned as ‘other’” (Mirza, 2015, p. 3) and do so in an affirming manner.

The relational and reciprocal processes of sharing one’s culture also enabled participants to learn about the cultures of other people in IYS, which they appreciated and enjoyed. In an interview conducted towards the end of the fieldwork, I asked Angelina what she liked about the weekly youth club and she replied:

-Honestly, it’s just an environment that I like… because it’s people of different diversity, different races, different ethnicities, different backgrounds, it’s just really nice, it’s something that you don’t have in schools like that, it’s just very different… [In IYS] I’m just like ‘Oh my god that’s my culture, I actually enjoy that’ and everyone’s like ‘Yeah this is my culture and this is what we do’ and it’s just really fun. …Yeah [it’s] a
place you can literally just hang out, talk to people, meet new people as well.

Angelina described the joy she gained from meeting and interacting with people of different ethnic identities and cultures. Her words serve as a powerful reminder that like Black women and women of colour in Scotland (Sobande & Hill, 2022, p. 117), Black girls and girls of colour in Scotland do not consist of a homogeneous group. While the principle of homophily was prevalent in the friendships and connections that participants made in IYS, and it contributed to the uniqueness of IYS as a social setting in their lives, it did not gloss over differences between friends. Rather, participants actively sought to establish commonalities and similarities in their experiences, identities and political causes that will bind them together while also recognising differences between them that enrich their friendships. This demonstrates how homophily can be politically affirming and is crafted relationally. It resonates with how Black British feminists seek to create solidarities by constructing ‘sameness’ while at the same time acknowledging differences (Mirza, 2015, p. 6). However, participants largely did not discuss potential power relations between marginalised ethnic and racialised groups, especially in relation to their own experience in IYS. I will address this issue further in the next chapter.

4.1.3. Enacting safe spaces

‘Safe space’ was a term used frequently by the young people and youth workers to characterise both IYS as an organisation and specific IYS programmes and activities, such as the girls’ groups, youth club and activism programme. Participants’ prevalent use of the term, the significance IYS had in their lives and the negative experiences they recounted having in other places, indicate that many spaces in their lives were not experienced as safe (at least not in the way that IYS was). Safe spaces are an integral feature of youth work settings and it is youth workers who are first and foremost responsible for constructing and sustaining safe spaces (Batsleer, 2008; Fyfe et al., 2018). This was also the case in IYS, where youth workers employed a range of skills and practices to enact safe spaces. In this subsection, I will focus on the role that friendship ties, concepts and practices played in the wider relational aspects of
enacting safe spaces. I will thereby shed light on young people’s contribution to these processes.

4.1.3.1. The relationality of safe spaces

A focus on friendship demonstrates how the construction of safe spaces can be relational. The homeplace friendships and relationships that participants cultivated in IYS, which also contributed to the construction of IYS spaces as homeplaces, engendered a sense of safety (hooks, 2014). Specifically, participants spoke of feeling ‘comfortable’ and accepted in IYS spaces, rather than judged, in relation to both their ethnic identity and discussions of racism. For young people, having a safe space is an important feature of youth work services in Scotland (Fyfe et al., 2018). To safeguard young people in IYS, the youth workers also attempted to ensure that they did not feel pressured to share sensitive personal experiences if they did not want to.

The sense of safety in IYS spaces hinged on the people who occupied them in complex and possibly contradictory ways. In our interview, conducted towards the end of the fieldwork, Asha D detailed what constituted a safe space in IYS:

[The IYS activism programme] was a safe space where I could say what I thought… and if I didn’t feel like sharing, I didn’t have to. …What makes IYS a safe space, [is] that [it] doesn’t matter where you come from or who you are, we all have a thing in common and that’s that we’re keen to end racism and to fight discrimination. …I go in and I do not worry about racism, I don’t worry about discrimination…

For Asha, IYS spaces were experienced as safe not because of the ethnic and racialised identities of IYS attendees but because they were members of an anti-racism and anti-discrimination organisation and therefore supported these political values and causes. Relatedly, one Black participant critiqued the notion that ethnic identity necessarily equates to certain values and beliefs, by noting that they had met Black people who supported Trump and believed that ‘all lives matter’ (a standpoint that criticises and opposes the political movement Black Lives Matter). However, in scholarship on safe spaces for Black girls and on homeplaces, these spaces are described as being solely for Black girls or Black people (e.g. hooks, 2014; Showunmi, 2017). For some of the other participants, their sense of safety in IYS spaces was
linked to attendees' marginalised ethnic and racialised identities (though not only one specific ethnicity). This was partly because they believed they would not be subjected to racism from other Black people and people of colour. Moreover, the shared understanding of experiencing racism and racialisation between Black people and people of colour described earlier might have meant that participants felt safer discussing these sensitive experiences with other young people of racialised identities.

Accordingly, some of IYS’ programmes were only for Black people and people of colour, for instance those delivered at schools as well as the activism programme, while others like the youth club and Senior Girls’ Group were open to everyone yet were aimed at and mainly attended by young Black people and people of colour. The two approaches to defining safe spaces somewhat mirror the supposed contradictions between identity politics, which focuses on shared social identities and experiences, and affinity politics, which focuses on shared political goals (Collins, 2010). Collins argues that in practice the two approaches sustain one another and that political action happens at the intersections between them. This was largely the case in IYS, an anti-racist organisation where almost all members were Black people and people of colour.

Nevertheless, tensions in enacting safe spaces and solidarities did sometimes come up in relation to ethnic and gender identities. The potential tension between affinity and identity politics is brought to the fore in the case of Alyx, who was one of the only White British people who attended IYS. Alyx heard about the organisation from a friend who attended it and decided to join because they were passionate about social issues such as anti-racism and feminism. In my interview with them, conducted towards the end of the fieldwork, they spoke about how they navigated their presence in IYS:

I just felt like I didn’t want to make other people uncomfortable by coming in their space. But because I knew a couple people already there, they were welcoming and it’s fine… I think because I was always supportive, they have no reason to be ‘Ew leave’ sort of thing. …But I guess if loads

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9 Some Black feminists have criticised identity politics for being hierarchical and divisive (Mirza, 1997b) and constricting identity and political action (Bryan et al., 2018). However, other Black feminists have argued that identity politics can be politically transformative (Collins, 2000; Sudbury, 2005). The findings and analysis presented in this thesis can largely be read as supporting the latter argument while also noting some of the difficulties that identity politics presented. However, since identity politics is not a major theoretical lens employed in this thesis it is beyond its scope to delve into the different understandings of and debates surrounding the term.
of White people were coming along that would defeat the purpose of the group.

Alyx’s experience in IYS illustrates that a dominant majority of young Black people and people of colour was needed for the space to be perceived as safe. Similarly, LGBT people explained that they sought LGBT groups, communities and spaces as it afforded them ‘safety in numbers’ (Formby, 2017). One of the reasons Alyx gave for their acceptance in IYS was the existing friendships and connections they had with people who attended IYS, as close friendship is characterised by acceptance and ease (e.g. Goins, 2011; Winkler-Reid, 2016). This indicates another way in which friendship ties can engender a sense of safety. It also shows that the boundaries of safe spaces do not have to be completely impermeable.

The IYS girls’ groups were similarly conceived by participants as safe spaces. The girls described them as spaces where they could relate to one another and bond over shared experiences they had as Black girls and girls of colour and discuss issues that affect them. The necessity and value of working to create safe spaces in schools for Black girls to spend time with one another, share experiences, speak freely about issues that are important to them and grow closer to one another has also been found in a study conducted in England (Showunmi, 2017) and the US (Kelly, 2020). Similarly, in youth work provision, gender-specific and culturally-specific groups are vital for supporting and affirming young people from socially marginalised backgrounds (Batsleer, 2008; Batsleer & McCarthy, 2019).

Yet, participants’ conceptualisation of the girls’ groups as safe also implicitly revealed the challenges and limits of enacting safe spaces in IYS. Describing the girls’ group in an interview conducted towards the end of the fieldwork, Cece said:

[The girls’ group] is really nice. It’s just more comfortable because everyone can relate as women. …For example, we spoke about gender roles and how they affect women… We’ve also spoken about other things like health and safety when it comes to relationships and intercourse.

While most participants described the appeal of a girls’ group in positive terms, one participant also stated that the group was necessary because some of the boys in IYS held negative views about women. This participant also preferred the girls’ group over
mixed-gender IYS activities because they previously had negative interactions with boys. One of the reasons that groups and political organisations of Black women and women of colour were founded in the UK was the prevalence of sexism and the marginalisation of women in Black power organisations (Bryan et al., 2018; Sudbury, 2005). Taken together with Cece’s description of the girls’ group as ‘more comfortable’, this reveals that not all IYS spaces were experienced as equally safe by all of the participants, an issue that youth workers were well aware of.

Another challenge in relationally constructing safe spaces was that young people sometimes made comments or acted in ways that made others feel hurt and therefore potentially unsafe. In the interview conducted at the end of the fieldwork, Asha the youth worker discussed the challenge of simultaneously cultivating spaces where young people felt safe and able to express their opinions. When I asked her how the tension between the two goals is managed, she replied:

Give everyone the knowledge that people make mistakes and are still learning, we’re all very young, everyone is allowed to make mistakes. So when somebody does say something offensive it’s important for them to know that they’ve said something offensive and what they’ve done is wrong but then also it’s important for us to… make sure that the [young people] know that these people need the opportunity to change before they are berated or ostracised. So to create spaces [like] that, there is always going to be the opportunity for someone to be hurt, no matter what space, no matter how safe a space you create, there’s always something that could be said that is going to trigger you or make you uncomfortable but we need to know how to deal with our emotions within that and help other people to do better.

Similarly, Ola the youth worker used the term ‘safer space’ in their work ‘because we also acknowledge that they are never gonna be perfectly safe space where nothing, no harm can ever happen’. bell hooks (2009) argues that to engender critical open dialogue in the classroom, safety should not be conceptualised as avoidance of conflict and prevention of hurt but rather as the ability to cope with risk (with students and teachers still considering how their words might impact others). The relational enactment of safe spaces in IYS was therefore a complex and ongoing process.
4.1.3.2. The role of friendship concepts and practices

Understandings and practices of (ideal) friendship also played a role in the construction of safe spaces. The terms ‘safe’ and ‘safe space’ cropped up in the ways that some of the participants defined friendship. The following text (emphasis my own) was created by Faith in an online writing workshop I conducted in the Senior Girls’ Group towards the middle of the fieldwork, where I asked the girls to describe what they think a friend or friendship is.

Friend. What is a friend to me?

A friend is like a house. My safe space. The place I go when I am tired of life’s obstacles. The place I go when I want to relax, feel comfort and laugh. My house, my family, my rock. My own place. Loyal like a therapist. Someone who is there forever. In the good and the bad. Someone to hug, someone that understands you in the loudness as well as in the silence.

Laughter, screams, tears and yet still here, because a friend is not a souvenir. A friend doesn’t disappear. This is a friend. A real friend to me.

Similar to participants’ experiences of IYS spaces as safe, Faith and some of the other participants defined friendship as a relationship and a space that engenders a sense of safety, comfort and acceptance. A similar conceptualisation of friendship as a safe space appears in a study of Black women’s friendships (Goins, 2011) and friendships in the workplace (Cronin, 2014).

The association between friendship and safety suggests that having friends in IYS made the girls feel safe in IYS spaces. This also helps explain Alyx’s acceptance in IYS as a White person – joining IYS through previously existing friendships with IYS members could signal to others in the organisation that Alyx’s friends felt safe with them and therefore they could feel similarly.

Additionally, in some cases, the concepts and characteristics of friendship were employed as a ‘building block’ in the construction of IYS spaces as safe. In my interview with Ola, a youth worker who facilitated IYS programmes in schools and the activism programme, they delineated how they create a ‘safer space’ agreement with the young people at the beginning of each programme, which they all sign.
[Friendship is] an intuitive and quick answer for that. [When we ask] ‘What is a safe space?’; ‘A space where I’m with my friends’ is a very standard [answer] that we get quite a lot. And then for us, it’s kind of trying to tease out ‘What do you mean by that? And how can you ensure [it]?’ …Because it can be a group of 20 people, we’re not asking them to be all best friends, that’s not the goal. So it’s kind of talking about these attributes that your best friends have and how can we transform them into actions that the group can take and hold for each other.

Ola described how they explored with the young people the friendship characteristics and practices that engendered a sense of safety in them, for instance caring and listening, and then turned them into some of the guidelines for the group. A safe space agreement in one of the school groups led by Ola and signed by all group members included the guideline: ‘Treat everyone as if they’re your friends’. In these cases, the political potentials of friendship were brought to the fore.

The preceding ‘as if’ phrase in the group’s friendship guideline as well as Ola’s qualification that the young people were not asked to become ‘best friends’ with everyone in the group point to an encouragement of a friend-like relationship between group members, which incorporates certain characteristics and practices of friendship yet is not (necessarily) close friendship. Moreover, the safe space agreement had additional guidelines (such as ‘Everyone has a voice’) which shows that friendship was meaningful but not solely sufficient for enacting safe spaces. In IYS programmes where attendance was open and the activities were much less structured, such as the girls’ groups and youth club, safe space guidelines were not explicitly written. However, as I will show later in this chapter, a friend-like relationship also (ideally) characterised the bonds the girls had with many or even all the people in IYS who they did not consider close friends.

In this section, I explored how friendship with young Black people and people of colour took on a politically affirming meaning of homeplace for participants and the ways that friendship ties, concepts and practices contributed to the relational construction of IYS as a homeplace.
4.2 Friendship and friend-like relationships in IYS

In her interview, Cece spoke about having different kinds of friends in IYS:

I’m close with [names of several people from IYS] but they’re not friends-friends, so I would just say ‘Oh yeah we’re friends’ or ‘Oh yeah I know them’. So when you’re kinda close to a person you would say ‘friends’ but obviously I feel like ‘friends’ is just a generic word and then if you’re friends with someone, proper-proper friends most of the times I would just say ‘They’re my best friends’ or ‘I’m just really close with them’. But if it’s someone that you also talk to now and then, even if it’s not every single day, you would also call them friends.

I discussed earlier how friendships in IYS cultivated an affirming sense of belonging, safety and authenticity for the girls. However, as is evident in Cece’s explanation, the girls did not perceive all their friendships and relationships in IYS in the same way and they imbued them with different meanings. Studies undertaken with children and adults have shown that the term ‘friend’ is used to describe different relationships that people have in their lives, even in the same setting (like school). Friendships can be categorised, for instance, according to their purpose, the practices they involve and the perceived qualities of the friend (Policarpo, 2015; Spencer & Pahl, 2006; Zhu, 2019). In this section, I will conceptualise three major types of friendship and friend-like relationships that participants cultivated in IYS: close friendship, solidarity friendship and youth work as friendship. These relationships supported participants’ involvement in the organisation and were therefore also politically affirming. They often overlap with but are not synonymous with homeplace friendships, as there were a few White people in IYS and the organisation’s political values and goals also shaped the friendships that formed there.

4.2.1 Close friendship

The first type of friendship or friend-like relationship that participants had in IYS was close friendship. Close friendship was seen by the girls as a strong bond that takes time to develop. They characterised a close friend as someone they can trust, confide in and turn to in times of need, who makes them feel safe, comfortable and accepted, someone they can have fun and be silly with, and who shares the same interests and
social justice values as them (such as anti-racism and feminism). These characteristics reflect the dominant modern Western qualities associated with close friendship (e.g. Policarpo, 2015; Spencer & Pahl, 2006). That participants perceived shared social justice values as a requisite of close friendship demonstrates one of the ways in which these relationships were political.

Participants had close friendships both in and outside of IYS. Here is how Faith distinguished between her friends and close friends in our interview:

For [someone to be considered] a friend obviously we met each other and we’re cool with each other but a sister is someone that I have met, that I’ve known for a long time, at least a minimum 2 years or something like that, and we’ve been close. …When I’m in my worst moments I know I can call this person, when I get to that point I’m like ‘Okay, she’s not my friend anymore she’s closer, she’s my cousin, she’s my sister’.

Although there were commonalities in how participants understood close friendship, their definitions were not uniform. For example, while Faith asserted that it takes ‘a minimum of 2 years’ to form a strong bond, when I asked Sidrath what she wanted people to know about her friendships she stated: ‘You don’t need to be friends with someone for a long time for the bond to be really unbreakable’. Still, it is clear that close friendship cannot be instantaneous.

Attending IYS enabled participants to cultivate their close friendships and this was one of the reasons why they took part in IYS activities and projects. According to the girls and youth workers, spending time together was necessary for close friendships to form as it allowed the girls to discover mutual interests and create shared memories. Relatedly, the youth workers felt that meaningful connections and close friendships were less likely to develop in a group which met exclusively online as there were fewer opportunities to spend time together and get to know one another outside of the structured activities. Therefore, shared racialisation, cultural and parental expectations and support of IYS’ political causes did not mean that the girls instantly become friends with everyone in IYS (see also Harris, 2016; Scholtz & Gilligan, 2017). Nevertheless, support for IYS’ political causes could indicate shared social justice values, which were important to participants in their close friendships. Additionally, as Faith mentioned in an earlier section, shared experiences with people from marginalised ethnic and
racialised groups contributed to growing closer as friends more quickly, with Sidrath describing the connection these commonalities engendered as a ‘click’. These commonalities therefore somewhat shaped the temporality of forming close friendships.

Notably, Cece labelled close friends as ‘best friends’ and ‘proper-proper friends’ while Faith chose the kinship terms ‘cousin’ and ‘sister’. Some of the other participants also used these and similar labels, such as ‘friends-friends’ (see also Dillard, 2019). They did so to express how meaningful the friendship was to them and because, as Cece mentioned, the term ‘friend’ has, for some people, become a prevalent means of characterising positive relationships with others (Miller, 2017; Spencer & Pahl, 2006). Some participants certainly called many people in their lives and IYS their ‘friends’, and this was perhaps exacerbated in my presence because they knew that friendship was one of the main topics of my research. Still, other participants applied the term more sparingly. Faith and other participants’ use of kinship terms to describe close friends might signify suffusion between or overlap in roles and qualities of family and friends (Pahl & Spencer, 2010; Spencer & Pahl, 2006). However, this cannot be ascertained, as participants mostly did not discuss their relationships with their family members (although one participant did mention that she also considered her siblings as her friends). Labelling close friends as family can be seen as entrenching the supremacy of family over friends yet also as challenging the notion of family as given, blood relations (for debates on the significance of friendship compared to family in people’s lives see Jamieson et al., 2006; Roseneil, 2006).

A defining characteristic of close friendships, according to participants, was that these relationships were not confined to a specific setting. This distinction is evident in Marina’s reply, when I asked her in our interview if she feels like she made friends in IYS:

I do feel I’ve made friends but it’s a specific type of friend. It’s ones that you can talk to when you’re at IYS and going to different IYS events you can take them with you and they’ll be the people that you sit with throughout the space. But it’s not really the type of friends that you call and text outside of girls’ group and [the youth club]. …And I think it’s kind of the same for lots of people. Some people will have their specific
friends from school that they bring to IYS so they’re friends outside of IYS anyway and then the other people are just there more like acquaintances.

As Marina makes clear, to consider someone in IYS a close friend the bond had to also be practised beyond IYS. Thus, developing a close friendship, which participants distinguished from other types of friendships they had, required attributing certain positive qualities to the friend and the bond, spending time together and extending the friendship into additional spaces.

4.2.2. Solidarity friendship
I argue that a second type of friendship or friend-like relationship in IYS was one that the girls formed with many or all of the young people in IYS that they did not consider friends. I term this relationship ‘solidarity friendship’. I define solidarity friendships as positive relationships of affinity that (ideally) develop in group settings and activities, that are based on shared political goals and experiences and are facilitated and informed by ties, practices and notions of close friendship. I argue that bonds of solidarity friendship encouraged participation in IYS activities and programmes and helped engender a political community among IYS members.

4.2.2.1. Grappling with terminology
The following is an excerpt from a workshop I conducted towards the middle of the fieldwork with one of the girls’ groups, where some of the participants attempted to define the relationship they had with people in IYS who they got along with but did not consider as (close) friends:

Angelina: I think because a lot of friendship groups, for example one person that knows about IYS - they bring their friends, and you talk within IYS and at each other on social media but we’re not friends-friends, unless you actually go there and have something in common, like you both rap or you both dance. You have to spend more time and integrate to actually be friends. So it’s like, we are friends, but they’re not really our friends, they’re friends within IYS. It’s kinda like classmates. Like at
school, the people you’re cool with and you talk with them a little bit and you have a laugh but when you go back home, you don’t really talk

Asha (youth worker): Yeah, I think it’s something you build.

Sonia: Yeah, it’s definitely something that you develop as you progress, I wouldn’t just go to IYS and say ‘Oh everyone in the [youth club] is my friend’. I’m still cool with all of them. Cause I don’t talk to half of them but we’re cool, if that makes sense. I feel like IYS is more of a group thing. So we’re all just, cause he’s cool with you or she’s cool with you, we’re all cool. Yeah. It’s weird.

Angelina: I just wanted to add that we like the people there, we genuinely like them, it’s just [that] we’re not ‘friends’.

...

Asha (youth worker): I think it’s community. I think what it is, is we’ve created our community and you know like with your family, you’re not necessarily friends with a lot of family members, you don’t necessarily like all of your family members but you respect them cause they’re part of who you are. …[In a community] there’s people you know really well, there’s people you don’t know really well, there’s some that you’re friends with and stuff. But there’s still a mutual respect and a bond between you all because you are all from, you’re all part of something together.

In this conversation, the girls defined the relationships they had with all (or most) young people in IYS in myriad ways: ‘not friends-friends’, ‘friends within IYS’, ‘kinda like classmates’, ‘community’, ‘we’re all cool’, and ‘family’. Other terms used by participants to describe their relationships with others in IYS were: ‘friendly’, ‘more like acquaintances’ and ‘sort of friends’. These varied descriptions and terms indicate that participants generally perceived their relationships with others in IYS as positive yet they also struggled to clearly define them. Participants therefore likened them to different types of relationships, namely friendship, kinship and peer and community ties. These various relationship types are not necessarily distinct, as sociologists of friendship have shown that in practice friendship can be suffused with other
relationship categories, such as family, community member and neighbour (Heaphy & Davies, 2012; Pahl & Spencer, 2010).

I too struggled to define this type of relationship during my analysis and after careful consideration I settled on the term ‘solidarity friendship’ for the following reasons: First, like the sense of safety and homeplace that I discussed earlier, positive relationships among IYS members were facilitated through existing friendships. As Sonia described: ‘[C]ause he’s cool with you or she’s cool with you, we’re all cool’. Sociologists (Allan, 2003; Wilkinson, 2019) and feminist scholars (Roseneil, 2006) have argued that friendship bonds are essential for sustaining communities and political groups. The collective element of solidarity friendship is evident in Sonia’s explanation that the relationships with others in IYS are ‘more of a group thing’. Second, I have shown that the concepts, characteristics and practices of friendship were explicitly utilised to construct the relationships and interactions between members of IYS groups. When I asked Melissa if friendship is part of the IYS activism programme, which she had recently joined, she said: ‘I’m kind of new [so] I’ve not necessarily become friends with any of them but you can sort of tell that it’s a group and they’re all sort of friends and I think that that is important’. Scholarship that discusses how friendship contributes to constructing and sustaining communities has mostly focused on friendship ties (presumably close friendships). However, Allan (2003) also argues that the principles of friendship, such as support and egalitarianism, inspire widespread notions of community. The findings of this study demonstrate how such processes occur in practice.

Third, I perceive the connection that IYS members felt towards one another as political solidarity, which can be based on shared interests and goals (hooks, 1995) and shared social identities and experiences (Collins, 2010). Participants shared the anti-racism and anti-discrimination goals of IYS and most were young Black people and people of colour who attested to shared experiences of racialisation and racism. Relatedly, I discussed earlier how notions of safety in IYS spaces were dependent for some participants on members’ ethnic and racialised identities (identity politics) while others based them on members’ shared political goals (affinity politics). In the above conversation, Asha the youth worker used the terms community and family to explain the sense that in IYS ‘you are all from, you’re all part of something together’. However, ‘community’ is more often used to describe a group and one’s relationship with it, not
their individual relationships with other members of that group. Additionally, while the term ‘sisterhood’ is used by Black women to signify their solidarity with one another, its use by White women in the feminist movement has been criticised by Black feminists and feminists of colour, as the term assumes unconditional love and egalitarian relationships and therefore served to mask and deny the ways that former group oppresses the latter groups (hooks, 1995; Lugones & Rosezelle, 1995). Moreover, participants employed the term ‘sister’ to describe their closest friendships and they had more distant bonds with some of the other IYS members. I argue friendship is a more appropriate term in this case, as it has been conceptualised as a form of solidarity in people’s lives and as providing social glue for communities (Delgado, 2016; Spencer & Pahl, 2006). Moreover, because friendship requires commitment and ongoing work to understand the realities of the friend it also has political potential to bridge across differences (Lugones & Rosezelle, 1995). Based on the above reasons, I conceptualise the relationship that participants had with IYS members they were not close to as ‘solidarity friendship’. Nevertheless, I recognise that this term (like any term) cannot perfectly capture these relationships in their entirety and that notions related to community, family and other relationships also figure into these bonds. I will now turn to examine how solidarity friendship was enacted and instances when it was challenging to do so.

4.2.2.2. How, when and with whom

For participants, being solidarity friends ideally meant being respectful, supportive, caring, nice, accepting of others’ identities, creating space for people to speak, listening and making everyone feel included. Enacting attitudes and practices of solidarity friendship was especially pertinent, and even expected, in group interactions and most of all when young people put themselves in a vulnerable position in front of others, for example when sharing personal stories in a group discussion or performing in the youth club’s open mic. In these cases, solidarity friendship contributed to experiencing these situations as safe and empowering. On the other hand, when the young people freely socialised and danced in the youth club, solidarity friendship was more minimally displayed and could simply mean not making anyone feel unwelcome or judged. Even so, some of the young people did make an effort to engage with newcomers or those who were by themselves.
The enactment of solidarity friendship between IYS members did not mean that complex social dynamics did not exist. It is likely that because solidarity friendship was (at least partially) informed by notions and practices of close friendship, it was easiest to enact toward IYS members that the young people already considered as their friends and close friends. A number of participants mentioned that there was a core group of young people who attended IYS regularly and were therefore closer. As a result, when the young people freely socialised in the youth club and were not expected to display solidarity friendship to a high degree, those who had no or few friends present could feel lonely or socially awkward. I often had this experience when I undertook participant observation at the youth club, as I was not sure whether and how to approach young people who were already interacting with one another, particularly those I did not know very well. I found it easier to engage with girls who were by themselves and some of them told me that they experienced similar social difficulties to mine. Still, their choice to attend the youth club shows that it was also a positive, albeit complex, experience for them. One of these participants told me that although she experienced social anxiety in IYS, she also felt happy there because, unlike with White people, she did not feel pressured to fit in and could speak her mind freely about race and racism. I argue that ties of solidarity friendship contributed to this largely positive experience.

Solidarity friendship became challenging to enact when young people did not get along with one another, especially when someone expressed a negative view on matters relating to someone else’s identity (for example their gender, sexuality and/or culture). In these cases, solidarity friendship in IYS was at risk because it was based on a commitment to anti-discrimination and because such views could make a young person feel uncomfortable and harm their sense of belonging and safety in IYS. The youth workers, therefore, had to manage the tensions and clashes between the young people and find ways for them to be able to get along. Such conflicts seemed to occur most in relation to LGBTQ+ identities. Amy the youth worker explained in our interview that they facilitated workshops in IYS groups about the LGBTQ+ community and intersectionality ‘Because [for] quite a lot of people of colour in the community being LGBT isn’t something that’s very talked about or very accepted due to a whole heap of historical things.’ Youth workers specifically mentioned cultural backgrounds and religious beliefs as factors that sometimes led to disagreements over and lack of
acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities and issues among some of the IYS young people, though as Amy mentioned these factors need to be historically contextualised.

The youth workers described how disagreements and lack of acceptance by some of the young people in IYS could make some of the LGBTQ+ young people in IYS feel uncomfortable and unsafe. This therefore threatened their solidarity friendship ties with those who did not accept and support them. Youth workers made efforts to help young people communicate with one another, negotiate conflicts, maintain solidarity friendship ties and make the spaces safer. For example, one youth worker mentioned that in one of the IYS school groups, a few young people jokingly used a homophobic slang word. The youth worker made it clear that such language was not acceptable in the group. The youth workers’ efforts might have been buttressed by the fact that some of the other young people had positive opinions about and friends who belonged to the LGBTQ+ community.

Notably, participants rarely spoke in my presence about conflicts in IYS and when asked about it most denied the existence of tensions. Only a few participants spoke about such issues in our private conversations and interviews and I was told by Asha the youth worker that some also turned to her to help them deal with difficulties they had with others in IYS. Relatedly, some participants had admitted or implied that they did not want to discuss friendship difficulties or that they found the topic to be sensitive. They were not alone in their reluctance. In reflecting on their friendship, which grew out of their participation in a feminist activist group in England, Sowinske and Jamal (2019) describe how they did not want to discuss the difficulties they faced in their activist social network nor the eventual breakdown of their friendship. Similarly, in tracing their experience of friendship in Black movements in the US, Tabitha Jamie Mary Chester (2018) acknowledges that activism can produce tensions in friendships and ruin them, yet admits that they chose to mainly describe and celebrate the positive aspects of activist friendship as those are ‘more powerful and life-affirming’ (p. 756-757). Participants’ general reluctance to discuss conflicts, especially in group settings, was perhaps their way to keep intact a sense of solidarity friendship, which supported their engagement with IYS.  

Although scholars have argued that conflict avoidance can preclude critical dialogue (hooks, 2009) and therefore political solidarity (Coates, 2007).
Moreover, I believe participants were particularly silent regarding interpersonal tensions in IYS in our research engagements because they saw themselves as representing IYS and did not want to depict the organisation in a negative light. It is also possible that some participants had no negative relationships with others in IYS. However, what these silences, refutations and refusals revealed most of all was how important IYS was for the girls, as a social and activist space, and how they protected its image through the dominant ideal of friendship as a solely positive relationship (Heaphy & Davies, 2012).

4.2.3 Youth work as friendship
The third type of friendship or friend-like relationship that participants had in IYS and was significant for their involvement in the organisation was the bond they had with their youth workers. These relationships had some common characteristics with close friendships and solidarity friendships but unlike close friendships they were limited to one setting (IYS) and they seemed less distant and more personal than solidarity friendships. I will focus in particular on the unique characteristics that set them apart from other friendships and, in turn, bring into question dominant notions of friendship.

4.2.3.1. Friends with responsibilities
In my interviews with the girls, I asked them to pick a friend they had made in IYS and tell me about their relationship. I was surprised when a few of them named their IYS youth workers, as I expected them to choose someone closer to their age and whose position in IYS was the same as theirs. In her interview, Marina described the bond she formed with some of the IYS youth workers she came in regular contact with:

> I also have quite good relationships with the youth workers. …So I consider them friends as well because the youth workers, yeah they don’t necessarily feel like staff because they come and join in everyone’s conversations as well.

Marina considered some of the youth workers her friends because they resembled the young people in IYS, or at least did not fit with her dominant conception of ‘staff’. The youth workers I met in the girls’ groups and youth club were very approachable and
friendly – they dressed casually, spoke informally and participated enthusiastically in the games, activities and open mic performances they organised for the young people. The youth workers took part in casual conversations and serious discussions with the young people, where they shared their own opinions and experiences. The young people were also able to relate to the youth workers because they were all Black people and people of colour. Scholarship on youth work has shown the importance of youth workers developing positive and friendly relationships with the young people they engage with and serving as role models for them (Delgado, 2016; Fyfe et al., 2018). These relationships can be enhanced if the youth worker is willing to share information about themselves, has faced similar challenges to the young people and the age gap between them is relatively small so that they can share commonalities and slang (Delgado, 2016). IYS catered to young people aged 12 to 24 and there was, therefore, a relatively small age gap between the young people and the youth workers who were under 25 years old. Moreover, a small age gap was also imagined between youth workers and volunteers who were older - the girls were often shocked when Asha or I mentioned our age (28 and 31 respectively) because they thought we were younger. This demonstrates that behaviour and communication style are not simply a consequence of biological age but also contribute to the social construction of age.

In the observations I conducted in various IYS settings and groups, the peer-like connections and friendships between the youth workers and the young people did not seem incompatible with the position of the youth workers as paid staff members who were in charge of the IYS programmes and responsible for the young people’s behaviour, wellbeing and safety. Melvin Delgado (2016) argues against the common notion that distance supposedly contributes to youth workers’ authority. Delgado asserts that while friendship between youth workers and youth has not received significant scholarly attention, such a relationship can certainly develop. I argue that because youth workers acted as role models and assisted young people in developing friendships with peers (Delgado, 2016; Fyfe et al., 2018), it makes sense that they were perceived as friends. In befriending projects, where organisations facilitate supportive and trusting relationships between volunteers and socially isolated people, the latter often conceptualise the relationship as friendship (Jamieson, 2008; Milne & Thomlinson, 2012).
Friendship between youth workers and young people challenges dominant ideals of friendships and helps expand our understanding of this bond. Specifically, friendship is theorised as an egalitarian relationship (Allan, 2003; Heaphy & Davies, 2012) and this characteristic is also used to differentiate friendship from a befriending relationship, as the befriender holds the power to end the relationship (Philip & Spratt, 2007). Sociologists of friendship have critiqued this conceptualisation of friendship by showing that friendship can include power relations (Heaphy & Davies, 2012) yet they have focused on the negative or ambivalent experiences that result from them. The relationships between the girls and their youth workers demonstrate that friendship can exist when one friend has institutional power and responsibility over another friend and that such friendship is experienced as positive as long as there is no abuse of power.

The unequal terms that youth work friendship was based on engendered a certain type of friendship. This was evident in my interview with Marina, after she told me she considers some of the youth workers to be her friends:

Thalia: And does that feel like the same type of friendship with people who are not staff or does it feel different or…?

Marina: Different because it's easier to talk to them and become friends with them because it’s their job that if you want to talk to them then they definitely want to talk to you, so it can be less intimidating.

For Marina, youth workers’ (paid) social responsibility towards her was the reason why it was easier for her to form friendship bonds with them. Her friendships with them were therefore perceived as different from ones with young people in IYS yet not less meaningful. This type of friendship complicates the dominant assumption that friendship is purely chosen and voluntary, an assumption that is also used to distinguish between friendship and a befriending relationship (Jamieson, 2008; Milne & Thomlinson, 2012). In the case of befriending, blurred lines with friendship require careful negotiations of boundaries and an honest discussion of the relationship, so as to avoid confusion and disappointment on the part of the befriended, especially when the befriending scheme comes to an end (Jamieson, 2008; Philip & Spratt, 2007). Marina was perfectly aware of the fact that it was the youth workers' job to socialise with her. Moreover, while befriending offers a socially isolated person a relationship
with one volunteer, engaging in IYS usually enabled the girls to come in contact with several youth workers (as well as other young people). The fact that Marina did not name all of the IYS youth workers (who as I mentioned before were all sociable and approachable) as her friends shows that choice and preference still played a role in her friendship formations.

4.2.3.2. One-sided friendship?
When I asked the three youth workers I interviewed to tell me about the relationships they have with the young people they work with, they all characterised them as highly positive relationships. The term ‘friend’ was used, though sometimes in contradiction to the ways they perceived the relationships. Friendliness is an important characteristic of youth work but friendship is often perceived as standing in opposition to, or at least in significant tension with, professionalism (Batsleer, 2008). The youth workers did not all understand their relationships with the young people in the exact same way. This might have been because of the different IYS programmes they facilitated, the different settings they took place (especially school versus the IYS youth club) and the kinds of relationships that these programmes and settings enabled or necessitated between the youth workers and the young people. Here is how youth workers who worked in more structured IYS programmes, such as the activism programme and education programmes in schools, described the relationships they created with the young people in our interviews:

I think it’s kind of not too authoritative but not too friendly. I think it’s a really nice balance in that they don’t see me like a teacher and the kind of stern authority figure that they’re a bit scared of, that they can’t say how they feel and stuff. So they’ve said that they see me as kind of a friend or kind of this older person that they can feel comfortable going to but then still respect me and know that I’m there as a person that has a job and is there to educate them and teach them things. -Amy

I think there’s a clear boundary, like I am a person who has facilitated them and I’m an adult, I’m definitely not a friend but I’m definitely someone they can just come and talk to or they can message. …That was one of the key things that they do say [makes a difference] ‘being
taught by someone who is almost the same age as me’ or ‘who is an older sibling’ - Ola

Both Ola and Amy spoke of cultivating meaningful relationships with young people that were markedly different from those between teachers and students, especially because the young people could more easily approach them and confide in them. Again, a small age gap, or a perception of one, contributed to this kind of relationship – while Ola stated in our interview that they are not a peer to the young people because they were ten years older than some of them, in the above quote they mentioned that the young people see them as being ‘almost the same age’. However, Amy and Ola clearly stated that they were not ‘a friend’ to or ‘too friendly’ with the young people. Even so, Amy mentioned that the young people see them as ‘a kind of friend’.

In contrast, Asha, who worked in the more informal IYS settings of the youth club and girls’ groups, did conceptualise her relationship with the young people as friendship:

As well as their youth worker I’m also their friend and it’s important for them to know that they have a friend in me. ... Obviously I’m not their friend, I’m not their friend in the same sense as I am a friend to my pals but I’m not just an acquaintance, I’m not just someone they see about, I’m someone that they can actually share with and be open with, which is a part of friendship. There’s maybe a different word for it.

When I asked Asha about what is the difference between friendship with the young people she worked with and friendship with her pals, she explained that while it is important for her to be open with the young people and share her experiences with them when they are relevant to theirs, she does so in a professional manner and does not disclose everything about her life to them. On the one hand, Asha defined her relationship with the young people as friendship because they could be open and share with her and self-disclosure is considered a key characteristic of close friendship (Delgado, 2016; Policarpo, 2015). Ola and Amy also spoke about how young people felt comfortable sharing with them, and this can help explain why Amy mentioned that the young people saw them as ‘a kind of friend’. Yet Amy and Ola did not see themselves as friends of the young people.

On the other hand, Asha noted that her friendships with the young people in IYS were not the same as the close friendships she had with people she was not employed to
be responsible for and had to be professional with. She maintained boundaries within these friendships that are crucial for youth work (Batsleer, 2008). It seems that it was important for Asha that the young people see her as their friend and therefore feel comfortable sharing with her and reaching out for support (which many of them did). Perhaps it was less important that she saw them as her friends because she could not entirely share her life with them. This position complicates another defining element of friendship – reciprocity in emotional, material and symbolic exchanges (Allan, 2003; Jamieson, 1998). Spencer and Pahl (2006) note that friendships are often ended if there is a prolonged sense that the exchange has become one-sided, yet some people are less concerned with reciprocity in a specific friendship if the friend has other important qualities or if they feel an overall sense of reciprocity from their friendships. In Asha’s case, she was able to confide in her friends outside of IYS. Moreover, when I asked her what she felt she received from her relationship with the young people, she spoke about creating social change and a sense of community, which made her feel good. Thus, reciprocity characterised Asha’s relationship with the young people to a degree, yet it was maybe not as symmetrical or straightforward as it appears in dominant and idealised conceptions of friendship.

There is still much to explore in the study of friendship that is anchored in a professional relationship. After all, friendship is considered a personal and voluntary relationship (Budgeon, 2006; Giddens, 1991), not one that stems from a social role or structural position (Allan, 2003). While Marina had a choice of whether to see the youth workers as her friends, it appears that Asha wanted to cultivate such a relationship with all the young people she worked with. I did not have the opportunity to ask her if she ever found it difficult to do so in relation to her own friendship preferences. Amy’s description of the young people perceiving her as ‘a kind of friend’ and Asha’s qualification that ‘there’s maybe a different word’ other than friendship to describe her relationship with them perhaps stems from the dominant ideals of close friendship discussed in this section. It also points to a lack of affective terms to describe positive relationships between adults and the young people they work with. In any case, friendship served as a meaningful concept in understanding these relationships.
4.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored the political aspects of friendship ties, concepts and characteristics in IYS and thereby began to illuminate their political significance for Black girls and girls of colour in a youth work setting in Scotland. In the first section, I have shown how friendship with other young Black people and people of colour in IYS engendered a sense of belonging, authenticity, understanding and safety. I argued that these friendships constituted homeplaces (Goins, 2011; hooks, 2014; Kelly, 2020) as they countered experiences of racism, racialisation and othering that stemmed from structural inequalities and power relations that participants faced in White-dominated spaces in Scotland. I discussed how participants perceived friendship with young Black people and people of colour as based on a mutual understanding of racism, racialisation and culture. At the same time, participants valued the ethnic and cultural differences between them and sought to establish commonalities in their experiences, identities and political causes. In these cases, friendship homophily (Allan, 2003; Davies, 2019) was politically affirming and constructed relationally.

I argued that friendships in IYS also contributed to the construction of this political organisation as a homeplace, where participants felt a sense of authenticity, acceptance and safety. I focused in particular on the relational construction of safe spaces in IYS, which youth workers were chiefly responsible for yet young people also contributed to. Some participants felt safe from racism in IYS because members supported the organisation’s political goals of anti-racism and anti-discrimination while others felt that this sense of safety was contingent on members’ belonging to marginalised ethnic and racialised groups. The approaches correspond, respectively, affinity politics and identity politics and demonstrate the tensions between the two (Collins, 2010). Relatedly, I argued that the participation of a White young person in IYS was made acceptable not just because of their commitment to anti-racism but also through their friendship ties. I discussed the challenges of constructing safe spaces by noting how some participants felt safer in the IYS girls’ groups than in mixed-gender activities. Additionally, youth workers strove to cultivate spaces where the young people felt safe but also free to express their opinions, acknowledging that the spaces can be ‘safer’ but not completely safe. I then explored how friendship itself was conceptualised as a safe space by some participants (see also Cronin, 2014; Goins, 2011). The association of friendship with safety was even utilised in some cases to
encourage young people in IYS groups to treat one another as friends during meetings. This illustrates some of the potentials of friendship to shape participation in a political organisation.

In the second section, I conceptualised three types of friendships and friend-like relationships that participants cultivated in the organisation. These relationships were politically affirming because they supported engagement with the organisation. The first was close friendship, which for participants also required sharing the same social justice values. This highlights the political significance of their friendships. Close friendship was not instantaneous, as friends had to spend time together and do so also outside of IYS. However, commonalities between members helped them grow closer more quickly. Close friendships were given labels such as ‘friends-friends’ and ‘sister’ to denote the strength of the relationship.

The second friend-like relationship was with IYS members that participants did not consider friends and it strengthened the sense of community and solidarity between them. I termed this relationship as ‘solidarity friendship’ and defined it as positive relationships of affinity that (ideally) develop in group settings and activities, that are based on shared experiences and political goals and are facilitated and informed by ties, practices and notions of close friendship. In IYS, enacting solidarity friendship meant being respectful, supportive, caring, nice, accepting of others’ identities, creating space for people to speak, listening to them and making everyone feel included. Nevertheless, solidarity friendship bonds did not preclude complex social dynamics such as loneliness and difficulty in interacting with others. Moreover, solidarity friendship was at risk when people did not get along, especially when someone felt that their identity was not accepted. Youth workers recounted how discussions about LGBTQ+ identities could turn contentious, which could make LGBTQ+ members feel uncomfortable and unsafe. The youth workers worked to negotiate conflicts and maintain solidarity friendship. Participants were reluctant to admit to the existence of conflicts between IYS members, especially in group settings, perhaps in order to preserve solidarity friendship. I suggested that they employed idealised notions of friendship (Heaphy & Davies, 2012) to protect the image of IYS as it had a monumental significance in their lives.
The third type of friendship or friend-like relationship was between some of the participants and youth workers. The IYS youth workers, who were all Black people and people of colour, were very friendly and participated enthusiastically in the activities and discussions they organised. A few of the participants considered some of the young workers their friends yet this did not seem to undermine the youth workers’ authority nor obscure the fact that befriending the young people was part of their job. Some of the youth workers who worked in more structured IYS programmes did not consider their positive relationships with the young people as friendship, while a youth worker who worked in more informal IYS settings did. For this youth worker, friendship was somewhat one-sided, as she encouraged young people to share with her but limited her own disclosure to them, yet she also found the relationships meaningful. Youth work as friendship complicates the dominant conception of friendship as voluntary, egalitarian relationships based on reciprocity (e.g. Allan, 2003; Davies, 2019; Spencer & Pahl, 2006).

The friendship bonds, concepts and practices analysed in this chapter are integral to understanding the politics of friendship discussed in the following chapters. While this chapter mostly focused on some of the positive aspects of friendship politics, the next chapter will shed light on some of their negative aspects by interrogating how structural power relations were navigated in and through friendships.
Chapter 5: Navigating Structural Inequalities and Power Relations With Friends and Within Friendships

In this chapter, I examine how participants navigated structural inequalities and power relations within and through their friendships. I use the term ‘navigation’ similarly to its use in studies of youth transitions to adulthood, where this term illustrates how young people must find their way through ‘perilous waters’ and societal uncertainties (Evans & Furlong, 1997, p. 18). However, in contrast to the focus on individual navigations in these studies, I illuminate how these navigations can also be undertaken together with others. I first interrogate how participants contended with instances where a friend engaged in oppressive behaviour, especially everyday racism. I then discuss how participants’ friendships and the collective settings of the IYS girls’ group supported them in contesting gendered power relations. Finally, I briefly note structural power relations and inequalities that were largely not discussed in IYS, namely those relating to being of mixed ethnic background, colourism and racism in communities of colour, class and, to some extent, religion.11 This chapter sheds further light on the politics of friendship, both their negative and positive aspects, and demonstrates how coming together can help navigate and even challenge structural inequalities.

While the structure of this chapter might imply otherwise, my analysis is based on an intersectional approach, which does not perceive identity categories such as race, gender and age as discrete but rather attends to how these intersecting systems of power shape people’s lives and identities (Collins, 2021b; Mirza, 2015). Nevertheless, the different sections in this chapter reflect the dynamic character of intersectionality, whereby one form of oppression can, in certain situations, be experienced as more dominant than others (Obasi, 2019). For instance, when participants recounted instances of racist behaviour by friends, they mostly spoke of it in relation to the ethnic and racialised aspects of their identity. When relevant, I discussed in the chapter how identity categories that were more prominent in certain contexts intersected with others, for example how the gender norms that participants contended with were often racialised and how the school setting, which they were required to attend due to their

11 Some of the empirical material and arguments that were presented in the previous chapter can also be analysed through the lens of navigation, particularly the ways in which participants navigated their ethnic and racialised identities in and through their friendships with others in IYS. To avoid repetition, these navigations will not be discussed in this chapter.
age, affected the strategies they employed in response to friends’ racism. Furthermore, I am not arguing that the identity aspects analysed in this chapter were the only ones that were meaningful to participants. Rather, these identity aspects were the ones that appeared most salient in the context of this study.

5.1. Contending with everyday racism and oppression in friendships

While participants conceptualised friendship as a positive relationship, they sometimes recalled instances where friends behaved in an oppressive manner. Participants mostly described instances of racism and occasionally oppressive behaviour related to their gender and religious identities. When recounting incidents of friends’ racism, participants either mentioned that the friend was White or did not mention what their ethnic identity was.

Racist and oppressive behaviour by friends was usually relatively implicit and casual. For example, Faith, who is Black, recalled how, back in the European country where she was born and raised and whose language was the only one she spoke, her national identity was denied by others and some of her friends assumed she was born in her parents’ country of origin. Nevertheless, participants sometimes also told stories about more explicitly oppressive behaviour by friends. For instance, Emily, who is Black, shared that she was told that a friend of hers angrily called someone a ‘Black bitch’. When I asked Emily if she thought that the friend would have used this term in her presence, Emily was confident that the friend would have, explaining it was an instinctive response. These examples demonstrate how common and ingrained racism can be (Rollock, 2022), even in friendship.

Similarly, in two of only a handful of studies conducted with young people of colour in Scotland, participants spoke of encountering everyday racism and islamophobia, including in comments and banter made by their friends (Hopkins et al., 2015; Kennelly & Mouroutsou, 2020). More generally, critical sociological research on friendship has shown that it can also be experienced as a difficult, painful and negative relationship that is not fully voluntary (Eramian & Mallory, 2020; Heaphy & Davies, 2012; Smart et al., 2012). Scholars have also argued that friendship can involve power relations (Heaphy & Davies, 2012; Hey, 1997) and hierarchies (Zhu, 2019). However, based on my extensive review of the literature, the sociology of friendship has yet to
meaningfully engage with how structural power relations, particularly racism, are navigated within friendships and how structural inequalities shape difficult experiences of friendship. This section seeks to address this gap in the literature, in order to better understand friendship from a sociological perspective. Moreover, in contrast to the dominant understanding of racism which focuses on extreme forms of racist oppression that exist on the margins of society, this study helps draw attention to the ways that racism permeates and is reproduced through everyday life and relationships and the complex navigations it requires of people of colour (Rollock, 2022).

Sometimes, though certainly not always, participants recounted how they acted in response to a friend’s everyday racism or other forms of oppressive behaviour. In other instances, in accordance with feminist scholarly attention to absences in women’s speech (DeVault & Gross, 2012), I inferred what occurred from more general comments that participants made about their social experiences in Scotland and their silences around friendship difficulties. Following Black feminist theory’s exploration of the survival and resistance strategies employed by Black girls (Brown, 2021; Kelly, 2018), I delineate four types of strategies that participants employed in the context of oppressive behaviour by friends: challenging friends, self-preservation, ending the friendship and remaining friends out of necessity and/or ambivalence. I explain or suggest the reasons behind each of those strategies. As my analysis will show, these strategies were not all mutually exclusive. I then examine how painful experiences and complex navigations of power relations meant that some participants avoided forming friendships across certain structural inequalities. Finally, I discuss how recognition of racist and oppressive behaviour by friends constituted a process, why such recognition was difficult for participants and what conditions might facilitate it.

5.1.1. Challenging friends
In some cases, participants challenged the oppressive behaviours of their friends. This type of strategy was described by Valerie, in the following excerpt from my fieldnotes:

In one of the sessions of the online youth club, which occurred during the second national lockdown, IYS members were discussing the representation of Black people in films, television and books. Spontaneously, Black people and people of South Asian heritage began
sharing awkward and aggravating experiences where someone assumed that they were familiar with a Black person or a person of South Asian heritage (respectively) who happened to be in the same space as them. In some cases, it was even assumed that they were related to that person although they looked nothing like them. Valerie described an incident where a Black person passed by her and her friend and her friend asked her if she knew that person. In response, Valerie pointed to a random White person and asked her friend if she knew him.

Valerie’s way of challenging her friend’s racist remark was to point out the falsity and absurdness of the assumption that the remark was based on. In the context of IYS and solidarity friendship, I sometimes observed Alyx, who came out as non-binary during the fieldwork period, challenging oppressive assumptions of heterosexuality and gender-binary that some members held. For example, when someone in IYS once mentioned something to do with ‘boys and girls’, Alyx interjected: ‘and everyone in between’. When I asked Alyx in their interview about such incidents, they explained that a friend of theirs in IYS identifies as queer and one of their pronouns is ‘they’ but people sometimes disregard that pronoun and that the same thing sometimes happened to Alyx, when they were still using both ‘they’ and ‘she’ pronouns (though Alyx did not specify whether it was people in IYS who acted this way or people in general). By challenging members’ oppressive assumptions of heterosexuality and binary understandings of gender, Alyx was trying to hold up solidarity friendship in IYS to its shared goal of anti-discrimination and its ideal of inclusivity, for the sake of themselves and their friend.

Although there were a few times where participants described challenging their friends in a more antagonistic manner, in most cases, like the examples above, the challenges seemed to me rather mild. However, as participants did not usually describe how their friends reacted to being challenged, it is possible that even ‘mild’ challenges were perceived by friends as hostile. This is because Black girls and women are often seen as aggressive (Bryan et al., 2018, p. 113; Showunmi, 2017) and White people tend to react negatively when the topic of racism is brought up (Eddo-Lodge, 2017; Rollock, 2022) due to their White fragility, which is generated by and seeks to maintain dominant whiteness and White privilege (DiAngelo, 2011). Moreover, as the discussion of the next type of strategy will illustrate, even ‘mildly’ challenging friends
was likely a difficult task for participants to undertake and should not be assumed as the ‘obvious’ or best strategy to tackle oppressive behaviour.

5.1.2. Self-preservation

In other cases, when faced with a friend’s oppressive behaviour, participants chose to preserve their energy and focus on their survival and well-being. In a workshop I conducted with the Senior Girls’ Group online towards the middle of the fieldwork, I asked participants whether they could be friends with someone who did not support a social or political issue that was important to them. Marina said that it is important to agree on ‘core values’. Keke then replied:

Yeah. Cause to me some political opinions are morals. And I feel like if there’s someone in my circle who I think doesn’t really value those and I think that it kinda, for me as a person, I don’t feel comfortable with that person. For example, there was an instance where someone insulted my religion. Well, I think it was an insult, I don’t think they meant it directly. But to me, I felt like it was kind of an insult and I pretended not to hear, I was like ‘Oh pretend I didn’t hear that’. And obviously I was just kinda distancing slightly.

As mentioned, participants did not always recount how they acted when a friend behaved in an oppressive manner. However, in Keke’s case, she described that she ‘pretended not to hear’.

Participants’ choice not to outwardly and immediately contest everyday racism and other oppressive behaviour by friends can be explained through several connected reasons. First, several participants have noted that challenging people’s racism was an extremely difficult task because racism is deeply entrenched and yet denied. In Scotland, public discourse usually repudiates the existence of racism while Black people frequently experience it and are expected to silently accept it (Sobande & Hill, 2022). Emily noted that ‘sometimes you just need to survive and stay quiet for a while’.

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12 Indeed, all the strategies I map in this chapter can be understood as acts of self-preservation, as they were all ways in which participants sought to protect themselves from oppression in their friendships. However, I find the term particularly fitting for this strategy as it helps challenge potential normative judgement on participants’ (constrained) decision to remain silent in the face of racism.
before you are in a place to speak out’. Similarly, in my interview with Faith, we discussed navigating race and racism in friendship and Faith mentioned that in the European country where she grew up people were ‘very racist’. She then went on to say:

It’s so ingrained in the society that they don’t even realise they’re being racist, they’re just racist and I’m like ‘wow, damn’. So growing up I’m just like ‘Okay Faith, fine, let it slide, fine, let it slide, just don’t, please’ you know? Cause it’s just too much. Obviously, when you’re in a room full of White people and you’re a student, you’re not going to, you just don’t have energy. Me - I didn’t have energy to bring up the topic or anything.

Faith then explained that outside of school she did not put up with such behaviour by friends. Her story illustrates how being in the minority makes challenging racism even harder, especially in a school setting. In her research with Black girls in a predominantly White American high school, Kelly (2018, 2020) argues that the girls often remained silent in the face of racism as previous attempts to challenge them were emotionally draining, ineffective and resulted in being disciplined. Participants in my study seemed painfully aware of how speaking up about issues such as racism could instead make them be perceived as the problem (Ahmed, 2017). They therefore chose in some instances to engage in self-preservation rather than challenge their friends.

A second reason why participants might have chosen self-preservation was that many of the instances of everyday racism and other forms of oppression by friends fell under the category of micro-aggressions. Micro-aggressions are comments, gestures and behaviour made in everyday settings to members of marginalised groups that are subtly demeaning and cumulatively harmful (Sue, 2010; Sue et al., 2008). Micro-aggressions are often very difficult to identify and subsequently challenge (Johnson & Joseph-Salisbury, 2018; Sue et al., 2008). The pernicious illusiveness of micro-aggressions is evident in Keke’s story, where she first asserted that someone insulted her religion, then said she thought the comment was an insult, then conceded that it was not a direct insult and finally framed it as ‘kind of an insult’. Her account reflects how one can sense an injustice they experience yet not necessarily be able to pinpoint it or put it into words (Ahmed, 2017, p. 21).
A third potential reason for engaging in self-preservation was that contending with oppression can be especially onerous in friendship. Greenland and colleagues (2020), who are social psychologists, found that participants avoided challenging the oppressive behaviour of friends because they viewed it as expending much time and energy without reducing inequalities as well as carrying the risks of painting one as contentious, harming the friendship and resulting in a traumatic experience. Moreover, a study found that young people of colour in Scotland did not address racist and Islamophobic jokes by their friends at school because they wanted to conform to their peers and feel a sense of belonging (Kennelly & Mouroutsou, 2020). Some of the participants in my study have also noted the struggles of fitting into mainstream society. The negative consequences of challenging friends further explain why Keke ‘pretended not to hear’ that a friend insulted her religion. Based on the above reasons, it is possible there were instances where other participants also chose the strategy of self-preservation when navigating racialised power relations in their friendships.

5.1.3. Ending the friendship

Whether participants challenged a friend or engaged in self-preservation, at times they also chose to end their relationship with them. In a workshop I conducted about friendship several months into the fieldwork, which was attended by two girls, Cece told us that she was a ‘loner’ in high school because she was ‘kind of anti-social’ and because she was the only Black girl in a school while most of her peers were White. Cece then shared a story about the only person she managed to befriend, who was White:

And I thought we were gonna be friends forever or for a very long time and then Black Lives Matter came, [inaudible] other stuff and we kinda drifted apart. Not drifted apart, I literally stopped the friendship. …Because a lot of other people kept telling her - why is she not, why is she silent [about BLM]. They say if you keep silent you’re literally supporting the oppressor and I told her and then she was just like… And it’s not something that I really realised back then but she did and does kind of culturally appropriate stuff. For example, I remember times, even at school people would look at me weird because I was friends with her
and apparently she used to say the n-word. So I wasn’t aware of all of that. So obviously the Black Lives Matter happened and you know we stopped being friends and instead of saying ‘Okay sorry’, if she was a real friend she would have, not agreed with me cause I’m not telling you ‘Oh, you this, so you have to say ‘I’m sorry” but she would have to at least take a step back and try to look at the whole situation. It was really funny because she ended up saying I only support Black Lives Matter and not all lives matter which was a lie but I just left it, I just left like that.

As mentioned, participants characterised their close friendships as ones where they shared the same social justice values, such as anti-racism and feminism. Some, like Valerie, also described ending friendships when their friends did not support the same causes as them. A lack of support for the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement was seen as a racist stance – in the above excerpt Cece equated it with ‘supporting the oppressor’. In a different workshop, when I asked participants if they could be friends with someone who they have a lot in common with but does not support BLM, Sun, who is Black, replied: ‘Then they don’t value you as a human being and they are racist’. In Cece’s story, this discernment was corroborated as Cece later learned that her friend engaged in other kinds of racist behaviour, specifically using the n-word and engaging in cultural appropriation.

Swiftly ending a friendship due to a friend’s racism seemingly corresponds to the notion of friendship as a ‘pure relationship’ that is maintained only as long as it is mutually rewarding and is promptly ended once it ceases to be so (Giddens, 1991). However, Cece described how she was willing to keep her friendship intact without requiring an apology, as long as her friend was willing to better understand the situation. This leniency might be partially explained by the fact that this person was Cece’s only friend in high school, which also potentially made Cece’s decision to ultimately end the friendship quite difficult and painful. Two other participants spoke of situations where they tried to get a friend to stop engaging in oppressive behaviour (for example constantly addressing them with the wrong pronouns) but eventually gave up their attempts and the relationship. These complex navigations of structural power relations and inequalities point to a particular gap between idealisations and realities of friendship in people’s lives (Heaphy & Davies, 2012; Pahl & Spencer, 2010).
and how friendships can be experienced and perceived beyond the binary concepts of a ‘good’ vs ‘bad’ friend (Lahad & van Hooff, 2022).

5.1.4. Remaining friends: Necessity and ambivalence

In a few rare cases, participants attested that they remained friends with someone who behaved in an oppressive manner. This strategy complicates the dominant conception of friendship as a voluntary relationship (Budgeon, 2006; Giddens, 1991). In one of the Senior Girls’ Group sessions, Sarah shared that in her European home country, she had no choice but to be friends with White people (presumably because there were no people of colour for her to befriend). While Sarah advised the other girls not to follow in her footsteps, she described to them how she resisted her friends’ racism by insulting them. Afterwards, she and her friends made the decision not to say mean things to one another. In Sarah’s case, it seems that while her friendships were born out of necessity, she sustained them because she successfully challenged her friends’ racist behaviour. Sociologists of friendship have challenged the conceptualisation of friendship as a personal and freely chosen relationship by showing how it is constrained by social norms and is usually formed between those who have the same gender, class and/or ethnicity (Allan, 2003; Davies, 2019). For Sarah and other participants, friendship formation was constrained due to a lack of ethnic diversity.

Another participant spoke about remaining friends with her White friends, even though she felt that they were pressuring her to assimilate into their White culture and not mention her ethnic background or issues of racism. She explained that ‘I’m only friends with them cause I’m in school with them, it’s just to make do at the moment’. In our interview, Amy the youth worker, who defines themselves as ‘Black and mixed’, spoke of facing a similar bind in their own experiences and in those of the young people they worked with:

> When you’re young and when you’re in school, and obviously when you’re in a school where 90 percent of the population is White, you really can’t choose and be picky and selective with who your friends are, you know? It’s particularly if you’ve been friends with them since you were a kid or since you started high school. …When I was in high school, now
that I’ve left 7-8 years ago, I’m very aware of the conversations that I had with my friends and the situations and now I’m not friends with them because of those conversations and those situations but at the time, you know, those are my friends, it was them or no one.

In a different IYS research project that I was involved in, when discussing the effects of racism on their mental health, one of the participating girls commented that ‘In Scotland we take a lot of things as a joke, when you’re making friends in high school you let things go because you want to have friends’ (IYS Ambassadors & Assan, 2021, p. 15). These accounts illustrate how it is not only friendship formation that can be constrained but also the possibility of terminating such a relationship. Sociologists of friendship have further contested the conceptualisation of friendship as a voluntary relationship by illuminating cases in which people feel ‘stuck’ in friendships and refrain from ending them because they feel a sense of obligation to the friend or because the friendship is entangled in their everyday life or other relationships (Heaphy & Davies, 2012; Spencer & Pahl, 2006). Amy and the anonymous participant’s experiences point to another reason why a friendship might not be terminated – the desire and necessity of having friends, especially for young people who must attend school. Likewise, in a study of the girls’ relationships in a diverse school in London, Winkler-Reid (2016) found that: ‘while friends may be chosen, friendship in school is practically compulsory – to be without friends is an unequivocal sign of social failure’ (p. 167). Relatedly, Yan Zhu’s (2019) research in a Chinese boarding school reveals that students with a low academic and social status formed ‘useful’ friendships with high-achieving students to better their status. While some children were treated negatively by their ‘useful’ friends, they sustained the hierarchical friendship as it helped them to contend with everyday life at school. Taken together, these findings bring to light the intense pressures of the school environment and how friendships are formed and sustained, in the words of the participant, ‘to make do’ in this institution.

A friend’s racist attitude could also render the friendship ambivalent. In a mapping workshop that explored the connections between participants’ meaningful relationships and the socio-political issues they cared about, Isabella described how her relationship with a friend had changed after she heard that the friend supports Donald Trump:
I was like ‘Whoa, hold on a minute’. So I asked them about it one time and they were like ‘Yeah, I don’t think he’s that bad’ and I was like ‘Huh, right, okaaay, mmm… might not hang out with you as much as I was before’. And we kind of… lockdown didn’t help, we haven’t spoken to each other as much and I think it’s partially because of that and because I was kind of like ‘Right, I’m not really sure how much I want to hang out with you anymore’. She’s really nice and we’re good friends but also if you don’t think Trump is that bad... then… …and I think that kind of changed our relationship, our friendship.

Isabella struggled to comprehend how her friend could support Trump, who often expressed racist views and whose actions stood in contrast to social justice values that she upheld and sought to base her friendships on. As a result, Isabella decided to spend less time with her friend. At the same time, she mentioned that her friend was ‘really nice’ and still described herself as ‘good friends’ with them. In contrast to the popular culture discourse that creates a dichotomous distinction between ‘good’ versus ‘bad’ friends (Lahad & van Hooff, 2022), people can also feel ambivalent about a friendship (Heaphy & Davies, 2012; Spencer & Pahl, 2006), as Isabella’s account shows.

Participants’ stories have demonstrated the gaps between their friendship ideals and the realities of their friendships (Heaphy & Davies, 2012; Pahl & Spencer, 2010). These gaps negatively impacted the way they perceived their friendships, as in the case of Isabella, whose friend supported Trump. In the case of the participant who spoke of keeping school friendships out of necessity, the gap became almost impossible to bridge:

I need another word for [my friends at school] cause like they’re not acquaintances but they’re not really friends either because they just don’t, they don’t really take the time to think about how I’m not White and my experience is not the same. I don’t think they even know that I’m [ethnic identity] and I just find it so weird, they actually don’t really know me at all.

In the previous chapter, I described how participants associated their friendships and connections with other young people in IYS with notions of authenticity, acceptance,
comfort and lack of judgement, which are common characteristics of close friendship (Goins, 2011; Spencer & Pahl, 2006; Winkler-Reid, 2016). Additionally, Maria Lugones (1995) argues that friendship, especially across inequalities, entails a commitment to understanding the friend’s realities and how those differ from one’s own. All of these characteristics seemed to be lacking in the friendships that the anonymous participant described. This is probably why she struggled to keep labelling them as her friends. However, she endured the relationships (and the label) out of necessity, to contend with everyday life at school.

5.1.5. Avoiding friendship
The complex and painful navigations of oppressive behaviour that participants had to undertake within some of their friendships illustrate the difficulties that some of them experienced in friendships that formed across inequalities. This was particularly evident in relation to friendships with White people. A few participants mentioned that they do not have White friends and a few others have explicitly said that they avoided befriending them. Below is an excerpt from a conversation that unfolded in one of the first workshops, where Sonia and Cece, who are of South Asian heritage and Black respectively, discussed why they preferred to be friends with Black people and people of colour:

Sonia: You’ve not got that kind of fear that they’re like slightly racist as well that you just don’t want to put yourself in that awkward situation.

Thalia: Yeah, it’s harder cause-

Sonia: Yeah, you don’t know somebody’s views on political systems and stuff.

Cece: Yeah, sometimes it might even feel uncomfortable as well and it’s kind of weird because you don’t want to be friends with someone that is trying to, not have pity on you but watch everything they say just because it might affect you or it might not-

Sonia: Yeah
Cece: It's weird to be ‘Oh I’m sorry I don’t want to say this, no offence’.
It’s best when you can relate with someone.

For Cece and Sonia, friendship with White people, which they experienced before, was mired with racialised power relations and potential and actual racism. They therefore characterised it as involving tense interactions and feelings of unease. To avoid such situations, Faith explained that when she is about to become close friends with a White person, she will initiate a conversation on racism to ascertain whether the person is racist or not. The fear of discovering that a friend is racist that Sonia mentioned echoes bell hooks’ (1994) explanation that Black women are weary of befriending White women because they fear that the latter would unexpectedly assert their power over them (p. 107). Writer and film critic Wesley Morris conceptualises unexpected experiences of racism as the ‘trapdoor of racism’. He argues that awareness of the trapdoor means that people of colour are never fully comfortable with their White friends, even those who are committed to anti-racism, as they too will at some point be at fault (Sow & Friedman, 2020, p. 118). Similarly, Cece spoke of how friendship with White people can feel uncomfortable and restrict conversations.

A few participants also spoke about their reluctance to befriend someone who does not support LGBTQ+ identities and issues. Alyx attested that they found it difficult to connect and feel comfortable with people who posted online about various social justice issues but not about LGBTQ+ issues: '[S]o it’s like ‘do you actually care?’ it kind of makes me question that’. In the workshop where I presented participants with the study’s findings, conducted 4 months after the fieldwork concluded, Asha also spoke of the lack of comfort that such friendships can entail:

If I associate myself with a person who doesn’t agree with LGBTQ+ rights and I have friends in the [LGBTQ+] community I’m not gonna feel safe bringing this person around those friends or bringing my friends close to that person. And do I really feel safe? I wouldn’t feel comfortable with myself knowing that I’m hanging out with a person who is against some of the people who are close to me, you know?

Asha felt that having a friend who does not support the identity of her other friends would make her and her friends feel unsafe. These experiences and views contrast with notions of authenticity (Winkler-Reid, 2016), comfort (Spencer & Pahl, 2006) and
safety (Cronin, 2014; Goins, 2011) associated with close friendship. This underscores why such friendships were avoided by some participants.

5.1.6. Recognising oppressive friendships

In the examples provided in this section, participants recognised their friend’s behaviour as oppressive. However, in White-dominated settings where oppressive behaviour is prevalent, such precise recognition is not necessarily immediate. In Cece’s story of ending a friendship over lack of support of BLM, she mentioned that she only later realised that her friend also engaged in cultural appropriation. Relatedly, in one of the sessions of the Senior Girls’ Group, Asha the youth worker shared with the group members that she was the only person of mixed ethnic background in her school and that her friends used to call her by a nickname that neither she nor her friends understood at the time was a racist term.

Acknowledging racism or other forms of oppression in a friendship can be a difficult and upsetting undertaking. Ola the youth worker explained that often in the IYS school groups, young Black people and people of colour did not initially want to acknowledge their marginalised ethnic and racialised identity. Ola explained that their resistance stemmed from a position of ‘I wanna fit in, I don’t want you to recognise my racial identity, I don’t wanna, I’m already being called names, why are you pointing it out?’. This position indicates that acknowledging oppression in friendships is similar or even more difficult. According to Sara Ahmed (2017), people sometimes will themselves to not notice the injustices that they experience, like racism and sexism, because noticing can change their understanding of the world and might require them to let go of relationships, aspirations and the ways they perceive themselves (p. 28). For instance, in one study, young people of colour in Scotland attempted to minimise the effect of racist and Islamophobic comments made by their friends and peers in school by framing them as jokes and claiming they were not bothered by them (Kennelly & Mouroutsou, 2020). Acknowledging oppressive behaviour is especially difficult in friendships because it can indicate a lack of judgement in choosing friends, frame one as a victim and contradict the dominant positive conception of friendship (Greenland et al., 2020). The challenges entailed in such recognition help explain why participants...
were not keen to speak about oppressive behaviour by friends and suggest it was not an uncommon experience.

It seems that recognising friendships as oppressive is a process that occurs over time and is shaped by relationships and spaces. Amy the youth worker spoke in their interview about the difficulty that the young people they worked with faced in acknowledging everyday racism by friends:

It’s only throughout the years that you start to realise the things that [your friends] said or they’ve done or the situations and then later on down the line you might be like ‘Okay, I don’t wanna be friends with these people anymore’ but it takes a very very long time, it’s very hard to come to that realisation. Particularly when, unless you have friends nearby or family members nearby that are B-PoC [Black and people of colour], you will only be surrounded by White friends in your school and your clubs and your societies and your sports. So it’s very difficult to be like ‘Okay, these friends are problematic but these are literally the only people I can be around’. So I think it’s only when you get to university and you move out of your city and later on that you can be very very picky about your friendships. …It’s hard to recognise those things, particularly if you don’t have the language or the understanding about what you’re actually experiencing. So when I was 13-14 I didn’t know what micro-aggressions were.

For Amy, having family and friends who are Black or people of colour during adolescence as well as moving away from one’s hometown can help one to acknowledge that certain friends are ‘problematic’ and subsequently disengage from them. Another youth worker shared she was only able to form meaningful friendships once she was able to go to the city or online. Similarly, Emma Dabiri (2019) recounts how during adolescence she never felt ‘entirely comfortable’ with her White friends, who did not support her when she experienced racism (p. 56). Moreover, it was only when Dabiri left home and had more choice in the spaces she frequented and people she interacted with, that she realised most of her adolescent friends were not truly her friends (p. 27). While these accounts belong to older Black people and people of colour, they still seem relevant and suggest that access to more diverse spaces is
crucial to forming meaningful friendships and reassessing old ones. Such access can be especially difficult for young people to achieve, as their geographical mobility is often restricted.

IYS was a diverse space where participants could develop new friendships and together unpack experiences of racism and racialisation and (as will be discussed in the next chapter) develop critical consciousness. This likely facilitated processes of recognition, as the following excerpt from my fieldnotes about the findings workshop illustrates:

I read aloud the anonymous comments that participants made regarding my finding that participants created social change through conversation. One comment mentioned that conversations are not always positive and that when they are online it is hard to tell whether they involve veiled racism. When I asked if anyone wanted to add anything, Isabella said that she had written the comment. She then recounted how a White friend had replied to a story regarding race that she shared on her social media account. In the subsequent conversation that unfolded between them, Isabella felt that what her friend had said was wrong but could not pinpoint what it was exactly. She said she felt weird and confused because she could not tell if her friend was being racist or not. When Isabella finished her story, Alyx and Asha commiserated with her, asked her questions about the incident and explained why they thought what the friend had said was racist.

Thus, the bonds formed in IYS supported Isabella in acknowledging that her friend engaged in racist behaviour. As mentioned, participants were usually not keen to speak about friendship difficulties. It is possible that, like with the IYS youth workers, with the passing of time, and especially when their school days will be far behind them (rather than being in school or having recently left it), it will be easier for them to share these stories. In the meantime, IYS was a space where participants could begin the process of acknowledging and speaking about how structural power relations and inequalities were enacted within their friendships. Instead of navigating these power relations by themselves, as they often did in White-dominated spaces such as school, at IYS they could do so together with others who understood such experiences.
Attending the organisation could perhaps be conceptualised as another strategy to contend with oppressive behaviour by friends, one that is collective and long-term.

In this section, I uncovered a negative aspect of participants’ friendship politics. I argued that friendship across inequalities sometimes involved structural power relations, which required participants to undertake painful and complex navigations in their friendships.

5.2. Interrogating gendered power relations through friendship

This section addresses how friendships and the collective settings of the IYS girls’ group supported participants in their navigations of gendered power relations (and their intersections with race and age). First, I illustrate how participants contested together with others the gendered, heteronormative and sexist assumptions and demands they faced. I then discuss these assumptions, demands and contestations in the specific context of participants’ friendships. Lastly, I examine how participants relationally explored their gender identities beyond traditional, racialised and binary constructions.

5.2.1. Critiquing gender norms together

In the IYS girls’ groups and through the bonds of close friendship, solidarity friendship and friend-like relationships with youth workers, participants collectively criticised gender norms and how those affected their and other people’s lives. They spoke of how they encountered gender expectations and demands as well as sexist attitudes both in their own communities and in wider society. For example, in the last workshop I conducted with the School Girls’ Group, we explored the meanings of the term ‘political’ and watched a video that was produced for a National Museum of American History exhibition titled ‘Girlhood (it’s complicated)’. The video challenged the notion that girlhood is solely associated with objects such as dolls and pink bedrooms and unpacked the diverse settings in which girls grow up. The video also argued that ‘political’ meant ‘seeing the world differently’, ‘asking a lot of questions’ and ‘speaking up’ and provided examples of girls being political throughout history (National Museum
of American History, 2020). After watching the video, I asked the participants how they understood these different meanings of ‘political’:

Melissa: I feel like it sort of means, it can mean that you’re questioning the way the world is run. And you’re kind of realising that might not be the best way so you look at it differently.

Sidrath: Yeah, I guess if you know that the world is a certain way, you don’t really want to believe that because it’s not that great generally. So you just kinda stereotype with the whole pink bows and every girl gets to have a Barbie doll. Not every child has privileges.

…

Asha (youth worker): I’m really empowered by hearing [about] the changes that women have made and I find that really pushing, you know? I want to do that too.

Sidrath: Yeah, people never talk about that part of womanhood. You can give a Barbie doll to a girl – that’s not womanhood.

…

Asha (youth worker): I love getting my nails done and I love getting my hair done and I like waxing my legs every once in a blue moon. I like doing all these things that are related to that side of womanhood but then a part of me feels guilty for doing it sometimes because it feels like it’s not part of the other side of womanhood anymore. It separates from it, if you know what I mean.

Sidrath: Yeah, I feel like they need to come together because, you know, people will talk about ‘Oh yeah, bows and tiaras that’s not womanhood’ but then it’s still nice to do, getting your nails painted. It is somewhat part of womanhood. It’s the one that kinda somewhat frowned upon of girls stereotypically liking pink, there’s a whole ‘Oh girls can like blue too’ but they can also like pink, you know?

Asha (youth worker): Yeah, exactly. You should be allowed-
Sidrath: I remember during primary school there was this stage of ‘No girls like pink’ after Primary 5 or whatever, every girl liked blue or something masculine.

Melissa: I didn’t like pink until P7 cause I was like ‘no’-

Sidrath: ‘No, not pink’

Melissa: ‘That’s just a girl colour’. …and then I kinda like got to the end of primary school and beginning of high school and I was like ‘No, this is a nice shade of pink, I like this magenta’.

Sidrath: Or even now I never paint my nails pink. If I want to paint my nails a feminine-ish colour I paint them purple but what is a feminine colour? It’s a colour. Pink [was] kinda being erased from my mind because of how [inaudible] people would slander it in primary school. Like (in a judgemental voice) ‘Oh you like pink, that’s so girlie’, ‘Oh you like painting your nails, that’s so weird’.

In their conversation, Sidrath, Melissa and Asha the youth worker collectively challenged notions that limited womanhood and girlhood to preference for the colour pink and activities such as painting one’s nails and playing with dolls. At the same time, they were critical of how they and their peers previously degraded such preferences and activities and how their rejection of the label ‘girly’ has affected some of their choices and feelings to this day. Participants were thus navigating and challenging a societal context where young women are simultaneously encouraged to embody traditional markers of femininity and girliness while also being ridiculed for doing so (Nicholls, 2019). In these discussions, participants seemed less interested in defining what womanhood and girlhood were and more preoccupied with contesting attempts to limit what they could and should be.

In one of the sessions of the radio show that the Senior Girls’ Group recorded, participants spoke of being treated differently than the boys in their families, for example being expected to cook, care for the younger children and dress more modestly, especially in the presence of male family members. In this and other discussions, participants examined their experiences through an intersectional lens that attended to the ways that their lives were shaped by intersecting oppressions of
gender, age and race (Collins, 2021b; Mirza, 2015). In the UK, young people’s lives are constantly regulated by gender norms and expectations, with girls feeling especially subjected to pressures and judgement regarding their bodies and appearance (Renold et al., 2017). The above examples illustrate how coming together and forming connections enabled participants to find commonalities in their experiences as Black girls and girls of colour in Scotland and challenge some of the ways in which they were oppressed (see also Kelly, 2020; Showunmi, 2017).

While Faith attested that she was largely against gender-based segregation, for example in educational institutions, she said in our interview that she found the girls’ group helpful because:

Minorities are the most attacked group but women of the minorities are even worse. Cause men always have the power, even in my culture… It’s just stressful on us a lot of times cause we’re the ones that are supposed to know how to cook, how to clean, how to do this, how to do that and [the girls’ group is] just a safe space, we’re just there, you’re all girls, you all understand each other and you’re (exhales) ‘Okay, so let’s talk about this, let’s talk about that’.

Similarly, Asha the youth worker, explained that she initiated the Senior Girls’ Group to ‘create a space where young women of colour felt comfortable to share and be together’. One of her initial goals for the girls’ group was:

Personal development, to help young women of colour self-actualise and be full, independent entities that aren’t just part of their families. Because so many people, the women in my family, you’re born to be a wife, you’re born to be a mother, you’re born to be cooking, it’s very the classic gender role for women in my family. And I know a lot of girls from African backgrounds their lifestyle is very much similar, you’re a caregiver, you support your family, you do all these things. I wanted to create a workshop and things that were around them just knowing that they can be their own selves as well… they don’t have to follow in the path of what they were being told.

Crucially, ‘personal development’ was to be undertaken in a collective setting where members could form meaningful bonds with one another. While this study did not
examine whether such a goal was achieved or not, the above examples do show that participants critiqued some of the gendered power relations in their community. Moreover, in a consultation undertaken for a separate IYS project, one of the participants from my PhD study, who is of South Asian heritage, attested that because she participated in IYS she was able to convince her mother to let her attend university, despite her initial prohibition (Intercultural Youth Scotland, 2020, p. 7).

5.2.2. Contending with gendered notions of friendship

Participants also had to grapple with other people’s gendered, heteronormative and sexist conceptions of their friendships. In several sessions of the School Girls’ Group, Melissa and Sidrath critiqued together the expectation that as girls they should be exclusively invested in supposedly feminine interests, such as hair and makeup. Such expectations also shaped how others understood their friendships, as the following fieldnotes excerpt from one of the first workshops I conducted with the group illustrates:

Melissa explained that she and her friends talk about many different topics, like spontaneous combustion and war crimes, but once when they discussed the latter a group of boys who walked by looked at them like they were weird. Sidrath then recounted a time when she and her friends hung out at a teacher’s office. Sidrath said that when she and her friends made TikTok videos the teacher thought it was cute, but when they started talking about all sorts of things the teachers thought it was odd. One of the group members then added that it’s not that they don’t talk about hair and makeup but they also talk about other things.

The ‘odd’ and ‘weird’ looks that Melissa and Sidrath received for discussing topics such as spontaneous combustion and war crimes are likely the result of a dominant conception that equates girliness with being shallow, childish and frivolous (Nicholls, 2019). Through their friendships, participants challenged this negative conception of girliness by engaging in discussions that are considered ‘serious’ and (as will be explored in the next chapter) undertaking activist practices.

At the same time, participants described how they ‘goof around’ with their friends and post ‘silly’ photos of and with their friends on social media. Moreover, they also
challenged the negative views on supposedly feminine interests like hair and makeup. In the findings workshop, conducted 4 months after the fieldwork concluded, when I presented the finding that many people view girls and their friendship negatively and perceive them as silly, one participant commented:

A lot of people think all girls talk about are stereotypical things like hair and makeup, and although that is not true I think it’s important to remove the stigma around that as girls should still be allowed to converse about ‘feminine’ things without being judged.

Participants also contested negative conceptions of femininity in less overt ways. For example, in an online session of the youth club, Rama and Alyx were critically discussing gender roles and inequalities, while at the same time applying makeup as they planned on recording TikTok videos after the session was over. These different practices were therefore not mutually exclusive but rather woven together in their daily life. Participants’ accounts of their friendships demonstrate that girls do not adhere to gender and sexist stereotypes and instead contain multiplicities and that these relationships can be a source of joy and resistance.

Additionally, some participants spoke of having to contend with gendered and heteronormative pressures in their friendships with boys. When the IYS youth club took place in person, I noticed that most of the girls and boys did not significantly socialise with one another. When I asked participants in the Senior Girls’ Group about this phenomenon I received a myriad of responses: Cece replied that this happened everywhere naturally; Sonia argued it was because there were only a few boys at the youth club and they were shy around girls, but that previously more boys attended and then they were all a big friendship group; and Faith likewise explained it was due to the small number of boys and that she has friends who are boys, but also that it is harder to befriend them because they might think she is interested in them romantically. Relatedly, members of the School Girls’ Group, who did not attend the youth club, spoke about how they experienced difficulties in being friends with boys because others assumed the relationship was romantic and teased them about it. In EJ Renold and colleagues’ study (2017), some of the girls described how their platonic cross-gender friendships were sexualised by others and the pressures they felt as a result. When I asked Asha the youth worker about the relative lack of gender mixing
in the youth club, she explained that many young people come from cultures that tend to keep boys and girls separate. Scholars of friendship have argued that dominant understandings of and restrictions posed on cross-gender friendships are shaped by heterosexual and sexist assumptions and ethnic-cultural norms (Blatterer, 2013; Chaudhry, 2022; Rawlins, 2008). The challenge of forming and sustaining friendships with boys that some participants experienced illustrates how cross-gender friendships also entailed complex navigations of gendered and racialised power relations.

5.2.3. Exploring gender identities
Friendships in IYS and the collective setting of the girls’ group also helped some participants to explore their gender identity beyond dominant, oppressive and racialised constructions, which they faced outside of the organisation. Girlhood studies scholars have argued that friendships are an important space where girls collectively construct, practice, negotiate and resist identities and specifically femininities (Aapola et al., 2005; Hey, 1997). In one of the workshops I conducted with the Senior Girls’ Group towards the middle of the fieldwork, I asked participants whether their friendships in IYS were different from friendships they had in other places, like school. Faith, who is Black, spoke of how friends outside of IYS do not have the same hair type as her. Emily, who is Black, shared how people (outside of the organisation) would tell her that her hair is a wig, despite her telling them otherwise. She added:

And then people find it weird that I don’t wash my hair every single day.
My friends are like ‘I had to get up at 7 this morning to wash my hair and dry it and it was such a rush blah blah blah’ and I’m embarrassed slightly,
I’m not washing my hair nearly as often as you are.

Emily had to contend with racist and racialised attitudes towards her hair. In her analysis of the politics of Black hair, Dabiri (2019) describes how, growing up in Ireland without a Black community, her hair (like Black women’s bodies) was constantly subject to inspection, control and negative judgements by others and she therefore felt ashamed of it. Dabiri discusses how hair is often tied to notions of femininity yet dominant Western norms of beauty are based on White standards and afro hair is
therefore perceived negatively. Hair exemplifies one of the ways in which normative constructions of femininity that inform the different demands made of girls are largely White and middle-class (Ringrose et al., 2019; Showunmi, 2017). Hair also carried various meanings in the cultures of participants who were not Black as well as in some of the participants’ religions, but they did not discuss this in relation to navigations of their gender identities and whiteness. Emily’s story illustrates how she was racialised and othered in interactions with White people and friends. In the context of hair, she was judged for not fitting into the White normative construction of femininity and therefore was constrained in her navigations of femininity. Emily’s story also implies that Emily’s White friends bonded over this shared femininity, which excluded her. In her analysis of the barriers to enacting feminist sisterhood between White women and women of colour, hooks (1995) notes that White women often think they are bonding over their identity as women while in reality, they are bonding over their identity as White women (p. 304).

While outside of IYS hair could be experienced as political in a negative sense, in the organisation it was made political in a positive sense. Participants spoke of how, because there were many Black people and people of colour in IYS, they were exposed to different hairstyles that they could have and felt that others understood their hair type and the care it required. Dabiri (2019) argues that the knowledge, skills and products needed to take care of Black hair are not readily available in the UK. She recounts how she was able to gain such knowledge only later in life when she befriended other Black women. These experiences echo the ones described by participants and illuminate another way in which homeplace friendships and spaces in IYS were experienced as politically affirming.

Moreover, attending IYS enabled some participants to challenge pervasive and oppressive constructions of femininity. Sonia had mentioned that she liked attending the girls’ group online because she did not have to ‘get changed’, for example straighten her hair. I observed that Sonia often had her camera turned on during online sessions, which implied that she felt comfortable with her appearance in the presence of other members. While I did not keep a detailed record of how participants dressed

13 Although this did not come up in my research, it is worth noting that hairstyle rules in many schools in the UK effectively discriminate against children with natural afro hair and can result in them being sent home or excluded (Graham, 2016).
during my fieldwork, I did observe that some seemed to alternate between different clothing styles, sometimes dressing in clothes that were relatively revealing and tight-fitting and at other times wearing clothes that hung more loosely. In this way, they somewhat fluctuated from feminine or hyper-feminine to tomboy or more masculine markers of appearance (Nicholls, 2019). These examples indicate that at least some participants did not feel constrained to solely embody a dominant construction of femininity, including the limited and often demeaning sexualised representations of Black femininity that are prevalent in Black popular cultures such as hip hop (Taylor, 2016).

Relatedly, when I asked Faith in our interview, conducted towards the end of the fieldwork, what she feels that she learned from being in the girls’ group, she replied:

The fact that if you look feminine you don’t have to be feminine. Cause when I was younger, I thought that if you look feminine you are feminine. …I’ve always put [on] a little bit of makeup… But I would never admit that to anyone. ‘No, I’m a tomboy, I would not put [on] makeup’. But then I think it’s when I moved [to Scotland] I was like ‘Okay, I have the chance to be a new me’ and I tried things on and then I saw that many people here that wear makeup… so I was like ‘Okay, let me try it on, let me start wearing makeup’ and I actually discovered that I really like makeup, I just don’t wear it as often as other people… When I first met this girl I was like ‘Oh she’s very girly, I don’t think I could be that close with this person’ but it ends up I’m actually very close with this person cause once we started speaking we’re actually very similar so I was like ‘Oh okay, so you can show that you like something and then still be yourself, okay, okay’. So each person in the IYS girls’ group has taught me something. This other girl… she’s a tomboy but then when it comes to occasions she dresses up and she’s showing her culture off and she’s just girly but then usually she’s a tomboy and she likes music, she dances, she does this, she does that.

Faith’s initial position resembles that of some of the young women in Emily Nicholls’ (2019) study, who distanced themselves from traditional femininity and identified as tomboys, partly due to ambivalent and negative associations of girlishness. Meeting and
befriending girls in the IYS girls’ group who embodied femininity in different ways helped Faith joyfully experiment with feminine appearance without feeling that this compromises her identity as a ‘tomboy’ who engages in sports. This demonstrates how, in the context of anti-sexist youth work, peer groups can help young people explore gender identities beyond binary and narrow constructions of femininity and masculinity (Batsleer, 2018). Friendship and friend-like bonds in IYS therefore supported some participants in positively navigating gender identities.

In Alyx’s view, however, the gender identity of other members of the girls’ group, and perhaps also the framing of the group itself, reflected a more binary understanding of gender. Alyx, who was a member of the Senior Girls’ Group realised over time that they do not subscribe to binary conceptions of gender and they came out as non-binary during my fieldwork period. I conducted the interview with Alyx online, towards the end of the fieldwork, after they had come out. Alyx was in their bedroom and they had a big non-binary flag (stripes of yellow, white, purple and black) hanging on the wall behind them. Alyx reflected: ‘I think it has helped, going to this stuff, the girls’ group, cause [it] made me realise I don’t identify as a girl actually’. Faith and Alyx’s experiences in the girls’ group draw attention to the ways in which gender identities, and identities more generally, are continuously formed through interactions with others (Holmes, 2011).

In an earlier conversation, Alyx told me that they would still attend the group because it was called ‘Gals Group’ yet in the interview they mentioned that being in the group ‘is kind of a bit confusing cause I’m like ‘Oh, I’m there but it’s ‘Gals [Group]’ or whatever’. Alyx also mentioned experiencing some difficulty because ‘I feel like a lot of the girls [in the group are] very girly and I’m not very girly’. While navigating their non-binary identity (in IYS and outside of it) was sometimes a challenging or ambivalent experience for Alyx, they were also proud to claim this identity and gained joy from it (see also Renold et al., 2017). Toward the end of 2021, the Senior Girls’ Group’s name was changed to TLC, an acronym for ‘Truth, Love and Culture’. Asha the youth worker explained to me that while the term ‘Gyals’ is used by young women

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14 In writing, the Senior Girls Group’s name was at times spelled ‘Gyals Group’ and other times ‘Gals Group’. When participants spoke, I could not always discern what spelling they were referring to. I therefore alternate between the two forms of spelling.

15 To be clear, this is not to imply that Alyx thought that non-binary people could not be girly. In their interview, they mentioned that a non-binary person can also ‘be hyper-feminine or hyper-masculine’.
of colour to identify their group of female friends it can also include non-binary people and was therefore supposed to be inclusive for non-binary people. Nevertheless, Asha said that because IYS realised the term still seemed somewhat exclusionary the name of the group was changed to TLC so that those who are non-binary or prefer not to identify in a specific way will feel welcome to attend it. As this change occurred towards the very end of my fieldwork, I am unable to discuss what kind of impact it might have had on how participants navigated their gender identities.

In this section, I explored the political significance of friendship in supporting participants to contest gendered power relations, especially by critiquing and challenging gender norms and constructions.

5.3. Unspoken structural power relations

It seemed that there were some structural power relations that participants tended not to discuss explicitly with others in IYS, especially the ways they personally experienced them. This was likely because such discussions were perceived as threatening the politically affirming sense that friendships and friend-like relationships in IYS cultivated. These power relations and the silences around them sometimes came up in the interviews I conducted. For example, one participant told me in her interview that because she is of mixed ethnic background she sometimes suffers from ‘imposter syndrome’ where she does not feel that she is ‘Black enough’. This meant that when she was new to IYS she sometimes worried she was not perceived by other Black young people as ‘one of them’. I asked her whether this was talked about in IYS. She replied:

It’s not talked about so much. I make a point of bringing it up because I think it’s important. Because I do have a lot of privilege… So whenever I can I bring up the fact, because I don’t want it to go unspoken that I’m mixed and have a White parent. But there’s not a lot of mixed-race people within IYS so it’s not talked about very much. Colourism will be talked about sometimes but… yeah and that can be difficult because it’ll be darker-skinned people talking about how much colourism impacts them so then, even though I know they’re not really pointing a finger at me it’s hard to not… feel… yeah, it’s hard to not internalise that so yeah.
Although Black people of mixed ethnic background might not suffer from all forms of oppression that Black people do (Sobande & Hill, 2022), they contend with unique stereotypes, can feel pressure to prove their blackness and their sense of identity might be more constricted or contradictory (Bryan et al., 2018; Joseph-Salisbury, 2016). In general, being of mixed ethnic background in the UK entails complex identity navigations, including in relation to how one is perceived by others and their subsequent sense of belonging to the minority group and the nation (Pang, 2018; Song & Aspinall, 2012). The participant mentioned that this topic was not discussed much in IYS because there were not many people of mixed ethnic background in IYS and she seemed worried about being judged for the privilege that she holds. This implies that the IYS settings were not experienced as safe settings in this context. Based on my observations in IYS activities, it was almost only Asha the youth worker who spoke about her identity and experiences of being of mixed ethnic background and relatively lighter-skinned. Asha’s candour might have empowered the anonymous participant and made her feel less alone, yet it seems that the complex experiences of being of mixed ethnic background were largely not unpacked and positively explored together with other young people in IYS.

The anonymous participant mentioned that young people in IYS spoke of how issues of colourism affected them. However, in my observations, participants (apart from Asha the youth worker) did not speak of how the power relations based on skin tone shaped their own lived experience but only mentioned the topic more generally. For instance, in one session of the weekly youth club, Sonia, who is of South Asian heritage, mentioned there was racism in her community and Rama, who is Black, said racism and colourism also exist in her community (e.g. Dabiri, 2019; Ludhra, 2015; Phoenix, 2014). Asha the youth worker explained to me that one of the reasons why IYS was attended mostly by young Black people was a pervasive anti-blackness sentiment by parents in other communities of colour in Scotland (see also Sobande & Hill, 2022). In my interview with Ola, they mentioned that as part of their work, they seek to address colourism and the marginalisation of Black people within communities of colour. At the same time, Ola explained that in the IYS youth groups that they facilitate:

It’s actually been really difficult. One, because bringing in colourism into that conversation really felt like a divider… specifically when you feel that
[in the group] these are your people and this is your community and then you get thrown at you ‘Oh but colourism is a thing’ and maybe they haven’t actually... especially when you are that dark-skinned Black person... it makes you feel isolated again or it makes you feel remote again and saying ‘Oh shit, so these people are betraying me now’ or ‘I need to check these people again but these people feel like my home’. …You would bring it up in an overall sense, but you wouldn’t interrogate it as soon as possible, you would interrogate it when the group feels safer or when there’s an incident that happened specifically.

As I explored in the previous chapter, participants spoke of a political sense of understanding, belonging and safety that arose out of the homeplace friendships they made with other young Black people and people of colour in and through the organisation. They described the commonalities they found in their marginalised ethnic and racialised identities and showed an appreciation for their cultural differences. Nevertheless, the accounts above indicate that such positive political experiences were not instantaneous and that relationships in IYS were sometimes more complex. It seems that at least some participants had to still carefully navigate racialised power relations within the close friendships and solidarity friendships they formed in IYS, and not just in their friendships outside of the organisation.

Additionally, as far as I could tell, the girls did not explicitly discuss their experiences of classed power relations, though they did engage in a few general discussions on economic inequalities. While I acknowledge that intersections of class with race and gender likely shaped participants’ lives in significant ways (e.g. Bryan et al., 2018; Sobande & Hill, 2022), I did not feel that I could ask participants directly about this issue sensitively and ethically. In my interview with Asha the youth worker, I asked her to describe in general the economic status of the participants and she replied that it ranged from working-class to middle-class. Asha also explained that people of colour are often proud and prefer not to discuss such issues and that she gathered this information from one-on-one conversations she had with the young people after a number of months of working with them. She also said that because she was conscious that the young people might be in economic need she made sure that there was always a lot of food at IYS activities and she encouraged the young people to take home what was left. The delicacy and potential shame in discussing one’s class
identity and experiences of classed power relations, as well as the economic disparities between IYS members, offer a possible explanation as to why participants did not bring up these issues in IYS settings.

Finally, while religion was not completely absent in participants’ stories, it was not discussed much, particularly not in relation to structural power relations and oppression. However, for some participants, religion was an important part of their identity and their lives, with a few also posting religious content on social media. Most of those participants were Christian but a few were Muslim or Sikh. Angelina mentioned that they spoke of the above-mentioned religions in the Senior Girls’ Group and I observed that the food served in the youth club also included options for Muslim young people. Additionally, when participants in the School Girls’ Group created quizzes about their cultures, one girl wrote questions both about her family’s country of origin and her religion - Islam. It seemed that inclusive spaces existed in IYS for participants to discuss these topics, at least to some extent. Nevertheless, it is possible that more negative and complex experiences were not shared because they were still perceived as sensitive or contentious and/or because most of the religious participants belonged to the same and culturally dominant religion.

It seems that power relations relating to class, being of mixed ethnic background, colourism and racism within communities of colour and potentially religion were largely unspoken in IYS because the young people did not feel safe or comfortable enough to openly discuss them. This was probably because these topics could reveal divisions and set some young people apart from others, thereby threatening the sense of community and belonging that was relationally cultivated in IYS. Nevertheless, while I framed these power relations as unspoken, they were likely navigated in more implicit ways that I was unable to pick up on due to my own identity and positionality.

5.4. Conclusion

In this chapter, I analysed additional aspects of the politics of friendship by exploring how participants navigated structural inequalities and power relations within and through their friendships and the painful, empowering and ambivalent experiences that such navigations entailed. In the first section, I examined how participants contended with racism and other oppressive behaviour by friends. Critical sociological
perspectives have been employed to analyse difficult experiences of friendship (Eramian & Mallory, 2020; Spencer & Pahl, 2006), including power relations (Heaphy & Davies, 2012; Hey, 1997) and hierarchies (Zhu, 2019). The contribution of this study is in interrogating how structural inequalities, and racism in particular, play out and are navigated within friendships.

I mapped four different survival and resistance strategies (Brown, 2021; Kelly, 2018) that participants employed to contend with oppressive behaviour by friends. First, in some cases, participants challenged their friend, a strategy that should not be taken for granted given that White people tend to respond negatively when the topic of racism is brought up (Eddo-Lodge, 2017; Rollock, 2022) due to White privilege and fragility (DiAngelo, 2011). The second strategy participants employed was self-preservation. Participants did not speak up because they were highly aware that it could label them as the problem (Ahmed, 2017) and oppressive behaviour usually took the form of micro-aggressions, which are difficult to pinpoint and contest (Johnson & Joseph-Salisbury, 2018; Sue et al., 2008). They might have also chosen self-preservation in order to fit into mainstream society (see also Kennelly & Mouroutsou, 2020). The third strategy was ending the friendship yet this did not necessarily happen immediately, which points to a gap between the idealisation and realities of friendship (Heaphy & Davies, 2012; Pahl & Spencer, 2010). The fourth, and rarer, strategy was remaining in a friendship out of necessity and/or ambivalence. The desire to have friends seemed especially felt due to their age, as they had to attend social settings such as school, where their friendship choice was constrained due to a lack of ethnic diversity. This challenges the prevalent conceptualisation of friendship as voluntary (Budgeon, 2006; Giddens, 1991). Overall, these findings illuminate the gravity of everyday racism, how it shapes everyday life and relationships and the complex navigations it requires of people of colour (Rollock, 2022).

The painful experiences that friendship across structural inequalities can entail explain why some participants avoided such friendships. Moreover, recognising a friend’s oppressive behaviour often seems to be the result of a difficult process, as it necessitates a change in one’s worldview and relationships (Ahmed, 2017, p. 28), contrasts with the positive conception of friendship, can indicate a lack of judgement in choosing friends and frame one as a victim (Greenland et al., 2020). IYS youth workers attested that access to more diverse settings, online or geographically, and
therefore greater choice in friend formation, enabled them to undergo recognition processes and form more meaningful connections. I suggested that such recognition processes were made possible for participants by forming bonds in IYS and speaking about their difficult friendship experiences. They could therefore navigate oppressive behaviour together rather than individually.

In the second section, I examined how participants navigated gendered power relationships through their friendships and the collective settings of the IYS girls’ groups. I discussed how participants contested together constricting and demeaning societal notions of girliness (Nicholls, 2019) as well as sexist demands in their communities. Moreover, participants recounted facing gendered expectations that their friendships will solely revolve around supposedly ‘feminine’ interests, such as hair and makeup. I argued that they challenged these expectations with their friends by discussing ‘serious’ topics, resisting the negative view of ‘feminine’ interests and acting ‘silly’. Participants also expressed frustration with how sexist and heteronormative norms constrained their opportunities to form cross-gender friendships. Lastly, I demonstrated how bonds with others in IYS enabled some participants to embody femininity beyond its dominantly White, demeaning and narrow constructions (e.g., Batsleer, 2018; Showunmi, 2017; Taylor, 2016). Another participant attested that taking part in the girls’ group made them realise they identify as non-binary. They were conflicted about their ongoing participation in the group, as they felt that the group subscribed to a more binary understanding of gender.

In the third section, I briefly discussed how some experiences of structural power relations were largely left unspoken in IYS group settings but sometimes came up in the interviews. These were experiences of being of mixed ethnic background, colourism and racism within communities of colour and class, with religious identities discussed but usually not in-depth. Conversations with IYS youth workers suggest such topics were incredibly delicate to discuss in a group setting and could potentially create divisions among the young people and damage their newfound sense of community, belonging and safety in IYS. Though not explicitly spoken about, these structural power relations were likely navigated by participants in IYS in ways that I was unable to detect.
The chapter focused on some of the different ways, negative and positive, that friendship can be experienced as political and how coming together and bonding can help navigate and even challenge structural inequalities in one’s life. The next chapter will extend this exploration by focusing on the significance of friendship in participants’ activist engagements.
Chapter 6: Entanglements of Friendship and Activism

In this chapter, I interrogate the role of friendship in participants’ activism, meaning the ways that their friendship and activism affected one another and were entangled together. This is an under-studied topic in youth activism and political participation. In the first section, I begin by analysing how some friendships and other personal relationships were experienced by participants as hindering their political expression and participation outside of IYS and how friendship fall outs and interpersonal conflicts potentially made engaging in activism through IYS more difficult. I then examine how friendship ties facilitated participants’ activist engagements in IYS and how these engagements strengthened their friendships with IYS members. Additionally, I explore how friendships that participants formed across structural inequalities expanded and shaped their activist interests and actions. In the second section, I map out the varied forms of activism that participants engaged in and the ways that many of these activist practices were facilitated through friendships and undertaken together with friends. I argue that participants’ activist practices went beyond traditional and narrow definitions of political participation and activism. I also discuss how participants undertook activism online. I then focus on a specific form of activism that participants viewed as vitally significant for enacting social change – critical pedagogy. I explore how participants undertook critical pedagogy conversations in IYS and with friends outside of the organisation and I shed light on the mundane, interpersonal and dialogical characteristics of these conversations.

6.1. Friendship hinders and cultivates activism

In this section, I argue that participants experienced some of their friendships as curtailing their activism, while other friendships encouraged their activism and were fostered by it. Peer relationships and cultures are vital for youth activism (Gordon, 2010) yet they are understudied. Friendship has received even less attention than peer relationships in studies of youth activism and political participation.

The scant scholarly attention to relationships in youth activism has mostly focused on intergenerational ties. These studies have explored how these bonds can support girls’ political engagement (Bent, 2016; Edell et al., 2016). Some have also noted the constraints that intergenerational ties can impose, for example patronising and
tokenising attitudes from adults in formal political institutions (Bent, 2013) and parental restrictions on young people’s participation in social movements (Gordon, 2010). However, in Hava Rachel Gordon’s (2010) research with activist youth, girls’ engagement was also hindered by the sexist attitudes of boys in their activist organisations. My study contributes to understandings of interpersonal hindrances to young people’s political engagement, by showing how some participants refrained from political expression because they worried about negative judgement by friends (and family members) and how friendship fall out and conflicts could curtail activism in IYS.

Several studies have revealed the significance of friendship in various forms of youth political engagement. Friends help shape young people’s political opinions (Manning, 2014), cultivate their critical consciousness and encourage their everyday activism at school (Kelly, 2018, 2020) as well as entry into social movements (Taft, 2017). In Taft’s study (2010), activist girls formed close friendships in social movements, which created a sense of solidarity and companionship that sustained their activism; this experience has also been found in studies of women and Black people’s experiences in political organisations and social movements (Benski, 2010, p. 23; Chester, 2018; Roth, 2005). Along with the above findings, my study challenges the dominant neoliberal and individualising public discourse that erases the support and activist networks of activist girls (Bent, 2016; Edell et al., 2016). It does so by exploring how friendship fostered and was fostered by participants’ various forms of activism in IYS and beyond. Overall, this section will illustrate how a focus on friendship can reveal some of the interpersonal, more mundane and less observable ways in which youth activism is hindered and cultivated.

6.1.1. Interpersonal hindrances to activism

In some cases, friendships and other meaningful interpersonal relationships hindered participants’ activism. As participants were largely reticent to discuss their friendship difficulties as well as the interpersonal tensions and conflicts they experienced in IYS I do not have much data on this topic. Nevertheless, the findings I discuss offer insights into the interpersonal hindrances that Black girls and girls of colour experience toward and in their activism.
Emily, who is Black, felt that she could not speak critically about racism and other topics in front of her White friends. As I will argue later in this chapter, conversations about socio-political issues were a central way in which participants undertook critical pedagogy activism. For both young people and adults, discussion of political issues with family and friends can be a fraught matter as it can result in interpersonal conflicts (Davies, 2022; Ekström, 2016). Young people tend to discuss politics with friends and family who either share their views or are willing to engage in such discussions (Ekström, 2016; Levinsen & Yndigegn, 2015). In the experience of many Black people and people of colour, bringing up race in conversations often makes White people uncomfortable (Bonilla-Silva, 2019; Kennelly & Mouroutsou, 2020) and react negatively (Eddo-Lodge, 2017; Rollock, 2022). Keeping silent on political and race-related issues is, therefore, a way to maintain close relationships (Davies, 2022; Sanchez et al., 2022). In Emily’s case, the activism hindrances she described were not only interpersonal but involved structural racialised power relations.

One participant shared in a workshop that she largely refrained from posting or even engaging with race-related and other political issues online, explaining that if she did otherwise:

> I would get a lot of grief from my friends and people around me. …I feel like when I’m using social media I have to almost pretend how my friends will see it through their eyes, I can’t follow all the people I want to follow cause they probably, I think they mostly only follow White people and I don’t… the people I want to follow, most of them aren’t White but I feel like [my friends will] think that’s weird, like when it pops up [Participant’s name] follows this person’ so then I feel kinda restricted in that way.

Relatedly, Valerie, who is Black, experienced interpersonal hindrances to her activism from her family. In one of the workshops, she shared that her parents did not allow her to attend a Black Lives Matter protest.16 Valerie also limited her political engagement on Instagram as she had many family members who followed her account, saying: ‘I feel like really judged for putting on what I think matters’. These participants censored their political expression and activism online because they felt (or worried about being)

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16 See Gordon (2010) for how family can restrict, encourage and shape youth engagement in social movements.
judged by friends and family. When I presented this finding to participants in the workshop I conducted after fieldwork concluded, one of the participants anonymously commented: ‘This is really sad but also relatable [sad emoticon]’. Similarly, a recent study conducted with English girls found that they self-regulated their online activism because they were concerned about surveillance by friends and family (Rogan, 2023). This adds another angle to discussions of the negative consequences of online political discussions and activism. These discussions tend to focus on negative comments and abuse by distant acquaintances or strangers, which are especially targeted toward girls (Ekström, 2016; Rogan, 2023) and women of colour (Heuchan, 2019). Some participants described receiving hateful comments from strangers in response to their online activism and posting through anonymous accounts to protect themselves. However, the above findings show that close interpersonal relationships can pose additional hindrances to Black girls and girls of colour’s online political engagement.

Arguments and difficulties with friends in IYS could cause the girls to refrain from attending IYS or restrict their participation, which could therefore curtail their opportunities to engage in activism through the organisation. In our interview, Cece spoke of feeling awkward about coming to IYS after having a fallout with a friend she made there and how she did eventually attend because another friend she made in IYS encouraged her to. One of Cece’s takeaways from this situation was that one should make many friends in IYS, so that a conflict with one will not cause you to feel alone and awkward when attending or refrain from attending activities altogether.

In an earlier chapter, I argued that ‘solidarity friendship’ existed between participants and most of the young people in IYS and that it supported their participation in IYS, as it (ideally) meant being respectful, supportive, caring, nice, accepting of others’ identities, creating space for people to speak, listening to them and making everyone feel included. I discussed how solidarity friendship in IYS was at risk when young people did not get along. Here, I suggest that challenges in enacting solidarity friendship could negatively affect IYS attendance and therefore hinder participants’ ability to engage in activism through the organisation. In our interview, conducted towards the end of the fieldwork, I asked Cece whether there was anything she disliked about the girls’ group or whether she had any negative experiences there:
Cece: Erm, not really. I mean it might have to do with someone that I might not get along with but at the end of the day that’s my own personal feeling towards a person so obviously I’m not gonna put it out and be like ‘Oh I’m not coming because of this person’. So yeah, I mean at the end of the day that person is also there because probably the same reasons I’m in the group so I’m just not gonna make it an awkward thing, so that’s like a personal feeling. So yeah. But in general, I like everyone (laughs)

…

Thalia: But is there something that you feel does affect you in some way, if you come to the girls’ group and this person is there or… if it matters in any way?

Cece: Erm, not really, the only thing is probably that I might go there and I might not really speak that much cause I just don’t feel like that comfortable if that person is there. Or I just don’t feel like I want to be that involved or I might just go and then leave a bit earlier. But obviously, like I said I’m not really, I don’t really want it to… to have an impact on my involvement with the group. …But it’s fine cause I kinda got used to the person…

Cece was reluctant to let negative relationships affect her participation in IYS, though clearly they did in some instances. Moreover, because Cece recognised that attending the girls’ group was important for both her and the person she did not get along with, she did not want to discuss their conflict publicly in IYS as it would ‘make it an awkward thing’. This suggests that, to some extent, solidarity friendship did exist between Cece and the person she did not get along with, as Cece showed care toward them and wanted them to feel included and able to speak in the group. Nevertheless, Cece explained that while she will still attempt to attend the girls’ group even if she does not feel comfortable with someone there, she might not speak or become involved as much. Thus, interpersonal hindrances are not just experienced in girls’ ability to access activist spaces but also in whether and how much they are made to feel that they can take up space and be active in those spaces.
6.1.2. Friendship fosters and is fostered by activism

IYS programmes had significant social components. Starting from the weekly youth club, where young people mostly socialised and ‘hung out’ with little structured activity (except the open mic at the end and the occasional optional workshop), to the girls’ groups where there were usually workshops but also games and opportunities to simply talk to one another, to the activism programme whose every second weekly meeting was designated as a ‘social’ where members could get to know one another better. Some of the participants explained that the socialising and befriending opportunities that IYS provided, along with the political sense of affirmation (that I argued was cultivated through friendship ties), was what drew them to joining and attending IYS. Through their participation in IYS programmes, they then undertook activist practices. Other participants explained that they joined IYS because they wanted to engage in anti-racism work. These participants often learned about IYS through friends who were attending it and they were likely encouraged to attend IYS because they knew their friends would be there too. Young people often join youth work programmes through or with friends (Delgado, 2016). Thus, friendship served as a vital foundation for the girls’ participation in IYS and the activism they undertook there.

To be clear, I am not arguing for a simple causal connection between friendship and activism, where the former leads to the latter (or vice versa), but rather pointing to how the two were entwined in participants’ lives and fostered one another, especially in their engagement in IYS. Some participants spoke of how the intimate and political conversations they had with others in the Senior Girls’ Group and activism programme enabled them to get to know each other better and grow closer as friends. This is reflected in Sonia’s account from a workshop that occurred several months into the fieldwork:

When IYS first started that was just one big friendship group, that’s what it felt like. Every single group we’ve had, we all became friends because you’re sharing your experiences, you get to know the person and you feel like that’s your friend, cause you spoke about personal stuff in these types of groups. I don’t know what else to say but it does create a deeper connection than school because [in] school you’re talking about other stuff and [in] IYS you’re talking about important things.
Young people create and strengthen friendships through participation in youth work programmes (Fyfe et al., 2018; Ord et al., 2022). For participants in this study, deep connections were in particular fostered through discussions which were both personal (‘sharing your experiences’) and political (‘the important things’) (see also Showunmi, 2017). This is in contrast to programmes that seek to cultivate social cohesion by bringing together youth to learn about each other’s ethnic differences without acknowledging racism and other structural inequalities, thus potentially instrumentalising friendship ties and limiting their political potentials (Harris, 2016).

In some cases, friendship also extended participants’ activist interests, commitments and actions to socio-political issues that their friends were engaged with or affected by. When I asked Asha in our interview if she feels that being in IYS and the girls’ group helps to engender social change, she answered:

Yeah, definitely. Cause in the girls’ group for example or even in IYS I relate with so many people… And it’s like ‘Oh, you get me, I get you, what can we do about this’, you know? …Once you relate with someone you try and make that social change. You try and find a way to create an impact or make that social change or even if you can’t relate at all to that person you go and listen and you learn and you’re like ‘I like you because we have common interests, I don’t like what’s happening to you or to your community and because I care about you I’m going to unite with you, to fight’. And I think what I like about IYS is that it creates many bonds, it starts with bonding, and then once you bond, when you want to unite forces and create social change.

I asked Asha if she could give a personal example, which she did:

Well, I think with [friend from IYS], for example, he’s a gay man, right? …He’s aware that I’m a Black woman living in Scotland and because I’m a Black woman living in Scotland, not only that but also an immigrant from [country] he’s aware that certain things will affect me… He’s an ally let’s say, he shows me that he fights against those things affecting me. And by me listening to his struggles, me being educated by him or by what he posts on Instagram, I get educated, you know? And I want to fight against the struggles that are affecting him or his community.
For Asha, her activism was fostered not just by being able to relate to people in IYS based on a shared identity (such as her gender, ethnic or racialised identity) but also by forming friendships that can translate into political alliances. Friendship has been theorised as a relationship that has transformative political potentials because it can generate connection, understanding, love, dialogue and solidarity across differences and inequalities related to social categories such as ethnicity, gender and sexuality (Chowdhury & Philipose, 2016; Harris, 2016; Lugones & Rosezelle, 1995). In this context, friendship itself has even been framed as a form of social activism (Banerjea et al., 2017). Dillard (2019) argues that ‘[t]o be both an ally/advocate (for) and to be a friend (with) is to be mutually and reciprocally seen, heard, respected, and made whole/full by that relationship’ and that such friendships produce joy which alleviates the harms of oppression (p. 115). Friendship is thus politically significant both on an interpersonal level and on a societal level where it helps to fight for change.

A similar political conception of friendship was evident in my interview with Asha the youth worker at the end of the fieldwork, when I asked her how she thinks that friendship and making social change are connected in IYS:

I think that IYS is a space to harbour friendships and those friendships are so important because they’re from across cultural boundaries, they’re across borders, there’s so many different connections you can make within IYS because of all the different people that come there and different age groups, working with people older than you, with people that understand more than you or less than you, learning off of each other is really amazing and that is harbouring community that is creating a proper social impact.

These political understandings of friendship relate to Black feminist thinkers’ advocacy for community and relationships of love, support and care (Anim-Addo, 2014; Brown, 2021; Luna & Laster Pirtle, 2021) and feminists’ promotion of an ethics of care for others in both the private and public sphere (Held, 2006; Noddings, 2013). In Asha’s case, she became motivated to fight for LGBTQ+ people, to become their ally, through her friendship with a gay person, who taught her about the challenges their community faces. Reciprocity, a key characteristic of friendship (Allan, 2003; Jamieson, 1998),
was imbued in this case with an activist meaning, as Asha supported her friend and they supported her in the struggles she faced as a Black immigrant woman in Scotland.

When I asked Asha how friendship and making social change are connected in her life, she spoke of the importance of learning through speaking to other people. She then described how she had written a blog post about the struggles that Roma people face based on a conversation she had with her friend who is Romani. In their interview, Alyx, who is White, shared a similar story when I asked them how they became involved in online activism:

> It was right at the beginning of the pandemic... I saw so much stuff about people being racist about East Asian people and I was like ‘This is so fucked up, why are people thinking like this, what the hell’. …So I made a little post about it, cause I was really pissed off and also my friend who is Filipino was really annoyed at it as well and didn’t want to post on their account because they were scared of what was gonna happen so I was like ‘Okay, I’ll do it’. And we kinda discussed what I should say.

For both Asha and Alyx, their friendships cultivated their knowledge and activism on issues that did not directly affect them, namely racism and discrimination against specific marginalised ethnic and racialised groups. Moreover, Alyx supported their friend’s political engagement by posting on their own account the critical text they had crafted together because their friend was worried they would face harm if they posted it themselves. As Alyx’s friend belonged to a marginalised ethnic and racialised group they likely faced a greater risk of harm from engaging in online activism, specifically on matters relating to racism, than Alyx did as a White person. Friendship, therefore, has the potential to help people (at least somewhat) circumvent some hindrances to activism.

When I presented the argument that friendship cultivates activism in the findings workshop, some participants wrote that they agreed while others elaborated on why they partly or fully disagreed. One participant wrote that interacting with people who are different makes them more motivated to learn about them and the issues they face yet they do not necessarily grow ‘very passionate’ about them. Another participant wrote:
I wouldn’t completely agree. Even though you are friends with someone, that doesn’t mean you will fight for all their beliefs. This is simply because my friends’ beliefs might not always align with mine. On the other hand, when your friends have the same view as you, having conversations together will make you realise that you can fight together.

These participants argued that passion and a shared outlook are necessary ‘ingredients’ for friendship to foster activism. This certainly seems to be the case in Alyx and Asha’s stories and in the accounts of some of the other participants. Isabella, for example, commented: ‘I think that if someone wasn’t a feminist, or acted like they weren’t a feminist, then I’d not be friends with them’. Sonia said she distanced herself from people who do not care about the same issues as her. She attested that she ‘unfollowed so many people cause you could just see they’re reposting other stuff that they’ve not even read.’ This underscores another political dimension of participants’ close friendships, where one was expected to not just share the same social justice values but also act upon them.

By foregrounding friendship, this section illustrated some of the more interpersonal, mundane and less publicly noticeable ways in which youth activism is hindered and cultivated. It also showed how friendship can be fostered by political commitments and engagement.

6.2. Undertaking activist practices with friends

Black feminist scholars have argued that traditional conceptualisations of activism focus on highly visible political actions such as protests and riots and do not account for the everyday resistance that Black women and girls undertake (Collins, 2000; Kelly, 2018) and how their activism is often aimed at their communities and themselves (Mirza, 1997a; Sudbury, 2005). Similarly, youth and girlhood scholars have critiqued the notion of young people’s political disengagement by shedding light on the barriers that young people, especially girls and young people of colour, face in formal political institutions (Bent, 2013; Rogan, 2023) and social movements (Clay, 2012; Walker & van Holstein, 2023). They also brought to the fore the myriad informal and everyday political practices that young people undertake in both the private and public spheres (e.g. Harris et al., 2010; O’Toole, 2015; Pickard, 2019). Following these scholarly
arguments and based on participants’ political understandings and practices, in this study I define activism as efforts to enact social change on a personal, interpersonal, community/local, national and/or international level. In this section, I first delineate the myriad activist practices that participants undertook in, through and outside of IYS and the ways that their friendship ties in the organisation facilitated their activism. In this context, I focus especially on their online activism. I then undertake an in-depth exploration of how participants engaged in critical pedagogy conversations to affect social change. My focus on friendship will help to uncover and understand the mundane, interpersonal and dialogical characteristics of their activism.

6.2.1. Interpersonal activist practices
Participants undertook myriad activist practices in IYS and through various IYS programmes and activities such as IYS girls’ groups, activism programme, public events and open mic at the youth club. Their activism included planning, hosting and participating in radio show recordings about topics that they were interested in (including ‘gender stereotypes’ and discussing ‘female issues’, such as women’s rights and periods, with men in their lives); undertaking critical pedagogy with others in their lives; advocacy; participating in focus groups, workshops and interviews for IYS research projects (e.g. Intercultural Youth Scotland, 2020; IYS Ambassadors & Assan, 2021) and my own research; writing and performing music, poetry and spoken word that addresses issues such as racism, sexism and colonisation; creating and sharing critical socio-political content through social media; and blogging. Outside of IYS, participants also engaged in various forms of activism, such as attending protests, joining a local working group on their town’s links to slavery, signing petitions, leading their school’s equality and diversity committee and writing to politicians. When asked about actions they take to socio-political causes they are passionate about, participants also mentioned picking up litter, mediating between people and ‘breaking [the] glass ceiling’ as a woman of colour working in the tech industry. Some participants undertook many of the above practices and others only some of them.

The wide variety of participants’ activist practices shows that their activism was not limited to one sphere or form of political participation. Some of the practices they undertook - signing petitions, taking part in committees and working groups, writing to
politicians, engaging in advocacy and protesting - can be considered more traditional forms of political engagement. Traditional forms of participation are usually less accessible to members of oppressed and marginalised groups (e.g. Bent, 2013; Gordon, 2010; Sudbury, 2005). Still, some participants undertook these practices through IYS, before they began their engagement with the organisation and/or outside of it. Practices of media making and online activism, like making a radio show, creating and sharing content on social media and blogging, are the (relatively) newer ways in which youth and especially girls are politically active (Burns & Eaton, 2016; Pickard, 2019; Rogan, 2023). Moreover, the digital sphere enables women of colour to represent themselves and disseminate their messages better than traditional media and outlets (Heuchan, 2019). Creating and performing spoken word (Endsley, 2018), poetry (Kelly, 2018) and hip hop music (Clay, 2012; Collins, 2021b) are ways in which Black youth and girls of colour make their experiences and political voices heard and thereby cultivate critical consciousness and engage in subversion and resistance.

Other practices that participants engaged in are not usually considered as activism or political participation, yet participants perceived them as a way to engender social change or to a way to act upon socio-political issues they cared about. Practices such as picking up litter, mediating between people and breaking the glass ceiling were likely easier for participants to undertake as part of their day-to-day than other practices, and might therefore be seen as a kind of lifestyle politics (see in Pickard, 2019). Participants also found their contribution to IYS research projects - on topics such as the unique mental health needs of young Black people and people of colour and the barriers they face to education and employment – and their participation in my own research as an important way to affect social change. In a writing workshop I conducted in the Senior Girls’ Group, I asked participants to imagine that they were old and writing their autobiography and to describe the meaning the group had in their lives. Here is an excerpt from Rama’s text where she describes her participation in my PhD project:

Contributing to something informative and helpful to others all around the UK. I believe that our words and stories can guide many young people in different aspects of their lives. A research that I look back on and I’m proud of that I contributed.
While it may seem that those who conduct and write the IYS reports and my PhD research are the ones undertaking activist work, Rama’s text illuminates that the contributions of the participants lie at the heart of this activism. Participants also engaged in critical pedagogy to enact social change, and I will unpack these practices later in this chapter. Taken together, the variety of activist practices that participants undertook showcase why a broad definition of youth activism should be adopted over choosing one of the narrower definitions, be it traditional or newer (e.g. Harris et al., 2010; O’Toole, 2015; Pickard, 2019).

As I argued in a previous chapter, concepts, practices and bonds of friendship were integral to participants’ engagement with IYS. Friendship was therefore entwined in and supported the activist practices that participants undertook in and through IYS. Notions of friendship as well as ties of solidarity friendship and close friendship helped create a sense of safety, trust and being listened to in IYS settings, thus likely lessening fears of judgement and damage to relationships, which served as interpersonal hindrances to some participants’ activism. IYS settings and relationships enabled participants to express their political opinions and recount their experiences of oppression and structural power relations, and thus engage in the different activist practices detailed earlier. This is evident in the words of one of the participants, who described in her interview what involvement in IYS research projects required of her and why she chose to do it:

I’ll be vulnerable [in IYS] in a sense of how discrimination has affected me. …It’s something vulnerable but I don’t mind talking about it, especially because I feel like it needs to be spoken about, it needs to be talked about, it needs to be shared, it needs to be addressed.

This participant mentioned that her close friendships are another place where she can be more vulnerable (see also Cronin, 2014). Later in this chapter, I will elaborate on the role of lived experience in participants’ activism and the emotional toll of sharing such experiences.

Ties of close friendship and solidarity friendship in IYS also meant that when someone performed at the youth club’s open mic, other IYS members (usually) demonstrated their support and affirmed them by cheering them on in a call-and-response style of communication that is common in hip hop culture (Clay, 2012; Endsley, 2018).
Additionally, as youth workers led the various IYS programmes, meaningful, friend-like relationships between the young people and the youth workers, were particularly significant to participants’ engagement with IYS and the activist practices such engagement encouraged. Moreover, the youth workers also served as role models (Fyfe et al., 2018) for young people’s activism by participating in IYS activities - for instance performing at the youth club’s open mic, expressing their opinions in socio-political discussions and disclosing their experiences of discrimination - and speaking about the activism they undertake outside of IYS. Lastly, some of the activist practices that participants engaged in outside of IYS, like protesting and leading a school’s equality and diversity committee, were also undertaken with friends.

I will now explore in greater depth participants’ political engagement on social media, so as to shed light on their more mundane and less publicly acknowledged activist practices and how they are interwoven with their friendship ties. Social media was perceived by participants as a significant platform to enact social change. Correspondingly, many participants undertook online activism by creating media about and engaging with socio-political issues on online social networks (e.g. Burns & Eaton, 2016; Kim & Ringrose, 2018; Rogan, 2023). For example, several participants took part in an IYS project where they filmed themselves talking about the meaning of hair in their culture or religion and how they take care of their hair. Some of them also spoke of how they had undergone a journey to accept and love their hair. The videos were then disseminated through social media.

In my discussion of participants’ online activism, I also include practices of sharing and liking socio-political content on social media, which many participants did frequently. The political importance of such practices, and social media more generally, is evident in the following quote from my interview with Angelina:

So now [after the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020] people feel this pressure [to] actually speak up. Even if it’s just sharing a post or liking a post, it kind of shows your stance, getting more attention to the cause

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17 When I joined each girls’ group, the youth worker added me to the Instagram group chat that she used to communicate with members outside of sessions. As a result, many members followed my Instagram account and in the interest of reciprocity, I followed them back. This exposed me to their social media activism, which I consequently discussed with them, for instance in workshops, interviews and casual conversations.
and stuff like that. And so definitely social media is kind of a power breeding ground for political change because people report stuff... for example [on] Instagram, Twitter or anything like that, then it gets covered by the news and so that sparks more debate there.

Online activism, which young people are especially involved in, is often ridiculed, trivialised and labelled ‘slacktivism’ in contrast to ‘real’ activism that happens on the ground. Scholars have countered these claims, arguing that online platforms offer young people and other marginalised groups new, enhanced and empowering ways to generate social change (e.g. Heuchan, 2019; Pickard, 2019; Rogan, 2023). Specifically, Angelina argued that liking and sharing brings ‘more attention to the cause’. This argument is echoed by Markku Lonkila and Pertti Jokivuori (2022), who have conceptualised practices of liking and sharing undertaken by young Finnish people on Facebook as forms of ‘nano-level participation’ that help spread messages and make them viral. In my study, the posts that participants shared on Instagram included information, opinions, news items and calls to action on a variety of socio-political issues such as sexual harassment, racism, LGBTQ+ rights and the climate crisis. These practices of sharing and liking are mundane forms of activism which are relatively accessible to and valued by girls, especially Black girls and girls of colour, yet often go unrecognised in scholarly and popular discourses on youth activism (Kelly, 2018; Rogan, 2023). At the same time, many participants were painfully aware of the downsides and harms of social media engagement. For example, Cece told me that she used to post more frequently on social media but had to take a break because she found it overwhelming. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, some participants described receiving negative and even hateful comments online in response to posting or sharing posts about socio-political issues.

Friendship ties were interwoven in participants’ online activism and cultivated it. Towards the middle of the fieldwork, I conducted a workshop with the School Girls’ Group where I asked the group members to draw a map that showed their close relationships, issues they cared about and connections between the two. In the discussion that followed, one of the questions I asked participants was whether they felt they had learned about an issue through one of their relationships or taught someone in their lives about a certain issue. At one point, the conversation turned to social media:
Asha (youth worker): I think social media has a really big place in that now, cause I can see what my friends are thinking about all the time. It wouldn’t just matter that we sit in a room and talk about it anymore, everyone is always posting something that they care about or a social cause that they care about and then I’m learning about it through that as well.

…

Melissa: I learn so much from having Instagram but I don’t think I would have learned if I didn’t have Instagram. …And it’s quite good that I know, that I have my own sources to learn things.

Thalia: And these sources are your friends that you follow or pages or…?

Melissa: Different pages and then sometimes I’ll follow certain pages and then my friend will follow the same pages but also a couple of other ones and then they’ll share things in their stories and I’m like ‘Oh this is cool, this is a nice page’ and I’ll end up following it and then learning more things.

…

Sidrath: I’ll say I use it the same as Melissa. …A lot of my friends, they do wanna help out and things, so if they are interested in a volunteering thing or something they’ll let me know or Instagram will just let me know. So I feel like part of something and I discovered a lot of stuff from Instagram.

As this excerpt shows, social media engagement with socio-political issues was an empowering experience for participants, as it provided them with knowledge and made them feel active about these issues. Similarly, I learned about different socio-political issues that I was not aware of previously by reading the posts that participants shared online. For instance, I learned about the farmer's strike in India in 2020-2021 because a participant of South Asian heritage frequently posted about it. Other scholars have also noted that online engagement enables girls to learn about political issues (Kim & Ringrose, 2018; Rogan, 2023) and therefore develop critical consciousness (Kelly, 2018). Asha the youth worker, Melissa and Sidrath described how friends were central
to these processes, as they learned about specific socio-political issues, actions and social media accounts (‘pages’) by following their friends online. Close friendship, solidarity friendship and youth work as friendship all seem to be at play here. Many participants followed one another on Instagram, including Asha the youth worker (who had an account specifically for communicating with the young people). Participants shared and liked posts that others in IYS created, thereby showing their support and amplifying each other’s voices. Additionally, participants sometimes shared the same socio-political posts as each other. It is possible that in some cases, as the excerpt above shows, participants became aware of an issue because a friend shared a post and they then followed suit. Just as participants’ activist practices were sometimes mundane and small-scale yet significant, so too were the ways in which their friendship ties cultivated such practices.

Finally, participants’ online activism with friends was interwoven with activism they undertook in person with their friends, as is evident in Valerie’s account from one of the workshops:

Me and my friends, we all kinda support the same matters. So we will have conversations, whether it’s lunchtime at school or just texting each other and tagging each other in stuff. We do have conversations with each other and I think it’s great cause I feel like you build your friendship in a way, because you’re supporting the same matters which are important to you. And I think it’s just great to have people who can support you the way that you support them in the same topics and conversations and being able to go to protests or demonstrations together and stuff like that and having people to talk to about important matters that you don’t always have someone to talk to with, cause not everyone does.

Valerie described how her friendships support the activism she undertakes by talking about socio-political topics (through various mediums) and attending protests and demonstrations together. In turn, Valerie felt that the activist practices she and her friends engage in strengthen their bonds with one another. Valerie cherished these friendships and acknowledged that not everyone has friends or people in their life with whom they can undertake political engagement. Moreover, Valerie drew a connection
between engaging in activism with her friends face-to-face, through text messages and online. Similarly, Angelina described in an earlier quote how posting on social media can lead to news coverage. Online and in-person activism are thus entangled together in participants’ views and experiences. This echoes scholarly findings that show that online and in-person activism foster one another, thereby further dismantling the belittling of young people’s online activism as ‘slacktivism’ (Lonkila & Jokivuori, 2022; Soler-i-Martí et al., 2020). I will now unpack the conversations that Valerie mentioned having with her friends, as they were a central and highly interpersonal form of activism that participants engaged in.

6.2.2. Critical pedagogy activism

Critical pedagogy was one of the chief forms of activism that participants undertook to affect social change. In one of the workshops I conducted with the Senior Girls’ Group towards the middle of the fieldwork, I asked participants to write down on a shared slide what they do about social issues and causes that they care about:

Image 5 – word cloud: socio-political actions
As the above image shows, the most common response had to do with ‘learning’ from and ‘educating’ other people. I include in this category responses such as ‘spread awareness’, ‘talk to people’ and ‘post on social media’. A comment by Marina exemplifies the emphasis participants placed on the role of education in challenging racism, which was a key issue that their activism addressed: ‘I think being uneducated and being racist go hand in hand, that is why education is so important’. The education that participants advocated for did not result from schooling. They were critical of the whiteness of the school curriculum and how it failed to significantly include their histories, cultures and achievements as Black people and people of colour (see also Sobande & hill, 2022). These were also some of the reasons many participants felt isolated and othered in school. As I will show, the ‘education’ they advocated for and were involved in dealt with socio-political issues and inequalities, cultivated critical consciousness and was interpersonal and dialogical (in contrast to top-down approaches in mainstream schooling). I therefore conceptualise it as critical pedagogy, as it resembles the transformative approach pioneered by Paulo Freire (1970) which ‘involves a constant unveiling of reality. …[And] strives for the emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality’, whereby ‘[t]he students… are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher.’ (p. 86) (see also hooks, 2009).

Participants frequently undertook interpersonal practices of critical pedagogy in IYS. They often spoke of ‘learning’ and acquiring knowledge when describing what they did and gained from their participation in IYS and their interactions with others in the organisation. In the autobiography writing activity, Rama wrote ‘I went to [the girls’ group] sessions because I gained knowledge about myself and about those around me.’ This corresponds with the characterisation of youth work as a space of informal education that provides learning opportunities to young people (Batsleer, 2008; Youthlink Scotland, 2005). Historically, the Scottish context endowed this education with radical, emancipatory purposes (Jeffs et al., 2019). In IYS, learning opportunities often had critical socio-political dimensions.

Critical pedagogy in IYS was generated through young people’s interactions and relationships. Asha explained that ‘everybody [in IYS] is there to learn, everyone’s there to learn about others. So for you to learn about something, it’s really important that when that someone’s talking you listen. You listen and you try to understand’. Participants also told me that one of the things they enjoyed most about participating
in my workshops was the opportunity to hear everyone’s opinions. Encountering peers’ views is one of the ways in which students acquire knowledge they were not aware of previously and cultivate critical curiosity and consequently critical consciousness (Clark & Seider, 2017). Solidarity friendship facilitated critical pedagogy because it aimed to create a space where IYS members could speak and be listened to and therefore facilitated critical pedagogy. Young people’s contribution to the political socialisation and activism of their peers and friends has been under-researched. Studies of young people’s political discussions focus more on their family relationships than friendships (Levinsen & Yndigegn, 2015), while programmes of youth political socialisation tend to situate adults as the socialisers (Gordon & Taft, 2011). However, young people often perceive political conversations with their peers and learning activist skills and knowledge from their peers as more effective and desirable, because they feel more comfortable, heard and able to communicate with one another (Gordon & Taft, 2011; Harris et al., 2010; Taft, 2010). Relatedly, friendship is a space where political ideas can be developed and disseminated (Forster, 2020). Here, I will focus on the role that friendships and peer relationships play in the critical pedagogy activism that participants undertook.

Many of the social media activism practices I delineated earlier were also a way for participants to engage in critical pedagogy or at least initiate it. In her interview, Faith explained how this might happen:

> For example, if I post on Instagram that I’m spreading awareness on something and then someone replies to me ‘Oh my god that’s so sad’ or stuff like that, and then we’ll have a conversation based on that basically. So there are some people that just pop up, that are like ‘Okay, can I know more?’ because they’re trying to learn.

Similarly, Asha described how she becomes ‘educated’ about the struggles that her gay friend and the LGBTQ+ community face by talking with her friend and reading what they post online.

The chief way in which participants engaged in critical pedagogy was through conversations, both in and outside of IYS. Pedagogy, especially through conversation, is not usually conceptualised as a form of youth activism. However, teen activists in social movements perceived education about socio-political issues as a central way
to enact social change and they undertook it not just by organising structured activities such as workshops and events but also through casual conversations with people in their lives, including friends and peers (Clay, 2012; Taft, 2010). Moreover, in Harris and colleagues’ (2010) study of ‘ordinary’ young people - ones who are not politically ‘apathetic’ but also do not take part in ‘spectacular’ forms of activism – one of the forms of political participation that participants undertook was discussions with friends and family. Earlier in this chapter, Valerie described how she and her friends talk to one another about socio-political issues during lunchtime at school. I argue that critical pedagogy conversations are another mundane form of activism undertaken by youth, and more specifically Black girls and girls of colour, that often remains hidden from and unacknowledged by adults. In my analysis, I will mostly focus on the critical pedagogy conversations that participants had in IYS, as they were the ones I observed and participated in during fieldwork. However, towards the end of the chapter, I will explore how participants undertook such conversations outside of IYS, especially within their close friendships.

6.2.2.1. Conversation characteristics

Critical pedagogy conversations in IYS were interpersonal and dialogical and they unfolded in various settings and formulations. Some conversations were more focused and guided, for example when sessions of the online youth club were dedicated to debating different topics, like gender roles, or in workshops in the girls’ groups on topics such as intersectionality or women’s rights around the world. Other conversations were facilitated but more loosely, for example in the Senior Girls’ Group when Asha the youth worker posed stimulating questions such as ‘What do you think about using the word bitch?’ Asha also told me that although she usually prepares a workshop for each session of the girls’ groups, sometimes she forgoes the plan and simply lets the girls talk about issues they are interested in, and that it is important that they have a space to do so. There were also critical pedagogy conversations that occurred spontaneously. For example in this excerpt from my fieldnotes:

The School Girls’ Group met on Zoom due to Government restrictions. We played ‘Stop the bus’ – we came up with different categories, chose a random letter and then competed to come up with a word that begins
with that letter for each category. We shared the words we came up with, made jokes and laughed a lot. One of the categories was ‘snacks’ and when we landed on the letter ‘J’ Asha the youth worker shared that the word she came up with for this category was ‘Jelly Tots’, a snack that is manufactured by Nestlé. Asha and Melissa mentioned that there is a boycott on Nestlé. I asked what makes them more evil than other corporations. Asha explained that they used products on people in Africa in harmful ways. Melissa elaborated that Nestlé told women in Africa that their milk formula was better than breastmilk even though they knew that it was bad for them and some people died from it. Sidrath nodded along as they spoke. Then we went back to playing the game.

At times, many or all of the IYS members who were present in the space participated in the critical pedagogy conversation that unfolded, while at other times a few people spoke while the others listened. I employ the term ‘critical pedagogy’ because the conversations bore a resemblance to Paulo Freire’s (1970) pedagogy of the oppressed and bell hooks’ (2009) engaged pedagogy, as they were based on dialogue between participants rather than a ‘banking system’ where the all-knowing teacher deposits knowledge in the supposedly empty mind of students; drew on participants’ personal experiences and stories; and cultivated critical consciousness and engagement. The youth work setting helped enable such processes as youth work in Scotland is based on the approach of emancipatory education (Jeffs et al., 2019). The IYS girls’ groups and youth club, where such conversations unfolded, were not formally or explicitly designed to enact critical pedagogy but rather seemed influenced by the key principles and aims of critical pedagogies and youth work. The less structured character of critical pedagogy is reflected in that participants undertook it through conversations (and social media engagement) that were often spontaneous. Moreover, while in some instances critical pedagogy conversations took up half a group session or more, in other instances they occurred for only a few moments, for example in the above conversation about the boycott on Nestlé. Participants wove their critical conversations into their engagement with IYS and those had a cumulative pedagogical effect.
Below are excerpts from a critical pedagogy conversation that unfolded in one of the in-person sessions of the Senior Girls’ Group, which occurred at the beginning of the fieldwork:

Asha, the youth worker, asked what the girls thought about ‘Blackfishing’. Some weren’t familiar with the term while those who were began voicing their opinions. Asha said they would take turns speaking and explained to those who didn’t know that, for example, Blackfishing is when people use so much fake tan that they think they are Black or Brown. Elham said cultural appreciation is good but there’s a line and she gave the example of belly dancing. Sonia, disagreeing that belly dancing is cultural appreciation, exclaimed ‘Oh my goooood’. Sarah said it’s about the history of Black people, they used music to express themselves, and then White people appropriated it, country music started from slaves, same for hip hop, blues, and rock’n’roll which didn’t start from Elvis but from a group of Black people. Then it was whitewashed. It’s facts, it’s history. Sonia agreed with her.

Elham said that whether it’s cultural appropriation or appreciation depends - if you’re educated about the issue it’s not racist. She told us about how a girl who tanned herself told Elham that she was blacker than her. Elham said this was racist, you need to know the past, the deep meaning. Sarah said ‘Truth’, agreeing. Asha the youth worker tried to negotiate between both sides of the debate. She said she understands what Elham is saying about appreciation, that it’s the end goal.

Valerie told us that she went to see the Lion King musical and some of the performers had their upper bodies painted in black but not the ends of their feet. The other girls expressed their shock.

I will now analyse these excerpts to unpack the different characteristics of the critical pedagogy that the girls engaged in. I will argue these conversations constituted activist practices; demonstrate the interpersonal and dialogical character of participants’
critical pedagogy; and show how these conversations were based on various kinds of knowledge, especially lived experience.

As the above excerpts show, the girls were not simply educated by Asha about the phenomena of cultural appropriation but rather contributed their own knowledge and critical opinions to discussions. They engaged in a dialogue by speaking as well as reacting verbally and non-verbally to express their agreement (‘Truth’) and disagreement (‘Oh my goooood’) with one another. Freire’s (1970) pedagogy of the oppressed aims at developing a critical consciousness (that is, an understanding) of reality and consequently transforming it to end oppression and dehumanisation. Roderick J. Watts and Carlos P. Hipolito-Delgado (2015) mapped a spectrum of socio-political actions that can result from critical consciousness work with oppressed groups and argued that in addition to mass actions of social movements, actions occurring on an individual or group level can also contribute to systematic change. The action with the lowest impact, yet also the one that was most accessible and prevalent, was one that ‘[a]s part of dialogue, an individual in the group makes a significant contribution to another’s critical social analysis skills or personal development’ (p. 854). As mentioned earlier, participants perceived ‘education’ and conversations with people as a way to effect social change and they spoke about the learning outcomes of their participation in IYS. Considering participants’ perspectives and these scholarly arguments together made me realise that participants’ active contribution to critical pedagogy conversations in IYS helped develop other members’ critical consciousness and should therefore be recognised as an activist engagement. Unlike public, highly visible and violent forms of activism that are not easily available for Black girls and girls of colour to undertake (Gordon, 2010; Mirza, 1997a), critical pedagogy conversations (especially in IYS) were a form of activism that was relatively accessible, safe and encouraging for participants to engage in.

The excerpts from the above conversation also illustrate the various kinds of knowledge that participants drew on in their critical pedagogy activism. They taught one another about the phenomena of cultural appropriation by sharing their lived experience (times when they encountered the phenomena, how they felt and reacted), factual knowledge (the history of cultural appropriation, for instance in various musical genres) and their opinions (cases in which they believe an action should and should not be condemned as cultural appropriation). In particular, lived experience played a
central role in participants’ critical pedagogy activism. Black feminist thinkers have advocated for valuing Black women’s lived experiences of contesting the ongoing oppression they face and the knowledge they produce through these experiences (Collins, 2000; Emefulu & Sobande, 2019). IYS as an organisation strove to highlight and validate young people’s lived experience as a valuable form of knowledge, thus recognising them as experts in their own lives whose expertise does not fall short of expertise gained through formal education and employment. Relatedly, the lived experience of students is a vital basis for critical pedagogies (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994, 2009) and feminist consciousness-raising groups, through the notion of ‘the personal is political’ (Bruley, 2013; Hanisch, 2006). While many scholars use the term ‘knowledge production’ to frame processes where individuals and groups share their experiences, I prefer the term ‘critical pedagogy activism’ because it foregrounds participants’ aim to enact social change through education. That is not to say that the two terms are opposed or to belittle the radical potential of knowledge production and theory that are based on lived experience (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1994).

The interpersonal and dialogical characteristics of critical pedagogy activism meant that participants listened to and affirmed each other’s lived experiences (Collins, 2000). For example, in the above conversation when Elham spoke about a racist comment she received and when Valerie recalled an instance of encountering cultural appropriation, the others echoed their indignation and did not challenge their experience. These reassuring reactions might not have occurred in other relationships that participants had and spaces they frequented. In their critical pedagogy conversations, participants thus not only learned from and taught one another critical thinking skills but also supported each other (see also Boutwell & Guhad, 2015).

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18 This is also the aim of girlhood studies scholars (e.g. Bent, 2013; Boutwell & Guhad, 2015).

19 Consciousness-raising groups began forming in the 1960s and 1970s as part of the women’s movement. In the groups, women shared their personal experiences, found connections between them and analysed them through a feminist lens that uncovered and contested women’s oppression (Bruley, 2013; Hanisch, 2006). Meaningful friendships and communities were formed in these groups yet historically they were attended almost exclusively by White women and issues of race and racism were not usually discussed (Bruley, 2013; Phoenix, 2016). There are certainly some similarities between these groups and the processes that occurred in IYS, yet I preferred to analyse the latter mainly through the framework of critical pedagogies and Black feminist thought as it centres race more and interrogates its intersections with gender.
bell hooks (2009) argues that sharing personal stories can create connections and lead to healing. Amy the youth worker described in our interview the importance of safe spaces for young Black people and people of colour in IYS, where they can share their experiences of oppression and structural inequalities:

[R]acism is very isolating and it’s very in the way that unless you talk to other people and you know that they experience the same, even though you know in your head that it’s because you’re a person of colour or because you’re Black, in your head it’s just unique to you and it’s hard to stand up for yourself or talk about it because it feels like it’s just happening to you.

Emily described this very process of affirmation and healing when she wrote in the autobiography writing activity about her experience of joining the girls’ group: ‘It was the first place where people were having the conversations that I was having in my head out loud. Suddenly I didn’t feel so crazy or alone’. This illustrates the transformative significance of participants’ critical pedagogy activism, especially when it was grounded in their lived experience. At the same time, IYS youth workers tried to ensure that young people did not feel pressured to share difficult and painful experiences, as they were aware that sharing such stories and listening to them being told by others could also negatively affect the young people’s mental health. As hooks (1994) writes: ‘It is not easy to name our pain, to theorize from that location.’ (p. 74).

Earlier in this chapter, I described how a participant spoke of the vulnerability that such sharing demanded and in a previous chapter I argued that IYS spaces were not experienced as equally safe by all participants at all times. The emotional toll of sharing and listening to lived experiences might be one of the reasons why the girls also incorporated factual knowledge in their critical pedagogy conversations.

Lastly, critical pedagogy conversations in IYS were shaped by the different settings in which they took place. As mentioned, most of the girls’ group sessions during my fieldwork took place online due to Covid-19 Government regulations. While Sonia said that she found it ‘much easier to talk’ when the group was online, many other participants felt that online conversations were awkward and more stilted as time delays meant that people either talked over each other or did not speak because they were worried about cutting someone off. Based on my observations, online settings
somewhat constrained opportunities for dialogue, especially short verbal expressions of affirmation, agreement and disagreement which participants often made when conversations took place in person (see also Abdul Rahim & Walters, 2022).

6.2.2.2. The position of youth workers and the researcher

Asha the youth worker played an important role in fostering critical pedagogy activism in IYS. She usually guided the critical conversations that unfolded in the girls’ group and youth club and often initiated them. She made sure the young people were familiar with the terms mentioned in those discussions and mediated between contrasting views. For example, in the conversation about cultural appropriation, she explained what ‘Blackfishing’ was to those who were unfamiliar with the term. Later, when there was a disagreement regarding the legitimacy of cultural appreciation, she conciliated by explaining that cultural appreciation is something we should strive for. This reflects some of the ways in which youth work is an informal education setting where youth workers facilitate mutual learning through dialogue (Batsleer, 2008).

Moreover, Asha often shared her own lived experience and opinions in the critical conversations that took place in IYS. hooks (1994, 2009) argues that in engaged pedagogy, educators need to be open and share their personal stories so that students will feel confident to share their stories and be similarly vulnerable. As mentioned in an earlier chapter, when I asked participants whether they made a friend in IYS, a few of them mentioned Asha. Alyx was one of those participants and they described Asha in the following way: ‘She’s really interesting, genuinely, and she does so much good stuff that I’m just like ‘amazing’. She’s really inspiring’. Meaningful relationships with youth workers are vital for engendering learning dialogues (Batsleer, 2008; Fyfe et al., 2018).

As I discussed in the methodology chapter, during fieldwork I was not always sure whether and how much I should participate in IYS activities. I felt this dilemma especially in participants’ critical pedagogy conversations, given my positionality as an adult as well as someone who did not have a history of experiencing racism – a central topic in these conversations. Towards the middle of the fieldwork, I shared my concerns with Asha the youth worker, who is of mixed ethnic background, she replied:
I think it’s in your head, I have the same thing in my head because I’m so light-skinned, I often think that it’s not my place to say something but I think that our opinions are very very valid and as older people who have experienced a lot of different racialised things or just viewed other people, their experiences and things. Our opinions are valid and do help them to see things from a different perspective. So I think it is important when you do speak and when I speak.

Asha’s supportive response assured me that my participation was appropriate and valued. As fieldwork progressed I spoke more in critical pedagogy conversations, expressing my opinions, sharing relevant lived experiences and validating those of participants. Asha’s response also illustrates a role that adults can have in youth activism and hints at navigations related to colourism that were discussed in the previous chapter.

6.2.2.3. Beyond IYS

Many participants also undertook critical pedagogy activism outside of IYS, for instance on social media. For some participants, it was especially important to undertake such practices within their close interpersonal relationships. In one of the workshops, I asked participants to write a text describing or imagining how they create social change with friends. After participants shared their texts, a short discussion followed, in which Faith said:

I feel like sometimes it’s good just [to] know you can make this change, at least within your friend group, to feel better. …Education-wise, you’re never gonna educate the whole world but at least knowing that all your friends are educated, you know, to a certain level, I feel like it makes you feel better. At least the people you surround yourself with.

It seems that ideally, Faith wanted to undertake critical pedagogy with ‘the whole world’ to create social change. Practically, she did so with her friends as they are the ones she interacted with the most and so, presumably, could best engage with and influence.
While participants often spoke of the importance of involving others in critical pedagogy, they occasionally wondered about the responsibility such activism placed on their shoulders. In one session of the radio show that two participants planned and hosted (with the support of IYS), they discussed with an IYS volunteer whether it was their job to teach men about issues that affect women. One girl explained that she likes teaching her friends about topics like periods, while the other girl said she admires her for it but feels conflicted about whether it is her responsibility. The first girl and the volunteer said that it is their responsibility when it comes to people they are close to.

In my interview with Faith, I asked her to elaborate on what she meant when she said (in one of the workshops) that it is important to ‘educate’ friends. After giving it some thought, she explained:

If it’s friends-friends I feel like you are in charge as well to make sure they know what you are on about. So if you are let’s say Muslim and you wear a hijab and you cover yourself completely and your best friend doesn’t know anything about hijabs and he doesn’t know anything [about] Muslim culture, it’s kind of weird. You would think ‘Oh damn, it’s weird’ on the friend’s side cause you should want to know, he’s your best friend, how do you not know anything? But as well on the friend, if you’re very good friends you should share things without being afraid of the friend’s view. …So [it’s] on the friend to ask questions and be keen to educate himself or herself, but it’s also on you to give the information, cause you won’t always find everything on the internet. …When it comes to friends, especially if they are very close friends, issues that are what makes you you, you should share them, it should be their main priority to learn about it, yeah.

Later in her interview, Faith, who is Christian, also mentioned that she has Muslim friends. For Faith, close friends have a responsibility to both teach and learn from one another about their identities (‘issues that are what makes you you’). In the previous chapter, I described how one participant experienced friendship difficulties, saying that her friends are ‘not really friends… because they just don’t, they don’t really take the time to think about how I’m not White and my experience is not the same.’ The ways that Faith and the anonymous participant conceptualised close friendship illustrate that this relationship has moral dimensions (Smart et al., 2012; Spencer & Pahl, 2006) and
that despite its relatively un-institutionalised character, it can still involve expectations (though those are not necessarily met in practice) (Eramian & Mallory, 2020). Faith and the anonymous participant spoke of the importance of learning about the identities and cultures of friends who belong to groups who are oppressed based on their religion or ethnicity. This indicates the socio-political dimensions of such pedagogy. Sociologists of friendship have called to critically interrogate the gaps between friendship ideals and their realities (Heapy & Davies, 2012; Pahl & Spencer, 2010).

As the case of the anonymous participant demonstrates, there can be gaps between the political ideals and realities of friendship.

The gap between the political ideal and realities of undertaking critical pedagogy with friends and other important people in one’s life was also evident when participants chose not to engage in such activism. In my interview with Amy the youth worker, they explained that in the safe spaces of IYS groups, people respect one another and do not ask ‘ignorant’ and ‘intrusive’ questions. Subsequently, they become more comfortable in discussing race, sharing their experiences of racism and racialisation and learning that they are not alone in these experiences. This cultivates their confidence to speak up in other spaces and helps them understand if and how to engage in conversations about these topics with White people, as Amy explained:

You realise ‘Okay, I either start to learn how to have those conversations in a way that isn’t upsetting to me or annoying, [or I] say to you - no we’re not having this conversation about my hair because I’m not here to educate you’ or you keep having those conversations with dozens of White people every time because you aren’t quite confident enough to say ‘No, we’re not having this conversation’.

Black women are often expected to educate others about race, especially White people, with disregard for their own needs, the negative and hateful reactions they encounter and the hefty emotional resources that such pedagogy expends from them, which is why some refuse to do so (Eddo-Lodge, 2017; Heuchan, 2019). Amy explained that having critical pedagogy conversations is especially burdensome because the young people in IYS are ‘usually the only people of colour in their school, in their year, in their friendship group, so they feel like they have to be the only point of reference for those conversations.’ (emphasis mine). Engaging in critical pedagogy
activism can therefore turn into a hefty burden of changing the world by oneself. This is a common outcome of neoliberal discourses of girls’ empowerment, which open up new avenues of political engagement for girls but also task them with additional, individual responsibilities (Taft, 2014). When I asked Faith if there are cases where she wouldn’t engage in critical pedagogy, she said that she does not educate those who are ‘too racist’ and those who do not really want to learn. These accounts show that in the collective settings of IYS and friendships committed to mutual and respectful learning, critical pedagogy could be a shared practice rather than an individual obligation.

As mentioned earlier, there was an emotional toll to undertaking critical pedagogy activism, especially when sharing lived experience with others. Faith told me in her interview that she is ‘never keen to share my racism experiences, cause I just don’t like, I don’t want that to define me, I don’t want that to be who I am’. This ties to Amy saying that through discussions in IYS, the young people realise that they need to either decline to talk about such issues or learn how to have conversations in a way that is not ‘upsetting’. The choice not to fulfil the political ideal of engaging friends in critical pedagogy should be understood as political, as it is the result of contending with structural and everyday racism. This raises questions about what activist and emotional responsibilities one should have towards their friends and other people they are close to and how these responsibilities might be shaped or distributed in the context of systemic oppression.

Attending IYS helped the girls to resist demands to educate others but also to engage in critical pedagogy if they wanted to. Some participants spoke of how the knowledge, skills and confidence they have gained in IYS enabled them to undertake critical pedagogy with people outside of the organisation. The development of critical consciousness can be an empowering experience and can encourage resistance and the undertaking of social change (Collins, 2000; Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994). Relatedly, in an above quote, Amy said that engaging in conversations about race, racism and racialisation in IYS made the young people ‘learn how to have those conversations’ with others. The importance of undertaking critical pedagogy beyond IYS came up in the findings workshop, conducted 4 months after the end of fieldwork, where a few participants wondered about the efficacy of critical pedagogy conversations. One participant anonymously commented that having these conversations in IYS can
sometimes ‘feel a bit like a bubble because the rest of Scotland isn’t having these conversations’ and another commented that ‘Being part of some IYS research projects feels like it will actually make change because a wider audience will see it eg the government’. These participants advocated for critical pedagogy conversations to be undertaken in wider and more public circles. As the comments were anonymous, I do not know whether the participants who wrote them were the same ones who also spoke of the importance of engaging in critical pedagogy with others in their lives. It is therefore possible that the commentators perceived activism as a more public and highly visible action or that their understanding of activism encompassed both these practices and more mundane and less publicly acknowledged ones, such as undertaking critical pedagogy conversations with the people in their lives.

This section has shown that friendship was politically significant for participants’ activist practices as those were often undertaken with friends and were seen by some participants as an important part of their friendships.

6.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored the different ways in which friendship was politically significant to participants’ activism. Studying this under-researched topic helps challenge dominant neoliberal public discourses that erase the support and activist networks of activist girls (Bent, 2016; Edell et al., 2016). I began the first section by discussing how some participants curtailed their political expression because they worried about being judged by certain friends and family members. Additionally, conflicts with friends and others in IYS could make participants less eager to engage in IYS activities, thereby hindering the activism they undertook through the organisation. However, solidarity friendship between members helped to somewhat mitigate these difficulties.

Next, I interrogated how the social components of IYS programmes and the friendships and friend-like relationships that participants cultivated there encouraged their activist engagement in the organisation. This engagement, in turn, strengthened their friendships. Furthermore, I discussed how some of the friendships that participants formed across structural inequalities extended their activist interests, knowledge and actions to issues that affected their friends. These friendships
therefore became political alliances (see also Dillard, 2019) and participants argued that passion and a shared outlook were necessary for this to occur.

In the second section, I examined participants’ activist practices and the role that their friendships played in undertaking such practices. I argued that participants engaged in a wide variety of activist practices, such as protesting, advocacy, media making and research participation. These myriad practices underscore the need for a broader definition of youth political engagement (e.g. Harris et al., 2010; O’Toole, 2015; Pickard, 2019). Many of these practices were interpersonal, as friendship and friend-like relationships in IYS encouraged participants to undertake them in IYS and some also undertook activist practices with friends outside of IYS.

I specifically interrogated participants’ political engagement on social media, which included creating, sharing and liking critical socio-political content. Participants viewed social media as a significant way to engage in activism, in contrast to the popular view that online activism, which is more accessible to young people and women of colour, is not ‘real’ activism (e.g. Heuchan, 2019; Pickard, 2019; Rogan, 2023). Participants’ online activism was highly interpersonal, as they learned about socio-political issues by following their friends on social media, amplifying their online creations and often sharing the same posts. Moreover, the activism participants undertook online with friends was interwoven with the activism they took with their friends in person.

Lastly, I explored participants’ critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970; hooks, 2009) activism, which was one of the main ways in which they sought to create change. Participants criticised the whiteness of the school curriculum and spoke of the importance of ‘educating’ themselves and others about socio-political issues, through social media engagement and especially conversations. Contrary to the dominant notion that adults should be tasked with the political socialisation of youth (Gordon & Taft, 2011), these findings join studies that show that young people prefer to engage in political conversations and learning with their peers (Gordon & Taft, 2011; Harris et al., 2010; Taft, 2010). Unlike more public and violent forms of activism, such mundane practices were relatively accessible and safe for participants to undertake.

I analysed how critical pedagogy conversations in IYS were based on dialogue between participants, drew on participants’ personal experiences and stories; and cultivated critical consciousness and engagement (Freire, 1970; hooks, 2009). The
youth worker who led the girls’ groups and youth club, and had friend-like relationships with the young people, played an important role in facilitating these conversations (Batsleer, 2008). She and other youth workers made efforts to enable the young people to share their lived experience without feeling pressured to do so. The youth worker also shared her own experiences and opinions to inspire confidence and vulnerability in the young people (hooks, 1994, 2009) and I strove to do the same. Many participants also undertook critical pedagogy activism outside of IYS and for some this was an important political ideal of close friendship. In reality, however, friends and others in their lives were not always willing to learn and critical pedagogy could become an individual burden. Engagement in IYS helped young people resist unwanted demands to educate others and gave some of them the confidence to do so if they wished. For some participants, engaging in critical pedagogy outside of IYS was necessary in order to enact wider social change.

Friendship is therefore political in its ability to hinder, cultivate and facilitate activist engagement and to be fostered by it. Moreover, activism is undertaken through and in friendships. This chapter has also highlighted how both the activist practices that participants undertook and the ways that friendship was entangled in these practices were often mundane and small-scale yet significant.
Chapter 7: Conclusion

This thesis explored the politics of friendship in the lives of Black girls and girls of colour in Scotland. I conceptualised the politics of friendship as the ways that friendship is affected by, contends with and challenges structural inequalities and power relations and how it relates to efforts to enact social change.

The sociology of friendship has shed light on how friendship is embedded in social structures, contexts and norms (Adams & Allan, 1991; Blatterer, 2013; Davies, 2019). Sociologists of friendship have also advocated for a critical perspective that interrogates the gaps between the ideals and realities of friendship and the negative experiences they can entail, such as power relations (Heaphy & Davies, 2012; Pahl & Spencer, 2010; Smart et al., 2012). However, the topic of ethnicity and racism, along with other intersecting forms of oppression, has received little attention in this regard. This thesis therefore brought the sociology of friendship into conversation with Black feminist theory, youth studies and girlhood studies. Together, these fields informed the analysis of how participants' experiences and understandings of the politics of friendship related to the ways that identity categories and systems of oppression of race, gender and age intersected in their lives.

This thesis is based on an ethnographic study conducted in Intercultural Youth Scotland (IYS), an anti-racist youth work charity that supports young Black people and people of colour and works with them to enact social change regarding issues that affect their lives. The study was conducted from September 2020 until November 2021 with girls aged 14-20 who were members of two IYS girls’ groups and with their IYS youth workers. Fieldwork consisted of participant observation in the girls’ groups, the IYS youth club and special activities and events organised by IYS; workshops based on creative qualitative methods; and in-depth interviews with some of the girls and youth workers. The study was designed not only to explore the research questions but also to engender meaningful, beneficial and enjoyable research engagements for participants.

In this conclusion, I summarise the thesis findings and analysis by answering the three research questions and highlighting contributions that this thesis makes to the sociology of friendship, Black feminist theory, youth studies and girlhood studies. I also note some of the methodological takeaways of the thesis and its relevance to
practitioners and policy-makers, consider the limitations of this study and provide suggestions for future research. I conclude with a few final thoughts on why it is important to study the politics of friendship while also going beyond them.

7.1. The politics of friendship
In this thesis, I posed three research questions:

1. In what ways is friendship politically affirming?
2. How do structural power relations play out in friendship?
3. What is the role of friendship in challenging inequalities and in youth activism?

In the empirical chapters, I presented findings and analysis that interrogated how participants experienced and understood different political aspects of their friendships, including the political realities, ideals, potentials and significance of their friendships. These findings provide the answers to the above questions, both directly and inversely in relation to questions number 1 and 3, meaning they also show what might prevent friendship from being politically affirming and how friendship can hinder activist engagement. Some of the empirical chapters addressed one research question more than the others but still touched on the other questions too. I will therefore now answer each question separately.

7.1.1. Political affirmation
Participants perceived and experienced some of their friendship bonds as politically affirming. In Chapter 4, I explored how attending IYS provided participants with opportunities to foster friendships with young people who, like them, belonged to marginalised ethnic and racialised groups. These friendships engendered for participants a sense of belonging, authenticity and understanding that they did not always feel with White friends. Friendships with other young Black people and people of colour therefore consisted of homeplaces (Goins, 2011; hooks, 2014; Kelly, 2020) as they countered the experiences of oppression and othering that many of them faced in White-dominated spaces in Scotland, especially schools. I analysed how participants perceived their homeplace friendships as based on a mutual understanding of experiences of racism and racialisation as well as cultural similarities,
specifically in parental and community demands as well as family life and traditions. Some of these perceived commonalities were also found in other studies of friendship between young people from marginalised ethnic and racialised groups (Bergnehr et al., 2020; Harris, 2016; Reynolds, 2007). Participants’ friendship homophily (Allan, 2003; Davies, 2019) was related not only to their ethnic and racialised identities but also to their political views. The girls argued that to be a close friend one had to share the same social justice values as them.

The political significance of friendship homophily raises questions about how difference was treated within friendships. In Chapter 4, I argued that participants valued the ethnic and cultural differences between them and actively sought to establish commonalities in their experiences and identities. This suggests that friendship homophily is desired and can be both found as well as relationally crafted. As indicated by participants’ stories throughout the empirical chapters, friendship could not be politically affirming when friends did not acknowledge differences and were not interested in learning about participants’ identities and experiences as Black girls and girls of colour. Still, it is possible that to experience friendship as politically affirming, other differences between friends were more difficult to recognise. In Chapter 5, I discussed how experiences relating to being of mixed ethnic background, issues relating to class and colourism and racism within communities of colour and to some extent also religious identities were largely not spoken of in the group settings of IYS. The IYS youth workers explained that discussion of such issues was a delicate affair and could harm the young people’s newfound sense of community, belonging and safety. It is possible that this also affected the ways friendship was cultivated within the organisation and points to potential challenges in rendering differences politically affirming. However, in Chapter 6, I have shown how some of the friendships that participants formed across inequalities became political alliances when friends recognised the oppression the other faced and joined their struggle against these injustices (see also Dillard, 2019). In these political alliances differences between friends could be experienced as politically affirming.

Relatedly, I explored in Chapter 6 how some girls said that, in contrast to White-dominated spaces and friendships with White people, in their homeplace friendships and IYS settings they did not feel judged about their hair and were instead exposed to different hairstyles and various forms of femininity. This enabled them to embody
femininity beyond their dominantly White, demeaning and narrow constructions (e.g., Batsleer, 2018; Showunmi, 2017; Taylor, 2016). Another participant found that taking part in the girls’ group made them realise they do not identify as a girl but as non-binary. This participant was conflicted about their ongoing participation in the group, as they felt that the group subscribed to a more binary understanding of gender. This demonstrates the relational construction of gender identities (Holmes, 2011). It also illustrates how similarities, and perhaps also a degree of difference, can be politically affirming.

Friendship ties as well as concepts and practices of friendship were also politically affirming in the sense that they encouraged participation in IYS, a political organisation that acknowledged the structural inequalities that young Black people and people of colour face in Scotland, supported them and invited them to participate in activist projects to address such injustices. In Chapter 4, I analysed how friendships contributed to the construction of IYS itself as a homeplace (hooks, 2014), where participants felt a sense of authenticity and acceptance - key characteristics of friendship (Goins, 2011; Spencer & Pahl, 2006; Winkler-Reid, 2016). I also highlighted the role of friendship in the relational construction of safe spaces in IYS groups by youth workers and young people. Some participants perceived friendship as engendering a sense of safety and even conceptualised the relationship itself as a safe space (see also Cronin, 2014; Goins, 2011), which indicates that having friends in IYS augmented their sense of safety there. I also argued that the presence of a White young person in IYS was made more acceptable not only due to their commitment to anti-racism but also because they had pre-existing friendship ties with some of the IYS members, which could signal to others that they could feel safe with them. The association of friendship with safety was even utilised in some cases by youth workers to encourage young people in IYS groups to treat one another as friends during sessions.

In the same chapter, I conceptualised three types of friendships and friend-like relationships that participants formed in the organisation. These relationships supported participants’ engagement in IYS activities and projects. The first type was close friendship, a bond which required time to develop and had to be practised outside of IYS as well. At the same time, the commonalities that participants shared helped them grow closer more quickly. Close friendships were given different labels,
for instance ‘friends-friends’ and ‘sister’, to denote the strength of the relationship due to the prevalent use of the term friend to characterise positive relationships in one’s life.

The second type of friend-like relationship was the one that existed between the girls and most or all of the people in IYS that they did not consider friends and it strengthened the sense of community and solidarity between IYS members. I termed this relationship as ‘solidarity friendship’ and defined it as positive relationships of affinity that (ideally) develop in group settings and activities, that are based on shared experiences and political goals and are facilitated and informed by ties, practices and notions of close friendship. I have argued that enacting solidarity friendship in IYS meant being respectful, supportive, caring, nice, accepting of others’ identities, creating space for people to speak, listening to them and making everyone feel included. These characteristics and practices were especially needed when young people opened up in front of others. Nevertheless, solidarity friendship bonds did not preclude complex social dynamics – at times, some participants felt lonely and found it challenging to interact with others in IYS. Moreover, as I noted in Chapter 6, conflicts with friends and other members of IYS could make participants less eager to participate in IYS. However, I argued that commitment to solidarity friendship helped to somewhat mitigate interpersonal difficulties.

The third type of friendship or friend-like relationship presented in Chapter 4 was between some of the participants and their youth workers, who were all Black people and people of colour. Studies have emphasised the significance of a positive and friendly relationship with youth workers to the success of youth work (Delgado, 2016; Fyfe et al., 2018). A few of the participants considered some of the young workers their friends yet this did not seem to undermine the youth workers’ authority or responsibility over the young people nor obscure the fact that befriending the young people was part of their job. Some of the youth workers who worked in more structured IYS programmes did not consider their positive relationships with the young people as friendship, while a youth worker who worked in more informal IYS settings did. For this youth worker, friendship was somewhat one-sided, as she encouraged the young people to share with her and turn to her for support yet erected professional boundaries on what she disclosed to them in return. Youth work as friendship complicates the dominant conception of friendship as voluntary and egalitarian
relationships based on reciprocity (see for example Allan, 2003; Davies, 2019; Spencer & Pahl, 2006).

This thesis illuminates the ways that friendship can be experienced as politically affirming. Friendship bonds between people who belong to marginalised communities can generate a sense of belonging, authenticity and safety in their identity and enable them to explore these identities further. This friendship homophily is not only found but also relationally crafted. In such cases, differences between friends can potentially be unspoken or denied. However, they can also be valued and even provide the basis for political alliances. Moreover, the cultivation of friendship ties along with friendship concepts and practices can encourage participation in a political organisation, including by contributing to members’ sense of acceptance, authenticity and safety in the spaces of the organisation. Friendship, or at least friend-like relationships, can even form between members when one has authority over the other. However, conflicts between friends can also hinder their joint participation in a political organisation. Finally, the concept of ‘solidarity friendship’ was developed in this thesis to describe how friend-like relationships can develop between members of a political organisation and in turn strengthen community and solidarity in the organisation and help alleviate interpersonal difficulties between members. The theorisation and account of solidarity friendship contribute to recent sociological and anthropological endeavours that explore the role of friendship in the formation of collectivities and group life (Kaplan, 2018; Sundberg, 2019) by showing how friendly relations can be utilised as a model for forming and sustaining political collectivities.

7.1.2. Structural power relations
For participants in this study, some interactions with friends entailed structural power relations and inequalities. This is an understudied topic in the sociology of friendship, especially in relation to ethnicity and racism. However, I interrogated it by following critical sociological perspectives that have analysed difficult and negative aspects of friendship (Eramian & Mallory, 2020; Spencer & Pahl, 2006), including the power relations (Heaphy & Davies, 2012; Hey, 1997) and hierarchies (Zhu, 2019) it can entail.
In Chapter 5, I examined how participants had to face everyday racism and other oppressive behaviour by some of their friends. I mapped four different survival and resistance strategies (Brown, 2021; Kelly, 2018) that participants employed to contend with such instances: challenging friends, self-preservation, ending the friendship and remaining friends out of necessity and/or ambivalence. I argued that the first strategy - challenging friends - should not be taken for granted given White people’s tendency to react negatively to discussions of racism (Eddo-Lodge, 2017; Rollock, 2022) due to White privilege and fragility (DiAngelo, 2011). I therefore framed the second strategy, whereby participants did not outwardly react to oppressive behaviour by a friend, as self-preservation. Participants were aware that speaking up about issues such as racism could label them as the problem (Ahmed, 2017), with micro-aggressions also proving difficult to pinpoint and contest (Johnson & Joseph-Salisbury, 2018; Sue et al., 2008). Other studies have found that friends’ oppressive behaviour was dismissed in order to fit in (Kennelly & Mouroutsou, 2020) and not harm the friendship (Greenland et al., 2020).

The third strategy that participants employed was to end the friendship. Nevertheless, this did not necessarily happen immediately, which points to a gap between the idealisation and realities of friendship (Heaphy & Davies, 2012; Pahl & Spencer, 2010). The fourth and rarer strategy was to remain friends out of necessity and/or ambivalence. Some participants spoke of staying in the relationship because of a desire and even necessity to have friends, an imperative which has been found in other studies of school friendships (Winkler-Reid, 2016; Zhu, 2019). Such a necessity seemed especially felt due to participants’ age as they had to attend school, which was a social setting where their friendship choice was constrained due to a lack of ethnic diversity. This complicates dominant notions of friendship as a voluntary relationship (Budgeon, 2006; Giddens, 1991). Oppressive behaviour by a friend could also render the friendship ambivalent, as it strayed from participants’ ideal conceptions of friendship. The difficult and painful political experiences that friendship across structural inequalities sometimes entailed, along with feeling uncomfortable or unsafe due to a friend’s oppressive behaviour, explain why some participants did not have such friends and even actively avoided forming such friendships.

I argued that recognition of oppressive behaviour, including by friends, was not always immediate. IYS youth workers attested that access to more diverse settings, online or
geographically, and therefore greater choice in friend formation, enabled them to recognise their friends’ oppressive behaviour and form more meaningful connections. In the case of the participants, I suggested that IYS and the bonds cultivated there could support processes of recognition and enable them to speak openly about structural power relations in their friendships.

The discussion of survival and resistance strategies that participants employed focused largely on instances of racism, as this was the form of oppression participants most spoke of experiencing. However, participants sometimes mentioned navigating additional and intersecting power relations in their friendships. In Chapter 5, I mentioned participants’ critique of the ways that sexism and heteronormativity constrained their ability to form cross-gender friendships. Additionally, I described how one participant spoke of contending with racist and racialised attitudes towards her hair by White people and friends. I suggested that this participant was excluded when her friends bonded over their shared White femininity (see also hooks, 1995, p. 304).

Lastly, in Chapter 4, I analysed how solidarity friendship at IYS was at risk when people did not get along, especially when someone felt that their identity was not accepted. Youth workers recounted how discussions about LGBTQ+ identities could turn contentious, which could make LGBTQ+ members feel uncomfortable and unsafe. The youth workers worked to negotiate conflicts and maintain solidarity friendships as best they could.

Thus, contrary to idealised notions of friendship (Heaphy & Davies, 2012), this thesis has shown that friendship is not necessarily free from power and oppression. Rather, people who belong to marginalised groups might need to enact various survival and resistance (Brown, 2021; Kelly, 2018) strategies to contend with structural power relations within friendships. The choice of strategy may also be informed by the desire to have friends and fit in socially, especially in mandatory institutional settings such as school. Examining friendship from this perspective also illuminates the gravity of everyday racism, how it shapes everyday life and relationships and the complex navigations it requires of people of colour (Rollock, 2022). These politics of friendship also help explain why people from marginalised groups might avoid forming friendships across inequalities.
7.1.3. Challenging inequalities and engaging in activism

Friendships were also politically significant to participants as they assisted them in challenging inequalities and engaging in activism and were in turn affected by such practices. Friendship is under-researched in studies of young people’s political engagement and shedding light on it helps challenge the dominant neoliberal media narratives that erase the support and activist networks of activist girls (Bent, 2016; Edell et al., 2016). In Chapter 6, I explored how in some cases, friendship and other personal relationships hindered participants’ political expression because they worried they would be judged by friends and family members. In other cases, friendship encouraged participants’ activist engagements in IYS and outside of it and was in turn fostered by it. This political significance of friendship has also been noted in a study of girls’ everyday activism in school (Kelly, 2018, 2020) and explored in a study about girls’ involvement in social movements (Taft, 2010, 2017). I further argued that some of the friendships that participants formed across inequalities extended their activist interests, knowledge and actions to issues that affected their friends. These friendships therefore became political alliances (see also Dillard, 2019). Some participants noted that passion and a shared outlook are needed for such processes to occur.

Some friendships and the collective settings of IYS also enabled participants to challenge structural inequalities and injustices. In Chapter 5, I discussed how participants criticised together constricting and demeaning notions of girlishness in wider society (Nicholls, 2019) as well as sexist norms and demands in their communities and families, such as being expected to cook and dress modestly. Moreover, participants recounted facing gendered expectations that their friendships will solely revolve around supposedly ‘feminine’ interests, such as hair and makeup. I argued that they challenged these expectations together with their friends by discussing ‘serious’ topics, resisting the negative view of ‘feminine’ interests and acting ‘silly’.

Furthermore, friendship was entangled in participants’ activist practices. In Chapter 6, I discussed the wide variety of activist practices that participants engaged in, which demonstrate the need for a broader definition of youth political engagement (e.g. Harris et al., 2010; O’Toole, 2015; Pickard, 2019). Many of these activist practices were undertaken with friends in and outside of IYS. Participants perceived social media engagement, including sharing and liking posts, as a vital way to enact social
change. Their online activism was highly interpersonal, as they learned about socio-political issues by following their friends’ social media accounts, amplifying their online creations and sharing the same posts. These findings contribute to scholarship that challenges the belittling of online activism, a form of engagement that is more accessible to and therefore often undertaken by young people and other marginalised groups (e.g. Heuchan, 2019; Pickard, 2019; Rogan, 2023).

I then explored one of the main forms of participants’ activism - critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970; hooks, 2009) – which they undertook through social media engagement and especially conversations about socio-political issues from a critical perspective. Conversations are not usually defined as activism in academic literature yet youth activists and young people who are not involved in social movements include it in their political repertoire (Clay, 2012; Harris et al., 2010; Taft, 2010). In IYS, these conversations were based on dialogue between participants, drew on participants’ personal experiences and stories; and cultivated critical consciousness and engagement (Freire, 1970; hooks, 2009). The girls actively contributed to these conversations, drawing on factual knowledge as well as their lived experience and affirming the lived experiences of others (Collins, 2000; Emejulu & Sobande, 2019). The youth worker who led the girls’ groups and youth club, and was considered by some participants as their friend, had an important role in facilitating critical pedagogy conversations (Batsleer, 2008). The youth worker shared her own lived experience and opinions to encourage the young people to share their own stories and display the vulnerability that critical pedagogy necessitates (hooks, 1994, 2009).

Many participants also undertook critical pedagogy activism outside of IYS. For some participants, learning about friends’ identities, cultures and socio-political issues that affected them and teaching friends about their own was a political ideal of close friendship. However, friends and others in their lives were not always interested in engaging in such transformative processes. Outside of friendships committed to learning and the collective settings of IYS, critical pedagogy activism could turn into a hefty and individual burden rather than a shared practice. I discussed how engagement in IYS helped the girls resist unwanted demands to educate others and gave some of them the confidence to do so if they so desired. For some participants, engaging in critical pedagogy outside of IYS was necessary to enact wider social change. These findings illustrate some of the more interpersonal and mundane
practices of participants’ activism, which I suggest are more accessible and safer for them to undertake in comparison to more public and violent forms of activism. This helps counter dominant public narratives about young people as either politically apathetic (Bulbeck & Harris, 2008; Manning, 2014) or exceptional activists (Bent, 2016; Edell et al., 2016).

This thesis has shown that friendship can lend support to contesting structural inequalities in everyday life and can encourage as well as hinder various kinds of activism. Moreover, activist practices can be undertaken with friends, strengthen friendship bonds and even constitute an important part of friendship. These findings contribute to scholarship that explores the politically transformative potentials of friendship (Banerjea et al., 2017; Chowdhury & Philipose, 2016; Lugones & Rosezelle, 1995). A focus on friendship also engenders a better understanding of the everyday activism of Black girls and girls of colour, which lacks scholarly recognition (Kelly, 2018).

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To conclude, while friendship is usually perceived as wholly separate from, and even alien to, structural inequalities and power relations, this thesis has analysed how friendship can be highly political. I argue that friendship interactions and bonds can involve oppression and injustice and can therefore require complex navigations. At the same time, I contend that friendship ties, concepts and practices can help counter the outcomes of injustice, challenge inequalities and cultivate activism for social change. These politics of friendship refine scholarly understandings of some of the ways that friendship is formed, fostered and navigated, how it is conceptualised, idealised and practised and the positive, negative and ambivalent experiences this relationship can entail. This thesis therefore offers a contribution to the field of the sociology of friendship and demonstrates what studies of girls’ friendship have to offer to the field, which mostly draws on studies with adults (see also Vincent et al., 2018, pp. 9–10).
7.2. Additional contributions, considerations and future directions

The above section has detailed many of the scholarly contributions that this thesis makes, especially to the sociology of friendship. Additionally, this thesis sought to bring scholarly attention to some of the experiences and perspectives of Black girls and girls of colour in Scotland. These groups are understudied in the UK, especially in Scotland (Hill & Sobande, 2019), and are often depicted through deficit and simplistic perspectives in academic, media and public policy discourses (Ludhra, 2015; Meetoo, 2021; Palmer, 2016). Studies that seek to challenge such perspectives are often set in schools, while the uniqueness of this study is that it focuses on a youth work setting and sheds light on the political significance of this setting for participants. The friendships of Black girls and girls of colour, which lie at the heart of this study, are also under-researched (Delgado, 2016; George, 2007, p. 115).

At the same time, the girls who participated in this study should not be assumed to represent all Black girls and girls of colour in Scotland. The girls who attended IYS programmes might have differed from those who did not in important respects yet those are mostly beyond the scope of the study to assess. As mentioned earlier, most fieldwork took place in online settings, which enabled the participation of those who did not live in Edinburgh but curtailed or prevented the participation of some IYS members due to technological issues and lack of safe spaces at home. The digital divide likely meant that those who were marginalised in terms of socio-economic background were most negatively affected (McBride & Ralph, 2020).

Additionally, because participants’ specific ethnicities and (in most cases) their religions were not mentioned for the sake of maintaining anonymity and because participants themselves often preferred to discuss their similarities over differences and were mostly silent about their experiences relating to mixed ethnic background, class, colourism and racism within communities of colour and to some extent their religious identities, this thesis largely does not analyse how these aspects of their identities related to the politics of friendship. This thesis supports the view that Black girls and girls of colour in Scotland, together and separately, are not a homogenous group and have different experiences and views, which are also informed by intersections of different social categories they belong to (see also Hill & Sobande, 2019; Ludhra, 2015; Sobande & Hill, 2022). However, ethical considerations and the data produced meant this diversity was not necessarily possible to discuss and
analyse. I am aware that this risks the flattening of differences and restricts the ability to challenge stereotypes, for example those relating to the religious identities of various ethnic groups (Jameela, 2021).

The thesis joins recent scholarly endeavours to diversify girlhood studies (Cann et al., 2018; Desai, 2021) and youth studies (Cooper et al., 2021; Harries et al., 2016) and sheds light on how ethnicity and racism (along with other intersecting forms of oppression) inform and play out in girls’ friendships, a topic which has received little attention in the sociology of friendship. However, I am highly conscious of the fact that this thesis has drawn almost exclusively on literature from the Global North. This is the dominant literature in the sociology of friendship as well as in youth studies and girlhood studies. In the context of this thesis, the dominance of literature from the Global North is partially justified because the study took place in the Global North. Nevertheless, there are complex constitutive connections between the Global North and the Global South (Bhambra, 2007), including Scotland’s colonial legacy (Liinpää, 2018; Sobande & hill, 2022), that shaped the life histories of the study’s participants and their families (Bryan et al., 2018). This was one of the reasons why it was important for me to bring Black feminist theory into this scholarly examination, as even though most of it was produced in the Global North it takes some of these complex contexts into account. Sociological work on friendship in the Global South has begun to emerge (e.g. Mao & Zhu, 2023; Zhu, 2019) and there is likely more that is not accessible to the Global North. This scholarship has largely been beyond the scope of this thesis to consider, though it certainly begs the question of how it might have informed the analysis of the study if it had been used and whether it would have produced different insights.

This thesis contributes to Black feminist theory by giving more analytical consideration to age (Collins, 2021b). However, while class and the ways it intersected with race and gender likely shaped participants’ lives in significant ways (e.g. Bryan et al., 2018; Sobande & hill, 2022), it was not a significant category of analysis in this thesis. This was because participants did not explicitly bring up this topic and I did not feel that I could discuss this with them in a sensitive and ethical manner. Future research should consider how this might be done. The thesis also contributes to Black feminist theory by exploring the political significance of friendship (see also Brown, 2021; Goins, 2011;
Sowinske & Jamal, 2019), as this relationship has received less conceptual attention in the field compared to other relationships and social configurations.

In terms of methodology, this thesis has demonstrated the rich data that can be co-produced about the politics of friendship through an ethnographic study that utilised various qualitative methods. It also stressed the importance of engendering meaningful, enjoyable and beneficial engagements for (young) people who participate in a study. Additionally, it has considered instances where friendship can be a sensitive topic to explore and the careful considerations this necessitates.

The thesis also offers important insights to practitioners and policy-makers whose work relates to the lives, peer relationships and political engagement of Black girls and girls of colour and in some cases more broadly to young people from marginalised groups. In the context of youth work, the thesis sheds light on the significance of friendship, which has received little acknowledgement in European youth work policy (Ord et al., 2022). It also illuminates the politically transformative potentials of culturally- and gender-specific youth work provision and safe spaces (Batsleer, 2008; Batsleer & McCarthy, 2019).

My observations in mixed-gender IYS activities and conversations with participants and youth workers suggest that friendship was also politically significant for Black boys and boys of colour who attended IYS. Their friendship politics as well as the friendship politics of non-binary young people (of whom there was only one in this study) could make for fruitful future research. Studies on this topic should also be conducted with young people and adults who belong to other marginalised communities. Research with care experienced people (Roesch-Marsh & Emond, 2021) and LGBT people (Formby, 2017) has noted some of the political potentials of friendship in their lives. Considering the role of friendship in other forms and settings of youth activism than those discussed in this thesis could also prove generative. Youth-led social movements might prove particularly relevant in this regard (see also Taft, 2010). When youth climate activist Vanessa Nakate was asked in an interview what sustains her fight, one of the things she mentioned was: ‘Being part of a movement, and that sense of friendship, community and working together’ (Ireland, 2023, para. 15).
7.3. Final remarks

This thesis and the study it is based on sought to foreground friendship, a relatively understudied personal relationship in sociology, and interrogate its political aspects in participants’ lives. However, I do not wish to imply that friendships were the only meaningful personal relationships that participants had nor that they were the sole ties that carried political significance for them. I recognise that friendship might have featured more prominently in participants’ accounts because they were aware that this was the focus of the study and due to the questions I asked. Nevertheless, other relationships sometimes came up in the data and were mentioned in the thesis when relevant. I also touched on instances when there were overlaps between friendship and other personal relationships in participants’ experiences and conceptualisations and noted the somewhat limited vocabulary that exists to describe meaningful relationships. Additionally, not every aspect of participants’ politics was enmeshed in their friendships. At times, this thesis discussed issues that had some connection to friendship but went far beyond them, such as tensions between affinity and identity politics, the burdens of enacting critical pedagogy and the challenges of sustaining safe spaces.

Still, I contend that friendship is worthy of scholarly focus and that exploring its politics generates unique sociological understandings about friendship, the political and the lives of Black girls and girls of colour in Scotland. In particular, it sheds light on the ways the relational and the political are entwined. It also encourages us, especially those who belong to socially dominant and powerful groups, to think more carefully about how our friendships might reproduce or challenge structural inequalities and the ways they can affect social change.

Finally, just as Black people and their experiences are not exclusively defined by the oppressions they experience (Sobande & hill, 2022, p. 3), the same is true for participants in this study as well as their experiences and understandings of friendship. In the last workshop I conducted with the Senior Girls’ Group, we discussed what ‘political’ meant and whether friendship is political. During the conversation, I asked participants what would happen if they had a friend who did not support the Black Lives Matter movement. Sun replied:
I guess then they don’t value you as a human being and they are racist. Because why is someone’s life political? …That means that you don’t look at me as equal as you. And why should I be friends with you if you think my life is political? I didn’t make that choice to be Black, you know what I mean?

Sun and other participants did not want to be defined by racism and other forms of oppression. As I have shown, the ways that their friendship bonds were shaped by and contended with structural power relations and inequalities not only resulted in painful experiences but also in empowering and potentially transformative ones. Moreover, while I contend that a political lens was needed to more fully understand participants’ friendship experiences and understandings, their friendships and lives were not entirely or solely political. I am choosing to end this thesis with a text written by Marina in one of the study’s workshops towards the middle of the fieldwork. The text contains glimpses of some of the politics of friendship I have discussed in this thesis, but also so much more than that.

A friend is:

Someone where pretences are not needed, they accept that you are not good 100% of the time, but that doesn’t mean you are not good.

Someone who listens to your deepest insecurities but doesn’t weaponise them. They also listen to the most trivial thought.

It is a relationship built from memories both good and bad.

It is a conscious decision, to make space for someone while knowing the same is extended to you.

A friend is someone you feel safe with. -Marina
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