# Civil Discourse in the Digital Age: Perceptions of Age as a Barrier to Civic Engagement

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**Abstract :** Young people are at a critical stage in their lives, developing from young participants to adult participants in democratic society. At this time, civic engagement is crucial for young people's sense of belonging and future participation in their communities. In adolescence, individuals form their own identities and associations with others and may accomplish this with the help of technology and social media. In the Digital Age, young people and adults use technology as a platform to discuss political issues, including human rights and social justice but do not always engage in civil discourse. There is an urgent need to investigate this complex interplay of social media, identity formation, and civil discourse as it relates to how teenagers become participants in democratic society and how they engage in civil discourse. This qualitative study draws on theories of identity formation in adolescence and is situated within the literature surrounding teen civic engagement and technology use. Through in-depth interviews with participants ages 14 through 17, this study investigates the ways in which teens conceptualize their civic identities and engagement, presence online, and civil discourse. The context in which the young people in this study have grown up has the potential to impact and inform these processes. Early results of this study illustrate what it means to be a young person in today's world, and how perceptions of others' opinions may influence young people's engagement in their communities and online. Participants in this study often indicated concerns of their age as a constraint on participation in their communities and in society, and a self-imposed restriction around the people with whom they engage in conversation about political and social issues. While the participants shared common concerns and experiences, each participant's unique perspectives and beliefs are viewed with equal importance. The results from this research will help students, teachers, and community groups learn about the reasons for engagement and disengagement among this age group, and how technology has influenced teens' dialogue about political issues. With this knowledge, academics and school leaders can devise new ways to best teach citizenship skills and civil discourse to students in the Digital Age.

**Keywords :** civics, digital age, discourse, sociology of youth, youth studies