

# Participation of young people in online social communities: an exploration of attitudes among university students in a case study in Spain

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**Abstract:** This study aims to examine the different dimensions of online citizen participation for the purpose of delving into the types of engagement that are being developed in order for citizens to benefit from the opportunities offered by the Internet. A self-administered survey has been carried out with 420 students from a Spanish public University (Universidad Rey Juan Carlos) from its five campuses in Madrid. A typology of attitudes has been developed, firstly with factor analysis, and then with a varimax rotation. Moreover, a hierarchical linear regression has been applied in order to discover the variables that might predict the typology of participation. The study shows that online participation is a complex phenomenon influenced by multiple personal and social factors. The results have revealed three points of view: 1. Scepticism toward the ability to exert influence; 2. Social networks as a channel for maintaining social contact and expressing opinions; and 3. Capability of empowering users. Certain attitudes toward social networks can predict online participatory behaviour in different types of profiles on these networks. Furthermore, age does not affect online participation, and gender only has an influence on sports and media profiles.

**Keywords:** online participation, attitudes, motivations, young people, social network, Internet.

## Introduction

Social networks allow citizens to contribute their opinions by providing feedback to institutions and public figures beyond the private sphere of friends and family, and enabling them to have an influence on decision-making in public life. Having contact with organisations and figures linked to collectives such as politicians, political parties, administrations, associations, or journalists, in order to convey opinions, complaints or demands, is a fundamental feature of participation, as well as social and political activism (Anduiza et al., 2010; Ganuza & Francés, 2015; Hargittai & Shaw, 2013; Yamamoto, Kushin, & Dalisay, 2015). Ganuza and Francés (2008) coined the term *institutionalized individual participation* to describe such activity. From time to time, the issue of participation by young people is raised as a subject of concern (Hart, 1997; Linmer & Kaufman, 2002; Benedit, 2020), which has been examined from highly diverse

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perspectives, ranging from social points of view (Balsells, Fuentes-Peláez y Pastor, 2017) to others within the scope of communication (García, del Hoyo & Fernández, 2014; García-Jiménez, López de Ayala & Montes-Vozmediano, 2020). Nevertheless, young people can also participate with other public profiles such as companies, celebrities, youtubers, etc., by offering their opinion, sharing content, or asking questions. Moreover, activities connected with relationships and entertainment are the most common paths taken by young people (García-Jiménez, López de Ayala, & Gaona, 2012).

Piechota claims that social media can contribute to the development of horizontal communication, creating groups and communities as well as active support for different kinds of social participation (Piechota, 2014). Online participation indicates an active personal contribution that implies varying degrees of involvement and commitment (Muntinga, Moorman & Smit, 2011), yet there is no consensus about which types of activities are considered participation in the sphere of social networks. Thus, many authors consider *Likes* to be a low-effort action and are reluctant to consider these acts as participation (Soyer, Cornelissen & Karelaia, 2013). However, very few users create their own content and share their ideas publicly online (Brake, 2014; Men & Tsai, 2013; Livingstone & Helsper, 2007), which would result in a greater degree of involvement on social networks (Kalsnes, Olof, & Gunn, 2017).

Social participation in the digital sphere requires attitudes that are compatible with sharing, collaborating, contributing to the community, and shaping people's willingness to engage. According to McGuire (1986), in a broad sense attitudes refer to a set of beliefs, feelings and tendencies of an individual that support a certain behaviour. Being of a social nature, these attitudes are also shaped by the evaluation of previous experience, expectations, and self-efficacy. As such, the expectations and consequences that individuals anticipate regarding their participation in commenting on different social network profiles guide the decision to participate in such spaces in order to influence the decision-making processes. As suggested by Únal (2017), the freedom of expression inherent in the digital sphere creates a sense of self-efficacy in the user that can act as a condition that fosters civic participation. However, this author has also revealed certain beliefs that might limit the use of social networks as channels for political expression, such as those related to personal consequences resulting from actions taken by a public authority, as well as the social or political usefulness of online activities.

In this context, a growing body of research has analysed the way in which the Internet can contribute to social and political participation among young people, and especially their motivations for contributing to these participative spaces (López-de-Ayala & Paniagua, 2019). However, in spite of the fact that the literature has described different online participation patterns (Shaw & Hargittai, 2018; Muñiz et al., 2017; Brake, 2014; Hargittai, Connell, Klawitter & Litt, 2014; Morán & al., 2017; Livingstone & Helsper, 2007), as well as attitudes toward the Internet and social networks (Joyce and Kirakowski, 2015; Haight, Quan-Haase & Corbett, 2014; Tsai, Lin & Tsai, 2001), studies that examine the ways in which attitudes influence participation on social networks are scarce. This study aims to explore the different dimensions of online citizen participation by young university students through their actions of sharing comments, and to discover the predictors of online participation. In particular, attitudes toward social networks have been analysed.

## **Theoretical framework**

Network participation occurs for various reasons, and technology has contributed to changes in the intensity and types of participation in which people engage, an example of which is the nearly universal use of smartphones (Montes, Pastor, Martín-Nieto & Atuesta, 2020).

According to Preece, there are generally two main types of environments: a "Community of Practice (CoP)", and a "Community of Interest (CoIs)" (Preece, 2007). A CoP will seek either professional improvement or enhanced competence in a subject in which the participant is an expert. The CoIs will seek improvement in the context of learning. Wenger defined CoPs according to a social theory of learning that includes learning by doing (practice), learning as experience (meaning), learning as becoming (identity), and learning as belonging (community) (Wenger, 1998: 188). There are many other possible classifications, but in all of them the common point is the different motivations that lead the user to participate, as the motivations are the components that determine behaviour (Maslow, 1943: 371).

However, the concept of participation itself is complex. Koh et al. (2007) distinguish between passive participation (viewing or lurking), and active participation (posting). Nevertheless, a key issue highlighted by Malinen (2015) is the uncertainty regarding the concept of 'poster' and 'lurker', which has been investigated by diverse research studies. For Kim & Ketenci (2019), there are three levels of participation: the peripheral participant, inbound participant, and full participant. Finally, another way of considering participation is according to contexts: online and offline.

Koh et al. (2007) believe that from a social perspective, a virtual community is weak due to the fact that it is difficult to maintain an authentic idea of community when compared to what occurs in an offline community. According to Nielsen (2006), participation is distributed following the 90:9:1 rule (90% inactive, 9% occasional participants, 1% active). There are three elements that influence greater or lesser participation. On the one hand, there is the impact of technical aspects that help to create a social feeling, such as avatars, images or video chats. The second element is the presence or absence of leaders in the virtual community. Finally, there are technical-communicative factors such as greater or lesser difficulty in accessing the social network, navigating through it, usability issues, etc., which influence activity on the network as well (Koh et al., 2007: 70-71).

According to research conducted on social networks, participation seems to depend to a greater or lesser extent on the type of social network involved, among other reasons (Arguello et al., 2006). This is partially in line with Maslow's motivational theory of the hierarchy of needs, because although he proposed an ordering of needs, he also observed alterations in the hierarchy (Maslow, 1943: 395). The researcher Nov (2007) has studied eight possible motivations in collaborative networks: career, enhancement, fun, ideology, protection, social aspects, understanding, and values. The highest motivation-participation correlations were found in the categories of fun, understanding, enhancement, and protection (Nov, 2007). Koh et al., 2007 (cited in Malinen, 2015: 229) agree with this assertion, as they have also found a positive correlation between having fun and the number of contributions.

Nevertheless, such motivations change according to the type of social network involved. Chan et al. (2017) have studied participation in informal medical communities, which are less strict than traditional channels for knowledge dissemination (an example of which is scientific journals), in which debate and participation are truly public and current. Staying up-to-date or circulating possible findings are the obvious motivations. On the other hand, in creative communities related to music or photography, for example, the motivation that makes users participate is receiving feedback about their work. Social networks are not only defined by their theme, but by their size as well. The larger they are, the weaker they are as social entities, because they become more uncontrolled: some participants may engage in inappropriate or unpleasant conduct toward the rest of the community, and the result is often lower participation (Wellman et al., 2001).

The reasons for participation also seem to depend on the profile of the participant (professional-consolidated or amateur-basic), because their interests are different. In this sense, the results are confusing or contradictory. According to Tausczik & Pennebaker (2012), no

relationship has been found between the degree of participation among experts (to help others) and non-experts (aimed at using resources to learn mathematics, for example). Personality seems to have an influence as well. Even though extroverts spend less time in online communities, they participate more than introverts (Nov et al., 2013). According to these same authors, the higher the emotional stability of the participants, the lower the possibility of social anchoring in an online network, based on personality profiles and experimental research. Likewise, people who use a social network for a longer period of time tend to participate more (Wellman et al., 2001).

Cultural values also seem to be related to participation and to the type of social network chosen. For example, materialistic values are related to participation in sports-related or multiplayer social networks (competitiveness), while people with less materialistic values participate in health, religious, or social assistance communities (Grace-Farfaglia et al., 2006). The use and gratification theory is present in these situations. Johnen, Jungblut and Ziegele (2017) have confirmed that in the specific case of networks promoted by moral issues (and more specifically by moral panic or a feeling of fear in society), participation is linked to establishing moral limits and the desire to achieve social recognition. In this case, the social context plays an important role in the level and type of participation. However Tejedor, Carniel & Giraldo (2019) have observed similarities in the use of social media by young university students in countries with significant economic differences. Thus, it is important to continue conducting research and searching for aspects that reveal nuances in the contributions of different studies.

The issue of gender is controversial. Although some studies seem to show differences in use according to this factor (Gaspard, Hors, Gómez & Pink, 2020), gender seems to have an influence in conjunction with personality, at least for certain ages, as outgoing women ask less questions than outgoing men (Cullen and Morse, 2011). For these authors, there is no predominant personality type among the participants in a social network, but the motivations to participate in them are indeed related to personality. People with an agreeable profile (understanding, good-natured, cooperative, and lenient) spend less time on the Internet, despite seeing it as useful. Conscientiousness personalities (self-disciplined and strong-willed) spend less time on leisure networks on the Internet, yet they regularly use networks that are useful to them. Extroverts spend less time on the Internet but are more participatory, and are motivated to express an opinion and willing to share information. Neurotics (people with a “lack of psychological adjustment and emotional stability”, Cullen and Morse, 2011: 3), are less likely to participate actively.

Other more comprehensive reasons have been studied as well, including research by Preece, Nonnecke and Andrews (2004), who concluded that there are a wide variety of reasons for low participation: feeling that participation is not necessary, distrust of the social network, feeling the need to be helped (but not participate), or even technical problems (usability issues), were some of the reasons that prevent users from participating, whereas Nov (2007: 62) found that Career, Enhancement, Fun, Ideology, Protection, Social aspects, Understanding, and Values were possible motivations

If online networks are compared to off-line networks, one can observe that triggering factors in the formation of offline groups, such as age, gender, educational levels, geographical origin, etc., are not features that determine participation, or a lack thereof, in an online social network (Bisgin et al., 2010, cited in Malinen, 2015: 234). However, some studies have established a relationship in this regard (Wellman et al., 2001). Butler & Princeswal (2010) have showed that many actions and mobilizations occur as a one-time response.

In short, the results are not consistent due to variability in the type of network, participant, gender, and country, among other factors. This highlights the importance of knowing the motivations involved in network participation, which confirms the need for their continued

exploration, given their current unpredictability. According to Wohn et al. (2012) (cited in Malinen, 2015: 233), participation can be defined as “non-conscious habits” .

In a previous study by one of the authors (López de Ayala & Paniagua, 2019), which examined the motivations that affect online participation among five types of public profiles on social networks, a variety of reasons were found as to why different profiles make comments, and similarities were revealed among NGOs and celebrities, as well as political and other influential profiles.

A key factor closely related to motivation is attitude, with the latter being less goal-specific (Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2015), although some studies have approached them as being integrated. Attitudes can generally be defined as predispositions to respond in a positive or negative way to specific stimuli (Fabrigar & Wegener, 2010). These predispositions arise from the long-term organization of beliefs and cognitions about a topic, or social representations (Moscovici, 1988), which are learned through interaction with others and are considered to have a strong influence on behaviour. Although there is great controversy regarding the influence of attitudes on behaviour, with low levels of correlation between the two, as well as results that are inconsistent in a large percentage of studies with surveys (see Chaiklin, 2011), researchers Van Deursen and Van Dijk (2015) have demonstrated that attitudes directly and indirectly influence the diversity of Internet use. This supports the view of Jonassen (1955, cited in Claiklin, 2011) regarding the ability to predict behaviour from attitudes in non-problematic areas.

Similar to the diversity of Internet use, attitudes and social representations are considered to have an effect on social network use to the extent that beliefs about the effects and consequences for society, or for the users themselves as a result of participation on social networks, may affect this participatory behaviour on such networks, as suggested by use and gratification frameworks (Larose & Eastin, 2004). Thus, those who have a positive attitude toward technology and expect positive results from online contributions will tend to participate more than those with opposing attitudes.

Although multiple studies have described the attitudes and motivations of individuals toward the Internet or have sought to develop scales to measure such attitudes (Tsai & Lin, 2004; Joyce and Kirakowski, 2015; Cai, Fan y Du, 2017), the amount of research that has analysed the influence of these factors on participatory online behaviour is scant. This statement can also be extended in the case of social networks.

## **Objectives and methodology**

This exploratory study aims to examine different dimensions of online citizen participation by young university students based on their sharing of comments, in order to delve into the types of participation that young Spanish people are developing in order to benefit from the opportunities offered by the Internet, and to augment their ability to become actively involved as citizens of an increasingly virtual world. More specifically, the aim is to discover different spheres of online participation linked to political, social, economic, and leisure facets of their lives, and factors that promote or reduce greater participation by young university students in diverse online profiles on social networks. The reason for focusing on this age group is due to the boundless use of social networks among students and young people aged 16 to 24, which has reached percentages that are higher than the rest of the overall population in Spain (over 90% versus 64.7%) (INE, 2020). In addition, youth culture has been associated with digital media defined by participation and the production of “user-generated content” (Jenkins, 2006; Deuze, 2006).

This paper is based on a self-administered survey carried out with young university students (18-24 years old; N=420) at Rey Juan Carlos University (Madrid, Spain), a public university in the Autonomous Region of Madrid with five campuses located in the City of Madrid, Alcorcón, Móstoles, Fuenlabrada, and Aranjuez, in addition to online students as well. All the courses are represented, as well as four branches of knowledge in proportions that are similar to the overall data at Rey Juan Carlos University. The survey respondents are 73.3% women and 26.7% men, and the average age is 20 years old.

A questionnaire with closed questions was conducted in the classroom. Moreover, the survey was tested prior to being used in order to ensure that it was understandable and consistent. The completed questionnaires were filtered on the basis of the consistency of the information reported. A database was generated using the information collected, which was processed using the SPSS Statistics 26.0 statistical package.

Table 1. Sample demographics and characteristics

	Percentage			Percentage		
Sex	Male	26.7	Time spent on social networks	Less than 2 h	24.6	
	Female	73.3		Between 2-3 h	33.7	
Status	Studying only	76.8	Between 3-5 h	27.2	27.0	
	Studying & working	23.2	More than 5 h	14.3	27.3	
	Age	18	19.3	Branches of knowledge	Social & legal Sciences	69.6
		19	20.0		Engineering & Architecture	3.3
	20	29.0	Health Sciences		11.9	
	21	17.1	Arts & Humanities		15.2	
	22-24	14.5				
Year	1	36.7				
	2	37.1				
	3-4	26.2				

Source: prepared by the authors

## Method of Analysis

In order to discover the underlying dimensions of online participation among different profiles on social networks on which undergraduate students have commented, an exploratory factor analysis has made it possible to reduce a set of variables to a lower number of unobserved latent variables called factors. This statistical method describes variability among observed, correlated variables and creates a model as linear combinations of the potential factors, thus avoiding redundancies. Afterward, a new analysis was carried out in order to reveal which variables are able to influence the different types of online participation of sharing comments in public profiles. Specifically, we are interested in determining whether there is a correlation between the dimensions of online participation among young university students and variables related to the characteristics of the students, the time they spend on the Internet, and attitudes and beliefs related to social networks. To achieve this aim, a hierarchical linear regression analysis was carried out in order to explore the predictive power of diverse variables introduced sequentially.

## Measures

### *Participation by commenting in profiles on social networks*

In this study, participation by users is seen from a restrictive point of view that implies participation in conversations by making comments, as well as by asking and answering questions in public profiles, as the user's contribution requires greater effort, which corresponds to a higher level of involvement and commitment (Kalnes, Olof & Gunn, 2017) with specific motivations (López-de-Ayala & Paniagua, 2019). Additionally, contributions have been gathered from diverse public profiles due to the fact that online participation is directed toward a broad audience beyond interpersonal online communication (Hoffman, 2012), with the ultimate goal of having an effect on the social environment. The people in the sample were asked how often they participate in conversations, comment, or ask and answer questions on a list of social networking sites, with the following possible responses: never (0), rarely (1), sometimes (2), and frequently (3). Table 2 gives the full texts of the items and descriptive statistics for this question.

Table 2. Users who share or comment in different profiles (in percentages)

	<b>Never</b>	<b>Rarely</b>	<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>Frequently</b>
Public authorities	84.2	12.2	3.3	0.2
NGOs	80.5	14.7	4.1	0.7
University/Colleges	69.8	19.2	8.9	7.8
Companies and brands	72.9	15.9	7.8	3.4
Civic Platforms created from social networks	83.0	10.6	5.5	1.0
Cultural organisations	77.2	16.1	5.3	1.4
Sports clubs, associations & federations	71.1	16.7	8.1	4.1
Sports figures, actors, and singers	59.6	20.2	13.9	6.3
Media	62.8	23.3	10.3	3.6
Television programmes	64.5	18.2	13.2	4.1
Political parties	77.8	14.1	6.0	2.2
Political leaders	79.2	12.4	6.2	2.2
Trade unions	85.9	11.2	2.4	0.5
Union leaders	87.4	9.7	2.2	0.7
Professionals and leaders in my field of study	60.9	24.0	10.8	4.3
Youtubers/influencers in leisure: television, films, music, games, sports events, etc.	53.4	24.5	1.1	7.0
Youtubers/influencers in fashion, beauty, nutrition, cooking, etc.	60.0	20.5	12.8	6.7
Youtubers/influencers in humour	61.7	20.5	11.3	6.5
Other youtubers/influencers	69.7	16.9	7.7	5.6

Source: prepared by the authors

### *The age when Internet was first used and time of Internet use*

Empirical evidence shows that those with more Internet experience engage in a wider range of opportunities that involve creative activities (Livingstone, Haddon y Görzig, 2013). This issue

has two dimensions: the time spent on the Internet, and how long they have been Internet users. These aspects were applied to social networks. Thus, in addition to sociodemographic variables such as age and gender (with no conclusive results regarding their effect on online participation), we have included measurements regarding how long people have been using social networks and other media based on the age at which they began. This issue was addressed with a closed-ended question with four possible responses according to grouped age ranges: “< 7 years old”, “7 to 9 years old”, “10 to 12 years old” and “over 12 years old” (consecutively coded as values from 1 to 4).

The Time of Internet Use variable was measured through the combination of two questions. The first was the following: “How often do you connect to social networks and other media?” There were four possible answers: “Every day or nearly every day”, “3-4 days a week”, “2 days a week”, and “one day a week” (coded with values from 1 to 4). The second question referred to the time spent on social networks and other media, differentiating between school days and weekends. There were five possible answers: “less than 2 hours”, “2 to 3 hours”, “3 to 5 hours”, “6 hours or more”, and “I don't connect” (coded as values 1 to 4 consecutively, with the last one, "I don't connect", coded as value 0).

#### *Attitudes toward using social networks for political purposes / perception of political self-efficacy on social networks*

In order to gather the beliefs that characterise different attitudes toward social networks, either positive or negative, a series of statements was included with a scale of five levels of agreement or disagreement that registered the intensity of the interviewees' feelings about a given item (strongly disagree=1, disagree=2, uncertain=3, agree=4, strongly agree=5). Overall results are reflected in the following chart.

Table 3. Beliefs about social networks (in percentages)

	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>disagree</b>	<b>Uncertain</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>N (valid case)</b>
I feel better informed with social networks	1.9	4.8	15.3	57.3	20.9	417
Social networks allow for greater participation by ordinary people	1.2	3.4	24.7	4.8	25.9	413
I can express my opinions through social networks	2.7	5.5	23.6	42.9	25.3	415
Commenting on social networks is useless	12.0	27.5	39.5	14.5	6.6	408
I can keep in touch with people on social networks with tastes and hobbies similar to mine	1.2	2.2	15.1	53.1	28.5	418
Social networks allow me to keep in touch with my friends and stay up-to-date on things that happen in their lives	1.4	3.3	8.8	42.5	43.9	419
Nowadays, you're fully controlled on social networks	2.4	9.6	15.9	29.2	42.9	415

Social networks provide more power and control to ordinary people	4.1	14.6	40.3	29.1	11.9	419
Anyone can comment on social networks without fear of reprisal	19.7	32.9	22.3	15.6	9.6	417
You should be careful with information uploaded to social networks because it can have negative consequences	0.5	1.0	4.3	23.7	70.5	417
The comments I upload to social networks do not change anything	6.7	19.3	48.7	16.7	8.6	419
You can express ideas and opinions more honestly on social networks because of anonymity	5.5	15.3	2.6	36.8	18.9	419
The institutions on social networks aren't interested in our opinions. They're just posturing.	3.1	14.2	44.5	25.0	13.2	416

Source: prepared by the authors

We carried out a factor analysis in order to obtain a typology of attitudes toward social networks among young university students that summarises the thirteen assessments above. This method of extracting principal component factors maintains the maximum information of the variables in determining the factors. To extract the factors, eigenvalues lower than one were excluded.

The programme provided a five-factor solution that synthesized the information and explained the 60.48% variance. The analysis obtained a sampling adjustment of 0.701 (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy), which is enough, and an observed significance level of 0.000 (Barlett's Test of Sphericity), which indicates that the model of correlations obtained is not due to chance. To improve the interpretation of the results, a varimax rotation was applied to the factors obtained. In this way, the features that define each of the five factors obtained could be defined more clearly and interpreted following the criteria of selecting scores of over 0.5. The results are reflected in the following chart.

Table 4. Rotated Component Matrix. Attitudes and representations about social networks

	Components				
	1	2	3	4	5
I feel better informed with social networks	<b>.665</b>	.026	.209	-.053	-.172
Social networks allow for greater participation by ordinary people	<b>.725</b>	-.084	-.038	.102	.108
I can express my opinions through social networks	<b>.641</b>	-.322	-.087	.090	-.075
Commenting on social networks is useless	-.367	<b>.719</b>	-.117	.010	-.003
I can keep in touch with people on social networks with tastes and hobbies similar to mine	.523	-.151	<b>.564</b>	-.079	.099
Social networks allow me to keep in touch with my friends and stay up-to-date on things that happen in their lives	.491	.016	<b>.520</b>	-.057	.195

Nowadays, you're fully controlled on social networks	-.038	.020	-.031	.178	<b>.736</b>
The comments I upload to social networks do not change anything	.002	<b>.862</b>	-.068	-.016	-.014
The institutions on social networks are not interested in our opinions. They're just posturing	-.022	<b>.549</b>	.348	.042	.128
Social networks provide more power and control to ordinary people	.373	.075	-.093	<b>.731</b>	.079
Anyone can comment on social networks without fear of reprisal	-.174	-.048	.239	<b>.790</b>	.003
You can express ideas and opinions more honestly on social networks because of anonymity	-.062	.057	<b>.753</b>	.187	-.059
You should be careful with information uploaded to social networks because it can have negative consequences	.021	.049	.089	-.112	<b>.770</b>
<b>Eigenvalues*</b>	<b>2.736</b>	<b>1.752</b>	<b>1.218</b>	<b>1.153</b>	<b>1.003</b>
<b>Variance explained*</b>	<b>21.04</b>	<b>13.48</b>	<b>9.37</b>	<b>8.87</b>	<b>7.72</b>

Extraction method: Principal components analysis. Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalisation.

a. The rotation converged in 10 iterations.

Items with scores of over 0.5 in bold.

Source: prepared by the authors.

The following factors were extracted from the survey:

**Factor 1: Participation channel for ordinary people - information and expression.** This factor comprises factor saturation and positive statements about social networks: "I feel better informed with social networks"; "Social networks allow for greater participation by ordinary people"; and "I can express my opinions through social networks".

**Factor 2: Inefficiency as a tool for change.** This factor is made up of the following items: "Commenting on social networks is useless"; "The comments I upload to social networks don't change anything"; and "The institutions on social networks aren't interested in our opinions. They're just posturing".

**Factor 3: Anonymous social contact.** This dimension comprises the following items: "I can keep in touch with people on social networks with tastes and hobbies similar to mine"; "Social networks allow me to keep in touch with my friends and stay up-to-date on things that happen in their lives"; and "You can express ideas and opinions more honestly on social networks because of anonymity".

**Factor 4: Empowerment through free expression.** This factor includes items related to user empowerment as a consequence of expressing their ideas on social networks: "Social networks provide more power and control to ordinary people"; and "Anyone can comment on social networks without fear of reprisal".

**Factor 5: Prevention.** This dimension includes items regarding control and negative individual consequences: "Nowadays, you're fully controlled on social networks"; and "You should be careful with information uploaded to social networks because it can have negative consequences".

## Results

### *Online participation by young audiences*

In order to obtain a typology among young university students of the dimensions of participation by sharing in profiles other than those of peers and family members, the nineteen items that refer to this issue in our survey underwent principal components analysis. This method of extracting principal component factors maintains the maximum information of the variables in determining the factors. To extract the factors, eigenvalues lower than one were excluded.

Finally, the program provided a four-factor solution that synthesized the information from these twenty items and explained the 73.43% variance. The analysis obtained a sampling adjustment of 0.900 (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy), which is very good, and an observed significance level of 0.000 (Barlett's Test of Sphericity), which indicates that the model of correlations obtained is not due to chance. To improve the interpretation of the results, a varimax rotation was applied to the factors obtained. In this way, the features that define each of the four factors obtained could be defined more clearly and interpreted following the criteria of selecting scores of over 0.5. The results are reflected in the following chart.

Table 5. Rotated Component Matrix. Commenting on social network profiles.

	Components			
	1	2	3	4
Public Authority profiles	<b>.714</b>	.143	.300	.170
NGO profiles	<b>.733</b>	.167	.291	.159
University/College profiles	<b>.678</b>	.149	.220	.374
Company and brand profiles	<b>.658</b>	.313	.046	.369
Civic Platforms on social network profiles	<b>.761</b>	.161	.181	.004
Profiles of cultural organisations	<b>.707</b>	.122	.233	.196
Profiles of sports clubs, associations & federations	.212	.116	.183	<b>.756</b>
Profiles of sports figures, actors, and singers	.171	.404	.145	<b>.737</b>
Media profiles	.341	.453	.212	<b>.532</b>
TV programme profiles	.336	.393	.251	<b>.588</b>
Political party profiles	.222	.081	<b>.771</b>	.401
Political leader profiles	.252	.098	<b>.762</b>	.395
Profiles of trade unions	.266	.127	<b>.897</b>	.020
Profiles of union leaders	.254	.132	<b>.882</b>	-.013
Journalist profiles	.260	.304	<b>.617</b>	.394
Leisure Youtuber profiles	.156	<b>.835</b>	.169	.317
Fashion Youtuber profiles	.213	<b>.865</b>	.101	.114
Humorous Youtuber profiles	.175	<b>.810</b>	.120	.292
Profiles of other Youtubers	.155	<b>.858</b>	.100	.080
Eigenvalues*	9.11	2.34	1.43	1.10
Variance explained*	47.95	12.32	7.54	5.61

Extraction method: Principal components analysis. Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalisation.

a. The rotation converged in 6 iterations.

Items with scores of over 0.5 in bold. High score, but under 0.5, in italics.

Source: prepared by the authors.

Four factors were extracted from the survey. However, some items scored high in more than one dimension: “media profiles” had a very high score (under 0.5) in leisure participation and sports/media fan, which is not surprising. The final factors are given below:

**Factor 1. Social participation.** This factor includes variables of participation in profiles of social, cultural and economic organisations: “Public Authorities”, “NGOs”, “University/College”, “Companies and brands”, “Civic Platforms created from social networks”, and “Cultural entities”.

**Factor 2. Leisure participation.** This factor comprises the items “Leisure Youtubers”, “Fashion Youtubers”, “Humorous Youtubers”, and “Other Youtubers”.

**Factor 3. Political participation.** This consists of factor saturations and questions about participation in topics of political interest: “Political parties”, “Political leaders”, “Trade unions”, “Union leaders” and “Journalists”.

**Factor 4. Sports and media fan.** This factor includes items related to sports and television programmes: “Sports clubs, associations & federations”, “Sports figures, actors, singers, etc.”, “Media profiles”, and “Television programmes”.

### *Regression analysis*

Based on factors that gather participation by commenting in different profiles, a hierarchical linear regression analysis was applied in order to discover the variables that could predict the typology of participation among young university students (Table 6).

Among the variables chosen to be included in the model as predictor variables, some were chosen that form an initial category linked with the characteristics of the students and their relationship to social networks ( $p < 0.01$  and  $p < 0.05$ ): gender (male=0; female=1), age, and age of first Internet use. A second set of variables was also chosen that relates to the time spent on the Internet: “number of hours of use on school days”, and “number of hours of use at the weekend” (“frequency of use in days” does not correlate with the dependent variables and has not been included in the analysis). A third group of variables was linked to attitudinal variables.

It should be noted that no independent variables correlate with the social participation factor. Accordingly, the “online social participation” factor did not acquire significance levels for  $F$  (.418), which would allow us to speak of a linear regression model.

For the second factor, “participation in leisure profiles”, the model selected explained 14.7% of the variance ( $R^2$  corrected), with an  $F$  significance level equal to 0.000. Significant variables were “Age of first use”, “Social networks as participation channels” (positive) and “Inefficiency of social networks as a tool for change” (negative).

Commenting in political profiles obtained a model with an explained variance of 4.7 % and an  $F$  significance level of 0.003. Predictor variables in this case would be Inefficiency of social networks as a tool for change (negative).

For the fourth factor, referring to “sports/media fan participation”, the model explained 5.9% of the variance, with an  $F$  significance of 0.000. The predictor variables would be “Gender” (negative) and “Social Networks as participation channels” (positive).

Therefore, university students participate more in political profiles when they disagree with the idea that commenting on social networks is useless for changing things because institutions are not interested in their opinions. Students who start to use social networks at younger ages and think that commenting on social networks is useful for changing things, and that social networks allow for greater participation by ordinary people, participate more in leisure profiles. Males and those who see social networks as a participative channel engage more by commenting in sports and media profiles. Finally, no variable predicts commenting in social profiles.

Table 6.- Hierarchical linear regression of characteristics of the young students, time of use, and attitudes toward Social Networks

Variables	Social participation			Leisure participation			Political participation			Sports/media participation		
	B	Beta	p	B	Beta	p	B	Beta	p	B	Beta	p
(Constant)	.983		.248	1.442		.066	.037		.963	1.556		.056
Gender	.098	.044	.422	.047	.021	.675	-.191	-.090	.094	<b>-.472</b>	<b>-.214</b>	<b>.000</b>
Age	-.046	-.067	.226	-.032	-.047	.360	.032	.049	.365	-.029	-.043	.429
Age of first Internet use	-.004	-.003	.963	<b>-.326</b>	<b>-.207</b>	<b>.000</b>	-.106	-.071	.195	-.031	-.020	.710
Time spent on Internet on schooldays: hours	.042	.042	.574	-.027	-.027	.698	-.061	-.064	.384	.037	.037	.608
Time spent on Internet at the weekend: hours	-.122	-.129	.087	.129	.136	.050	.053	.058	.427	-.052	-.055	.449
Social Networks as participation channels	.020	.020	.723	<b>.190</b>	<b>.188</b>	<b>.000</b>	.092	.095	.085	<b>.109</b>	<b>.109</b>	<b>.046</b>
Inefficiency of social networks as a tool for change	-.077	-.076	.152	<b>-.158</b>	<b>-.157</b>	<b>.001</b>	<b>-.185</b>	<b>-.193</b>	<b>.000</b>	-.100	-.100	.051
Social networks for anonymous social contact	-.005	-.005	.930	.066	.067	.182	-.095	-.099	.060	.070	.071	.179
Empowerment through free expression on social networks	-.032	-.032	.549	-.026	-.026	.604	.057	.059	.260	-.095	-.095	.068
Social Networks as a tool of control with negative consequences	.074	.072	.178	-.094	-.092	.064	-.028	-.029	.585	.057	.057	.274

The results were obtained from a sample of 362 valid cases. Those values of the variables that are significant for  $p < 0.05$  and  $p < 0.01$  are shown in bold type.

Source: prepared by the authors

## Discussion and Conclusions

Online participation is a complex social phenomenon influenced by multiple personal and social factors. Online participation potentially empowers users who contribute to social discussions by allowing them to provide opinions, criticism or suggestions in order to influence their social environment, which has sparked the interest of researchers. However, very few users share comments on social networks.

Despite interest in online participation, there has been very little academic analysis of these practices, and contributions in this area have focused on political, civic and, to a lesser extent, commercial participation (López-de-Ayala & Paniagua, 2019). Researchers have also scrutinised specific online communities. Nevertheless, few studies have analysed online participation from a comprehensive perspective (Lutz, Hoffmann, & Meckel, 2014), and only slight attention has been paid to the way in which attitudes and social representations toward the Internet affect participatory online behaviour, which can also be said of social networks. In this study, we have hypothesized that those who have a positive attitude toward technology and expect positive consequences from online contributions will participate more than those who have opposing attitudes.

The first conclusion to be drawn from the present work refers to the various dimensions of attitudes toward social networks and participation that can be observed according to the comments made on such networks. On the one hand, there is the position that highlights scepticism toward the ability to influence the social environment through participation on social networks, as well as obstacles to achieving results from such participation. On the other hand, a differing view asserts that social networks stand out as a channel for information and communication, as well as their capability of allowing users to maintain social contact and express opinions. Finally, a third perspective is related to the ability of participation to empower users thanks to the option of openly expressing ideas.

Secondly, the factor analysis carried out has differentiated four dimensions or types of profiles in which young university students have commented: social, leisure, political, and what we call sports/media profiles, with different variables having an influence in the participation in these spheres.

We shall now define the profiles of young people and their attitudes toward social networks that predict online participatory behaviour in different types of profiles on social networks:

- 1) Commenting in social profiles: no variable can predict this.
- 2) Commenting in leisure profiles is more likely among students who start to use social networks at a younger age and think that commenting on social networks can be useful for changing things, and that social networks allow for greater participation by ordinary people
- 3) Commenting in political profiles is greater among university students who disagree with the idea that commenting on social networks is useless for changing things because institutions are not interesting in their opinions.
- 4) Commenting in sport/media profiles: according to the model, this is more common among males and those who see social networks as a participatory channel.

Regarding socio-demographic variables, we found that age does not affect online participation in any dimension, and that gender only has an influence in commenting in sports and media profiles, with higher participation by males in this area. In addition, those who start using social networks at the earliest ages tend to comment more in leisure profiles. On the other hand, commenting in different profiles is contingent upon different attitudes and beliefs about social networks. Inefficiency as a tool for influencing change (in a negative sense), as well as

the idea of a participation channel for ordinary people, influence participation in different types of profiles. The former affects participation in leisure and political profiles, and the latter influences engagement in leisure and sports/media profiles. Thus, disagreement with the idea that commenting on social networks is useless for changing things fosters participation in political and leisure profiles. Finally, those who think of social networks as channels for ordinary people are prone to participate in leisure and sports/media profiles.

Our conclusion is that only a minority of students publish in profiles of entities that are not those of their own relatives or friends, and they do so more often in leisure profiles. There is no doubt that most students only look at what others publish in these profiles, yet do not contribute their own comments. In theory, this could be explained by the fact that few students believe that participation on social networks is useless for making an impact or changing things. This would indicate not only digital literacy, but also the need to foster certain values and attitudes such as sharing, collaborating and contributing to the community. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the  $R^2$  (R-squared) (explained variance) in the resulting models were very low, except for the factor of online participation in leisure profiles, which stood at 15%. Specifically, the scores of the factors that summarize attitudes toward social networks and that influence online participation are very low, in contrast to the scores obtained from other social variables. This indicates that the relevance of attitudes toward the action of commenting in different public profiles on social networks is not very high, even if they refer to the effectiveness of commenting on social networks. According to Chaiklin (2011), these results are not surprising, as this author points out that most scientific evidence does not support the idea that attitudes guide behaviour.

From a psychological point of view, other authors have asserted that attitudes influence behaviour when they become objectives (Kruglanski, Baldner, Chernikova, Lo destro, and Pierro, 2018; Armintage and Christian, 2003; cited by Chaiklin, 2011), which lead to motivation.

Another possible explanation is that processes by which attitudes and cognitive dispositions translate into behaviour differ whether they are deliberate or spontaneous (Kahneman, 2003). According to Trafimow et al. (2004) (cited by Chaiklin, 2011), a distinction can be made between attitudes that stem from expectations about the consequences of behaviour and those that take into consideration the expectations of others (subjective norms that relate to symbolic interaction). Furthermore, Chaiklin (2011) (following Merton), suggests that the role of social structure is a factor that has a stronger influence on behaviour than on attitudes. In this sense, we can see that the gender and age of first Internet use achieves scores that are higher than attitudes in fostering participation in commenting in public profiles.

In conclusion, our results suggest that other variables should be taken into account as well, referring specifically to situational factors related to the social structure or personality variables that moderate the attitude-behaviour relationship, or that act as a stronger factor in influencing online participation. In this regard, from a psychological point of view, Cullen and Morse (2011) have proven that personality variables such as the degree of extroversion or introversion can influence participation in social networks. Another possible variable that affects online participation is self-efficacy, which Hoffmann, Lutz and Meckel (2015) have confirmed is a powerful factor in influencing online participation, with substantial increases in the variation explained.

Regarding the implications of this study, our data show that despite the fact that young people of these ages are already starting to become interested in issues related to their broader environment, they manifest a high degree of scepticism toward the relevance of their participation in social networks, to the extent that they do not believe this implies real consequences for the social and political reality. Together with a general mistrust of politics (*Observatorio de la Juventud en España*, 2017), this explains why their participation is largely

limited to leisure and entertainment profiles. Only a receptive attitude on the part of institutions toward the feedback received from social networks that would give rise to real changes can modify this attitude and foster greater participation by young people, generating a truly participatory culture that will allow the democratic promise to be fulfilled, which many have witnessed in the development of the new interactive media. Nevertheless, the data also point out the limited importance of attitudes in influencing online participation. Thus, if we want to encourage this type of practice, we must focus attention on other social and psychological factors.

This study is not without limitations. Our concept of online participation is not based on participation in community profiles that do not appear on the list of public profiles included in this article, nor on the creative contributions published on those profiles, yet it is valid to the extent that we believe participation is aimed at intervening in social dialogue in order to influence the social environment. Future research should delve more deeply into the relationship between attitudes and behaviour, examining different situational variables that might moderate this relationship.

Moreover, it should be noted that this is an exploratory study based on a sample composed specifically of young students at Rey Juan Carlos University. Although the sample is varied regarding the qualifications and fields of study of the students, the extent to which this sample is representative of university students in Spain is unclear. Although the analysis is explicative, it is necessary to approach the results with caution. Likewise, even though the commonplace belief holds that young people adopt avant-garde behaviour that subsequently spreads to the rest of society, or that such youthful behaviour persists throughout a person's life, caution must be exercised in not confusing the age effect with the generation effect. On the one hand, work and family obligations limit the free time available to older adults, whereas young people have more free time to dedicate to social networks, and on the other hand, the effects of age, cohort and historical context have an impact on attitudes and beliefs in complex ways. Future studies could delve into the effects of age and cohort on attitudes and beliefs regarding social networks, and how these factors influence online participation in different contexts.

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