# Digital social education: a systematic review

**R&D Digital Youth Work:** young people, active citizenship and inclusion

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# 1. Introduction

The present document may be considered a first step in a line of research that explores three aspects[1]: the way in which uses of the internet can promote active citizenship and political participation; the development of a critical pedagogy in the digital environment; and the establishment of guidelines for digital social education. Young people are the study subject in this analysis, as users of the internet, and as the recipient population of critical pedagogy and digital social education.

The question articulated in the text is the way in which the internet and the digital environment influence citizen participation in the public sphere of democratic societies, and motivate political, social and cultural engagement among young people. To ascertain the current situation, we conducted a systematic review of the last five years' scientific literature on questions related to citizenship, literacy and social education, paying particular attention to the digital aspects of these.

Despite the increased number of critical stances over the last decade (Morozov, 2011; Fuchs, 2014; Srnicek, 2016; Lovink, 2019), the dominant literature tends to perceive the internet as a space ideally suited to political and civic engagement in the form of self-expression and action, characterized by digital technologies which are "people-oriented", "interactive", "social", "adaptive", and fundamental for the development of a "participatory culture" (Jenkins, 2016; Freelon, Wells & Bennett, 2013; Ranieri, Rosa & Manca, 2016). In particular, it regards information as a first phase of this participation, taking into account the transformation in the nature of information (Álvaro & Rubio, 2016). The consensus is that the informational use of the internet has a positive effect in terms of democratic engagement (Boulianne, 2009), and that young people have a new channel of communication through which they can **participate politically**. In recent years, however, an increase in the dissemination of false information via digital platforms, commonly known as "fake news" (Fox, 2020), has prompted debate on the need for a **digital literacy** intervention designed to safeguard these positive effects of digital information on democratic engagement (Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017; Jones-Jang, Mortensen & Liu, 2019).

In this context, **digital competence** is a key concept, in European Union policies specifically. The European Digital Competence Framework for Citizens – DigComp 2.0 – (Vuorikari et al., 2016) and DigComp 2.1 (Carretero, Vuorikari & Punie, 2017), identify five areas of competence: information and data literacy; communication and collaboration; creation of digital content; safety; and problem solving. The objective is for citizens to be able to access and critically evaluate a constant and diverse flow of information upon which to base their democratic participation (Mihailidis & Thevenin, 2013). In a digital communication environment marked by "misinformation" (the spreading of false information, whether involuntarily or with intent to cause harm) and "disinformation" (information based on facts employed deliberately to cause harm), media and digital or "data" literacy (Carmi et al.,2020) is essential to full participation in a media-saturated society (Hobbs, 2010).

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**Social education**, understood as a "citizens' right based on the recognition of a professional educator as a generator of educational contexts and mediatory and training strategies" (ASEDES, 2007), helps to promote a more inclusive society, placing particular emphasis on actions designed to support the personal development and empowerment of young people. When working with young people, social education has two fundamental characteristics: young people are treated as a specific group; and work takes place outside the classroom, in a variety of social and educational spaces. Expert groups set up under the European Union Work Plan for Youth (2016–2018) defined digital social education as "proactively using or addressing digital and media and technology in youth work". Social education can play an important role in helping young people to navigate the opportunities offered by digital technologies, consider the risks and the consequences, make informed decisions and assume responsibilities.

The **digital environment** presents new opportunities for social inclusion. Specifically, social media are seen as the point of entry to the internet for a "digitally excluded" majority (Correa, 2015). The digital gap is now not so much a technological gap – the majority of young people have access to technological devices and the internet – as one of uses and specific objectives of media and digital technologies. Digital competence is key to the understanding of inequality in the digital society (Morales et al., 2016; Sampedro, 2005). Critical approaches in this area expose the role of commercial platforms in relational dynamics in the digital environment: advertising rationale, possessive individualism and promotional participation (Kaplún, 1998; Kelty, 2008; Gillmor, 2010; Sampedro, 2018).

This perspective must be considered in relation to the notion of "digital natives". This mythological notion leads to the erroneous conclusion that **young people** are fully acquainted with digital technologies and require no attention from digital inequality policies (Sánchez-Navarro & Aranda, 2012). On the contrary, digital content creation and participation require skills and knowledge far beyond everyday use of the internet (Hargittai, 2010; Aranda et al., 2018). Supporting young people in acting responsibly in the digital environment, and responding to their need for training in the digital environment, is essential. Social education must therefore strive to integrate digital media and devices into its practices and activities (Middaugh & Khane, 2013).

# 2. Method

We conducted a systematic review of the academic literature (Siddaway, Woods & Hedges, 2018) to provide a quantitative analysis and a qualitative synthesis of the output on the questions identified. This is an explicit and replicable method for the identification, evaluation and synthesis of the relevant body of work produced (Okoli & Schabram, 2010).

To initiate the design and planning of the systematic review, the following research questions (RQ) were formulated:

RQ 1. How does the digital environment influence the participation – social, civic and political – of young people and the formation of active citizenship?

RQ 2. What kind of competencies, skills and knowledge are needed for the media and digital literacy of educators and young people?

RQ 3. What role can digital social education play in the empowerment of youth, especially in the social inclusion of marginalized sectors[2]?

These RQs were operationalized in keywords used as database search terms to obtain the academic literature:

-digital "youth participation"

-"digital citizenship"

-digital "media literacy"

-digital "youth work"

-digital "social education"

-digital "youth empowerment"

-digital "social inclusion"

-digital "(non-formal OR informal) learning"

Having established the search terms, we developed the inclusion/exclusion criteria (I/EC):

I/EC 1.Period of time. Articles published between 2015 and 2019.

I/EC 2. Language. English, or with at least the abstract in English, even where the text is in Spanish.

I/EC 3. Type of publication. Peer-reviewed academic articles.

I/EC 4. Research questions. Articles which, according to the title and the summary, answer any of the three research questions posed above.

I/EC 5. Impact index. Articles published in academic journals with a ranking score above the 50th percentile (Q1–Q2) in the categories of Communication and/or Education; or, failing these, in related research categories (Social Sciences, Information Sciences, Cultural Studies, etc.).

I/EC 6. Categories of analysis. Based on the research questions, we established three sections of analysis: digital citizenship, digital literacy, and digital social education. These sections are divided into two categories each, one focused on theoretical approaches to

2 By marginalization we refer to socio-economic factors related to place of origin, residence, gender, ethnicity, educational level and social class, among others.

these concepts, and the other dedicated to practical application relevant to the research interest.

- Theoretical approach to the concept of "digital citizenship".
- Analysis of the social, political, civic and cultural participation of youth in the digital environment.
- Theoretical approach to the concept of "digital literacy".
- Analysis of digital competencies among educators and/or young people.
- Theoretical approach to the concept of "digital social education".
- Analysis of the relationship between use of digital technologies and empowerment and social inclusion of young people.

We used the following databases and search strings[3]:

Web of Science: *TS=((digital "youth participation") OR (digital "media literacy") OR ((digital "citizenship") OR (digital "youth work") OR (digital "social inclusion") OR (digital "youth empowerment") OR (digital "social education") OR (digital "(non-formal OR informal) learning"))*

Scopus: *TITLE-ABS-KEY=((digital "youth participation") OR (digital "media literacy") OR (digital "citizenship") OR (digital "youth work") OR (digital "social inclusion") OR (digital "youth empowerment") OR (digital "social education") OR (digital "(non-formal OR informal) learning"))*

The searches were conducted on 12 December 2019. In both databases, I/EC 1, 2 and 3 were applied, indicating the inclusion of academic articles in English (title, abstract and keywords) published between 2015 and 2019. The set obtained consisted of 779 articles. A manual review identified and excluded 39 book chapters and 41 duplicate publications, leaving a total of 699 articles. We complemented the search by consulting the content of specialized Social Education journals drawn from the expert knowledge of authors in this field, obtaining seven relevant articles. In total, 706 academic articles were retrieved as a result of the search phase. The flowchart model [Figure 1] developed by the PRISMA group (Moher et al., 2009) is used to present the search, filtering and selection phases:

3 The remainder of this section can be consulted on the log sheet (https://bit.ly/38Hsgjg).

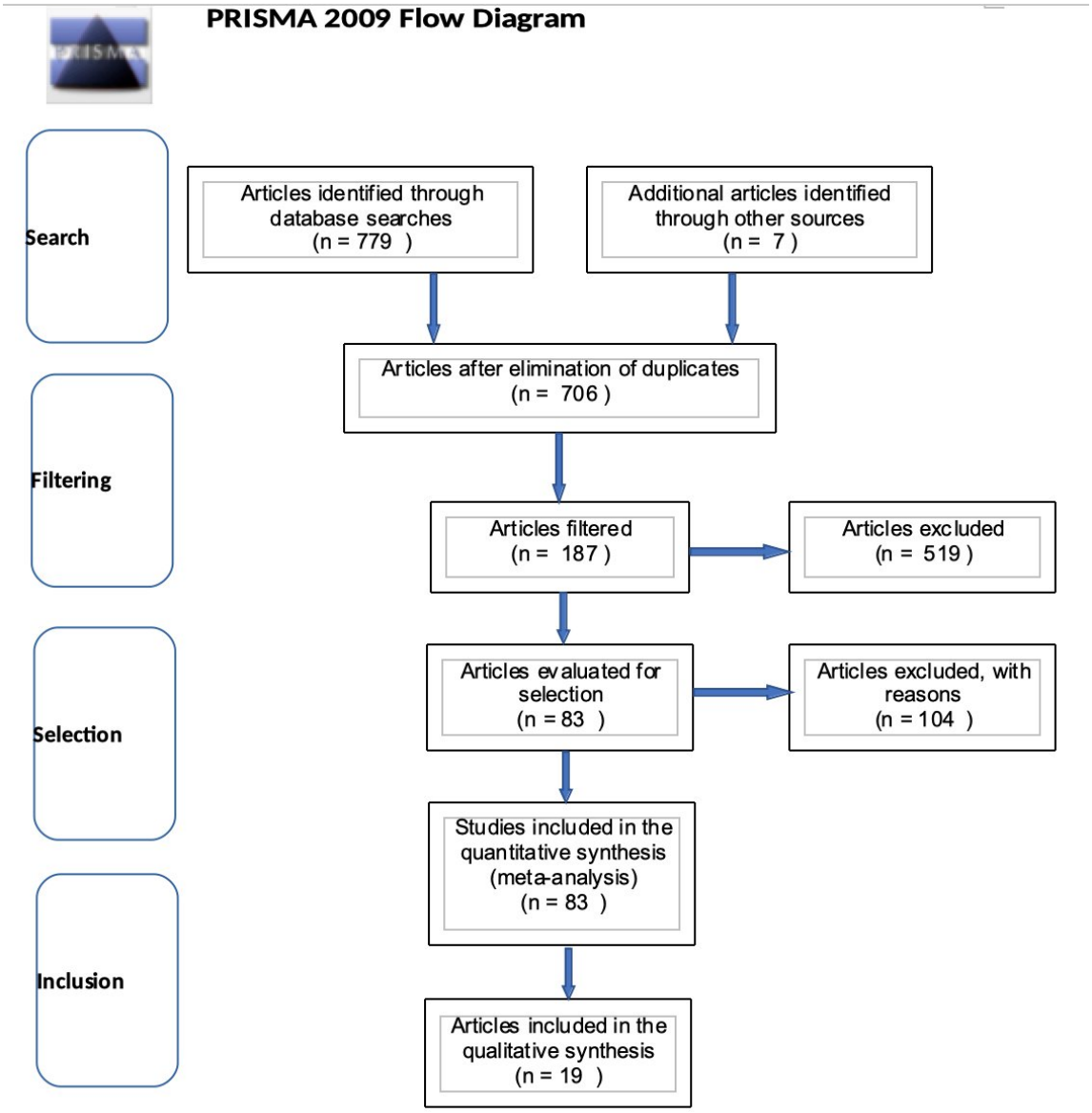


Figure 1. PRISMA flowchart (Moher et al., 2009) of the systematic review.

After reading the title and summary of the 706 articles, we discarded 519 for failing to answer the research questions (I/EC 4), retaining 187 articles in the filtering and selection process. We then applied I/EC 5 to the remaining 187 articles. To do so, we searched for the journal of the publication using Clarivate Analytics InCites Journal Citation Report (JCR) and, if it did not appear there, in CiteScore in Scopus. We noted the percentile assigned to its category and the journal's area of focus. Having applied this filter, we excluded 99 articles, retaining 88 which went forward to the quantitative analysis phase. We then downloaded and performed a complete reading of the texts. Five of the 88 articles were excluded from the quantitative analysis because they either could not be retrieved (two), or were published before 2015 (three). A total of 83 articles remained.

The next phase consisted of two parts: quantitative analysis and qualitative synthesis. Quantitative analysis was performed on all 83 articles, while I/EC 6 was applied for the qualitative synthesis. After reading the articles, we awarded a score for each of the six study categories. This score was awarded according to whether the article addressed the

issue in question (1 point), or did so at least partially (0.5 points). Each article was scored out of 6, and we established a cut-off point of a minimum score of 3 points to ensure relevance to the research: 19 articles exceeded this cut-off point for qualitative synthesis.

The quantitative analysis of the sample of 83 items included the following: area of publication (communication, education, cultural studies, etc.), year of publication, place of publication and methodology. We also used the previously established score to determine the weight of each category in the scientific literature of the last five years.

For the qualitative synthesis, we proceeded to the exhaustive reading of the sample of 19 articles. We coded the articles by colours associated with the six subcategories. Once the articles were coded, we bundled the extracts from each article under the corresponding subcategories. In this way we obtained an overview of the approaches found in the sample for each article. In these sections we indicate the areas of consensus and conflict found among the articles, and the most relevant discussions.

# 3. Results

## 3.1. Quantitative analysis

In this section we consider the following aspects of the sample: area, year and place of publication, methodology, and topics according to the established categories.

According to the area of publication, understood as the principal category to which the article is assigned in the InCites or CiteScore indexation, two areas stood out: **Education** (36) and **Communication** (26). To these must be added one broader area, Social Sciences (13), and two other related areas: Paediatrics (2) and Information Sciences (4). Finally, there were two articles in nearby areas: Cultural Studies (1) and Humanities (1).

Taking into account the time distribution of the five-year period under consideration, we observed a change between the first three years (2015–2017) and the last two (2018–2019). Of the 83 articles, 14, 10, and 14 were published in 2015, 2016 and 2017, respectively. In 2018, the number of publications (21) increased by 50% over the previous year, and the trend continued in 2019, with 24 articles published. This indicates a **growing interest in the topics addressed by this research**.

Regarding place of publication – the country location of the university from which the article proceeded – we note the predominance of the United States. Of the 83 articles analysed, 39 emerged from American universities (47%). If we also take into account articles proceeding from the United Kingdom (8), Canada (4) and Australia (3), the **predominance of articles produced in English** is even greater, at almost two thirds (65%). Eighteen articles, 21.7% of the total, proceeded from the European continent, most notably Spain (8), with 9.6%, followed by Portugal (2) and Slovakia (2). The remaining 11 articles, 13.3%, were distributed around the globe, with Turkey and South Korea contributing two articles each.

In terms of theoretical and methodological approaches, 11 of the 83 articles (13.3%) took a theoretical approach (10 discussions and 1 conceptual analysis). **Mixed methodological approaches were the most widely used**, in 21 of the 83 articles (25.3%). These included content analyses, surveys, in-depth interviews, focus groups and ethnographies, among others. The most notable methodologies applied were the **survey** (20), the **"design-based" study** (9), and the **case study** (6).

Finally, we observed a clear inequality in the distribution by category of analysis. Of the 83 articles, 39% addressed digital citizenship (15.4%) and youth participation (23.6%); 43.3% addressed digital literacy (26.2%) and digital competencies (17.1%); and 17.7% addressed digital social education (6.1%), and social inclusion and youth empowerment (11.6%). At this point, the sample of 19 articles of the qualitative synthesis offered an interesting comparison. Since these articles were selected on the basis of their coverage of the six categories, more balanced results were obtained. While the second section, digital literacy and competencies, showed only the slightest increase (44.7%), the first section, citizenship and participation, dropped to 31.7%, and the third section, education and social inclusion, rose to 23.6%.

These quantitative results show a **failure to address social inclusion and empowerment in the academic literature on citizenship and digital literacy focused on young people**. Furthermore, the **scant scientific production on digital social education** confirms the relevance of this study and ascribes validity to the qualitative results presented below.

# 3.2. Qualitative synthesis

## 3.2.1. Citizenship and participation

### Digital citizenship

The academic literature on digital citizenship suggests a notion in the process of being defined. The difficulty in establishing precisely what we mean by "digital citizenship" shows that it is a "multifaceted" term (Panke & Stephens, 2018) that encompasses other related concepts (literacy, participation, access, competencies, norms and values). It is therefore approached from diverse fields such as education, communication or political science (Gleason & von Gillern, 2018). For the notion of digital citizenship to be useful in the curricular design of an applied discipline such as social education, the exercise of a concrete conceptualization is essential.

In order to clarify the notion of **digital citizenship**, a methodology such as conceptual analysis is a valuable tool, especially if focused on its educational use (Choi, 2016; Gleason & von Gillern, 2018). This analysis is underpinned by the assumption that citizenship plays a central role in social studies about education, justifying the need for a reinterpretation of citizenship in the digital era (Choi, 2016). In the reinterpretation of citizenship in the digital age, it is worth briefly mentioning previous notions of citizenship, distinguishing between "traditional notions", such as legal membership of a nation-state with its respective rights and obligations; and "critical notions", in terms of identity and

culture in the context of globalization. The emerging debate perceives digital citizenship, on the one hand, as an additional layer to previous notions adapted to the effects of digital communication technologies, or, on the other, as a determining factor that demands its own conceptualization.

Choi (2016) adopts an intermediate position in the debate on the basis of her conceptual analysis, concluding that digital citizenship, though a different concept, is related to previous notions of citizenship anchored in offline life, and recognizing its relevance and utility in the digital age. Choi (2016) highlights three elements common to all notions of citizenship: "social responsibility," "being well-informed," and "active engagement". A similar position is expressed by Panke and Stephens (2018), who point out that the digital sphere extends and transforms "traditional" citizenship. In contrast, Yue et al. (2019) reject the idea that digital citizenship is another dimension of citizenship, understanding it instead as a "practice" through which citizenship is exercised in the digital environment.

In terms of a definition, Choi (2016) refers to digital citizenship as the **set of "skills, thoughts and actions related to use of the internet, which enable people to understand, navigate, relate to and transform themselves, the community, society and the world"**. Panke and Stephens (2018) state that it is not "something we have", but rather "something we do", a "continuous reflective practice", agreeing in this respect with Yue et al. (2019), who perceive digital citizenship as a practice consisting of the "ability to participate online" and an "extension of social inclusion". This last approach is, according to Gleason and von Gillern (2018), one of the most common trends in current understanding of the term.

In their "practical" vision of digital citizenship, Yue et al. (2019) include digital citizenship as a subcategory of **media literacy**. Conversely, Choi (2016) develops a conceptual framework with four categories of digital citizenship: "ethics"; "media/information literacy"; "participation/engagement"; and "critical resistance". As Choi (2016) points out, this framework offers a vision of digital citizenship that can be operationalized in the development of useful measurement tools in the educational curriculum. Choi herself in subsequent works – included in the quantitative sample – develops a digital citizenship scale (2017) and applies it to educators (2018).

We focus here on the first dimension (ethics), since the other three correspond to the following sections of the document. Choi's (2016) "ethics" category is divided into three subcategories: safe and responsible use of digital communication technologies; digital awareness; and digital rights and obligations. Taking a stance based on a report by Impero Software and the Digital Citizenship Institute (2016), Panke and Stephens (2018) state that the concept of digital citizenship "reflects our shared need to develop skills and perspectives for safe, ethical, responsible, inspired, innovative and involved online conduct". Gleason and von Gillern (2018) identify this approach as another major trend in the definition of the term.

Finally, Yue et al. (2019) identify **approaches to digital citizenship in relation to youth**, distinguishing two in particular: the freedom approach, relating to the ability to participate online and the extension of social inclusion; and the control approach, which adopts a normative perspective in which young people are framed as "not-yet-citizens" in need of codes of behaviour that will enable them to become "good citizens". To overcome this dichotomy, Yue et al. (2019) propose a third approach focused on "civic participation". Digital citizens, according to Mossberger et al. (2008), are "those who use technology for

political information to fulfill their civic duty". Digital citizenship would thus relate, not only to practices in the digital environment, but also to how these practices relate to the offline lives of citizens. The use of digital practices in the transition from digital citizenship to the face-to-face institutional sphere is a point of particular relevance.

## Youth participation

It should be remembered that social education treats young people as a group with specific needs and aspirations. Literat et al. (2018) state that the analytical frameworks for digital participation tend not to target youth as a specific category. These authors do not perceive youth as merely a social and cultural category. In addition to being defined by age ranges, youth can also be defined according to the "institutional phases of life". **Youth** consists of an institutionally subordinate position, with the transition into adulthood marked by participation in work and non-educational settings (Literat et al., 2018).

De Lucas and D'Antonio (2019) identify **three notions of youth in relation to the approaches through which youth is linked to digital citizenship** (Yue et al., 2019), as shown in Figure 2. First, youth as a waiting period for adult life. This implies that young people are passive subjects in need of guidance, justifying a "control approach". According to De Lucas & D'Antonio (2019), this is the dominant trend, and leads to hierarchical, and even oppressive and discriminatory approaches. Second, youth as an agent of generational rupture. Youth is framed as a counter-culture with the potential for innovative routes to knowledge and creation, supporting the "freedom approach". This perspective can lead, as Literat et al. (2018) point out, to the uncritical assumption that participation is inherently positive. In the third notion, youth is not framed as a specific condition, allowing room for either of the two approaches. We consider the indeterminate nature of this third proposal to be the most pertinent, as it requires a critical evaluation of youth participation.

To describe the **relationship between young people and the digital environment**, Liubiniene & Thunqvist (2015) propose the term "digital generation". Although the concept of "generation" is valuable for enhancing understanding of the conception of youth, Liubiniene and Thunqvist's (2015) approach is superficial, as it is based on the notion of digital natives. Pawluczuk et al. (2019) propose a more practical term, "digital youth", understood as the young citizenship of the digital age, making explicit reference to the need for social educators to assist young people in their exploration of uses of digital technology.

Of particular relevance is the discussion around **"digital participation cultures"** (Cohen & Kahne, 2015; Ito et al., 2009; Jenkins et al., 2016), a framework within which Literat et al. (2018) began to analyse digital youth participation as a socio-cultural practice. Jenkins et al. (2016) write of "participatory cultures", which can be understood as having "relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, […] strong support for creating and sharing one's creations with others, […] some type of informal mentorship [...] where members believe that their contributions matter […] and feel some degree of social connection with each other". Literat et al. (2018) counterbalance the debate by pointing out how digitally mediated environments can allow or limit new forms, channels and modes of participation. They highlight "social position" (Boyd, 2014) and "cultural capital"

(Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016) as conditioning elements to enable or constrain digital youth participation.

One of the recurring concepts in the literature on digital youth participation is "**civic engagement**" (Martens & Hobbs, 2015; Mihailidis, 2018; Panke & Stephens, 2018; Yue et al., 2019). Martens and Hobbs (2015) propose a twofold understanding of the concept: as conventional political participation; and as the connections between people and their communities. They emphasize that both formal and informal educational experiences can contribute to building civic engagement, pointing to different forms of measurement such as behaviours, attitudes, perceptions, consumption, and knowledge. Discussion exists as to whether this notion of civic engagement and its relationship with the digital environment, no longer in terms of conditioning but in terms of effects, promotes "engaged" or "disengaged" youth. Martens and Hobbs (2015), from a critically distant stance, focus on identifying the uses and experiences that contribute to civic engagement. Mihailidis (2018), however, on the basis of previous works, argues that the current digital environment, dominated by social media networks, leads to a "**civic intervention gap**" between awareness raising and meaningful action. To settle this debate between "utopians and dystopians", Literat et al. (2018) propose a concrete analytical framework. Like Choi's (2016) research on digital citizenship, Literat et al.'s (2018) framework can be used to design measurement tools applicable to the social education curriculum. This framework consists of four categories: objectives, actors, contexts and intensities.

With respect to objectives, Literat et al. (2018) distinguish three dimensions: individualist/collectivist; expressive/instrumental; and focused on either the process or the product. This point resembles the "participation/engagement" category of digital citizenship (Choi, 2016), with two subcategories: macroforms of participation/engagement dedicated to intervention in the public sphere, tending to be more collective and instrumental; and microforms of participation/engagement, tending to be more individual and expressive, as well as being the most widespread. With regard to actors, Literat et al. (2018) identify two dimensions: individuals/collectives; and exclusive/inclusive.

The following contexts differentiate this framework: formal/informal; and bottom-up/top-down. Here, Literat et al. (2018) identify an important point: the dichotomy frequently assumed between formal/top-down and informal/bottom-up is not always borne out. The same authors also point out the importance of the role of educators as determinants for youth participation projects, and establish limits for the (re)appropriation of youth. With respect to intensities, the following dimensions exist: executive/structural; and minimalist/maximalist. The first dimension is fundamental because it addresses the question of empowerment by differentiating between executive participation (executing the orders of the adults who design the plan) and structural participation (young people are involved in the design of the project). This axis marks the difference between collaboration and participation (Literat, 2012).

Finally, the idealization of participation as an "invariably empowering practice" functions as a cover for the shortcomings in evaluation of the impact of digital youth participation initiatives (Literat et al., 2018). This perspective marginalizes understanding of the challenges and opportunities in terms of empowerment and social inclusion.

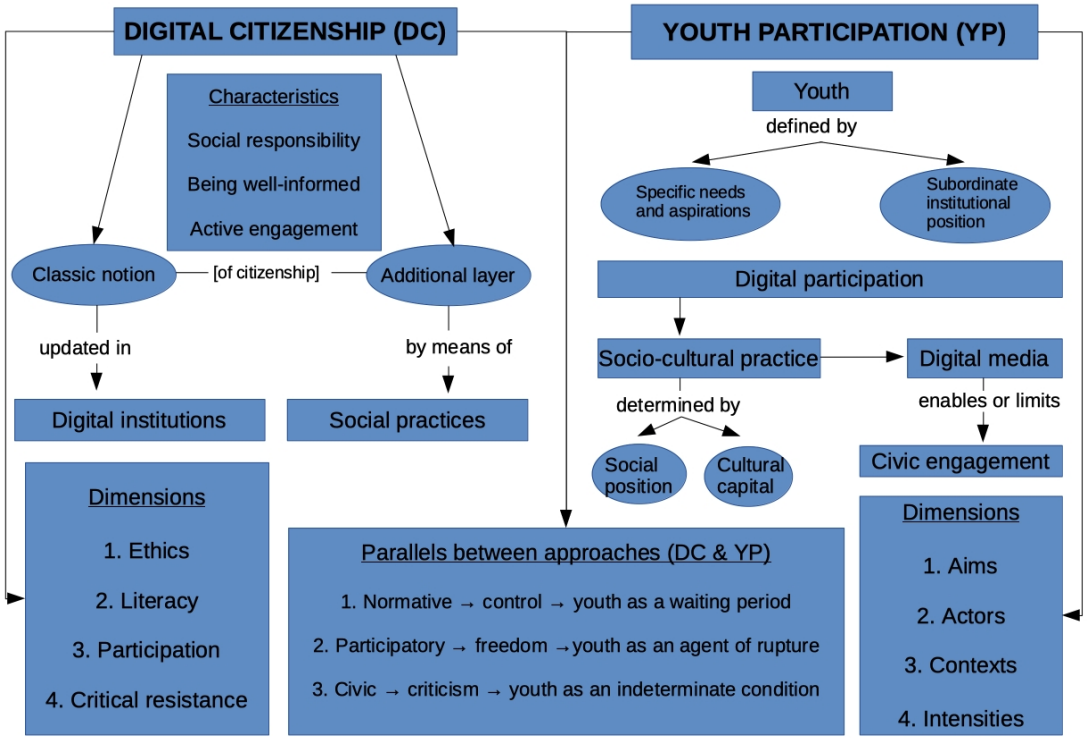


Figure 2. Schematic representation of the relationship between digital citizenship and youth participation.
Source: Author's own.

## 3.2.2. Literacy and competencies

### Digital literacy

Perovic (2015) introduces his study on media literacy by pointing out the multiplicity of terms related to literacy, some of the most prominent among which are "media literacy", "new media literacies", "media literacy 2.0", "digital literacy", "critical literacy", and "critical digital literacy". On the question of the "flourishing" of digital literacy studies, Yue et al. (2019) explain the phenomenon by the "increased cultural consumption of digital media and the shift towards production in the form of digital media".

Given its fundamental condition, the first concept worthy of attention is "**media literacy**". Among the wide variety of articles on literacy, there is a recurring definition that defines media literacy as the "set of skills required to access, use, create, analyse and evaluate information in a variety of communicative forms" (Liubiniene & Thunqvist, 2015; Young, 2015; Choi, 2016; Mihailidis, 2018). This shared definition is based, with slight variations, on Aufderheide's (1993) proposal of almost three decades ago.

Here we must pause to consider the work of Mihailidis (2018). Moving beyond the basic definition, Mihailidis refers to the US National Association for Media Literacy Education (see https://bit.ly/2xBPsIG) to assert that media literacy "empowers people to be critical thinkers and creators, effective communicators and active citizens". Having established

the hegemonic framework, termed "solutionist", Mihailidis (2018) identifies five constrictions that detract from the "civic relevance" of media literacy: assumption of a "critical distance" on the part of the citizen that does not exist; "transactional" approaches that prioritize the acquisition of technical skills that would provide a certain level of literacy; approaches focused on "deficits", such as information manipulation; approaches focused on the content rather than the platforms and how their functionality shapes communication; and prioritization of "individual responsibility". In addition, Mihailidis (2018) considers the norms of today's digital culture, which complicate the intervention of media literacy: cultural spectacularization, institutional delegitimization, and the civic intervention gap.

In the context of today's digital culture, the notion of "**digital literacy**" requires clarification. Yue et al. (2019) refer to it as the "skills and abilities required by individuals to participate in a digital society". They complement the definition by referencing Gilster (1997), who coined the concept as the "ability to understand and use digitalized information", which "emphasizes the mastery of ideas rather than technical skills" (Yue et al., 2019). Panke and Stephens (2018) cite Hibberson, Barrett and Davies' (2015) definition of digital literacy as "those capabilities which fit an individual for living, learning and working in a digital society". They add, in line with Gilster (1997), that digital literacy “transcends isolated technical skills, and encompasses a comprehensive understanding of digital environments” (Panke & Stephens, 2018). Pawluczuk et al. (2019) define digital literacy as the "ability to use information technology for both information sharing and information creation practices", and this, they add, with respect to young people, is an "evolving process, where young people access, navigate, examine, and produce digital media" (Pawluczuk et al., 2019).

In contrast to the basic definition of literacy as skills-based (accessing, analysing, evaluating, etc.), Milhailidis (2018) proposes **five "constructs" to reinforce the civic intentionality of media literacy**, focusing on the values that it should promote. The first of these constructs is "**agency**", understood as the possibility of empowering people to act in the public arena. The second is "**caring**", meaning receptivity and interrelatedness as an ethic of "caring about" rather than "caring for". The third is "**critical conscience**", the perception of reality as a situation capable of being transformed. The fourth is "**persistence**", the ability to withstand the accelerated communication flows of the digital environment. And the fifth construct is "**emancipation**", the power of active participation in the design of alternative realities. Mihailidis (2018) advocates a "civic renewal" of media literacy, evaluated on the basis of its "positive social impact". The social impact of literacy interventions is the subject of research by Pawluczuk et al. (2019), but in the field of social education, as we will return to later. However, this common objective enables the exchange of knowledge between the two fields of media literacy and social education, something which we will explore in greater detail in future works of the present research project.

Another relevant notion is "**critical digital literacy**". Pötzsch (2019) develops this concept from the premise that there exists a general lack of reflection on the implementation of technology in educational spaces. Consequently, there is a need to focus less on technological devices and the technical skills required to make efficient use of them, and more on the critical capabilities needed to assimilate their use into "capitalist dynamics, environmental ramifications, and individual empowerment" (Pötzsch, 2019). Like Milhailidis' (2018) "constructs", digital literacy would focus, not on training the user in the

technical skills required for insertion in the labour market, but on the **values that promote autonomous digital citizenship** (Pötzsch, 2019).

Pötzsch (2019) proposes three frameworks for developing critical digital literacy: using and reflecting on non-commercial alternatives to corporate products and services; paying attention to the history of digital technologies as well as technopolitical practices; and using cultural expressions that explicitly address the questions of power, surveillance and exploitation in the digital environment. This approach corresponds to another of the categories of digital citizenship established by Choi (2016), "critical resistance", and its two subcategories: "criticism of the existing power structure", with emphasis on the values of the hacker ethic; and "political activism", inspired by recent social mobilizations (Arab Spring, 15M, Occupy). Pötzsch (2019) argues that the impact of these approaches is to open the technological "black box", contextualizing and criticizing technologies in order to "retain democratic control over their personal, socio-political, economic and cultural ramifications".

Finally, Tugtekin and Koc (2019) have developed a model to assess the relationship between media literacy, communication skills and democratic trends. With respect to the "new media literacies", they establish two axes: consumption/prosumption; functional/critical. Four categories emerge from this: functional consumption; critical consumption; functional prosumption; and critical prosumption. The indicators they establish, in the form of competencies, will be addressed below.

## Digital competencies

Tugtekin and Koc (2019) apply ten indicators to operationalize the four categories that enable the distinction of critical uses. "**Functional consumption**" consists of technical access skills, and the ability to understand media content. "**Critical consumption**" is composed of three skills: analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of media messages. "**Functional prosumption**" involves the technical capabilities required to produce content; the ability to distribute messages; and the competencies needed to produce different forms of content. "**Critical prosumption**" includes participation as the ability to interact in digital media environments; and creation, such as the generation of content inserts designed to raise awareness of socio-cultural values and ideologies. Young (2015) also uses "new media literacies" and "participatory cultures" to identify twelve competencies: playing, acting, simulating, appropriation, multitasking, distributed cognition, collective intelligence, judgement, transmedia browsing, networking, negotiation, and visualization.

Perovic (2015) and Martens and Hobbs (2015) offer a more synthetic version of Tugtekin and Koc's (2018) proposal. Perovic (2015) identifies, but does not develop, five types of digital competencies: access, critical thinking, creative production, media awareness, and civic participation. Martens and Hobbs (2015) define the following five types: "**access**", the ability to make responsible decisions and access information with understanding; "**critical thinking**", the analysis of diverse messages with content evaluation skills; "**creative production**", using digital tools to create diverse forms of content; "**media awareness**", reflecting on one's own conduct, guided by social responsibility and ethics; and "**civic participation**", performing social, individual and collaborative actions in order to share knowledge and resolve problems. Within the same framework, Pawluczuk et al.

(2019) reduce the categories of digital competencies to just three: "use" (technical skills); "understanding" (critical thinking); and "creation" (media production). Tugtekin and Koc refer to Van Deursen and Van Dijk (2011) to distinguish between digital competencies related to either the "medium" (instrumental skills) or the "content" (information processing and content evaluation).

These proposals, however, neglect one fundamental factor pointed out at the beginning of this document: access, understood in socio-economic, not technical, terms (see Figure 3). Choi (2016), within the "media and information literacy" category of digital citizenship, divides digital competencies into three subcategories. The "**access gap**" or "**digital divide**" differentiates the population into those able to use technology simply and safely, and those with limited or no access, taking into account factors such as race, ethnicity, age and educational level. "**Technical skills**" are understood from an instrumental perspective and considered a prerequisite for the acquisition of advanced competencies. "**Psychological skills**" refers to the cognitive-intellectual skills required to process data critically, the social-communication skills to communicate and interact in digital environments, and the emotional skills to manage negative feelings and develop empathy.

Finally, an addition should be made to Choi's proposal (2016). Pötzsch (2019) draws on Simanowski (2018) to highlight two types of competencies required for **critical digital literacy**: in relation to technical skills, the ability to "repair, play, resist, or simply avoid digital technologies"; and, in terms of psychological capabilities, the "ability to see technology in local and global contexts and maintain a critical awareness of the political and economic issues underlying power".

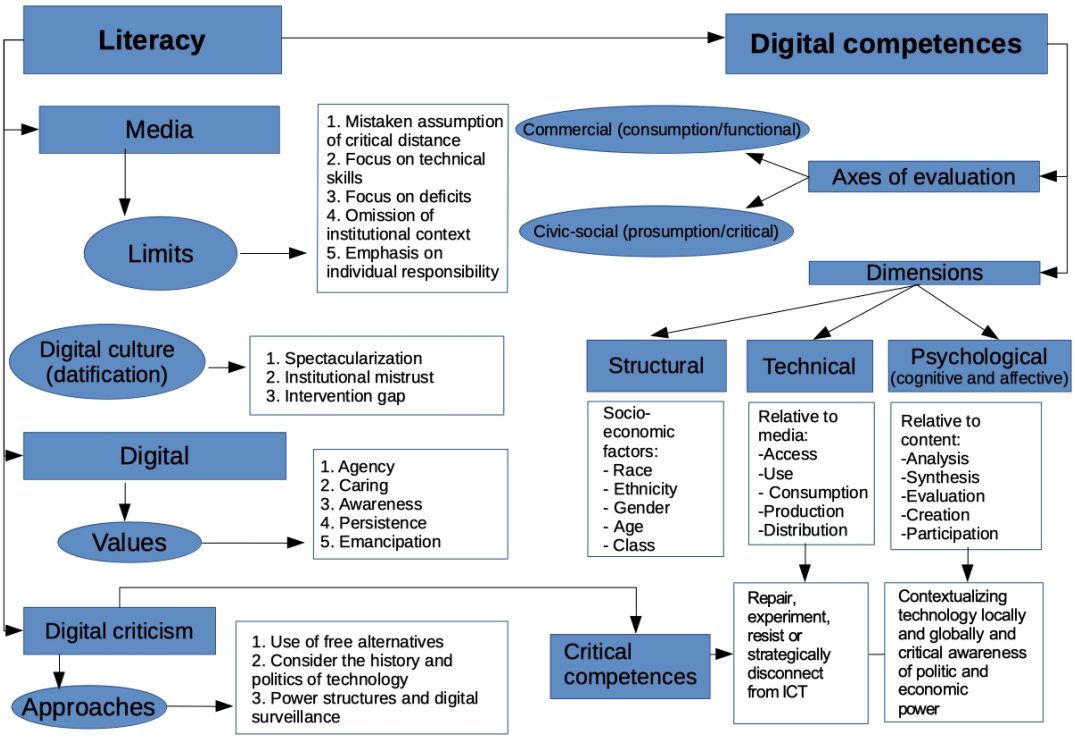


Figure 3. Schematic representation of the relationship between digital literacy and competencies.
Source: Author's own.

### 3.2.3. Education and social inclusion

## Digital social education

Young (2015) notes an increase in the volume of scientific literature on the use of ICT in education and the practice of social education over the last decade, while highlighting another debate on the inadequacy of the professional training in ICT received by social education students. Diaconu et al. (2019), however, points to a "scarcity of literature" that appears to demonstrate "some reticence in the social education field to accept the technological advances of the profession". In this regard, Pawluczuk et al. (2019) state that the role of educators working with digital youth has long been overlooked in the academic literature, necessitating further research in this emerging field.

De Lucas and D'Antonio (2019) state that a joint consideration of the **relationship between social education, ICT and youth** reveals that the "contradictions that divide them only increase" (see Figure 4). This complex relationship is built, on the part of social educators, on mistrust generated by the threat of a possible removing of the “human element” and "oppression" of their professional activity, as well as a lack of digital competencies. This trend in the implementation of ICT in social education takes the form of "disengagement" and "suspicion", which De Lucas and D'Antonio (2019) explain using the concept of "solutionism" (Morozov, 2013). This consists of the "will to improve using ICTs, which becomes the means trough which social relationships are articulated, giving pure technical solutions that seems to solve social issues in a self-evident way." (De Lucas & D'Antonio, 2019).

De Lucas and D'Antonio (2019) develop a critical framework with which to turn disengagement into an opportunity for social education students to generate frameworks and tools to understand and critically use ICT, through active participation in their design and implementation. They are supported by Illich's (2011) notion of "coexistence", and highlight the importance of "horizontal alternatives in the field of educational innovation" (Alonso Puelles et al., 2017). Pawluczuk et al. (2019) develop their work in this line, using the term "**digital youth work**". According to these authors, the term is used principally in Europe, where digital youth work is perceived as an essential element of youth engagement practice, and reference Harvey (2017) to define it as the "area of youth work that implements digital technologies to improve the results of youth-centred initiatives". This area should be understood as a continuation of youth work and not as a distinct method. Examples of educational innovation include coding clubs, participatory media clubs, digital storytelling and campaigning projects, and online support chats.

Diaconu et al. (2019) identify six **barriers for technology educators in social education**. The first two have to do with a lack of support, both "institutional" and "technical". The next two relate to the conditions of the technological environment: "constant change" and "overload of technological choice". The last two are related to online training, in both the "scarcity of design skills" and the "time-consuming nature of monitoring student interactivity". To overcome these barriers, Diaconu et al. (2019) propose "familiarizing social education students with the essential tools available" so that they gain confidence in using technology for their professional practices, and understanding, relating to and communicating better with young people.

However, Diaconu et al.'s (2019) intervention proposal leads to the solutionism identified by De Lucas and D'Antonio (2019). In view of the need to include ICT as a subject in the social education curriculum, Zorn and Steelmeyer (2017) state that this education should focus, not on current applications, "but on broader principles that explore the socio-technical impacts of technological innovation". Regarding the curriculum of social educators as saturated, these authors address the question from the perspective of interdisciplinarity and the setting of standards for the implementation of ICT in social education. As for the approach method, they employ the term "**research-based learning**" to refer to a pedagogical approach based on finding "answers and solutions to questions rather than absorbing and repeating knowledge presented by the teacher" (Zorn & Steelmeyer, 2017). This would address the barriers of "constant change" and "overload" in the technological environment, and contribute to the improvement of digital competencies and evaluation in digital education.

With respect to mechanisms for the **evaluation of the digital competencies of social educators**, Young (2015) proposes a validation instrument based on the "new media literacies" described above. We have already identified one shortcoming of this framework: lack of access as the result of a set of socio-economic inequalities. The development of a social inclusion evaluation tool, based on the competencies described above, is therefore needed. This tool should consider **"social impact"** (Pawluczuk et al., 2019), understood as "all the social and cultural consequences on human populations of any private or public action that alters the ways in which people live, work, play, relate to one another, organize to meet their needs, and generally cope as members of society" (Burdge & Vanclay, 1995, p. 59). Pawluczuk et al. (2019) highlight two issues to be resolved in this task: limited critical engagement with the evaluation process of youth projects and their outcome; and the lack of a consistent definition of such processes. To this end, they propose that workers with digital youth have "a degree of flexibility and freedom when analysing the social impact of their work"; and "encourage social impact assessment as a critical process, encompassing positive and negative outcomes and their associated challenges" (Pawluczuk et al., 2019).

Before concluding this section, one issue noted in the introduction as a constituent part of social education is worthy of mention: **alternatives to classrooms as educational spaces**. Pereira and Moura (2019) refer to schools, understood as the "most relevant instance of formal education", as "sociocultural institutions". These are characterized by the intervention of multiple actors, with young people being the least listened to while adults are the "key players that define the purposes of formal education" (Pereira & Moura, 2019). The "lack of appeal of schools amidst students", the "loss of its hegemonic position as a learning site", and their "outdated structure" are arguments which indicate that schools, and formal education in general, "neither corresponds with the needs of late modernity nor is synched with the young people's practices" (Pereira & Moura, 2019). This formal vision of education marginalizes the knowledge young people acquire in their leisure time through peer-to-peer communication on digital platforms. A lack of vessels of communication with the world beyond the classroom drives young people to develop their own learning strategies in the digital environment (Pereira & Moura, 2019).

Panke and Stephens (2018) understand informal learning as an "untapped resource", given the role it plays in fostering competencies focused on civic engagement. These authors use edublogs as a pedagogical tool in their work, highlighting their potential for informal learning, as well as the "seamless learning opportunities" to which they have contributed in academia. With respect to academia, De Lucas and D'Antonio (2019) point

out that universities – where social education, ICT and young people converge – can be an experimental space for a coexistence in which young people's creativity and innovative potential participate in the design of ICT-related programmes, and young people interact with academia in a more horizontal and active way.

## Social inclusion

The key notion with respect to the social inclusion of young people is the "**access gap"** or **"digital divide"** (Liubiniene & Thunqvist, 2015; Choi, 2016; Garmendia & Carrera, 2019). In view of the growing focus on the digital inclusion of vulnerable groups, Garmendia and Carrera (2019) base their discussion on the premise that "social exclusion can contribute to digital exclusion" (Salemnik, 2016). Discussion in relation to the digital divide is broadened to consider, not only its technical aspect, but also the fundamental role of socio-economic factors in the limited or non-existent use of digital applications. Like Choi (2016), Garmendia and Carrera (2019) focus on race, gender, ethnicity and social class as elements of influence. Liubiniene and Thunqvist (2015) go further and relate the digital divide to media literacy, with particular reference to the "digital generation".

Liubiniene and Thunqvist (2015) address the impact of **socio-cultural and socio-economic factors** from the concept of the "network society" (Castells, 2010). The rapid growth of the network society modifies everyday aspects of life, so that the "traditional understanding of the concept of social stratification changes with the advance of an emerging elite" (Liubiniene & Thunqvist, 2015) known as the "netocracy" (Bard & Jan Söderqvist, 2002). This is defined as the "global upper class that bases its power on technological advantage and networking skills", on which the "future of all social structures and functions, ranging from politics, through economy, consumption models to culture and even construction of social identity" could depend (Liubiniene & Thunqvist, 2015).

According to Liubiniene and Thunqvist (2015), it is not enough to develop the technological infrastructure; rather, priority must be given to "ensure the economic, educational and socio-cultural development of all segments of the population". Garmendia and Carrera (2019) reference Kleine (2013) in their assertion that, with respect to "technologies for development", "development is the aim and ICTs are the means of achieving it", and should be seen as more of a process than an outcome. Continuing with Kleine (2013), this perspective requires an "open-ended process of deliberation which puts the views of the people whose lives are affected at the heart of the development process". Garmendia and Carrera (2019) add that, in order for this development to contribute to the wellbeing of children and young people, digital access should be understood as **a right**.

Finally, Garmendia and Carrera (2019) call on the **public sector** to demonstrate greater willingness to invest in digital literacy, to "minimise inequality and the knowledge divide and to foster greater social justice" (Stoilova, Livingstone, & Kardefelt-Winther, 2016). Furthermore, funding for this task should promote “educational activities outside the formal school system" (Garmendia & Carrera, 2019). Non-formal initiatives would contribute to the development of digital competencies focused on the social inclusion of peripheral and marginalized strata of youth in environments in which they learn together.

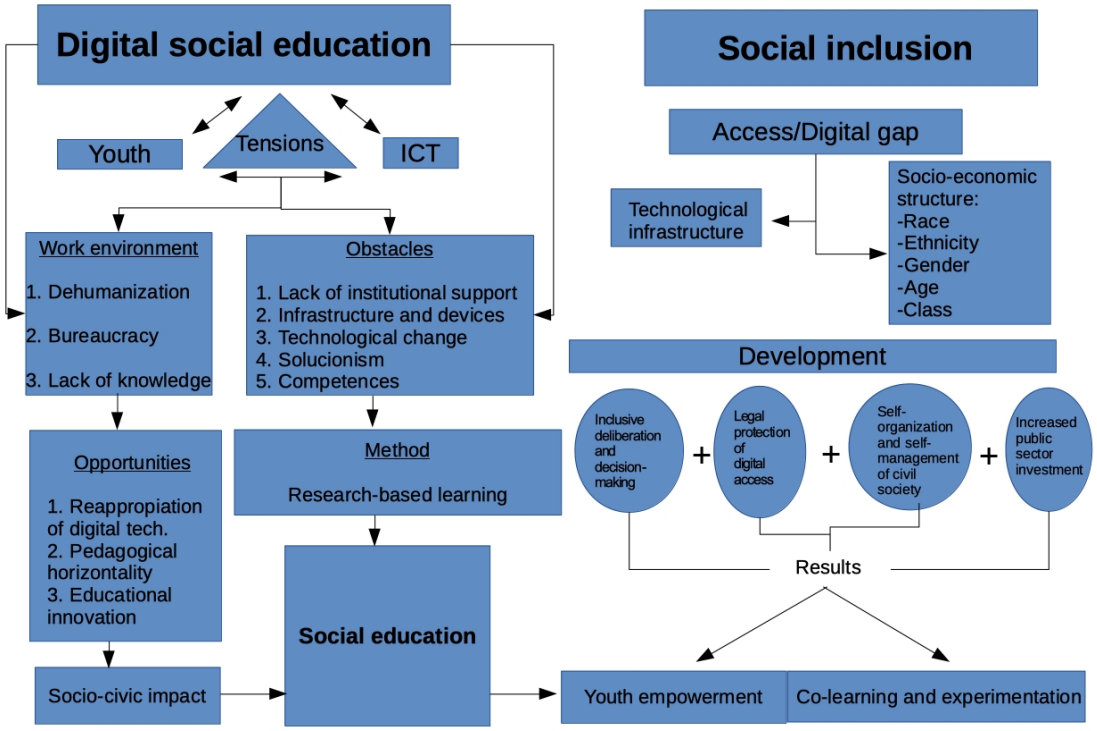


Figure 4. Schematic representation of the relationship between digital social education and inclusion and youth empowerment. Source: Author's own.

# 4. Conclusions

This scientific literature review aims to provide an overview of the most recent academic discussion – over the last five years – in relation to the civic engagement of young people and their political, social, cultural and economic participation in the public sphere through the internet and digital technologies. This exposition assumes that the development of digital literacy and its associated competencies represents an appropriate course of action for the promotion of active citizenship among young people; that social education is the area of intervention within which to work with young people in general, and in particular with sectors marginalized by socio-cultural and socio-economic factors (race, ethnicity, place of origin, gender class, etc.); and that digital social education can contribute to the inclusion and empowerment of young people, and this in turn will strengthen civic engagement and the democratic principles of society.

We divided the issue into three sections of analysis: (1) the notion of **citizenship**, with its need to be brought up to date and reinterpreted in the digital age, and, more specifically, the **digital participation of the young population**; (2) **digital literacy**, which consists of a set of technical and intellectual **competencies**; and (3) **digital social education** itself, especially with regard to assessing its impact in terms of **social inclusion** and **youth empowerment**.

Citizenship and youth are taken as concepts of reference, since they constitute both the objective (the formation of active citizenship) and the subject (young people) of the research that this literature review reveals as the most suitable and, at the same time, the most neglected or requiring of study. As for the notion of **citizenship**, the internet and digital technologies involve a set of structural transformations sufficient to require a reinterpretation of citizenship in the framework of the digital age. However, **the concept of digital citizenship must remain linked to offline notions of citizenship**, in order to determine which of these notions continue to be valid, and which need to brought up to date. Thus, it is possible to conceptualize digital citizenship both in its strictly online aspect, and in its interrelationship with the analogical environment. **Youth**, on the other hand, as a socio-cultural category with specific needs, aspirations and fears, can be understood not only in terms of age, as it is commonly understood, but also as a subordinate institutional position. This situation conditions the digital participation of young people, understood as a **socio-cultural practice in the digital media that is, or is seen to be, determined by social position and cultural capital**, and the civic engagement of young people as active citizens.

With respect to the **relationship between digital citizenship and youth participation**, **three main trends** emerge. These are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but they are characteristic of social intervention in projects with young people. (1) The first is the "**normative**" trend, predominant in formal educational spaces, and based on a conception of youth as a waiting period for adult life and young people as passive subjects in need of guidance. The normative trend justifies a "control approach" that requires the imparting of ethical codes of conduct from a vertical perspective. (2) Second, the "**participatory**" trend understands young people as agents of rupture and innovation and enables their full participation with a minimum of adult intervention. This "freedom approach" risks assuming participation as inherently positive, ignores possible harmful effects and makes it more difficult to evaluate youth practices. (3) Third, the "**civic**" trend is characterized by a "critical approach" which emphasizes the indeterminate nature of youth (neither a passive subject nor an active agent per se), and the need for a permanent and comprehensive analysis of the social and civic impact of digital youth participation.

Each of these trends involves a set of relationships of youth with (social) education and digital technologies, and **the dominant trend will shape the technology users of the future**. Macgilchrist et al. (2019) carry out an exercise in "theory fiction" in the social sciences by speculating on three possible future scenarios, in the year 2040, which consider the political, educational and technological decisions that bring us closer to these socio-technical configurations. The three stories are related to all three trends associated with the relationship between digital citizenship and youth participation. The first story, about "**smooth users and competent subjects**", anticipates the result of promoting the "normative" trend and a "control approach". This scenario promotes the acquisition of technical skills and seeks efficiency in the use of digital tools in order to insert young people into the labour market and a post-democratic society dominated by corporations. **"Digital nomads"** are the focus of the second story, in which the "participatory" trend, with its "freedom approach", leads users to cultivate individualism and superficiality and exploit state algorithmic regulations to shift towards a new capitalist economy. The third story depicts a scenario in which "**collective agency**" prevails, and institutions are spaces to explore new forms of more equitable and sustainable coexistence. This third future is the one most in line with the objectives of the research, and it is proposed that the "civic" trend with a "critical approach" is the means with which to most effectively promote the decision-making processes capable of drawing young people closer to such a scenario.

With regard to the future of education and its relationship with digital technologies, the **COVID-19 pandemic** represents a turning point (Selwyn et al., 2020). Lockdown measures have obliged the teaching profession to adapt its methods to the online environment in order to continue its activity. In this situation of forced **technological accelerationism**, the propensity towards the **privatization** of digital education through the use of corporate services is being accentuated (Education International, 2020). The pandemic is creating a situation of emergency that provides educational technology (EdTech) corporations with the perfect opportunity to deploy the discourse of technological solutionism, while educational institutions are being forced to make quick decisions to alleviate the effects of the crisis situation. This situation crystallizes into the formation of **new power networks** in the context of the pandemic, with alliances being formed between EdTech corporations and international governance bodies and national governments (Selwyn et al., 2020). Faced with these challenges, social education needs to **develop a digital literacy programme that takes into consideration the structural changes that the pandemic is causing in the digital environment**.

The literature review shows that the dominant conception of media literacy, upon which many **digital literacy** proposals are based, derives from a definition almost three decades old. This lack of renewal, and lack of consideration of the prevailing norms of current digital culture (spectacularization, mistrust of institutions, intervention gap), exacerbated by the pandemic, contrive to reduce the relevance of literacy projects. Future digital literacy proposals will need to expose **the ideology behind the dominant conception of digital literacy** (Carmi et al., 2020), and cease to prioritize the acquisition of utilitarian skills aimed at preparing the user to join the labour market. Digital literacy that focuses on the **promotion of values** such as **intervention**, **caring**, **critical awareness**, **persistence** and **emancipation** can increase the civic and social impact of literacy initiatives. This critical digital literacy would also foster the acquisition of knowledge and use of free software tools and programs, serve to analyse existing power structures and promote **autonomous citizen activism**.

To this end, digital literacy programmes must place more emphasis on **competencies** related to the production of content and formats, and on critical skills to increase their civic and social impact. They will also need to take into account three consecutive dimensions. First, the structural components related to the influence of **socio-cultural and socio-economic factors** (race, ethnicity, place of origin, gender, place of residence, social class, etc.). Second, **technical and instrumental skills**, as a prerequisite for the third dimension, **psychological, cognitive and affective competencies**. These should facilitate both experimentation with and contextualization of digital technologies in political and economic power relations.

As with digital literacy, the COVID-19 pandemic may exacerbate the problems identified in this review as they relate to the use of digital technologies in **social education**: **dehumanization** and **bureaucratization** of professional practices, **lack of knowledge** and competencies, **paucity of institutional and technical support,** and excessive weight of technologies in the workplace. The proposals drawn from the literature review point towards **educational innovation based on the reappropriation of digital technologies from a coexistentialist approach, and enhanced pedagogical horizontality**, issues made more difficult by the social and health crisis. To avoid the predominant technological solutionism, the **research-based learning method** can provide social education with the necessary autonomy to develop its digital professional practices.

In this way, social education can contribute to **bridging the digital access gap**, understood in socio-cultural and socio-economic terms, and to the development of sectors of the population made most vulnerable by issues such as gender, social class, ethnicity, etc. This development is supported by **deliberation and decision-making processes** that include youth, the guarantee of digital rights, the **self-organization and self-management of civil society,** and an increase in **public sector investment**. As a result, digital social education can increase its civic impact in terms of inclusion, empowerment, co-learning and experimentation in relation to young people.

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