THE CONSTRUCTION OF YOUTH CITIZENSHIP LEGITIMACY: FROM SOCIAL ADVOCACY TO DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP

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Abstract

This study examines how youth citizenship is constructed beyond its formal status by analyzing the multidimensional processes through which young people gain legitimacy as civic actors. The research problem arises from the tendency to view youth merely as "not-yet citizens," overlooking their active roles in addressing societal issues. The study aims to demonstrate that youth are real citizens who build legitimacy through social participation, digital engagement, and trust-based practices. Using a phenomenological method, this study explores the lived experiences of youth communities, capturing their advocacy initiatives, cross-community collaborations, and use of digital media. Data were collected through interviews, document analysis, and observation, and analyzed through categorization, interpretation, and inductive reasoning. The findings show that social legitimacy is derived from the relevance of issues raised—such as education, environment, gender equality, and human trafficking—and the solidarity built through collaboration. Digital legitimacy is established by utilizing diverse social media platforms as contemporary civic spaces to expand advocacy and visibility. Trust-based legitimacy emerges from practices of egalitarian advocacy, transparency, and sustained solidarity across communities, which enhance both credibility and moral authority. The study concludes that youth citizenship is a dynamic and multidimensional process shaped by the interplay of social, technological, and ethical contexts. It also suggests that further research should explore how digital legitimacy can evolve into tangible influence on public policy and that comparative studies across regions may enrich understandings of global patterns of youth civic practices.

Keywords: Civic Legitimacy, Youth Community, Social Advocacy, Digital Citizenship, Trust-Building

INTRODUCTION

The debate surrounding youth citizenship has garnered significant attention in the fields of social sciences, politics, and public administration. Young people are often situated in an ambivalent space—on the one hand, they are regarded as agents of change capable of bringing renewal to society, yet on the other, they are frequently perceived as "not-yet citizens," or citizens-in-the-making who lack full recognition. Such perspectives highlight the limitations of age, experience, and political capacity, portraying youth as insufficiently mature to obtain full civic legitimacy (Marcu, 2024; Wood, 2022). This view reproduces asymmetric relations between the state and young people, where recognition of youth citizenship is more often seen as something to be granted rather than something already enacted. Contemporary scholarship has begun to challenge this perception by emphasizing that young people are not merely citizens-in-becoming but are instead real citizens who actualize their citizenship through everyday participation in social, political, and cultural life. Citizenship cannot be understood solely as a legal-formal status but must be conceived as a social practice realized in daily life (Bloemraad, 2018; Stevenson et al., 2015). Young people negotiate their citizenship by contributing to communities, engaging in collective decision-making, and participating in activities that support the public interest (Sturtevant, 2017). Thus, youth citizenship is not singular but layered, practiced in ways that often transcend the formal frameworks established by the state. A major shift in the landscape of youth citizenship has also been driven by the development of digital technologies. The advent of social media has expanded the public sphere from face-to-face interactions into virtual spaces that enable broader and more flexible participation. Collin, (2015) demonstrates that although youth often experience a democratic disconnect with formal institutions, they are highly active in creating new participatory spaces through digital platforms. Sayrani et al., (2023) propose the concept of active-differential citizenship to describe how young people

articulate citizenship differently from state norms, particularly through advocacy practices and digital participation. These studies highlight that youth citizenship is dynamic, diverse, and deeply influenced by social contexts and the technological infrastructures that shape it. Beyond the digital factor, the relational dimension of youth citizenship has also become a crucial focus. Trust emerges as a fundamental aspect in building legitimacy, both among young people themselves and between youth and broader society. Foa et al., (2020) caution that contemporary democracies face a crisis of trust, where confidence in political institutions has declined drastically. Yet other research underscores that community solidarity can serve as a new basis for shaping citizenship, particularly among youth (Essomba et al., 2023). This suggests that youth citizenship can be understood as a social construct that emerges through interaction, collaboration, and reciprocal ethical trust. In the Indonesian context, youth are often portrayed as agents of change or as the nation's "next generation." In practice, however, youth are not merely successors but active actors in social transformation. They establish communities, engage in student organizations, initiate social movements, and advocate for public issues. Kim & Chung, (2020) demonstrate that socio-economic factors shape the capacity of young people to engage in citizenship, while other studies in Indonesia reveal that youth communities increasingly rely on social media as a space for advocacy and the strengthening of civic identity. This illustrates that Indonesian youth practice citizenship in ways that diverge from the legal-formal frameworks emphasized by the state.

This research is situated in the specific context of youth communities in Kupang City. Youth communities in Kupang are highly diverse, focusing on issues ranging from education and the environment to gender equality and human trafficking. Through community-based movements, they advocate these issues to assert their existence. Moreover, Kupang's youth communities build cross-community collaborations with student organizations, NGOs, and other local groups. Such collaborations typically begin through interactions on social media and are later consolidated through formal mechanisms within the communities. The guiding principles are equality and mutual support, which are crucial for building trust among communities. Social media plays a central role in constructing youth legitimacy in Kupang. Instagram serves as the dominant platform for reaching students, while TikTok, YouTube, and Spotify are utilized to disseminate educational content, document activities, and produce podcasts. Nearly every community activity is reproduced as digital content and distributed to wider audiences. This illustrates how digital legitimacy is constructed not only through online presence but also through the production of narratives that amplify the impact of social advocacy. Furthermore, inter-community relationships are reinforced through practices of mutual mentions, reposting, and content collaboration, generating digital solidarity.

However, youth citizenship legitimacy in Kupang rests not only on social and digital dimensions but also on trust-building. Trust is cultivated through direct engagement in collective activities, principles of openness, and egalitarian advocacy practices that reject hierarchical dominance between communities. Challenges persist, such as slow responses on social media or structural differences among organizations, yet practices of reciprocity and transparency have succeeded in strengthening the credibility of youth communities in the eyes of the public. This trust becomes the foundation that ensures the sustainability of youth advocacy movements. Based on the discussion above, this study formulates the following research question: How do young people construct the legitimacy of their citizenship amid the limited recognition by the state? This question leads to the hypothesis that youth citizenship legitimacy does not merely derive from the legal-formal status granted by the state, but is actively constructed through issue-based advocacy, digital engagement, and ethical practices of trust-building in community collaboration.

Previous research has extensively examined youth engagement in social citizenship (Brennan et al., 2022; Odera et al., 2022; Saud & Margono, 2021), digital participation (Grishaeva & Shamaev, 2022; Kligler-Vilenchik & Literat, 2020; Manuain et al., 2025; Pawluczuk et al., 2020; Prima Roza et al., 2023; Wahyuningroem et al., 2024), as well as the importance of solidarity and trust in strengthening citizenship (Brünker et al., 2019; Evans et al., 2018; Schoenebeck et al., 2021). However, these studies tend to separate the social, digital, and relational dimensions, leaving a gap in conceptual models that integrate all three. By analyzing the experiences of youth communities in Kupang, this study unifies these three dimensions of legitimacy—social, digital, and trust-based—to build a more holistic understanding of youth citizenship. Additionally, this research contributes geographically by bringing perspectives from Indonesia, offering a contrast to the dominance of Western scholarship. The aim of this study is to analyze how young people construct the legitimacy of their citizenship through social advocacy, digital media engagement, and trust-building. By highlighting the interconnection of these three dimensions, this research seeks to enrich citizenship studies by offering a new, context-sensitive conceptual framework, while affirming that youth are full civic actors—legitimate, credible, and actively contributing to public life.

METHOD

This study employs a phenomenological method. This approach was chosen because it is particularly relevant for exploring the subjective experiences, meanings, and social constructions shaped by young people in the process of social advocacy. Phenomenology enables the researcher to understand how youth actors interpret their experiences in constructing legitimacy—whether through issue-based advocacy, digital media engagement, or egalitarian trust-building practices. The central focus of this approach lies in lived experience, namely, the direct experiences of the research subjects and how these are interpreted within a specific socio-political context (van Thiel, 2014). The research was conducted in Kupang City, East Nusa Tenggara, which was selected due to its distinct socio-political dynamics compared to larger cities in Indonesia. Kupang presents a unique context of youth advocacy, where limitations in infrastructure, geographical distance from the centers of power, and socio-cultural diversity encourage innovation in community-based advocacy. Thus, this research not only enriches broader understandings of youth advocacy but also provides a contextual contribution by emphasizing the importance of examining legitimacy within a local framework.

The data analysis techniques consist of three stages. First, categorization, which involves systematically organizing the collected data before interpreting it. Primary qualitative data were obtained from interview transcripts in verbatim form, while document analysis and observation were used to complement and reinforce the primary data. All data were recorded and organized according to themes relevant to the research focus. Second, data interpretation, which refers to the process of assigning meaning to the patterns identified during the research process. Data sorted into thematic categories were further interpreted to enable the researcher to draw meaningful insights. Third, inductive reasoning, which entails deriving general conclusions from specific observations. The interpreted data were then synthesized to develop conclusions concerning the construction of youth citizenship legitimacy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Social Legitimacy: Issue Advocacy and Community Collaboration

Social legitimacy in youth citizenship does not automatically derive from the legal status they hold as citizens, but rather from their active involvement in public life, which grants them recognition in the eyes of society (Odera et al., 2022; Wood, 2022). Young people in Kupang City demonstrate how such legitimacy is constructed through issue advocacy, cross-community collaboration, and the principle of equality embedded in every form of advocacy they undertake. The issues raised by youth communities are closely tied to the needs of the local population, such as education, the environment, gender equality, and human trafficking. These issues are not selected for their popularity, but because they are directly experienced as everyday challenges in Kupang, positioning young people as agents who are highly responsive to social realities. Advocacy on education, for instance, emerges from concerns over the limited access to and quality of education across various regions of East Nusa Tenggara. Similarly, attention to human trafficking issues reflects responses to numerous actual cases occurring in the area. By elevating such relevant issues, youth communities show that their citizenship is manifested as social responsibility toward society. The relevance of these issues provides social legitimacy for their movements (Earl et al., 2017). As a result, society and other communities view them not merely as groups of idealistic young people but as actors with genuine commitment.

Beyond issue-based advocacy, collaboration serves as a crucial foundation in shaping youth social legitimacy. Nearly all communities in Kupang place collaboration at the core of their advocacy strategies. They build partnerships with NGOs, local communities, and student organizations to expand their networks and strengthen their advocacy efforts. Such collaborations often begin with simple interactions on social media, such as direct messages, and later evolve into more formalized cooperation through letters or written agreements. This pattern illustrates that inter-community relations are built organically and flexibly, yet can develop into more institutionalized forms when necessary. Interestingly, equality is the principle consistently upheld in these collaborations. Youth communities reject forms of cooperation that place one party in a dominant position. Instead, they emphasize horizontal relations, where all parties contribute equally and support one another. This principle differs significantly from the relational patterns commonly found in bureaucratic structures, which tend to be hierarchical (Whittaker, 2016). By stressing equality, young people in Kupang not only build social networks but also create advocacy spaces that are inclusive and participatory. Their social legitimacy stems from this mode of collaboration, as it reflects an ethical orientation that values all participants. Youth citizenship is thus learned and practiced in the context of everyday life, not only through formal education or state institutions (Foa et al., 2020; Odera et al., 2022; Whittaker, 2016). In Kupang, young people learn citizenship by directly engaging with communities through issue advocacy and cross-community collaboration. This contrasts with deficit views of youth as "not-yet citizens" (Collin, 2015), which portray them as

incomplete actors. Instead, the experience of Kupang's youth demonstrates that they are "real citizens" who enact citizenship through concrete participation. Their civic legitimacy does not derive merely from legal status but from social recognition of their contributions. Citizenship, therefore, is not only about formal rights but also about active participation in public life. The involvement of Kupang's youth in issues of education, environment, gender equality, and human trafficking illustrates a broader conception of citizenship. They practice citizenship as social responsibility, which in turn strengthens their social legitimacy. What occurs in Kupang demonstrates that youth civic legitimacy is constructed from the ground up, through tangible contributions that are directly felt by society. There are three key mechanisms in the construction of youth social legitimacy. First, the relevance of issues raised provides the foundation for social recognition, as communities perceive youth as actors attentive to their needs. Second, cross-community collaboration broadens advocacy networks and generates solidarity, collectively reinforcing legitimacy. Third, the principle of equality in advocacy highlights that legitimacy emerges not only from outcomes but also from the manner in which advocacy is conducted. These three mechanisms shape an ethical orientation of movement that distinguishes youth communities from formal citizenship frameworks, which are often exclusive and bureaucratic. Thus, social legitimacy in youth citizenship in Kupang can be understood as the result of advocacy practices grounded in real community needs, cross-community solidarity, and egalitarian relations.

Social Media as a Contemporary Civic Space

If the social legitimacy of youth is constructed through their engagement in public issues and cross-community collaboration, then digital legitimacy demonstrates how young people shape their citizenship within new spaces formed by the advancement of communication technologies. Social media has become a crucial arena where civic identity is practiced, recognized, and expanded (Brünker et al., 2019; Essomba et al., 2023; Sindermann, 2024). In the context of youth communities in Kupang City, social media is not merely a tool for communication or event promotion but serves as the primary infrastructure for broadening advocacy outreach, constructing collective narratives, and strengthening public visibility. Instagram is the dominant platform used by youth communities. This is understandable given that most of their target audience consists of Generation Z, who are highly active on this platform. Through Instagram, youth communities disseminate information about their activities, educate the public through visual content, and engage directly with their audiences. In addition to Instagram, communities also utilize TikTok for distributing messages in the form of creative video content, YouTube for showcasing short films, podcasts, or after-movie documentation, Spotify for educational podcasts, and Facebook for reaching a broader demographic. In other words, digital legitimacy is not built within a single space but through a diverse ecosystem of social media platforms, each employed according to the characteristics of its audience.

These practices do more than expand the reach of advocacy messages; they also foster interactions that strengthen inter-community networks. Mentions, reposts, and collaborative content production serve as symbolic gestures of support that not only enhance exposure but also demonstrate digital solidarity (Belotti et al., 2022). Through these practices, youth communities demonstrate that they are active civic actors, interconnected, and capable of generating public resonance through digital narratives. Consequently, their digital legitimacy grows in tandem with the visibility and connectivity fostered through social media. The shift of civic practices into digital spaces also gives rise to the phenomenon of democratic disconnect (Collin, 2015; Whittaker, 2016), where young people tend to disengage from formal democratic institutions yet remain highly active within digital arenas as new sites of participation. In Kupang, youth communities illustrate this phenomenon. Although their participation in formal institutions may be limited, they exhibit active citizenship through social media–based advocacy. This reinforces Wood, (2022) perspective on citizenship as a process of becoming, being, and doing, in which the digital sphere becomes a central medium for youth both in being citizens and in doing advocacy-oriented actions.

Furthermore, Sayrani et al., (2023) introduce the concept of active-differential citizenship, which highlights how Indonesian youth develop forms of citizenship distinct from state norms, particularly through digital activism. This concept is relevant to the practices of youth communities in Kupang, where social media is not only a space for raising issues but also a platform for asserting the independence of their movements. By not depending on the state, youth demonstrate their capacity to articulate collective interests through digital channels while simultaneously expanding their civic legitimacy in the public sphere. Digital legitimacy carries a dual dimension. On the one hand, it functions as a medium for amplifying advocacy narratives to broader and more diverse audiences. On the other hand, it enables youth communities to connect with global networks of citizenship. Through these digital practices, youth transcend geographical boundaries, bringing local issues into wider conversations (Odera et al., 2022). For example, human trafficking—an issue addressed by youth communities in Kupang—can become part of the international human rights discourse through digital content they disseminate.

Nevertheless, digital legitimacy also faces challenges. One such challenge is ensuring that digital participation does not remain purely symbolic but genuinely contributes to social change (Tappert et al., 2024). Another challenge concerns responsiveness, as some communities acknowledge that digital communication can often be slow or ineffective if not reinforced by personal networks (Bouzguenda et al., 2019; Manuain et al., 2025). Despite these limitations, youth communities in Kupang have demonstrated that social media remains a vital medium for strengthening their legitimacy, particularly by integrating digital interactions with direct advocacy practices on the ground. In sum, digital legitimacy in youth citizenship represents a form of construction that reflects a significant transformation of civic space. Digital citizenship is not merely a supplement but a foundational element in the actualization of youth citizenship. This perspective underscores that digital legitimacy not only expands civic spaces previously confined to the social domain but also lays the groundwork for discussions on trust-building and egalitarian advocacy practices that sustain youth movements.

Trust-Building and Egalitarian Advocacy Practices

Beyond social and digital legitimacy, another crucial dimension in the construction of youth citizenship is legitimacy founded upon trust. Trust serves as the foundation that binds together various forms of collaboration and interaction—both in social and digital spaces—thereby ensuring the sustainability of youth advocacy movements (Schoenebeck et al., 2021). In the context of communities in Kupang City, strategies for building trust are evident in everyday advocacy practices, which emphasize equality, transparency, and the ethics of reciprocal relationships. Trust is fostered through direct involvement in collective activities. Youth are not only initiators of programs but also active participants in initiatives organized by other communities. Physical presence in face-to-face events adds weight to social relations, as it demonstrates tangible commitment. For instance, when one community organizes an environmental activity, other communities actively join in. Such cross-community presence strengthens solidarity while simultaneously serving as a means of building trust across networks.

In addition to direct engagement, the practice of mutual invitations plays a significant role. Communities in Kupang regularly attend each other's events and further support one another by sharing event promotions on their respective social media platforms. This practice provides symbolic legitimacy, expands advocacy outreach, and illustrates that inter-community relationships are grounded in a spirit of mutual support (Brünker et al., 2019; Oliveira et al., 2023). Transparency in collaboration—whether in activity planning or role distribution—further reinforces trust among these groups. The principle of egalitarian advocacy is also central to the construction of trust. Youth communities reject hierarchical forms of relationships, instead prioritizing equality of roles. No community is positioned as more dominant than another. All parties contribute according to their capacities, and this principle helps sustain inclusive relationships. Equality is essential because youth communities differ in organizational structure and resources: some operate with more bureaucratic, hierarchical structures, while others are more flexible. Such differences have the potential to generate inequality, yet by emphasizing egalitarian advocacy, communities manage to maintain harmonious and trusting relationships.

Nevertheless, the process of building trust is not without challenges. One obstacle is the variation in communication responsiveness, particularly through social media. Some communities struggle to obtain timely responses from potential partners, whereas personal networks or face-to-face communication are often more effective. This challenge illustrates that trust cannot be built solely through digital interaction but requires personal engagement to strengthen interpersonal and interorganizational ties (Kumar & Pradhan, 2020; van Kersbergen & Tinggaard Svendsen, 2024). Thus, trust emerges as the product of layered interactions across digital and physical spaces. A central issue in contemporary democracies is the decline of trust, both in institutions and among citizens (Foa et al., 2020). Yet research also suggests that participation in communities can help restore social trust. This is relevant to the experiences of communities in Kupang, where trust among youth is cultivated through tangible collaboration, thereby reinforcing their civic legitimacy. Essomba et al., (2023) even argue that in contexts of intensifying political polarization, community solidarity represents a new form of citizenship capable of addressing the crisis of democratic legitimacy. Such solidarity, however, can only be realized when trust binds social actors together. The trust cultivated through egalitarian advocacy practices also provides additional legitimacy for youth communities—not only in the eyes of fellow communities but also in the broader public sphere. Transparency, openness, and equality create the perception that youth movements are credible and reliable. This credibility confers moral legitimacy, which may even exceed the formal legitimacy granted by state institutions. In this way, trust not only sustains the movement but also functions as a source of social authority that strengthens the position of youth as genuine citizens. Trust-building can thus be understood as a binding mechanism that connects social and digital legitimacy. Social legitimacy provides substance through issue advocacy, while digital legitimacy broadens reach

and visibility. Yet both remain fragile without trust as their foundation. Trust ensures that cross-community collaboration extends beyond formal cooperation to become sustained solidarity. It also guarantees that digital interactions are not merely symbolic but are linked to credible, tangible practices. Trust-building and egalitarian advocacy practices complete the cycle of constructing youth civic legitimacy. Through trust, young people gain not only social and digital recognition but also solidify their credibility as legitimate civic actors. These findings reaffirm arguments in the literature that youth citizenship is not a status conferred but rather a dynamic process constructed through interaction, collaboration, and ethical relationships. In Kupang, trust operates as the adhesive that ensures youth citizenship is not only acknowledged but also believed in, thereby granting robust legitimacy for the sustainability of their movements.

CONCLUSION

Youth citizenship does not rely solely on formal status but is dynamically constructed through social participation, engagement in digital spaces, and the ethical practice of trust. This finding reaffirms that young people are real citizens—legitimate and credible actors within public life—rather than merely individuals "in the process of becoming." The study further demonstrates that the legitimacy of youth citizenship is a multidimensional process that interconnects social contexts, technological infrastructures, and the ethics of relational practices in a mutually reinforcing manner. First, social legitimacy emerges from the relevance of issues addressed and cross-community collaboration, which enables youth to gain recognition as actors who contribute directly to societal needs. Second, digital legitimacy is constructed through the use of social media as a contemporary civic space that broadens the reach of advocacy and enhances public visibility. Third, trust-based legitimacy arises from practices of trust-building and egalitarian advocacy, which not only ensure the sustainability of youth movements but also provide moral credibility for young people as citizens. This research opens pathways for further inquiry into the dynamics of youth citizenship across diverse social and political contexts. In particular, studies on how digital legitimacy may transform into tangible influence on public policy or structural change—rather than remaining at a symbolic level—are crucial. Moreover, comparative research across regions or countries can enrich our understanding of the patterns through which youth citizenship is constructed globally, while simultaneously highlighting the unique factors that shape civic practices at the local level. In this direction, the study of youth civic legitimacy can continue to evolve, both conceptually and empirically, offering substantive contributions to the strengthening of participatory democracy in contemporary times.

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