Strengthening Participatory Civic Skills of Gen Z in the Digital Era: Innovation in Civic Education

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the strengthening of participatory citizenship skills among Generation Z students in the digital age, with a particular focus on their abilities to engage with public issues, monitor policies, and influence political processes. Using a qualitative approach with 150 participants, data were collected through open-ended questionnaire-based interviews and analyzed using thematic techniques. The research findings indicate that although students demonstrate advanced discursive skills and actively engage in online discussions, their participatory practices exhibit a spectrum of sophistication ranging from basic digital deliberation to more strategic forms of collaboration, such as advocacy, investigation, and documentation. However, these skills often face significant internal and external barriers, including public apathy, misinformation, and unsupportive socio-political practices. The study underscores the urgent need for innovative citizenship education that embraces experiential learning, digital collaboration, and project-based approaches that are adaptive to the characteristics of Generation Z. Recommendations The findings of this study make an important contribution to education because they offer ways to shape responsible citizens through digital integration, participatory pedagogy, and critical digital literacy.

Keywords: Civic Education, Generation Z, Participatory Civic Skills, Digital Era, Digital Literacy

INTRODUCTION

Generation Z, born and raised in the digital era, possesses unique characteristics, such as technological skills, a preference for fast communication, and a strong affinity for social media (Janssen & Carradini, 2021; Limilia et al., 2022). This presents both opportunities and challenges for education, particularly Civics Education (PKn) in higher education. Civics Education is not sufficient only to provide knowledge of civic concepts; it also needs to develop participatory civic skills. Participatory civic skills encompass the abilities to interact with, monitor, and influence public issues, engage in political processes, and participate in public problem-solving (Dahl, 1992; Patrick et al., 2003). However, this study explicitly expands Dahl and Patrick's theoretical discourse, stating that for Generation Z, this realm of participation is no longer limited to physical spaces and traditional institutions, but has migrated and been transformed by digital platforms. While previous research has confirmed that these skills are important for mobilizing communities, listening to different perspectives, and participating in concrete actions (Damiani et al., 2022; Dumitrica, 2020; Luguetti et al., 2024; NAEP, 2018).

The development of digital technology opens up new opportunities to strengthen participatory civic skills. Social media such as Twitter (X), TikTok, and Instagram have become effective interactive platforms for facilitating young people's political participation, enabling direct communication with national leaders and political leaders, advocacy on important issues, and public education (Omotayo & Folorunso, 2020; Suherlan, 2023). Global phenomena such as the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States demonstrate how social media can encourage young people to participate in socio-political events, educate themselves and others, and coordinate solidarity across regions (Wilf et al., 2023). In Indonesia, a similar phenomenon occurred with the Indonesian Emergency Warning Movement, which became a trending topic with over 31,000 tweets on the Twitter (X) platform on September 21, 2024, voicing public dissatisfaction and encouraging political reform related to the revision of the Regional Election Law following Constitutional Court Decision Number 70/PUU-XXII/2024 (Yahya, 2024).

However, while these studies and phenomena highlight the global potential of digital platforms for engagement, there remains a critical gap in the literature regarding how these opportunities translate into the development of tangible participatory citizenship skills within the specific context of Indonesian higher education. Previous research (Wilf et al., 2023) has extensively documented challenges such as misinformation and shallow heuristics, but has not sufficiently explored the pedagogical frameworks and practical mechanisms needed to cultivate sophisticated, sustainable, and informed participatory skills among Indonesian students. This study aims to address this gap by investigating the specific practices, barriers, and educational needs of Generation Z students in Indonesia, moving beyond the documentation of problems to offer strategic recommendations for curriculum innovation.

With 212.9 million internet users (Kemp, 2023) and a youth population of 23.18% of the national population (BPS, 2023), Indonesia has significant potential to build a healthy culture of digital participation. Article 16 of the Youth Law Number 40 of 2009 emphasizes the strategic role of youth in advancing democracy, making strengthening participatory civic skills an urgent need. However, previous research has shown that digital participation does not always have a positive impact. The digital generation is not only a consumer of information but also a producer of content that influences public opinion (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020). The internet's interactive features encourage participation while simultaneously opening up space for the spread of misleading information (Sun et al., 2023; Tarsidi et al., 2023). Social media has also become an arena for competing narratives, including the intervention of political actors through influencers who produce structured campaigns, both positive and negative, as well as smear campaigns (Aditya Dewantara et al., 2022; Faulina et al., 2021; Putra, 2023).

The challenge becomes even more complex when the younger generation, despite having widespread access to information, tends to use a shallow heuristic approach when assessing the credibility of sources (Alghamdi et al., 2023; Kozyreva et al., 2020). Furthermore, disinformation and opinion polarization on social media have the potential to undermine public trust in democratic institutions, hindering constructive dialogue between citizens (Pira, 2023; Xing et al., 2024). This situation demands that civics learning in higher education not only teach democratic norms and values but also equip students with critical, ethical, and adaptive participation skills in both digital and offline spaces.

This study examines how Generation Z demonstrates participatory civic skills in the digital era and proposes civics learning ideas tailored to their characteristics. Using a qualitative approach with 150 university students, this research maps the spectrum of their participatory practices, the strategies they employ, and the barriers they face, to build a framework for innovative civic education. The novelty of this research lies in the development of conceptual ideas for civics learning that combine the use of digital platforms, participatory approaches, and digital literacy strengthening to encourage students' critical, ethical, and productive participation in public issues. These findings are expected to benefit educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers in developing strategies for strengthening civic skills in higher education. Therefore, this study examines the following main research questions: How do Generation Z students in Indonesia apply participatory citizenship skills in the digital age, and what educational strategies can effectively support the development of these skills?

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research approach with a descriptive study design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) to gain an in-depth understanding of the forms of participatory citizenship skills among Generation Z in the digital era. The research design was selected to comprehensively explore students' experiences, strategies, and challenges in developing participatory skills through detailed analysis of their personal accounts and reflections.

Participants and Sampling

This study involved 150 students aged 18-25 years from various academic programs enrolled in Citizenship courses at universities in Indonesia using a purposive sampling technique emphasizing the distribution of private. The distribution of participant data is as follows.

Study Programs	Male	Female	Number per Study Program
Nutrition	20	30	50
Management	22	28	50
Primary Teacher Education	16	34	50
Number per Gender	58	92	150

While this approach is in line with the qualitative principle of seeking information-rich cases that are at the core of the phenomenon being studied, in this case, digital citizen participation in various fields of study. Sampling criteria were designed to identify participants who could provide meaningful insights: (1) active student status, (2) experience in using digital media for public participation, and (3) willingness to participate in all stages of the study.

Data Collection

Data were collected through open-ended questionnaire-based interviews designed to elicit rich and detailed responses about participants' civic engagement experiences. The instrument was developed based on a comprehensive literature review of digital citizenship and participatory skills (Dahl, 1992; Patrick et al., 2003). The data were then validated by two experts in civic education and research methodology. Their feedback was used to refine the questions to make them clearer, more relevant, and more comprehensive. The final instrument contained questions addressing: (1) experiences in public issue discussions, (2) strategies for seeking and verifying information, (3) involvement in policy deliberations, (4) use of fact-based data for advocacy, (5) participation in policy socialization, (6) motivations for socio-political activities, and (7) written reflections on previous civic learning experiences, including strengths, weaknesses, and suggestions for improvement in the digital age.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a systematic two-stage thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017) within the framework outlined by (Robson & McCartan, 2016). The first stage employed open coding to identify initial themes relevant to participatory citizenship skills. The second stage utilized analytical coding to establish connections between categories, build thematic relationships, and develop conceptual conclusions. The analysis was supported by ATLAS.ti software version 23 (Friese, 2019), which facilitated data organization, coding management, and visualization of complex relationships between emerging categories.

Validity and Trustworthiness

To ensure the validity and credibility of the study, various verification strategies were implemented following Patton's (2015) recommendations for qualitative rigor. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing findings from open-ended questionnaires with participants' written reflections. Peer debriefing sessions were also conducted with fellow researchers to test coding consistency and interpretive validity. As an effort of reflexivity, the researchers critically noted and reflected on assumptions made during the data collection and

analysis process to minimize bias. Furthermore, the study's credibility was enhanced through in-depth descriptions (thick descriptions) of participants' contexts and experiences, and maintained by a documented audit trail of analytical decisions (Nowell et al., 2017).

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical research principles by obtaining informed consent from all participants, ensuring confidentiality through anonymization of identifying information, and providing participants with the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty. All data were stored securely and used solely for academic purposes.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study found that Generation Z's civic participation skills in the digital era are formed through three main dimensions: discursive, collaborative, and direct action. The participation process begins with public dialogue, develops into the formation of collaborative spaces, and culminates in concrete actions that influence policy. This pattern demonstrates that the digital space is not only a communication medium but also an effective ecosystem for social mobilization.

1. **Forms of Gen Z's Participatory Civic Skills in the Digital Era**

Figure 1 illustrates that Generation Z's participatory civic skills are a multidimensional construct encompassing discrete, collaborative, and direct action aspects. The results of the observed analysis of the participants' experiences showed patterns that were in harmony with the conceptual maps produced from the analysis of the Atlas. ti software. Concretely, student participation is manifested through several main activities.

First, initiate and actively participate in public discussions, both offline and online, to discuss policy issues. An informant described his experience: "*I once initiated an open discussion between citizens to discuss public policy issues, such as the use of village funds and budget transparency. This activity raises citizens' awareness that their voices matter and can influence decisions at the local level*" (P98). In addition, participation is shown through an active role in disseminating information and raising public awareness about public issues, as expressed by the participants: "*Some time ago, when there was an emergency Indonesian demonstration, I participated in disseminating information related to what problems are currently in Indonesia*" (P7). This activity reflects the elements of learning about public issues and public discussion engagement in the conceptual map.

Second, participation in online dialogue spaces that function as a learning vehicle to understand the complexity of an issue and practice an open attitude. This is reflected in the statement: "*My most meaningful experience in online discussions about climate change involved debates with individuals from different backgrounds, which deepened my understanding of the impact of this issue on communities. The experience taught me to be more open and respectful of other people's views, as well as the importance of listening and engaging in constructive dialogue.*" (P67). Online dialogue also contributes to the building of courage and empathy that is the foundation of the courage to dialogue: "*I learned that the courage to speak up for good, no matter how small, can spark change and strengthen empathy and engagement in social issues*" (P28).

Third, students also translate discussions into collective actions that are more instrumental in influencing policies and solving community problems. This action is in the form of collecting votes through petitions, as revealed by the informant: "*It can be through online petitions and hearings to the relevant agencies. As a result, the road was repaired and the number of accidents decreased.*" (P121). Fundraising and collaboration with local authorities: "*Usually I also raise funds and work with RT administrators to provide village facilities.*" (P76). In fact, there are those involved in more strategic advocacy efforts: "*What I have done is to raise public awareness and support, as well as influence policymakers' decisions to budget more for transportation infrastructure projects.*" (P54).

Figure 1. Participatory Civic Skills Conceptual Network for Generation Z
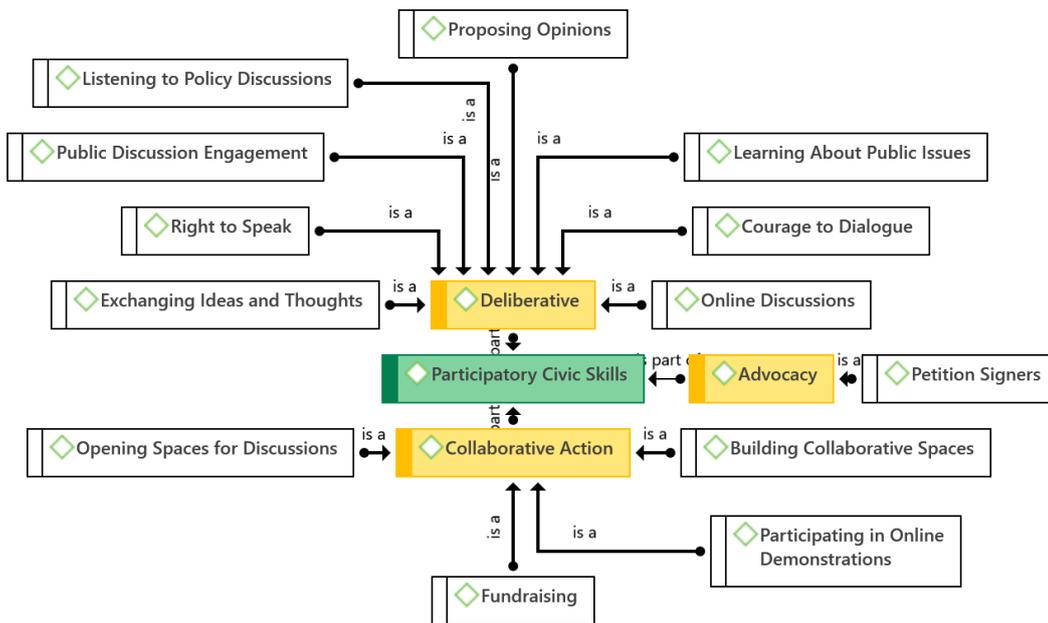
The conceptual map in Figure 1 visually standardizes and reinforces the above qualitative findings. The combined findings of qualitative data and network analysis confirm that Generation Z's civic participation is tiered and networked, a pattern that is in line with the concept of "participatory politics" (Bowyer & Kahne, 2020; Ginzarly & Teller, 2025), where young people run their agency through interactive and peer-to-peer actions. Their participation does not begin with a big action. Still, it often stems from *the courage to dialogue* in both digital and physical spaces, which is a basic practice of deliberative democracy (Karatsiori, 2023; Symonds et al., 2022) that emphasizes constructive and mutually respectful exchange of thoughts. At this stage, the value of civic education lies in fostering an open attitude, empathy, and a profound understanding of public issues.

The transformation step from discourse to action is facilitated by the ability to *build collaborative spaces*. It is this element that bridges the conversation with instrumental participation, such as online petitions and fundraising, which demonstrates the development of "civic agency" (Peart et al., 2024; Phan & Kloos, 2023), citizens' capacity to act collectively to solve public problems. This pattern reinforces the opinion of Earl et al. (2022) that digital platforms are not just talking spaces, but have become ecosystems for real social mobilization, where conversations can be converted into support organizations, resource gathering, and lobbying.

Therefore, the main implication for Civics Education is the need to design learning that reflects this level of participation. The curriculum needs to provide a safe space to practice basic-level discursive skills, while also providing "action civics" (Fitzgerald et al., 2021; Levinson & Solomon, 2021) or project-based learning challenges that simulate the construction of collaborative spaces to solve real problems in their communities (Dahliyana et al., 2024; Kusnadi et al., 2023). Thus, education not only produces citizens who are critical in discourse but also skilled and resilient in acting collectively and responsibly.

2. Strategies and Student Contributions in Strengthening Participatory Civic Skills

Table 1 presents strategies and student contributions in strengthening participatory civic skills and the wider community. The data analysis uncovered three main strategies that form the foundation of more advanced participatory citizenship skills: advocacy, investigation, and

documentation. These three strategies encourage engagement that is not only reactive but also proactive and evidence-based in government policy and oversight processes.

Table 1. Strategies and Student Contributions in Strengthening Participatory Civic Skill

No	Strategy	Indicator	Quotation
1	Advocacy Efforts of individuals or groups in defending the interests of the community, either through lobbying, campaigns, or submitting proposals to policy makers.	1. Direct Approach 2. Campaigns and Socialization 3. Strengthening Participation 4. Aspiration Delivery 5. Increased Awareness	"*Policy Advocacy and Socialization: By actively voicing pro-people policies, I contribute to building public awareness and encouraging citizen participation in deliberation and decision-making*" (P:34) "*My contribute through advocacy for fairer policies, participation in community programs, and public education on rights and responsibilities. In doing so, I strive to promote citizen awareness and participation in the democratic process to create a better life for the community.*" (P87) "*By lobbying and collaborating with environmental groups and scientists to persuade policymakers with concrete data and recommendation*s." (P71)
2	Investigation The process of collecting, reviewing, and ensuring the accuracy of data related to public issues to find the right causes and solutions.	1. Data Verification 2. Critical Analysis 3. Evidence Collection 4. Change Monitoring 5. Transparency	"*One example of the importance of verification is when I help spread information about COVID-19 social assistance. Many hoaxes are circulating on WhatsApp, so I make sure that the information I share only comes from the official website of the Ministry of Social Affairs and local government accounts. This prevents the public from deception and misunderstanding*" (P87) "*Verify Information: After getting the information, I compare it with other sources. If the news only appears in one place, I tend to doubt it. I also checked the date, author, and whether the information was quoted from a primary source. For viral issues, I use fact-checking sites such as Turn Back Hoax or FactCheck*" (P34)
3	Documentation Storing data in a structured manner so that it can be used to drive social change	1. Data Storage 2. Visualization 3. Media and Dissemination	"*The solution is to use simple language and compelling data visualization, and engage local community leaders and influencers to help spread the word. Thus, policies can be understood and*

"*The strategy is through presentations and examples of success in other regions. As a result, the citizens agreed and the recycling program began to run, reducing waste and raising environmental awareness*" (P117)

Findings on advocacy, investigation, and documentation strategies show an evolution from basic participation to strategic participation that requires high-level thinking skills and careful planning. This shift is in line with the concept of critical digital citizenship that emphasizes the use of technology for ethical and impactful citizen engagement (Ribble et al., 2004; Villar-Onrubia et al., 2022). The advocacy strategy shows the development from just discussing to influencing policy directly, which reflects the concept of participatory politics (Ruess et al., 2023; Willis et al., 2022) and the development of civic agents (Hidayah et al., 2020; Thaiyalan & Choo, 2024). The investigative strategy places digital literacy as a defense mechanism for democracy, where students act as a filter of critical information in the face of misinformation, a practice that is at the core of citizen digital literacy (Ismaul Fitroh et al., 2024; Milenkova & Lendzhova, 2021; Nurjanah et al., 2024). Meanwhile, the documentation shows the ability of students to change persuasive narrative data through visualization and presentation, which is a form of creative civic engagement (Bach et al., 2023; Sakarang et al., 2025). These three strategies strengthen each other's participation ecosystem as depicted in Figure 1. Students not only participate but also strengthen digital public spaces through critical, informative, and strategic contributions.

3. Obstacles in Strengthening Participatory Civic Skills

Although students have developed various forms and strategies of participation, the research findings reveal that in practice, they face many challenges that hinder the optimization of these skills. These barriers stem from two main aspects, namely internal factors that come from individuals and communities, and external factors related to systems and environments outside of themselves, as detailed in Table 2.

A number of informants highlighted how difficult it is to invite an apathetic and skeptical public. An informant stated, "*The main challenge is the lack of public awareness of the importance of the policy. Many citizens were skeptical and reluctant to participate*" (P77). This is exacerbated by the hustle and bustle of individuals, as another informant revealed: "*The challenge is that not all people are willing to participate... because they are busy with their own activities*" (P6).

External obstacles also arise in the form of destructive political practices. Informant **(**P46) clearly states: "*Many ignore the socialization of policies and lose the 'money' given to individuals*". Challenges also come in the form of communication gaps between students and the community, including difficulties in conveying messages, "*the challenge is how we speak to the community well*" (P4), as well as managing differences of opinion, "*The challenge is quite difficult to communicate because of different opinions*" (P11).

Table 2. Obstacles in Strengthening Participatory Civic Skills

No	Aspects	Information
1	Internal	Lack of self-awareness, lack of interest, bad habits of society, lack of understanding, ignoring important information, skepticism, not following political activities, retention of change.
2	External	Disinformation and Data Distort, Limited Infrastructure, Lack of Technological Literacy, Lack of Information, Lack of Human Resources, Policy Miscommunication and Misconception, Law Violations, Information Polarization, Unilateral Policy Changes, Low

The findings on these barriers provide a critical and realistic perspective on Generation Z's digital participation optimism. External barriers such as disinformation and information polarization are directly in opposition to student investigative and documentation efforts, demonstrating the need for broader media and information literacy for society (Koren, 2023; Xing et al., 2024). Meanwhile, obstacles such as unilateral policy changes and violations of the law confirm that citizen participation is still heavily influenced by the structure of political opportunity (Firchow & Selim, 2022; Suhariyanto & Rozak, 2025), which is not always responsive. The implication is that civic education should not only focus on soft skills of participation but must equip students with hard skills such as effective communication strategies, stakeholder mapping, and resilience development to face challenging socio-political realities (Aldabbas & Alzoukani, 2025; Pastrana-Huguet et al., 2022; Tian et al., 2024). Thus, strengthening participation skills should be seen as a process that not only builds the capacity of individuals but also prepares them to deal with the complexities of the real democratic environment.

The findings of this study reveal that Generation Z's civic participation in Indonesia develops through a tiered model, starting with basic discursive skills, progressing to instrumental collaborative action, and culminating in evidence-based advocacy, investigation, and documentation strategies. This developmental pattern reinforces the concept of civic participation skills as proposed by Bowyer & Kahne (2020), Earl et al. (2022), and Elecalde et al. (2024), and provides a critical perspective on the complex challenges faced by young people in the realm of digital participation.

These findings deepen existing understanding by highlighting the unique characteristics of Indonesian Gen Z participation, not purely digital, but as a hybrid participation space that combines the digital and physical worlds (Fariah, 2025; Anoraga & Sakai, 2023). Previous studies have almost entirely emphasized the dominance of digital participation, such as Wahyuningroem et al. (2024) in their analysis of the #ReformasiDikorupsi and #TolakOmnibusLaw movements, which highlighted how Indonesian youth mobilized primarily through online platforms. Similarly, Saud et al. (2023) underscored the role of networked engagement in both Indonesia and Pakistan, showing how cultural dynamics shape youth participation in virtual spheres. However, the SMERU Research Institute (2023) found that in cities such as Denpasar and Makassar, social norms and collective values remain the primary drivers of youth participation, rather than solely individual initiatives. These findings align with Campbell's (2021) argument on the dominance of collective agency over individual agency and position digital literacy as an act of citizenship, thereby expanding the analytical framework of digital citizenship beyond its technical dimension as initially introduced by Ribble, Bailey, and Ross (2004). Building on this, the present study contributes to the literature by proposing a developmental model of Gen Z participation that integrates digital and physical engagement, grounded in lived experiences and local socio-cultural contexts.

Furthermore, the SMERU study shows that social norms and collective values remain the primary drivers of youth participation in Denpasar and Makassar, rather than solely individual initiatives (smeru.or.id). These findings also highlight the dominance of collective agency over individual agency (Campbell, 2021) and position digital literacy as an act of citizenship, expanding the analytical framework of digital citizenship that only looks at the technical side. As introduced by Ribble et al. (2004). Thus, this study complements the literature with a developmental model of Gen Z participation based on experience and local context.

Theoretically, this developmental journey of participation aligns with Bruner's (1961) *Discovery Learning* model, which underscores the role of scaffolding in progressively enhancing learners' skills. The tiered nature of these participation stages also reflects Gardner's (1983) principle of *Multiple Intelligences*, affirming that civic competence emerges through diverse domains of experience, from linguistic to interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences. Practically, these results point to an urgent need for transforming civics

education toward an "action civics" approach—an instructional paradigm that embeds safe spaces for deliberation, integrates project-based learning, and provides explicit strategic skills training. Such an approach resonates with the findings of Sukban et al. (2025), who documented a shift in Indonesian civics education toward more transformational, inclusive, and contextually responsive practices that address local socio-political realities.

This study, however, has several limitations. First, the sample is drawn entirely from urban areas, limiting the generalizability of findings to rural or frontier, remote, and underdeveloped (3T) regions. Second, the use of a cross-sectional design restricts the ability to capture the temporal evolution of participatory civic skills. Third, reliance on self-reported data introduces potential biases, as respondents may overstate or understate their actual engagement. These constraints should be carefully considered when interpreting the results.

Future research should employ longitudinal designs to map the developmental trajectories of participatory civic skills over time, extending coverage to rural and 3T regions. A mixed-methods approach would provide richer insights into the complex interplay between digital and physical modes of participation. Additionally, experimental or quasi-experimental studies testing "action civics" interventions in classroom or school settings could yield robust empirical evidence on their effectiveness in enhancing both online and offline civic engagement.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Generation Z's civic participation is a tiered and multidimensional process, evolving from discursive dialogue to collaborative action and strategic advocacy, yet it is significantly challenged by internal apathy and external disinformation. The novel contribution of this research lies in its integrated framework that maps this development and directly implies the critical need for Civic Education to shift towards an experiential, project-based learning model that simulates this entire spectrum while equipping students with resilience strategies. Therefore, we strongly recommend that educators implement practical "Digital Democracy Labs" for skill simulation and that policymakers integrate digital civic literacy into the core curriculum to provide authentic advocacy opportunities. Despite the obstacles, this generation's demonstrated ability to hybridize digital and physical engagement positions them not as passive heirs but as the essential architects of a more adaptive and resilient democratic future, mandating an education system that actively cultivates their inherent potential.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

LR, AA, and DS contributed to this research by developing the conceptual framework, writing the initial manuscript, and conducting initial analysis of the research phenomena. PB and AI were responsible for data collection and distribution. EKW was responsible for analyzing the data, interpreting the findings, and refining the final research results. S played a role in designing the research methodology, validating the analysis results, and providing substantive input during the review and editing stages of the final manuscript.

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