

## **Unite App: Activism for youth**

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# **Unite App | activism for youth**

Empower youth to learn about, discuss, and participate in civic activism.

**Project Type:** UX/UI Mobile App Design

**Role:** UX/UI Design, UX research

**Industry:** Social Media, Activism, Youth

**Tools:** Figma, Notion, Illustrator, Zoom

**Methods:** Surveys, remote interviews, personas, sketching, low-fidelity prototyping, think-aloud usability testing, iteration, stakeholder presentation

**Duration:** 4 months

## **Overview**

UNITE is a mobile concept I designed to help youth navigate civic and social advocacy. During the pandemic, when in person engagement vanished, I noticed a gap. Young people wanted to stay involved, but they found online spaces to be either overwhelming or purely performative. I wanted to create a platform that prioritized learning and safety over social metrics.

**The Problem:** Many young people cared about civic issues but lacked a safe, low pressure way to discuss

them or take action without the fear of public judgement.

**The Users:** I focused on youth aged 18–24 who were navigating activism and community building while physically isolated during the COVID 19 lockdowns.

**My Role:** As the UX/UI Designer, I was responsible for the full design cycle. I led the initial research, developed user personas, designed the core interactions, and validated the work through usability testing.

**What I Did:** I translated my research findings into an idea first model. Instead of building a profile heavy social app, I focused on creating a space for thoughtful dialogue. I then spent four months iterating on the prototype based on how users actually moved through the app.

**The Outcome:** I delivered a platform concept that supports a gradual journey from learning to action. The design was recognized for its alignment with youth needs and its focus on making digital participation feel meaningful rather than stressful.

## **Discovery: Understanding the Problem Through Users**

To get a real sense of how youth experienced activism during the pandemic, I conducted surveys and remote interviews with participants aged 18–24. Due to ethical limitations regarding minors, I focused on this young adult demographic to explore what actually motivated them, or, more often, what discouraged them from getting involved in advocacy.

What I found was a consistent disconnect. While the internet made it easier to access information, it didn't necessarily make participation feel impactful. In fact, many participants described an increased sense of anxiety. They felt that public digital spaces were too tied to their personal identity and social judgment, which made them hesitate to voice their opinions.

### **Research Snapshot**

To ground these observations, I designed a mixed methods research phase that looked specifically at how the pandemic shifted the way youth engage with social issues.

- **Who I spoke with:** Youth aged 18–24 from various educational and social backgrounds.
- **Methods used:** I combined broad surveys with one-on-one remote interviews to get both the "what" and the "why."
- **What I looked for:** I focused on their awareness of existing platforms, their emotional context while online, and the specific barriers that made them pull back from participating.

### **Key Patterns Observed:**

- Very low awareness of any existing youth focused advocacy tools.
- A significant hesitation to engage driven by the performative nature of current social media.
- A feeling that online actions don't lead to real world change.

Despite these hurdles, there was a strong interest in contributing, provided they could find a safe, guided pathway to do so. Based on this research, I developed personas to represent different youth contexts including younger users who felt isolated and uncertain about their influence, and older users who were interested but time-constrained and disengaged.

### **Name: Sarah**

Age: 14

**Context:** Sarah recently moved to Waterloo and is navigating a new school and social environment during a period of heavy online learning. Most of her interaction with peers and information now happens digitally.

**Experience:** Sarah feels isolated by remote schooling and overwhelmed by the volume and noise of social media. While she cares about social and civic issues and wants to contribute, she struggles to find spaces

that feel safe, constructive, and accessible.

### **Needs & Challenges:**

- Wants to contribute meaningfully to issues she cares about
- Lacks guidance on how to get involved in realworld impact
- Feels disconnected and isolated from peers and community
- Finds existing online spaces noisy, performative, or overwhelming

**What This Persona Helped Clarify:** Sarah represented young users who were motivated but unsupported. Designing for her highlighted the need for:

- Clear, structured entry points into engagement
- Spaces that feel safe and low-pressure
- Reduced emphasis on social performance
- Guidance from learning into action

This persona grounded the project in the emotional and social realities of younger users and reinforced the importance of psychological safety alongside usability.

## **The Pivot: Reframing the Challenge**

Synthesizing my research was a turning point for the project. It shifted how I viewed the entire problem. I realized that the primary obstacle wasn't a lack of interest from youth, as I had initially assumed. Instead, the real barriers were a lack of psychological safety, a lack of clarity, and a low sense of perceived impact. I noticed that while youth wanted to engage, they didn't feel confident that their contributions actually mattered. They didn't feel safe expressing unpolished ideas in public digital spaces. I concluded that traditional social platforms often amplify these anxieties by prioritizing visibility, personal identity, and social comparison over genuine learning and dialogue.

This insight allowed me to reframe the challenge: the goal wasn't simply to move activism online, but to

design an environment that intentionally supports trust, understanding, and confidence before asking for participation. This led me to my core design question: How might we help youth learn about, discuss, and contribute to civic issues in a way that feels safe and meaningful without replicating the social pressures of traditional media?

## **Design Strategy & Decisions**

### **Design Strategy: Prioritizing Ideas Over Identity**

Most social platforms today are built around the profiles, follower counts, and popularity metrics. However, my research into mental health and the fear of judgment suggested that this identity heavy model was exactly what was keeping youth from speaking up. I made the deliberate choice to shift UNITE toward topic centered interaction rather than identity centered interaction. I wanted users to be able to explore issues, contribute ideas, and respond to others without the social weight.

**The Trade-off:** Every design decision involves a compromise. I recognized that by de-emphasizing personal profiles, I was potentially reducing long term reputation building and accountability on the platform. I felt this was a necessary trade-off: it made the initial step of participation feel much less risky and more approachable, especially for users who were completely new to civic engagement.

### **Participation as a Learning Journey**

One of the biggest pain points I identified was the blank canvas problem where users often want to help but don't know where to start. Instead of a standard, high pressure social feed, I structured the UNITE experience as a deliberate progression from understanding to contribution. I designed the interface so that users can begin by simply learning about a topic. Once they feel informed, they can move into discussion spaces, and only when they feel ready do they transition into taking direct action. This sequencing was

intentional; it respects different comfort levels and avoids pressuring users into public participation before they've built up the necessary confidence. By removing the "all or nothing" approach to activism, I was able to create a flow that feels supportive rather than demanding.

## **Designing for Tangible Contribution**

During my interviews, I heard a common frustration. Online activism often felt purely symbolic. Participants wanted to see their efforts lead to something real. In response, I moved away from simple "post and comment" layouts and designed spaces specifically for collaborative drafting, structured feedback, and idea refinement. By providing these tools, I wanted to shift the user's focus to actually building a solution. This helped the entire experience feel more constructive and grounded. Instead of a performative social post, users were working together to refine proposals, which made their participation feel like a tangible contribution to a larger goal.

## **Strategy: Sustaining Engagement via Progress**

My research showed that while youth wanted to contribute, they often lacked the confidence to start. I introduced lightweight gamification to build momentum, but I intentionally focused these elements on personal progress rather than public popularity to avoid creating a competitive or performative environment.

- **Participation Milestones:** I designed private badges for completing learning modules or refining ideas, acting as personal markers of growth.
- **Collective Progress:** Visual indicators show how the entire community is moving toward a shared goal, shifting the focus from individual fame to collective impact.

**The Trade-off:** I recognized that gamification can sometimes distract from the actual cause. To avoid this, I kept the system subtle and non competitive. This ensured that the rewards reinforced the mission rather

than overshadowing it, making participation feel encouraging rather than like a game.

## Encouraging Thoughtful Dialogue Through Annotation

One of the loudest pieces of feedback from my research was that likes and comments felt too shallow for serious topics. Participants wanted more meaningful ways to interact. To support this, I introduced an annotation feature that allows users to respond directly to specific sections of a proposal or article, rather than just leaving a generic comment at the bottom.

By designing for contextual feedback, I was able to achieve three things:

- **Focused Discussion:** It moved the conversation away from broad, often shallow reactions and toward constructive, specific critiques.
- **Targeted Feedback:** Users could address the nuance of an idea, making the dialogue far more useful for the person who drafted the proposal.
- **Lower Social Risk:** Responding to a specific idea or sentence feels much less intimidating than responding directly to a person. This lowered the barrier for entry for quieter users.

This feature was central to my goal of making participation feel thoughtful and purposeful. It reinforced the idea first model by ensuring the platform was a space for collaborative refinement, not just social noise.

## Prototyping, Testing & Iteration

I started with sketches to map out the structure and flow, then moved into low-fidelity prototypes for testing. Using think-aloud usability sessions, I quickly realized that my early versions were too intimidating. Users found the navigation confusing, the discussion spaces too exposed, and the notifications distracting.

## Considerations: Constraints: Accessibility, Privacy & Ethics

Several real world constraints heavily influenced my design direction. Because I couldn't interview users under 18 directly due to ethical limitations, I had to rely on proxy research and young adult interviews to infer the needs of younger teens. Additionally, the sensitive nature of civic discussion meant that privacy and safety weren't just nice to have, they were the foundation of the project. These requirements, alongside UNICEF's need for inclusive access without a complex onboarding process, reinforced the importance of privacy defaults. I chose to treat features like guest access, anonymity, and visible moderation as core design principles that dictated the entire user experience.

## Outcome

The final concept was recognized for its thoughtful framing and deep alignment with the needs of young users, ultimately earning first place among the participating teams. While the award was a great validation, the more significant outcome was the project's success as a proof of concept. It demonstrated that UX design can and should go beyond usability. By prioritizing emotional safety and trust, we can influence a user's willingness to participate in complex social spaces, proving that a safety first approach is a viable model for the future of digital advocacy.

## Results Snapshot

- **Task Completion:** During usability testing, participants were able to navigate the full engagement funnel (from learning to taking action) without any external guidance.
- **Reduced Friction:** User hesitation around posting decreased significantly after I introduced anonymity options and a softer visual hierarchy.

- **Enhanced Dialogue:** The annotation feature successfully increased the depth and specificity of feedback compared to the shallow responses seen in free-form comments.
- **User Sentiment:** Participants consistently described the platform as "calmer" and "more focused" than traditional social media, validating the safety first design approach.

## Reflection & Next Steps

This project reinforced a vital lesson: designing for social impact requires designing for vulnerability, not just efficiency. Creating a space for meaningful contribution meant prioritizing emotional safety and trust as much as I prioritized interaction patterns. Moving forward, I would focus on validating and strengthening the platform responsibly through these next steps:

- **Community Partnerships:** Partnering with youth serving organizations, such as schools and community groups, to evaluate the platform within facilitated, real world programs.
- **Safety & Accountability:** Further exploring moderation and escalation models to better support psychological safety without sacrificing user accountability.
- **Multi-Stakeholder Testing:** Expanding testing to include educators and youth facilitators to ensure the onboarding and guidance features are effective for all users.
- **Impact Measurement:** Developing a framework to measure whether long-term participation actually increases a user's confidence, understanding, and sense of agency over time.