

# Digital Social Participation of Young People in Serbia: Between Symbolic Support and Civic Engagement

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Contemporary youth participation increasingly occurs in digital environments, yet it remains unclear whether such practices amount to mere symbolic support or constitute an emerging form of civic engagement. This article examines the forms, motives, barriers, and mobilisation potential of digital social participation among young people in Serbia. The study is based on an exploratory triangulation design that combines a survey involving 100 young respondents aged 16 to 24, 12 semi-structured interviews, and a coded content analysis of 500 social media posts. The findings show that young people use the internet and social networks intensively and that they follow social and political content regularly or occasionally. However, their engagement most often takes low-threshold forms, including sharing activist content, signing online petitions, commenting, and occasionally expressing personal views publicly. At the same time, the interviews reveal that young people do not uniformly understand digital activism: some perceive it as a contemporary public space and a first step towards broader civic engagement, while others see it as a limited, superficial, or insufficiently effective form of support. The content analysis indicates that education, politics, and human rights are the most visible topics, whereas video posts, calls to action, and emotionally framed content have the strongest potential to generate reactions. The article concludes that digital social participation among young people is neither a substitute for traditional civic engagement nor a mere illusion of action. Rather, it is a transitional and generationally specific form of participation whose effects are strengthened when connected with education, community support, clear objectives, and offline action.

**Keywords:** youth, digital participation, social media, civic engagement, Serbia

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The issue of young people's social participation has traditionally occupied an important place in sociological, demographic, political, and public policy research. Young people are not just an age category but a population group in a transitional position: at the same time, they are users of existing social institutions, subjects of youth policies, and potential carriers of future change. In the classical order of public life, their participation was most often viewed through formal channels: membership in organisations, participation in the work of pupil and student bodies, volunteering, political engagement, protests, public debates and local initiatives. Digitalisation has not abolished these forms of participation, but it has changed the space in which they are prepared, presented and beyond.

In this paper, young people are not seen merely as users of social networks, but also as a special population and generational group whose social participation is shaped by the intensive digitalisation of everyday life. From the perspective of population studies, research on the digital participation of young people is important because this age group is undergoing a phase of educational, work, political, and civic formation, during which patterns of information use, public expression, trust in institutions, and readiness for social action are adopted. Digital space is therefore not only a technical channel of communication but also an environment in which young people's attitudes, generational identities, and patterns of civic participation are shaped. In this sense, digital social participation is a relevant issue for the study of the contemporary position of young people in Serbia, particularly regarding their education, public voice, social inclusion, and the potential to move from symbolic online support to more concrete forms of civic engagement.

In Serbia, this context is particularly relevant due to the population's high level of digital inclusion. According to the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia and 2024 survey on the use of information and communication technologies among individuals including persons aged 16 to 74 for 2024, 90% of individuals use the internet, while 84.7% of the Internet population has an account on social networks ([Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2025](#)). Eurostat data for the European Union further indicate that digital life is particularly pronounced among young people: in 2024, 97% of 16-29-year-olds in the EU used the internet daily, and 88% participated in social media activities ([Eurostat, 2025](#)). Although these indicators do not directly point to activism, they show that the social lives of young people increasingly take place in a digitally mediated environment.

In the domestic context, public policy documents and reports on young people increasingly emphasise the need for greater involvement of young people in decision-making, local communities and public life. UNICEF Serbia points out that civic participation is important for the development of civic values, social trust and democratic culture, and that young people need accessible channels through which they can express their opinions and influence policies that concern them ([UNICEF Serbia, n.d.](#)). In the Alternative Report for 2025, the Umbrella Youth Organisation of Serbia notes that research conducted with a representative sample of 1,259 young people aged 15 to 30 found a high level of interest in social events ([Stojanović et al., 2025](#)). This confirms that the passivity of young people should not be taken as a starting point, but as an empirical question.

In the scientific literature, digital activism and online participation are interpreted differently. One line of research highlights that digital media lowers the cost of participation, accelerates the dissemination of information, enables personalised and networked action, and opens up space for new forms of collective action ([Bennett & Segerberg, 2013](#); [Earl & Kimport, 2011](#)). The second line warns of the limitations of digital engagement: the ephemerality of attention, symbolic action, performative support, polarisation, and the absence of lasting organisational effects ([Christensen, 2011](#); [Kristofferson et al., 2014](#); [Morozov, 2011](#)). Between these two poles lies the most realistic research task: not to accept in advance either digital optimism or digital scepticism, but to empirically examine under what conditions young people's online engagement remains at the level of symbolic support, and under what conditions it takes on the character of civic action.

The subject of this paper is the digital social participation of young people in Serbia. This term refers to online practices by which young people express their views, disseminate information, support social initiatives, participate in discussions, sign online petitions, share activist content, engage in campaigns or are encouraged to engage offline. The paper does not start from the assumption that all such practices are equally significant, nor that any content sharing is tantamount to civic action. On the contrary, the starting idea is that digital participation varies in intensity, from passive exposure to social content to organising or supporting concrete actions.

This paper aims to analyse, based on exploratory empirical research, the forms, motives, barriers, and mobilisation potential of digital social participation among young people in Serbia as a distinct population group. The paper starts from the assumption that the social participation of young people can be understood not only through traditional forms of political and civic engagement, but also through digital practices of informing, expressing views, supporting campaigns, participating in online discussions, and moving from online to direct social action. This situates the topic of digital activism within a broader framework for studying contemporary patterns of social inclusion among young people.

## 2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: FROM DIGITAL SPACE TO CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Digital youth participation must be seen as part of a broader transformation of the public sphere. In the traditional social framework, participation in public life implied relatively clearly separated roles: a citizen as a member of an organisation, a participant in a forum, a signatory of a petition, a protester, a volunteer, or a member of a political community. The digital environment makes this border more porous. An individual can be simultaneously a spectator, commentator, content distributor, campaign participant and occasional organiser. That is why digital participation cannot be measured solely by the criteria of older forms of activism, nor must it be uncritically equated with them.

The concept of networked public space is particularly important for the understanding of young people. [Boyd \(2014\)](#) shows that social networks for adolescents and young people are not just technical platforms, but spaces of sociability, identity negotiation and public presence. Such spaces allow visibility, connection, and expression, but also carry the risks of surveillance, misinterpretation, the permanence of the digital footprint, and conflict. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has defined six categories of online radicalisation, which lead to terrorism, some of which are complementary ([Živaljević, 2022](#)). Young people, therefore, do not move in the digital space as in a neutral technological environment, but in a public-semi-public environment in which any expression can have social consequences.

[Bennett and Segerberg \(2013\)](#) introduce the notion of the logic of connected action, emphasising that digitally mediated forms of collective action often need not rest on solid organisational structures. Instead of traditional membership and hierarchical mobilisation, personalised messaging, shareable content, weak connections, and platforms that enable quick engagement are increasingly important. For young people, who often lack stable institutional channels of influence, such logic can be particularly appealing. It does not always require long-term organisational affiliation, but allows for occasional, thematic and situational participation.

[Earl and Kimport \(2011\)](#) suggest that digitally enabled social change can alter the cost of organising, the speed of mobilisation, and the threshold of participation. This change is important for young people because it lowers the initial threshold for engagement: sharing a post, signing a petition, or participating in an online discussion becomes accessible to those who would not otherwise engage with formal organisations or traditional political activities. However, a lower threshold does not guarantee the depth of engagement. This is where the difference between initial, simpler forms of participation and actual civic action emerges.

[Theocharis \(2015\)](#) proposes that digitally networked participation should not be dismissed as secondary or insufficiently serious, but rather be conceptually recognised as a possible form of political and social participation. This is important because many young people's digital activities arise from the daily use of the media and only subsequently acquire political or civic meaning. Young people can first follow content about mental health, education, or a local problem, then share the post, then participate in the discussion, and only later get involved in offline action. In this sense, digital and offline action are not separate worlds, but can be phases of the same process.

Empirical research generally confirms that the connection between social networks and participation exists, but that it is not a simple one. A meta-analysis by [Boulianne \(2015\)](#) shows a positive relationship between social media use and participation in civic and political life. However, this relationship does not imply automatic causality or equal effect sizes across all groups. [Kahne et al. \(2013\)](#) particularly emphasise that online participatory cultures among young people can serve as a bridge to volunteering, community problem-solving, protest activities, and public expression of political voice. Some research confirms the connection between social exclusion, non-acceptance of cultural identity, and the radicalisation of young people in modern society, facilitated by social networks and platforms ([Jugović & Živaljević, 2021](#)). This is especially important for this study, as it examines the transition from online support to offline engagement.

On the other hand, criticism of slacktivism warns that less demanding online activities can create a

subjective sense of participation without real contribution. [Christensen \(2011\)](#) discusses the dilemma of whether political activities on the internet are merely slacktivism or another form of participation, and concludes that there is insufficient basis for a simple thesis that Internet activities can replace offline participation. [Kristofferson et al. \(2014\)](#) further show that symbolic support can have different consequences depending on its public visibility, participants' motivations, and association with values. In other words, sharing content is neither worthless nor sufficient in itself; its significance depends on the context, motivation, and subsequent steps.

Domestic research on young people in Serbia increasingly raises questions of political culture, trust, participation and socio-demographic differences. [Mandić and Vinokić \(2025\)](#), in the journal *Population*, analyse the political culture of young people in Serbia using interest, participation, satisfaction, and trust, thereby confirming the relevance of a population-based approach to young people as a distinct group in contemporary social research. This paper builds on this by shifting the focus to digitally mediated forms of social participation.

Methodologically, the paper relies on the classical principle that complex social phenomena cannot be reliably understood based on a single data source. In the domestic methodological literature, the connection among the problem, subject, goal, methods, and the available empirical material is consistently emphasised ([Milašinović & Milojević, 2016](#); [Milojević et al., 2025](#)). An interdisciplinary study of complex social phenomena requires both theoretical clarity and empirical verifiability, which can be seen in papers that, although created in the fields of applied social sciences, consider the broader question of the relationship between the scientific discipline, methodology, theoretical foundation and empirical approach ([Milojević et al., 2025a, 2025b](#)). In this sense, digital social participation among young people requires linking sociological, communicative, methodological, and public policy perspectives. Thus, the methodological approach in this paper relies on the general principles of empirical research in the social sciences, in particular the combination of quantitative and qualitative data sources, the inductive derivation of analytical categories, and the triangulation of findings. Such an approach is suitable for exploratory research into social phenomena that are not well established in the existing literature, such as contemporary forms of digital social participation among young people.

### 3 METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted as an exploratory triangulation study. Such an approach was chosen because digital social participation among young people has both quantitative and qualitative dimensions. Quantitatively, it is possible to register the frequency of Internet use, the representation of certain platforms, forms of engagement and attitudes towards digital activism. Qualitatively, it is necessary to understand how young people themselves interpret the differences among content sharing, support, public attitudes, and actual activism. Content analysis complements these two data sources by examining the digital space where participation occurs.

The data sources in this study were an online survey, a semi-structured interview, and an analysis of social media post content. Such a combination of sources has made it possible to look at the digital social participation of young people from three interconnected angles: through the respondents' self-assessment of their own digital habits and forms of engagement, through a deeper understanding of their motives, barriers and meanings that they attach to digital activism, as well as through an insight into the content that appears in the digital space as forms of social engagement of young people.

The first data source was an online survey conducted with young people. The original survey database had 101 rows and 23 columns. After downloading the database, a technical cleaning of the data was performed, which included correcting character encoding, removing redundant spaces, correcting broken column names, unifying duplicate response categories, standardising multiple responses, and removing empty or technically invalid entries. The respondents' answers have not changed. Since one respondent was 44 years old, the analytical sample for this paper was limited to 100 respondents aged 16 to 24 years, in accordance with the research subject, which focuses on young people as a distinct population group. The online survey sample was non-probabilistic, with elements of snowball sampling. The research included available respondents in the target age category, with the option to forward the questionnaire to other young people. The sample is dominated by high school students, an important limitation for interpreting the results.

Therefore, the findings cannot be generalised to the entire population of young people in Serbia. The results are interpreted as an exploratory insight into the patterns of digital social participation of the young people included in the research, and not as a representative picture of the attitudes and behaviours of all young people in Serbia ([Table 1](#)).

**Table 1.** *Basic characteristics of the youth survey sample (n = 100)*

| Gallery            | Category            | n  | %    |
|--------------------|---------------------|----|------|
| Gender             | Female              | 61 | 61.0 |
|                    | Male                | 39 | 39.0 |
| Place of residence | Mid-sized Town      | 60 | 60.0 |
|                    | Big City            | 22 | 22.0 |
|                    | Small town          | 9  | 9.0  |
|                    | Village             | 9  | 9.0  |
| Status             | High school student | 68 | 68.0 |
|                    | Student             | 17 | 17.0 |
|                    | Employed            | 13 | 13.0 |
|                    | Unemployed          | 2  | 2.0  |

*Note.* The age of the subjects in the analytical sample ranged from 16 to 24 years; the median age was 19.02 years, and the median was 18 years.

The second data source consisted of semi-structured interviews with 12 young people from diverse educational, work, and social backgrounds. The interviews were participated in by high school and college students, as well as employed and unemployed young people. The sample for interviews was a deliberately selected maximum-variation sample, drawn from respondents who, during the survey research, indicated they agreed to participate in the interview, because the goal was to capture the different experiences of young people, not to form a statistically representative group of respondents. The interviews were conducted face-to-face or via a Viber video call, depending on the respondents' availability and capabilities. With the participants' prior consent, the conversations were audio-recorded to ensure data accuracy, and the recordings were then transcribed and prepared for qualitative analysis. The interviews focused on young people's digital habits, experiences with digital activism, motives and barriers to online engagement, perception of the effects of digital activism, a broader generational perspective and respondents' assessments of possible future engagement. The transcribed interviews were analysed thematically, with the separation of recurring categories such as: digital public space, less demanding forms of engagement, symbolic support, transition from online to offline engagement, solidarity as a motive, scepticism towards the effects of digital activism, fear of negative reactions and the need to educate young people for responsible digital participation.

The third data source was an encrypted database of 500 posts from social networks, compiled by scraping publicly available content from the selected platforms. The sample consisted of publications that were publicly available at the time of the data collection and aligned with the research topic, i.e., social topics, public expression of views, support for campaigns, calls to action, criticism of social problems, or other forms of digital social engagement among young people. Only posts that were accessible without access to private profiles, closed groups, or other forms of restricted access were included in the analysis. The units of analysis were individual social media posts, sorted by platform, author type, date of publication, format, text length, dominant topic, primary function of the message, level of engagement of the author, number of likes, comments, shares or retweets, intensity of reaction, tone of the message and total number of reactions. The analysed period includes publications from April 2, 2025, to April 2, 2026. This component of the research aimed to complement the data obtained from the survey and interviews with insight into the characteristics of the digital space in which young people's social participation takes place.

Given the nature of the sources used, the research has an exploratory character. Its goal is not to generalise the findings statistically to the entire population of young people in Serbia, but to understand the basic patterns, motives, obstacles, and forms of digital social participation among young people. By combining the online survey, semi-structured interviews, and analysis of social network posts, methodological triangulation is achieved, linking quantitative indicators, qualitative insights, and digital content analysis. In this way, the research seeks to provide more comprehensive insight into how young people use digital spaces to inform themselves, express their

views, support social initiatives, and, in some cases, move towards concrete civic engagement offline. The survey data are described descriptively: frequencies, percentages, and averages on Likert scales. In the case of multiple answers, the frequency of each category's selection is shown, so the sum of the percentages can exceed 100. The interviews were analysed thematically, without any tendency to statistical generalisation. Content analysis of posts was used to describe platforms, formats, topics, message function, tone, and reaction potential. Such a combination of methods aligns with the principle that empirically complex phenomena are more reliably understood by integrating multiple data sources than by relying on a single data type ([Milašinović & Milojević, 2016](#); [Milojević et al., 2025](#)).

The research does not start from a predetermined causal hypothesis, but from an inductive approach. First, the available data were reviewed, then the regularities were identified, and only then was the interpretative axis of the work formulated: digital social participation among young people moves between symbolic support and civic engagement. Such a procedure aligns with the logic of exploratory research and cautious reasoning based on non-representative yet content-rich material.

## 4 RESULTS

The results that follow refer to the respondents included in this exploratory research and do not comprise a representative picture of the entire youth population in Serbia. Bearing in mind the sample's occasional nature and the dominant participation of high school students, the findings are interpreted as indicators of possible patterns of digital social participation among young people, rather than as a basis for statistical generalisation.

### 4.1 Digital Everyday Life and Exposure to Social Content

The survey results show strong digital inclusion among the surveyed young people. Out of 100 respondents, 82% use the internet almost constantly, several times a day, while 16% use it daily. Only 2% of respondents say they never use the internet. The time spent on social media further confirms the high level of digital presence: 47% of respondents spend three to five hours a day on social media, 35% spend more than five hours, 16% spend one to two hours, and only 2% spend less than one hour.

The most-represented platforms are Instagram (97% of respondents), TikTok (89%), YouTube (84%), Snapchat (51%), Facebook (42%), Twitter/X (27%), and Reddit (19%). This distribution shows that the digital everyday life of young people is not tied to a single platform, but to a multi-channel communication environment. However, the dominance of Instagram, TikTok and YouTube points to the predominance of visual and video-oriented platforms. In this regard, contemporary social participation among young people increasingly depends on the aesthetics of short-form content, virality, divisibility, and algorithmic visibility.

Furthermore, 32% of respondents regularly follow social and political content, 38% occasionally, 21% rarely, and 9% do not follow it at all. This means that 70% of the young people surveyed come into contact with social or political topics regularly or occasionally. This data does not mean that the majority of young people are engaged in activism. However, it indicates that the digital space plays a significant informational role and shapes young people's social and political attitudes. The interviews further confirm this. More active respondents describe social networks as spaces where they first encounter problems that are not sufficiently visible in traditional media. In contrast, more reserved respondents predominantly perceive them as a means of entertainment, information, or relaxation.

Qualitative findings clearly show that the same digital infrastructure does not have the same meaning for all young people. For some, social networks are the "public space of a generation", a place where attitudes are formed, and like-minded people are found. For others, they are an ambivalent space where there is useful information but also superficial, conflicting, and overly emotional discussions. This proves that it is not enough to measure the frequency of internet use. It is necessary to understand how young people interpret the digital space and how much they perceive it as a legitimate channel for social action.

## 4.2 Forms of Digital Activism: The Dominance of Less Demanding Participation

When asked whether they had ever participated in any form of digital activism, 53% of the respondents answered yes, 24% were unsure, while 23% answered no. The fact that nearly a quarter of respondents were unsure whether they had participated in digital activism is methodologically important. It shows that the line between ordinary online support and activism is not clear for a significant proportion of young people. Young people often share content, sign petitions, or support humanitarian causes, but they do not necessarily name such behaviour as activism.

Among the forms of digital activism, the most common is sharing/reposting activist content, which was reported by 57% of respondents. Signing online petitions occurred in 27% of respondents, publishing one's own position on social issues in 24%, membership in an online activist group in 10%, participation in a hashtag campaign in 7%, while organising or launching an online campaign occurred in only 3%. This finding clearly shows that digital participation in the sample tends to be less demanding. Young people are more likely to get involved as distributors, signatories or commentators than as organisers.

The frequency of engagement further confirms this pattern. The responses show that 21% participated occasionally, 18% rarely, 15% very often, and 5% only once or twice, while 41% did not answer this question because they had not previously identified themselves clearly as participants in digital activism. In this regard, digital social participation among young people does not appear to be a stable, permanent practice for the majority, but rather an occasional, thematic, and situational form of inclusion.

The interviews help better understand this finding. More active respondents did not see sharing content, commenting and signing petitions as insignificant activities, but as the first step in spreading information and creating visibility for the problem. More reserved respondents, however, often stated that they did not perceive sharing the post as activism, but as a small gesture of support, especially when it comes to humanitarian actions. This distinction is important because it shows that digital activism exists not only as objective behaviour, but also as a subjective interpretation of that behaviour (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Selected results of the survey on digital youth participation (n = 100)

| Indicator                              | The most common categories       | n  | %    |
|----------------------------------------|----------------------------------|----|------|
| Use of the Internet                    | It is almost constant            | 82 | 82.0 |
| Time on social networks                | 3–5 hours a day                  | 47 | 47.0 |
|                                        | More than 5 hours a day          | 35 | 35.0 |
| Monitoring of social/political content | On a regular or occasional basis | 70 | 70.0 |
| Participation in digital activism      | Yes                              | 53 | 53.0 |
|                                        | I am not sure                    | 24 | 24.0 |
| A form of activism                     | Sharing activist content         | 57 | 57.0 |
|                                        | Sign an online petition          | 27 | 27.0 |
|                                        | Publishing one's own position    | 24 | 24.0 |
| Offline incentive                      | Yes. once or more times          | 41 | 41.0 |

*Note.* In multiple-choice answers, the percentages indicate the proportion of respondents who selected a given option, so they do not add up to 100.

## 4.3 Topics that Move Young People: Education, Humanitarian Action and Human Rights

The topics that most often encourage young people to engage online clearly indicate that digital participation is not only political in the narrow sense. The most represented are education and student issues, cited by 60% of the respondents; humanitarian action at 57%; human rights at 49%; local problems at 39%; environmental protection at 35%; political change at 34%; and mental health at 27%. Such distribution shows that digital youth participation arises at the intersection of

personal, generational and public problems.

Education and student issues are expected to occupy the most important place, as the majority of the sample consists of high school and university students. The presence of humanitarian actions shows that young people respond to immediate needs for help, especially when the problem is personal and emotionally resonant. Human rights, local issues, ecology and mental health point to broader values and a shared horizon of engagement. Politics is present, but it does not dominate on its own. This is an important finding because it confirms that young people's digital social participation cannot be reduced to party or institutional politics alone.

In addition, the interviews show that the motives for engagement are most often not procedural-political, but moral and solidary. Young people get involved when they feel injustice, recognise others' suffering, when a topic affects their generation, or they see a concrete way to help. In this sense, digital youth activism has a strong affective component, but this affectivity need not be a sign of superficiality. On the contrary, it is often a mobilisation condition for young people to get involved at all.

At the same time, the barriers are clearly expressed. As reasons for not participating, 33% of respondents said they had never thought about it, 18% did not believe digital activism had an effect, 17% believed they were not sufficiently informed, 6% were not interested in such topics, and 5% were afraid of negative reactions. These data show that passivity is not just the result of indifference. It often arises from a lack of information, a lack of incentives, and distrust of the effects and social risk of public expression.

#### **4.4 Attitudes Towards the Effects of Digital Activism**

Likert's claims indicate a moderately positive, though not uncritical, orientation among young people towards digital activism. The claim that digital activism allows young people to make their voices heard has an average score of 3.69, with 56% of the respondents mostly or completely agreeing with the statement. The statement that social networks are the primary space for social engagement among young people today has the highest average rating, 3.88, and 66% of respondents mostly or completely agree with it. This confirms that young people recognise social networks as an important space for public expression.

However, when digital activism is compared to traditional forms of activism, attitudes become more cautious. The statement that digital activism is as valuable as traditional forms of activism has an average score of 3.26, with 42% positive, 31% neutral and 27% negative responses. The claim that digital activism rarely leads to real change in society has an average score of 2.91, with as many as 40% of the respondents being neutral. This does not reflect simple scepticism but rather ambivalence: young people see the value of digital activism, but are unsure of its transformative power.

The interviews provide the best key to interpreting this ambivalence. One group of the respondents believes that digital activism can have a real effect when it goes viral, attracts media attention, creates institutional pressure, or leads to offline action. Another group believes that too much ends up being shared or liked, or that it causes a short-term burst of attention. Between these two positions, there is a mature middle ground: digital activism is not enough on its own, but it can be an initial impulse for broader civic action.

A particularly important result is that 41% of the respondents reported that digital activism prompted them to engage in an offline activity on one or more occasions, such as volunteering, attending an event, or getting involved in an organisation or humanitarian action. This does not mean that digital activism regularly transitions into offline engagement, but it does show that such a transition exists and should not be overlooked. This finding aligns with the theoretical assumption that online participatory cultures can serve as a bridge to other forms of civic engagement ([Kahne et al., 2013](#)).

#### **4.5 Analysis of the Content of Publications: Digital Space as an Arena of Visibility and Mobilisation**

An analysis of 500 coded social media posts shows that the digital activist space is broken down by platforms, actors, formats and message functions. Most posts came from Instagram (35.2%), followed by Twitter/X (27.4%), TikTok (22.4%), Facebook (9.4%), and YouTube (5.6%). However, platforms differ not only in the number of posts but also in their potential for reaction. TikTok, while accounting for 22.4% of posts, accounts for 46.4% of total reactions, with an average of 6,169 reactions per post. Instagram has the highest number of posts, but a lower average number of reactions than TikTok and YouTube.

By author type, individual young users dominate, accounting for 60% of the posts, followed by youth organisations at 27% and public figures or influencers at 13%. This finding is important because digital participation is not only seen as an action by formal organisations. On the contrary, most of the content comes from individual young users. However, the average reach per post is highest among public figures and influencers, followed by youth organisations, while individual users, due to the number, are the most important in terms of the total sum of reactions.

By format, video content is the most represented, at 31.6% of posts, followed by text posts at 24%, photos with descriptions at 18.8%, combined format at 18.2%, and infographics at 7.4%. Videos account for more than half of the total reactions in the database. This is particularly important for the interpretation of digital youth participation: contemporary activist speech is no longer primarily a textual proclamation or a lengthy argument, but often a short video, a visual message, a personal story, a combined format, or an emotionally framed call to action.

The dominant topics in the posts are education (30%), politics (24.6%), human rights (16.8%), local problems (10%), mental health (6.8%), humanitarian actions (4.4%), and ecology (3.8%). In comparison, gender equality and other topics are represented with 1.8% each. Politics, education, and human rights lead in reactions, while mental health has the highest average number of reactions per post. This finding confirms that topics that are generationally, emotionally and politically relevant have the greatest potential for visibility.

According to the primary function of the message, the most common is a call to action with 28.8%, followed by criticism of the system with 23%, expressing a personal attitude with 20%, an informative function with 15.2%, a personal confession with 8.2%, and symbolic support with 4.8%. In terms of overall reactions, they are most likely to bring calls to action. According to the message's tone, the most common is critical (28.2%), followed by emotional (22.2%), neutral-informative (21.6%), confrontational (14.4%), and positive-motivational (13.6%). The highest average number of reactions is for emotionally charged posts. This shows that digital activist content becomes more visible when it combines a clear naming of the problem, emotional recognition, and a call to action ([Table 3](#)).

**Table 3.** *Selected findings of the analysis of the content of posts on social networks (n = 500)*

| Dimension                | The most common categories | n   | % / Average                       |
|--------------------------|----------------------------|-----|-----------------------------------|
| Platform                 | Instagram                  | 176 | 35.2%                             |
|                          | Twitter/X                  | 137 | 27.4%                             |
|                          | TikTok                     | 112 | 22.4%                             |
| Author's tip             | Individual young user      | 300 | 60.0%                             |
|                          | Youth Organisation         | 135 | 27.0%                             |
| Format                   | Video content              | 158 | 31.6%                             |
| Theme                    | Education                  | 150 | 30.0%                             |
|                          | Politics                   | 123 | 24.6%                             |
| Message function         | Call to action             | 144 | 28.8%                             |
| The tone of the message  | Critical                   | 141 | 28.2%                             |
| The Highest Average Echo | TikTok                     | 112 | 6,169 reactions after publication |
|                          | Video content              | 158 | 5,163 reactions after publication |

## 5 DISCUSSION

The findings of the research indicate that the digital social participation of young people is not only

a matter of media habits, but also of their contemporary social position as a population group. The high frequency of the use of the internet and social networks, regular or occasional monitoring of social and political content, as well as the readiness of some respondents to support campaigns, sign an online petition, participate in a discussion or switch to offline engagement, show that the digital space is emerging as an important environment for generational information, expression and social inclusion. At the same time, scepticism about the effects of digital activism, fear of negative reactions, and uneven understanding of the boundary between symbolic support and civic action indicate that digital youth participation is ambivalent and depends on the educational, communicative, and social conditions in which it occurs. The digital social participation of young people in Serbia cannot be reduced to either an optimistic thesis about a new digital democracy or a sceptical thesis about superficial slacktivism. The actual picture is more complicated. Young people are highly digitally present; they recognise social networks as important spaces for expression and information, but most often they participate through less demanding forms: sharing content, signing petitions, commenting, and occasionally publicly expressing their positions. This is not insignificant, but it is not enough to declare such behaviour as full civic engagement.

The first important conclusion is that the digital participation of young people exhibits continuity in intensity. At one end is passive exposure to social content. Then comes symbolic support: liking, sharing, changing profiles, making a short comment or signing a petition. The following are more active forms: argumentative commenting, publishing one's own position, participating in a discussion or joining an online group. At the higher level, there are calls to action, content creation, campaign organisation, and going offline. The biggest mistake would be to treat all of these forms as the same. Another mistake would be to dismiss the initial forms as worthless just because they are not traditional activism.

The second conclusion relates to the ambivalence of young people. Young people do not accept digital activism unreservedly. They recognise that the internet can make a problem visible, connect people, and trigger a reaction. However, they also doubt the durability of the effect, the quality of online discussions, and participants' willingness to move from symbolic support to concrete action. This is methodologically and theoretically important: ambivalence is not a sign of immaturity, but a realistic attitude towards the digital space. Young people see both possibilities and limits.

The third conclusion is that young people's digital participation has a strong generational dimension. The interviews show that the respondents often reject the label of passivity. They do not claim that all young people participate equally, but they point out that engagement is changing and that it occurs through channels natural to their generation. This finding fits with the literature on online audiences and online participatory cultures ([Boyd, 2014](#); [Kahne et al., 2013](#)). A generation-specific form of engagement should not be underestimated because it does not resemble older patterns of political and social participation.

The fourth conclusion relates to topics. Education, humanitarian action, human rights, local issues, mental health and political change show that young people respond to problems that are close to their experience and value horizon. It is an important population finding. Youth digital activism is not an abstract ideological activity. However, it often stems from issues that shape their daily lives: school, studies, mental health, solidarity, local community, and a sense of social injustice. In this sense, digital participation can be an indicator of generational concerns.

The fifth is about barriers. The most common reason for not participating is not an outright rejection of social issues, but rather that young people have not considered digital activism, are insufficiently informed, or do not believe it is effective. The interviews also add the fear of negative comments, misinterpretation, conflict and digital violence. This means that greater participation of young people cannot be expected only through a moral call to be more active. The following conditions are needed: digital and media literacy, clear ways to participate, safer spaces for expression, support from peer communities, and visible results of engagement.

This is where the public policy significance of the research lies. If youth policy wants to involve young people, it must not see the digital space as mere entertainment. However, digital media should not be seen as a magic bullet. Digital channels can only serve as a gateway to participation if they are linked to real decision-making processes, local initiatives, school and student programs, youth organisations, and feedback mechanisms. Young people get more involved when they see

meaning, results, and community. Without this, digital participation remains short-lived and fragmentary.

The results of the content analysis further indicate that the digital space favours visible, emotional, visual and actionable messages. The video format, TikTok, and calls to action have particularly strong potential for eliciting reactions. That does not mean that content should be trivialised or reduced to emotion. On the contrary, the finding points to the need to bring serious social topics closer to young people in the formats they actually use, without sacrificing argumentation, verifiability, and responsibility. The traditional public word has not disappeared; it adapts to new carriers and new channels.

Research limitations must be clearly stated. The survey sample is not representative of all young people in Serbia, but is exploratory and structurally shifted towards high school students, women and respondents from medium-sized cities. The interviews provide an in-depth understanding, but not a statistical generalisation. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted as indicative rather than definitive statements about all young people in Serbia. However, the strength of the research lies in the triangulation: three different data sources point to a similar pattern – digital participation among young people exists, but it is divided, ambivalent, and most significant when it transcends mere symbolic support.

## 6 CONCLUSION

Digital social participation of young people in Serbia is between symbolic support and civic engagement. It usually starts with less demanding actions: sharing content, signing a petition, commenting, following a campaign or supporting a humanitarian post. Such forms of participation cannot be completely equated with traditional activism, but neither should they be dismissed as a mere illusion of action. They represent the entry threshold for participation, especially for young people who lack stable institutional channels of influence.

Empirical findings show that young people see digital activism ambivalently. On the one hand, they see social networks as the primary space for intergenerational social engagement and a place where their voices can be heard. On the other hand, they are suspicious of the long-term effects of online campaigns, fear negative reactions, and are often unsure whether their actions are actually changing society. This ambivalence is the most important finding of the paper. It shows that young people are neither completely passive nor naively enthusiastic about digital opportunities. They move between wanting to react and doubting that their reaction has a consequence.

The greatest potential of digital participation occurs when online engagement is not just visible, but also leads to learning, connecting, organising, and offline action. The interviews show that digital campaigns can encourage volunteering, participation in workshops, local initiatives and humanitarian activities. The content analysis shows that messages that connect emotional recognition, a clear naming of the problem and a call to action have the greatest resonance. Digital participation is most powerful when it brings together a voice, a community, and a specific goal.

For youth policy, educational institutions and civil society organisations, this gives rise to a practical recommendation: young people should not only be invited to engage, but also provided with understandable, safe and effective channels of participation. There is a need for digital and media literacy programmes, examples of successful campaigns, support from peer communities, protection from digital bullying and a clear link between online activities and real decision-making processes. Without it, digital activism remains an occasional reaction. Under these conditions, it can become an important form of modern civic socialisation for young people.

Given the limitations of the sample, the findings of this study cannot be generalised to the entire population of young people in Serbia. Their contribution is primarily exploratory and analytical: they point to possible patterns of digital social participation among young people, the difference between symbolic online support and more active civic engagement, and the conditions under which digital space can become an environment for information, connection, and mobilisation. Future research should include a more representative sample of young people, compare different age subgroups, examine differences by gender, education, type of settlement, and socioeconomic status, and monitor, longitudinally, whether less demanding online activities actually lead to more

lasting civic engagement. It is especially important to explore further the roles of TikTok, the video format, and the emotional tone of the message, as the available findings suggest that these elements strongly shape the visibility of digital youth activism. This would enable a more reliable view of the role of digital participation within the broader context of young people's social position in Serbia.

## Data availability statement

A survey database, anonymised material obtained from the interviews and an encrypted database resulting from content analysis are available from the author in charge of correspondence, upon reasonable request. The public sharing of full interview transcripts may be limited, as they contain contextual details that could indirectly identify participants.

## Ethical Approval and Informed Consent Statement

Participants in the part of the study that included interviews gave their consent to participate and to be audio-recorded for research purposes. Prior to submitting the paper, the authors ensured that the consent procedures for all survey and interview participants, including any minors, were documented in accordance with the applicable institutional and legal requirements.

## Coauthor contributions

**Saša Milojević:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Investigation, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – original draft

**Dragan Živaljević:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft

**Srdan Milašinović:** Methodology, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing

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