Social Media as a Shaper, Enabler, and Hurdle in Youth Political Participation

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Introduction

Conventional political participation (electoral turnout and party membership) has been in decline in Europe since the 1970s, especially among young people (Van Biezen et al., 2012), which scholars have interpreted

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both as a threat to democracy (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007) and as an indication of the growing relevance of alternative forms of participation (Bennett, 2012; Loader et al., 2014). Young people's participatory repertoires (Thorson, 2012) are increasingly entangled with the internet and social media. While scepticism about the political potential of networked participatory practices is ever present (Morozov, 2012), the fourth wave of digital activism (2010–2014) took the notion mainstream (Karatzogianni, 2015; Karatzogianni & Schandorf, 2016). Further, there is mounting evidence that even seemingly non-political online practices do sometimes have political potential (Jenkins et al., 2016; Tiidenberg et al., 2021). Starting and signing petitions, commenting, liking and sharing posts, but also making and sharing memes, or being part of fandoms allows young people to connect to like-minded peers, share symbolic resources, and through that participate in collective political expression (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019). Yet, the intersection of social media and political participation is also discursively overburdened: even while scholars are finding the political in social media practices, the discourse of online political participation being ineffectual or cynically performative continues to circulate, also shaping how young people make sense of their own experiences (Sipos, 2017).

In this chapter we approach young people's political participation in and with social media from an ecosystemic perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), relying, in particular, on the updated perspective on ecosystems theory (Neal & Neal, 2013; see also chapter "How Can We Understand the Everyday Digital Lives of Children and Young People?") that illuminates the overlapping, relational, and networked character of different relevant social contexts in a young person's life. On the one hand, social media use is situated within young people's broader personal ecosystem—what happens on and with social media is co-constituted by what happens at school, home, and work. Of course, the felt effects of conventional social institutions can, and often are, also socially mediated to a large extent (cf. van Dijck & Poell, 2013 for 'social media logics'). Beyond that, however, research has shown that it makes sense to approach social media use from an ecosystemic perspective as well (Phillips & Milner, 2021; Taffel, 2019). DeVito and co-authors (DeVito et al., 2018) suggest that young people's decisions of how to present themselves on social

media occur in an ecosystem made up of the features, functions, and perceived affordances of platforms used, the imagined and actual audiences on those platforms, and the broader and narrower social norms. Relying on their work, as well as that by Treré and Mattoni (2016) and Zhao et al. (2016), understanding youths' socially mediated political participation becomes a matter of exploring the dynamic interconnections between personal, structural, and environmental factors that come together in each users' personal social media ecosystem—the platforms and apps they use, in which interactional situations, for which purposes, with whom and with which experienced outcomes. This, in turn, is a matter of their embodied identities and how those are experienced as vulnerable or agential in the context of broader social norms, cultural values, and young people's personal support networks. In other words, two different young people will use social media for political purposes quite differently, depending on their family relationships, sense of agency, relationships with their peers, identity categories, and self-identification. As argued in chapter "How Can We Understand the Everyday Digital Lives of Children and Young People?", this networked understanding of ecological systems theory allows exploring digital technologies, social media in this case, as enabling (or constraining) relations between actors, as activating (or making more porous) boundaries between the particular microsystems. We explore how the studied Estonian, Greek, and the United Kingdom (UK) youths (aged 16–18) incorporate social media into their political participatory practices, how they articulate their motivations for doing so, and how they see social media as shaping youth participatory practices in general.

Social Media as Part of Young People's Ecosystem

Sense of agency and self-efficacy are critical to how young people participate within societies and to how they use digital communication technologies for democratic citizenship (Fonseca, 2019). The ability to 'take effective civic action online' (p. 335) is often articulated across the

literature as a matter of access and literacy. Access to digital spaces and tools has been argued to have radically altered youth's political engagement (Kaskazi & Kitzie, 2021), with youth internet use fostering both online and offline political participation (Lutz & Hoffmann, 2019). Meanwhile, social media has also become increasingly central to young people's news consumption, which has, in and of itself, been connected to political interest and engagement across studies (Swart, 2021; Vizcaíno-Laorga et al., 2019). Concurrently, inequalities in online political participation have been shown to emerge due to disparities in literacy (Mascheroni, 2017), with digital-, data-, critical-, citizenship-, and media literacies crucially shaping young people's news consumption, their ways of using digital tools for political purposes, their vocabularies and repertoires of enacting citizenship.

Young people's political and digital agency and literacies, in turn, are an ecosystemic accomplishment and are linked to their family, school, and leisure lives (Herrero-Diz & Ramos-Serrano, 2018). Previous research has established a connection between young people's online and offline political participation and factors like family and peer relationships, school environment, and of course their experiences with and perceptions of their country's political, cultural, social, and economic climate (Cicognani et al., 2016). Thus, family members' or teachers' political views and ideologies shape young people's social media use, including their political participation on social media in a variety of ways. Young people might turn to a different platform to avoid a family member with views that do not align with theirs, or they might turn to social media for alternative framings of the world and its injustices compared to what they hear at home or in the classroom.

Social Media as an Ecosystem of Political Participation

When thinking about socially mediated political participation, it is important to ask which platforms are used, but more specifically, questions about how they are used, and what kinds of actions, practices, and

user cultures are perceived as encouraging and discouraging. This focus, in turn, lends itself well to being conceptualized via the notion of affordances.

The concept of affordances, as used in communication research, explains how people's agential practices intersect with platform structures. At their most basic, affordances are defined as possibilities of action, describing 'what material artifacts, such as media technologies, allow people to do' (Bucher & Helmond, 2017, p. 235). Affordances are not objects, features, or their outcomes (Evans et al., 2017), they are always perceived, and they have a range: variably requesting, demanding, allowing, encouraging, discouraging, or refusing specific actions (Davis & Chouinard, 2017). Therefore, Twitter encourages pseudonymity, while Facebook strongly discourages it. Twitter's retweet button is not an affordance, despite sometimes being cast as such; rather, it is a feature that affords the spread of content; the affordance, in this case, would be scalability (also spreadability, cf. Boyd, 2010). Most platforms have similar affordances, so rather than focusing on single affordances (scalability, for example), it makes sense to focus on each platform's 'set of affordances with ranges (high or low)', as this communicates which actions the platform is perceived as encouraging or demanding, and which as discouraging or refusing (Tiidenberg et al., 2021, p. 45). Further, it is useful to analyse a platform's affordances *for* a particular practice—in our case political participation (for an analysis of platform affordances for resistance, cf. Tiidenberg & Whelan, 2019). An analysis of affordances, thus, always necessarily hones in on the ecosystemic relations and co-dependencies, as whether a particular app or a platform is experienced as encouraging or forbidding actions needed for political participation pends on the particular users' other social media practices, audiences, networks, competencies, sense of agency, etc.

Previous studies have linked information-rich, discussion-oriented, and overtly political use of social media to political participation, although even entertainment-oriented and 'escapist' social media use has been shown to have political potential (Hoffmann et al., 2017; Kligler-Vilenchik & Literat, 2018). Based on a meta-analysis of survey studies conducted between 1995 and 2016, Boulianne and Theocharis (2020) report a strong correlation between online and offline political activities,

but caution that the causality and the direction of causality (whether online political activities lead to offline activism or vice versa) is difficult to ascertain. Further, online participation can be disincentivized by a presumed lack of rhetorical prowess and lack of moderation on social media (Sipos, 2017). Young people's political social media practices are also shaped by their perceptions of datafication, surveillance, and the likelihood of them experiencing trolling and harassment (Fonseca, 2019; Keller, 2019), which in turn is linked to their self-identifications and categorizations (race, gender, sexual identity, disability). Just like generalizing to all young people should be avoided, generalizing to platforms is not fruitful; the affordances of one platform may be experienced as conducive to political participation for some young people, while for others the same platform may be too risky to utilize as a digital citizenship tool (Kalmus & Siibak, 2020; Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019).

Methods and Data

In the following we draw on analysis of interviews (N = 65, conducted 2020–2021) and ethnographic social media observations (Karatzogianni et al., 2021), as well as on youth's digital stories (N = 12) and transcriptions of the discussions in digital storytelling workshops (organized in 2021–2022, Karatzogianni et al., 2022) collected in Estonia, Greece, and the United Kingdom.

We started our work with exploratory ethnographic social media observation in all three countries in 2020. We followed trending hashtags, daily memes, young influencers' and known political activists' and advocacy organizations' content, as well as protests organized at the time and events pages set up for those protests on Instagram, Twitter, Reddit, YouTube, and Facebook. From the initial fieldwork emerged a list of topics that young people seemed to be concerned with at the time (racial injustice and marriage equality in Estonia; gendered violence, sexual harassment, and police brutality in Greece; racial injustice and climate futures in the United Kingdom). We then followed up with focused online observation around those topics and hashtags on the same

platforms. This gave us an initial list of potential interviewees. Further interviewees were found via snowballing technique (Parker et al., 2019).

Interviews were conducted primarily with young people (16–18) who considered themselves activists or politically active. In addition, we conducted some interviews with adult mentors that the young people mentioned they had met and been helped by while organizing, for example the COVID-19 lockdown era Black Lives Matter (BLM) protest in the United Kingdom. In Estonia, we also conducted additional interviews with 16–18-year-olds, who did not consider themselves to be politically active (those people we found via contacting schools), to contextualize what the activist youths were saying and where the ethnographically salient rich points lay. All interviews were conducted online (fieldwork coincided with the COVID-19 lockdowns), using the platforms, tools, and forms of conversation chosen by the interviewees (Zoom call, Zoom audio, Skype audio, Messenger typed chat). Information sheets and consent forms were sent to the participants before the interview. All interviews were transcribed and coded in NVivo.

After the interviews we did another round of ethnographic fieldwork, now conducting selective observation of hashtagged content, topical accounts, groups, channels, and pages that emerged as relevant in the interviews. Fieldwork included observation, systematic taking of field notes, and screen capture, which we anonymized. We analysed the interviews and ethnographic data using methods of thematic, ethnographic, and multimodal analysis.

Following the first stage of research and analysis, we conducted four online (Zoom) digital storytelling workshops with 12 young people between September 2021 and January 2022. Within the workshops, the youth were taught how to create audio-visual narratives from images and text using PowerPoint. The stories focused on young people's motivations, causes, and means for what they perceive as political participation and digital citizenship. Each workshop had two to five participants, lasted for two hours, and yielded a 2–5 minute video from each participant. The protocols of the digital storytelling workshops were shared beforehand, as well as the information sheets and consent forms. Participants for the digital storytelling workshops were recruited from the previous interview participants, via schools, via flyers on Facebook and Instagram

shared by advocacy and justice organizations. We analysed the stories using critical multimodal discourse analysis including visual discourse analysis as proposed by Rose (2001, p. 135–163).

Context: Youth Political Participation and Justice in Estonia, Greece, and the United Kingdom

The studied youths' participation is oriented towards racial justice (BLM and anti-racist/fascist protests), gender and LGBTQ justice (anti-homophobia, anti-sexual violence protests), and climate justice (environmental protests). Broadly then, our studied young people's political participation lends itself to being conceptualized within the framework of new social movement theories and global justice activism. New social movements emerged in the 1960s and within them, people identify with and organize around their youth, gender, sexual orientation, or ethnicity, but reject identification with conventional abstract group identities like class (Lievrouw, 2011, p. 48). Based on their international fieldwork, Juris and Pleyers (2009, p. 58) elevate the notion of 'alter-activism, (…) a mode of activism based on lived experience and process; a commitment to the horizontal, networked organization; creative direct action; the use of new information and communication technologies (ICTs); and the organization of physical spaces and action camps as laboratories for developing alternative values and practices'. Juris and Pleyers (2009) argue that alter activism is particular to young, urban global justice activists and it is also applicable to our research participants.

While culturally, historically, and politically diverse, Estonia, Greece, and the UK are broadly comparable when it comes to internet and social media use. In 2022 the internet penetration in the UK is 98%, in Estonia 92%, and in Greece, 82.2%, with social media use estimated to sit at 84%, 79%, and 71%, respectively (We Are Social, 2022). Youth from all participating countries have been described before as 'standby citizens' (Amnå & Ekman, 2013), who tend to be inactive in areas conventionally categorized as political activism, but interested and informed regarding

topics of public debate via social media (Beaunier & Veneti, 2020; Tiidenberg & Allaste, 2016). Yet, it is worth noting that Greece and the United Kingdom have a long tradition of political activism, with younger generations being able to learn political participation from their parents and older relatives, and their stories of on-street activism and protest, whereas in Estonia, like in many Post-Soviet countries, the term 'activist' was marred by its connotations of communist informants for many in the older generations (Allaste, 2014; Vukelic & Stanojevic, 2012).

According to a 2020 study, 34% of 8–17-year-old Britons say that the internet has inspired them to take action about a cause, and 43% say the internet makes them feel that their voices matter (UK Safer Internet Centre, 2020). Keating and Melis (2017) argue that while online political expression is relatively widespread among young Britons, more involved online political participation is less prevalent. The authors divided young Britons into non-engagers, low-engagers, high-engagers, and responders—differentiated primarily by their level of political interest (or lack thereof). The Estonian youths, similarly, were divided into four participatory types: politically minded activists (5%), volunteers/benefactors (30%), digital activists (28%), and passive young citizens (37%) (Beilmann & Kalmus, 2019). The most active Estonian youths were found to be from higher as well as lower-than-average economic backgrounds (Beilmann et al., 2018; Nugin et al., 2018), with those of lower economic status and living in rural areas more likely to lean towards non-conformist, anti-authoritarian, but also anti-democratic political and protest activity, and those from higher social economic status and higher education backgrounds to pro-democratic and anti-establishment or conformist forms of activity (Beilmann et al., 2018). In a recent study on 16–25-year-old Greeks, they were found to be interested in politics and develop a repertoire of political actions that are not exclusively online. They seem to be interested and to act upon issues, such as racism and gender equality, and they are increasingly concerned about climate change. Although the political Left seems to have a relative lead in the studied Greek youths' ideological preferences, the majority of them doubt the traditional Left-Right division.

Defining Activism and Situating It Within Online Communication

Studied youths' definitions for activism and political participation vary, ranging from systematic and intense reactions to perceived injustices to more abstract practices of speaking back to power, to even smaller everyday practices undertaken to change the minds of others through on-, and offline conversation. While youths in all three countries agreed that internet-based activities are needed for political participation and activism, and count as real activism, youths in Greece, in particular, argued that what happens in the streets is superior to what happens online: 'Face-to-face communication cannot by any means be compared with online communication; the latter plays a role only in arranging the time and the place' (Greece, student activist). However, Greek youths did differentiate between local and global causes here, arguing that 'when it comes to global issues, online mobilizations can be very helpful' (Greece, student and activist against police violence). In contrast, youths in Estonia were more likely to say that to make a change, online discourse and the spread of content on social media are particularly important.

Interestingly, youths also link the COVID-19 pandemic and its restrictions to internet-based political practices in varied, sometimes even conflicting ways. While in the United Kingdom organizing #BLM protests in ways that adhere to pandemic restrictions led older and younger activists to collaborate, Estonian activists linked COVID-19 restrictions to social media's increasingly central role in political discourse and mobilization. So did Greek participants, but their take on the matter was more complex; their general tendency to prioritize face-to-face interactions led to anxiety regarding the pandemic-related mainstreaming of ICT use. Greek participants worried about the possible adverse effects the prevalence of online and ICT-mediated political participation may have on future protest movements and political participation.

> I am not saying that we won't go back to our universities, but it is convenient for them [the government] for studies to happen remotely, so we don't have interactions with other students or the professors; everyone is at

> home, alienated, not participating, not understanding what is going on so that they [the government] can pass their bills etc. (Greece, Student, activist against police violence).

What youths think counts as activism is deeply contextual, and co-constituted with the networked ecosystem of experiences available to young people. Local political cultures and traditions intersect with what types of actions are perceived as suited for what types of causes, which in turn is linked to what even counts as activism or political participation for the youths. In Estonia, activism has the shortest history, and the culture has been described as one of passivity, introversion, and even hostility towards expressive acts (Tiidenberg & Allaste, 2016). Thus, in Estonia, speaking up for the marginalized by making or sharing social media posts, or wearing tote bags or t-shirts with political messaging carries more political weight. In the United Kingdom and Greece youth activists inherit, but then have to negotiate, previous generations' conceptualizations of what activism is or should be.

Motivations for Political Participation and Activism

Our participants found their way to activism through a personal ecosystem of personal and peer experiences of discrimination, but social media narratives of injustice also played an important role. Thus, a White LGBTQ youth could start participating towards LGBTQ justice based on personal experience, get involved in BLM topics because of emotionally resonant social media content, and join climate action because of interaction with peers in the LGBTQ or BLM networks. A young United Kingdom participant, who is a Labor party member and has gone to one Extinction Rebellion (XR) protest, spoke of BLM:

> I have my two cousins who are mixed race and they were, you know, incredibly angry about what had happened to them when they were teenagers. And they were regularly stopped and searched and profiled by the

> police … And, you know, I did support much of what the BLM movement did, at least in this country. (United Kingdom, young Labor party member)

Active youths are likely to participate across topics. Estonian youths were particularly likely to elevate affective first-person narratives and evidence of discrimination on social media as having mobilized them, in particular in the case of BLM. This is linked to their daily interaction ecosystem and the fact that they are less likely than their United Kingdom and Greek counterparts to witness discrimination against persons of colour (POC) or hear personal accounts of POC friends. In the case of LGBTQ rights, personal and peer experiences of local discrimination or othering also played a huge part.

> Actually, it was the internet that made me get involved in BLM, because the videos circulating online really had a very strong emotional impact on me. (Estonia, BLM activist/ally).

In Greece, for most of our participants, political or social activism emerges out of personal and/or family experience or as a 'spontaneous' reaction towards specific events. Getting involved was often cast as a personal choice, linked to everyday life:

> Discussing with other students at the university there was an interest to do some things, not to change the world, but first to change our everyday life; so, we started like that. (Greece, activist in an anti-sexist organization as well as activist against police violence).

However, young Greek activists who are part of political organizations think that immediate and reactionary political participation is a hindrance to a deeper form of political participation:

> People usually get active/mobilized on the grounds of a specific event, for example, what happened with police violence in Nea Smyrni, and not for a more general purpose/cause or a broader change. (Greece, activist in an anti-sexist organization).

In the United Kingdom, participants reported that their political activism and ideology were influenced by a very diverse personal ecology of relationships like those with close relatives (e.g., a pioneer Asian union grandparent, a veteran social movement activist mother, coming from a civil rights or environmentalist family), peers (fellow pupils, YouthStrike recruitment), and colleagues (e.g., a colleague who worked as public relations officer for Occupy; a colleague organizing already in XR that was moving to a new city and the participant ended up replacing as coordinator in the local group).

Young people's motivations for political participation were echoed in the digital stories they told. Concerns in the digital storytelling workshops included racism (the United Kingdom and Greece), gender inequality (Greece and Estonia), and environmental crisis (Estonia). Estonian participants elevated having their voice heard as a motivator for participation, while in Greece and the United Kingdom, participants spoke about being worried about violent events involving structural problems relating to media visibility, misinformation, and police violence.

Political Social Media Practices and Social Media's Political Affordances

Youths articulated a shift in platform preferences and perceptions as they became more politically active. The way they experienced their social media ecosystem shifted according to the motivations of their use. Choice of the particular platform (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, or Twitter), feature (post vs. story, group vs. own feed), as well as the geo-cultural/linguistic is based on imagined affordances, intended audiences, and, relatedly, prior experiences with hate speech and harassment and one's own perceived vulnerability.

Estonian BLM and LGBTQ activists argued that international (English-speaking) accounts were much better for informational purposes than local Estonian ones, which were often accused of being ill-informed, narrow-minded, even racist, and homophobic. Very few local political or activist accounts were talked about; mostly these were meme

accounts remixing politics, humour, and sarcasm. Thus, one of our Estonian LGBTQ+ active participants told us (note that she is talking about her interest in BLM):

> I don't use Twitter, but … as my friends send me a lot of stuff from there then, in a way, I get content from there. I tend to not use TikTok, but I did, a lot when the BLM movement rose, I used it a lot for content from the U.S. and other countries, to find out what is going on elsewhere. But right now, I don't really see a point in using it. (Estonia, LGBT+ activist/ally).

When our interviewed youths started working more actively towards a particular protest, intervention, or event, their perception of the affordances of particular platforms could shift as well. This was particularly interesting when it came to Facebook, which youth across countries tended to say they didn't use much. An XR Youth activist in the United Kingdom argued that they used Facebook when they needed to target older people:

> We have a lot of parents of primary school-age children that want to engage with on Facebook. Whereas in XR Youth, you know, many young people don't use Facebook, so we mainly focus on Instagram and Twitter and like save Facebook for when we need to break events. (United Kingdom, XR Youth Activist).

Similarly, a 17-year-old Estonian LGBTQ+ activist describes his changing relationship with Facebook:

> I didn't really use to be on Facebook that much, Facebook—and I'm lumping it in with Messenger - was just for interaction, but no new content reached me through there. My main places for informing myself and figuring the world out used to be Tumblr and Instagram. Facebook has become more relevant now, when there are events or protest actions like Heameeleavaldus [a portmanteau of words 'being glad' (heameel) and 'demonstration' (meeleavaldus)], because then you can share an event or set up an event, say that you are attending an event, also share people's speeches, articles. It's still not the most important platform, but it has become more significant for me. I still don't spend time on Facebook, but

> I go there, when events or protests are forthcoming, to contribute towards their success. (Estonia, LGBT+ activist/ally).

Further, social media's perceived political affordances were also informed by active youths' experience of self-efficacy when participating in political and social justice discourse. Estonian youth are portrayed actively speaking up on issues of BLM and LGBTQ+, especially on social media, as something that leads to other people becoming more informed, maybe even changing their minds. This means that for them social media affords political persuasion or education. An LGBTQ+ activist explained it like this:

> I have been in discussion with people, for example an editor of a large newspaper didn't know anything about BLM protests (…) but I was happy, because they listened to me, and started getting it and, in the end, they said OK, maybe I wasn't informed enough (Estonia, LGBT+ activist/ally).

Among our Greek respondents, social media was seen as having different affordances for local and global issue-related activism. In the case of local issues, social media was seen as affording information diffusion and management of local activist issues (e.g., to agree on times and places of offline activities), but it was not seen as affording pedagogy or persuasion. For global issues, however, social media was seen as highly effective to mobilize people by Greek participants as well. Again, we see how the affordances of social media for political participation hinge on the particular digital, technological, and political issue-related personal ecosystems the youths find activated at any particular moment.

> For me, the online is more for informing people on a specific issue and making some incidents known; but when we talk about osmosis and communication and maybe a better understanding of some things, then this is very difficult to do online and you need a dynamic communication that is mostly communicating with people face-to-face. (Greece, activist in anti-sexist organization)

However, in Greece and the United Kingdom, Meta-owned apps and platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Messenger, WhatsApp) were scrutinized and avoided for a lot of activism-related work because of privacy, surveillance, and data security concerns. Greek respondents elevated an example of Facebook banning political and activism-related sites, including the page of their own organization:

> There was a rise in censorship incidents at the beginning of 2021 on Facebook and Instagram. Reporters' pages, posts of lawyers, for example, that of Thanassis Kambagiannis, who was in the Golden Dawn trial, pages of political organizations … even our site was banned twice. (Greece, an activist in an anti-sexist organization as well as an activist against police violence).

For Greek participants this banning and de-platforming:

> generated a discussion within the movement(s) inviting people also outside the movement to seek new ways of political participation in the so-called "digital sphere"; to use the digital space, because this is important in the pandemic, but to also have discussions outside [these platforms], in more open-source stuff, for example to stop organizing things through Messenger, but do it through Signal and so on. (Greece, an activist in an anti-sexist organization as well as an activist against police violence).

Similarly, our participants in the United Kingdom, particularly those in XR, which often uses the tactics of non-violent civil disobedience, including a tactic of getting arrested, were sensitive to surveillance on generic social media platforms and experienced it as disaffording political participation. The social media ecosystem here converges based less on the affordances platforms have for mobilizing, persuading, or educating, and more based on imaginaries of what those same platforms afford to state powers in terms of surveillance. The United Kingdom youths studied tended to use more surveillance-proof apps and platforms, although members of XR also elevated carbon neutrality and open source as criteria according to which the organization chose its infrastructural services. Our participants from the United Kingdom mentioned Glassfrog.com,

Basecamp (which had to be abandoned after it couldn't scale after 8000 XR members went on it), and Mattermost as apps and platforms used for internal communication and organization management. Publicizing and coordinating moved from WhatsApp to Signal and Telegram after May 2019, because of perceived privacy issues related to WhatsApp (acquired by Facebook's owner Meta in February 2014). Estonian participants did not seem to worry about privacy and surveillance. We link this to both general trust in state institutions,[1] as well as membership in activist organizations (in the United Kingdom and Greece) as opposed to atomized, individual, affinity-driven activism (in Estonia). However, Estonian participants elevated risks of cyberbullying and trolling as factors in the assemblage of their participatory social media ecosystems. Thus, arguably, the more likely an app or a platform is considered to be a space of harassment, the less that app or platform is considered to afford political participation. We argue that both how apps and platforms were perceived from the perspective of privacy and surveillance, as well as how they were perceived from the perspective of potential harassment is a matter of imagined audiences (Litt, 2012). Some of our Greek participants self-censored for security reasons because they 'don't know how data on Facebook and Instagram are used because they are private companies' (Greece, student and activist against police violence). Some of our Estonian participants self-censored instead of managing *which* audiences see which facets of their (political) identities and worldviews, choosing, for example, to post certain arguments on platforms their family members did not use, or by creating narrow audience groups:

> Cyberbullying makes me hesitant; I have experienced bullying and it feels like my country doesn't care about me. It's scary to show local people who I am (…) It's complicated, on the one hand, I don't think that the government should interject in information flows, but when it's hostile then someone certainly should interject. (Estonia, LGBT+ activist/ally).

[1] For example, according to the Flash Eurobarometer European Parliament Youth Survey of 2021, only 13% of young people in Greece trust their national government to give them information about issues facing Europe, compared to 30% in Estonia (European Union, 2021).

Youths in all three countries situated the internet and social media as key in their informational ecosystems; gesturing to the internet and social media as an ecosystem where they educate themselves, as part of larger information ecosystems (converging with school, parents, friends, and legacy media); as well as elevating social media as an ecosystem where they can educate others. Estonian youths, in particular, also rely on social media to learn rhetorical skills and techniques from international social justice content creators. This can, again, be linked to the broader social justice activism ecosystem and the possible mentorship it might entail that the young people in Estonia do not have access to compared to their peers in Greece and the United Kingdom.

> I search for arguments, I don't want to be superficial when I argue for something, I don't want it to seem like I don't know what I am talking about. So … these accounts that I follow, they are much better than I am at explaining what they believe in, or better at posing the arguments to make it clear why and what, so I definitely learn that form there, this ability to explain that this is why it is important, and this is why you should care (Estonia, LGBT+ activist/ally).

Finally, across studied youth from all three countries, social media was positioned as shaping how the social justice ecosystem in the broadest sense was experienced. It was credited with concurrently amplifying the feeling that the social justice situation in the country is dire—which was linked to personal mobilization, a realization that something has to be done and solidification of one's activist views—as well as amplifying the messages of like-minded people, thus generating a feeling that others care and change is possible. Hate speech, trolling, disinformation, and cyber-bullying were elevated as the flipside of the coin across all three countries.

Generational Imaginaries and Social Media as Part of One's Broader Social Ecosystem

It was common for our participants to openly acknowledge the central role of the internet and social media in shaping their political identity. As argued in the previous section, our participants described both as having expressly political affordances for informing and educating self and others; for organizational work, affective impact, and related mobilization/participation (although the latter differed by country). However, conversations around the political and activist affordances of social media often included generational perspectives—usually along the lines of differences between youth activists and older activists in Greece and the United Kingdom, and along the lines of clashing perspectives between youth activists and their parents/grandparents in Estonia. Thus, our Greek participants told us that older and youth activists have different approaches to what they think helps achieve political goals, which in turn was linked to their varying levels of digital skills and comfort with using social media:

> Every time something happens and we have to tell the members of the organization to share it with other people, we have the issue of older people asking 'How do we share?', 'How do I set up a Facebook account?', we get phone calls etc. When some of our Facebook pages were banned, there was a different kind of chaos, we were sending videos with screen recordings on how you send an invitation to friends to 'like' something and the older members were still calling because they couldn't understand. Or when we started using other platforms to discuss things more freely, we had issues again. This is part of it, but another issue is that [the older] members understand political participation somehow in a more … let's say … traditional way. They don't understand how someone who is not in your union, in your assembly, might come to a meeting because they saw the form on the website. They don't accept it yet. (Greece, an activist in an anti-sexist organization as well as an activist against police violence).

Estonian youths, in turn, juxtaposed parents' and social media's impact on their political views. Perceptions of LGBTQ and racial justice issues,

in particular, were described as differing radically among parents and in social media discourse:

> Back when I didn't know much about the political stuff … or anything, I would listen to what my parents had to say, but after I started searching for information on Instagram and even the homepages of different political parties, about what they believe in and do … this is when I decided that my parents' world view doesn't really work for me. (Estonia, LGBT+ activist/ally).

Estonian participants would also elevate a variety of causal links between social media use and acceptance of liberal political views, or an interest in contributing towards new social movements. Sometimes the older generation's perceived racism and homophobia were directly attributed to their limited social media use.

Conclusion

Overall, we argue that there are both significant similarities as well as interesting differences between how politically active youth in Estonia, Greece, and the United Kingdom incorporate social media into their political participatory practices, articulate their motivations for doing so, and see social media shaping youth participatory practices in general.

While all interviewed youths said that online activities are an important part of activism, Greek youths argued that online political participation can never compare to what happens in the streets, while Estonian interviewees, in contrast, tended to emphasize online activities as that which makes a difference. Youths in all three countries use similar platforms, but the ways these are used vary, that is young people use less Facebook in Estonia and the United Kingdom, but still do use it to reach parents or older people; participants in Estonia and the United Kingdom use more Instagram and TikTok than Greek participants, and all follow debates on Twitter. Youths in all three countries also articulated a shift in platform preferences and perceptions as they became more politically active. Motivations to choose a particular platform (Facebook, Instagram,

TikTok, or Twitter), feature (post vs. story, group vs. own feed), as well as a geo-cultural/linguistic space (e.g., 'local TikTok' vs. 'international TikTok') rely on imagined affordances, intended audiences, but also one's sense of vulnerability to surveillance and harassment. That, in turn, is situated within the broader political context of the country, the prevalence and strength of activist organizations that might support a young person faced with cyberbullying or surveillance. Young people's political participation, therefore, is enacted via overlapping, relational, and networked ecosystems (Neal & Neal, 2013, see also chapter "How Can We Understand the Everyday Digital Lives of Children and Young People?"), which is concurrently socially mediated (e.g., the personal, peer, school family, social activism ecosystems, cf. van Dijck & Poell, 2013) and where social media itself functions as an activist ecosystem (DeVito et al., 2018) with particular affordances. This means that how social media shapes youth activism—whether it is a hurdle, or an enabler of youth participation is situational and contextual, hinged on individual young people's experienced position within their personal and broader societal ecosystems and on their particular social media ecosystem—the platforms they use, the features they have, the (imagined) audiences they have access to (DeVito et al., 2018).

Youths in Estonia, Greece, and the United Kingdom said they had found their way to activism through personal and peer experiences of discrimination, as well as social media narratives of injustice. Youth in all three countries articulated disappointment and disenchantment with local politicians and local party politics and tended to care about issues of global justice (Lievrouw, 2011; Juris & Pleyers, 2009), which social media played a dominant role in delivering information about. An ecosystemic view of the motivators and hindrances in youth experiences of socially mediated political participation invites exploring how social media platform affordances and imagined audiences (DeVito et al., 2018; Treré & Mattoni, 2016) as well as peer, family, and school support co-constitute young people's sense of political self-efficacy. Participants, who said that the risk of cyberbullying discourages them from speaking up on social media, also said that they think that those young people, who use social media as political activists, probably have 'a very strong friendship group or a family that has their back'. Young people's political

participation as such, and politically motivated social media use more narrowly, is grounded in a young person's broader personal and social ecosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). At the same time, young people whose political views diverge from their classmates', parents', grandparents', and teachers' views can and do often turn to social media for information, a sense of belonging, support, and examples of persuasive rhetoric to use to defend one's views. Social media and conventional social institutions do not thus only function as concurrent and convergent shapers of young people's politics, they can at times also function as competing forces and resources.

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