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Digital Activism: Transformation of Youth Civic Engagement in the Digital Age

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Abstract

The digital transformation of public life has created new arenas in which young people negotiate citizenship, political identity, and collective action. This paper investigates the changing relationship between digital activism and youth civic participation, with particular attention to the ways networked technologies reshape participation beyond conventional institutional channels. It examines major forms of digital activism, including hashtag movements, online petitions, social media campaigns, digital protests, and networked advocacy, and considers their contributions to political awareness, civic voice, community formation, and mobilisation. The analysis is informed by Resource Mobilisation Theory, Connective Action Theory, Participatory Politics Theory, and the Networked Public Sphere perspective. While digital environments can broaden opportunities for participation and connect young citizens across geographical and organisational boundaries, they also generate significant democratic tensions. These include unequal digital access, unreliable information, algorithmic influence, polarisation, surveillance, online abuse, and low-cost forms of engagement that may not develop into sustained participation. The paper further argues that the distinction between online and offline activism is increasingly blurred, as digital interaction can initiate, coordinate, amplify, and sustain physical civic action. It concludes that the democratic contribution of digital activism depends on critical digital competencies and supportive educational environments that enable young people to participate thoughtfully, ethically, and effectively in contemporary civic life.

Keywords: *Digital Activism; Youth; Civic Engagement; Digital Citizenship; Social Media; Civic Education; Democratic Participation.*

Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has transformed the nature of civic and political participation, particularly among young people. Social media platforms, smartphones, messaging applications, and other networked technologies have created new spaces in which young citizens encounter public issues, construct political identities, express opinions, organise collective action, and communicate with institutions and wider publics (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Kahne et al., 2014; Cho et al., 2020). Consequently, youth civic engagement can no longer be understood solely through conventional activities such as voting, political-party membership, or participation in formal organisations. It increasingly includes digitally mediated practices such as sharing political information, participating in online campaigns, signing petitions, creating civic content, engaging with public officials, fundraising, and mobilising around social causes (Kahne et al., 2014; Cho et al., 2020; Wilf & Wray-Lake, 2023).

Digital activism represents an important dimension of this transformation. Broadly, it refers to the use of digital communication technologies to support advocacy, political expression, mobilisation, networking, and collective action. Unlike traditional forms of activism, which often depend on formal organisations and hierarchical structures, digitally mediated activism can facilitate more personalised and decentralised participation. Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) concept of

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connective action explain how digital networks enable individuals to participate in collective causes through personalised forms of communication rather than through conventional organisational membership. Similarly, research on participatory politics demonstrates that young people increasingly engage in political activities through peer-to-peer networks, creative production, information circulation, and online mobilisation (Kahne et al., 2014; Kahne et al., 2016). Digital platforms, therefore, expand the repertoire through which young people can exercise political voice and civic agency.

Empirical research provides evidence that social media can contribute to civic and political participation, although the relationship is neither automatic nor uniform. Boulianne's (2015) and Verma et al.'s (2026) meta-analyses on social media and political participation found an overall positive association between social media use and civic and political engagement, while also highlighting substantial variation across studies and methodological limitations. More recent youth-focused research similarly indicates that sociopolitical action increasingly occurs through social media and involves activities aimed at challenging social inequalities and systems of oppression (Wilf & Wray-Lake, 2023). UNICEF further identifies digital civic engagement among young people as encompassing both conventional activities conducted through digital environments, such as accessing news and communicating with representatives, as well as newer creative practices involving videos, memes, artwork, and networked advocacy. Importantly, UNICEF argues that digital and offline participation should be viewed as interconnected rather than as separate spheres of civic life (Cho et al., 2020).

The growing importance of digital activism is particularly significant because young people have traditionally experienced barriers to conventional political participation. Digital environments can lower certain costs of participation by providing relatively accessible spaces for information exchange, political expression, networking, and mobilisation (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Cho et al., 2020). They can also enable young people to bypass some traditional institutional and media gatekeepers, amplify marginalised voices, and connect local concerns with national and transnational movements. In this sense, digital activism can function as a catalyst for civic participation, transforming young people from predominantly passive recipients of political information into active producers and disseminators of civic discourse (Kahne et al., 2014; Wilf & Wray-Lake, 2023).

Nevertheless, the democratic potential of digital activism should not be overstated. Digital participation occurs within platform environments shaped by algorithms, commercial interests, unequal access, and varying levels of digital literacy. Young people may encounter misinformation, disinformation, political polarisation, online harassment, surveillance, and algorithmically amplified content, while unequal access to technologies and digital skills can reproduce existing social inequalities (Cho et al., 2020). Furthermore, debates surrounding "slacktivism" question whether low-cost activities such as liking, sharing, or signing online petitions necessarily translate into sustained political action. Although such practices should not automatically be dismissed as politically insignificant, their civic value depends partly on whether they contribute to political learning, collective identity, sustained mobilisation, or offline action (Boulianne, 2015; Madison & Klang, 2020).

Thus, digital activism should be understood neither as a replacement for traditional civic participation nor as an inherently transformative force. Rather, it represents an evolving mode of civic engagement whose democratic consequences depend on how young people use digital technologies, the opportunities and constraints embedded within platforms, and their capacity to critically interpret and participate in digital public spaces. This makes digital literacy, media literacy, civic knowledge, and democratic competencies increasingly important components of citizenship education (Kahne et al., 2016; Cho et al., 2020). Understanding the rise of youth digital activism is therefore essential for examining how citizenship itself is being reshaped in the digital age and how educational institutions can prepare young people for informed, ethical, inclusive, and meaningful participation in contemporary democratic life.

Conceptualising Digital Activism

Digital activism refers to the purposeful use of digital technologies and networked communication to express political claims, disseminate information, build collective identities, mobilise participants, and pursue social or political change (Earl et al., 2010; Joyce, 2010). It encompasses activities ranging from social-media advocacy and hashtag campaigns to online petitions, crowdfunding, digital storytelling, protest coordination, and more technologically sophisticated forms of networked resistance. Digital activism should therefore not be reduced to "activism on social media"; rather, it represents a

changing repertoire of collective action in which digital technologies influence how grievances are communicated, networks are constructed, and political action is organised (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Milan, 2015).

The emergence of digital activism represents an evolution of, rather than a complete departure from, traditional activism. Conventional social movements have historically depended on formal organisations, face-to-face mobilisation, physical demonstrations, printed communication, and established leadership structures. Digital technologies have altered the speed, cost, reach, and organisational structure of collective action by enabling activists to communicate across geographical boundaries and coordinate participation with relatively limited organisational resources (Earl et al., 2010). Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) theory of connective action is particularly influential in explaining this shift. Unlike traditional collective action, which often depends upon formal membership and collective organisational identities, connective action allows individuals to participate through personalised political expressions that circulate through digital networks. Activism consequently becomes more flexible, decentralised, and individually mediated.

Digital activism encompasses multiple forms. Hashtag activism enables dispersed individuals to connect their posts and narratives around a common issue, increasing visibility and facilitating collective identification. Online petitions and digital campaigns provide relatively accessible mechanisms for expressing demands and generating public pressure. Social-media activism involves creating and circulating political messages, videos, infographics, testimonies, and calls to action through platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, and X. Digital protest and mobilisation include using online platforms to recruit participants, coordinate demonstrations, document events, organise boycotts, raise funds, and maintain movements between physical actions (Kahne et al., 2014; Cho et al., 2020). These practices exist along a continuum, ranging from low-cost symbolic participation to sustained and resource-intensive collective action.

Theoretical Perspectives on Digital Activism

Digital activism can be better understood when situated within established theories of collective action, political participation, and networked communication. Rather than treating technology as an independent cause of activism, these perspectives explain how digital technologies reshape the resources, networks, identities, opportunities, and communicative practices through which civic action occurs. Four theoretical perspectives are particularly relevant to understanding youth digital activism: Resource Mobilisation Theory, Connective Action Theory, Participatory Politics Theory, and Networked Public Sphere Theory.

1. Resource Mobilisation Theory

Resource Mobilisation Theory (RMT) views social movements as collective efforts that depend upon the availability and effective use of resources, including information, communication networks, organisational capacity, money, skills, and participants (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). From this perspective, digital technologies are significant because they can reduce the costs of organising and communicating while increasing activists' ability to reach potential participants. Earl et al. (2010) demonstrate that Internet technologies can transform activism by lowering the costs of creating, coordinating, and participating in collective action. Earl and Kimport (2011) further identify two important digital affordances: reduced participation costs and the ability to coordinate collective action without requiring participants to be physically co-present. For youth activism, this perspective is particularly relevant because young people may have limited financial resources, institutional access, or formal political influence. Digital platforms can compensate for some of these limitations by providing inexpensive mechanisms for creating campaigns, circulating information, recruiting supporters, fundraising, and coordinating activities. However, RMT also highlights that technology does not eliminate resource inequalities. Access to devices, reliable connectivity, digital skills, influential networks, and visibility remains uneven. Digital activism, therefore, expands opportunities for participation without necessarily producing equal participation.

2. Connective Action Theory

Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) Connective Action Theory provides one of the most influential explanations of contemporary digital activism. Traditional collective action often depends on formal organisations, collective identities, membership, and centralised coordination. Connective action, by contrast, describes forms of mobilisation in which individuals participate through personalised political expressions that circulate across digital networks. Social media enables people to contribute to a common cause while maintaining their individual identities and motivations. This theory is

especially useful for understanding youth activism because young people frequently participate through flexible, issue-based networks rather than through established political organisations (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Kahne et al., 2014). A young person may create a post, use a hashtag, share information, sign a petition, or produce a video, thereby contributing to a wider movement without formally joining an organisation. Digital platforms consequently facilitate personalised yet collective participation. The theory also explains why contemporary movements can expand rapidly: individual acts of communication can be connected and amplified through networked technologies.

3. Participatory Politics Theory

The concept of Participatory Politics, developed through research on youth and new media, is particularly relevant to the present study because it directly addresses changing forms of youth civic engagement. Kahne et al. (2014) define participatory politics as interactive political activity in which individuals participate through peer-based networks and are not necessarily dependent upon traditional political institutions. Examples include creating and circulating political media, forwarding political information, joining online communities, discussing public issues, and mobilising others. Kahne et al. (2016) argue that digital media have changed the civic learning environment by providing young people with new opportunities to develop political voice and participate in democratic life. This perspective challenges narrow definitions of citizenship that are based solely on voting, party membership, or institutional participation. Instead, youth citizenship can include political expression, content creation, peer mobilisation, network building, and issue-based activism. The theory, therefore, provides a strong conceptual foundation for examining how digital activism may foster young people's civic agency and political efficacy.

4. Networked Public Sphere Theory

The Networked Public Sphere perspective focuses on how digital communication transforms the spaces in which public issues are discussed and political identities are formed. In the traditional public sphere, mass media and formal institutions played a major role in determining which issues and voices became publicly visible. Digital networks have expanded the capacity of ordinary citizens and social movements to produce, circulate, and contest political information (Castells, 2009; Tufekci, 2017). For youth activists, networked public spaces provide opportunities to bypass some traditional media gatekeepers and communicate directly with wider audiences. Hashtags, videos, memes, livestreams, and personal narratives can transform individual experiences into collective political claims. Tufekci (2017) demonstrates how networked technologies have enabled contemporary movements to mobilise rapidly and achieve considerable visibility. However, the networked public sphere is not inherently democratic: algorithms, platform ownership, commercial interests, misinformation, surveillance, and unequal digital access influence which voices become visible, and which remain marginalised.

Taken together, these four perspectives provide a comprehensive framework for understanding digital activism. Resource Mobilisation Theory explains how digital technologies alter the costs and resources of participation; Connective Action Theory explains the emergence of personalised and decentralised mobilisation; Participatory Politics Theory explains the changing forms of youth civic engagement; and Networked Public Sphere Theory explains how digital platforms reshape political communication and public discourse. Their combined application suggests that digital activism is neither simply a technological replacement for traditional activism nor merely a symbolic online expression. Rather, it represents an evolving form of civic participation in which resources, networks, political identities, communication, and collective action increasingly intersect in digital environments

Youth Political and Civic Engagement through Digital Platforms

Youth civic participation refers to the ways in which young people engage with public issues, contribute to community life, express political preferences, influence decision-making, and participate in collective efforts aimed at social change. Traditionally, participation was associated with voting, political-party membership, volunteering, community organisations, contacting representatives, and protest (Putnam, 2000; Dalton, 2008). However, these conventional measures increasingly provide an incomplete picture of contemporary youth citizenship. Digital technologies have expanded the repertoire of participation to include accessing and sharing political information, signing online petitions, creating civic content, participating in hashtag campaigns, communicating with public officials, fundraising, and organising collective

action through networked platforms (Kahne et al., 2014; Kahne et al., 2016; Cho et al., 2020). Civic participation is therefore increasingly understood not simply as institutional involvement but as the exercise of voice, civic identity, political efficacy, and collective agency.

The changing pattern of youth participation reflects a broader shift from organisation-centred to more personalised, issue-based, and networked forms of political engagement. Research on younger generations suggests that declining attachment to some traditional political institutions does not necessarily indicate political apathy; rather, young people increasingly engage through flexible, expressive forms of participation that align with their identities and immediate concerns (Dalton, 2008; Bennett et al., 2009). Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) concept of connective action is particularly relevant: digital networks enable individuals to contribute personalised political expressions to wider collective causes without necessarily becoming members of formal organisations. Kahne et al. (2014) similarly demonstrate that young people participate in "participatory politics" through peer networks, political content creation, information circulation, and mobilisation. Digital participation thus broadens the conventional repertoire of citizenship while making engagement more immediate, personalised, and potentially decentralised.

Social-media platforms have become particularly significant infrastructures for youth civic and political engagement because they combine information, expression, networking, and mobilisation. Young people can encounter political issues, discuss them with peers, construct political identities, challenge dominant narratives, and rapidly circulate information through platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, X, and messaging applications (Kahne et al., 2016; Cho et al., 2020). Empirical research generally finds a positive relationship between social media use and civic or political participation. Boulianne's (2015) meta-analysis found an overall positive association between social-media use and participation, although the strength and significance of this relationship varied across studies. More recent research indicates that social media can facilitate youth sociopolitical action by providing opportunities for political expression, collective identification, information sharing, and mobilisation (Wilf & Wray-Lake, 2026; Verma et al., 2026). However, digital engagement is shaped by algorithms, platform governance, unequal digital access, misinformation, and varying levels of media literacy; therefore, connectivity should not be equated automatically with meaningful civic participation (Cho et al., 2020).

Youth-led movements illustrate the political possibilities of this transformation. The Fridays for Future climate movement demonstrates how Greta Thunberg's school strike developed from an individual act of protest into a transnational youth mobilisation through digital communication and networked coordination. Similarly, March for Our Lives, led by young activists following the 2018 Parkland school shooting, combined social-media mobilisation with demonstrations, voter registration, fundraising, and policy advocacy. Digital activism has also played a major role in the diffusion of racial-justice activism through #BlackLivesMatter, enabling young participants and wider publics to circulate testimony, document events, construct collective narratives, and mobilise offline action (Jackson et al., 2020). In India, digitally mediated mobilisation surrounding protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and National Register of Citizens (NRC) further illustrates how social media can connect individual grievances with wider networks of collective action (Roy et al., 2021).

Importantly, online and offline participation should not be treated as competing or mutually exclusive forms of citizenship. The earlier "slacktivism" argument suggested that low-cost activities such as liking, sharing, or signing petitions might substitute for substantive political engagement (Morozov, 2009). Subsequent research provides a more nuanced picture. Greijdanus et al. (2020) reviewed the relationship between online and offline collective action and found that the two forms are generally positively related and frequently intertwined. Online spaces can recruit participants, strengthen collective identity, disseminate information, coordinate demonstrations, and sustain movements, while offline events generate stories, images, and experiences that subsequently circulate online. Digital participation should therefore be viewed as part of a hybrid civic repertoire, in which online expression can serve as a pathway to offline action, and offline mobilisation can acquire greater visibility and continuity through digital networks (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Greijdanus et al., 2020). The central issue is consequently not whether digital participation is "real" participation, but whether it develops young people's civic knowledge, political efficacy, collective capacity, and sustained engagement with public life (Kahne et al., 2016; Cho et al., 2020).

Digital Activism as a Catalyst for Civic Participation

Digital activism has increasingly become a catalyst for civic participation by expanding the ways in which individuals, particularly young people, can access information, express political views, connect with others, and engage in collective action. Unlike conventional participation, which may require organisational membership, geographical proximity, financial resources, or direct contact with political institutions, digitally mediated participation can offer relatively low-cost and accessible opportunities for civic engagement (Earl et al., 2010; Kahne et al., 2014). Digital technologies, therefore, do not simply provide new communication channels; they fundamentally reshape the conditions under which citizens initiate and sustain civic participation.

One of the most significant contributions of this transformation is the reduction of barriers to participation. Social-media platforms, online petitions, messaging applications, and digital campaigns enable individuals to engage in civic activities without necessarily joining formal organisations or possessing substantial financial resources. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) argue that digital networks facilitate personalised forms of *connective action*, allowing individuals to contribute to collective causes through easily shared political expressions. For young people, who often experience limited access to conventional political institutions, these flexible forms of engagement provide important entry points into civic life (Kahne et al., 2014; Cho et al., 2020). Nevertheless, participation remains uneven, as disparities in internet access, digital literacy, language, socioeconomic status, and platform visibility continue to reproduce existing inequalities (Cho et al., 2020).

Another important contribution lies in enhancing political awareness and information sharing. Networked platforms enable young people to access information about elections, social movements, environmental issues, human rights, and public policy through peer networks and activist communities. Users simultaneously consume and create political content, thereby challenging the traditional distinction between political audiences and political communicators (Kahne et al., 2016). This participatory information environment can strengthen political awareness and civic learning, particularly when young people engage with diverse viewpoints and credible information sources. At the same time, the digital environment also facilitates misinformation, disinformation, polarisation, and selective exposure, indicating that connectivity alone does not ensure informed citizenship (Cho et al., 2020).

Equally important is the role of digital platforms in facilitating mobilisation and collective action. By reducing the time and coordination costs associated with organising campaigns, disseminating calls to action, recruiting participants, and maintaining communication networks, digital technologies enable rapid and large-scale mobilisation (Earl et al., 2010; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Hashtags, viral campaigns, online petitions, crowdfunding, and messaging groups can transform dispersed individual concerns into coordinated collective efforts. This capability is particularly valuable for youth-led movements, where informal digital networks often substitute for traditional organisational structures, increasing both the speed and visibility of civic campaigns.

Beyond mobilisation, digital environments provide opportunities for greater voice, representation, and empowerment. Social media enable individuals and groups that receive limited attention from traditional political institutions or mainstream media to articulate their experiences and frame public issues on their own terms. Hashtag activism, for example, connects individual testimonies with broader collective narratives and creates networked spaces for recognition and solidarity (Jackson et al., 2020). Such opportunities can strengthen young people's sense of political efficacy and civic agency. However, visibility should not automatically be equated with representation or influence, as platform algorithms and unequal access to digital resources continue to shape whose voices gain prominence (Milan, 2015).

Furthermore, the development of digital communities and social networks has strengthened the social foundations of civic participation. Shared hashtags, online groups, discussion forums, and messaging platforms enable individuals with common concerns to develop collective identities and sustain relationships across geographical boundaries. These networks provide emotional support, political information, organisational resources, and opportunities for collaboration, thereby reinforcing long-term civic engagement (Greijdanus et al., 2020). Consequently, digital activism should be understood not merely as a tool for communication but as an evolving mechanism that connects individual expression with collective action and strengthens contemporary civic participation.

Most importantly, digital activism can connect online engagement with offline action. Online participation may begin with information sharing or discussion but develop into petitioning, volunteering, fundraising, voting, attending demonstrations, or participating in community initiatives. Research indicates that online and offline activism are frequently complementary rather than competing forms of participation (Greijdanus et al., 2020). Digital platforms can recruit participants and coordinate physical action, while offline events generate content that sustains online visibility and mobilisation. Thus, digital activism is best understood as a potential bridge between expression and action, transforming individual digital engagement into collective civic participation when supported by political efficacy, civic knowledge, organisational capacity, and meaningful opportunities for participation (Kahne et al., 2016; Cho et al., 2020).

Opportunities and Challenges of Digital Activism

Digital activism has significantly expanded the possibilities for civic and political participation, particularly among young people. Digital platforms provide relatively accessible spaces for political expression, information exchange, mobilisation, and networking, but these opportunities exist alongside substantial technological, social, and democratic risks. The impact of digital activism is therefore best understood as ambivalent: the same technologies that broaden participation can also reproduce inequalities and create new forms of political manipulation (Boulianne, 2015; Cho et al., 2020).

Opportunities

1. Accessibility and Inclusivity

Digital platforms can lower the financial, geographical, and organisational barriers associated with conventional activism. Young people can participate through smartphones and online networks without necessarily joining formal organisations or attending physical meetings (Earl et al., 2010; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Digital spaces can also provide opportunities for individuals and marginalised communities whose voices may receive limited attention in traditional political institutions or mainstream media (Jackson et al., 2020). However, accessibility remains dependent on connectivity, digital skills, language, and technological resources.

2. Rapid Mobilisation

Digital technologies enable activists to disseminate information and coordinate collective action with unprecedented speed. Hashtags, messaging applications, online petitions, and social-media campaigns can transform dispersed individual concerns into collective mobilisation within a short period (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Tufekci, 2017). This rapidity is particularly valuable during emergencies, protests, elections, and social movements, where timely communication can determine the scale and visibility of collective action.

3. Global Networking and Solidarity

Digital networks allow local movements to connect with activists and audiences across national boundaries. Ideas, campaign strategies, visual materials, and experiences can circulate transnationally, creating networks of solidarity around issues such as climate change, gender equality, racial justice, and human rights (Castells, 2009; Tufekci, 2017). Youth activists can consequently participate in global civic conversations without being physically present in the same geographical space.

4, Political Awareness and Civic Learning

Social media provide young people with opportunities to encounter political information, discuss public issues, follow movements, and produce civic content. Digital participation can therefore contribute to political awareness and civic learning by allowing young people to move from being passive consumers to active producers and distributors of political information (Kahne et al., 2014; Kahne et al., 2016). Nevertheless, the educational value of digital participation depends heavily on users' ability to assess the reliability of information.

Challenges

1. Misinformation and Disinformation

The openness and speed of digital communication also make platforms vulnerable to misinformation, false or inaccurate information shared without necessarily intending to deceive, and disinformation, which involves deliberately deceptive or manipulative information. Political misinformation can distort public understanding, undermine trust, and

influence civic decision-making (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017; Cho et al., 2020). Young people's high levels of digital connectivity, therefore, underscore the importance of media and information literacy.

2. Slacktivism and Superficial Participation

The concept of slacktivism refers to low-cost online actions, such as liking, sharing, changing profile pictures, or signing petitions, that may create the appearance of participation without sustained political commitment (Morozov, 2009). However, research cautions against assuming that all low-cost digital participation is meaningless. Online actions can provide entry points into political awareness, collective identity, and further mobilisation (Greijdanus et al., 2020; Madison & Klang, 2020). The challenge, therefore, is to determine when symbolic participation develops into sustained civic action.

3. Online Harassment and Political Intimidation

Digital activism can expose participants, particularly young activists and marginalised groups, to trolling, cyberbullying, threats, hate speech, and coordinated harassment. Such practices can discourage political expression and produce unequal participation by making some individuals more vulnerable to online abuse (Cho et al., 2020). Consequently, the expansion of digital voice does not automatically guarantee safe or inclusive civic spaces.

4. Surveillance and Privacy

Digital activism can also expose activists to monitoring by governments, corporations, and other actors. Social-media platforms collect extensive behavioural data, while governments may use digital surveillance technologies to monitor political activity. Tufekci (2017) argues that networked movements can benefit from rapid mobilisation while simultaneously becoming vulnerable to surveillance and repression. Thus, the same digital visibility that increases an activist's reach can increase personal and political risks.

5. Algorithmic Bias and Echo Chambers

Digital platforms do not distribute political information neutrally. Algorithmic systems determine which content users encounter, often based on engagement metrics and platform objectives. This can amplify emotionally charged content and contribute to selective exposure, political polarisation, and the formation of echo chambers, where individuals repeatedly encounter information consistent with their existing beliefs (Pariser, 2011; Cinelli et al., 2021). Algorithmic visibility can consequently privilege particular voices and movements while marginalising others.

6. Digital Divide

Finally, digital activism can reproduce inequalities through unequal access to devices, reliable internet, digital skills, affordability, language resources, and opportunities for meaningful participation. The digital divide, therefore, extends beyond simple internet access to include differences in the quality and effectiveness of digital engagement (van Dijk, 2020). A civic environment that appears universally accessible may, in turn, exclude young people who lack the resources or competencies required to participate effectively.

Overall, digital activism presents a complex democratic paradox. It can make civic participation more accessible, rapid, networked, and visible, while simultaneously exposing participants to misinformation, harassment, surveillance, algorithmic manipulation, superficial engagement, and unequal access. Its democratic potential, therefore, depends not merely on technological connectivity but on digital literacy, platform accountability, inclusive access, civic competencies, and the capacity to transform online participation into informed and sustained civic action (Kahne et al., 2016; Cho et al., 2020).

Implications for Civic and Citizenship Education

The rise of digital activism requires civic and citizenship education to move beyond traditional understandings of citizenship and incorporate the competencies necessary for participation in digitally mediated democratic life.

1. Digital Citizenship

Digital citizenship involves the responsible, informed, ethical, and active use of digital technologies to participate in society and public affairs (Ribble, 2015; Choi et al., 2017). As young people increasingly encounter political information and civic debates online, education must prepare them not only to access digital spaces but also to participate constructively within them. Civic education must also promote ethical and responsible digital participation. Students should understand issues of privacy, consent, respectful communication, online harassment, hate speech, intellectual property, and the

consequences of digitally amplified political expression. Digital citizenship education should consequently combine rights with responsibilities, encouraging young people to use digital platforms for dialogue, solidarity, advocacy, and constructive civic engagement rather than hostility or manipulation (Choi et al., 2017).

2. Media and Information Literacy

Young people increasingly encounter political information through social media. Education should therefore develop the ability to identify misinformation and disinformation, verify sources and claims, recognise manipulated or misleading content, understand media ownership and platform influence, and assess the credibility of online information (UNESCO, 2021; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Closely connected to this is critical thinking, which enables students to question political claims, compare competing perspectives, distinguish evidence from opinion, and recognise bias. Such competencies are increasingly fundamental to informed democratic participation.

3. Prepare Young People for Democratic Participation

Digital activism demonstrates that citizenship increasingly involves creating and sharing political content, participating in online discussions, joining campaigns, communicating with institutions, and mobilising others. Civic education should therefore provide opportunities for students to practise these forms of participation through debates, digital campaigns, collaborative projects, fact-checking activities, and community-based initiatives (Kahne et al., 2016).

4. Role of Schools, Teachers, and Educational Institutions

Schools, teachers, and educational institutions have a crucial role in this transformation. Teachers should function not merely as transmitters of civic knowledge but as facilitators of critical digital civic learning, helping students navigate complex information environments and engage respectfully with differing perspectives. Schools can provide structured opportunities for democratic discussion and responsible digital participation while ensuring that students understand both the opportunities and risks of digital activism (UNESCO, 2021). Thus, effective citizenship education in the digital age should integrate civic knowledge, digital literacy, critical thinking, ethical responsibility, and participatory skills, enabling young people to become informed and active democratic citizens.

Conclusion

Digital activism has emerged as a significant dimension of youth civic engagement in the digital age, transforming how young people access information, express political views, construct collective identities, and participate in public life. Unlike conventional forms of participation that often depend on formal organisations, institutional membership, or physical presence, digital activism enables relatively accessible, immediate, and networked forms of civic action. Social-media campaigns, hashtags, online petitions, digital storytelling, crowdfunding, and digitally coordinated protests have expanded the repertoire through which young people can articulate concerns and influence public discourse (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Kahne et al., 2014). The analysis demonstrates that digital activism can act as an important catalyst for civic participation. It lowers some barriers to participation, facilitates rapid mobilisation, connects geographically dispersed individuals, and provides opportunities for young people to make their voices visible. Digital platforms can also support political awareness and civic learning by enabling young citizens to access, produce, and circulate political information. The emergence of youth-oriented movements such as Fridays for Future and digitally mediated campaigns around racial, environmental, gender, and social justice illustrates how online networks can transform individual concerns into collective action (Tufekci, 2017; Jackson et al., 2020). Importantly, research suggests that online and offline participation are not necessarily competing forms; rather, digital engagement can complement demonstrations, volunteering, campaigning, and other forms of offline civic action (Greijdanus et al., 2020).

At the same time, the democratic potential of digital activism should not be overstated. The digital environment is characterised by misinformation and disinformation, algorithmic bias, echo chambers, online harassment, surveillance, digital inequality, and concerns surrounding slacktivism. While online participation can create meaningful pathways into civic engagement, activities such as liking, sharing, or signing petitions may remain superficial when they are not connected to sustained political involvement (Morozov, 2009). Moreover, unequal access to technology and differences in digital literacy mean that the benefits of digital participation are not distributed equally (Cho et al., 2020). Digital activism is therefore shaped not only by technological affordances but also by social, political, educational, and institutional conditions. These

developments have important implications for civic and citizenship education. Preparing young people for democratic life now requires more than knowledge of political institutions and conventional citizenship practices. Young citizens need digital citizenship competencies, media and information literacy, critical thinking, source evaluation, ethical communication, and an understanding of how algorithms and platforms shape public discourse (Kahne et al., 2016; UNESCO, 2021). Schools and teachers have a crucial role in creating opportunities for students to engage with digital political content critically and to translate online expression into constructive civic action.

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