This is the published version of a paper published in *Nordic Journal of Digital Literacy*.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Children’s shared experiences of participating in digital communities  

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Children’s shared experiences of participating in digital communities

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ABSTRACT
The aim of this study is to gain knowledge about children’s participation in digital communities and to develop a model that can be used as a tool for practitioners. The research question guiding the study is: What kind of participation emerges from children’s shared experiences when engaging in digital communities? Lave and Wenger’s theory about communities of practice, and their notion of legitimate peripheral participation, are used. The data consist of nine individual interviews with children. Through nexus analysis, four different kinds of participation are identified: friendship-driven, interest-driven, knowledge-driven and performance-driven. The study generates an empirical model that can be used for interpreting and understanding children’s participation. The main findings are significant aspects of participation, linked to friendship, the connection between digital cultures, learning, literacy, identity and performativity, democratic implications and practices in constant change.

Keywords
participation, experiences, communities of practice, participatory cultures

INTRODUCTION
An emerging consensus suggests that engaged and active forms of learning with digital media take place in communities where children, through participation, learn to communicate, produce digital content, construct identities, and share, and distribute knowledge (Beavis, Deuzanni, & O’Mara, 2017; Jenkins, Ito, & boyd, 2016). The aim of this study is to investigate children’s participation in digital communities by exploring children’s shared experiences of engaging with digital media in their leisure time. Children in the same digital community develop their own practices, departing from Wenger’s notion of community of practice (1998/2008). In this study, a digital community is positioned as a smaller entity of a participatory culture, which has low barriers to artistic expression, strongly supports creating and sharing creations, and makes members believe that their contribution matters (Jenkins et al., 2016). Children’s engagement with digital media is shown to be a social and active ongoing process (Ito et al., 2010), of which children pos-
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Children’s experiences with digital media in their leisure time often focus on personal interests, leading to diversified and individualized use of media (Drotner, 2008). These experiences have been shown to impact upon children’s attitudes to learning and to educational practices (Drotner, 2008; Jenson & Droumeva, 2017). Findings indicate a correlation between being comfortable with computers and feeling positive about learning new programs. Boys have been shown to have their own computer where they can “try things out”, while girls share with others in the family (Jenson & Droumeva, 2017).

A number of studies have focused on children’s experiences of participating in digital gaming. Young children’s navigation of avatars have been shown to engage two key aspects of participatory culture, collaboration and online connectivity (Wohlwend, Vander Zanden, Husbye, & Kuby, 2011). Discourses of schooling seem to complicate children’s goal of coordinated game play when teachers constrain children’s meaning making by, for example, removing multimodal resources (ibid). Few studies explore children’s digital gaming experiences in other settings (Niemeyer & Gerber, 2015; Willett, 2017a). Multiple levels of experience appear necessary for creating digital content, to belong to cultural environments that foster collaboration and sharing and using common design standards, in digital maker cultures and walkthroughs1 of creators’ work (Niemeyer & Gerber, 2015). Participants’ online access have been shown to vary, and by that also their experiences and knowledge of virtual world games, identifying three different levels: experienced, mid-level experience and novice (Willett, 2017b).

Research on children’s participation in social media contexts are scarcer. Findings show that girls are more frequent users than boys, and that the primary use of social media is to manage and reconstruct already existing relationships (Wang & Edwards, 2016). Online

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1. Walkthroughs and commentaries provide gamers information that helps them in game play.
engagement through social media can be positive and constructive for young people, to practice identity and relationship management strategies (ibid). This is supported in recent work, where identity, learning and literacy are regarded as complex entities (Beavis et al., 2017). Girls have been shown to “bring themselves into being” through talk and producing digital content in Minecraft (Dezuanni, O’Mara, & Beavis, 2015). These findings reveal the complex relationships between identity, learning, authority and performativity, in the social processes of play (Dezuanni et al., 2015). Digital games can be used for presenting complex representations and experiences, to foster collaborative and deep learning, and to enable curricula to connect with young people today (Beavis et al., 2017). These findings illuminate the role of context in game play as well as the links between digital culture, game play and identity in learners’ lives (ibid).

Frameworks for understanding children’s participation in digital communities

Young people’s everyday engagement and learning with media generated two high-level categories: friendship-driven and interest-driven participation (Ito et al., 2010). The former describes practices of young people’s negotiations with friends and peers, and the latter young people’s specialized activities, interests and marginalized identities, such as “geeks” and “dorks”. “Friends” refers to individuals who young people have close affiliations with, and “peers” are people whom young people look to to develop their sense of self, reputation and status (ibid). The same definition of “peers” and “friends” is used in this study.

Ito et al. (2010) identified additional genres in relation to one another: “hanging out”, “messing around” and “geeking out”, emphasizing modes of participation with media, and not categories of individuals. Van den Beemt et al. (2011) identified four patterns of interactive media applications usage as interchanging, interacting, performing and authoring, and four types of media users: Traditionalists (interacting), Gamers (performing), Networkers (interchanging) and Producers (authoring).

This study adds to research linking children’s (8-12 years of age) participation in digital communities to issues of identity, performance and the sense of self (Beavis et al., 2017). By seriously acknowledging the time and energy children invest by engaging in digital communities in their leisure time, the following research question guides this study: What kind of participation emerges from children’s shared experiences when engaging in digital communities?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Participation is here understood as a social process of learning, and Wenger’s theory about communities of practice (Wenger, 1998/2008) was chosen to interpret and understand children’s participation in digital communities. Legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) is used as an analytical approach, based on its fundamental assumptions that learning is always situated, knowledge is socially mediated and that learning is a process of participation in communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Participation is described by Lave and Wenger (1991) as a movement from newcomer to full participator. Participation is always based on situated negotiation and renegotiation of meaning in the social world,
indicating that understanding and experience are in constant interaction (ibid). Dewey (1916/2011) helps to explain how this experience is gained and evokes change which includes an active trying and a passive reflective element in combination. Only activity does not constitute experience, since experience as trying involves change, which appears to be a key concept in interpreting and understanding children’s participation.

Communities are complex, differentiated and in constant change, indicating that there is not a linear notion of skill acquisition (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The purpose for newcomers is to learn to talk as a key to participation (ibid). Since participation is a process, there are gradual changes that can be traced in children’s utterances, aspirations, goals and recalls. If the children connect the change with a prior activity indicates that it means something specific to them, they have experienced something from it (Dewey, 1916/2011). In this study, children share their experiences of engaging in digital communities, using situated artefacts and performing identities. A community of practice is here understood as “a nexus”, described by Scollon and Scollon (2004) as a network of linked practices. Change in participation through experience is sought in analyses by navigating the different ‘nexus of practices’ (ibid).

METHODS

Focusing on understanding children’s engagement with digital media suggests applying an ethnographic approach to investigating children’s daily lives, trying to make sense of what is going on (Walford, 2008).

Participants

Snowball sampling is a method useful for sampling a population, where access is difficult to gain and often relies on interpersonal relations, known contacts and friends (Bryman, 2012). In order to gain access to navigate younger children’s social worlds, parental consent was necessary. Initially, parents of the children of interest were identified in informal conversations, granting access to interviews when the researcher was unknown to many children. The result was that purposive sampling and snowball sampling were combined (c.f. Bryman, 2012). The children were in the position of choosing the setting for the interview; this was decided so that they would feel as comfortable as possible. Only one of the children chose their own home. All parents signed the informed consent form approved by the Research Ethical Committee (Dnr 2016/289-31). The study sample consisted of nine children, all born in Sweden and native speakers of Swedish (see Table 1).
A guideline with objectives for the interviews was constructed, to encourage the children to share their expert knowledge, in line with ethnographic interviewing (Forsey, 2008). Some of the objectives were: digital tools, contexts, communities and skills. The researcher had ten years of experiences of talking to children with special needs as a teacher and familiarity with many of the digital contexts, which were of help in the process of generating and understanding data. Data generated by researchers who have built relationships of trust with children is likely to be of considerably use and validity (Walford, 2008). The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in order to avoid data loss and the risk of reduction of complexity.

### Analytical procedures

The analysis was partly informed by nexus analysis, which is an ethnographic methodological strategy (Scollon & Scollon, 2004). Nexus analysis focuses on the point at which historical trajectories of people, places, discourses, ideas and objects come together to enable some action, here participation. Participation, regarded as a dense knot of actions, occurs at the intersection of the historical bodies, the interaction order which the participants mutually produce among themselves and the discourses in place (ibid). Participants take actions with mediational means, for example, physical and psychological “objects” that mediate between subjects and their social worlds (Norris & Jones, 2005). Actions here occur in different digital contexts, and are highly complex networks of meditational means.
In the first stage of analysis, actions taken with meditational means and participants were searched out, identifying crucial social actors, the interaction order and discourses in place – tracing the most significant cycles of discourse (Figure 1):

**Figure 1** Significant cycles of discourse

The second stage in analysis was to locate transformative moments (Scollon & Scollon, 2004) in each of the significant cycles of discourse. During this stage, transformative moments were sought in data, tracing children’s aspirations, goals and recollections in utterances from each cycle of discourse as differences in motive statements (c.f. Scollon & Scollon, 2004). Variations of participation were traced as different knots of actions serving as tacit markers of membership and expertise, constituting the sub-themes. These sub-themes summoned into being themes identifying significant changes in the participants’ interests and shifts in orientation. The analysis was here informed by the concepts of newcomer and full participator from Lave and Wenger (1991). Movement towards full participation in practice involves “a greater commitment of time, intensified effort, more and broader responsibilities within the community and more difficult and risky tasks, but, more significantly, an increasing sense of identity as a master practitioner” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 111). A table was constructed to illustrate how this movement could be identified in the data.
Table 2. Movement towards full participation in practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Commitment of time</th>
<th>Reflected experiences</th>
<th>More and broader contributions</th>
<th>Performing for a worldwide audience</th>
<th>An increasing sense of identity as a master practitioner</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;I can get in here because I have played longer&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;I only compete to level up, but it is possible to buy a rank only to brag, meaning that you are not that good&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;I broadcast live when I’m playing Minecraft&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;I have something called videoshow which I use for editing clips. I can add music and I can add an outro and then I save it and publish it&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;I have got 1000 followers&quot;/&quot;I hashtag a lot, so people can find my pictures&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;When you play a game very much, you get tired of it and there is a period when you don’t play it at all and they you start playing A LOT again&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;But now when I’m playing Dragon City and the new game Monster Legend I need some help because it is more advanced&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Only today I have got about 11 new followers. I think it is because I publish public and there are many who are engaged with Schleich&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;But I haven’t told anyone that I have got a Schleich account because others might think it’s dorky&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;I know like everything about Minecraft so I don’t have to search for how to do any longer&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

RESULTS

This section presents the four different kinds of participation identified in data as a movement from newcomer towards full participator: friendship-driven participation, interest-driven participation, knowledge-driven participation and performance-driven participation. These themes are presented first, followed by the sub-themes.

Friendship-driven participation

Friendship-driven participation consists of two sub-themes: socializing with friends and following trends. Hanging out with known friends and peers characterize this theme. The dominant cycle of discourse is the one that includes the social actors (Figure 1). For the children, to feel as a participant appears to be of more importance than personal interests. The children express how they foster relationships in school and how digital contexts are used for playing games and staying in touch with friends. According to data, the children share the required knowledge within the community. The children’s participation is here interpreted as peripheral.

Socializing with friends

In this sub-theme, children express that the main reason for engaging in an activity is to keep socializing digitally with friends in leisure time. Data reveals how non-participation might contribute to feelings of exclusion in another social arena of great importance, namely school:

My friends, X and X who are my friends in school, they talked about it (Dragon City) all the time and then I found it boring because I couldn’t participate in the conversations, because I didn’t have it, so that’s why I downloaded it.
Another child explains why he bought a smartphone:

Everyone played Pokémon in school, it was then when it started to get tough... even my best friend had got a smartphone and he was also engaged with this Pokémon and then I thought... yes.

These excerpts illustrate how participation in digital activities opens up possibilities for children to keep socializing. The last excerpt shows how a digital tool can be the easy way to get access to being with friends. It is easy to see if a child has a smartphone and is engaging in activities with others, by observing. Discursive knowledge might be more difficult for an observer to grasp, but it seems to be impossible for a non-participant to engage in conversations with experienced players. This indicates that children need to invest time and effort in becoming members of a shared social practice. When the children hang out with their closest friends, they can be themselves:

I ALWAYS style my hair when someone can see me (using the web cam) except when I’m playing with my cousin.

Here the difference in orientation towards friends or peers is shown, and what impact it has on actions. To perform identities is of greater importance when playing with peers.

**Following trends**

In this sub-theme, children orient more towards peers and the importance of following trends, for example playing the most popular game or watching the most popular clips on YouTube stands out. Data shows there is more at stake when orienting toward peers and a need to start to perform, above all to perform identity. The idealized identity according to the children is someone who follows trends:

There are a lot of trends, which is why you play a game or a mobile game.

But trends seem to be shifting fast and different strategies to keep updated can be identified:

There is a tab on YouTube that’s the most popular right now.
You just check the top list on the App store.
When they publish a clip on YouTube it vibrates in my smartphone.

These excerpts display the importance of belonging to trends in following digital practices. To avoid the risk of losing their membership, the children have found supportive meditational means. The most important artefact appears to be the smartphone, and what it would mean to be without it is expressed here:

It’s like pulling the plug on me, because I wouldn’t be able to check ANYTHING... shut down from the outer world because I wouldn’t get any.. I can’t contact my friends.. and I can’t check Instagram.
A girl reflects upon previous experiences gained, and conclusions are drawn about how she would suffer, not being able to participate at all without a smartphone. Data reveals the importance of acting as a trend follower when others see:

I only caught Pokémons in school, because I thought it was like Pokémon school. Peers were engaged in playing it there.

This indicates that significant social actors, here peers, need to witness the participation so that the social actor can uphold his/her reputation and status. Trend followers seem to have gained enough skills to act as peripheral participants in trend-following communities of practice.

**Interest-driven participation**

Interest-driven participation consists of three sub-themes: learning languages and artefacts; understanding the rules, reward systems and hierarchical structures; and performing identities. The theme is characterized by children’s personal interests in engaging with specialized activities. Discourses in place appear to be the dominant significant cycle. The children seek to make meaning of contexts, focusing on learning by taking actions with mediational means, to learn in practice. The children have been shown to “bring themselves into being” through talk and producing digital content. There is a change in orientation regarding social actors and social interaction, from the familiar towards the unknown, which can be found in data:

We compete against each other and then against many other people from different countries whom we don’t know.

I often meet new peers when playing Minecraft.

The children are leaving a peripheral position and now have aims clearly impacting upon their participation.

**Learning languages and artefacts**

In this sub-theme, learning languages and artefacts are in the foreground. It is clear that the children have learnt context-specific languages through participation, constantly using English and ‘Swenglish’ concepts while sharing experiences. One child explains how learning is possible:

Because when you pick up this thing, it spells out the thing your holding.

The context itself affords educational mediational means, so that the children can connect the artefact with the concept. This indicates that language learning and learning about artefacts occur as parallel multimodal learning processes, as exemplified here:

In the beginning I didn’t know, I only knew the things my cousin was using and then I gradually learned for example that this is stone//..//and after a while I got to learn the English words for it as well.
Data shows that the children when seeking help to translate contexts specific words not always can rely on what parents say:

I don’t think she’s always right, because she does not really understand the game.

Instead the children orientate towards people they can trust, more knowledgeable friends or peers. Learning English in digital communities appear to be different from learning in school:

You have to take in much more at once, when people talking in the chat and when you play with someone who is older and really good at English I ask him what the others were saying…and then you learn.

Here the children learn English in practice, which includes being exposed to spoken and written language. To participate also means to communicate, the children cannot remain silent or ignore to answer in chat forums.

**Understanding the rules, reward systems and hierarchical structures**

In this sub-theme the children express the need to understand the rules, rewards systems and hierarchical structures. Some rules regulate what is allowed and to break them is risk getting banned. But some children are willing to take risks because to break rules can be beneficial when exploring the game world. Other rules encourage the children to actively participate:

An hourglass appears and then you know that the time is soon out, you have about 1.5 days to send a Snapchat

This illustrates how mediational means at the same time can be supportive, as a reminder to take action, as well as to put pressure on children to act. If children don’t act they might miss out on mediational means of importance. Learning how reward systems work and what options there are to climb the hierarchical structures are of relevance for those having career aspirations. In social media practices are many followers, likes and subscribers of importance:

The crown means that you have a lot of likes and fans and such, to show that you are like best in the world.

The crown serves as a mediational mean signifying the interaction order, someone with high status. There appear to be more options to climb towards the top in games for example to buy a higher rank:

It is only to brag about being a higher rank and that you are better than others and then when you meet that person you crush him completely.

Here a person has tried to buy his/her way to success but is revealed in competitions. Data indicates that the valued way of making progress is to invest time in training and gaining the actual skills for a rank:
You need 500 points because then you can enter into the world of the elite, the world of the masters.

This is where they want to enter – the world of the masters.

Performing identities
In this sub-theme the children are performing identities in different ways in various digital contexts. To perform as an already created character, an avatar, appears to be less complex. In comparison with performing as an avatar that gradually changes appearance as the player gain artefacts of importance:

I met someone who had a really high level. I saw that because he had better weapons and better armour.

Here we see how artefacts as mediational means signal status and expertise and how children position themselves in relation to others, as the performed identity in this game is closely related to the player’s actual skills. Data show that hierarchies of proficiency are established in digital communities and the children learn that there are additional arenas for gaining status and power, where some will succeed and others will fail. Expected patterns of behaviour could also be traced in data:

CS is the kind of game that if you get offended, then you answer back in the same way otherwise you show yourself to be weak and then the others push even harder.

This explains why children need to learn the discourse in place, picking up discursive knowledge and also enact it, to gain a sense of self in relation to other participants. The desirable is to appear as someone with status. The most complex performance is identified to take place in social media practices. Here it looks as if the children are performing as themselves but data reveals that they are imitating others:

You can imitate someone who does it in a right way.

This illustrates the interaction order. A boy explains how he imitates girls performing different moves in Musical.ly, and the girls are imitating role models who are showing the way. Children express that they publish videos and pictures to friends and peers, a selected audience, indicating there is not so much at stake. The children know they will get likes for the pictures and the videos they produce.

Knowledge-driven participation
Knowledge-driven participation consists of two sub-themes: using previous knowledge gained, and orienting towards more knowledgeable people. This theme is characterized by a deeper engagement and commitment, a greater autonomy where the children draw on existing knowledge or seek new by turning to more knowledgeable people. The dominant cycle appears to be interaction order. There is a change in orientation, children “leaving” the actual digital context and start engaging with participatory cultures by using other people’s creations as input for gaining knowledge and finding solutions to problems.
As participants, the children have learnt to tactically select which resource to turn to in order to find answers to their questions. The children have been shown to self-regulate their actions to gain more skills and knowledge, and are gradually moving towards a more centre position.

**Using previous knowledge gained**

In this sub-theme more experienced participants have been shown to apply repertoires of actions and draw on previous knowledge gained, and experiences when entering new contexts, exemplified here:

This is Call of Duty, this is CS and this is Halo. It is three completely different games but all three are first person. I think they are all easy, because first person is first person, if you know how to play that almost all games are the same.

This indicates that the children learn from experiences and also can distinguish which knowledge they need to enact. They also seem to be aware of what discursive knowledge they are lacking in order to succeed:

By defeating bosses and do more things, it says on the screen but I don’t understand the thing that appeared so I do not know what to do.

This excerpt shows an initiated gamer identifying the problem by expressing awareness of the possibilities to defeat obstacles after getting the information needed. By figuring out the mediational means, the problem will be solved. To gain new artefacts can often be the solution to problems, as expressed here:

And there is one thing that I can’t pass and then I get a new character who can pass that thing. Then I play that round again.

The children have been shown to make backward and forward connections between what they do to things. Previously the gamer has suffered, but now realizes that he will enjoy the consequences. Previous knowledge gained seems to be of importance when the children start navigating towards participatory cultures and above all that they can enact it and put into play.

**Orienting towards more knowledgeable people**

In this sub-theme the children are orienting towards more knowledgeable people, as here:

X knew much because he was already watching YouTube a lot///He spends a lot of time playing so he has gained a lot of knowledge, so he has taught me very much. He keeps teaching me things.

A girl explains why she asks, when she wants to find things out, her younger brother, who has turned to YouTube as a resource for participatory cultures. But in another context, she is the more knowledgeable sibling, indicating that children take on various roles as participants. At this stage, the children make use of the affordances of participatory cultures more strategically, by using Google or YouTube as mediational means:
You can click on the minus so that you like leave Minecraft but still has it on the screen. Then you can search on Google and there you find others who have built that thing. There are a lot of videos coming up showing how to do it and then you can just enter Minecraft again.

This shows how the children develop strategies for getting support, for example from YouTubers serving as mentors by showing exactly how to do something in a recorded tutorial. Children appear to have unlimited access to multimodal instructions from which they can imitate and learn:

You observe at the same time as you are building. I pause the clip otherwise I cannot follow.

This shows how the children self-regulate their actions to get the best support and how they coordinate their actions, from watching a clip to the actual performance.

**Performance-driven participation**

Performance-driven participation consists of three sub-themes: contributing to participatory cultures; imitating masters to achieve personal goals; and accessing supportive tools. This theme is characterized by children contributing to participatory cultures, performing for a worldwide audience. Performance is here understood as the act of performing by using knowledge, distinguished from merely possessing it. Data reveals the complex relationships between participatory cultures, identity, learning and performativity. For risk-takers, it is worth taking the risk because of the possibility of gaining status, reputation and becoming famous, indicating that it might be an effective way to position themselves in relation to friends and peers. Participation appears to be more exclusive, since supportive tools become of importance, and financial resources are required. Some children are orienting towards becoming full participators.

**Contributing to participatory cultures**

In this sub-theme, the children who contribute to participatory cultures seem to know that they should produce digital content of interest for the audience, and of high quality. A girl expresses the effort she puts into producing pictures on Instagram:

And then I think like this, now I take this horse and put it in this environment so it will look nice. You have to think about the colours of the horse and the environment. Sometimes it is a bit tricky to place the horse in order to get the right focus, the right angle and also thinking about the light.

Here we see how production can be a time-consuming process, requiring both reflection and consideration. The goal is a high-quality multimodal representation of interest for the audience, also serving as a representation of the creator’s expertise and skills – a representation of self. The productions need to be easily found by other members:

I hashtag a lot, so people can find my pictures. I think that’s why I have got so many followers.
This exemplifies how the social actor has learnt from practice how to make use of mediational means in the most sufficient way to achieve the desired result. Also, here the children mind how they position themselves in relation to peers:

But I haven’t told anyone that I have got a Schleich account because others might think it’s dorky.

Although she has gained status with many followers, it appears to be risky to tell peers; some things are best left unsaid, and can be kept secret by having an anonymous account. Data shows that these children have access to digital tools and online access, but above all seem to have been given time to engage and participate in digital activities, thereby the possibilities for developing the necessary skills for contributing to participatory cultures.

**Imitating masters to achieve personal goals**

In this sub-theme, the children imitate masters to achieve personal goals. YouTubers serve as masters by constantly contributing to the participatory culture, showing the way for what to produce. The children express that they spend a lot of time watching video clips:

I think you need to check what is popular on the Internet or YouTube and then you publish something like that and then I think that you can get more viewers //..///I want to be like PewDiePie because he has 50 million followers.

This could partly explain children’s consumption of YouTube clips as getting inspiration and seeking cues for what to produce in order to become popular. This child seems to have figured out the key to success and expresses career aspirations, willing to put an effort into it and also willing to take risks. To be compared with those who are not:

I don’t want to have a YouTube channel, firstly because I don’t think that I would get so many subscribers and it just seems to be hard work. It is not fun if nobody watches.

Data shows that risk takers know that it is possible to earn a lot of money if they become famous YouTubers:

YouTubers get money from cooperation with companies and they get money from YouTube.

This could also be a motivator for why they are willing to take risks. The fact is that famous YouTubers must also have started somewhere:

But what I’m thinking is that they were not famous from the beginning, they have also been on 0 views and 0 subscribers.

Thus, data shows that there is a chance to succeed.

**Accessing supportive tools**

In this sub-theme, children express motifs for accessing supportive tools. The quality of digital tools, for example, a camera, a computer, a keyboard, or a headset, are of importance, and this is expressed thusly:
So I would like to have a camera instead because then the pictures will become much better.

In order for PewDiePie to get really good quality, he uses a green screen so that you can’t see the background when he is recording videos.

These excerpts illustrate an awareness of how supportive tools of higher quality impact upon the quality of the multimodal representation and thereby also the representation of the self. But also, they show that some children have picked up discourses in places where masters inform members of what to use in order to succeed. To buy supportive tools seems to be a way to identify with professional gamers:

It depends on what kind of keyboard you have got. If it is a mechanical keyboard you just have to touch a key and then you press it. I am quite fast on the keys.

This explains how supportive tools, in combination with the social actor’s skills, impact upon the actions taken in becoming a better gamer.

The empirical findings are here illustrated in a model as four different kinds of participation.

**Fig 2** Empirical based model of different kinds of participation

**DISCUSSION**
The following question guided the study: What kind of participation emerges from children’s shared experiences when engaging in digital communities? Four different kinds of participa-
tion, friendship-driven, interest-driven, knowledge-driven and performance-driven, were identified and illustrated in a model (Figure 2). The risk of using a model for illustrating the children’s participation is that it might be regarded as rather fixed, with clearly defined boundaries. Complexity is identified, although separated into significant common features, and the discussion will centre around four significant aspects of participation.

The first significant aspect of complexity is linked to friendship (c.f. Wang & Edwards, 2016). The findings in this study support previous research. Children have been shown to participate in digital communities in order to maintain existing relations. In comparison with other research where personal interests were in the foreground (Drotner, 2008), this study indicates something different. In this study children choose to participate because of other friends and to avoid exclusion from the social scene – a merger between different arenas, online and offline. It is shown that children risk being excluded from conversations with friends if they lack discursive knowledge about digital activities.

The second aspect of complexity, the connection between digital cultures, learning, literacy, identity and performativity (Beavis, 2017; Jenkins et al., 2016) is also shown to exist in this study. Children have been shown to “bring themselves into being” through talk and producing digital content, in line with Dezuanni et al. (2015). It is alarming that recent work has shown that some children are hindered by lack of access to digital tools from trying things out (Jenson & Droumeva, 2017), suggesting that their way to “bring themselves into being” might be harder for different reasons, but a consequence is a risk of exclusion. This is a struggle they risk facing when they cannot turn to other people in digital cultures who have the knowledge, considering that many children still become new-media literate outside the educational system (Buckingham, 2015). Instead, educational practice should intervene: “Our goals should be to encourage kids to develop the skill, knowledge, ethical frameworks, and self-confidence needed to be full participants in contemporary culture” (Jenkins, 2007, p. 25). The results in this study evoke the affordances of participating in digital communities, as a promising foundation to build on in becoming citizens in a democratic society. The children expressed confidence in communicating with digital tools, producing digital content, sharing and distributing knowledge in fruitful and efficient ways. They have experienced what it means to learn in practice, and how to enact knowledge through actions with mediational means. The results illustrate the importance of their own participation in developing discursive knowledge in digital contexts, not easily achieved and something that appears to be time-consuming. If formal education neglects the task of developing children’s new-media literacy skills, there is a risk of leaving some children behind, and to leave children behind is a major problem for a democratic society.

The third aspect of complexity also has democratic implications: children’s possibilities of positioning themselves in relation to peers. The most critical audience with voices that counts most has been shown to belong to peers in school. An arena of importance where this positioning takes place is school. Although findings in this study reveal that there are other arenas where children can gain reputation and status through performing skills and expertise, these experiences are not fully acknowledged by teachers and policy-makers. But at least these children have arenas and experiences of gaining self-confidence and have started constructing an identity of a learning self, compared with children who might not even have access to these informal arenas. The results show that the children’s learning rep-
ertoire include how to draw on a multiplicity of modes when communicating, producing digital content and displaying their expertise and skills. Sadly, discourses of schooling (Wohlwend et al., 2011) still seem to hinder many children from “bringing themselves into being” and to fully make use of their experiences and knowledge gained in informal arenas. Multimodality appears to be underused as a means and is not being acknowledged in schools, which is unfortunate when so many children would gain from representing their knowledge in a way they master.

The last aspect of complexity is linked to practices in constant change. None of the previously used frameworks (Ito et al., 2010; van den Beemt et al., 2011) could be directly applied in this study, most possibly because the media landscape is constantly changing and new media activities create other conditions for participating (Jenkins et al., 2016). It is necessary for researchers to keep up with children’s pace, remaining with one foot in the field. Otherwise it might be hard for researchers to provide stakeholders, interested in children’s learning, with updated models. The empirical-based model (Figure 2) can be used by teachers to gain knowledge about children’s participation in digital communities. It is a necessity for teachers to gain an understanding of how the lack of competences might hinder children from entering a social scene. Teachers also need to gain awareness of children’s reasons for investing time and effort in gaining discursive knowledge, struggling to position themselves by gaining status and reputation. By acknowledging children’s experiences, skills and knowledge gained in informal arenas, possibilities are afforded for teachers to build on and connect these experiences to children’s learning in school. This is of major importance, since participation is a key aspect of today’s society – the importance of feeling a sense of belonging strongly impacts upon the sense of self, constituting a learner’s identity in a democratic society.

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