Article

Activism and Social Media: Youth Participation and Communication

Antonio Cortés-Ramos [1,*], **Juan Antonio Torrecilla García** [2] , **Miguel Landa-Blanco** [3] ,
Francisco Javier Poleo Gutiérrez [4] **and María Teresa Castilla Mesa** [5]

[1] Department of Developmental Psychology and Education, Faculty of Psychology and Speech Therapy, University of Malaga, 29010 Malaga, Spain

[2] Department of Economy and Business Management, Faculty of Social Studies and Labor, University of Malaga, 29010 Malaga, Spain; juantorrecilla@uma.es

[3] Degree in Clinical Psychology, School of Psychological Sciences, National Autonomous University of Honduras, Tegucigalpa 11101, Honduras; miguel.landa@unah.edu.hn

[4] INCIDE (Inclusión, Ciudadanía, Diversidad y Educación), 29013 Malaga, Spain; javierpoleo@incide.org

[5] Department of Didactic and School Organization, Faculty of Education, University of Malaga, 29010 Malaga, Spain; mtcm@uma.es

* Correspondence: antoniocortes@uma.es

Abstract: Background: Digitalization and hyperconnectivity generate spaces for youth participation in social activism through social media platforms. The purpose of this research was to analyze young people's online experience in social activism movements, including their preferences, themes, usage of language, and perceived impact. **Methods:** The research is framed within a qualitative interpretative–descriptive paradigm. Five focus groups were conducted, including 58 high school students from Malaga, Spain. **Results:** Several themes were identified through the coding process, including technological devices and social media preferences, participation in social movements or activism, perception of the degree of participation, the focus of interest, motivation for involvement, language use on social media, and beliefs. **Conclusions:** In a hyperconnected world, youth participation in social movements becomes more relevant. Their interest is reflected in the enormous potential that this social participation of young people has through networks and virtual platforms, becoming an informal communication model with characteristics to be an effective vehicle for social transformation.

Keywords: social media; ICT; digital communication; social participation; virtual communities; digital natives

1. Introduction

Given their social nature, human beings have a constant need for interacting, cooperating, and communicating with others to work towards the satisfaction of their multiple needs [1]. In this context, activism can be understood as the diversity of behaviors that people exhibit within society and the aim to make problems of social interest visible. Such actions are developed in-person or in digital environments through the internet. These forms of participation are interrelated, and therefore not independent from each other, giving rise to the term "hybrid activism" characterized by the development of integrated actions in both online and offline platforms.

In this sense, the internet has amplified and enhanced the possibilities of social activism [2]. Here, social media serve as a platform for the viral dissemination of information that has a high impact potential on the public's opinion [3]. From a youth-centered perspective, social activism is necessary to promote the betterment of society in areas related to education, politics, law, socio-economic wellbeing, and culture. Therefore, hybrid activism opens up and interconnects powerful spaces fueling the engine of social change [4].

Likewise, some young people possess a decisive personal capacity to pursue social change and acquire civic commitments. This can be developed, channeled, and enhanced through educational contexts, which act as catalysts for activist action within different societies. It is worth noting that social movements which involve youth participants tend to take more risks and have more vehement demands and militant tactics [5].

Consequently, the relevance and scope of youth social activism are evident. In other words, activism driven by young people constitutes an element of social transformation, which disrupts the status quo and collectively unwanted situations or contexts, promoting social coexistence that adapts to human needs [6]. Social activism in young people can be highly effective, even when initiated at a very early age. Evidence suggests that social activism projects with school-related platforms have successfully achieved their objectives in a significant way [7].

Hence online activism through the internet and social media is a particularly relevant topic on this subject. In this sense, recent academic literature has focused on social networks and their relationship with human motivation. The digital world promotes communication and cooperation between people interested in participating, to some degree, as an activist, both virtually and offline. This is affected and enhanced by the continuous emergence of new information and communication technologies. In consequence, new spaces, platforms, and possibilities of interaction among activists are continuously generated. Another essential feature is the control that people have over communication processes, in which all parties involved can participate using a direct and bidirectional dialogue. As a result, it is possible to achieve greater awareness, motivation, and involvement towards social activism causes [8].

To further understand this topic, it is necessary to present an integrated definition of social media in the context of the current research. Social networks are "internet-based and persistent channels of mass personal communication facilitating perceptions of interactions among users, deriving value primarily from user-generated content [9] p. 49."; while also stating that "Social media are Internet-based channels that allow users to opportunistically interact and selectively self-present, either in real-time or asynchronously, with both broad and narrow audiences who derive value from user-generated content and the perception of interaction with others" [9] p. 50.

The importance of youth participation today has become a topic of great interest for social research since young people's environmental and communication systems are strengthened by the interrelationship that occurs through social media and the virtual world. In this sense, the current youth generations are considerably defined by a permanent hyperconnectivity state that maximizes their socialization potential through social media and instant messaging applications. However, this hyperconnectivity tends to be negatively perceived, with criticism focusing on the time young people dedicate to non-educational or productive activities [10].

According to the Youth in Spain Report of 2019, there are approximately seven million young people in Spain, of which 78% use social networks to participate in social movements, 9% in social-oriented associations, and 5% in political parties [11]. This might lead us to believe that young people are not particularly interested in participating in social movements. Nevertheless, research legitimizes this low participation and apathy based on young people's disinterest in politics or party membership [12]. However, many social movements generate interest in youth. They participate directly through social media and virtual platforms, with a high purposeful involvement and communication rate.

Virtual social media created from the development of the Internet and Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) are a phenomenon of increasing importance in academic studies [13]. Compared to other mass media, their development and use have not stopped growing, given their immediacy, interactivity, and use as a communication tool between people and global activism [14–17].

Hence, the interest of young people in participating in these new social contexts of interaction is high [18], with a high prevalence of social media usage within this age

group [19,20] due to different motivations [1]. This affects their behaviors and relationships with others, including family and societal structures [20,21], since social media is a robust platform of social expression and youth participation targeting various causes.

Thus, the internet facilitates and promotes many possible scenarios of interaction and communication through social media and, at the same time, causes a profound effect on the development of young people. In this regard, the language used by young participants in their media communication patterns will regulate the developmental impact of social media. This may include symbols, codes, narratives, speech, etc. [22]. Although these social communication mechanisms are essential to enhance and promote youth social movements, we must also weigh other factors related to their success and effects [19]. Communication allows the integration of different motives in virtual spaces, which are also referred to as "expanded public space", "digital public space", "scenario of cybermobilizations", and "digital communities" [23].

The digitalization of society has affected the modes of communication, causing an adaptation of language that responds to the demands and dynamics of the new digital social reality [24]. Social media users have the freedom to adapt their language, giving place to a set of communication rules built and accepted by the internauts, resulting in the appearance and development of characteristic and creative linguistic behaviors. Additionally, there is a relationship between their use of written language and its corresponding oral manifestation. At the same time, new linguistic codes are constantly generated, usually based upon signs and new abbreviated words that facilitate their writing. It is, therefore, appropriate to consider that we are dealing with a virtual language that also aims to transmit feelings, sensations, gestures, and emotions [25]. Examples of this type of language used by young activists through the construction of symbols, codes, narratives, and discourse have been addressed in previous research [26,27].

On the other hand, an important point is the modality of social activism that young people carry out in virtual social networks. In this sense, the geographical and social proximity may cause variations in youth activists' involvement in online and offline platforms [17], highlighting the active online participation of young people in actions of a civic, social, and solidarity nature. There are many factors motivating youth cyber-activism. Young people are digital natives and feel that online media is a natural platform for communication that allows for the massive dissemination of messages that can raise collective awareness. This might be done through "viral" content, of which young people are both creators and consumers. Additionally, young people may need to fight against certain aspects of reality to promote social change [28].

Despite all of the above, there are still significant gaps in the literature regarding the role of social media usage concerning youth social movements [29]. Considering this, the purpose of the current study pretends to analyze the role young people have in online social movements participation, focusing on their online preferences, language styles (symbols, codes, specific phrases), motivations, and expectations. This in a sample of high school students from Malaga, Spain.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Design

The current research is designed within a qualitative framework, allowing for the comprehension of multiple realities, exploring, and analyzing participants' interpretation regarding specific topics in their natural context [30,31]. Therefore, an emerging, inductive, and flexible design is proposed, open to the changes that may arise throughout the study, especially during the data collection process. Our methodology is based upon the Grounded Theory approach. It offers an inductive methodology that allows discovering essential dimensions of the phenomenon under study without starting from pre-established theoretical hypotheses based on the analysis of participants' discourse [32].

2.2. Procedure

The selection of the participants followed three phases. First, initial contact was made with the principals and teachers at the selected schools. The researchers explained the study's overall purpose and its ethical considerations, including the confidential nature of the data collection process. Once they confirmed their participation, a protocol of action was established. The tutors were responsible for sharing an informative dossier with the students and their parents, as a parental consent form was included. Once the parents signed the consent form and returned it to the schools. The focus groups were organized by the student's educational stage in either Compulsory Secondary Education (ESO) or Baccalaureate and Professional Training. The students were subsequently informed about the date and place of their focus group. Focus groups' composition and sample size were determined following contextual, heterogeneity, and accessibility criteria [33].

In the next stage, the data collection process started through the focus groups interviews, which were organized in the following manner: (1) reception of the participants, (2) introduction of the session, (3) preparation and welcome to the group, (4) questions and answers, (5) in-depth discussion of the topics, and (6) closing. Finally, the third phase included a literal transcription of the different recordings of the sessions. These transcripts were later anonymized, coded, analyzed, and interpreted.

2.3. Participants

Students were selected through an intentional sampling, respecting their ecological conditions and development [34], within the microsocial level (students-young participants) and macrosocial level (use of social media). The sample consisted of 58 students, of which 22 were boys, and 35 were girls, with an average age of 13.22 years.

The students were enrolled either in Compulsory Secondary Education or in the Baccalaureate and Professional Training degrees from the following schools: IES Picasso, IES Ben Gabirol, IES Campanillas, and IES Puerta Oscura de Málaga. Although the sample selection did not have a representative purpose or the generalization of the results, the intention was to obtain the maximum information of the different perceptions and behaviors related to online social activism.

2.4. Data Collection Techniques

For the systematic collection of information, five focus groups were formed, led by a moderator. Each focus group had between 90 and 120 min. Some of the questions included in the discussion were: (1) What devices do you use to connect to the internet? (2) What social media do you usually use? (3) Do you participate in social movements or social activism? (4) What do you think of your participation? (5) What kind of activism, social movement or campaigns do you participate in? (6) What motivated you to get involved in that social movement? (7) When you want to express your opinion, which type of language do you use? (8) How are the expressions in that specific group? (9) Do you use a specific code? (10) Do you use specific symbols to refer to something specific to that social movement? (11) How do you express your agreement or disagreement with the issues that arise? (12) Do you think that those expressions, symbols, or codes work? (13) Do you believe that your work in social media is going to help achieve social changes in the future?

At the start of each focus group, interviewees were reminded of the ethical considerations of their participation, including the confidentiality, voluntary, and withdrawal agreements. The interviews were recorded in audio and later transcribed; coding analysis was assisted by Atlas.ti 8.

3. Results

This section presents the results that emerge from the focus groups. Based on the categories and subcategories involving youth social activism, the following eight themes are presented: (1) preferences related to online access, (2) preference of social media for social par-

ticipation, (3) perception of the degree of participation, (4) social interests, (5) motivations for involvement, (6) use of language, (7) beliefs; see Figure 1.
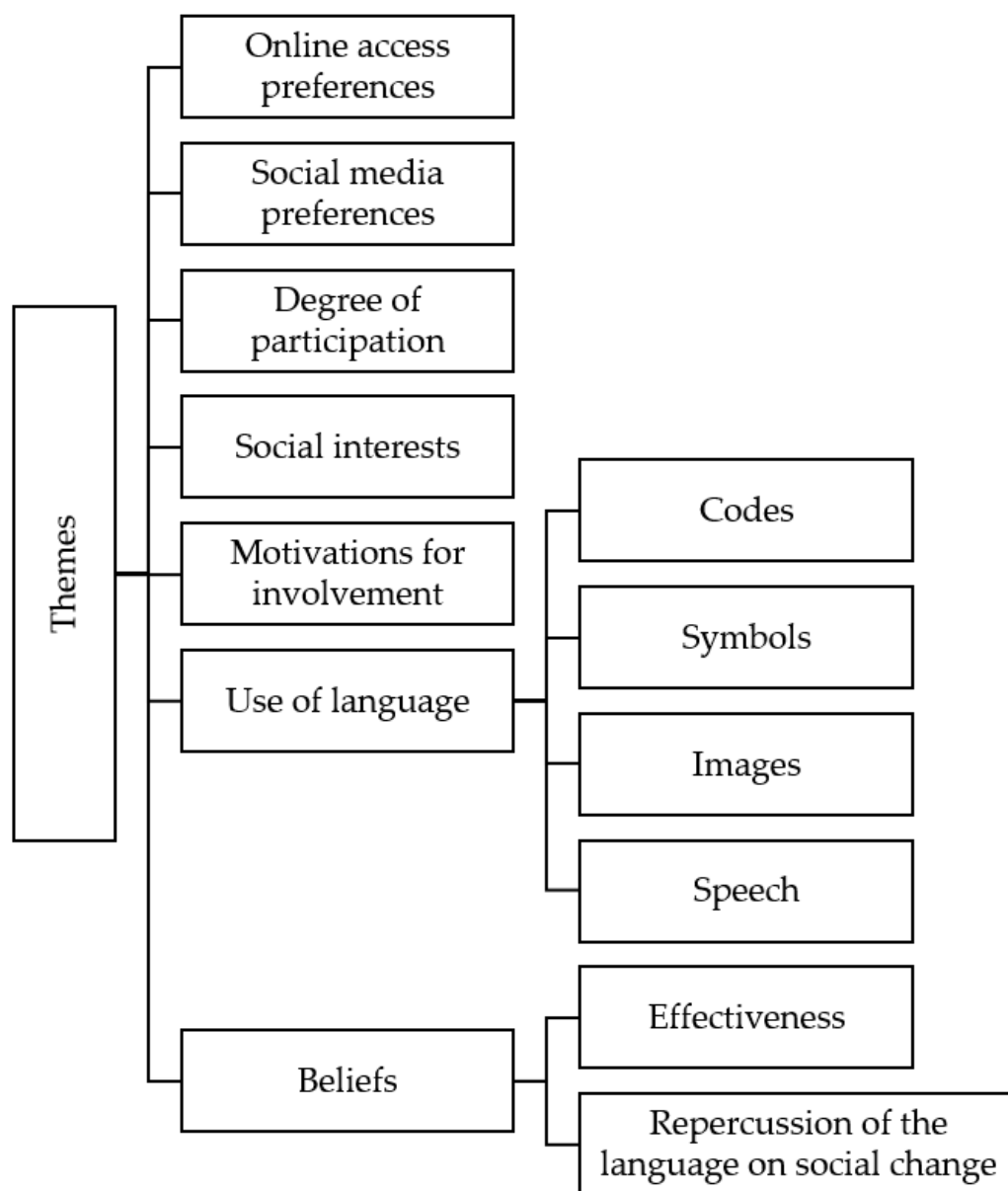

Figure 1. Themes related to youth online social activism.

3.1. Preferences for Online Access to Social Media

The findings suggest that most participants choose to use their cell phone or laptop to access social media and, to a lesser extent, through desktop computers or tablets; see Figure 2. It is thus verified that enabling resources of easy access are also those that promote access to networks since they are the facilitators of immediate communication, considering the factors of portability, access, and immediacy in the communication. The progressive update of applications that can be carried out on mobile devices and laptops answers two key questions: temporality and location.
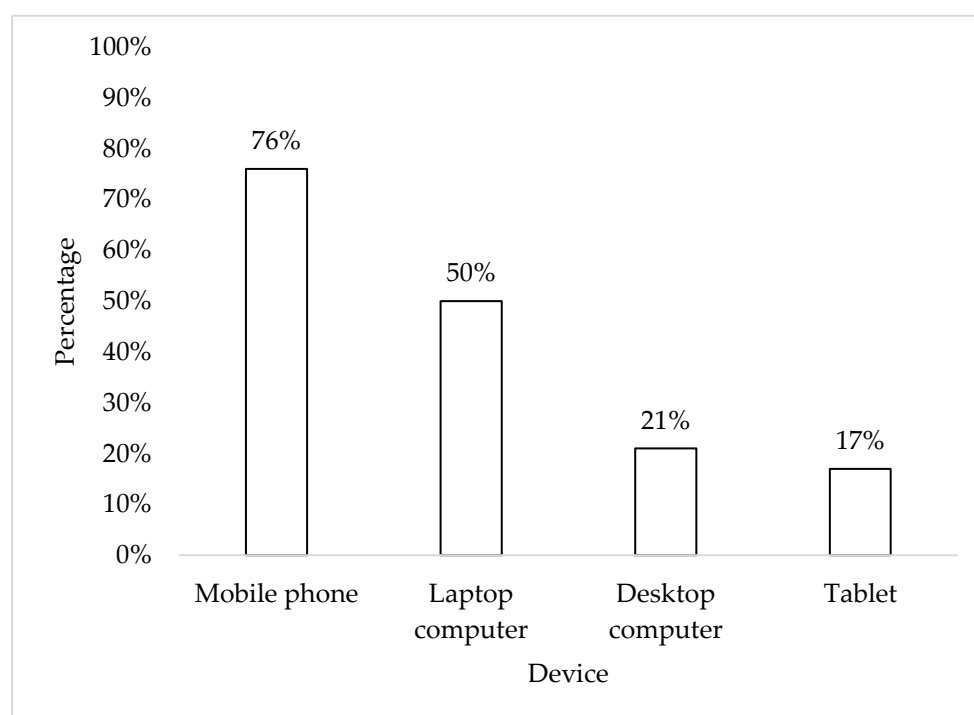
Figure 2. Devices used to access social media.

3.2. Social Media Preferences

Instagram, YouTube, and Google were among the most popular digital platforms used by the interviewees, followed by Discord, Twitter, and Twitch. To a lesser extent, TikTok, LinkedIn, and Pinterest (see Figure 3). None of the respondents reported using Facebook. This is not surprising considering that worldwide data of Facebook users reveals that only 3.3% of male users and 2.5% of female users are between 13 and 17 years of age [35]. It is also noteworthy that participants report using social media platforms such as Discord or Twitch; despite being originally gaming-oriented spaces, they allow young people to express themselves and participate in social issues and carry out campaigns.

3.3. Perceived Degree of Participation

When asked about their participation, most interviewees (45%) describe their online participation as variable, with 37% reporting active participation and 17% passive participation. An example of active participation can be found in the following quote: "I always publish on Instagram, normally what happens. I give my opinion, always with a specific language use for those situations so that people can understand it better. I also like to think of solutions and comment on them" (P38, D38_38:5). On the other hand, the following phrase indicates passive participation: "Well, when people upload a picture [against] racism, violence, or animal abuse, I like the post" (P3).

3.4. Interests

The interviewees were interested in many topics related to social activism or campaigns, including gender violence, discrimination, racism, climate change, and equality. Table 1 contains details of such topics. These themes are also discussed in offline media, offering complementary information and opportunities to approach such movements critically.
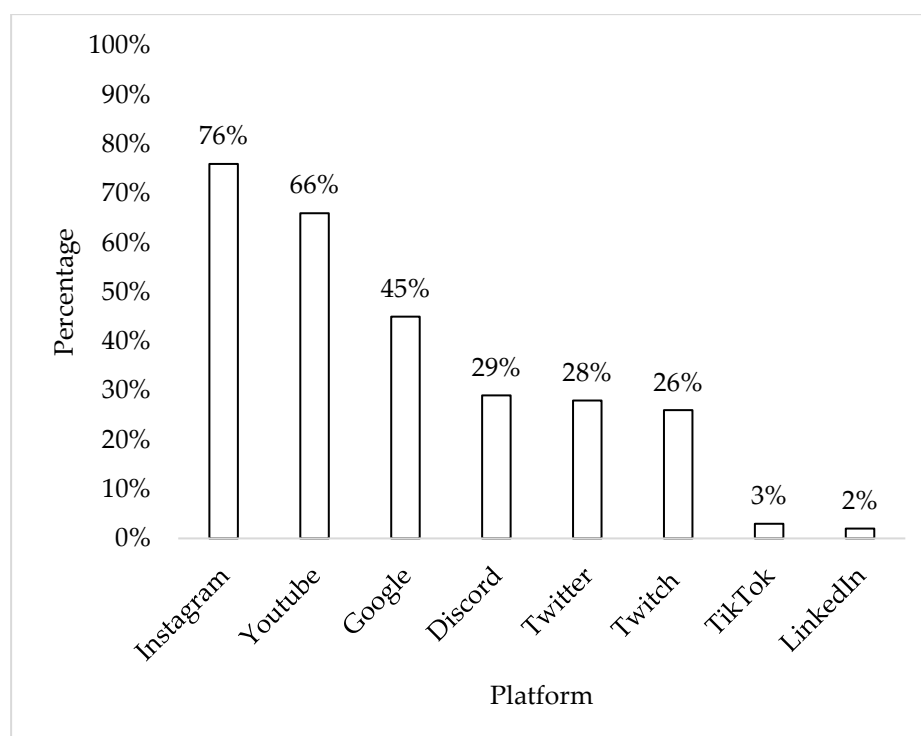
Figure 3. Social media platforms used for activism.

Table 1. Activism themes and motivations.

Categories	Quotes
Interests	"Against machismo, inequality, racism, and homophobia." (P2, D2_2:5). "Above all things, climate change." (P9, D9_9:5). "The fight for equality between men and women, fighting against gender violence and animal abuse, etc." (P45, D45_45:5). "To fight against gender violence." (P48, D48_48:5).
Involvement motivation	"Because I lived many things related to it and I want it to keep happening." (P2, D2_2:6). "The inequality we live every day with." (P48, D48_48:6). "I have friends that suffer discrimination and bullying because they are gays or lesbians." (P37, D37_37:6).

Some of the opinions reflecting the degree of commitment and the modalities or typologies of communication that young people use to communicate, raise awareness, or share information stand out. Sometimes resorting to social media allows, according to one of the participants, to socialize specific issues, thus raising awareness on the topic. This can be done by sharing images, allowing the user to make a reality known by providing images and thus becoming a spokesperson for a reality: "Sometimes I share images especially of animal abuse so that people see that it exists, and we must avoid it. I also do it with campaigns against cancer and childhood cancer" (P25, D25_25:5).

In some cases, social activism is promoted by the family structure and is later internalized by the youth. In this sense, one of the interviewees commented: "My family is a member of Greenpeace, and every month we give some money to help aquatic animals that are at risk of extinction." (P29, D29_29:5).

Certain interviewees could identify specific, well-known social movements, showing compromise and sensitivity towards it. For example: "When racism problems were visible in the United States through the Black Lives Matter" (P47, D47_47:5). Some participants do not focus their activism on specific topics but rather on general actions: "In many topics, I like to help others solve their problems" (P30, D30_30:5).

Others possess a purposeful and decisive attitude that leads them to be active in social media, using specific language patterns to express their comments and generate awareness. One interviewee commented: "I always publish on Instagram, normally what happens. I give my opinion, always with a specific language use for those situations so that people can understand it better; I also like to think of solutions and comment on them." (P38, D38_38:5).

Some of the interviewees who have not participated in online social activism are also not interested in participating in offline active movements; one participant states that: "I do not usually attend to protests or things like that" (P55, D55_55:5). Others avoid sharing their opinions publicly and prefer to do it only within personal circles: "I do not like to participate in these types of things, I only share my opinion with close people and friends" (P14, D14_14:5).

3.5. Participation Motives

Different factors motivate online youth participation in social topics. These motivations come from personal experiences, as well as from external or internal conditions, and even implicit attributional factors related to the decision-making process. Some motivations denote the knowledge that young people have about specific issues; in this sense, one interviewee commented: "Well, knowing that little by little our planet is dying because of humanity, the truth is that it worries me and torments me a lot" (P9, D9_9:6). This also relates to a sense of inconformity with the status quo and a determination to change it, as one participant stated: "Seeing the inequality that exists in society and considering the changes that need to be made" (P49, D49_49:6).

The motivation that comes from recognizing the transformative and influential role that young people can play with their online participation has been mentioned in the interviews: "It motivates me to know that I have done my bit to help these people" (P12, D12_12:6), "Because you have to count on everyone to change things and I can be an important part of the change" (P42, D42_42:6), "My participation may not change anything, but it contributes in a way and it costs nothing to do it because certain rights or injustices need to be rectified" (P55, D55_55:6). The attitudes and personality traits of young people who are committed to the causes they choose are added to the pre-existing motivations: "Because I like to help" (P21, D21_21:6), "The interest in Education and because I want to be an educator myself in the future" (P41, D41_41:6), "Disagreement with some things I think that should be changed" (P38, D38_38:6). Criticism and reflection from an intergenerational perspective are also present as a reason to generate participation: "Well, trying to make a new world much better than the one left to us by our parents, grandparents, etc." (P45, D45_45:6).

The direct personal experience, "lived experiences" (P36, D36_36:6), with situations or problems addressed in campaigns or social movements "having people close to black people suffering from racism" (P47, D47_47:6), is also another reason to participate because: "unfortunately I have had and currently have many people close to me with cancer, and I would like people to become aware and (if they could) donate even a small amount of money for research into this disease" (P25, D25_25:6), and "concerning gender inequality, because I am within that group and I think that there are still many things to change, as with other groups that are disadvantaged in many aspects" (P53, D53_53:6).

Immediate educational and social agents also influence the awareness for youth participation. This impact can either promote or discourage the interviewees: "My teacher is always encouraging us to sign up or collaborate" (P58, D58_58:6), "They told me it was mandatory" (P1, D1_1:6). This last quote is from an interviewee who resisted using social media for activist purposes (see Table 1).

3.6. Use of Language

The language used in youth participation is highly relevant, particularly in two areas related to social issues. On the one hand, the way language is expressed and, on the other,

the codes and symbols to which they resort. As shown in Table 2, language is used directly, adapted to the various causes in which young people participate, also reinforcing their belonging to their group. The ability to generate symbols is practically unlimited when communicating on different networks and platforms, with people of different ages and cultures, and with different objectives.

Table 2. Use of language.

Categories	Quotes
Expressions	"I try to be as straightforward, sincere and formal as possible." (P9, D9_9:7). "An inclusive language, with expressions related to the movement." (P48, D48_48:7). "Assertive and without violence." (P51, D51_51:7).
Codes	"Yes. It is not a code, but it accompanies the sentences, emphasizing the meaning of these. Most are quite popular, although some are very old. In WhatsApp and other networks, I use "stickers", "emojis," or faces. The most common is the Pacman (":v") and its derivatives such as ">:v", ":u", etc., I also frequently use the xD. Apart from others" (P15, D15_15:8). "Images, most of all." (P26, D26_26:8).
Symbols and images	"Sometimes I use, for example, for the feminist movement, I use these ⚥ 🤭." (P45, D45_45:9) "Phrases from memes, videos, photos." (P43, D43_43:9)
Opinions	"With symbols and words." (P8, D8_8:10) "I upload my pictures or phrases as status, or I participate by giving my opinion and confronting those who attack the people for being what they want to be." (P37, D37_37:10)

The use of symbols, emoticons, and other expressions is an integral part of this communication, which seeks to simplify the message and the response. This simplification helps to make the transmission of messages and ideas more concise and compelling. This usage of common language contributes to increasing participation, as it is easy to understand and disseminate faster. That is why memes are frequently used, accompanied with short sentences, and edited with symbols. Table 2 shows some codes and symbols used that are perfectly recognizable in the participating sample population. Since language is constantly changing, images, pictograms, and common expressions become very important to maintain coherence while allowing the immediacy of emission and response. This communication is done directly, transparently, and assertively to motivate and promote trust among the community.

3.7. Beliefs

This category represents young people's opinion regarding the importance of the usage of language, codes, and expressions concerning social change and its possible impact on social transformation. Most respondents consider the impact of communication through social media as positive, identifying it as a tool that stimulates others to reflect upon social causes in the hope of generating social progress and evolution, see Table 3.

The interviewees perceive themselves as protagonists of social change since the information they share on social media can potentially influence others due to the scope and interconnectivity of such platforms. One participant states that: "I hope so since it is not just me, there are thousands of children supporting change and at the end of the day we are the future, and the fact that from a young age we do different things to raise awareness and raising awareness makes me understand that as we grow up, we will do what we can to continue with the change" (P25, D25_25:12).

Table 3. Beliefs regarding the perceived impact of the participation.

Categories	Quotes
Effectiveness of the opinions	"Yes, fortunately nowadays we have many resources that allow us to express ourselves simply. If used intelligently, this can give us interesting results when it comes to influencing others." (P44, D44_44:11). "I believe it helps people to reflect." (P41, D41_41:11). "Of course, progress and social evolution." (P51, D51_51:11).
Impact of language on social change	"There cannot be changed without language." (P10, D10_10:12). "Yes, of course. Social media connects us in a very effective manner. Our opinion gets everywhere." (P44, D44_44:12). "Yes, because nowadays everything moves through social media, I think that is the best way to achieve certain social changes, particularly with the youth population, which usually are the ones that use social media the most." (P53, D53_53:12).

4. Discussion

The current study has analyzed youths' online activism and its relationship with social media usage. Findings suggest that the participants use a specific communication system that adapts language usage for social media activism. Considering microsocial and macrosocial conditions, results indicate a high prevalence of youth participation in social causes; some are motivated within the school setting, and others related to personal interests.

Our study suggests that young people perceive social media as a platform for expression and communication. Since digital resources are widely available to young people, they serve as an ideal and accessible platform to share opinions and committing to causes without formally joining an organization [36]. However, this digital access should be equitable and must be accompanied by civic education processes. Additionally, many factors might prevent young people from participating in cyberactivism movements. These include unreliable internet sources, online bullying, mistrust in the government, and privacy-related issues [37]. This is of extreme importance since many authoritarian governments often seek to censor the digital presence of critical opinions or that incite social mobilizations [38].

Participants are aware of their transformative potential and how online platforms are an effective tool for communication, capable of reaching a diverse and massive audience. This has resulted in a linguistic adaptation to promote immediate and concrete communication systems in which new communication codes are established, accompanied by images, short and direct messages [39]. An example of this is memes, which are used as a coping strategy, helping to the reinterpretation of stressful situations that impact society [40]. In this same line, emojis have also been identified as an expression of emotions (positive, neutral, negative), meanings (behavioral and passive), and the content of the message. This serves to simplify communication. However, there is also the risk that the use of emojis leads to ambiguities that may be difficult to interpret [41]. Despite this, it is necessary to emphasize that stickers in virtual communication, in conjunction with textual messages, are highly effective in achieving a sense of intimacy among people [42].

Additionally, motivation for social participation is usually associated with the concerns arising from the environment in which young people develop. This includes their educational context, family environment, peer groups, or personal experiences linked to social movements, such as racism, xenophobia, homophobia, inequality, discrimination, gender violence, or climate change. Such themes are consistent with the movements identified in previous research [38]. It is worth noting that several of the topics the participants were interested in are in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The interviewees specifically mentioned poverty, good health and wellbeing, gender equality, responsible consumption and production, reduced inequalities, life below water and on land, climate action, and peace [43]. Consequently, public and private institutions should consider youth's transformational potential and promote activism and digital civic engagement to enhance sustainable development [37,44].

Furthermore, previous studies have found that young people who participate in digital activism are more likely to exercise "offline" political participation [37]. Additionally, the number of interactions on platforms, such as Twitter, was a significant predictor of people's participation in social protests [45]. Therefore, social media creates new forms of youth participation and help develop participation in traditional spaces [46].

The rise of social networks usage is reaching unsuspected parameters and even more so among the young population. This constitutes a communicational resource that transcends beyond a merely informative purpose, becoming an instrument of expression and social mobilization for young people, generating identity links based on their linguistic codes. Endogenous and exogenous factors are decisive to articulate language and message construction processes while generating dimensions of social co-responsibility, commitment, vindication, knowledge, critical judgment, and the development of citizen values. It is precisely this argument that provides the added value of the research presented in this article.

Evidently, research on the link between social networks and the youth population has proliferated in the last decade [12]. However, the current study makes a distinctive contribution since it has allowed articulating the existing connections between the modalities of participation in virtual social networks, the construction of spaces for spontaneous and intentional communication, the identification of complex and problematic situations, evidencing them as a focus of intervention and socio-community commitment. Our research can also characterize those youth populations susceptible to use virtual networks as social activism channels and their language symbology, connotations, attitudes, and behaviors. Therefore, the current research has made it possible to approach the reality of young people's social activism and how their participation influences it through social networks using a language and communication system adapted to a changing reality.

In conclusion, our research confirms the potential of young people's social participation through social media and virtual platforms, turning an informal mode of communication into an effective vehicle for social transformation. Despite the contributions of this study, some limitations must be considered. The qualitative nature of the research carries the risk that the findings are not representative of the studied population nor transferable to other contexts. In line with this, the influence of digital media is variable and context-dependent [3]. Nonetheless, these types of descriptive studies are often crucial to generate scientific knowledge and innovation [47].

Future research on the topic would benefit from a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative aspects. This will allow for a deeper understanding of youth participation in social movements. In the same way, it will be beneficial to perform a thematic analysis on the content published by young people on social media and how this relates to "offline" participation. In part, this could be done through data mining tools that allow for sentiment analysis techniques and similar tools.

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