

## Researching Social Media and Activism With Children and Youth: A Scoping Review

ANNAMÁRIA NEAG<sup>1</sup>  
University of Groningen, The Netherlands

MARKÉTA SUPA  
Charles University, Czech Republic

PAUL MIHAILIDIS  
Emerson College, USA

This scoping review explores current research on social media and activism involving children and youth under the age of 18. After analyzing a selection of 34 journal articles published between 2010 and 2021, available in major scholarly databases, this study provides a comprehensive overview of the research topics, participants, methodologies, and the sociocultural and political contexts surrounding this area of study. Most of the articles, published in the Global North, focused on the roles that social media play in inspiring activism among minors, on the online and offline media in children's civic lives, and on the support and education they receive. However, there was a notable lack of children's active involvement in the research process and limited inclusion of diverse participants. We contend that future research should prioritize inclusivity, acknowledge children's diverse identities, and apply participatory methodologies that empower children and youth to share their subjective experiences and unique standpoints.

*Keywords: children, youth, activism, social media, empirical research, review*

From the #MarchforOurLives movement in the United States to #FreeYouth in Thailand, social media has become a rich terrain for scholars seeking to comprehend how young people's activism has changed in the last decades because of the widespread use of smartphones and other digital technologies.

---

Annamária Neag: a.neag@rug.nl

Markéta Supa: marketa.supa@fsv.cuni.cz

Paul Mihailidis: paul\_mihailidis@emerson.edu

Date submitted: 2023-06-13

<sup>1</sup> This research has been funded by Charles University, Grant no.: PRIMUS/21/HUM/003 (Neag) and by the Czech Science Foundation (GACR), Standard Grant, no. 21-28556S—"The role of online media in constructing, negotiating, and practising children's active citizenship" (Supa). We would like to thank Karolína Šimková for her support in the initial phases of the project.

Copyright © 2024 (Annamária Neag, Markéta Supa, and Paul Mihailidis). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives (by-nc-nd). Available at <http://ijoc.org>.

The surge in movements and campaigns has led researchers from varied fields (e.g., media studies or sociology, among others) to conduct studies investigating the role of social media in shaping protest narratives, mobilizing people, and supporting connections. This scholarly work drew on somewhat similar, though not precisely identical, concepts and approaches (for instance, *civic engagement* and *participation*). Therefore, having a comprehensive overview of the research conducted at the crossroads of social media, children and youth, and civic activism poses a considerable challenge. This scoping review aims to provide such an overview.

Although some reviews of the literature have already explored research on social media and activism or related concepts, such as *civic and political engagement* or *participation* (see, for example, Boulianne, Lalancette, & Ilkiw, 2020; Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020), none of the reviews focused specifically on research conducted with children and youth. According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children (1989), anyone under 18 is classified as a “child,” while other approaches prefer to differentiate children and youth at an earlier age, most commonly somewhere between 12 and 15 years of age. Although the age-based approach is of course problematic, Kim, Russo, and Amná (2017) suggested that offline and online activism may vary in relation to age because of developmental differences and because there is a minimum age for exercising many civic and political rights. Even though the minimum voting age differs from country to country, the most common minimum age is 18. The aim of this scoping review, therefore, is to explore the existing research about social media and activism in which children and youth under the age of 18 have been actively involved.

We focus on the research conducted *with* the under-18s because we identify with the view of children as right-holders, meaning-makers, and experts in their own lives who should be actively invited to share their experiences, views, and attitudes, and who should be listened to and heard (Mason & Danby, 2011). For better readability, we will mostly refer to children and youth under the age of 18 jointly as “children” while sidelining the otherwise important debates about children and childhood as sociocultural concepts.

Similarly, problematic are the concepts of *activism* and *social media*, which have a myriad of definitions. We lean toward Carr and Hayes’ (2015) general but fitting definition of social media as the “Internet-based, disentranced, and persistent channels of mass personal communication facilitating perceptions of interactions among users, deriving value primarily from user-generated content” (p. 49). For this article, we define *activism* as “practices that involve political, civic, social, or cultural action oriented toward social change or transformation . . . that can serve as central mechanism to disrupt inequality” (Stornaiuolo & Thomas, 2017, p. 338). Although this is a fairly broad conception of *activism*, we must bear in mind that there are several other related terms (e.g., *participation* and *civic engagement*), and no widely agreed-upon definition of them (Adler & Goggin, 2005). In fact, from *online civic engagement* to *micromobilization*, we observed a wide array of terms with often overlapping meanings in the articles included in the scoping review. To showcase this complexity, in Table 1—available on Figshare<sup>2</sup>—we summarize both the different terms used in these articles and the definitions used by the authors. One

---

<sup>2</sup> The table can be accessed here: <https://figshare.com/s/ec8d57fb40e694f103e5>

important finding here is that although some authors cover relevant literature pertaining to the topic of activism, they do not provide a clear definition of the concepts they are working with.

It is important to highlight that the scoping review does *not* focus on the theoretical concepts used or on the findings of the studies. The complexity of the areas of interest—as we discuss in the analysis section—has been such that including an analysis of the findings alongside the examination of research designs, context, and participants would have proven challenging. Instead, we have decided to focus on the ways research has been conducted, rather than on what has been discovered. We do so to question how the existing knowledge about children, social media, and activism has been so far constructed, what issues have arisen during research, and what approaches future research might take. Through this, the article provides an insight into prevailing trends in such research, highlighting both strengths and limitations in this work (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005).

### **Background**

The complex relationship between social media and civic activism has been of growing interest to scholars since the rise of the Internet in the final years of the 20th century. However, only a few meta-analyses, systematic studies, and scoping reviews have been conducted that provide an overview of the existing literature on the topic. These analyses have been aimed at presenting an overview of the findings of the studies. None have looked specifically at the research designs employed, as ours does. However, the literature does offer a good overview of the changes in scholarly interest in the field, and so we will present these in the following part of this article. It is important to note here that different studies use different terms for “activism,” and in this overview, we respected the authors' choices.

An early meta-analysis (Boulianne, 2009) tried to find an answer to the question of whether Internet use affects civic engagement. It is interesting to note that in this study, the author specifically excluded studies that examined online civic and political engagement. She concluded that existing research found little evidence to support an argument that Internet use is contributing to a decline in civic engagement in the offline realm.

Shelley Boulianne carried out two other meta-analyses, one in 2015 and the other in 2020. Her work (Boulianne & Theocaris, 2020) indicates how discussion of the subject has evolved over the years. Boulianne's (2015) meta-analysis focused on social media, while the 2020 study focused specifically on digital media and young people (Boulianne & Theocaris, 2020). For the 2015 article, Boulianne analyzed 36 studies and concluded that there is a positive relationship between social media use and civic participation. However, Boulianne (2015) argues that it was not clear whether the relationship was causal. Importantly, Boulianne (2015) included only quantitative, survey-based studies in her meta-analysis. She concluded that research that applied mixed methods and cross-national analyses was lacking (Boulianne, 2015).

Boulianne's most recent meta-analysis aimed to understand how digital media affects youth engagement in civic and political life (Boulianne & Theocaris, 2020). This analysis of survey-based studies included participants in the 12–34 age range. The authors concluded that despite all concerns, digital media does not distract its users from civic and political participation. Moreover, the authors stressed the

importance of the purpose for which digital media was used (political vs. nonpolitical use) and the existence of a strong correlation between online and offline forms of participation in civic life. Boulianne and Theocaris (2020) noted several weaknesses in the research they reviewed. They criticized the use of cross-sectional instead of longitudinal designs and a lack of standardized measurements (e.g., measurements of online political participation).

In the last five years, two other meta-analyses have focused on social media and citizen engagement. Skoric, Zhu, Goh, and Pang (2016) reviewed research carried out between 2007 and 2013 and concluded that social media use has a generally positive influence on engagement and its three subcategories: development of social capital, civic engagement, and political participation. As with the previous meta-analyses, one limitation was that this meta-analysis focused solely on research conducted with surveys. In their recommendations, the authors suggested that future studies should use computational and longitudinal approaches to gathering data (Skoric et al., 2016).

The second meta-analysis examined the relationship between Internet use and political participation (Chae, Lee, & Kim, 2019). This study found that reading news online had a stronger influence on political participation than did Internet use that did not include news reports. Chae et al. (2019) note a problem of ambiguity when it comes to the operationalization of research items related to political participation and Internet use.

Few scoping reviews have reported directly on the relationship between digital media and civic participation. Michalovich (2021) reviewed research that focused on the production of digital media by young refugees. His findings showed that refugee youth can effectively produce digital media to engage with audiences, increase their visibility, and represent themselves across space and time. Michalovich's review of qualitative studies noted a lack of clear descriptions of methodological designs, data types, and methods of data analysis in many of the studies he analyzed (Michalovich, 2021).

Another scoping review relevant to this study looked at the kinds of disciplines that have studied social media in the context of education and its use by students of high school and college age (Dennen, Choi, & Word, 2020). Dennen et al. (2020) concluded there is a dire need for interdisciplinary research to account for "the fluid manner [in which] social media is present in teenagers' lives" (p. 1650).

A number of systematic literature reviews have been published recently that offer useful insights for this study. Lutz, Hoffmann, and Meckel (2014) reviewed research done on online activity. They differentiated its distinct forms and identified salient discourses within each study. They found that civic engagement and online political participation were the most prominent subjects of research up to that time, while other forms of online participation (e.g., cultural, business) were less discussed. Chen, Mirpuri, Rao, and Law (2021) explored the conceptualization and measurement of digital citizenship across disciplines. They found that more than half of the studies published related to education and that there is a glaring lack of empirical research with younger children. As with previous studies, Chen and colleagues (2021) noted a need for more interdisciplinary research. A third systematic review investigated whether social networks can facilitate civic engagement (Pang, Qin, & Ji, 2022). The authors found that certain ways of using social

media (e.g., obtaining and disseminating news via social media) significantly predicted increased civic engagement.

After considering the different approaches, limitations, and recommendations of these previous studies, we decided to focus our scoping review on how empirical research with children under 18 has been conducted. The two main reasons are that, so far, no review has provided an overview of the designs and contexts of research on social media and activism, and that none of them recognized children as a social group to which separate attention should be given.

### **Methodology**

In our review of the empirical research on social media and activism with children younger than 18, we followed the *Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses*, known as the PRISMA guidelines (Tricco et al., 2018). We searched academic databases online using relevant keywords and screened titles, abstracts, and subject terms to identify potentially eligible studies that met our criteria for inclusion, as introduced below.

### **Search Protocol**

For this study, we conducted a thorough search of nine major academic databases: Academic Search Ultimate, JSTOR, Oxford University, Science Direct, Scopus, Springer, Taylor & Francis, Web of Science, and Wiley. We limited our search to academic journals, books, and reports published in English. We began searching for articles published between January 2000 and December 2020, but we later extended our search to 2021, as explained below. The first search was carried out in mid-2021 and reflected our initial aim of producing an overview of academic work published in the last 20 years. Our comprehensive search terms included combinations of the following keywords: youth, children, social media, activism, social change, and social movements. For the structure of the keyword combinations, see Table 2. The first search led to more than 4,000 results, which we refined by focusing only on peer-reviewed articles published in English.

**Table 2. Keyword Search Structure.**

#1	"youth" AND "social movements" AND "social media"
#2	"children" OR "adolescents" OR "youth" OR "child" OR "teenager" AND "social movements" OR "activism" OR "social change" AND "social media"
#3	"youth activism" AND "social media"

Data analysis followed a six-step process in which the number of articles to be reviewed was narrowed down (see Figure 1, adapted PRISMA flow diagram). In the first step, the databases were checked using the preselected keywords in their different combinations. The relevance of an article was determined by its use in the title, keywords, or abstract. This search produced 402 items. Next, to narrow down the results, we excluded articles on theory only and articles not directly involving children under 18 (99 items remained). By "direct involvement," we mean studies in which (a) children actually participated in the research and (b) the projects analyzed the digital communications or digital artifacts produced by children

younger than 18. We considered these types of research projects to be more reflective of children's participation in matters affecting their lives.

At the third stage, we reviewed the full text of the articles. In that way, we excluded all articles whose overall focus was not children's civic participation and engagement, but rather the role of NGOs, education, policymaking, and so forth (69 items remained). In the fourth step, we excluded papers that were not specific enough in terms of our research, which was focused on topics, subjects, contexts, and designs (59 items remained). In the next stage, we selected eight articles (approximately 15% of the total number of articles with which we began) for in-depth reading and coding inspired by previous scoping reviews published (e.g., Wolfers & Schneider, 2021). We eventually excluded articles in which social media was not central to the analysis (e.g., online media was just one of many variables in a panel study) and one article that matched our criteria but was published before 2010. Because we completed our preliminary selection in 2022, we decided to do further search for articles published in 2021. This resulted in adding three more articles to our database. Last, the final group of articles ( $n = 34$ ), published between 2010 and 2021, were coded using Atlas.ti.

We formulated our research questions as follows:

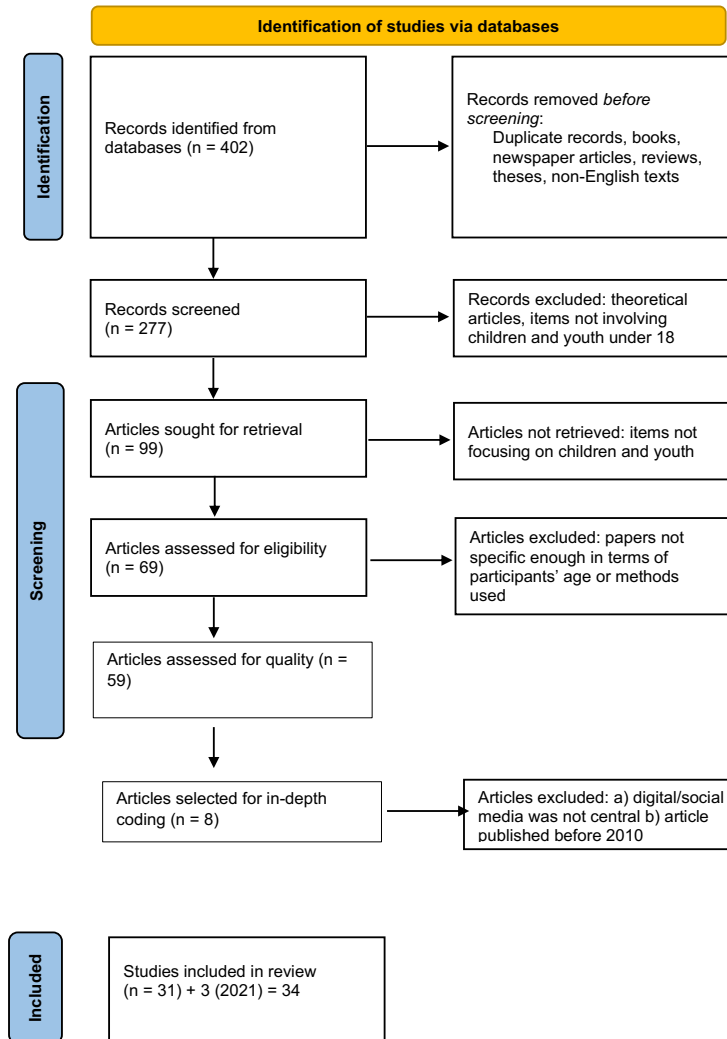
*RQ1: What research topics did the articles cover?*

*RQ2: What types of research designs were used?*

*RQ3: In what contexts were the research projects carried out?*

*RQ4: Who were the research subjects and what were the criteria on which they were selected?*

We present our analysis of our findings below under four headings: research topics, designs, contexts, and participants.



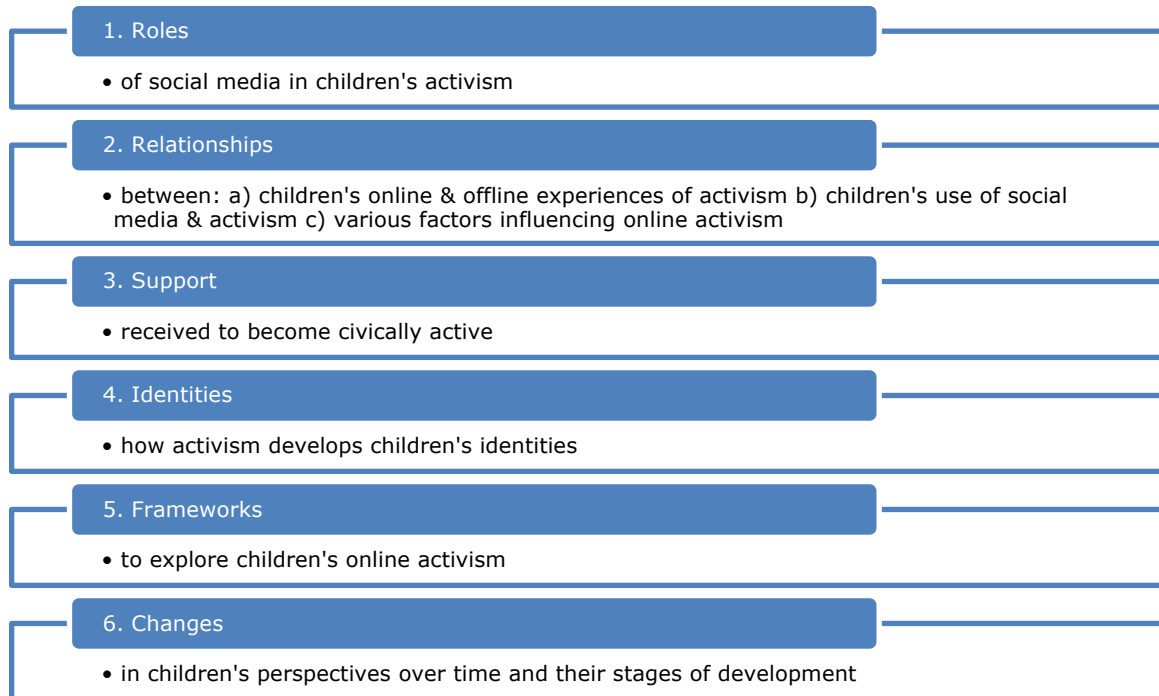
**Figure 1. Adapted PRISMA 2020 flow diagram (Tricco et al., 2018).**

**Analysis**

**Research Topics**

To determine the focus areas of the selected studies, we looked at their research aims, goals, questions, and hypotheses. Six main groups of research topics emerged, which we coded as *roles*,

*relationships, support, identities, frameworks, and changes* (see Figure 2 for an overview). Although these areas often overlapped, for this scoping review, we categorized the studies based on the main research gap each paper sought to fill. The most common focus of the articles was on three areas (*roles, relationships, and support*). The remaining three topics (*identities, frameworks, and changes*) were only marginal areas of interest for the researchers. In the following, we will only present and discuss the areas of research and not the findings of the selected articles.



**Figure 2. Overview of research aims.**

The most prominent topic of research was the role of social media in inspiring activism among children, by discussing affordances, tools, and creative, visual, and strategic communication processes. The articles explored these roles primarily through examples of children using social and digital media to engage in social and political issues they deemed important (e.g., Caron, Raby, Mitchell, Théwissen-LeBlanc, & Prioletta, 2019; Rodriguez, Rodriguez, & Zehyoue, 2019; Zeng & Abidin, 2021) or to participate in civically or politically active youth councils (Garcia, Mirra, Morrell, Martinez, & Scorza, 2015) or youth movements (e.g., Boulianne et al., 2020; Chu, 2018; Fernandez-Plannells, Figueras-Maz, & Pàmpols, 2014; Khalil, 2017; Yuen & Tang, 2021). Another strand of research investigated children's ideas about and attitudes toward the use of social media for civic and political "expression" (Mihailidis, 2020), "discussion" (Sveningsson, 2014), "doing politics" (Vromen, Loader, & Xenos, 2016), and overall civic and political engagement (David, 2013).



The topic of the second group of studies was the relationship between (a) children's online and offline experiences of activism, (b) children's use of social media and their activism, and (c) various distinct factors influencing online activism among children. To provide an example of offline-online relationships, Garcia-Galera, Del-Hoyo-Hurtado, and Fernandez-Munoz (2014) asked in their research how online participation encourages and nurtures offline participation, if at all. Mascheroni (2013) drew on three different empirical studies to provide a complex overview of the ways in which political uses of social media are preconditioned by their young users' interest in political and social issues and their offline activism. Bakker and de Vreese (2011) tested the relationships between children's use of media (newspaper, television, and the Internet) and their online and offline political participation. Kahne, Lee, and Feezell (2013) examined the relationship between children's online nonpolitical participation and their offline political engagement. They found that online participation driven by interests, friendships, or political orientations fosters different civic and political engagements. Last, Šerek and Macháčková (2015) explored the diverse factors that influence offline and online civic participation among minority Roma and majority White youth.

The question of how children can be, and are, persuaded and supported to become civically and politically active was another common area of interest. Most studies approached this question from the perspective of teaching and learning. Charmaraman (2013) and Hull, Stornaiuolo, and Shani (2010) conducted interventions where children first imagined themselves acting as engaged, active citizens in their local and/or global communities, and then took action. Youths' experience of civic engagement activities (Chan, 2019), participatory politics (Clark, 2016), and their critical view of them were another topic of research, along with their environmental awareness and their perception of the need for civic engagement (Karahan & Roehig, 2015). Another strand of research explored the support structures available to youths from a wider perspective. Ohme, Marquart, and Kristensen (2020) compared the success of get-out-the-vote campaigns, civic education, and political events for strengthening children's political engagement. Maher and Earl (2019) investigated the role of support networks (e.g., family, friends, and school) in helping children take advantage of the opportunities for micromobilization offered by digital media. Finally, Pietilä, Meriläinen, Varsaluoma, and Väänänen (2021) asked how children can best make use of digital services designed to offer them inclusive means for civic and political participation.

The fourth area of interest was the connection between the online civic and political participation of children and the development of their identities. Fullam (2017) explored the influence of social media activism on the development of an activist identity. Gleason (2018) investigated the development of identity that takes place when young people engage in new literacy practices (e.g., hashtagging, information sharing, and live streaming) on Twitter, specifically when they create, circulate, and curate feminist discourse or critique antifeminist behaviors.

Next, frameworks were the major focus of the study by Literat, Kligler-Vilenchik, Brough, and Blum-Ross (2018), who introduced a digital participation framework for youth.

A sixth group of studies researched changes in children's perspectives, attitudes, and civic participation behaviors over time and their stages of development. Chu (2020) explored youth's changing perspectives on online participation over a period of five years and discussed findings related to their

intentions to participate in civics. Using longitudinal data over a two-year period, Kim and colleagues (2017) examined online and offline political participation at different developmental stages (adolescence and early adulthood). Finally, Weinstein, Rundle, and James (2015) investigated how civically engaged youths' patterns of online civic expression changed over a two-year time span.

### **Research Designs**

A second issue we explored was research design, focusing specifically on the research methods used in the studies selected for this article. Our analysis focused on qualitative and quantitative research methods, and also explored the use of newer research methods, such as Internet-based "big data" methods (for an overview, see Table 3).

**Table 3. Research Methods Used in Selected Studies.**

<b>Qualitative methods</b>	<b>Quantitative methods</b>	<b>Mixed methods</b>
Interviews	Surveys	Surveys + interviews
Media diaries		Questionnaires, skill inventories, social media data + interviews, observations, artifacts analysis
Participant and nonparticipant observation		
Thematic analysis		
Focus groups		
Content analysis		
Visual sociological methods		
Artifacts analysis		
Digital storytelling		
Educational interventions		

The most used qualitative research method was interviewing, with specific use of semistructured interviews (e.g., Chu, 2018; David, 2013) and in-depth interviews (but see Charmaraman, 2013). In most instances, interviews were conducted in conjunction with other qualitative research methods to diversify the collected data. For instance, in a study by Svenningson (2014), individual interviews were complemented by media diaries, classroom observation, and group interviews. In another study, Khalil (2017) analyzed pictures, videos, and tweets produced by his subjects to supplement data collected through interviewing. Focus groups were also frequently used in the studies we analyzed (e.g., Chu, 2020; Mascheroni, 2013; van Oosten, 2021). Focus groups featured in much of the qualitative research we analyzed because they allow for peer-driven dialogue and creative interaction between participants, which helps researchers better understand the participants' ideas about online participation (Bagnoli & Clark, 2010). In the articles we studied, scholars reported using focus groups to ensure that young people were able to talk about sensitive topics as they normally would among friends (van Oosten, 2021). Another positive aspect of this method that was reported by the authors was that it enabled conversations to flow in a natural way (Chu, 2020).

Research that analyzed digital artifacts produced by activist children focused on print and new media texts such as photos, digital films, and student blogs (Garcia et al., 2015), vlogs (video blogs; Caron, 2017), tweets and online interactions (Gleason, 2018), artifact reviews (Charmaraman, 2013), and more recently, TikTok videos (Zeng & Abidin, 2021). The researchers considered digital media production skills to be essential for children's activism. By collecting artifacts created by participants themselves, researchers captured "critical insights into social life and ways of speaking back to power" (Garcia et al., 2015, p. 156). The academics used a number of methods for analyzing the artifacts, such as content analysis, grounded theory, and visual sociology.

Participant observation (see, for example, Charmaraman, 2013; Fernandez-Plannells et al., 2014), and classroom observation (Sveningsson, 2014) were less-used methods. We also noticed a relative lack of creative or arts-based methodologies, except for one study that employed digital storytelling (Chan, 2019) and another that analyzed a digital literacy class intervention involving memes and hashtags (Mihailidis, 2020). What was all but completely missing was the use of participatory methods. Only one study used YPAR—Youth Participatory Action Research (Clark, 2016). The author there presented activities that were conducted over the course of an academic year and that focused on heroic, "real-life" stories of youths' participation. Clark (2016) also tested the boundaries of the participatory politics framework, as she acknowledged that the students' political action ultimately failed to achieve its aims. Overall, we must note that young people were not much involved in designing and carrying out the research and in discussing its results.

The most frequently used quantitative method was surveys, carried out online (e.g., Garcia-Galera et al., 2014). Surveys are useful for understanding the relationship between the type of media used and activism (Bakker & de Vreese, 2011), and changes in the intensity of online civic expression over time (Weinstein et al., 2015). Bakker and de Vreese (2011) analyzed the dependent variables of traditional media and digital participation against the independent variable of type of media use (newspapers, television, or Internet) to show that the use of different types of media is more or less positively linked to political participation.

Mixed methods were also employed in many studies we analyzed. The authors' reasons for using mixed methods were multifold, from the potential of mixed methods for gathering different types of data to exploring participants' different perspectives, or answering complex questions in a deeper manner (Wisdom & Creswell, 2013). Mixed-method studies used data made available by social media, survey data, and semistructured interviews in researching Instagram use, social capital, and youth activism (Yuen & Tang, 2021). In a different study, Hull and colleagues (2010) gathered and analyzed a wealth of data coming from an online history-tracking system that recorded participants' contributions to social media, and also from posts to a private social network, questionnaires, and skill inventories. The data were then corroborated by observational notes, semistructured interviews, tapings of group interactions, and artifacts created by study participants. The authors tabulated the frequency and types of participants' posts. They thematically coded their observational field notes and interviews and produced multimodal analyses of the output created by youth.

### **Research Contexts**

To understand research contexts, we analyzed where and when the selected studies were conducted. We explored whether research projects were prompted by specific events like street protests, political movements, advocacy initiatives, or other political and social events. We were also interested in deciphering the role of educational spaces in the research. We considered educational spaces in broad terms, to include not only schools but also community-based educational programs, after-school programs, and community-based youth organizations (for a discussion of this, see Baldrige, Beck, Medina, & Reeves, 2017).

We found that most of the articles available on the subject were published after 2010. We theorize that one reason for this is that social media had achieved greater penetration throughout the world by then, increasing from 970 million social media users in 2010 to a forecasted 2.9 billion by 2020 (The Competence Centre on Foresight, 2018). Also, beginning in 2010, the number of youth movements and political events in which social media occupied a central role increased, such as the Arab Spring (which started in December 2010 with the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi) and the Occupy Wall Street movement, which started in September 2011 with the occupation of Zuccotti Park in New York City. And third, the dissemination of the smartphone reached higher levels by 2010, when its price and use were more accommodating. These three factors may have prompted scholars to pay greater attention to the online civic activism of youth throughout the world.<sup>3</sup>

Although these online and offline protest actions aimed against economic inequalities, state repression, or diminishing rights took place around the globe and involved youth from countries as different as Yemen and Peru, the articles we found did not reflect this diversity. What was striking, albeit not unexpected, was a focus on the Global North. Most research was conducted in the United States and Scandinavia (e.g., Caron, 2017; Gleason, 2018). A few notable exceptions were studies focused on Lebanon (Khalil, 2017), India (Hull et al., 2010), the Philippines (David, 2013), and the Czech Republic (Šerek & Macháčková, 2015).

Three important events became the starting points for interesting studies: the Umbrella Movement and the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement in Hong Kong and the 15M Movement (Indignados) in Spain. These protest movements offered a good opportunity to study the online civic activism of children and youth. Chu (2018, 2020) and Yuen and Tang (2021) looked at the online participation practices and the attitudes of young people toward them in the context of the changing political landscape in Hong Kong. Fernandez-Plannells, Figueras-Maz, and Pampols (2014) evaluated how protesters used both online and offline tools to get information about the 15M movement.

Educational settings still seem to be the main sites for research in this field, often for finding participants (e.g., Ohme et al., 2020), but more so as a focal point for researching the role and effects of after-school programs like digital media clubs organized at schools (e.g., Charmaraman, 2013; Hull et al., 2010). Over time, as the number of social media users grew, researchers also began to "follow" the young

---

<sup>3</sup> See the timeline of the analyzed articles on Figshare: <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.21511011.v1>.

people to the online sites of their activism. We found that the most common reasons for selecting specific social media sites to analyze were the popularity of the platforms among children in the area and the affordances of the sites (e.g., the possibility of creating a closed group on Facebook and the relative ease of downloading data from Twitter). With the appearance of new social media platforms, researchers started embedding them into their research as well. So, while Facebook remained popular throughout the period studied, YouTube (Rodriguez et al., 2019), Instagram (Yuen & Tang, 2021), and TikTok (Zeng & Abidin, 2021) all became popular sites for exploring young people's online civic participation.

### ***Research Participants***

Our analysis of the research subjects of our selected studies looked at the participants' demographics and the authors' selection criteria and processes. First, our analysis of the participants' demographics reveals that (1) most studies included 16- to 18-year-olds, although there was some research done with younger teens aged 13–14 (e.g., Mihailidis, 2020); (2) almost half of the papers did not differentiate between adolescents and young adults (e.g., Bakker & de Vreese, 2011; David, 2013) and some made no reference at all to the age of the "young" people (e.g., Zeng & Abidin, 2021); and (3) very few studies researched the differences (Kim et al., 2017) and similarities (e.g., Maher & Earl, 2019) between age groups (i.e., children, youth, young adults, older adults). One study was longitudinal and followed the same age cohort over time (Chu, 2020), and another one followed its participants over a longer time span (Gleason, 2018).

Sociocultural diversity was addressed in half of the reviewed articles. It was discussed mostly in terms of the participants' race or ethnicities (e.g., Charmaraman, 2013; Šerek & Macháčková, 2015), their nationalities (e.g., Vromen et al., 2016), their places of birth (e.g., Clark, 2016), their immigration status (Rodriguez et al., 2019), or their social capital and educational backgrounds (Yuen & Tang, 2021).

Choosing participants based on their educational backgrounds was used as a proxy for sociocultural diversity, for instance, by choosing participants attending racially mixed schools (e.g., Kahne et al., 2013; Mihailidis, 2020) or from vocational or general secondary schools (Pietilä et al., 2021). With very few exceptions—for example, Hull and colleagues (2010), who conducted a study with only female participants—the studies aimed at achieving gender balance by including both male and female research subjects. There were no studies that considered more complex, nonbinary gender identities.

Alongside demographic criteria, the studies we investigated for this article involved participants with diverse experiences with and attitudes toward civic and political participation and engagement with social media. Quantitative studies primarily chose a random sample of young people to survey at first and then compared the respondents based on their levels of online and offline activism (e.g., Bakker & de Vreese, 2011; Ohme et al., 2020) or their forms of engagement (e.g., Garcia-Galera et al., 2014; Kahne et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2017). Qualitative studies primarily used purposeful or theoretical sampling to achieve diversity among participants in terms of their social media use and degrees of activism (e.g., David, 2013). Some included only young activists (e.g., Gleason, 2018). Less commonly, they sought out members of niche groups such as young people who expressed interest in politics but remained unengaged (Sveningsson, 2014) or participants with little or no opportunity to engage with social media and participate

in civic activities (Hull et al., 2010). The sample size used in qualitative studies ranged from only three (Gleason, 2018) to 93 (Mihailidis, 2020). For quantitative studies, sample size ranged from around 1,000 survey respondents (e.g., Kim et al., 2017; Šerek & Macháčková, 2015) to 5,505 (Kahne et al., 2013).

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The aim of this scoping review was to describe the research conducted on the online activism of children under the age of 18. We focused on four aspects of selected studies: their research topics, designs, contexts, and participants. In total, we selected 34 peer-reviewed articles published between 2010 and 2021 for inclusion in our research. We derived several key insights that highlight where most existing research is situated and some key gaps in the research.

The scoping review discovered that the existing research is mostly preoccupied with (1) the roles that social and digital media play in leading children to activism, (2) the relationships between online and offline behaviors and the factors that influence such behavior, and (3) the support that children and youth receive or should receive for their social and political activities. There is limited but still valuable research that explores other topics, such as the identities children and youth develop as activists, the development of frameworks for activism, and the changes in and development of civic and political participation among children and youth over time.

Our analysis of demographics (age, diversity, gender) of the participants and other criteria for participation in the research studies found that the studies generally did not differentiate between participants who were younger or older than 18 years. This is quite surprising, as mid- and late adolescence is considered a crucial period in the development of political engagement (Hoskins, Janmaat, & Melis, 2017). Moreover, there is an important lack of research conducted with children younger than 13 years of age. One could argue that this might result from a legal age limit for children's use of social media. However, a body of research suggests that children use social media at ages much younger than 13 (Smahel et al., 2020) and that younger children are quite capable of participating and also willing to participate civically and politically (Rivera & Santos, 2016). In general, any research about online media and young people's activism should take a critical and reflective approach to exactly what constitutes "children and youth."

One of our main findings about the contexts in which online behaviors and activism have been studied is that while children and young people are active participants in protests all over the world, the research does not reflect this fact. Most of the selected articles were set within the Global North. This finding reflects the roles played by different regions of the world in the global system of knowledge production (Demeter, 2019). Demeter (2019) showed that the core academic regions are located exclusively in the Global North. Those regions "determine the leading theories and ideas, the adaptive courses of action, and the accepted forms of academic capital in the world system of knowledge production" (Demeter, 2019, p. 135). Although research findings from countries in the Global North are very relevant, more studies conducted by academics in countries where young activists are actually living and fighting for justice should be featured in international journals.

As for events studied by our selected articles, only three major political movements appeared in our sample: the Umbrella Movement and the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement in Hong Kong and the 15M Movement (Indignados) in Spain. We hypothesize that the lack of other major events (e.g., no studies addressing the #BlackLivesMatter or #metoo movements) can be explained by our strict selection criteria for participants (mostly) under 18 years of age, while these other protests involved a much larger pool of citizens.

Educational spaces still occupy a central place in research on online participation, probably because the most structured places to connect with under-18-year-olds are still the educational ones. Nevertheless, our analysis showed that social media itself can constitute an educational space. Social media platforms can offer an arena for nonformal learning that facilitates the creation, sharing, and externalization of knowledge (Whitty & Anane, 2014). Moreover, as Kumar and Guzd (2019) argue, social media offers opportunities for discursive practices such as the exchange of resources and ideas outside of the classroom setting that can assist students in informal learning. While not all of the articles we studied shed light on online learning, they do discuss the possibilities such platforms offer children for gaining organizational, communicational, and critical thinking skills. Future studies on children, social media, and activism could be more attentive to the potential risks associated with heavy online social media use (Smahel et al., 2020).

Finally, in terms of methods and methodologies, we found that both quantitative and qualitative methods are used to create data sets for research, with a significant focus on qualitative inquiry. Surveys and interviews are the most popular methods. However, active participation by children was limited throughout the research process. This is particularly worrying in light of concerns raised by proponents of a more child-inclusive approach to research among young people (see Wall, 2019).

Longitudinal and cross-country comparisons were lacking in the quantitative research. Longitudinal studies could provide relevant data for understanding the digital civic participation of young people as they grow from childhood to adulthood. Cross-border comparative studies could also provide different insights, whether carried out longitudinally or not. Another method that was all but ignored was "big data" analysis, although this may be explained because such analysis has gained popularity only in recent years. There exists a plurality of approaches to big data methodologies that could be successfully employed in this field, which account for various ethical, methodological, and epistemological concerns (for an in-depth discussion, see Helles & Ørmen, 2020). Unfortunately, longitudinal and cross-border comparative studies require significant funding. Also, because of their relative novelty, not many academics have the skills to carry out research using "big data" methods.

While this study offers a thorough investigation of the literature on children and online activism, it was limited by a few key constraints. The papers we studied were all written in English. Although it is true that much of all academic literature is in English, limiting our sample to papers published in English tended to exclude studies of online political participation by young people in non-Western and non-English-speaking academic environments. Furthermore, many of the studies were published in academic journals in the Global North, further increasing the dominance of discourses in the Western context. Concepts like "activism, social movement," and "online political and civic participation" are complex and require entire papers and books to deconstruct. This scoping review employed the terms to identify articles, but it did not operationalize

them in any direction and simply allowed their appearance in the literature to drive the creation of the sample. Studies of young people, their online behaviors, and their civic and political activism should be broad in scope and extend to a range of ages. Studies show that children (aged 5–12 years) have very different experiences with media and online activism than do adolescents and older young people (see, for instance, Chaudron, 2015).

Future research in this field could explore new forms of online media and activism and be more inclusive of diverse genders and other identities of children and youth, as indicated by participants themselves. It would also be relevant to conduct studies only with marginalized groups (immigrant youth, youth with disabilities, and so on) to bring in understudied groups and their specific perspectives into the current debate. Another possible direction for research would be to focus specifically on different age groups within the under-18-year-old demographic (e.g., early/late childhood; middle childhood; adolescence) in an effort to understand social media and activism in the lives of children and adolescents in a more fine-grained manner. Researchers could also look at whether the topics of study and the methods employed for research sufficiently allow for comparisons across time, countries, and contexts (i.e., longitudinal and cross-national comparative studies). Last but not least, it is essential to extend the focus of research to countries and children outside the Global North.

Overall, this review shows that research into social media and the activism of children and youth involves a multitude of perspectives, aims, and approaches. This reflects the complexity of activism and the difficulty of studying it systematically. Looking for generalizable findings is challenging because of the various permissions needed to work with these populations, restrictions on access to the online political content that young people share, and the difficulty of reaching them in a timely manner. Nevertheless, this study suggests that research that actively involves children and youth is valuable and well worth conducting because it allows us to better understand their authentic experience of, and views on social media and activism.

### References

- Adler, R. P., & Goggin, J. (2005). What do we mean by "civic engagement"? *Journal of Transformative Education*, 3(3), 236–253. doi:10.1177/1541344605276792
- Arksey, H., & O'Malley, L. (2005). Scoping studies: Towards a methodological framework. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 8(1), 19–32. doi:10.1080/1364557032000119616
- Bagnoli, A., & Clark, A. (2010). Focus groups with young people: A participatory approach to research planning. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 13(1), 101–119. doi:10.1080/13676260903173504
- Bakker, T. P., & de Vreese, C. H. (2011). Good news for the future? Young people, Internet use, and political participation. *Communication Research*, 38(4), 451–470. doi:10.1177/0093650210381738



- Baldrige, B. J., Beck, N., Medina, J. C., & Reeves, M. A. (2017). Toward a new understanding of community-based education: The role of community-based educational spaces in disrupting inequality for minoritized youth. *Review of Research in Education, 41*(1), 381–402. doi:10.3102/0091732X16688622
- Boulianne, S. (2009). Does Internet use affect engagement? A meta-analysis of research. *Political Communication, 26*(2), 193–211. doi:10.1080/10584600902854363
- Boulianne, S. (2015). Social media use and participation: A meta-analysis of current research. *Information, Communication & Society, 18*(5), 524–538. doi:10.1080/1369118X.2015.1008542
- Boulianne, S., Lalancette, M., & Ilkiw, D. (2020). "School Strike 4 Climate": Social media and the international youth protest on climate change. *Media and Communication, 8*(2), 208–218. doi:10.17645/mac.v8i2.2768
- Boulianne, S., & Theocharis, Y. (2020). Young people, digital media, and engagement: A meta-analysis of research. *Social Science Computer Review, 38*(2), 111–127. doi:10.1177/0894439318814190
- Caron, C. (2017). Speaking up about bullying on YouTube: Teenagers' vlogs as civic engagement. *Canadian Journal of Communication, 42*(4), 645–668. doi:10.22230/cjc.2017v42n4a3156
- Caron, C., Raby, R., Mitchell, C., Théwissen-LeBlanc, S., & Prioletta, J. (2019). How are civic cultures achieved through youth social-change-oriented vlogging? A multimodal case study. *Convergence, 25*(4), 694–713. doi:10.1177/1354856518795094
- Carr, C. T., & Hayes, R. A. (2015) Social media: Defining, developing, and divining. *Atlantic Journal of Communication, 23*(1), 46–65. doi:10.1080/15456870.2015.972282
- Chae, Y., Lee, S., & Kim, Y. (2019). Meta-analysis of the relationship between Internet use and political participation: Examining main and moderating effects. *Asian Journal of Communication, 29*(1), 35–54. doi:10.1080/01292986.2018.1499121
- Chan, C. (2019). Using digital storytelling to facilitate critical thinking disposition youth civic engagement: A randomized control trial. *Children and Youth Services Review, 107*, 1–10. doi:10.1016/j.chilyouth.2019.104522
- Charmaraman, L. (2013). Congregating to create for social change: Urban youth media production and sense of community. *Learning, Media and Technology, 38*(1), 102–115. doi:10.1080/17439884.2011.621956
- Chaudron, S. (2015). *Young children (0–8) and digital technology: A qualitative exploratory study across seven countries* (EUR 27052). Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. doi:10.2788/00749

- Chen, L. L., Mirpuri, S., Rao, N., & Law, N. (2021). Conceptualization and measurement of digital citizenship across disciplines. *Educational Research Review, 33*, 1–18. doi:10.1016/j.edurev.2021.100379
- Chu, D. S. C. (2018). Media use and protest mobilization: A case study of Umbrella Movement within Hong Kong Schools. *Social Media + Society, 4*(1), 1–11. doi:10.1177/2056305118763350
- Chu, D. S. C. (2020). Civic intentionality in youth media participation: The case of Hong Kong. *Learning, Media and Technology, 45*(4), 363–375. doi:10.1080/17439884.2020.1809450
- Clark, L. S. (2016). Participant or zombie? Exploring the limits of the participatory politics framework through a failed youth participatory action project. *The Information Society, 32*(5), 343–353. doi:10.1080/01972243.2016.121261
- The Competence Centre on Foresight. (2018). *Number of social media users worldwide 2010–17 with forecasts to 2021*. European Commission. Retrieved from [https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/visualisation/number-social-media-users-worldwide-2010-17-forecasts-2021\\_en](https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/visualisation/number-social-media-users-worldwide-2010-17-forecasts-2021_en)
- David, C. C. (2013). ICTs in political engagement among youth in the Philippines. *International Communication Gazette, 75*(3), 322–337. doi:10.1177/1748048512472948
- Demeter, M. (2019). The world-systemic dynamics of knowledge production: The distribution of transnational academic capital in the social sciences. *Journal of World-Systems Research, 25*(1), 111–144. doi:10.5195/jwsr.2019.887
- Dennen, V. P., Choi, H., & Word, K. (2020). Social media, teenagers, and the school context: A scoping review of research in education and related fields. *Educational Technology Research and Development, 68*(4), 1635–1658. doi:10.1007/s11423-020-09796-z
- Fernandez-Planells, A., Figueras-Maz, M., & Pàmpols, C. F. (2014). Communication among young people in the #spanishrevolution: Uses of online–offline tools to obtain information about the #acampadabcn. *New Media & Society, 16*(8), 1287–1308. doi:10.1177/1461444814530097
- Fullam, J. (2017). Becoming a youth activist in the Internet age: A case study on social media activism and identity development. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 30*(4), 406–422. doi:10.1080/09518398.2016.1250176
- Garcia, A., Mirra, N., Morrell, E., Martinez, A., & Scorza, D. (2015). The council of youth research: Critical literacy and civic agency in the digital age. *Reading & Writing Quarterly, 31*(2), 151–167. doi:10.1080/10573569.2014.962203

- Garcia-Galera, M., Del-Hoyo-Hurtado, M., & Fernandez-Munoz, C. (2014). Engaged youth in the Internet. The role of social networks in social active participation. *Comunicar*, 22(43), 35–43. doi:10.3916/C43-2014-03
- Gleason, B. (2018). Adolescents becoming feminist on Twitter: New literacies practices, commitments, and identity work. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 62(3), 281–289. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26632964>
- Helles, R., & Ørmen, J. (2020). Big data and explanation: Reflections on the uses of big data in media and communication research. *European Journal of Communication*, 35(3), 290–300. doi:10.1177/0267323120922088
- Hoskins, B., Janmaat, J. G., & Melis, G. (2017). Tackling inequalities in political socialization: A systematic analysis of access to and mitigation effects of learning citizenship at school. *Social Science Research*, 68, 88–101. doi:10.1016/j.ssresearch.2017.09.001
- Hull, G. A., Stornaiuolo, A., & Shani, U. (2010). Cultural citizenship and cosmopolitan practice: Global youth communicate online. *English Education*, 42(4), 331–367. doi:10.2307/23018017
- Kahne, J., Lee, N.-J., & Feezell, J. T. (2013). The civic and political significance of online participatory cultures among youth transitioning to adulthood. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 10(1), 1–20. doi:10.1080/19331681.2012.701109
- Karahan, E., & Roehrig, G. (2015). Constructing media artifacts in a social constructivist environment to enhance students' environmental awareness and activism. *Journal of Science Education and Technology*, 24(1), 103–118. doi:10.1007/s10956-014-9525-5
- Khalil, J. F. (2017). Lebanon's waste crisis: An exercise of participation rights. *New Media & Society*, 19(5), 701–712. doi:10.1177/1461444816686321
- Kim, Y., Russo, S., & Amná, E. (2017). The longitudinal relation between online and offline political participation among youth at two different developmental stages. *New Media & Society*, 19(6), 899–917. doi:10.1177/1461444815624181
- Kumar, P., & Gruzd, A. (2019). Social media for informal learning: A case of #Twitterstorians. In *Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences* (pp. 2527–2535). Grand Wailea, Hawaii: HICSS. doi:10.24251/HICSS.2019.304
- Literat, I., Kligler-Vilenchik, N., Brough, M., & Blum-Ross, A. (2018). Analyzing youth digital participation: Aims, actors, contexts and intensities. *The Information Society*, 34(4), 261–273. doi:10.1080/01972243.2018.1463333

- Lutz, C., Hoffmann, C. P., & Meckel, M. (2014). Beyond just politics: A systematic literature review of online participation. *First Monday*, 19(7). <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v19i7.5260>
- Maher, T. V., & Earl, J. (2019). Barrier or booster? Digital media, social networks, and youth micromobilization. *Sociological Perspectives*, 62(6), 865–883. doi:10.1177/0731121419867697
- Mascheroni, G. (2013). Performing citizenship online: Identity, subactivism and participation. *Observatorio*, 7(2), 93–119. doi:10.15847/obsOBS722013656
- Mason, J., & Danby, S. (2011). Children as experts in their lives: Child inclusive research. *Child Indicators Research*, 4, 185–189. doi:10.1007/s12187-011-9108-4
- Michalovich, A. (2021). Digital media production of refugee-background youth: A scoping review. *Journalism and Media*, 2(1), 30–50. doi:10.3390/journalmedia2010003
- Mihailidis, P. (2020). The civic potential of memes and hashtags in the lives of young people. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 41(15), 762–781. doi:10.1080/01596306.2020.1769938
- Ohme, J., Marquart, F., & Kristensen, L. M. (2020). School lessons, social media and political events in a get-out-the-vote campaign: Successful drivers of political engagement among youth. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 23(7), 886–908. doi:10.1080/13676261.2019.1645311
- Pang, H., Qin, K., & Ji, M. (2022). Can social network sites facilitate civic engagement? Assessing dynamic relationship between social media and civic activities among young people. *Online Information Review*, 46(1), 79–94. doi:10.1108/OIR-10-2020-0453
- Pietilä, I., Meriläinen, N., Varsaluoma, J., & Väänänen, K. (2021). Understanding youths' needs for digital societal participation: Towards an inclusive Virtual Council. *Behaviour & Information Technology*, 40(5), 483–496. doi:10.1080/0144929X.2021.1912182
- Rivera, R., & Santos, D. (2016). Civic and political participation of children and adolescents: A lifestyle analysis for positive youth development programs. *Children & Society*, 30(1), 59–70. doi:10.1111/chso.12118
- Rodriguez, X. D., Rodriguez, S. C., & Zehyoue, B. C. (2019). A content analysis of the contributions in the narratives of DACA youth. *Journal of Youth Development*, 14(2), 64–78. doi:10.5195/jyd.2019.682
- Šerek, J., & Macháčková, H. (2015). Predicting online and offline civic participation among young Czech Roma: The roles of resources, community perceptions and social norms. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 41(13), 2173–2191.

- Skoric, M. M., Zhu, Q., Goh, D., & Pang, N. (2016). Social media and citizen engagement: A meta-analytic review. *New Media & Society, 18*(9), 1817–1839. doi:10.1177/1461444815616221
- Smahel, D., Machackova, H., Mascheroni, G., Dedkova, L., Staksrud, E., Ólafsson, K., . . . Hasebrink, U. (2020). EU Kids Online 2020: Survey results from 19 countries. *EU Kids Online*. doi:10.21953/lse.47fdeqj01ofo
- Stornaiuolo, A., & Thomas, E. E. (2017). Disrupting educational inequalities through youth digital activism. *Review of Research in Education, 41*(1), 337–357. doi:10.3102/0091732X16687973
- Sveningsson, M. (2014). I don't like it and I think it's useless, people discussing politics on Facebook: Young Swedes' understandings of social media use for political discussion. *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace, 8*(3), Article 8. doi:10.5817/CP2014-3-8
- Tricco, A. C., Lillie, E., Zarin, W., O'Brien, K. K., Colquhoun, H., Levac, D., . . . Straus, S. E. (2018). PRISMA extension for scoping reviews (PRISMA-ScR): Checklist and explanation. *Annals of Internal Medicine, 169*(7), 467–473. doi:10.7326/M18-0850
- United Nations. (1989). *The UN convention on the Rights of the child*. Retrieved from <https://www.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/unicef-convention-rights-child-uncrc.pdf>
- van Oosten, J. M. F. (2021). Adolescent girls' use of social media for challenging sexualization. *Gender, Technology and Development, 25*(1), 22–42. doi:10.1080/09718524.2021.1880039
- Vromen, A., Loader, B. D., & Xenos, M. A. (2016). Everyday making through Facebook engagement: Young citizens' political interactions in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States. *Political Studies, 64*(3), 513–533. doi:10.1177/0032321715614012
- Wall, J. (2019). Theorizing children's global citizenship: Reconstructionism and the politics of deep interdependence. *Global Studies of Childhood, 9*(1), 5–17. doi:10.1177/2043610618815484
- Weinstein, E. C., Rundle, M., & James, C. (2015). A hush falls over the crowd? Diminished online civic expression among young civic actors. *International Journal of Communication, 9*, 84–105. Retrieved from <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/2901/1286>
- Whitty, C., & Anane, R. (2014). Social network enhancement for non-formal learning. In *Proceedings of the 47th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences* (pp. 1645–1654). Waikoloa, Hawaii: IEEE Computer Society. doi:10.1109/HICSS.2014.210
- Wisdom, J., & Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Mixed methods: Integrating quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis while studying patient-centered medical home models* (AHRQ Publication No. 13-0028-EF). Rockville, MD: Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality.

Wolfers, L. N., & Schneider, F. M. (2021). Using media for coping: A scoping review. *Communication Research, 48*(8), 1210–1234. doi:10.1177/0093650220939778

Yuen, S., & Tang, G. (2023). Instagram and social capital: Youth activism in a networked movement. *Social Movement Studies, 22*(5–6), 706–727. doi:10.1080/14742837.2021.2011189

Zeng, J., & Abidin, C. (2021). '#OkBoomer, time to meet the Zoomers': Studying the memefication of intergenerational politics on TikTok. *Information, Communication & Society, 24*(16), 2459–2481. doi:10.1080/1369118X.2021.1961007