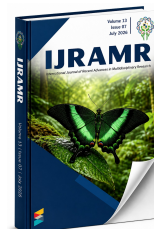




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REVIEW ARTICLE

DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP PARTICIPATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN A SECONDARY CITY IN SENEGAL: THE CHALLENGES OF CAPITALISING ON PRACTICES

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ABSTRACT

The rise of digital technologies is redefining how young people in Ziguinchor, a city in south-western Senegal, participate in the management of their city. Indeed, digital technology, as a new space for free expression, allows them to bypass conventional forms of citizen participation and, as a result, to make their voices heard more clearly. This new civic power in the hands of young people is leading to a new type of governance that is now horizontal and direct, particularly with tags to the relevant authorities. From a sociological point of view, the concept of empowerment makes it possible to account for the potential acquired by young people thanks to digital technologies. The purpose of this article combining sociological approach and web scraping, is to assess the extent of digital participation by this connected generation in the local governance of this medium-sized city, which has been affected by a desire for secession in the region known as the Casamance conflict, described as "low intensity", which began in the early 1980s and lasted for more than two decades, with all its consequences. This assessment was based on empirical data collected from 610 young people in 10 targeted neighbourhoods that fit a well-defined typology (well-off, mixed, peripheral or spontaneous), as well as web scraping of 1000 comments and posts on the main Facebook pages related to the city. Socialisation into digital citizenship from a cultural, social and political perspective was identified thanks to the intervention of local NGOs. The approach adopted combines a territorial analysis of the digital divide with a detailed examination of socio-demographic profiles and infrastructure contexts. The analysis focuses in particular on young people aged 18 to 24, both girls and boys, whether in education or not, according to the socio-spatial status of the neighbourhoods (residential and administrative, peripheral, working-class or informal). Young people make up more than half of the Senegalese population (75% are under 35, according to the latest census conducted by the National Agency for Statistics and Demography). To this end, the concept of empowerment can facilitate this comprehensive approach, enabling us to rethink participation, which becomes direct regardless of educational level and type of neighbourhood. Among the obstacles to full participation by young people in decision-making bodies are volunteering and strong intergenerational ties. 18-20 year olds do not have the same digital citizenship practices as 21-24 year olds.

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INTRODUCTION

More than just a tool for entertainment, communication, learning and commerce in the hands of young people in the city of Ziguinchor, digital technology also involves a sharing of power that can be seen in the capitalisation of their digital practices in relation to citizenship. By appropriating ICTs in

this way as part of a process of civic affirmation, which André (2012) considers to be a « *process of mandatory or voluntary engagement of ordinary people, acting alone or within an organisation, with a view to influencing a decision on significant choices that will affect their community* », young people clearly demonstrate their empowerment. These 18–24-year-olds, in search of autonomy, highlight agency understood

as the capacity for action capable of generating social, political and cultural transformation. It should be noted that access to digital technology does not guarantee civic engagement among young people. What is at stake is civic participation encouraged by actors such as local NGOs and local authorities with a view to socialising young people into the digital civic participation necessary in the face of young people who, for the most part, had kept their distance from traditional decision-making and consultation mechanisms. In fact, before the age of 18, young people are introduced to the participatory process through the children's parliament. Only after they reach the age of majority, there is a noticeable break in the participation opportunities available to this category of citizens. Thanks to this new dynamic, we are seeing the emergence of a hybrid form of participation with two levels of engagement: individual and collective. Digital technology thus offers young people the opportunity to engage in direct dialogue with the authorities by tagging them via digital platforms, thereby renewing the way young people participate in civic, cultural and political life at the neighbourhood and city level. What about the norm of speaking out in Diola culture, which has strongly influenced this southern part of the country? It should be noted that in the opinion of Jean-Michel Landry (2010:223) for whom agency does not always imply breaking norms or challenging power. According to him, it is simply a matter of viewing it as the ability to bring about change in the world. The positive impact of digital citizen participation is well established.

This is confirmed by Godrie, B. *et al*; (2018), who state that « it helps to promote the diversity of knowledge and combat social inequalities, particularly those that manifest themselves in access to speech ». Digital citizenship appears to be a cornerstone of democracy, "offering new ways to access information, advocate for change and demand transparency" (Rebecca Avusu & Tolulope Adeyefa, 2025). A close examination of the digital practices of 18-24 year olds in the city of Ziguinchor reveals that the proportion of civic and political activities undertaken by young people in Ziguinchor remains low. In fact, digital civic participation accounts for only 14.13% of usage (Mbengue *et al*, 2025). Despite this low rate, it is important to capitalise on these digital practices related to citizenship in order to fully appreciate the scope of the actions carried out by young people in this medium-sized city. Indeed, digital tools are perceived as a means of free expression, democracy and direct communication with government officials, designed to strengthen participatory democracy, particularly for young city dwellers. The youthfulness of Senegal's population is a reality, and this region in the south of the country is no exception to this trend. It would be interesting to examine the forms of digital citizen participation developed by young city dwellers in Ziguinchor, given that digital technology offers "a new space for citizen participation" (Normand *et al*; 2020). Attempting to assess how young people in Ziguinchor are using digital technology to establish their civic participation leads us to ask the following questions: Is digital civic participation really disrupting urban management? What role does digital technology play in addressing these challenges, particularly in mixed or even peripheral neighbourhoods? Is it enough to have a smartphone and an internet connection to make a difference for the benefit of one's community? This leads us to formulate the following hypothesis: digital technology enables young people, whether individually or collectively, to bypass traditional decision-making and consultation structures,

thereby creating new channels for participation in civic life. In other words, we seek to confirm or refute the assertion that social norms and cultural constraints that prevent young people from speaking out after their elders have had their say are being circumvented by digital technology, which emphasises the autonomy of the younger generation.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This article draws on data from two types of data collection, given the nature of the research project, which is based on an interdisciplinary approach at the intersection of the social sciences and engineering. Firstly, we will outline the approach that led to the collection of quantitative and qualitative data. Secondly, we will reveal the methodology used to scrape data from the Facebook pages most frequently visited by young urban dwellers in the city of Ziguinchor.

Quantitative and qualitative data: According to Senegal's latest general population census (GPC 5), the spatial distribution of the city of Ziguinchor is among the least densely populated (3.3%, or approximately 250000 inhabitants). This medium-sized town is characterised by its distance from the capital and a lack of infrastructure (with outlying neighbourhoods lacking electricity). This area is distinctive in being semi-rural, with an urbanisation rate of 54.9% compared to 100% for the capital, Dakar.

SAMPLING

Strategic selection of the neighbourhoods surveyed: The city of Ziguinchor officially comprises 26 neighbourhoods. For this study, 10 neighbourhoods were strategically selected to ensure a diversity of socio-spatial contexts and to maximise the representativeness of local conditions.

Sampling strategy: Out of a total of 7,131 households identified across the 10 target neighbourhoods, a sample of 560 households was selected, representing 7.85% of the total population. This rate ensures robust representation whilst maintaining the logistical feasibility of the survey. The sample was stratified by neighbourhood, with allocation proportional to the number of households recorded. Each neighbourhood was thus allocated a fixed quota, calculated precisely using the formula: (number of households in the neighbourhood / total number of households) x 560.

DATA COLLECTION TOOLS: The data presented in this article are drawn from a survey conducted as part of the DigiSen research project, which adopts a transdisciplinary approach to identify social and spatial inequalities in digital access and digital usage among young people aged 18 to 24, both girls and boys, whether in education or not in the cities of Saint Louis and Ziguinchor. The data, collected via a questionnaire created using Kobocollect, an interview guide and a focus group guide, covers 610 young people spread across 10 targeted neighbourhoods that make up the city of Ziguinchor: a border town, coastal city, estuary town and university town. The qualitative data was collected through 40 semi-structured interviews and the focus groups conducted.

Web scraping: The aim is to understand how young people in the medium-sized city of Casamance use Facebook to set up citizen initiatives to address the challenges faced by the city

and share their opinions on city governance. To do this, we draw on the main Facebook pages collected during recent surveys in Ziguinchor and scraped over 1000 comments and posts, all dating from 2025. Much of the content is in video format, influenced by Reels formats, making scraping difficult.

DATA ANALYSIS

In order to refine the analysis, qualitative data from individual interviews will be used to strengthen the interpretation. Variables such as the type of activities involved in community engagement and the digital platforms targeted for this purpose will reinforce the analysis after being cross-referenced with the level of education and type of neighbourhood, with the focus on empowerment, a real potential offered by digital technology to young people: a new type of power. The use of digital technology for citizen participation, as well as platforms, will be correlated with the level of education and type of neighbourhood with two levels of analysis: the test of CHI². Since our analysis is also based on textual data, it is useful to examine all the words appearing in the collected Facebook comments and posts. To visualise this distribution, we use word clouds, which graphically represent the relative frequency of terms, i.e., the larger the word, the more frequently it appears. We used the Natural Language Toolkit (NLTK) (Loper *et al.*, 2002), a widely adopted library for symbolic and statistical natural language processing, NLP that includes a built-in list of French stop words but not Wolof ones. To compensate for this limitation, we manually translated a subset of French stop words into Wolof, generated preliminary word clouds, identified remaining high-frequency but non-informative Wolof stop words, and iteratively added them to our stop-word list to improve cleaning.

We then produced word clouds for the comments associated with each use case. In terms of limitations, given that Facebook's API does not allow posts to be filtered based on the age of the person posting them, some posts may come from adults and therefore skew the results. However, the pages and groups aimed at young people that we collected following field surveys conducted in Ziguinchor among young people ensure that the majority of the comments and posts collected come from young people.

RESULTS

TERMS AND CONDITIONS FOR YOUTH CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

With smartphones now almost ubiquitous (99.12%) and 85.51% of households having internet access of households having internet access, whereas, for example, the rate of access to a waste management system for these same households is 68.2% and that of sanitation is 50.18%, i.e. half of the households where the respondents live and 48.59% of the households concerned have access to roads. These rates clearly show the importance of internet access, which ranks just behind basic social services.

Table 1. Households' access to basic social services

VALUE	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
ELECTRICITY	558	98.59%
MOBILE NETWORK	530	93.64%
INTERNET	484	85.51%

Source: DigiSen survey data, May 2025

In terms of available digital infrastructure, urban centres, with their high density of relay antennas, remain more connected than the suburbs. Internet access via mobile data is more expensive for young people living in outlying neighbourhoods. Overall, 70.85% of respondents are satisfied with the quality of their mobile data connection at home, 20.32% consider it acceptable, and a tiny minority (0.88%) find it poor. Respondents perceive a lack of both public and private strategies aimed at young people and digital technology to improve access to digital technologies. For example, in Boucotte Nord, the equipment intended to make the neighbourhood's public square a connected space has been installed but is not functional.



Source: Survey data, May 2025

Figure 2: Non-functional Wi-Fi device installed by the Town Hall in Boucotte Nord

This involves young people using collaborative means ranging from mobile data sharing to Wi-Fi access in administrative buildings, particularly in outlying neighbourhoods, with a view to democratising internet access. With 30.04% having no access to home Wi-Fi, 42.93% of respondents use collaborative means, broken down as follows:

Table 2: Collaborative means to facilitate internet access

VALUE	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Mobile data sharing	162	28.62
Private domestic wifi access (neighbour's wifi)	123	21.73
Access to one wifi connection per month	85	15.02
Wifi access (administrative building near the accommodation)	41	7.24

Source: Survey data, May 2025

In this context, some young people end up sacrificing expenses such as transport in order to facilitate their connectivity. Generally, solidarity systems are organised to share the costs of domestic Wi-Fi. This is confirmed by comments gathered from B, a 21-year-old resident of Néma, volunteer and political science student:

To this end, culture appears to be a powerful lever capable of overcoming obstacles to peace. Certain comments are perceived by influencers as ethnocentric and revive stigmas in the Goffmanian sense (1963) among the inhabitants of a region marked by decades of conflict. Dalberto points out that this rebellion never threatened the Senegalese state. This sociological notion recalls the discredit that arises in particular during interactions between 'normal' people and stigmatised individuals. The stakes are high because, with stability restored, Casamance influencers are working to restore its image. These influencers are striving to participate in this work of deconstruction and cultural revaluation for an intact Joola identity. Referring to Moscovici's theory of social representations (1961), Buschini and Cristea (2018) highlight the basis of behaviours and interactions, namely "the way in which individuals and groups perceive their social environment." Based on this premise, only 5.3% of respondents believe that their neighbourhood is not integrated, while 65.02% perceive their neighbourhood as well as integrated and 29.68% as moderately integrated. When the civic engagement of young people in Ziguinchor, a cosmopolitan city, touches on cultural identity according to the interactionist approach embodied by the Chicago school, this indicates a process of subjectivation underway. Young people in Ziguinchor have preferences when it comes to social media: WhatsApp, TikTok and Facebook. The Facebook pages of

Also, the emergence of terms such as « Reboisement » → Reforestation, « Route » → Road, « Etudiant » → University Student, Formation » → Training, ... gives an idea of the problems commonly encountered and the activities implemented by young citizens to address them. According to survey data, Facebook is used more for civic initiatives by 23–24-year-olds, whereas 18 year olds prefer to use TikTok for the same types of digital civic practices. This reinforces the idea that a digital platform accompanies the generation that saw it come into being, and that novelty takes precedence over the existing, particularly in the digital sphere. This is evidenced by the disappearance of Skype, Messenger, etc., which have fallen into disuse because they have been swallowed up by newer platforms. Even though 85.16% of young people obtained their first smartphone between the ages of 15 and 20, this has had little impact on the use of digital technologies for civic purposes. It is worth noting the strong presence of the UNDP, which funds a number of civic activities in the region, 2 highlighting the impact of international organizations in the Ziguinchor region.

It is worth noting that young people show a lack of interest in community or local development activities, which may be due to the fact that their views are not taken sufficiently into account, or simply because they lack the time. Digital technologies could help to address this situation, even though access to them does not automatically guarantee digital civic engagement, as their digital activities tend to revolve mainly around leisure, studies, commerce and football betting to make ends meet. Paradoxically, it is ultimately through entertainment that messages about citizenship education are conveyed. Those who are most engaged digitally are so because of the socialisation of NGOs. This has led to the emergence of hybrid participation and delegated citizen participation. Among the obstacles to full participation by young people in decision-making bodies are volunteering and strong intergenerational ties. 18–20 year olds do not have the same digital citizenship practices as 21–24 year olds. Volunteering does not always appeal to young people (Vermeersch, 2004). The use of influencers to address the challenges facing neighbourhoods is due to the fact that their posts have a greater impact and that they are able to withstand criticism on social media. The horizontal power offered to young people by digital technology allows them to tag

¹Severine Awenengo Dalberto « The Casamance conflict. Origins, emergence and developments», *Revista de Politică Internațională*, n°XI-XII, 2008, pp.116-145.

authorities directly to raise awareness of certain issues. The socio-spatial disparities (neighbourhood typology) observed in Ziguinchor have no impact on the digital civic participation of 18-24 year olds. Digital technology empowers young people who have mastered digital skills. While in Mali, digital citizenship has served as a powerful lever for protest, even as a new counter-power due to the deconstruction of the image of a passive youth with no interest in city management, in Côte d'Ivoire, young people's civic participation, whether political or social, appears to be weak (Boga Agodio, 2022).

The impact of NGO action among young people in strengthening strong citizen control is real. Consequently, this socialisation through the organization DECLIC, considered a driving force for change and leadership and a major player in training volunteers who are fully committed to voluntary civic engagement to transform local communities. Continuing in the same vein, the NGO Dimbaya Kagnalen was part of a strategy to train young parliamentarians in order to introduce those under the age of 18 to taking on responsibility early on in the service of their community. Digital civic engagement is more prevalent among those over the age of 25. Before this age, studies, entertainment, or the search for financial stability prevent young people from turning their attention to digital civic engagement. Although most of those surveyed acquired their first smart phone between the ages of 15 and 20, this did not lead to early digital civic engagement. They may be from the same generation, but differences in practices related to age can be noted. Young people certainly have power however, this awareness of empowerment generally occurs after the age of 20 or even 24, usually with the support of NGOs. Seeing what is happening elsewhere inevitably has a contagious effect on young people, leading to the formation of a network of actors committed to societal issues that demonstrate participatory democracy (mobility, waste, development, etc.). Furthermore, in the city of Ziguinchor, which is strongly influenced by Diola culture, women play a significant role. Joola women have played a significant role in the peace process. They have no qualms about expressing their opinions on the governance of their neighbourhood or city. They are in the majority among young people who use digital technology for civic initiatives, particularly on social issues related to early pregnancy. In a comparative analysis with Burkina Faso, on a cultural level, women face socio-cultural constraints (Sanoudi, 2019) linked to social, religious and cultural factors that are unfavourable to them. The percentage of young men surveyed (50.88%) and young women (49.12%) is almost the same. This same trend is observed in the level of civic participation. Digital technologies offer young people a genuine opportunity: a new form of power. Power structures will be redefined (Ciriminna et al., 2021), leading to a shift in behaviour in the absence of legitimacy (as they are not elected) regarding financial resources or power relations, thereby democratising democracy.

CONCLUSION

Faced with the rise of digital technologies (85.51% for the internet and 93.64% for mobile telephony) in this medium-sized city, there has been a decline in traditional forms of citizen participation and the emergence of hybrid dynamics. Furthermore, these digital technologies are part of a more inclusive approach that can enable young people, particularly those without elected office, to contribute to the governance of their neighbourhoods or the city. The most popular platforms

are those that are easy to use and have the most users, as they do not require advanced digital skills. However, differences remain. By looking at how young people use digital tools and services to participate in civic life (social, political, cultural, sporting), we arrive at some key findings. Young people have chosen to go beyond entertainment to denounce injustice and give their opinion on the governance of the city or neighbourhoods. A new form of agent is emerging. The typology of neighbourhoods does not have too much of an impact because, overall, socio-spatial realities remain the same, particularly in wintering, and relate to flooding, sanitation and road problems due to the poor condition of the roads. Level of education is not always a factor, as the democratisation of smartphones has led to the democratisation of speech.

Attempting to decipher digital citizenship practices reveals that the tools used to deconstruct social representations are linked to cultural revaluation. Ultimately, digital civic engagement is interesting for more than one reason: in the absence of new leadership and local meeting places, digital technology gives young people the opportunity to ensure that all voices are heard, regardless of their level of education, age or neighbourhood. Inequalities in digital skills do not affect digital civic participation.

The obstacles associated with respecting elders' rights are circumvented through digital civic participation; young people give their opinions directly to the authorities without going through intermediaries, thus putting an end to intergenerational conflict. A form of participation that is now hybrid The impact of this research is an awareness of participation thanks to the research project. One of the perverse effects, according to Boudon's perspective, linked to the advent of digital technology is that instead of digital technology serving to strengthen young people's civic participation, it leads to disinformation. There is a law, No. 14/2025 of 18 August 2025, on access to information for democracy, good governance and transparency. By extending the study to 26–35-year-olds, the relationship becomes significant. Looking ahead, we will need to address the obstacles to the development of civic tech.

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GLOSSARY OF ABBREVIATION

ADM: Municipal Development Agency
 ICT: Information and Communication Technologies
 SMDFC: Senegal and the Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance
 NGO: Non Governmental Organization
 NLTK: Natural Language Toolkit
 RGP: General Population Census
 UNDP: United Nations Development Programme

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