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BRIEFS IN EDUCATION

NUMBER 15 SEPTEMBER 2021



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How does social media use relate to activism among young people?

SUMMARY

Results from IEA's International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) 2016 show that a notable number of young students use social media to engage with political and social issues regularly. This brief examines how this type of social media use may translate to students' intended political behavior. We find that social media use for engagement with political and social issues among young people is weakly related to intentions to participate in illegal protest activities. However, it is moderately related to feelings of citizenship self-efficacy and intentions to participate in legal forms of activism. We examined these relationships more closely and found that students' increased sense of citizenship self-efficacy partially explains the relationship between social media use for engagement with political and social issues and students' expected participation in legal forms of activism.

IMPLICATIONS

- Social media is an important tool for policymakers to use when trying to mobilize youth in support of political and social causes, as a notable number of young people use social media to engage with political and social issues.
- Promoting active citizen participation is crucial for a healthy democracy. Online engagement with political and social issues is related to an increased sense of citizenship self-efficacy among young people. Therefore, access to the internet for all youth is an important policy goal.
- Social media use for engagement with political and social issues moderately relates to intentions to participate in legal actions that influence civic and political institutions. It is only weakly related to expected participation in illegal protest activities. Hearing out and responding to young people's demands on social media will likely reinforce legal and organized outlets for dissent rather than promote engagement in illegal activities.

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INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms are increasingly important in the realm of politics. These platforms allow for immediate, direct communication between individuals and are invaluable organizing tools for activists, especially for those of a younger generation. While young people are usually marginal players in conventional political organizations, they are experts in social media. For instance, the School Strike for Climate movement (also called Fridays for Future)—a youth-led movement aimed to encourage government action on climate change—relies on social media as a tool to organize, connect, and mobilize millions of student protesters worldwide. On 20 September 2019, over four million people in 163 countries participated in the movement, marking the largest climate strike in history (Barclay & Resnick, 2019). Thus, as exemplified by the School Strike for Climate movement, social media engagement is related to political mobilization among young people.

Involvement with political and social issues on social media is positively related to citizenship self-efficacy, defined as young people's beliefs in their own abilities to influence politics and solve problems within their communities (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014). This may be because social media platforms provide a space for debate and immediate exchange of information about political and social issues, which can help more passive youth feel better prepared for political participation.

Further, students' citizenship self-efficacy has been shown to be related to expected political activism (Schulz et al., 2018). Online, youth can quickly share ideas for political action outside institutional structures, and easily access information including where, when, and how different forms of activism are taking place.

Little is known about how social media use for engagement with political and social issues relates to students' sense of citizenship self-efficacy and to specific types of activism—that is, legal versus illegal activist behaviors. Given that young people are the future of democracy, and in view of the rise of social media as a tool for political engagement, examining the strength of these relationships is crucial. As such, in this brief we use ICCS 2016 data¹ (Schulz et al., 2018) to explore the following questions: (1) To what extent do students use social media to engage with political and social issues? (2) How strongly does social media use for engagement with political and social issues relate to students' sense of self-efficacy as citizens and to expected types of activist behavior? (3) What is the role of students' citizenship self-efficacy between social media use for engagement with political and social issues and expected activist behavior?

In what follows we address each of the questions separately followed by a short discussion.

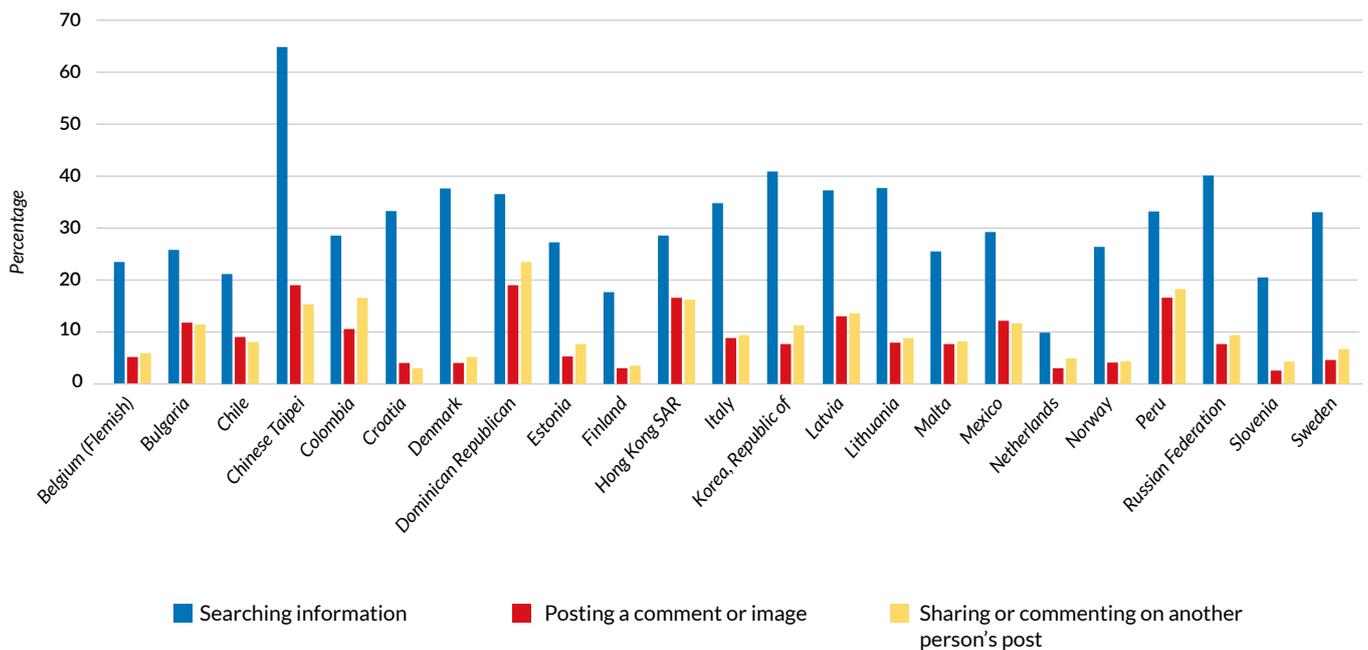


TO WHAT EXTENT DO STUDENTS USE SOCIAL MEDIA TO ENGAGE WITH POLITICAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES?

To answer this question, we used an ICCS 2016 scale that examines students' social media use. This scale measures students' use of the internet and social media for the specific purposes related to engagement with political and social issues, such as climate change or the #MeToo movement (Schulz et al., 2018). It comprises three items measuring how often students: (a) [use] the internet to find information about political or social issues, (b) [post] a comment or image regarding a political or social issue on the internet or social media, and (c) [share or comment] on another person's online post regarding a political or social issue.²

Results reveal great variability between countries in the percentage of students who use social media (at least) on a weekly basis for all three items (Figure 1). On average, 31% of students use the internet and social media to search for information related to political and social issues online, ranging from 10% in the Netherlands to 65% in Chinese Taipei.³ For posting a comment or an image related to political and social issues, the average is 9%. However, this ranges from 3% in Slovenia to 20% in Chinese Taipei. Finally, percentages of students sharing or commenting on another person's post related to political and social issues at least once a week ranges from 3% in Croatia to 23% in the Dominican Republic, with an overall average of 10%.

Figure 1: Students' percentage of at least weekly engagement with political and social issues through social media, per country.



Note: The reported percentages are a sum of the percentages of students who reported weekly engagement and the percentages of students who reported daily engagement.

1. ICCS 2016 is a comparative cross-country study that includes questionnaires assessing grade 8 students' attitudes, perceptions, and activities related to civics and citizenship. A total of 23 participating countries in Europe, Latin America, and Asia are included in these analyses of which, 21 countries met acceptable sampling participation rates.
2. Each item has four response options: "Never or hardly ever," "Monthly (at least once a month)," "Weekly (at least once a week)," and "Daily or almost daily."
3. The averages reported have been calculated using (weighted) within-country percentages.

HOW STRONGLY DOES SOCIAL MEDIA USE FOR ENGAGEMENT WITH POLITICAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES RELATE TO STUDENTS' SENSE OF SELF-EFFICACY AS CITIZENS AND TO EXPECTED TYPES OF ACTIVIST BEHAVIOR?

To explore how social media use relates to students' sense of citizenship self-efficacy and expected types of activist behavior, we ran Pearson correlation analysis (Table 1). We analyzed students' sense of citizenship self-efficacy (e.g., confidence in one's own ability to organize a group of students to achieve changes at school), students' expected participation in legal activities surrounding political and social issues (e.g., expected future involvement in collecting signatures for a petition), and students' expected

participation in illegal protest activities (e.g., expected future involvement in occupying public buildings as a sign of protest).

Results show positive relationships of moderate strength ($r \geq 0.20$) between students' social media use for engagement with political and social issues and students' sense of citizenship self-efficacy in almost all countries. The average correlation is $r = 0.24$. The positive relationship is weak for five countries (Belgium (Flemish), Dominican Republic, Republic of Korea,

Table 1: Pearson correlations between students' social media use and sense of citizenship self-efficacy, expected participation in legal activism, and expected participation in illegal protest activities.

Country	Sense of citizenship self-efficacy	Expected participation in legal activism	Expected participation in illegal protest activities
Belgium (Flemish)	0.19	0.26	0.08
Bulgaria	0.24	0.28	0.11
Chile	0.27	0.29	0.04
Chinese Taipei	0.23	0.24	0.02
Colombia	0.27	0.31	0.06
Croatia	0.28	0.28	0.01
Denmark	0.30	0.31	0.04
Dominican Republic	0.13	0.20	0.08
Estonia	0.26	0.28	0.10
Finland	0.30	0.34	0.08
Hong Kong, SAR	0.27	0.35	0.16
Italy	0.29	0.33	0.06
Korea, Republic of	0.18	0.28	0.04
Latvia	0.11	0.15	0.09
Lithuania	0.24	0.27	0.03
Malta	0.29	0.33	0.13
Mexico	0.16	0.23	0.08
Netherlands	0.26	0.26	0.06
Norway	0.29	0.35	0.10
Peru	0.22	0.25	0.09
Russian Federation	0.26	0.32	0.07
Slovenia	0.24	0.29	0.09
Sweden	0.32	0.37	0.08

Note: Bolded correlation coefficients are of moderate strength ($r \geq 0.20$).

Latvia, and Mexico) ($r < 0.20$), but the relationship is statistically significant in all cases.

Analyses of the relationship between students' social media use and students' expected participation in legal political activities revealed moderate positive relationships in all countries, with the exception of one (Latvia). The average correlation is $r = 0.29$, and all relationships are statistically significant.

The relationship between student social media use and expected participation in illegal protest activities is weak in all countries, with an average correlation of $r = 0.07$. Moreover, the relationship is not statistically significant in six countries (Chile, Chinese Taipei, Croatia, Denmark, Republic of Korea, and Lithuania, all of which had $r < 0.06$).

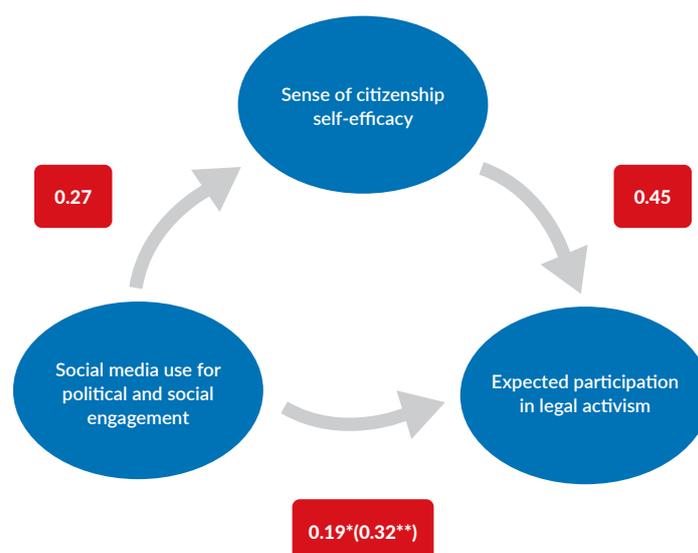
WHAT IS THE ROLE OF STUDENTS' CITIZENSHIP SELF-EFFICACY BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA USE FOR ENGAGEMENT WITH POLITICAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES AND EXPECTED ACTIVIST BEHAVIOR?

Based on prior research showing that social media might enhance young people's sense of citizenship self-efficacy, which in turn could impact activist behavior (Halpern et al., 2017; Schulz et al., 2018), we used multiple linear regression to run a mediation analysis (Figure 2).

Results indicate that social media use for engagement with political and social issues is a significant predictor of intent to participate in legal forms of activism.

However, the effect partly works through an increased sense of citizenship self-efficacy, which acts as a mediator in the model. The partial mediation is statistically significant, and the proportion of the effect that operates indirectly is 40%. In short, this shows that the association between social media use for engagement with political and social issues and legal forms of activism among young people is partly direct but also somewhat indirect, through an increase in their sense of citizenship self-efficacy.

Figure 2. Mediation model showing the indirect effect of sense of citizenship self-efficacy in the relationship between social media use for engagement with political and social issues and participation in legal forms of activism.



Notes: All numbers shown in the figure are regression coefficients. They are all statistically significant.

* Direct effect from social media use for political and social engagement to participation in legal activism, excluding the indirect effect that occurs through sense of citizenship self-efficacy.

** Total effect, including direct and indirect effects.

DISCUSSION

Overall, there is a notable proportion of young students who use social media for engagement with political and social issues. Results show that this type of social media use is moderately related to students' sense of citizenship self-efficacy. Furthermore, our findings indicate social media use for engagement with political and social issues to be, on average, weakly related to expected participation in illegal protest activities. In contrast, social media use for engagement with political and social issues showed a positive, moderate relationship with expectations to participate in legal forms of activism. This, in turn, was partially explained by an increased sense of citizenship self-efficacy. While the expected direction of the mediation model tested here was based on prior research, ICCS 2016 data are correlational and therefore directionality is assumed and causality cannot be inferred.

With engagement in political and social issues through social media use on the rise (Boulianne, 2020), the associated empowerment and expected participation in legal forms of activism among young people is encouraging news for the future health of democracy. Follow-up studies should investigate whether the intended behavior reported in this brief translates into actual behavior in the future. Moreover, the data used for this study was collected in 2016. Thus, the average of social media use for engagement in political and social issues among young people, and the strength of the relationships investigated should be reevaluated with data from the next ICCS study.

There are three main practical implications to be extracted from this brief. First, social media is an important tool for policymakers to use when trying to mobilize youth in support of political and social causes because many young people use social media for engagement with political and social issues. Secondly, promoting active citizen participation is crucial for a healthy democracy. Online engagement in politics and social issues is related to an increased sense of citizenship self-efficacy among young people. Therefore, access to the internet for all youth is an important policy goal. Finally, social media engagement with political and social issues is related to intentions to participate in legal forms of activism, but it is not related to illegal protest activities. Hearing out and responding to young people's demands on social media will likely serve to reinforce legal and organized outlets for dissent rather than promote engagement in illegal activities.

Although social media platforms can be used as positive tools for democratic participation, there is a dangerous side of the internet and social media that cannot be neglected. The online environment can also be a space for misinformation, hatred, and even radicalization, and terrorist recruitment. Thus, it is crucial to guide students toward responsible internet and social media use so they can benefit from the positive aspects while avoiding the negative.

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FURTHER READING

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The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, known as IEA, is an independent, international consortium of national research institutions and governmental agencies, with headquarters in Amsterdam. Its primary purpose is to conduct large-scale comparative studies of educational achievement with the aim of gaining more in-depth understanding of the effects of policies and practices within and across systems of education.

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ISSN: 2589-70396

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Please cite this publication as:

Fernández-Villà, G., & Musu, L. (2021, September). "Follow me for more content" How does social media use relate to activism among young people? IEA Compass: Briefs in Education No.15. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: IEA