

Abstract Submission Form

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Submission Details

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| Title of Abstract | Youth Digital Participation: Measuring Social Impact | |
| Type of Submission (please select ONE): | Full Paper | x |
| Short Paper |  |
| Round Table Discussion |  |
| Themes (please select all that apply): | Information Literacies |  |
| Information Behaviour |  |
| Impact | x |
| Information as agent of change |  |
| Methodological Paper |  |
| Abstract (Please check Call for Papers for requirements): | 1. **Introduction**   The concept of ‘youth participation’ has developed since the early 2000s in a time during which young people's everyday lives have become more heavily influenced and shaped by ‘multimodal, interactive, convergent, and networked media’ (Livingstone 2012, p.1). The changing dynamic of relationships between young people and digital technologies has proved a fruitful seam of research for a number of scholars (for example boyd, 2014; Buckingham, 2008; Ito, Gutiérrez, Livingstone, Penuel, Rhodes, Salen, & Watkins 2013). They have observed that young people in a digital era are no longer simply passive consumers of information, but are instead active digital participants, makers, and ‘doers’ (Ito et al. 2013, p.6), who operate in an environment where digital skills have become a necessity. As a consequence, a progressive understanding of the social impact of the interactions between young people and digital technologies is now advocated by researchers and practitioners alike (for example Araya & McGowan 2016; 2017, Livingstone & Sefton-Green 2016). This also applies to the means of *measuring* social impact, regarded as both a complex and ripe area that merits further research (Ito et al., 2013; Livingstone, Mascheroni & Staksrud, 2015).  Current scholarly debate around digital participatory youth projects, and approaches to their evaluation, are examined in this paper. The analysis of the literature presented here reveals (1) an over-reliance on traditional evaluation techniques for such initiatives, and (2) a scarity of models for the assessment of the social impact of digital participatory youth projects. It is concluded that the challenges and limitations of social impact evaluation practice in digital participatory youth projects should be addressed through the adoption of alternative, participant-centred approaches. These issues are discussed with reference to a doctoral study that seeks to identify solutions for enhancing social impact evaluations of digital co-creation initiatives by young people.     1. **Claims for the value of digital media tools to young people**   Digital media are frequently cited as tools of empowerment for young people (Erstad, 2012; Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016). For example, it has been argued that young people can alter the ways in which ‘people live, work, play, relate to another, organise to meet their needs, and generally cope as members of society’ through their active participation in the digital world. In addition, when engaging with digital media tools, young people may contribute towards the formation of ‘social impact’ (when conceived as ‘all social and cultural consequences to human populations of any public or private actions that alter the ways in which people live, work, play and relate to another, organise and meet their needs, and generally cope as members of society’ (Burdge & Vanclay, 1995, p.59)). For example, they can influence ‘health and growth of civic collective, jointly produced stories, and real world social change’ (Ito et al., 2013, p.48). In addition, the digital world furnishes environments in which young people can enjoy autonomy to learn and network (Ito et al., 2013). Further, the enhancement of young people's understanding of the concept ‘self’, and societal interactions, can result from their digital participation (Buckingham, 2008; Robards & Bennett, 2014).   1. **Measurement of the value of digital participatory youth projects**   Practitioners within youth organisations have acknowledged the possible transformative power of digital technologies. This is evident in a number of implementations located in Scotland (for example, Young Scot, 2017; Time to Shine Digital, 2015; STEP, 2016). However, as the use of digital technologies becomes increasingly common, practitioners also struggle to capture and analyse the social impact of such mediated initiatives (for example Buccieri & Molleson, 2015; Wilson, 2017). For instance, Wilson (2017) recently highlighted the general challenges faced by the Carnegie Trust when attempting to measure and evaluate the progress of a digital youth inclusion project launched in 2015. Equally, practitioners have noted that it is difficult to assess the value of hoped-for outcomes of initiatives, such as learning (#NotWithoutMe, 2017).  The extent to which digital technologies genuinely contribute to youth empowerment (or not) is also debated in the research literature (for example Buccieri & Molleson, 2015; Livingstone, Mascheroni & Staksrud, 2015). It is evident that more research is required to enhance understanding (Buccieri & Molleson, 2015, p.251; Livingstone et al. 2015, p.14). A key question here, however, is research design.   1. **The adoption of alternative, participant-centred approaches to social impact evaluation**   To date, researchers keen to explore the social impact of technologies on young people have mainly adopted functional, but traditional, research approaches (for example Hyder, 2017; Livingstone, Mascheroni & Staksrud 2015). Thus the social significance of youth digital participation is primarily measured with the use of tools such as surveys and interviews (Quinlan 2015; Stevens, Gilliard-Matthews, Dunaev, Woods & Brawner, 2016), case studies (Hyder, 2017), and/or ethnographic observations (Ito et al. 2008; Livingstone & Sefton-Green 2016). While these evaluation processes and their outcomes shed light on the relationship between youth and technologies, they have their limitations, notably in respect of the role, status and participation of data subjects, measurement metrics, and scalability.  The implementation of alternative participatory social impact evaluation practice in this type of research could enrich studies of the impact of youth digital participation. For example this would give young people opportunities to critically reflect on their participatory experience as part of a collective and experiential evaluation exercise (#NotWithoutMe, 2017). In addition, this type of research would benefit from dropping the focus of traditional evaluations on ‘success’ versus ‘failure’, and the meeting of specific targets (Percy-Smith & Thomas 2009, p.21). A further important consideration is the development of social impact measurement tools that are accessible to, and work with all digital participatory projects for young people, regardless of their scale.  The concept of ‘impact’ in this environment also merits attention. Overly-broad definitions of ‘social impact’, such as that cited above need to be reviewed to take into account the digital context in a youth participatory setting. This is in line with the spirit of research endeavours that seek to engage subjects as genuine participants in the process, allowing them to determine the boundaries of the nature of the research.     1. **Conclusion**   The need for alternative approaches in impact evaluation will be presented in the paper. The arguments for this will be set against an examination of digital participatory youth initiatives and the ‘traditional’ approaches undertaken to analyse and capture their impact. Further their application is considered in an ongoing doctoral study that (a) focuses on young people as co-creators of digital culture and (b) deploys a sequential mixed methods approach with Grounded Theory as an overarching theoretical framework in the context of a participatory paradigm. The presentation thus addresses both practice and research gaps in the field.  **References**  boyd, D. (2014). *It's complicated: The social lives of networked teens*. Yale University Press.  Buccieri, K., & Molleson, G. (2015). Empowering Homeless Youth: Building Capacity through the Development of Mobile Technology. *Journal of Community Practice*, 23(2), 238-254.  Burdge, R. J., & Vanclay, F. (1995). Social impact assessment. *Environmental and social impact assessment*, 31-65.  Cammarota, J., & Fine, M. 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