
María Elena Meneses Rocha

marmenes@gmail.com
Professor & researcher. Escuela
de Humanidades y Ciencias
Sociales, Tecnológico de
Monterrey, Mexico.

Enedina Ortega Gutiérrez

enedina.ortega@gmail.com
Professor & researcher. Escuela
de Humanidades y Ciencias
Sociales, Tecnológico de
Monterrey, Mexico.

Gustavo Urbina Cortés

urbina.gustavo11@gmail.com
Guest professor & researcher. El
Colegio de México.

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Youth and Political Participation. #Yosoy132 and the struggle for Freedom of Expression in Mexico

Abstract

The mobilization of the student movement #YoSoy132 inspired new political and civic participation among young students in the urban context of Mexico City. This study explores the habits and perspectives around political participation, freedom of expression, and the use of social networks among these university students. Based on survey data from two samples, we contrast the relationship between online and offline political practices during the birth of #YoSoy132. For the first sample, we administered a questionnaire to college students who took part in a public demonstration organized by the #YoSoy132 movement just one week before the 2012 Mexican federal election. We collected the second sample via social media online, with a focus on college students from different universities across Mexico City. We compare the similarities and differences across youth participation via the samples *In Situ* and Online groups. We demonstrate that digital penetration and the presence of a convergent culture are important elements that favor hybrid political and civil participation. Our findings allow us to infer, at least from our samples of college students, that social networks are gaining unprecedented importance in the formation of youth imaginaries when a strong correlation between online and offline practices exists. In the face of widespread accusations of the corruption of mass media in Mexico and systemic threats to freedom of expression, social networks provided an alternative and trustworthy route for expression, dialogue, and mobilization.

Keywords

Social networks, civic engagement, youth, participatory democracy, digital activism, Mexico

1. Introduction

Movements with high levels of youth participation—such as *los Indignados* in Spain, the Occupy Movement on Wall Street, the protests in Northern Africa, and the #YoSoy132 movement in Mexico—share expressions, content, forms, and practices that today's youth use to negotiate the conditions they face (Melucci, 1996). In spite of the distinct contexts and diverse causes out of which each movement arose, shared characteristics include, as Castells (2012) describes, the appropriation of social networks to re-configure and re-signify political participation, the hybridization of online/offline spaces, and the transformation of emotion into action through the capacity to organize and communicate.

The focus of our study, the student movement #YoSoy132, has political and social relevance for any analysis of the political participation of youth, engagement with new technologies for political change, as well as Mexico's current political landscape. Social demonstrations were encouraged by #YoSoy132 at a time when Mexican citizens were preparing for general elections. The movement arose spontaneously out of the student body of the Universidad Iberoamericana, a private college in Mexico City. The name of the movement refers to the hashtag and meme that went viral throughout the digital ecosystem in May 2012. A group of 131 students produced and uploaded the video, *We Are More Than 131*, to document their outrage that peaceful protests on the occasion of candidate Enrique Peña Nieto's visit to their university were ignored by television news reports of the same event (R3CR30, 2012). The hash tag #YoSoy132 was a trending topic on Twitter for six consecutive days.

The movement emerged online out of an instance of collective anger. #YoSoy132 refers to popular support for the students' critique, everyone a potential 132nd person raising their voice in dissent. The students' outcry quickly grew to form a massive, popular reaction to partisan support by the two main television companies, Televisa and TV Azteca, for the presidential candidate of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). Leading up to the general elections, the #YoSoy132 movement began to strategically combine offline and online strategies to promote various actions including social demonstrations, student-led political debates and informative campaigns.

Remarkably, the #YoSoy132 and its different adherents were predominately organized via social media networks that not only attracted the attention of mass media, but also inspired other young people from different universities. Via the confluence of emotional reactions and the collective construction of an identity (Jasper, 2013; Treré, 2015), the movement moved from the Internet to the streets. It even passed through the ballot box, provoking a more acute sense of awareness among youth about their freedom of expression and their rights to public information. The scenario was also significant because of the socio-economic status of the protestors, as well as the conflict with the *de facto* powers of mass media in Mexico via new online technologies (Gómez & Treré, 2014).¹ #YoSoy132 purposefully and successfully engaged new technologies to interrupt the monopoly on information by traditional forms of mass communication.

However, the integration of technology and social media for participatory purposes is not a simple equation. For some scholars, the use of technological resources may lead to political disaffection as users are exposed to asymmetrical quality information, privilege excessive time on the Internet, and sacrifice opportunities to involve offline communities and spaces (Pinkleton & Austin, 2001; Baum, 2003; Zhang & Pinkleton, 2009; Baumgartner & Morris, 2010; Loader, 2007). On the other hand, researchers have also posited that digital technology enhances civic engagement by allowing its users new and varied ways of

¹ Tuition for the Universidad Iberoamericana is more than 12,000 dollars a year, positioning it as an elite university in Mexico.

expression, self-creativity and organization (Hesseldahl, MacMillan & Kharif, 2008; Smith, 2009). Yet others have posited that social media facilitates a more fluid participation through access to a diversified wealth of information in which users can interact as equals (Gil de Zúñiga, Puig y Rojas, 2009).

A result of diverse and ambivalent data samples, scholars continue to debate the nature of the hybridization of on- and offline participatory traits. Scholars like Smith (2009), Wang (2007), and Gil de Zúñiga, Puig and Rojas (2009) find a strong correlation between connected and disconnected forms of engagement. On the other hand, Baumgartner and Morris (2010) and Towner and Dulio (2011) insist on the unrelated character of actions that take place within vs. beyond the web. Furthermore, although political interaction mediated by the use of social networks has received significant attention from Mexican scholars, the vast majority of research focuses on qualitative and documentary treatments based on conclusions that lack the broader context and proof of quantitative data (i.e. Díaz de León, 2011; Mazorra, et.al., 2012; Gómez, Ortiz and Concepción, 2011).

The objective of this article is to present a brief exploration of the role that social media networks play in political participation and collective action among these young college students. It is important to clarify that this article does not present an opinion about or analysis of the student movement itself. Rather, we try to capture the conditions of political participation during a very specific moment. This particular political moment allowed us to compare two different clusters of college youth in Mexico City, contrasting the strength of the association of political tendencies and participatory traits across online and offline environments. In the following two sections we provide the larger contexts and relevant terms for our analysis of #YoSoy132. Then, we describe our methodology and the results of the two samples. Finally, we offer a discussion with implications for future studies of youth and the increasing hybridization of online/offline political action. The practices and perspectives of college youth between 18 and 29 years old in Mexico City, one of the largest and dynamic capital cities in Latin America, represent an innovative, collective effort to claim the rights of a participatory democracy under precarious conditions.

2. The Youth Condition and Connectivity

Mexico, similar to many other countries around the world, is experiencing a notable increase in availability and access to technological resources. However, these improvements have not translated into automatic and widespread penetration of new technological platforms across public life. According to Eli Noam (2011), Mexico is one of the countries with the highest concentration of electronic media in the world through which the majority of Mexicans receive information about politics. And yet various organizations, like Article 19 and the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) take note that Mexico is also one of the countries with the highest risk for exercising freedom of expression.² Such risk is accompanied by a lack of competition in mass media and communications. The industry is dominated by two major companies, Televisa and TV Azteca, that claim 96% of the frequencies available for commercial television (Trejo Delarbre, 2011).³

Because of these structural constraints, we avoid describing today's Mexican youth as a "digital generation" or as "digital natives" (Prensky, 2011). Rather, we try to understand the

² According to Article 19, Mexico is one of the main countries where journalists are being killed due to organized crime and the correlated corruption in different government levels.

³ Between 2009 and 2011, Article 19, an international organization dedicated to the defense of freedom of expression, registered 772 attacks on media institutions and journalists. 128 of them grave. In the year before the federal elections, the organization registered 11 crimes against journalists constituting public security crises throughout the country. Security Agents are the principle aggressors according to the international organization and the principal consequence of the aggressions is auto-censorship in the media (Article 19, 2011).

complexity inherent within the relationship between young people and technology in Mexico today. Not all Mexican youth are connected online, nor do all youth participate in virtual networks in such a way that it is significant for their human development. Thus, to generalize the conditions of connectivity can be as misguided as to underplay the notable penetration of new technological platforms in the daily routines of many youth.

Additionally, when we talk about youth we seek to avoid any simplistic inference to monolithic conceptions of young people. Rather, college students like those who participated in #YoSoy132 reflect the diversified and heterogeneous aspects of Mexico's young people. We do not assume that Mexican youth are broadly represented by those who took part in #YoSoy132. Although we capture relevant characteristics, especially those related to the political habits and perspectives of college students in an urban context, we must remember that a significant percentage of Mexico's youth have limited opportunities including access to education, the use and appropriation of new technologies, and the opportunity to claim a voice in political and national discourses.

Therefore, following García Canclini (2012), we assume it necessary to break with characterizations of youth as a homogeneous block delimited by age, and instead, we try to explain this youth-led movement from its own perspectives based upon diverse experiences and multiple memberships. Such socio-anthropological research reveals limitations in traditional frameworks and proposes new categories, such as the "youth condition" to describe the post-World War II conceptualization of youth as a legal, cultural, and socio-economic construct that exceeds biological definitions (Reguillo, 2010). Our study of the #YoSoy132 movement offers insight into a specific instance of identity-formation and the youth condition in Mexico City, within a broader context of political, economic, and cultural engagement (or lack thereof) with Mexican youth as a pre-identified interest group. Thus, scarce opportunities for employment, access to higher education, and the growing poverty rate form the backdrop for the digital divide in Mexico in which only particular populations have the capacity to appropriate content and technology for personal and collective benefit.

According to the 2010 National Survey on Mexican Youth (IMJUVE, 2011), the panorama of digital reach across Mexico is characterized by:

- Limited access, wherein only 28.5% of Mexican youth possess the conditions to connect to digital platforms from their home.
- Restricted efficiency, wherein only 69.5% possess the minimal competence to access, to use, and to take advantage of Internet resources.
- Gradual and stratified use of information and technological services, wherein as little as 8.6% of young people have a history of more than five years as advanced users.
- Diversified uses, considering that among those connected 88.2% use Facebook to communicate and socialize as a principal activity. 3.7% said that they play video games, a higher percentage than those who stated they read books.
- Connectivity gaps that are regionally distributed. For example, in Mexico City, where this study is based, 42.3% of young people stated that they have the Internet in their homes. This number contrasts with reports from states with high levels of underdevelopment such as Oaxaca and Chiapas, where only 12.8% and 8.2% of those interviewed report having access to the Internet (INEGI, 2011a).

Many of the college students in our sample are privileged by their socio-economic status, educational access, and regional location.

In fact, the point of departure for the two samples we compare is a movement born out of explicit engagement with new digital technologies for political purposes. We expected higher access and habitual contact with technological platforms among the targeted population, and we assumed that our informants would reflect particular online habits. Within this population characterized by significant Internet access and social media use, we

were able to explore their real-time political practices between online and offline environments. As mentioned previously, the nature of political participation via hybrid online and offline strategies is widely debated amongst scholars worldwide. Based on the rapid growth of the #YoSoy132 movement via viral videos, hashtags, and social media, we knew that a group of young students in Mexico City combined offline and online political participation to extraordinary effect, but we did not know as much about how and under what conditions youth were participating in both traditional and technological pathways for political voice and change.

3. The Internet, Civic Engagement and Political Action

We understand the Internet to be a technological, social, and cultural construction (Bijker, Hughes, & Pinch, 1998; Hine, 2005) that does not directly lead to traditional political participation in the same ways that voting does. However, as we have observed, it does provide platforms with which to connect to the public sphere such as a retweet, an inquiry of a candidate through social media, or mass invitations to join in public demonstrations and protests. Furthermore, technology is subject to the user's formation via cultural, symbolic, and imaginary practices that are both individual and collective. We maintain, like Bimber (2003), Norris (2000) and Livingstone, Couldry and Markham (2007), that those citizens who participate civically offline, also do so online. The main question is the extent of the correlation between both kinds of political participation: Are they independent? Is there a real connection amongst purposes and targets?

By capturing our two samples within the #YoSoy132 context, we wanted to explore how participatory practices are related within and beyond connected environments. The architecture of the Internet—ubiquitous, de-centralized, interactive, and with the capacity to avoid traditional forms of control—seems to lead to the revitalization of representative democracy. Castells (2009) labels “mass self-communication” as the capacity to communicate directly, and to therefore engage in new forms of relating to political power. The #YoSoy132 movement successfully moved from online communication of outrage to offline political engagement in the form of marches, general assemblies on multiple university campuses, coverage in traditional print, radio, and television media, and even a historic student-coordinated debate among participating presidential candidates disseminated via Google Hang Out On Air and YouTube (an example which we will describe in detail below).

In order for this to take place, certain fundamental conditions are required: the convergence of digital connection, education, and competency, the construction of a collective identity, and a culture of political and civic participation. Among connected youth with convergent digital and cultural skills (Jenkins, 2006), it seems unquestionable that digital networks are re-defining their civic and political participation.

We understand civic and political participation, as defined in relation to theories of participatory democracy by Dahlgren (2009), to extend beyond the act of voting and militant party-affiliations towards citizens influencing actual decision-making (Verba, Nie & Kim, 1987). Active citizens in a participatory democracy engage in autonomous civic practices, whether through civil society organizations or collective actions (Dahlgren, 2009; Coleman & Blumer, 2009; Bennett, 2008; Bennett, Segerberg & Walker, 2014; Jenkins, 2009). We agree with Dahlgren (2011) when he signals that the establishment of communication between state actors and citizens, especially with youth, is fundamental for something akin to democracy to exist. This study empirically shows the ways that these practices are changing in the age of the Internet, through a mixture of participatory trails in online and offline venues.

Based on the results of our surveys, conducted in 2012 with a grant from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) (Meneses, Ortega, Urbina, 2012), this analysis compares the similarities and differences between online and offline participatory traits within two independent convenience samples.

4. Methodology and Samples

First, we developed and applied an exploratory, descriptive questionnaire directed to university students in Mexico City. The survey consisted of 57 questions distributed across six sections in order to obtain information about the following categories:

- Socio-demographic facts
- Equipment and the use of the Internet
- Public sphere and political participation
- Perceptions about freedom of expression
- Communication media, social networks, and civic and political participation

We defined a two-phased strategy for data collection. In the first phase, we administered a pilot questionnaire *in situ*, in the context of a public demonstration organized by #YoSoy132 in the Zócalo in Mexico City on June 10, 2012. The survey instrument was applied in face-to-face interviews to 100 students selected via convenience sampling among the various groups of university students participating in the protest.

The first round of results primarily generated new knowledge about the population size, timing, and difficulties to get responses from informants. The spatial and temporal framework was chosen intentionally in order to directly approximate a sample of actively participating youth. We collected 89 records with the following general characteristics:

- A range of ages from 15 to 76 years of age, 82.6% of which corresponded to a population less than 30 years old.
- A gender distribution of 55.1% female and 44.9% male.
- 25 different majors at university and postgraduate levels, and 20 preparatory, or high schools.

Taking into account these results, we were able to refine the survey instrument and the sample group.

For the second stage, we gathered a sample, also via convenience sampling, through emails provided by those surveyed during the march in response to our question about other contacts. In addition, we asked professors to share the emails of their students in order to invite them to participate. To obtain the email addresses, as well as to identify the schools to include, a previous sample study was conducted using the snowball method, with the support of academic personal and students attending the universities in question. Google Docs provided the most optimal platform for the survey. An invitation was extended by email to 899 students at distinct public and private universities. The online survey was in the field for two weeks via Google Docs. Due to the way in which we obtained each sample group, we have labeled the first group *In Situ* (in the #YoSoy132 march), and the second group Online (Youth Online).

Keeping in mind the framework of the first sample group with a distinct way of approaching the informants, we gathered an Online sample that provided a comparison to the sample derived *In Situ*. We took care to ensure that the majority of those surveyed lived in Mexico City and the surrounding urban area. From the *In Situ* group, 95.2% said they lived in the greater metropolitan area, and amongst the Online sample, 81% said the same. The age group ranged from 18 to 29 years old, and we also took care to maintain the proportions of gender representation. In the *In Situ* sample, 74% studied at public universities and 26% at

private universities; in the Online group, 55% at public universities and 45% at private universities. Regarding the differences between the sample groups, we anticipated distinctive patterns in our informants' participatory traits. The first group was much more homogenous in their practices and habits, while the second group was more heterogeneous with a much more diverse socio-political profile. The dimensions of the survey were maintained and enriched with open answer questions that allowed for improved data based on scale and multiple-choice questions. Care was taken to ensure that the answer keys maintained a comparable pattern to the first survey instrument, which was conducted in person.

The final sample of answers reached 20.8%, or 187 registered surveys out of 899 invitations, with the following characteristics:

- A range of ages between 18 and 50 years old, 94.7% of which corresponded to a population less than 30 years old.
- A distribution by gender of 58.8% female and 41.2% male.
- Data collection from people in more than 25 different majors and professional training programs, and more than 10 different universities.
- This selection of a group via convenience sampling allowed us to get to know the differences and the coincidences across the political and civic participation of mobilized youth (*In Situ*) and other youth, who are not necessarily politically active. The students in the Online group were questioned online and their political and civic participation was unknown.

Our youth are 20 to 24 years old: (43.8% *In Situ*) and (72.2% Online). They are more educated than their parents, and they are full-time students. 29% of the young people *In Situ* and 24% of the Online students reported combining their studies with some part-time employment.

Upon exploring the variable of historical use of the Internet (Table 1), it becomes clear that all of these youth belong to a more connected generation. While some were born and grew up with the Internet and text messages, others are a part of the newer generation of smart phones and tablets.

Table 1. Years as users

Years as users	% Youth Online	% Youth In Situ
Less than a year	4.2	0.6
Between 1 and 5 years	16.7	9.6
Between 6 and 10 years	54.2	48.0
More than ten years	25.0	41.8
Total	100.0	100.0

The data in both sample sets demonstrate that these students belong to a privileged sector because Internet-use and equipment exceed national averages. Of course, this tendency was expected. Even when university students constitute a very heterogeneous group, it is important to remember that they are part of an exclusive sector with access to a professional career.⁴

In the Online group as well as the *In Situ* group, we found that connection to the Internet is a generalized, current condition of their youth experience. In order to demonstrate this, we constructed a connectivity index that took into account the frequency

⁴ In Mexico only 30% of young people have access to a university education (ANUIES, 2012).

in which the participant completed different activities. We then separated them according to four indicators: Scarcely-connected, Novice-connected, Intensely-connected, and Hyper-connected. The latter two categories correspond to more than seven hours of Internet connection per day. Both sample groups are characterized by intensely and hyper-connected periods of connection, as well as by the diversity of actions completed during the hours of connectivity. In order to determine the diversity of activities, we listed 22 activities including the use of social media, video consumption, chat use, search engines, email, and online media consumption.

The evidenced gathered suggest two very relevant issues. First, for the youth questioned in person, 67.8% of those who participated *In Situ* also participated in online actions via platforms on the web. Second, for those interviewed Online, 59.9% of those who are politically involved offline, are politically involved online. As described above, the survey referenced examples of “informal politics” wherein political action is not an exclusively instrumental activity to obtain specific goals, but rather an expressive and performative act (Dahlgren 2009).

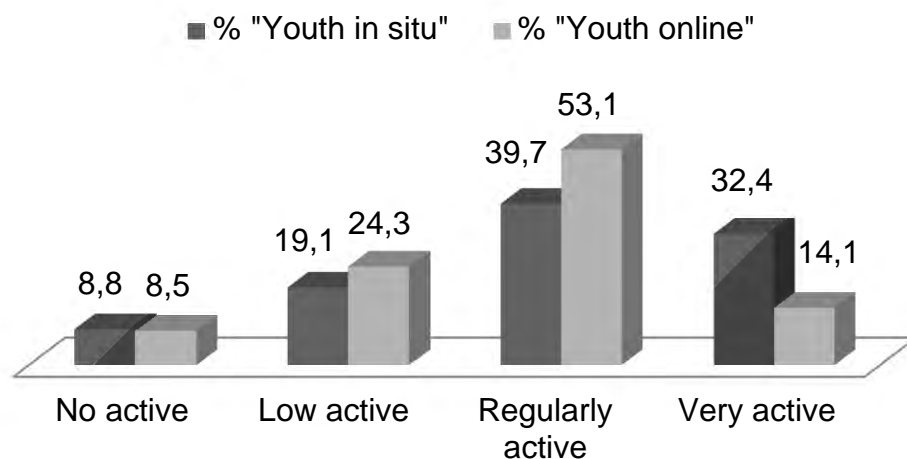
5. Results

5.1. How do youth perceive their political and civic participation?

We worked with a composite of youth whom—due to their inclusion in the education system, digital competence, and convergence culture—experience sufficient association between politicizing elements and connectivity. The civic and political practices of our respondents were complimentary in an offline and an online setting, as the borders between the two environments are diffuse. Furthermore, these young people perceive themselves as active in political and civic matters.

What this generation understands to be political civic participation is a question that remains for subsequent research. When we asked how they perceive their own political participation, the response was “regularly active”. However, as we have maintained, some studies suggest that in the age of the Internet, political and civic participation disassociates from formal institutions and occurs as first and foremost, a private experience (Dahlgren, 2009; Bennet, 2008; Dahlberg 2001; Papacharissi, 2009).

Figure 2. Self-Perception of Participation in Formal Politics



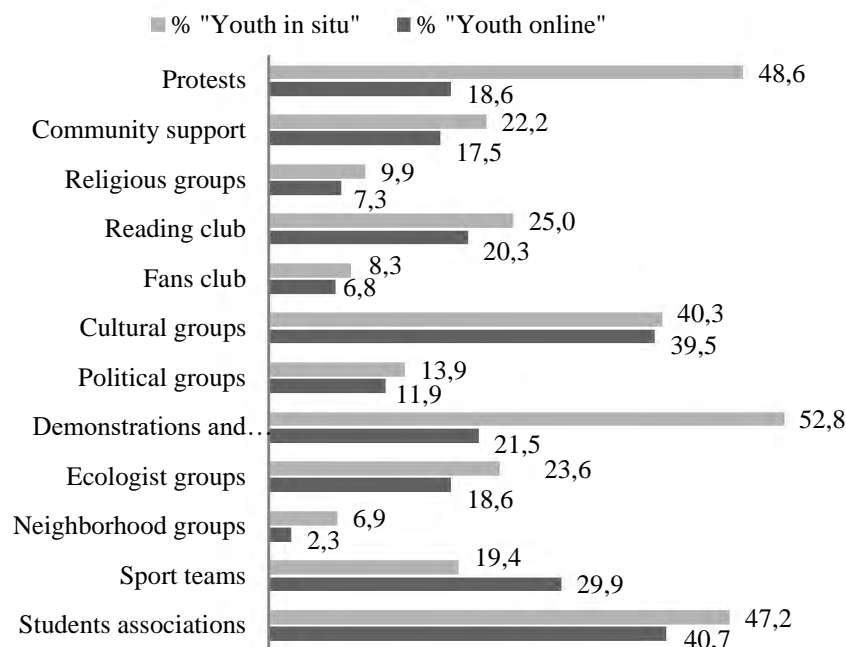
In comparison to the evidence supplied by Baumgartner and Morris (2010) or Towner and Dulio (2011), we found that our informants perceive themselves as politically active regardless of an offline/online distinction. Even when both samples correspond to hyper-connected youth with a diversified use of technological resources, the vast majority understood their offline and online actions as complimentary political efforts to get involved in public affairs.

5.2. In what spaces do young people participate?

Our findings are similar to Smith (2009), Gil de Zuñiga, Puig and Rojas (2009), and Haro and Sampedro (2011). While we found that offline and online environments complement one another in strategic ways, the environments result in differences in the articulation of political practices. For the mobilized youth surveyed *In Situ*, the takeover of public spaces through protests to denounce the government, specific actors and/or particular processes are the preferred strategy in which to participate (Figure 2). On the other hand, youth surveyed online tend to participate in environments akin to private and community spheres, privileging instances less related to contentious politics like demonstrations, protest, or occupations.

We can infer that some of these practices are not associated with political impact, but rather, with impacts in other fields of influence such as familial, religious, and social. We still need to demonstrate whether this pattern of involvement is more individualized than collective, and whether it extends beyond ideology with the probable consequences for democracy that such a pattern suggests. It is likely that we will need to look for answers in the relationship between individual empowerment from within the private sphere and possible impacts in the public sphere.

Figure 2. Participation Rates Based Upon Type of Activity



The results show that over 50% of the youth surveyed identify as intensely-connected or hyper-connected and are also involved in protests, political group affiliations, demonstrations, cultural groups, and ecology groups (Tables 2 and 3). This trend suggests that even when technology does not translate into an automatic civic participation, as Smith

(2009) points out, we are dealing with young people who have more access to information and more possibilities to mobilize and organize.

Table 2. Political and civic activities according to level of connectivity: Youth In Situ

	Protests	Political groups	Demonstrations	Cultural groups	Ecology groups
Scarcely-connected	32.3%	33.3%	16.7%	16.0%	.0%
Novice-connected	25.8%	.0%	33.3%	20.0%	28.6%
Intensely-connected	22.6%	22.2%	23.3%	28.0%	42.9%
Hyper-connected	19.4%	44.4%	26.7%	36.0%	28.6%
TOTAL	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Table 3. Political and civic activities according to level of connectivity: Youth Online

	Protests	Political groups	Demonstrations	Cultural groups	Ecology groups
Scarcely-connected	21.1%	4.8%	21.2%	22.9%	24.2%
Novice-connected	18.4%	23.8%	21.2%	14.3%	24.2%
Intensely-connected	26.3%	33.3%	27.3%	31.4%	27.3%
Hyper-connected	34.2%	38.1%	30.3%	31.4%	24.2%
TOTAL	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

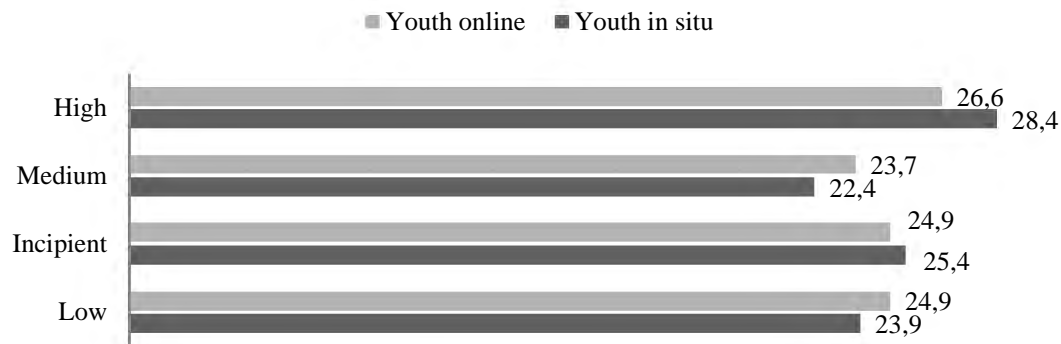
5.3. How are youth navigating perceived threats to their freedom of expression?

As previously mentioned, Mexico has been documented as one of the most dangerous countries for freedom of expression and journalistic activities. From 2000 to 2011, 69 reporters were reported as victims of murder (Meneses, 2011). As a result of the war against drug trafficking—begun by the government of former President Felipe Calderón—journalists, especially in the regions most affected by organized crime, have experienced dilemmas about whether to publish or have ceased publishing at all. Within such a context, we needed to understand the perceptions about personal identification, trust, and freedom which pre-figures political and civic involvement in Mexico. In both surveys, we observed low levels of institutional trust.

We synthesized 25 distinct indicators of trust amongst the following actors and institutions: family, police, universities, journalists, military, electoral oversight, religious leaders, federal government, academics, and classmates, among others. In order to avoid making arbitrary scores, we divided the index in four quartiles (Figure 3), labeling each as

low, incipient, medium and high trust. Only universities and the family environment reached scores higher than five points in our trust scale.

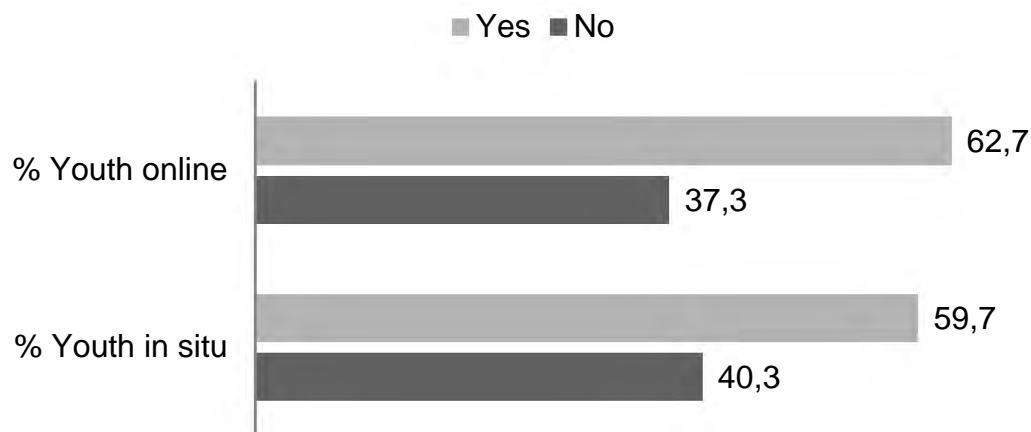
Figure 3. Trust in Mexican Political and Social Institutions



Amongst those surveyed *In Situ* and Online, a high level of skepticism predominates about political institutions related to security administration and rule of law. According to our informants, the family, the social media and universities were the only places in which they could express freely in a context of openness and plurality.

Traditional media received low points, coinciding with the demands that inspired the #YoSoy132 social movement. In general, the rate of approval was low, not exceeding rates of 45/100 points. The data also included the perception of other institutions that seem to hinder the expression and dialogue, such as police departments and military forces. Considering this prevalent rejection of mass media and traditional political institutions, the #YoSoy132 movement is an example of how social media networks can emerge as alternative spaces in times of threats to freedom of expression. As we can observe in Figure 4, over 50% of both groups expressed feeling limited in their freedom of expression. This pessimistic perception is especially acute in the context of young people's responses to the consideration that to express one's ideas is to put one's life at risk.

Figure 4. Perceptions of Freedom of Expression



This data helps us to better understand the values and contexts in which the politics of youth might be re-signified and constructed. In the case of the #YoSoy132 movement, political participation, online and off, did not become more limited in the face of adversities and lack of guarantees, but rather became an emergent product of such conditions.

Social media does not tend to substitute political action taking place in offline contexts. On the contrary, this kind of technological resource allows users to communicate in alternative ways, express ideas through new dynamics, and engage with others in more equalized terms. The creation of a platform for less hierarchical communication is especially significant in the context of systemic obstacles to exercise political liberties and civil rights. Significantly, a majority of youth surveyed identified social media as a trustworthy space for freedom of expression, akin to family and the university.

5.4. How are connected youth engaging in an incipient diasporic public sphere?

The #YoSoy132 movement demonstrates how the online formation of a youth imaginary and new identity can connect young people to both online and offline political action. Following Castoriadis's (1984) definition of the social imaginary, a youth imaginary is a cultural construction that invokes institutions, norms and symbols shared within a social group. Although construed subjectively, according to Castoriadis, imaginaries affect reality providing opportunities and constraints to action. In that sense an imaginary is not a fiction or a falsehood; it is a reality with practical consequences for everyday life. Social and political perceptions about trust and freedom of expression affected the way in which our surveyed youth navigated political participation.

It was no surprise that family and school are institutions with the most trust and influence amongst this age group. However, social networks are gaining unprecedented importance amongst those surveyed. We can infer that the trust and sense of freedom of expression expected of family and university milieus, foci of a young student's social contexts, extends to the public sphere articulated across social media. Thus, in the case of #YoSoy132, online political action and related offline political action benefited from the imaginary of trust created in ostensibly apolitical digital environments.

This information is even more relevant in electronic media systems with monopolies as in Mexico. According to Trejo Delarbre (2011), 95% of the population has access to commercial television in contrast to 37% with access to the Internet. Although difficult to generalize, we are probably on the cusp of a media transition between the generation of connected youth and those who made up our sample groups. As this continues to shift, the correlations between political persuasion, political action, and mass media are also changing.

For the mobilized youth of #YoSoy132, the Internet took on a central and strategic character. In our online survey, we found the Internet was explicitly articulated as an alternative sphere to traditional media. We observed a displacement of the public sphere in a Habermasian sense towards an incipient diasporic public sphere, or a multiplicity of public spheres. We also observed a differentiated appropriation of the Internet in order to participate in political-civic issues. According to our data, the role played by *in situ* youth was more contentious and active compared with the online surveyed students. The latter tended toward a role much closer to that of a passive consumer, concentrating their actions on community spaces like school, neighborhoods or associations. We understand the students' self-professed political activity—whether in public spaces or private conversations—to represent this incipient diasporic, varied, multiple landscape for political voice and action.

That said, extracting information and sharing content stand out as the most often recurring practices between both samples. To our surprise, only 4.3% of those surveyed *In Situ* and 9% of those surveyed *Online* shared memes. The percentage of those who claimed not doing anything with online information was considerable for this so-called generation of convergence culture. This suggests that in the diasporic public sphere the potential of online networks for improving democracies is not a clear, direct, or linear process. The

tension between passive consumption of information and political action, online and off, is present in our samples. For this reason we emphasize the #YoSoy132 movement as a manifestation of an incipient diasporic public sphere, characterized by passive participation with a few key exceptions of successful political action in public spaces.

Given the interactive possibilities of the web, these youth sought out minimal online interaction with the candidates for the Presidency of Mexico: Enrique Peña Nieto of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional; Josefina Vázquez of the Partido Acción Nacional; Andrés Manuel López Obrador of the Partido de la Revolución Democrática; and Gabriel Quadri of the Partido Nueva Alianza. But the #YoSoy132 movement did successfully interpolate the de facto powers of mass media monopolies via direct engagement with the presidential candidates. On June 11th, 2012 the #YoSoy132 movement was able to plan the first televised presidential debate organized by young adult students in the history of the country. The debate was held via Google Hang Out On Air and YouTube. It was moderated by two professors and one student, using a format that permitted citizen participation via the platform Google Moderator. The young people chose the questions with the highest votes to present to the candidates.⁵

In an example that also defies the tendency to simply share (as opposed to engage and interact with) information, Twitter trolling appears with more points among those surveyed *In Situ*. This is not surprising given that such activity was a common practice among political parties during the 2012 campaign. Even though both online and offline political action are strongly correlated,⁶ an asymmetrical appropriation of technological resources predominates. We contend that this is the result of a diversified pattern of involvement in public action wherein political-civic participation has its origin in the offline world. Only those individuals who are politically pro-active in real environments are those who use digital networks in a sufficiently significant manner to have an impact public life.

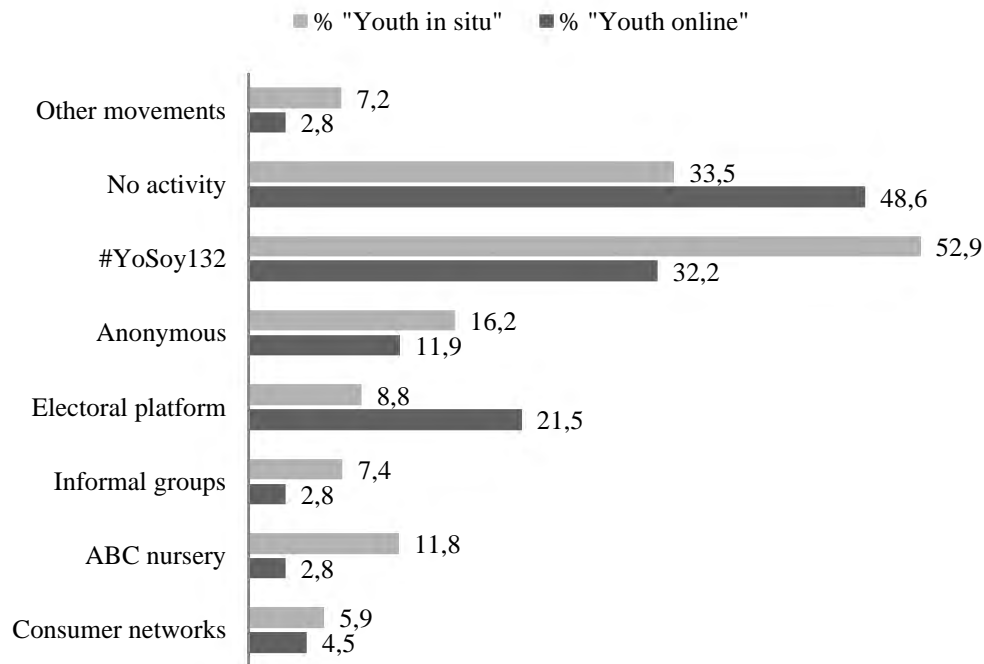
5.5. How does #YoSoy132 correlate with other networked social movements?

We observed new forms of political involvement that are distanced from the idea of the Habermasian public sphere and closer to the idea of a diasporic public sphere, in which deliberation gives way to expression and performance with public impact (Fraser, 1992; Butler, 2011). However, in addition to a notably high percentage of passive consumption and communication online, our attention is drawn to the fact that there is scarce participation in virtual politicized networks beyond the #YoSoy132 movement (Figure 5).

⁵ Since 1994 in Mexico, the electoral oversight authority and the political parties have been the only institutions to organize televised presidential debates, the rules determined internally.

⁶ Participation index online and offline between both samples are strongly correlated by a Rho Spearman coefficient of 0.472, statistically significant at the 95% level of confidence.

Figure 5. Participation in Networked Social Movements



There is a small but notable percentage of the youth surveyed who participated in other rebellious actions. 16.2% of those surveyed *In Situ* claimed participation in Anonymous, in comparison to 11.9% in the *Online* group. Anonymous is a global network of Internet “hackers” who describe themselves as dedicated to the disruption of a hegemonic global elite, public and private. In the case of the Collective #JusticiaABC,⁷ we found that 11.8% of mobilized youth participated. The collective has achieved one of the first legal initiatives elaborated by citizens: a law comprised of service benefits and attention to infants. This picture of networked, mobilized youth roughly mirrors the dynamic of passive vs. public participation in the diasporic public sphere described above. The majority of surveyed youth were not participating in other networked social movements, while a significant smaller percentage were doing so with considerable success.

6. Discussion

Our main findings are related to three different aspects discussed in the literature about social media, connectivity and civic engagement. First, despite the fact that the majority of the most important contributions to the field have been developed in countries like the United States, we found a strong correlation with the current literature about the online and offline political practices of surveyed youth during the #YoSoy132 movement. Our informants exhibit an effective link between their habits and political perceptions within and beyond connected environments. Even though this connection evolves from and along different participatory paths, where some students prefer contentious public actions over community-oriented channels, our samples reflected similar tendencies between a pessimistic perception of the public sphere and rates of political participation.

⁷ In June 2009, 49 children died in a fire in the ABC Daycare in Hermosillo, Sonora. The tragedy was the result of negligence and influence-trafficking. The Collective #JusticiaABC used social networks to demand justice for the parents and pressured Congress to elaborate legislation what would protect children who attend public daycares.

We observed that these college students use technological resources for multiple purposes. While the vast majority use social media as an alternative way to inform themselves regarding news and politics, almost 50% take advantage of networked dynamics to organize and mobilize in political activities. The remaining half of our surveyed youth are passive consumers of data or news, and do not translate their political interest into effective action. Although we need more information to offer a conclusive conjecture, it is clear that technology does not automatically detonate political participation. Rather, social media operates as a complementary platform for those who were previously involved in political activities. Students with previous experience in political actions perceived themselves as “regularly” and “very active” in political issues, and we cannot infer that passive citizens tend to become more active through the use and appropriation of networked environments.

Third, with respect to the social imaginary of our surveyed youths, we want to highlight the confidence expressed in family and universities in a context of the prevalent mistrust of political and media institutions and an acute awareness of pervasive threats to freedom of expression. Moreover, these contexts of trust seem to extend to social media networks constructed online. Technological resources allowed our college students to express themselves more freely within more equal interactions.

In a framework where the political *habitus* of youth is conditioned by mistrust, digital environments are still insufficient to guarantee wide and transcendent political and civic participation. Even so, the #YoSoy132 movement and the mobilization of other national sectors, which joined in the disapproval of political uses of mass media, had specific political repercussions in Mexico. In 2013, President Enrique Peña Nieto’s administration proposed a historic constitutional reform to promote the breaking up of monopolies on mass media and telecommunications. This action supported by all the political parties in Congress suggests that the mobilization of connected youth had an effect.

Furthermore, four years after our study, the #YoSoy132 movement continues to impact political mobilizations, online and beyond. The unprecedented insurgence of the movement in 2012 showed how effective a strong correlation between offline and online strategies can be. In the aftermath of the #YoSoy132 wave of mobilizations, there are several examples that deserve further inquiry. Local networks of #YoSoy132 student group continue to meet and mobilize. The national demonstrations to protest the disappearance of 43 high school students from Ayotzinapa, Guerrero have emulated some aspects of the #YoSoy132 mobilizations. Networks that were generated in 2012 continue to remain active among intercollegiate assemblies. Finally, in 2015 the young 25-year-old activist Pedro Kumamoto and his youth-led team made a historic, Internet-driven, and successful bid for election as an independent candidate in the Jalisco state legislature.

For the moment, the evidence we have gathered points to the possibility that we are in the midst of a re-signification of political and civic participation with distinct characteristics compared to past patterns. We must re-evaluate the perception that youth remain on the margin of activities relevant to public life and their own human development. Youth participate, as Dahlgren (2011) also suggests, in practices that occur outside of traditional institutions (political parties, national political affiliations) via an incipient diasporic public sphere. We must continue to explore why traditional institutions take on a marginal aspect in the face of youth participation; which environments are shown to be open and which are demonstrated to be closed; what distinctions operate in favor of and what distinctions operate against the greater political inclusion of youth; and, above all, what model of society leads to the active engagement of our youth actors.

Although we cannot generalize a theoretical model from this data, our conclusions are relevant to future studies of today’s youth. Technology has differentiated effects, and the youth observed in this phase of research form only part of a much larger and more heterogeneous composite. In order to better understand the complexity of exercising

participatory democracy in a political environment where freedom of expression is systemically discouraged, such distinctions must be further explored. In a country with a significant investment and notable improvements in technological infrastructure, imminent challenges that must be addressed include the inequality of access to technology and the Internet. The privileged position of the mobilized youth in our study suggests that the successful hybridization of online and offline environments among the #YoSoy132 movement is a privileged mode of political participation in Mexico.

We found that in this privileged overlap between online and offline networks, there is opportunity for a renewed youthful imagination about their political voice and impact. In the face of widespread accusations of a corrupt mass media, social networks have provided an alternative route of expression, dialogue, and mobilization. Without replacing the necessity of offline participation, new online technologies offer other means to organize and participate in political action. #YoSoy132's strategic interpellation of digital and offline actions suggest that there is critical mass of young people in Mexico who are seeking to disrupt the status quo with the tools of a virtual reality. Learning more about who these young people are and how their social imaginary influences their political actions should not be neglected by future research agendas. In a country like Mexico, such research not only strengthens civic engagement and participatory democracy, it also contributes to the urgent task to find alternative modes for the fundamental exercise of freedom of expression.

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