eParticipation for Supporting Societal Participation Self-efficacy and Lowering the Thresholds of Societal Participation: Case Virtual Council

Iikka Pietilä*
Human-Centered Technology, Unit of Computing,
Tampere University, Finland
iikka.pietila@tuni.fi

Miia Lähde
Faculty of Social Sciences, Tampere University, Finland
miia.lahde@tuni.fi

Jari Varsaluoma
Human-Centered Technology, Unit of Computing,
Tampere University, Finland
jari.varsaluoma@tuni.fi

Kaisa Väänänen
Human-Centered Technology, Unit of Computing,
Tampere University, Finland
kaisa.vaananen@tuni.fi

ABSTRACT

While eParticipation platforms have been developed extensively, there is a lack of insight into how they support societal participation. People's beliefs in their capabilities are a relevant component in human action, also affecting the motivation to participate. In this paper, we report the results of a study on the possibilities of an eParticipation platform to a) enhance the users' self-efficacy in the context of societal participation, and b) lower the threshold of societal participation. Altogether, 34 young people from various backgrounds participated in Virtual Council field tests to collaborate on the Climate Change Act in Finland. The results suggest that eParticipation platforms can enhance the societal participation self-efficacy of youths that initially have less experience participating in societal issues. Furthermore, the threshold of participation can be lowered after using the eParticipation platform. The paper adds to the growing discussion on connections between youths use of digital services and societal participation.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Field studies**; • **Software prototyping**; • **Computing in government**;

KEYWORDS

eParticipation, societal participation, self-efficacy, Virtual Council

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1 INTRODUCTION

During the last two decades, European youth policy has strongly emphasised the importance of improving young people's possibilities and resources for engagement in political and social spheres. International youth policy documents such as the White Paper on Youth (European Commission, 2001) and the EU Youth Strategy have highlighted the need to create opportunities for debate between public institutions and young people and make effective use of information and communication technologies to broaden and deepen participation (Youth Wiki, 2020).

The concept of societal participation can refer to the activity of a single person or group taking part in a plethora of societal processes that can include, but are not limited to, voting, decision-making, and discussing politics (Pietilä et al., 2019). Harris et al. (2010) assert that societal participation can also include belonging to a political party and participating in party activities. The concept of societal participation is closely affiliated with civic engagement and political participation. Adler and Goggin (2005) describe civic engagement to include activities such as community services, collective actions, or political involvement. These activities can manifest, for instance, as donating blood or mentoring youths, voting, or contributing to political party activities. Moreover, as Macedo and Alex-Assensoh (2005, p. 6) argue, civic engagement can be defined as "any activity, individual or collective devoted to influencing the collective life of polity". Furthermore, according to Weber et al. (2003), political participation beyond voting can refer to activities such as signing petitions, attending public, town, or school meetings, contacting government representatives, attending political rallies, serving in organisations or clubs, and taking part in political discussions online.

Societal participation and interaction between citizens and officials are increasingly taking place online (Xenos & Moy, 2007; Auxer, 2020; Van Kessel et al., 2020), and online participation is especially preferred by youths (Xenos & Moy, 2007; Weber et al., 2003; Omotayo & Folorunso, 2020). In the international policy context of youth participation, eParticipation is understood as measures aiming to broaden youth participation through the use of information and communication technologies and social media (Youth Wiki, 2020). Furthermore, as an even broader phenomena, the concept of digital participation refers to a plethora of institutionally and

traditionally recognised activities, which can often fall under eParticipation, and less institution-centric and traditional ones, such as using social media or discussion forums to affect societal matters (Pietilä et al., 2019).

1.1 Barriers and unequal possibilities for participation

Not all young people have equal possibilities for societal participation (Checkoway, 2011; Cahill, 2018; Auxer, 2020). Pietilä et al. (2019) assert that some key obstacles for youth societal participation, as reported by the youths themselves, include lack of interest, lack of information, fear of conflicts and being stigmatised. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) elaborate that the inefficient and conflict-ridden impressions of politics and democratic processes cause disengagement from societal participation. Additionally, according to Ten Brummelaar (2018), the youths are limited in their possibilities to participate meaningfully.

Enabling societal participation online may mitigate some of the differences in and quantities of participation between youths with different backgrounds (Flanagan & Levine, 2010), but eParticipation services should not be considered as silver bullets that enable equal participation for all. In addition to reproducing similar problems related to traditional ways of participation, there may also be new problems. Identified challenges in digital participation include various divides, such as males and middle-class youths benefiting from better internet connections in comparison to females and working-class youths (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007).

1.2 Self-efficacy in societal participation

Self-efficacy refers to the expectations or beliefs that people have about their abilities. According to Albert Bandura's widely used theory, perceived self-efficacy refers to an individual's beliefs in his/her "capabilities to organise and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (Bandura, 1997, p. 3); more simply, it is "a judgment of capability to execute given types of performances" (2006, p. 309). Beliefs concerning one's capabilities are a central guiding factor of human behaviour, which influences the individual's thinking patterns, motivations, affects and actions. Through its direct and indirect effects, perceived self-efficacy contributes to, for example, people's aspirations, how they approach new tasks, goal commitment and resilience (Bandura, 1995; 2006). Self-efficacy relies on mastery experiences, vicarious learning (learning from social models), verbal persuasion and physiological and affective states at the time of the behavioural opportunity (Bandura, 1995, pp. 3–5; Williams & Rhodes, 2016).

As self-beliefs are not a unitary system but specific to different domains of human actions, their measurement should be tied up with a particular situation and task (Bandura, 2006; see also Latikka et al., 2019). In societal participation, efficacy beliefs have been regarded both as an important predictor of participation and of its positive outcome. A high level of efficacy among citizens is understood as desirable for democratic stability (see European Social Survey, 2016; Solhaug, 2016). Even before Bandura's theory on self-efficacy, the concept of political efficacy has been discussed in political science. For example, Campbell et al. (1954, p. 187) have defined political efficacy as the "feeling that political and social change is possible and that the individual citizen can play a part in bringing about this change". Almond and Verba's (1963) term "internal political efficacy" assert that an individual's engagement in political action requires not only knowledge but also other capabilities such as believing in one's abilities to act and exert influence in various fields (Solhaug, 2006). In this paper, we use the concept of societal participation self-efficacy to refer to the beliefs and expectations of one's own performance and capabilities in relation to societal participation.

2 STUDYING VIRTUAL COUNCIL

In this study, we are interested in how a digital service can support young people's societal participation self-efficacy and lower the thresholds of societal participation. To study the relationships of using an eParticipation platform, societal participation–related self-efficacy, and thresholds to participate, two research questions were formulated: **RQ1**: How is the use of Virtual Council related to societal participation self-efficacy? And **RQ2**: Does the use of Virtual Council lower the threshold of societal participation? These research questions are answered in the Results and are further discussed and juxtaposed with previous studies in the Discussion.

2.1 Virtual Council – a platform and process for youths' eParticipation

Virtual Council is an eParticipation platform that aims to foster the participation of young people in societal discussions to influence policies that (may) affect them. Virtual Council can be employed at different levels of governance, such as at the municipal or state level, in order to engage young people in planning or decision-making processes. A functional prototype of Virtual Council has been developed as part of a multidisciplinary research project All-Youth. Various youth groups and individual young people have been involved in the different phases of its design and development processes (Pietilä et al., 2021).

Virtual Council research encompasses various roles. By "user", we refer to anyone who uses the service, and by "participant", we refer to the individuals who participated in this study. "Official" refers to people who work for the government or a municipal or governmental organisation. A "chairperson" is a user that is not an official but has a special role in a council; they are a volunteer who is responsible for creating a summary that functions as a final statement of that particular council. In Virtual Council it is possible to create digital councils, in which the creator can invite participants. Each council has sections for real-time textual chat, supplementary materials, and final statement, in which the council's viewpoints are summarised. The chat includes features such as reactions to individual messages ("Agree", "Disagree", and "Well argued") and allows a chance to reply to a message, thus starting a sub thread. The materials section enables users to upload external documents. The final statement feature enables the council to form a statement that reflects the central opinions and viewpoints that manifested during the discussions through a questionnaire.

2.2 Using Virtual Council to hear the youths concerning Climate Change Act renewal

The use case of Virtual Council for this study was created in collaboration with the Ministry of the Environment of Finland. The Climate Change Act consists of matters such as goals for emission reductions and the planning system for policies concerning climate that includes, e.g., various long-term plans. In this use case, the participants were asked to engage in a consultative process concerning the renewal of the Climate Change Act and to produce the final statement addressing the emerging views. Although the officials working for the Ministry were partners in this study and provided the materials to support the discussions, the councils' creation and the material uploads were conducted by the researchers, as the service is still under development and does not yet have the features that enable the officials to independently run the councils.

2.3 Methods and study setting

The data for this study was acquired through three different online questionnaire sets and by conducting a semi-structured interview on eight individual participants. Data acquisition was executed in a series of multiple separate digital test councils in which the participants used the Virtual Council platform for a week-long working period. Each council included 5–10 participants. Altogether, five councils were carried out in five different settings in Central and Southern Finland. A few days after each council had finished, one or two participants were recruited in an interview (8 in total). The interview included questions concerning general thoughts on participation, overall experiences regarding Virtual Council, thoughts on the functionalities and contents of discussions, materials section and final statement, and participant activity.

For the operationalisation of societal participation–related self-efficacy, a set of questions utilising 1–7 Likert scale assertions were prepared for both, with 1 being "Completely disagree" and 7 being "Completely agree". The section was based on the work of Pietilä et al. (2019) and Pajares et al. (2006). Societal participation self-efficacy was inquired before and after the use period of Virtual Council and thus represent a repeated measures setting style.

To measure an individual's threshold for societal participation, another set of questions was prepared. The items in the section are based on the European Social Survey (2018) and are edited to fit the needs of this study. Each item represents an activity that is affiliated with societal participation (See Figure 2). Participants were instructed to appraise each of the items categorically as "I have not and I could not imagine myself doing so", "I have not, but I could imagine myself doing so", "Yes, but I could not imagine myself doing so anymore", "Yes, and I could imagine myself doing so in the future", "I don't know / I don't want to answer / Does not apply to me". These data were collected once before and once after the one week use period of Virtual Council and, thus, also represents a repeated measure setting style. To reduce dimensions and to increase interpretability, the data from these two measurements (before and after) were aggregated to three categories: "Threshold lowered", "Threshold remained the same", and "Threshold increased".

2.4 Study process & Participants

The study is based on a use case of Virtual Council that was carried out with five different groups, each stretching over a one-week period. The study process included three phases: Orientation & Initialisation, Use period and Finalisation. The first phase, Orientation & Initialisation, was organised as a face-to-face workshop-like meeting with the group. During this meeting, the group was given information concerning the project. Also, the participants' written consents, demographics and first round of repeated measures data were acquired. Use period consisted of three sessions. During the first and second use sessions, the participants were asked to familiarise themselves with the supporting materials, discuss questions addressing emission reduction and participation in legislation, and to edit the old act or create a completely new act. For the third use session, the participants were instructed to answer the questions for the final statement. The concluding summary of the final statement was assigned to the chairperson. The third phase, Finalisation, included filling out the end questionnaire and the repeated measures questionnaires and interviewing eight of the participants over Skype. No separate face-to-face meeting was arranged for the third phase, and the participants completed the questionnaires independently. The participants were acknowledged for their participation with a free movie ticket and a diploma of participation for the Climate Change Act renewal.

Altogether, 34 young people participated in the week-long use periods in Virtual Council. Data were usable from 25 of those participants, who were between 15 and 32 years of age. Seven (28%) participants were over 15 but under 18 years of age. Eight (32%) participants were 18–23 years old. Seven (28%) were between 24 and 29, and two (8%) had turned 32. The median age of the participants was 21 years. Fourteen (56%) participants identified as female and nine participants (38%) as male. Two participants identified as "other" or did not want to answer this question. The participants were recruited from various settings such as rehabilitative workshop activities (6), volunteering youth action team (4), inclusive rehabilitative activities team (13), vocational special education group (7), and bachelor's level students' group (4). By this we aimed to include youths with various backgrounds (See e.g., Pietilä et al., 2021).

2.5 Analysis

SPSS was used for analysis and infographics. To compare differences between the before and after measurements, the non-parametric equivalent of the t-test (related-samples Wilcoxon signed-rank test) is used where applicable. Non-parametric tests were chosen due to small sampling sizes. For statistical tests, .05 was selected as the alpha threshold value and Bonferroni correction is used for repeated tests. The number of participants in each statistical test may differ from the number of participants in the whole group due to inadequately completed questionnaires precluding uniform formation of sum variables. Sum variable Societal participation self-efficacy was formed from seven items with an inner consistency of $a = .971$.

In the qualitative analysis of the interview data, the methodological approach of grounded theory was applied as the categorisation was based on the aspects that were identified in the data (Glasser

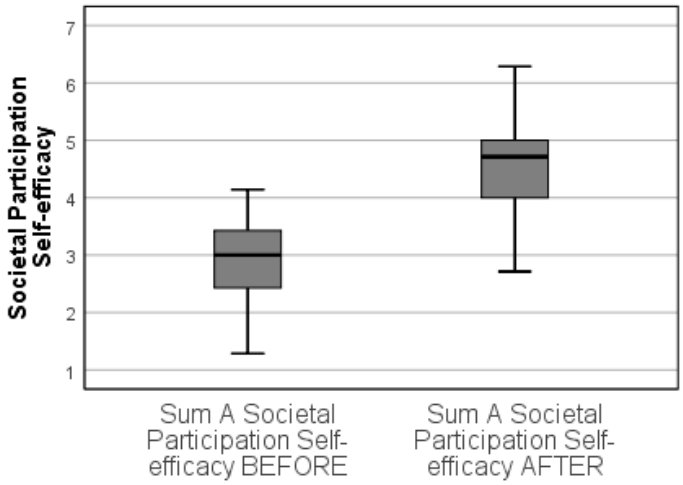

Figure 1: Before and after measurements of the variable Societal Participation Self-efficacy for the participants that were initially below the median value (n = 9).

& Strauss, 1967). The notes from the eight personal interviews were transcribed. Thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was applied to the notes by one author to form categories. The question guiding the analysis was, "How can Virtual Council lower the thresholds of participation?". For the qualitative data analysis, a structure consisting of multiple stages was designed in a similar (but simplified) manner, as described by Burnard (1991). The stages constituting the analysis were the following: 1. Establishing an overview of the data through reading all of the interview notes, 2. Systematically reading and annotating the notes, 3. Initially creating categories through open coding (Malterud, 2012), 4. Iterating and combining categories, 5. Re-reading notes through a perspective concerning each category, 6. Elaborating the category and linking commentary to highlight the nature of affiliation for items in each category, and 7. Setting the categories in dialogue with the theoretical framework and previous studies.

3 RESULTS

3.1 RQ1: How is the use of Virtual Council related to societal participation self-efficacy?

Young people's use of Virtual Council and self-efficacy in relation to societal participation was studied through the statistical testing of the variable Societal participation self-efficacy. This testing includes a comparison of the societal participation self-efficacy sum variable before and after the week-long use period of Virtual Council to elicit a possible difference before and after using the service.

Running a related-samples Wilcoxon signed-rank test on the sample (n = 17) to inspect the difference in the variable Societal Participation Self-efficacy before and after measurements did not show a statistically significant change (Z = -.735, p = .462). This result reflects no change in societal participation–related self-efficacy at the group level during the use period of Virtual Council.

To further explore the possible changes in societal participation self-efficacy before and after using Virtual Council, only answers of participants that had a smaller initial value in the Societal Participation Self-efficacy variable were inspected. Filtering for further testing of those whose score for the Societal participation self-efficacy sum was below the median (4.13) leaves half of the participants (n = 9) for testing. Running a related-samples Wilcoxon signed-rank test suggests a statistically significant difference between the before and after measurements (Z = -2.314, p = .021, Bonferroni corrected p = .042). Figure 1 illustrates this difference.

3.2 RQ2: Does the use of Virtual Council lower the threshold of societal participation?

Research question 2 explores the relationship between using Virtual Council and the threshold of participation in societal matters through various activities. This relationship is elucidated by comparing participants' attitudes towards an activity before and after the one-week use period of Virtual Council.

To inspect changes in the attitudes towards various activities related to societal participation, the before and after measurements for each item were aggregated into one variable that reflects the change, i.e., whether the threshold to participate societally through an activity was increased, lowered, or stayed the same. As visible in Figure 2, for almost half the participants, the threshold to "share something political on social media or through email or other online means" decreased. Similarly, for roughly a third of the participants, the threshold to "support a cause by using a badge in my profile or cover picture on some social media service" and to "wear a badge, pin or flag that is related to a campaign" was lowered. Additionally, for roughly a third of the participants, the thresholds to "contact an MP, minister, official or local politician" and to "support an ideological group or community by liking a page, etc." was lowered. For two participants, the threshold increased to "support a cause by

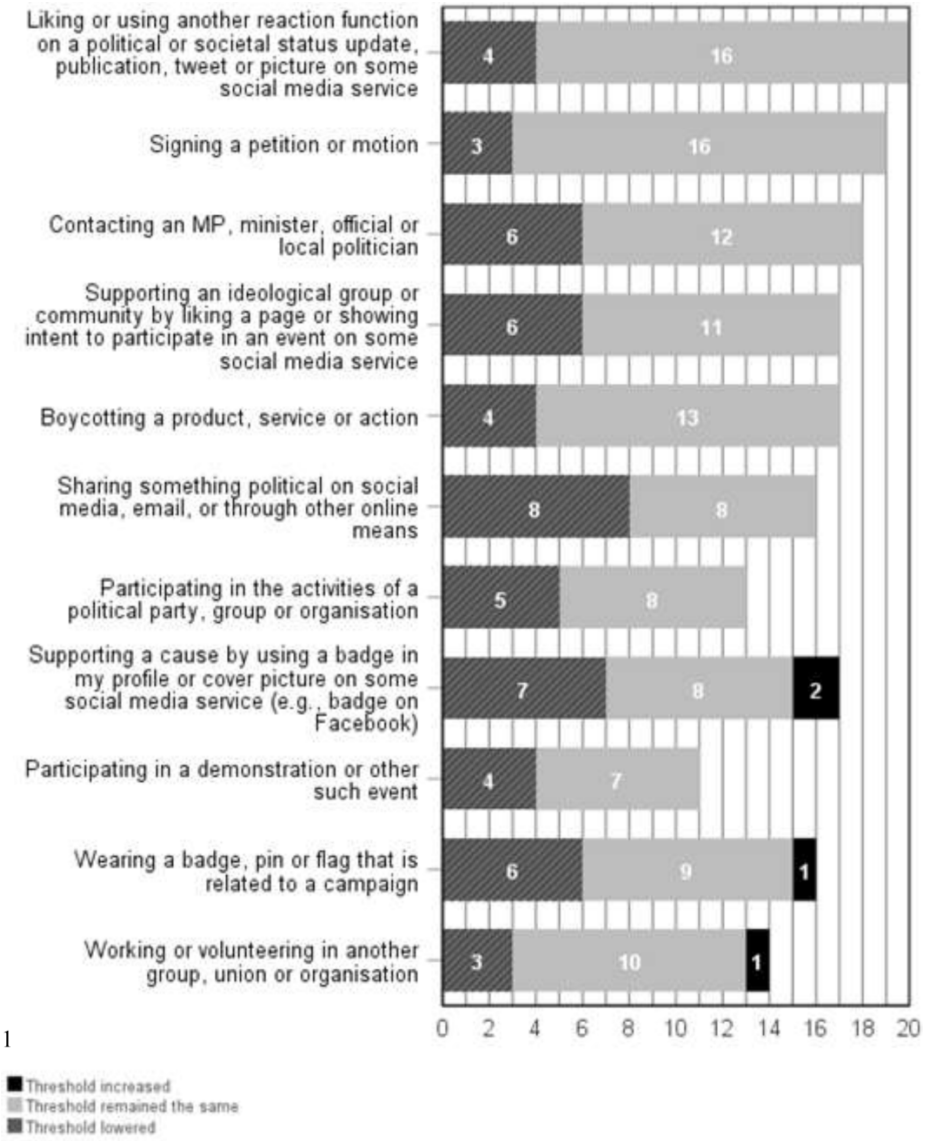

Figure 2: Changes in thresholds for participation through various activities.

using a badge in my profile or cover picture, etc." Additionally, for one participant in both "wearing a badge, pin or flag that is related to a campaign" and "working or volunteering in another group, union or organisation", the threshold increased.

The interviews also elucidated the relationship of usage of Virtual Council and experienced thresholds for participation. Eight categories of aspects related to the guiding question "How can Virtual Council lower the thresholds of participation?" were identified from the interview notes. Next, these categories are introduced, and a linking commentary is presented to highlight the nature of affiliation for the items in each category. The identified categories are summarised in Table 1, with the number of interviewees that mentioned at least one aspect in a particular category.

Seven interviewees used expressions such as "*easy to use*" and "*clear*" as they described Virtual Council or some of the solutions applied in it, for instance "*The discussion area was simple and easy; I liked it.*" and "*It was easy to use, simple, and I found what I wanted to find. [...] Documents were clear, and it was easy to send and receive messages. [...] Seems easy to use.*" Five out of eight participants discussed their feelings of enhanced societal empowerment and activity invoked by the use period. A participant stated that "This is official, and the information [participant input] from here is propagated further [to decision-makers]." Another participant elaborated: "*I was able to participate just fine, and I helped others.*"

Table 1: Categories identified in the interview data

#	Category	Number of interviewees
1	Ease of use and clarity	7
2	Enhanced societal empowerment and activity	5
3	Safe space	5
4	Features or functionalities in Virtual Council that support participation	5
5	Potential complementary service	4
6	Interesting theme	3
7	Have an effect / Reach the decision-makers	1
8	Personally suitable way of participating	1

Virtual Council offered a safe space to promote interaction and discussion over societal issues, as it does not require revealing personal information and enables communication with pseudonyms. The importance of the possibility to participate in the exchange of ideas through pseudonyms was manifested in how the participants discussed their feelings towards the use of Virtual Council (5 participants). Nevertheless, the sense of safety was also linked to the discussion not being completely anonymous, as they knew others who were participating in the council.

Also, features or functionalities that supported participation in Virtual Council were identified and characterised by five participants. One of them said: "*Documents from which I could read [. . .] [are] a positive [feature].*" Another stated that: "*Understandable instructions. [. . .] And it was good that there was this material that needed to be read. [. . .] Votes, questionnaires and chats were good.*"

Virtual Council was also seen as a potential complementary service in the plethora of participation services, offering a new channel for participation by four participants. One of the interviewees said that "*Seems like a good channel for young people.*" Another further elaborated that "*At school, we are fed that we should remember to participate, and they just always give the same [types of participation]: go vote, gather names for a petition, [. . .] so this kind of way would open possibilities. [. . .] I have not run into this kind of service, so personally, I think this is a necessary service.*"

Three participants separately pointed out that they were personally interested in the discussed theme of climate law renewal. One said that: "*It was useful to read and to see where I could do better in having an effect on climate change or politics or participating and perhaps trying to mitigate harmful emissions and what I could do.*" Moreover, one participant asserted that the Virtual Council use period enabled a feeling of being able to have an effect on issues and that he/she could reach the decision-makers: "*Indeed, I felt like I would be able to have an effect. [. . .] Virtual Council is different in a way – it is certain that the information goes further and does not just stay with the closest ones. Here [in Virtual Council], it is more certain that one is able to have an effect.*" Furthermore, a participant discussed her feelings in relation to self-expression and thought that Virtual Council offered a personally appropriate way of participating: "*For me, it is that [. . .] that I can write. I do not want to go to demonstrations so that I have time to think about rationalisation for my own views.*"

4 DISCUSSION

The results do not suggest a group-level difference between the before and after measurements of societal participation self-efficacy. However, when focusing on the participants who initially had lower societal participation related self-efficacy, a statistically significant change emerged, reflecting an increase in societal participation related self-efficacy. The answers to the questions regarding thresholds of participation through certain activities differed between the before and after measurements among a significant proportion of the participants in various activities. In seven out of eleven items, more than a third of the participants changed their views on whether they could imagine themselves participating as described in the activity. This change was visible between the measurements that were executed before and after the week-long use period of Virtual Council. Changes occurred in both digital and non-digital spheres of societal participation.

The identified aspects related to lowering the thresholds for participation included the feeling of enhanced societal empowerment and activity. Moreover, other aspects that were identified consisted of Virtual Council being clear and easy to use. Additionally, Virtual Council offers a feeling of safety through anonymity and an understanding conversation atmosphere. Virtual Council was also seen as a service that offers a usable addition to the plethora of participation channels, especially for youths. Various features and functionalities of Virtual Council, such as materials and documents supporting discussions, instructions, questionnaires, and chat, can contribute to lowering thresholds of participation.

The participants identified and named helpful knowledge acquisition–supporting features or functionalities, such as the documents and materials section. This is connected to a lack of information as one of the key obstacles for participation, which is described by Pietilä et al. (2019). Virtual Council succeeded in strengthening the belief that one's actions make a difference, as interviewees pointed out, which may alleviate the inefficiency-related disengagement highlighted by Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002).

Another obstacle for participation outlined by Pietilä et al. (2019) is fear of conflicts. Furthermore, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) described the connection between conflict-ridden impressions of politics and disengagement. In this week-long test period, Virtual Council was experienced as safe, and the possibility of participating anonymously was identified as a factor that could prevent a user from being targeted, thus lowering the threshold of participation and reducing the fear of being stigmatised.

Pietilä et al. (2019) mentions a lack of interest as one of the key obstacles for youth participation. Psychological empowerment due to involvement with acute societal issues leading to societal participation self-efficacy enhancement (Leung, 2009) and youth's increasing interest towards environmental themes (Marques et al., 2020) manifested in the interviews as mentions of the theme (Climate Change Act renewal) being interesting. These may have contributed to lowered thresholds.

According to Bandura (1995), self-efficacy can be strengthened by supporting defining factors such as providing occasions of successful learning, peer experiences and positive feedback from the social environment. Moreover, Theiss-Morse and Hibbing (2005) summarise the contemplations of Fiorina (1999) and Levi (1996) and elaborate that belonging to a group can enhance an individual's learning of democratic values and of becoming politically active. As a phenomenon, this was not explicitly identified by the interviewees in the context of Virtual Council. However, the small-group activities were affiliated with feelings of safety. Perhaps the use process and features should be developed so that Virtual Council would enable a more cohesive experience of belonging to a group, for instance, through adding functionalities that encourage and enable more ways for giving positive feedback to other users.

5 CONCLUSION

The results of this study propose that use of Virtual Council can support societal participation self-efficacy and affect attitudes towards various activities under the wider umbrella of societal participation. The various ways in which the service enhanced societal participation self-efficacy among the participants are affiliated with previously identified obstacles and enabling factors for participation. This finding should encourage the decision-makers and officials to further explore the possibilities in digital participation and to utilise the empowering possibilities of eParticipation services that address the user needs of users with various backgrounds.

However, the specific mechanisms through which Virtual Council or, more broadly, eParticipation services that may produce these effects need to be studied more extensively. This incorporates thorough and systematic testing of services that utilise various ways of interaction and include citizens from diverse backgrounds regarding their previous experience and perceived ability in societal participation. Also, possible long-term effects need to be explored.

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