



NextGenC Working Papers

Youth, (Political) Participation, and Technology in Latin America and Colombia

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1 Introduction

This paper presents a review of the academic literature on youth participation, politics, and its connections to technology and activism in Latin America and Colombia. Youth participation has been the subject of research in various disciplines, based on diverse theoretical approaches, and explored through multiple methodologies. The body of literature poses questions as to how young people's participation differs from other forms of engagement; how youth activism distinguishes itself from that of other social actors; the role young people play in political decision-making; the influence they have as legitimate actors within society; as well as about their modes of action, motivations, and purposes.

Across disciplines, research indicates that current forms of participation principally develop in and through non-traditional spaces, modes, and actions. These new and alternative forms of participation are widely characterized by horizontal and autonomous organization forms, bottom-up decision-making, direct action to address local issues of concern, and signal a growing role of technology.

Although the literature on youth participation has increased significantly in the recent decade, we found important gaps related to 1) research in intermediate or small cities, as analyses are almost exclusively focused on principal Latin American cities, reproducing the centre-periphery inequality that characterizes the region's modes of governance; 2) research with a decolonial, intersectional focus addressing the role of gender, race, and ethnicity in participation, reflecting the region's heterogeneous population and historical biases; 3) a limited analysis of the role of technology in contemporary Latin American activism, particularly if and how new digital media and communication tools facilitate or hinder youth participation, and thus perpetuate existing inequalities.

This paper is structured in four sections. We begin with a description of the definitions of youth political participation across key disciplines including political science, youth studies, education, sociology, and anthropology, exploring how youth participation is used as an analytical framework. The second part focuses on youth participation in Latin America. It highlights how the region's high rates of poverty and socioeconomic inequality, as well as historical

episodes of violence and discrimination, impact upon the possibilities and forms of youth participation. The section also introduces the central debate in the regional literature about youth' alleged political apathy. We address this issue by first presenting research findings about "traditional" political participation, that is, voting or involvement with political parties. This is followed by more recent findings about new and alternative modes of participation, as well as the impact and limitations of different forms of engagement. We include a discussion on the role of technology and social media in youth participation, considering both online and offline political engagements, and their use for organization, communication, and mobilization. In the third subsection we discuss how these issues play out in the Colombian context. The article concludes by discussing the progress and contributions of research on youth participation and suggests possible future topics based on gaps in the literature.

2 Contemporary ideas and concepts of youth participation

The debate around youth participation in politics shifted at the beginning of the century. Instead of understanding participation only in terms of conventional involvement like voting and engaging in formal and adult-led institutions, researchers began to increasingly pay attention to emergent non-institutionalized forms of participation. This shift followed worries about young people's low turn-out in elections, their alleged disengagement and apathy, and subsequent identification of a crisis of democracy (Farthing, 2010). This research demonstrated that the notion of youth disengagement resulted from an adult-centric focus on institutionalized and formal forms of participation (Farthing, 2010), which omitted young people's perspectives. Consequently, the concept of political participation was redefined to include a more extensive understanding (Harris et al., 2010). This review of the literature on contemporary ideas and concepts of youth participation reflects that shift, highlighting how the debate has evolved and the definitions that currently guide it.

Within the reviewed literature, we found discussions of youth participation in youth studies, anthropology, political science, and sociology particularly informative. These disciplines propose a broad perspective on youth

participation. In addition, they employ qualitative and quantitative methodologies to study diverse activities and consider aspects such as youth as a particular social group, notions of citizenship and the influence of technology in their analysis. As a result, the studies provide a nuanced understanding of youth activists' experiences, interactions, and roles within society.

In political science, participation has been central to analyzing democracies as a political system and the democratization of different government systems (Hooghe et al., 2014). It is understood as a necessary practice that every democratic government should ensure for its citizens (Deth, 2014). Political participation can be loosely defined as the activities of citizens seeking to influence politics (Deth, 2014). However, activities across a wide spectrum fit this description, including voting, demonstrations, volunteering, boycotting products, joining an unlawful group, starting a business, among others. Nevertheless, political participation is not merely a multitude of activities aimed at altering politics, which points to the ambiguity and multiplicity of definitions. Thus, studies adhering to an institutional and traditional understanding of political participation find a decreasing participation across the different institutional mechanisms provided by the state. This trend has been accentuated over time, particularly among youth populations. In contrast, as we will discuss in further detail below, studies with a more ample definition of participation, identify that instead of a lack of engagement there has been a shift in the forms of youth political participation (Deth, 2014).

Despite the different ways of understanding political participation, Deth's (2014) literature review identifies four common points across definitions. First, political participation is portrayed as an activity or action. Second, political participation is understood as an activity carried out by individuals in their roles as citizens and as politicians or lobbyists. Third, political participation should be voluntary and not imposed by any legal mechanism. A fourth common aspect is that political participation is related to government, politics, or the state in the broad sense of the word (political system, public policies, local, departmental, or national administrations, etc.). Additionally, Norris (2002) adds that activities aiming to alter civil society or systemic behavioral patterns are also forms of political participation. Zukin et al. (2004) finally emphasize the importance of both

individually and collectively organized activities that seek to bring about change.

Addressing the question of youth activism's legitimacy, Mattheis (2022) discusses Friday for Future's school strikes and protests in institutional buildings. Such demonstrations have been publicly questioned on three grounds: 1) an assumption that young people lack knowledge and experience to participate in decision-making processes; 2) fear of the consequences of such civil disobedience; and 3) citizenship models centered on formal adult participation. Mattheis, in contrast, defends young people's protest practices as a legitimate form of making themselves heard. Since young people are usually not included in political decision-making processes, their civil disobedience is a justified means to influence politics and to create alternative democratic spaces beyond institutions.

The question of legitimacy of young people's political participation connects to debates about their representation in youth studies. Thus Farthing (2010) criticizes that political participation of youth in political and social sciences is currently mostly understood in simplistic binary terms. Either negatively, as non-participation or apathy that endangers democracy, or as harbingers of new forms of politics, including in or through electronically mediated domains. In contrast, Farthing supports Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (2002) approach to considering young people's apolitical stance as a form of political participation. That is, not participating in traditional party politics as well as in new electronic and consumerist forms is a deliberate decision that reshapes "the political." The author refers to this position as the "politics of fun," which he describes as having a transformative agenda, a new "target," and new forms of participation that include rejection of traditional forms of participation. Yet this is not an apolitical stance. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) argue that this politics is no longer interested in the "state" but instead focused on the NGO and multinational corporation sphere. The politics that young people adopt to reach their targets include political consumerism - consuming certain social media content, supporting or boycotting particular businesses - and e-democracy such as online petitions and campaigns but importantly also disengagement.

Sociologist Manning (2010) also argues that the conception of political apathy among young people is limited as it overlooks the great variety

in which young people understand and exercise politics: “The discourse of youth apathy assumes a narrow, regulatory, and hegemonic definition of politics” (Manning, 2010, p. 55). This discourse, the author points out, narrows the research approach to studying youth political participation. It also impacts on young people’s identification as political or not, their possibilities of political critical thoughts, and the creation of new or different political initiatives (Manning, 2010).

Allsop and Kisby’s study (2019) similarly draws attention to new political forms of engagement. The authors examined young people’s engagement in British politics, and particularly the election of Jeremy Corbyn as the leader of the Labour Party in 2015. While commentators lamented the lack of youth political participation, the study identified different forms of youth political engagement beyond voting such as digital forms of engagement like social media activism, involvement with grassroots political organizations, trade and students’ union participation and other grassroots actions linked to global movements like the climate change school strikes.

Also taking up the issue of low youth voter turnout in European elections, Hoikkala (2009) reframes the discussion through the notion of exercising citizenship. The author finds that “conventional political institutions of representative democracy do not seem to inspire the youth to take action” (Hoikkala, 2009, p. 14). Instead, young people place more trust in NGOs and prefer to participate in civic activities, activisms, networks, and movements organized by young people themselves (Hoikkala, 2009).

Further challenging common conceptions on youth political participation, Desai (2015) approaches the debate from a cultural studies perspective. She points to their premise on recognized citizenship. In occupied and colonial contexts, however, this condition is complicated. The author coins the term “anti-colonial participatory politics” to account for the politics of refusal and revolutionary violence as central to politics and participation (see also Kasanda 2019). Even in a post-colonial context, such as present-day Colombia and the Latin American region, this might be a relevant consideration since large numbers of peoples and populations

are systematically neglected and excluded, despite having formal citizenship.

Anthropologists, in turn, criticize common biological, psychological, economic, and sociological conceptions of youth due to their attributed nature. That is, youth in these disciplines is defined through processes or aspects external to the subjects, such as the psychological integration of a young person into society, a state of limbo, waiting to reach adult- and full personhood, often associated with becoming an autonomous consumer in the market economy (Blanco, 2021). Instead, anthropologists suggest approaching the concept of youth from the perspective of individual agency, that is, as conscious social actors who participate in the construction and shaping of culture from an early age on (Rohrer, 2013). In the context of political participation, this conception underlines the importance of examining young people’s situated social and political practices and experiences from their own point of view (Bucholtz, 2002). Thus, Feixa et al.’s (2009) anthropological study of four social movements in Barcelona and Lisbon finds that, for young people, physical and virtual spaces of political participation have merged. These “new, new social movements” navigate between previously non-existent or separate spheres and situate themselves in the globally interconnected space of digital platforms. Young people take a leading role in political participation, no longer subordinate to other social actors as these tend to be in more traditional forums. Further elaborating on social movements, Feixa (2021) in fact identifies youth leadership as a key factor in the social uprisings of the second decade of the 21st century. Following the wave of 2019 protests worldwide, he argues that these movements spread faster and stronger due to global connections with other movements and the active role of young people as the architects of online social media, where they build networks based on mutual trust.²

The important interrelation between young people’s activism and their (global) connections comes to the fore in Ancelovici and Guzman-Concha’s (2019) analysis of protest movements in Chile in 2011 and Quebec in 2012. The authors conclude that in both cases social mobilizations were sustained by students’ ample contacts with other social groups, which generated inter-generational and inter-organizational

2 E.g. Juris 2012 on the Occupy movement; Leyva Solano 2002 on the Zapatista movement; Abdalla 2013, 2016 on the Arab Spring.

connections. They also note, however, that the widened protest coalitions radicalized students' objectives, a result of the – realo r perceived – need to maintain and expand participants' interest. In effect, recent research literature on youth participation shows an important shift in the conception of "political" and "participation". Particularly, authors draw attention to new and creative engagement forms beyond voting. These include a wide array of practices; not only local activism and strikes, but also cultural interventions, art installations, and creative performances - activities that previous analyses did not consider, but that research shows to play an – increasingly – more important role in young people's activism. In this context, **we define youth political participation as the dynamics and practices that reflect a concern for well-being and promote actions directed towards societal change through heterogeneous means, whether formal or informal, on scales ranging from local to global and can occur individually or collectively.**

3 Youth participation in Latin America

Latin America is one of the most unequal regions in the world. Since the beginning of the century, regional governments have paid special attention to the relationship between education, employment, and youth, hoping that targeted policies can offer more opportunities for participation and social inclusion (Aparicio-Castillo, 2013). Yet, structural inequalities persist, including socio-economic vulnerability during the transition to adulthood, disparities in access to higher education, and precarious labor conditions (Aparicio-Castillo, 2013). Furthermore, there are few legitimate political and institutional representatives in the region to effectively represent and address the diverse interests and demands of the young population (Rodríguez-Vignoli, 2008).

Echoing the abovementioned discussions, Latin America-focused literature **provides two main conceptualizations** of young people's activities and engagement. **One** considers young people's influence on decision-making processes, local democracy, and public affairs primarily through traditional political participation mechanisms such as voting, involvement in political parties, and political organizing (Alvarado et al., 2012). A **second conceptualization** follows from the expanded notion of political participation mentioned above. Thus, Ruiz (2015) suggests

that "youth today aim at the transformation of meanings, practices, and styles of politics, historically defined by dominant powers and discourses" (p. 532). Youth and student organizations use creative ways to reach their goals, including social mobilizations, roadblocks, artistic and cultural displays in the streets, dances, and concerts. In addition, they rely on social media for greater visibility and communication. Young people's political participation diverges from previous generations in crossing previously "fixed boundaries between culture and politics, individual and organization, subjectivity and collectivity, virtual and real" (Coe and Vandegrift 2015:132). Parties, unions, and the state are no longer the sole or main domains of engagement. "Activism extends beyond the traditional site, the university, to marginalized sectors of urban and rural society, feminist and indigenous politics, sexuality, and cyberspace" (ibid.:132). Moreover, as we discuss below, young people's concept of "democracy" often entails means of engagement to distance themselves from the traditional political system.

In this section, we describe the regional literature on youth political participation following these two definitions, discussing strengths and limitations of each one, and current gaps in knowledge.

3.1 Political participation linked to state institutions and democracy's mechanisms

Traditional or institutional political participation refers to mechanisms such as voting, participation in plebiscites, referendums, political parties, among others. The focus on practices linked to state institutions and constitutionally established mechanisms has analytical and methodological implications. Participation is measured through the percentage of young people voting in elections, the percentage of young people who joined a political party within a specific period or who participated in formal spaces of consultation and decision-making. Thus, Miriam Kriger (2023) analyses the perceptions of young people regarding voting, politics, and politicians. Her 2015 and 2019 surveys of youngsters in public and private schools in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires revealed a differentiated assessment of "politics" and "politicians." While the first was regarded positively, the second lacked credibility among the first-time voters she focused on. In addition, Kriger found that the act of voting itself is valued, yet young people expressed skepticism whether it was an effective

means to bring about serious change. The author therefore concludes that youth differentiate between politics as a forceful and positively conceived of social practice and politicians as negatively charged historical actors.

This aligns with Treviño et al.'s (2019) study on the role of the Chilean education system as a mechanism for socialization on political participation. The authors argue that there is a lack of civic and citizenship education classes, which is a key factor for understanding the low levels of electoral participation of young people in Chile. In addition, after Pinochet's dictatorship democratic institutions restricted participation due to limitations and rules on voting, decision making in the congress and political discussion on media communication. This has built up a generalized discredit of traditional politics, which "generated a separation between the citizens and the ruling elite, building an unrepresentative and low-impact democracy" (Treviño et al., 2019, p.281) and is mostly evidenced in youth's perception of the institutional political sphere as illegitimate.

A similar picture emerges from Pinzón et al.'s (2013) interviews of young political leaders in Bogotá, Colombia. In their analysis, youth lack both awareness of and interest in different political participation mechanisms. To increase political involvement, the authors thus recommend continuing to strengthen and promote the value of participation. They also underscore a positive correlation between higher education and participation in the political sphere or electoral abstention (Pinzón et al., 2013).

Importantly, rather than from an institutional point of view, young people's low political participation in state institutions and through established democratic mechanisms might be better understood from the perspective of youth themselves. After all, research has diagnosed that one challenge to youth political participation is the so-called 'adultcentrism', which characterizes decision-making institutions (Careces et al., 2017). Thus, young people's interventions are often relegated towards subordinate decision-making and/or to limited-impact spheres such as political campaigns, where they collaborate in tasks managed by adult activists. Their actions, proposals, and ideas, therefore, are limited to secondary circuits and debates, thus impeding their influence (Careces et al., 2017). Gordon and Taft (2011) explore this ageism and youth's reactions. They find that young people explicitly oppose organizations that do not recognize

ageism as a "legitimate oppression that works in concert with other systems of oppression" (p. 1521). Youth work towards political action that values peer-based and youth-led political organizations, and "an approach to political socialization that centres the already significant knowledge and skills of youth" (Gordon and Taft, 2011, p. 1521).

Authors exploring young people's traditional political participation increasingly also pay attention to the role of digital media and its potential influence on democratic development. As digital platforms are understood as a common space, in which citizens can access new and different information (Bajoghli, 2023), researchers expect that digital media will positively impact on participation, particularly for young people. Nevertheless, this is neither guaranteed nor evenly spread in Latin America. Thus far, scholars have found no clear or significant correlation between Internet use and participation in traditional politics in Latin America (Wagner, Gray, Gainous, 2017).

Bimber and Copeland (2013, in Wagner, Gray, and Gainous, 2017), for example, argue that academics tend to assume a stable relationship between traditional political participation and the use of social media over time. Yet, they found several cases to the contrary. While the overall use of digital media tools remains relatively constant over time, the type of communication and information to which individuals are exposed through digital media can vary significantly depending on the temporal and political events. This, in turn, affects their perception of democracy.

Matassi and Boczkowski (2020) also present findings on the relationship of digital media and the impact on political processes and political attitudes. Navia and Ulriksen-Lira's study (2017, in Matassi and Boczkowski, 2020) suggests that Chile's 2011 and 2013 electoral participation was affected by media and social network use. They conclude, however, that digital media did not change people's decision to vote, it only reinforced their predispositions. Matassi and Boczkowski (2020) connect these findings with their research on social networks' "bubbles", i.e. exposure to selective political information. The authors conclude that "both pro-government and opposition users interact with like-minded peers in separate information bubbles, sharing different posts and spreading divergent political frames" (pp. 498-499).

Some states in Latin America have created institutional frameworks seeking to channel young people's political participation. Among these are social policies requiring a differentiated approach to youth affairs and national and local dependencies that allow youth interlocutors to interact with the State (Hünemann & Eckholt, 1998). Historical examples in the region include Chile and Uruguay, two of the first countries to establish national youth departments within their governmental structure. The Chilean program "ProJoven" stands out in Latin America for being a reference in its capacity to articulate and coordinate intersectoral policies, while the Uruguayan National Youth Institute, founded in 1993, was among the first programs in the region recognized for its efficiency in managing and directing resources towards young people and towards applied youth research before the beginning of the century (Hünemann & Eckholt, 1998).

Yet, according to Vommaro (2015), these institutions are not solely the product of the will of the state. In most cases, these resulted from youth and students' social mobilizations demanding to be included national development plans and policies to reduce the social inequities affecting the young. Because of the 2011 student movement, Chile experienced a resurgence of its youth policies, which led to the creation of the National Coordinator of Secondary Students (CONES) and the Confederation of Chilean Students (CONFECH), both crucial platforms for the development of Chilean youth public policy (Aguilera, 2012). Similar processes happened in Brazil. Thanks to the Free Pass Movement (Movimento Passe Livre) - which demanded students' exemption from urban transport fares - the Brazilian government has felt the need to prioritize young people in its political agenda, especially regarding segregated and racialized youth (Braga, 2013). In Mexico, following the #YoSoy132 trend - one of the most media-covered youth protests against the Peña Nieto government - a political movement were created that focused on educational issues and criticized the adult-centric Mexican state, and directly impacting as a political party (Vommaro, 2015).

Colombia's youth policies, characterized by three distinct moments, illustrate how much has changed in the last three decades. In the 1990s, cities like Medellín, Cali, and Manizales created municipal youth offices called "Youth Houses", government provided spaces where young people can share with others and make use of their free time (Muñoz, 2003). Legislation at the end of the 1990s and beginning of the 2000s (Law 375 of 1997, Statutory Law 1622 of 2013, and Statutory Law 1885 of 2018), in turn, stipulated that to guarantee young people's rights public institutions had to include a youth perspective into all their social planning (Otálvaro, 2022). Finally, social mobilizations led by young actors in 2011, 2019, and 2021 pressured the national government to provide more tangible tools and grant them political spaces for decision-making (Álvarez, 2021).³

The Presidential Advisory Office for Youth, "Colombia Joven," is responsible for advising national and territorial entities in the design, implementation, execution, monitoring, evaluation, and coordination of public youth policies in the country (Colombia Joven, 2023). Among its main achievements are: a) the CONPES⁴ 4040 regulation increasing public investment aimed at youth across sectors in Colombia; b) the National Youth System (Sistema Nacional de Juventud), which consolidated Youth Participation Platforms at the municipal and departmental levels; c) the election of Municipal Youth Councils (Consejos Municipales de Juventud), an autonomous mechanism elected by popular vote for the consultation, participation, surveillance, and control of the State; and d) the Pacts for Youth (Pactos por la Juventud), dialogues to mediate mobilization processes and social protest between the State and youth (Otálvaro, 2022). These initiatives expand across the national territory and have positively impacted some youth movements. At the same time, however, some parts of Colombia's youth do not identify with, or are attached to traditional forms of participation. These seek alternative ways to intervene in politics and are often grounded in convictions that do not align with, or outrightly reject practices commonly associated with institutionalism.⁵

3 There is a detailed inventory of policies to promote youth's formal participation in Colombia in the literature review *Urban Governance: From Global Concepts to Regional Realities*.

4 Consejo Nacional de Política Económica y Social, National Advisory Group for Political Economy and the Social, is the highest national planning authority

5 The effects of the Presidential Advisory Office for Youth are further developed in the literature

3.2 Non-traditional youth political participation

Recent research about youth and politics in Latin America acknowledges the new and alternative forms of political participation mentioned above. Studies increasingly focus on young people's less conventional or institutionalized forms of political engagement (Gordon and Taft, 2011; Silva and de Castro, 2014). Here political participation is understood multidimensionally, as encompassing collective and individual actions with different scopes, including school and family (e.g. Vommaro 2015). This body of research points out that the shift of activities towards new spheres also transforms decision-making processes and consequently questions the effectiveness of classical mechanisms of political participation.

Research shows that often, young people's concept of "democracy" has nothing to do with the traditional political system. Ecuadorian youth, for example, referred to ideals such as self-rule, rights, and equality when asked what democracy meant to them (Gillman, 2018). Political institutions were not considered to contribute to these ideals. Moreover, the youth surveyed described politics as exclusionary and part of a repressive hierarchical system. In line with this, young people's political activities were directed towards cultivating more egalitarian social relations and inclusive spaces for debate (Gillman, 2018, p.430). The author concludes: "Citizens may validly conceive of democracy as a social process occurring beyond the political system; democratization is and must be more than the implementation and fortification of formal institutions. At the same time, however, "social ideals without some organizational infrastructure to aggregate citizen actions and connect them to politics 'up there' constitute an unsatisfactory version of democracy (...) by young Ecuadorians' own frustrated accounts" (Gillman, 2018, p.446).

Alternative forms of participation emerge and spread in the Latin American context, marked by poverty, social inequality, and unemployment or precarious employment (Alvarado et al., 2012). Hence, social issues are an important motivation for young people to become politically active. Silva and de Castro (2014), for example, argue that "the struggle against poverty and social misery are priorities in young people's activism" (p. 197). Political activists in the Brazilian favela

with whom they worked were "mobilized and organized around diverse issues—racial, ecological, gender, cultural, and especially youthhood" (Silva and de Castro, 2014, p. 190). They mostly engaged in artistic performances – hip-hop, street art, and graffiti – in public spaces, to express their discontent with processes on the neighbourhood- or city-level.

In line with this, Acevedo-Tarazona and Correa-Lugos (2021) argue that young people change traditional forms of participation by addressing specific issues, working reactively and proposing concrete solutions. Activists produce "mobilizing chain reactions in the street and, especially, in social networks to stop governmental proposals considered harmful to the welfare of the population and the common good" (p. 13. Own translation). According to Acevedo (2021), technology has been a driving force behind various social mobilizations, with young actors at the forefront, striving to reclaim their territories and modify the social and political practices they inhabit. Consequently, it has become easier to share political culture ideals assumed from new values, investments, and interests of the generation (Coe et al., 2015).

Fabias et al. (2010) found that new forms of youth political participation are characterized by their horizontality. This refers to an organization without hierarchies, where all members of a collective or organization can participate equitably in decision-making. This principle emerges as a response to traditional forms of participation, which are organized vertically, with member hierarchy, and decision-making occurring at the top levels.

According to Silva and de Castro (2014), alongside horizontality, young people particularly value more autonomous and democratic groups that oppose militant practices, which reproduce the institutionalized logics of political action. This is substantiated by Treviño et al. (2019) who explore Chilean youth's political participation. The authors found that young people felt excluded from the institutional political sphere, but "have been active promoters of political participation in informal associations. "Chilean youth exhibit higher levels of participation than adults in cultural activities such as sports clubs, artistic groups and voluntary organizations, which are self-

understood as political action” (Treviño et al. 2019, p. 281).

Contemporary youth activism further distinguishes itself through its principle of respect for difference, both in organizing and regarding activities (Borda, 2020). There is also an emphasis on direct action, especially in everyday contexts and spaces where young people live. Finally, self-management has become an alternative to the economic dependency many groups find themselves in. That is, to finance the movement and its activities, young people rely on contributions from community networks and participants in their collectives or organizations. Sometimes, as Feixa (2021) mentions, the networks that participants of the organizations establish function to circulate more than financial contributions, as they also help to communicate, to organize, share purposes, call for more people or to share information. These types of practices and dynamics of the alternative forms of youth participation are based on a strong relation between online and offline activities (Ramirez, 2016), which presents as an emergent aspect for analysis on the literature.

Wagner, Gray, and Gainous (2017) suggest that social media supports civic activities by offering detailed information and collective dialogue. Valenzuela et al. (2016) note a great academic interest in social networks’ influence on participatory processes and collective decision-making in Latin America. Scherman et al (2022), for example, highlight the political importance of WhatsApp messages during the social protests in Chile and Colombia in 2019. Their analysis reveals a correlation between the frequency of WhatsApp usage and both polarization and political mobilization due to the specific traits of WhatsApp as a social platform that enables strong interactions and the construction of firm ties, in contrast to other platforms such as Facebook, where users are exposed to diverse information and build weaker ties. Nevertheless, there are nuances, with more pronounced effects observed in specific demographic segments and variations in the type of polarization across countries. In Colombia, traditional media seemed to mobilize without polarizing, while in Chile, radio news, particularly, appeared to serve as both a demobilizing and polarizing influence (Scherman et al., 2022).

After examining 17 Latin American countries, Valenzuela et al. (2016, p.696) found that among the politically active population, those who “use social media for political purposes are significantly more likely to protest than those

who do not”. Their research also revealed that social media might contribute to (somewhat) reducing participatory inequalities: Digital platforms were used as alternative channels to establish dialogue while also raising their voices to influence the public debate. These social media conversations were a new form of using the platforms, which they perceived as sources of information and where they could join groups based on common interests (Valenzuela et al., 2016). In this sense, continuous participation in these spaces helped build trust among users, a central aspect for alternative youth participation (Aguilar-Forero, 2020).

According to Ramirez et al. (2015), in Colombia and Brazil in 2011, youth organizing efforts were consolidated to confront increasingly pronounced social injustices and decisions made by some public officials. These groups utilized social networks to achieve their goals. Specifically, social networks and the internet were used to conduct evaluation processes, organize activities, and produce calls to action. For example, in the case of the National Student Broad Assembly (MANE) in Colombia, the use of social media facilitated more universities and student organizations to join the student strike. It also favored the formation of movements with a networked and horizontal structure due to constant communication among members. Additionally, in a Latin American context where the struggles of social movements tend to be stigmatized, communication through social networks became a strategy to clarify, visualize, and explain aspects related to the social movement, its struggles, and its ways of operating in public space. Moreover, it was a way to position itself in the public scene, gaining legitimacy (Ramirez et al., 2015).

In Brazil, social networks were important to consolidate and to give visibility to Occupy Sampa, part of the worldwide Occupy Movement. Occupy Sampa gathered around 600 young people who protested the country’s unequal way of life, an economic system they opposed and for a democracy in which they felt represented (Ramirez, 2016). At the same time, they connected with people from other countries who were also mobilizing against measures taken by some governments to address the 2008 crisis. Therefore, Ramirez et al. (2015) conclude that social networks enable identification with larger causes and struggles, fostering global sympathy with other processes while strengthening local engagement.

MANE and Occupy Sampa illustrate a moment of youth leadership significantly impacting political debates and decision-making. Technology and social media played a central role in driving and developing these movements. This was evident in the Colombian call for the Continental March for Education (Marcha Continental por la Educación), which urged Latin American countries to mobilize on November 24 of 2011. The call was attended by the Chilean student movement Confech and Occupy Sampa. Ramirez (2016) thus describes Latin American youth movements and the role of technology as characterized by 1) large and intensive use of digital platforms that allow them to organize locally and regionally; 2) reaffirmation as non-affiliated with political parties, that is, non-partisan, not "anti-party" or "apolitical"; 3) internal structuring independent of individual leaders, consensus-based and decentralized decision-making processes; and 4) organization through broad local university assemblies, operational committees, a national body of spokespersons, and academic, human rights, and communications commissions.

Online and offline practices are intricately connected within social youth movements. The internet facilitates reaching out to contacts, helping offline mobilization (Harlow 2012; Valenzuela et al., 2012). The Internet has become a space for youth to express aspirations, leading to participation grounded in alternative framings of the world to be addressed through politics (Galindo Ramírez 2012; Harlow 2012; Vandegrift 2015). Youth throughout Latin America use technology to expand the public sphere and construct new citizenship practices. These include diverse forms of involvement in public debates, non-traditional communities, and activities to address shared problems. Activist strategies strongly embedded in digital technologies have become a way to subvert the antidemocratic tendencies found in traditional political and communication institutions (Cogo and Barsi Lopes, 2011).

Educational institutions and supranational organizations also promote online initiatives with the hope to "undesirable" youth behaviors, such as apathy toward electoral politics and engaging in delinquency (Blasco and Hansen, 2006). A richer vein of inquiry, however, stems from the ways young people themselves

creatively deploy online technologies that coincide with the "cultural turn" and other transitions in political action" (ibid. 140). This points to the low effectiveness of technology when imposed in a top-down manner. Thus, technology appears useful when used organically from the bottom up by young people themselves.

Digital communication technologies (often referred to as ICTs, or Internet communication technologies) constitute a rapidly shifting online media ecosystem in which youth build peer cultures (Martín-Barbero, 2002). Unlike often-leveled accusations of "slacktivism" (see Christenson 2011), Spanish-language scholarship frequently cites the "digital optimists". Martín-Barbero (2002) and Livingstone (2008) thus emphasize the digital opportunities for community engagement, self-expression, new socialites, and emergent literacy skills. This connects with the finding that young people prefer youth-led organizations, where new socialites could shape young people's identities towards emergent active and alternative participation (Treviño et al., 2019). In effect, questions about the role of online and mobile platforms in citizen participation, have shifted from whether social media foster protests (e.g., Gladwell 2010 vs. Howard et al., 2011) to "how and under what conditions" they do (Valenzuela 2013, 921) (:139-140).

2.2.1. The limits: technological barriers

Social inequalities affecting offline youth political participation are reflected in the virtual world (Pedrozo, 2013). Valenzuela (2016) found that within the 17 Latin American countries that participated in the LAPOP's 2012 study, 65.1% of respondents had never used the Internet, and only 11% had read or shared political information on Twitter, Facebook, or other social media platforms in the past year. This underlines that youngsters in Latin America face significant technological obstacles. Technological barriers can be measured by access gaps, i.e. who has access and who does not; usage gaps, who has access but does not utilize it; and quality of usage gaps, the cause of differences in participation between those with access and actual users (Peña-Gil et al., 2017). That is, technological barriers can be defined as social, infrastructural, platform design, or institutional limitations, which actively or passively prevent a young

6 The countries included in the survey were: Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panamá, Paraguay, Perú,

Uruguay, and Venezuela. Details about the study can be found in: <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/regional-reports.php>

person from being a politically active internet user and inhibit their ability to create networks and autonomously influence their communities of interest.

The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically highlighted and amplified technological inequalities (Aguilar, 2020). During confinement in Colombia, only 4% of municipalities had good connectivity, and only 37% of high school students could access the Internet from their homes in 2018. This was compounded by overcrowding in many households, which limited individual, prolonged, and private use of electronic devices. Lack of access to basic public services such as water and electricity made internet connectivity a secondary concern. Rural youth was one of the population groups most affected by these inequalities. Even before the pandemic, the rural-urban digital access gap for youth was significant (Dos Santos, 2009); in 2020, only 9% of youth in rural areas had access to a computer (de Zubiría, 2020).

It is therefore important to reduce technological barriers, especially for adolescents and young people. Over the last decade, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, and Honduras have joined efforts to address this issue (Cristancho et al., 2008). The continuation of these efforts is vital to benefit from the potential advantages of technology use and appropriation, not only as a space of interaction but also as an engine of transformation (Cristancho et al., 2008).

4 Local Context: Colombia

Colombia's youth became politically active at the end of the 1960s, when student movements protested the failures of modernity (Reguillo, 2003). In the light of increasing structural violence and social inequality students called for a radical transformation of society. Today, Colombian youth movements continue to demand action to reverse long-standing structural inequalities in the country; they also aspire to debunk the stigmatization of young people as uninterested in politics (Borda, 2020).

Young peoples' modes of participation and degree of influence are quite different on the national or local level. On the local level, Pinzon (2020) found that participation in the youth councils in Bogotá benefited young people's political careers. It gave them access to positions with greater responsibility, allowed them to put issues affecting their communities on the public agenda, and to propose possible solutions.

Nevertheless, Gutiérrez and Giraldo (2021) argue that it remains the case that "the capacity for political influence is determined by proximity to the centre of power in decision-making"(p.20). In addition, institutional spaces continue to be platforms for dialogue rather than decision-making. Even if young people get closer to centres of power, political effectiveness is a different discussion.

Daisy Aparicio, a Colombian student leader and peace counselor, similarly explains that political participation should be understood as an intervention or attempt to influence specific issues that affect young people, other social groups, or the country at large. Political participation is not only a strategy to be heard or express an opinion, but a project to foster different educational and healthcare systems, and new ways of living, which contribute to dignified living conditions for all (Aparicio, 2016).

Moreover, youth's participation in Colombia also connects with the new and alternative forms of political participation elsewhere. Rueda (2013) argues that "[Young people] establish strategic frameworks of agency aimed at building citizenship through collective action, alliances, and agreements with other social actors with whom they establish common purposes" (p. 15. Own translation). The author describes youth collectives and their activism as grounded in the principles of self-organization and self-determination, the construction of bonds based on political proximity, and the articulation of creative and horizontal actions (Rueda, 2013). These actions include the "invention of language and language games, ironies and metaphors, the creation of other ways of saying that they struggle, (such as) slogans, graffiti, plays, performances, festivals, meetings, blogs, magazines, virtual platforms, memes etc., in order not to let themselves be trapped by the homogenization of meaning" (Rueda, 2013, p. 15. Own translation).

Building on this notion of youth participation, Alvarado et al. (2012) analyze the relationships between youth, politics, and culture in Colombia. The authors affirm that the ways in which youth engage in political action are based on motivations driven by the desire for a renewed future. The authors examine seven youth organizations that engage in collective action and political participation, consider themselves counterhegemonic, create alternative dynamics and actions, and come from diverse spaces of creation and creativity, such as art, academia,

dissident political parties, digital social media, or minority social movements. Their analysis identifies four ways these youth-led organizations create forms of resistance and opposition to violence and inequality that affect young people in Colombia. 1) Explicit opposition to patriarchal and military logics in day-to-day life, expressed through rejection of their home and through their bodies, languages, and consumption practices; 2) Protection of the territory, that is, preservation, care for and expansion of life in all its dimensions by opposing exploitative dynamics that subjugate minority groups in remote areas of the country; 3) Autonomy as a main premise of political participation and understood as “the possibility to critique, transform and, effectively produce transformations in a shared reality” (Alvarado et al., 2012. P. 89. Own translation); and 4) Communication to inform and build new and alternative understandings of reality. This communication takes the form of ‘conterinforming’ in spaces of dissent, questioning and confronting manipulated information, expanding information and embracing plural opinions in nation-building, as well as denouncing injustices and developing a sensible opinion.

Uribe-Zapata (2019) in turn analyzes two alternative education-oriented organizations in Medellin - Exploratorio and Platehodro, spaces where young people lead non-school practices with a strong use of technology. The institutions aim at reconfiguring common conceptions of digital culture and participation and generating new understanding of citizenship. The author finds that the new youth practices affect urban, institutional, epistemic, political, and technological processes. Regarding the urban dimension, new citizen practices claim the right to the city and argue that there are other ways of making it, as evidenced in the growing number of urban gardens, the widespread use of bicycles for mobility, or the reappropriation of abandoned places by neighborhood residents. On the institutional dimension, the two spaces helped to reaffirm the crisis of the institutional places because, in contrast to Exploratorio and Platehodro, formal institutions as viewed as limiting the creation of new ideas, are inflexible, restrictive, and outdated (Uribe-Zapata, 2019). In terms of the epistemic dimension, the author found that both spaces were conceived as producers of knowledge by different young people with different expertise, not only academic but what he calls “neighborhood science” [ciencia de barrio] (Ibid. p.9. own translation). This connects with the political

dimension, which he understands as a politics of being and creating together, where there is time and space to experiment with multiple ways of inhabiting possible worlds. Finally, the four dimensions merge and take form in the technological dimension. New practices and uses of technology oppose the homogenization that digital culture develops around the world by, for example, a member of one collective who creates art that combines digital designs and later paints it with oils; or another group that learned how to program codes which can solve local issues.

Student protests in the last decade have clearly departed from Marxist conceptions of worker mobilization (Acevedo-Tarazona and Correa-Lugos, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2019). They are based on psychosocial dimensions of individuals and youth, such as politics, ideology and culture, identities and gender (Berrío 2001, in Acevedo-Tarazona & Correa-Lugos, 2021). While they seek political-structural changes, they gain support through collective cultural, recreational and pedagogical actions that invite citizens to join initiatives. In addition, digital technology has played a growing role in youth protests (Acevedo-Tarazona & Correa-Lugos 2021). Students use Facebook and Twitter to facilitate meetings and organize events. Social media allows famous people to join in and support the cause; it also helps to counter biased media reports. According to La Rosa (2016), social networks were catalysts of recent mobilizations, as YouTube allowed continuous updates testimonies on events, which kept them going. Moreover, appealing to emotions, social media contributed to the construction of collective imagery and activists’ sense of belonging (Gerbaudo, 2012). This was even more important since activists rejected the politicization of protests. Most young people emphasized that they were not connected to any political or subversive group, probably due to Colombia’s long history of civil war. Thus, while the students were concerned about the country’s situation, they did not get involved in political discussions. Instead, they aspired to pragmatic solutions, demanding common and often minimalist objectives of social change, such as improvements in the quality of life or the common good (Acevedo-Tarazona & Correa-Lugos, 2021).

Aguilar-Forero (2020; 2021;2022) analyses the 2019-2020 and 2021 protests in Colombia, which were characterized by the leading role of young people. Referring to the first cycle of protest (2019-2020), Aguilar-Forero (2020) affirms the national protest (Paro Nacional) focused its

strength on youth collective action which was characterized by four pillars that work together and flow within youth's collective action: communication, trust, collaboration, and the construction of the common. The author frames the operation of these pillars based on the drumming sessions (batucadas) that took place during the mobilizations. For example, the construction of the common articulates with the communication between the diverse groups that participate in the mobilizations, because the common was defined by the combination of singularities in the present through communication, be it digitally or in the streets, where narratives were expressed through the body, through speech or through art. Similarly, collaboration and trust were built by constructing bonds and affective networks (Aguilar-Forero, 2020). This was evidenced when the indigenous guard (Guardia Indígena) traveled to Bogotá to support mobilizations and protect protesters by creating human barriers to prevent aggressions by and against young people on the front line.

In this context, Aguilar-Forero (2021) retrospectively analyses the novel ways of organization that allowed the 2019-2020 protest, highlighting the important role digital platforms played in allowing collective action in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. He affirms that "communication mediated by digital technologies is a characteristic feature of this type of action, as many youth collectives have used the internet and digital social networks to coordinate actions, bring attention to issues silenced by major media, exert social pressure, circulate and produce critical or counter-informative content, among other forms of cyberactivism" (Aguilar-Forero, 2021, p. 6. Own translation). Likewise, digital participation forms such as "twitterathons" (twitteratones), live streaming on social networks, or video blogs posted on YouTube allowed other youth groups who typically do not participate in social mobilizations to engage, as was the case with medical students from various universities (Aguilar-Forero, 2021).

Finally, Aguilar-Forero (2022) analyses the 2021 social mobilizations of 2021 through the relationship between memory and the violence suffered by the protesters in previous mobilizations. The author argues that the state repression and the exacerbated inequality caused by the policies decreed withing the Covid-19 pandemic were the driving forces behind the social outbreak, motivated by "concentrated energies of discontent and indignation" (Aguilar-

Forero, 2022. P.18. Own translation). In particular, young people sought to protest against "the lack of opportunities, job precariousness, exclusion, the limitation of their rights (to education, health, locomotion, protest), physical elimination, and the media stigmatization that portrays them as delinquents or a danger to society" (Ibid. p. 18. Own translation). Accordingly, "young people took the streets, established points of concentration and resistance, created solidarity networks through self-management and obtaining donations, fostered popular assemblies from which they exchanged knowledge and built their own sets of demands" (Ibid. p.9. Own translation).

5 Conclusion: main contributions, gaps, and possible future research

The reviewed literature reflects the new direction of studies on youth participation. Studies have shifted away from the assumption of a lack of youth participation to embrace the wide range of new perspectives on what is understood as political participation. This poses challenges when defining what qualifies as political participation and what does not, as the very diversity that characterizes it makes it difficult to define. Nevertheless, research shows that young people are seeking new spaces and forms to engage in the political spectrum of society, including organizations characterized by their horizontality, political non-partisanship, self-organization, flexibility, and extensive use of digital platforms. Simultaneously, their modes of action are guided by autonomous actions, top-down decision-making, and a focus on addressing issues through direct action in the short term and with a local impact.

A growing body of evidence now approaches youth participation not only from institutional or adult-centric perspectives but also from the point of view of young people. Young people's motivations for participation are different from those of other social groups since they are affected by their identity as young people. Among these motivations are poverty, education, unemployment, inequality, the environment, and violence in the Colombian context. However, it is necessary to look deeper into the differentiated way in which these issues affect young people, as the literature does not consider the role of age, gender, ethnicity, race, or geographical location to understand how this may be influencing their participation or shaping the modes of

participation that are already being developed. Thus, an intersectional perspective is necessary in understanding the youth population, as within the identity of being young, there are also heterogeneities that determine them beyond the conception of youth.

Regarding geographical location, in the context of Colombian youth participation, it is necessary to consider the gaps and inequalities between the center and periphery of the country. This is identified insofar as the literature focuses its analyses on political manifestations and participation in the country's main cities (Medellín and Bogotá), excluding other types of smaller-scale organizations that lack national visibility but can still provide new perspectives on participation.

Simultaneously, in this new analytical framework, technology becomes highly relevant as it is presented as a tool highly used by young people for their participation. Among the identified uses are creating communities, digital interfaces as a public space for discussion and communication, cyberactivism, broader coverage of political issues that allow a greater call for action, and the building of networks. The latter stands out as an aspect to be highlighted within the uses of technology due to its potential to create interconnections between movements and allow the circulation of information, testimonies, objectives, and practical experiences. However, the reviewed literature does not delve into the tensions, competitions, and power dynamics that may occur within these networks. It also does not provide an in-depth understanding of how networks could operate in rural or segregated contexts, the different types of networks that may emerge according to the type of organization that forms them, nor the processes involved in constructing such networks.

Similarly, although the literature emphasizes the benefits of technology in youth participation, it does not consider how it can be a barrier to participation since socioeconomic inequalities extend to access to technology, especially in countries with high inequality rates, such as Colombia. For example, it is essential to explore how participation varies based on different social classes and their access to technological devices, considering the internet's role in staying informed and engaging in movement actuality. Additionally, aspects like digital literacy, that is, "disparities in terms of skills and sociocultural practices" (Lombana, 2018, p.21. Own translation), may influence how one participates

politically. Even variations in technology usage, such as using it to improve socioeconomic status or stay informed, could also affect forms of participation that should be considered in the literature. The use of technology for political participation in violence-ridden contexts has also yet to be studied. Open communication, political dissent, and grassroots organizing are risky activities for young people in urban contexts controlled by non-state armed groups.

Lastly, more research is needed to identify the negative aspects of technology in youth political participation. For instance, exploring how subversive, far-right, or hate groups use these tools to advance their agendas.

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