

# RETHINKING STUDENTS' CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF NEW TECHNOLOGIES

Federica Caccioppola\*

## Abstract

Social media are having a wide impact on teenagers' civic engagement, while the nature of this impact is not yet clarified. According to the conceptualization proposed in IEA-ICCS study, civic engagement refers to connections with the life of the local community, including civic activities, participation, and beliefs about the possibility to become actively involved. In this context, social media stimulate adolescents' civic engagement, supporting social networks that differently would not be possible, providing the opportunity to express opinions, allowing partnerships to take action. However, social media have an impact in diminishing the time spent in face-to-face interactions. Additionally, they can contribute in propagating misinformation that may cause polarizing, or absent, forms of engagement. The paper will analyse these aspects in ICCS 2016 data, as the study explores the new forms of youth political participation, investigating how social media influence young people's engagement in society and how students' engagement can be supported and encouraged by schools.

Keywords: students' civic engagement; social media; media literacy; teaching methods

## Sommario

I social media stanno avendo un notevole impatto sull'impegno civico degli adolescenti, anche se la natura di questo impatto non è del tutto chiara. Nel quadro di riferimento dell'indagine IEA-ICCS 2016, l'impegno civico comprende tutte le connessioni dell'individuo con la vita della comunità locale. Non si esaurisce, pertanto, nel coinvolgimento in attività sociali o di cittadinanza attiva, ma comprende motivazioni, valori e opinioni circa la possibilità di essere coinvolti attivamente. All'interno di questa prospettiva, i social media stimolano l'impegno civico degli adolescenti, supportando reti sociali che non sarebbero state possibili in modalità diverse, e costituendo una effettiva opportunità di esprimere opinioni, confrontarsi ed

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\* LUMSA University - *Education Faculty*, [fcaccioppola@lumsa.it](mailto:fcaccioppola@lumsa.it); Australian Catholic University, *Learning Science Institute Australia (LSIA)*, [federica.caccioppola@myacu.edu.au](mailto:federica.caccioppola@myacu.edu.au)

agire. Nel contempo i social media giocano un ruolo determinante nella riduzione del tempo trascorso nelle interazioni faccia a faccia. Inoltre, possono contribuire a diffondere alti livelli di disinformazione, la quale potrebbe causare forme di coinvolgimento radicali o assenti. Il documento analizza questi aspetti a partire dai dati IEA-ICCS 2016, ed esplora le nuove forme di impegno civico e partecipazione politica giovanile. Lo studio indaga, altresì, come i social media possano influenzare l'impegno dei giovani nella società e come quest'ultimo possa essere sostenuto e incoraggiato dalle scuole.

Parole chiave: impegno civico degli studenti; social media; media literacy; metodi d'insegnamento

## Introduction

In recent years the information related to the social media students' use has significantly increased, with limited evidence on its possible influences on civic engagement. Whereas previous studies focused on the social media as a pedagogical tool (Junco, Heiberger & Loken, 2011; Kassens-Noor, 2012; Prescott, 2014) or, separately, on students' civic engagement (Markham, 2014), only a small portion of them is focused on students' civic engagement through social media (cf. ERIC database, 2008-2019<sup>1</sup>). In addition, a large number of studies (Arsenijevic & Andevski, 2016; see also Bennett, 2008a, 2008b; Burgess, Foth & Klæbe, 2006; Coleman, 2013; Jenkins et al., 2009; Mandarano, Meenar & Steins, 2010; Turner-Lee, 2011) reported a lack of descriptive information about the students' civic engagement through the Internet and social media, primarily in the context of the secondary school as a specific target group among the Internet users. Although students at lower-secondary level are generally unable to vote and to have access to many forms of citizenship participation in society, several studies (Pancer, 2015; Quintelier & Hooghe 2013; Schulz, Ainley, Fraillon, Losito, Agrusti & Friedman, 2017) suggest that students' participation in civic-related activities at school can contribute to develop a positive attitude to a future citizenship engagement.

The paper addresses the relationship between students' civic engagement and social media based on a review of literature. As civic engagement and social media are broad concepts, the paper considers these issues starting from the main data of the IEA International Civic and Citizenship Study 2016 (IEA-ICCS2016) (for more detail, see: Schulz, W. et al., 2008; Schulz, W. et al., 2010; Schulz, W. et al., 2016; Schulz, W. et al., 2017), which is a comparative international study on civic and citizenship

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<sup>1</sup> A research on "students' social media" provides 3.836 results in published research articles, abstracts and book chapters but the number is significantly low, decreasing the number to 56 results, of which 12 available on ERIC, if the question regards "students' social media and civic engagement".

education among youth (low-secondary school, grade 8, 13.5 years or above). Additionally, this reviews is based on published research since 2009, in the English language, and available on ERIC<sup>2</sup>.

Finally, the paper proposes a first framework for research and practice on students' civic engagement through social media with specific reference to two key domains: students' civic engagement and students' media literacy. Students' civic engagement includes three areas: the *connection/interactivity*, the *possibility of action* and the *interest in civic issues*.

### **The meaning of “students’ civic engagement” in the context of social media**

According to the conceptualization proposed in IEA-ICCS2016 (Schulz et al, 2017, p. 72), civic engagement refers to students: (a) gaining information about issues that emerge in civic and political life; (b) discussing aspects of civic and political life with peers and adults; and (c) being disposed to actively engage in society. Civic engagement also concerns students' expectations of participating in civic activities in the future and being able to actively engage in society (Eckstein, Noack, & Gniewosz, 2013). In addition, civic engagement comprises involvement in the virtual networks, including civic and political content that are available through social media. This refers to a collection of online social networking sites and tools (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube) and shared content sites (e.g., wikis, blogs, discussion forums), used to socially interact and distribute content with other groups of people (Koršňáková & Carstens, 2017). Theben, Porcu, Peña-López and Lupiáñez Villanueva (2018), as well as Bowen, Gordon and Chojnacki (2017), confirm that civic engagement improves knowledge, skills, values and motivation to help students to become active citizens and to promote the quality of life in their community.

As reported by Ekman and Amnå (2012), *civic engagement* is a latent form of participation (including, e.g., characteristic such as interest and attentiveness), as distinct from the manifest *political participation* (including, e.g. formal political behaviour, protest or extra-parliamentary political action). In identifying meaning for latent forms of political participation among young citizens, Ekman and Amnå (2014) also consider different varieties of political passivity. *Standby* citizens are those who *stay alert* (p. 262) and informed about political issues in everyday life context to become engaged if needed. However, *disillusioned* citizens have lost trust in being able to exercise an influence on civic practices and institutions and have consequently become alienated from civic process.

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<sup>2</sup> In addition, the study contains a variety of studies related to the argument available on the resources of the Australian Catholic University (ACU): *Research Bank*, which is an institutional repository showcasing the research outputs of Australian Catholic University staff and postgraduate students; *Directory of Open Access Journals*, which provides access to free full-text quality controlled scientific & scholarly journals, and *Directory of Open Access Books*, which is a discovery service for peer-reviewed books published under an open access license.

In the body of literature regarding students' engagement as sustained and stimulated by school (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004), school engagement is defined as a multifaceted construct, synthesis of three conceptualization recurring in research literature: behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement. *Behavioural engagement* refers to the participation in academic, social or extracurricular activities; it is considered a requisite for achieve positive outcomes and prevent dropping out. *Emotional engagement* includes both positive and negative reactions to teachers, classmates, academics, and school; it is considered a requisite for create bonds with an institution and improve willingness to work. Finally, *cognitive engagement*, drawing on the idea of investment, includes thoughtfulness and inclination necessary to work together on a project; it is considered a requisite for comprehend complex ideas and difficult skills (p. 60).

### **The use of the Internet and social media and their influence on students' civic engagement**

According to literature upon the benefits of social media for engagement, civic engagement can be divided into three major categories: the *connection* and the *interactivity*, the *possibility of action* and the *interest in civic issue*.

The *connection* and the *interactivity* had been analysed by Loader, Vromen and Xenos (2014); Bowen, Gordon, and Chojnacki (2017); Arsenijevic and Andevski (2016); Koršňáková and Carstens (2017), and Black (2009): social media can connect individuals and groups, even in distant areas, and expose them to a common experience. Loader, Vromen and Xenos (2014, p. 4), confirmed by Arsenijevic and Andevski (2016), coin the expression *networked young citizen* to emphasize the characteristic of the new young citizens: they enact their social relations through a social media networked environment and participate in horizontal or non-hierarchical networks, which are preferred to a political or civic organization. Koršňáková and Carstens (2017), as well as Black (2009), report that the interactive nature in virtual communities even has the potential to enhance civic engagement in ways not possible through the one-way communication channels of traditional media.

Although these studies have shown the advantages of social media for civic engagement, they have also revealed some disadvantages:

1. *Isolation*. Digital connectivity could cause isolation and the breakdown of traditional forms of socialization (Jenkins et al., 2009) because personal interactions and relationships are often substitute for individualism (Bowen, Gordon & Chojnacki, 2017): youth may be *alone together*, physically present in one space, yet mentally and emotionally engaged elsewhere (Turkle, 2017).
2. *Lack of face-to-face interactions and physical distance* (Sexton et al., 2011). Social media, diminishing the time spent in face-to-face interactions (Vietze, 2011; Huang, 2010), contribute to cause phenomena such as anonymity, lack of responsibility and inhibition during a stage of

psychological development. For instance, the act of posting your feelings on Facebook is simply not equivalent to expressing what you feel face-to-face at that time in your life with another person.

3. *Lack of geographic proximity.* Online spaces occupied by youth, accompanied by commercial activity, private conversation, and individual expression, do not promote solid connections or strategic mobilizations that an operative social activism requires (Gladwell, 2010). The expression “echo chamber” effect of social media explains that ideas are reinforced through repetition and often remains unchallenged by different perspectives (Baildon & Damico, 2012).

At the same time, some critics reported that these aspects are not negative because new media had modified the significance of geography. New criteria are required for defining local communities, which are more interest based than geographically based (Schrager, 2001; Delli Carpini, 2000). The “networked individualism” (Rainie & Wellman, 2012a), furthermore, allow people to connect, communicate, and exchange information efficiently with numerous others.

The *possibility of action* had been analysed by Aaker and Smith (2010); LaRiviere, Snider, Stromberg, and O’Meara (2012); and Obar, Zube, and Lampe (2012). Social media could foster civic engagement, meet social change goal, and build a sense of collective action, involving the movement of individuals, or organizations, “away from disinterest, distraction, ignorance, and apathy, and towards education, understanding, motivation, and action” (Obar, Zube & Lampe, 2012). Although the literature on students’ civic action through social media is less consistent, the ICCS 2016 provides information about civic engagement in the context of active participation in one’s community (Schulz et al., 2017). The study reports that civic engagement in the community was not very frequent among the 94,000 8th-grade students surveyed in 3,800 schools across 24 countries. In order to measure students’ engagement in organizations and groups outside of school, the ICCS 2016 student questionnaire asked students to state if they had participated “within the last 12 months”, “more than a year ago” or “never” in a youth organization affiliated with a political party or union, a voluntary group doing something to help the community, or a group of young people campaigning for an issue (p. 90 – 93). The data shows that only a small part of the student’s sample had participated in a youth organization affiliated with a political party or union (an international average of 10%), in a voluntary group to help the community (an international average of 37%), or in a group of young people campaigning for an issue (an international average of 24%). The findings confirm the characteristic of the new young citizens to prefer horizontal or non-hierarchical networks instead of the participation to a political or civic organization (Loader, Vromen & Xenos, 2014; Arsenijevic & Andevski, 2016). Maguth (2012, p. 3) endorses the argument that the new generation of citizens is politically engaged through a different habit than previous generation, preferring alternative approaches, as participation in social movements, rallies, and protests,

represented through networking practices. For instance, the latest people movement *#FridaysforFuture*, following the call from *@GretaThunberg* to school strike, reached 1.6 million strikers on all 7 continents, in more than 125 countries and in well over 2000 places (<https://www.fridaysforfuture.org/>).

However, exactly, how and why social media are important for the civic action is less well established. Questions emerge as: what kind of social media is most important for collective action? What characteristic of social media is specifically significant? Are social media important because they connect more people, or because they mobilize with limited resources? These areas represent relevant issues still to be addressed.

The *interest in civic issues* had been analysed by Schulz, Ainley, Fraillon, Losito, Agrusti, and Friedman (2017); Bowen, Gordon and Chojnacki (2017); Arsenijevic and Andevski (2016): it could increase the use of social media, as well the participation in society. ICCS 2016, investigating the associations between the extent of students' interest in political and social issues and some aspects of students' civic engagement, recorded important findings. First of all, significant associations across all 24 countries are founded between scores on the social media engagement scale and students' interest in civic issues: "In all countries average scores on the social media engagement scale were consistently higher for those student who expressed interest in civic issues than for those students not interested in civic issues" (Schulz, et al., 2017, p. 77). Secondly, "strong association emerged between the frequency with which students discussed political and social issues outside the school and their interest in these issues" (p. 79). Thirdly, a *consistent and moderately strong association* emerged between students' citizenship self-efficacy - defined as "students' self-confidence in undertaking specific behaviours in the area of civic participation" - and their interest in political and social issues (p. 81). Finally, consistent associations were also evident between students' willingness to participate in school activities and students' interest in political and social issues. Noteworthy, in all 24 participating countries, "students who said they were quite or very interested in this type of participation had significantly higher willingness scores than the student who expressed little or no interest" (p. 90). Bowen, Gordon and Chojnacki (2017), in their study on the effects of a long project on the use of social media for the civic action, confirm that the students who feel strongly connected to a specific identified social issue were more inclined to navigate the social media system in order to engage with others regarding that issue (p. 25).

In conclusion, the above-mentioned three areas - the *connection/interactivity*, the *possibility of action* and the *interest in civic issues* – appear as benefits of social media for civic engagement. However, it has been argued that the main *driving force*, the *individuals' motivation for civic engagement through social media* [...] should be the subject of further analysis (Arsenijevic & Andevski, 2016, p. 9).

Therefore, the motivation for those who are active in internet is yet not very clear (these activities, in fact, do not provide immediate and adequate benefit to the participants), as well as the direction of possible associations (e.g. who is interesting in civic issues is motivating to be active in Internet or who is motivate to be active in Internet increases their interest in civic issues). Consequently, this aspect requires detailed investigation to better understand the influence of the motivation of virtual civic engagement on public activities into the civil sector.

### **Skills, competencies and media literacy**

The effective participation of students in a globalised society requires the accumulation of new capabilities and knowledge possessions (Mills, 2010), which are often grouped under the term of *media literacy*, a necessary digital-age survival skill in the 21st century (Ashley et al, 2017). Media literacy has been defined as the ability to access, analyse, evaluate, create and act using a variety of forms of communication (Christ & Potter, 1998; Tamayo, 2016). It includes the ability to understand how and why media messages are constructed and for what purposes they are used, representing a prerequisite for empower individuals to participate as informed and active citizens. *Media literate citizens* are effective communicators, able to demonstrate critical thinking as they utilize media tools; in addition, they understand the characteristics of the contents they have selected and the ways in which media can influence beliefs and behaviour (Tamayo, 2016).

There is growing consensus that media literacy is important for participation and active citizenship (Livingstone & Graaf, 2010). Significant differences exist, however, whether the connections between media literacy and improved citizenship is analysed, producing contrasting results (Arsenijević & Andevski, 2016; Ashley, Maksl & Craft, 2017; Literat, 2011). In addition, international surveys and academic literature warn that many people lack digital capabilities (Ferrari, 2013). It is not yet clear how student comprehend in depth resources founded on Internet and through social media and how can measure their digital competence. Ashley, Maksl and Craft (2017) suggest that learning about media can push students toward disengagement, cynicism, and apathy and underline the limited research on adolescents' interest in information through social media (e.g. how and why they consume it, and what they do because of having consumed it). Jenkins et al. (2009) also state that social media, because of the problems of unequal access or lack of media transparency, can contribute in propagating misinformation that may cause polarizing, or absent, forms of engagement. Research by Bowen, Gordon and Chojnacki (2017), Arsenijevic and Andevski (2016), as well as Schulz et al. (2017), indicate that some aspect of students' use of social media for civic engagement deserves further investigation in future studies - e.g. the association between higher civic knowledge and lower trust in politic (Bowen, Gordon & Chojnacki, 2017, p. 27), and between higher civic knowledge and lower active political participation (Schulz et al., 2017, p. 101); or the nature of the everyday practical involvement and

activities of the Internet users (Arsenijevic & Andevski, 2016) - . As recently indicated in literature (Alvermann and Robinson, 2018), investigate theory, methodology and practice related to youths' global engagement, and to youths' global engagement through new media, contribute to *inform (and being informed by) digitally literate young people* whose practices intersect with new forms of media and technologies negotiating their position in the world through active engagement with it, and to *create the world as at it could be*.

The everyday practical involvement and activities of the Internet users, which are rarely addressed in the literature (Arsenijevic & Andevski, 2016), are analyzed in three extensive studies: IEA-ICCS2016, the *National Assessment Program for Civics and Citizenship* (NAP-CC) conducted by the *Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority* (ACARA) to measure student learning outcomes in civics and citizenship, and the Pew Research Center conducted in the United States to measure the civic engagement. These studies describe the effective use of students' social media for civic engagement referring to an extensive geographic area<sup>3</sup> showing similar results: they confirmed that the *effective* students' use of social media related to civic engagement is lower than students' use of social media. The ICCS 2016 data reveal that civic engagement in the context of social media was not very frequent among more than ninety thousand young students in the world. In order to measure students' civic engagement in the context of social media, ICCS 2016 asked students how often they used both traditional sources (watching television, reading newspaper, and talking with parents) and new social media to obtain information about political or social issues. The data shows that an average of two-thirds of students (66%) in countries watched television at least once a week to obtain information about national and international news. The average percentage for talking with parents was 46 percent, while the average percentage for reading newspaper was 27 percent (Schulz et al., 2017, p. 74). The television represents the main source to get information about national and international news, while the characteristics of this information (content, type, validity or use) are not investigated. Similarly, the extent to which students were using Internet and social media for information and to giving and getting information about political and social issues was generally low: the ICCS 2016 international average percentages for students' engagement with political and social issues through Internet and other social media at least once a week ranged from 31 percent for using the Internet to find information about political or social issues to 10 percent for sharing or commenting on another person's online post regarding a political or social issue, and 9 percent for posting a comment or image regarding a political or social issue on internet or social media (p. 76). Various commentators have suggested that civic participation is more likely when information about political and social issues is conveyed through

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<sup>3</sup> Belgium (Flemish), Bulgaria, Chile, Chinese Taipei, Colombia, Croatia, Denmark, Dominican Republic, Estonia, Finland, Germany (North Rhine-Westphalia), Hong Kong SAR, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Mexico, The Netherlands, Norway, Peru, Republic of Korea, The Russian Federation, Slovenia, Sweden (ICCS 2016); Australia (NAP-CC); America (PRC).



interactive means instead of the one-way communication of traditional media (Bachen et al., 2008; Kahne et al., 2011; Rainie et al., 2012b, Segerberg & Bennett 2011). This suggestion confirms the importance the ability to interact about a topic online reported in the paragraph below. In Australia, NAP-CC (ACARA, 2017) reported that 276.059 students in Year 10 (15-16 years) in 2.428 schools from 2010 to 2016 show a decline:

- in the use of traditional print media and television to access civic information;
- in the levels of trust for social media;
- and in participation in school-based civics activities, such as elections and student representative councils.

Pew Research Center indicates that, in The United States there is a huge increase in adolescents' political activity in social networks from 2008 to 2012 (Smith, 2013). Facebook represent the main source to get information about the news about politics and government (Amy, Gottfried & Matsa, 2015) but this process is involuntary because even if much of that news exposure is incidental (Amy et al., 2013), confirming ICCS' findings.

### **The school's role in developing students' civic engagement**

The students' use of social media related to civic engagement can increase when precise conditions occur. Research results have revealed that schools play a significant role in developing knowledge, and capacity to exercise this knowledge within society, if design activities and experiences for students are adapted to the students' life situation (Zaff et al., 2011); an open classroom climate, for instance, could predict higher civic knowledge and voting intentions of the adolescents (Torney-Purta, Barber & Wilkenfeld, 2007; Keating & Janmaat, 2016). Organize less-episodic student activity on social media could affect more authentic engagement, demonstrating the action-eliciting potential of such activity: a course-based project that has real-life utility permits to integrate school contents with real life. It also promotes critical reflection to enrich the learning experience, foster civic responsibility, and support communities (Bowen & Gordon, 2017; Chojnacki, 2017). Civic education should be "bottom up" and teach students to interact directly with their government, making government respond to their concerns (Graham & Weingarten, 2018, p. 6).

*Teaching civics should be more than just understanding the structures and functions of government. In an era of "fake news" [...], it is crucial that students learn how to gather and evaluate sources of information, and then use evidence from that information to develop and support their ideas [...] (and to) know how to separate fact from opinion, and how to gather and weigh relevant evidence. Education shapes attitudes, values, and actions [...]. It takes time and long-term funding. It requires new forms of professional training.*

This suggests that the use of new technologies effectively requests “teachers must be facile in all areas of technology, pedagogy, and content, in order to prepare students to make appropriate use of technology” (Beal, Holcomb & Lee, 2012, p. 99). It also requests to develop guidelines for encouragement new forms of teaching and learning<sup>4</sup>, and criteria and standards to conceptualize, create, analyse, and evaluate effects to support students’ civic engagement (Baildon & Damico, 2012, p. 24). Mathews (2016, p. 25), corroborating this suggestion, profiles some implications for future practice in constructing multimedia projects as a form of global and civic citizenship: construct long-term projects; intentionally scaffold cross-cultural interactions (students could learn more by engaging in collaborative, problem-solving sessions); and teachers and students should prepare to use a variety of technological resources. The IEA-ICCS2016 student questionnaire, considering the large body of literature concerning students’ engagement as supported and encouraged by schools (Schulz et al., 2017, p. 72; see also: Campbell, 2005, 2007; Flanagan et al., 2010; Gilleece & Cosgrove, 2012; Hooghe & Quintelier, 2011; Lenzi et al. 2014; Torney-Purta & Barber, 2005; Wilkenfeld, 2009; Zaff et al., 2011), asked students to state their level of agreement with a group of five items on the value of participation at school: (a) “Student participation in how schools are run can make schools better” (ICCS 2016 average percentage of students agreeing with this item: 90%). (b) “Lots of positive changes can happen in schools when students work together” (93%). (c) “Organizing groups of students to express their opinions could help solve problems in schools” (87%). (d) “Students can have more influence on what happens in schools if they act together rather than alone” (90%). (e) “Voting in student elections can make a difference to what happens at schools” (81%) (p. 87). The high percentage of students that express their level of agreement on the value of participation at school attests the importance of the role of schools to create a civic engagement and a social change in societies. It also confirms the role of schools in supporting students to explore new ways of using existing knowledge and of producing new knowledge (Wyatt-Smith, 2018). Additionally, it confirms that civic engagement during adolescence contributes to the positive development of young people into communities and societies. The findings detailed that actions as “work together”, “express own opinion” or “act together” could influence students’ disposition to participate in civic activities, in and out school, helping them to become civically and politically proactive in their context.

Previous researches on media literacy can only be considered a first step towards a more profound understanding of the complex relationship between news media and civic engagement and between online dialogue and offline interaction and social action. As Bowen, Gordon and Chojnacki (2017, p. 27) conclude their study,

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<sup>4</sup> For example, the role of teachers and their competencies to use active learning techniques related to social media are perceived to be very influential in promoting student engagement (Almarghani & Mijatovic, 2017).

*We would like to determine the extent to which students can use social media effectively not only to draw attention to social issues but also to mobilize support in the online community, and, furthermore, to exert influence offline on the powers that be.*

## **Conclusions**

The Internet and social media have evolved as a space for civic engagement, as well as a potentially powerful pedagogical tool. They create several opportunities for young people to access information, produce and circulate content, explore, engage in discussions or sharing ideas. Young people need to be prepared to fully use the benefits of the internet and social media, “which not only relate to technical skills that enable them to access, use and produce content, but also skills that enable them to critical reflect and analyse media content” (Theben et al., 2018, p. 31).

As reported through the literature review in this paper, students’ civic engagement can be modelled by “the manner in which they participate and interact through the social networks which they themselves have had a significant part in constructing” (Loader, Vromen & Xenos, 2014, p.1). However, schools remain the institutions with the strongest mandate for educating youth to live together and to build their civic participation, not just promoting knowledge about government and political processes, but also by creating a climate where apply these principles in school practices. This takes place through opportunities to engage in civic discussions at school level or to participate within the school environment (UNESCO, 2013). This is a significant finding to inform possible ways to enhance students’ civic engagement through social media.

This report examined how educational research can contribute to this challenging task and reinforce the necessity to investigate how social media can best serve as a catalyst for online and offline civic engagement.

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