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Terhi Tuukkanen

A Framework for Children's Participation in Online Environments

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ABSTRACT

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Online environments are an essential part of children's everyday lives today. The purpose of this study is to increase parents', teachers', educators' and decision-makers' knowledge about children's use of online environments and the opportunities and risks in them. The objective of the study is to develop a framework for children's online participation by exploring different dimensions of children's participation in online environments. These dimensions are the reasons, practices and perceived effects of children's online participation. The study is multidisciplinary in nature and its basis is in social childhood studies.

The empirical part of the study was conducted in 2010–2012 in Finland. The study was conducted in four phases. The first research question, "what are the reasons for children's participation?", was answered by exploring the online discussion of the members of the Finnish Children's Parliament. Altogether 61 children participated in the discussion, with 566 postings. The second research question, "what are the practices of children's online participation?", was answered by conducting a survey which had 126 participants. Moreover, a deeper understanding of the practices was achieved by conducting interviews with 21 children aged 11 to 15. The third research question, "what are the perceived effects of children's online participation?", was answered by conducting and analyzing interviews with 13 children aged 11 to 13, and with 7 parents and 7 teachers. Content analysis was used as an analysis method.

According to the results of the study, children participate in online environments mainly to socialize with others. In the online discussion, the members of the Finnish Children's Parliament also showed a willingness to participate in and influence global issues, such as children's well-being in poor countries. In virtual worlds, children play, create virtual persona, communicate with others, perform commercial activities, express themselves, participate in community activities and organize activities. Children, parents and teachers perceived many positive and negative effects in online environments that can be seen as opportunities and risks. The perceived effects included learning and socialization, a sense of community and empowerment, antisocial behavior and the threat to security.

Keywords: children, participation, online environments, framework.

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Producing a dissertation could be compared to a long-lasting sport performance. There are different phases, such as the starting phase when one throws one's self into the work with enthusiasm, the middle phase for steady work, and the final phase which is climaxed when one crosses the finishing line. Although it feels good to reach the finishing line, the most important part is the journey itself. As my own dissertation journey is now coming to an end, it is time to thank all those people who have participated in my journey.

First, I would like to thank all those children, parents and teachers who participated in my study. My study would have been unfeasible without you. The participants' interest in my study, and especially the children's eagerness to talk about their use of online environments, encouraged me to carry on. Secondly, it would have been impossible to do the study without funding. My study was funded by the Finnish Cultural Foundation and the Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy, University of Jyväskylä. Thanks go to my sponsors.

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At the end of my journey, there were some important people who made it possible for me to cross the finishing line. I would like to thank Atte Oksanen and David Oswell for reviewing my thesis. Special thanks also go to Atte Oksanen for being my opponent.

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and research environment

Online environments are an essential part of children's everyday lives today. According to studies, more than 90 percent of children and young people aged 9–17 in America and Europe use the internet, and most of them go online every day or almost every day (Madden, Lenhart, Duggan et al., 2013; Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig et al., 2011). In Finland, the number of daily users is even higher: 79% of Finnish children use the internet daily (Haddon & Livingstone, 2012). Finland ranks among the top countries with Denmark, the Netherlands, Estonia and the United Kingdom when the number of children in online environments is examined in Europe (Livingstone & Haddon, 2009). Studies have been made about the number of internet users since the early days of the internet (e.g. Internet World Stats, 2012), but less remains known about the activities that children perform in online environments. The media conveys a certain kind of picture of the positive and negative sides of online environments, but not much scientific research is available on the topic. More research is needed especially about children's online activities, and how they do or may reap the benefits (Ólafsson, Livingstone & Haddon, 2013). The purpose of this study is to fill in this gap by exploring online environments as arenas for children's participation.

The study was conducted in Finland, which is one of the leading countries in Europe when the current techno-scientific state and level of development is measured (Lehtoranta, Ahlqvist, Loikkanen et al., 2010). The challenge in the Finnish information society is, however, that stagnation has been noticed in its development (Lehtoranta et al., 2010). There are problems particularly in terms of information and communications technology (ICT) exploitation, which has been a challenge in schools, for example. ICT is not extensively used in schools, although it is an essential part of children's everyday lives in their free time (Key Data on Learning and Innovation through ICT at School in Europe 2011, 2011). One reason for not using ICT is the lack of teachers' knowledge: they

have sufficient technical skills but not enough information about how to utilize ICT in teaching (CICERO Learning selvitysraportti, 2008). Thus, there is a need to increase teachers' and other educators' understanding about children's use of online environments and, thus, enhance safe use of online environments in education. The discussion about using online environments in schools is especially topical today as the Finnish National Board of Education is reforming the national core curriculum.

The third reason to study children's online participation is to explore the potential of online environments for their participation. Online environments have challenged the traditional ways of participation (Lappalainen, 2008), because today people meet each other and experience a sense of community in the internet more often than before (Noveck, 2006; Meyers, 2009). In particular, the development of technology has increased the potential of using online environments. Today, online environments refer not only to simple, text-based websites but also to game-based 3D virtual worlds and solutions of social media, such as Facebook, Youtube or blogs. In online environments, children build their identity, for example, by consuming or writing their own blogs (Noveck, 2006). Children and young people have been seen at the leading edge of this development, and in many children's lives, traditional forms of participation, such as participation in organizations, have been replaced by online participation (Loader, 2007; Siisiäinen & Kankainen, 2009). Hence, there is a need to increase adults' and especially decision-makers' understanding about the possibilities of children's online participation and thus enhance children's possibilities to be heard. In order to ensure children's safety and to prevent harm, more information is also needed about the risks related to children's online participation.

In this study, children's use of online environments is explored particularly from the viewpoint of participation. The research on children's participation originates from social and pedagogical childhood studies which have focused more systematically on questions related to children's agency, participation and citizenship since the 1980s (Alanen, 2010). In the political field, the concept of children's participation became familiar in the late 1980s when the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child[1] was published. The Convention emphasizes children's agency by stating that children are entitled to participate in all matters concerning their own lives. From the viewpoint of online environments, children's participation has been less explored. The extensive EU Kids Online study explored children's use of online environments mainly from the viewpoint of risks (Livingstone & Haddon, 2009) but, as Kafai (2010) states, too little is still known about how children participate and act in online environments. Another problem is that there is no simple definition for the concept of participation from the viewpoint of online environments. Therefore, this study starts by defining the concepts. The aim is to explore first

[1] The Convention is available at http://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=IV-11&chapter=4&lang=en (accessed 9 October 2013).

the reasons for children's participation and, secondly, the practices of children's online participation.

The increased use of online environments has motivated researchers to examine the effects, too. According to the studies, there are many social effects of using online environments; children, for example, make new friends (Meyers, 2009). On the other hand, there are also negative experiences in online environments, as children face much harm, such as pornography, violent content and propositions to meet from people whom they do not know (Livingstone, Kirwil, Ponte et al., 2013). When exploring the effects of using online environments, there are many aspects that have to be noticed, such as the stereotypes conveyed by the media and the differences between the attitudes of different groups. According to Herring (2008), for example, the news reports of terrible things that have happened to young internet users occasionally gives rise to 'moral panic', and online environments are presented as a threat to societal values. On the other hand, children and young people themselves typically oppose any moral panic (Cohen, 1972). The reason for the different kinds of viewpoints may be in people's own experiences about online environments. Many adults may not have as much experience of online environments as children have today.

Up to now, not many studies focus on adults' attitudes towards children's use of online environments. It would be important, however, to examine parents' and teachers' viewpoints, because they have an important role in the development of children's relation to online environments. The "Productive and Inventive Finland – Digital Agenda for 2011–2020" report (2011), for example, emphasizes parents', teachers' and other educators' ICT- and media education skills as a prerequisite for children and young people to be able to act in a digital environment. Hence, the third aim of this study is to examine children's, parents' and teachers' experiences and viewpoints about the effects of children's online participation on children's everyday lives.

1.2 Research questions and dissertation structure

The objective of this study is to develop a framework for children's online participation. The framework is created by exploring different dimensions of children's participation in online environments. These dimensions are reasons, practices and perceived effects of children's online participation. The study is empirical by nature, and it focuses especially on children's own viewpoints and experiences. Moreover, teacher's and parents' points of view are examined. The study is located in the field of social and pedagogical childhood studies. Thus, the background of the study is based on a broader discussion about childhood and children's role in society. The main research questions are as follows:

- What are the reasons for children's participation?

- What are the practices of children’s online participation?
- What are the perceived effects of children’s online participation on children’s everyday lives?

The dissertation consists of four articles and an introductory section. The introductory section starts with a presentation on the theoretical background of the study. The second chapter contains explorations of all the important concepts in this study, such as “life world”, “agency and structure”, “children’s participation” and “online environments”. Moreover, based on the analysis of the previous research literature, the framework for children’s online participation is developed. This framework, the theoretical synthesis, worked as a basis for the empirical part of the study. In chapter three, research questions, data and methods as well as ethical issues are discussed. The fourth chapter contains the results of the study and the framework that was further developed based on the results of this study. Chapter five consists of the discussion about the reasons for, practices and perceived effects of children’s online participation. Finally, chapter six concludes the study by presenting theoretical and practical implications as well as the limitations of this study and recommendations for further research.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is multidisciplinary by nature. It covers the fields of sociology, social and educational sciences, and touches on information technology as well. Particularly, the study focuses on online environments, which are a very important sector of children's life world today. In this chapter, the background of the study is presented. First, the focus is on life world perspective as a basis for studying children's lives, including discussions on agency and structure. After that, the focus is on the multidimensional concept of participation and the different kinds of argumentation about it. Thirdly, children's online participation, its forms, opportunities and risks are examined. The last sub-chapter concludes the theoretical foundation by establishing the theoretical framework which worked as a basis for the empirical study.

2.1 Life world perspective as a basis for studying children's participation

Life world is a concept used in social sciences to present and analyze the everyday life of people. The roots of the concept derive from the 1930s when the concept was first introduced by Husserl (1970), lately known as the father of phenomenology. After that, the meaning of the concept has been discussed, for example, by Schutz and Luckmann (1973) and Habermas (1987). Their notions of the life world are very similar in the sense that they all emphasize the life world as an arena for our actions and interactions. It is not a stable and constant state but ”a reality which we modify through our acts and which, on the other hand, modifies our action” (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, 6). The life world is also an intersubjective reality. According to Habermas (1987), it means the intersubjective understanding and the ‘place’ where communicative action takes place. Baxter (1987, 46) states that the phenomenological tradition has conceived of the life world as the “horizon within which individuals seek to

realize their projected ends." Schutz and Luckmann (1973) also argue that it is something to be mastered according to one's particular interests.

2.1.1 Definitions of children's life world

Children's everyday lives has been studied in many studies from different viewpoints, such as gender (Morrow, 2006), technology (Plowman, 2013), food and identity (James, Kjorholt & Tingstad, 2009). Although there are many studies concerning children's everyday lives, the concept of life world is not used in any of these studies. In fact, only one study was found that briefly explores the concept of life world from the point of view of children (see Jans, 2004). Life world could be, however, a useful concept with which to study children's everyday lives, because, as Jans (2004, 31) states, the perspective "seems to open more possibilities for linking childhood and active citizenship in a meaningful way." In this study, children's life world is examined from the viewpoint of online environments. It is considered as a context for children's participation.

One way to examine children's life world is to identify systems that describe the environment of children's development and everyday lives. Bronfenbrenner (1979) writes about micro-, meso-, exo- and macrosystems which represent the contextual nature of a person's life (Figure 1). The systems are described in Article 1. According to Jensen (2004), these systems are not stable but are, instead, open to social changes and influences. At a macro level, for example, there are underlying forces, such as globalization, internationalization, marketization, individualization and changes in gender systems. Furthermore, at a meso level, welfare policies and family institutions assume new forms and figurations which, at a micro level, are likely to be mirrored in children's everyday lives (Jensen, 2004).

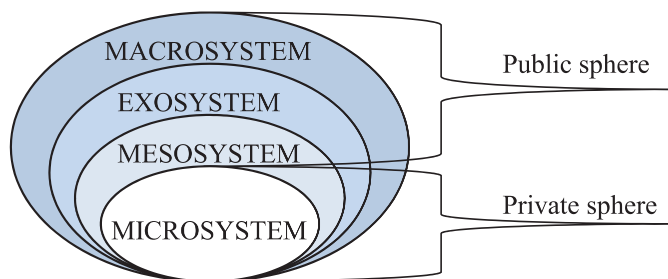

FIGURE 1 Children's life world based on the ecological model of children's development (see Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Another way to explore children's life world is to divide it into private and public spheres. Habermas (1987) explores public and private spheres as components of the life world that communicate with the systems of economy and state (see also Baxter, 1987). The public sphere refers to objects connected to

the activity of the state and to a realm of our social life in which public opinion can be formed, whereas the private sphere consists of family and home, for example (Habermas, Lennox & Lennox, 1974). According to Arendt (1998, 7), the public sphere is another side of "our privately owned place." From Bronfenbrenner's (1979) point of view, the private sphere consists thus of a microsystem, whereas the public sphere refers to the other systems (Figure 1).

Children have historically been located in the private sphere of the home and family (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998). Later, however, the boundaries between private and public spheres have been blurred as children's lives within the 'private' realm of the family are increasingly being shaped by social forces (Cockburn, 2005; Vandenbroeck, Roets & Snoeck, 2009). Political action, that has traditionally also been perceived as public, is becoming more individual and personal as new arenas of participation, such as online environments, provide public spheres for all citizens to engage in civic and political activities (Rinne, 2008; Cockburn, 2005). According to Buckingham (2000), children have acquired a new status within the private sphere of consumption. Children who spend money in virtual worlds by sitting in front of the computer at home are an example of this phenomenon.

The discussion about children's life world, and the public and private spheres in it, is essential in terms of children's agency and participation. Children have different scope for action in different spheres of their life world, and often their opportunities to act vary according to a situation. Thus, it would be too simple to say that all children are capable actors and participants in a particular sphere or system of their life world. Moreover, although children may have more opportunities to act in the public sphere today, it does not make them more capable actors as such.

There has also been discussion about the role of the public sphere generally in children's lives and about the extent to which it should be a part of children's lives (see Buckingham, 2000). It has been considered problematic that children are hardly aware that they themselves need to form such a public, freedom of speech and expression (Cockburn, 2005). Based on these discussions, the viewpoint that the everyday worlds of children are 'public' and that they should be seen as ′political′ has become more common in the field of childhood studies (Buckingham, 2000). The basic idea in childhood studies is that political in its traditional sense does not even belong to children's lives: instead, children have their own issues and ways of participation that are as valuable as adults' ones (e.g. Hart, 2009; Buckingham, 2000). This viewpoint will be discussed in the following chapters.

2.1.2 Agency and structure in children's life world

Agency and structure are basic concepts that form a core debate in sociology. They are essential concepts from the viewpoint of children's participation. Despite the broad conversation about these concepts, they have no simple or generally accepted definitions. There are many perspectives, for example, on agency: it can be seen as a fundamental ontology of the human being or as

something that is constructed in social interaction. Moreover, there are concepts such as tactical, discursive, material, heterogeneous, distributed and situated agency (Oswell, 2013). One way to define agency is to see it as an intentional action that an individual either does or does not do (Giddens, 1984). Thus, it means the activities for which the individual is "guilty", in the sense that he or she could have acted in a different way as well (Giddens, 1984). According to Oswell (2013) too, "agency, at some basic level, refers to the capacity to do things". On the other hand, Giddens' definition has been criticized as it is said to overemphasize the capacity of individual agents (Oswell, 2013).

Another way to define agency is to consider it as the resources that people have in different situations and the use of those resources (Lehtinen, 2000). The resources can be human resources, such as knowledge and skills, cultural resources, such as possessions and roles in play, and social resources, such as popularity and position in a group (Lehtinen, 2000). Furthermore, agency can be seen as competence, which is constructed in social activities and which is a culturally variable construction (Prout & James, 1997; Alanen, 2009; Lehtinen, 2000). In this study, children's agency is considered as a combination of all these definitions. Children's agency is seen as an individual's capacity to do things but also as resources generated through social relations.

Structures are closely attached to action because they limit and determine but also enable and direct people's action. An individual as an agent adopts, carries and reproduces but also utilizes structures (Giddens, 1984). From the viewpoint of children, the structures refer to structural conditions that enable and prevent children's agency (Kiili, 2006). These structural factors may produce inequality and restrict children's opportunities and choices to participate (Williams, Popey & Oakley, 1999). One example of a factor that limits children's agency is, according to Alanen (2009), the spaces that adults have created for children and which have institutionalized childhood. Children are sent by their parents to day care centers and schools; these are institutions which are decided on by their parents and which are thought to be justified by children's needs, hopes, experiences and interests, which are believed to be uniform. "Good childhood is standardized and it is known what children need and when and from whom they need it" (Alanen, 2009, 14).

The essence of children's agency is thus based on the relation between children and adults (James et al., 1998). On the one hand, children are seen as dependent on adults and institutions created by the adults and, thus, as targets of education and protection (Lansdown, 1994; Alanen, 2009). On the other hand, children are considered active agents who play a part in society's processes (e.g. Alanen, 1992; Prout & James, 1997; Hutchby & Moran-Ellis, 1998; Lehtinen, 2000; Kiili, 2006). Instead of seeing children merely as passive agents who grow up, develop and who are socialized into the world where adults choose the information and skills that are taught to children, children and adults are seen as being equal in this discourse. Childhood is not merely seen as a phase of preparing oneself for society, but as a valuable phase of life (Prout & James, 1997). Children themselves actively construct their own lives and life world and

thus participate in creating the environment as well (Alanen, 2001; Lehtinen, 2009).

Although children are seen as active agents in a society, the viewpoint should not blur the responsibilities and conditions in which children live (Kiili, 2006). Understanding children as active agents does not mean considering childhood and children's lives as being separate from adults and families, for example, and it is obvious that parents can make decisions that are not possible for children to make (Smart, Neale & Wade, 2001). Thus, considering children as active agents does not exclude the power relations between adults and children − it means, instead, sharing power in an interactive relationship (Smart et al., 2001). Children's agency is realized in very different ways in different situations, and it begins from the possibility to choose whether to participate or not. Moreover, emphasizing children's differences in relation to adults should not go against the children. Considering children as a special or "different" group may isolate them in a marginal position which is difficult to reach with the concepts of social sciences (Kiili, 2006).

In order for children's agency to be implemented, it is important to understand how children themselves see their agency and which methods they use to express themselves and to be recognized as individual agents. Waring (2006) emphasizes the agents' own will in getting the desired results. According to Waring, information about one's own agency is not enough, because a lack of confidence in one's own agency and abilities may lead to apathy. Thus, children need support from adults to construct self-confidence and to realize their agency (Waring, 2006). In this regard, a child's family plays a significant role. According to Smart et al. (2001), most children want to express their opinions about important matters and issues related to the family, and they feel like outsiders if they are not allowed to do so. Nowadays, as the family is not seen as "given" anymore, children also have more opportunities to engage in issues related to the family (Smart et al., 2001; Alanen, 2001).

Kiilakoski (2008) explores the significance of the context of children's participation and of the realization of their agency. He argues that on the level of a group, community, club or society, there has to be a situation where the action as an active agent is possible. There is also a need for developing different methods which help to create a sphere where it is possible for children to become recognized as a valuable part of the community around them. This means, from children's viewpoint, that adults should do the things that they talk about, which is not, however, always the case. According to Ruckenstein (2013), for example, children are highly valued in today's society, but, at the same time, parents hardly have enough time to spend with their children. Moreover, although parents argue that children always come first, children's opinions are not taken into consideration in financial and political decision-making. Thus, according to Ruckenstein (2013), children live in the world where adults say something and do it in a different way.

In general, there is a lack of research on how children's agency is implemented in practice. According to Alanen (2001), it is important to make

children's agency and their experiences visible by listening to children and respecting their experiences as one important source of information. Vandenbroeck and Bouverne-De Bie (2006) state that a challenge in research on children's agency is to integrate 'macro' and 'micro' approaches and to examine the possibilities of how they may be interconnected. Children can be positioned in their own contexts and can look at the micro level of peer interactions, or they can be located within the broader social structure, the macro level, and explore the systematic denial of their agency (Wyness, 1999; see also Vandenbroeck & Bouverne-De Bie, 2006).

From the viewpoint of children's participation and citizenship, the notion of the relation between agency and structure is important. If children are seen as dependent on adults and on the structures created by adults, the focus is on children as future citizens. Thus, children's integration in society should be supported, and they should learn the skills and the features that are a part of the role of a good citizen (Bell, 2005). On the other hand, children can be regarded as participants and citizens here and now. The focus is then on children's voices and experiences.

In this study, children's agency and structure are considered from the viewpoint of online environments. Children are seen as active agents, who are capable of performing activities in online environments and recounting their own experiences regarding online participation. On the other hand, online environments are seen as a structure that may also prevent children from participating and doing what they want. In many online environments, children are allowed to create new contents and discuss freely, but their viewpoints are not visibly taken into consideration in the development of online environments (see Nousiainen, 2008). Considering children's participation is thus always related to the notions of agency and structure and the relation between them.

2.2 Children's participation

Participation is a complex concept to define, because it covers a wide range of fields. The most common fields in which participation is discussed range from science and the arts to fashion and business, politics and religion, and from local to national and global, and from secret and private to different levels of publicity (Siisiäinen, 2010). Typically, participation is defined from the point of view of adults. This means that the concept is often laden with politics, and it is used to describe the formal processes of civic life. The focus is not on the everyday lives of people, but rather on something that people do as citizens of a nation, such as vote in elections[2].

[2] Of course, these viewpoints are not mutually exclusive.

2.2.1 What is participation?

One way to analyze the concept of participation is to divide it into formal and non-formal types (Kotilainen & Rantala, 2008; Hay, 2007). Formal participation refers to activities related to public administration, such as voting and party politics, whereas non-formal participation means alternative forms of participation, such as organizational activities and activities in the internet (Kotilainen & Rantala, 2008). Another way to understand the concept of participation is to define it either as social action or as a process of influencing (Sotkasiira, Haikkola & Horelli, 2009). A process of influencing refers to the action that aims at changing things on a political or societal level. In that case, the forms of participation cross the limits of formal and non-formal participation, and they are not mutually exclusive. Siisiäinen (2010) defines participation as action generated by the agent oneself, and it is, thus, voluntary. What is common to all these definitions of participation is an assumption that a participant is always more or less an active agent.

There are also other concepts that are often used beside participation, such as citizenship, civic participation and engaging or having an influence on issues. According to Delanty (2000), participation is a part of citizenship which consists of rights, responsibilities and identity. Similarly, Nivala (2008) divides citizenship into three viewpoints, which are formal, experienced and participatory membership. Participatory membership refers to the phenomenon that is strengthened through citizens' activities and interaction (Nivala, 2008). Participation can also be seen as a fundamental right of citizenship (Hart, 1992). Participation refers here to "the process of sharing decisions which affect one's life and the life of the community in which one lives" (Hart, 1992, 5). According to Anttiroiko (2003), participation is indeed related to many subtle questions about the process of influence and its conditions. He argues that participation is action that people are involved in with other agents, through a social process. The process of influence refers to bringing about some kind of effect or change in political processes or in decision-making processes. The point where these two concepts encounter can be called "influential participation[3]" (Anttiroiko, 2003).

Participation can also be investigated by using the concept "acts of citizenship" (Isin & Nielsen, 2008). In that case, citizenship is not merely seen as a legal status, but the focus is on social, political, cultural and symbolic practices that produce a subject that is a citizen. Whereas citizenship practices such as voting appear passive and one-sided in mass democracies, acts of citizenship are everyday deeds that are not necessarily founded in law or responsibility. In fact, for acts of citizenship to be politically effective and acts at all, they must call the law into question and, sometimes, break it (Isin, 2008). Thus, acts of citizenship are those acts through which citizens, strangers, outsiders and aliens

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[3] Researcher's translation from Finnish into English. The Finnish expression is 'vaikuttava osallistuminen'.

emerge not as beings already defined but as beings acting and reacting with others (Isin & Nielsen, 2008).

In this study, participation is defined according to Sotkasiira et al. (2009) as social activity on the one hand, and as influencing political and societal processes on the other hand. This definition is used because it provides a broad viewpoint on participation that is not related to any specific context: participation is not seen merely as formal activities in society but also as activities that take place in the everyday life world. The relations of the different concepts presented above are illustrated in Figure 2. Firstly there is citizenship, which consists of three forms: experienced, participatory and formal citizenship (Nivala, 2008). In this study, the focus is on participatory citizenship which consists of two forms of participation: social activities and the process of influence (Sotkasiira et al., 2009). At the bottom, there are acts of citizenship which are the practical elements of participation.

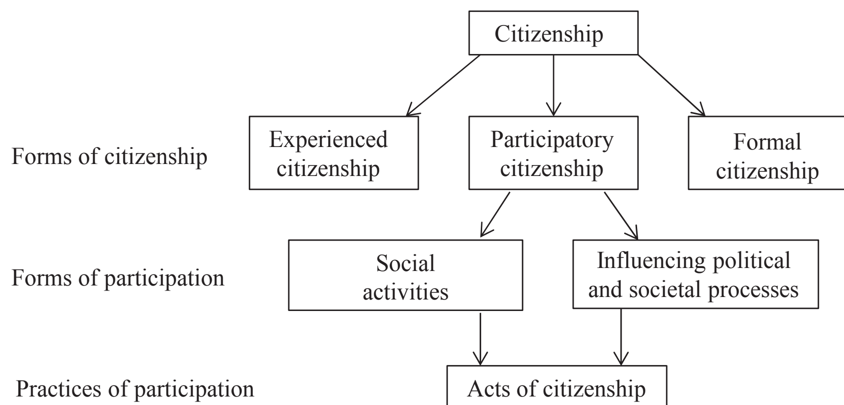

FIGURE 2 One definition of participation.

2.2.2 What is children's participation?

The way how participation is understood also defines to what extent children can be seen as participants and thus as active agents. From the viewpoint of formal participation, infants have fewer rights and responsibilities than adults, because children have no right to vote, for example. Thus, children are always somewhat incompetent in relation to adults. However, if participation is considered as action and activities in one's everyday life, children can also be seen as active agents in the process of participation. According to Buckingham (2000), the concepts of participation and citizenship should be seen more broadly from the viewpoint of children. Children learn many "political" concepts, such as notions of authority, fairness and justice, and rules and laws at a very early stage, through their everyday experiences of institutions such as their school and family (Cullingford, 1992). Lister (2007) talks about "lived citizenship" which, according to James (2011), draws attention to the significance of children's own agency and their everyday lives (see also Kallio,

2006). Deleuze and Guattari (1980) argue that analyzing participation requires close analyses of daily practices since it is in these micro-events where concepts such as democracy, citizenship and participation are shaped (according to Vandenbroeck et al., 2009).

The notion of participation as action in one's everyday life is a starting point in this study as well. The focus is on children's participation which is understood as social action on the one hand and as influencing political and societal processes on the other hand. Although the focus is on participation as everyday life action, it does not exclude the viewpoint of participation in a global context. Delanty (2000) argues that people today participate in international communities through online environments and adopt an international or European identity. This applies to children as well: in online environments, they may play and discuss with children from the other side of the world. According to Buckingham (2000), a challenge regarding children's participation is to establish the relevance of 'politics' and to find ways of connecting the 'micro-politics' of personal experience with the 'macro-politics' of the public sphere. This refers to the question of how the macro level issues could be relevant to children in their everyday lives and vice versa, how the issues in children's everyday lives could be relevant in the discussion about macro level issues.

In order to make participation relevant to children, adults play a significant role in creating the context and sharing the power. Hart (1992) and Grover (2004) argue that young people's participation cannot even be discussed without considering power relations and the struggle for equal rights. According to Horelli, Haikkola and Sotkasiira (2007), the extent to which children are able to participate, and their experiences about the process of participation, depend on the interaction between children and adults. In this interaction, the decision to participate is not always dependent on children's own will or decision but it may be determined by adults. Thus, fundamentally it is a question about how far children themselves can determine their agency and to what extent adults are a condition for children's agency. O'Toole, Lister, Marsh et al. (2003) argue that, in order to define children's citizenship, the first thing to do is to find out children's own viewpoints about citizenship, participation and politics: we must discover how and why children participate and why they do not participate?

Pulkkinen and Launonen (2005) explore the relation between children and adults by talking about child-centeredness. According to them, child-centeredness does not mean acting on children's terms but means responsible adulthood: listening to children and taking their needs into consideration with respect to their age and maturity. Child-centeredness is a basic value especially in the pedagogical field. Taking children's opinions into consideration is one of the basic principles in the National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland (2005)[4], for example. Children and their

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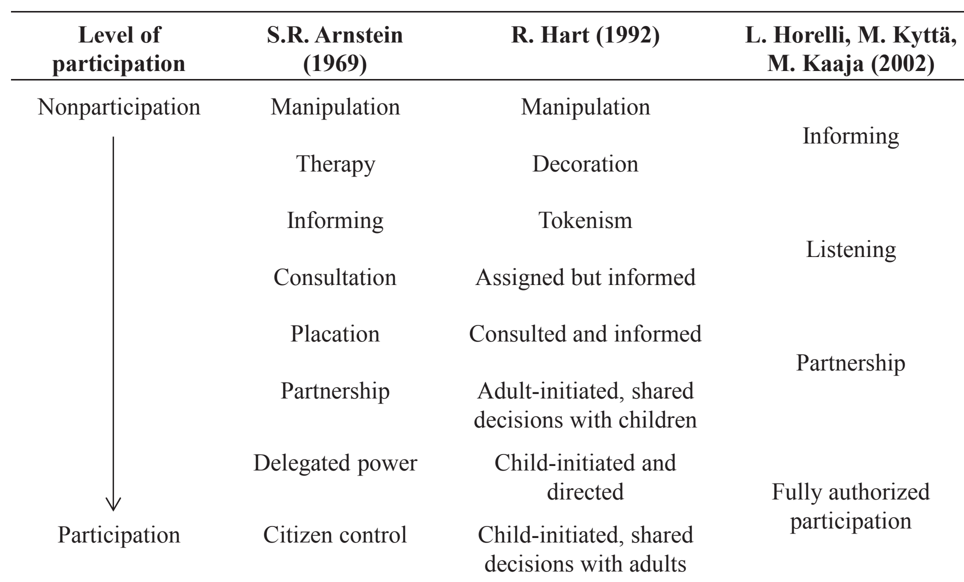
[4] The National Curriculum Guidelines are available at http://www.thl.fi/thl-client/pdfs/267671cb-0ec0-4039-b97b-7ac6ce6b9c10 (accessed 8 October 2013).

viewpoints are noticed by emphasizing the forms of action that are suitable for children and by listening to children (Karila, 2009). A child is considered a competent and self-reflective agent who is able to understand her or his action and knows the way to plan it (Kampmann, 2004; Strandell, 2012).

One way to understand children's participation better is to analyze the impact of it. The impact of children's participation can be analyzed by using the "real-world" effects and changes as a basis. There are many models that represent levels and, thus, the possible impact of participation (Table 1). Based on the previous research literature, one of the most commonly used models is Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation, in which the lowest levels represent nonparticipation and the uppermost levels represent participation. The highest level of participation is citizen control, which means that citizens can govern institutions, for example. Similarly, Hart (1992) has divided participation into eight levels, in which the lowest levels represent young people as targets of manipulation, as decorations and as quasi-participants, whereas the highest levels represent them as active agents and subjects. The highest level is achieved when the starting point for the action is children's own ideas which they realize together with adults.

Horelli, Kyttä and Kaaja (2002) explore participation from the viewpoint of environmental planning, as a relation between citizens and the authorities or decision-makers. They present a four-stage model of the levels of participation, in which the highest level is fully authorized participation. It means that citizens themselves are allowed to decide upon their aims and methods without society interfering in the process. In the stage of partnership, the situation is analyzed by all parties together, but the citizens have no opportunity to participate in decision-making. The third stage of listening is implemented when authorities take responsibility for the project and ask citizens' opinions about different choices. The lowest level of informing applies when authorities only inform citizens about their plans, or citizens are targets of a study.

TABLE 1 Levels of participation according to different researchers.



Level of participation	S.R. Arnstein (1969)	R. Hart (1992)	L. Horelli, M. Kyttä, M. Kaaja (2002)
Nonparticipation	Manipulation	Manipulation	Informing
	Therapy	Decoration	
	Informing	Tokenism	Listening
	Consultation	Assigned but informed	
	Placation	Consulted and informed	Partnership
	Partnership	Adult-initiated, shared decisions with children	
	Delegated power	Child-initiated and directed	Fully authorized participation
Participation	Citizen control	Child-initiated, shared decisions with adults	

Another way to analyze the impact of participation is to analyze the skills and feelings that are formed in the process of participation. In the process of participation, children not only participate, but they also experience the feeling of participation in relation to their own community: they feel themselves competent and regard their role as important. According to Gretschel (2002), this feeling is a sign of the quality of the participatory process. The feeling could also be called "empowerment" (Horelli et al., 2002; Gretschel, 2002). Lehtinen (2009) states that empowerment is a result of the action that includes the active capacity of participants. Empowerment is not usually possible if the agent and his or her choices are guided from the outside. On an individual level, empowerment requires active participation in a situation and successful use of one's resources (Lehtinen, 2009). According to Itzhaky and York (2000), participation and empowerment are closely related to each other, both directly and indirectly. Participation reduces alienation and also has a direct effect on empowerment (Zimmerman, 1990).

On the other hand, Kiilakoski (2008) argues that the feeling of participation is not enough. According to Kiilakoski, the feeling of participation is a necessary but inadequate condition of participation, because a person can feel oneself involved even though other people treat him or her as an object. Thus, a process of participation requires a community in which real participation is possible. It also requires methods that help children and young people to participate. A real participatory situation enables a space where an individual can be oneself and participate as a valuable party of the surrounding community (Kiilakoski, 2008). Karlsson (2005) also states that there are both individual and communal elements in the process of participation. Participation is not only a feeling, but is a concrete activity and a way to act with other people

(Karlsson, 2005). From the viewpoint of children's participation, adults have the important responsibility to create the kind of space and atmosphere that make it possible for children to have their say.

What is also noteworthy is that children are not a homogeneous group. There are many things that have an effect on children's possibility to participate, such as gender, age, geographical location, ethnicity and social class (Bell, 2005; Martens, Southerton & Scott, 2003). The focus group in this study consists of 10–15 year-old children, which is an interesting age group because children's opportunities to participate often increase at this age. At a younger age, children's participation is more dependent on adults as they take care of the children. At the age of 10–15, however, children are able to verbally express their opinions. From the viewpoint of developmental psychology, children are at a phase when their personalities develop and their ability to think increases both independently and critically (Dunderfelt, 2011). They may not be able to perceive complex issues but they are able to take other people into consideration and express their opinions related to the issues that deal with other people as well. Participation also has a significant role in achieving the aims of developmental phases. According to Havighurst (1982), developmental tasks for children between the age of 10–15 include their ability to behave in a way that is acceptable in society and to develop their own worldview, values and morals. These abilities develop in the process of participation: in social interaction, by acting in a community.

2.2.3 Why children's participation?

Children's participation in different activities in society and in decision-making processes is a relatively new phenomenon. For a long time, children's special character in relation to adults excluded them from the discussions about citizenship because they were not seen as citizens who have the same rights and responsibilities as adults. The roots of the notion that emphasized children's participation originate from the 1980s, when researchers in childhood studies tried to improve the position of children and their valuation in society, and to enhance children's participation (Alanen, 2010). One way of doing this was to focus on another extreme of children's participation and to endorse children's agency as an unquestioned starting point of the research work. Participation was not seen as an adult-centered thing that is based on rights and responsibilities anymore but rather as a process that belongs to children's everyday lives, too (Jans, 2004; Roche, 1999). Later, the notion of children as active agents and participants was criticized, but, even so, the discussions about children's participation are the core of social and pedagogical childhood studies (e.g. Vandenbroeck & Bouverne-De Bie, 2006; Karila, 2009). Children's participation is seen as a children's right but also as a fundamental human right (Alanen, 2010). Basically, children's participation is thus a very normative concept.

A juridical starting point and a basis for children's participation is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was adopted by

the UN General Assembly in 1989. In the Convention, participation is considered as one of the children's rights. According to Article 12, "States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child." A special context for expressing views is not mentioned in the Convention but, according to Alderson, (2008) children's right to participate refers both to the micro level, such as decision-making concerning home and family and to the macro level, such as legislation and juridical activities related to children. In addition to participation, the Convention emphasizes children's right to special protection and care and to adequate provision of resources by society. The Convention obliges the member countries juridically as well. Thus, children's rights are a part of the legislation in many countries. In Finland, the Constitution guarantees the human rights of those people who live in Finland. According to the Constitution[5], "Children shall be treated equally and as individuals and they shall be allowed to influence matters pertaining to themselves to a degree corresponding to their level of development." Children's right to participate is also written into the Local Government Act[6], the Youth Act[7], the Basic Education Act[8], and the Child Welfare Act[9].

In addition to the juridical foundation, an attempt to enhance children's participation has been justified with the studies and discussions that indicate the positive effects of children's participation in society. Children's participation is seen as a way to enhance democracy and to prevent the progressions that represent general social malaise, such as alienation from society and general apathy, which make it difficult for people to act in society (Kiilakoski, 2008; Kirby, Lanyon, Cronin et al., 2003). Enhancing children's participation is also seen as a way to obtain economic savings. In 2007 in Finland, for example, the Government published the Policy Programme for the Well-being of Children, Youth and Families[10], which tried to reduce costs

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[5] The Constitution of Finland is available at http://www.finlex.fi/fi/laki/kaannokset/1999 /en19990731.pdf (accessed 9 October 2013).

[6] Local Government Act, Article 27: "Local councils must ensure that the municipality's residents and service users have the chance to participate in and influence the activities of the municipality."

[7] Youth Act, Article 8: "Young people must be given opportunities to take part in the handling of matters concerning local and regional youth work and youth policy. Further, young people shall be heard in matters concerning them."

[8] Basic Education Act, Article 47 a: "A school (--) may have a student association composed of the pupils. The remit of the association shall be to promote joint action, influence and participation of the pupils in matters relating to pupils."

[9] Child Welfare Act, Article 5: "When assessing that of the need for child welfare, a decision concerning a child or young person or the provision of child welfare, must pay special attention to the views and wishes of the child or young person."

[10] The Policy Programme is available at http://valtioneuvosto.fi/tietoarkisto/politiikkaohjelmat-2007-2011/lapset/en.jsp (accessed 9 October 2013).

resulting from ill-health and exclusion by supporting the everyday well-being of children, encouraging the participation and involvement of children and reserving more resources for disseminating information about children's rights. There are also world-wide projects that have tried to get children involved in developing structures and institutions that support their basic needs and rights (Hart, Newman, Ackermann et al., 2004).

The enhancement of children's participation may also have an effect on how the community works and how its members feel. According to Hart (2004), involving children in the action of the community may create a sense of solidarity and help adults to understand children better, which may also enhance children's status in the community. By listening to children, the community is better able to take children's needs into consideration. From the viewpoint of families, children's participation may have an influence on children getting a better status in the family, better family relations, a reduction in child abuse, as well as social support and an increase in social freedom, especially among girls (Hart, 2004; Cook, Blanchet-Cohen & Hart, 2004). These are important issues in many countries and cultures where the social freedom of girls is seen as undesirable, and poverty drives children to work. Moreover, children's participation may lead to better decisions. According to Lansdown (2001), children think that they would have a lot to say about many issues which are related to their lives but which are often decided by adults.

From an individual's viewpoint, participation may improve children's self-confidence and help them become more independent and responsible people. Participation may also improve many important skills, such as group work skills and provide children with an opportunity to channel their energy and inventive skills in a way that interests them. At best, the process of participation has a positive effect on the development of children's identity as well (Hart, 2004; Lansdown, 2001; Kirby et al., 2003). Thus, children's participation may have many positive effects on their learning and development (Kiilakoski, 2008).

On the other hand, there are also critical viewpoints related to children's participation. According to Vandenbroeck and Bouverne-De Bie (2006), the focus on negotiation, self-expression and verbalization of the self are a white, western and middle-class norm. Moreover, Tobin (1995) and Canella (1997) argue that the focus on the autonomous child and self-expression are typically linked to the liberal, free market-oriented society which needs autonomous, entrepreneurial individuals (see also Vandenbroeck & Bouverne-De Bie, 2006). The mutation of the welfare state into a social investment state (Giddens, 1998) has called for an active citizen: a responsible citizen who is able to speak up for his or her own interest and who has no rights without duties (Masschelein & Quaghebeur, 2005; see also Vandenbroeck et al., 2009).Thus, the notion of children's participation has to be contextualized, and intercultural differences in meaning-making have to be taken into account, as well as political and socioeconomic contexts (Vandenbroeck & Bouverne-De Bie, 2006).

2.2.4 How is children's participation realized?

Many studies indicate that children's participatory practices and their attitudes towards participation have changed in recent years. Children participate less frequently in organizational and sport club activities, and they consider those activities old-fashioned (Myllyniemi, 2009; Siisiäinen & Kankainen, 2009). In particular, there have been concerns about young people who do not seem to be interested in participatory activities. Recent studies indicate that, in many countries, young people are not interested in traditional, democratic institutions and practices (Myllyniemi, 2014; Loader, 2007; Xenos & Bennett, 2007). Loader (2007) even talks about political apathy which is leading to the decline of democratic citizenship in many countries world-widely. The large International Civic and Citizenship Education Study 2009 (ICCS) also indicates that young people, especially in Finland, have neither the will to change the world nor to engage in societal processes (Kankainen & Siisiäinen, 2012). The dreams of Finnish children and young people are limited to friends and family (Tuononen, 2008).

The reasons for children's perceived passiveness have been sought from their ways of spending leisure time. According to Siisiäinen and Kankainen (2009), there are more activities that take children's leisure time, which may have led to a reduction in the time spent in civic activities. Moreover, the amount of leisure time grew in the 1990s, but, as a result, Finnish people spend more time on other activities, such as watching television and surfing on the internet (Siisiäinen & Kankainen, 2009; Pääkkönen & Hanifi, 2011). According to the Finnish Youth Barometer, one of the main obstacles for young people to exerting influence is indeed lack of time (Myllyniemi, 2014). Another problem is that children consider they have few opportunities to participate in planning and developing leisure time activities (Myllyniemi, 2009) or school-related issues (Tuononen, 2008). Moreover, young people are unable to find meaningful ways of exerting influence (Myllyniemi, 2014). According to Anttiroiko (1998) and Gerodimos (2006), this reflects an erosion of citizenship, which is a general phenomenon in a modern society. Anttiroiko (1998) states that the idea of citizenship is eroded because of citizens' passiveness in terms of the management of public issues, the declined significance of local communities, and citizens' alienation from political institutions. At the same time, civic participation has become an end in itself, and its enhancement has produced quasi-democratic arrangements which, however, only alienate from the realities of the life world (Anttiroiko, 1998). This kind of critique has been directed, for example, at the Children's Parliament activities (Jans, 2004).

Children's passiveness in terms of civic participation does not mean, however, that they are not interested in having an influence on issues related to them. According to Coleman (2007), the reason is that traditional ways of participation do not attract children and young people enough for participation. He talks about a new form of participation, "remote-control citizenship", and considers it more effective than the traditional forms of participation. As

"remote-control citizens", people may freely change channels, turn off television and be in interaction with the media. Thus, the reason for young people's political "apathy" is not in themselves but in the current political culture that has become alienated from the language and values of young people. As the world today is based on interactive communication, one-way politics does not work anymore (Coleman, 2007). In order to participate in traditional politics, young people have to have an opportunity to participate in their own way (Bennett, 2008). Bers (2008) agrees that young people today are interested in civic life, but in a different way than previous generations. Young people choose activism, voluntary work and cooperation rather than vote or participate in party politics (Bers, 2008). Moreover, the choices regarding school lunch or the organization of the school playground are, thus, just as 'political' as what goes on in parliament (Buckingham, 2000).

There has been an attempt to enhance children's participation both on the micro-level and on the societal and global level with the help of different structures and programs. In support of the legislation, the post of the Ombudsman for Children was established in Finland in 2005. The duty of the Ombudsman for Children is to listen to the opinions of children, and to promote the interests of children and the implementation of their rights on a general societal level. Moreover, the Finnish Children's Parliament was established in 2007 to provide children with an arena to express themselves and, thus, to support children's participation in decision-making processes both locally and nationally. Children's participation was emphasized also in the government policy program which was published in 2007 to enhance children's participation in society (see page 25 in this book). Furthermore, there are many projects and studies that have tried to enhance children's position in developing and making decisions concerning the environment (e.g. Koskinen, 2008). According to Horelli et al. (2002), children's participation in developing the environment is, at best, an activity that completes and extends representative democracy.

In this study, the focus is on online environments as arenas for children's participation. Online environments have been considered as one solution for enhancing participation, especially among children and young people, who use them actively. The focus is on participation as a process of influence but also as social activities. Thus, the viewpoint is not restricted to "political" participation in its traditional form which usually is not a part of children's lives. Children's online participation will be examined in the next chapter.

2.3 Children's online participation

In this study, children's participation is explored from the viewpoint of online environments. Online environments refer to the internet in this study. The current phase of the internet has also been described with the terms web 2.0 and social media (Sassi, 2009). The terms refer to the tools and services that anyone

can use to produce and publish contents (Sassi, 2009). According to Lietsala and Sirkkunen (2008), social media is the term that came along the web 2.0 rhetoric, around 2005. The concept caused a lot of criticism among researchers because it raised the metaphor of the traditional media as somehow being unsocial (Lietsala & Sirkkunen, 2008). Sassi (2009) argues that the internet is a medium that collects people together and is a tool for working with the issues that other people are interested in as well. It is heterogeneous, practical and context-based rather than a strictly planned tool (Sassi, 2009). The term 'online environments' is used in this study because it is both a neutral concept and one widely used in the studies on children's use of technology (e.g. Livingstone, Bober & Helsper, 2004; Hasebrink, 2012).

2.3.1 Online environments as means of social participation

The initial version of the internet was developed in the 1960s (Leiner, Cerf, Clark et al., 1997). The internet was originally designed to serve the scientific community, and it was constructed from content that was mostly accessed for reading, learning and entertaining oneself (Näsi, 2013). For the masses, the internet became more widely available in the early 1990s. Its commercialization led to wider adoption of the internet in all segments of society, and, by the early 2000s, the cost of computers, software and internet access decreased, allowing individuals access to the same tools of production used by professionals (Mandiberg, 2012). Nowadays, the internet has penetrated all over the world, most widely in North America (79% of the population), Oceania (68%) and Europe (63%) (Internet World Stats, 2012). New devices, such as smartphones and tablet computers, have made it possible to access the internet almost everywhere.

According to Näsi (2013), much of the discussion related to the internet focuses nowadays on the rising importance of the social media. Whereas newspapers served as the most valued medium in 1999, by 2009 the internet was perceived as the most important of the three media types: television, newspapers and the internet (Näsi, 2013). When technological breakthroughs occur, it becomes, according to Johnson (2013, 1), "urgent to assess their impact on people's everyday lives." This kind of assessment has happened with the internet as well and, according to many researchers, the internet has changed the whole culture of participation. Sassi (2009) states, for example, that the buzzwords today are openness and peer-to-peer culture. The line between media producers and consumers has blurred, and access to tools and new media forms allow formerly passive media consumers to make and disseminate their own media (Lietsala & Sirkkunen, 2008). At the same time, new technological solutions have increased the possibilities for interactivity (Sassi, 2009).

According to Kotilainen (2009), discussion about online environments and social media reflects the ideology that is prevalent today. She argues that there is a strong neoliberal ethos, and both the logic of earning and the motive for

obtaining profit are the basis when virtual communities are constructed. Moreover, postmodern culture is labelled by the increased individualization and reflexivity which opens up opportunities for new kinds of communalities (Kotilainen, 2009). She refers to online environments which are not homogeneous anymore: there is no one big audience but many groups and communities. This does not mean, however, that the users would have less power. On the contrary, these groups may be very powerful, as was noticed in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011: social media played an essential role in shaping political debates in the Arab Spring. The key groups in the revolution were young, urban, relatively well educated individuals, many of whom were women (Howard, Duffy, Freelon et al., 2011).

It should be noted that the potential of online environments for participation depends on the characteristics of the particular website as well. Lietsala and Sirkkunen (2008) present six types of online environments that provide an arena for different forms of participation: content creation and publishing (blogs), content sharing (Youtube), social network sites (LinkedIn, Facebook), collaborative productions (Wikipedia), virtual worlds (Habbo Hotel, Second Life), and add-ons (Slide, RockYou). In this thesis, the focus is on different types of online environments. The online environment of the Finnish Children’s Parliament, which is analyzed in this study, represents content creation and a publishing-type of environment. Moreover, the focus is on virtual worlds and online environments in general.

In this thesis, two articles focus on virtual worlds. A virtual world is, according to Bell (2008, 2), “a synchronous, persistent network of people, represented as avatars and facilitated by networked computers.” This means that virtual worlds cannot be paused, and they continue to exist and function after the participant has left (Bell, 2008). In virtual worlds, participants are represented by avatars and they can communicate and interact with each other. In addition to persistence and interactivity, Book (2004) lists shared space, graphical user interface and immediacy as features of virtual worlds. This means that virtual worlds allow many users to participate at once, and interaction in virtual worlds takes place in real time. Furthermore, Book (2004) states that virtual worlds depict space visually, ranging from 2D imagery such as Habbo Hotel to more immersive 3D environments such as Second Life.

Virtual worlds are often seen as a separate world, located outside “the real world.” According to Lehdonvirta (2010), however, virtual worlds should be seen as a part of the reality because they are real to their users. Furthermore, virtual worlds may be connected to “the real world” through their purpose. Meyers (2009) classifies web-based virtual environments into three different types, according to their purpose. Firstly, adverworlds are commercially-based virtual environments designed to support marketing campaigns or real-world products, such as candies or dolls. The online presence and the product are mutually exclusive, but the goal is to build excitement for the real-world product. Secondly, the commercial worlds are products themselves or deeply intertwined with the real-world product. Webkinz, for example, used to require

the purchase of a real-world toy, which then provided a code for online access. Nowadays, there is an option of creating a free account as well. Thirdly, there are value worlds which are alternatives to the commercially-based sites. They do not advertise or require membership fees.

2.3.2 Online environments in children's everyday lives

Today, most children start using online environments very early in life, at the age of 5–8 years, and many start even younger (Livingstone et al., 2011; Suoninen, 2014). Children use online environments very diversely. According to an American survey, 80% of teens aged 12–17 use an online social networking site like MySpace or Facebook, and 62% of them go online to get news or information about current event or politics (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith et al., 2010). The most popular activities among European children using the internet are school work (85%), playing games (83%), watching video clips (76%) and instant messaging (62%) (Livingstone et al., 2011). According to a Finnish study, boys tend to use the internet for playing and spending time, whereas girls prefer interacting with friends and getting familiar with other people (Tossavainen, 2008).

Among preteens, especially virtual worlds are popular today. According to worldwide reports by KZero (2011), there were 650 million user accounts among 10–15 year-old children and 320 million user accounts among 5–10 year-old children already in 2011 and the number of accounts has naturally grown since then. The most popular virtual worlds among children are Poptropica, Habbo Hotel, Stardoll and Club Penguin with 220–292 million user accounts (KZero, 2013). Although virtual worlds have become popular among children, as indicated by multimillion memberships, we actually know little of what happens in them (Kafai, 2010; Meyers, 2009). Tweens, people between the ages of 10 and 12, in particular, are an understudied group (Kafai, 2010). Most of the research on virtual worlds has focused on adult virtual communities, ignoring the unique considerations of virtual communities for children and youth (Beals & Bers, 2009).

Children as internet users have been previously studied focusing on particular online environments. Johnson and Toiskallio (2007), for example, explored Habbo Hotel users and identified six user groups: "Oldtimers", "Playmakers", "Silent majority", "Gang-members", "I don't pay" people and "older people" (see Article 3). These groups describe children's ways of using online environments. Furthermore, not all children engage in online activities with the same intensity. Blanchard and Markus (2004) explored the sense of virtual community in a newsgroup and found three types of members. There were leaders who were influential in the group, participants who posted messages but did not identify themselves or were not identified by others as leaders, and lurkers who did not post messages to the group. Horst, Herr-Stephenson and Robinson (2009) talk about three genres of online participation: hanging out, messing around and geeking out. According to Horst, Herr-Stephenson and Robinson, the majority of children and young people "hang

around, meet friends, just be" in online environments. Messing around is a genre of participation that represents more intense engagement with online environments whereas geeking out refers to a very intense commitment or engagement with online environments.

Due to children's active use of online environments they are often called as pioneers of the information society. They are also called the digital or Facebook generation, wiki kids or digital natives, which refer to children and young people as active and skillful users of online environments (e.g. Prensky, 2001; Selwyn, 2007; Turkle, 2011). In the discourse of digital childhood, the notion of children as people who are naturally ready to act in media culture is emphasized (Suoranta, 2001): children are used to using online environments, adopt information quickly and talk "digital language" (Prensky, 2001; Montgomery, 2008). The debate is often characterized by technological determinism, "a belief in the all-conquering power of technology" (Buckingham, 2009, 37). In order to survive in the world of technology, children have to be able to use online environments.

The problem with this discourse is, according to Selwyn (2012), that it ignores the complexities of social action and change. He calls for more critical thinking and also for theoretical research on the use of technology. According to Buckingham (2009), online environments should not be seen merely as technology. He states that there are forms of culture and communication in online environments: children, for example, participate in an increasingly diverse and increasingly commercialized media culture. Similarly, Sassen (2002) argues that the online environment is not a vacuum but it is inflected, for instance, by the values, cultures and power systems within which it is embedded. This can be seen both as an opportunity and as a challenge. Online environments provide children with opportunities to socialize with others and to learn about other people and about themselves. On the other hand, this kind of culture may be difficult for adults to understand and control (Buckingham, 2009), which may cause fear and a moral panic-like phenomenon among them.

Moreover, children should not be seen as one consistent group of "digital natives." According to Livingstone and Helsper (2007), little attention has been paid to the "digital divide" among children and young people. Boys and girls, middle class and working class, younger and older children are all in different positions when their access and use of the internet are considered. For example, boys and older children use the internet more, whereas non-users are more likely to be from working-class households and from the 9–11 or 18–19 year-old age groups (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007). There is also a significant gap between what children do at school and what they do in their leisure time, as, outside school, children live increasingly media-saturated childhoods (Buckingham, 2009). At school, however, online environments are not extensively used (Key Data on Learning and Innovation through ICT at School in Europe 2011, 2011), which may even widen the digital divide among children.

2.3.3 Forms of children's online participation

As online environments are a natural and frequent part of children's everyday lives, they have been seen as one solution for enhancing children's participation as well. So far, however, there are few studies on online participation from the viewpoint of children (e.g. Iqbal, 2012; Iqbal, Kankaanranta & Neittaanmäki, 2010; Tuukkanen, Iqbal & Kankaanranta, 2010; Tuukkanen, Iqbal & Kankaanranta, 2012). This is partly a reason why there is no simple definition of the concept of online participation. On the one hand, online participation refers to all kinds of activities in online environments as "participation in online environments." On the other hand, online participation can be limited to the traditional forms of political participation, such as voting, the activities of the government, and party politics. The line between these viewpoints is blurred. Some people discuss in online environments for fun and just to spend time, whereas other people may consider it as a way to express their opinions and have an effect on issues.

According to Earl and Schussman (2008), dividing participation into political participation and into more informal forms of participation is an inadequate way to explore the concept of online participation, because, in practice, the forms of participation are very close to each other. The activities that seem to be nonpolitical may, in fact, be signs of the changes that have happened in cultural consumption and civic participation (Earl & Schussman, 2008). Online participation is related, according to Häyhtiö (2008), to a reflective notion of politics which considers choices related to one's personal life and consumption, for example, as a basis for political action. In reflexive politics, there is an assumption that a citizen oneself wants to choose the issues in which he or she wants to have an influence.

Previous studies tend to regard children as active agents in online environments. They are not one consistent group of consumers and receivers but they have become active content producers (Kangas, Lundvall & Sintonen, 2008; Lietsala & Sirkkunen, 2008; Kotilainen & Rantala, 2008). Children are actively involved in what Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma et al. (2006, 3) call participatory cultures. By participatory culture they refer to "a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices." According to Fischer (2011), it is not the technology that determines the cultures of participation but the changes in human behavior and social organization. In cultures of participation, "not every participant must contribute, but all participants must have opportunities to contribute when they want to" (Fischer, 2011, 48).

The forms of children's participation can be considered, according to Fischer (2011), as a five-level model (Figure 3). Fischer himself talks about ecologies of participation and examines technology in general but his model can be applied in exploring children's participation in online environments as well.

The model presents the levels of participation and five different participant types. The first type represents unaware consumers, which refers to children who do not know and thus do not use an online environment. Children of this type cannot be called participants because they do not know the opportunities and thus are not able to choose whether they want to contribute or not. The second type represents consumers who are aware of the possibilities. This type refers to children who know the online environment, but do not use it. The third type presents the children who use the online environment and, thus, they can be seen as contributors. On the fourth level, children actively participate in the online environment. They can be called collaborators, facilitators or as organizers. The fifth type comprises children who design or participate in the process of designing the online environment. They are thus called meta-designers.

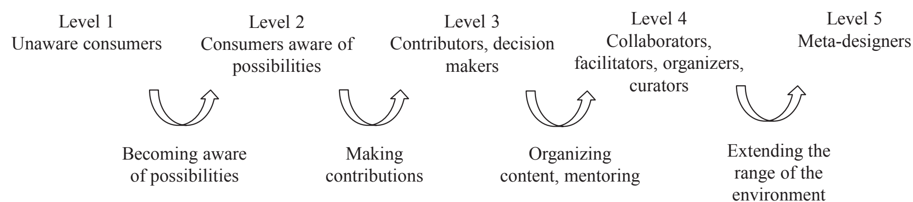

FIGURE 3 Model of children's participation in online environments (adapted from Fischer, 2011).

The concrete meaning of online participation has also been explored by using the models representing different forms of online participation (Table 2). Livingstone et al. (2004) examine online participation as a broad phenomenon in which many kinds of forms of participation, such as communicative activities, are seen as important. Bachen, Raphael, Lynn et al. (2008) classify the forms of participation into nine categories, which contain informal participatory practices, such as collaborative activities with people around the world, and formal practices, such as voting. The model by Polat (2005) and Vromen (2008) is the simplest: the internet is seen as an information source, as a communication medium and as a virtual public sphere. The models present the phenomenon of participation broadly as they take many, and also informal, forms of participation into consideration. On the other hand, the models focus on young people and adults and ignore children. They contain forms of participation which do not belong to children's lives, such as webpage creation or visiting political websites (e.g. Livingstone et al., 2004), volunteering or voting (Bachen et al., 2008), or considering online environments as a source for obtaining political information (Polat, 2005; Vromen, 2008).

TABLE 2 Models of the forms of participation in online environments.

Model 1 (Livingstone et al., 2004)	**Model 2** (Bachen et al., 2008)	**Model 3** (Polat, 2005; Vromen, 2008)
- Communicating (e.g. email, chat and instant messaging) - Peer-to-peer connection (e.g. online games, downloading music) - Seeking information (e.g. browsing educational and entertainment sites) - Interactivity (e.g. online quizzes, sending pictures or stories to a website) - Webpage/content creation (e.g. setting up one's own website) - Visiting political/civic websites (e.g. websites about charity, environment, government, human rights)	- Volunteering/ Community service (e.g. online sharing of users' time and/or skills) - Voting (e.g. participation in electoral activity) - Global issues/international understanding (e.g. collaborative online activities that involve youth from different nations or focus on international issues - Online youth journalism/ media production (e.g. online news reporting, arts projects) - Tolerance and diversity (e.g. activities that foster acceptance and celebration of diverse cultures, races) - Positive youth development (e.g. activities that prepare youth to be responsible individuals including responsible internet use) - Youth activism (e.g. activities that help youth organize and express their political views) - Media literacy (e.g. analysis of media representations of issues, "netiquette") - Workings of government (e.g. fostering understanding of how levels and agencies of government function)	- The internet as an information source (e.g. information about political issues, existing political groups and campaigns) - The internet as a communication medium (e.g. one-to-one dialogue such as email, the aggregation of information such as online petitions, a form of broadcast from one centre to many people such as personal web sites and blogs, and group dialogue such as forums and online chat) - The internet as a virtual public sphere (e.g. platform for rational critical debate rather than simple registration of individual views)

In order to explore children's online participation, a broad definition which contains many forms of participation is needed. Meijer, Burger and Ebbers (2009) provide a relatively broad definition of participation as they divide citizens' online participation into three forms: policy participation, political participation and social participation (Table 3). In policy participation, the emphasis is on supporting or undermining government policies. Citizens act as regulators who may serve the interest of government but they also help each other to avoid certain forms of regulation. Political participation is directed at influencing the selection and behavior of political decision-makers and it is often organized in the form of public hearings and citizens' panels, for example. The forms of participation that do not only refer to relations between citizens and government but also interactions between citizens can be grouped under

the heading of social participation. The goal of social participation is to create mutual support, and it is implemented in social networks between citizens.

TABLE 3 Three forms of online participation (Meijer et al., 2009).

	Political participation	**Policy participation**	**Social participation**
Goals	Influencing agenda-setting and decision-making	Influencing policy implementation	Creating mutual support
Public good	Debated in political system	Debated in administrative system	Implemented in social networks
Relevance for e-governance	Influencing in political system	Influencing the administrative system	Influencing the public sphere
Research community	Political science	Policy sciences	Sociology

Particularly from the viewpoint of children, it is important to notice the differences between these forms of online participation. As stated before, political or policy participation that represent participatory practices hardly belong directly to children's lives, but social participation is something that is naturally a part of children's leisure time and life world. Instead of talking about participatory practices, it is thus better to talk about social practices in the case of children.

2.3.4 Children's social practices in online environments

When using the broad definition of online participation that includes social participation as a criterion, numerous studies on children's concrete practices of participation can be found. However, most of these studies focus on particular practices, such as social interaction (Siitonen, 2007) and avatar activities (Ducheneaut, Wen, Yee et al., 2009), and there are not many studies that explore children's online participation as a whole. What separates participation from other activities is, according to Livingstone et al. (2004), active contribution. A participatory or social practice “invites from the individual user either an active or creative contribution that directs or modifies the flow of events online, and/or an activity directed towards a civic or social enterprise larger than the individual exchange of information” (Livingstone et al., 2004, 4). Using this as a criterion for choosing social practices, a review of literature related to children's online participation was made and four categories of children's social practices were found. These categories are 1) playing, 2) social interaction, 3) learning, and 4) expressing oneself. According to these categories, the roles of the online environments in the process of participation can also be defined: online environments can be seen as virtual playgrounds, social communities, arenas

for learning and as public spheres. The social practices and roles are also examined in Articles 2 and 3.

Playing is one of the most popular practices among children in online environments and virtual worlds (Iqbal et al., 2010). Many children play online mini games, such as shooting or puzzle games, and some children also participate in multiplayer online role-playing games, such as World of Warcraft or Runescape. Moreover, much of the use of online environments is playful in nature (Marsh, 2010). In virtual worlds, children explore places, for example, or create their own avatar and participate in game activities. Marsh (2010) has explored children's play in virtual worlds and identified five types of play. First, children's engagement in a virtual world includes fantasy play. Children create imaginative narratives involving characters and roles that are not necessarily based on real-life examples. Secondly, children carry out both socio-dramatic play which involves social interaction and play activities based on everyday practices. The third way of playing is ritualized play, which serves the function of providing social glue and enables users to signal online allegiances. Fourthly, games with rules enable children to accrue in-world currency and thus enable them to purchase items for their avatars and homes. Last, children participate in what might be called rough and tumble play. This involves deliberate attempts by children to engage in avatar-to-avatar contact, including chasing and snowball fights.

In virtual worlds, avatars play a significant role in children's activities. According to the study of children's activities in a virtual world called Whyville, 28% of the users indicated that half of their time spent in the virtual world is dedicated to avatar-related activity, and 36% reported that they change their avatars' look at least every few days (Feldon & Kafai, 2008). According to Ducheneaut et al. (2009), avatars are used in virtual worlds as vehicles to escape the constraints of physical bodies. Thus, virtual avatars can be seen as a substitute for dolls that girls have traditionally played with in the real world. On the other hand, avatars may also have another purpose, as they are used as a vehicle for identity exploration. Valentine and Holloway (2002) argue that children's identities are direct presentations of their offline identities and activities. Moreover, Ducheneaut et al. (2009) state that virtual world users tend to create thinner, younger and more fashionable versions of themselves. The virtual avatar represents a projected identity, an idealized version of their own personality, which often matches or exceeds a society's norms about attractiveness (Ducheneaut et al., 2009). Marsh (2010) also states that the relationship between online and offline play is close: play in virtual worlds is not virtual play but is real to the users of virtual worlds.

From children's point of view, *social interaction* can be seen as another form of online participation. According to Livingstone and Brake (2010), young people have a strong desire to connect with peers, to stay in touch and share experiences, also in online environments. Wellman (2001) has stated that, although physical place continues to be important, cyberspace has become more important, affecting the ways in which people find and maintain a feeling

of community. It has emphasized individual autonomy and agency but also afforded greater involvement in communities of shared interest (Wellman, 2001). Noveck (2006) has argued that participation in online environments takes many different forms and is not limited to equal time in a conversation anymore. New technology has also changed the opportunities for intentional collaboration: people go to virtual worlds to participate in a community activity and an avatar, a public character, represents the role of a citizen (Noveck, 2006). According to Adrian (2009), a virtual world is indeed a type of civil society where users participate in collective action around shared interests and values.

Siitonen (2007) has argued that multiplayer communities, such as virtual worlds, are fundamentally communities of interest which include at least some level of social interaction. In virtual worlds, there are many mechanisms for interaction. According to Johnson, Hyysalo and Tamminen (2010), there are, for example, verbal and paraverbal interaction which means speech, text and gestures such as dancing and sitting. There are also spatial mechanisms, such as personal space and space customization, identity referring to an avatar, and moderation such as kick and ban. Moreover, mechanisms of interaction can be divided according to their publicity: in public communication, all other users can see each other's activities, whereas in private communication only the person to whom the communication is directed can see it (Beals & Bers, 2009).

Social interaction is a basis for the development of social identity, which refers to the collectively constructed notion that members of a community have about themselves and others (Siitonen, 2007). Thomas and Brown (2009) talk about a sense of shared space and co-presence that are created in the activities within the virtual worlds. It is the "network of imagination" that ties together notions of community, technologically mediated collective action and imagination (Thomas & Brown, 2009). Meyers (2009) has called this as "a sense of community." According to Koh and Kim (2003), this sense can be divided into three dimensions that are membership, influence and immersion. Membership refers to people experiencing feelings of belonging to their virtual community. People also influence other members of their community and feel the state of flow during virtual community activities (Koh & Kim, 2003).

The social nature of online environments has been related to many positive effects and affordances. According to Henri and Pudelko (2003), virtual worlds allow children to participate in communities of users that would be geographically inaccessible in "the real world" (see also Woo-Yong, 2005). Thus, the internet offers an opportunity to engage in virtual interactions which extend beyond children's real-world relations (Meyers, 2009). According to Livingstone and Brake (2010), another consequence important to many children and teenagers is an opportunity to overcome the embarrassments of face-to-face communication. On the internet, they may anonymously share and discuss their experiences and other difficult issues and thus get empowered (Korp, 2006; Amichai-Hamburger, McKenna & Tal, 2008). This may be especially important for shy and antisocial children or minorities (Brouwer, 2006; Parker & Song, 2007). By interacting with other people, they are socialized into society at the

same time (Boyd, 2008). Moreover, according to many studies, the use of the internet increases interaction between people and thus maintains social capital (Wellman, Quan Haasen, Witten et al., 2001; Boase, Horrigan, Wellman et al., 2006; Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007). According to Stranius (2009), online environments create a more physical communality as well, as people met in online environments are encountered in ”the real world”.

The third social practice in online environments is *learning*. This practice is often intentional. According to de Freitas and Veletsianos (2010), virtual worlds can be used in many ways to support learning and increase children’s engagement and motivation through greater learner empowerment and participation, for example. Furthermore, there are affordances in virtual worlds for experiential and exploratory learning and in practicing many important 21st century skills (Iqbal, 2012). One example of online environments that intentionally aims at immersing children in educational tasks is Quest Atlantis[11], a 3D multi-user online environment. It allows users to explore virtual places to perform educational activities, to talk with other users and thus to become empowered scientists, doctors, reporters and mathematicians who have to understand interdisciplinary content to accomplish desired ends. On the other hand, children in virtual communities learn through their participation in the social practices of the community, also unintentionally. When participating in the digital worlds, children adopt new cultural norms and social practices, for example (Kankaanranta, 2007). In online environments, children also work at a complex level to communicate effectively when they solve problems together (Thomas, 2005). According to Quintelier and Vissers (2008), the opportunities for learning through online environments are based on the huge amount of information available: it is possible to get a lot of information very quickly.

Aittola and Pirttijärvi argued as long ago as 1996 that the increased significance of online environments is related to the decreased significance of the school institution. As the school has lost some of its significance as a producer of learning experiences, online environments have become an important arena for children to learn informally and to construct their identities (Aittola & Pirttijärvi, 1996). According to Henri and Pudelko (2003), participation in a community always leads to learning since it contributes to the construction of identity. Through participation in virtual worlds, children become familiar with their persona, a unique identity that reflects their growing sense of self (Meyers, 2009). Thus, in online environments, young people do important identity work (Willett, 2008; Weber & Mitchell, 2008; Stern, 2008). Moreover, online environments allow young people privacy from the family, which is important to the social-psychological development of the 14-16 year olds (Willett, 2009).

Fourthly, children participate in online environments by *expressing themselves* in a public sphere. In online environments, children create their own digital stories, blogs and wikis (Meyers, 2009; Rheingold, 2008) and express

[11] The online environment is available at http://atlantisremixed.org/ (accessed 29 October 2013).

themselves through virtual consumption choices (Lehdonvirta, Wilska & Johnson, 2009). Virtual commodities are also used to signal distinctions between different statuses and between membership and non-membership (Lehdonvirta et al., 2009). According to Leung (2009), user-generated internet content has exploded in recent years. The strongest motivation for creating and publishing one's own work is an urge to be recognized. The interactive nature of the internet attracts children because the comments that they receive on their content empowers them and encourage them to do more (Leung, 2009). Rheingold (2008) talks about public voice, which refers to "the unique style of personal expression" in a public sphere. When the public voices of many individuals are connected in the dialogue, it becomes "public opinion", which adds to the effectiveness of online participation (Rheingold, 2008). The public sphere refers, thus, to that domain of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed (Habermas et al., 1974).

Gerhards and Schäfer (2010) consider the public sphere as critically important for modern societies because it provides a forum for communicating collectively relevant issues. According to Stranius (2009), we have not yet even seen the whole potential for civic activities that lies in the internet. According to Lappalainen (2008), the internet is very important in terms of civic activities because it extends the public space. Polat (2005, 450) has argued, on the other hand, that "the potential of the internet to extend the public sphere is limited because of its unequal distribution, highly fragmented structure and increasing commercialization." Polat admits, however, that online communities may operate as arenas in which participants exercise their rights as citizens and take part in debates (Polat, 2005).

Bers and Chau (2006) have explored Zora, a virtual world, as a sphere for youth participants to engage in civic activities. According to their study, young people in Zora participated in dialogue and civic deliberation to promote community development. Thus, they reflected their personal set of values, shared information about civic life and engaged in meaningful civic actions and civic discourse (Bers & Chau, 2006). According to Evans-Cowley and Hollander (2010), today's web-based virtual worlds, like Facebook and Second Life, indeed provide platforms for public participation in planning processes in a manner distinct from previous formats. However, rather than replacing offline modes of participation and citizenship, online environments only complement them (Gerodimos, 2006; Gil de Zúñica, Puig-I-Abril & Rojas, 2009). Some activities in the internet, such as chatting with unfamiliar people, blogging or participation in discussion forums may stimulate participation in "the real world" but there is not a straight relationship between the time spent in the internet and participation in "the real world" (Quintelier & Vissers, 2008).

2.3.5 Risks and challenges of online participation for children

Children's use of online environments has been related to many risks as well. According to Herring (2008), public discussion in particular focuses on the worst scenarios in which online environments cause health problems and

dependencies and expose children to abuse. Moral panic-like phenomenon exists especially among adults and parents who are worried about children's safety. According to Plowman, McPake and Stephen (2010), parents are indeed more aware of the arguments about the dangers of technology than its creative potential. On the other hand, children themselves are more positive about online environments, and they do not consider them as such a threat (Herring, 2008). According to Livingstone et al. (2011), opportunities always go hand in hand with risks in online environments: the more children use the online environments, the more opportunities they face, but more risks, too. On the other hand, the more their use of online environments is limited, the fewer risks they face, but fewer opportunities, too. In this study, the risks are explored in Article 4.

Children often use online environments just to spend time. Kupiainen (2013), for example, states that creative media production is actually not the most important online activity for young people: they prefer entertainment and peer-to-peer communication. There is nothing wrong in entertainment as such, but this can be seen as problematic if the use of online environments is laden with the expectations related to civic participation. According to Kahne, Lee and Freezell (2011), friendly-driven participation, which means messaging, for example, is not related to civic activity, political action or expression, campaign activity or politically driven online activity. Moreover, the critical design choices underlying sites such as Facebook and MySpace are not concerned with developing the civic skills of users (Bennett, Wells & Freelon, 2010). The problem is that communication on the internet is seen as even more one-sided and less inclusive than print media communication in terms of its actor structure and issue evaluations (Gerhards & Schäfer, 2010). Thus, according to Olsson (2006), traditional media, such as television, radio and newspapers seem to be much more important for people's civic identities than the internet. According to the Finnish Youth Barometer, young people's belief in the impact of participating in social media is not indeed very strong (Myllyniemi, 2014). There is also an argument that the internet activates people who already are active and thus supports the social inequality between people (Norris, 2003; Ward, Gibson & Lusoli, 2005).

Another challenge is the gap between the opportunities to participate online and the degree to which young people take up these opportunities. Although 50% of 12–19 year-old people visit civic websites, 64% of them just view the information and do not interact with the site (Livingstone, 2007). According to Livingstone (2007, 180), the problem is that "the social and discursive structures of participation online do not sufficiently facilitate youth participation because the communicative relationship between producer and user is inadequate." Thus, young people do not know whether they are actually listened to (Livingstone et al., 2004). Levine (2008) also talks about "the audience problem", which means that even if some kids are highly successful in creating something on the internet, most will not draw a significant or appropriate or responsive audience. The topics that young people know best

are very local; they are important to them but not to others (Levine, 2008). Hence, more attention should be paid to developing the online environments that are targeted at children and to finding the right people who really are interested in what children want to say.

Moreover, the digital divide, both between different generations but also between different children, has been seen as a challenge for children's online participation. Xenos and Foot (2008) argue that decision-makers and young people, who represent different generations, tend to use online environments in very different ways, which means that their ways of thinking do not confront. Children and young people prefer social networking, such as blogs and collaboratively produced documents, whereas decision-makers often prefer life stories and statements and reports related to political issues (Xenos & Foot, 2008). According to Gerodimos (2006), the starting point in the use of online environments is to have access to the internet. However, this is not a self-evident thing for all people, and thus the digital divide is one obstacle for enhancing children's civic activities in online environments. Moreover, there may also be a divide between children's online participation in different environments. The evidence from the study by Sharples, Graber, Harrison et al. (2009) is that children engage with a wide range of social, creative and engaging web activities at home, which is not, however, possible for all children. Thus, there is a growing divide between web-confident children and those who are restricted to using the web at school to retrieve specific information from pre-approved websites (Sharples et al., 2009).

The potential of online environments for learning has also been criticized. Selwyn (2007), for example, advises educators to reflect carefully upon the nature of the web 2.0 applications, such as Facebook, as online learning environments. He questions the learning affordances they offer in practice. According to Selwyn (2007, 6), a limitation to younger learners' educative uses of these applications is that of "the increased salience of 'e-safety'", which refers to the increased number of risks related to online environments. There are risks, such as interpersonal victimization, disclosure of personal information, and aggressive and sexual behavior, which children and young people may not be able to confront in online environments. Furthermore, Buckingham (2009) argues that there is actually very little persuasive evidence that the use of technology in itself improves students' achievement.

There are also a number of other studies that have shown the challenges of "e-safety." According to Sharples et al. (2009), there are online bullying, the possibility of being contacted by harmful strangers, the opportunities to cause harm to others, and inappropriate material ranging from advertising to portrayals of violence and pornography in the online environments that children can access. Anonymous communication allows people to write something online that they would seldom consider saying face-to-face, sometimes generating flames (Alonzo & Aiken, 2004; Niemi-Pynttäri, 2009). Furthermore, online environments have been seen as a threat to children's privacy, creating new forms of inequality and commercial exploitation and

causing addictions which result in problems in family relationships (Oksanen & Näre, 2006; Buckingham, 2007; Kabakci, Odabasi & Coklar, 2008). Internet addiction symptoms, for one, are considered as key indicators of internet risks, especially for being the target of harassment (Leung & Lee, 2012). In order to reduce the risks and to ensure that participants are safe, there are, of course, rules in online environments (Beals & Bers, 2009). The problem is, however, that not all rules can be written and embodied in the code. This means that, in online environments, there are always unwritten rules that are embodied only in the expectations of the users (Bartle, 2006).

The risks of using online environments have also been considered as a threat to childhood in general. Young people are seen to be at risk, not only from more obvious dangers such as pornography and online pedophiles, but also from a wide range of negative physical and psychological consequences that derive from their engagement with technology, such as antisocial behavior, obesity and commercial exploitation (Buckingham, 2008). Furthermore, the internet has been related to a decrease in social capital as people do not meet each other face-to-face anymore (Ellison et al., 2007; Nie, 2001; Putnam, 2000). Cordes and Miller (2000) argued that online environments may even destroy childhood, because using computers requires too abstract and analytical thinking. The discourse about children as passive victims of online environments is strongly deterministic in nature. This means that instead of focusing on the way online environments are used, the environments themselves are seen either as good or bad things. The discourse of children as vulnerable victims is interesting in the sense that, on the other hand, children are often seen as digital natives (Prensky, 2001; Turkle, 2011). These contradictory discourses also indicate a lack of empirical research in this field.

Media education has been regarded as one solution for preventing risks. In 2011 in Finland, for example, the National Board of Education published a program called "Children and Young People as Media Participants" (Lapset ja nuoret mediaosallistujina) to support media education. In the program, media skills are seen as civic skills in the information society, and it is considered important to do media education in all school teaching and educational work. Rheingold (2008) also speaks up for media education, and Levine (2008) demands increasing media education, especially at schools. According to him, creating digital media at school could be a good way to enhance citizen participation. At the same time, teachers could educate children about using their public voice, which is an important part of the process of participation (Levine, 2008). According to Kotilainen and Rantala (2008), the important factors in media education are comprised of its role as a learning community, a process of influence, and the fact that audiences are based on media publicity. The community is important because it supports children both in their discussions and in gaining confidence. In the process of influence, producing media is linked to creating opinions. Media is used, for example, to solve the problems that exist in the everyday lives of young people. A sense of having an influence is finalized when young people know that there is an audience which

enables the public space: media publicity. Media publicity may be local, national, global or the corridor at school which brings people together during breaks (Kotilainen & Rantala, 2008).

Lack of knowledge is, however, a challenge in media education. According to the report by the National Board of Education in Finland (2011)[12], the opportunities of the internet for children's participation are not known very well, and teachers do not have the necessary skills to use different websites or participatory arenas in teaching. Moreover, teachers may have a negative attitude towards promoting children's use of online environments, which is often based on their own use of technology (Anastasiades & Vitalaki, 2011). Thus, teachers need support in developing new teaching practices that embrace creative and social learning on the web and in promoting responsible internet use (Sharples et al., 2009). At home, parents naturally play a significant role in educating children about the safe use of online environments. Aaltonen (2009) argues that some parents set very clear limits to their children's use of online environments, whereas other parents do not control it at all. Among restrictive parents, there are more highly educated people, whereas the group of permissive parents consists more of people with college degrees (Aaltonen, 2009).

Buckingham (2007) argues that the problem in general is an uncritical, unreflexive use of technology. For example, there is a tendency to emphasize online environments as arenas for learning without considering any problems or challenges related to them (Selwyn, 2007). It should be kept in mind, however, that not all life is digital (Weber & Mitchell, 2008). Most children still want to hang out with their friends in the "real world." Oksanen (2008), who has analyzed the risk of violent virtual identities in the case of the Jokela High School shooting in Finland, argues that communication in online environments is less effective than normal face-to-face interaction because of the lack of unconscious body language. According to Aaltonen (2009), many parents are critical in terms of social interaction in online environments: they do not consider it "real" interaction because of the lack of face-to-face contact. As online environments are, however, an essential part of modern life, parents consider media education as an important part of general upbringing. According to them, children should be taught how to use digital media and how to read and interpret it (Aaltonen, 2009).

2.4 Theory synthesis

Based on previous studies, I created a framework for children's online participation (Figure 4). The theoretical framework consists of four levels, of

[12] The report is available at http://www.oph.fi/download/139651_Lapset_ja_nuoret_mediaosallistujina.pdf (accessed 16 October 2013).

which the uppermost is children's online participation as competent actors. The viewpoint on children as competent actors and participants is a basis for an exploration of children's participation, because participation always requires an active contribution to some extent, as previously indicated (Livingstone et al., 2004). The second level of the framework represents forms of children's participation. The division of participation into social activity and into a process of influence is based on the model created by Sotkasiira et al. (2009) and works as a basis for understanding participation in this study as well.

The third level of the figure represents children's social practices in online environments. Based on the previous studies, there are four basic practices that represent children's action in online environments. Playing and social interaction are placed under the definition of participation as social activity because they are social activities in nature. Learning and expressing oneself represent participation as a process of influence because they are activities that aim at having an effect on something. In learning, the effect focuses on personal development, and thus children are seen as citizens in the future, whereas expressing oneself aims at having an effect on the current situation, and thus the focus is on children as citizens here and now. The lowest level of the framework represents the roles of online environments in the process of participation. Depending on social practices, online environments can be seen as playgrounds, social communities, arenas for learning or as public spheres.

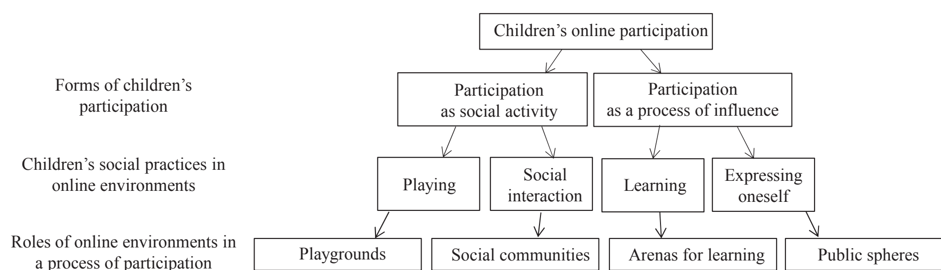

FIGURE 4 Theoretical framework for children's online participation.

The parts of the theoretical framework are not mutually exclusive, but they are closely related to each other. For example, participation can be influential and social at the same time, as it often is. Similarly, playing can contain social interaction, and when expressing oneself one can also learn something new about one's identity. The theoretical framework works as a basis for the empirical part of the dissertation. It is created on the basis of previous studies and thus indicates that there are already studies on children's participation and their use of online environments. There are, however, many gaps in the previous studies, too, as indicated in the next chapter.

3 RESEARCH PROCESS

3.1 Research questions

The main objective of the empirical part of the study was to increase our understanding of children's online participation and to test and develop the framework presented in the theory synthesis. This study focuses on the reasons, practices and perceived effects of children's participation in online environments. There are studies that have previously focused on these viewpoints (e.g. EU Kids Online study), but there are also many deficiencies in terms of the methods and approaches utilized. Figure 5 presents the relation between the Articles and the research questions of this study. Next, I present the research questions and the reasons for choosing these questions.

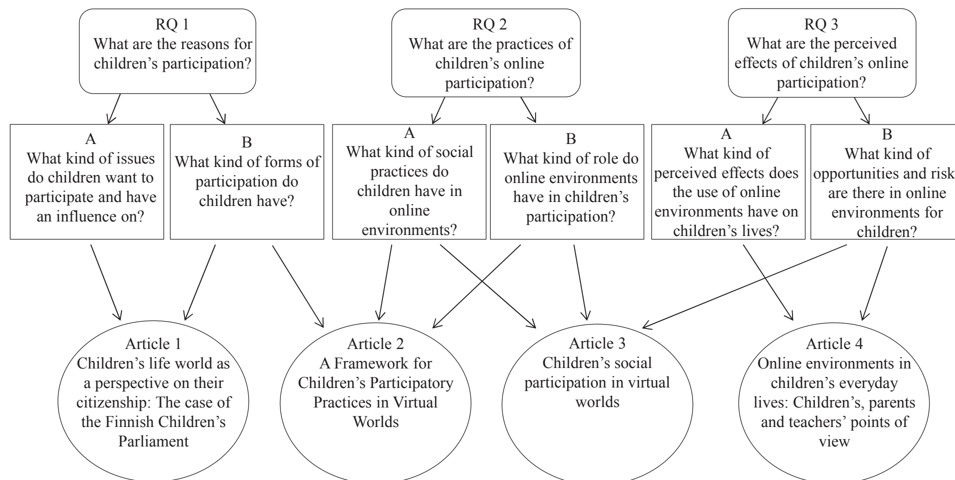

FIGURE 5 Relation between included articles and the research questions.

RQ 1: What are the reasons for children’s participation?

a) What kind of issues do children want to participate in and have an influence on?
b) What kind of forms of participation do children have?

Before children's participation can be considered from the viewpoint of online environments, there has to be an understanding of what children's participation is. Therefore, the first task is to find out what children’s participation is by exploring the reasons for children's participation. There is, in particular, a lack of information about children's participation in practice. There are many studies that are based on theoretical argumentation about the definition of children's participation but they often ignore children's own perspectives (e.g. Jans, 2004). Children's viewpoints have been explored in some non-scientific reports and projects (e.g. Tuononen, 2008) but not from a scientific viewpoint. Thus, the aim of this study is first to explore the kind of issues children want to participate in and have an influence on, and to consider what these issues tell us about children's participation and citizenship. Secondly, this study aims at specifying the forms of children's participation. As the framework presented, participation has previously been considered as social activity and as a process of influence (Sotkasiira et al., 2009). However, based on the earlier studies, it remains unclear what the process of influence means, especially from children's point of view. Moreover, there is a need to explore the forms of children’s participation in online environments. The answers to these questions are provided in the first and in the second articles.

RQ 2: What are the practices of children’s online participation?

a) What kind of social practices do children have in online environments?
b) What kind of a role do online environments have in children’s participation?

The number of studies on children's online participation has increased in recent years. According to Kafai (2010), however, we still know little of how children participate and act in online environments. The problem is that children's social practices have not been explored comprehensively in the sense that not all practices have been listed and explored in the same study. Previous studies have mainly focused on certain practices, such as social interaction (Siitonen, 2007; Johnson et al., 2010) and learning (Thomas & Brown, 2009), which is, of course, important, but the studies do not provide a comprehensive picture of children's activities in online environments. On the other hand, the social practices in online environments have not been extensively explored from the point of view of certain groups, such as that of children. Considering the viewpoints of children, for example, is important, because children are always special in relation to adults, as stated previously. In order to get a comprehensive picture of children's online activities, it is thus necessary first of all to explore children's social practices in online environments and to find out whether there are some practices that have not been previously studied.

Secondly, the aim of the study is to examine the role of online environments in children's participation. Previous studies have indicated four roles of online environments in children's participation: playground, social community, learning arena, and public sphere. But what do children think of online environments and how are these roles emphasized on the basis of children's interests? These questions are answered in the second and third articles.

RQ 3: What are the perceived effects of children’s online participation?

a) What perceived effects does the use of online environments have on children’s everyday lives?

b) What opportunities and risks are there in online environments for children?

There are also an increasing number of studies that examine the effects of online participation. The results of these studies are, however, very varied. On the one hand, online environments are seen as opportunities for learning, for example (Iqbal, 2012; Thomas & Brown, 2009) and civic participation (Noveck, 2006; Montgomery, 2008). On the other hand, the studies emphasize the harm and risks for children, and the media in particular focuses on the worst scenarios, such as sexual harassment, health hazards and dependencies (Herring, 2008). The harm and risks of online environments have also been explored in the EU Kids Online study, which consisted of a large survey and interviews with children and their parents. There is less research, however, on the opportunities and benefits of using online environments (Ólafsson et al., 2013). The aim of this study is to explore the perceived effects of using the online environments on children's everyday lives and the opportunities and risks of online environments for children. Thus, the aim is to complement the previous, partly contradictory results with new information.

It can also be seen as problematic that most of the previous studies have explored the perceived effects of using online environments by using theoretical argumentation without an empirical basis. In this study, the perceived effects of using online environments are explored empirically from children's, parents' and teachers' viewpoints. In previous studies, particularly teachers' viewpoints in terms of children's online participation have been ignored (Ólafsson et al., 2013), and few studies on this theme can be found (e.g. Anastasiades & Vitalaki, 2011). It is important to explore their points of view because school is one of the most important institutions in children's everyday lives. Thus, teachers play an essential role both in the way online environments are used in civic education and in the way children are educated about the risks of online environments. The third research question is answered in articles three and four.

3.2 Data and methods

Typical methods used in studies of children's online participation comprise interviews (Thomas, 2005; Willett, 2009), surveys (Kabakci et al., 2008), ethnography (Siitonen, 2007) and theoretical argumentation (Meyers, 2009; Thomas & Brown, 2009; Selwyn, 2012). There are also many studies that combine two or more methods. Marsh (2010), for example, used both the survey method and semi-structured interviews in her study. Similarly, the data in the EU Kids Online study consisted of a survey and interviews (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007). According to Gerodimos and Ward (2007), the most effective research strategies are exactly those that combine quantitative and qualitative elements. They argue that an ideal research design combines web content analysis with another method, such as user research, so that each method helps to overcome the limitations of the other and provide complementary data that builds a more complete picture (Gerodimos & Ward, 2007). In this study, three methods − analysis of online discussion, survey and interviews – were used to obtain as comprehensive a picture as possible of children's online participation (Table 4).

TABLE 4 Aims, methods, articles and data of this study.

Aim	Method	Article	Data
1. What are the reasons for children's participation?	Analysis of children's online discussion in spring 2010 (566 postings)	1. Children's life world as a perspective on their citizenship: The case of the Finnish Children's Parliament	61 children: -42 girls, 19 boys -10–13 y/o
1. What are the reasons for children's participation? 2. What are the practices of children's online participation?	Survey among children in spring 2010	2. A Framework for Children's Participatory Practices in Virtual Worlds	126 respondents: -65 boys , 61 girls -84 % were 11–15 y/o
2. What are the practices of children's online participation? 3. What are the perceived effects of children's online participation?	Interviews with children in spring 2010	3. Children's social participation in virtual worlds	21 children: -13 boys , 8 girls -11–15 y/o
3. What are the perceived effects of children's online participation?	Interviews with children, parents and teachers in autumn 2012	4. Online environments in children's everyday lives: Children's, parents' and teachers' points of view	-13 children: 7 boys, 6 girls, 11–13 y/o -7 parents: 6 mothers, 1 father, 38–52 y/o -7 teachers: 4 women, 3 men, 28–49 y/o

Chronologically, the first method that was used in this study was a survey which aimed at mapping a fairly unknown field of virtual worlds. The survey, which was conducted in spring 2010, helped to get the basic information about the virtual worlds that children use and the reasons for and practices in using them. At the same time, an analysis was conducted of the online discussion in the Finnish Children's Parliament. The Parliament was an interesting case because it was possible to explore the viewpoint of children's online participation as a process of influence, in addition to the social dimension (see page 4). After the survey, there was a need to deepen the data and our understanding of the practices of online participation, which was done with interviews. Thus, group interviews were conducted with those children who had reported using virtual worlds in the survey. Finally, individual interviews with children, parents and teachers were conducted. At this last phase, the focus changed from virtual worlds on online environments and paid attention particularly to the perceived effects of using them. With the interview data, it was possible to examine children's use of online environments in a broader context and to reflect the perceived effects on society as well. Next, I will present these methods more closely.

It could be said that the main method for collecting data in this study was interviews. The interviews were used in two phases as stated above: first, to explore children's social practices in online environments and, secondly, to study children's, parents' and teachers' experiences and viewpoints about the effects of children's online participation. In the social sciences, an interview is a very common method to collect data, and it thus has a long history in the discipline. According to Kvale (2007, 9), a qualitative interview is a key method employed for understanding people's world and exploring the ways in which people experience and understand their lives: "It provides a unique access to the lived world of the subjects, who in their own words describe their activities, experiences and opinions." Compared to a survey, the epistemology of a qualitative interview tends to be more constructionist than positivist, which means that the purpose of interviewing is to derive interpretations, not facts, from respondents' talk (Warren, 2001). Holstein and Gubrium (1995) talk about an active interview and emphasize that all interviews are reality-constructing, meaning-making occasions where there is a subject behind the respondent.

The task of interviewing children presents a researcher with unique opportunities but dilemmas, too. According to Eder and Fingerson (2001), interviewing children allows researchers to give voice to children's own interpretations and thoughts rather than relying solely on adult interpretations of children's lives. On the other hand, the interviewer needs to be sensitive to the power imbalance that always exists between adults and children and should try to create a natural context for the interview (Eder & Fingerson, 2001). In this study, children were considered to be the best experts as their social practices and perceived effects of using online environments are explored. In order to get as broad a perspective as possible, the perceived effects of children's online

participation were also explored by interviewing adults. I interviewed altogether 34 children and 14 adults. The duration of the interviews was 20-80 minutes, depending on the interviewees. Typically, children's interviews were shorter than adults' interviews. The interviews were conducted in schools, in public places such as cafeterias or at the interviewees' home, and they were recorded and transcribed in order to analyze the data. Ethical issues were taken into consideration particularly in children's interviews by choosing as comfortable a space as possible and by trying to create a safe and confident atmosphere for the interviews. Furthermore, I started the interviews with the easy questions and saved the most difficult questions to the end of the interviews. There is more discussion about the ethical issues in the next chapter.

All the interviews were successful and there were no technical or other problems. Two interviews with teachers were interrupted when there was a fire drill at a school, and a student once came into a classroom to take his backpack (the interview was conducted in a classroom after school) in another school. After the interruptions, the interviews were continued in the normal way. The interviewees' activity in terms of talking about their experiences varied, and some people, especially children, were shy at first but they soon "warmed up" during the interviews. I conducted both individual and group interviews with children, whereas all the interviews with adults were conducted individually. It was a positive experience to conduct the group interviews with children who used virtual worlds. In groups of two or three people, the children talked about their use of virtual worlds very eagerly, and there were moments when my role as an interviewer was not to ask but to follow the discussion as children both talked and asked questions from each other. Teachers and parents also had no problems to talk about the children's use of online environments and the theme was already familiar to them. A framework was followed in all interviews, though not very strictly.

Besides interviews, a survey data was collected in this study. The aim of the survey was to map children's social practices in online environments and the role online environments have in children's participation. Surveys, too, like interviews, are one of the most important methods used in the social sciences (Wright & Marsden, 2010). They are used mostly to collect data on behavior, like in this study, but also about knowledge, perceptions and attitudes from various populations of interest (Bautista, 2012). When planning the survey, it is important to pay attention to the questionnaire, particularly to its clarity and to the sample which should be as representative as possible. In this study, we used previous studies as a basis for our questionnaire, and it consisted of both multiple-choice questions and open questions. The survey was conducted as an online survey at schools. Thus, we also reached those children who do not use virtual worlds. There were altogether 126 respondents. The survey was focused on 11–15 years old children who are already able to express themselves by writing.

In general, the survey could be seen as a problematic method because it is always the researcher who creates the questionnaire and chooses the questions.

Thus, it may not be the best method to “hear the voices” of the focus group. In this study, however, the survey was the best method to map the field of virtual worlds, which was previously fairly unknown. The survey was successful as relevant information about children's use of virtual worlds was obtained. Related to the implementation of the survey, however, there were some challenges that could have been avoided by better planning. For example, the group of participants should have been limited more strictly. The online questionnaire was freely available and 16% of the participants did not belong to a focus group of 11–15 year-old children. On the other hand, only the focus group was informed about the questionnaire, which means that some of the participants may have lied about their age. Mainly, the participants were 11–15 year-olds (84%), which means that the participants who were not in a focus group had not a large effect on the results.

The third data in the study comprised children's online discussion. The aim of the analysis of the online discussion was to explore the issues children want to participate in and have an influence on, and the forms of participation that children have. In the methodological field of social sciences, online studies present a relatively new orientation. Online environments have been seen as an important focus of studies because mediated interactions have come to the fore as key ways in which social practices are defined and experienced (Hine, 2005a). The traces which online activities leave are seen to provide a valuable resource to social researchers who wish to understand both what people do online and what significance these actions have (Hine, 2005b). In this case, we were interested especially in the content of children's online discussion. As there are children's discussions everywhere in online environments, however, we limited the data very carefully. We examined the closed environment that is focused only on the members of the Finnish Children's Parliament. Moreover, we chose to study the discussion forum that was established for a certain purpose (the campaign forum for the elections for the Board of the Parliament) in a certain time frame (spring 2010). This forum was chosen because children actively discussed about the issues related to their lives there. The data consisted of the discussions that included 566 postings from 61 children.

The online environment of the Finnish Children's Parliament is an interesting research environment because it has many of the same elements that virtual worlds possess. There are different spaces, such as a hallway, a workroom, a rest room and a seminar hall where children operate through their own avatars. Technically, however, the online parliament is not a virtual world. It is rather a website or a discussion forum where people participate with their own nicknames. It is also possible to add a photo to the profile which is public. Furthermore, the online parliament is a closed environment which is open only for the members of the Finnish Children's Parliament. In virtual worlds, typically anyone can log in and create his or her own avatar. The members of the parliament have also met face-to-face, which may have an effect on their virtual communication. In this study, the online parliament was an interesting environment, because it represents a virtual place where children meet with a

motivation to express their opinions. Thus, it was a perfect environment to study the issues that children are interested in and want to have an influence on.

The main analysis method in the study was content analysis, which was used in analyzing the interviews and the online discussion. Content analysis is one of the most important research techniques in the social sciences, and it has a long history also in sociology (Krippendorff, 2004; Neuendorf, 2002). According to Krippendorff (2004, 18), content analysis is "a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use." Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2009) define it as a single method or as a loose theoretical framework that can be linked to different analytical methods. According to them, the aim in content analysis is to form a clear and summarized description of the phenomenon which links the results to the broader context of the phenomenon. The data is categorized and summarized by examining the similarities and differences in the data. The analysis is based on a logical reasoning and interpretation in which the data is reduced, conceptualized and classified into a logical entity in a new way. In content analysis, different kinds of texts can be analyzed. These texts can be almost anything, such as online discussions and transcribed interviews like in this study (see Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009).

As the data in this study consisted of online discussions and transcribed interviews, other methods such as discourse or conversation analysis could have been used too. Content analysis was chosen, however, because its ontological and epistemological background suits this study best of all. All three methods are interested in exploring social reality, but the methods differ fundamentally in their assumptions about the nature of reality and of the role of language in particular. According to Hardy, Harley and Phillips (2004), discourse analysis assumes in a constructionist way that reality is socially constructed, whereas the ontological basis of content analysis is realist: it assumes that an independent reality exists. Moreover, in discourse analysis, meaning is fluid, whereas in content analysis it is fixed. This means that, in discourse analysis, reality is seen to be constructed in ways that can be posited through the use of interpretive methods whereas in content analysis, meaning reflects reality in ways that can be ascertained through the use of scientific methods (Hardy et al., 2004). Conversation analysis is close to discourse analysis as it focuses on understanding the structural underpinnings of everyday conversation and seeks to describe and explain the structures of social interaction (Stivers & Sidnell, 2013). Instead of focusing on the relation between text and context (how children talk about their use of online environments), I was interested in the text abstracted from its context (how children actually use online environments) (see Hardy et al., 2004). Thus, content analysis was chosen in this study.

According to Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2009), there are three types of content analyses: data-driven, theory-driven and theory-guided[13] analyses. In this study,

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[13] This is the researcher's translation from Finnish to English. The Finnish expression is 'teoriaohjaava'.

both data-driven and theory-guided content analyses were used. Data-driven analysis was used in analyzing children's online discussion (Article 1) and children's, parents' and teachers' interviews (Article 4). The analysis was conducted inductively, according to the phases introduced by Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2009), so that the data was first reduced. This means that parts were removed that were not interesting from the viewpoint of this study. After that, the data was clusterized, which means that the data was analyzed in terms of similarities and differences, and classified according to them. In the third phase, the data was abstracted, which refers to creating broader concepts of the phenomenon. Wimmer and Dominick (2006) have used the term "emergent coding" for this kind of content analysis. It means that categories are established based on common themes that arise from the data. Theory-guided content analysis was used in analyzing children's interviews (Article 3). Basically, the analysis was conducted and the sub categories were formed on the basis of the data. However, the theoretical concepts, the roles of virtual worlds in the process of participation in this case, were presented as already "known."

The survey data was analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods. We collated descriptive information about the data and used a qualitative classification method in analyzing participants' answers to the open form questions. Due to the small sample size, we did not use multivariate analysis methods.

3.3 Ethical issues

Ethical issues should be taken into account in every step of the research process, starting from choosing the research questions, collecting data and reporting the results of the study. The general principle is that the researcher should do one's work honestly, accurately and as thoroughly as possible. The starting point for the research ethics is the researcher's own viewpoint on the research subject, because as Grover (2004) states, it is never possible to completely escape one's interpretive framework as a researcher. The researcher is always the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (Merriam, 2009). In terms of the researcher's accuracy and awareness of his or her own thinking, there are some special demands in studies concerning children because the ways of seeing children have a profound impact on the way in which children are studied (James et al., 1998; Punch, 2002). As adults are unable to be full participants in children's social worlds, the researcher should critically reflect on his or her role and assumptions but also on the choice of methods and their application (Punch, 2002). According to Morrow (2005), this involves respecting children's competences.

In this study, I also reflected on my viewpoints on children and childhood. I familiarized myself with the research literature on the theme and realized that children themselves are able to talk about things and issues related to their lives.

Based on this, I mainly chose methods that respected the children’s own viewpoints and opinions. The survey was an exception as there was a need to broadly map the field of children’s online participation. On the other hand, children are always vulnerable in relation to adults and a researcher, and thus it is the researcher’s responsibility to ensure that the study does not cause children any harm. In this study, the special character of children was taken into consideration by choosing a research topic that did not cause any harm but tried instead to improve children’s status in society by presenting their own experiences and viewpoints. Moreover, the research topic was not a sensitive one.

In all research that is related to children, one of the most important ethical issues concerns obtaining permission for the study. In that regard, adults play an essential role because they are gatekeepers who are able to limit researchers’ access to the children (Punch, 2002). In this study, permission was received before collecting the data. Permission for the study and for the children’s interviews was requested from the individual children, headmasters, teachers and children’s parents, who were informed about the study by a written letter. The letter, which mentioned that participation was voluntary, contained information about the study. In terms of analyzing the online discussion of the Finnish Children’s Parliament, the children and their parents were informed of the research project at the beginning of the parliamentary season, and consent for the research was received from the Board of the Finnish Children's Parliament Foundation.

During the phase of collecting the data and during the interviews, in particular, the ethical issues refer to building up a relationship of trust with children (Punch, 2002) and the researcher’s sensibility to listen to and hear what children say (Helavirta, 2007). The problem in the interviews is that the situation is fundamentally unequal because the researcher has the power to determine the course of the interview (Helavirta, 2007). The researcher may also lead the interviewees too much (Kvale, 2007). In this study, I tried to avoid these problems by creating an open and relaxed context for the interviews and by conducting some of the children’s interviews as group or pair interviews. According to Smith, Duncan and Marshall (2005), friends can provide language support, mutual interest and knowledge of shared activities. Moreover, I tried to be as sensitive as possible in terms of what children said; I put further questions and showed in all ways that I was, as a researcher, interested in what children, as experts on online environments, wanted to tell me. In the phases of analysis and reporting the study, ethical issues were perceived by deleting all personal information from the data and by reporting the study as accurately and thoroughly as possible.

4 RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION

This study consists of four articles. The first article focuses on the kind of issues children want to participate in and have an influence on, and what they say about children's participation and citizenship. In the second article, the emphasis is both on creating a framework for children's participation in virtual worlds and on testing the framework by looking at children's social practices in virtual worlds. In the article, children's reasons and forms of participation and the role of online environments in children's participation are also explored. In the third article, the aim is to deepen the understanding of children's social practices and to examine the opportunities and risks for children's participation in virtual worlds. In addition, the role of online environments in children's participation is considered in the article. The fourth article focuses on the perceived effects of using online environments in children's everyday lives and its opportunities and risks for children's participation. The articles are not in chronological order but rather in a logical order in terms of the contents.

4.1 Article 1

In the article, we present an analysis of the online discussion that children in the Finnish Children's Parliament participated in during spring 2010. First, children's discussions were classified into seven main themes, based on the kind of issues that children generally commented on. These themes were education and school environment, relations with other people, children's well-being, nature and animals, hobbies, local environment, and miscellaneous issues. After this, children's comments were classified into three categories based on how they presented their comments, namely expressing opinions, expressing deficiencies and proposals for action. Thus, we found out the issues that children wanted to have an influence on, as separated from those issues that children commented on only in a descriptive way.

The most important result in the article is that children want to share their experiences on the issues related to their everyday lives, such as school. The most prevalent themes in children's discussions were education and school environment (38%), relations with other people (22%) and children's well-being (14%). However, as children's comments are classified into the forms of children's participation according to how children present their comments, different kind of issues are emphasized. Children also want to have an influence on issues that are global and only indirectly affect their own lives, such as children's welfare in poor countries and environmental issues. Thus, children's participation appears, according to this study, both as exchanging experiences about everyday issues and as an attempt to have an influence on global issues. The result supports previous studies that consider children as global citizens sensitive to global themes (Howe & Covell, 2005; Jans, 2004). By exploring the themes that children want to participate in and have an influence on, the study makes, however, a new contribution to the field of social childhood studies.

Based on the results of this phase of the study, the reasons for children's participation can be divided into social activity and a process of influence as in previous studies (see Figure 4 on page 45). Both forms of participation are important to children and they are not mutually exclusive. Children may have an attempt to influence issues and to find friends at the same time, for example. A new finding is, instead, the sub categories that were named for the definition of participation as a process of influence (Figure 6). These categories, namely expression of opinions, expression of deficiencies, and proposals for decision or action represent the ways in which children attempt to have an effect on issues. The background for the whole process of participation is children's life world. It represents children's everyday lives and consists of different spheres of children's lives. These spheres, or systems as named by Bronfenbrenner (1979), are more closely presented in Article 1.

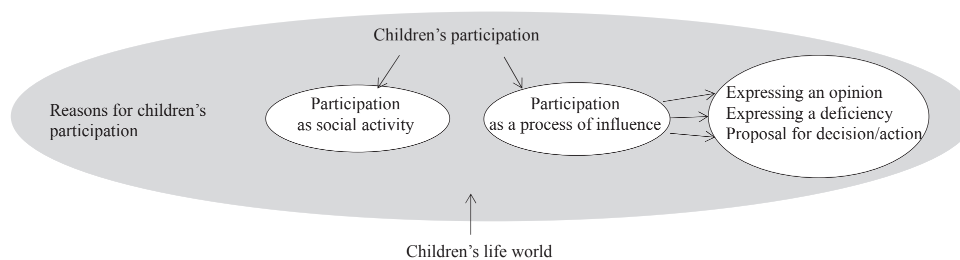

FIGURE 6 Reasons for children's participation

4.2 Article 2

In the second article, we created a framework for children's online participation and tested the framework by exploring children's participatory practices in virtual worlds. Instead of focusing on new practices in children's online participation, the aim in this phase of the study was to examine the relation between the roles of online environments in children's participation. Children's participatory practices were examined by conducting a survey which had 126 participants. One fourth of them were currently using virtual worlds.

The framework for children's online participation was created on the basis of the previous research literature. It consists of four levels, of which the first presents the forms of participation: participation is seen as social activity or as a process of influencing. The second level represents children's roles as participants. Children are regarded as social actors, as learners of civic participation and as citizens. The third level presents the role of virtual worlds in the process of participation. If participation is considered social activity, virtual worlds are seen as social communities. On the other hand, if participation is seen as a process of influencing, virtual worlds are seen either as arenas for civic education or as public spheres. The fourth level describes the affordances of virtual worlds for children's participation. These affordances may be intentional: for example, virtual worlds provide an arena for social action and for playing games. On the other hand, they may also be unintentional when they emerge during use. Figure 7 presents the roles of online environments in a process of children's participation. The full version of the framework is presented in Article 2.

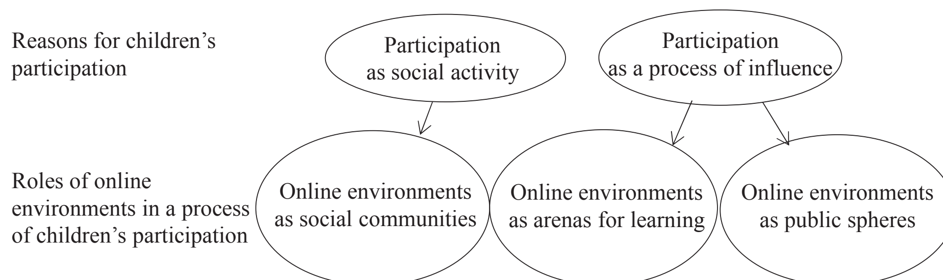

FIGURE 7 The roles of online environments in a process of children's participation

The most essential result in the article is that children use virtual worlds mainly for social purposes. In two out of three answers, chatting and doing things with friends was seen as an interesting feature in virtual worlds. Thus, the affordances for children's social activities in virtual worlds were clearly intentional. Based on the analysis of the survey data, however, virtual worlds do not appear as public spheres for children. It means that virtual worlds are not extensively used for presenting one's opinions and thus, for having an

influence on something. Participating in demonstrations and presenting one's opinions were mentioned only in one out of four answers as an interesting feature in virtual worlds. On the other hand, although the affordances of virtual worlds for children's civic participation are not intentional, children may do those activities unintentionally, by chatting, for example. The same applies to the role of virtual worlds as arenas for learning: although children do not use virtual worlds to learn, some children said that they had learnt new things about themselves and about different cultures in virtual worlds. The result is in accordance with previous studies which have revealed that interactive features are the most interesting ones in virtual worlds (Noveck, 2006; Iqbal et al., 2010) and that traditional ways of participating do not motivate children to participate (Torney-Purta et al., 2001; Loader, 2007; Bennett, 2008).

4.3 Article 3

In the third article, we present an analysis of the interviews which were conducted among 21 children. Most of these children (19) were currently using virtual worlds, and they were 11–15 years old. As a result of the analysis, we found seven social practices that describe children's participation in virtual worlds: playing, creating virtual persona, social interaction, commercial activities, expressing oneself, community activities and organizational activities.

The most popular activities among children included playing, creating virtual persona, social interaction, and commercial activities. Almost all children reported doing these activities in virtual worlds, although the performance of these activities varied according to the virtual world. Other activities, such as expressing oneself, community activities and organizational activities were also mentioned by several children. According to the interviews, children's interest in the activities is based on the possibility to "escape" from "real" life. In virtual worlds, children can do things that they could not do in "real" life, such as fly, conjure, freely play with their avatars or express themselves without parents looking at them.

The reverse side of this freedom is misbehaving which has been noticed in previous studies as well (Livingstone et al., 2011). In this study, children reported about bullying, swearing, and people who pretend in virtual worlds, for example. At its worst, this kind of misbehaving could be a problem in terms of children's privacy and safety. The children who participated in this study were, however, very aware of the risks, and they mentioned that they do not share their personal information in virtual worlds. This is a positive and a new point, because, according to many previous studies, a number of children seem to lack the necessary information about safety issues. According to EU Kids Online study, for example, only around half of the children can change privacy settings on a social networking profile (Livingstone et al., 2011).

As a result of the empirical part of the study, we presented a new version of the framework for children's online participation (Figure 8). In the

framework, children's social practices were classified according to the roles of virtual worlds in the process of participation. As a new viewpoint in the empirical study, we also presented the role of online environments as playgrounds. Thus, altogether four roles of online environments in children's participation were found, which was on line with the theoretical framework. Just like the forms of children's participation, social practices are not mutually exclusive. For example, commercial activities can be educational but they can also be social and public. Furthermore, children may learn from other practices than commercial activities as well.

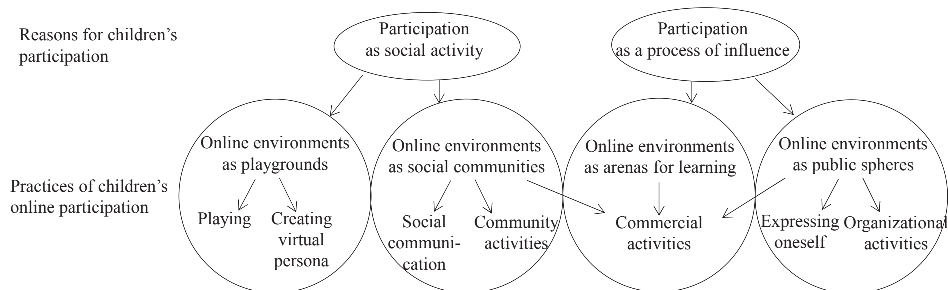

FIGURE 8 Practices in children's online participation

4.4 Article 4

In the last article, we present an analysis of 27 interviews which were conducted with 10–13 year-old children as well as parents and teachers. As a result of the study, we presented four perceived effects, which are learning and socialization, sense of community and empowerment, antisocial behavior, and threat to security. The first two effects represent opportunities whereas the two other effects are risks, and each effect consists of subcategories. There were altogether 11 subcategories. The typology presented in the article supports the previous studies on the effects of children's use of online environments (e.g. Wellman et al., 2001; Ellison et al., 2007; Noppari, Uusitalo, Kupiainen et al., 2008). Compared to the previous studies, it is exceptional, however, that the opportunity to express oneself and form a public voice was not mentioned by children and adults in this study. One reason could be that parents have rather strict control over children's use of online environments.

An important result in this article is that children, parents and teachers mainly agree with each other about the opportunities and risks of using online environments. Both children and adults identified many positive effects in online environments, such as learning new information and foreign languages, spending leisure time, communication and even empowerment: children and adults thought that it is easier in online environments to express themselves and chat about difficult issues than it is in "real" life. On the other hand, negative effects, such as overuse, lack of concentration and difficulties in

concentration on long-term tasks were identified too. Both children and adults agreed that there is also a significant amount of incorrect or inaccurate information as well as contents that are not suitable for children in the online environments. The consensus between children's and adults' viewpoints is a good starting point when children's e-safety is considered because it is possible for both children and adults to understand each other.

The biggest differences between children's and adults' viewpoints were noticed in discussions related to the role of online environments in the future and in school. Adults' viewpoints could be described as deterministic whereas children were not so radical: adults emphasized the very significant role of online environments in the future, whereas, for children, their role could be even less than it is nowadays. On the other hand, although parents and teachers considered online environments as an important part of children's future, children did not consider that online environments are sufficiently used in schools. Thus, either there is a discrepancy between what adults say and do (in general, adults decide the content of the curriculum), or children would like to use online environments more at school because they see it as a fun and enjoyable leisure time. The third difference between children's and adults' viewpoints was noticed in their awareness of the problems related to the use of online environments. For example, children reported online bullying, which was not mentioned by adults at all.

In the framework, the perceived effects of children's online participation can be seen as the consequences of the practices of children's online participation (Figure 9). The perceived effects cannot, however, be classified according to the roles of online environments in children's participation because they are related to all practices. Children, for example, can learn from all practices, and all practices are social in the sense that they can provide a sense of community and empowerment or cause antisocial behavior or a threat to security. Considering the perceived effects of certain practices would have required interviewing the same children as previously, and it was not practical in this study as the focus was on online environments in general, not only on virtual worlds. Furthermore, parents' and teachers' points of view were explored in this study.

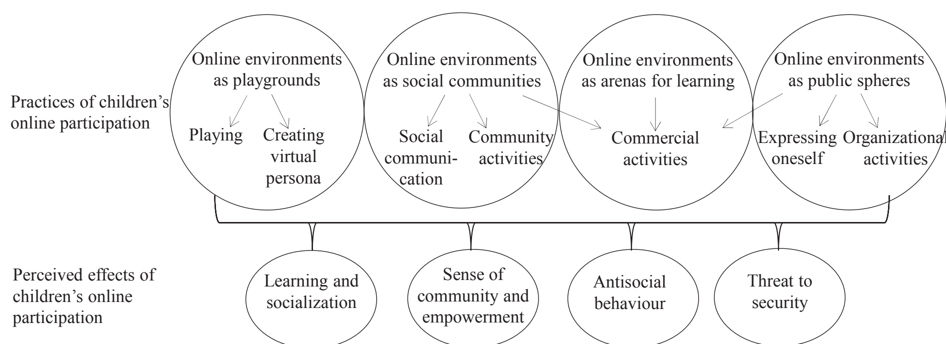

FIGURE 9 Perceived effects of children's online participation

4.5 Framework for children's online participation

The aim of the study was, based on the research literature, to create a framework for children's online participation and, using the results of the empirical study, to develop the framework further. Finally, the framework became a three-level model in which children's online participation is illustrated from the viewpoints of reasons, practices and perceived effects (Figure 10). The figure could have been much more complex but it was not possible to summarize all the information in one figure. The levels of children's participation and the spheres of children's life world are discussed more closely in the articles. The framework has been developed to illustrate the process of children's participation in online environments. In the future, it would be interesting to study whether it can be used without the viewpoint of online environments as well. Do children have the same practices of participation in the "real" world? Next, the levels of participation will be discussed more closely, using theoretical background as a basis.

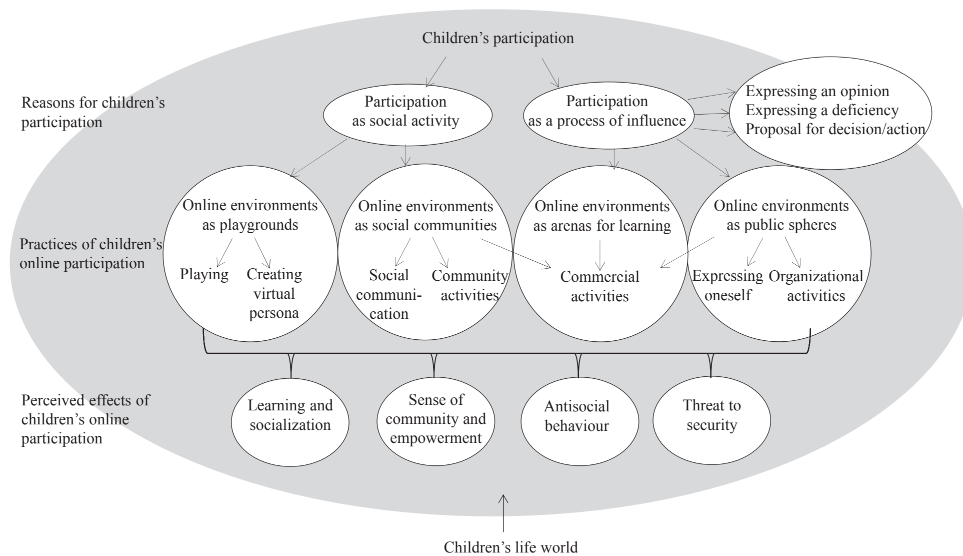

FIGURE 10 Framework for children's online participation

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Reasons for children's participation

Children have many reasons to participate in online environments. The empirical part of the study revealed that the reasons for participation can be divided, as the theoretical framework suggests, into two categories: Usually the most important reason is sociability, but some children also aimed at influencing certain issues. The reasons for children's participation are strongly related to the context. In virtual worlds, sociability is the most important reason for participation, whereas in the Finnish Children's Parliament, children actively discussed the issues that they would like to change and improve. Basically, these online environments are very different environments. Virtual worlds are often commercial environments, whereas the Children's Parliament is an arena, a structure, which is created to enhance children's opportunities to have an influence on issues. In virtual worlds, children can meet unfamiliar people, but the Children's Parliament is open only to the members of the Parliament who have met each other before in the "real" world. Moreover, the process of influence or expressing one's opinions is not an interesting thing in virtual worlds, whereas, in the Children's Parliament, the whole structure and all the activities are based on that idea. This does not mean that one kind of online environment would be better or more valuable than another one. Instead, the result indicates how significant the structure is from the viewpoint of children's agency, in online environments too (see Kiili, 2006; Williams et al., 1999).

In this study, the focus was especially on the issues that children discussed in the Children's Parliament website. Thus, the aim was to explore children's process of influence. The study indicated that the children understand and discuss different issues in a broad context. In the online parliament, children discussed the issues related to their everyday life context, but they also wanted to engage in global and macro level issues such as children's well-being, and nature and animals. Children expressed most of their opinions, deficiencies and proposals for action related to these macro level issues. The result supports the

viewpoint of social childhood studies on children as capable agents who are able to express their opinions on many different issues (Prout & James, 1997; Alanen, 2009). At the same time, the study indicates that, from the viewpoint of children's participation, there is no need to talk about the audience problem in the sense that the topics young people know best are very local and important to them, but not to many others (Levine, 2008). The idea of children's inability in terms of understanding the issues in broad exo- and macro levels refers to the traditional viewpoint of children as incompetent agents and is not valid from the viewpoint of this study.

In order to understand children's participation, it is also important to explore the issues that children did not discuss in the online parliament. The issues that have traditionally belonged to the micro-level of children's life world, such as family and home, were not emphasized in the children's discussion. As stated in Article 1, this may mean that children are satisfied with their family life (cp. Rousi, 2013). On the other hand, family and home may not be the issues that children discuss in online forums, even though the Finnish Children's Parliament is a closed environment. Online environments encourage unwanted publicity, and thus children want, and know how, to protect and keep them as closed environments (see Rosenberg, 2010). The reason why exo- and macro level issues were, instead, emphasized in children's discussions may be facelessness. In other words, children have an assumption that it is easy to have an influence on issues that are not close to themselves. In the media, for example, children probably see different kinds of collections that aim at helping children in poor countries. Participation in the issues related to everyday life is often more a face-to-face process which may provide children with concrete experiences about participation but may also make the process of influence difficult. A face-to-face context can make participation more binding, which may scare children.

It has to be emphasized that in this study, the important issues for children were explored in the Finnish Children's Parliament, which is an arena for the representative process of influence. This may also be the reason for the fact that children discussed the broad issues: as the parliament is a representative arena, the process of influence is perceived as action that aims at improving the issues that concern other people as well. If the same question had been studied in virtual worlds, the result would probably have been very different. Traditionally, representativeness is not an issue that belongs to children's world, and this is an issue that has been criticized in previous studies. Wyness (2009), for example, studied youth councils in the UK and concluded that the implementation of electoral forms of participation only reinforce existing inequalities between groups of young people. Moreover, formal structures have an effect of silencing groups of young people already marginalized within society (Wyness, 2009). The Children's Parliament and youth councils are examples of participatory practices for children in Finland but, as representative organs, they keep a large group of children outside the structural practices of participation. Online environments could be one solution

if all children’s opportunities to express their opinions are enhanced. There could be an online environment which is open to all people, though this is not enough. It is already possible to express oneself in many different ways in virtual worlds, but children do not consider this opportunity interesting. There is a need for a type of culture which considers children’s opinions important, regardless of the context.

From the viewpoint of online environments, it is essential to examine how structure could enhance children’s agency and participation. Participation as social action does not require new or specific structures as it is already possible to communicate with others in online environments. However, if participation aims at having an influence on issues, it is essential to create new structures. In the case of children and young people, it is especially important to pay attention to timing: children's expressions of opinions and deficiencies as well as proposals for action or decision should be processed as quickly as possible. If the structures are too slow, there will always be a new generation of children whose right to participate is not concretely realized. Waring (2006) has stated that agency is an essential part of being a productive citizen in a participatory democracy, and if children are expected to act, they must believe they possess the power to affect change. This means that in the process of creating structures for children’s participation, it is important to ensure that children know what happens to their opinions. Otherwise, their participation may remain token and on the level of therapy (Arnstein, 1969; Hart, 1992). Expressing opinions is not enough and, as Kiilakoski (2008) states, there is a need for a community in which real participation is possible. It means that there should be adults in children’s online environments who, in the end, make decisions concerning children. From the viewpoint of participation, it could be meaningful to take children, too, into the process of creating structures, planning and developing online environments (see Nousiainen, 2008). This could be useful for both children and adults, no matter whether the online environment aims at enhancing children’s social activities or their process of influence. Adults would learn to make better online environments, and children would get online environments which they would probably find more interesting.

It has to be emphasized that, for children, participation may not always be action that consciously aims at their having an influence on issues. However, children express themselves in many ways without considering it a process of influence. In virtual worlds, for example, children were not interested in expressing themselves but they considered chatting with others an interesting activity. This is natural for children and the action that aims at changing things on a political or societal level is traditionally an adult-centric idea (Buckingham, 2000). Thus, sociability is an important feature in children's participation: participation in the activities of online community and the experience of the possibility to control the flow of the game can be important and empowering to children. To some children, it may be even more important than the possibility to express their opinions related to climate change or the situation of poor children in the world.

5.2 Practices of children’s online participation

Children consider virtual worlds as arenas for action. In virtual worlds, they are actors in a public sphere; they play and participate in a social community and learn new skills. For children, virtual worlds represent participatory culture where they can do things and participate within the written and unwritten rules (Jenkins et al., 2006; Bartle, 2006). In virtual worlds, it is possible to do and test things, act through their own avatar, visit different virtual places, and be in interaction with the avatars that represent other users. Virtual worlds are, in this regard, special in relation to other online environments. This may be the most significant reason for the big popularity of virtual worlds among children. In this study, the exploration of the practices of children's online participation focused specifically on virtual worlds.

Virtual worlds can be considered as certain kind of miniatures of real societies (Adrian, 2009). In a virtual community, users represent citizens whose acts can be seen as acts of citizenship (Isin & Nielsen, 2008). In virtual worlds, the citizenship or the practices of participation are not, however, formal. Instead, children’s activities in virtual worlds represent the form of citizenship that Lister (2007) calls “lived citizenship”. In virtual worlds, children produce the “lived” citizenship by creating communities and organizing different activities and happenings, for example. Moreover, children buy, sell and exchange articles inside virtual worlds, just like they consume in the “real” world. It could be summarized that children's action in virtual worlds is a combination of traditional “real-world” games: in virtual worlds, playing ”house” represents decorating one’s own room, playing with dolls represents dressing one’s own avatar and playing hide-and-seek represents exploring new places (see Marsh, 2010). The virtual context does not make children’s play valueless. Instead, children's play and action in virtual worlds can be considered just as important as in the “real” world. Noveck (2006), for example, has stated that when children participate in online environments, they have to think about their identity and position as a part of a community, which helps them to develop an understanding of how the community works.

On the other hand, there are also differences between children’s social practices in virtual worlds and in the “real” world. One of these differences is the borderline between the private and public sphere. Virtual worlds are basically always public and the activities are visible to all those who have logged in. This may be the case in the “real” world as well, but often there is not such a big audience in children's local environment. In virtual worlds, there are private spaces as well, just as the home represents the private sphere in the “real” world (see Habermas et al., 1974). In virtual worlds, this private space may be a child’s own room which is restricted to a certain user group. Although children could act privately in virtual worlds, they have, interestingly, a desire to act publicly and to be seen (see Leung, 2009). In virtual worlds, children may ask other users to comment on the appearance of their avatars or they may

organize competitions in their private rooms where they ask other avatars to come in. The reason for this desire may be in the experience that virtual worlds offer as a safe place to be seen. This means that there is no need to reveal one's identity in the virtual worlds and thus, there is nothing to lose if one wants to try out a different appearance, for example. In this study, children strongly emphasized their freedom to do whatever they want as the best thing in virtual worlds.

The desire to be publicly seen does not mean, however, that children would not respect the privacy of virtual worlds. According to this study, children are very aware of their privacy settings and they do not share their personal information, for example. Moreover, only a few and carefully selected people are welcome to the clubs that children have established by themselves. Thus, the need for privacy has not disappeared though, at the societal level, children have moved from the private to the public sphere (see Cockburn, 2005). It could be stated that the private sphere has become even more important as people do not want to reveal too much of themselves (see Rosenberg, 2010). From children's point of view, protecting privacy is an important and nowadays very well-known issue. In this study, for example, the children said that they discuss issues related to privacy in online environments with their parents. One reason for the increased awareness of the risks related to virtual worlds could be the common trend in society to see everything as risks. Beck (1992), for example, talked about the risk society, which refers to the increased uncertainty of society. This means that people regard different factors as risks and evaluate them more carefully than before.

Considering the practices of children's online participation, it has to be stated that children are not a uniform group of virtual world users. Instead, they use virtual worlds in very different ways. This study indicated that some children want to play, some want to change the appearance of their avatars and, for some children, the most important activity is to chat with others (cp. Johnson & Toiskallio, 2007). Children also participate in virtual world activities with different intensities. Some children mentioned that they only check comments and discussions in online environments, whereas other children said that they spent a lot of time there, developing their avatar, discussing and playing. Thus, there are both contributors and collaborators (Fischer, 2011). Furthermore, there are children and young people who do not want to participate at all in virtual worlds. In this study, 25% of the children said that they use virtual worlds, which means that most children and young people do not use them, usually because of their lack of interest in them. One reason for the lack of interest in virtual worlds may be children's experience of virtual worlds as places for younger children, although the biggest user group in virtual worlds is the focus group of this study, children aged 10–15 years (KZero, 2011).

What then can we say about children's participation in general, based on the practices of children's online participation? At least it could be argued that part of the children's social practices has been transferred or copied from the

“real” world to the virtual worlds. Instead of going to friends' homes to play with cars or dolls after school, many children today go home, sit in front of the computer and log into the virtual world where they meet the same friends that they have just met at school. In the virtual world, they may chat about the school day, play and try out new hairdos or clothes on their avatars. Using the virtual world may also be a way for children to be seen and heard if they feel the same opportunity is lacking in their real world. In virtual worlds, children can create unique avatars, and get feedback on them, which form children's understanding of the important, accepted issues and social norms. Compared to participation in the real world, there is a huge potential in virtual worlds because all the important elements, such as practicality and sociability, are in their structure. Thus, the elements that are important from the viewpoint of children's participation are not dependent on the motivation of single agents.

5.3 Perceived effects of children’s online participation

Children's online participation has many positive and negative perceived effects on children's lives. Based on this study, the effects are considered pervasive: they concern children's social life, their process of socializing in society, as well as their learning and safety factors. Thus, it can be stated that online environments are a part of every sector of children’s lives. The results are significant not only from a single child's point of view but also from the viewpoint of society. Threats to children’s security, such as the increase in children's difficulties in concentrating on long-term tasks, undoubtedly have an effect on the everyday life of families and schools, as well as on the ability of parents and teachers to cope, and thus on health services and their costs. Similarly, antisocial behavior, such as online bullying, is a problem that has an influence on children's and young people's well-being, and on the whole of society, too. From the viewpoint of society, a positive opportunity can be seen, on the other hand, by the potential that online environments bring in promoting children's learning (see Buckingham, 2007). Also, the positive effects of sociability in online environments, such as empowerment, are important in a broader context because these effects enhance children's well-being.

Although the effects of children’s online participation are seen as pervasive, participants in this study did not report the effects related to childhood itself. Only one parent mentioned that children have become more materialistic. Thus, childhood was not considered as a shortened or changed phase of life because of online environments, as researchers feared at the beginning of the 2000s (Buckingham, 2000). In this regard, the study supports the previous study by Plowman et al. (2010). They found no evidence to suggest that children’s childhood could be described as toxic or that family life is being undermined. According to Plowman et al. (2010), it is not the technologies that determine whether a family communicates, plays together or supports their child’s learning but rather their cultural practices and values. Although online

environments are a significant part of children's lives, they have not changed childhood itself, at least according to this study.

On the other hand, the role of online environments in children's lives was an issue that divided the opinions of children and adults. Mostly, their opinions differed in terms of the viewpoint of children as agents in the context of the effects. The adults mainly had technology deterministic viewpoints: they emphasized that children must learn to use online environments because information and communication technology is an important part of their future. Thus, children are seen as passive agents who have to resign themselves to their fate and follow this development as the structures of technology dominate their lives. In children's own viewpoints, agency had a more significant role and the role of the online environments in their lives was seen as important but not as totally pervasive. The children considered online environments more as a tool, and not as valuable in themselves. The notion of children's agency is interesting because the effects of children's online participation can be seen in a different light depending on the viewpoint on children's agency. As active agents, children can learn, get empowered and in a negative case, also behave in an antisocial way in online environments. As passive agents, children are vulnerable to bad things in online environments and they socialize in society by using them. Of course, this classification is not mutually exclusive and there were also adults who considered children as active agents and children who talked about online environments in a way that emphasized children as more passive agents.

What then is the reason for the differences between the viewpoints of children and adults? One reason might be the differences between the generations that the children and the adults represent. Adults have seen the days when technology did not yet dominate life. Thus, the change from the previous society to the network society appears very substantial to them, and single actors are seen as being rather powerless in this change. Instead, children have always lived in an environment where technology is everywhere. Thus, online environments are everyday tools for them and they do not consider agency in the same way as adults do, as a subject that has changed along with the structures. In this regard, there seems to be a division between the different generations, digital natives and digital immigrants, but in the opposite way that Prensky (2001) stated. Prensky stated that digital immigrants do not appreciate the skills of using technology, but in this study they were digital immigrants, namely, adults who considered it very important that children learn to use online environments.

Children's and adults' viewpoints differed in some other issues as well. There were some issues that children mentioned but adults did not recognize or just did not mention in this study. One of these issues was online bullying, which is a serious problem among children. Respectively, the adults talked about issues that children did not pay attention to. These issues included, for example, changes in sociability and some positive effects such as developing long-term working skills. In general, adults also talked about the effects on an

abstract level, whereas children discussed the effects on a concrete level. This is natural, as children are at the developmental phase when their ability to think independently increases, but they may have not reached yet the formal operational stage of cognitive development (Dunderfelt, 2011). Thus, adults are able to recognize and name the abstract effects that may be unfamiliar to children. It is problematic, however, that children talked about the problems that adults did not mention. This raises a question about the role of adults: Do adults know what happens in children's online environments? According to previous studies as well, online bullying is a serious problem that adults should take seriously (see Livingstone et al., 2013). The problem is, however, that bullying in online environments is an even more difficult phenomenon than in the "real" world. In online environments, it is very easy to break the unwritten rules (see Bartle, 2006) and to do and say things behind the anonymous avatars. According to this study, online bullying refers to negative name-calling or leaving someone out of the community, for example.

Although the children and adults in this study together discussed children's use of online environments, there still seems to be a need to increase the interaction between children and adults. There is often discussion in the media about the worst scenarios such as violence and sexual abuse in online environments (Herring, 2008) but from the point of view of children, the real problems are often related to "small-scale" situations that pass by soon but which leave children with a bad feeling. Thus, adults should constantly be aware about what happens in children's online environments. Moreover, media education could be one solution to prevent the risks and threats. It should be a part of general childrearing both at school and at home (Aaltonen, 2009; Kupiainen, Suoninen, Kotilainen et al., 2012).

6 CONCLUSION

6.1 Theoretical and practical implications

In this study, I have created a Finnish perspective on children's use of online environments, which is a relatively new and unknown field in social childhood studies. The framework for children's online participation, developed in this study, provides an analytical tool for exploring children's online participation. It could also work without the viewpoint of online environments, when exploring children's participation, though there is a need for more research on this topic. The study focuses on children’s participation particularly in virtual worlds. This is only one type of an online environment, but in terms of the numbers of users it is an essential and less studied section of online environments. The study can be placed in many disciplines, such as social sciences, educational sciences and information technology. The multidisciplinary viewpoint is needed to obtain as comprehensive a picture of children's online participation as possible.

Theoretically the study operates with the concepts of agency and structure, which are typical in the field of social childhood studies. The relation between the concepts is considered as multidimensional and context-based in this study. Children are seen as agents in online environments, although the structures, online environments designed and made by adults, create an arena for children’s agency and participation. Moreover, the life world perspective is used as a theoretical basis in the study. From the viewpoint of social childhood studies, it is an only rarely used perspective, although it could provide an interesting way to look at children’s use of online environments and their participation in general. In this study, the life world perspective provided a systematic way to look at the issues that children want to participate in, thereby presenting the reasons for children’s participation.

On a practical level, the study provides useful information about children's participation and their use of online environments particularly for parents, teachers, decision-makers and people who work with children and

young people. The study may also be useful for people who design and develop online environments for children and young people, because these designers try to find the most interesting features and activities from the viewpoint of children.

6.2 Limitations

As in all social research, there are limitations to this study. These limitations have to be noticed when the validity and reliability of this study are evaluated. The most important limitations in this study are related to small sample sizes and to the selection of the participants. A small amount of data was used in this study, and thus the results cannot be extensively generalized. This is, however, typical of qualitative research which does not even aim at generalizations. The aim of qualitative research is usually to understand the phenomenon and to find explanations (Alasuutari, 2007). As there was a small amount of data, and as participation in the study was voluntary, the participants do not represent the whole population. This is typical of qualitative research. For example, people who participated in the interviews were interested in the theme, and the parents had a higher level of education than the average in Finland. Moreover, the online discussion presented in the first article represents the viewpoint of a particular group of children. The discussants were members of the Finnish Children's Parliament, and they represent only a small and perhaps more proactive sample of Finnish children.

The data was collected in a particular area of Finland, which also naturally prevents the generalizability of the results. According to Statistics Finland (Tilastokeskus, 2012), people who live in cities tend to use online environments more often than people who live in the countryside. In this study, interview and survey data were mainly collected in a city which is located in Central Finland. Only a small minority of the participants lived in the countryside. As the focus of the study is on online environments that develop all the time, the time of the data collection has to be noticed too. Development is fast particularly in the field of virtual worlds, and new worlds appear every day. In this study, the data was collected in spring 2010 and in autumn 2012, which means that some of the online environments that were popular among the participants then may not be the most popular today. As the user accounts are examined (KZero, 2013), however, the virtual worlds that children mentioned using at the time of the data collection are still popular among children and young people.

In qualitative research, a researcher's prejudices, and the same researcher's reflection on his or her prejudices, are always a part of the research process (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001). In this study, I, too, reflected on my prejudices and presuppositions during the research process by discussing my viewpoints and experiences with colleagues, for example. I wrote the articles and collected the part of the data with other researchers. In particular, we had many discussions about the concept of the value of children's participation that

worked as a basis and as a starting point for this study. It was important to make clear to ourselves that we explore children's viewpoints and experiences about participation and online environments as objectively as possible, without using our own viewpoints about participation as a starting point for the analysis. Similarly, it was essential to keep in mind that the presupposition of children's participation as a valuable entity is actually a very culturally bounded ideal and is typical especially of western countries. I tried to improve the reliability of the study by using many methods to collect the data, by reporting the steps of the study as accurately as possible, and by comparing previous studies with the results of this study. The results of this study were indeed in many respects supported by earlier studies.

6.3 Recommendations for further research

There are many themes and topics that would be interesting and useful to explore more closely in the future. In this study, I touched on the issues related to children's identity and consumption. Because of the focus of this study, however, I did not explore those topics more closely. It would be interesting to explore how children's and young people's identity develops in online environments. There is also a need to explore children's commercial activities in online environments and the amount of money children spend there. Moreover, it would be interesting to examine the impact of using online environments on children's consumption habits in "real" life. As these themes are multidimensional by nature, both quantitative and qualitative analyses are needed. Virtual ethnography, in particular, could be a useful method to obtain as realistic a picture of children's online activities as possible.

Children's online participation needs to be studied further. As the aim of this study was to map out a new and unknown area, the next phase is to explore the ways in which online environments could be used as a tool for directly listening to children's opinions and experiences. How could we use online environments as a tool for children to participate and make their voices heard when adults in municipalities and in society make decisions for them? There is a need for action research which aims at developing the kind of online environment that promotes children's participation, in particular. This needs to be done in cooperation with children and adults, including decision-makers. This would be a very important project from the viewpoint of society, but there is not much of that kind of research so far (see Bers & Chau, 2006). More research is also needed on the ways how online environments could be used for civic education. Based on this study, online environments are already informal arenas for children's civic education, but they also have potential for formal civic education.

There is also a good reason to explore the significance of different devices in children's online participation. Nowadays, computers are no longer the only way to access online environments, because children and young people use the

internet with smartphones and tablets as well. Thus, an interesting question arises: what kind of effect does this have on their use of online environments? Moreover, it would be beneficial to take the differences between the various online environments into consideration in further studies. Different online services develop quickly, so it would be important to continually gather information about children's online participation.

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TIIVISTELMÄ

Verkkoympäristöt ovat tänä päivänä keskeinen osa lasten jokapäiväistä elämää. Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoituksena on lisätä vanhempien, opettajien, kasvattajien ja päätöksentekijöiden ymmärrystä lasten verkkoympäristöjen käytöstä sekä siihen liittyvistä mahdollisuuksista ja riskeistä. Tutkimuksessa kehitetään lasten verkko-osallistumisen viitekehys tarkastelemalla lasten verkko-osallistumisen ulottuvuuksia. Näitä ulottuvuuksia ovat lasten verkko-osallistumisen syyt, käytännöt ja havaitut vaikutukset. Tutkimus on luonteeltaan monitieteinen ja sen taustana on yhteiskuntatieteellinen lapsuustutkimus.

Tutkimuksen empiirinen osuus toteutettiin vuosina 2010–2012 Suomessa. Tutkimus toteutettiin neljässä vaiheessa. Ensimmäiseen tutkimuskysymykseen ”mitkä ovat syyt lasten osallistumiselle?” vastattiin tarkastelemalla Suomen Lasten Parlamentin verkkokeskustelua. Yhteensä 61 lasta osallistui keskusteluun 566 kommentilla. Toiseen tutkimuskysymykseen ”mitkä ovat lasten verkko-osallistumisen käytännöt?” vastattiin toteuttamalla kysely, johon osallistui 126 henkilöä. Lisäksi ymmärrystä osallistumisen käytännöistä syvennettiin toteuttamalla haastatteluja 21 lapsen kanssa, jotka olivat iältään 11–15-vuotiaita. Kolmanteen tutkimuskysymykseen ”mitkä ovat lasten verkko-osallistumisen havaitut vaikutukset?” vastattiin toteuttamalla ja analysoimalla haastatteluja, joihin osallistui 13 iältään 11–13-vuotiasta lasta, 7 vanhempaa ja 7 opettajaa. Analyysimenetelmänä käytettiin sisällönanalyysia.

Tutkimuksen mukaan lapset osallistuvat verkkoympäristöissä pääasiassa ollakseen sosiaalisessa vuorovaikutuksessa muiden kanssa. Verkkokeskustelujen perusteella Suomen Lasten Parlamentin jäsenet osoittivat myös halua osallistua ja vaikuttaa kansainvälisiin asioihin, kuten lasten hyvinvointiin köyhissä maissa. Virtuaalimaailmoissa lasten osallistumisen käytäntöjä ovat pelaaminen, oman virtuaalihahmon luominen, yhteydenpito toisten kanssa, taloudellinen toiminta, itsen ilmaiseminen, osallistuminen yhteisölliseen toimintaan sekä toiminnan järjestäminen. Lapset, vanhemmat ja opettajat havaitsivat verkkoympäristöjen käytöllä olevan monia positiivisia ja negatiivisia vaikutuksia lasten elämään. Mahdollisuuksia ovat oppiminen ja sosialisaatio sekä yhteisöllisyyden tunne ja voimaantuminen. Riskejä ovat epäsosiaalinen käyttäytyminen, kuten kiusaaminen sekä verkkoympäristöissä olevat turvallisuusuhat, kuten väärän tiedon levittäminen.

ORIGINAL PAPERS

I

CHILDREN’S LIFE WORLD AS A PERSPECTIVE ON THEIR CITIZENSHIP: THE CASE OF THE FINNISH CHILDREN’S PARLIAMENT

by

Terhi Tuukkanen, Marja Kankaanranta & Terhi-Anna Wilska, 2012

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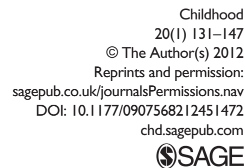

Children's life world as a perspective on their citizenship: The case of the Finnish Children's Parliament

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Abstract
The latest childhood studies present children's citizenship as a process of engaging in matters related to children themselves in their everyday lives. However, only a few studies have been conducted on what those issues are and what they actually tell about children's citizenship. This study explores the nature of children's participation and citizenship by adopting a life world perspective. The aim is to examine what kind of issues children want to participate in and influence. The data are drawn from an online discussion in the Finnish Children's Parliament. Altogether 61 children participated in the discussion, with 566 postings. The analysis of the children's online discussion shows that children comment mainly on issues that directly impact their lives, such as school. However, they also want to engage in issues that are global in nature, such as children's general well-being.

Keywords
Children, citizenship, life world, online discussion, participation

Children's life world as a perspective on their citizenship

Children's opportunities to participate in the discussion of issues related to their own lives and their roles as citizens have been discussed increasingly in the fields of research and politics during the past decades. Children have gained attention especially in sociological studies: instead of being seen as entities who merely internalize the existing rules and culture of society, they are nowadays seen as agents who actively contribute to society (Alanen, 1992; Corsaro, 2005; James et al., 1998; Kehily, 2009; Mayall, 2002; Prout and James, 1997; Wells, 2009). In recent years, the viewpoint on children in the research

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process has changed, with the focus nowadays more often on research *with* children, rather than *on* children (Christensen and James, 2008).

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child was introduced in 1989 in the attempt to increase children's participation in decision-making across the world. The Convention obligates politicians, teachers and other adults to listen to children's opinions, and it entitles children to special protection and care, adequate provision of resources by society and participation in the decision-making concerning them. In Finland, this obligation is supported by national laws passed to ensure the opportunities for children to participate and have their say. The aim of the Finnish Youth Act, for example, is to improve young people's active citizenship, by obligating municipalities to provide young people with opportunities to take part in the handling of matters concerning local and regional youth work and youth policy. The Basic Education Act entitles children to participate in student associations and have an opportunity to put forward their opinions about matters relating to the operation of their schools.

Despite these principles, children's participation can be seen as an aspiration rather than a fact. For example, possibilities to become involved in school-related matters are not as successful as children would hope for (Nordic Study on Child Rights to Participate, 2009–2010). This may also be related to children's school satisfaction, which is quite low in Finland (Inequalities in Young People's Health, 2008). Children are often seen as 'half-citizens', for being dependent on adults. For example, Lister (2007) argued that children need protection, which makes it problematic to consider children as equal citizens with adults. There has been critical discussion about the Convention as well, which, according to some researchers, is not a solution for improving children's status as citizens (Invernizzi and Milne, 2005; Milne, 2005). The problem is, according to Milne (2005), that the Convention neither provides children with political rights nor elucidates the duties that accompany the rights. Thus, if citizenship is approached from a traditional viewpoint, which emphasizes the rights and responsibilities of citizens, the criteria of citizenship are not fulfilled by children (Lister, 2007).

It has also been difficult to define children's participation accurately. According to Skelton and Valentine (2003), children and adults may perceive what constitutes participation differently. In addition, previous studies on participation and citizenship typically have focused on young adults. Thus, participation has often been defined as politically oriented civic engagement, such as initiatives for the government, or alternatively as civic participation, which refers to, for example, social activism or initiatives based on single-issue campaigns (see Banaji and Buckingham, 2010; Loader, 2007). The concepts of participation and citizenship have not been established for children under age 13.

Instead of using the traditional and narrow definition of citizenship, a new, broader, child-centred and everyday-related definition of citizenship has been proposed (Bell, 2005). According to Jans (2004), for example, children can be seen as citizens when citizenship is understood as a playful and ambivalent concept that is related to people's everyday life. Similarly, Buckingham (2000) emphasized the role of children's everyday experiences in the definition of citizenship. He criticized the discourse that reproaches children for being apathetic towards politics and argues that the lack of children's interest in formal politics should be understood as 'part of the condition of being a child'. Thus, instead of seeing citizenship as participation in formal politics, there is a need for

adopting a broader definition of politics that recognizes the potentially political dimensions of children's everyday experiences.

The aim of this study is to explore what children's participation and citizenship are. Which issues are important for children in their life world, and which issues do they wish to be engaged in? In this article, we present results of a study which explored the topics and issues that children presented to the Finnish Children's Parliament. The Parliament is an institution that provides 9- to 13-year-old children with an opportunity to express opinions and influence issues related to children. It is maintained by the Finnish Children's Parliament Foundation, which is funded by the Ministry of Education and Culture in Finland. By exploring the content of the children's participation, we highlight the topics and issues that are important for Finnish children as citizens. Thereby, we develop a richer understanding of what citizenship is from Finnish children's viewpoint.

Life world perspective and children's citizenship

The life world perspective is used in sociology to describe and analyse the lived world of everyday life. Life world consists of the physical and social worlds experienced by an individual; it is both a personal and intersubjective reality which people modify through their acts and which, on the other hand, modifies their actions (Schutz and Luckmann, 1973). Habermas (1987) also stated that the life world consists of communicative action. One way to analyse children's life world is to distinguish the private sphere – home, school and family – from the public sphere – public services, organizations and political discourse (Cockburn, 2005; Sinclair, 2004). According to Habermas (1987), private and public spheres are socially integrated spheres of action in the life world that stand against the systems of economy and state (see Baxter, 1987).

Another way to analyse and illustrate children's life world is to use the ecological model of children's development (Figure 1). According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), one of the developers of the ecological theory, children's development can be delineated by four types of nested systems. These systems are (1) microsystem: the child's immediate surroundings, such as family, home and friends; (2) mesosystem: the interrelations between microsystems, for example home and school; (3) exosystem: the external settings that do not directly influence the child, such as a parent's place of work or the activities of the

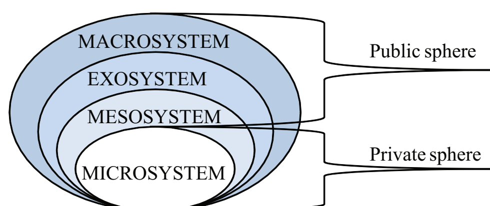

Figure 1. Children's life world based on the ecological model of children's development.
Note: See Bronfenbrenner (1979), Cockburn (2005) and Sinclair (2004).

local school board; and (4) macrosystem: the larger sociocultural context. Children's development refers in this model to the effects that the interaction between a child and his/her environments has on the child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In the model presented in Figure 1, the private sphere refers to the microsystem whereas the other three systems constitute the public sphere. The borderline between the private and the public is, however, diffuse as the actions that traditionally have been seen as pertinent to the public sphere have now important ramifications for all of people's seemingly 'private lives' (Cockburn, 2005).

In this study, the ecological approach to children's development is used as a framework for describing and analysing the observed issues in an online discussion in the Finnish Children's Parliament that the children commented on and expressed interest in influencing. Thus, these issues illustrate the life world of children today. Earlier, children's place in society was merely in the private sphere, meaning within the home and family (James et al., 1998). Nowadays, children's life is increasingly shaped by outside social forces and children spend more time in institutions such as schools, nurseries and after-school clubs (Cockburn, 2005). This has changed the context of children's participation. Media have played an essential role in extending children's participatory field. They have added information about the world and provided children with opportunities to participate in worldwide matters (Kangassalo and Suoranta, 2001). Rheingold (2008) lists blogs, wikis and podcasting as examples of this new kind of participatory media.

The extension of children's life world has increased expectations of children's abilities to participate and, thus, children's position as citizens is now closer to adult citizenship. For example, media and consumption are permanent parts of children's lives today, even to the extent that childhood is believed to have become shorter or disappeared (Buckingham, 2000; Wilska, 2004). Children not only adopt adult-like ways of behaving and dressing (Suoranta, 2001) but also are very aware of many social themes, such as the environment and peace (Jans, 2004). Howe and Covell (2005) sketched a picture, albeit a fictional one, of child citizens having the right but also the responsibility to participate in the discussion of global problems, such as the environment, poverty and the effects of war.

In society, children's awareness of global themes is often considered a solid base for future citizenship and only rarely a base for actual citizenship (Jans, 2004). Furthermore, children are often regarded as beings who always need protection and whose place is thus solely in the private sphere. Buckingham and Tingstad (2010) examined these polarized viewpoints in the context of consumption, where children are seen either as powerful agents or passive victims. They argued that in order to develop a more complex account of how children relate to commercial markets, it is necessary to look beyond these opposing positions. The same applies to children's participation and citizenship: instead of merely talking about children as competent or incompetent citizens, we should actually explore the 'child-sized' citizenship. Then, an essential question is what kind of matters children want to participate in and thus, which issues are relevant for children regarding their life in general?

According to the Nordic Study on Child Rights to Participate (2010), children wish to engage in the discussion of matters related to their private sphere, such as the use of their own money, the choice of school, their perspectives on the content of school curricula

and lessons, and home-related issues such as the decor of one's room. In a survey carried out by the Ombudsman for Children in Finland (Tuononen, 2008), it was found that friends, family and home, as well as hobbies and pets, bring joy to children and young people, whereas arguments, bullying and concern about the well-being of loved ones can lead to sadness and worrying. In addition, global issues such as wars and questions related to inequality and the environment were also mentioned as reasons for children and young people's unhappiness and worry.

Research design

The Finnish Children's Parliament as an arena for children's participation

In many countries, children's councils at schools and municipalities have been seen as good investments for improving not only the local environment but also student development (McGinley and Grieve, 2010; Yamashita and Davies, 2010). Recently, the role and potential of online environments in enhancing children's participation has been observed as well. This study focuses on the activity of the national Finnish Children's Parliament, which is an example of an institution that utilizes both the Internet and face-to-face interaction. Child parliaments have been introduced in many countries to ensure children a democratic citizenship (Van Bueren, 2011). The national children's parliament was established in Finland in 2007. Nowadays, there are also more than 20 municipalities in Finland which have a local children's parliament.

The Finnish Children's Parliament is aimed at 9- to 13-year-old children. The purpose of the Parliament is to provide children with opportunities to participate in and influence issues related to their lives. In the Parliament, members can express their opinions on any topic they want. Additionally, authorities and other adults have the right to ask children's opinions on different issues. Annually, multiple in-person meetings are organized for the Board of the Children's Parliament and a plenary session for all the representatives is held. There is also a 'virtual building' on the Internet, where the children can chat, discuss, respond to surveys submitted by decision-makers and participate in multiple two-week-long online plenary sessions. Only the representatives and the adult tutors have access to the virtual parliament.

In 2010, there were about 400 representatives from all over Finland in the national children's parliament. The appointed representatives act under the mandates given to them by their municipalities. The way how they become representatives depends on the municipality; the representatives are chosen by a headteacher or another teacher, or in some municipalities, teachers may organize elections at school in order for students to elect the representative. A parliamentary term lasts two years and, after that, new members are selected. The child representatives elect their own board and the committees which meet once in a week to discuss certain topics. In 2010, there were committees on the environment, school, health, free time, friends, animal protection and children's rights. At the start of each Parliament term, a chairperson and board are elected by the current representatives. All members are free to stand for the elections and they can campaign by discussing and presenting their opinions and views to their peers in the online

environment. The children's activities in the Parliament are supported and guided by the adults employed by the Children's Parliament Foundation.

Research question and method

The aim of this study is to build a richer understanding of what children's participation and citizenship are from their own viewpoint by adopting a life world perspective. The focus is on which issues children commented on in the Finnish Children's Parliament online discussion that comprises the data, which issues children wanted to engage in and thus, what topics are relevant for children in their life worlds. In order to answer these questions, we analysed the children's online discussion. The discussion forum (Figure 2) was created for the representatives to present their opinions during the spring 2010 elections for the Board of the Finnish Children's Parliament. The elections were organized to choose the members of the Board, which meets weekly to discuss the current issues and to coordinate activities in the Parliament. Participation by the delegates was voluntary, and the themes of the discussion were not specified in advance. However, the online discussion was framed by a short introduction: 'Here the candidates can present their opinions about different things and campaign. Other representatives can also ask the candidates questions. It is allowed to start new discussions in this page.' The children's discussions were in Finnish and the translations are provided by the researcher.

Altogether 61 children took part in the discussions, with 566 postings. The children were 10 to 13 years old and there were 42 girls and 19 boys. Two adults

Figure 2. The online discussion forum in the Finnish Children's Parliament.

moderated the discussions in the case of seven postings, as there was a need, for example, to remind the children not to share their personal information. The discussion was distributed among 47 different themes defined primarily by the children. Two themes were introduced by an adult in order to create a space for children to ask the candidates questions. Otherwise, the children freely chose the themes and started the discussions independently. The children and their parents were informed of the research project at the beginning of the parliamentary season and consent for the research was received from the Board of the Finnish Children's Parliament Foundation. None of the parents or children declined to participate in the study. The children's anonymity was assured by removing their names and user names from the data before the analysis.

In order to analyse the content of the children's online discussion, we adopted a qualitative content analysis approach. Content analysis is a research method for making replicable and valid references from data to their contexts (Krippendorff, 2004) and it can be used for analysing online discussions as well (Wimmer and Dominick, 2006). At the heart of content analysis is the category system, which can be established in two different ways, namely emergent coding or a priori coding (Wimmer and Dominick, 2006). In our analysis, we selected emergent coding, in which categories are established based on common themes that arise from the data. We first made a list of topics that the children presented in the discussion and, after that, classified the children's discussions into larger categories. After this phase, we had 47 files classified into 13 subcategories. We continued the classification by selectively combining the subcategories into even larger categories that represent the main themes and the issues that children commented on. In the second phase of our analysis, we focused on the issues that children wanted to engage in or influence. We continued the analysis by classifying the children's comments into categories based on how children presented their comments.

Results

We first present the results of the initial phase of our analysis, which focused on the issues that the children commented on in the online discussion. In the second subsection, the focus is on the issues that the children wanted to influence.

Issues that children commented on

The children's discussions were classified into seven main themes. Table 1 illustrates that the most prevalent theme in the discussion was education and the school environment. The second most prevalent theme was respect for and treatment of others and the theme of children's well-being was third, comprising 14% of the comments. Other themes, such as nature and animals, hobbies and local environment, comprised fewer than 10% of the comments. The category of 'miscellaneous', encompassing the children's questions to the candidates as well as the introductory discussion, represented 10% of all the comments. In addition to the primary themes, Table 1 also contains the subthemes presented in the following paragraphs.

Table 1. The amount and percentage of children's comments classified into the main and subthemes.

Main themes	Subthemes	Number of comments	Percentage of comments
Education and school environment	Teaching and lessons School services Ability to have influence at school Behaviour at school School environment	213	38
Relations with other people	Behaviour and treatment of others Respecting self and others	125	22
Children's well-being	Situation in Finland International solidarity	81	14
Nature and animals	Conservation and own behaviour Value and treatment of animals	52	9
Hobbies	Hobbies	23	4
Local environment	Local environment	18	3
Miscellaneous	–	54	10
Total		566	100

Education and school environment. The children's comments relating to education and the school environment were divided into five subcategories. These subcategories are:

- teaching and lessons (67 comments);
- behaviour at school (48);
- school services (46);
- ability to have influence at school (27);
- school environment (25).

First, the children criticized teachers' habit of announcing in the class the results of or mistakes made in exams. According to the children, the results should be kept private because, at some schools, announcing them has caused bullying and embarrassment. Second, children paid attention to the amount of homework assigned, which varies considerably among schools. Third, some children argued for an increase in physical education in order to help them concentrate on other lessons. On the other hand, some children argued that an increase in physical education would mean a need to reduce the number of lessons in other subjects if the total number of lessons was not increased. Most children did not, however, want to increase the total number of lessons at school.

With respect to behaviour at school, many children saw bullying as a problem that should be addressed as soon as possible, because it may lead to bigger problems, such as shootings. According to the children, there are several good conciliation methods to resolve such issues, such as peer mediation or the KiVa programme,[1] which involves

indicated actions to prevent bullying and to tackle cases of bullying coming to attention. Furthermore, many children paid attention to teachers' behaviour: teachers should be role models for children and not, for instance, smoke or take snuff in the school area. In order to get help and friends at school, children considered the buddy system, in which older students monitor and help younger students, as an important and useful thing for young students.

Children would develop the school services by investing in the better availability of a school nurse. Nowadays, school nurses often serve multiple schools and are not on campus full-time:

> We don't have a nurse at the school every day. It's a bad thing because we need the nurse. I don't understand why municipalities put money in some unnecessary things. I think that health care should take priority over some entertainment or buildings. (Boy 8, 11 years old)

Second, some children called for equality in school meals. According to these children, there is too big a difference between school meals, in both quality and quantity. Third, children considered it important to have organized after-school activities in every school.

In many children's opinion, students should be able to participate in the decision-making regarding their school and the school's investments. However, this is not always possible. Some children also suspected that the money is used for teachers' benefit. On the other hand, some students felt that they have a possibility to participate in decision-making through student councils. The student councils are organized in many Finnish schools to promote joint action, influence and participation of the pupils in matters relating to them. The student council is usually composed of all students from one school and they elect the members for the board of the student council. The organization of the student councils is decided by the education provider in Finland. According to these children, there should be a student council at every school.

With regard to the school environment, the children emphasized the importance of having small village schools, and most of the children opposed closing them down. The children considered such schools as peaceful and good environments for studying. Most children also criticized the availability of soft drink machines at schools as they think soft drinks are unhealthy.

Relations with other people. Another prevalent discussion point among the children was relations with other people. Based on the children's discussion, this main theme was divided into two subcategories:

- behaviour and treatment of others (67 comments);
- respecting self and others (58).

Regarding behaviour and the treatment of others, many children presented their own experiences and discussed the principles of honesty, teasing, discrimination and swearing. As a whole, the children agreed that lying, swearing and all kinds of bullying are always 'stupid' and have negative consequences. Many children also had personal

experiences about these negative things. Some had been teased and some had had a friend who proved to be a liar:

> It's never worthwhile lying, you will be caught anyway. It's true that even friends go away quite soon if you lie enough. (Girl 10, 12 years old)

Many children also expressed their opinions about respecting themselves and others, particularly allowing people to be themselves. Although the children thought that nobody should be bullied for being different, it does happen. Many children reported that they had been denigrated because they succeed at school. In this respect, children thought friends are important because they help and give support. Furthermore, people should, according to many children, be pleased with themselves because people too often understate their achievements.

Children's well-being. The third theme in the children's online discussion was children's well-being. Based on the discussion, this main theme was divided into two subcategories:

- children's welfare in Finland (46 comments);
- international solidarity (35).

First of all, the children discussed problems and depression, and criticized financial savings made at children's expense. Many children argued that the lack of attention to children by adults and parents' drinking, for instance, cause problems in children's family life and at school. In order to solve such problems, many children emphasized the role and help of school personnel: they should be available and close enough to students to assist, if needed. Special attention should, according to some children, be paid to children's depression. Some children criticized municipalities that save money by cutting funding for services aimed at or beneficial to children's lives. These children thought that the municipalities spend too much money on unnecessary things when at the same time, for example, school meals are getting worse. In general, however, many children thought that things are very good in Finland.

International solidarity appeared in the children's discussion as they talked about the need to help poor and hungry children. According to several discussants, poor people can be aided through different charity collections, such as street collections, as well as by participating in different fundraising campaigns and activities. Avoiding unnecessary investments could also, in some children's opinion, help save money that could be used for the benefit of poor people:

> I think that we Finnish people should donate to the collections because most of the people can afford to give a couple of euros to Haiti or other countries. (Boy 3, 11 years old)

Nature and animals. The fourth theme in the children's online discussion was nature and animals. Children's discussion on this theme was divided into two subcategories:

- conservation and one's own behaviour (39 comments);
- the value and treatment of animals (13).

The pollution of the environment as well as climate change aroused concern among children. The condition of the Baltic Sea was of particular concern to the children. On the other hand, most children were generally optimistic about the future state of nature and the climate, and encouraged people to think about their own consumption in everyday life. Several children were concerned about the value and treatment of animals as well. According to these children, animals are important and valuable creatures that should be treated well. Many children were also against fur farming and animal testing.

Hobbies. The fifth theme that children presented in their online discussion was hobbies. Altogether 23 comments were related to this theme. The discussion about hobbies was very personal and unlike in the other discussions, the children did not strive to change anything. Many children introduced their own hobbies and the online environments that they use.

Local environment. The sixth theme in the children's online discussion was the local environment. Altogether 18 comments were classified under this theme. Some children thought that there should be more dog cages near supermarkets and service stations so that people could safely leave their dogs in the cages while running errands. Some children also wished for more bicycle paths because these would increase road and cycling safety.

Issues that children want to influence

In order to examine the issues that children wanted to influence, their comments were classified into three categories, namely, expressing opinions,[2] expressing deficiency and proposal for action. Children's well-being and relations with other people were clearly emphasized in those comments that contain expression of opinion, deficiency or a proposal for a decision or action (Table 2). Correspondingly, the number of descriptive comments

Table 2. The percentages of all children's comments, comments that include expression of opinion, deficiency or proposal for decision/action and comments that are purely descriptive.

Theme	All comments (%)	Comments that include expression of opinion, deficiency or proposal for decision/action (%)	Comments that are purely descriptive (%)
Education and school environment	38	83	17
Relations with other people	22	88	12
Children's well-being	14	94	6
Nature and animals	9	87	13
Hobbies	4	39	61
Local environment	3	78	22
Miscellaneous	10	–	–
	100% (total)	78% (average)	22% (average)

was the smallest in these themes. The children generally presented numerous descriptive comments on education and school environment (see 'all comments' in Table 2).

On average, the children expressed an opinion in 75% of their comments (Table 3). Expression of deficiency was found in 24% of the comments, as were proposals for a decision or action. The percentages varied considerably, however, with regard to the theme of the comment. Expression of opinion was detected in 87% of the children's comments related to relations with other people, whereas only a third of the comments on hobbies contained opinion. Again, the children expressed many deficiencies and proposals for a decision or action in relations with other people and in children's well-being.

The issues that children commented on can be illustrated by the ecological approach framework (Figure 3). The issues that children generally presented comments on are placed within the left part of the diagram, whereas the right side of the diagram represents the issues on which children expressed opinions, deficiencies or proposals for a decision or action, and thus, wanted to influence. As the issues that children generally commented on are considered (the numbers represent the order of prevalence), the emphasis is on micro- and meso-levels. The most prevalent theme, education and school environment, is placed in the micro-level and the second prevalent theme, relations with other people, in the meso-level in this framework. However, as the issues that children want to participate in are considered, the most prevalent theme, children's well-being, is placed in both the macro- and exo-levels. Again, relations with other people also stand out in the meso-level.

The issues that children generally commented on are mainly related to their everyday life context and immediate surroundings. Thus, these issues – school and interaction with others – are important for children in their life world. This is not a new finding; these contexts represent the basic elements of micro- and mesosystems in the ecological approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). What is noteworthy, however, is that the children in this study did not mention home or family-related issues, which are essential parts of the microsystem in the ecological approach. One reason for this may lie in children's reluctance to present their personal experiences in public. On the other hand, children may

Table 3. The percentages of children's comments that contain expression of opinion, deficiency or proposal for decision/action.

Theme	Comments that include		
	Expressing opinion (%)	Expressing deficiency (%)	Proposal for decision/action (%)
Education and school environment	78	28	16
Relations with other people	87	36	31
Children's well-being	86	32	41
Nature and animals	83	21	27
Hobbies	35	0	0
Local environment	78	28	28
Average	75%	24%	24%

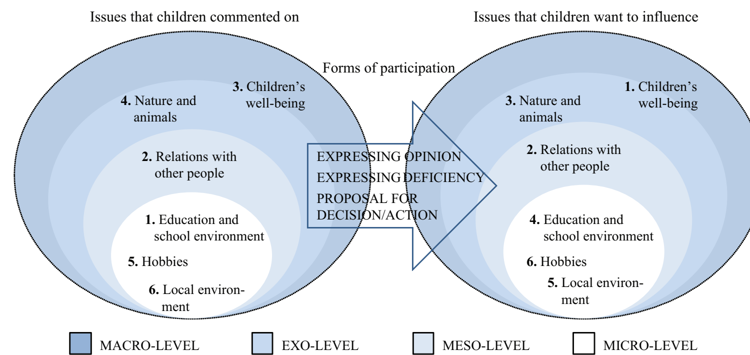

Figure 3. The issues that children commented on, want to participate in and influence placed in the framework of the ecological approach to children's life world.

also be so satisfied with their family life that they do not see a need for sharing their experiences. According to a previous study (Tuononen, 2008), many Finnish children are indeed happy with their family and home.

Concerning the research field of children's participation and citizenship, it is especially important to notice the difference between the issues that children generally commented on and the issues that they want to participate in, on the one hand, and the forms of participation, on the other. Issues that children want to participate in and influence included, first and foremost, the desire for improving children's well-being both in Finland and in countries where children suffer from the lack of the basic necessities of life. In relation to the previous studies on children's participation and citizenship (see Bell, 2005; Buckingham, 2000), the notion of children's international solidarity is important. As the emphasis has lately been on children's participation as a process of influence that takes place in their everyday life contexts, the results of this study underscore that children also want to influence themes that are global in nature and only indirectly affect their lives. Furthermore, the results of this study show that children are able not only to express opinions or deficiencies but they also have many proposals for decisions and action. These ways of presenting comments online represent one model for forms of participation which thus far have been only ambiguously defined (see Skelton and Valentine, 2003). The following quotations represent the different forms of participation:

> We all are different, some people more than others. We all are still equal and nobody should be treated worse than others :) (Girl 5, 11 years old)

> A new jungle gym was purchased at our school without asking the students. I think that the students should have a possibility to give their opinion on how the money is used or saved at school. (Girl 4, 12 years old)

> I agree that the climate and environment have to be paid attention to. Our family recycles and tries to buy long-lasting and ecologically packed products. (Boy 16, 10 years old)

Regarding the previous studies on Finnish children's low satisfaction with school (Inequalities in Young People's Health, 2008), it is noteworthy that education and the school environment were not emphasized in this study as the issue that children want to participate in and influence. One reason for this may be in the methods of participation. Children may find it easier to engage in the discussion of children's well-being, for example, rather than on school-related issues. In order to help poor children or to preserve nature, it is easy to donate money in collections or switch off the lights, instead of trying to influence school-related issues by talking to the headteacher, for example. Similarly, hobbies and local environment were not emphasized as matters that children want to discuss or influence. The reason for this may be in the lack of participatory practices. Even though the need for involving children in developing their own environment has been previously noted (Koskinen, 2010; Kyttä, 2003), involving them in developing their own immediate surroundings has not become a part of daily life, for example at schools (Koskinen, 2010).

In this phase of this article, the limitations of our research have to be noted. First, the discussion forum that comprises these data was an arena for children who voluntarily participated in debate. Thus, the discussants represent only a small sample of Finnish children. Moreover, the discussants were members of the Finnish Children's Parliament, which indicates that they may have been more proactive in participating than their at-home peers. Second, they also knew each other as they had met face-to-face before the discussion. In general, however, the children's discussion was open by nature and they also discussed sensitive topics, such as bullying and lying.

Conclusion

Children want to share experiences on issues that are related to their immediate environment and everyday life, but they also want to engage in the discussion of issues that are global in nature, such as children's well-being in poor countries and climate change. Thus, the results of this study support the previous studies on children's global citizenship. Children can be considered as global citizens and they are sensitive to global themes (Howe and Covell, 2005; Jans, 2004). Children are able to express their opinions, note deficiencies and propose ideas for decisions and action related to their own but also to other people's lives. Children's citizenship can thus be seen as an active, participatory practice, representing an expression of human agency (Lister, 2007). It is children's right but also 'lived' in the sense that children's social and cultural backgrounds and material circumstances affect their lives as citizens (Hall and Williamson, 1999).

In order for children to participate and be citizens, they need support from adults. In spite of their own wishes children cannot participate in decision-making concerning purchases at school, for example, if teachers do not take them seriously (see Devine, 2002; Fielding and Robinson, 2007). According to Buckingham (2000), the challenge for teachers and other adults is to find ways of connecting the 'micro-politics' of personal experience with the 'macro-politics' of the public sphere. This requires going beyond the formal definitions of politics to provide children and young people with opportunities to engage in political activity, rather than simply observing it (Buckingham, 2000).

Cockburn's (2005) theory refers to assimilating private and public spheres in the sense that children's private sphere is seen as political and taken seriously. From adults' viewpoint, the issues in children's private sphere, such as the way a teacher announces the results of exams, may seem small. For children, they are not, however, negligible, and the issues that seem to be small may lead to more complex phenomena, such as bullying. Our study suggests that children have a plethora of ideas on how to build arenas for their participation. Children share their life world with adults: it is beneficial for all adults to pay attention to children's opinions.

Habermas (1987) examined the life world as the shared common understanding that develops through face-to-face contacts. However, as communicative 'net' environments and virtual worlds have become a frequent and natural component of many children's lives today, they could provide adults with the opportunity to co-participate in and to familiarize themselves with children's life world. In particular, virtual worlds also offer researchers a new and interesting possibility to explore children's life world and participatory cultures as well as ways of how they could enhance children's civic participation and citizenship.

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Notes

1. Salmivalli et al. (2011).
2. We separated out the comments that, for example, took a stand from the descriptive comments that present experiences.

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II

A FRAMEWORK FOR CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATORY PRACTICES IN VIRTUAL WORLDS

by

Terhi Tuukkanen, Ahmer Iqbal & Marja Kankaanranta, 2010

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A Framework for Children's Participatory Practices in Virtual Worlds

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Abstract

In recent years, participation of children in virtual worlds has grown and children are also the largest number of users of virtual worlds (KZero, 2009a). This growth in participation in virtual worlds has brought out discussion about their effects on children's lives. In this article, we consider opportunities of virtual worlds to engage and educate children about their civic life.

The aim of this paper is to establish a framework for participation in virtual worlds and to test the framework by looking at current participatory practices in virtual worlds. In this paper we present a framework for children's participation in virtual worlds which is based on research review. Our framework sees children in virtual worlds as social actors, learners of civic participation and as citizens. Results of a survey conducted to find the participatory practices of children in virtual worlds are also presented. The results indicate that children are highly interested in socializing with friends and engaging in avatar related activities. It was also found that traditional forms of civic participation are not very common in virtual worlds. Thus, there is a need to promote traditional forms of civic participation and at the same time look at new opportunities presented by virtual worlds for civic participation.

Keywords: virtual worlds; virtual participation; civic participation; civic education; children's participation.

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A Framework for Children's Participatory Practices in Virtual Worlds

Virtual worlds captivate children with imaginary, immersive and collaborative environments. In recent years some of the virtual worlds have seen an exponential growth in the number of users. Most of this growth has come from child-centered virtual worlds aimed at 10-15-year-old children as is revealed through a comparative analysis of registered user accounts of virtual worlds for the first quarter of 2009 and at the end of fourth quarter of 2009 (KZero, 2009a). As virtual worlds and other virtual spaces such as games and websites have become almost a natural part of children's daily life, their supposed positive as well as negative effects on children's lives have been discussed. Some people have argued that virtual spaces contain many risks for children, related to inappropriate content and social interaction, while others have emphasized the possibilities of virtual spaces for children's agency and participation (Livingstone & Haddon, 2009).

Altogether, there has been growing interest in developing virtual worlds that could enhance children's participation and contribute to better learning by motivating, inspiring and supporting while having fun. Stranius (2009) has argued that the huge potential of collective participation is accumulated in online communities and it is only a matter of time as this power is extensively launched. Virtual spaces have been seen as new arenas for children's participation because traditional ways of participating, such as voting or organizational activities, do not encourage young people to participate anymore (Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schulz, 2001; Bennett, 2008; Loader, 2007). The potential of virtual spaces has been related to their competence in allowing children to express their opinions and in offering children opportunities to construct their identities as well as learn civic skills such as deliberation and decision making (Bers, 2008; Stern, 2008; Kotilainen & Rantala, 2008). At the same time, the viewpoint of children as passive consumers of technology and media has changed (Jenkins, 2006) and they are now seen as active content producers and participants of virtual communities.

Although the potential of virtual spaces has been recognized, the focus of previous research has not been on virtual participation. Research on virtual participation has been in its infancy and for example internet access, use, interests and activities have received more research attention than participation in virtual worlds. According to Donoso, Ólafsson and Broddason (2009), only eight percent of studies related to children and their online practices

have focused for example on civic or political participation while 83 percent of the studies include information about online usage. Research on children's online practices and their media use in general has dwelt on how children are at risk online and are thus in need of protection, instead of considering them as active participants who have some autonomy in developing their own online experiences and practices (Ponte, Bauwens, & Mascheroni, 2009).

Given the current research landscape, our aim in this article is to establish a framework for participation in virtual worlds and to test the framework by looking at current participatory practices in virtual worlds. Additionally, we look at how these participatory practices can be used to enhance civic participatory skills.

Framework of virtual participation

The research field of virtual participation is quite young and the concepts related to virtual participation are not yet established among researchers (Pessala, 2009). Different concepts such as participation, civic engagement and influence are used in the research field. Virtual participation also refers to participation in different contexts, for example virtual worlds, net pages or social media. In this paper, we focus specifically on children's participation in virtual worlds. Use of virtual worlds is very popular among children but research on virtual participation has focused more on websites and other technologies than on virtual worlds. A lot of research has been conducted on children's participation as well, mainly focusing on methods for enhancing children's participation in different environments. However, the focus on virtual worlds has been missing. In this article, we seek to fill this lacuna by proposing our framework of virtual participation.

Virtual worlds as arenas of participation

Theis (2010) observes that the concept of participation has been criticized as it does not specify the meaning or forms of participation. Participation simply means "taking part" but the definition leaves open an essential question "taking part in what?". As participation does not take place inside a vacuum (Polat, 2005), we have to define the context of participation. One way to approach the concept is to recognize the distinction between participation as social activity and participation as influencing or creating change in political

or societal processes (Sotkasiira, Haikkola, & Horelli, 2010). Considering virtual worlds, both of these viewpoints are important and useful. Use of virtual worlds is usually social action and can thus be considered as participation. On the other hand, use of virtual worlds may have effects for example on users' opinions, attitudes and behavior, when the concept of participation refers to the effects which emerge as a consequence of the social activity. If participation refers to a process of influencing which is focused on a group of people or on a community, we may talk about civic participation (see Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles, & Larson, 2004). In this section, we will look more into these two viewpoints that form a basis for our framework of children's virtual participation. We will first present a figure of the framework and then explain it.

The framework consists of four levels (Figure 1). The first level describes the two above-mentioned forms of participation: participation as social activity and as a process of influencing. The second level represents the child's roles as participant in virtual worlds which will be considered more closely in the next section. The third level describes the roles of virtual worlds in the process of participation and the fourth level illustrates the affordances of virtual worlds for children's participation. By affordances we refer to intrinsic features of technologies that support actions people intend to take with the technology (Gibson, 1986; Nardi & O'Day, 1999). Affordances may be intentional, for example virtual worlds' affordance is to provide people a place for social interaction and playing games. On the other hand, some of a tool's affordances emerge during use, unanticipated by designers (Nardi & O'Day, 1999). Considering virtual worlds, unintentional affordances may refer, for example, to participatory features. Intrinsically virtual worlds were not designed to enhance user's civic participation or their civic skills but today we may see that virtual worlds have great potential for civic participation as well.

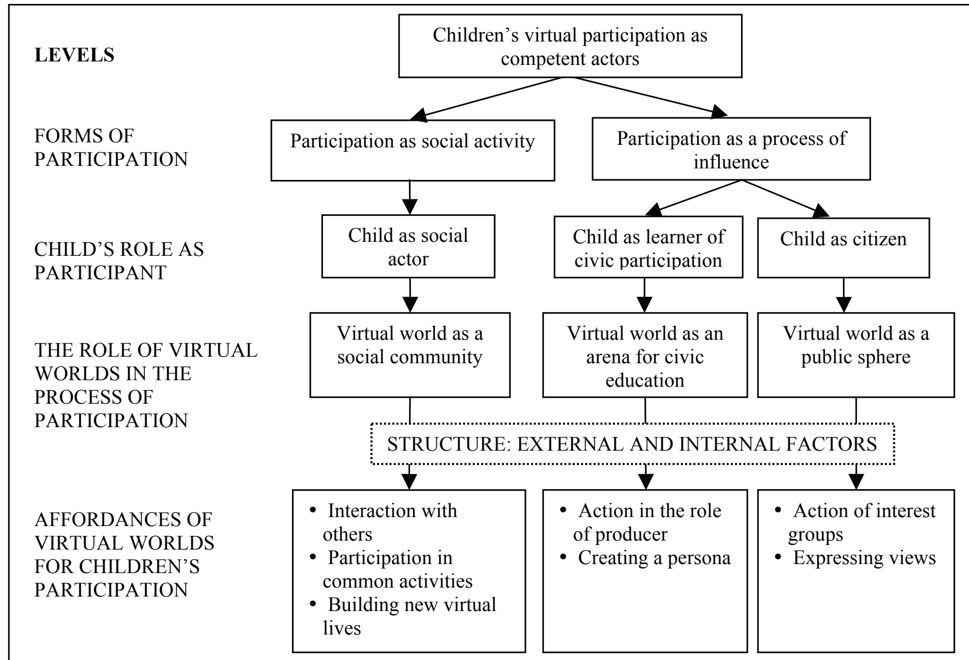

Figure 1. Framework of children's virtual participation.

The significance of virtual worlds as arenas of participation lies in their intrinsically social nature. Virtual worlds are conducive to groups coming together and spending time together, with people going to virtual worlds to seek sociability, interact with others and participate in a common activity of play or work (Noveck, 2006). Virtual worlds stimulate social experimentation and encourage people to create new virtual lives and to build new virtual cultures and identities. They are full of social cooperation but also social conflicts at the same time – in this respect virtual worlds present all the opportunities and risks of social order we find in real space (Balkin & Noveck, 2006). According to earlier surveys, social activity is one of the main reasons for using the virtual worlds (KZero, 2009b). Most of the Habbo users, for example, use the virtual world to meet and discuss with friends or to help others. In addition, the virtual world holds a specific social value for those people who may otherwise be passive, insecure and shy: virtual worlds as well as the Internet in general are important for fulfilling their social needs. (Global Habbo Youth Survey, 2006.)

A process of influence always demands that other people are involved (Kiilakoski, 2008). Thus the view of virtual participation as a social activity creates a basis for

considering virtual participation as a process of influencing. However, if the definition of participation as social activity is fairly unambiguous, defining the concept of influence is not so simple. Influence may refer to achieving certain transformations in the social or political processes or through decision making (Sotkasiira et al., 2010; Anttiroiko, 2003). In this regard, virtual worlds may be considered "public spheres". Participation takes place within a public realm (Polat, 2005) and virtual worlds have been seen as arenas for interest groups and activists to act in public. They organize meetings and events to engender public debate and in this way, seek to accomplish something together (Noveck, 2006). These meetings and events may be organized for the community of practice interested in issues ranging from transportation to clean air (Noveck, 2006). As civic engagement is understood as expressing one's views in order to participate and influence public life (Bachen, Raphael, Lynn, McKee, & Philippi, 2008), virtual worlds may be seen as arenas of civic participation as well.

It has been argued that the significance of new media for participatory activities lies in the shift from the "traditional" public sphere to everyday active participation in a networked, highly heterogeneous and open cultural public sphere (Burgess, 2007; Kalmus, Runnel, & Siibak, 2009). Since 'public sphere' has traditionally referred to the places of formal politics, such as elections and party activities, interactive net environments have expanded this sphere to everyday life and practices (Burgess, 2007; Rinne, 2008; Bennett, 2008). At the same time, forms of participation have become more personal and open: people can express their personality, values and lifestyles in a way they want (Rinne, 2008). This refers to opportunities of technology and virtual worlds as well. Virtual worlds have expanded children's environments, like other online participatory spaces, from school, home and hobbies to an extensive, world-wide virtual community and public sphere.

On the other hand, a process of influence may point to more abstract transformations in skills, attitudes and identities. According to Bers (2008), children may learn new concepts and ways of thinking about identity and civic life by using the virtual world. This is based on the ways in which the virtual world works. For example in Zora, which is a three-dimensional multiuser environment, children are put in the role of producers instead of consumers: children are engaged in thinking about issues of identity by inviting them to construct their own virtual homes and populate them with their most cherished objects, characters, pictures, stories, and personal and moral values (Bers, 2008). Another important characteristic of virtual worlds for identity construction is the avatar, the simulacrum of self within the game space. Creating a persona to represent oneself realizes the idea of freedom and autonomy and

on the other hand, forces users to think about how they want to appear as a member of a community. Thus creating an avatar is akin to assuming the role of citizens: avatars think and act as members of a game community rather than as private individuals (Noveck, 2006). In this case the significance of virtual worlds lies in their potential as arenas of civic education: virtual worlds are seen as a context for learning civic skills.

As we talk about public sphere and learning civic skills in virtual worlds, we come close to the concept of "civic participation" which can be defined in many ways. From the narrow viewpoint, civic participation refers to formal and traditional forms of participation, such as voting and taking part in demonstrations. The broad viewpoint extends the definition to active participation by community members, their interaction with others and their rights and responsibilities as community members (Montgomery et al., 2004). According to Levine (2008), civic engagement comprises even participation in shaping a culture which can mean many kinds of activities. In our study, civic participation is considered rather from the broad viewpoint though we will also look at the traditional forms of participation in virtual worlds.

The viewpoints of virtual participation as a social activity, and as a process of influence also define the roles of children as participants. Children can thus be considered as social actors, citizens or learners, depending on the context of their participation. If participation is defined as a social activity, participants may be seen as social actors in the first place. Children are social beings (Smart, Neale, & Wade, 2001) and technology, including virtual worlds, is one of the contexts in which many children fulfill their social needs. Defining participation as a process of influence, for one, sets children in the role of citizens. Children may be seen as citizens at this moment and thus virtual worlds are seen as public spheres and arenas for bringing out their own views and experiences. On the other hand, children may be seen as citizens in the future when the emphasis is on learning civic skills for the future. Thus, children are seen as learners. In the next section, we focus more on children's roles as participants in virtual worlds.

Children as participants in virtual worlds

Our examination of virtual participation is focused on children which entails some specific aspects. Children are always slightly special related to adults and hence things connected to children's well-being generate a lot of discussion, sometimes laden with moral panics. In recent years, discussions of children's use of technology, including virtual worlds,

have been intensifying. According to Ponte et al. (2009), the discussion has oscillated between two contradictory approaches to children's competence. Children have been seen as autonomous and fully-developed social actors on the one hand and as immature and incompetent agents on the other. Children's autonomous and social character has been emphasized especially in political and academic circles. Ponte et al. (2009) have recognized children's use of technology as part of their own culture and everyday life and based their argument on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which entitles every child to participate in their own culture and in all matters affecting the child. The traditional discourse, on the other hand, has been based on a view of children as incompetent beings. People using this discourse have associated children's online activities with negative feelings, problems and risks and thus brought out a critical view of effects of technology on children's well-being (Ponte et al., 2009).

The view of children's competence forms a basis for understanding their roles as participants in virtual worlds. Our basic argument is that a starting point for considering children as participants is the view of children as competent agents. We found this argument in one of the main theses of sociological childhood studies whereby children's competence justifies their roles as social actors and citizens. According to this thesis, children have the competence to be involved in the construction of their own social lives as well as of the societies in which they live (James & Prout, 1997; Smart et al., 2001). Thus, children are seen as social actors and as actual citizens here and now, not only in the future (Roche, 1999; Jans, 2004). According to Jans (2004), for example, children are strikingly sensitive about global social themes like the environment and peace. Children have a lot of thoughts and experiences and virtual worlds may provide an arena for bringing out these views. On the other hand, considering children as competent participants do not mean that adults give all the power and responsibilities to children. The fact of adult power is and will be inescapable as children always need protection from adults (Roche, 1999; Jans, 2004). What is being argued, however, is that the definitions of participation as social activity and as a process of influence intrinsically involve the view of children as somewhat competent agents.

The question about children's competence and their roles as participants can be contextualized by Giddens' notions of structure, which refers to rules and resources, and agency, which refers to people's capability of doing things (Giddens, 1984). Children have traditionally been considered as passive agents, first because they were seen as vulnerable and incompetent people (Smart et al., 2001) and second, because they have not been very

active for example in organizational activities (Myllyniemi, 2009). However, current research is beginning to indicate that today's children are indeed engaged in civic life and interested in participation, but in different ways than previous generations. Children tend to choose activism, volunteerism and virtual participation, as opposed to formal forms of participation such as participating in organizational activities (Bers, 2008). This means that children may also need new kinds of structures in the process of participation. Nevertheless, the potential of virtual worlds, for example, has not been fully realised. The potential of virtual spaces for enhancing children's participation has been noted and emphasized in many agendas (for example Lansdown, 2001; Inter-Agency Working Group on Children's Participation, 2008) and some preliminary studies have also shown the potential of new technologies to engage young people in online civic life. However, there is still a need for more research looking at *how* technology-based interventions, virtual worlds for example, can promote participation (Bers, 2008).

On the other hand, the notion of structure and agency can be considered as a viewpoint on virtual worlds. In virtual worlds, the structure may point to the external factors such as parental guidance, rules and restrictions on the one hand (Kalmus et al., 2009) and to the written rules of the virtual world on the other (Bartle 2006). Agency, for one, may refer to children's competence to participate in virtual worlds. Crucial to the children's participation in virtual worlds is the relationship between structure and agency. To what extent are children allowed to freely express themselves and discuss their opinions and experiences, for example? As we consider virtual participation from children's viewpoints, we base our framework on the view of children as competent actors. The way children's agency can be enacted relies, however, on the internal and external structures of the virtual world. It is crucial how the virtual world is constructed, the rules and restrictions which are set for their participation and the external factors which may have an impact on children's use of virtual worlds. At its best, the relationship of structure to agency is in balance so that the structure of the virtual world supports children's agency.

Defining clear bounds of virtual participation is not possible as the concept of participation is so fuzzy itself. However, we have now constructed our four-level framework of children's participation in virtual worlds, based on research literature on participation, virtual worlds and childhood. We will next present the study which sought to test the framework.

Methods

The aim of this study was to test the framework by looking at children's current participatory practices in virtual worlds. The study was carried out as an empirical survey study. A survey was conducted online at two Finnish schools in February 2010. It was distributed to schools through email with clear instructions for teachers and participants and a letter for parents. Most of the participants filled the survey in the computer labs of their schools with a teacher available for assistance. The total number of participants was 126.

The aim of the survey was to find out children's participatory practices in virtual worlds. The survey consisted of three parts: the first part asked the children about their background, the second part about their virtual world usage and the third part about their participation in virtual worlds. The first part included six questions related to name, gender, age, municipality, parents' education and leisure activities. It was followed by a question in which participants were asked about their knowledge, use and experiences of virtual worlds. We asked whether participants knew what virtual worlds were; whether they had used virtual worlds or not; and if they were currently using virtual worlds. Based on the answers to these questions the participants were directed to other parts of the survey. Those who were still using virtual worlds were asked to identify the virtual worlds they were using and answer different questions related to participation in those virtual worlds. Those who had stopped using virtual worlds were asked to identify the virtual worlds that they were using and give reasons for abandoning virtual worlds. We asked these questions in order to understand what contributes to the lack of participation in virtual worlds.

The main aim of the survey was to find out what participants are interested in within virtual worlds and what participants do in virtual worlds. The third part of the survey was designed from this point of view. We constructed the questions using earlier studies on motivations and experiences of using games and virtual worlds as a basis. For example Yee (2005), Schuurman, De Moor, De Marez and Van Looy (2008) and Tychsen, Hitchens and Brolund (2008) have studied motivational factors of games and listed the features and activities such as competition, socializing, creating and customizing character, group achievements, exploration, role-playing, game mechanics and freedom as motivational factors in games. Also Iqbal, Kankaanranta and Neittaanmäki (2010) have studied the motivational features and activities of virtual worlds and listed socializing with friends, developing the character, playing games and exploring new places as the most popular and

interesting activities in virtual worlds. As these earlier studies have not focused especially on participation, we also used our framework to get the viewpoint of participation in the questions. We listed the features and activities based on the affordances of virtual worlds for children's participation, for example expressing views refers to voting and action of interest groups refers to taking part in demonstrations in virtual worlds. As we did not want to confine participants' thinking to the features and activities that we chose, we also gave them a possibility to write on an open field about interesting things and their activities in virtual worlds.

Eventually, the third part contained four main questions. First of all, participants were asked which features of virtual worlds they were interested in. The participants were presented with 13 features and given three options (not interested, a little interested, very interested) for each feature. Secondly, the participants were asked about the activities they perform in virtual worlds through a series of three questions. There were three options, 'never', 'sometimes' and 'often', for each of the 15 activities. The features selected in this survey were not exactly the same as the activities, for example role playing was listed as a feature but not as an activity. This was done because we understand that the features and the activities have slightly different meanings. 'Feature' refers to the capacity of virtual worlds to make it possible to execute or facilitate an activity, whereas 'activity' refers to the practical process of doing things in virtual worlds. Thus every activity is facilitated by a feature but not every feature can be transformed into an activity. In this part of the survey, we also asked the participants about what kind of benefits they had perceived in using virtual worlds and what kinds of virtual worlds they would like to use.

The survey data was analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods. SPSS was used to collate descriptive information about participants' background, virtual world usage and participatory practices in virtual worlds. In order to deepen the understanding of participatory practices in virtual worlds, we also used qualitative classification method in analyzing participants' answers to the open form questions.

Results

General information about participants

As earlier studies have shown that certain background factors such as age and gender have an effect on virtual world usage and children's roles as participants in virtual worlds (Global Habbo Youth Survey, 2006; Johnson & Toiskallio, 2007), we also inquired about the childrens' background information. Roughly one third of the participants were studying in primary school and most of the participants were at the upper level of comprehensive school. Some of the participants who answered the survey were from higher secondary. However, these participants were very few in numbers and their impact on results is negligible. Gender distribution among the participants was even. There were almost equal numbers of boys (52%) and girls (48%). Most of the participants (84%) were 11-15 years old. In order to find out if the educational level of children's parents has an effect on virtual world usage, we also asked the children about this. Most of the participants' parents (60%) had passed either vocational school or upper secondary school and a third of the parents had graduated from university or polytechnic.

The most popular leisure activities among participants were outdoor activities and spending time with friends. A clear majority of the participants reported doing those activities more than four hours a week. More than half of the participants also reported watching television, spending time with hobbies and playing with computers or consoles more than four hours in a week. Considering leisure activities, there were no significant gender differences except that markedly more boys (71% of all boys) than girls (31% of all girls) reported playing with computers or consoles more than four hours in a week.

In order to find out if some background factors have an influence on virtual world usage in our data, we also conducted cross tabulations. They showed that participants who use virtual worlds at the moment tend to be predominantly 11-14 year olds. This is in accordance with the KZero (2009a) report which reveals that 10-15 year old children constitute the biggest age group of virtual world users. Secondly, we wanted to examine if the educational of participant's parents has an effect on use of virtual worlds. However, we were not able to find any conclusive or significant results based on this factor.

Virtual world usage

The results of the survey showed that 25% of the 126 participants use virtual worlds at the moment. Furthermore, 41% of the participants reported that they have used virtual worlds but stopped utilized them. There were also participants who reported that they know

what virtual worlds are but they have not used them (27%) and participants who did not know what virtual worlds are (6%)[1]. The most popular virtual worlds among the participants who use virtual worlds at the moment were Runescape, Habbo, Club Penguin and Aapeli. Other virtual spaces that were named but which are less popular were GoSupermodel, World of Warcraft, Travian, PollyPocket, Atlantica Online, Fishville, Farmville, MoiPal and Stardoll. Interestingly, many worldwide popular virtual worlds such as Poptropica, Neopets, Barbie Girls, Girl Sense and Weeworld were not used by the participants of our survey.

The most common reason for not using virtual worlds seems to be a lack of interest. Two-thirds of the participants who have not used virtual worlds mentioned this reason. In addition, slightly less than one-third of the participants reported that they want to be in contact with others, for example friends in other ways. The same reasons were mentioned when we asked participants who had stopped using virtual worlds to explain their reasons for doing so. The most common reason was that they were not interested in the virtual world anymore, mentioned by 62% of these participants.

There may be several reasons for the lack of interest in virtual worlds and the other reasons mentioned by the participants, for example, the need for money in order to enjoy the virtual world and a lack of understanding of how the virtual world works, may account for their lack of interest in virtual worlds. One fairly natural explanation for the lack of interest is that some young people have just grown out of the children's virtual worlds. For example, some participants mentioned the childish appearance of some virtual worlds as one reason for abandoning them. The most common virtual worlds which participants had stopped using were Habbo, Stardoll and Club Penguin. Habbo is a virtual world aimed at 13-year-olds or older but Stardoll and Club Penguin are virtual worlds aimed at 6-7-year-old children. This may not motivate all 11-15-year-olds to use the virtual worlds.

Participation in virtual worlds

The questions related to interests in different features and frequency of activities in a particular virtual world received 54 answers for each feature or activity. This is higher than the number of participants who answered these questions (32 participants) because each

[1] Percentages are rounded off to the nearest whole number due to the removal of decimals. Therefore these numbers add up to 99 %, instead of 100 %.

participant was allowed to provide answers for more than one virtual world. The percentages for each feature and activity were calculated based on 54 answers.

The results indicate that the participants are very interested in socializing with friends in virtual worlds. Chatting and doing things with friends was shown as a very interesting feature in two-thirds of the answers. Another interesting feature in virtual worlds seems to be creating one's own avatar which was considered as a very interesting feature in 60% of the answers. In slightly less than half of the answers, features such as the sense of being there or being part of, and competing and challenges were considered very interesting. One interesting result is that the participants are not very interested in expressing opinions which is one of the most essential features of civic participation.

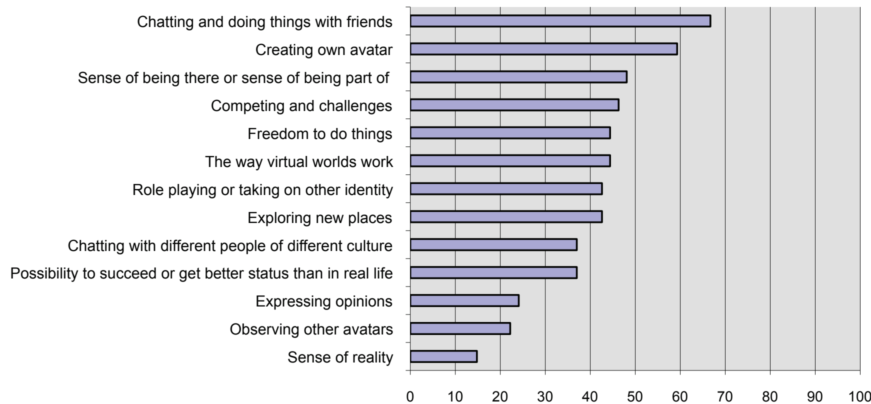

Figure 2. Percentages of features which participants were interested in.

The results related to activities that participants frequently perform often in virtual worlds are quite similar to the results of interesting features. Chatting and doing things with friends is clearly the most popular activity in virtual worlds as it was reported in nearly 60% of the answers as an activity that is performed often. Playing games, changing the appearance of the avatar or exploring new places were mentioned in about 40% of the answers. The interesting result is that again, the participants do not either perform activities that are related to the public sphere and which can be regarded as formal forms of civic participation in real life. Indeed, most participants do not participate in group activities or in voting often and

even fewer participants organize events or participate in demonstrations frequently in virtual worlds.

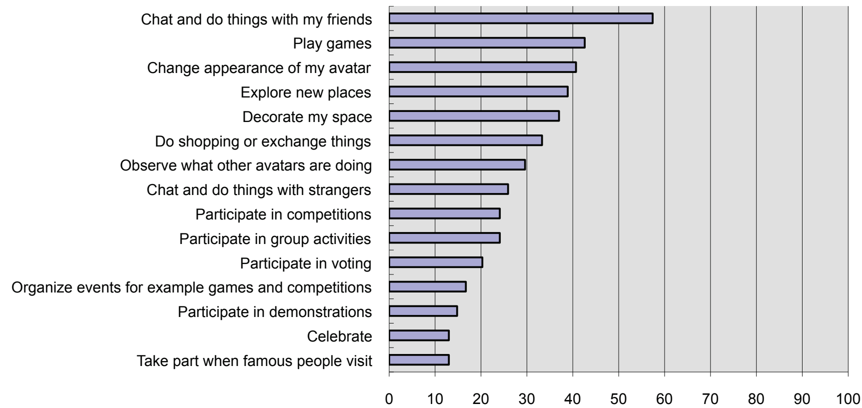

Figure 3. Percentages of activities which were performed frequently.

In order to deepen our understanding of interests and activities in virtual worlds, participants were given the opportunity to talk about their interests and activities freely in an open form question. The answers did not, however, differ much from the results presented earlier. Socializing and chatting with other people (14) and playing games (11) were clearly the most oft-mentioned features among the 32 respondents. The same answers were given when we asked about the activities that participants perform in virtual worlds. Playing games was mentioned by 22 participants and socializing or chatting with others by 17 participants. Other features and activities were mentioned only one to three times. In this respect, answers given to open form question resonate with the findings presented earlier.

The affordances of virtual worlds for children's participation were explored more closely with a question on the benefits of using virtual worlds. The participants who were currently using virtual worlds were asked about their perceived benefits for a particular virtual world and they were allowed to choose multiple benefits for a virtual world. A total of 167 answers were received pertaining to benefits of different virtual worlds and the percentages are calculated based on that. In this analysis, we did not consider the benefits for each virtual world. The results show that the participants have derived many learning benefits from using virtual worlds though the most commonly mentioned benefit is entertainment.

The participants reported that being entertained (23%); learning to use computers and the internet (14%); making new friends (12%); and learning new languages (13%) were the most important benefits they had gained from virtual worlds. Some of the participants also reported benefits that can be related to civic participation, for example participants had the opportunity to express themselves (10%), learn new things about themselves (9%) and learn new cultures (8%). Thus, whether intentionally or otherwise, some of the participants were engaging in civic participation or in activities that can teach them civic skills.

Conclusion

The aim of the study was to test the framework by looking at children's participatory practices in virtual worlds. Figure 4 presents the three roles of virtual world in a process of participation and the affordances of virtual worlds for children's participation which have been specified with the lists of features and activities that children perform in virtual worlds. As we now reflect on our results on the framework of virtual participation, we may make three main conclusions.

The survey results related to interesting features and often performed activities in virtual worlds show that the participants are very interested in many features and engage in many activities relating to virtual worlds as social community. For example chatting and doing things with others and creating or changing the appearance of one's own avatar were in the top of the list as participants were asked about the features they found interesting and the activities they performed frequently . The finding is in accordance with earlier studies which have revealed that sociability, interaction with others and participating in common activities are the most interesting activities and features in virtual worlds (Noveck, 2006; KZero, 2009b). Thus, our first conclusion is that virtual worlds can be considered as arenas of participation, as far as participation is seen as social activity. Affordances of virtual worlds for children's social activity are clearly intentional, which means that children were intentionally looking for social activities..

On the other hand, the participants were not very interested in features and did not often engage in activities related to the virtual world as a public sphere, for example participating in demonstrations or expressing opinions. In this sense, our results support earlier examinations which have revealed that traditional ways of participating do not encourage children and young people to participate (Torney-Purta et al., 2001; Bennett, 2008;

Loader, 2007). Virtual worlds may not be seen as public spheres in a traditional sense which is our second main conclusion. This does not mean, however, that virtual worlds would not serve as public spheres for children for example to express their opinions. Children may fulfill these affordances unintentionally, by chatting or being in social interaction with other people, both of which are popular activities in virtual worlds.

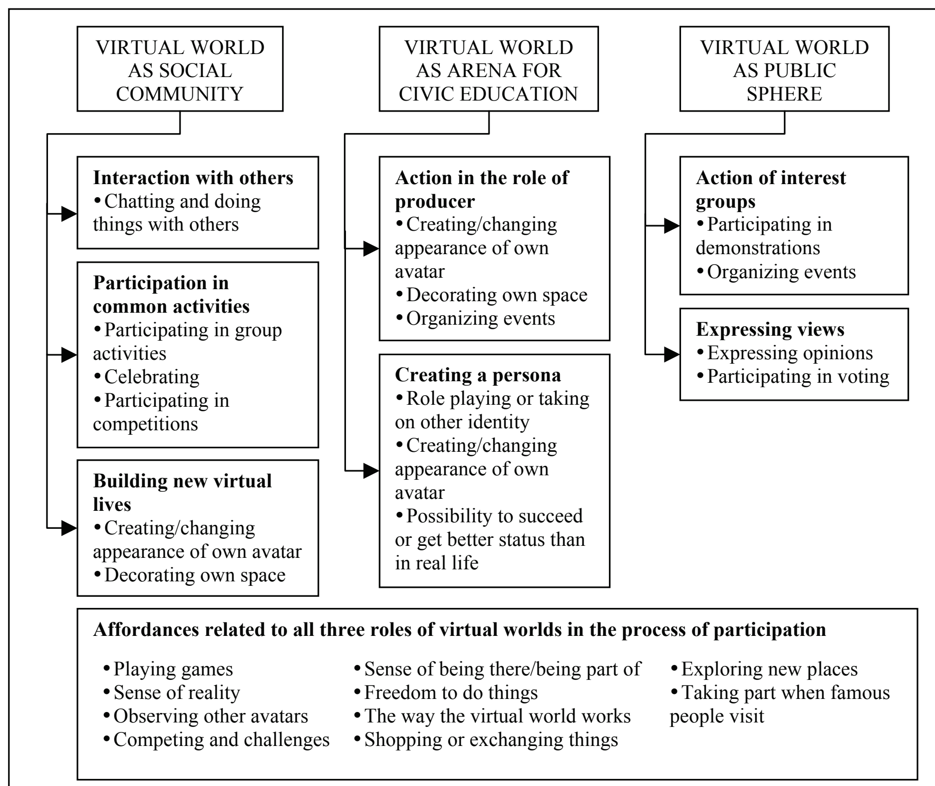

Figure 4. The affordances of virtual worlds for children's participation, according to the three roles of virtual world in a process of participation.

Participants' interest in the features and activities related to virtual world as arenas for civic education varied according to the feature or activity. Creating or changing the

appearance of one's avatar was one of the features participants found most interesting and that they performed most often but participants were not very interested in possibility to succeed or in role playing, both of which can be classified into features related to civic education. Interestingly, the potential of virtual worlds as arenas for civic education was also raised by some participants when we asked them about the benefits of using virtual worlds. The most often mentioned benefit was entertainment but some participants also mentioned the opportunity to express themselves and learn new things about other cultures. Some children mentioned that they have learnt new things about themselves as well. This may be due to social interaction but it may also derive from developing one's identity as a member of a community by through managing the appearance of one's own avatar. According to Noveck (2006), creating a persona to represent oneself in virtual worlds forces users to think and act as citizens and members of a community. Based on these results, we may argue that virtual worlds indeed have the potential to serve as an arena for civic education though the main aim of using virtual worlds is not to learn civic skills and not all children may be aware of this potential. This is our third conclusion.

Discussion

Hitherto, virtual worlds have not been extensively researched from the viewpoint of children. Also the focus on participation has been missing from studies related to virtual worlds. This has been problematic because the use of virtual worlds is growing rapidly among children and more information is needed about activities that children perform in virtual worlds. There is also a growing interest in the potential of virtual worlds to enhance children's participation as research has shown that children do not engage in traditional forms of participation in real life (Torney-Purta et al., 2001; Bennett, 2008; Loader, 2007). According to Kirby, Lanyon, Cronin and Sinclair (2003) and Kiilakoski (2008), many negative trends such as isolation from society can be prevented by promoting children's participation. The Convention on the Rights of the Child also obligates adults to take into account the interests of the children and listen to their opinions. The first step in promoting children's participation is to go where children spend their time, for example virtual worlds,

find out what is happening there and then consider what could be done to enhance children's participation in virtual worlds.

Our study has shown that virtual spaces have the potential to serve a place for children to fulfill their child-sized citizenship and acquire civic skills. This should, however, be made more concrete and noticeable in virtual worlds. As chats and games are the most interesting activities in virtual worlds, they could be utilized for example by creating games about civic skills and organizing public chats about matters that are closely related to children's own lives. Also adults could take part in these chats. Sometimes the obstacles to children's participation can be, however, in structures of virtual worlds which limit users' agency and their behavior (Bartle, 2006). This is probably one reason why children do not utilize the affordances of virtual worlds as public spheres: it is not even possible in all virtual worlds for example to vote or take part in demonstrations. Hence it is important in the future to conduct research about structures of virtual worlds and how they limit users' behavior.

On the other hand, the result of children not utilizing the affordances of virtual worlds as public spheres may be taken as a reminder of the fact that children are always somewhat incompetent and immature agents and citizens when viewed in relation to adults. Children do not have the right for example to vote in real life and thus, these traditional ways of participating are not familiar to children in virtual worlds either. Instead, children seem to be more interested in expressing themselves in chatting and other social activities. On the other hand, it has to be remembered that there are always differences between children as well. There were children in our study who reported being interested in expressing opinions and taking part in voting and demonstrations often in virtual worlds. We also have to accept that all children are not interested in virtual worlds at the moment. In many cases, the reason for abandoning virtual worlds is natural: they have grown out of them. Thus, the task of researchers and developers of virtual worlds is to consider how virtual worlds could be developed so that young people's interest in them can be preserved and virtual worlds would serve as an arena for young people to participate.

Our aim in this first phase of the study was to establish a framework for children's participation in virtual worlds and to test the framework by looking at current participatory practices in virtual worlds. In this article, we have presented one way to look at children's virtual participation and our study still continues. Based on this first phase of our study, we may argue that children are socially active in virtual worlds, which creates many opportunities to educate children about civic participation and to prepare them as citizens of

real world by enhancing citizenship in virtual worlds. However, these opportunities can only be realized when the activities and features for civic participation and education are social in nature and have a fun element to it. Thus, there is a need to carry out further research in order to enhance civic education and participation in virtual worlds.

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III

CHILDREN'S SOCIAL PARTICIPATION IN VIRTUAL WORLDS

by

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Children's Social Participation in Virtual Worlds

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ABSTRACT

Virtual worlds provide an arena for children to express themselves and to interact with others. They are a natural and frequent part of children's life today. However, there is not much research on what actually happens in the online worlds and what kind of opportunities those worlds could offer to children and thereby enhance their social participation. The aim in this study is to explore the potential of virtual worlds for children's social participation. The empirical part of the study consists of interviews with 21 Finnish children, aged 11-15 years. By interviewing children, the authors examined their social practices in virtual worlds. In the study, the authors found seven types of social practice that make it possible for children to socialize with others, learn new things and skills, express themselves publicly and play in virtual worlds. Virtual worlds provide an arena for children to overcome the limitations of the real world. However, the freedom also has side effects: misbehavior.

Keywords: *Children, Expressing Oneself, Learning, Playing, Social Participation, Social Practices, Socialization, Virtual Worlds*

INTRODUCTION

Social media and particularly virtual worlds are a part of most children's everyday life from an early age (Livingstone et al., 2011).Virtual worlds are also natural space for children to express themselves. Thus far, however, there is not much research on what actually happens in the online worlds that children use and what kind of opportunities those worlds could offer to children and thereby enhance their possibilities for social participation (see Kafai, 2010). Several studies have been conducted on the use of media (e.g. Kotilainen, 2010) and also on risks in the use online worlds (Livingstone et al., 2011; OECD, 2011). The previous research

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literature on virtual worlds has mainly focused on adults or young people rather than children under the age of 15 (Meyers, 2009).

The aim of this study is to explore children's social practices in virtual worlds and thereby to contribute to the discussion on opportunities and risks of media and involvement in user-generated content for participation (e.g. Leung, 2009; Loureiro et al., 2012; Sangwan et al., 2009; Östman, 2012). We examine online worlds as children's participatory media. Participatory media refers to many-to-many media which makes it possible for everyone to express oneself, explore one's identity and connect with peers by broadcasting and receiving text, images, video, data or discussions (Rheingold, 2008). Virtual worlds are defined as synchronous, persistent networks of people, represented as avatars and facilitated by networked computers (Bell, 2008).[1] They are only one but a significant part of the online world. Hundreds of millions of children around the world use virtual worlds (KZero, 2011). In virtual worlds, children spend their time by engaging in different activities, for example developing an own avatar, chatting and playing.

VIRTUAL WORLDS AS ARENAS FOR CHILDREN'S SOCIAL PARTICIPATION

The way people engage in media has changed in recent years. Today, children and young people are not only consumers but also active creators of media culture (Schäfer, 2011). Some researchers see an entirely new kind of culture emerging from the use of participatory media. Jenkins et al. (2009), for example, writes about participatory culture, which refers to "a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement" and "strong support for creating and sharing one's creations" (p. 3). Cultures of participation are dictated by the result of changes in human behaviour and social organization and facilitated and supported by a variety of different technological environments, such as virtual worlds (Fischer, 2011).

Previous studies have shown that there are four basic features of virtual worlds as participatory media. First, virtual worlds provide users an arena to present their voices in public and, thereby turning their self-expression into a form of public participation. Rheingold (2008) writes about the public voice which, with other voices, is a basis of the 'public opinion'. The expression of the 'public opinion' refers, according to Habermas (1974), to criticism and control which citizens informally and, in periodic elections, formally exert to influence decision-making by state. Many researchers have indeed seen the Internet and virtual communities as a new public space for politically oriented conversation (Barlas & Caliskan, 2006; Papacharissi, 2002). However, as virtual worlds are considered public spaces, children's viewpoint on participation and political discussion has to be separated from the adults' one. From adults' viewpoint, it may be relevant to talk about virtual worlds as spaces for political discussion. From children's viewpoint, however, regarding virtual worlds as public spaces refers to their potential to be children's arena for presenting opinions about their everyday matters (see Tuukkanen et al., 2012).

Secondly, virtual worlds are collaborative in nature. Virtual world users encounter and engage in many social phenomena and processes in virtual worlds, such as solidarity, trust between people, common rules and shared attitudes (Blanchard & Markus, 2004; Heinonen, 2008; Sangwan et al., 2009). Heinonen (2008) writes about 'communality', which refers to the feeling of belonging to a virtual group. The sense of community can also be characterized as an imagined reality (Thomas & Brown, 2009) or as a social identity (Siitonen, 2007). Castells (2000) talks about 'real virtuality', referring to a system "in which appearances are not just on the screen through which experience is communicated, but they become the experience" (p. 373). This means that virtual reality is not artificial but real, which applies to online identities as well; users' identities are enabled and constrained by social structures (Fuchs, 2008).

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The virtual world users construct the sense of community by editing and creating the world they inhabit (Siitonen, 2007). By discussing and collaborating, people become a part of a group and at simultaneously, they are forced to think of in which way they want to appear as a member of a community (Noveck, 2006).

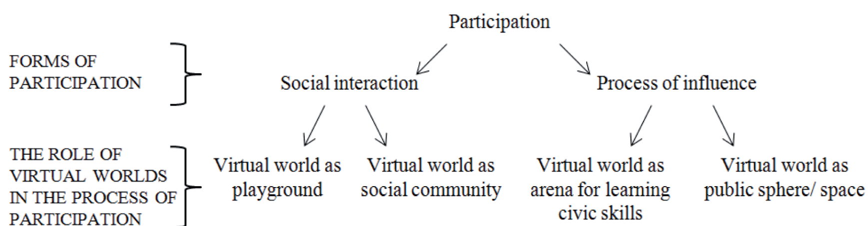
The power of virtual worlds to bring groups together can also be seen as a new kind of opportunity for democracy (Noveck, 2006). In virtual worlds, users create avatars which represent them as citizens in virtual community. Thus, although virtual worlds are public communities common to all users, there is also the users' privately owned place in them (see Arendt, 1998). The users work as producers of contents in the virtual worlds and thus design and reshape the space around their own ideas and interests (Ondrejka, 2008). This way, virtual worlds enhance the public participation experience (Evans-Cowley & Hollander, 2010). Adrian (2009) even writes about civil society in Second Life. She sees the virtual world as an arena of unenforced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values.

Thirdly, virtual worlds can be seen as arenas for learning participatory skills. Bers and Chau (2006) studied the Zora, three-dimensional multi-user environment, as an arena for engaging children in the design of a virtual city and community. In their pilot study, for a group of 11-17 year-old young people, who used Zora, a virtual community became a safe space for experimenting civic issues and testing different values, behaviours and attitudes. The potential of virtual worlds for new kind of social and experimental learning has inspired researchers in the field of education as well. Thomas and Brown (2009) argue that "participants in virtual worlds are learning to give voice to new dispositions within networked worlds and environments that are well suited for effective communication, problem solving, and social interaction" (p. 47). Furthermore, Henri and Pudelko (2003) state that participation in a virtual community always leads to learning (see also Oliver & Carr, 2009). This is based on Wenger's (1998) idea of learning as a social process that contributes to the construction of identity.

Fourthly, virtual worlds are playgrounds for the users. Marsh (2010) explored young children's play in virtual worlds and argues that children engage in many types of play there, such as fantasy play, socio-dramatic play, ritualized play, games with rules and what might be called 'rough and tumble' play. By playing in virtual worlds, children negotiate meanings, solve problems, and explore the possibilities presented to their real or virtual selves (Meyers, 2009).

Figure 1 illustrates the framework for children's virtual participation, based on the previous research literature on the theme of children, participation and virtual worlds. The concept of participation is classified into two forms; a social activity and a process of influence (Sotkasiira et al., 2010). As a social activity, participation refers to a person being part of a community in any social situation, whereas participation as a process of influence refers to the aim of making changes in some issues. The roles of virtual worlds in the process of participation,

Figure 1. Framework for children's virtual participation



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presented above, are classified according to these forms of participation. The first version of the framework was introduced in our previous article (Tuukkanen et al., 2010). In this study, we develop the framework further, by exploring empirically how children's social participation in virtual worlds manifest themselves in their social practices and activities.

SOCIAL PARTICIPATION IN VIRTUAL WORLDS

Previous studies on virtual worlds have often focused on single activities, such as social interaction (Siitonen, 2007) or avatar activities (Ducheneaut et al., 2009). However, there are not many studies examining the whole spectrum of children's social practices in virtual worlds. One of the most researched activities in virtual worlds is social interaction. According to Noveck (2006) and Beals and Bers (2009), there is potential in virtual worlds to bring together people from different backgrounds, experiences and locations to interact with others. Sometimes in game-based virtual worlds progressing in the game may even require social interaction between the users; there are challenges that can be overcome only if the players practice together (Siitonen, 2007). Thus, virtual worlds offer an arena for group engagement. According to Gordon and Koo (2008), virtual worlds allow users to immerse themselves in an environment and to engage in synchronous dialogue and production with other users. This way, they enable a sense of collective ownership (Gordon & Koo, 2008), which may have a positive, empowering effect on children's participation. On the other hand, the social nature of virtual worlds may also cause negative consequences; 12 percent of European 9-16 year olds have been bothered or upset for example by sexual messages or bullying on the Internet (Livingstone et al., 2011).

Another important and motivating activity for children and young people in virtual worlds is developing one's own avatar (Iqbal et al., 2010). In virtual worlds it is possible to escape from the real world through one's avatar which enables, according to Noveck (2006), virtual world users to take a role distinct to their own identity. This means that virtual worlds can be used to experiment with digital bodies that may be very different from the real bodies of the users. The digital bodies often reflect the users' projected identities (Ducheneaut et al., 2009). Johnson and Toiskallio (2007) analysed users' practices and avatars in Habbo Hotel. They presented six Habbo user groups: 'oldtimers' who have been in Habbo for a long time, 'playmakers' who like to arrange events for others, 'silent majority' who don't want to be disturbing, 'gang-members' who like to spend time in Habbo with their regular gang, 'I don't pay –people' who don't want to pay for anything in Habbo, and 'older people' who want to help keeping the place nice. In their study, Johnson and Toiskallio did not examine how virtual and physical identities interact and whether the identity play in virtual worlds can alter children's pro-social development. According to Meyers (2009), however, children were at least given an introduction to the development of a persona in virtual worlds. Thus, they have a great potential for learning as well.

In virtual worlds, children and young people also perform many commercial activities. According to Castronova (2007), there are millions of people buying or making virtual things and selling them to other people in return for virtual money in virtual worlds. Although the trade happens entirely within the virtual world, it still represents an exchange of value and therefore counts, in real world terms (Castronova, 2007). Lehdonvirta, Wilska and Johnson (2009) studied commercial activities in virtual world, and argued that the users' virtual consumption choices include self-expression, aesthetic considerations and even artistic aspirations. Furniture and clothes, for example, are used to signal distinctions between high and low status and between one group and another. Again, there may be some negative

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consequences, if these signals escalate into bullying. Furthermore, there is a risk, although a small one, of losing money by being cheated (see Livingstone et al., 2011).

Some studies have also been conducted on expressing opinions in virtual worlds. Bers and Chau (2006), argue that young people are able to cooperatively build a virtual community through engaging in meaningful civic actions and civic discourse. With civic discourse, they refer to a dialogue exchange that is based on information and opinion sharing, allowing participants to share and understand each other's perspectives.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHOD

In this article, we explore the potential of virtual worlds for children's social participation. More precisely, we aim at developing a comprehensive picture of children's social practices in virtual worlds and thereby further develop the framework of children's virtual participation. The research questions below are formed on the basis of previous studies on children's use of virtual and online worlds (e.g. Johnson & Toiskallio, 2007; Livingstone et al., 2011):

1. What kind of social practices children have in virtual worlds?
   a. What kind of activities children perform?
   b. Which activities and special features children find interesting and useful?
2. What opportunities and risks there are in children's participation in virtual worlds?
   a. What are the benefits and harms of using virtual worlds?
   b. How do virtual worlds differ from the 'real' world in terms of risks and opportunities?

The data was collected by conducting group interviews in two Finnish schools in spring 2010. In semi-structured interviews, we asked children to tell about the virtual worlds they use and the activities they perform there. Altogether 21 children (13 boys and 8 girls) aged 11-15 were interviewed. Permissions for the interviews were asked from the children's parents and a strict ethical conduct and sensibility was followed when performing the interviews.

Before the interviews the children were asked if they were users of virtual worlds and the interviews were carried out among those who reported to be users. However, it turned out that two boys had not used virtual worlds, but only online games. Thus, the analysis focused on 19 children, who were actually users of virtual worlds. The interviews were conducted in Finnish and the translations are provided by the researchers.

For the analyses, we adopted a qualitative content analysis approach. In general, content analysis refers to qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings, often called themes (Patton, 2002). Content analysis is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts to the contexts of their use (Krippendorff, 2004). In this study, the data was classified into seven main themes which follow the questions presented in the interviews. The themes were 'children's activities in virtual worlds', 'misbehaving in virtual worlds', 'the best things in virtual worlds', 'differences between virtual worlds and 'real' world', 'benefits of using virtual worlds', 'harms of using virtual worlds' and 'features of a good virtual world'.

In the second phase of the analysis, we focused specifically on the theme of 'children's activities in virtual worlds', dividing it into seven subcategories according to what children reported doing in virtual worlds. After this, in the third phase of the analysis, we explored the contents of the other six themes and classified them into the seven categories. These seven categories of social practices are presented in the next section. As the aim of this study is to examine the spectrum of children's social practices in virtual worlds, we focused on the qualitative content of each practice. Thus, we did not quantify the practices or examine the exact number of children performing the practices.

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In the interviews, children concretely described their activities in virtual worlds. In order to name and understand the meanings of the practices, we used previous research literature about children's virtual participation as a basis for the analyses. We then compared our findings with the previous research. Based on this comparison, we named the categories of social practices according to the meanings the children gave to each activity. Based on this method, we also developed the framework further, by the roles and meanings of virtual worlds in the process of children's participation.

Furthermore, the number of virtual world users (see Table 1) was used as background information in the analysis. The virtual worlds that children used varied from social virtual worlds, such as goSupermodel, Habbo and Pamfu to game virtual worlds, such as Runescape, World of Warcraft, Runes of Magic, PowerPlay Manager, Kiekko.tk and Aapeli. The most popular virtual world among the interviewees was goSupermodel, used by eight girls. Four children used Aapeli and Habbo and three reported using Powerplaymanager. Other virtual worlds were used by one or two children.

RESULTS

In the analyses described, we found seven types of social practices that illustrate children's participation in virtual worlds: playing, creating virtual persona, social interaction, commercial activities, expressing oneself, community activities and organizational activities. The performance of these practices varied, because it is not even possible to perform all practices in all virtual worlds. Furthermore, all children did not engage in the same practices. In goSupermodel for example, children performed all the aforementioned activities, while children using Powerplaymanager told merely about social interaction, commercial activities and playing. Table 2 represents children's social practices in different virtual worlds.

PLAYING

One of the most popular activities in virtual worlds is playing. Nearly all children reported playing in virtual worlds. The purpose of playing depends on the particular world. The virtual world may either be one big game itself, such as Runescape or World of Warcraft, or consist of small games, such as Panfu or goSupermodel. Regardless of the virtual worlds, children considered playing a fun activity. By playing in virtual worlds, children can do things they could not do in real life, such as getting involved in fantasy-based activities, like flying and conjuring.

In her study Marsh (2010) found out that in virtual worlds even young children engage in a range of play activities that relate closely

Table 1. Number of virtual world users according to gender

Virtual World	Girls	Boys	Total
goSupermodel	8	0	8
Aapeli	3	1	4
Habbo	0	4	4
Powerplaymanager	0	3	3
Panfu	2	0	2
Runes of Magic	0	2	2
Kiekko.tk	0	1	1
World of Warcraft	0	1	1
Runescape	0	1	1

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Table 2. Children's social practices by a virtual world

Virtual World	Playing	Creating Virtual Persona	Social Communica-tion	Commercial Activities	Expressing Oneself	Community Activities	Organiza-tional Activities
goSupermodel	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Aapeli	x	x					
Powerplaymanager	x		x	x			
Habbo		x	x	x	x	x	x
Panfu	x	x	x	x			
Runes of Magic	x	x	x	x		x	x
Kiekko.tk	x	x	x		x		
World of Warcraft	x						
Runescape	x	x		x			

to 'offline' play. Playing is a social practice that is constructed through interactions with others (Marsh, 2010). In our study, playing appeared mainly as a positive activity. It is practicing and testing things that children could not do in the real world. On the other hand, some children reported about malpractices related to playing. With this regard, playing indeed appeared as a social activity that – in order to be a positive experience for everybody – inherently presumes obeying the common rules:

Boy 10 (7th grade): almost everybody swears there (--) and score their own goal

Interviewer: what kind of effects or consequences does it have?

Boy 10: well, it doesn't have, if you are in the same side and somebody scores an own goal the people in the same side just get minus

CREATING VIRTUAL PERSONA

Creating an avatar and acting through it is an important activity for many children in virtual worlds. Some children mentioned creating and changing the appearance of an avatar also as the best part of virtual worlds. Children had used the opportunity to be a different person than in real life. They described their avatars as 'toughie', guy with moustache, funny or cool guy. In virtual worlds, children can have different skin colour, eye makeup or colourful hair, or they can wear clothes that they would not wear in real life:

'I can put colourful hair to my avatar, I wouldn't do that in real life, but I can do it to my avatar because I can remove that and it's not permanent' (Girl 2, 5th grade)

The informants considered this mainly a fun opportunity, but some of them mentioned its reverse side as well: in virtual worlds the users may not always be who they pretend to be. This may be risky, if the children do not know the line between public and private. Typical of these children was, however, caution with their personal information. Several children reported having an own profile, but they did not reveal addresses or phone numbers in their profiles, which indicates that these children are aware of dangers that breaching ones privacy can cause.

An important part of children's virtual persona is the space they have in a virtual world. Depending on the world, this space may be a room, where the users store the virtual items they have purchased or received, for instance. The appearance of an own virtual space results in popularity and may also add reputation to

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the competitions that children organize in their own space. Virtual items and commodities are thus used to signal success and distinction between high and low status (see Lehdonvirta et al., 2009). A boy using Habbo, for example, told about 'Tuolari', a chair competition that he organizes in his room. The idea of the competition is to find a chair and sit on it as soon as possible. However, there is one chair less than the number of competitors in each round and thus, one competitor gets out in every round. The boy told that there are similar activities in other rooms, but the competitions he organizes are popular, because he is so good in decorating the rooms.

SOCIAL COMMUNICATION

A very popular activity among children in virtual worlds is chatting with others. Nearly all interviewees told that they have chatted with other members, and for many it is one of the best features of virtual worlds. Thus, our study confirms previous study results about interactive activities as one of the most motivating elements in virtual worlds (Iqbal et al., 2010). Topics of chatting are usually related to everyday matters, such as hobbies and homework, or to the particular virtual world. Some children reported using chatting also for asking friends for help, selling virtual items and talking about other users. Most of the children chatted with their friends, but some children reported chatting with people they did not know beforehand. This way, they get new friends:

'I like that I can chat with others or those other avatars, although I don't know them (--) so that you don't reveal your identity…(and then mentioning how they make friends from chatting) nothing important but you just chat with them and then you get new friends' (Girl 2, 5th grade)

In addition to chatting, children told they communicated with other users by sending messages, writing in discussion forums, exchanging presents and acting as support persons for new users in virtual worlds. Sometimes, the opportunity to interact may provoke negative side effects as well. Many children told about bullying, name-calling and swearing in virtual worlds. Most children had not experienced these malpractices themselves, but they recognized the phenomena in the virtual worlds they used.

COMMERCIAL ACTIVITIES

Children engage in many commercial activities in virtual worlds. Most of the virtual worlds that the children used have some kind of items for sale, for example virtual money or points. In many virtual worlds, the whole idea of the site is based on collecting money or points by playing games, executing tasks and using them to get virtual items, or to edit the appearance of one's avatar. Several children think that this is also the best part of virtual worlds. In virtual worlds, they can test different methods of spending money without a fear of bankruptcy, for example. On the other hand, it can result in false conceptual thinking about money and bankruptcy; if bankruptcy is not a bad thing in a virtual world, then it will not be bad in real world either:

Boy 13 (5th grade): bankruptcy is not so bad thing in the game

Interviewer: is not a bad thing?

Boy 13: that's right

Boy 12 (5th grade): you can always create a new team if the old one is destroyed

In virtual worlds, many children also perform business activities, such as purchasing and selling items. Girls using goSupermodel, for example, reported shopping new clothes for their avatar. As in real life, the clothes also wear out and they can be sold to other users in a vintage store. With this regard, self-expression was revealed in the users' virtual consumption

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choices (see Lehdonvirta et al., 2009). Most of the children in our study said that they did not use real money in virtual worlds. However, some children had bought membership to goSupermodel or Habbo Credits, which can be used to trade different artefacts or avatar related accessories. The credits can either be earned by participating in different activities or bought in physical store or online using a variety of different services, such as credit card, a telephone service or via SMS message.

EXPRESSING ONESELF

Children express their thoughts and ideas in many ways in virtual worlds. In our study, several children told that they wrote mottos and stories that are publicly available for all users. Some expressed themselves in more formal ways, such as voting or replying to inquiries in virtual worlds. In Habbo, for example, a poll is conducted every year to nominate the best avatar of the year. In some virtual worlds, such as goSupermodel and Habbo, users also have a right to create and conduct inquiries by themselves as well as to create music and design clothes for their avatar. Thus, virtual world users may express themselves also through their avatars, by how they look like and behave.

A direct way to express oneself and one's opinions in virtual worlds is by interacting with others by chatting, for example. However, although Bers and Chau (2006) argue that it is possible for children and young people to engage in civic discourse in virtual worlds, the results of our interviews do not support this argument. The children reported chatting mainly about homework, hobbies and pets, without a profound purpose to point out problems or to make changes in those matters. According to some children, it is easier for them to express themselves in virtual worlds than in real life, because there are no restrictions or 'nothing to follow' in virtual worlds. For example, there are no parents of other familiar people looking after them. In virtual worlds, children can talk about issues they would not talk about in real life:

Interviewer: you have said that you are interested in expressing your views?

Boy 9 (8th grade): well, at least it's easier there

Interviewer: how is it easier?

Boy 9: well, there are no parents or other people looking after you and it's easier with the people you don't know before

Interviewer: why is it easier with the people you don't know before?

Boy 9: well, there won't be the situation that some close people get information about some blunders.

In this respect, virtual worlds indeed represent social participation with low barriers to self-expression (see Jenkins et al., 2006). On the other hand, this opportunity also has its a negative side. As children reported, there are people who insult other people by being rude.

COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES

Several interviewees reported participating in community activities in virtual worlds, such as parties, competitions as well as different group and club activities. The significance of these activities is based on the opportunity to do something different than in real life. The children told that in virtual worlds, they can participate in fashion shows, for example, which they would never do in real life. The aim of the community activities varies with the virtual world. In game virtual worlds, such as Runescape, groups called guilds exist only for a certain time as their existence is based on the task performed in the game. In social virtual worlds, instead, the clubs may be based first on a common interest, such as a hobby. The girls using goSupermodel, for example, reported about a club for Madonna fans, which has thousands of users. Secondly,

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the clubs may also be based on real life-based friendships between users:

Interviewer: How big are these clubs? How many members are there?

Girl 8 (5th grade): it depends, the clubs that admin has founded may have something like over 2000 members, our club has maybe some.

Girl 7 (5th grade): 20

Girl 6 (5th grade): but it is on purpose that it is not allowed for strange people to join…what is the name of the club?

Girl 8: jrl

Girl 6: jrl means friends

Girl 7: in real life

Girl 8: and friends forever.

In virtual worlds, there are community activities at two levels. A virtual world can be seen as one big, public community which consists of common rules and shared attitudes (Heinonen, 2008). These basic rules and attitudes are usually defined by the virtual world developers. Secondly, there are non-public or 'private' communities inside the virtual worlds. These communities are founded by the users themselves, who also define the rules and attitudes in the community. The girls who reported creating a club, for example, described their club as a small community which is restricted only to their closest friends.

ORGANIZATIONAL ACTIVITIES

Some of the children indicated exceptional activity in virtual worlds by organizing activities by themselves. They told that they have created surveys, discussions or competitions in virtual worlds. Some informants also had created groups and clubs in virtual worlds. The girls using goSupermodel, for example, reported they created their own club in the virtual world which, according to them, would not happen in real life. As it is their own, the club is particularly significant for them:

Girl 5 (5th grade): (--) I have created one club as well.

Interviewer: What kind of club have you founded?

Girl 5: the one in which I have created different discussion forums where we can talk about all kind of matters with those who are my friends.

The opportunity to edit and create the world that one inhabits is important to children, because it gives the 'sense of collective ownership'. According to Gordon and Koo (2008), it exists as the users engage in synchronous dialogue and production with others. The feeling the girls got as founding and being members of the club can be seen as an example of this sense. The opportunity to create something own that is close to one's own life is the basic idea in participatory culture (Jenkins et al., 2006). It enhances children's public participation experience as well (Evans-Cowley & Hollander, 2010).

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to find out children's social practices in virtual worlds, and based on the results further develop the framework of virtual participation. We found seven practices that describe children's participation in virtual worlds. These practices are related to each other, and they are not mutually exclusive. Social communication, for example, always requires expressing oneself at least at some level. Based on the previous research literature, children's social practices can be classified according to the roles of virtual worlds in the process of participation (see Figure 2).

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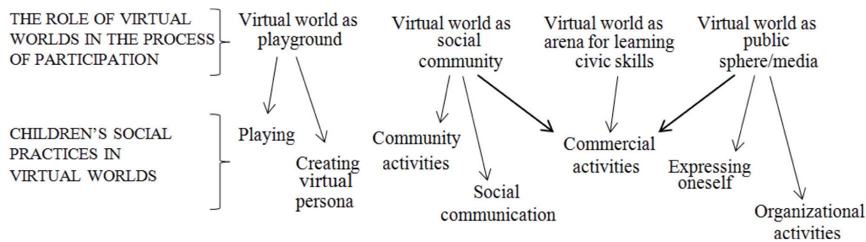
Figure 2. The children's social practices classified according to the roles of virtual worlds in the process of participation



First, virtual worlds can be seen as children's playground, which refers to children's practices of playing and creating virtual persona. The classification was made, as children did not present any particular reasons for doing these practices and there was no special meaning for them. Playing can be seen as a part of being a child, whether it takes place in virtual worlds or in 'real' world (see Marsh, 2010). Moreover, by playing games and through their virtual personas, children can practice different skills, such as cooperation and problem-solving as well as express their identity (Thomas & Brown, 2009; Meyers, 2009).

Secondly, social communication and community activities can be classified into the role of virtual worlds as social communities. These practices have a social meaning for children; children either socialize with their real-world friends, or use virtual worlds as tools for extending their social networks. Being part of a social community is valuable as such, but it is also a significant reason for children to use virtual worlds (see Iqbal et al., 2010; Livingstone et al., 2011). Solidarity and trust between people are among the positive social phenomena that children encounter in virtual worlds (Blanchard & Markus, 2004; Heinonen, 2008). However, children also encounter negative phenomena, such as bullying. In this sense, the social nature of virtual worlds is a multidimensional matter. Virtual participation can also cause problems and sorrow for children.

Thirdly, the role of virtual worlds as arenas for learning civic skills includes commercial activities. Children reported practicing different methods of using money in virtual worlds. This may be a positive thing, as children learn the rules of the real world as well; if they want to purchase goods they cannot afford, they have to save money. On the other hand, children may also get bad influence, because there are no risks and consequences in virtual worlds; if they run into bankruptcy in virtual worlds, they can always create another team. Of course, this may also be seen as a positive initiative. Dalgarno and Lee (2010) listed facilitating "experiential learning tasks that would be impractical or impossible to undertake in the real world" as a learning affordance of virtual learning environments (p. 19).

Fourthly, expressing oneself and organizing activities represent virtual worlds as a public sphere or media. In virtual worlds, children have a role of producers and they can present their voices and opinions in public. Both these practices are performed anonymously, which makes it possible also for those children to participate, who may otherwise be passive, insecure and too shy to express their views in the real world. This is important, because in order to be effective, participation requires publicity. The 'public opinion' cannot be formed unless people do not present their voices in public (see Habermas, 1974; Rheingold, 2008). In virtual worlds, children form the public opinion by

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voting the best avatar, for example. There is no formal, political discussion in virtual worlds, but children chat informally about the matters that are close to their own personal life (see Tuukkanen et al., 2012). In addition to the public, children also have private communities and spaces in virtual worlds. This can be taken as a sign of children being aware of the challenges and risks in virtual worlds; children want to have their privacy, and they share their private spaces only with their closest friends. However, although the children in our study were conscious and cautious, not all children are fully aware of the risks related to publicity on the Internet. Therefore the public nature of virtual worlds also contains serious risks for children (Sharples et al., 2009).

Although these seven practices we found can also take place in real life, the children in our study considered some of these practices practically impossible to perform in real life. Thus, virtual worlds provide an arena for children to overcome the limitations of the real world. However, the freedom also has side effects; the opportunity to act anonymously may provoke misbehaviour in virtual worlds (see also Selwyn, 2008). Virtual worlds are as much 'reality' for children as the real world (Castells, 2000), which makes misbehaviour as a serious problem. Virtual participation may have a positive effect on children's 'real world' participation. Online activities, for example, maintain and develop offline relationships and position subjects differently, thus re-contextualizing offline identities (Valentine & Holloway, 2002; Östman, 2012). However, negative experiences about participation in virtual worlds may restrain children's motivation to participate and express themselves in 'real world' too. It is also problematic that misbehaviour is a very difficult phenomenon to prevent, because of the structure of virtual worlds (Bartle, 2006). In this sense, media education and the role of adults are important. Moreover, enhancing children's media literacy is also important in order to protect children from external threats, such as inappropriate or even criminal acts of adults.

There are obviously limitations in this study, and there is also a need for further research in this field. First, the sample size in this study was small, which means that it is not possible make broad generalizations from the findings. Secondly, the focus of this study was on children's experiences and viewpoints. In the future, it is important to explore teachers' and parents' viewpoints as well, in order to enhance the positive use and effects of virtual worlds.

Although virtual worlds have potential for enhancing children's social participation and learning civic skills, they are not utilized as efficiently as they could be. In Finland, for example, virtual worlds are not extensively used in education. For most teachers and parents, virtual worlds appear merely as entertaining games or as 'kid stuff', in DeMaria's (2007) words. However, teachers and parents could have useful ideas on how to minimize the risks of using virtual worlds. Methodologically, virtual ethnography could be useful for getting as authentic a picture of children's virtual participation as possible.

NOTES

According to Schroeder (2008), there is a difference between virtual environments and virtual worlds as the latter term has been applied to persistent online social spaces. He argues that virtual worlds can therefore be distinguished from online gaming and massively multiplayer online roleplaying games (MMORPGs), such as World of Warcraft and Runescape. In this study, we adopted the broad viewpoint and considered also MMOPRGs as virtual worlds.

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IV

ONLINE ENVIRONMENTS IN CHILDREN’S EVERYDAY LIVES: CHILDREN’S, PARENTS’ AND TEACHERS’ POINTS OF VIEW

by

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Online environments in children’s everyday lives

Children’s, parents’ and teachers’ points of view

Abstract

Purpose: This article explores the role of online environments in children’s everyday life. We examine the meanings that children aged 11-13, parents and teachers derive from their understanding of online environments and make a typology of the perceived opportunities and risks of the online environments for children. The research questions are: a) how do children, parents and teachers experience the effect of online environments on children's everyday lives, b) what opportunities and risks for children are noticed in online environments, and c) what similarities and differences are there in children's, parents' and teachers' points of view in terms of opportunities and risks? The theoretical framework of the study consists of the discussion on opportunities and risks of using online environments.

Methodology: The data were collected by conducting semi-structured interviews in Finland in 2012. Altogether 27 interviews were conducted with children, parents and primary school teachers. The interview data was analysed with content analysis.

Findings: As a result, we found four types of perceived effects that represent opportunities and risks: learning and socialization, sense of community and empowerment, antisocial behavior and threat to security. According to this study, children, parents and teachers agree with each other in many issues concerning children's use of the online environments. On the other hand, children also have issues and problems that parents and teachers may not be aware of, or they do not view them as important.

Originality/value: This qualitative study focused on how children, parents and teachers described their subjective feelings about the effects of using the online environments. Thus, this study provides a new viewpoint on the research that has mostly relied on querying parents or teachers about children’s use of the internet, neglecting children’s often different perspectives on the risks of the internet.

Keywords

Children, online environments, everyday life, opportunities, risks, parents, teachers

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Introduction

Online environments and applications, which cover broadly all websites, are a pervasive part of children's lives today. According to Pewinternet study (2013), 95 per cent of children use the internet at home, at school or in some other environment. Sixty percent of European 9-16 year-old children go online every day or almost every day (Livingstone et al., 2011), and in Finland, the number or daily users is even higher, 79 per cent (Haddon and Livingstone, 2012). This has led to a public debate about the role of online environments in children's everyday lives and about the ways in which childhood is being transformed by virtual worlds (Plowman et al., 2010). On the one hand, children are seen as experts of the online environments who act there even more skilfully than adults. Children are named as "digital natives," whereas "digital immigrants" refers to the adults who lived before the era of the internet (Turkle, 2011; Prensky, 2001).

On the other hand, online environments are often regarded as a threat to children, because the opportunity to act anonymously causes misbehaviour (Livingstone et al., 2011; Vanacker and Heider, 2012). In public discourse, the worst scenarios are usually presented, such as violence, sexual abuse, dependence on the online environments and thus alienation from "the real life" (Herring, 2008). One reason for the moral panic-like phenomenon may be technological determinism: technology itself is seen as either a good or a bad thing (Martin, 2001). It is not understood that the way technology is used determines causes and effects of the use (Kaplan, 2009). Furthermore, the steady growth of the ostentatious power of technology is seen as a self-evident feature of modern life (Marx and Smith, 1994). The lack of information and experience in the online environments children use may also cause suspicion. Children and young people themselves, however, typically oppose any moral panic expressed by adults (Cohen, 1972).

In this study, we analyse the effect the online environments are perceived to have on children's everyday lives. We look at the issue from children's, parents' and teachers' viewpoints. The research questions are: a) how do children, parents and teachers experience the effect of online environments on children's everyday lives, b) what opportunities and risks for children are noticed in online environments, and c) what similarities and differences are there in children's, parents' and teachers' points of view in terms of opportunities and risks?

In our literature review, we could not find many studies that would compare children's, parents' and teachers' viewpoints regarding children's use of online environments. Most research relies on interviewing parents or teachers about children's use of the internet, neglecting children's often different perspectives on the risks of the internet, adult supervision and coping (Livingstone et al., 2011). This is problematic, because social desirability effects may be strong. In our study, we focus on 11-13 year-old children and their parents and teachers. The age group 11-13 is note-worthy, because the 11-13–year-olds are still regarded as children, who are not yet officially

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entitled to use adults' environments, such as Facebook or Twitter. However, the online activity of this particular age group has grown rapidly during the 2000s and 2010s, and more and more digital environments have been created to attract child users (Tapscott, 2009; KZero, 2013). Theoretically, the research on children's use of online environments is a relatively new and unstructured field. In this study, the discussion about the opportunities and risks in online environments is used as a framework for positioning the internet within the wider context of children's lives.

Online environments in children's everyday life – opportunities and risks

Among researchers, the effects of the use of computers and digital media have been a topic of active discussion ever since the use of them became more common in 1980s (Turkle, 1984; Rheingold, 1985). Since the mid- 1990s, numerous studies have been written on new technology and its importance in people's lives (e.g. Turkle, 1997; Castells, 2000; Katz, 2003). During the 2000s, the number of studies on children and online environments, in particular, increased notably. Simultaneously, the viewpoint of the studies has shifted into the processes "behind" technology, such as ways of acting in the online environments (Herring, 2008).

More recently, the studies have focused on specific aspects of the online environments in children's and young people's lives, such as internet as a tool for participation (Rheingold, 2008), learning (de Freitas and Veletsianos, 2010) or as a risk (Sharples et al., 2009). Very often, the discussion about children's use of the online environments has focused on two essential veins (Buckingham, 2008). Firstly, the online environments have been seen as creating new forms of community and civic life and offering resources for personal freedom and empowerment. Secondly, the online environments have been seen as a threat for privacy, as sources of new forms of inequality, as commercial abuse and potential sources of addiction. There is a lot of discussion on the effects but often these discussions lack empirical basis. How do parents, teachers and children themselves experience the effect of online environments on children's everyday lives? This is the first research question in this study.

The theoretical framework of this study consists of the discussion on opportunities and risks of using online environments. Opportunities and risks are a part of our everyday life and "self-actualisation" as Giddens (1991, 78) puts it. This means that people negotiate a range of interconnected opportunities and risks in the hope of constructing a meaningful lifestyle, a valued identity and satisfactory relations with others. In the online environments too, opportunities and risks are always intertwined although in public discourse, risks are often more emphasized (Herring, 2008). In general we live, according to Beck (1992), in "risk society" which refers to the way of

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post-modern society to perceive everything as risks. One example is technology which is evaluated and often seen as a risk for children. Children themselves may, however perceive as opportunities some activities that adults perceive as risks, such as making friends (Livingstone & Haddon, 2009). What opportunities and risks for children are noticed in online environments? This is the second research question of this study.

The previous studies on the positive effects of using the online environments have focused primarily on learning and socialization (Thomas, 2005; Thomas & Brown, 2009; Iqbal, 2012), sense of community and empowerment (Wellman et al, 2001; Brouwer, 2006; Parker and Song, 2007) and the possibility to express oneself and form a public voice (Rheingold, 2008; Stern, 2008; Willett, 2009; Martens, 2011). These positive effects can be seen as opportunities of using the online environments. Thomas (2005), for example, has explored children's learning in a virtual community by adopting Wenger's model of ”communities of practice”. According to her study, children in a particular virtual community learned new literacies through their participation in the discursive and social practices of the community. Children puzzled out problems together and used strategies such as trial and error. The online environments may also support children's sense of community, empower them and maintain their social capital (Wellman et al, 2001). There are positive results from the studies that have examined the use of the online environments as a part of inclusion of minorities in society, for example (Parker and Song, 2007; Brouwer, 2006). In our previous studies, the results indicated that children and young people use the online environments not only to interact socially and learn but also to play and spend time (Tuukkanen et al, 2010; Tuukkanen et al, 2013). Similarly, Lwin, Miyazaki, Stanaland and Lee (2012) have found information seeking, entertainment and socializing as three common internet usage motives among children aged 10-12.

On the other hand, risks such as antisocial behaviour and threat to security have been detected. These include, for example, cyberbullying (Görzig and Ólafsson 2013), encounters with “complete strangers” (Barbovschi, 2013) and online sexual content (Soldatova and Zotova, 2013). Especially children with low self-efficacy and psychological difficulties are considered to be vulnerable online (Vandoninck et al., 2013). The online environments have also been associated with the decrease of face-to-face interaction (Nie, 2001) and social capital (Ellison et al., 2007). Moreover, many researchers suggest that young people's feelings of loneliness have increased, as intimate relationships have become mediated by technology (Turkle, 2011; Deresiewicz, 2011). It could also be asked, how free children and young people really are to participate and to express their own opinions, as the ideology of a consumer citizen is always there in the online environments (Willett, 2008)?

In the discussion about children and online environments, the adults' role both in ensuring the e-safety and providing children with digital skills have often been emphasized. This is not an easy task for adults, because opportunities always go hand in

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hand with risks (Livingstone et al., 2011). For example, children's competences with technology are noted as necessary for a successful future (Plowman et al., 2010), but a limitation in educative uses of online environments is “e-safety,” the increased possibility for young people to be at risk when using online environments (Selwyn, 2007). It is also problematic if there is a gap between children's and adults' viewpoints about the aims of using online environments. According to the previous studies, teachers often have rather negative attitudes towards promoting children's internet awareness (Anastasiades and Vitalaki, 2011), whereas children themselves would like to use a variety of technologies and online environments even more at school (Geer and Sweeney, 2012). It is possible that the contradiction between children's and adults' viewpoints and aims leads to the decrease of children's motivation to study. The third research question in this study is, what similarities and differences are there in children's, parents', and teachers' points of view in terms of opportunities and risks?

Research questions, data and method

The purpose of this study is to explore the role of the online environments in children's everyday lives by using the discussion about the opportunities and risks in online environments as a framework. Thus, we digest discussion and findings from the previous studies on the opportunities and risks in online environments and complement them with some new findings from the qualitative data collected in this study. In particular, we examine the meanings that children, parents and teachers derive from their understanding of online environments and make a typology of perceived opportunities and risks of the online environments for children. The research questions that are presented below are based on the theoretical framework of this study. Specifically, the research questions are:

- How do children, parents and teachers experience the effect of online environments on children’s everyday lives?
- What opportunities and risks for children are noticed in online environments?
- What similarities and differences are there in children’s, parents’ and teachers’ points of view in terms of opportunities and risks?

The data were collected by conducting semi-structured interviews in a medium-sized town in Middle Finland in autumn 2012. Altogether, 27 interviews were conducted: 13 with children aged 11-13 years, 7 with parents and 7 with primary school[1] teachers. All children were from the same school class and there were seven boys and six girls. The parents were 38-52 years old. Six of them were mothers and one was a father. All parents were native Finns[2] and all had either University or College degrees. The teachers were 28-49 years old; four women and three men. Four teachers were also

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parents themselves although they answered from teacher's point of view. Their answers did not differ from the teachers who were not parents. The interviewees were recruited mostly by using snowball sampling. We contacted some familiar schools and got most of the participants from these schools. The parents were first recruited through children: when we asked parents' permissions for children's participation in the study, we also asked the parents' own interest in participating in the study. In the end, four parents were interested in participating in the interview. Three parents were then recruited by contacting some familiar people and asking their friends to participate.

The interviews took between 20 and 80 minutes. Typically, the children's interviews were shorter than the adults' interviews. In the beginning of the interviews, each informant was asked to fill in a short questionnaire related to their own use of online environments. All the informants filled in the same questionnaire, which firstly aimed at helping the interviewees to understand what the online environments are. Secondly, the purpose was to find out which online environments people use, how often they use them, how long they have used them and with whom the children use them. The most popular online environments among all interviewees were internet search and video pages (Table 1). The experience and amount of use of the online environments varied among adults and children, which was expected. All teachers, and nearly all parents, reported that they have used the online environments for longer than five years and all of them use them daily, whereas the majority of the children disclosed that they used them 1-3 times in a week. The children used the online environments most often alone or with their friends instead of their parents, siblings or other people online.

Table 1. The number of children, parents and teachers using different online environments.

Online environment	**Children (13)**	**Parents (7)**	**Teachers (7)**	**All (27)**
Internet search (e.g. Google)	13	7	7	27
Video pages (e.g. Youtube)	13	5	7	25
Online stores (e.g. Amazon)	9	7	7	23
Websites of school, town or sport clubs	9	7	7	23
Online encyclopedias (e.g. Wikipedia)	10	4	7	21
Internet communities (e.g. Facebook)	9	6	5	20
News websites (e.g. afternoon papers)	7	7	6	20
Email	7	6	6	19
Discussion forums (e.g. Suomi24)	9	3	2	14
Instant messaging (e.g. Skype)	5	4	5	14
Online banks (e.g. Osuuspankki)	0	7	7	14
Online games (e.g. Miniclip)	7	1	2	10
Virtual worlds (e.g. Habbo)	6	1	1	8
Online galleries (e.g. IRC)	1	1	2	4

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The aim of the interview questions was to explore the role of online environments in children's lives and thus, the effects, opportunities and risks of using them. The interview framework consisted of five main sections related to children's use of the online environments: purposes of using them, context and amount of the use, adults' role in the use, perceived effects of the use and general opinion about the online environments. In addition, every interviewee was asked about some background information, such as age and education. The interview framework was same in all interviews but the questions were, to some extent, different in children's, parents' and teachers' interviews. In teachers' interviews, the focus was on children's use of online environments in school environment whereas parents focused on what happens in home environment. Children talked about their use of online environments in both environments.

The interview data was analysed by content analysis. Content analysis is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts to the contexts of their use (Krippendorff, 2004). It is based on qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that attempt to identify core consistencies and meanings of the data (Patton, 2002). The research strategy was abductive. According to Blaikie (2010), abductive strategy involves developing descriptions and constructing theory that is grounded in everyday activities. It has two stages: describing these activities (sub categories) and deriving categories and concepts that can form the basis of an understanding of the problem at hand (main categories) (Blaikie, 2010). The categories and concepts at the second stage can be based on the previous theories or studies as in this study.

In this study, the analysis was started by classifying the comments of each interviewee into five categories based on the interview framework. The aim of this phase was to reduce the data and to eliminate the comments that are not relevant to this study. In the second phase, similarities and differences in the data were looked at. The data were classified into 11 sub-categories, based on the context or the aspect that each comment was related to. The focus in the third phase of the analysis was to abstract the data by creating main categories, based on the sub-categories. In this phase, we used theoretical framework as a basis which means that the main categories were named according to the effects found previously. These effects are presented in the theoretical framework of this study. Thus, four effects of online environments on children's life were identified. In order to compare the viewpoints of children, parents and teachers, the number of their comments was counted in each category. Although in the interviews, children's comments were more concrete than adults' ones, it was possible to compare them because the main categories were based on the more concrete sub categories.

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Results

As a result of the analysis, four types of perceived effects of the online environments on children's everyday life were found. These perceived effects were named according to the concepts presented in previous studies. The effects are learning and socialization, sense of community and empowerment, antisocial behaviour and threat to security. Although the effects are not mutually exclusive, they can be examined from the viewpoint of opportunities and risks. Learning and socialization, sense of community and empowerment represent opportunities whereas antisocial behaviour and threat to security are regarded as risks (Figure 1). These opportunities and risks consist of sub-categories that are analyzed more closely in this chapter.

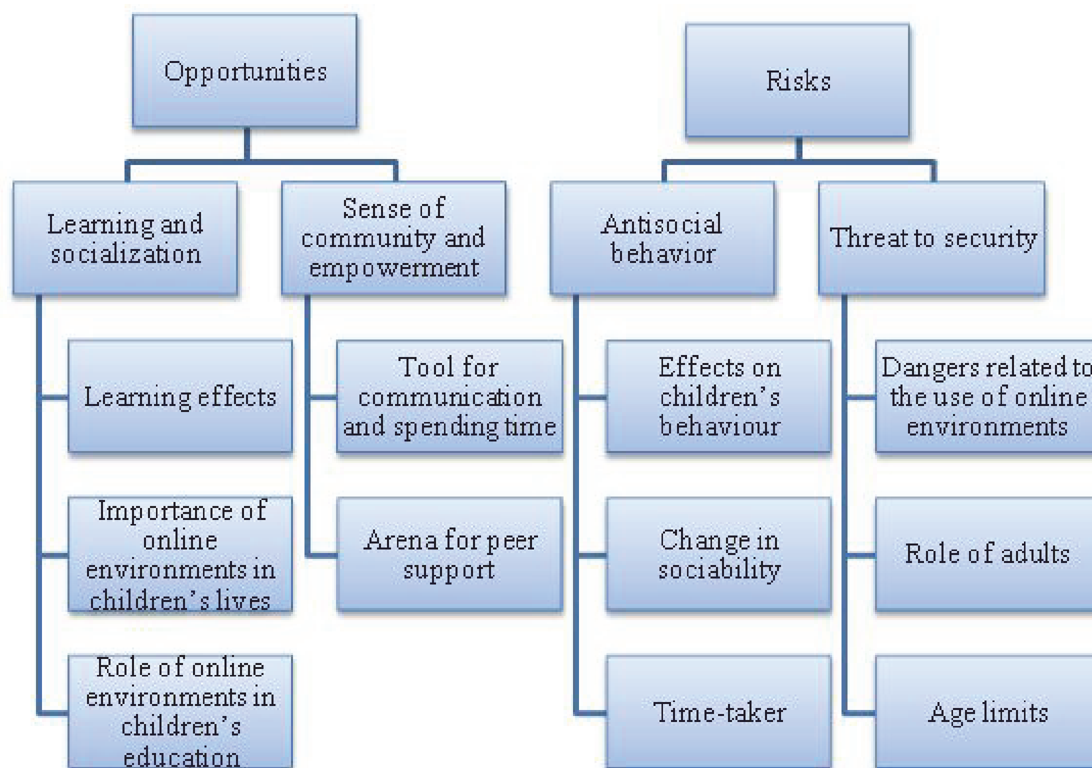

Figure 1. The perceived effects of the online environments as opportunities and risks in children's everyday lives.

In a quantitative comparison, children, teachers and parents had very similar attitudes towards the effects of the online environments on children's lives (Table 2). Their viewpoints differed mostly in terms of the sense of community and empowerment, which was mentioned more often by children and parents than teachers. The

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quantitative comparison is presented here in order to illustrate children's, parents' and teachers' viewpoints regarding the perceived effects in general. Qualitatively, there were some differences between children's, parents' and teachers' points of view. Next, the differences between their viewpoints will be analyzed more closely.

Table 2. The number of teachers, parents and children who mentioned different effects of using the online environments.

Effect	**Children (13)**	**Parents (7)**	**Teachers (7)**	**All (27)**
Learning and socialization	13	7	7	27
Sense of community and empowerment	12	7	4	23
Antisocial behaviour	10	6	7	23
Threat to security	12	7	6	25

Learning and socialization.

The perceived effect of learning and socialization was explored through three sub categories. First, children, parents and teachers presented the learning effects of the online environments. All but two children agreed that children can indeed learn something in the online environments. The learning effects of online environments have been identified in previous studies as well (e.g. de Freitas and Veletsianos, 2010; Thomas and Brown, 2009; Iqbal, 2012). Interestingly, however, this study indicated that children and adults emphasized different kind of issues and skills. As parents and teachers talked about positive effects, such as learning new information and foreign languages, most children responded that, in addition to positive effects, there can be bad things in the online environments, such as viruses, bullying and people who are not honest. Thus, children learn about the dangers of social environments. Moreover, adults presented many abstract effects, such as constructing identity and developing long-term working skills, while children talked about concrete effects, such as getting tips related to their hobbies. Children have a very practical viewpoint on the effects of using online environments which is natural as they do not have the same ability to abstract thinking as adults have.

They (children) can show creativity or they can be social or maybe they can also construct their identity safely, it (the internet) certainly isn't a bad place only (Teacher 1, female, no children)

If you don't know something you can use Youtube and watch some videos which show it step by step (Child 1, girl, 12 years old)

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Secondly, the interviewees were asked about the significance of the online environments in children's lives and thereby, the importance of the online environments in children's socialization into society. In this regard, nearly all children, parents and teachers agreed that the online environments are a natural part of children's everyday life and generally of modern life. Adults, in particular, also emphasised the increasing importance of the online environments: the ability to use them is a civic skill and "a prerequisite for surviving," as one of the parents expressed.

On the other hand, there were children who supposed that the role of the net will be the same or even smaller in the future. Some children were more sceptical than adults (see also Bennett et al., 2008). The reason for the difference between children's and adults' viewpoints is probably in their different time perspective. For children, the online environments have always been there and thus they are a normal part of the everyday life, whereas for adults, the online environments are still something new. Thus, unlike in Prensky's theory (2001) about the digital natives and immigrants, they are the digital immigrants, adults, who had strongly deterministic viewpoints on technology. To the question: "What do you think, what kind of role do the online environments have in children's/your life in the future?" a teacher and a child answered:

"I guess it will be enormous, if I think about the explosive development that has happened, for example, after the 1990s, the change has been so astonishing"(Teacher 6, male, 2 children)

"I will probably use it for sending email and paying bills and for these kind of activities, but it (the role) will not be different" (Child 10, girl, 11 years old)

The third sub-category contains children's, parents' and teachers' views on the role of the online environments in children's education. Most parents considered it good that children are taught to use online environments at school and most of the teachers were convinced that the online environments are already a natural part of teaching today. However, when the children were asked about the theme, almost all of them wanted to use the online environments more at school. Although two teachers admitted that schools are lagging behind in the use of online environments, there is a discrepancy between what the teachers reported about the role of the online environments in education and how children experience it.

This discrepancy may be caused by the differences between children's and teachers' viewpoints concerning the ways of using the online environments. At schools, the online environments are used rather unilaterally and it is often the teacher who uses the online environments, while the students are watching. This may not be the way how the students would like to use the internet at schools. Moreover, it is probably not the optimal way, if all opportunities that the online environments could provide for children,

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such as expressing own opinions, are considered (Iqbal, 2012). It has to be noticed too that children may want to use online environments at school because they feel they would learn more but also because they see it as a fun and enjoyable leisure time.

Sense of community and empowerment.

The perceived effect of the online environments for the sense of community and empowerment was examined through two sub-categories. First, the interviewees regarded the online environments as a tool for communication and spending leisure time. In terms of communication, nearly all children and teachers agreed that the online environments are a nice and easy way to keep in contact with other people. This was not, however even mentioned by parents who may rather see the internet as a tool for doing something useful, not “only” spending time. This is, nonetheless, problematic, because the aim of spending time does not exclude the aim of doing something useful too. For children spending time in online environments can be empowering.
Some children, as well as parents and teachers regarded the online environments as an arena for peer support, for example. They all agreed that it is easier to express oneself and chat about difficult issues in the online environments (see also Wellman et al., 2001). It is worth noting that this was mentioned by those parents who do not control their children’s use of the online environments. For these parents, this positive social effect is thus a significant reason for not controlling their children's use of online environments.

“She talks to her friends there and they support each other in different issues (-) by chatting it is perhaps easier to tell about different issues to the friends than to discuss about them face-to-face” (Parent 2, female, 3 children)

Antisocial behaviour.

The perceived effect of antisocial behaviour was explored through three sub categories. First, the interviewees commented on the reverse side of the online environments in terms of time use. Especially the parents emphasized that the use of online environments could waste too much time from other activities, if there is no control. Most children indeed admitted using or having used too much time in online environments at some point. Overuse may be a problem at schools as well. Some teachers admitted being sometimes concerned about the students, who seem to be absorbed in the online environments, even at school. Nearly all participants agreed that the overuse of the online environments is a problem, as it may reduce the time their family spent together (see also Ellison et al., 2007).

Secondly, the interviewees assessed the effects of the online environments on children’s behaviour. There was an essential difference between children's and adults'

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answers. Parents and teachers emphasized many negative effects, such as a lack of facial expressions and gestures, difficulties in social development and social pressure, but children saw only bullying as a problem. Moreover, most of the children did not recognise any effect on their or other children's behaviour. This could be seen as problematic. If children do not recognise the effects of the online environments, it may be difficult for them to understand the aims of media education. On the other hand, one may ask if it is children's duty to recognise those effects at all. In the end, adults always have the responsibility for children's use of the online environments. One teacher and one child answered the question "What kind of effects does the use of online environments have on children's behaviour?" as follows:

"It (the use of the internet) may have an effect on social interaction, it may not help, for example, the boys who have difficulties in social development anyway" (Teacher 1, female, no children)

"It doesn't change my behaviour except if there is some bad thing, somebody has bullied me or such, after that I am a little sad" (Child 2, girl, 12 years old)

Thirdly, some parents and teachers talked about the general change in sociability in children's life. According to them, social face-to-face contact has been decreased, because it is physically easier to chat with friends in the online environments than to go out and play. This was not mentioned by children at all because they do not have a historical perspective yet. Among some parents and teachers, the discourse was very strong, which supports the notion that some adults indeed have deterministic views when talking about children's use of the online environments.

"It is a meeting for them (for children) as they are in the internet at the same time (--) it (the internet) has changed very much the way of being together" (Teacher 5, female, 2 children)

Threat to security.

The fourth perceived effect of the online environments on children's lives is threat to security. This was examined through three sub-categories. In terms of the first category that is the dangers related to the use of the online environments, the interviewees mostly agreed, however, they emphasized different issues. The lack of concentration and difficulties in long-term working were mentioned by many children and parents, but particularly by teachers. Similarly, the fact that there is a significant amount of incorrect/inaccurate information, as well as contents that are not suitable for children in the online environments, was mentioned both by children and adults. On the other hand,

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children's and adults' points of view differed in terms of what they did not mention. Unlike children, teachers talked about the problems of publicity: what is published in the internet cannot be always removed. Moreover, children discussed the problems related to bullying, whereas it was not mentioned by adults at all. This is, of course, problematic because if adults do not know the issues that children experience as problems, they cannot prevent them.

Secondly, the interviewees discussed the role that the adults should have in children's use of the online environments. Most parents and teachers agreed that children's use of the online environments should be controlled at home and most parents indeed do that. Most children also answered that their use of the online environments is controlled and they have discussed the dangers of the online environments with their parents. However, there were also some children whose parents are not really interested in their use of the online environments. A couple of parents reported that they do not want to control their children's use of the online environments, because they trust their children's ability to cope there. According to some adults, it is also the children's own responsibility to make choices: ability to make decisions is a part of civic education. The notion of two kinds of adults, restrictive and permissive, has been presented in the previous studies as well (Livingstone et al., 2011). It is important to take note that the distinction between these types is not normative. According to this study, both the restrictive and permissive parents were aware of their choices and gave reasons for them.

"At first I didn't let her create a profile in Facebook, but then she asked for it again and again and I said okay do it (--) I am not worried and she takes care of her school work very well" (Parent 2, female, 3 children)

"I am like a police of the internet, sometimes I think I am too strict but I have experienced that I want to be rather too strict than too loose (--) you cannot give the big, worldwide ball of responsibility to children" (Parent 3, female, 4 children)

The third sub category contains interviewees' viewpoints of age limits. In this category, the opinions were very similar: most of the children and adults considered it good to have age limits on the sites. On the other hand, especially teachers and parents told that people do not take the age limits seriously and they are passed anyway. Many children admitted to using Facebook, although they were younger than 13, in spite of their parents' opinions about age limits. The attitudes of both children and adults were contradictory. One reason for using the online environments too early is social pressure, which was mentioned by children as well as adults. Thus, rather than focusing on the structural factors, such as age limits, it is important to try to change the attitudes of children and young people (see also Livingstone et al., 2011).

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Conclusions and discussion

According to this study, children, parents and teachers identify many effects of using online environments that can be seen as opportunities and as serious risks. The opportunities include learning and socialization as well as sense of community and empowerment whereas antisocial behavior and threat to security were seen as risks. Children and adults considered the online environments as an unavoidable part of life and children's future which indicates the significance of the discussion and research on the effects of using online environments. The typology developed in this study describes the opportunities and risks of using online environments and serves as a basis for teachers and parents as they discuss about the use of online environments with children. It can also be used in the material related to media education. For researchers, this study can work as a basis for exploring single effects of using the online environments.

One of the main conclusions in this study is that children, parents and teachers agree with each other on many issues concerning children's use of the online environments. Mostly they saw the same possibilities and risks in online environments. The reason for the similarities between children's and adults' viewpoints could be in the risk society: children have lived in the society where risks are always there and people talk about them more than before (Beck, 1992). Thus, as adults' role was previously to protect children from all risks and harms (Prout and James, 1997), children today are also aware of them, at least of the ones that are related to the online environments. This is an important result because it encourages parents and teachers to see children also as active agents in the online environments (Prout and James, 1997). They are not only the adults who can teach children about the use of online environments: adults can also learn from the children if they are genuinely interested in children's online activities. The consensus between children's and adults' viewpoints in terms of the recognition of opportunities and risks is a good starting point when children's media education and e-safety are considered: it is possible for both children and adults to understand each other.

Another important conclusion in this study is that there are issues that children, parents and teachers also disagree (see also Hendriyani et al., 2014). The biggest differences between their viewpoints were noticed in discussions about the role of online environments in the future and in school and the problems related to the use of online environments. As adults' viewpoints could be described as deterministic, children were not so radical. Theoretically, this is an interesting result because it challenges Prensky's (2001) idea about the digital immigrants who do not appreciate for the skills of using online environments. In this study, digital immigrants, adults and teachers, considered it impossible to survive without the knowledge of online environments. Thus, they emphasized the role of adults in teaching children about the opportunities and risks of using online environments.

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In this sense, there was also a small discrepancy between what parents and teachers told about the significance of online environments in children's lives and how children experienced the use of the online environments in schools. Although online environments are seen as a part of children's everyday lives, children did not experience that the online environments are used enough in schools. Moreover, children also have issues and problems that parents and teachers may not be aware of or they do not regard them as important. For example, some children were worried about online bullying, which was not mentioned as a risk by parents and teachers. This is of course problematic, as children are always vulnerable in relation to adults and thus they need protection in the online environments as well. According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child[3], it is adults' duty to make sure that the both viewpoints, protection and trust, are realized in children's everyday life.

The typology presented in this study mainly supports the previous studies and theories about the effects of children's use of online environments. All four effects, learning and socialization, sense of community and empowerment, antisocial behavior and threat to security have been presented in the previous studies as mentioned in the theoretical framework. Exceptional in this study is, however, that possibility to express oneself and form a public voice was not emphasized by children and adults in this study. The reason for this may be in parents' fairly strict attitudes towards controlling children's use of the internet. Moreover, it is very restricted at school too. Adults see the public nature of the internet rather as a risk than as an opportunity. As expressing oneself could mean for example presenting own outputs or discussing about the current issues, there are no opportunities for children to express themselves in other ways than discussing with their friends. One reason for this could be the lack of information about the different ways of using online environments. Furthermore, this is the issue related to children's safety: children as well as adults may not experience it safe to share their opinions and outputs in online environments.

As with all research in social sciences, there are limitations in our study. First, the results cannot be generalized as the data set is very small. However, this study is qualitative in nature. It focused on how children, parents and teachers described their subjective feelings about the effects of using the online environments. Secondly, the topic we focused on may have had an effect on the sampling. For example, all teachers in this study responded they used online environments in teaching, which may not be the case among all teachers. Also, all the children came from one classroom. Thus, it is likely that they all were reflecting on the same experiences of using the internet in the classroom. The parents who participated in this study also had a slightly higher education than the average in Finland. Moreover, in our sample, only part of the children and parents were from the same families. Having all children and parents from the same families would provide an interesting opportunity to compare their viewpoints.

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In future, it is necessary to explore the practices of media and civic education also in schools and in informal contexts. It is also necessary to compare the curricula in different countries with a focus on how technology and online environments are seen as a part of children's learning and life in general. Furthermore, it would be useful to conduct a large survey on children's use of online environments, especially among teachers. These studies could provide important information particularly for politicians and other decision-makers when they make plans for education in the years to come.

Endnotes

[1] In Finland, children attend primary school in the fall of the calendar year when they turn 7, and move to secondary school when they turn 13.
[2] The share of ethnic minorities of the population in Finland is minimal.
[3] The Convention on the Rights of the Child available at: http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm.

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