

Chapter 14

The Digital Environment: Contributions and Challenges for the Children's Participation From a Perspective of Equity

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ABSTRACT

The digital environment has the potential to guarantee inclusion in child participation initiatives and decision-making processes. This chapter looks at findings from a recent research project on child participation in the local area in Spain, and from a participatory diagnosis with children and adolescents from vulnerable neighbourhoods in the metropolitan area of Barcelona. Based on these findings, the authors explore the roles, uses, and specific areas of youth participation in the digital sphere. The results indicate that children and adolescents from vulnerable areas use social networks to communicate, entertain themselves, and share information, but not usually to participate, be socially active, or express active citizenship. The chapter reflects on the need for education to contribute to young people's digital literacy to increase the opportunities for participation and to create diverse, inclusive, and participatory spaces and strategies from a perspective of equity in the digital environment.

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INTRODUCTION

Active and significant participation of children in decision-making promotes a more equitable and inclusive perspective of action, wherever it takes place. Reference authors in this field (Hart, 1992; Pozo, 2014; Novella et al., 2021) defend children's rights and have written about the importance of child and adolescent (C&A, from now) participation as a way of creating a fairer educational system and developing social and civic skills for more equitable and democratic societies in the future. In this work, we understand child participation as the process by which C&A, individually and/or collectively, express their opinions and decisions in matters that concern them directly and as an expression of the right to take part in collective decision-making, regardless of their origins and circumstances.

In recent years, there has been a proliferation of social organizations and protests led and supported by adolescents and young people expressing their opposition to social and economic inequality and the lack of "real democracy" in various parts of the world; for example, the movement of indignance in Spain (2011), the Arab Spring (2011), Greece (2012), and the Occupy movement (2011), first in the United States and then in other countries. More recently, in 2018, Greta Thunberg addressed the United Nations during the 24th Conference of the Parties (COP24) in Poland after initiating and leading a school strike in defence of the planet. Millions of students from over 150 countries also participated in this strike, asserting their right to participate as children and adolescents. These are just a few examples of how young people can organize themselves to exercise and demand their right to participate (Ballesté, 2022; Soler-i-Martí et al., 2021).

The combination of online social media and traditional channels has played a key role in these protests. The Internet and social media have had an immense impact on the proliferation of citizen participation channels, which allow citizens to interact with each other and with public representatives based on horizontality and connectivity (Claro et al., 2020). Children and adolescents are contributing to the development of a "participatory culture" mediated by technology, characterized by greater ease of expression and dedicated support for creation and exchange in social connection contexts. Based on these conceptual premises, child participation needs to be consolidated in digital environments. It is necessary to overcome narratives of risk and distrust and promote the potential of technologies to get children and adolescents involved in civic participation in their reference communities and in the public sphere. Children and adolescents use social networks as a source of information on political and social issues and perceive these networks as a fast and useful way to exercise their right to participate (Cho et al., 2020).

In this context of a significant emergence of adolescent and youth protests, several studies have been carried out to analyse adolescent and youth participation in socio-political life, and the conditioning factors, characteristics, and forms of organization of this participation (Soler-i-Martí et al., 2021; Boulianne, 2020; Council of Europa, 2016; Dennis, 2018; García et al., 2014; 2016; Harlow, 2012; Kaun & Uldam, 2017; Novella et al., 2021; Unicef, 2016). These studies show that it is necessary to rethink the ways of ensuring a place for adolescents and young people in the socio-political sphere, promoting their participation in decision-making processes (Farrow, 2016) as well as their social responsibility. Likewise, other studies (Atkins & Hart, 2010) highlight participation as an essential condition for building a more democratic, fairer society with higher levels of equity and social cohesion. These works, based on Marshall's (1950) concept of social citizenship, argue that to fully participate in public life, citizenship needs to reach a certain threshold of material and social well-being.

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A recent study on child participation in the local world in four autonomous communities in Spain concluded that, although it can be seen that children can access the different participatory activities in municipalities as everyone can participate, there are structural reasons related to gender, gender identity, cultural diversity, nationality, physical characteristics, age, tastes/preferences, social class, abilities, etc., that make it difficult for children to be included or to develop public policies based on equity (Laforgue et al., 2022). This is an important challenge for the adult world, which is reluctant to accept the questioning of the hierarchical system based on the criterion of “age” and the adult-centred perspective (Ballesté & Soler-i-Martí, 2023) that prevails in our societies. It also clearly shows the necessity to analyse the meaning of the concept of inclusion in creating practices and spaces for children and young people to participate, and to thus progress towards fairer and more responsible societies for all age groups and all contexts, especially the most vulnerable.

Considering the important mobilizing function of social networks and the Internet, as well as the leading role that adolescents and young people are playing in civic protests, it is important to analyse the commitment and participation of the youth collective in the media, without forgetting social inequalities.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In 2005, the World Youth Report of the United Nations (UN, 2005) recognized that Internet-based activities related to civic and political causes are a factor that counteracts the decline in traditional civic engagement among teenagers and young people. Digital technology (the World Wide Web, social media, and mobile devices) is providing an “architecture of participation” that impacts forms of participation and shapes contemporary social movements. The new media ecosystem involves new spaces and forms of socialization in which young people can meet, learn, create, participate and act (Agudo et al., 2011; Lasén & Martínez, 2008; Scolari et al., 2018).

In fact, with the emergence and popularization of the concepts of ‘participatory culture’ and ‘convergence culture’ proposed by Jenkins (2006), there has been intense debate and theorizing on how citizens (usually young people) use technologies to participate and contribute to the different spaces of the media public sphere. Jenkins (2006) highlights that this new ‘convergence culture’ promotes spaces for interaction between producers and consumers. Spaces that are presented in a complex, uncertain and uneven way. It is obvious that media corporations continue to hold more power than individuals; however, individuals now demand their right to participate. According to Jenkins et al. (2013), this ‘participation’ goes beyond creating and circulating content and includes a participatory-political aspect that refers to the idea of ‘community participation’. Therefore, the new media environments also include collaboration, coordination, and the creation of user networks.

Guerrero-Pico et al. (2019) and Pereira et al. (2018) point out that the current production and participation dynamics are dispersed and complex and they vary according to the contexts of the young people as well as their socioeconomic, educational, and family backgrounds. Despite the shortcomings and limitations of the new media ecology, we are now immersed in it, and it has the potential to promote users’ empowerment and participation. The so-called empowerment and participation technologies (EPT) are based on the idea that it is necessary not only to disseminate information, but also to create it through active participation in ideological and social terms. Democratizing production through technologies means thinking about the social cohesion of groups, ideas, interests, values, and shared proposals based on a common goal that encourages, organizes and facilitates active citizenship in today’s knowledge and

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learning society. Concepts such as democracy, shared space, and virtual agora are gaining momentum in this new setting, which could involve and enable critical analysis, knowledge exchange, and collective decision-making (Reig, 2012).

Experts such as Hesmondhalgh (2017), Uldam (2017), and Cammaerts (2013) consider that Internet technologies can not only make political and business agents visible but also give visibility to civil society agents. From an inclusive approach and from the perspective of social participation in education (Apple & Beane, 2007), it is understood that the challenge in this framework is to turn this production, exchange and consumption of interactive digital media into platforms to give a voice to groups and minorities who have been excluded from these media. At the same time, these groups and minorities need to learn to use digital media for dialogue, to recognize their own identity, to express their problems and to meet other cultures in the virtual community (Sabariego, 2009). The challenge is to practice a communicative, reconstructive, and critical ethic in the new digital environments (Kim, 2015). Within the framework of “Critical Educational Technology” (Fainholc, 2008), interesting paths have been opened up for exchanging experiences and new forms of active socialization in which teens and young people use the Internet and social networks to generate spaces for meeting, creation, participation, and action. All this force us to seriously consider the transformation of schools into educational environments of democratic quality that allow knowledge to be generated and citizenship and participation to be carried out in the digital sphere.

The participatory potential of technology depends on the civic and political uses made of it, and the more participatory experiences children and adolescents have in the offline world, the more likely they are to engage in online participatory processes, and vice versa (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2018). Echeita (2017) indicates three major challenges for inclusive education in schools, which can be applied to child participation in the digital environment: (a) that all people are welcomed in their diversity; (b) that all children feel recognized, and meaningful social relationships are built within the group; and (c) that there are sufficient strategies and forms of organization that allow the learning possibilities and contributions of all people to be enhanced without leaving anyone or anything out (Moretin-Encina et al., 2022). The proposal presented in this chapter focuses on the role of education in promoting child participation in these new media environments and promoting the participation of young people who live in socially vulnerable contexts. This proposal answers the challenge of inclusion in relation to child and adolescent participation, understood as a substantive right that must be addressed so that all minors can enjoy and exercise this right in the best conditions.

Inclusion and Equity as Values in Participation

From the inclusive citizenship perspective, child participation is understood as the process by which children and adolescents, individually and/or collectively, express their opinions and decisions on matters directly affecting them based on their age and maturity (Novella et al., 2021). It is the expression of the right to take part in collective decision-making on issues that affect us as groups or communities (Pozo, 2014), with a certain presumption of empowerment on the part of the individuals or collectives involved.

Therefore, it is not enough to provide avenues for children to participate in community dynamics. If inclusion refers to guaranteeing access for the entire population to spaces for participation, it is necessary to ensure that these spaces are inclusive. That is, that there are equal guarantees and conditions for exercising the right to participate to ensure that the participation is fair. Children and adolescents are situated in diverse social structures that give rise to different needs and experiences and, at the same

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time, offer greater or lesser access to participation (Ballesté & Feixa, 2019; Martínez-Palacios, 2017). These structural situations shape people's rights and access to resources according to their gender, origin, racialization, social class, physical and intellectual capacities, physical and mental health, gender identity, etc. Combined with the status of child or adolescent, ascription to one or more of these social categories translates into added disadvantages for exercising rights in general and participation in particular. This, in turn, weakens social inclusion and the exercise of citizenship and deepens social vulnerability, particularly in the digital environment.

The aforementioned project on the state of child participation in the municipalities of four autonomous communities in Spain, did not find a consistent concept of 'inclusion' regarding child participation at the local level. While there is a consensus on the need to continue promoting equal opportunities for child participation as a fundamental right, the project found two main obstacles. First, in some cases, adult centrism is considered the main obstacle. The second obstacle is the concept of childhood as a diverse collective with different circumstances and needs that hinder child participation, due to at least three types of factors (Mateos et al., 2023): personal factors, structural factors, and factors related to the individual's own participation experiences. These factors relate to the lack of economic resources to pay for certain activities (fees, travel, materials, etc.) or that families do not have time to accompany the children; barriers associated with the territorial dispersion of some municipalities or the fragmentation of cities, which can lead to certain neighbourhoods or educational centres being segregated, outside municipal participation experiences; and families as a factor that can limit the inclusion of children in participation experiences for various reasons (lack of interest, prioritization of other activities). Most of the proposed activities in the municipalities are not only carried out to ensure the participation of all children and adolescents in the municipality but also to make their existence visible and raise awareness among the rest of the population, fostering empathy with the diversity of situations that individuals may face. The importance of networking with schools, welfare services, and social entities is also emphasized. In addition, it is considered beneficial to diversify the avenues of action, supplementing child participation bodies with other strategies such as suggestion boxes, the use of social media, or other communication channels (radio, magazine, etc.) where they can express themselves. In this regard, harnessing the potential of technologies is highlighted in some municipalities as an inclusive strategy, as it provides an opportunity to strengthen child and adolescent participation with a channel and means of involvement that can reach more young people and be aligned with their languages and ways of relating. The project acknowledges the increased use of technology since the pandemic; however, the aim is to integrate it as a process of consultation and participatory action, rather than just for communication and managing virtual meetings.

Recognizing child participation as a right implies taking on the responsibility of guaranteeing it for all people under equal conditions from a perspective that addresses the different axes of inequality, not only in relation to access to these spaces but also in the relational dynamics that take place in them. There is a decisive position regarding diversity and inclusiveness of the people in the community and the professionals who accompany the process. This involves training for horizontal, dialogic and egalitarian communication for dealing with the mechanisms of privilege and oppression in these relational dynamics and confronting them. Inclusion implies transforming the education and participation systems and spaces so that all people have the same opportunities to develop and influence their realities. If we do not adopt the inclusion approach, we run two risks: (a) that we generate homogeneous spaces that are poor in diversity and unrealistic in our socially complex municipalities; and (b) that the most vulnerable children and adolescents, due to factors such as socio-economic level, functional diversity, origin,

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ethnicity, age, gender, sexual diversity, territory or unique living conditions, are left out of these spaces, reducing their educational opportunities and increasing social inequality.

An intersectionality approach (Crenshaw, 1989; Rodó-Zárate, 2021) is necessary for analysing and acting in a sensitive way on the different axes of privilege and oppression and how these occur in social dynamics. It is necessary to delve into the meaning of the term “inclusion” and take a broad view of the multi-causal nature of barriers, avoiding discourses that point to individual factors as the sole explanation for these, and highlighting the social and institutional mechanisms that create systematic barriers for certain groups of people. The ability to unveil and reverse these mechanisms is a key issue in achieving more inclusive spaces. In this regard, it is interesting to review the work of Romero et al. (2021) since it proposes an analysis of child participation from three approaches: the capabilities, feminist, and intercultural approaches, which complement the extended rights-based approach. These approaches, which are not exclusive, make it possible to highlight the social, cultural, and institutional dynamics and barriers that limit child participation, reflecting the power structures present in all societies.

Based on the above-mentioned frameworks, this chapter has a twofold objective: a) first, to present the perspectives and viewpoints of children and adolescents living in socially vulnerable environments on the uses and functions of online participation (the platforms they participate in and their uses of social media and the Internet); and b) second, to identify both the favourable and unfavourable conditions for this participation, as well as the motivations, rewards and personal benefits of the digital environment as a means of participation that can contribute to generating meaningful and inclusive participation practices and spaces.

METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

This chapter presents the result of a participatory diagnosis that can serve as an instrument for local development and an opportunity to build relationships and comprehensive proposals in response to online child participation. The goal was to prioritize and, at the same time, discover the perspectives, interests and points of view of children and adolescents involved in the study. The aim was to promote co-constructed participation and give the young people a voice so they could analyse their own needs, share these and propose action paths to improve and boost young people’s involvement and participation in local development.

The study involved 159 girls and 138 boys between 12 and 16 years old. The study area, the Barcelona metropolitan area (the city of L’Hospitalet del Llobregat in general, and the neighbourhoods of Collblanc, Torrassa, and La Florida, in particular), includes neighbourhoods with advanced social marginalization (Wacquant, 2008) due to residential and school segregation processes.

The data reflect a particularly diverse sample: 26% of participants were born in Spain, while 15% came from Ecuador, 12% from Bolivia, 11% from the Dominican Republic, 7% from India and 29% were born in various other places in South America and Asia. Only 27% of the teenagers have always lived in Catalonia, while 16.2% have lived in Catalonia for between five and seven years, 15.8% between two and four years, and 15.5% have been living in Catalonia for less than two years. We used non-probability convenience sampling to select participants due to the accessibility and proximity of the schools participating in the project.

The participatory diagnosis has a mixed method triangulation design (Cresswell, 2005; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003), combining complementary qualitative and quantitative techniques. This chapter

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analyses a questionnaire and three focus groups. These techniques help us to collect the children's and adolescents' voices, opinions, perceptions, and uses of online participation.

The main goal of the questionnaire was to identify how the young people understand participation and how they participate. Using ten Likert-type questions (on a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being not at all and 5 being a lot) and three open-ended questions, the questionnaire explores seven dimensions: i) the understanding of participation; ii) spaces and levels of participation; iii) barriers to participation; iv) emotions and feelings experienced when participating; v) conditions that favour participation; vi) online participation; and vii) satisfaction with participation. The questionnaire was administered virtually and in person during school hours to students in each of the schools.

This chapter presents the results of two of these scales: spaces and levels of participation, focusing specifically on online participation (platforms the young people participate in and their uses of social media); and conditioning factors of online participation (favourable conditions and barriers). For the data analysis, we used descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) and inferential analyses of the dimensions of the scales through an exploratory factor analysis using the statistical programme SPSS 21.0.

Based on a more reflective approach, we also organized three focus groups, one in each of the three schools located in the neighbourhoods involved in the project. With this technique, we aimed to gain a deeper insight into the C&A's perspectives and opinions on the personal motivations, rewards, and benefits of participating online. The script for the focus groups was organized into five major themes: i) spaces for participation; ii) conditioning factors of participation; iii) online participation; iv) rewards and benefits experienced; and v) suggestions for participation. Purposive sampling was used, and equality was respected when the groups were formed so that they contained a representative proportion of both sexes. The focus groups were facilitated by two members of the research team (a moderator and a person responsible for the narrative report and literal recording). The qualitative data were analysed using thematic content analysis and constant comparison (Libarkin & Kurdziel, 2002). After inductively and deductively generating the category system (Table 1), we analysed the information using the computer programme QSRNVIVO 11.

Table 1. Category system for analysing the focus groups

CATEGORY: NAME	CODE	DEFINITION
UNDERSTANDING OF PARTICIPATION	CONCPARTI	Understanding expressed by the participants
CONDITIONING FACTORS OF PARTICIPATION	COND	Elements that favour or hinder participation
PARTICIPATION SPACES	EP	Projects and spaces where young people participate
ONLINE SPACES	ONLINE	Participation in online platforms, content and motivation for participating
BENEFITS	BENE	Benefits of participation in terms of subjective experiences
PARTICIPATION PROPOSALS	PROPPARTI	Identification of future participation actions

Source: Compiled by the authors.

*The Digital Environment***RESEARCH RESULTS****Online Participation Platforms: Roles and Uses Among C&A**

The first significant aspect of the data concerns the function that social media performs in children's and adolescent's lives. It was found that they use social media to become informed about events or topics that interest them and to share and comment on them. As illustrated in Table 2, 92.3% of participants say that they participate in the online sphere as followers; 63.3% do so to find information; 55.2% to share information; and 59.3% use the Internet to comment on topics that interest them. These are the main types of online participation. The less common types of participation include those involving the use of social media to defend, condemn, or protest (19.5%) or to create blogs or websites with friends (33.3%). These results corroborate those of current studies, which suggest that the participation of young people in social media is more leisure-based than ideological (Smahel et al., 2020; Torrego & Gutiérrez, 2016; Jenkins, 2006).

Table 2. Roles and uses in online participation

		Count	% of N
I am a follower	Yes	274	92.3%
	No	23	7.7%
I find information	Yes	188	63.3%
	No	109	36.7%
I share information	Yes	164	55.2%
	No	133	44.8%
I use the Internet to vote on issues (in my class, in my neighbourhood, in my school)	Yes	112	37.7%
	No	185	62.3%
I publish my own content	Yes	130	43.8%
	No	167	56.2%
I create blogs, websites, etc. with my friends	Yes	99	33.3%
	No	198	66.7%
I use the Internet to organize parties	Yes	87	29.3%
	No	210	70.7%
I use the Internet to defend my beliefs (condemn, protest...)	Yes	58	19.5%
	No	239	80.5%
I use the Internet to comment on subjects that interest me	Yes	176	59.3%
	No	121	40.7%

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Regarding social media, WhatsApp (91.2%) and YouTube (88.9%) are the platforms where teenagers participate most intensively (Table 3).

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Platforms		Count	% of N
Twitter	Yes	117	39.4%
	No	180	60.6%
Google +	Yes	222	74.7%
	No	75	25.3%
Instagram	Yes	197	66.3%
	No	100	33.7%
WhatsApp	Yes	271	91.2%
	No	26	8.8%
Spotify	Yes	92	31.0%
	No	205	69.0%
Online newspapers	Yes	46	15.5%
	No	251	84.5%
Blogs	Yes	77	25.9%
	No	220	74.1%
YouTube	Yes	264	88.9%
	No	33	11.1%
Thematic websites	Yes	115	38.7%
	No	182	61.3%
Information websites	Yes	53	17.8%
	No	244	82.2%

Source: Compiled by the authors.

In their own words, they confirm that they use these resources primarily for social support (Costa, Cuzzocrea & Nuzaci, 2014):

“I have friends on Facebook, and I see some of them but not all of them.” (FG 3, st. 3, ref. 1) ¹

“I have WhatsApp and Instagram and I have some friends. But I don’t use Facebook or Twitter much.” (FG 3, st. 4, ref. 1)

“I use Skype to talk to my family; they live far away. I like to share my life here with them and to find out how they are there” (FG 3, st. 4, ref. 1)

At the other extreme, they have only a very limited presence and use of platforms or devices such as online newspapers (15.5%) and information websites (17.8%).

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C&A's Interest in and Motivation for Participating in Social Media

The main motives for participating in social media (Table 4) are closely related to their interests and to social needs linked to relating with others and inclusion. This agrees with the results obtained by Notley (2009) and Colás (2013).

Table 4. Motives for online participation

		Count	% of N
My interpersonal relationships (friends, family, etc.)	Yes	264	88.9%
	No	33	11.1%
My sports interests	Yes	207	69.7%
	No	90	30.3%
My artistic interests	Yes	224	75.4%
	No	73	24.6%
My political interests	Yes	61	20.5%
	No	236	79.5%
My religious interests	Yes	157	52.9%
	No	140	47.1%
My hobbies (computers, beauty, fashion...)	Yes	249	83.8%
	No	48	16.2%

Source: Compiled by the authors.

For most students in the focus groups, participation in the virtual world is particularly motivated by their interpersonal relationships (contact with friends and family) and their hobbies (sharing tastes related to computers, beauty, music, etc.), specifically, for 88.9% and 83.8%, respectively. Online platforms allow them to expand their social relationships, transcending the barriers of physical distance and time, which is particularly relevant in the context of this sample given its ethnic diversity. In their own words, they use social media for:

“Contacting people, especially people in other countries.” (FG 1, st. 1, ref. 1)

“Seeing what famous people post, gossiping...” (FG 1, st. 2, ref. 2)

“Uploading photos and that type of thing... and interacting with my friends.” (FG 1, st. 3, ref. 4)

In contrast, the aspects that least motivate them to participate are political interests (20.5%) and religious interests (52.9%). Social media, therefore, are essentially a form or a means by which to communicate and exchange personal information and to learn. However, the population analysed does not use social media as a way to channel solid responses to needs for action and support, or for rejecting specific events. Thus, they do not practice online activism. This potential also takes on added importance when we explore the students' satisfaction with online and offline participation in more depth. As Table

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5 shows, the teens who answered the questionnaire expressed a considerable level of satisfaction both in terms of their participation in school ($\bar{x}=3.39$) and in platforms and social media ($\bar{x}=3.23$). This confirms the results obtained in previous studies (García et al., 2014). Geographical and emotional proximity are important for determining this group's engagement in specific events or projects: they feel more involved in real, meaningful, more controlled, and more day-to-day settings.

Table 5. Satisfaction with online and offline participation

	Mean	Standard deviation
In your classroom	3.34	1.04
In your school	3.39	1.18
In your neighbourhood	2.85	1.39
In online platforms and social media	3.23	1.38

Source: Compiled by the authors.

C&A participate with their friends, and they do so in familiar places where they feel comfortable (the classroom and the school), within a climate of safety and trust, and at appropriate times when they can engage in activities related to their interests. Participating with friends is therefore a relevant conditioning factor, particularly in the school setting. In the offline context, teenagers are active protagonists and activists when it comes to issues that affect them, and they take on responsibilities when they participate, as the focus groups show:

“Helping people motivates me. That’s why I participate in these projects at school.” (FG 2, st. 2, ref. 3)

“Learning motivates me. I participate in the school welcome centre, so I can learn.” (FG 2, st. 3, ref. 4)

“You feel good because you contribute. You help and share ideas, you collaborate.” (FG 1, st. 4, ref. 13)

Following Arnillas and Paccuar (2006), these spaces can facilitate participation as an exercise in empowerment for C&A. This involves recognizing themselves as subjects capable of thinking, acting, getting involved in decision-making, defining what and how, and taking on challenges and facing consequences within the framework of horizontal relationships.

Limits and Potential of Social Media for Child Participation

Social media facilitate the exchange of information and interactivity among C&A. Social media are motivating and rewarding for this group. We can therefore confirm their value for promoting adolescent and youth dialogue and participation online. However, the research has also made it possible to identify the limits of adolescent participation and, more specifically, to understand their impact when we analyse participation in and through social media. As shown in Table 6, the main barriers are (in order of importance): a) adults' opinions; b) the way the system and the channels of participation operate; c) self-perception of having little influence over others (feeling ignored); d) lack of personal skills for par-

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participating (difficulty expressing themselves, lack of leadership skills); and (e) economic problems. To a lesser extent, they mention variables linked to their cultural and ethnic backgrounds as well as their gender.

Table 6. Conditioning factors in child participation: difficulties perceived

	MEAN	STANDARD DEVIATION
Adults seeing me as too young	2.82	1.41
Being a girl	1.88	1.23
Being a boy	1.80	1.20
Being from another country	2.11	1.30
Being ignored	2.74	1.40
The way the system operates (corruption)	2.75	1.36
Difficulties expressing myself	2.47	1.27
Lack of leadership skills	2.44	1.26
My personality	2.29	1.32
Economic problems	2.13	1.25

Source: compiled by the authors.

The set of factors identified reflects a more superficial or symbolic (Hart, 1992) form of participation, rather than effective participation. And it is certainly not spontaneous or self-managed. This suggests there is a paternalistic and/or adult-centric view of teenagers that is making it difficult for them to participate or to become more active citizens in issues that affect them and could make them feel involved. The focus groups confirm these results and highlight two types of limitations:

- a) Aspects involving the lack of trust and encouragement from families or adults who are significant to them, as well as economic difficulties and lack of time due to family responsibilities:

“My parents make it hard for me. I’m sure that if I wanted to do something else that they considered more worthwhile, they would help me more ... I don’t know ...” (FG 3, st. 5, ref. 1)

“Outside of school, I prefer to meet with my friends in the park ... everything else costs a lot of money.” (FG 2, st. 4, ref. 1)

- b) Aspects focused on the limits of virtual participation due to issues of a material nature, such as not having a computer at home or relying on free Wi-Fi to connect to the Internet; this is explained by economic difficulties regarding paying for data:

“Technical issues, there are problems with the Internet. Sometimes you want to chat online, but the connection is not good.” (FG 3, st. 7, ref. 12)

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Their statements also reveal limitations of an interpersonal type (such as lack of trust and privacy issues) in using social media for participation:

“I use Skype to talk to my family; they live far away. But I’d rather have face-to-face friends. Just a few close ones.” (FG 3, st. 2, ref. 10)

“I only accept people I know. I had a bad experience and I felt betrayed.” (FG 2, st. 1, ref. 8)

Public administration professionals place particular emphasis on *the value of channels and paths for adolescent and youth participation that are mediated by social media* when it comes to creating spaces for meeting, networking, exchanging, solidarity, and effective self-management for teens and young people. In this regard, the focus groups have also provided subtle evidence of the value that teenagers place on social media as an opportunity for social participation. When asked in which projects and what they would do to participate in the future, several people linked online activism to participation in the community:

“With social media ... I’d create an event online and I’d also have someone spreading the word on the street.” (FG 2, st. 6, ref. 1)

“I’d also come up with a meeting place using social media, creating an event or a major project for lots of people.” (FG 2, st. 7, ref. 2)

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results indicate that the study participants do not yet use new technologies as a form of social participation or as an expression of active citizenship. These results align with other studies on digitization as a mechanism for the civic and political participation of child citizens (UNICEF, 2019). They also reproduce the results obtained in the EU Kids Online Network study (Smahel et al., 2020), which revealed that common digital practices of children and adolescents (9 to 16-year-olds) are recreational and relational, rather than civic and political. Although social media offer the potential for social participation, the challenge lies in knowing how to use them in the community in a broad sense and schools) as agents of socialization par excellence.

It is known that the participatory potential of technology depends on the civic and political uses made of it, and the more participatory experiences children and adolescents have in the offline world, the more likely they are to engage in online participatory processes, and vice versa (Novella et al., 2021). To this end, not only should we ensure access and connection and encourage the development of digital skills, but we also need to include critical awareness and democratic and citizen values as part of these skills. In terms of education, it is worth emphasizing the idea that social participation in education is a citizen’s right and duty (Muñoz, 2009).

Children and adolescents tend to use social media and online platforms as channels for interpersonal communication and, as their first preference, for entertainment and leisure. These data coincide with those obtained in the project *Transmedia Literacy* (Scolari, 2018): teens demonstrate “transmedia skills”, the most common of which are those related to producing and consuming media in the context of par-

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ticipatory culture. All of this urges us to encourage a change in the meaning of this group's participation in social media, so that young people understand social media as potential spaces to collaborate and practise social participation and civic engagement first-hand. This research suggests avenues in this regard and proposes developing further what Lim (2012) calls the transformation of online activism into offline protests or mobilizations through social media. Young people's participation can be linked with organizations that engage in online projects and activities that foster solidarity, exchanges, networking based on understanding and empathy, and leisure activities that they manage themselves. The forms and places of interaction generate a solid link, which in turn generates a sense of social identity and shared belonging (Wellman et al., 2002).

The study confirms that children and adolescents often choose to take on a passive role in social media, primarily as followers and information seekers. It is important to salvage the value of online activism for developing active citizens (Haley, 2018). Sharing information and commenting on topics that interest them provides children and adolescents who participate online with considerable potential for responding, taking the initiative with new messages, and generating questions, proposals, and calls to action. According to Cerbino and Belotti (2016), the relationships established between those participating start a process of construction and recognition of what is common in terms of having a shared social function. To this effect, the shift from a policy of presence in schools (more symbolic than transformative) to a policy of influence is an interesting prospective path. From the perspective of considering citizenship as a socio-political practice (Ramiro & Alemán, 2016), the data encourage us to promote ways for C&A to exercise citizenship in their day-to-day relations and ways of life both in online and offline contexts. Moreover, to do so while refusing to remain stuck in a paternalistic, welfare-based model in which activity, rather than being educational and transformative, is organized and guided. It is important to promote spaces where children and adolescents are protagonists and which they recognize as their own (Aguirre et al., 2017) so that they can generate activities based on self-management and the logic of being participants (not users) (Haley, 2018).

We need to accept and understand that today child participation is growing in a context saturated with relational technologies and digital communications that generate initial frameworks for interpreting life, sets of opinions and prejudices, stereotypes and dilemmas that guide the young people's understanding of the meanings of everyday actions. However, it is important not to ignore the fact that these digital contexts are not free from the dynamics of social inequality, which have a more intense impact on the most vulnerable groups. In fact, some experts comment that the digital divide is no longer all about access, but rather about uses and appropriations (Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2009) and social and cultural benefits (Masanet, Pires & Gómez-Puertas, 2021; Ragnedda, 2017). In this context, the most socially vulnerable groups are the most exposed and have the least guidance in the use of social media. Therefore, they are more vulnerable to risks derived from inappropriate uses, such as, for example, consuming age-inappropriate content, cyberbullying, and sextortion, among others (Cano et al., 2018).

Accessing information or participating in social media is not enough to be a responsible citizen or cyber citizen, nor is interacting online, forming groups, or disseminating new information. The challenge lies in learning how to use digital media to improve public space and community life, channelling their power as civic tools to make the most of democracy and enhance the community's quality of life. Digital citizenship, e-citizenship or cyber citizenship involves understanding human, cultural and social issues related to the use of information and communication technologies, as well as implementing appropriate behaviour regarding ethics, safety, and responsibility in the use of the Internet, social media, and the available technologies (Kim, 2015). The development of this citizenship is a key challenge if,

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as studies have already revealed over a decade ago, new paradigms of involvement and participation emerge that mean that young people prefer informal, more horizontal organizations, where most of the action is collective and focused on specific issues and interests, with strong roots in the community and in social media.

The pandemic context has led to the proliferation of using technology as a channel for the civic participation of children and adolescents, giving rise to emerging innovative experiences through the digital environment focused on deliberation, decision-making, and the development of creatively engaging actions (Novella et al., 2022). Child participation is a responsibility of local governments in the framework of the 2030 agenda and from the commitment to include children as active citizens in their communities and public spaces.

The research presented in this chapter falls within an emerging line of studies on child participation through the digital environment in local politics. The results obtained help identify some of the challenges for moving towards including children and adolescents in decision-making both in online and offline spaces, summarized below in three main premises (Laforgue et al., 2022):

- Child and adolescent participation is more inclusive and equitable when their consent to participate is sought; that is, when the municipality offers open information to its entire child and adolescent population, thereby soliciting their willing participation. It is also important to clarify the criteria for including vulnerable groups in these forums. At this level, it is important to highlight an intersectional perspective because participatory experiences are not exempt from reproducing domination (Martínez-Palacios, 2017) and it is important to consider measures to avoid it: a) as professionals, we need to be aware of our relational patterns and how they may reproduce certain oppressions to ensure that we are creating spaces where diversity is embraced as a value; and b) it is important to openly discuss racism, sexism, ableism, poverty-related discrimination, LGBTQIA+phobia, anti-Gypsyism, etc., with children and adolescents and how these oppressions affect people's lives. Approaching these discussions based on their everyday experiences, fostering dialogue and mutual learning, could be of interest.
- Findings also confirm that child participation is more inclusive when young people have opportunities to make decisions that are meaningful to them and that are recognized and made visible locally as successful initiatives stemming from their active role in participation. The adult-centric viewpoint of child participation is a barrier we must overcome by training in critical pedagogies and analysing the languages and codes through which we communicate information to ensure that they represent the different types of children and adolescents with differing characteristics.
- The real inclusion of all types of children and adolescents stems from our ability to listen to, recognize, and make visible all their views on an equal footing. These approaches should enable us to listen to their perceptions, opinions, experiences, and to understand their world and point of view to engage them in developing and carrying out institutional participation projects and initiatives based on these principles.

These scenarios open new possibilities and challenges to make progress in child and adolescent participation in the local context, mediated by the digital environment and with an inclusive, equitable and meaningful character, and having a transformative power in society.

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FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

As explained above, a recent study on child and adolescent participation in Spain (Laforgue et al., 2022) found that there are structural reasons related to gender identity, cultural diversity, nationality, physical nationality and age, among others, that must be considered to understand the difficulties faced to make equitable inclusion and public policies. Therefore, it is necessary to promote research projects on participation that include an intersectional theoretical and methodological perspective (Harris & Leonardo, 2018; Rodó-Zárate, 2021). Understanding that the participation of young people, both offline and online, implies considering the participants' social positions in order to detect the possible oppressions that they may experience. Thus, in future research, it is essential to establish these categories of difference (gender, cultural diversity, sexual orientation, etc.) with the main objective of recognizing and analysing them as structural elements that can help us understand the complexity of young people's participation processes and carry out actions to promote inclusion.

In second place, it is also essential to develop and apply methodological approaches that help us question hierarchical systems based on the criterion of 'age' and the adult-centred perspective that prevails in our society (Ballesté & Soler-i-Martí, 2023). More qualitative approaches, based on the perspectives, needs, and interests of young people, are necessary in this regard. We must place young people's voices at the centre of the discourse to overcome adult-centric perspectives. From this point of view, we consider that methodological proposals are essential for achieving bottom-up approaches that centre the discussion on the young people's views and experiences.

Finally, child and adolescent participation needs to be consolidated in digital environments, overcoming the narratives of risk and mistrust attributed to inappropriate use and lack of protection as a relational medium. The pandemic introduced the widespread use of digital media in child and adolescent participation. COVID-19 increased the use of digital media in municipal child and adolescent spaces and processes; however, this use still has mainly information and communication functions, and therefore it is necessary to move towards deliberative and decision-making uses. There is also a relationship between understanding participation as a fundamental right and a political exercise for children and the increased use of digital media in child and adolescent participation. However, there is still a gap to overcome between the usefulness that it is believed these digital media can have in child and adolescent participation and the limited use that is made of them. It is necessary, even urgent, to encourage initial innovative experiences through the digital environment oriented towards deliberation, decision-making and the development of creative participatory actions that expand the opportunities for participation and the number of children and young people who can become involved in participatory practices mediated by technological environments. Child and adolescent participation mediated by the digital environment in the local policy space needs to foster an implicit citizenship open to debate, deliberation, collaboration and creative democracy with an inclusive, equitable and meaningful nature (Novella & Sabariego, 2020).

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Child Participation: The process by which children and adolescents, individually and/or collectively, express their opinions and decisions on matters that directly concern them according to their age and maturity.

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Cohesive Society: A society that seeks the well-being of all people, combats exclusion and marginalization, creates a sense of belonging, promotes trust and offers opportunities for social mobility. Hence, social cohesion is key to the development of societies, to political stability and to democracy itself.

Digital Environment: An integrated communications environment in which digital devices communicate and manage the content and activities contained within it. The concept is based on digital systems that are integrated and implemented for a global community.

Equity: The normative ethical principle associated with the idea of justice; this concept is about meeting the needs and interests of people who are different, especially those who are disadvantaged.

Inclusive Participation: Giving people a voice and presence in social life and in democratic processes that enables social processes and outcomes to be fair.

Social Inclusion: A process that guarantees people the opportunities and resources necessary to participate fully in society. At the same time, it seeks to ensure that they enjoy a standard of living and well-being that is considered normal in the country they live in, and that they are active members of the community.

Transmedia Competencies: A set of skills related to the production, exchange and consumption of digital interactive media. These competencies range from problem-solving processes in video games to the production and sharing of content on web platforms and social networks; and the creation, production, sharing, and critical consumption of narrative content (fanfiction, fanvids, etc.).

ENDNOTES

1 Information is included on the outputs extracted by the software Nvivo (focus group number, student number, category reference number).