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Interpreting political participation as communicative action: a comparison of younger and older adults

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Introduction: This study investigates the subjective interpretations of political participation among different age groups, focusing on youth and older adults. Building on an interpretivist approach, the research challenges prevalent assumptions about engagement patterns.

Methods: Data were collected through a representative Hungarian survey (N = 2,972). Respondents assessed various political acts in terms of whether they considered them to be political participation. The sample was divided into two age cohorts: 18–29 and 60+ years.

Results: The results reveal significant differences between age groups: while younger respondents are more likely to associate institutional forms with participation, older individuals display greater recognition of online engagement and conversational activities as legitimate forms of political involvement. Regression models highlight that older men are particularly inclined to view digital activism as political participation.

Discussion: These findings challenge stereotypes of online participation as a youth-dominated phenomenon and underscore the evolving roles of digital platforms in shaping political agency across age cohorts. By integrating theoretical and empirical insights, the study emphasizes the importance of subjective meaning-making in conceptualizing participation. It advocates for a reevaluation of established frameworks, arguing that top–down typologies may inadequately reflect diverse, context-dependent understandings. The findings hold broader implications for refining participatory research methodologies and fostering inclusive mobilization strategies.

KEYWORDS

political participation, comparison of young and older adults, subjective interpretations of political participation, online political participation, participation as a speech act

Introduction

Forty years have passed since Joel D. Schwartz cautioned us that "'participation' is a word not a thing", highlighting the subjective nature of political engagement (Schwartz, 1984; p. 1,119). Although Schwartz's thesis dates back four decades, it remains highly relevant, as satisfactory answers to his call have yet to emerge, hence, recent works still reference this approach (e.g., Pickard, 2019; Knott, 2016). In the decades since then, the landscape of political participation has undoubtedly shifted, yet research often lags

behind in capturing its evolving complexities. This study aims to better understand this evolving terrain, examining how age, and other relevant factors shape individuals' understanding of what constitutes "political participation." Such exploration contributesto refining conceptual frameworks and addressing practical challenges, such as designing more effective mobilization strategies.

A significant research gap exists when it comes to political participation across age groups. For young people, much of the academic discourse critiques the limitations of existing definitions and struggles to accommodate emerging forms of engagement. Conversely, studies on older adults are scarce and often shaped by stereotypes rather than empirical insights. By addressing both groups, this research seeks to challenge assumptions, offer a comparative lens, and provide a more nuanced understanding of how perceptions of participation evolve with age.

Our central argument moves beyond oversimplifying explanations highlighting the role of age. We contend that traditional, top-down theoretical approaches may struggle to capture contemporary patterns of participation. Furthermore, traditional, standardized measurements might hide emerging, new patterns that point to diverse ways different cohorts engage politically. For a better understanding of the tendencies, we focus on two key age groups—youth and the elderly—who are often the subject of sweeping generalizations, and we try to understand patterns of their understandings of political participation. In line with previous research (see Szabó and Déri, 2023, 2024) that shed light on political participation being understood as a discursive act, our analysis examines these groups from the primary perspective of communicative actions: their recognition of online activities that are by nature communicative, and political talk. This focus allows us to interrogate whether these cohorts indeed align with prevalent assumptions or if new nuances emerge in their understandings of political participation.

Following Schwartz (1984) and Weiss (2020), we believe that it is essential to consider how individuals themselves interpret participation. By examining subjective interpretations in the light of key socio-demographic factors, we aim to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of political engagement. The novelty of our approach lies in the application of quantitative measures for a better understanding of the subjective interpretations of political participation, as well as in the direct comparison of younger and older cohorts.

In our study, the theoretical overview aims to map the conceptual and research frameworks of political participation (where we put a special emphasis on the often-overlooked group of older people) and the potential of integrating the approach of subjective interpretation; we use empirical data to investigate how different groups understand the concept of participation with an emphasis on the two communicative forms (online and offline) that previous research has identified as under reached and/or contradictory to general expectations (see Szabó and Déri, 2023). Our main aim is to better understand the role of subjective interpretation in the concept of political participation by looking at two age groups of special interest. This exploratory case study was conducted in Hungary. While the context of a Central European country experiencing notable democratic backsliding since 2010, we believe that considering perceptions of participation in its conceptualization has a general, systemic importance that extends beyond the specific data collection results of one country.[1]

After the literature review, we analyze how individuals interpret political participation—particularly its communicative forms—through non-linear principal component analysis (CATPCA), which allows for the dimensionality reduction of dichotomous variables. The analysis focuses on differences between younger and older adults, with attention to how age and other social factors shape interpretations of participation. Finally, the paper concludes with a discussion of the findings and their implications.

Materials and methods

Theoretical backgrounds

The relevance of the interpretivist approach

The most important theoretical starting point of our research is Schwartz's (1984) call for an interpretivist approach to participation. While the call itself is often cited [for example, Sarah Pickard, in her work that is also an important point of reference to our research, emphatically refers to the need for a more open-ended and bottom-up approach based on Schwartz (see Pickard, 2019, p. 59–60)], there have been few empirical attempts to address the need for this approach. It is telling though that many theoretical and empirical references connect this work with youth participation. Empirical studies aiming to challenge the classical research methods found sharp differences between interpretations of politically engaged and disengaged youth, the former being more open to recognizing non-traditional forms as participation (Sant, 2015) and identified communicative action as a characteristic interpretation of university students (Szabó and Déri, 2023); however, so far, relevant studies have mostly focused on qualitative methods and/or specific target groups.

Schwartz's interpretivist approach offers a valuable lens for examining how older adults approach participation, particularly in relation to the contrasts between online and offline participative methods and the supportive or restrictive contexts they encounter. Expanding the interpretivist approach beyond youth to include elderly populations could provide richer insights into how diverse

1 It is important to acknowledge that the political context, particularly the democratic backsliding under Hungary's Orbán administration (see e.g., Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019; Körösényi et al., 2020; Mikecz, 2023), might influence how political participation is perceived by citizens. While theoretically relevant, empirical evidence from our study alone does not permit generalized conclusions about the regime's direct impact. Still, this aspect constitutes an important consideration and needs further examination. Additionally, it must be noted, that the study is grounded in the socio-political and cultural contexts of Central and Eastern Europe, within the broader framework of the Global North. While we reference international literature to situate our findings, our primary aim is to explore patterns of political participation specific to these contexts. We acknowledge that these patterns may not be transferable to regions with different historical, cultural, or political experiences, such as those in the Global South. As such, our conclusions are intended to reflect the particularities of the studied settings, and we caution against overgeneralization beyond similar contexts.

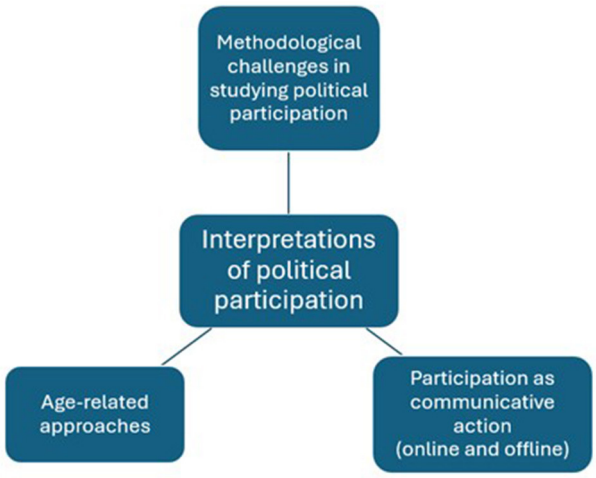

FIGURE 1
Triangular model. *Source* Own edition.

age groups reinterpret participation according to their social contexts and lived experiences.

To define our research problem, we have built on Joel Schwartz's still relevant call: "concept building can and should be an ≫empirical≪ activity: the political scientist must define participation internal to the conceptual universes of the ≫actors≪ studied if there is to be any hope to understand the ≫acts≪ that they are engaged in" Schwartz (1984, p. 1,124).

Recent research also calls for a critical reassessment of traditional categories of political participation. Weiss (2020) and Pickard (2019)—who focus mainly on young people—highlight issues such as the imprecise distinction between life-cycle effects and political socialization, problematic definitions of participation, and the lack of attention to diverse perspectives. Additionally, Pickard (2019) critiques the conventional vs. non-conventional dichotomy in political participation, advocating for a broader, more inclusive definition that recognizes both online and offline activities aimed at societal change. Quintelier (2007) addresses the question of definitions connected to the issue of subjective interpretations, noting that "young people generally embrace a narrower conception of politics or political participation than do researchers" (Quintelier, 2007, p. 168).

Recent research on online participation also pointed to problems of conceptualization. A meta-analysis by Ruess et al. (2021) emphasizes the need for clearer definitions and measurements that align with those definitions. The authors argue that "an adequate definition of the concept is necessary not only to avoid inconsistencies within studies, but to ensure that seemingly contradictory findings caused by conceptual confusion may be avoided" (p. 13).

Additionally, we believe that while there has been a considerable effort put on understanding youth political participation, especially in the context of online participation, little emphasis has been put on elderly people. In recent mainstream literature, online participation has been identified as a form of participation particularly specific to young people (Theocharis et al., 2021), so we included its investigation in our current quantitative research.

Our argumentative framework for the research can be summarized in a triangular model (see Figure 1).

The three vertices represent the key dimensions shaping this inquiry: methodological challenges in studying political participation[2], which emphasize the limitations and opportunities of existing tools (see Szabó and Déri, 2024); the importance of age-based approaches: cohort, and period effects on participation patterns (Serra and Smets, 2022); and participation as communicative action, encompassing both online and offline forms of engagement.

A recent example of re-defining attempts of the concept of political participation has highlighted the role of participation understood as communicative action. Szabó and Déri (2023) has argued that while "online—communication-based—activities have been more and more widely accepted as possible forms of participation" (p. 488.), everyday political talk—despite the growing recognition of its importance (see e.g., Ekström, 2015) is rarely examined in the context of political participation.

Moreover, insights from recent research on deliberative democracy further underline the significance of considering subjective perceptions in light of communicative processes. Inclusive deliberative processes are especially appealing for under-represented groups—including youth and the elderly—as they otherwise risk marginalization (Gherghina et al., 2020). Conversely, when deliberative mechanisms are poorly designed, they may lead to disengagement, reinforcing the importance of exploring subjective understandings of participation (Miscoiu and Gherghina, 2021).

Building on the theoretical backgrounds of participation and its subjective interpretations, we now turn to examine how age influences these understandings. By exploring lifecycle characteristics and their effects on political engagement, we aim to uncover how different age groups navigate and interpret the concept of political participation in their social contexts.

The role of age in the understanding of political participation

The intersections of the three dimensions of our triangular model highlight a central hypothesis: access to and skills of communicating online are less and less depending on age. Research shows (see e.g., Hargittai and Dobransky, 2017; Bergström, 2023) that, except for the oldest age groups (i.e., those over 80 years), the online presence and activities of older adults are increasing. As more people who have routinely used digital technologies for work or personal reasons enter this group, the gap in online presence between older and younger cohorts is expected to narrow. All in all, the triangular model offers a comprehensive lens to explore how these dimensions intersect and inform each other in shaping contemporary political participation.

2 A particular challenge in terms of methodology and conceptualization, that goes beyond the scope of our study, but is worth mentioning nevertheless, is related to local-regional research priorities and funding. As Elerian et al. (2025) point out, these aspects result in disparities of research between EU and non-EU post-socialist countries in the research of youth activism, but their lessons probably have relevance outside their examined context too.

Understanding these intersections requires situating them within broader theoretical frameworks that address political participation across life stages and social contexts. The study of political participation by age groups, most importantly understanding youth-specific patterns, is a recurring theme in political sociological research and theory. Research, especially comparative studies, use top-down, theory-led typologies that are usually derived, explicitly or implicitly, from the influential theories of Theocharis and van Deth (2017). Following these, three major types of participation can be distinguished.

Institutional participation involves traditional activities like voting or running for office, rooted in parliamentary representation. Non-institutional participation includes protest actions, such as demonstrations and boycotts, addressing state, social, or economic issues. Expressive participation focuses on activities that voice citizens' political aims and intentions (Pfanzelt and Spies, 2019; p. 35).

A comprehensive understanding of political participation behaviors requires considering its subjective interpretation, which can vary significantly across different social groups. Among these factors, according to traditional approaches, especially related to online forms of participation, age can play a particularly important role. While the participation of young people has been more extensively studied—though typically not from the perspective of subjective interpretations—the participation of elderly people is often overlooked. This research gap suggests a need for analyses that specifically explore the subjective aspects of participation behaviors related to age.

Online participation, as the only communicative aspect of political participation widely recognized in its conceptualization, is often viewed as a youth phenomenon, with studies suggesting it boosts young people's offline engagement (Theocharis et al., 2021) and ties to diverse media use (Diehl et al., 2019). However, some findings challenge this, such as Swiss data showing minimal age effects on online political participation (Büchi and Vogler, 2017). Despite early skepticism around "slacktivism" (Morozov, 2009), recent studies (Tufekci, 2017) and pandemic-era shifts highlight the value of blended online/offline participation (Jacobsen and Kersting, 2022; Kwan, 2022). Additionally, Szabó and Déri (2023, 2024) has challenged the notion that online participation is a youth phenomenon based on qualitative and quantitative findings that suggested young people recognize online participation less than older adults. Based on existing literature it can be stated that older adults increasingly perceive digital engagement as legitimate, driven by its practical benefits in daily life—such as accessing essential services and maintaining social connections (Money et al., 2024; Fischl et al., 2020). Positive experiences with digital platforms may enhance this perception of legitimacy (Hill et al., 2015).

Age-related differences in the understanding of the concept of political participation can be connected to life cycle characteristics. Older adults are more integrated into the social structures of housing, employment, and family, which are often tied to formal political engagement. On the other hand, young people are "less likely to participate in political activities because they do not feel attracted to politics," and this is influenced by lifecycle factors such as housing and employment, which they generally do not yet have (Quintelier, 2007, p. 177). These lifecycle effects can contribute to a limited understanding of politics among young people, making formal political processes appear less relevant in their lives. Notably, Quintelier explicitly mentions questions related to the interpretation of political participation: "young people do not view politics (in their very small conception) as relevant to their daily lives.", thus "we expect to find lower levels of political participation among the younger population than among the older population when we use more traditional questions." (Quintelier, 2007, p. 168–169.) However, the indifference of young people to institutional politics does not imply a lack of political interest. Hooghe and Boonen (2015) argue that "voting and following the political news is clearly not a priority for young age groups," and their lower voter turnout is largely due to the fact that they "find elections less relevant, and less central to democratic politics" (Hooghe and Boonen, 2015, p. 26). This suggests that younger people are not disengaged but instead seek alternative avenues to express their political opinions, often through direct forms of action that they perceive as more meaningful and impactful, or other ways they attribute participative nature.

On the other hand, political participation of the elderly population remains significantly underrepresented in scholarly discourse, despite the growing recognition that "contemporary senior citizens should [...] become more interesting as subjects of politics than used to be the case, when ≫senior citizens≪ to a far greater extent were treated solely as objects of politics" (Berglund, 2006; p. 115). Serrat et al. (2020), while arguing that the participation of elderly people does get increasing attention in the last decades also highlights the need to view the elderly as political agents, and "to broaden the scope of research on older people's civic participation and advance toward a more nuanced understanding of what it means to participate civically in later life" (Serrat et al., 2020; p. e46).

Existing literature suggests that older adults tend to participate less than their younger counterparts, particularly in non-institutional and more demanding forms of political engagement.[3] According to Solevid and Scheiber Gyllenspetz (2022), "the reasons as to why older people abstain from voting seem to be numerous, from no longer viewing voting as important, to not having the internal and/or combined capabilities to execute this functioning" (Solevid and Scheiber Gyllenspetz, 2022; p. 245). In addition to physical barriers, there are further societal and individual factors. Nygård and Jakobsson (2013) emphasize that "other factors, such as societal attitudes toward older adults, need to be considered," while Alves Martins et al. (2022) note that "previous educational background and the lack of learning opportunities in old age are recognized as barriers to participation".

Conversely, some factors may enhance institutional participation. Goerres (2009) argues that "a combination of psychological and sociological factors experienced through individual aging" leads older adults to habituate voting, as they "become more deeply entangled in the social fabric of a liberal democracy" (Goerres, 2009; p. 18).

Some studies suggest that seniors exhibit high voter turnout and a sustained interest in political issues, particularly when these align with their values and life experiences (Jirovec and Erich, 1992). Nygård and Jakobsson (2013), in their examination of older Scandinavians, note that while seniors report high

3 For a detailed analysis of participation patterns of the elderly in Europe, see Vercauteren et al. (2024).

levels of institutionalized participation, their involvement in non-institutionalized activities is considerably lower—and both forms of participation are less frequent than among younger adults (p. 89). This reduced engagement can partly be explained by physical limitations, as aging often leads to a shift toward less demanding forms of participation, reflecting a more selective approach to political engagement (Jennings and Markus, 1988). Additionally, elderly individuals tend to adopt a long-term perspective on societal wellbeing, contrasting with the more immediate, issue-driven focus typical of younger populations (Nygård and Jakobsson, 2013). These findings indicate that older adults may hold a broader, yet often underappreciated, interpretation of political participation, calling for further exploration.

When comparing young and older people's political participation, most literature shows that older adults tend to vote more regularly, younger people often engage in unconventional forms of participation, such as protests, petitions, and demonstrations (see e.g., Melo and Stockemer, 2014). Renström et al. (2020) argue that "younger people's higher participation in protests is explained by their greater need to belong," a motivation that sets them apart from older adults who may not seek the same sense of collective identity through political engagement" (p. 789). This need for belonging and the desire for immediate, visible impact in political activities (see also Trachtman et al., 2023) help explain why younger individuals are drawn to protests and demonstrations, while older cohorts remain more committed to voting and other institutionalized forms of participation.

These patterns highlight the need to explore how lifecycle characteristics and societal roles influence the ways different age groups interpret and practice participation. Given this, a comprehensive understanding also requires exploring how other sociological dimensions intersect with age to influence participatory behaviors and interpretations.

The role of other factors

While our interest lies in understanding the differences between the adult population and young people, this necessitates consideration of other sociological dimensions. In age-based approaches "Intragenerational differences are mostly overlooked. Important variables such as gender, family background, social economic class, occupation, ethnicity, level of education, religion are sidelined, resulting in young people being portrayed as a homogeneous group." (Pickard, 2019, p. 73).

While contradictory and incomplete information sometimes exists on the impact of age on political participation, the literature is more consistent on other important sociodemographic background variables. Perhaps the most important of these dimensions is gender.

Classical approaches have assumed a lower degree of political interest and involvement of women than of men (see, for example: Verba et al., 1997), while more sophisticated analyses have suggested that direct forms of participation (party membership, political contact) are more male-dominated, while private/individualistic activities are more characteristic of women (see, for example: Cho et al., 2020).

Similar trends were also found for the participation patterns of young men and women: "detachment from more institutional politics [...] is more so the case for young women as they are significantly less engaged than young men in conventional activities. However, young men are also more likely to have embraced online political participation whereas young women are more engaged in less confrontational forms of unconventional activism (petitioning, boycotting) and community volunteering." (Grasso and Smith, 2022; p. 54). Both classical and recent literature assume a difference in political interest between genders behind these trends (see, for example: van Deth, 1990; Prior, 2019; Bos et al., 2022).

The positive effects of socioeconomic status on participation are certain (see, for example: Quintelier and Hooghe, 2013). But, as Willeck and Mendelberg (2022) argue this might confound with cultural capital, and the role of educational attainment is unclear: "While the literature on education and political participation began with a mere correlation, it increasingly relies on strong causal strategies. Those include instrumental variables, matching, panel data, and natural and controlled experiments. Nevertheless, the literature has generated mixed results, even when using similar methods and data." (Willeck and Mendelberg, 2022, p. 106). This suggests that the explanation of factors related to social status and cultural capital needs further research.

Having considered these tendencies, it is crucial to again emphasize that our research does not focus on trends in political participation but on how different groups interpret and perceive the concept. The different participation patterns might relate to the understating of political participation, and to further investigate this topic, it is crucial to address the question of what political participation means to various social groups. The need for a better understanding of the concept's interpretations simultaneously comes from political science (including questions related to the conceptualization of online participation) and youth research. This requires more nuanced approaches that combine qualitative and quantitative methods to better capture the diverse and complex ways in which political participation is understood across age groups and social contexts.

Measuring the interpretation of political participation

The theoretical frameworks described above raise the question of whether and how traditional approaches to participation should be reviewed.

Based on these, our research aims to answer the following questions:

1. How do younger and older adults interpret the concept of political participation?
2. Are there age-related differences in interpreting participation as a communicative action?
3. How do younger and older adults differ in their perceptions of online political participation?

The starting point of our research is based on the findings of Szabó and Déri's (2023) qualitative research, which showed

that participation as a communicative action is particularly prominent in young people's discourses and can be linked to online participation. This led us to investigate whether there is an age and gender effect in the communicative interpretation of participation.

We tested two hypotheses to answer the following research questions:

H1: Age significantly influences individuals' interpretations of political participation, with young and older adults exhibiting distinct conceptualizations.H2: Differences in interpretations of political participation are reflected in participation domains, particularly in the contrast between online and offline communicative actions. As older adults increasingly participate in online political conversations, younger individuals may be less likely to perceive these online forms—associated with older age groups—as valid expressions of political participation.

Methodology

In this section, we present the findings from a questionnaire-based survey conducted in Hungary. The analysis is approached as a case study, aiming to derive results that can potentially be generalized from a single case (representative data on the Hungarian adult population). However, we proceed with caution, acknowledging the need for further research, and treat the findings as hypotheses grounded in relevant theoretical frameworks. Hungary serves as an influential case in understanding the approach of participation, particularly within the Central European context. The conclusions of our theoretical starting points pointed out that political participation, as well as the interpretation of the concept, cannot be solely examined through age-based lenses. Thus, in the data we analyze, in line with the literature and the data collection characteristics, we take gender, socio-demographic and socio-cultural background variables into account.

The study examines the findings of an online survey conducted by the IDEA Institute in August 2022[4]. This survey represents Hungarian citizens aged 18 and over, by gender, age group (18–29, 30–39, 40–49, 50–59, 60+),[5] education level (low, middle, high), type of municipality, and region (N = 2,972).[6]

TABLE 1 The different forms of participation surveyed.

Variable name	Label of variable	% (Yes, it is participation)
POLACT01	Signing petitions declarations	69
POLACT02	Contacting a politician	47
POLACT03	Discussing public issues and political matters in the family	41
POLACT04	Being active in a political party	73
POLACT05	Protesting, demonstrating, marching	69
POLACT06	Counting votes during parliamentary and municipal elections	43
POLACT07	Discussing public issues and political matters with friends and acquaintances	45
POLACT08	Liking, voting, posting, or commenting online on public or political issues	55
POLACT09	Changing or adding to their profile picture to raise awareness of a social or political issue	46
POLACT10	Commenting on Facebook posts of politicians	48
POLACT11	Participating in a political party's campaign (e.g., distributing posters and leaflets, persuading voters)	72
POLACT12	Wearing badges, emblems, or symbols with political messages	59
POLACT13	Donating money to NGOs, independent media, parties, politicians for public or political purposes	58
POLACT14	Deliberately, on principle, buying or not buying, boycotting certain goods	43

The sample included 14% (N = 427) of young people under 30 and 25% (N = 744) of older people over 60. Further characteristics of the sample: gender: female: 52%, male: 48%. Age groups: 18–29: 14%, 30–59 years: 61%, and 60 and older: 25%. Settlement: Budapest: 20%, big city: 22%, small town: 31%, and village: 26%.

Four socio-demographic and socio-cultural variables were used in the multivariate statistical procedures as predictor variables: age groups, gender, years of schooling completed, and type of municipality of residence (following the structure of Hungarian settlements, we have transformed the categorical variable into the dummy variable: smaller settlements or cities). In addition,

4 The authors would like to express their special thanks to Balázs Böcskei, research director of the IDEA Institute. Our questions were included in the survey as a courtesy, without any financial compensation.

5 In our analysis, in line with our research questions, a key focus is the comparison between the youngest and oldest age groups. Defining these groups inevitably involves a degree of arbitrariness, as various socio-economic factors beyond age can influence a person's position in the life cycle. However, we primarily relied on standard statistical-policy categories that draw relatively broad age boundaries. This approach ensures sufficient sample size and a more robust basis for comparison. Therefore, we categorize individuals under 30 as young (in line with Eurostat's definition) and those over 60 as older adults (in line with the UN definition; see Scherbov and Sanderson, 2019). As a methodological note it should be added that the shift to online data collection was driven by changes in people's habits related to the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, as people became less willing to allow strangers into their homes. Telephone surveys also faced increasing challenges in representativeness due to GDPR regulations and general mistrust. Thus, online methodology emerged as a suitable solution (for the Hungarian research context, see Messing et al., 2022; for general context, see Maslovskaya et al., 2022).

6 The data collection was entirely voluntary, based on informed consent, and focused solely on adults. It did not employ any experimental methods. There were no ethical concerns, no specific ethical approval was necessary. Participants were provided with details about the research's purpose, inclusion criteria, and the interviewer's contact information. They were informed that they could withdraw at any time, their information would remain confidential, and their names and personal details would not be included in any report. Therefore, as the study involved participants over the age of 18 and did not collect any particularly sensitive personal data, it did not require separate ethical approval.

as described in the literature, we included political interest and ideological affiliation (left–right scale).

The procedure involved asking respondents to determine whether they considered 14 types of participation as political participation or not (with binary answers: yes or no – see Table 1). The original ESS questionnaire served as the basis for the questionnaire design. Drawing on theoretical frameworks (Quintelier, 2007; Quinelier and van Deth, 2014; Pickard, 2019; Weiss, 2020) and qualitative empirical experience (Szabó and Déri, 2023), the questionnaire was expanded to include other forms of participation that could be nuanced and clarified. These additionally included forms of participation reflected both online and offline types and considered the potential significance of participation as a speech act.

"People can express their political views and positions differently. Do you consider the following activities to be political participation or political activity? In other words, do you think it is political participation or activity if someone..."

The questions were randomized in the middle section of the questionnaire. Respondents had no difficulty evaluating the various forms of participation, with <2% providing non-responses or uncertain answers. However, it is important to note that the online data collection methodology tends to reach a slightly higher proportion of politically active individuals, which is an acknowledged limitation of the study.

Results

Age effects: general tendencies[7]

To explore the role of age in the interpretation of political participation, the analysis began with two-dimensional cross tabulation analysis to identify significant differences across age groups.

This revealed that, while most forms of political participation show significant differences in perception between age groups, signing petitions stands out as the only activity perceived similarly across all age groups ($p \leq 0.1$). However, for some forms of participation, the differences are not very robust in statistical terms (see Table 2).

Young adults (18–29) are significantly more likely than older adults (60+) to interpret activities such as contacting politicians (Polact02), participating in political parties (Polact04), and engaging in campaigns (Polact11) as political participation. The Pearson Chi^2 statistics and the Cramer's V-values confirm these differences are statistically significant.

Young adults are also more likely to view participation in demonstrations or protests (Polact05) or consider vote counting (Polact06) as political participation than older adults. Young adults (61%) are more likely to consider wearing badges or symbols (Polact12) as political participation than older adults (54%). The difference is significant but not very strong.

In contrast, older adults are much more likely to consider discussing public affairs within the family (Polact03) and with friends (Polact07) and acquaintances as political participation compared to young adult individuals. The percentage for older adults is 55%, and 58% while it is 40% and 50% for young adults. The Pearson Chi^2 statistics and the Cramer's V values show a more robust significant difference in this. Thus, older adults are significantly more likely to view that the political discussion or speech as political participation than young adults. This distinction highlights a greater valuation of dialogue-based, communicative forms of engagement among older individuals.

One of the most important findings of Table 2 is that older adults (69%) view online activities (liking, voting, posting, commenting, Polact08) as political participation to a greater extent than young adults (50%). The difference between older and younger cohorts is significant based on the Adjusted Residual. It is an important finding that, by age, only older adults stand apart from the other examined groups. Thus, it might be valuable to investigate their specific attitudes.

A similar pattern is observed in commenting on politicians' social media posts (Polact10): older adults are significantly more likely to recognize this as political participation. In contrast, symbolic digital actions, such as changing a profile picture (Polact09), are more widely considered participation by younger (47%) than older adults (41%). This is inconsistent but aligns with other data, showing that communicative actions are more likely seen as participation by older adults, while perceptions of symbolic actions vary by age.

The analysis highlights significant age differences in how various forms of political participation are perceived, with younger adults favoring institutional and symbolic actions, while older adults place greater emphasis on dialogue-based and communicative engagement, suggesting a nuanced relationship between age and participatory interpretation.

Patterns of the interpretation of political participation

For deeper analysis we conducted a Non-linear Principal Component Analysis (Categorical PCA) analysis of the 14 forms of participation to identify latent structures in perceptions of participation types.[8] We identified the following five Non-linear PCA factors (see PCA factors): while three factors align with Theocharis and van Deth's (2017) classifications, the PCA factor of speech acts differs, and the symbolic, consumer participation factor partially aligns[9]:

7 See Szabó and Déri (2024) for general details of the results. All data analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics 21.0.

8 The interpretation of PCA analysis is very similar to standard factor analysis, but it can also handle binary variable sets using optimal scaling techniques. The robustness of the resulting latent structures is demonstrated by the fact that whether we run the data with traditional factor analysis or Nonlinear PCA analysis, we reach the same statistical conclusion. The resulting five factors are robust and well interpretable.

TABLE 2 Interpretation of political participation by age groups: "Yes, participation" answers (Two-dimensional cross-tabulation analysis, %, Adjusted Residuals).

*$p \leq 0{,}1$; **$p \leq 0{,}05$; ***$p \leq 0{,}01$		Age groups: 18–29; 60 and older		Total % (full sample)	Pearson Chi^2	Cramer's V
		18–29	60+			
POLACT01	%	69%	72%	68.9	0.999	0.033
	Adjusted Residual	−0.1	1.7			
POLACT02	%	55%	41%	47.2	17.289***	0.138***
	Adjusted Residual	**4.2**	**−4.2**			
POLACT03	%	40%	55%	40.5	17.574***	**0.138*** **
	Adjusted Residual	−0.4.2	**4.2**			
POLACT04	%	79%	63%	72.5	24.368***	0.164***
	Adjusted Residual	**4.9**	**-4.9**			
POLACT05	%	74%	61%	66.8	16.031***	0.133***
	Adjusted Residual	**4.0**	**−4.0**			
POLACT06	%	51%	45%	42.7	3.330*	0.060*
	Adjusted Residual	**1.8**	−1.8			
POLACT07	%	50%	58%	45.0	5.058**	**0.074** **
	Adjusted Residual	−2.2	**2.2**			
POLACT08	%	50%	69%	55.5	33.168***	**0.192*** **
	Adjusted Residual	**−5.8**	**5.8**			
POLACT09	%	47%	41%	46.4	3.192*	0.059*
	Adjusted Residual	1.8	**−1.8**			
POLACT10	%	46%	56%	48.3	8.303***	0.096***
	Adjusted Residual	**−2.9**	**2.9**			
POLACT11	%	78%	66%	71.6	13.471***	0.121***
	Adjusted Residual	**3.7**	**−3.7**			
POLACT12	%	61%	54%	59.2	4.655**	0.071**
	Adjusted Residual	2.2	**−2.2**			
POLACT13	%	60%	54%	58,1	2.545	0.053*
	Adjusted Residual	1.6	**−1.6**			
POLACT14	%	49%	43%	43,1	3.665*	0.063*
	Adjusted Residual	**1.9**	−1.9			

Bold: The Adjusted Residual exceeds ±2. If the Residual absolute value is >2, then there is a significant relationship between the two categories.
Source IDEA (2022) own edition.

- Institutional and public activism linked to the parties.
  - Activities in political parties, campaigns, wearing political badges.
- Speech acts.

9 In order to test the validity of our model, we also conducted separate nonlinear PCA analyses for younger adults (under 30) and older adults (60 and above), using the same method and item set. The resulting structures were largely consistent: four out of the five components were identical across the two groups. These stable components included "Institutional and public activism linked to parties", "Speech acts", "Online participation", and "Direct democratic, protest activism". The fifth component showed some variation: among younger participants, boycott and symbolic activism had a stronger presence, while among older adults, this component was more strongly characterized by direct contact with political actors. Nonetheless, the shared structure across four out of five components is remarkably stable and meaningful—arguably one of the key findings of the study. For this reason, and to retain statistical power and allow for the inclusion of age as an explanatory variable in the regression analysis, we chose to conduct and report the nonlinear PCA based on the full sample.

TABLE 3 Non-linear PCA analysis—components scores.

Variable name	Variable label	Institutional activism	Speech act	Online participation	Direct democratic participation	Symbolic, consumer participation
POLACT01	Signing petitions declarations	0.576	0.21	−0.257	**0.561**	−0.218
POLACT02	Contacting a politician	0.634	0.08	−0.053	−0.337	−0.102
POLACT03	Discussing public issues and political matters in the family	0.163	**0.792**	−0.257	−0.226	**0.126**
POLACT04	Being active in a political party	**0.669**	−0.51	−0.073	−0.184	−0.042
POLACT05	Protesting, demonstrating, marching	**0.671**	−0.111	−0.244	**0.313**	−0.19
POLACT06	Counting votes during parliamentary and municipal elections	0.59	0.051	−0.372	−0.101	−0.067
POLACT07	Discussing public issues and political matters with friends and acquaintances	0.219	**0.799**	−0.245	−0.174	0.074
POLACT08	Liking, voting, posting, or commenting online on public or political issues	0.524	**0.496**	**0.4**	0.057	−0.208
POLACT09	Changing or adding to their profile picture to raise awareness of a social or political issue	**0.721**	−0.061	**0.296**	−0.079	**0.153**
POLACT10	Commenting on Facebook posts of politicians	0.548	0.4	**0.452**	−0.028	−0.303
POLACT11	Participating in a political party's campaign (e.g., distributing posters and leaflets, persuading voters)	**0.689**	−0.438	−0.118	−0.191	−0.045
POLACT12	Wearing badges, emblems, or symbols with political messages	**0.754**	−0.281	0.133	−0.012	0.085
POLACT13	Donating money to NGOs, independent media, parties, politicians for public or political purposes	**0.704**	−0.162	−0.073	−0.053	**0.182**
POLACT14	Deliberately, on principle, buying or not buying, boycotting certain goods	0.54	0.189	0.133	**0.294**	**0.652**

Source IDEA (2022), own edition (see the further statistics in Appendix Table 1). Bold values indicate The Adjusted Residual exceeds ±2. If the Residual absolute value is >2, there is a significant relationship between the two categories.

- Discussing public or political issues with friends, family, or liking content online.

- Online participation.
  - Engaging with political content online (e.g., commenting, liking, posting, or profile changes).

- Direct democratic, protest participation.
  - Signing petitions, protesting, or helping count votes in elections.

- Symbolic, consumer participation.
  - Raising awareness (e.g., profile picture changes, boycotts, political symbols).

- Online participation.
  - Engaging with political content online (e.g., commenting, liking, posting, or profile changes).

To better understand the demographic drivers behind these interpretations, hierarchical regression models were applied (see Table 3). In the following we focus on the Non-linear PCA factors relevant to our research questions. The stepwise method was used in the regression models to see the effects of the explanatory variables as precisely as possible.

Partly due to the calculation Non-linear PCA method, among the five models,[10] the *institutional activism* model showed the strongest explanatory power, accounting for 9.6% of the variance,

10 See Appendix for the regression table of the fifth model (symbolic, consumer participation) and for the model summaries.

TABLE 4 Linear regression model 1—institutional, political activism.

Model		Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	*t*	Sig.
		B	Std. error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	−0.552	0.094		−5.891	0.000
	Political interest 100°	0.007	0.001	0.208	6.310	0.000
2	(Constant)	−1.256	0.167		−7.512	0.000
	Political interest 100°	0.006	0.001	0.183	5.555	0.000
	Number of completed classes	0.063	0.013	0.166	5.052	0.000
3	(Constant)	−1.145	0.168		−6.831	0.000
	Political interest 100°	0.008	0.001	0.219	6.498	0.000
	Number of completed classes	0.062	0.012	0.162	4.961	0.000
	Young or older people (0–1)	**−0.292**	**0.069**	**−0.141**	**−4.247**	**0.000**
4	(Constant)	−1.122	0.167		−6.700	0.000
	Political interest 100°	0.008	0.001	0.220	6.550	0.000
	Number of completed classes	0.066	0.012	0.173	5.262	0.000
	Young or older people (0–1)	**−0.294**	**0.069**	**−0.142**	**−4.291**	**0.000**
	Small settlement or city	−0.163	0.065	−0.082	−2.523	0.012

Source IDEA (2022), own edition. Bold values indicate important or key variables in the factors.

TABLE 5 Linear regression model 2—direct democratic activism.

Model		Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	*t*	Sig.
		B	Std. error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	0.094	0.064		1.480	0.139
	Left–right scale 0–100°	−0.002	0.001	−0.074	−2.214	0.027
2	(Constant)	−0.096	0.109		−0.877	0.381
	Left–right scale 0–100°	−0.002	0.001	−0.073	−2.187	0.029
	Political interest 100°	0.002	0.001	0.072	2.140	0.033

Source IDEA (2022), own edition.

compared to 1–8% in the other models. The *F*-tests of all models are significant, i.e., statistically analyzable, despite the relatively low explanatory power. As indicated in the methodology chapter, we analyzed the impact of age as an explanatory variable by using age groups as a binary variable: 0 = 18–29 year-olds and 1 = individuals aged 60 and older. The model includes four explanatory variables in the following order: political interest, number of classes attended, age group, and type of settlement (the last two variables are binary). A key finding is that the age group, analyzed using this method, significantly affects the dependent variable in four out of the five latent factors. In other words, belonging to the younger or older cohort influences the interpretation of political participation.

In the case of *institutional activism* (see Table 4), the age group dummy variable is significant at the $p \leq 0.000$ level. Younger individuals are more likely to associate institutional or political actions with political participation, while this recognition declines among older adults. The strongest explanatory variable is political interest ($\beta = 0.208$), but education ($\beta = 0.166$) also plays an important role. It is important to note that the effect of these two variables, although reduced when the other variables are included, is of primary importance in all four models. These aspects further enhance the likelihood of perceiving institutional activism as participation, highlighting the influence of cultural capital and personal engagement. The age group enters the model in the third step with a relatively strong and negative signed effect.

The perception of *direct democratic activism* (see Table 5) is much clearer: it is not influenced by socio-demographic variables, and is recognized as political activism by everyone. The more interested respondents are in politics ($\beta = 0.72$ in the second step), and the more they oppose the ruling party (i.e., those with left–wing views, $\beta = -0.74$ in the first step), the more likely they are to perceive protest participation as political activism.

The two most important factors for the present analysis are speech acts and online or digital activism. Previously, we noted that *speech acts* (see Table 6) refer to forms of participation like discussing politics within various reference groups. According to the regression model, older people are more likely to perceive this as a form of political participation ($\beta = 0.144$

TABLE 6 Linear regression model 3—speech acts.

Model		Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	*t*	Sig.
		B	Std. error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	−0.422	0.094		−4,483	0.000
	Political interest 100°	0.008	0.001	0.237	7.234	0.000
2	(Constant)	−0.517	0.096		−5.397	0.000
	Political interest 100°	0.007	0.001	0.201	5.994	0.000
	Young or older people (0–1)	**0.301**	**0.070**	**0.144**	**4.314**	**0.000**

Source IDEA (2022), own edition. Bold values indicate statistically significant difference between young and older people.

TABLE 7 Linear regression model 3—digital or online activism.

Model		Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	*t*	Sig.
		B	Std. error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	0.388	0.100		3.896	0.000
	Political interest 100°	−0.006	0.001	−0.157	−4.720	0.000
2	(Constant)	0.265	0.101		2.633	0.009
	Political interest 100°	−0.007	0.001	−0.202	−5.966	0.000
	Young or older people (0–1)	**0.390**	**0.074**	**0.179**	**5.298**	**0.000**
3	(Constant)	0.133	0.105		1.265	0.206
	Political interest 100°	−0.008	0.001	−0.213	−6.327	0.000
	Young or older people (0–1)	**0.441**	**0.074**	**0.203**	**5.954**	**0.000**
	Gender (0–1)	0.279	0.069	0.133	4.039	0.000
4	(Constant)	0.600	0.179		3.361	0.001
	Political interest 100°	−0.007	0.001	−0.197	−5.805	0.000
	Young or older people (0–1)	**0.436**	**0.074**	**0.201**	**5.917**	**0.000**
	Gender (0–1)	0.294	0.069	0.140	4.263	0.000
	Number of completed classes	−0.042	0.013	−0.106	−3.227	0.001

Source IDEA (2022), own edition. Bold values indicate statistically significant difference between young and older people.

in the second step). However, these two factors are only valid if the *older* person also has a political interest (β = 0.237 in the first step). Thus, the first two types of participation factors are mainly associated with political participation for politically interested people, but gender or social capital has no significant effect.

Finally, *Online/digital activism* (see Table 7) is the most gender-dependent participation factor, with men more likely to consider it political participation (β= 0.133 in the 3 step). Interestingly, older respondents (β= 0.179 in the 2 step), especially older men, are more inclined to view networked actions as legitimate political participation. This reversed age effect highlights the growing role of online platforms in older adults' political engagement and is in line with the qualitative findings of Szabó and Déri (2023), as well as the expectation arising from the more active internet use of older adults (Hargittai and Dobransky, 2017), suggesting that their engagement with digital platforms influences their interpretation of political participation.

A surprising finding, however, is that the likelihood of perceiving online participation as political activism does not increase with the number of classes completed. And a very similar finding can be made about political interest. Surprisingly, an increase in political interest does not lead to an increase in the interpretation of online involvement as participation.

To summarize the results, institutional participation is tied to a narrow interpretation of politics (i.e., party-linked), making them more likely to be recognized as political participation by young people. In contrast, online participation and speech acts are clearly more likely to be seen by the elderly as political participation.

Discussion

Building on the data analysis discussed above, we can explore the following key insights connected to our research questions: first, examining how younger and older adults interpret the concept of political participation—especially as communicative action—and second, how they differ in their perceptions of online participation.

The main lesson to be learned from the breakdown by age groups, relates to the types of online participation. Age is explicitly linked to the way in which participation is judged, with older people clearly more likely to perceive online activity (posting, liking and commenting on political profiles) as political participation. The regression analysis confirmed this finding. While it is important to note that the explanatory power of the model was limited in this case, both age and gender played a significant role. Consistent with our observations noted above, men and older individuals are more likely to perceive online political activity as a form of participation. These findings are at odds with the common expectations in terms of age: it can be argued that younger people are more reluctant to recognize the online political activity under study as participation.

There are two possible explanations for this. On the one hand, it should be noted that the most popular online platforms among young people today were not mentioned, only Facebook, which can no longer be considered a very youthful social media (see e.g., Flaverio and Sidoti, 2024)[11]. On the other hand, it is possible that the increased presence of older people in online communities is creating a backlash phenomenon and reducing the sense of relevance among young people. This shift represents a reversal of traditional socialization dynamics, whereby younger age groups have historically been influenced by their elders. Conversely, the ubiquity of digital platforms, particularly social media, has enabled older adults to actively participate in and shape online communities, often drawing upon knowledge and skills acquired from younger cohorts (see e.g., Wang, 2020).

This distinction also highlights the changing dynamics of political engagement among younger cohorts, who may view direct and offline forms as more effective means of participation.[12]

A very similar result was found in the case of speech acts. Besides political interest, age proved to be the key explanatory variable ($B = 0.144$). This suggests that politically interested older citizens are more likely to interpret low-resource conversations as political participation. However, it is worth noting that engaging in political discussions with family or friends is an intimate process that requires a high level of trust, as it involves openly revealing one's political affiliation and core values.

The relationship between institutional activism and communicative forms of participation, such as speech acts or online engagement, is weaker but significant. This underlines a divergence in how these types of participation are conceptualized, with online and networked forms potentially representing a distinct, less traditional avenue. Interestingly, the emergence of digital participation as a relatively independent factor hints at its growing significance, as it appears to operate increasingly outside the frameworks of both traditional activism and communicative forms (This finding is supported by the fact that no other PCA factors are nonparametric correlated.).

The age dimension further complicates this picture. Younger individuals tend to associate participation with resource-intensive activities, such as direct protests, which demand high levels of energy, commitment, and often political opposition. This aligns with their stronger interest in activism that involves visible, oppositional forms of engagement, and, according to the literature reviewed, might be connected to their greater need to belong (Renström et al., 2020). On the other hand, older cohorts are more inclined to embrace online participation, which requires fewer resources and is less dependent on physical capabilities (Solevid and Scheiber Gyllenspetz, 2022; Nygård and Jakobsson, 2013). This shift toward digital spaces among older adults, particularly older men, could reflect broader societal trends where online environments provide accessible platforms for engagement, regardless of health or mobility constraints.

The disconnect between traditional and online participation is particularly striking. While the recognition of traditional, institutional activism remains tied to cultural capital and political interest, online forms are increasingly carving out a separate identity. This independence of perceptions suggests an important finding: digital participation is no longer just an extension of traditional methods but a space where new forms of engagement and influence are emerging. This development could make online participation less appealing to younger age groups, who may perceive it as less effective for achieving meaningful political change in the illiberal regime, compared to more direct, resource-heavy methods.

Overall, our findings challenge some long-held assumptions, particularly those associated with the Theocharis and van Deth framework of political participation. While younger people clearly recognize institutional forms of participation, such as party activism and protests, as legitimate engagement, the notion that this is solely their domain is dispelled (see Szabó and Déri, 2024). Similarly, the perception of speech acts, such as online political discussions, as participation, is surprisingly more prevalent among older people. This suggests a potentially evolving understanding of political engagement in the digital age, where older individuals may recognize the growing importance of online spaces. This calls for a reassessment of the relationship between age and online political engagement and urges us to move beyond simplistic stereotypes. Cultural capital, political interest, and even settlement type all influence how individuals perceive different forms of political participation.

11 While we acknowledge that platforms like Instagram and TikTok have gained popularity among younger demographics, at the time of our data collection in 2022, Facebook remained the most widely used social media platform among Hungarian youth. According to a representative study of 8.000 young people between the ages of 15 and 29 years, over 80% of Hungarian youth used Facebook daily, compared to 39% for Instagram and 30% for TikTok (Domonkos et al., 2021, p. 49). Given our resource constraints and the significant presence of youth on Facebook, we focused our analysis on this platform, which was considered the most relevant for examining online political participation among young people at that time.

12 It must be noted that evidence shows that in the case of marginalized youth, digital engagement can remain a central way of agency, belonging and, ultimately political participation (see e.g., Kaskazi and Kitzie, 2021). Similarly, in contexts where direct political repression limits expression and access to information, online connectivity can mean grounds of agency and activism (see e.g., Mateos and Erro, 2021).

Importantly, these results underscore the need to focus not only on younger people but also on older individuals when addressing political participation. The findings reveal significant differences in how participation is interpreted across age groups, and they highlight the potential transformation of online participation as a critical aspect of political engagement.

In summary, the regression analysis confirmed that age-groups and gender play key roles in how different forms of political participation are perceived. Younger adults are more likely to view institutional activism and protest participation as political, while older adults tend to recognize online activities, like commenting or liking political posts, as forms of participation. These insights set the stage for further exploration of the complex dynamics of political participation across age groups, particularly the shift toward online engagement among older adults, which will be discussed in the concluding chapter.

Conclusion

Our study, echoing (Schwartz's, 1984) call, begins by acknowledging the pivotal question: "It all depends on what we take participation to be" (p. 1129). Indeed, participation is not a self-evident concept; as Schwartz further argues, "Participation does not 'just happen,' it is something we say about what happens" (p. 1,132). Our aim was to answer this call and explore how political participation is perceived across different social groups (with a particular focus on age and the possible explanatory power of other relevant factors).

By integrating empirical evidence with theoretical perspectives, we aim to reach a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of political participation. This is critical to recognizing the evolving paradigms of engagement that characterize contemporary politics. Our triangular model of political participation introduced in our study highlights the interplay of methodological challenges, age-based approaches, and participation as communicative action—online and offline alike. This framework provides a lens for interpreting the increasing online presence of older adults and the weakening role of age in shaping access to and skills for digital engagement (Hargittai and Dobransky, 2017; Bergström, 2023).

By analyzing 2022 data from Hungary, we sought to understand if age-related and other social differences exist in the interpretation of political participation, and if so, how these differences manifest themselves, especially in the context of online participation.

It is important to emphasize again that our study is not concerned with political participation, but rather with the interpretation of political participation. Reflecting on the issue identified by Schwartz (1984), that the need for comparative approaches may mask contextual differences, our study demonstrated how quantitative methods can be used to incorporate the interpretative approach with keeping the potential of comparability. Our literature review revealed a lack of emphasis on the subjective interpretation of the concept of participation in empirical research. This oversight is consistent with recent theoretical calls for greater conceptual clarity and an increased focus on subjective interpretation (Pickard, 2019; Weiss, 2020), as well as better conceptualization of online participation (Ruess et al., 2021). Our position is that understanding political participation requires consideration of subjective meaning-making, that is, whether individuals perceive certain activities as participation.

At the same time, limited exploration of elderly perspectives on their participation also highlights a need for interpretivist approaches that capture their subjective experiences and motivations. Addressing this gap could not only enrich our understanding of aging but also inform policies and programs aimed at fostering more meaningful engagement among older adults.

In response to our first research question (How do younger and older adults interpret the concept of political participation?), our findings suggest that there is a significant and real difference between how young and old interpret institutional political participation, but direct participation does not show this trend.

Our main finding is that age often plays the most important role in shaping interpretations of participation, but not quite in the way we expected. Contrary to our assumptions, young people are more likely to view party activism as participation, while older individuals have shifted toward digital forms of participation (see Szabó and Déri, 2024 for more details). In addition, addressing our second research question (Are there age-related differences in interpreting participation as a communicative action?), we found that older people also increasingly associate participation with other communicative forms of engagement.

These findings partially confirm our first hypothesis (age significantly influences individuals' interpretations of political participation, with distinct conceptualizations evident among younger and older adults), as age is not in every case a key factor that defines patterns of interpretation of political participation, but does play an important role in explaining recognitions of institutional participation and participation understood as communicative actions, including forms of digital engagement. The potentially important role of socialization processes and socio-demographic contexts in shaping interpretations of political participation—particularly its communicative forms—calls for further research.

Regarding our third research question (How do younger and older adults differ in their perceptions of online political participation?), the answers are clear. Speech acts, including digital forms of participation are more recognized by older people. These results confirm our second hypothesis (Differences in interpretations of political participation are reflected in participation domains, particularly in the contrast between online and offline communicative actions): it seems, the increased online activity of older individuals, does indeed lead to a higher recognition of digital engagement among the age group. As older adults are becoming more active in online political conversations, younger people might be less likely to interpret those online forms as political participation that are inhabited by the older age-groups. The results indicate that it is wrong to assume political socialization is only one-way, top-down, from older to young people. Older people have learnt and adopted online platforms from young people, and some general social media interfaces are now much more for older people than for young people. With increasing age, the convenience function may become stronger, and due to health or resource constraints, we can talk about age equalization or perhaps even a gradual adoption of certain parts of the online space.

There is no doubt that whether we speak of online participation or speech acts, we are referring to the occupation of communicative spaces that are partly personal and partly public in nature. As noted earlier, these forms of participation are relatively low in resource demands, yet their impact on one's immediate environment through personal communication can be significant. While the question of how much discursive acts can directly or indirectly influence political decisions is important, it was not within the scope of our present research. Further qualitative studies are needed to explore whether influencing politics is even an explicit aim when older individuals engage in political conversations.

For particularly elderly but still politically active individuals, speech acts and online activism may offer especially tangible means of participation.

In contrast, young people may seek more immediate and visible successes in their political participation. It is easy to see that in an illiberal system, such as the country examined in our case study, forms of participation that move beyond the realm of personal, interpersonal communication may offer greater chances of success.

Our findings suggest a need to re-evaluate existing theoretical frameworks, such as the Theocharis and van Deth (2017) typology, which may not fully capture the breadth of young and older people's interpretations of political participation. Top-down approaches may limit the understanding of the concept of participation and over represent middle-class and/or institutionalized approaches. The article argues for a revised framework that authentically reflects the complex, blended nature of participation that integrates the aspect of subjective interpretations too.

Further research is needed to fully understand the nuances of political participation in the digital age. Incorporating qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews, can provide deeper insights into the motivations and meanings behind individuals' perceptions. In addition, examining the relationship between subjective interpretations of participation and actual participation behaviors can shed light on what influences individuals' decisions to engage. Finally, examining the influence of broader socio-cultural factors, like political systems and media landscapes, can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of participation in different societies.

Limitations: Our study was conducted in a single, newly fractured democratic country with strong de-democratization tendencies (see, for example: Delbos-Corfield, 2022; Nord et al., 2024), and thus the results should be considered in this context in mind. While our study offers valuable insights into political participation within this setting, the findings may not be directly transferable to other regions with different cultural, political, or social dynamics. Future research could explore similar themes in varied contexts to enhance the generalizability of the results. Important limitation to consider is that in examining online participation, we named only Facebook (whereas mentioning other platforms that are more popular among today's youth may have led to higher acceptance as participation) and worked with a closed list of participation forms.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article were collected by a market research company and therefore cannot be made publicly available in full. The data used in this study are available from the authors upon request via email.

Ethics statement

Ethical approval was not required for the studies involving humans because data was collected by a market research institute that fully complies with GDPR regulations and has high level ethical standards. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

AD: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. ASz: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declare that Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript. In the finalization of the manuscript, we used ChatGPT as a writing assistant. We chose not to cite it in the main text, as its contributions were limited to improving the clarity and flow of our writing rather than generating new ideas or analyses. We used prompts such as 'Improve this section for clarity", or "Check the language and grammar".

Publisher's note

Supplementary material

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpos.2025.1568369/full#supplementary-material

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