Creating Long-Lasting Local Networks for Youth Participation in Democracy and Society

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Introduction

There is a growing trend of disinterest in politics and democracy, or a lack of trust in political institutions, where many young people today also exhibit this lack of confidence and interest (Sloam, 2007). This disengagement often stems from political apathy (Cicognani & Motti-Stefanidi, 2019), or from political alienation (Sloam, 2007) where they feel their voices and votes do not make a meaningful difference. As a result, many youth view political institutions as unresponsive and irrelevant to their everyday lives, leading to diminished participation and enthusiasm in democratic processes. Reducing the detrimental effects of the political apathy and alienation of young people is key, as youth will one day become the new generation in power and become policymakers (Cicognani & Motti-Stefanidi, 2019; Sloam, 2007). A generation that feels unheard or alienated from the political system in charge of decision-making processes can result in decreased effectiveness and reduced democratic values of any political system. Youth participation can be a helpful tool to overcome the detriments of young people's apathy or alienation (Cammaerts et al., 2016). Engaging young people in various activities or processes fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility, reducing political apathy and encouraging active citizenship (Akiva et al., 2014). When youth see the direct impacts of their contributions, they feel valued and empowered, leading to stronger habits of democratic/political engagement and a stronger commitment to democracy and societal well-being (Akiva et al., 2014). Involving and consulting youth in decision-making processes can provide development opportunities and benefits, which can positively impact the young people themselves as well as the broader society (Head, 2011). The involvement of youth can foster active collaboration between adults and young people and provide youth with the opportunity to voice their opinions. Youth participation is also considered a potential tool to

foster a sense of citizenship, making policy processes more transparent and accountable to young people (Cammaerts et al., 2016).

Next to that, youth participation is becoming increasingly important in democracy and society nowadays, especially with growing complex societal problems like sustainable development, polarization, and climate change (Dickson‑Hoyle et al., 2018). These issues are affecting everyone, but younger generations have to deal with the greatest impacts of, for example, climate change. Policymakers are also increasingly acknowledging the importance of youth as stakeholders, decision-makers, and future leaders in the context of these complex and intergenerational problems that society is facing (El Zoghbi, 2017). Therefore, it is crucial to involve these young people in policy and decision-making processes, as most policies are aimed at improving their future (Dickson‑Hoyle et al., 2018). All these benefits from youth participation urge the need for increasing youth engagement, however, there is a lack of information on how to effectively implement youth participation initiatives.

A crucial part that is missing in the literature on youth engagement and participation is the aspect of volunteer work, even though it can encourage young people to participate. The literature needs to address whether volunteering can be considered as youth participation, or how it could potentially influence the engagement of young people, especially in specific initiatives aimed at improving youth participation. Next to that, there is a lack of information on how youth participation can be increased through initiatives that are based on volunteers. There is a gap in the literature, which this research aims to address. This will be achieved by focusing on youth participation in democracy and society, based on volunteering work. The research aims to answer

the following question: "How can we motivate youth to become volunteers for NGOs aimed at increasing youth participation in democracy and society?". The research contributes to the current literature on youth participation by adding the perspective of volunteering work as a way for young people to participate or exert their influence on the political debate or the issues of their interest. This can serve as a helpful addition to the literature and expand our understanding of the topic, which can provide more insights for practical initiatives that could drive more or improved volunteering initiatives aimed at enhancing youth participation in democracy and society.

In this paper, the theoretical framework for the research is first explained. The importance of youth participation is stressed and what motivates young people to participate, whereafter the obstacles to youth participation are elaborated upon. This serves as the basis for the research, which is to compare the barriers that are identified by the literature, look at the current experiences of young people, either volunteering or not, and look at strategies to overcome these barriers. The findings of this research are elaborated on in the following sections, which include motivating factors, demotivating factors, and helpful strategies to improve volunteering/youth participation. The discussion section draws parallels between the findings and the existing literature and focuses on the theoretical contributions and the practical implications of the research. It also includes the research limitations and suggestions for future research. Finally, a conclusion is drawn from the research which is detailed in the last section of this research paper.

Theory and background

Importance of youth participation and motivations for it

Youth participation is crucial for the vitality of democratic societies. It brings other perspectives and innovative solutions to societal challenges, ensuring that the needs and interests of younger generations are represented (Akiva et al., 2014). Active engagement also fosters a sense of responsibility and citizenship among youth, helping to build a more informed, proactive, and resilient community (Checkoway, 2011). By involving young people in decision-making processes, we create a more inclusive and dynamic society that values diverse viewpoints and experiences (Dickson‑Hoyle et al., 2018). Active collaboration between youth and adults is vital in fostering sustainable success for community development efforts, stressing that youth are an important part of the development process and should become active contributors to their own communities (Barnett & Brennan, 2006). Misrepresentation and disregard of youth can be detrimental to solving intergenerational issues, so youth participation is crucial (El Zoghbi, 2017).

One reason for youth to participate is to talk about topics that they care about, but which are not accurately addressed by older generations (Kettunen, 2021). A major example of this is the topic of climate change and climate activism, where youth are increasingly voicing their concerns about current affairs (Dickson‑Hoyle et al., 2018). Climate change is an intergenerational issue but will be most detrimental to young and future generations, which is why young people tend to become active in making changes for the better (Kettunen, 2021). Next to that, young people often feel unheard or misrepresented by the policy-making generation and therefore try to

become active and participate in political discourse or democratic processes (Dickson‑Hoyle et al., 2018; Kettunen, 2021). Related to this is the internal motivation of individuals to participate in their communities through volunteering or charity work, without expecting personal benefits (Khin, 2021). Young people, in that sense, tend to work towards societal benefits that exceed their personal gains, which is also shown in their active voice in solving issues like climate change (Kettunen, 2021). Active community development initiatives can also help motivate young people to participate in these community-building efforts to achieve desired outcomes for their surroundings (Khin, 2021). Young people who are interested in providing benefits to others, or have a political interest can be intrinsically motivated to participate in community initiatives. Young people's understanding of participation and the importance of participating can motivate them to actively engage in community activities, given that the social structures around them are assisting them to do so (Khin, 2021). However, these social structures are oftentimes lacking, providing several obstacles for young people to actively participate in democracy and society, which are detailed in the following section.

Obstacles to youth participation

Obstacles in youth participation can vary greatly but often include age discrimination; harassment and hate speech; a perceived lack of skills; predictable patterns and structural challenges; negative organizational cultures; portrayal as a group representative; and a too-high threshold for self-expression (Tholstrup et al., 2022). Age discrimination is often used as a tool of youth suppression and disregards the potential of young people to participate meaningfully (Checkoway & Gutiérrez, 2006). Discrimination also relates to harassment and hate speech, which prevents minorities from actively speaking up when needed or relevant and thus decreases

the overall participation rate of youth (Laforgue et al., 2022; Tholstrup et al., 2022). Another factor links to the perceived lack of skills that young people have, indicating that young people often feel that they lack the necessary skills to compete with more mature or experienced people (Tholstrup et al., 2022). Their limited experience with voicing their opinions and unfamiliarity with politics, democracy, and debating, enhance the feeling of lacking skills to engage and participate in society. Young people tend to feel dissatisfied with their perceived inability to participate in a meaningful way, compared to their desire to act on their right to participation (Kwon, 2018). Next to that, the conservatism that is often associated with politics and democracy or the predictability and structure of public institutions can hinder youth participation as well (Laforgue et al., 2022; Tholstrup et al., 2022). Young people perceive politics and democracy as unwilling to change or conservative, which decreases their interest in participating. This also relates to their reluctance to participate in organizations that they consider to have a negative organizational culture, meaning that the current people in the organizations do not reflect positively on youth becoming involved in that organization (Tholstrup et al., 2022). Furthermore, whenever young people are asked to participate in politics, decision-making processes, or society, they are often regarded as group representatives. Policy-makers are interested in involving more youth but think that involving a few young people would suffice in capturing the demographics, opinions, and values of a large group like youth (Tholstrup et al., 2022). All of these different issues accumulate in the fact that youth experience a too high threshold for self-expression and participation. Discrimination and harassment, a (perceived) lack of skills, conservative institutions, and group (mis-)representation are factors that decrease the perceived ability of youth to engage and thus add to the threshold for them to participate in democracy and

society (Tholstrup et al., 2022). To fully benefit from the positive impacts of youth participation, this threshold first needs to be lowered.

Methodology

Data collection

Interviews and focus groups (qualitative primary data)

In order to answer the research question, qualitative research has been conducted. This qualitative approach was suitable for finding answers in a field that is not extensively researched yet, which makes big data analyses more difficult (Edmondson & McManus, 2007). The organization that made the research setting is Tienskip, which is committed to engaging youth in democracy and society, and facilitates project days where young individuals are motivated to address local issues that they experience themselves, with the support of experts (e.g. policymakers, councilmen, or researchers) (Tienskip, 2024). As Tienskip currently expands its reach from the province of Fryslân to three additional Dutch provinces (Groningen, Overijssel, and Zuid-Holland), the establishment of robust local networks is crucial for this national expansion (Tienskip, 2024). The focus on creating enduring local networks to foster youth engagement in democracy and society proved as a well-suited case study for this research.

The research design is twofold, including seven interviews with people who are involved with Tienskip, but also two interviews with non-volunteers, and a focus group that consisted of three people who are not active within Tienskip. The research process started with interviews that have been conducted with people who are currently volunteering for Tienskip. These people had

different motivations to join such an organization, yielding interesting results. The interviews were conducted with a semi-structured design, which allowed for flexibility and structure at the same time. An interview guide (Appendix A) has been created, including questions that could direct the conversation with participants but has not been strictly followed when there was a consistent flow of information and/or interesting topics that came up in the interview. The interviews served as a basis for the second part of the research, the focus group. Motivations and/or potential barriers for volunteering that came up during the interviews informed the conversation that was hosted during the focus group session. This session has been conducted with non-volunteers, and young people who are not (yet) actively involved with Tienskip. Again, there was a document that served as a guide for the conversation, but this was only used when there was a need for deeper conversations or new topics. Next to that, two additional interviews have been conducted with people that are not active as volunteers. To get a deeper understanding of the perspective of non-volunteers, these interviews have been really helpful. The insights from people outside of the organization enriched the findings of the research greatly, as they have different perspectives on volunteering work, democracy, and youth participation. Including volunteers and non-volunteers in the research process resulted in a detailed understanding of motivations and potential barriers to volunteering to increase youth participation in democracy and society.

Participant recruitment

Interview participants (active volunteers)

In order to get a diverse perspective into different motivations of young people to volunteer for organizations that improve youth participation in democracy and society, a selection of different volunteers has been made. These volunteers have been directly contacted by the researcher

through text or by phone. The characteristics of all participants were chosen to get as much variety of demographic characteristics as possible. The youngest participant was 18 years old, and the oldest was 29 years of age. One volunteer has been selected based on their geographical location, which is not in Fryslân. The different regionality of this volunteer served as a basis for comparison between different Dutch regions, where the organization started, and one of its branches. Two volunteers with lots of experience have been interviewed, and one of them even encountered Tienskip before the COVID-19 pandemic. Another participant has been selected that took part in a project day of Tienskip, and years later decided to volunteer for the organization due to past positive experiences. The last participant started as a volunteer within the organization but became a paid part-time employee of Tienskip, which provided another unique perspective of long-term commitment and professionalization in the area of youth participation, which also helped with answering the research question. The full overview of the participant list can be found in Table 1 at the end of this section.

Focus group participants (non-volunteers)

For the focus group discussion, a variety of participants were recruited, by direct contact with the researcher. The focus group involved three participants who are currently enrolled in a Dutch university but are not active within Tienskip. These students are all between the ages of 21 and 25, which matches the age group of usual volunteers at Tienskip. One participant is a first-year bachelor's degree student from the province of Flevoland. The second participant is a third-year bachelor's student who is in the final year of the program, coming from the province of Gelderland. The last participant is a master's student from Drenthe, the Netherlands. These participants have been invited to participate in the focus group discussion and through mutual consent ended up in the discussion for this research project.

Interview participants (non-volunteers)

For the last round of interviews, two additional non-volunteers have been chosen to participate in the research. Both participants are enrolled in a vocational educational institution in Drachten, Fryslân. These interviews served as an enrichment of the already existing data, which provided a deeper understanding of the non-volunteers perspective. The participants were recruited on a project day at Tienskip, where they were asked to participate in the research project by the researcher. After learning about the study and signing the informed consent form (see Appendix B) these two participants were part of a short interview that was also semi-structured and based on the interview guide for both the interviews and the focus group (see Appendix A).

Participant number	Interview/focus group	Volunteer/non-volunteer	Years of experience	Gender (F/M/X)	Age *	Education **	Fryslân or non-frisian
01	Interview	Volunteer	0.1	F	-	RU	Non-frisian
02	Interview	Volunteer	2	F	26	UoAS	Fryslân
03	Interview	Volunteer	1	M	29	RU	Fryslân
04	Interview	Volunteer	1	M	18	UoAS	Fryslân
05	Interview	Volunteer	0.5	M	21	UoAS	Fryslân
06	Interview	Volunteer	3	F	23	UoAS	Fryslân
07	Interview	Volunteer	2	F	22	RU	Fryslân
08	Interview	Non-volunteer	0	F	23	VE	Fryslân
09	Interview	Non-volunteer	0	F	20	VE	Fryslân
11	Focus group	Non-volunteer	0	F	25	RU	Non-Frisian
12	Focus group	Non-volunteer	0	F	-	RU	Non-Frisian

Participant number	Interview/focus group	Volunteer/non-volunteer	Years of experience	Gender (F/M/X)	Age *	Education **	Fryslân or non-frisian
01	Interview	Volunteer	0.1	F	-	RU	Non-frisian
02	Interview	Volunteer	2	F	26	UoAS	Fryslân
03	Interview	Volunteer	1	M	29	RU	Fryslân
04	Interview	Volunteer	1	M	18	UoAS	Fryslân
05	Interview	Volunteer	0.5	M	21	UoAS	Fryslân
13	Focus group	Non-volunteer	0	F	-	RU	Non-Frisian

Table 1: *List of participants*

* Author's note: in the Age column; - indicates that the age of the participant is not known

** Author's note: in the Education column; RU = Research University (WO in Dutch), UoAS = University of Applied Sciences (HBO in Dutch), and VE = Vocational Education (MBO in Dutch))

Data analysis

Transcribing and coding

Data collected from both data collection methods, the interviews and focus group, have been transcribed from the recorded audio files, where anonymity has been guaranteed under the University of Groningen's ethical guidelines. The transcription has been generated using AI tools, and later corrected and improved by the researcher. After the process of transcribing, the data has been coded with a thematic analysis approach, which aims at identifying common themes in the data derived from the different interviews and focus groups. The first order codes summarized the participants' responses and comments (e.g., a statement by a participant "If you

join Tienskip as a volunteer, then it is very fun, you get a new friend group" was labeled as "fun times"). The first-order codes were then grouped into the second-order themes by identifying the source of identified factors (e.g., intrinsic or extrinsic). Then the second-order codes were aggregated into motivating and demotivating factors. In the final step, based on the motivating and demotivating factors, strategies were suggested that could increase the motivation and mitigate factors that are demotivating youth to participate. This thematic analysis pointed at the commonalities that different participants shared and yielded a detailed and comprehensive list of motivations and/or barriers for people to volunteer, shown in Table 2 below.
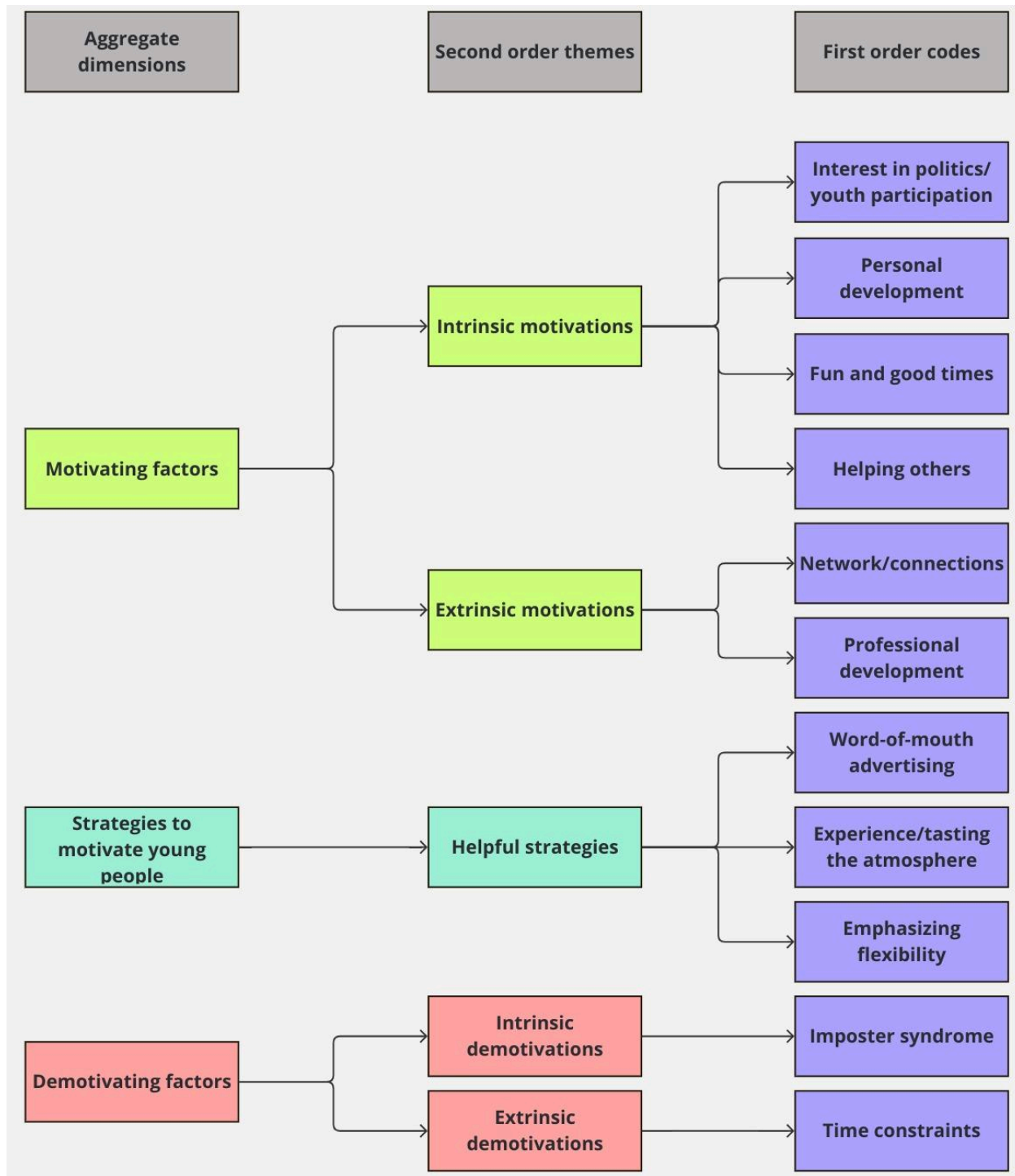
Table 2: *Coding scheme of the thematic analysis*

Findings

In the following section, the findings are detailed and provide a comprehensive overview of the factors influencing youth participation in volunteering. All the data derived from the interviews and the focus group are included in this section, complemented by quotes from participants that were translated from Dutch to English for the purpose of this research paper. The diverse perspectives of participants, including both volunteers and non-volunteers with varying educational backgrounds and experiences yielded interesting insights that were categorized based on the thematic analysis that was detailed above. As a result, the findings section is divided into three subsections, where the first findings are categorized as motivating factors for volunteering and youth participation. The second section details the demotivating factors for volunteering and youth participation, and the last section aims to explain strategies to motivate young people to participate in volunteering.

Motivating factors for volunteering and youth participation

From the interviews and the focus group, many motivational factors have been identified by the participants. These factors include intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, reflecting the diverse reasons why young people choose to engage in volunteering and democratic activities. Understanding these motivations provides critical insights into what drives youth participation and how to effectively encourage greater engagement. In the first part of the motivating factors for volunteering and youth participation, the intrinsic motivations are described, and thereafter the extrinsic factors are detailed.

Intrinsic motivations

General interest in politics and democracy

Intrinsic motivations, such as a genuine interest in politics and democracy, play a significant role in enticing youth participation and volunteering. Personal passion and curiosity about political decision-making processes can drive young individuals to get involved in volunteering initiatives surrounding politics and democracy. This has been exemplified by Participant 06, "I already had that intrinsic motivation for public administration, for politics". This inherent enthusiasm fuels their interest in becoming active in volunteering initiatives but also sustains their commitment to contributing to democratic society and public administration. Next to that, it explains their interest in becoming a volunteer for initiatives that aim at increasing youth participation in democracy and society. Through their interest in politics and democracy, young people are eager to learn more about the democratic processes and want to contribute to the good cause of increasing youth participation. They do so by joining volunteering initiatives that provide them with knowledge about the democracy and political landscape around them, while at the same time becoming an active and participative young person themselves through their volunteering efforts.

Personal development

Another factor that plays a key role in motivating youth to become active in volunteering initiatives is personal development. As Participant 02 noted, "You have the opportunity outside of your studies and work to develop yourself personally ... to put yourself in situations where you would normally never be, and that can be very valuable for your perspective on the world", indicating that such experiences offer unique opportunities for growth and learning beyond conventional environments. Stepping outside of their comfort zone means that they challenge

themselves to learn something new and develop themselves personally. Young people grow more confident in their abilities when different or even difficult situations present themselves, as they have more experience in dealing with such circumstances outside of their school or work environment. This also comes from learning how to engage with other young people, when that is not necessarily something they do on a daily basis, but can be a helpful skill in their lives. Therefore, personal development has been identified as a valuable factor in influencing young people to become active in volunteering.

Fun and good times

Participant 07 highlighted the role of fun and friends as a motivating factor for volunteering, "If you join Tienskip as a volunteer, then it is very fun, you get a new friend group". This feeling emphasizes the importance of social connections and enjoyable experiences in attracting and keeping youth volunteers, as they seek to have fun while undertaking any type of activity. They want to have meaningful experiences and opportunities for social interaction and fun, which can be provided for by NGOs or other organizations that are involved with volunteering activities. The current volunteers reflected on their positive experiences with Tienskip and expressed that fun and good times were always present, even in stressful situations or on difficult days. This adds to the importance of having fun when attracting new volunteers and encouraging young people to become active.

Helping others

The significance of helping others as a motivating factor for volunteering has been emphasized by Participant 05, stating "If you help out, you can make sure that someone can develop themselves later." This perspective highlights the altruistic aspect of youth participation and

volunteering, where young people are driven by a desire to contribute to the growth and well-being of others, which fosters a sense of fulfillment and purpose in their volunteer efforts. Helping others is especially important to them when it comes to guiding other young people on their path to becoming active citizens. They act as a guide into the political landscape, democracy, and society, explaining the workings of different institutions and their role in them. They feel the intrinsic motivation to add to someone else's development and their becoming of an engaged young person, which is a valuable characteristic to have when volunteering. Thus, the intrinsic motivation of helping others proves to be a solid foundation for youth's efforts in volunteering initiatives.

Extrinsic motivations

Network/connections

Extrinsic motivations are also part of the motivating factors that influence young people in their reasons for becoming active and engaged. Participant 04 emphasized the role of networking and building connections as a motivation for volunteering, noting, "You can make really nice ties with others, so you also get connections out of it.". This perspective highlights how youth may be incentivized to participate in volunteering activities to expand their social and professional networks. Becoming a part of a network full of experts and other enthusiasts can be super beneficial for young people in their future careers, especially when making meaningful connections with them. Most youth are at the start of their professional life, which makes the creation of a helpful network crucial for their further careers. Leveraging the opportunity to form valuable relationships that may benefit them in their personal and professional careers beyond the volunteering context can thus be a solid motivation for volunteering.

Professional development (skills, CV building)

Professional development, particularly in terms of skills enhancement and CV building, serves as another extrinsic motivation for volunteering among young people. Youth may view volunteering experiences as opportunities to acquire valuable skills and enhance their resumes. They can showcase their dedication, teamwork, and leadership abilities through their volunteering experience and add it to their personal CV. Participant 05 highlighted this aspect, stating, "What it gives you in the professional area, for example for your CV.". This adds to the notion that youth are focused not only on the short term but also on investing in their futures. The acquisition of skills, such as collaboration, project management, and adaptability/flexibility, all add to the organizational skills needed for any job in the future. Having the possibility to develop these skills in a voluntary setting provides a great opportunity for young people who are eager to invest in their professional development while keeping their autonomy. The professional development factor thus extrinsically motivates youth to participate in volunteering initiatives and become active as it helps them for future jobs and their careers.

Demotivating factors for volunteering and youth participation

In addition to the motivating factors for volunteering and youth participation, demotivators have also been identified during the research. These have been divided into intrinsic and extrinsic demotivating factors again, providing a clear overview of participant's experiences and beliefs. Understanding the reasons why young people might not participate in volunteering initiatives is crucial to youth participation. This can serve as a basis for interventions that can alleviate these demotivators, potentially increasing the willingness of youth to participate and volunteer. In the

first section, the demotivating factor of the imposter syndrome is detailed, and later, the extrinsic demotivation of time constraints is explained.

Intrinsic demotivations

Imposter syndrome (fear of failure)

Firstly, the intrinsic demotivating factor of imposter syndrome, or a fear of failure, has been identified. Participant 12 expressed experiencing imposter syndrome stating, "I have never really done anything like that before, so then it is more like, am I the right person? I think that that for me is more of an obstacle, ..., am I the right person for that. I think that that would mostly be the doubt.". This sentiment reflects a fear of failure and self-doubt, which may hinder youth from participating by undermining their confidence in their abilities. It makes them doubt whether their contribution is effective, decreasing the likelihood of them becoming active participants. This creates a barrier to exploring new opportunities for personal growth and community involvement, as it makes youth reluctant to participate in volunteer activities. The self-doubt that young people might experience when considering participating in democracy and society can become a detrimental obstacle to youth participation. Therefore, the experience of the imposter syndrome is a significant factor that intrinsically demotivates youth from volunteering and participation in general.

Extrinsic demotivations

Time constraints

Young people can also be extrinsically demotivated for youth participation, as Participant 11 highlighted time constraints as a demotivating factor for their engagement, acknowledging, "I think that as young people we are very busy, or at least, you feel very busy. So then I think, you

also need to make time for it.". This perspective explains the challenge of balancing multiple commitments and responsibilities, making it difficult for young people to prioritize volunteer activities while keeping up with their busy schedules. Participants expressed that their efforts to balance their schedules prove difficult, as they often go to school, have a side job, want to spend time with their friends and family and need time for themselves. Adding another potentially time-consuming activity to that, volunteering, can be seen as an obstacle for them. Prioritizing their time division might thus result in not being able to volunteer as it proves to be unfit for their schedules. Time constraints may thus deter youth from engaging in volunteering, despite their potential interest and willingness to contribute, which is why this serves as another demotivating factor for young people.

Strategies to motivate young people to participate in volunteering

In this section, strategies to motivate young people to participate in volunteering are described. The strategies in this section are all derived from the interviews and the focus group with the research participants, meaning that they expressed their viewpoints on what strategies might be best for motivating other young people. These strategies could potentially alleviate the obstacles or demotivating factors that were detailed above, which is why these findings are crucial to deepen our understanding of youth engagement.

Word-of-mouth (stories of existing volunteers)

The first strategy that can help motivate young people is word-of-mouth advertising, as highlighted by Participant 09, "Telling about it enthusiastically, and sharing your own experiences I think, how you like it. To maybe motivate like I really enjoy doing it, maybe it might be nice for you as well.". This approach involves using the enthusiasm and positive

experiences of existing volunteers to inspire and encourage others to get involved. By sharing personal stories and insights, volunteers can effectively communicate the value and rewards of volunteering, thus potentially enticing more young individuals to participate. This shows that the best sellers of a volunteering initiative are the people who are already involved and enjoy being with that specific organization. Most of the volunteers who were interviewed for this research have also been recruited by pre-existing volunteers who shared great stories about their experiences and the potential benefits it might bring them. The enthusiasm of the pre-existing volunteers has led to the participants becoming active in the organization and dedicating themselves to increasing youth participation in democracy and society. The word-of-mouth strategy has proven to be very effective for the recruitment of volunteers for Tienskip and thus might be a helpful strategy for other volunteering initiatives as well. This strategy can also help in combating the imposter syndrome among non-volunteers who have a fear of failure. Emphasizing that current volunteers have also started without any skills or knowledge and sharing their stories of how they became experienced volunteers with new skills, can shed some light on the process that occurred during the volunteering activities. It might be difficult for youth to see beyond the experience of existing volunteers, so sharing their stories might be beneficial in painting the full picture of the progress that can be made when participating in volunteering initiatives. Therefore, word-of-mouth can be an effective strategy for overcoming the obstacles that young people might face when considering volunteering, potentially increasing the number of volunteers and thus youth participation in general.

Experiencing/tasting the atmosphere

Experiencing or tasting the atmosphere of volunteering can be a powerful strategy to motivate young people to participate as well. By offering opportunities for young individuals to engage in

volunteer activities on a trial basis, they can gain firsthand experience of the positive atmosphere and sense of fulfillment that volunteering provides. This firsthand experience can inspire them to further involvement and commitment to the organization. Participant 01 highlighted this approach, stating, "That in an accessible way you can just help out once, and if you like it that you can then continue.". The fact that you are not committed to the organization when being there for the first time and seeing whether or not volunteering is something for you, can help lower the threshold for youth to volunteer. Tasting the atmosphere and experiencing the positive vibe among other volunteers and sensing that the volunteering activities make a difference can entice young people to engage themselves in these activities. This strategy can also be used to decrease the fear of failure or imposter syndrome when youth consider volunteering. The firsthand experience of volunteering through a trial day can increase their realization of their abilities and that they are well fit for the task. Allowing them to participate on a trial basis can help alleviate fears and uncertainties, making the idea of volunteering more approachable and less intimidating. Young people often tend to degrade themselves compared to their older peers but are perfectly capable of fulfilling the same tasks as others. Experiencing that they are capable of volunteering can be instrumental in removing the barrier of the imposter syndrome that young people experience and their fear of failure might be proven irrelevant. Therefore, experiencing or tasting the atmosphere of volunteering through a trial day of some sort might lead to more volunteers and thus more youth participation.

Emphasizing flexibility

The last strategy mentioned by participants that can help motivate young people is to emphasize flexibility. Enabling young people to be flexible with their efforts, and allocating more or less of their time to volunteering work whenever needed is very beneficial. This has been brought

forward by Participant 11, stating "That it's emphasized that you can participate in your own way. Maybe with certain rules yes, but still free and flexible". The flexibility of volunteering is crucial in recruiting new volunteers, especially when they are busy individuals with crowded schedules. A demanding volunteering job might be a big obstacle for young people when they do not get a financial reward for it, which is why flexibility is key. This strategy can be employed to decrease the demotivating factor of time constraints, as it proves that the time efforts needed can be very flexible. Volunteers at Tienskip are free to allocate as much or as little time to the organization as they want and can, which makes it a flexible volunteering initiative. Time constraints can be detrimental to recruiting new volunteers, but when the flexibility of time efforts is emphasized this detriment can be countered. The emphasis on flexibility and the freedom volunteers have when committing themselves to an organization proves to be a very suitable tool for recruiting new volunteers. It lowers the barrier of time constraints that are often experienced by young people and thus can yield new volunteers to join the organization, therefore increasing youth participation.

Discussion

In the following section, the theoretical contributions and practical implications of this research are described. The limitations of this research and suggestions for future research are also included in this section. The theoretical contributions are related to the research question: "How can we motivate youth to become volunteers for NGOs aimed at increasing youth participation in democracy and society?". This research aimed to identify motivations and demotivations for youth to participate in volunteering activities, as youth participation is becoming increasingly important in current political affairs and global crises (e.g. climate change). Policymakers tend to

acknowledge the importance of including young people in decision-making, but tools for youth participation are not optimized (El Zoghbi, 2017). Young people tend to feel dissatisfied or alienated from the political system, which results in a lack of youth that participates (Sloam, 2007). Volunteering initiatives can increase youth participation in democracy and society, which is why sustaining these initiatives is crucial (Dickson-Hoyle et al., 2018). Attracting new volunteers to these organizations is necessary to continue their efforts, and thus this research focused on finding the answer to the research question. The theoretical contributions and practical implications of this research are described first in the following section, whereafter the limitations and recommendations for future research are detailed.

Theoretical contributions

The theoretical contribution of the research lies in its exploration of the diverse perspectives and factors influencing youth participation in volunteering. Through a variety of participants, including volunteers and non-volunteers with different educational backgrounds and life experiences, the study provided insights that are applicable across various groups. This research adds the perspective of volunteering work as a way for young people to participate, which is a unique addition to the literature. Time constraints emerged as a new factor that can demotivate young people to volunteer. This factor has been previously overlooked, which is likely due to the association of volunteering and youth participation in the research context. The demotivation of time constraints can be overcome by emphasizing the flexibility of volunteering initiatives, which adds to the significance of this research as it provides a strategy to overcome the barriers that were identified in the research. Imposter syndrome also emerged as a significant barrier, reflecting a lack of confidence in one's abilities and fear of failure. This psychological hurdle

hinders young people from believing in their capacity to contribute effectively. Their lack of skills or perceived lack of skills is also reflected in the literature on youth participation, emphasizing that this is a serious barrier to youth participation and engagement. A strategy to alleviate this barrier has been provided as well, which is to have new volunteers experience or taste the atmosphere of the organization. This can help to boost their confidence and realize that they are capable of fulfilling any task and potentially decrease their experience of imposter syndrome or their fear of failure (Checkoway, 2011). Next to that, this research revealed that most demotivating factors stemmed from either external circumstances, such as time constraints, or internal factors, such as self-doubt and lack of trust in one's abilities. Interestingly, there was no indication of apathy or disinterest among participants; rather, demotivation stemmed primarily from how individuals perceived themselves and their capabilities, either personal or practical. This highlights the importance of addressing self-esteem and confidence issues in efforts to enhance youth participation in volunteering, but also to highlight the flexibility in time spent on volunteering. By understanding and addressing these underlying barriers, improvements can be made through strategies like emphasizing flexibility, word-of-mouth advertising or sharing of stories by existing volunteers, and experiencing the atmosphere of the organization. This can empower young people and encourage their active engagement and participation in volunteering initiatives, but most of all in politics, society, and democracy.

Practical implications

The practical importance of the research lies in that it gives a comprehensive overview of motivations for young people to become active as volunteers in youth participation initiatives. This is important for NGOs that aim to increase youth participation in democracy and society,

and especially for the organization that provided the research setting for this study, namely Tienskip. Understanding the motivations of young people to become part of a volunteering organization can help in the recruitment of new volunteers, as well as provide appreciation for the efforts of current volunteers. It also serves as an inspiration for alleviating the barriers or demotivating factors that were expressed in the research. Barriers to participation such as the imposter syndrome or time constraints were identified as the main obstacles for young people. This means that youth can experience a fear of failure when considering joining a volunteering initiative, as well as needing to find the time in their busy schedules. Lowering the threshold for participation is instrumental in finding new volunteers and committing them for a longer time, creating a sustainable and long-lasting local network of volunteers. This research provides helpful strategies for mitigating the potential barriers or demotivating factors that can influence youth participation, such as emphasizing flexibility, word-of-mouth advertising or sharing of stories by existing volunteers, and experiencing the atmosphere of the organization. NGOs that are looking for new volunteers can employ these strategies to recruit more young people to join their mission, which serves as a great contribution to their organizations. Recruiting new volunteers is always on the agenda for Tienskip, which becomes increasingly important with their intended expansion throughout the whole of the Netherlands. Therefore, the research is highly beneficial and has a valuable impact on the practical aspect of youth participation and provides tools to motivate young people to actively participate.

Limitations of the research

Participant bias

A potential limitation of the study could be participant bias resulting from the familiarity of some participants with the researcher. Participants may have been influenced by a desire to provide socially desirable responses or to please the researcher, potentially skewing their perspectives or minimizing the disclosure of negative experiences. Additionally, their familiarity with the researcher may have created a sense of comfort, leading to less critical reflection or reluctance to express opposing viewpoints. The effect of participant bias has been minimized by also including non-familiar participants in the research, but these are still a small group (two participants out of a total of twelve).

Number of participants

Another limitation of this study is the relatively low number of participants, considering that there were only 12 people involved in the research. The limited participant involvement is mainly due to the time constraints of the research, as it was developed over a period of two months. Increasing the number of participants would have significantly contributed to the time invested in transcribing and coding the interviews, which was simply impossible to achieve before the deadline of this paper when more people would have been included. However, this would have given a more comprehensive and detailed understanding of young people's viewpoints, thus yielding an even more valuable research paper, and is therefore considered a limitation of this research.

Recommendations for future research

The first recommendation for future research would be to address one limitation of this study by increasing the number of participants. This could potentially shed light on new insights that have not been discovered in the interviews that were conducted for this research. All the participants were Dutch, but a larger and different pool of participants, perhaps from other countries, could also yield additional interesting findings. Another recommendation for future research could be to conduct a longitudinal study to explore the long-term effects of youth participation in volunteering on their democratic/political engagement and personal development. By tracking the participants over an extended period, researchers can gain insights into the sustainability of volunteer involvement and its impact on participants' attitudes, behaviors, and outcomes over time. This longitudinal approach would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the enduring effects of volunteering and youth participation and inform the further development of initiatives aimed at promoting sustained engagement among young people. Similarly, these techniques could be combined to develop a study of a more quantitative nature with more participants in a longer time frame. This could provide more insights into the prevalence of certain motivating or demotivating factors among certain young people and their demographics/characteristics. Lastly, the research that has been presented in this paper provides three strategies that can help motivate youth to participate in volunteering activities that are aimed at increasing youth engagement in democracy and society. One avenue of further research could be to implement the different strategies; word-of-mouth advertising, experience/tasting the atmosphere, and emphasizing flexibility. Implementing these strategies can reveal the true effectiveness of the strategies that were proposed by participants of this study, which can provide helpful insights into what might or might not work when motivating youth.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research has shed light on the various factors influencing youth participation in volunteering, providing valuable insights into both motivators and barriers. Through diverse participant perspectives, including volunteers and non-volunteers with varying backgrounds and experiences, the study explained the complexity of youth engagement in democracy and society. The main findings underscore the importance of addressing internal barriers such as imposter syndrome as well as external constraints like time constraints to effectively promote youth involvement in volunteering. Moving forward, initiatives should focus on empowering young people in their own right, fostering a sense of confidence and belonging, and providing accessible opportunities for meaningful engagement across every layer of democracy and society. Emphasizing flexibility in volunteer opportunities can help accommodate the busy schedules of young people, making it easier for them to commit to volunteering activities. Additionally, word-of-mouth advertising or sharing of stories by existing volunteers can create a more relatable and inspiring narrative, encouraging others to get involved. Experiencing the atmosphere of the organization can also be highly effective in enticing youth to participate in volunteering activities. These are all strategies that can be employed by organizations to lower the barrier for young people to participate in volunteering initiatives. By understanding and addressing these factors, organizations can foster a more active and engaged generation of citizens, committed to shaping a better future for their communities and society as a whole. This approach can also contribute to sustainable youth participation development, which is crucial for addressing current political and social challenges. Engaging young people not only benefits themselves but also strengthens the democratic values of society, ensuring that diverse voices

and perspectives are included in the decision-making processes that shape our world, now and in the future.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Interview guide

Introductory questions
- How old are you?
- Where are you from?
- What level of education have you attained/are you currently pursuing?
- What field of study have you completed/are you currently pursuing?

Tienskip questions
- When did you first come into contact with Tienskip?
- When did you decide to become active with Tienskip?
    - Why did you decide to do so?
- What was your role when you started at Tienskip?
    - How much time on average did you spend per week on Tienskip?
- Has that role changed from the beginning compared to the present?
    - Has there been any change in the time you spend on Tienskip?
- Would you like to take on another role within Tienskip in the future?
    - Why/why not?

Motivation questions
- What was the reason for you to become active in Tienskip?
    - Were there things that made you want to become active or not?
    - Were there any obstacles for you to get involved?
- What do you experience as the biggest advantage of your activity at Tienskip?
- What do you experience as the biggest disadvantage of your activity at Tienskip?
- What do you think Tienskip has brought you?
- What do you think Tienskip can still bring you in the future?
- Would you recommend other young people to become active at Tienskip?
    - Why/why not?
- How would you promote Tienskip to young people when recruiting new volunteers?

Focus group guiding questions
- Who should be representing the youth?
- Would you see yourselves as the ones representing the youth?
    - Why/why not?
- What would stimulate you to engage yourselves?

- Would there be some benefits of engagement for you/your friends/your surroundings?
- What would you see as an obstacle to becoming engaged?
    - Could those obstacles be removed in some way?
- Would you recommend other young people to become active at Tienskip?
    - Why/why not?

Appendix B

Informed consent form

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Title of the study: *Increasing youth participation in democracy and society*

Name participant:

Assessment
- I have read the information sheet and was able to ask any additional questions to the researcher.
- I understand I may ask questions about the study at any time.
- I understand I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason.
- I understand that at any time I can refuse to answer any question without any consequences.
- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.

Confidentiality and data use
- I understand that none of my individual information will be disclosed to anyone outside the study team and my name will not be published.
- I understand that the information provided will be used only for this research and publications directly related to this research project.
- I understand that data (consent forms, recordings, interview transcripts) will be retained on the Y-drive of the University of Groningen server for 5 years, in correspondence with the university GDPR legislation.

Future involvement
- I wish to receive a copy of the scientific output of the project.
- I consent to be re-contacted to participate in future studies.

Having read and understood all the above, I agree to participate in the research study: YES / NO

Date

Signature

To be filled in by the researcher
- I declare that I have thoroughly informed the research participant about the research study and answered any remaining questions to the best of my knowledge.
- I agree that this person participates in the research study.

Date

Signature