

Youth Participation and Social Media: Potentials and Barriers

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Abstract: This work-in-progress-paper presents the multi-layered research design of the Austrian team in the U-YouPa project. First, we give a brief overview of Social Media use in Austria. After a short description of our research design at a glance, we focus on our methodological considerations for four case studies. Our research approach can be used to explore youth in its diversity and to prevent limited perspectives.

Keywords: youth participation, social media, case studies, participatory research, diversity

1. Introduction

A decline in election participation has been observed in most European countries since the mid-1980s. But young people are still interested in participating in democratic life, they just demand new opportunities which are often located online (European Commission, 2016). Against this background, we explore interconnections between online platforms and youth participation in the international research project “U-YouPa. Understanding Youth Participation and Media Literacy in Digital Dialogue Spaces” (The Research Council of Norway). One of the main goals of the project is the development of methods, concepts and empirical knowledge that contribute to increased understanding of the potential participatory online spaces. It is carried out by Oslo Metropolitan University (Norway) (lead), FH JOANNEUM – University of Applied Sciences Graz (Austria), University of Music and Performing Arts Graz (Austria) and Malmö University (Sweden) between 2020 and 2024 (funded by the Research Council of Norway, SAMKUL, project number 301896; <https://uni.oslomet.no/u-youpa>).

The Austrian team has a special focus on youth participation in Social Media (SoMe). We define youth participation as “both ‘spaces’ where young people can express their views and opinions but also opportunities for decision makers to listen to those views” (Crowley and Moxon, 2017: 13). In contrast to mainstream media where production is restricted to media professionals, SoMe “[...] allows the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010: 61). Therefore, SoMe could be a tool for participation and for connecting with communities. Young people use SoMe for different activities, so it is important to consider the characteristics of each platform. There is no single concept of SoMe; rather, they can take different forms such as “blogs, discussion forums, wikis, video-sharing sites, photo-sharing sites, social bookmarking, and social networking sites” (Chugh and Ruhi, 2019: 1).

2. Social media use by Austrian youth

The frequency of SoMe use by young people is quite high in Austria: 74.5 % of people between 16 and 29 use SoMe daily (RTR, 2018). The Youth-Internet-Monitor 2021 shows that Austrian teenagers between 11 and 17 use especially three online platforms (Saferinternet, 2021): They use 1) WhatsApp to share pictures, videos and locations, and for group chats or phone calls, 2) YouTube for entertainment and information and as a search engine, and 3) Instagram for sharing images and stories. The Digital News Report Austria shows that Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok are increasingly used by people between 18 and 24. The most common platform among this group for news consumption is Instagram. In contrast, Facebook is still very popular among 25- to 34-year-olds (Gadring et al, 2021).

3. Research design

The central question of our study is how SoMe spaces can enable participation for young people between 15 and 29. We focus on this age group as the EU defines youth as young people up to the age of 29 (European Commission, 2016). As the emic perspectives (Kubik, 1996) of young people and their diversity is in the centre of our research, we are guided by a qualitative-oriented and participatory research design. This research approach is flexible and allows young people to set their own priorities and share with us those details of their SoMe use that are meaningful to them (Flick, 2018).

We have been conducting four case studies in which we analyse the SoMe use of young people and SoMe spaces relevant to them. We include different participatory activities for young people to play an active role in the

research process as co-researchers. Therefore, a range of methods and techniques are combined. Through this approach, we try to meet young people at eye level and to deal with topics that are important to them.

First of all, we analyse communities initiated by young people. Herein, we focus on already organised groups. To make our case studies comparable, we have developed four leading questions: a) how is the term (political) participation defined and used, b) which digital platforms are used for which activities, c) what is currently missing on digital platforms to enable participation, and d) what has changed through COVID-19.

To gain understanding of youth participation and the role of SoMe in stimulating (political) participation, we also deal with initiatives that are started top-down by youth, media or political organisations. We discuss general topics that are relevant for society and ask young people how they engage in SoMe spaces and how they perceive selected top-down initiatives.

4. Case studies

4.1 LGBTQIA+

Background. The largest EU-wide LGBTQIA+ survey shows that over half of the people surveyed are never or rarely open about their identity (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2020). Therefore, digital spaces are often the first spaces LGBTQIA+ youth turn to. Young people use SoMe “to safely navigate their lives through learning, participating, engaging, communicating and constructing identities in digital spaces” (Lucero, 2017: 117).

Group description and sampling strategies. We are trying to reach members of these communities in Austria to learn about their SoMe use and important topics. Approximately half of the identified German-speaking LGBTQIA+ SoMe spaces are designed to live exclusively online where anonymity and respectful conversation is guaranteed. As this is a sensitive issue, we choose the snowball sampling strategy for recruitment (Patton, 2015).

Methods. When inviting LGBTQIA+ youth to participate, it is important to choose a format that ensures anonymity but also offers creative and fun elements. Therefore, we work with a participatory conference where the participants co-determine the session topics related to SoMe and participation. On the interactive video-calling platform Gather.Town, we set up an online BarCamp (Marquardt and Gerhard, 2019) that encourages the participants to engage and empowers them to take the learnings back into their communities (Wagaman, 2015). Afterwards the discussions of the Barcamp are compared with the main topics covered in online LGBTQIA+ communities in general.

4.2 Fridays/Students for Future

Background. Young people are in a unique situation as the ongoing climate catastrophe affects their future. Therefore, this case study focuses on young people who take action in the grassroots movement Fridays For Future (FFF). FFF has motivated millions of people around the globe to actively protest to ensure climate justice and equity (e.g., Wallis and Loy, 2021).

Group description and sampling strategies. This case study focuses on the local group of Fridays/Students For Future in Graz (FFF/SFF). While FFF addresses the general public, SFF focuses on higher education policy. FFF/SFF work together very closely when it comes to strikes but hold separate meetings, working groups, and SoMe channels. Based on their suggestions, we concentrate on the SoMe teams of FFF and SFF.

Methods. The case study starts with ethnographic observations and informal conversations at demonstrations and networking meetings to become familiar with the existing structures and networks of FFF/SFF (Gobo and Molle, 2017). Workshops and card sorting activities are applied to specify and prioritise research topics (e.g., Best et al, 2021). The next steps include interviews, group discussions, auto-ethnographies (e.g., Chang, 2008), and identity boxes (Brown, 2019).

4.3 Skateboarding scene

Background. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, inner-city public spaces in Graz have been increasingly used by young skaters. As a reaction to complaints from residents about noise pollution, the city of Graz introduced a ban on skaters doing tricks in public spaces in April 2021. This led to a lot of protest actions.

In addition to demonstrations and art actions in public spaces, much of the mobilisation of allies took place on SoMe (Sackl-Sharif, 2022).

Group description and sampling strategies. The skateboarding scene in Graz can be found in different public venues where smaller groups and circles of friends exist side by side. To reflect the diversity of the skater scene, we include skaters who are as diverse as possible in terms of age, gender, origin, and skateboarding venue. To accomplish this maximum variation sampling strategy (Patton, 2015), it is important to work with gatekeepers, such as people from skate shops or the local skate club GRÄB.

Methods. To develop background knowledge, reports about the skate ban in print and online media are analysed. In addition, the most important online platforms of GRÄB playing a central role in the protests and the online platforms of the political party FPÖ, which were essential in advancing the ban, are investigated. The content analysis is conducted with the software MAXQDA20 and the content analysis approach by Mayring (2014). The next steps include interviews with young skaters and ethnographic observations (Gobo and Molle, 2017).

4.4 Perception of top-down initiatives

Background. In Austria youth-related agendas cover a wide range of topics and tasks. However, the Youth Value Study 2021 found that projects such as youth parliaments are perceived as public relations activities of those with power (Heinz and Zandonella, 2020). Therefore, it is important for us to ask young people directly about their perception of youth participation and the role of youth.

Group description and sampling strategies. The selection of the young people follows the principle of maximum variation (Patton, 2015) and we try to integrate as many different young people as possible into the sample. The variation criteria include age, gender, origin, education, and place of residence.

Methods. We start to identify initiatives that focus on youth and try to address the platforms and formats that young people frequently use. Besides publicly available material (podium discussions, videos), we gather recently installed accounts from politics and media on popular SoMe platforms. Examples are participatory journalism projects on Instagram and TikTok accounts by politicians or important newscasts. With this stimulus material we conduct (online) workshops with young people to get insights from their point of view and more examples of projects that reflect or miss their (SoMe) reality.

5. Conclusion

In this work-in-progress paper, we are proposing the design of different case studies to get an understanding of youth participation and the role of SoMe. We address two main starting points to tackle this challenge: topic- or community-based bottom-up initiatives and top-down initiatives. The planning and results of the first activities conducted show that characteristics, habits, and perceptions held by young people related to interest-based groups and the initial situations are manifold. As SoMe is increasingly being a commonplace, the question of youth participation and digital dialogue spaces will be further specified in the next steps of the research project depending on the respective context and groups and, most importantly, led by the participant's priorities, interests, and opinions.

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