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YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN ONLINE COMMUNITIES AND DIGITAL ACTIVISM

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ABSTRACT

Online communities and digital platforms have become important spaces for youth participation, social interaction, civic engagement, and collective action. Through social media, discussion forums, digital campaigns, and online networks, young people can express their opinions, raise awareness about social problems, support marginalized groups, and participate in discussions concerning political, cultural, and environmental issues. Digital activism has expanded opportunities for youth to communicate beyond geographical boundaries and mobilize support for causes that matter to them. However, online participation also involves challenges, including misinformation, cyberbullying, privacy concerns, unequal digital access, and the possibility that online engagement may not lead to meaningful offline change. Recent research highlights the importance of digital platforms in shaping youth civic participation and political expression (Saud et al., 2023; Sormanen et al., 2025). This article examines youth participation in online communities and digital activism, focusing on the motivations, opportunities, challenges, and social implications of digital engagement. It adopts a qualitative, literature-based approach to synthesize relevant academic research and identify major patterns in youth participation. The discussion emphasizes the importance of digital literacy, inclusive online spaces, responsible communication, and meaningful connections between digital engagement and real-world social action.

KEYWORDS

Youth Participation, Online Communities, Digital Activism, Social Media, Civic Engagement, Youth Empowerment, Digital Citizenship

INTRODUCTION

Digital technology has transformed the ways young people communicate, share information, build relationships, and participate in social activities. Online communities provide spaces where youth can exchange ideas, discuss common concerns, develop shared interests, and connect with individuals from different cultural and geographical backgrounds. Through social networking platforms, discussion forums, video-sharing applications, and online campaigns, young people can contribute to public conversations that were previously dominated by traditional institutions and established organizations. Saud et al. (2023) examined digital culture, civic engagement, and youth participation in Indonesia and Pakistan, highlighting the significance of networked digital spaces for contemporary civic and political involvement. These developments demonstrate that online communities are not merely places for entertainment; they can also become environments for learning, collective identity formation, and public participation.

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Digital activism refers to the use of digital technologies and online communication to promote social causes, express political opinions, raise awareness, and encourage collective action. Young people may participate by sharing campaign messages, producing educational videos, signing online petitions, organizing virtual events, documenting social problems, or supporting movements for environmental protection, equality, and human rights. Such activities can make information accessible to wider audiences and help individuals coordinate around shared objectives. McDaniel (2024) illustrated how a young activist used social media literacies to support social justice activism and civic engagement, demonstrating the potential of digital platforms to help youth develop civic identities and influence public discussionThese interactions can encourage cooperation, mutual support, knowledge sharing, and awareness of different perspectives. Neag et al. (2024), in a scoping review of research on social media and activism involving children and youth, highlighted the importance of understanding young people's participation within their social, cultural, and political contexts. Online communities can help young people feel that their contributions matter, but meaningful participation also depends on whether these spaces are inclusive and whether young voices are taken seriously. Differences in language, socioeconomic circumstances, internet access, and social acceptance may influence who can participate and whose opinions receive attention.

Another important aspect of youth digital activism is the relationship between online expression and civic participation. Digital platforms allow young people to respond quickly to current events, communicate opinions, and engage with political or social discussions through likes, comments, reposts, videos, and longer-form contributions. Sormanen et al. (2025) examined young people's online political participation within a youth discussion forum and identified different forms of political expression, showing that civic discussion can occur even in spaces not explicitly designed for political activity. However, participation varies in intensity, from passively viewing content to actively producing material, organizing campaigns, and challenging social or institutional practices. Understanding these differences is essential because visible online activity does not always indicate sustained engagement or direct involvement in community decision-making.Despite its opportunities, digital activism presents challenges that can affect the safety, effectiveness, and inclusiveness of youth participation. Young activists may encounter harassment, hostile comments, misinformation, public criticism, or pressure to express opinions on complex issues without sufficient information. Online discussions can also become polarized, while algorithms and social networks may repeatedly expose users to similar viewpoints. Furthermore, young people without reliable internet access, suitable devices, digital skills, or supportive environments may face barriers to participation. Neag et al. (2024) identified gaps in the existing research, including limited representation of diverse youth experiences and insufficient involvement of young people in the research process itself. These concerns suggest that digital activism must be considered in relation to online safety, unequal access, and the

opportunities available for youth voices to influence meaningful decisions.The growing importance of online communities makes it necessary to examine how youth participation can contribute to civic awareness and social change. Quynh and Thanh (2025), studying youth participation in governance and civic activities in Vietnam, found that several dimensions of digital engagement were positively associated with civic participation, particularly engagement and dialogue, as well as networking and collaboration. Building on this research, the present article explores the motivations, opportunities, and challenges associated with youth participation in online communities and digital activism, with particular attention to responsible digital citizenship and meaningful civic engagement.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To examine the role of online communities in encouraging youth participation and civic engagement.
2. To investigate the opportunities and challenges associated with youth involvement in digital activism.
3. To identify strategies for promoting inclusive, responsible, and effective youth participation in digital spaces.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How do online communities encourage youth participation and civic engagement?
2. What opportunities and challenges do young people experience through digital activism?
3. What strategies can promote inclusive, responsible, and effective youth participation in digital spaces?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on youth participation in online communities highlights the growing importance of digital spaces in civic awareness, collective identity, and social engagement. Saud et al. (2023) examined digital culture and youth participation in Indonesia and Pakistan, emphasizing the role of networked communication in civic and political involvement. Online communities allow young people to exchange information, discuss social concerns, and connect with people who share their interests or values. These interactions can encourage civic learning and help youth recognize their potential role in society. However, the opportunities available through digital participation may differ according to access to technology, cultural expectations, and the level of support young people receive from their communities.

Neag et al. (2024) conducted a scoping review of research on social media and activism involving children and young people. Their review examined 34 journal articles and identified important themes relating to social media, civic participation, activism, and the social and political contexts in which young people participate. The authors highlighted the role of online platforms in encouraging activism and connecting digital participation with offline civic life. They also identified limitations in the existing research, including limited diversity among participants and insufficient involvement of young people in the research process. This work suggests that youth activism should be studied by recognizing young people as active contributors whose perspectives and experiences are essential to understanding digital participation. McDaniel (2024) explored the online activism and civic engagement of a teenage activist, demonstrating how social media literacy can help young people communicate social justice concerns, develop civic identities, and participate in cultural discussions. Digital platforms allow young activists to combine written messages, images, videos, and other forms of communication to present their perspectives to wider audiences. Such practices can increase visibility for issues that receive limited attention in traditional media and provide opportunities for young people to contribute to public debate. Nevertheless, digital communication skills alone do not guarantee meaningful participation. Young people also need reliable information, supportive relationships, and opportunities to connect their online expression with broader community efforts.

The relationship between online communities and political participation has also been explored through research on youth discussion forums. Sormanen et al. (2025) examined political topics and forms of expression in an online discussion space that was not specifically designed for political discussion. Their findings showed that civic and political topics can emerge in everyday digital environments, although the amount and form of participation may vary. This suggests that young people do not necessarily participate only through formal campaigns or explicitly political platforms. They may express civic interests through ordinary discussions, peer interactions, and responses to current events. The study also indicates that online political expression can take different forms, ranging from relatively simple engagement to more substantial contributions requiring greater effort and involvement. Research on digital platforms and youth civic engagement further demonstrates that online participation can be connected with wider forms of social involvement. Quynh and Thanh (2025) investigated digital platforms and youth participation in governance and civic activities in Vietnam. Their study found positive relationships between dimensions of digital engagement and civic participation, with engagement, dialogue, networking, and collaboration showing particular importance. These findings suggest that digital platforms can facilitate more than the distribution of information; they can also help young people coordinate activities, communicate with others, and participate in collective processes. However, the findings from a specific national context should not be

generalized automatically to all societies, as political systems, digital access, and community expectations may shape youth participation differently.

Another important theme in the literature is the emotional and social context of digital activism. Zummo et al. (2025) examined youth-produced digital civic media about climate change and identified expressions of fear, despair, and anger alongside civic and scientific meaning-making. Their findings demonstrate that young people's digital participation may be shaped by strong emotional responses to social and environmental issues. These emotions can encourage awareness and motivate action, but they may also create feelings of uncertainty or frustration when young people perceive that institutions are not responding adequately. Understanding youth activism therefore requires attention not only to digital skills and political knowledge but also to the emotional experiences that influence whether young people participate, what they communicate, and how they sustain their engagement. Recent research also emphasizes the importance of understanding the personal, relational, and wider social factors that shape digital activism. Kornbluh et al. (2026) examined factors influencing online youth activism through survey data and qualitative interviews, highlighting how young people's decisions to engage in civic expression are shaped by individual experiences, interpersonal relationships, online norms, and broader sociopolitical circumstances. Their findings suggest that knowing how to evaluate online information does not necessarily lead to public participation. Young people may consider how their opinions will affect friendships, how online communities respond to disagreement, and whether participation could expose them to criticism or conflict. This research supports a broader understanding of digital activism as a socially situated activity rather than simply a result of internet access or technical competence. Oerall, the literature suggests that online communities can support youth participation by providing spaces for civic learning, social connection, public expression, and collective action. At the same time, digital activism is influenced by unequal access, online hostility, emotional pressures, and the wider social and political contexts in which young people live. Existing studies provide useful insights into the forms and motivations of participation, but further research is needed to understand how digital engagement develops into sustained civic involvement across different cultural settings. This article brings these perspectives together to examine the opportunities and challenges of youth participation in online communities and digital activism, emphasizing inclusive participation, digital literacy, and connections between online engagement and meaningful social change.

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METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, literature-based methodology to examine youth participation in online communities and digital activism. It draws on academic publications addressing digital civic engagement, youth activism, online political expression, social media literacy, and community participation. Relevant literature was identified through academic search resources, including Google Scholar, using search terms such as youth participation in online communities, digital activism among young people, online civic engagement, youth political expression on social media, and social media and youth activism. Priority was given to peer-reviewed studies and research reviews published between 2023 and 2026.The selected literature was examined to identify the main motivations, opportunities, and challenges associated with youth participation in digital spaces. Studies were organized around themes including civic awareness, identity and belonging, online political expression, digital mobilization, emotional experiences, online safety, and barriers to participation. The findings were compared to identify recurring patterns and differences in how researchers describe digital activism and its relationship with wider civic involvement. This approach allows the article to synthesize existing knowledge without collecting new data directly from young people.The methodology also considers the limitations of the reviewed evidence. Studies may differ in their definitions of youth, digital activism, and civic participation, while their findings may reflect particular countries, platforms, or political environments. Therefore, the analysis avoids assuming that the experiences of one group of young people represent all youth communities. The conclusions are based on the interpretation of existing academic research and do not represent the results of a new survey, experiment, or interview study.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study uses a descriptive and thematic research design to examine existing evidence concerning youth participation in online communities and digital activism. The descriptive component presents the major forms of participation identified in the literature, including online discussion, campaign promotion, civic expression, awareness raising, networking, and collaborative action. The thematic component organizes the findings into related categories to explain how digital platforms create opportunities for youth engagement while also presenting challenges that may restrict participation.The research design involves identifying relevant academic publications, categorizing their findings according to the research objectives, and comparing the resulting themes to develop an integrated interpretation. Particular attention is given to the relationship between individual motivation, social relationships, digital platform characteristics, and wider political and cultural contexts. This design is appropriate for understanding a broad social phenomenon through existing research, while recognizing that

literature-based findings cannot independently establish causal relationships or represent the experiences of every young person.

DATA ANALYSIS

The selected literature was analyzed through qualitative thematic synthesis. Each publication was examined in relation to its research focus, principal findings, and contribution to understanding youth participation in online communities and digital activism. The analysis identified recurring themes concerning civic awareness, online identity, social networking, political expression, collective mobilization, emotional experiences, and barriers to participation. These themes were compared across the reviewed studies to identify common patterns and differences in the ways digital platforms support youth involvement in social and civic activities.The analysis suggests that online communities can facilitate youth participation by making information accessible, connecting individuals with shared interests, and providing opportunities to express opinions and coordinate activities. Research on digital civic engagement indicates that communication, dialogue, networking, and collaboration can support broader participation (Quynh & Thanh, 2025; Saud et al., 2023). However, online participation varies in depth and purpose. Sharing a campaign message may raise awareness, while organizing a campaign or contributing to sustained community initiatives may require greater commitment and coordination. The analysis therefore distinguishes between simple online engagement and participation that contributes to continuing civic action.The analysis also considered the challenges affecting digital activism, including misinformation, harassment, unequal digital access, emotional pressure, and the possibility that online engagement may not produce meaningful offline change. The reviewed literature suggests that youth participation is shaped by personal motivations, social relationships, platform norms, and wider cultural and political circumstances (Kornbluh et al., 2026). Because the studies differ in their contexts and methods, their findings were interpreted cautiously. The analysis emphasizes that digital activism can create valuable opportunities for youth involvement, but its outcomes depend on the conditions in which participation occurs.

FINDINGS

The findings indicate that online communities provide important opportunities for youth participation by enabling young people to exchange ideas, develop social connections, and discuss issues affecting their communities. Digital platforms can help youth raise awareness about social inequality, environmental protection, education, human rights, and other public concerns. Research on youth activism demonstrates that young people can use digital communication to express their views, develop civic identities, and contribute to public discussions (McDaniel, 2024; Neag et al., 2024). These opportunities may be particularly

valuable for young people who face barriers to participation in traditional civic or political institutions.The findings also indicate that digital activism can strengthen networking, collaboration, and collective mobilization. Online platforms enable young people to circulate information rapidly, coordinate activities, and connect local concerns with wider movements. Research on youth civic participation suggests that dialogue and collaboration are important dimensions of digital engagement (Quynh & Thanh, 2025). However, participation can be affected by misinformation, online hostility, privacy risks, and unequal access to digital resources. Furthermore, emotional responses to social issues can influence how young people communicate and participate, as demonstrated by research on youth digital civic expression concerning climate change (Zummo et al., 2025).A further finding is that effective youth participation requires more than access to digital platforms. Young people need opportunities to develop critical thinking, evaluate information, communicate respectfully, and understand the potential consequences of online engagement. Supportive online communities, inclusive educational environments, and meaningful opportunities for civic involvement can help youth participate more confidently and responsibly. The literature also highlights the need for greater representation of diverse youth experiences in research and practice. Overall, online communities can contribute to youth empowerment and social change when digital participation is inclusive, informed, and connected with meaningful civic objectives.

CONCLUSION

Youth participation in online communities and digital activism has become an important feature of contemporary digital society. Online platforms provide opportunities for young people to express opinions, develop civic awareness, connect with like-minded individuals, and participate in collective efforts addressing social, political, cultural, and environmental concerns. The reviewed literature indicates that digital participation can strengthen communication, networking, collaboration, and public awareness. However, these opportunities coexist with challenges such as misinformation, online harassment, privacy concerns, unequal access, and the difficulty of translating digital engagement into sustained social change. The influence of online communities therefore depends on the quality of participation and the wider circumstances in which young people engage.The study concludes that promoting effective youth digital activism requires a combination of digital literacy, inclusive online environments, responsible communication, and meaningful opportunities for civic participation. Families, educators, community organizations, and digital platforms can support young people by encouraging critical evaluation of information, protecting online safety, and creating spaces where youth perspectives are respected. Future research should examine how digital participation develops over time and how young people from different cultural, economic, and political backgrounds experience online activism. Strengthening these areas can help ensure that digital communities

serve not only as spaces for expression but also as meaningful channels for youth involvement in social and civic life.

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