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Understanding youths' needs for digital societal participation: towards an inclusive Virtual Council

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ABSTRACT

It is important for the sustainability of society that everyone can participate in societal discussions. Although a plethora of services exists for digital participation, they have not proven to entice a broad range of youths to contribute. The aim of this research is to investigate how digital tools can offer inclusive ways for youth to take part in societal processes. We present a study of young people's needs for a digital service enabling societal participation. Altogether 74 young people aged 16–27 with varying backgrounds participated in six workshops. Scenarios were used as stimulus materials for eliciting participants' feedback on digital participation. The findings bring up youth's needs for such service. Needs such as having a safe environment for discussions and making the effect of participation visible were found. Finally, the findings and resulting Virtual Council prototype are presented and discussed, and their significance in advancing inclusive digital societal participation are elaborated.

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EParticipation; computing in government; digital participation; user-centred design; user need analysis

1. Introduction

The Finnish Youth Act (2016) defines young people to mean those under 29 years. In this paper, we use the term young people to denote people between 16 and 29 years. We use the term youth to denote a group of young people. Young people have vast differences in their tendencies, interests, and possibilities to participate in societal processes. By *societal participation*, we refer to various forms and levels of participation that span from grassroots actions to legislative processes. These include the more traditional forms of participation such as being a part in law-drafting through youth consultations, voting but also latent forms of participation (Ekman and Amnå 2012) such as consumer behaviour or various online activities. Similarly, as in study, by Newton and Giebler (2008), political participation is a central concept for this paper, but we approach participation as a broader set of activities that can be formal or informal and institution centric or non-institution centric to which we refer by societal participation.

Obstacles such as privacy-related issues, and lack of forums, information and effect (Pietilä, Varsaluoma, and Väänänen 2019) to participate have been identified. Also, the individual properties that are subjectively identified as obstacles for participation include for instance lack of interest and time, fear of conflict, reluctance and age (Pietilä, Varsaluoma, and Väänänen 2019). The possibilities for youths to participate in society should be enhanced to enable the sustainable development of society (Feldmann-Wojtachnia et al. 2010).

eParticipation possibilities such as websites and apps may not alone enable equal possibilities for societal participation as inequality related issues in offline participation tends to replicate online participation also (Oser, Hooghe, and Marien 2013). Different kinds of youths have different abilities to use digital devices, as well as possibilities due to matters affiliated with i.a., accessibility and usability (Meriläinen, Pietilä, and Varsaluoma 2018). Maier-Rabler and Huber (2010) argue that information retrieval skills are strongly affiliated with education among youths. They further assert that one way to enable a society to develop towards participatory culture is to enable youths' digital participation. In addition, they elaborate that youths must master technological literacy that enables societal change. Polat (2005) challenge the idea of digital platforms per se enabling the access to information for the masses. Thus, to provide more equal possibilities for societal participation through more considerate eParticipation service designs, the user needs for digital and online participation of also those who have had fewer opportunities to participate in their lives need to be addressed.

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To illuminate the user needs of different kinds of youths in the context of eParticipation services, we conducted a study. In this study, semi-structured group interviews were conducted in six settings: a preparatory vocational education group, high-school classes, and other groups of young people that are not in education or employed (NEET) with altogether 74 participants. Data from 58 participants were used for analysis as recordings including discussions of 16 participants were discarded due to technical issues. Through the interviews, we aimed to form an in-depth illustration of the needs of youths concerning eParticipation services.

Research on possibilities, such as having one's voices heard, but also dangers, such as bullying, has been growing in academia regarding young people and eParticipation (Kligler-Vilenchik and Literat 2020). Although the possibilities offered by the various eParticipation services have been studied, there seems to be a lack of research that concentrates on the user needs of the youths that do not have extensive experience in societal participation. The aim of this research is to understand the needs for such services for different kinds of youths. The central contribution of the study is the eParticipation user needs of young people, including the ones that have had fewer possibilities and experiences in societal or political participation. The findings can be applied in designing more inclusive eParticipation services and to tackle the previously recognised obstacles for participation. The processes that enable societal participation encourage citizens to participate more (Newton and Giebler 2008), thus the processes and services should be designed with high consideration of the needs of those who the society wants to participate, that is, all youths. Moreover, this paper continues to present an eParticipation service prototype in which the user needs are considered and implemented as design solutions. This service, Virtual Council, aims to enable the societal participation of the various youths.

2. Background and related work

In the following, the main concepts and related work are presented. First, the concepts of societal and political participation are discussed, and the ways that different youths participate in societal matters are elucidated. Second, the domains of digital participation and eParticipation are explained. Finally, the obstacles for participating in societal matters, digitally or otherwise, are discussed shortly. The wider debate on these issues is out of the scope of this paper.

2.1. Societal and political participation

The theoretical understandings of societal participation of youths in literature differ between academic fields. Pietilä, Varsaluoma, and Väänänen (2019) use the concept of 'societal participation' to denote the participation of an individual or a group in the processes of the society, such as voting or participating in decision making, or engaging in political discussions. In turn, Piškur et al. (2014) assert that (social) participation has not been explicitly defined. Hästbacka, Nygård, and Nyqvist (2016) argue that the complex concept of societal participation can mean various things and is highly contextual. The authors continue to state that the term 'societal' can be affiliated with other dimensions of society such as political participation or working. Some authors argue the connection between societal and political participation – for instance, Ekman and Amnå (2012) highlight the multidimensionality of both concepts.

However, societal participation is not only tied to traditional political participation such as being part in law-drafting or voting in elections. There are various understandings of societal participation in society at different levels. Varying understandings span from social change processes at grassroot levels to legislative levels. For example, Meriläinen, Pietilä, and Varsaluoma (2018) studied youth participation in societal issues in the context of a wider human rights perspective, of exclusivity and accessibility, as well as in the realms of digital services. Meriläinen and Piispa (2020) researched the societal participation of vocational school students and found many ways in which young people participate in climate change actions outside the traditional ways tied to institutions through consumer behaviour, grassroot activism and by using social media. In a more traditional sense of participation, Meriläinen, Heiskanen, and Viljanen (2020) studied youth participation in legislative studies and found that even when young people participate using official platforms, their participation is not reflected in final legislations.

One domain in societal participation is political participation, which according to the International Encyclopaedia of the Social & Behavioural Sciences (Elsevier 2015) refers to

> Voluntary activities undertaken by the mass public to influence public policy, either directly or by affecting the selection of persons who make policies. Examples of these activities include voting in elections, helping a political campaign, donating money to a candidate or cause, contacting officials, petitioning, protesting, and working with other people on issues.

In the same lines, van Deth (2001) defines political participation as 'citizens activities aimed at influencing political decision' and continues to list more definitions for the concept by Milbrath and Goel (1977), Verba and Nie (1972), Kaase and Marsh (1979), and Parry, Moyser, and

Day (1992), each and all of which include the concept of a citizen actively trying to have an influence on a governing actor. Similar to societal participation, definitions of political participation may vary between fields, and inconsistencies have been identified especially regarding the more novel ways of participation (e.g. Weiss 2020). Moreover, political participation definitions vary between researchers, adults, and youths, as a unifying consensus of *what is political* is missing (Weiss 2020).

In comparison to political participation, in this paper, societal participation can be described to also consist of the kinds of societal activities that are not recognised by political institutions or actors (e.g., Meriläinen and Piispa 2020), including various latent forms of political participation, civic engagement and social involvement similar to what Ekman & Amnå assert (2012). Moreover, Garcia-Albacete (2014, 15) refer to these emerging forms of participation as 'sporadic' and elaborate that they 'imply networks with loose connections that often result in individualised actions' referring to the work of van Deth (2010). García-Albacete (2014) additionally remarks that these phenomena are of interest to researches in the sphere of political research even though they are not regarded as political participation in all discourses.

Virtual Council is a prototype of an eParticipation service that aims to enable both, political and societal participation, and is introduced in Section 7, Virtual Council.

2.2. Youth participation and inclusion

According to the UN Agenda 2030 (2018) objectives, youths should play an active role in the development of their own surroundings, in achieving sustainable development goals at the grassroots levels as well as more widely in policy making. Fridays for Future moment has increased young people's participation in society globally. Also, the EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027 has a focus on engaging, enabling and strengthening the participation of EU's young people in policies and society at its various levels. Moreover, the governmental programme (2019) of Finland has a strong emphasis on the empowering and inclusion of young people. The programme states 'We will reinforce the obligation to consult young people and introduce new tools to develop it.' (2019–2027, 188) Perhaps an eParticipation platform that is designed based on user needs could be one of the services in this process.

One of the many ways to engage different kinds of youths may be by using eParticipation services to enable active roles. We know that youths use digital services (Granholm 2016). Perhaps the various youths can be empowered by being active and eParticipation services may help in this respect.

As this paper focuses on youth participation, we take note of the definition from Checkoway (2011) in which youth participation is regarded as a process that enables the involvement of the youth in instances and decision-making that influence their life. Moreover, Checkoway and Gutierrez (2006) previously added to the definition that youth participation includes the young people actually having an effect in the decisions that may concern them and young people not just being subjects to others' decisions. They further argue that more focus should be set on the quality of young peoples' participation instead of just counting, for example, how many took part in a hearing or voting. In similar manner, Farthing (2012, 73) states that youth participation is 'a process where young people, as active citizens, take part in, express views on, and have decision-making power about issues that affect them.'

Youth participation can be approached from the inclusiveness point of view also. Coppedge, Alvarez, and Maldonado (2008) assert that a majority of widely used democracy indicators measure contestation and inclusiveness. Robert A. Dahl (as cited in Feldmann-Wojtachnia et al. 2010) further elaborate that inclusiveness relates to the parameters which allow or disable a part of a population to participate in societal decisions. Young (2002) states that inclusion can also be used as a concept to describe such democratic decision-making and discussion in which all the concerned parties can be involved in. According to Young (2002), equally executed inclusion is essential in enabling sterling deliberation of various opinions and perspectives. Jackson (as cited by Rawal 2008) capsulises the concept of inclusion to the question of who is excluded from what and who is privileged to be represented. Through these definitions, it can be interpreted that to enable youth participation, the channels and structures need to incorporate inclusive solutions and thus consider the user needs of the various youths.

In this study, inclusivity is addressed by considering the user needs of youths from various backgrounds in relation to digital societal participation, that is, enabling many parts of the population (Feldmann-Wojtachnia et al. 2010) to express their needs in online environments in a user-friendly manner, and enabling representations of various youths (Rawal 2008) in the requirement definitions of eParticipation services. Inclusivity also refers to the possibilities of young people to participate without having to tackle various obstacles such as language barriers, lack of time and space, fear of bullying and conflict, and limits to freedom of

expression. Participant details and their varying backgrounds are further elaborated in Section 4.1.

2.3. Digital participation and eparticipation

Societal and political participation can also be approached from a dichotomous perspective: Online versus offline forms of participation. According to Oser, Hooghe, and Marien (2013), online activism can be regarded as a distinct domain of participation and that digital political participation incorporates similar socioeconomic status related inequalities as offline participation. Possibilities and tendencies to participate accumulate to the empowered groups through factors such as education level, wealth, age, and gender (Oser, Hooghe, and Marien 2013). However, in their study, Oser, Hooghe, and Marien (2013) highlighted that if a population is separated into online and offline activists, the online group is more likely to comprise young people.

Pietilä, Varsaluoma, and Väänänen (2019) assert the concept of digital participation to consist of various activities that take place in digital realms including for instance utilising social media services or discussing in, for example, Slack or on forums, such as Reddit. Digital participation can also be used to denote activities such as survey answering or reading and producing blogs (Meriläinen, Pietilä, and Varsaluoma 2018). eParticipation refers to promoting political participation and citizen engagement through the use of ICT-tools (Panopoulou, Tambouris, and Tarabanis 2014) and to the use of ICT technology by individuals or groups when participating in societal issues (Albrecht et al. 2008). eParticipation is also said to have adapted the goal of promoting civic engagement through making the related activities more available (Sæbø, Rose, and Skiftenes Flak 2008). The concept of digital participation can be seen as a very versatile activity and is not necessarily restricted to only participating in political or societal issues in contrast to eParticipation (Pietilä, Varsaluoma, and Väänänen 2019). Sanford and Rose (2007) approach eParticipation as i.a. contributing to a shared activity which is connected to decision-making and is executed through ITC, usually the Internet.

In this paper, digital participation is viewed as a broad concept that can include societal activities such as eParticipation but also activities that are not traditionally viewed as societal participation. These activities can include for instance social media discussions or linking posts on social media as young people mentioned in a study by Meriläinen and Piispa (2020).

Pozzebon, Cunha, and Coelho (2016) discuss the processes underlying the decrease in civic participation through social representation framework theory. They argue that for governments to improve citizens' eParticipation, the social representational processes characterising their web-based initiatives should be given special consideration. The results imply, for instance, that applying digital participatory budgeting (DPB) to enable participation for people who had not previously participated would encourage civic involvement, promote discussion on public works, and permit citizens to engage in policy making, such as in legislation processes.

Kahne, Lee, and Feezell (2013) discuss the possibility of online activity serving as a gateway to participation in civic and political life. The threshold to engage in volunteering, community problem-solving, protest activities, and other forms of political involvement could be lowered by participating in online activities of a similar nature. According to their study, politics-driven participation is associated with an increase in online political action and expression, while online participation that is driven by interests is related to political action, expression, and campaign participation. Participation that is interest-driven is seen as a key predictor for enhanced civic engagement. However online platforms do not alone create, increase, or sustain societal participation.

2.4. Obstacles for participation

There are obstacles for societal participation in both offline and online worlds. Checkoway (2011) argues that participation is not even between the youths, implying power-relations among youths, notion which is strengthened by the study by Meriläinen and Piispa (2020). Additionally, Cahill and Dadvand (2018) elaborate that discourses that enable taking up positions are not accessed equally by everyone and that power relations exist also between young people. Along the same lines, Ten Brummelaar et al. (2018) discuss the notion of 'meaningful' participation in decision-making, arguing that the youths have limitations in their participation possibilities.

Similarly, according to the study by af Ursin and Haanpää (2012), young people consider their possibilities to participate as non-excitant. The authors wonder if young voices meet a listening ear and where are the ways how to activate young people. Yet, as many studies have shown young people already participate, but there are problems in youth participation. For instance, Meriläinen, Heiskanen, and Viljanen et al. (2020) argue that the role of young people in legislative processes appears to be inadequate although several laws guarantee their participation in society. Similarly, Kidman and

O'Malley (2018) found in their research that participation of young people in society, even at political levels, can be disregarded if young people's agendas do not fit into the existing political agendas. Bessant (2004) asked whose voices are heard in (youth) participation and raises the question of obstacles when young people try to participate socially, economically, and politically. Bessant ponders about the requirements of youth participation and whether youth participation is at odds with the rhetoric of democratic participation. Also, Nichols (2017) studied youth experiences and exclusion/inclusion in the justice system and pointed to the need to have a youth-based approach to studying various forms of participation. Some young people may participate through traditional ways, but also through ways which are not recognised by adults or in larger society, or even create newer ways (Bowman 2020). Also, as Head (2011) argues for the benefits of the various forms of youth participation, which may be at the individual or the wider social levels.

Perhaps one aspect to increase meaningful possibilities would be to create eParticipation tools to enable digital participation for different kinds of youths. Although eParticipation tools and means may, in fact, create possibilities to participate, these alone cannot guarantee participation. Regarding the designing process of eParticipation tools, Toots (2019) argues that the context where digital participatory tools are used and created enables both possibilities and failures for eParticipation. Toots (2019) elaborates that the eParticipation platforms aims are complicated as the different user groups have different expectations and objectives in the platforms and services.

Thus, when designing eParticipation services for youth, the following aspects must be considered: accessibility, usability, closeness, and the sense of purpose, as well as the feedback process of the usage (Meriläinen, Pietilä, and Varsaluoma 2018). This would perhaps increase the inclusiveness in eParticipation. Similarly, Scherer, Wimmer, and Schepers (2012) argue that terms such as the usage of regional languages and marketing at the regional level must be considered. The authors also mention that the eParticipation platform must be integrated with the political processes. Additionally, the local level implications of non-local matters should be elaborated to enhance the experienced relevance and thus be brought closer to citizens. The information presented needs to be understandable and expressed in an interesting manner, and the users must be able to receive feedback on their engagement (Scherer, Wimmer, and Schepers 2012).

3. Studying the user needs of youths

The study is a part of a multidisciplinary project ALLYOUTH (http://www.allyouthstn.fi/en/) that aims to explore the participation and engagement possibilities and obstacles of youths in Finland in societal matters. The results of this study are used as a basis for developing an eParticipation prototype. In this study, we focus especially on the needs of youths with different kinds of tendencies for societal participation for eParticipation services. Thus, the following research questions were formulated: (1) What are the youth's needs for eParticipation services? and (2) How to consider these needs in eParticipation platform/service design?

To answer these research questions and to provide a deep understanding of the youths' user needs regarding eParticipation services, a study applying a qualitative research approach incorporating semi-structured small group interviews in workshop settings was designed. In comparison to surveys, interviews often enable deeper exploration of the matter under study through providing the possibility for the interviewer to ask for specifications and further elaborations from the participants (Lazar, Feng, and Hochheiser 2010). Lazar, Feng, and Hochheiser (2010) elaborate on the different ways to apply interviews in HCI research. This study has characteristics of an initial exploration as it aims to shape the understanding of the youth's activities and wishes in regard to societal and political participation in digital services. Moreover, the study can be also regarded as requirements gathering, as it explores the various user needs that the youths have for eParticipation (Lazar, Feng, and Hochheiser 2010).

Although there are various important questions affiliated with the relationship of participating in societal processes and demographic variables such as age, ethnicity, and gender, this study focuses on the user needs of youths with various backgrounds in societal participation. Addressing the reasons and mechanisms that lead to more or less active participation in societal processes are outside of the scope of this study, albeit they are important factors in creating more inclusive decision-making processes.

3.1. Participants and study setting

The data was acquired between February and April in 2019. Data acquisition took place in altogether six workshops in southern Finland. Scenarios of youth participation were used as stimulus material. Semi-structured group interviews, recording of group discussions, and background questionnaire forms inquiring age,

education level, and profession, were used for data gathering.

3.1.1. Participants and recruitment

Altogether, 74 young people of the ages between 16 and 27 participated in 6 distinct workshops. Each workshop had from 4 to 25 participants, divided into groups from 3–5 people (20 groups in total). Thirty-six of the respondents identified themselves as males, 29 as females and 9 participants as other or did not want to disclose their gender. The sampling can be described to be between random and convenience sampling as the workshops were executed around southern Finland (less than 200 km away from Tampere) in settings in which youths were naturally present. Details of the workshop participants are described in Table 1. Groups that are included in the table as 'Undisclosed' are other municipality level settings that have participants that are not in education, employment, or training (NEET). These groups are not expressed in a more specific manner to ensure the anonymity of the participants.

The aim was to enable the participation of youths with various backgrounds. We approached this by recruiting the workshop groups from such settings that have young people with varying experiences in societal participation and by including groups from different locations. To accomplish this aim, we chose to recruit groups from preparatory vocational education ($n = 10$), NGO's and third sector settings ($n = 14$), and general upper secondary education settings ($n = 37$). Groups were recruited by contacting the personnel of each setting. Presumably, in these settings, the participants vary in their experience in societal participation.

Table 1. Details of the workshop participants.

Workshop ID	No of participants	No of groups	Setting type/ context	Age mean	Age range
1	10	3	Preparatory vocational education group	16.7	16–19
2	14	3	NGO/third sector workshop (Partially NEET)	23.1	18–27
3	3	1	Undisclosed for privacy reasons (participants NEET)	22.0	19–25
4	10	3	Undisclosed for privacy reasons (participants NEET)	21.8	20–27
5	19	5	General upper secondary education	16.3	16–17
6	18	5	General upper secondary education	17.4	16–18

For instance, students in general upper secondary education are considered to be more likely to participate in societal processes than students in vocational education (Myllyniemi 2014; Myllyniemi and Pekkarinen 2019; van de Werfhorst 2017). Also, students from vocational schools do not regard traditional ways of participating as interesting, but do participate through, for example, social media (Meriläinen and Piispa 2020). Additionally, NEETs ($n = 13$) (those not in education, employment, or training) are considered to have less political confidence and are less satisfied with democracy than their employed peers (Bay and Blekesaune 2002). Furthermore, Carle (2000) asserts that interest towards politics is lower among the unemployed than among the employed, as is participation in political activities such as signing petitions, participating in boycotts, wearing badges, or voting in elections. NEET groups are not expressed with more details to ensure the anonymity of the participants. Considering these assumptions, we aimed to enable a sample that varies abundantly in societal participation experiences, and in which also the youths that usually do not participate in societal activities, are represented.

The groups were recruited by directly contacting the personnel that facilitate the groups. For preparatory vocational education, three vocational upper secondary education institutions with preparatory vocational education that were located less than 200 kms away from Tampere were contacted. In one, a teacher was able to fit the research in their group schedule. For NGO's and third sector settings, seven organisations that were located less than 200 km away from Tampere and known to facilitate rehabilitative activities and group activities in which NEET's participate in, were contacted. Three of them were able to fit the study into their group activity schedules. Finally, teachers in five different general upper secondary schools were contacted, out of which two were able to fit the participation in the study in their group schedules.

3.1.2. Workshop process

The workshops consisted of introduction, scenario working, background questionnaire, and debrief. Scenarios are explained in the next section. Introduction included basic information about the study and goals for the workshop. During introduction, participants' consent was also inquired. Each scenario was read out loud and displayed on a screen. Scenario working involved discussing scenarios in small groups. At the end of the workshop, participants filled in the background questionnaire. Each participant was rewarded with a movie ticket. Each group had a researcher facilitating the discussion and the discussions were recorded.

Facilitators supported the semi-structured group discussions by asking participants to (a) share their thoughts about the scenario, (b) if it were realistic, (c) would they use the service and (d) what could be changed to make it more interesting. Each workshop lasted 1.5–2 h.

3.2. Data gathering methods and scenarios

Scenarios describing eParticipation use cases were used to ignite conversation. The scenarios aimed to represent a wide array of interaction features in eParticipation systems (Sæbø, Rose, and Skiftenes Flak 2008; Sanford and Rose 2007). The scenarios were produced with a group of scholars from various fields, including HCI, human rights, youth studies, power relationships, and public law.

Scenario 1 is as follows

> 'Jenni, together with 20 other people, has been chosen by random sampling to take part in civic council regarding updating the climate change act. Jenni receives an invitation to her email and notification with SMS. The email includes a web link that allows her to log in to the new societal discussion service. Jenni has one week to accept the invitation. She can use Google or Facebook identifiers or her email to log-in. Discussion team has been readily created in the service. The group has already materials, such as parts of the climate change act, proposed updates to the act and questions related to them created by governmental officials. Team members can add comments, response to others' comments and use chat to discuss the presented questions and materials. Reactions, such as 'likes', can be added to comments. Participants can also view materials, such as life cycle impact assessments, created by experts and interest groups. The discussion aims for consensus between the participants. After two weeks, the participants formulate a statement for the officials. Voting can be used for the final outcome.

Rest of the scenarios were presented in a similar narrative manner as Scenario 1 including a user and a description of the use case and central features of the hypothesised service. Key features that the rest of the scenarios included were discussions, voting, tagging of municipal actors, participation badges, materials section with commenting tools, digital council creation, map-based tools, activity summarising and visualising tools, and reminders.

After introducing each scenario, the use cases and features presented were discussed in small groups. Each discussion was facilitated by a researcher. Facilitation included posing questions such as (1) 'What kind of thoughts do you have from this story?' (2) 'Was there anything unclear or unbelievable?' (3) 'What would you change in the presented digital service? Why?' (4) 'Could you see yourself in this situation? If not, why?' (5) 'What would make you interested in using this kind of service? What should it include? Why?'. As a semi-structured interview was selected as the data acquisition method, the facilitators had the freedom to further explore interesting phenomena that emerged in the discussions and to present specifying questions.

3.3. Analysis

Three group discussion recordings, including discussions of altogether 16 individual participants, were discarded due to technical issues. Transcribed interviews from 17 groups ($n = 58$) were included in the qualitative analysis. The analysis can be described to follow grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) as the categorisation was based on the data. The category formation was more specifically conducted through thematic content analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) by one author. The analysis was divided into five phases and followed a similar structure as analysis presented by Burnard (1991). Phases of the analysis were (1) Data overview formation through reading of the transcripts, (2) Annotating the transcripts systematically, (3) Applying open coding to form initial categories (Malterud 2012), (4) Iterating the identified categories & re-reading transcripts, and (5) Assessing the categories, setting them in a dialogue with previous works and theory. Main question guiding the whole analysis process was 'What are the youth's needs for eParticipation?'. Topics that emerged from the data were coded and grouped into similar themes using NVivo software. The resulting themes were further divided into four main categories regarding user needs.

4. Results

4.1. Youth's needs for a digital service enabling societal participation

Ten user needs were brought up in at least five discussion groups. These ten needs were grouped into four categories (1) Trust and safety, (2) Motivation to participate, (3) Integration to governmental processes, and (4) Efficient and effective use. Other needs are discussed separately.

Needs related to trust and safety. Nearly all groups brought up topics related to the theme safe environment (mentioned in 14/17 groups). Participants were worried about provocative discussions ('trolling') and saw a need for moderators and rules. Anonymity (10) was seen as

an enabler for open discussions, but also as a risk to attract trolls. It was suggested that users would have to register with their real names, but could use nicknames in discussions, so that administrators would still know the users.

For the first time use experience, it would be beneficial if the service were already familiar from school, other official channels, or advertisements in social media. This would evoke trust towards the service (6). For instance, scenario 1, in which participants were invited via email, was considered suspicious by some youths. 'I am quite sceptical with those … when you need to register […] and you haven't heard about it before, then hardly.' commented one participant in an NGO setting.

Needs related to motivation to participate. A personally interesting topic (10) was seen as one of the main motivators to participate. One group with NEET youths contemplated that having participants in discussions who are not interested in the topic could still provide new viewpoints. One male participant in the same group asserted that: ' … if I do not know and I am not interested, then I won't even try to have an influence, because it seems wrong to try to affect something that […] I don't know anything about'. Competition, gift-cards, or monetary rewards (6) were considered motivating especially in discussions created by officials. However, if the discussion was created by citizens, then the rewarding system was considered unworkable, and the reward would be in advancing the societal goal. Finally, there should be an adequate number of users (6) using the service in order to make it 'credible'.

Needs related to integration to governmental processes. Having a real impact (9) was seen as crucial. As one male respondent from high school commented: 'The first thing that makes such service attractive is how impactful it is.' One way to support these expectations would be to highlight successful and impactful discussions from before. Finally, government or local government officials should be actively participating in discussions (5), as this was seen to provide confidence that the discussions could have an impact. However, one of the upper secondary education group were worried if the officials would have the time to participate:

> If it would be concretely described where the (statement) would go next, and if there was some policymaker sometimes to discuss the topic with them, it would increase the motivation quite a lot. But I do not know if they have the time, those decision-makers to be there.

Needs related to efficient and effective use. Useful search features (8) that were mentioned included filtering existing discussion groups based on tags and setting favourite topics or tags to receive notifications for new discussion groups. Also, a possibility to volunteer for upcoming discussions before they start was mentioned. The respondents were worried that they do not have enough knowledge to take part in discussions. To support the discussion, there should be material available for the participants (5) to read or watch before the discussions.

Other themes, for example, gamification. The idea of gamifying a service for societal discussions was met with scepticism and 9 groups were worried that adding gamified elements might take the users' focus out from the main purpose of the service. For instance, one female NEET participant commented: ' … there is a possibility to participate without influencing, so that you hang around, add some 'yeah' comments, and then gain points. But then you do not really provide any content for it'. Furthermore, 9 groups thought that visible badges and titles might create inequality. A comment from a female NEET respondent: 'I wouldn't dare to make a comment when there are only those 'master-conversationalists' and I am here for the first time.' In five groups, the statistics and information about personal merits were thought to be interesting and might be a motivating addition to the main features.

5. Virtual Council prototype

Results from the workshops were utilised in the design of an eParticipation platform called Virtual Council. The research team discussed the feedback from the workshops and updated the list of requirements, which was used in the design of the first prototype. Virtual Council aims to be a low threshold eParticipation service that enables participating in various societal and political matters. Virtual Council can be used via two approaches for running the councils: (a) council is created by an official, who also invites the participants or (b) a council is suggested by a citizen and supported by other citizens or officials. The first approach was the focus of the current prototype.

The following simplified use case describes how an official could use Virtual Council: (1) an official creates a new council and sets parameters such as council name and starting and ending dates. He then uploads the materials (documents and web links) into the council documents page. (2) The official sends an invitation email to a local schoolteacher, whose students have agreed to participate. The goal of a council is to write a statement based on the discussions on the given topics during a specified time frame, for example, one week. Students register to the Virtual Council service and

join the council. One of the students agrees to act as a chairperson and is responsible for writing the final statement based on the discussions. (3) Participants familiarise themselves with the provided materials and then proceed to the discussions in the chat. The teacher and the official also participate in the discussion. When the deadline for the council draws near, each member is asked to provide their own, pseudonymised answer to the given discussion topics for the final statement. (4) The chairperson summarises the individual responses for the final statement. Other participants can agree or disagree and comment on the statement. After the statement is accepted, the official rewards participants with small gift cards. He then exports the statement for his further work. (5) Later, the official sends a feedback message to the council members to inform them on what has happened with their statement and where it has proceeded.

Figure 1 illustrates the front page of the current Virtual Council's prototype, displaying search features and a selection of the currently available councils for the user. The prototype provides the basic user profile page and council pages. On the council page, participants can view the council description on the main tab, while other tabs include chat (Figure 2), documents and final statement.

Next, the implemented design solutions that aim to support the user needs are presented. A safe environment and anonymity were supported by allowing the use of nicknames in chat and by pseudonymization of the participants' personal answers for the final statement. The chat includes emoticons for agreeing/disagreeing, but also for complimenting on a well-written comment. Moderation will allow warnings for misbehaviour in chat and ultimately banning a user. Trust towards the service could also be increased by providing high-quality support materials for the council and by using an official language and look in the service, including example, official logo, images of the youth and clear design. The service should also support different types of 3rd party sources, such as text and video files, and links to external websites, to support discussions. The proposed design solutions for supporting a safe environment, anonymity, and trust towards the service, could also enhance the inclusiveness. Accessibility, as one aspect of an inclusive service (Meriläinen, Pietilä, and Varsaluoma 2018), is ensured by following the EU Directive (2016/2102) on the accessibility of the websites and the W3 Web accessibility guidelines. Further design implications that are not yet implemented are discussed in the following section.

6. Discussion

In this chapter, the results from the workshops are set in a dialogue with the related work and theories. Further design implications are proposed to address the identified user needs.

6.1. User needs and previous studies

The user needs findings provided by this study are analogous with the previous research in various dimensions. Considering the obstacles for participation listed by Pietilä, Varsaluoma, and Väänänen (2019), many

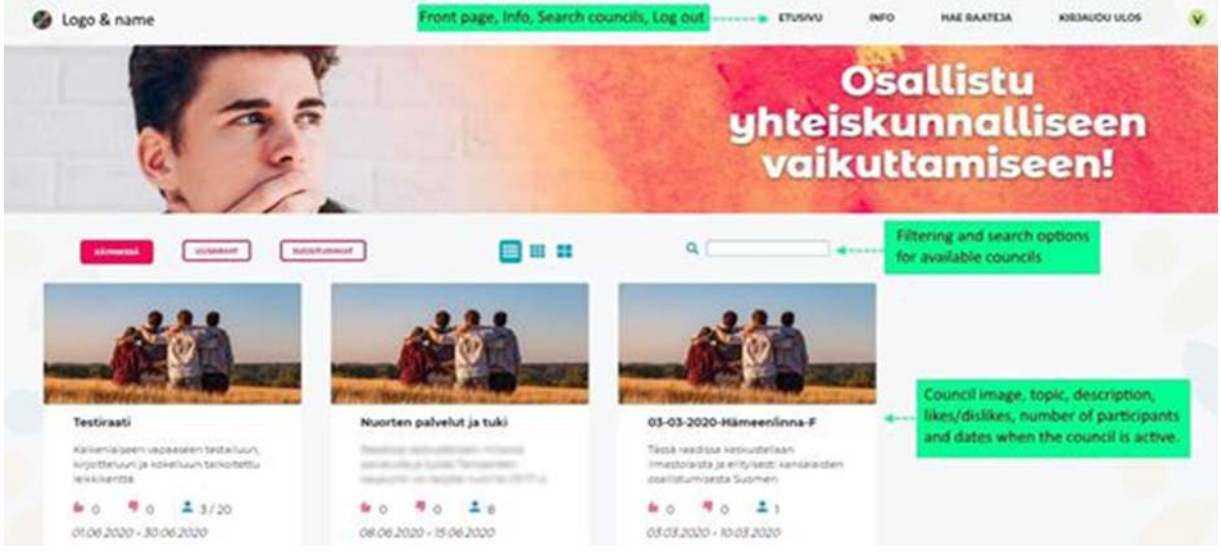

Figure 1. The front page of the Virtual Council prototype. Search options, when implemented, will help users to filter available councils based on their popularity, newness, topic, description, or keywords.

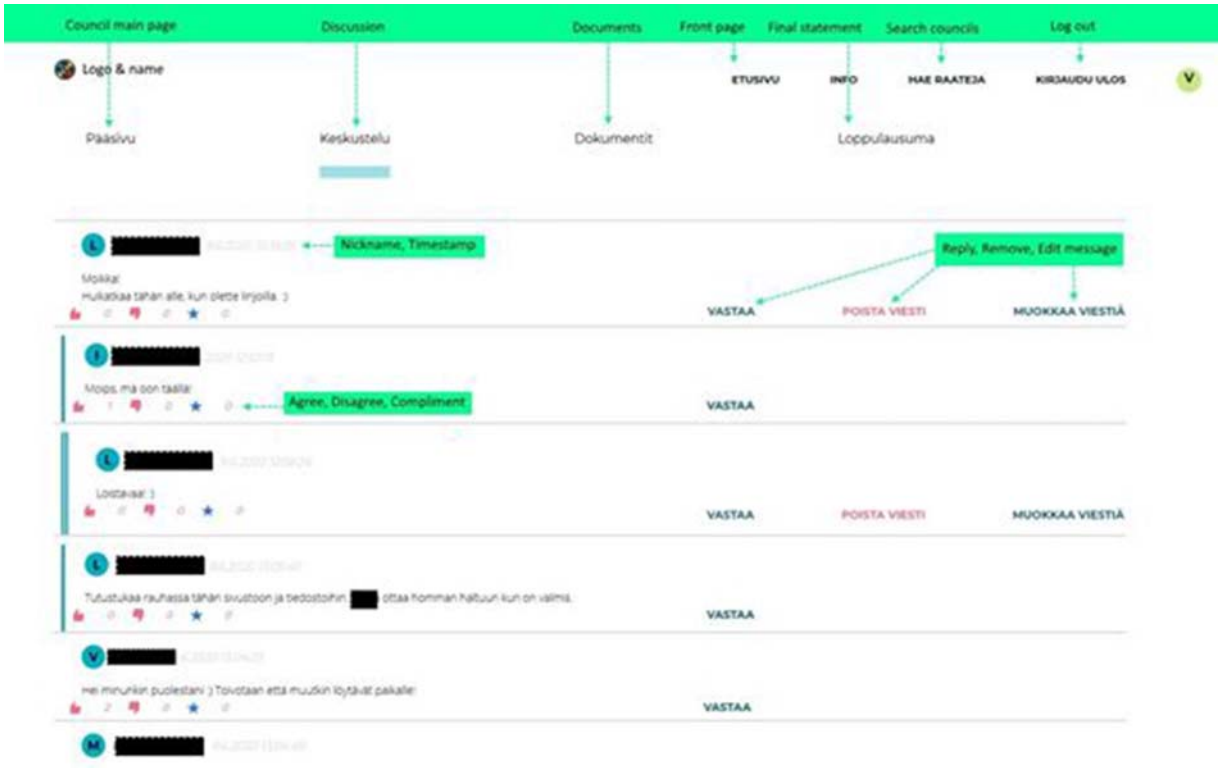

Figure 2. The chat view of the Virtual Council prototype. Users can reply to others' and edit their own comments. Users can also use reaction buttons to agree/disagree or to compliment for a well written comment.

overlapping areas were found in this study. For instance, the lack of information can be seen as the need for providing proper and extensive materials supporting discussion to enable informed opinion formation. Moreover, privacy-related issues are affiliated with the possibility to participate in the discussions anonymously thus retaining the privacy of the users. Additionally, the obstacle of inadequate effect when participating, is listed in the found needs as having an actual effect. Lack of interest, also mentioned by Pietilä, Varsaluoma, and Väänänen (2019) as an obstacle for participation, manifests in the identified user needs as a need for interesting topics for discussions in the Virtual Council. Obstacles related to the fear of conflict can be linked with the need for a safe environment.

Our findings regarding youths' needs for eParticipation services are similar to the challenges related to digital participation identified by Meriläinen, Pietilä, and Varsaluoma (2018). Both highlight the importance of 'having an impact', as some youths think that their thoughts do not matter. This aligns with the findings by Meriläinen and Piispa (2020) on vocational students, which emphasises the importance of the effect of participation in relation to the will to participate as well as the importance for the young people of having need to be heard in the society and in decision making. Based on their study, Meriläinen and Piispa argue that if young people do not see themselves as being heard and included in the society, at worse this makes them become passive.

Also, officials should provide participants information on the impact of their collaboration and illustrate if and when the young participants had an actual effect and in what, so not to follow the findings of Kidman and O'malley (2018); Meriläinen and Piispa (2020) who argue that in society, participation faces obstacles and may be disregarded because some young people's participation do not fit into the current political agendas. eParticipation platform that is designed based on user needs can at best break down obstacles in youth participation in society. As Runciman (2017, 4) states, 'there has been almost no discussion of how the digital revolution and the spread of information technology may be reshaping the ways in which power and legitimacy are to be understood'. At best this further creates inclusivity, which can be strengthened by further collaborating with young people from various backgrounds by using eParticipation services and offline gatherings.

Similar to our findings, Scherer, Wimmer, and Schepers (2012) elaborate that the eParticipation services need regional marketing, which is directly linked to

the awareness of the service. Additionally, it is stated that the eParticipation platforms need to be extensively integrated with the political processes. This is instrumental in relation to the need of having a real impact. There is also contemplation on the requirement of the users receiving feedback on their participation from officials. This relates to the needs for rewards and official's engagement allowing actual interaction between users and decision makers. It is also said that the information presented in eParticipation systems must be understandable and expressed in an interesting manner which can be seen to be closely related to the needs for interesting topics, and materials that can support the discussions (Scherer, Wimmer, and Schepers 2012). Moreover, the results imply that the decision makers or the governing organisations should invest more to interacting with the youths and eParticipation service incorporating such interaction could motivate the youths to participate more.

Additionally, the results relate tangibly to the definition of participation by Checkoway (2011), which includes actual effect as an outcome as one of its key components. The results of this study indicate that having an actual effect in the matters that the platform is used to contemplate on, is a constitutive user need among youths in the context of eParticipation services.

Furthermore, a cross-cutting social dimension can be implicitly identified in the interview results, as societal participation often concerns interacting with others. Instead of supporting the participation of individuals through eParticipation services, more emphasis should be given to how the young people's existing social networks could complement digital societal participation (Campbell 2013). Additionally, the needs connect to the ambiguity of societal and political participation identified by for example, Weiss (2020) as the topics need to be personally interesting. Not all the activities that the youths experience as meaningful and that may have societal implications, are regarded as societal participation (Meriläinen and Piispa 2020).

6.2. Design solutions to enhance inclusivity in eParticipation platforms

There are various design solutions the research team considers implementing to the Virtual Council as the design process continues. The design implications are discussed here as they might support the identified user needs (see Section 4.1.) and inclusivity of similar eParticipation services. First, finding the personally interesting topics could be supported with easy-to-use search features, such as automatic recommendations based on chosen keywords for council topics or previously joined councils. Users should be able to receive notifications, for example, via email, when interesting councils are about to start. Having a real impact is dependent especially on the officials who utilise the final statement, and how well the platform integrates to societal and/or decision-making processes. Since the process for making an impact can take a long time, the system should send notifications to the officials to prompt them to provide feedback for the council. Council members should also be notified when the feedback is given. Motivational examples of councils that had an impact could be highlighted in the front page. Finally, there should be a clearly stated purpose and goal for the council, also explaining the impact it aims to have.

Possible rewards could include movie tickets, gift cards or small amounts of money, but also recognitions such as an official diploma for participation can be important for youth to include in their CV. In addition, subtle gamification elements providing virtual rewards, such as activity points, levels, and user statistics (e.g. most praised comments, personal activity, and activity on timeline per council) could act as minor rewards and motivate continuous usage. An adequate number of users could be achieved by advertising the upcoming councils among the registered users. However, with a new service without a large user base, one must invite participants for example, via social media, schools, youth services and youth councils. Integrating the use of the service as part of existing curriculum in courses in various subjects in schools could be a way to make it familiar for youth. With a large number of users, there could be several discussion groups with the same topic in order to keep the online discussions less chaotic. In the end, each group could share their outcomes with other groups and choose or vote for the best solution. Finally, the active participation of the officials could be supported with an interface that is easy to learn and use, and suitable for mobile devices. Examples of features that might motivate officials' participation include (1) notifications of active discussions in the council or of direct questions to the officials, (2) the possibility to easily invite external users, such as colleagues, to the discussions, and (3) shared examples of successful councils.

Interestingly, Virtual Council has at least to a degree succeeded in responding to the user needs of the various youths (Pietilä et al. 2021). In a week-long use period of Virtual Council, the participant's societal participation self-efficacy was increased especially among the youths that were less experienced in societal participation. Additionally, the threshold to societal participation in

various forms was decreased after the one week use period (Pietilä et al. 2021).

As this study was intentionally executed also in such surroundings which include the youths that have had less possibilities to acquire experiences in societal participation, these results can be applied by designers to enable a more inclusive design of eParticipation platforms. As the structures that aim to enable societal participation encourage citizens to participate (Newton and Giebler 2008), the structures should be designed with regard to the needs of those who the society wants to participate that is, all youths.

7. Limitations and future work

Workshop transcripts were analysed only by one researcher, which could affect the validity of the results. Furthermore, in addition to socio-demographic determinants, societal and political participation are considered to be dependent on the context also (Kitanova 2020) and thus the results of similar studies may vary between countries. In future, we continue the iterative development process of Virtual Council in collaboration with the youth. The proposed solutions for the user needs described in this study will be evaluated accordingly in prototype tests. Referring to recent research (Meriläinen, Heiskanen, and Viljanen 2020), youth participation in online and offline environments is at worst disregarded by the officials and legislators due to power relations. Thus, in the future, it would be interesting to study if better youth-centric design and youth inclusivity in design could break down the obstacles for participation and in having an impact.

8. Conclusion

Young people's needs for digital service enabling societal participation play a crucial role in designing such services. By involving youths with a wide spectrum of different backgrounds we gained an understanding of their needs. In this paper, we presented the identified user needs and set the design solutions in the Virtual Council prototype in a dialogue with them. The results can contribute to future research and the design solutions to enhance the inclusiveness of digital eParticipation services. Through advancing inclusiveness in digital democracy services and eParticipation platforms, it may be possible to allow society to develop more deliberative and equally accessible democratic processes.

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