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Unveiling digital pedagogy tools for citizenship through a child-led study setting

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Abstract

This article aims to propose a child-led study setting as a bottom-up community-building approach concerning children's engagement in digital environments. Beginning with a theoretical framework addressing the boundaries and intersections between participation and engagement, it initiates a discussion on children's presence in the research field. This discussion is grounded in the preparation and implementation of a small-scale case study on the digital citizenship experiences of children in Istanbul, Türkiye. Viewed through a critical lens that examines the relationships among participants and contributors, including the researcher and the study's leader/co-researchers (which include children), this article also touches on the incorporation of children into democratic processes, discussions and decision-making. Since individuals under the age of 18 are often regarded as partial citizens who are excluded from social life and political decision-making processes, this field study aims to promote an understanding of digital citizenship within the context of social, political and cultural engagement. Following the principles of democratic participation, this study takes into account the potential of social media and digital tools as spaces where different segments of society intersect and converge, thereby enhancing the participation of children and adolescents transitioning into adulthood across various domains of life.

Keywords digital citizenship; participation; child-led research; digital pedagogy; children's involvement

Introduction

This article initiates a discussion on the description of digital citizenship (for example, Caluya et al., 2018; McGillivray et al., 2015; Mossberger et al., 2008) within the framework of social pedagogy. Digital citizenship is commonly defined as the ability to competently use digital tools while actively participating in digital communities. It encompasses two aspects: competency as digital users, and social and political engagement as citizens (Caluya et al., 2018). When it comes to children and young people, the digital competency of new generations has become a contemporary myth. Youth are often considered digitally literate simply because they were born into a digitalised world, yet they are regarded as partial citizens in the traditional sense. On the one hand, their digital tendencies should be understood and supported for their well-being, enabling them to become capable citizens of this world. On the other, while they are excluded from some aspects of citizenship practices due to being under the legal age, digital society offers them a space to speak out.

Traditionally, citizenship referred primarily to the right to vote rather than active participation in decision-making (Oboler, 2006), thus not considering children as equal practitioners of citizenship. In this context, it is worth noting that citizenship, as conceptualised here, typically refers to 'active citizenship'. This definition (Banks, 2008) highlights a pre-transformative stage where individuals act as active agents in society. Because social pedagogy targets individuals as community members striving for a better society by exercising their agency, it can be a practical tool for young people to understand each other, exchange ideas and transform digital media into their shared world. Social pedagogy not only focuses on current social issues but also takes a significant interest in societal changes and the impact of transforming environments on social settings (Odrowaz-Coates and Szostakowska, 2021). Thus, the field of social pedagogy intersects with evolving citizen practices in the digital realm.

Children's experiences of digital citizenship

This study explores children's experiences of digital citizenship, focusing on their participation in digital media, the establishment of networks among peers and whether their digital literacy differs from older generations. Conducted with children aged between 14 and 17 from various cities in Türkiye, studying in different schools ranging from vocational high schools to academically prestigious private schools, the study involved diverse activities tailored to the children's suggestions and interests via digital platforms. Throughout this process, insights were gained into how children exercise agency in online spaces, fostering and participating in various digital communities.

To achieve this, the study examined the social media tendencies of young participants in Türkiye, their perceptions of online and in-person communication and their critical perspectives on digital engagement. In delving into the concept of citizenship and its reflection in digital spaces, young participants in this study defined it as 'belonging to the digital world', 'expressing oneself within digital boundaries' and 'having a personal digital space'. Through the youth's conceptualisation of digital citizenship, this article aims to spark discussions on their experiences in community building, their representation of shared digital spaces as a generation and their levels of engagement and participation in digital environments.

In the Turkish context, unlike previous generations who were often silenced rather than empowered to voice their political aspirations following military coups, which are significant milestones in the history of the Republic, the current generation demonstrates a heightened awareness of their sociopolitical rights. The internet plays a pivotal role in this dynamic, despite being subject to control. While mass media and traditional channels, frequently under government influence, may steer society towards a more oppressive and conservative trajectory, new generations discover avenues for freedom and expression through digital platforms.

Despite political pressures and restrictions on citizenship rights, the internet and digital platforms were initially heralded as new arenas for policymaking and organisation. However, both private entities and government policies have imposed constraints on the use of digital media through censorship, underscoring the influence of oppressors in digital environments. This reality is increasingly recognised by children and youth. Their awareness indicates that in situations where they are oppressed or lack legal representation in democracy as much as needed, their potential for action becomes even more crucial as lived citizenship experiences (Oboler, 2006). Therefore, social pedagogical understanding of citizenship and reciprocal learning among youth is significant for this study. Regardless of the intention, motivation, interest or engagement of young people, researching digital experiences through a critical citizenship lens would help support their potential to take action and practice active citizenship.

Digital citizenship and social pedagogy

Social pedagogy fosters the practitioners as active citizens (Storø, 2013). Considering the impacts of social pedagogy on citizenship (Hämäläinen, 2012, 2015), critical citizenship theory is also effective (Isin and Ruppert, 2015) in exercising citizen performance. In a digitalised era, such performances and activities will occur in digital spaces rather than physical public spheres. Digitally conducted research has the potential to provide a learning environment (Johnston et al., 2019) for young people, supporting their exercise of participation rights and fostering their political action potential.

In this study, we barely mention children's political acts because most of the participants claimed that they refrain from acting politically due to a self-censorship mechanism (within their definition). However, they are fully aware that they have more opportunities to engage with politics, or at least learn about political issues or support the ideas they believe in. The concept of becoming political, as described by Isin (2002), can be exemplified through various stages, including assembly, singing, applause and dispersal, akin to a public square gathering. In digital spaces, similar forms of engagement are observed, such as virtual assembly, content creation in the form of memes rather than banners, expressing opinions by raising virtual hands, and even conveying emotions through virtual faces, emojis and virtual reality technologies.

During my interaction with the children, I explored different techniques and tactics to express opinions, or sometimes only emotions, and expectations about various circumstances. Despite these visible forms of engagement, digital actions often remain anonymous, allowing internet users to adopt multiple identities and etiquettes. This was also a significant issue that I addressed during my field study.

In Türkiye, where political and economic uncertainty persists and social and political polarisation have escalated since the 2010s, particularly following the shift towards an authoritarian regime within the framework of the existing parliamentary democracy, participatory culture has been damaged. Furthermore, I encountered 'radically unpolitical' youth as a potential new societal archetype for new individuals in society (Farthing, 2010). Different from traditionally engaged political subjects and apolitical youth disengaged from politics, Farthing (2010) suggests the existence of individuals who actively reject politics.

In the Turkish context, youth may abstain from politics due to a lack of trust in media and politics, which may also stem from censorship. In both cases, it is important to understand the digital citizenship practices of children by examining not only action but also inaction. Thus, this article dwells on the everyday experiences of young participants in a field study of digital media, where they attempt to be part of social engagement, aiming to understand whether the internet facilitates or inhibits their engagement with citizenship.

Digital pedagogy for community-based research

Virtually conducted research (Setty, 2023) provides a set of emancipatory tools for young participants. First, when discussing digital spaces and the potentials of digital environments, it appears consistent and meaningful to gather through online platforms. This approach has allowed me to use various digital tools such as Miro and Padlet for written communication, Make it Meme or similar sites for creating visual images to express opinions in different ways, and engaging in communities on diverse topics that I would like to share 'among us'. I have also used games (for example, Among Us, Minecraft, etc.) and platforms such as Discord and Instagram for social media interaction.

In addition to the advantages of internet-based communication (Dahlberg, 2001; Vromen, 2008) presented to us, my intention was to create a virtual public sphere in our activities via Zoom as the main platform for our meetings. This allowed me to gather everyone, while also facilitating group activities aimed at fostering close friendships through collaborative work and production, alongside discussions and conversations. Social media platforms enable the gathering of existing friends, friends of friends, unknown celebrities and influencers (Setty, 2023). Participants in the study stated that they had the opportunity to meet new people online, build friendships and feel included in various communities due to the lack of hierarchy and emphasis on collaboration (Bećirović, 2023).

Considering the potentials of including digital tools and strong interaction opportunities, we conducted all of the research online. This also made it possible to meet children from different cities. Twenty-three children in total from six different cities participated at different stages of the study, of which 15 were girls and 8 were boys, ranging from 14 to 17 in age; most were 15 years old and were high school students. Children were reached through their teachers via the Zoom platform. Five of the children were involved in communication through Instagram and Discord platforms as friends of other children; some also contributed to the activities I conducted on Padlet and Miro. Only two children, with whom the planning of the study was carried out, met face to face in a physical environment at different times (one from Ankara and the other from Istanbul). Fifteen of the children took part in all activities.

Findings

The study began by collaborating with two participants. As demonstrated in an earlier work (Demiral, 2023), the two research partners continued their cooperation and companionship to foster equal encounters with other participants. By cooperating with children, we initiated our project in digital environments. Before implementation, the project design and activities were planned with these participants. Under their leadership, the initial plan was changed to focus on discussing emotions and expressions to understand the social engagement of youth. Consequently, the children suggested organising an emoji workshop. We were all enthusiastic about discussing social media use and differences among platforms. However, digital identities were not a topic we had previously considered. Several issues were brought to the table during the focus group activities.

All meetings were held on the Zoom platform, with the entire session organised as a focus group interview that included creative activities and interactions through the aforementioned digital tools and applications. After introductory meetings with three different groups, we conducted online workshops for all. While I typically acted as the mentor when we were all together in the main room, discussions were led by other children in separate breakout rooms. Furthermore, on other platforms such as Discord, the children communicated among themselves and engaged in activities such as creating memes or playing virtual games. During these interactions, I did not actively participate; instead, the children shared their experiences with me afterwards.

The first activity involved investigating children's use of emojis and their individual and social activities on social media platforms. During subsequent activities, including creative story writing and group work about digital experiences, children discussed their experiences of childhood in digital environments and the extent to which child participation was possible in various areas. When discussing childhood, youth, relationships with peers and people from other generations, friendships and conflicts, children shared examples of exercising their rights and discussed issues such as limiting themselves in digital environments or encountering problematic content or issues. The topics that formed the content of the activities were revealed step by step during conversations with the children, some of which took place face to face on Zoom, while others were conducted in group chats on Discord channels or Instagram.

Additionally, community building was exercised through Discord and Instagram, which are commonly used platforms. The young people continued to communicate during this process and even afterwards, within separate groups as well as one on one through the digital platforms. For example, several children were studying at the same school, which has different campuses in different cities.

Some children from different cities became friends during the field process. Several children from İzmir, the third-biggest city in Türkiye, were studying in a vocational high school, and their peer culture and interaction on social media showed nuances.

Gender, academic success and city origin were diverse among participants. In an interpretive subjective analysis, these variables can be useful. However, this article, presenting preliminary findings of the study (focusing only on interviews rather than children's written expressions and visual reflections via memes), will only represent their similar insights, underlining their intersections as a generation. Respectively, this section provides examples of their common sense of communication and interactions, their roles as active users or passive observers in digital media and their potential to become members of the digital community.

Expressions and issues among us

With different groups of children, first we asked the participants to describe their interests and personality by declaring the emojis that they used the most. The idea belonged to the leader children who underlined the generational intersections in communication tools. One of them criticised the digital communication tools at first. While comparing physical and digital communication in our preparation debates, she declared that she had trouble with GIFs and emojis because 'when everyone uses the emoji of crying from laughing, everyone can use it for a different purpose'. Then she illustrated, 'Most of my friends use it to make fun of something they didn't find funny, but my parents use it for something they actually find funny. When it's someone I don't know, I can't tell if they're making fun or actually laughing, I can't figure it out.'

When we conducted the workshop as suggested by the children during our initial meeting, it became clear that they had similar experiences. Initially, I asked the participants to indicate the emojis they used most frequently in their notes during a brainstorming activity. Some children copied several emojis, while others mentioned that they were not fond of emojis or found them to be old-fashioned. Each participant explained their purposes for using those emojis, and then we imitated those emojis with our facial expressions, as well as explaining emotional states or verbal reactions to various situations. During a final session to evaluate emoji usage in different or similar ways, most of the participants noted the differing use of emojis by their parents and grandparents, while also mentioning that emoji usage is not as widespread among newer generations anymore:

> Well, my mom, my grandma, and all, they use emojis excessively. But I'm still sticking to my simplicity. I mean, I write directly without using emojis. I don't think they misunderstand me. I just write plain text, and they understand me just fine.
>
> Once, I sent a message without using anything extra. I sent it to my cousin, and the next day, my mom asked me why I'm being mean to her, why I'm giving such a harsh response, and stuff like that. I couldn't figure out what was going on. Then, my mom explained to me, saying, 'You didn't use any emojis'. My aunt misunderstood it as something else. Since that day, I've been filling up my messages with hearts and emojis of all sorts.

These two examples from young people showed how they felt forced to use emojis by their elders to seem nice and polite. Although they did not want to use such symbols to express themselves among peers, they might need to in order to satisfy their parents. However, they might also choose not to send emojis to older people for the same reason – the fear of being misunderstood:

> Usually, I prefer not to use emojis when talking to older folks, or people who might not understand the meaning of emojis. Because, they can interpret things differently, and they might understand something I didn't mean. The thing you put at the end or before the end.
>
> It also varies from person to person when you're talking face to face. Like, I don't use the same emojis with my parents as I do with my friends. For example, the emojis I send to my friends, I can't easily send those to my family. Sometimes, my family thinks certain emojis are unnecessary, but we can use them as a general language among friends.

That conversation highlighted specific features of peer relations resembling early youth cultures among the participants or within their social circles. Friendship emerges as a key motivator for their online engagement, with various digital tools such as sound, images, games and Reels facilitating its development. However, their usage of social media may lead them to be critical of themselves, a topic explored in the following subsection. Additionally, self-criticism among children regarding their emotional expressions was notable. For example, one participant mentioned feeling emotionally numb due to exaggerating reactions through emojis or other forms of digital content.

> When sending emojis, there are a hundred expressions, like we're really laughing. Sometimes, people even write things like 'I'm gonna burst out laughing'. You might have seen it. They write as if they're in a fit of laughter, but the hundred expressions are just flat, you know. It's a bit funny to me.
>
> We don't really send random emojis unless we're really laughing, and we don't usually write 'I laughed'. Those laughing smiley faces and stuff are kind of old-fashioned now. Everything's moving so fast, teacher, because of the internet, so being genuinely amused doesn't always have to be like that. For example, just turning a normal hundred into a smiling one is enough. When we do that, we send it. We're just random people, after all. Sometimes, we try to stay away from platforms a little.

As citizens of today and active participants in the digital realm, children often navigate their identity within the dichotomy of us as children/youth and them as adults. On the one hand, they express fatigue from being labelled as Generation Z, feeling burdened by expectations for the future imposed by their elders. Described as netizens (Robertson, 2009), they find joy in their digital competency but feel a distinction drawn between themselves and adults. Childhood is often viewed as a space of escape, with digital spaces playing a significant role in this escapism. On the other hand, they take pride in their digital presence, acknowledging their proficiency in using digital tools better than their parents or teachers. However, they feel torn between being politically engaged in their lives and having a voice, and simply enjoying their friendship circles and leisure time. For instance, they use Instagram the most and consume Reels 'extremely', in one of the children's words, while staying away from X (formerly known as Twitter) because it is mostly used for 'official information' or 'political purposes'. Instead of being active participants, they follow the news only if necessary.

Considering the nuance between engagement and participation, they involve themselves in activities through social media by using multiple tools when necessary. However, instead of actively participating individually, they find collective engagement to be more suitable. Since participation demands more activist practices, they tend to limit their social engagement among peers because their lifestyles and ideologies align more easily (Bee, 2021). First, they prefer staying within their circles as it provides them with more enjoyment; they participate in these circles through private accounts, sharing content that brings them laughter. They engage with and enjoy others' content and only criticise themselves for excessive use. Second, political polarisation is evident on social media. They emphasise that 'the culture of online lynching in social media is applied to everyone regardless of age'. Within the digital civic life of social media, misinformation poses a significant danger that can lead to polarisation (Felton et al., 2023). Young participants of the study express similar concerns about being excluded from a community due to bullying or even online harassment based on their posts.

Spaces for gathering, spaces for dispersing

Nowadays, digital environments are increasingly becoming 'echo chambers' that don't necessarily foster social interaction but rather reinforce existing circles – a topic I extensively discussed with the children. Thus, it could be intriguing to reconsider digital platforms and participation as spaces where diverse individuals converge. When children mentioned their aims and intentions for using social media, they specifically pointed out each platform. For instance, 'chatting behind the game' or 'chatting with other gamers' were common advantages of Discord, while Discord also:

> allows people from the same community, with the same hobbies, to come together for various topics like movies, music, books, and more. It's more user-friendly compared to other social media platforms. But people's differences … it's something that comes from society and generation, due to their style of communication … they spend all their time there, available 24/7 to talk. I stayed away from it because I don't have that much time.

Another participant added:

> I follow a music channel on Discord where people who are interested in music gather and talk about the same things. But when it comes to gaming, for instance, people of all ages and with different cultural backgrounds join, and when some use foul language and profanity, it can make others uncomfortable. It can become complex, in my opinion.

We also opened a Discord channel for the project and communicated while continuing collective activities, as the participants had highlighted that 'Discord allows you to create communities'.

Instagram, as the most used platform among participants, serves as a common, fun space for everyone. The participants communicate with friends, follow people they like, and engage in anything related to their interests. They do not segregate reels from that, but some emphasised that they watch reels most frequently. Facebook was considered an 'older' platform that none of them use, while one mentioned she only uses it to connect her Spotify account. Spotify or Netflix were not even mentioned as social media platforms, as they were perceived as 'one-directional' rather than enabling social interaction. However, because our accounts were connected, we could also see each other's music preferences via Spotify on Discord.

According to the participants, TikTok is also popular among them. Several said they never use it, while others indicated that they use it for 'recipes', following 'bands' or discovering 'edited music videos'. As mentioned earlier, X is considered by the participants to be for 'politics' or general agendas, with one participant indicating that he followed technology news specifically and a few sharing that they follow X as a passive audience after natural disasters. Due to censorship in mass media and citizens' lack of trust, youth are more engaged in X as a newspaper in the traditional sense and YouTube as television.

Despite several participants being content creators on YouTube, they all declared it to be the main platform for watching something while eating or doing other tasks, including studying. 'Game sports lego', 'fun music', 'informative research', 'podcasts' and 'following series' were also their responses for YouTube use.

For most social media platforms, children practised individual engagement rather than participation, while for Instagram they engaged socially and built networks. Participation or community building seemed more possible via Discord, according to what they said, while their interests (mostly limited to gaming) were supported by their engagement in other channels such as YouTube and Twitch. Thus, children's engagement with the internet seemed limited to watching videos to access 'eternal fun' and have 'pleasure' through mostly visual content. However, they also described the internet as an 'academic-artistic-linguistic self-improvement tool', 'encyclopaedia' and 'content producer': indicators for aspects of the digital realm as pedagogical tools. Some said that they discovered 'art waves', while others followed 'research', and some were into 'games' or 'music'. Apparently, individuals invented ways to improve their skills as competent users. When it comes to functions of the internet as spaces for gathering and interaction, such critical points of view occurred:

> The internet wasn't as functional back then. It was a place where people could meet up and hang out online. Like Newgrounds or a few travel blogs or catalogues, you know. It was a really simple place. Where you could learn information, do your job.
>
> Yeah, it was more one-sided. As the internet developed, it enabled much more … information to be hidden within it, and this led people to use the internet for different purposes. For entertainment, you know, drug abuse, for example, illegal things like drug trafficking or directly buying stuff, for example.

These expressions prompted our discussion about the negative aspects of social media. However, I sought to explore whether they found social media as social as they had expected or experienced previously. In this regard, one participant expressed her feelings in a contradictory manner, highlighting both the negative and positive aspects of its 'spontaneous' nature.

> Sometimes social media can be even more dangerous than the street. You know … For example, when I'm on an account where I'm only with my close friends, I feel, you know, okay, I'm in a safer space right now and I can share more comfortably. But, for example, on my public account, it feels like such a street, you know, because suddenly, for example, it's watched too much and I say to myself, I haven't encountered this many people in real life. Looking at it that way, it can sometimes be more street than the street.

In terms of content creation and individuals becoming public figures themselves rather than simply using public accounts, one participant remarked:

> For me, I never thought about doing it because there's this thing, you know, you need good social skills after all, and it can get boring after a while and your actions can be repetitive, and because so many people want to do the same thing, you know, everything becomes similar to each other, so there's no creativity, eventually everything overlaps, so I wouldn't do it.

Exploring youth cultures within the framework of technological settings (Jenkins et al., 2015), young people themselves shared how they built autonomy through social media and citizenship practices. Despite their apprehensions or tendencies to disengage, they were also aware of the need to develop skills to navigate these spaces. For instance, during a discussion about digital community building, one participant remarked:

> People started doing weird things over the internet, and it led to big problems … You can click a link and learn the summary of someone's entire life – from the ID number to everything, you know, I'm not even talking about social media stuff. Mother name, phone number, where they studied, IP, and so on. These are very dangerous things and … over time, the internet has become a much more dangerous place.

The SAFE framework – self-identities, activities online, fluency in digital environments and ethics in mapping activities with children – as developed by Zhong and Zheng (2023), was also part of our research activities. Our aim was to create a pedagogical setting within the context of societal pedagogy, promoting community-orientated and practice-centred approaches (Lorenz, 2008). Civic participation through our discussions was a central part of our fieldwork.

Children engaged in individual/subjective sharing expressed themselves comfortably and began to build a community together. However, it was observed in the study that some children did not want to delve too deeply into certain discussions. For example, while bullying was a topic that some wanted to discuss, there were children who wanted to discuss their discomfort on social media within the framework of concepts such as 'keyboard bravery', while others tended not to talk about these issues. It can also be said that they were relatively reserved about issues that they thought they could not find a solution to. In this context, there were areas where children did not fully share their thoughts and experiences with others or where participation did not occur to the extent that it would have an impact.

Digital engagements versus participation

In an era defined by technological advancements and the increasing democratisation of public spaces, digital environments foster openness and innovation (Isin and Ruppert, 2015). Nevertheless, these environments do not always encourage young people to act or interact meaningfully. In this context, it becomes imperative to discern between participation and engagement (Bee, 2021). As actual and potentially active citizens in the digital realm, young people usually engage in diverse communities, primarily through social media accounts and by constructing multiple identities. However, true participation entails stepping into the community as their authentic selves.

During our collaboration, I aimed to encourage the children to articulate their profound interactions with digital environments. Rare expressions can be found in this regard; however, they may be indicators of deeper engagement in digital tools by new generations. As an illustration of relationship and friendship development:

> Personally, I feel a bit nervous when meeting someone in person for the first time, especially if we've only interacted online. Because, you know, I don't know them well yet. I'm unsure about what to do, what to say, and I can't just walk away if I'm not comfortable, it might come off as rude or something. These thoughts always come to mind. But when I meet someone online first and then talk to them in person, I don't feel that anxiety at all. Because, in my opinion, most people our age probably feel the same way, but we're more comfortable and open online. I think it's because, you know, it's easier to say what we want to say online. It's really like that. For example, when I turn on my camera during an online chat, I don't feel uncomfortable. Or, you know, I don't worry as much about how I look right now, what they

> might be thinking about me. I don't know why, but I just feel more at ease getting to know people online.

The opposite could be expected. Typically, people are assumed to improve their communication skills in face-to-face interactions through physical encounters. However, young people seemingly preferred distance between each other to reconsider and even produce manifold identities in the digital realm. For instance, during our interactive activities, we used artificial intelligence (AI) tools for Padlet and Zoom. For Zoom, it was tasked with summarising the previous meeting for the children who could not attend our activity. For the Padlet AI tool, children suggested using it to provide more concrete examples of citizenship actions. Therefore, we had conversations with children in their groups about digital identities, footprint, privacy and other relevant topics. The discussion on digital identity became a favourite subject for most participants. One young person from İzmir claimed, 'I think digital identities make us feel safer, because we let people know about us as much as we want, and we do not give our own information to them'.

According to her, producing various identities was part of self-protection. Another participant from Istanbul added, 'I have many different accounts, and it is the opportunity to communicate with different communities that have no connection with each other'. This example demonstrated their functional use of multiple identities for diverse communities. Later, one participant said: 'We can become the person we want to be … For example, I was a completely different person. However, it's true that I later became so close to people that I gave details about my own identity. Nevertheless, it's a chance to become another person.'

These seemingly extreme examples of shifting identities were cited by several young participants in this study. However, they tend to use what they call a 'priv account' as their additional and essential social media accounts, for use with only their peers and/or close friends. Most of them did not add me through these accounts, for example. Instead, I could be part of their 'official/public' accounts, where their families and teachers – as older people – were included. When I questioned why they needed to have such accounts, the answer was usually 'privacy' and sharing something in common with their generation.

> [In such accounts] we do not have to post something nice or a photo where we look good. We can share anything completely sincere and honest. When we go out, encounter funny stuff, photos, and those can be things that we may not want our parents see. Or just something that our beloved friends would see, and we do not want anyone else to see.

This nuance between 'sharing something for attention' or just 'randomly posting' also served as an indicator for the study participants on how they segregate political reactions and fun moments among friends. To illustrate this, when it came to political expressions and building collective identities, the comments varied:

> I think, generally speaking, it's easier to talk face to face about certain things. Because, you know, when you're on social media or any other platform, what you say can be recorded and become a permanent record, but they say 'words fly, writings remain' in real life. That's why, you know, if we say something in a computer or virtual environment, for example, someone we talked to in person can use it against us, but in reality, it's not really possible.

> When we talk about these kinds of things in real life, we can understand the other person's reactions more clearly. We can understand how we should continue the conversation. We can't really convey what we mean, what we're thinking through messages when we talk digitally. Or we might feel uncomfortable because we can't see their reaction, we might think they're not uncomfortable.

Discussing 'certain things' often alludes to the self-censorship observed among young participants. On the one hand, they expressed a desire to speak out, with some indicating a willingness to post more to spread their ideas; however, they usually refrain from engaging in political discourse. On the other hand, they are cautious about increasing their digital footprints, as highlighted in another session during our activities. These contrasting attitudes represent two sides of the same coin. For instance, instead of posting content permanently on their feed or timeline, they prefer sharing 'snaps' (temporal image-sharing).

When distinguishing between permanent posts on their feed and temporary stories (like snaps, which typically lasts 24 hours), one participant remarked, 'when you post [to your feed], you should take care'. Others elaborated on this sentiment: 'It is for the moment'; and 'It is like capturing a scene from your everyday life, directly from your life'. Sharing stories or snaps allows them to express themselves comfortably without the need for careful consideration, yet it also creates a space for political action among peers, knowing that content will disappear like moments in their everyday lives. This connection they make between digital content and the passage of time in their real lives is significant. It mirrors the transient nature of childhood and youth. They are also aware that their opinions, interests and tendencies will evolve as they mature and 'become a different person'.

Their choice to abstain from social media or limit their presence on these platforms, using private accounts within their networks, stemmed from the concerns underlined in this section. Even when using emojis they may fear being misinterpreted, and they are unwilling to share their opinions on social media in case they leave a footprint in the digital world. Conversely, they also expressed a desire to communicate and engage in different communities as our study progressed. One participant highlighted the internet's utility for 'meeting, speaking and forming friendships (even more than friendships) with people worldwide', while others emphasised its role in providing everyday information and facilitating communication. It appears that as we continued our study and established trust, friendship and strong connections, the children became more willing to share their thoughts and experiences. At times, they remained apolitical due to these concerns, but they also articulated 'radically unpolitical' aspects of their inaction in their critiques of older generations (Farthing, 2010).

Unveiling digital pedagogy tools

Referring to Karl Mager's description of practical education within the boundaries of personal and social contexts, Moss and Petrie (2019) emphasise social pedagogy's informal, non-hierarchical relationships. Initially, children exhibited self-censorship in the presence of teachers during our early encounters. However, as discussions progressed they felt more comfortable expressing themselves on written platforms such as Zoom and Discord, engaging freely in small chat rooms. They consistently referred to me as 'teacher' or 'instructor', and our dynamics differed from their interactions with each other. Through our reciprocal learning process, we successfully removed invisible barriers.

Within the realm of educational theory and practice, social pedagogy signifies the political and cultural emancipation of individuals through the experience of *Bildung* (Moss and Petrie, 2019). This process involves individual change within societal settings and the development of agency within diverse social structures. Children often play pioneering roles in such experiences that extend beyond conventional education. As a result, pedagogical tools can evolve and adapt to a changing society through collaboration with children and advancements in technology. This study yielded pedagogic reflection, encompassing both individual and societal insights (Mollenhauer, 1964), gained from participants through their interactions and discovery of their shared sense of humour, reactions, political perspectives and understanding.

Most participants shared their experiences of forming friendships and learning from each other during our activities, particularly in group discussions and collective meme-making practices. They engaged actively in sharing opinions and challenging themselves, gaining knowledge about different games, platforms and interests such as music, cinema and video games, which strengthened their bonds. Towards the end of the field process, almost all participants expressed enjoyment in listening to diverse viewpoints, highlighting a desire to overcome biases and improve their listening skills compared to older generations entrenched in traditional political engagement. This reflects their often radically unpolitical stance on political involvement.

This study has considered the democratisation of society and the broader opportunities offered by the internet, such as internet-enabled citizen science and contributory expertise in interactions, as suggested by Wynn (2017). Through collaboration with children, we illuminated perspectives through a bottom-up approach, emphasising interactive transparency within communities, while prioritising well-being and dignity (Eichsteller and Holthoff, 2019), crucial components in childhood and youth studies.

The research highlights the multifaceted nature of children's experiences in digital environments and advocates for inclusive, participatory approaches in shaping pedagogy and societal engagement.

As trust and connections deepened throughout our study, children became increasingly willing to share their thoughts and experiences. Insights like 'you automatically understand each other when you are the same age; there is a natural connection between you' underscored the study's outcomes, suggesting that digital pedagogy can foster tools for community-building that enhance these natural connections among individuals.

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Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

All procedures conducted in this study adhered to ethical standards and complied with the principles outlined in the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its subsequent amendments, or equivalent ethical standards.

Consent for publication statement

Informed parental consent was obtained from the parents of the children, and both written and verbal assent were obtained from each child.

Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflict of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently blind the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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