Youth Digi-Citizens

DEMOCRATIC YOUTH FORUM: DEVELOPING DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP AND YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

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IMPORTANCE OF DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP AND YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

- **Digital Citizenship:** Refers to the responsible use of digital tools (internet, social media, ICTs) to engage in civic life. It's critical in the context of youth, who are increasingly relying on digital means for communication, activism, and participation in society.

- **Youth Civic Engagement:** Civic engagement refers to how young people get involved in societal and political issues, advocate for change, and participate in democracy. The digital dimension allows youth to amplify their voices, reach broader audiences, and engage directly with policymakers.

- Highlight the interconnectedness of digital tools and civic engagement, stating that modern civic participation is increasingly dependent on the effective and responsible use of digital tools.

OVERVIEW OF THE 4-DAY DEMOCRATIC YOUTH FORUM

Day 1: Introduction to Digital Citizenship

- Focus on defining and exploring digital citizenship.
- Interactive sessions to understand how participants currently engage digitally.

Day 2: Civic Engagement Through Social Media

- Practical workshops on using social media for social and political issues.
- Examples and discussions on how digital activism has influenced real-world change.

Day 3: Digital Literacy and Civic Responsibility

- Discussions around critical digital literacy, misinformation, and responsible behavior online.
- Ethical concerns such as online privacy, cyberbullying, and respectful digital dialogue.

Day 4: Bridging Digital and Civic Spaces

- Connecting digital actions with real-life civic participation.
- Focus on sustained engagement and youth involvement in policy-making.

EVENT OBJECTIVES

1. **Encourage Youth Civic Engagement via Digital Platforms**

- The first objective focuses on fostering active participation of young people in civic matters through digital means. Digital platforms, especially social media, have become crucial tools for political engagement, activism, and community organization.
- By encouraging youth to engage civically online, this objective aims to:
- Increase their awareness of political and social issues.
- Provide a modernized platform for their voices to be heard and their ideas to gain visibility.
- Equip them with the skills to use digital spaces for constructive dialogue and change-making.
- The underlying idea is that by using digital tools, youth can overcome barriers like geographical location, limited resources, or lack of access to traditional civic spaces, allowing for greater inclusivity in democratic processes.

2. Promote Digital Citizenship Education

- This objective highlights the need for education around digital citizenship, which goes beyond merely using digital tools but also understanding the responsibilities that come with being a digital citizen.
- Digital citizenship encompasses several elements:
- **Digital literacy:** Teaching young people how to evaluate online information critically, avoid misinformation, and recognize biases.
- **Ethical online behavior:** Promoting respectful communication, digital etiquette, and responsible online conduct, which is essential to prevent cyberbullying and online harassment.
- **Awareness of digital rights and security:** Educating participants on privacy, data protection, and their rights as digital citizens.
- The goal is to ensure that youth not only participate digitally but do so in a manner that is ethical, informed, and responsible, which will, in turn, create more thoughtful and respectful online civic engagement.

3. Explore Tools and Measures for Online Civic Participation

- This objective focuses on the practical application of civic engagement through digital tools. The exploration of these tools and measures involves:
- Providing participants with hands-on knowledge of existing digital tools such as social media platforms, petition websites, online polling systems, and advocacy networks.
- Discussing how these tools can be used to mobilize people, raise awareness, and even influence policy-making.
- Exploring ways to innovate or create new spaces where young people can participate in decision-making processes digitally.
- This goal also emphasizes the need for youth to be aware of how these tools are used not just for expressing opinions but also for taking collective action. The exploration of digital tools should prepare participants to use these platforms effectively for long-term engagement.

WHAT IS DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP?

Definition of Digital Citizenship:

- Digital Citizenship refers to the responsible use of technology and digital platforms by individuals to engage in society, politics, and government. It encompasses the knowledge, skills, and behaviors required to navigate the digital world responsibly, ethically, and safely.
- Key elements include:
  - Digital literacy (understanding digital tools, media, and platforms),
  - Online safety and privacy (protection of personal information),
  - Digital rights and responsibilities (knowing one’s rights online and respecting others' rights),
  - Civic engagement (using technology to participate in democratic processes, advocate for social issues, and foster community connections).

Importance in the 21st Century:

- As we live in an increasingly digitized world, being a digital citizen is crucial for functioning effectively in modern society. Nearly every aspect of life—communication, education, work, and civic engagement—is influenced by digital technology.
- Globalization: Digital technologies connect individuals and communities across the world, making it vital for citizens to understand global issues and work collaboratively online.
- Information Age: With the vast amount of information accessible online, understanding how to critically evaluate content, detect misinformation, and engage in meaningful dialogue is crucial for democratic participation.
- Economic and Social Development: Digital skills are essential in the job market, social integration, and in bridging the digital divide between different groups of society.
- Sustainability: Digital citizenship encourages the use of technology to promote sustainable development and positive change in society.

Relevance to Young People

- **Youth as Digital Natives:** Young people are often referred to as "digital natives," having grown up with technology. Their familiarity with digital tools offers great potential to influence change, communicate ideas, and participate in society.
- **Empowerment:** Digital citizenship provides youth with opportunities to engage in social movements, access information, and make their voices heard in ways that were previously difficult or impossible. They can lead movements for social justice, climate action, and other global causes.
- **Education and Social Participation:** With education increasingly moving online, young people must learn to use digital platforms responsibly, balancing freedom of expression with respect for others.
- **Social Media Impact:** Social media gives youth the power to raise awareness, mobilize others, and create social change. Digital citizenship helps them use these platforms effectively to contribute positively to society.
- **Democratic Participation:** Youth can use digital spaces to participate in local and global politics, share their opinions, and influence policies. This helps them develop as active citizens who contribute to democratic processes.

Youth Civic Engagement

Definition of Civic Engagement

Civic Engagement refers to the ways in which individuals actively participate in the public life of their community, aiming to improve conditions for others or help shape the future of their society. It encompasses activities such as voting, volunteering, participating in community service, engaging in public discussions, and advocating for social or political change.

- **Key Elements:**
  - Involvement in public life (community issues, governance, social services)
  - Both individual and collective actions
  - Focused on creating positive societal change or influencing public policies

The Role of Young People in Society

- Young people play a critical role in civic engagement as they bring fresh perspectives, innovative ideas, and energy to social and political issues. They are often the driving force behind movements for social change, from climate action to equality and inclusion.
- Youth have historically been at the forefront of progressive social movements, and their participation ensures that decisions reflect the interests and needs of future generations.
- In the digital age, young people are also digital natives, meaning they are naturally adept at using social media and online platforms to engage in civic life and mobilize others, making their role in modern civic engagement increasingly influential.
- Empowering youth to participate in civic life can help them develop a sense of responsibility, belonging, and ownership over their communities and nations, and fosters a culture of active citizenship.

Examples of Youth Engagement in Civic Life

- **Fridays for Future (Climate Action):** A global youth-led movement initiated by Greta Thunberg to address climate change. This movement demonstrated the power of young people to mobilize millions worldwide using social media, calling on governments and policymakers to take action against environmental degradation.
- **#MeToo Movement:** Although not exclusively youth-driven, young people have played a significant role in amplifying the #MeToo movement, addressing sexual harassment and gender inequality. It shows how social media can be a platform for youth advocacy on sensitive and deeply-rooted societal issues.
- **Youth Parliaments and Councils:** Many countries have established youth parliaments and councils that allow young people to engage directly with the political process. For example, the European Youth Parliament and National Youth Councils across Europe provide structured forums for youth to discuss key policy issues and make recommendations to policymakers.
- **Digital Activism and Petitions:** Platforms like Change.org have allowed young people to lead digital petition campaigns on topics ranging from educational reform to human rights. These platforms enable youth to organize and mobilize supporters on issues of importance, leveraging technology to drive social change.

THE POWER OF SOCIAL MEDIA

How Social Media Has Transformed Civic Engagement

1. Amplification of Voices

Social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook allow young people to express their opinions and share their messages with large audiences, including decision-makers, without traditional gatekeepers such as mainstream media or institutions. This has democratized the ability to participate in civic discussions and movements.

- Speed and Reach: Ideas can go viral quickly, spreading across communities, regions, and even countries in a matter of hours. Social media can mobilize thousands of people for protests or campaigns in a short amount of time.
- Low Barriers to Participation: Social media makes participation in civic activities more accessible. You don't need to physically attend protests or have formal affiliations; a retweet, like, or hashtag use can signal support, initiate dialogue, or provide resources for movements.
- Building Communities: Social media fosters the creation of online communities where like-minded individuals can collaborate, organize, and strategize around shared values and causes, empowering marginalized voices.

2. Personal Narratives and Storytelling

Social media allows individuals to share personal stories and experiences that can inspire empathy and build solidarity among participants. This emotional connection is key in mobilizing others and growing movements. Personal stories, often amplified by hashtags, can shift public opinion and policy.

- Example: Survivors of sexual harassment and assault sharing their personal stories through the #MeToo movement empowered millions of people worldwide to speak out, leading to widespread awareness, legislative reforms, and increased accountability for abusers.

CASE STUDIES OF YOUTH MOVEMENTS DRIVEN BY SOCIAL MEDIA

Fridays for Future (FFF)

- Background: Launched by Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg in 2018, Fridays for Future began as a solo protest outside the Swedish Parliament but quickly spread globally through social media.
- Social Media's Role: Thunberg's actions gained widespread attention when she shared them on Twitter and Instagram, where other young activists picked up the #FridaysForFuture hashtag. Instagram, in particular, played a significant role, where young people from all over the world posted images of their school strikes, creating a global network of climate-conscious youth.
- Impact: Through online organizing, Fridays for Future has inspired millions of young people to participate in climate strikes, influencing global awareness and urging governments to prioritize climate action. The movement illustrates the power of social media to connect localized actions into a worldwide phenomenon, exerting pressure on political leaders and institutions through online and offline protest coordination.

#MeToo Movement

- Background: Originating in 2006 by activist Tarana Burke to highlight sexual violence, the #MeToo movement gained global momentum in 2017 when actress Alyssa Milano used the hashtag in response to the Harvey Weinstein scandal.
- Social Media's Role: Social media allowed survivors of sexual harassment and assault to come together and amplify their voices, creating a sense of solidarity. The #MeToo hashtag was shared millions of times across platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, making it one of the most viral movements in history.
- Impact: The widespread sharing of personal stories online brought attention to systemic issues of gender inequality, harassment, and abuse. As a result, legal actions were taken against high-profile individuals, and societal conversations about consent, workplace dynamics, and sexual violence were transformed, leading to policy changes and greater awareness.

Social Media's Role

- **Catalyst for Movements:** Social media serves as a powerful catalyst for movements by reducing the barriers to participation, allowing decentralized organizing, and fostering a sense of community and urgency. This platform allows underrepresented groups, like youth and marginalized communities, to have a voice in issues where they might otherwise be ignored.
- **Challenges:** While social media enables rapid mobilization, it also faces challenges such as misinformation, online harassment, and the digital divide. These issues can hinder meaningful participation or even cause movements to lose focus. Additionally, online movements often face difficulties in translating digital activism into long-term, tangible changes without sustained offline actions.

The EU Youth Strategy (2019-2027)

The EU Youth Strategy (2019-2027) is a comprehensive framework designed to promote youth participation in European democratic, social, and economic life. It aims to empower young people by providing opportunities for active citizenship, social inclusion, and skills development, through three main pillars:

- Engage: Foster active participation in democratic life.
- Connect: Encourage social cohesion by fostering solidarity and exchanges across borders.
- Empower: Support personal, professional, and societal development of youth, ensuring they have the resources to thrive.

The strategy is implemented via:

1. EU Youth Dialogue: Structured participation process involving consultations with young people and youth organizations.
2. EU Youth Goals: A set of 11 objectives aimed at addressing youth needs, aspirations, and challenges in Europe.

CONNECTION TO YOUTH GOAL #9: SPACE AND PARTICIPATION FOR ALL

Youth Goal #9 specifically focuses on creating spaces and opportunities for young people to participate in all areas of life:

- It calls for inclusive participation in democratic processes and institutions at all levels (local, national, European).
- Advocates for safe physical and digital spaces where youth can engage in dialogue, express their opinions, and co-create policies.
- Emphasizes the need to remove barriers that prevent marginalized or disadvantaged youth from participating fully in democratic processes.

The goal addresses seven key targets, including:

- Ensuring equal access to participation.
- Strengthening democratic participation through digital tools.
- Providing opportunities for civic engagement via both physical and virtual platforms.

Digital citizenship plays a critical role in fulfilling this goal by enabling youth to access information, voice their opinions, and engage in discussions on policy matters in real-time and on a broad scale.

HOW DIGITAL TOOLS FIT INTO THE EU YOUTH STRATEGY

Digital tools are integral to the EU Youth Strategy in several ways:

1. **Enhancing Participation:** Digital tools, including social media, forums, and online platforms, facilitate broader and more inclusive participation. These platforms allow young people to engage with policymakers, participate in consultations, and contribute to the EU Youth Dialogue from any location.
2. **Providing Access to Information:** The internet provides access to an array of information on EU policies, decision-making processes, and youth opportunities, empowering young people to make informed decisions and participate effectively.
3. **Democratizing Civic Engagement:** Through the use of ICT (Information and Communication Technologies), marginalized youth who might not have access to traditional participation spaces can engage in the political process. This helps to reduce barriers related to geography, socio-economic status, or disability.
4. **Promoting Digital Literacy:** The EU Youth Strategy recognizes that effective engagement in digital spaces requires certain skills. Promoting digital literacy ensures that young people can navigate online environments responsibly and ethically, participate meaningfully in civic life, and protect themselves from risks like misinformation.

Challenges for Digital Citizenship

1. **Digital Literacy and the Digital Divide**

- **Digital Literacy:** Many young people lack skills to navigate digital spaces responsibly, including understanding how to evaluate information and avoid misinformation.
- **Digital Divide:** Unequal access to technology limits participation, especially for marginalized youth, hindering their ability to engage in digital citizenship.

2. **Misinformation**

- **Impact on Civic Engagement:** False information spreads easily on social media, shaping public opinion and creating mistrust in democratic processes. Youth are vulnerable to this, which can lead to misguided actions or disillusionment.

3. **Privacy and Security**

- **Privacy:** Concerns over data privacy and online harassment can deter youth from civic participation.
- **Security:** Lack of awareness about protecting online accounts can expose youth to risks like hacking, reducing the credibility and safety of their activism.

YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN POLICY-MAKING

1. How Young People Can Influence Local, National, and EU-level Policy

Local Level:

- Engaging in Community Initiatives: Young people can start by getting involved in local community projects or councils, providing input on decisions that directly affect their environment, such as education, urban planning, and social services.
- Youth Councils and Local Government Forums: Many cities offer youth advisory councils where young people can represent their peers and bring attention to youth-specific issues.
- Petitions and Campaigns: Digital tools allow youth to launch local petitions or campaigns on platforms like Change.org, gathering support for causes and influencing local authorities.

National Level:

- Participating in National Youth Councils: National youth councils are key platforms for formal engagement with governments. These councils advocate on behalf of young people's interests, presenting policy proposals and recommendations.
- Influencing Legislation: Youth can be involved in national legislative processes through public consultations or by partnering with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that push for policy changes on issues like education, climate change, and employment.
- Youth-Led Advocacy: Through social movements or national campaigns (e.g., youth climate strikes), young people can raise awareness and press lawmakers to act on youth-driven concerns.

EU Level

- EU Youth Dialogue: This structured dialogue allows young people to participate in consultations and discussions on topics relevant to their future. Results are presented to EU policymakers during the EU Youth Conferences, influencing the EU Youth Strategy.
- European Youth Parliament (EYP): A platform where young Europeans debate key issues, propose solutions, and collaborate on resolutions that are shared with EU institutions.
- Using Digital Platforms: Through tools like the European Citizens' Initiative, young people can gather support for EU-wide policies. If a proposal receives enough signatures (1 million from at least 7 countries), it can be brought to the European Commission for consideration.
- Partnerships with MEPs (Members of European Parliament): Young activists can collaborate with MEPs to champion youth-related issues, pushing for greater youth participation in EU decision-making.

2. Importance of Youth Voices in Decision-Making Processes

- **Democratic Legitimacy:** Young people make up a significant portion of the population, yet they are often underrepresented in formal political structures. Involving them ensures that policies reflect the needs of all citizens, not just older generations.
- **Fresh Perspectives and Innovation:** Young people bring new ideas, perspectives, and solutions that are often overlooked by more traditional policymakers. Their firsthand experience with modern technologies and social trends helps shape innovative approaches to current challenges, such as the digital economy, climate change, and social equality.
- **Long-Term Impact:** Policies made today will primarily affect the younger generation in the long run. By engaging them in the process now, policies can be designed with the future in mind, ensuring that young people are prepared for emerging challenges in areas like employment, education, and technological advancements.
- **Building Trust in Institutions:** When young people are actively involved in policymaking, they develop a stronger sense of trust and belonging in the political system. This engagement can combat political apathy and increase civic participation, leading to healthier democracies.
- **Diverse and Inclusive Representation:** Youth participation ensures that decision-making processes account for the diversity of young people across Europe, including those with fewer opportunities. This leads to more equitable outcomes in policy development.
- **Empowering Youth as Change Agents:** Active involvement in policymaking empowers young people, teaching them about governance, negotiation, and leadership. It also boosts their confidence and sense of agency, making them lifelong advocates for civic participation.

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