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Uploading democracy.
A Case Study of the Evolution of Participation through Technology.

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MA Programme Euroculture Declaration

I, Francesca Benedetta Aletto, hereby declare that this thesis, entitled “Uploading democracy. A case study of the evolution of participation through technology”, submitted as partial requirement for the MA Programme Euroculture, is my own original work and expressed in my own words. Any use made within this text of works of other authors in any form (e.g. ideas, figures, texts, tables, etc.) are properly acknowledged in the text as well as in the bibliography.

I declare that the written (printed and bound) and the electronic copy of the submitted MA thesis are identical.

I hereby also acknowledge that I was informed about the regulations pertaining to the assessment of the MA thesis Euroculture and about the general completion rules for the Master of Arts Programme Euroculture.

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Handwritten signature of Francesca Aletto in black ink.

Abstract

In recent decades, the idea of more participatory democracy has resulted in the creation of online platforms with different purposes. The European Union has taken an interest in the issue and recognized it as an interesting way to add a human factor to Smart City. However, although there have been several experiments, primarily by private individuals, there are no particular academic studies in this regard. Today it is difficult to understand if these platforms work effectively and improve participatory initiatives. There is a lack of studies that allow us to understand whom these initiatives are acting on concretely and their impact. This thesis aims to investigate precisely these aspects. To do this, an initiative was created, BresciaLiquida, which would re-propose the participatory model of the municipal initiative, Un Filo Naturale, on the online platform (adhocracy.plus). The goal of the two initiatives was to involve citizens in delineating areas to be regenerated in an eco-sustainable way and in designing these future spaces. The incentive to participate is that the ideas deemed best by the municipality will then be implemented. Thanks to the comparison between the two projects, it was possible to verify the efficiency of the initiatives. The study focused on compliance with smart cities' participatory initiatives, the quantity and heterogeneity of the participants and the impact that the study had on the participants on a personal level. The results show that the online initiative attracted more people than the municipal initiative. The most significant differences lie in the age and civic engagement of the participants. However, both initiatives need more visibility for more people to be interested and participate. Other problems raised by the participants are transparency and lack of trust in the institution.

Keywords: Participatory Democracy, Online platforms for Political Participation, Sustainability, Participation, Brescia.

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To all the amazing human beings that I have met during these two years and to those who has supported me for years.

*What goes around will come around
and come back and get you*

I. Introduction

Throughout the last decades, Western societies have been hit by several crises of different nature, such as economic, identitarian and health-related ones. It becomes spontaneous to ask if there is something behind those crises, something more profound and intrinsic that connects them. At the same time, traditional Western democracies have been bitterly criticised. A central confirmation of these critics is the citizens' widespread dissatisfaction with the democratic system. This low interest in classic political participation may be seen as a reaction since the latest surveys on dissatisfaction with democracy reveal that dissatisfaction "has risen over time, and is reaching an all-time global high, particularly in developed democracies".¹ This discontent has been widely expressed through decreasing turnouts at elections and low participation in political activities.² Many scholars have examined the issue to find reasons behind this extraordinary and unexpected turn. Whereas most of them have focused on the causes behind this phenomenon - whether they are economical,³ due to inequalities within or between countries,⁴ corruption⁵ or a complex combination - other

¹ Roberto S. Foa' et al., "Global Satisfaction with Democracy 2020" (Cambridge, UK: Centre for the Future of Democracy, 2020), https://www.cam.ac.uk/system/files/report2020_003.pdf. or Richard Wike and Alexandra Castillo, "Many Around the World Are Disengaged From Politics", *Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project* (blog), 17 October 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2018/10/17/international-political-engagement/>.

² Susan J. Pharr, Robert D. Putnam, and Russell J. Dalton, 'Trouble in the Advanced Democracies? A Quarter-Century of Declining Confidence', *Journal of Democracy* 11, no. 2 (April 2000): 7–25. <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/trouble-in-the-advanced-democracies-a-quarter-century-of-declining-confidence/>

³ Guillermo Cordero and Pablo Simón, "Economic Crisis and Support for Democracy in Europe", *West European Politics* 39, no. 2 (3 March 2016): 305–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2015.1075767>. or Colin Crouch, 'The March Towards Post-Democracy, Ten Years On', *The Political Quarterly* 87, no. 1 (2016): 71–75, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.12210>.

⁴ Lewis Dijkstra, Hugo Poelman, and Andrés Rodríguez-Pose, "The Geography of EU Discontent", *Regional Studies* 54, no. 6 (2 June 2020): 737–53, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2019.1654603>.

⁵ Michael Rock, "Corruption and Democracy", *Journal of Development Studies* 45, no. 1 (2009): 55–75. or Mark E. Warren, "What Does Corruption Mean in a Democracy?", *American Journal of Political Science* 48, No. 2 (April 2004): 328–43.

scholars have dared to question the structure of democracy itself.⁶ They mainly agree on the need to improve democracy.

A weighty topic that has emerged is participation in democracy. The fourth revolution, the ICTs revolution, information and communication technologies, has started an irreversible process of renewal of humankind in all its manifestations. These technologies, combined with the complex and multifaceted democracy structures, produce e-democracies. When ICTs are merged with political participation, the ideal society of Rousseau becomes a little more feasible. This idea of democracy is summarized under the concept of participatory democracy: “a society that fosters a sense of political efficacy nurtures a concern for collective problems, and contributes to the formation of a knowledgeable citizenry capable of taking a sustained interest in the governing process”.⁷ Depending on the purpose of the consultation, different tools can be used. In most cases, this compound translates into online platforms that use features and tools of the social web to promote citizen engagement and civic participation.

This thesis aims to identify the effectiveness of two types of participation activities in the decision-making process - one based on an in-person approach and the other through online platforms - carried out in Brescia. The general research question is: how can Adhocracy’s online services improve and increase people’s participation in “Un filo naturale”, Brescia’s municipality participatory project? To answer exhaustively, the research question is broken down into five assumptions that scrutinize the composition of the two clusters, their dimension and their impact on people’s perceptions.

Despite this, with this thesis, I have tried to independently help the municipality of Brescia while involving more people in the municipality project. To give a general context to the reader, Brescia is an Italian city situated at the foot of the Alps, a few kilometres from the lakes Garda and Iseo. After Milano, it is the second largest city in its region, Lombardy (fig.1). It has 196 670 inhabitants, and it is the administrative

⁶ José Ramos, “Liquid Democracy and the Futures of Governance”, in *The Future Internet: Alternative Visions*, ed. Jenifer Winter and Ryota Ono, Public Administration and Information Technology (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2015), 173–91, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-22994-2_11. or Ben Abramowitz and Nicholas Mattei, “Flexible Representative Democracy: An Introduction with Binary Issues”, in *IJCAI*, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.24963/ijcai.2019/1>. or Markus Brill, “Interactive Democracy”, in *Proceedings of the 17th International Conference on Autonomous Agents and MultiAgent Systems*, AAMAS ’18 (Richland, SC: International Foundation for Autonomous Agents and Multiagent Systems, 2018), 1183–87.

⁷ David Held, *Models of democracy*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2006), p 215.

capital of the province of Brescia, one of the biggest provinces of Italy (1.266 million inhabitants).⁸ On the one hand, Brescia is one of the wealthiest cities and provinces in Italy and Europe: it is active in the manufacturing, engineering, textile, chemical and food industries. On the other hand, Brescia is also one of Italy's most polluted industrial sites. According to EEA's latest report on pollution, Brescia places 315° in 323° cities.⁹ Furthermore, land and water tables are contaminated by a mix of PCBs, dioxins, solvents and other dangerous substances, so intrinsically that in 2002 the Ministry of the Environment recognized the environmental emergency and designated Brescia-Caffaro as a SIN, a site of national interest for decontamination. Since then, repeated investigations have shown that PCBs and dioxins have entered the blood of citizens and possibly into their mothers' milk.¹⁰ It is an environmental disaster that has led to a high rate of tumours.¹¹ However, not much has happened. On the contrary, the worsening of climatic conditions due to global warming has exacerbated the situation. The drought that hits the city during the summer months leads to a worsening of air. Awareness about the contamination that hurts our health has increased in the last decades, though citizens have little space (and motivation) to complain and take action. Therefore, I decided to run a sort of experiment that humbly aims to understand whether some of the ideas of e-participation through online platforms can work or not in a small city. This great possibility became concrete when in December 2021, I found out that the municipality of my hometown, Brescia, launched a quinquennial project to face climate change effects on the city. Among the



Fig. 1. Brescia province.

⁸ ISTAT, “Popolazione Residente al 1° Gennaio 2020”, I.STAT, Gennaio 2020, http://dati.istat.it/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=DCIS_POPRES1.

⁹ European Environment Agency, “European City Air Quality Viewer — European Environment Agency”, Dashboard (Tableau), accessed 4 June 2022, <https://www.eea.europa.eu/themes/air/urban-air-quality/european-city-air-quality-viewer>.

¹⁰ Marina Forti, “La ricca Brescia ha un problema con l’inquinamento industriale”, *Internazionale*, 1 February 2017, <https://www.internazionale.it/reportage/marina-forti/2017/02/01/brescia-inquinamento-industriale>.

¹¹ Sasha Khomenko et al., “Premature Mortality Due to Air Pollution in European Cities: A Health Impact Assessment”, *The Lancet Planetary Health* 5, no. 3 (1 March 2021): e121–34, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196\(20\)30272-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196(20)30272-2).

initiatives of this project, Un filo naturale (UFN, henceforth), there is an initiative that aims to involve citizens in proposing ideas and places to be renewed in a climate-friendly perspective. This initiative is held by Urban Center, the municipality office which takes care of citizens' participation. UFN consists in five meetings of two hours each in which citizens of the five districts of the city can dialogue and propose places and ideas to the municipality.

This thesis consists of four different chapters that follow the introduction. Firstly, the first chapter is devoted to the conceptual and theoretical framework. It outlines essential concepts in this thesis interspersed with theories. It aims at furnishing an overview of the complicated debate on what is participation and how it is shaped that has been going on for decades. Furthermore, special attention is given to the impact of ICTs on participation theories. The third chapter addresses the methodology used in this thesis. In particular, it is explained the design, the philosophy, the type and the structure of the thesis. In addition to these canonical features, this section has to expound on the structure of my project, BresciaLiquida, and its phases, since this is how I have collected my data. The fourth chapter unfolds the thesis results with the help of graphs. Then, the fifth one deals with a deeper analysis of the results and a correlation of those with theories. Finally, there is a concluding chapter that summarizes the content of the thesis. To conclude, it is necessary to say that this thesis only tries to investigate different but related phenomena, the digitalization and the decentralization of power, that are now perceived as utopias or not interesting because they are not economically profitable. Although this study will not change our society, I hope that my efforts will motivate someone and that technology will be seen as a powerful means to achieve a better future and not only a devilish and alienating tool.

2. Theory

The pivot of this research is to investigate the relationship between technology and participatory initiatives answering the research question: “how can Adhocracy’s online services improve and increase people’s participation in UFN, Brescia’s municipality participatory project?” and its five assumptions that narrow it down.

To have a clear idea of the matter, this chapter discusses the concepts and theories of participation. After the first overview of participation and its escalation, the chapter exposes some essential participation models and their critics. Afterwards, it introduces the development of participatory approaches in light of the technological discoveries of our century.

2.1. Towards a definition of participation

In our perception, citizens’ participation in public affairs appears to be as old as the concept of democracy itself. Although today most of us assume that citizens need to have an active role in democratic governance,¹² this has not always been the case in the past. Indeed, human beings consider Athens’s democracy as the starting point and landmark of participation. This democracy is - sometimes - idolised and classified as the perfect example of direct democracy though people do not take into consideration the tight number of legitimate citizens who were allowed to participate effectively. Through the centuries, the evolution of political systems has caused a clear split of government and its governance- in this thesis, political activities indicate decision making and agenda setting henceforth- and people participation. It does not sound astonishing that the more authoritarian the government, the less space for people there is. Therefore, after the downfall of the last authoritarian or better totalitarian governments in Europe and the following call for democracy, there was a comeback of participation in the socio-cultural-political milieu.

¹² Tandon, Rajesh, 2008, “Participation, citizenship and democracy: reflections on 25 years of PRIA”, *Community Development Journal*, 43, No. 3, pp. 284–296. *or* Laura Iannelli, “Ripensare La Partecipazione Politica, Tra Grammatiche Pop e Siti Di Social Networks”, in *Public Screens. La Politica Tra Narrazioni Mediali e Agire Partecipativo.*, ed. Alberto Marinelli and Elisabetta Cioni (Roma: Sapienza Università Editrice, 2014), 195–225, <https://doi.org/10.13133/978-88-98533-43-5>.

In the last decades of the XX century, participation has become a much-used buzzword whose meaning has blurred, in any case. Indeed governments have taken different approaches and perspectives on participation and its implementation. In the 1960s, emancipatory participation was promoted in order to challenge prevailing subordination and marginalisation. However, the approach of these initiatives remained stuck to the top-down paradigm. As a reaction to the unsatisfactory result, in the 70s, bottom-up, people-led participatory development increased through the development of community experiments.¹³ Although many participation-based initiatives were undertaken between the 1960s and 1970s, the concept of participation first hit the mainstream in the 1980s¹⁴. The need for organisation and classification of precious research by many researchers, such as Cohen and Uphoff, have testified to this dissemination.¹⁵ The new initiatives that flourished during this period aimed to incorporate the knowledge and opinions of the concerned people in the planning and management of development projects actively. It must be recognised that similar initiatives (PRA, Rwanda's government, etc.) in developing countries have adopted a more inclusive and collaborative approach than the developed countries' ones.¹⁶ Indeed, the latter carried out actions directed to specific target groups rather than trying to involve the entire population.

Despite these differences, during its continuous evolution, the general concept of participation has concatenated with the crucial and valuable idea that citizen participation can afford equal opportunity to all while establishing the basis for an equal

¹³ Malin Hasselskog, "Participation or What? Local Experiences and Perceptions of Household Performance Contracting in Rwanda", *Forum for Development Studies* 43, no. 2 (Maggio 2016): 177–99, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08039410.2015.1090477>.

¹⁴ Andrea Cornwall, "Unpacking 'Participation' Models, Meanings and Practices", *Community Dev J* 43 (June 2008), <https://doi.org/10.1093/cdj/bsn010>.

¹⁵ John Cohen and Norman Uphoff, "Participation's Place in Rural Development: Seeking Clarity Through Specificity", *World Development* 8 (1 February 1980): 213–35, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0305-750X\(80\)90011-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/0305-750X(80)90011-X). or Patrick J. Conge, "The Concept of Political Participation: Toward a Definition", ed. Samuel H. Barnes et al., *Comparative Politics* 20, no. 2 (1988): 241–49, <https://doi.org/10.2307/421669>.

¹⁶ Robert Chambers, "The Origins and Practice of Participatory Rural Appraisal", *World Development* 22, no. 7 (1 July 1994): 953–69, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0305-750X\(94\)90141-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/0305-750X(94)90141-4). or Folake Oyegbola, "Facilitating Social Change: Bridging Participatory Methodology with Training Design to Support Equitable Community Development in Kent, Washington. A Journey of Learning and Development.", *Capstone Collection*, 1 April 2019, <https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/capstones/3180>. or John Cohen and Norman Uphoff, "Participation's Place in Rural Development: Seeking Clarity Through Specificity".

society.¹⁷ Different schools of thought exist concerning the impact of participation on society and agree that the co-creation of informed, high-quality knowledge developed through the cooperation of different peoples has always been an essential feature of participation.¹⁸ The reason is that, according to different researchers, this should lead to greater acceptance of government interventions in city affairs¹⁹ and increase the sense of satisfaction with the government²⁰ and democracy by working on better policies and transparency, accountability and people legitimacy.²¹ Some others have stressed that participation initiatives could grow government efficiency and effectiveness while reducing costs. The general belief that has emerged and persisted is that citizens should shift from “users and choosers” to “makers and shapers” of their environment, as Cornwall and Gaventa have observed.²²

¹⁷ Paul Davidoff, “Advocacy and Pluralism in Planning”, in *The City Reader* (London: Routledge, 2015), 277–96, https://pauldavidoff.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/ByPD_AdvocacyPlanningandPluralism_1973-1.pdf.

¹⁸ Davydd J. Greenwood, William Foote Whyte, and Ira Harkavy, “Participatory Action Research as a Process and as a Goal”, *Human Relations* 46, no. 2 (1 February 1993): 175–92, <https://doi.org/10.1177/001872679304600203>. or Phil Macnaghten and Michael Jacobs, “Public Identification with Sustainable Development: Investigating Cultural Barriers to Participation”, *Global Environmental Change* 7, n 1 (1 April 1997): 5–24, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0959-3780\(96\)00023-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0959-3780(96)00023-4).

¹⁹ Adrienne Martin and John Sherington, “Participatory Research Methods—Implementation, Effectiveness and Institutional Context”, *Agricultural Systems* 55, no. 2 (1997): 195–216.

²⁰ Michael Warner, “‘Consensus’ Participation: An Example for Protected Areas Planning” 17, no. 4 (1997), <https://www.projecttopics.org/journals/114693-consensus-participation-an-example-for-protected-areas-planning.html>.

²¹ Andrea Cornwall and John Gaventa, “Bridging the Gap: Citizenship, Participation and Accountability”, *PLA Notes* 40 (1 January 2001): 32–35. <https://www.participatorymethods.org/sites/participatorymethods.org/files/Bridging%20the%20Gap%20citizenship,%20participation%20and%20accountability.pdf>

²² Andrea Cornwall and John Gaventa, “From Users and Choosers to Makers and Shapers: Repositioning Participation in Social Policy”, IDS Working Paper (Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, 2001). https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/8785/IDSB_31_4_10.1111-j.1759-5436.2000.mp31004006.x.pdf;jsessionid=4957405FE8D1BD6E66B41B19BAB95A51?sequence=1 or Ghazala Mansuri and Vijayendra Rao, “Localizing Development : Does Participation Work?” (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1596/978-0-8213-8256-1>.

2.2. Different models of participation

In light of these premises and large donations, large scale interventions were made through the 1980s and the 1990s.²³ Therefore, the need for institutionalising participation - the need to regulate participation with institutional rules and procedures so that it could be settled as the habitual routine of the democratic structure²⁴ - has arisen contemporaneously. With a little delay compared to the United States, the European Union has provided the first guidelines on participation in the 1990s. Another interesting aspect of the advancement of the participation is its deep bond with the ecological cause, as testified by the imperative for participation enshrined in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 1992.²⁵ Participatory European actions have grown importance abundantly after Aarhus Convention on the 25 June 1998, the European Water Framework Directive,²⁶ and the Participation Directive.²⁷ Within the political arenas, the scope of researchers and politicians has always been to understand and develop if it was possible sophisticated techniques, standard mechanisms for improving participation.

Likewise, many diverse actions and governmental interests, many definitions and models of participation have been theorised by researchers. The most emblematic theory about participation was - and still is - the one by Sherry Arnstein. In her “A Ladder of Citizen Participation”, Arnstein described participation in US government initiatives as a ladder that went from the bottom (non-participation) to the top (citizen power). Arnstein questioned all initiatives’ true impact on societies; she discerned empty rituals

²³ Samuel Hickey and Uma Kothari, “Participation”, in Rob Kitchin and Nigel Thrift, *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2009, p 82. or Rajesh Tandon, “Participation, Citizenship and Democracy: Reflections on 25 Years’ of PRIA”, *Community Development Journal* 43, no. 3 (2008), p 289.

²⁴ Rodolfo Lewanski, *La Prossima Democrazia: Dialogo, Deliberazione, Decisione*. (Bologna: Università di Bologna, 2016).

²⁵ United Nations (UN). *United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change*, United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), Rio de Janeiro, 1992. <https://unfccc.int/resource/docs/convkp/conveng.pdf>

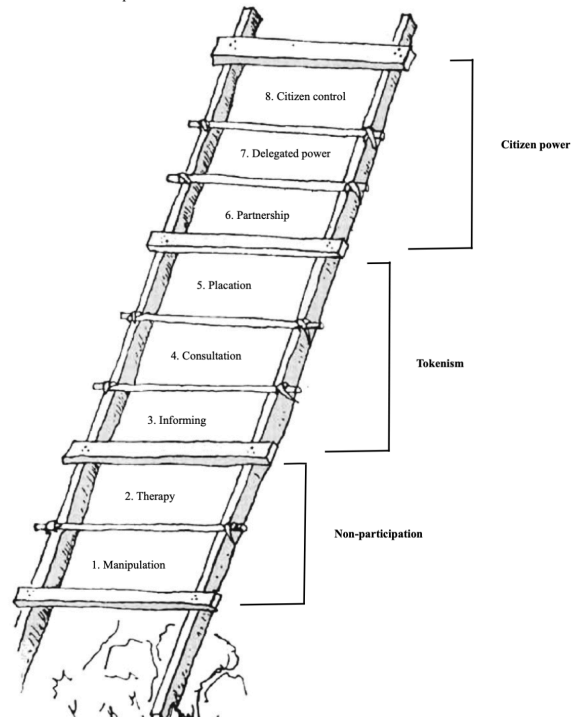
²⁶ Commission of the European Communities (CEC). *European Water Framework Directive 2000/60/EC*. CEC: Brussels, 2000. <https://leap.unep.org/countries/eu/national-legislation/directive-200060ec-european-parliament-and-council-establishing>

²⁷ CEC. *Public Participation Directive 2003/35/EC*. CEC: Brussels, 2003. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:4a80a6c9-cdb3-4e27-a721-d5df1a0535bc.0004.02/DOC_1&format=PDF.

that only benefit the image of the institutions that used them from the ones that changed the situation and create benefits for citizens (fig. 2). The eight archetypical rungs of this ladder start with manipulation and therapy (non-participation) that involve citizens through advisory boards or seminars to educate or promote urban renewal plans rather than involve them actively. Climbing up the rungs, it is found informing (well-timed information campaign and meetings), consultation (attitude surveys, neighborhood meetings etc.) and placation

(allows citizens to advise or plan). Those three rungs are classified as tokenism practices because although citizens can get involved, the final decisions are taken by power holders. The last category, citizen control of citizen power, comprehends partnership (decisions are taken through negotiation between citizens and power holders), delegation (citizens

Fig. 2. Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation



hold a clear majority of seats on committees that make decisions), and citizens control (citizens from every “category” has full authority to make decisions without the mediation of power holder).²⁸

Although Arnstein’s pinpointed the limits of her ladder, namely the discrepancy between the neat theoretical distribution of power among citizens and the ladder’s one; the omission of some road blocks such as racism, paternalism, disorganisation etc.; the approximation of all the levels of participation to 8 rungs, the model has remained the most authoritative model of participation.

In addition to that, several critics have pointed out Arnstein’s weak points, and many other models have been designed as a response. Desmond M. Connor has recognised

²⁸ Sherry R. Arnstein, “A Ladder Of Citizen Participation”, *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 35, no. 4 (1 July 1969): 216–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944366908977225>.

some limitations in the limited spectrum of participants (only black ghettos) and the absence of a logical progression from one rung to another one.²⁹

Instead, Kevin Collins and Ray Ison have disagreed with the power conceptualisation that Arnstein's theory is imbued with. Indeed, they have recognised that Arnstein envisaged participation as a power struggle between citizens trying to ascend and power holders, controlling organisations and institutions that intentionally or accidentally limit this rising power.³⁰ On the contrary, the two researchers have rejected the idea that participation has a hierarchical nature that reaches its ultimate expression and full realisation when citizens hold complete power. This conception has a disruptive influence on every attempt to participate that does not reach the highest rung, as Hayward and others showed.³¹ They would be automatically classified as failures. Furthermore, Jonathan Q. Tritter and Alison McCallum noticed that this interpretation draws a linear relationship between non-participation and citizen control. However, this should imply that every policy problem could be solved in the same standard way. On the contrary, the uniqueness of every problem requires a unique and nuanced participatory approach. This is why they created a different *not*-static model of participation: the mosaic one. This analogy tries to capture interactions between the multitude of different individual users, their communities, other organisations and the institution on which successful user involvement depends.³²

Despite its popularity arriving almost a decade after its publication, Scott Davidson's Wheel of participation has revolutionised the conception of participation itself.³³ What differs from the previous models is that the wheel and its shape and functioning imply that several more types of participatory engagement can stem from this model. The four

²⁹ Desmond M. Connor, "A New Ladder of Citizen Participation", *National Civic Review* 77, no. 3 (1988): 249–57, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ncr.4100770309>.

³⁰ Kevin Collins and Ray Ison, "Jumping off Arnstein's Ladder: Social Learning as a New Policy Paradigm for Climate Change Adaptation", *Environmental Policy and Governance* 19, no. 6 (2009): 358–73, <https://doi.org/10.1002/eet.523>.

³¹ Chris Hayward, Lyn Simpson, and Leanne Wood, "Still Left out in the Cold: Problematising Participatory Research and Development", *Sociologia Ruralis* 44, no. 1 (2004): 95–108, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9523.2004.00264.x>.

³² Jonathan Quetzal Tritter and Alison McCallum, "The Snakes and Ladders of User Involvement: Moving beyond Arnstein", *Health Policy* 76, no. 2 (1 April 2006): 156–68, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthpol.2005.05.008>.

³³ Scott Davidson, "Spinning the Wheel of Empowerment" (South Larnarkshire Council, 1998), <https://sarkissian.com.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2009/06/Davidson-Spinning-wheel-article1998.pdf>.

macro-categories (empowerment, consultation, information and participation) are, in turn, divided into three categories that differentiate clearly one from the other for the level of people involvement (fig. 3).

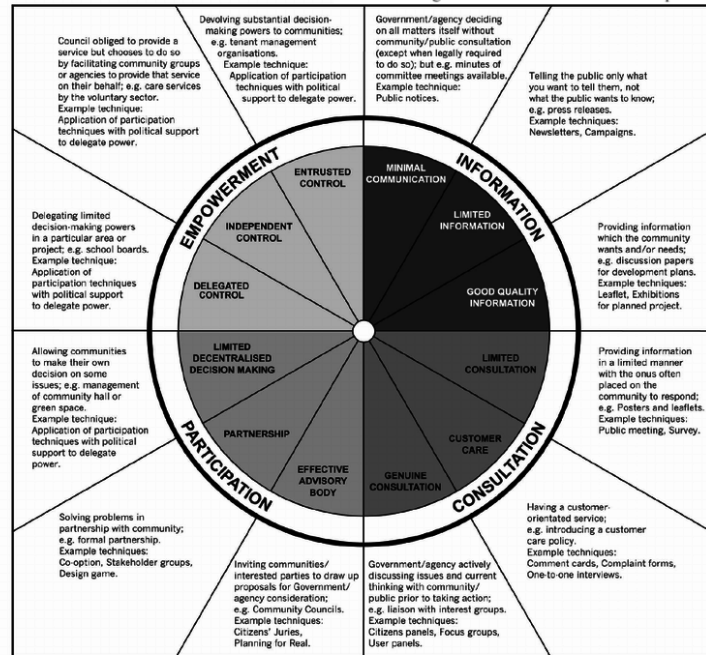
Furthermore, throughout the years, this model has been modified by other academics, such as Mark

Reed and Edward Charlie, that have created a second layer that controls the distribution of power (bottom-up/top-down) and spins independently from the other layer (increases the variables) and creates even more participatory possibility (fig. 4).³⁴

Since this ongoing debate has not agreed on a definition nor a structure of participation, in this thesis, the generic definition adopted is the one that was formulated by Kathryn S. Quick and John M. Bryson, but it coincides with many other participation definitions:³⁵

Public participation in governance involves the direct involvement – or indirect involvement through representatives – of concerned stakeholders in decision-making about policies, plans or programs in which they have an interest. Stakeholders are persons, groups or organizations that may influence or be affected

Fig. 3. Davidson's Wheel of Participation



³⁴ Mark Reed et al., “A Theory of Participation: What Makes Stakeholder and Public Engagement in Environmental Management Work?”, *Restoration Ecology* 26 (1 August 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1111/rec.12541>.

³⁵ Mark Reed, “Stakeholder Participation for Environmental Management: A Literature Review”, *Biological Conservation* 141, no. 10 (1 October 2008): 2417–31, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biocon.2008.07.014>. or Mark Reed et al., “A Theory of Participation: What Makes Stakeholder and Public Engagement in Environmental Management Work?”.

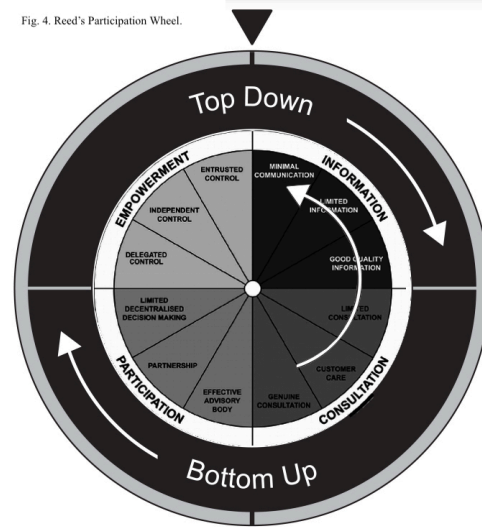
by policy decisions (Freeman 2010) or place a claim on an organization's or other entity's attention, resources or outputs (Bryson 2004).³⁶

2.3. Critical aspects of participation

Despite the fame that citizens' participation gained in the XX century's last decades, experiments and researchers' observations have expressed some concerns. An exhaustive inspection of the problematics of participation are the ten essays that form the book "Participation: the new tyranny?"³⁷

David Mosse, a social development consultant, has pinpointed that organisations' participatory learning and planning techniques have never climbed up the ladder of participation; on the contrary, most the initiatives have shaped and manipulated local knowledge to make it compatible with bureaucratic planning.³⁸ Frances Cleaver has highlighted that participation initiatives have a managerial dimension based on theoretical efficiency. He has reported that a lack of data on the effects of participation and indirect participation requires a deeper investigation of these initiatives whose outcomes are unclear, despite the heroic claims about the democratic impact of participation.³⁹ Similarly, Claudia Carter has supported these ideas and has reported a lack of experimental tests that study academically and systematically the different and more useful approaches. Whereas the most widespread initiatives are surveys and interviews to extract different points of view and values, (fig.

Fig. 4. Reed's Participation Wheel.



³⁶ Kathryn S. Quick and John M. Bryson, "Public Participation", in *Handbook on Theories of Governance*, ed. Christopher Ansell and Jacob Torfing, 2nd Edition (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd., 2022), 158–69, <https://www.elgaronline.com/view/edcoll/9781800371965/9781800371965.00022.xml>.

³⁷ Bill Cooke and Uma Kothari, *Participation: The New Tyranny?* (London: Zed Books, 2001).

³⁸ David Mosse, "People's Knowledge, Participation and Patronage: Operations and Representations in Rural Development", in *Participation: The New Tyranny?*, ed. Bill Cooke and Uma Kothari (London: Zed Books, 2001), 16–36.

³⁹ Frances Cleaver, "Institutions, Agency and the Limitations of Participatory Approaches to Development", in *Participation: The New Tyranny?*, ed. Bill Cooke and Uma Kothari (London: Zed Books, 2001), 36–56.

5) only a few initiatives have implemented more active approaches, giving people the possibility to deliberate or share insights. Besides, Bill Cooke investigates the social psychological limits of a group context. While using social psychology concepts - risky shift, the Abilene Paradox, group thinking and coercive persuasion - he illustrates that the processes of participation can hinder the processes themselves, leading people to take riskier and “universally” unsatisfactory decisions.⁴⁰

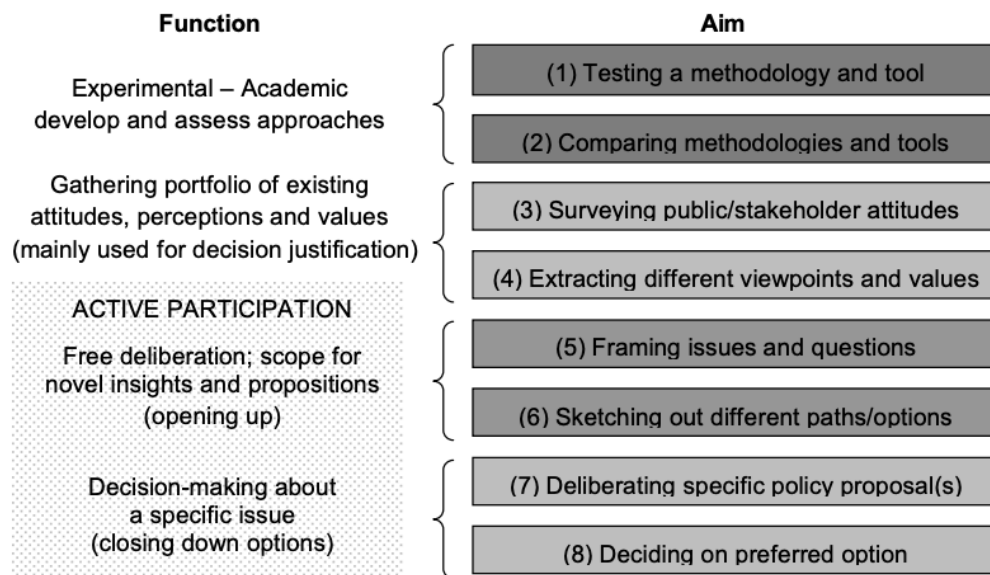


Fig. 5. Carter's Participation Scheme

Another important participation crux that we have to cope with is discrimination. Up to the age of two thousand, only the so-called stakeholders or selected groups (have-nots in Arnestein) could participate in participatory initiatives, not all citizens. In both cases, the lack of universal initiatives raises doubts. The first doubt concerns the identification of stakeholders: how can anyone calculate who has an interest in an initiative? For instance, the resident of a neighbourhood to be destined is certainly a stakeholder, but so is any person who works in that neighbourhood but resides in another place. This decision is critical because it creates discrimination. In this regard, the study on gender⁴¹

⁴⁰ Bill Cooke, “The Social Psychological Limits of Participation?”, in *Participation: The New Tyranny?*, ed. Bill Cooke and Uma Kothari (London: Zed Books, 2001), 102–22.

⁴¹ Andrea Cornwall, “Whose Voices? Whose Choices? Reflections on Gender and Participatory Development”, *World Development* 31, no. 8 (Agosto 2003): 1325–42, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0305-750X\(03\)00086-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0305-750X(03)00086-X). or Rachel Tolhurst et al., “Intersectionality and Gender Mainstreaming in International Health: Using a Feminist Participatory Action Research Process to Analyse Voices and Debates from the Global South and North”, *Social Science & Medicine*, Gender and health: Relational, intersectional, and biosocial approaches, 74, no. 11 (1 June 2012): 1825–32, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2011.08.025>.

and young people⁴² are of particular interest. The second node concerns the division between people who are discriminated against and those who are not. It is unclear whether the division from other groups is functional or discriminates them even more (similarly to ghettoise them).⁴³

Last but not least, various studies, including national reports, at the turn of the new millennium, testify that participatory processes have not a negligible economic impact. Simply to carry out each project, participatory phenomena require not only large funds - for employees and experts to make the process work correctly - but also more time - destined to mediate points of view and reach a shared decision.⁴⁴

2.4. Participation and Smart Cities convergence

Since the increasing difficulties, researchers and intellectuals have not abandoned this theme. On the contrary they have tried to overcome participation limits by conceptualising the use of the new groundbreaking technologies and the internet. Aiming to merge participation with the latest ICT in terms of distributed computation and state of the art human computer interaction, they have bet on the most innovative and tech based concept of city planning and government: the Smart City.⁴⁵ Cities have been delineated as the perfect hub to build future societies because of their traits, such as small entrepreneurialism, the job-market creativity and the presence of a rich

⁴² Nina David and Adria Buchanan, “Planning Our Future: Institutionalizing Youth Participation in Local Government Planning Efforts”, *Planning Theory & Practice* 21 (Gennaio 2020): 9–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649357.2019.1696981>. or Trevor Diehl, Matthew Barnidge, and Homero Gil de Zúñiga, “Multi-Platform News Use and Political Participation Across Age Groups: Toward a Valid Metric of Platform Diversity and Its Effects”, *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 96, no. 2 (1 June 2019): 428–51, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077699018783960>.

⁴³ Uma Kothari, “Participatory Development: Power, Knowledge and Social Control”, in *Participation: The New Tyranny?*, ed. Bill Cooke and Uma Kothari (London: Zed Books, 2001), 139–52, [https://www.research.manchester.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/participatory-development-power-knowledge-and-social-control\(be9c2e04-3de7-45e8-b3a0-2b6d1c3addcf\)/export.html](https://www.research.manchester.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/participatory-development-power-knowledge-and-social-control(be9c2e04-3de7-45e8-b3a0-2b6d1c3addcf)/export.html). or Mark S. Reed, “Stakeholder Participation for Environmental Management: A Literature Review”.

⁴⁴ Parks and Wildlife Commission and of the Northern Territory, “Public Participation in Protected Area Management Best Practice” (Darwin: The Committee on National Parks and Protected Area Management, 2002), <https://www.awe.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/public-participation.pdf>. or Claudia Carter, “Environmental Governance: The Power and Pitfalls of Participatory Processes” (Aberdeen, 2006), The Macaulay Institute, https://www.academia.edu/6678087/Environmental_Governance_The_Power_and_Pitfalls_of_Participatory_Processes.

⁴⁵ M. Batty et al., “Smart Cities of the Future”, *The European Physical Journal Special Topics* 214, no. 1 (1 November 2012): 481–518, <https://doi.org/10.1140/epjst/e2012-01703-3>.

substrate of local skills and culture.⁴⁶ Moreover, as the UN reported in 2018, data show the global tendency toward the urbanisation of the rural areas; the rate of urbanisation is deemed to rise from 55% to 68% in 2050.⁴⁷ Hence, worldwide, countries have gained interest in Smart Cities' improvement and implementation.⁴⁸ Several projects aiming at testing and defining what a Smart City is and should be have been carried out in Europe, Asia, the US, and Africa in the past decades.

Again, since the novelty of its concept - a clear upward trend post-2010 and a significant growth between 2018 and 2019,⁴⁹ there is not a single accepted definition of what a Smart City, also called “intelligent city” and “digital city”.⁵⁰ Furthermore, its cross-cutting areas features make narrowing down the concept into a few sentences even more complex. Indeed, the Smart Cities concept lies in many different disciplines such as technology, management, entrepreneurship, urban government and planning, supply chains, transportation, tourism, social development and many more.⁵¹ As many studies have testified since the beginning, much attention was given to the technological dimension, mainly focusing on software, hardware, platforms, and information systems

⁴⁶ Misuraca, G., Pasi, G., & Urzi Brancati, C. (2017). *ICT- Enabled social innovation: Evidence and prospective*. Ispra: JRC. Retrieved from <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/bitstream/JRC108517/kjna28814enn.pdf>.

⁴⁷ United Nation Departement of Economic and Social Affairs, “World Urbanization Prospects” (New York: United Nation, 2019), p. 10. https://espas.secure.europarl.europa.eu/orbis/sites/default/files/generated/document/en/WPP2019_Highlights.pdf.

⁴⁸ Jung-Hoon Lee and Marguerite Gong Hancock, “Toward a Framework for Smart Cities: A Comparison of Seoul, San Francisco and Amsterdam” (Yonsei University and Stanford University., 2012), <https://library.net/document/yrj6e5oq-framework-smart-cities-comparison-seoul-san-francisco-amsterdam.html>.

⁴⁹ Fang Zhao et al., “Smart City Research: A Holistic and State-of-the-Art Literature Review”, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.CITIES.2021.103406>. retrieved from The Smart Cities Council “Definitions and Overviews”, The Smart Cities Council, n.d., http://smartciti_escouncil.com/smart-cities-information-center/definitions-and-overviews. Appendix 4.

⁵⁰ Vito Albino, Umberto Berardi, and Rosa Maria Dangelico, “Smart Cities: Definitions, Dimensions, Performance, and Initiatives”, *Journal of Urban Technology* 22, no. 1 (2 January 2015): 3–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10630732.2014.942092>. or Scopus, Business Source Complete (EBSCO) references in Fang Zhao et al., “Smart City Research: A Holistic and State-of-the-Art Literature Review”.

⁵¹ Margarita Angelidou, “Smart City Policies: A Spatial Approach”, *Cities* 41 (1 July 2014): S3–11, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2014.06.007>. or Paolo Neirotti et al., “Current Trends in Smart City Initiatives: Some Stylised Facts” , *Cities* 38 (1 June 2014): 25–36, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2013.12.010>.

that should be used to develop Smart Cities.⁵² Similarly, the economic dimension has been studied deeply: researchers have tried to quantify the weight of intelligent cities' economic development, government policies and other institutions and infrastructures needed for their development.⁵³ On the contrary, only a few more recent studies have investigated the impacts of smart cities on urban planning and the social level. It is not surprising that the majority of the definitions of a Smart City have not touched on social aspects directly until some years ago. For instance, in 2014, the Smart Cities Council, in line with many other researchers,⁵⁴ defined “a Smart City as one that has digital technology embedded across all city functions”⁵⁵ as reported by Fang Zhao and others. This definition is true, but it does not examine the nature of the functions; it reports a generalist truth without investigating it carefully. Nevertheless, in the same year (2014), the European Parliament declared that a Smart City consisted of not only components but also people.⁵⁶ This new definition introduced citizens as active stakeholders and a fundamental component of these new types of cities.⁵⁷ For the inclusion of people in the design of Smart Cities, experts divide the initial concept of smart cities, Smart City 1.0, which had the technology and economy-led essence, from the Smart Cities of the

⁵² Andrés Camero and Enrique Alba, “Smart City and Information Technology: A Review”, *Cities* 93 (1 October 2019): 84–94, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2019.04.014>. or Karima Kourtit, Peter Nijkamp, and John Steenbruggen, “The Significance of Digital Data Systems for Smart City Policy”, *Socio-Economic Planning Sciences*, Digital Support Tools for Smart Cities, 58 (1 June 2017): 13–21, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.seps.2016.10.001>. or James Heaton and Ajith Kumar Parlikad, “A Conceptual Framework for the Alignment of Infrastructure Assets to Citizen Requirements within a Smart Cities Framework”, *Cities* 90 (1 July 2019): 32–41, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2019.01.041>.

⁵³ Paolo Neirotti et al., “Current Trends in Smart City Initiatives: Some Stylised Facts”, *Cities* 38 (1 June 2014): 25–36, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2013.12.010>. or Ajith Kumar Parlikad and James Heaton, “A Conceptual Framework for the Alignment of Infrastructure Assets to Citizen Requirements Within a Smart Cities Framework”. or Dietmar Offenhuber and Katja Schechtner, “Improstructure - an Improvisational Perspective on Smart Infrastructure Governance”, *Cities*, 1 January 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2017.09.017>.

⁵⁴ Albert Meijer and Manuel Pedro Rodríguez Bolívar, “Governing the Smart City: A Review of the Literature on Smart Urban Governance”, *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 82, no. 2 (1 June 2016): 392–408, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020852314564308>. or Tan Yigitcanlar et al., “Understanding ‘Smart Cities’: Intertwining Development Drivers with Desired Outcomes in a Multidimensional Framework”.

⁵⁵ Fang Zhao et al., “Smart City Research: A Holistic and State-of-the-Art Literature Review”, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.CITIES.2021.103406>.

⁵⁶ European Parliament, “Mapping Smart Cities in the EU”, European Parliament, 2014, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes/join/2014/507480/IPOL-ITRE_ET\(2014\)507480_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes/join/2014/507480/IPOL-ITRE_ET(2014)507480_EN.pdf).

⁵⁷ Francesco Russo, Corrado Rindone, and Paola Panuccio, “European Plans for the Smart City: From Theories and Rules to Logistics Test Case”, *European Planning Studies* 24, no. 9 (1 September 2016): 1709–26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2016.1182120>.

second generation, Smart City 2.0, which in parallel with the technological development involves several new aspects such as civic involvement, civic education.⁵⁸

As a result, today, the European Commission has dedicated a webpage of its website to define what a Smart City is:

A Smart City is a place where traditional networks and services are made more efficient with the use of digital solutions **for the benefit of its inhabitants and business.**

A Smart City goes beyond the use of digital technologies for better resource use and less emissions. It means smarter urban transport networks, upgraded water supply and waste disposal facilities and more efficient ways to light and heat buildings. It also means **a more interactive and responsive** city administration, safer public spaces and meeting the needs of an ageing population.⁵⁹

The bold emergence of the human capital occupies a significant percentage of the awaited outcomes of the Smart City. However, it is not the only component: the technological aspect has had major importance so far.⁶⁰ Digital solutions are the means in order to achieve benefits for inhabitants and businesses. When it comes to social interactions, it is undeniable that new technologies offer governments new opportunities to solve the distance and the lack of transparency that many identify as a critical aspect of our democracies. Among many researchers, Luciano Floridi, a philosopher who specialised in the Philosophy of information and Information and communication technologies (ICTs), has underlined the groundbreaking impact of new information technologies on our society: he refers to this novelty as a fourth revolution that has been modifying not only how we do business but also our daily life and, consequently, our perception of what surrounds us.⁶¹ In collaboration with the European Union, a group of

⁵⁸ Johan Colding and Stephan Barthel, “An Urban Ecology Critique on the ‘Smart City’ Model”, *Journal of Cleaner Production* 164 (October 2017): 95–101, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2017.06.191>. or Amy Glasmeier and Susan Christopherson, “Thinking about Smart Cities”, *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society* 8, no. 1 (1 March 2015): 3–12, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjres/rsu034>.

⁵⁹ European Commission, “Smart Cities”, European Commission - European Commission, April 2022, https://ec.europa.eu/info/eu-regional-and-urban-development/topics/cities-and-urban-development/city-initiatives/smart-cities_en.

⁶⁰ Yirang Lim, Jurian Edelenbos, and Alberto Gianoli, “Identifying the Results of Smart City Development: Findings from Systematic Literature Review”, *Cities* 95 (1 December 2019): 102397, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2019.102397>.

⁶¹ Luciano Floridi, *The 4th Revolution: How the Infosphere Is Reshaping Human Reality*, New edition (New York ; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) epub.

philosophers, among those Floridi, wrote “The Onlife Manifesto”⁶² delineating the challenges that digital innovations have generated and must face, such as education, freedom, regulation and politics. Generally, digital tools are considered enablers of social innovation because they trigger, empower, and transform existing social innovation processes. In addition to that, they aim to innovate the forms and functioning of a society whose constitution is deeply pervaded by digital technologies.⁶³

2.5. Models of digital participation

In parallel with philosophical advancements, since the early 2000s, private institutions or civil society organisations have implemented digital tools to “tackle issues that States failed to address, and the market had no interest to address; and so re-attracted social scholars’ attention”.⁶⁴ As in the past, experts believed that citizens could manage jointly the city but this time new ICTs are considered to be the turning point. Therefore, experiments about new technologies and participation started in the XXI century. In the 2010s, some have categorised these initiatives under the term Digital Social Innovation (DSI): “a type of social and collaborative innovation in which innovators, users and communities collaborate in using digital technologies to co-create knowledge and solutions for a wide range of social needs and at a scale and speed that was unimaginable before the rise of the Internet”.⁶⁵ Despite the fusion of participatory initiatives and ICTs, the concept of participation has not become more clear. Again, there is no univocal definition nor a universally accepted classification of the different levels - or ladders- of participation in the different initiatives. For instance, most of the Smart Cities initiatives looking for citizen participation increase have adopted ad-hoc e-

⁶² Floridi, Luciano. *The Onlife Manifesto: Being Human in a Hyperconnected Era*. 2015th edition. New York: Springer, 2014.

⁶³ Stavroula Maglavera et al., “Digital Transformation for a Better Society”, ChiC (Bruxelles: European Commission, 2019), https://capssi.eu/wp-content/uploads/ChiC_D5.2_Digital_Transformation_for_a_better_society-whitepaper.pdf. or Chiara Certomà, “Digital Social Innovation and Urban Space: A Critical Geography Agenda”, *Urban Planning* 5 (Agosto 2020): 8–19, <https://doi.org/10.17645/up.v5i4.3278>.

⁶⁴ Chiara Certomà, “Digital Social Innovation and Urban Space: A Critical Geography Agenda”, p.10, <https://doi.org/10.17645/up.v5i4.3278>.

⁶⁵ Francesca Bria, “Digital Social Innovation. Interim Report” (Bruxelles: European Union, 2014), p. 9. <https://waag.org/sites/waag/files/media/publicaties/dsi-report-complete-lr.pdf>.

platforms to enhance citizens' connection with local institutions.⁶⁶ They are deemed to empower citizens by giving them the ability to easily present their needs, suggestions, and demands to institutions.⁶⁷ Several examples of these platforms can be found since the early 2000s.

In European countries populist parties such as Pirate Party, have made direct democracy and citizen control over corrupt politics one of their most vital points leading to a peak of participation popularity among the citizens.⁶⁸ For instance, the need for a more transparent and a more horizontal decision-making process was a clear prerogative of Podemos in Spain⁶⁹, all the Pirate parties in Europe⁷⁰ and in the US, and Movement 5 stars in Italy.⁷¹ In different countries, several parties - and not only populist ones - have developed their private digital platforms (Rousseau by Movement 5 stars, Italy;⁷² Agora Vote by Podemos, Spain) or used third-parties platforms (SPD Debattenportal⁷³ by

⁶⁶ María E. Cortés-Cediel, Iván Cantador, and Manuel Pedro Rodríguez Bolívar, “Analyzing Citizen Participation and Engagement in European Smart Cities”, *Social Science Computer Review* 39, no. 4 (1 August 2021): 592–626, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0894439319877478>.

⁶⁷ Luca Buccoliero and Elena Bellio, “Marketing and Citizen Web Empowerment: An Index for Benchmarking Italian Municipalities’ Web Strategies”, in *Proceedings of the 9th International Conference on Theory and Practice of Electronic Governance*, ICEGOV ’15-16 (New York, NY, USA: Association for Computing Machinery, 2016), 17–26, <https://doi.org/10.1145/2910019.2910057>. or W. Castelnovo, “Co-Production Makes Cities Smarter: Citizens’ Participation in Smart City Initiatives”, in *Co-Production in the Public Sector*, ed. Mariagrazia Fugini, Enrico Bracci, and Mariafrancesca Sicilia (Milano: PoliMI SpringerBriefs, 2016), https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Maria-Fugini/publication/304537872_Co-production_of_Public_Services_Meaning_and_Motivations/links/603613534585158939c5bbde/Co-production-of-Public-Services-Meaning-and-Motivations.pdf.

⁶⁸ Eva Anduiza, Marc Guinjoan, and Guillem Rico, “Populism, Participation, and Political Equality”, *European Political Science Review* 11, no. 1 (February 2019): 109–24, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773918000243>.

⁶⁹ Podemos, “Releasing the Code of Podemos’ Digital Heart”, Podemos, 9 May 2015, <https://podemos.info/en/releasing-the-code-of-podemos-digital-heart/>.

⁷⁰ European Pirate Party, “Free Software | European Pirate Party”, *European Pirate Party* (blog), accessed 28 April 2022, <https://european-pirateparty.eu/programme/free-software/>.

⁷¹ Il post, “Il programma del M5S in 20 punti”, *Il Post*, 26 February 2013, <http://www.ilpost.it/2013/02/26/programma-movimento-5-stelle-grillo/>.

⁷² La Repubblica, “Tutti i voti su Rousseau. Ecco che cos’è la piattaforma del M5S”, *la Repubblica*, 10 February 2021, https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2021/02/10/news/rousseau-piattaforma-che-cosa-e_-286870028/.

⁷³ The online platform used by the SPD (<https://debattenportal.spd.de/>) has been develop by Liquid Democracy e.V., the same platform that BresciaLiquida uses. Adhocracy.plus, “Adhocracy+/Führen Sie Online-Diskussionen in Ihrer Politischen Partei Durch”, accessed 10 May 2022, <https://adhocracy.plus/info/use-cases/online-diskussionen/>.

Although SPD is not a populist party, they found interesting investing in an eplatform to connect with their electors. Edemocracy is not only a populist prerogative and it should never be so.

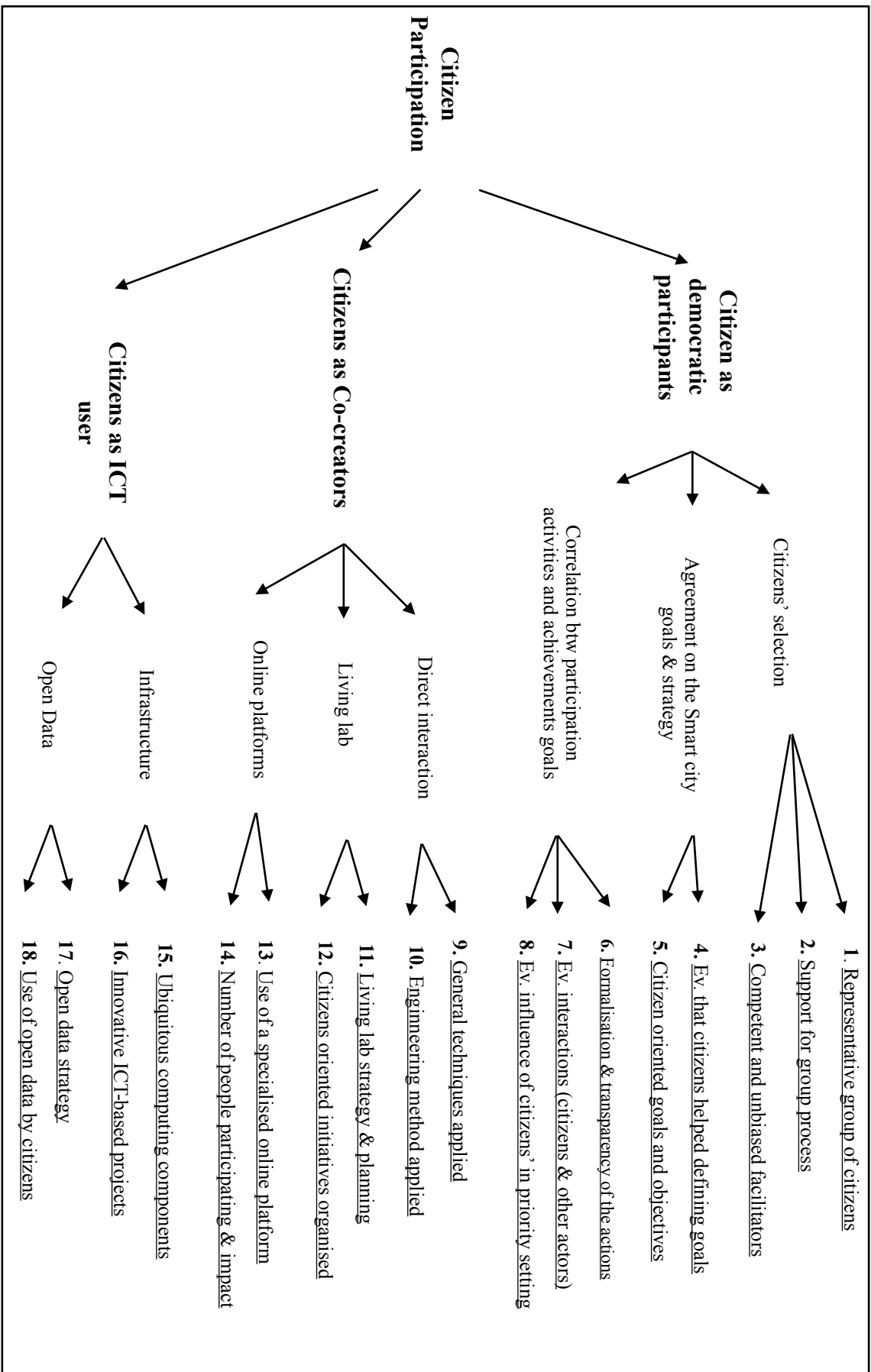
Liquid Democracy, Germany) to connect with people and give them the possibilities to express their opinions.

For the purpose of this study, the study on people's participation in Smart Cities by Anthony Simonofski, Estefanía Serral Asensio, Johannes De Smedt and Monique Snoeck will be used to better explain.⁷⁴ They divided the macro category of participation into three subgroups - Citizens as democratic participants, Citizens as co-creators, and citizens as ICTs users - which in turn are fractionated into eight subcategories on which eighteen criteria depend. In ascending order, the first criteria are the inherited and typical features of participatory initiatives - such as "representative group of citizens" or projects that aim to prove the interaction between citizens and other actors during the development - and they become more and more innovative and technology-based - use of a specific platform or creation of an open database. The table (fig. 6) depicts the content of this study exhaustively, and it establishes itself as a tool to evaluate participatory initiatives in already existing Smart Cities or help governments plan and design new initiatives. Many of these initiatives can and should coexist in order to incorporate citizens' perspectives concretely into decision-making processes instead of focusing on simulating them.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Anthony Simonofski et al., "Citizen Participation in Smart Cities: Evaluation Framework Proposal", in *2017 IEEE 19th Conference on Business Informatics (CBI)*, 1, 2017, 227–36, <https://doi.org/10.1109/CBI.2017.21>.

⁷⁵ Nicholas Kamols, Marcus Foth, and Mirko Guaralda, "Beyond Engagement Theatre: Challenging Institutional Constraints of Participatory Planning Practice", *Australian Planner* 57, no. 1 (January 2021): 23–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07293682.2021.1920993>.

Fig. 6. Simonofski's Citizen Participation evaluation scheme.



2.6. The need for further studies

Generally, new participatory ICTs tools are believed to strengthen precedents argument supporting participation. For instance, they should easily support the co-creation of a more qualitative knowledge made up by the mediation of different partial personal perspectives. Undoubtedly, the online platforms broaden the accessibility to participatory initiatives theoretically. Maria E. Cortes-Cediel and other researchers have indeed studied that participatory initiatives in Smart Cities environment have tended to open up to all the public rather than interact with selected groups with the result of reducing the number of discriminations mentioned above.⁷⁶ However, it must be recognised that inclusivity in participation is difficult to achieve.⁷⁷ An example is the need for specific skills to use ICTs embitters the digital divide, limiting all the already excluded people.⁷⁸ Moreover, this openness to an ideally universal public includes the difficulty of selecting the strategies to catch and activate people or a specific group of citizens. Grasping the attention of a sufficiently representative population is not easy; various actions with specific target groups have to be strategically taken.

Aspects such as the design of platforms, the design of the activities to carry out, the timing, and the tasks of workers must be studied and implemented, disregarding the context in which the project is carried out. Otherwise, “the interplay between political society, state-society relations and civil society, and the roles that cultural norms, global factors and the prevailing political settlement play on civic engagement”.⁷⁹

Although many participation in Smart Cities’ projects has been studied and conducted throughout time, researchers have underlined a lack of academic studies that answer fundamental questions concerning online participation. In the first decade of this

⁷⁶ María E. Cortés-Cediel, Iván Cantador, and Manuel Pedro Rodríguez Bolívar, “Analyzing Citizen Participation and Engagement in European Smart Cities”.

⁷⁷ Annelieke C. van den Berg et al., “Inclusivity in Online Platforms: Recruitment Strategies for Improving Participation of Diverse Sociodemographic Groups”, *Public Administration Review* 80, no. 6 (2020): 989–1000, <https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13215>.

⁷⁸ Andrea Caragliu, Chiara Del Bo, and Peter Nijkamp, “Smart Cities in Europe”, *Journal of Urban Technology* 18, no. 2 (1 April 2011): 65–82, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10630732.2011.601117>.

⁷⁹ Jonathan A. Fox, “Social Accountability: What Does the Evidence Really Say?”, *World Development* 72 (1 August 2015): 346–61, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2015.03.011>.

century, Jordanka Tomkova has underlined that “the focus has been more on evaluating the procedural ‘how tos’ than on e-consultation ‘thereafters’”.⁸⁰

In general, few reviews have revealed that e-platforms failed to enhance citizens and government relations. Maarja Toots has upheld the failure of Osale.ee, an Estonian governmental participatory platform, and she has drafted three reasons why this platform has not worked. The first is the human factor likely to commit errors, especially in new experimental situations. The second is the public sector implantation of these new technologies. The last one is the complex environment of e-democracy and e-participation.⁸¹

Though participatory platforms require more empirical research before they are ratified as useless, today, the knowledge of the impact and effectiveness of e-participation tools is still limited.⁸² Mark Reed et al. have claimed that there is “an urgent need to develop a theory to explain why different types of public and stakeholder engagement work and why”.⁸³ Indeed, so far, “no systematic attempt to compile participation rates for similar instruments across countries seems to exist. Nor are there clear benchmarks of what constitute “good” levels of participation”.⁸⁴ This is particularly true when it comes to “this [platform for online participation] category is far from being important in modern society or simply academics do not feel attracted in this study”.⁸⁵ Aligned with this need, the first and broad aim of this research is to investigate the impact of online services on public participatory initiatives. In particular, how Adhocracy’s online services can improve and increase people’s participation in “Un filo naturale”, Brescia’s

⁸⁰ Jordanka Tomkova, “E-Consultations: New Tools for Civic Engagement or Facades for Political Correctness”, *European Journal of EPractice*, 2009, 1–10.

⁸¹ Maarja Toots, “Why E-Participation Systems Fail: The Case of Estonia’s Osale.Ee”, *Government Information Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (1 July 2019): 546–59, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.giq.2019.02.002>.

⁸² Vito Albino, Umberto Berardi, and Rosa Maria Dangelico, “Smart Cities: Definitions, Dimensions, Performance, and Initiatives”. or Fang Zhao et al., “Smart City Research: A Holistic and State-of-the-Art Literature Review”.

⁸³ Mark Reed et al., “A Theory of Participation: What Makes Stakeholder and Public Engagement in Environmental Management Work?”, p 2. Similarly, Frances Cleaver, “Institutions, Agency and the Limitations of Participatory Approaches to Development”.

⁸⁴ David Le Blanc, “E-Participation: A Quick Overview of Recent Qualitative Trends”, ST/ESA/2020/DWP (New York: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020), <https://www.un.org/development/desa/publications/working-paper/wp163>.

⁸⁵ Rose Marie Santini and Hanna Carvalho, “Online Platforms for Citizen Participation: Meta-Synthesis and Critical Analysis of Their Social and Political Impacts”, trans. Rose Marie Santini and Hanna Carvalho, *Comunicação e Sociedade*, no. 36 (20 December 2019): 163–82.

municipality participatory project. Given that this objective is indisputably extensive, I have created five assumptions that delineate the directions in this investigation.

Assumption 1: BresciaLiquida offers more participatory tools than “Un filo Naturale” initiatives.

Assumption 2: more people will take part in the online platform than in the face to face initiatives of “Un filo Naturale”.

Assumption 3: the group that will participate in the online initiative will be more heterogeneous than the one participating offline.

Assumption 4: people will appreciate the technological tools, find them easy to use, and perceive them as positive tools to improve democracy.

Assumption 5: What reasons motivated or demotivated people to participate?

3. Methodology

This chapter furnishes the research methodology defined and explained in relation to the research aims and questions. This chapter reports the thesis's overall research design, data collection, and analysis methods.

3.1. Research Design

The design of this thesis has been essential in its functioning. The research started in October 2021 when I came across the organisation Liquid Democracy. Although the aim of the thesis was unclear, this organisation and its objectives were revealing. After some time, thanks to a course at university, I decided that I wanted to carry out my research with my data.

For several months, I have worked on the design of my experiment. From January to March, I read several papers, first among the others, that introduced me to the complex world of experiments or projects. I decided which platform the thesis would use, in which period I wanted to do the project and how long this period should be. Indeed, platform guidelines suggested doing one-month initiatives, and psychological papers adapted to marketing praised the novelty effect as it happened to Facebook or to Apple when they sold the first iPhone.⁸⁶ However, the initial conditions were completely different. My organisation had no popularity, and the content was not effortless. Thus, I opted for a project of three months so I could, little by little, reach more objectives.

The primary sources of this thesis are the data that I have personally collected from March to June. For the newness and the lack of academic studies on this theme, the range of the secondary sources is limited.

3.1.1. Research type and strategy

As a research strategy, I used different methods. To properly investigate all aspects of the research question, I combined quantitative surveys with in-depth qualitative interviews. In this case, the former helped me reach a consistent number of participants while the latter provided significant insights. Furthermore, a comparison between the

⁸⁶ Ellen McGirt, "Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg: Hacker. Dropout. CEO", Fast Company, 1 May 2007, <https://www.fastcompany.com/59441/facebooks-mark-zuckerberg-hacker-dropout-ceo>.

two initiatives was carried out according to the scheme of evaluation of Anthony Simonofski and his colleagues (see 3.2.3).

3.2. Data collection

In this section I report what I have done to gather data to answer the research question and the five assumptions.

3.2.1. Design and spread of BresciaLiquida

Although participation has not lost importance in the last decades, on the contrary, it has gained it; the lack of academic studies (paragraph above) has motivated me to carry out a humble but hopefully useful academic study.

After extensive research, I have found the Liquid Democracy e. V.'s website (<https://liqd.net/en/>). This Berlin NGO, whose name perfectly symbolises its values and interests, has developed a platform, Adhocracy, open source, non-profit and free to improve the dialogue between citizens and municipalities. The most well-known project is meinBerlin.⁸⁷ Launched in collaboration with the Berlin administration in 2015, 2018 counted more than 10000 registered users, 40 participatory initiatives and more than 1500 user contributions. Therefore, I contacted them and learned how to use their platform for my project. Indeed, the organisation offers manuals that explain how organisers of the project should design their initiative. Then, I prepared the project “BresciaLiquida” on Adhocracy: I designed the two activities that people could do to participate: a brainstorming (Brainstorming of methods) and a spatial brainstorming (Brainstorming of places). Furthermore, I wrote descriptions and added photos⁸⁸. At the same time, I have tried to reproduce all the tools that any organisation, shop or association needs to promote and engage people with a very limited budget (annexe 1). With the artist and friend Silvia Parolini, I have created a logo, a website,⁸⁹ a Facebook

⁸⁷ MeinBerlin, “Mein.Berlin.de — MeinBerlin”, MeinBerlin, <https://mein.berlin.de/>.

⁸⁸ Liquid Democracy and BresciaLiquida, “Adhocracy+/Brescialiquida”, March 2022, <https://adhocracy.plus/brescialiquida/projects/brescialiquida/>.

⁸⁹ BresciaLiquida, Francesca B. Aletto, and Silvia Parolini, “Brescia Liquida”, Brescia Liquida, March 2022, <https://brescialiquida.com/>.

page, an Instagram page,⁹⁰ and tutorials on how to participate,⁹¹ 4000 flyers, and 400 posters. Once all those things were ready, we started spreading and sharing information about the project around the city. To affix the posters around the city, I have dialogued with many different realities such as libraries, cultural centres, pubs, book shops. I also contacted many organisations and some of them helped me with the promotion of this project (Tab. 1).

Table 1: Organisations which supported BSL's promotion

Name	Type of organisation	Type of initiative
Fridays For Future Brescia	ecofriendly organisation	Explanation of the initiative during a meeting
XR Bresica	ecofriendly organisation	Explanation of the initiative during a meeting
Brescia al Passo coi Tempi	an organisation composed by different members from different organisations	Presentation of the initiative during a meeting
Via Milano59	an politically active organisation	Explanation of the initiative during a meeting
I frattimi	an eco friendly organisation	Phone call to explain the initiative
Festa del primo maggio	Popolar festival for the day of workers	Explanation of the initiative during a meeting + spot with flyers and posters during the festival
Octopus Brescia	an eco friendly non species organisation	Explanation of the initiative during a meeting

3.2.2. BresciaLiquida functioning

The project started on the 21 April and ended on the 21 June: a democratic spring. Since the 21 of April, the first questionnaire has been reachable from the website or the QR code displayed on flyers and posters. The first phase of the data collection consists of a preliminary questionnaire of 46 questions divided into four parts with mostly closed questions. First, it asks the participants for basic information (gender, age, residence, for instance). Second, it investigates participants' perceptions of climate change, particularly focusing on the city and their private interest in the matter. In the third part,

⁹⁰ BresciaLiquida, Francesca B. Aletto, and Silvia Parolini, "Brescia Liquida", Instagram, March 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/brescialiquida/>.

⁹¹ Menti Liquide, *BresciaLiquida: Come Condividere Idee Su Adhocracy*, How To: BresciaLiquida, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iLikEs8v_mc.

participants reply to questions related to political interest, political satisfaction, and democracy. Lastly, participants consent to collect data and their use for academic purposes since everything is in line with the GDPR law. Furthermore, people can give their availability to help with the data collection by being interviewed in a second phase. The estimated time to take this questionnaire is 5 minutes.



Fig. 7. BresciaLiquida's website

In order to make everything smarter, as every enterprise does, the link to access the project on adhocracy appeared at the end of the questionnaire. Participants must click on the link and be redirected to the BresciaLiquida page on adhocracy, the actual initiative of BresciaLiquida. Citizens must register (Google, GitHub and Twitter faster login available) and follow the project to always find it easily in their personal area. Once people have gone through this process, they can access freely and easily the platform whenever they want. There, they could formulate their ideas or co-operate with other people's ideas through comments. The goal for people is to create a group that positively supports other people's ideas and ameliorates their ideas to make the ideas come true and real by getting the municipality's funds.

A second questionnaire is launched and promoted through all our channels at the beginning of June. I have sent a reminder to those participants who previously gave their consent. The questionnaire ask to evaluate the project, its development and the idea of democracy, which are essential to test the assumptions of this thesis (annexe 2 and 3).

3.3. Data use

In order to confirm or confute the assumptions on which rely this thesis, I have analyzed data in different ways. I have used RStudio free software to make this analysis possible. Thanks to Rstudio free guide I was able to learn and use some basic coding language (R) to analyze the data.

Assumption 1: BresciaLiquida offers more participatory tools than “Un filo Naturale” initiatives.

Given the complex ongoing debate on what is participation and its practices, as first answer I will compare the “BresciaLiquida” and “Un filo naturale” as providers of participatory initiatives. The scheme used to compare them is the one of Simonofski mentioned in 3.2.3 paragraph).

Assumption 2: more people take part in the online platform than in the face to face initiatives of “Un filo Naturale”.

Brescia municipality's activity consists in five meetings held between the 19 of May and the 1 of June. I have attended all the meetings and I have personally collected data.

Thanks to these collections , I compare the numbers, age, gender of participants official data. As the duration of the experiments is different, an average will be considered*.

Assumption 3: the group participating in the online initiative is more heterogeneous than the one participating offline.

As for the second assumption, a comparison is made between the data collected by BresciaLiquida and those collected by the in person initiatives.

Furthermore, from both analyses, it is possible to delineate some characteristics of people who are more likely to participate.

Assumption 4: people appreciate the experiment, especially the technological tools because they find them safe and easy to use, and perceive them as positive tools to improve democracy.

To investigate this assumption, I have used 11 questions from the first questionnaire (tab 2). Thanks to the use of RStudio, I have assigned a score for each answer to the questions deemed relevant to the assumption. In general, in most of the questions the scores were assigned from 0 to 4 based on how an answer is in line with the objectives to be achieved. For example, in question number 25: "Do you trust sites and online services?", The answer "a lot" is given a value of 4 because trust must be the basis for using a platform; its absence is a deterrent for action. Similarly, the answer "no at all" is assigned the value 0, a "a little" the value 1, to "it depends" a 2 and to "enough" a 3. Two exceptions were made for question 24 (Would you rather participate in online or offline initiatives?) and question 33 (Would you like to participate more actively in the civic politics?) As for the first, I have attributed 2 for both "online participation" and "online and offline initiatives" while 0 was given to the answers "none of them" and "offline". Instead, for question 33, "no" was intended as 0, "yes" as 1 and "I don't care about it" was intended as -1. Ideally, those who get a high score are more likely to participate in the initiative because they are interested in climate change, have political interests and want to take part in the initiative, especially online.

These results are then compared with the ones similarly obtained from the data of the second questionnaire. Regarding the six questions from the second questionnaire (tab. 2), their aim is to see if people did participate and what they think about this project. The points were assigned as for the first questionnaire.

Another factor to keep in mind for this analysis is the rate of disinterest. With these data on hands, it is possible to understand if people aptitude and willingness to take part in this project has translated coherently into practice, and therefore, the fate of this initiative.

Table 2. Questions used for the fourth assumption.
Would you like to contribute actively (or more actively) to the fight against climate change?
Would you prefer to participate in online or offline initiatives?
Would you like to contribute more actively to city politics?
When it comes to influencing and changing society, how much value you place on private initiative/ personal power?
Do you think that the change should be conveyed by the municipality more than by the citizens?

Do you think there is a need for the mediation of experts or politicians to make society function optimally?
Do you think that citizens can have their say and contribute to any political issue?
Would you define yourself as satisfied with democracy?
Do you think democracy is the best form of government for human society?
How much do you feel represented by your municipal council?
Do you think that the interests and needs of citizens are listened to by the municipality?

Have you subscribed to the adhocracy platform?
Have you proposed your ideas on the platform?
Did you find it easy to participate?
Do you think that if the municipality used a platform to listen to citizens' ideas it would be good for democracy?
Did the ability to make proposals on the platform give you more confidence in democracy?
Do you think the proposals can be seriously considered by the municipality?

Assumption 5: What reasons motivated or demotivated people to participate? Why people have participated or not?

To understand the causes and the feelings that this initiative has provoked in people's minds, this thesis uses the results of 20 in-depth interviews with a heterogeneous sample of people who participated and who did not. Seven interviewees were people who did not participate. To get in touch with these people, I decided to promote the initiative distributing the flyers and giving to people a short explanation. Some people took the flyers and participated, some others took the flyers and threw it away right after. Still others genuinely expressed their disinterest. Nevertheless, some of those people, accepted to be interviewed shortly. The other interviewees gave their availability in the first form, therefore, I sent to an email to all the 59 people who agreed. Only 20 people replied to the email. Many of these people had similar characteristic, that is why only 13 of them were interviewed. Each interview lasted from 10 to 20 minutes. The eleven general questions are listed in the table 3.

Table 3. General questions.
Have you subscribed to the adhocracy platform?
Why have you subscribed (or not) to the adhocracy platform?
Have you proposed your ideas on the platform?
Why did (not) you propose your ideas on the platform?
How did you find the platform?
How was the passage from the survey to the platform?
Do you have any suggestion?
Do you think that if the municipality used a platform to listen to citizens' ideas it would be good for democracy How?
How did the possibility to make proposals on the platform give you more confidence in democracy?
How has this initiative change your relation with the municipality?
Do you think the proposals can be seriously considered by the municipality? Why?

4. Analysis

This chapter is divided into five sections, each investigating one of the five assumptions at the basis of this research. Thereby, the first section focuses on a comparison between the activities and tools that the two initiatives offer, "Un filo naturale" (UFN) and BresciaLiquida (BSL). The second and the third paragraphs report the results in terms of quantity and heterogeneity of participants. The fourth and fifth sections focus on people's impressions of BSL. While the fourth section works with data gathered thanks to the second questionnaire, the fifth section has a qualitative approach and works with the results of the in-depth interviews.

4.1. BresciaLiquida offers more participatory tools than “Un filo Naturale” initiatives.

The municipality initiative, UFN, and BSL share the same aim of involving people in decision-making processes concerning urban renewal from an eco-friendly perspective. Nonetheless, the two initiatives develop in different ways. Before we start the analysis, it is essential to underline that BresciaLiquida has never been hostile to the municipality project. Indeed, BSL is a graft of UFL: it could not work without UFL. It aims to help UFN to reach its unfulfilled potential. Needless to say, the two initiatives differ in funds, workforce, place of development and timeline of the projects. While BSL has only moved on a cyber level, UFN's initiatives work in our in-person reality. Brescia's municipality organised five meetings of two hours between the end of May and the beginning of June. In each of these meetings, the Urban Center invited the citizens of a specific area of Brescia to participate and propose places and methods to renew Brescia. The proposals consist of an A3 paper where citizens had to complete some answers regarding the area's current conditions, potential, and ideas to renew it. The paper offers even space to draw ideal sketches. People who can not participate can find this paper online, fill it in and send it by email by the 15 June 2022. At the end of the meetings, red round stickers were placed on a giant city map to seal the bond between people's ideas and the municipality.

Urban Center will announce the two places that will receive 70.000€ in September after analysing town architects. Afterwards, Urban Center has planned to repeat the meetings in 2023 in order to involve the citizens again in the brainstorming of actions to be

realised. Nevertheless, the town architects will have the last word since they are those who will plan the renovations.⁹² To understand if people's advice is, in reality, taken into consideration, thus, this aspect can not be discussed in this thesis.

On the contrary, BSL offered a three months cyberspace where people could register on Brescialiquida's project on adhocracy with a nickname and upload proposals. Furthermore, and most importantly, users could interact among them, commenting and liking the proposals of the others. I, personally fill in the A3 proposals modules and send them to the municipal of Brescia before the end of the 15 June.

Simonofski and his colleagues have developed eighteen criteria to categorise and value the effectiveness and the entity of the participatory approach in cities. This scheme (tab. 4) does not only refers to technology-led initiatives but also in-person activities. According to Simonofski and others' scheme to evaluate Smart cities' participatory initiatives, UFL scores 2,5 while BSL scores 3.

Here, in the table 4 the explanation of the results. The white columns refer to UFN, while the grey ones to BSL.

Citizens' selection

1. Representative group of citizens	(Attempt) Inclusion of citizens in meetings	0.5	There were no meetings	0
2. Support for group process	No support	0	No support	0
3. Competent and unbiased group facilitators	No support	0	No support	0

Agreement on the goals of the smart city strategy

4. Evidence that citizens helped define goals and objectives	The municipality of Brescia identified the goals	0	The municipality of Brescia identified the goals	0
5. Citizen-oriented goals and objectives	The municipality envisages a smarter future for Brescia. With the creation of the office Urban Center they aim at involving citizens in the decision-making process.	0.5	The municipality envisages a smarter future for Brescia. With the creation of the office Urban Center they aim at involving citizens in the decision-making process.	0.5

⁹² Comune di Brescia, "Progetto 'Un Filo Naturale'", https://www.comune.brescia.it/servizi/urbancenter/unfilonaturale/Pagine/UC_AT_226-SpaziAttivi.aspx.

BSL scores 0,5 points in the fifth criterion because it follows and depends on UFN.

Correlation between participation activities and achievement of goals

6. Formalization and transparency of the course of action	The organisation of the initiatives is clear. However, the clear amount of money and how the places will be chosen are not stated transparently during the meetings.	0.25	Despite BSL, shares the problematics of UFN, its functioning is clear and transparent. Tutorials are available. The media channels explain everything. Plus, an email to contact is available.	0.5
7. Evidence of inter- action between citizens and other actors	There is only a “one-way” interaction between the citizens of different organisations	0	There is only a “one-way” interaction between citizens.	0
8. Evidence of the influence of citizens’ input in priority setting of the projects	No influence of the citizens yet.	/	No influence of the citizens yet.	/

Direct Interaction

9. General Techniques applied	UNF has not used typical participatory techniques yet. However, they plan to organise two conferences to inform people about from September 2022 to June 2023.	0.5	BSL uses questionnaires and in-depth interviews. Plus, thanks to the online e-platform citizens can propose their ideas.	0.5
10. Type of requirement engineering method applied	There is a lack of scientific approach.	0	As written above, BSL uses questionnaires and in-depth interviews to analyse and study the effectiveness of the initiative.	0.5

Living lab

11. Living lab strategy and planning	UNF consists of 5 meetings where people can propose their ideas.	0.25	No in-presence activities are carried out.	0
12. Citizen-oriented activities organised	During the meetings, the municipality invites citizens to take parte in the development and innovation process. Citizens are asked to analyse the needs and brainstorm the ideas for improving urban planning and city design.	0.5	Through the e-platform, the municipality invites citizens to take parte in the development and innovation process. Citizens are asked to analyse the needs and brainstorm the ideas for improving urban planning and city design.	0.5

UNF only scores 0,25 at the criterion 11th because, despite the promise of future conferences, there is no official calendar that assures people that these conferences will

take place for real. Besides the fact that conferences align to an informative rather than a participatory approach, it still is an attempt that can give validity to the meetings.

Online platforms

13. Use of an existing or specifically designed online platform	There is no use of online platforms	0	BSL takes place on Adhocracy.plus.	0.5
14. Number of citizens that participate on the platform and impact on public life	/	/	The number of sample of people participating is not enough to represent the whole population of Brescia.	0

Infrastructure

15. Ubiquitous computing components	/	/		/
16. Innovative ICT- based projects	/	/		/

These two criteria do not apply to any of the initiatives. Although some citizen proposals on the BSL platform have promoted the bold use of innovative technologies, there is no sign of using the Internet of Things or sensors. Unfortunately, the UFN's proposals are private. However, those made during the meetings are far from interested in the technological aspect.

Open Data

17. Open Data Strategy	There is no sign of a final report so far.	/	Although BSL's data are not many, these will be published - with particular regard for the anonymity of the participants - so that anyone who wants to consult or use them can do so.	0.5
18. Use of Open Data by citizens	/	/	This cannot be studied now.	/

Although the two initiatives share some principal objectives, because BSL works as an amplifier of UFL, there still are some differences. As the table reports, the main distinction lies in UFL's lack of use of technological tools and lack of long-term vision. Indeed, despite UFL's efforts to gather people's opinions and improve users'

participation through living labs, the absence of a specific platform that could enable people to participate at any time and place hinders the initiative's success. BSL's slight advantage is due to the use of technological tools that lead to new systems to gather people's opinions (criterion 10).

Though BSL's timid approach to using technology and studies its potential through this thesis (criterion 17), there is considerable room for improvement to accomplish smart cities' participatory approaches. Both initiatives do not appear as satisfactory Smart Cities initiatives.

4.2. More people take part in the online platform than in face to face initiatives of “Un filo Naturale”.

The number of citizens that took part in UFN's in-person initiatives is 49 in total. It must be reminded that other people could participate individually and send their proposals in other ways. Besides, the number of people that run into BSL's survey is 216. Considering that the two initiatives have different durations - UFN roughly a month, BSL almost three months - the answer is found thanks to a proportion:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{BSL} = x : 1 = 216 : 3 &\longrightarrow 216/3 \longrightarrow 72 : 1 = 216 : 3 \longrightarrow \text{BSL} = 72 \\ &\text{UFN} = 49 \\ 72 > 49 &\longrightarrow \text{BSL} > \text{UFN} \end{aligned}$$

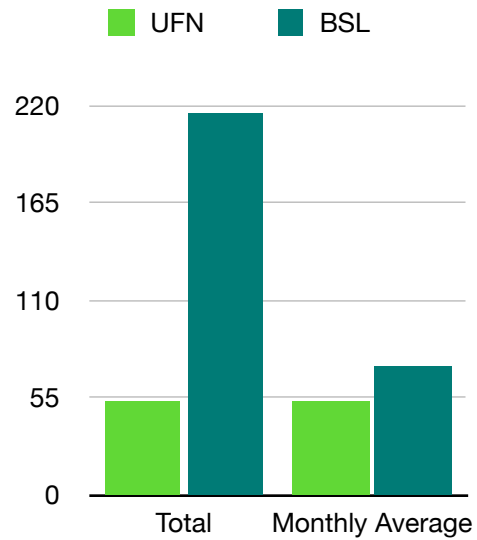
It appears that BSL involved more citizens not only from a global perspective but also on average.

Besides, the number of people registering on the platform and following the project is 65.

$$\begin{aligned} \text{BSL} = x : 1 = 65 : 3 &\longrightarrow 65/3 \longrightarrow 22 \text{ (approx. 21,66)} : 1 = 65 : 3 \longrightarrow \text{BSL} = 22 \\ &\text{UFN} = 49 \\ 49 > 22 &\longrightarrow \text{UFN} > \text{BSL} \end{aligned}$$

The number of active people is, therefore, globally higher than the one of UFN's initiative but lower on a monthly average. The reasons why people did not participate after the questionnaire are investigated in the following paragraphs.

In general, it must be said that the total amount of each initiative does not reach an interesting number to be representative of the population that lives in the city. UFN came into contact with 0,02% of the population of Brescia while BSL did 0,11%.



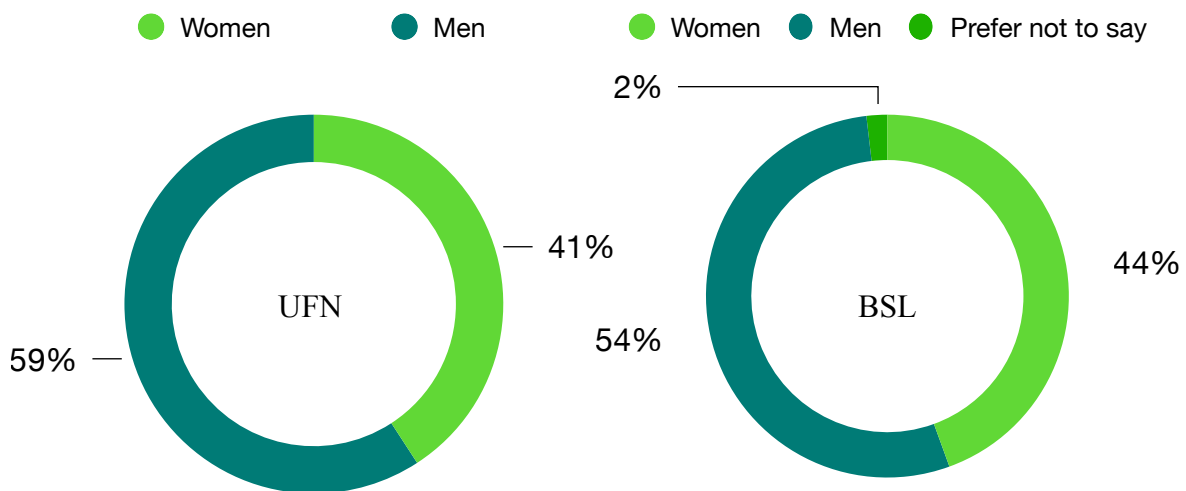
4.3. The group participating in the online initiative is more heterogeneous than the one participating offline.

This thesis intends to evaluate the heterogeneity of the sample of participants thanks to factors such as gender, age, area of residence and a pre-existing civic and political activism.

4.3.1. The genre

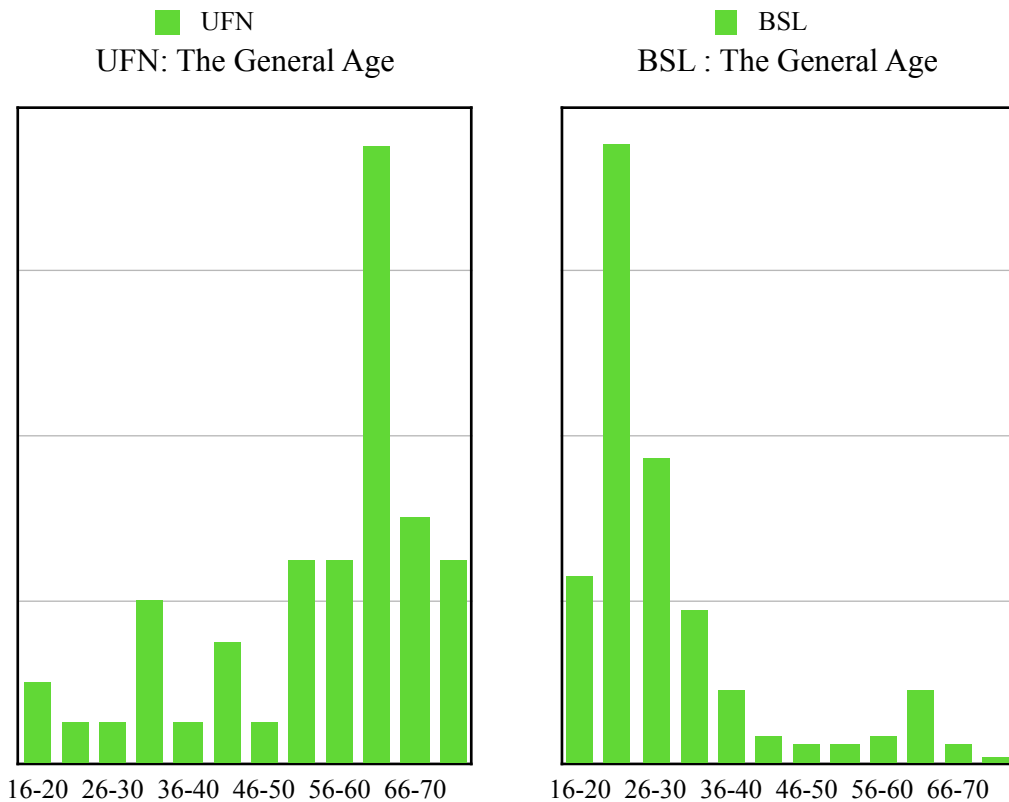
Out of 216 participants to BSL, 116 are men, 96 are women and 4 people prefer not to specify their genre. As regards UFN, on the other hand, 29 men and 20 women participated.

There is no substantial difference between the genre of participants in the two initiatives. Both genres are pretty balanced. However, in both cases, it is interesting to notice that men are slightly more likely to participate in initiatives than women.



4.3.2. The age

Participants in both initiatives were asked to specify their age. Age slots of 5 years were available to simplify the data collection. Participants in both initiatives were asked to specify their age. Age slots of 5 years were available to simplify the data collection.



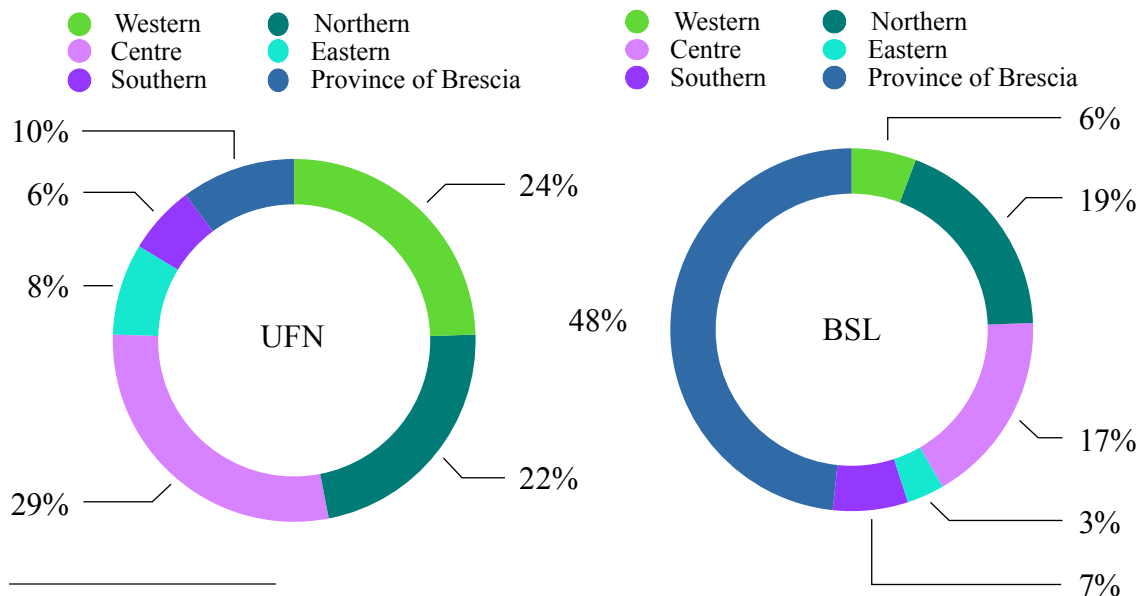
Despite the difference in amount, the data show the specific trend of each initiative. BSL has primarily attracted young participants (70% of the total participants are under 35 years), whereas it has bumped into indifference in older generations, especially between 40 and 55. These categories do not seem to pay particular attention to UFN's initiatives either. On the contrary, UFN's participants are older (73% of the total participants are over 51 years). Only a few young people took part in the initiatives. What differs between the two projects is that they are basically diametrically opposed. They cannot allure all the groups of people, but they have specific target groups. This result suggests that none of them is a perfect system; instead, they should cooperate in order to reach as many people as possible.

4.3.3. The Area of Residence

The city of Brescia is divided into 33 neighbourhoods grouped into five bigger areas, as reported in the figure below. The Central area neighbourhoods are the richest and most touristic ones. In general, the further a neighbourhood is in the city centre area, the more complicated the socio-economic conditions of the neighbourhood are. Some exceptions exist: for instance, the residential neighbourhood on the city's mountain in the Northern area. The Southern and the Eastern areas are the most socio-economic critical areas.⁹³

In general, there is a substantial disparity in the area of people's residence. In both cases, the areas that participate the most are the Central and Northern. Whereas the former two are areas characterised by wealthy and acculturated populations, the other areas that showed less interest are working-class areas. It could be said that there is a correlation between the wealth of the neighbourhood and the willingness to participate in participatory initiatives, as other studies previously proved.⁹⁴

A critical influence is the activation of people from the province. Indeed, since the early 1990s, wealthy people have moved from the city to the nearby province of Brescia.



⁹³ Elisa Chiaf et al., "Brescia Città Del Noi" (Brescia: Fondazione Cariplo, June 2006), https://centrostudisocialis.it/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Report_Le-famiglie-e-la-povert%C3%A0-nel-comune-di-Brescia.pdf.

⁹⁴ Bram Lancee and Herman G. Van de Werfhorst, "Income Inequality and Participation: A Comparison of 24 European Countries", *Social Science Research* 41, no. 5 (1 September 2012): 1166–78, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2012.04.005>.

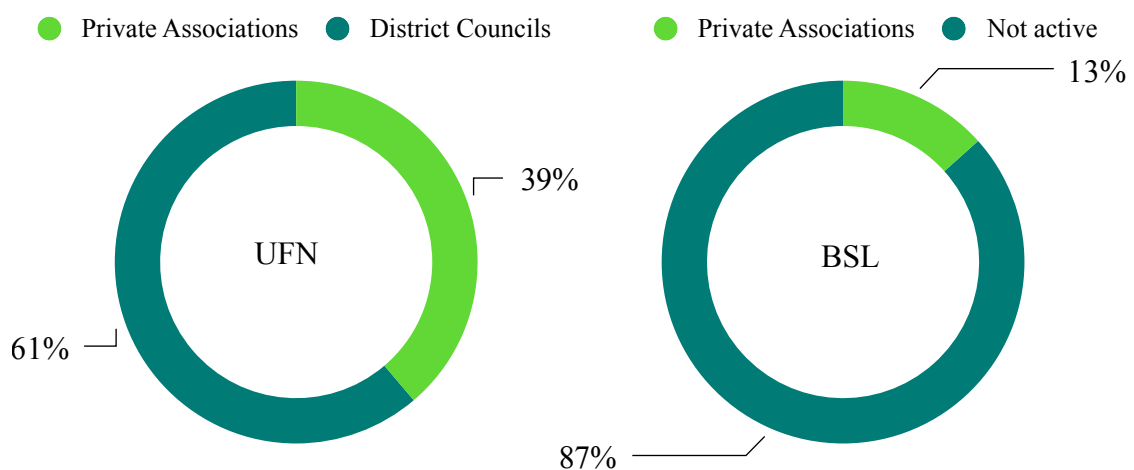
Nowadays, the countryside is highly connected to the city and offers peaceful green spots, lakes and rivers. Nonetheless, those people still live, work and spend most of their spare time in Brescia. Thus, the high interest of people from the nearby city countryside took part in the initiative (tab. 5).

Table 5. The most significant places where BSL participants came from and kms from the city

Residence Areas and Examples	Distance from Brescia
Southern province - Borgosatollo	7,39 - 12 km
Eastern province - Cellatica	5,68 - 10 km
Northern province - Concesio and hamlets	8,67 - 14 km
Western province - Franciacorta	14 - 17 km

4.3.4. Civic and Political Activism

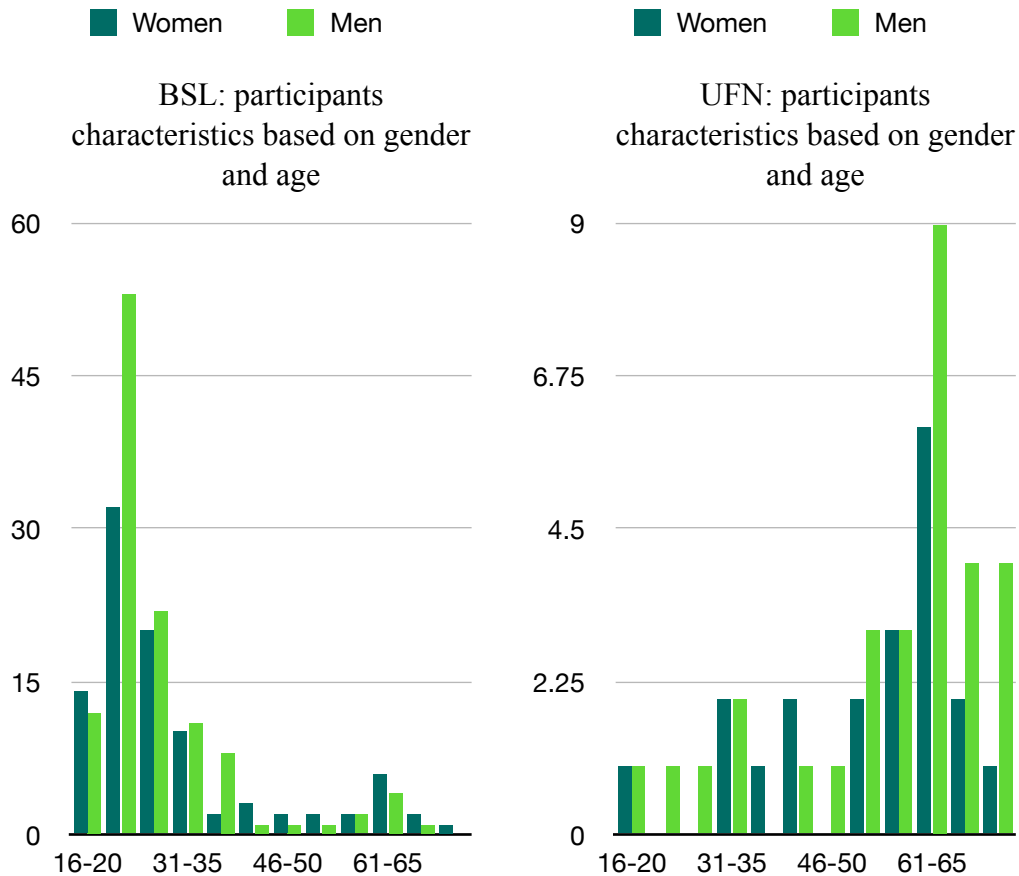
In this section, the participation of individual citizens in groups, associations and collectives represents a factor that can influence participation in participatory initiatives. Commonly, it is assumed that being already part of associations active in the area, people tend to be more willing to participate and get in touch with the municipal initiative. However, this study cannot validate or refute this idea as the two initiatives have achieved opposite results.



As for UFN, data show that all those who participated were part of the district council (30) or associations active in the city (19). As for BSL, data show that all those who participated were part of the district council (30) or associations active in the city (19). Instead, though BSL got in touch and asked for help from various associations, most participants defined themselves as private citizens (188), not politically active. These results allow reflections on how to promote the initiatives the municipality has decided to use. It can be said that UFN was able to dialogue with the other municipal apparatuses and with the various associations linked to different types of civic activism. However, no citizen unrelated to any association participated as an individual. 94% of BSL attendees said they had no idea what UFN was. Instead, precisely the opposite happens; BSL does not capture the attention of those who are part of associations, perhaps because they are aware of the municipal project, but manages to give space to those who are not part of any collective. In order to improve results and involve the largest number of citizens, it would be advisable to use both initiatives in order to increase the heterogeneity of the sample.

4.3.5. Conclusion of assumption 3

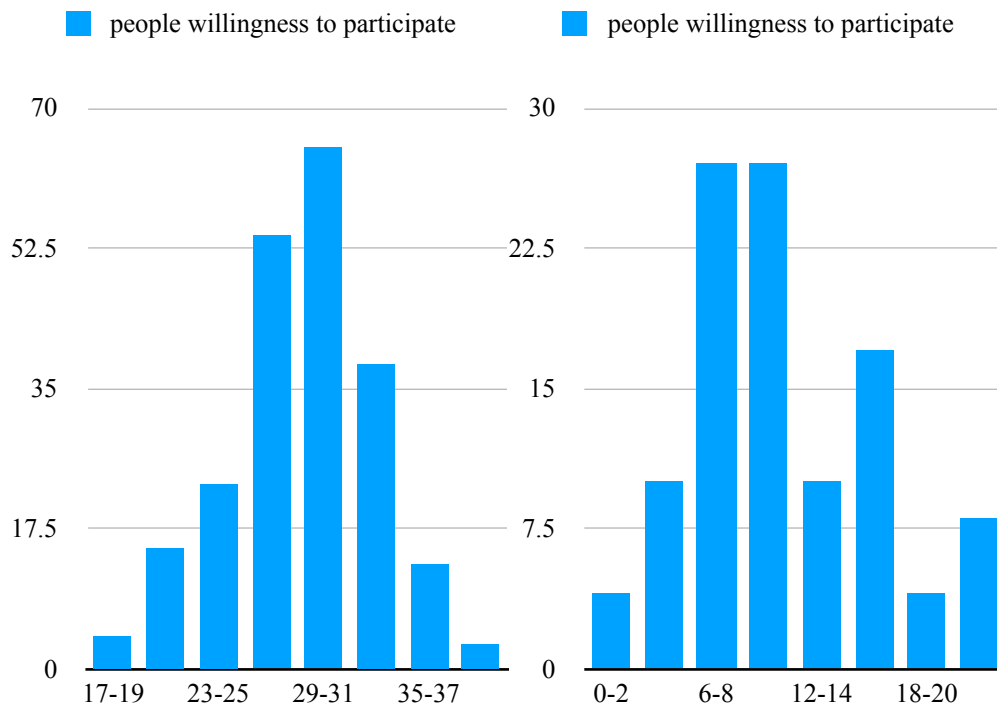
In conclusion, there is no real difference between the two initiatives as regards the heterogeneity of the sample of people who participated. There are no major differences in gender and area of residence - except for the greater inclusion of provincial citizens in BSL initiative. Regarding the age and activity or civic interest of citizens, it is evident that the participants of the two initiatives have two opposite tendencies. Primarily people over 60 who are part of organisations and associations of the city tend to participate in the UFN project. Indeed, the few people who know about the project (5,5%) were noticed by the organisation they take part or thanks to their family members. On the contrary, the BSL participants are mostly young people under 30 who do not join any association despite being interested in the climatic cause. In most cases, these participants are people who are more interested in climate change than in politics but for some reasons - such as shyness and lack of time - do not participate. Even combining ages and genders (graphs above), we observe this phenomenon clearly, but we do not reach any other different conclusions than the previous one. Lastly, it must



recognised that BSL was able to enter in contact with people of different ethnic origins. Although it is a few number of people (2,3%), it is still an encouraging result.

4.4. People appreciation of the experiment, especially the technological tools because they find them safe and easy to use, and perceive them as positive tools to improve democracy.

The results obtained in the first questions regarding the first form are pretty high, which means that people should be inclined to participate because they are interested in the environmental cause, willing to contribute more locally, and confident in personal initiative. The lowest score that a single participant scored is 17, just under half the score. The theoretical minimum score which is zero, has not been achieved it. The maximum score reached coincides with the theoretical maximum of 40.



Although only 7,4 % of the participants appears to be really willing to participate in this online initiative according to their rate (35-40), the majority of the participants got a slightly favourable score; the highest results were performed in categories slightly above the average: 25% score between 26 and 28; 30% between 29 and 31; and 17,5% between 32 and 34. The results are so elevated because the participants describe themselves as willing to get involved in the political activities of their municipality, probably motivated by their feeling of disappointment with the municipality delegation. It is interesting to see that the majority of people (61%) are not satisfied with democracy, and even those who are satisfied with it recognise it needs improvement (question 42, annexe 2).

Since this initial favourable result, the rate of participation in the BSL project on adhocacy and in the second questionnaire was expected to be less tough. Indeed, only 107 people (49,5%) filled in the second form. Furthermore, only 65 people registered and followed the project on adhocacy.plus (Tab. 6). Besides the few answers, the data from the second questionnaire show a low enthusiasm for the initiative. Indeed, 50% of the participants score a result between 6 and 11 points: a shallow result that shows disinterest in the initiative. Both the theoretical maximum (24) and minimum (0) are

reached. In general, the low scores depend on the lack of registration and, consequently, proposals.

Indeed, even in the second form, the data report that many people continue trusting the possibility of enhancing democracy through the use of online platforms. However, what mainly hinders their participation is their distrust of any form of government. Other reasons such as privacy and motivation are discussed in the following section.

Table 6. Disinterest rate

<i>Disinterest rate</i>	Percentage
From the first questionnaire to the second one	51.5%
From the first questionnaire to adhocracy registration	71.1%

4.5. What reasons motivated or demotivated people to participate?

The sample of twenty interviewees want to represent the most heterogeneous image of the general cluster while only working with people who gave their consent to help the research. Therefore, the number of men (11) is slightly more prominent than the number of women (9). While seven interviewees did not participate at all, the other thirteen engaged in different ways. Four people did the survey, registered and proposed ideas, while four people did everything but propose their ideas. Lastly, five other people did only the survey. The range of age is from 20 to 67, with a majority of people under 30. (Tab. 7) The causes that make people not participate in this project are several. First of all, the majority of the interviewees explained that they did not have ideas. Aligned with the results of the second questionnaire, although most interviewees like the idea of BSL, they “felt useless” or “incapable of help”⁹⁵. This lack of ideas could stem from different things. First, people could have low self-esteem or little confidence in their knowledge. It is difficult to understand if people are aware of their true limits or if they only fear a place where they can be judged. This is a consistent difference from the routine use of social media. What changes is the aim of the website. On adhocracy, people are invited to use their brains to propose their ideas aiming to share them in a community that is

⁹⁵ L, interview by Francesca B. Aletto, Brescia, 25 June 2022 or M, interview by Francesca B. Aletto, Brescia, 29 June 2022.

there to judge them critically and collaborate with the best ones. On the contrary, people on social media are not judged for their mental abilities but in other ways.

Another reason could be the total lack of constructive critics of education in school paths. In Italy, education follows a passive partner: teachers share their knowledge with the students who are asked to study and repeat the message they have learned. There is no custom of developing a critical spirit at school. Again, the topic is also a double-edged sword because it can work as a deterrent or an incentive.

Another aspect that people indicate as a cause of their disinterest is the lack of time. An interviewee states: “I do not have time, but I am sure that some good politician is now tackling the issue seriously”.⁹⁶ In general this was the main excuse that people who did not participate used.⁹⁷ From this perspective, politicians appear to be responsible for the changes and little importance is given to personal initiative. However, this is a tiny minority: the rest of the cluster does not trust politicians. Indeed, interviewees feel demotivated to propose their ideas because they are sure the municipality will not consider them. An interviewee has worked with the municipality in the last decades, and she has decided not to participate because “I saw it, they do not care. They only do it because they have to, but they do not listen to citizens”.⁹⁸ Even the most optimistic people retained that the process through which the choice is made is not transparent. There is no idea about the criteria to satisfy to be successfully selected. They felt that the municipality made the real choice, and they would never get to know who proposed the idea and the reasons why the ideas would be chosen.

In general, people have shown to appreciate the online process. Ideally, they think that democracy would benefit from introducing online platforms in the decision-making process. “It would be interesting to see and listen to excuses from politicians, once they decide without considering people’s point of view. This platform could be a reliable testimony of your people’s intention to compare with politicians’ decisions”.⁹⁹ Nevertheless, the majority of interviewees and participants at the initiative believe that

⁹⁶ B, interview by Francesca B. Aletto, Brescia, 12 May 2022

⁹⁷ A, interview by Francesca B. Aletto, Brescia, 27 May 2022. *or* D, interview by Francesca B. Aletto, 4 of June 2022.

⁹⁸ E, interview by Francesca B. Aletto, Brescia, 15 April 2022

⁹⁹ S, interview by Francesca B. Aletto, Brescia, 4 July 2022

democracy, as it is, does not work. They support the idea of the decentralisation of power. Since they believe that the system has to be broken down into smaller pieces, they support the idea of using platforms to foster equal powers. A system without technology is preferred instead. Although many express dissatisfaction with the current state of democracy, only two people express a radical aversion to democracy as a system. The motivation behind this is “the inefficiency of politicians that are the results of people’s votes. [...] Competent people should govern us, but it does not feel the case”.¹⁰⁰ The rest of the participants think democracy is ideally the best system in which man could live, mainly if it worked more locally. However, they perceive bureaucracy, corruption and a lack of transparency and information as “impediments to the smooth functioning of democracy, which therefore does not work for people's wealth in a long-term perspective”.¹⁰¹

Some concerns have been raised about the privacy of the platform. In general, most interviewees would have felt more likely to get involved in the platform had been of the municipality. Surprisingly, they distrust even private organisations, even non-profit organisations, while they feel safer in a cyber environment powered by the government. Nevertheless, the process appeared to be too intricate. Despite the fact that the majority of the interviewees and people who took the second questionnaire found it relatively easy to pass from the survey to adhocacy platform, all of them suggested making the entire process more fluent. “The ideal initiative would be hosted only on a website. It would be easier”.¹⁰² First, many people who did not registered on adhocacy, avoided it because “after all the questions I did not feel alike. I thought I could do it later but then I forgot about it”.¹⁰³

Furthermore, this fragmentation between the website, the survey, and the platform generated a huge amount of texts that people ignored because they required too much attention and effort to read them so that some of them felt “overwhelmed” . This caused a general state of confusion. “I was not sure of what I had to propose. Like I wanted to

¹⁰⁰ N, interview by Francesca B. Aletto, Brescia, 5 July 2022 and C, interview by Francesca B. Aletto, Brescia, 1 May 2022

¹⁰¹ N, interview by Francesca B. Aletto.

¹⁰² H, interview by Francesca B. Aletto, Brescia, 14 June 2022

¹⁰³ Q, interview by Francesca B. Aletto, Brescia, 28 June 2022

do something, but I felt that the aim of the initiative was too broad¹⁰⁴. The abundance of texts to explain the goals and the functioning of the initiative have hindered the functioning of the initiative itself.

In general, people feel that the efforts that they have to put are too demanding compared to the outcomes which are not defined.

Table 6. The interviewees

ID letter	Gender	Age	Survey	Subscribed	Proposals
A	Man	20	No	No	No
B	Man	24	No	No	No
C	Man	22	No	No	No
D	Man	33	No	No	No
E	Woman	55	No	No	No
F	Man	67	No	No	No
G	Woman	46	No	No	No
H	Man	24	Yes	No	No
I	Woman	26	Yes	Yes	Yes
J	Man	28	Yes	Yes	Yes
K	Woman	31	Yes	Yes	Yes
L	Man	26	Yes	No	No
M	Woman	27	Yes	Yes	No
N	Man	67	Yes	Yes	Yes
O	Woman	64	Yes	Yes	Yes
P	Woman	45	Yes	No	No
Q	Man	56	Yes	No	No
R	Man	39	Yes	No	No
S	Woman	22	Yes	No	No
T	Woman	30	Yes	Yes	No

¹⁰⁴ P, interview by Francesca B. Aletto, Brescia, 1 July 2022

5. Discussion

This chapter aims to meditate on the results and be critical of both initiatives.

As demonstrated in the previous section, both initiatives have several sticking points. To begin with, it could be observed that neither of the two initiatives completely satisfies the requirements that Simonofski et al. created to define and evaluate participation in Smart Cities.¹⁰⁵ This study clearly shows how the UFN project is anachronistic for the new participatory initiatives in European countries. Nevertheless, not only that, even applying Arnstein's scheme, developed in the 60s, it is evident that the organisation of the municipality is unable to climb the ladder.¹⁰⁶ Although there is an attempt to speak with citizens, it is not clear how decisions are made; rather, a group of experienced architects will have the real power to choose which areas the municipality will allocate the funds to. The project is stuck in the tokenism rung of consultation, where there is no assurance that citizen concerns and ideas will be taken into account. This works as a disincentive for the participation of people who think the municipality has created this initiative to show off and pretend to follow European trends rather than listen to citizens' ideas. It is legitimate to ask whether a different approach involving a longer decision-making process shared between citizens and experts is possible, and it is potentially better. Even the participation of experts during the meetings could guide citizens in proposing places and ideas relevant to the aim of the project.

Nevertheless, the level of expertise needed in participatory initiatives opens a controversial question about language and political power. On the one hand, a high level of specialised and technical knowledge is useful to formulate reasonable proposals and arguments to support them. On the other hand, local individuals moved by passion and interest may feel discouraged from expressing their opinion if their knowledge is not extensive as one of the experts. Indeed, in participatory initiatives as in daily life, "communication and language carry inequality, and the limits of human attention, patience, and self-love create or reinforce coercive conversational norms".¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵Anthony Simonofski et al., "Citizen Participation in Smart Cities: Evaluation Framework Proposal".

¹⁰⁶ Sherry R. Arnstein, "A Ladder Of Citizen Participation".

¹⁰⁷ Arthur Lupia and Anne Norton, "Inequality Is Always in the Room: Language & Power in Deliberative Democracy", *Daedalus* 146, no. 3 (1 July 2017): 64–76, https://doi.org/10.1162/DAED_a_00447, p. 74.

Qualified personnel as a mediator of interactions is also needed in both in-person initiatives and in online platforms such as adhocacy. Although these figures are necessary for an online participation project's success, their absence was marginal in the BSL project, given that the platform has not reached interesting participation levels. Professional facilitation and mediation can significantly reduce conflicts or help reduce or resolve conflicts through engagement with and management of power dynamics between participants. In addition to that, experience confirms that these figures must exist in a participatory municipal project. Indeed, whoever draws the participatory initiative must include them from the initial stage to make the project work. It is necessary to understand the local context "to determine what type of engagement approach is appropriate, and enable the design of any process to be effectively adapted to the context".¹⁰⁸ Although this thesis does not take into consideration the quality of the proposals that people made, it is interesting to report that many people advanced ideas of dubious quality and feasibility. For instance, during the meetings, several people proposed to transform the uncultivated public areas into parks, and no one from the staff blocked or explained that these types of proposals were not acceptable. Indeed, destroying the last uncultivated areas of our city means reducing our city's green spaces and stealing the essential sources of oxygen we need. On the contrary, on the platform, some people suggested more radical ideas, such as removing the floor of one of the city's most popular streets, which covers the river Mella. In this, as in other cases, people commented on bringing the feet of the dreamer(s) back on the ground.

Another sore point of both initiatives is the population's participation rate and representativeness. As data showed, none of the experiments has succeeded in attracting enough people to represent the city's entire population. While UFN has caught the attention of municipality bodies and organisations that have co-worked with them for years, BSL has mainly attracted youngsters that do not affiliate with any organisation. A simplistic overview presents a 65 years old white man from the richest quarters engaged in civic activism as the average participant of UFN, whereas a 25 years old, solipsistic university male student from the nearby city as an average participant of BSL. These

¹⁰⁸ Mark Reed Steven Vella, Edward Challies, Joris de Vente, Lynne Frewer, Daniela Hohenwallner-Ries, Tobias Huber, et al. "A Theory of Participation: What Makes Stakeholder and Public Engagement in Environmental Management Work?", p. 12.

results align with the study on Einstein's participation composition.¹⁰⁹ Like many other studies in the past, this research proves that white men, albeit slightly, are more likely to engage in direct contact and collective action.¹¹⁰ Again this thesis confirms that youngsters are more likely to participate in online initiatives.¹¹¹ Despite the gap that could be increased, this is a piece of encouraging news considering the young people's considerable disenfranchised or disengaged from political processes.¹¹²

Another intersection of this thesis and Einstein's paper is the unsatisfactory delivery of the initiatives. Albeit the two thematics are different, the different organisations that led the processes lacked to attract the population. Both municipality's projects dialogued with organisations or landlords without taking the responsibility of informing individuals. It seems that there is no real attempt to encourage participation.¹¹³ Cases in which local governments have supported bottom-up participatory initiatives show that people are willing to participate.

Nevertheless, many other factors such as the socio-cultural environment and the topic influence the participation rate. An example is Decidim, an online platform that helps citizens, organisations, and public institutions self-organise democratically at every scale in Barcelona. Thanks to the support of the municipality of Barcelona, "10.860 citizens proposals have been submitted - *online and offline* -"¹¹⁴ for the project concerning the strategic city plan. This synergy favors the outcomes of the initiatives.

¹⁰⁹ Katherine Levine Einstein, Maxwell Palmer, and David M. Glick, "Who Participates in Local Government? Evidence from Meeting Minutes", *Perspectives on Politics* 17, no. 1 (March 2019): 28–46, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S153759271800213X>.

¹¹⁰ Claudine Gay, "Moving to Opportunity: The Political Effects of a Housing Mobility Experiment", *Urban Affairs Review* 48, no. 2 (1 March 2012): 147–79, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1078087411426399>. or Andrea Cornwall, "Whose Voices? Whose Choices? Reflections on Gender and Participatory Development".

¹¹¹ Nina David and Adria Buchanan, "Planning Our Future: Institutionalizing Youth Participation in Local Government Planning Efforts". or Rose Marie Santini and Hanna Carvalho, "Online Platforms for Citizen Participation: Meta-Synthesis and Critical Analysis of Their Social and Political Impacts".

¹¹² Roberto S. Foa' et al., "Youth and Satisfaction with Democracy", (Cambridge: Centre for the Future of Democracy, October 2020), https://www.cam.ac.uk/system/files/youth_and_satisfaction_with_democracy.pdf.

¹¹³ Irene Alonso Toucido, "Barcelona's Spaces of Change Citizen Participation and Its Relationship with the Urban Space" (Groningen, University of Groningen, 2019).

¹¹⁴ Irene Alonso Toucido, "Barcelona's Spaces of Change Citizen Participation and Its Relationship with the Urban Space", p 30.

It is not acceptable for a self-found project such as BSL to reach more people than a municipality project. There is a terrible and unjustifiable lack of investments in marketing and communication. This lack is a cause of the low participation rate and low trust in the municipality. Many problems could be solved or detected thanks to investments in these two sectors. First of all, there could be a redistribution of power and funds. People could get to know the initiative for a more impactful promoting campaign in all the centre areas. The low representative rate of some neighbourhoods could decrease consequently, attracting more ideas located in deferent areas, and ideally, distributing funds not in the wealthiest areas, as it always happens, but in other areas that need it. Nevertheless, this study has proven that if the two types of initiatives were bonded together, the participation rate could rise substantially, and it could involve a more heterogeneous and representative sample of people. Recognising the need for further funds, investments and more capable guidance is necessary.

Another critical issue is the absence of studies that analyse UFN. Given the lack of studied experimentation of participatory theories,¹¹⁵ especially in the public sphere, it is necessary to document every attempt thoroughly. More competence and more scientificity would be needed in this kind of initiative.

This thesis has shed light on freedom, property and power in online initiatives.

It should be emphasised that private organisations lead most of the initiatives of this kind. Indeed big private companies such as IBM and Microsoft Digital are the leading promoters and investors of digital governance initiatives.¹¹⁶ Nonetheless, this interest is honourable as it seeks to explore and test the bond between technology and governance; what has been criticised is the neo-liberal approach that these companies have. Some call this tendency toward unlimited profit digital governmentality; others surveillance capitalism or even digital feudalism. The concept behind these theories is that new technology studies and measures population dynamics and uses the results as a constant invitation to action to people in order to create and control slyly human impulses and

¹¹⁵ Maarja Toots, “Why E-Participation Systems Fail: The Case of Estonia’s Osale.Ee”. or Rose Marie Santini and Hanna Carvalho, “Online Platforms for Citizen Participation: Meta-Synthesis and Critical Analysis of Their Social and Political Impacts”. or Mark Reed, Steven Vella, Edward Challies, Joris de Vente, Lynne Frewer, Daniela Hohenwallner-Ries, Tobias Huber, et al. “A Theory of Participation: What Makes Stakeholder and Public Engagement in Environmental Management Work?”.

¹¹⁶ Civic Graph Atlas for civic innovation. *Civic Graph Atlas*. Retrieved from <https://www.govtech.com/data/Microsoft-Civic-Graph-Charts-the-New-World-of-Civic-Tech.html>

desires. This already happens on private platforms to which we grant permission to use our data which are then used for marketing campaigns in exchange for services such as search engines, mail services, music, cyber communication media and many others. Quite a few activists have asked institutions such as the European Union for greater regulation of these services to protect individuals' privacy and freedom. This mechanism of influence has much more severe consequences when it affects the social and political sphere, as the Cambridge Analytica scandal demonstrated. In early 2018, it was revealed that Cambridge Analytica had collected the personal data of 87 million Facebook accounts without their consent and used it for targeted political propaganda purposes. In addition to shedding light on the issue of online data, this story has made it clear that we are much more influenced than we think and that the internet is no longer a free and naive space. With this awareness, using third-party platforms to collect citizens' ideas is not very attractive for reasons of privacy and openness.

Therefore, some digital activists work to approach these new participation tools to subvert the existing structure of digitally mediated governance radically. They want that digital social innovation (DSI) to prevent citizens' online activity from being locked into proprietary systems and redistribute the power equally.¹¹⁷ The private property of participatory services - such as platforms - could mislead observers (citizens) to see who holds power, giving them the impression to be in charge, albeit they are not. In addition, this privatisation reinforces the concealed structure of the new digital capitalism. Digital capitalism, Surveillance Capitalism and digital feudalism¹¹⁸ are all subtle academic labels used to describe the dangerous evolutive process that our system has undertaken: the establishment of Foucault's Panopticon. The new economic system is based on our information and not anymore on goods. "At least 70 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP, the value of goods and services produced in a country) depends on intangible goods, which are information-related, rather than material goods, which are the physical output of agricultural or manufacturing processes".¹¹⁹ Our data are the

¹¹⁷ ChiC, "DSI Manifesto", *Digital Social Innovation Manifesto* (blog), 2020, <https://www.dsimanifesto.eu/manifesto/>.

¹¹⁸ Jakob Linnaa Jensen and Jakob Linnaa Jensen, "Digital Feudalism", in *The Medieval Internet: Power, Politics and Participation in the Digital Age* (Emerald Publishing Limited, 2020), 95–109, <https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-83909-412-520201008>.

¹¹⁹ Luciano Floridi, *The 4th Revolution: How the Infosphere Is Reshaping Human Reality*, p30.

engine of the Big tech corporates at the head of this system that stimulates and stores them and uses them to thrive and produce more data. It is a vicious circle that aims at centring power in a few powerful landlords - or better services providers - and influencing the rest of the people.¹²⁰

The key to this system's success is the service's convenience. Every action tends to get easier, more automatic, more intuitive and child-proof. In my opinion, this is also why there has been such a large gap between people interested in the project and those who actually participated. We all have a brain, and potentially we can all use it acceptably; however, the price to use it is the effort, and nobody likes to make efforts, especially if it is not paid back concretely and quickly. Indeed, even if BSL offered the opportunity to collaborate with the municipality and other citizens to renew and ameliorate the city, people did not feel motivated by the final goal because it was too uncertain and too far away in time. Furthermore, people are used to criticising, but rarely do they translate their critics into practical propositions. This complexity and uncertainty go against the foundation of the smartness of this surveillance system.

To hinder the expansion of this system, up to now, the responsibility is up to the individual that has to take action alone. Needless to say, states or the European Union have to intervene as the guarantor of the rights of all citizens. On the contrary, the measures taken internationally leave something desired to date. Although the GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation) has symbolised an EU stance toward technology amoral data policies, it is evident that this regulation is insufficient.¹²¹ In this law, there is no trace of interest regarding purpose limitation in the use of personal data. Nor specifies what the data design should be despite requiring data protection by design. Excellent news - at least apparently- is that the European Union has finally reached a political agreement on the Digital Markets Act (DMA) and the Digital Services Act (DSA). Thanks to these legislative packages, the inadequacy of politics that caused the capitalist surveillance system to grow should be reduced. For instance, from the implementation of the DSA, “the European Commission, as well as the member states,

¹²⁰ Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for the Future at the New Frontier of Power*, Main edition (London: Profile Books, 2019).

¹²¹ Katharina Pistor, “The Code of Capital: How the Law Creates Wealth and Inequality – Core Themes”, *Accounting, Economics, and Law: A Convivium* 11, no. 1 (1 March 2021): 1–7, <https://doi.org/10.1515/acl-2020-0102>.

will have access to the algorithms of very large online platforms”.¹²² Furthermore, The European Union added some “new transparency obligations for platforms will allow users to be better informed about how content is recommended to them (recommender systems) and to choose at least one option not based on profiling”¹²³.

Alongside this new development, activists who are passionate about this topic have imagined a different use of the internet: a use that aims at enhancing equality and freedom. To date, the prerequisites for creating this type of tool are still under development as they are based on technologies, such as blockchains committed to decentralising the internet to promote citizens’ governance. Recent discoveries in IoT and blockchain-based solutions are working on developing a real and efficient tool for policy enforcement.¹²⁴ Despite many critics and suggestions to improve the blockchain network, it is well accepted that the level of security and privacy is higher in this new net rather than in every other network. However, this transition requires more time, and an increasing number of people feel (and even more should be) more and more insecure in using the most common search engine or popular social media. This tendency explains why a significant number of people did not register on BSL’s project on adhocacy.

Lastly, what really stakes out from the lack of participation in BSL is the lack of trust in government. Italians are generally among the most disappointed by local and national governments.¹²⁵ Nothing can convince Italians that the decision is not made by other people who have their interests - and given the structure of UFN, it is understandable. Due to the countless scandals that are constantly reported on tv, governments unable to rule for more than a few months, the crumbling of parties, and the lack of the right

¹²² European Parliament, “Digital Services Act: Agreement for a Transparent and Safe Online Environment | News | European Parliament”, European Parliament, 23 April 2022, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20220412IPR27111/digital-services-act-agreement-for-a-transparent-and-safe-online-environment>.

¹²³ European Parliament, “Digital Services Act: Agreement for a Transparent and Safe Online Environment | News | European Parliament”.

¹²⁴ Nguyen B. Truong et al., “Strengthening the Blockchain-Based Internet of Value with Trust”, in *2018 IEEE International Conference on Communications (ICC)* (Kansas City, USA, 2018), 1–7, https://www.academia.edu/35886688/Strengthening_the_Blockchain_based_Internet_of_Value_with_Trust.

¹²⁵ Ilvo Diamanti, “Gli italiani e lo Stato: giù la fiducia nei partiti, ma tra politica e social cresce la partecipazione”, *la Repubblica*, 7 January 2017, https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2017/01/07/news/a_picco_la_fiducia_nei_partiti_ma_tra_politica_e_social_cresce_la_partecipazione-155539074/.

investments in the past twenty years, Italians are exasperated. This is an alarming finding to which the political class should pay attention. To patch up this situation, some experts proposed to organising more referendums to involve people more frequently: precisely to restore citizens' confidence, participatory initiatives should be properly implemented. However, this has not worked effectively; not too many referendums have been organised, and those which were held were of dubious interest to citizens. In the end, it seems that even an initiative that could potentially reduce this distrust of politicians fails to involve extremely disillusioned citizens.

6. Conclusion

This thesis is the result of the curiosity for new technologies and the potential impact they could have on the structure of society, democracy, and in particular, on participatory processes that want to involve more and legitimise the will of the people. Thus, this thesis has been an attempt to study the impact that new technologies have on the participatory process through a comparison with classical participatory initiatives. To do so, the municipal project of Brescia, *Un filo naturale*, were considered and compared with *Brescialiquida*, the bottom-up cybernetic initiative built ad-hoc for this study. Therefore, this study sought to analyse the effectiveness of offline and online initiatives.

Since the broadness of the research question, *How can Adhocracy's online services improve and increase people's participation in "Un filo naturale", Brescia's municipality participatory project?*, several assumptions concerning the nature of the initiatives, the number and the heterogeneity of the participants and their willingness to participate have been built to try to have a satisfactory result for this specific case.

In fact, this thesis's aim was not to produce a univocal and universal statement but rather to explore the effectiveness of online platforms concretely for participation in a specific city.

However, certain conclusions that have universal resonances can be drawn from this study. In the first place, in general, the online initiative has impacted the traditional initiative. Indeed has given slightly bigger visibility to the official initiative, and it has involved a slightly bigger number of people. However, when analysed in detail, the situation is not notably different. The number of people who participated in at least the first step of the BSL initiative is very high compared to the number who participated in at least one UFN meeting overall. However, if you consider the initiative's duration or the number of people who signed up on the platform, this advantage persists but drastically decreases.

There is no distinct difference in the diversity of participants, gender and place of residence. Wealthy people tend to participate more, and men are, albeit slightly, more inclined to participate. The fundamental differences are found when it comes to age and civic commitment. While the participants in the initiatives of the municipality are

primarily elderly, young people are the main interlocutors of Brescialiquida. The reasons can vary, but indeed young people have a much stronger relationship with the internet and technology. If they are not digital natives, young people have begun to use technological means since childhood or adolescence, becoming confident and skilled users. It is not the same for older people. Another feature that diversifies the participants of the online initiative and those of the offline initiative is their political or civic activism. Although past studies show that participants in participatory initiatives tend to be people who have a developed civic sense, they look like a public or private associations aiming at social improvement or the political system. While UFN participants corroborate this thesis, BSL participants refute them. Further studies could investigate whether it is a coincidence or whether these new means can capture the attention and activate people who would otherwise be inactive. This potential acquires even more value if we consider that it has given a voice to young people, one of the most politically disillusioned and, therefore, less active categories.

A great truth with which this thesis has clashed is human incongruity. Although it was taken for granted that not all participants did all the steps, the expectation of the results was more optimistic. People were expected to show more enthusiasm, especially considering the answers given to the first questionnaire. People have shown enthusiasm for the initiative both for the personal belief that this experiment could in some way have an impact on the structure of democracy and because it is an issue dear to the citizens of Brescia, aware of the extreme pollution conditions in which we live. The causes of this inconsistency can be various. First of all, there is undoubtedly self-confidence in the forms of government. Many felt it was useless to waste their time and energy participating in a project whose outcome and methods were not transparent and unclear.

Another deterrent is the amount of time and brain effort that the initiative requires. In fact, it is not enough to register and passively live the experience; you must actively participate. For this reason, social networks' addiction does not apply to this kind of platform. There are no images to observe, pages to follow, or likes to share. The initiative built as brainstorming requires people to produce content and interact to develop it and is, therefore, more similar to the old thematic forums that are frequented

by fans, enthusiasts and/or experts.¹²⁶ Furthermore, even privacy plays quite an important role in discouraging the use of these platforms.

Lastly, it is remarkable how despite the guidelines of the Europe Union to merge this type of participatory technology and others (such as AI and IoT) in the macro area of smart cities aiming at creating more democratic and active cities in the future, both initiatives were not satisfactory attempt. If these two projects had worked together, they would have produced better results. People who organise participatory initiatives must consider these new technologies and implement them. Otherwise, the whole process results obsolete and not efficient. By using a marketing strategy, the number of people involved could increase substantially; by using an official digital platform, people could feel more at ease in participating while they have time. Thanks to experts, the results could be stored in databases and used for future investigations. Furthermore, these experts could increase the actual value since they could lead the participants of both online and offline initiatives towards proposals of higher quality and feasibility.

Finally, this thesis has tried to analyse digitisation in a democratic key. The fourth revolution, the digital one, is, in fact, the phenomenon that is changing the structure of our society the most, as is evident in the socio-economic sphere. However, this revolution has unexplored positive potential. Although some speak of decentralisation of power as a utopia or even a dystopia, it is right to work concretely on this possibility that technology offers us. It is correct to be critical of the nature and impact of new technologies on people; however, it is necessary not to be overwhelmed by the pessimism that leads to thinking of being condemned. We have the skills to try to change the cards and design a new, more equitable and sustainable future. This thesis is intended to be a small example of how one can try to make an impact. Clearly, it is an example limited by various factors such as monetary funds, the city, the number of people who worked on this project, the support of public bodies and so on. However, it has had an impact at the local level and will continue to have it next year when the municipality will have chosen the areas to be reclaimed; it will ask citizens to contribute to the choice of ways to improve these spaces. In fact, in light of this thesis's findings, BresciaLiquida will change to be more effective. The driving force behind this initiative

¹²⁶ A. Attrill, *The Manipulation of Online Self-Presentation: Create, Edit, Re-Edit and Present*, 2015th edition (Palgrave Pivot, 2015).

is the hope of being able to change our society's feudal fate and contribute to the fight against climate change. Again, I hope my efforts will motivate someone, and that technology will be seen as a powerful means to achieve a better future and not only a devilish and alienating tool.

People cannot surrender to dystopian scenarios; we must fight for ameliorating democracy even if it is difficult. However, even the democracy we live in today has been a utopia for centuries. We must remember that humanity is evolving and will always do. Our duty is to make evolution the most fair, equal and sustainable as possible.

“A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which humanity is always landing. And when humanity lands there, it looks out and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realisation of Utopias”.¹²⁷

¹²⁷ Wilde, Oscar. *L'anima dell'uomo sotto il socialismo*. Grandi classici, epub. Vol. 354. REA Multimedia, 2018, p. 272.

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Annexe

Annexe 1. The budget.

Budget description	Period	Sum in (€)
Domain and template for a year	17- 20/03/2022	96-99 € (a)
Print of 4000 flyers	15-23/03/2022	55.71€
Print of 400 posters	15-23/03/2022	47.04€
Total		€201.70

1. a

Invoice Posta in arrivo x



Cargo <noreply@cargo.site>
a me

inglese italiano [Traduci messaggio](#)

Cargo Invoice

Domain Name purchase: brescialiquida.com

Invoice date: March 17, 2022
Invoice #: 748539
Billed to: francescaletto.b@gmail.com
Payment method: PayPal — carlo.aletto56@gmail.com
Tax/VAT: \$0
Total: \$15 (USD)

Cargo Collective, Inc.
3006 N. Coolidge Avenue
Los Angeles, CA 90039
USA

Thank you. If any further help is needed, [send us a note](#).

Invoice Posta in arrivo x



Cargo <noreply@cargo.site>
a me

inglese italiano [Traduci messaggio](#)

Cargo Invoice

For: brescialiquida.cargo.site

Site Upgrade: \$99

Invoice date: March 20, 2022
Invoice #: 753702
Billed to: francescaletto.b@gmail.com
Payment method: PayPal — carlo.aletto56@gmail.com
Tax/VAT: \$0
Total: \$99 (USD)

Cargo Collective, Inc.
3006 N. Coolidge Avenue
Los Angeles, CA 90039
USA

Thank you. If any further help is needed, [send us a note](#).

1. b

DETTAGLI ORDINE

Lavorazione n. 1	Volantini e flyer
Base (cm)	14.8
Altezza (cm)	21
Grammatura	100 gr
Retro	4 colori
Formato	14,8 x 21 cm (A5)
Fronte	4 colori
Carta	Classic demimatt - Patinata opaca
Plastificazione	Nessuna
Numero di copie dello stesso soggetto	4000
Indicazioni di stampa	Fronte e retro differenti
Orientamento	Verticale
Totale netto	€ 55.71
Consegna indicativa	22/03/2022
Verifica file	Verifica professionale
Nome lavorazione	File4

> SCARICA LE ISTRUZIONI

Lavorazione n. 2	Locandine
Base (cm)	29.7
Altezza (cm)	42
Grammatura	130 gr
Retro	Non stampato
Formato	A3
	29,7 x 42 cm
Fronte	4 colori
Carta	Classic gloss - Patinata lucida
Plastificazione	Nessuna
Numero di copie dello stesso soggetto	400
Indicazioni di stampa	Solo fronte
Orientamento	Verticale
Totale netto	€ 47.04
Consegna indicativa	22/03/2022
Verifica file	Verifica professionale
Nome lavorazione	BresciaLiquida

> SCARICA LE ISTRUZIONI

Annexe 2. First questionnaire questions.

2.1. General data

1. Can you specify your genre?

Female	Male	Other	I prefer not to say
--------	------	-------	---------------------

2. Can you indicate your age?

16-20	21-25	26-30	31-35	36-40
41-45	46-50	51-55	56-60	61-65
66-70	71-75	75		

3. In which part of the city do you live?

1. Brescia Antica	2. Borgo Trento	3. Porta Milano	4. Centro Storico Nord	5. Chiusure
6. Don Bosco	7. Fiumicello	8. Folzano	9. Fornaci	10. Lamarmora
11. Mompiano	12. Porta Cremona-Volta	13. Buffalora	14. Porta Venezia	15. Villaggio Prealpino
16. Caionvico	17. San Bartolomeo	18. Sant'Eufemia della Fonte	19. San Polo Case	20. Chiesanuova
21. Urago Mella	22. Casazza	23. Villaggio Badia	24. Villaggio Sereno	25. Villaggio Violino
26. Primo Maggio	27. Centro Storico Sud	28. Sant'Eustacchio	29. San Rocchino	30. Crocifissa di Rosa
31. San Polo Cimabue	32. Sanpolino	33. San Polo Parco	34. Province of Brescia	

4. If "province of Brescia" please specify the municipality?

--

5. Which type of employment do you have? Please specify the field.

...

6. What level of studies have you reached?

Mandatory education	Secondo ciclo di istruzione (high school)	Bachelor's degree	Master's degree
PhD	Other		

Would you describe yourself as a member of a discriminated group?

Yes	No
-----	----

8. If yes, on what grounds is your group discriminated against?

...

9. Would you define yourself as a believer?

Yes	No
-----	----

10. If so, can you specify what is your religion or belief

...

11. Overall, would you describe yourself as satisfied with your life?

Yes, a lot	Quite enough	Neutral	A little	No
I prefer not to say				

12. Would you define yourself as a shy person?

Yes, a lot	Quite enough	Neutral	A little	No
------------	--------------	---------	----------	----

2.2. Climate change

13. How much do you care about climate change?

A lot	Quite enough	Neutral	A little	None
-------	--------------	---------	----------	------

14. Climate change is the contemporary challenge that interests you the most

Yes	Neutral	No
-----	---------	----

15. Do you recognize the effects of climate change on the city of Brescia?

Yes, a lot	Quite enough	Neutral	A little	None
------------	--------------	---------	----------	------

16. Can you give write down some examples?

...

17. Are you already taking action to tackle climate change?

Yes	Neutral	No
-----	---------	----

18. If yes, can you give write down some examples?

...

19. Are you aware of the "Un filo naturale" project

Yes	No
-----	----

20. If yes, how did you find out?

...

21. Did you know that Brescia's municipality has an office that deals with participation in political decisions?

Yes	No
-----	----

22. Would you like to actively contribute to the fight against climate change

Yes, a lot	Quite enough	Neutral	A little	None
------------	--------------	---------	----------	------

23. Would you prefer to participate in online or offline initiatives?

Online	Offline	Both	None
--------	---------	------	------

24. How much time could you devote to citizens' participatory initiatives in political decisions?

A lot (2h +/-week)	Quite enough (max 1h/week)	A little (max 30min/week)	None	I don't know
--------------------	----------------------------	---------------------------	------	--------------

25. In general, do you trust online sites? Do you feel safe when using them?

Yes, a lot	Quite enough	Neutral	A little	No
------------	--------------	---------	----------	----

26. If you don't trust them, can you write down why?

...

2.3. Civic and political activism

27. Do you know what a "Smart city" is?

Yes	No
-----	----

28. How much do you care about politics

Yes, a lot	Quite enough	Neutral	A little	No
------------	--------------	---------	----------	----

29. Would you define yourself politically active?

Yes, a lot	Quite enough	Neutral	A little	None
------------	--------------	---------	----------	------

30. Which of these activities do you do regularly?

I share articles / news
I read articles / newspapers
I take part in demonstrations
I am part of a collective
I organise initiatives (events, meetings, banquets)
...

31. Would you like to contribute more actively to city politics

Yes	Neutral	No
-----	---------	----

32. To change the society, how much value do you place on initiative or personal power?

Yes, a lot	Quite enough	Neutral	A little	None
------------	--------------	---------	----------	------

33. Do you think the change should be conveyed by the municipality rather than by the citizens?

Yes, a lot	Quite enough	Neutral	A little	None
------------	--------------	---------	----------	------

34. Do you think there is a need for the mediation of experts to make society function optimally?

Yes, a lot	Quite enough	Neutral	A little	None
------------	--------------	---------	----------	------

35. Do you think that citizens can have their say and contribute on any political issue?

Yes, a lot	Quite enough	Neutral	A little	None
------------	--------------	---------	----------	------

36. Do you think there is enough space to involve citizens in the political life of the city?

Yes, a lot	Quite enough	Neutral	A little	None
------------	--------------	---------	----------	------

37. In politics we sometimes speak of "left" and "right". Where would you place yourself?

...

38. In general, are you satisfied with democracy?

Yes, a lot	Quite enough	Neutral	A little	None
------------	--------------	---------	----------	------

39. Do you think that democracy is the best form of government for humans?

Yes, a lot	Quite enough	Neutral	A little	None
------------	--------------	---------	----------	------

40. Can you motivate your answer?

...

41. How much do you feel represented by your municipality?

Yes, a lot	Quite enough	Neutral	A little	None
------------	--------------	---------	----------	------

42. How much do you feel represented by the government?

Yes, a lot	Quite enough	Neutral	A little	None
------------	--------------	---------	----------	------

43. Do you think that citizens' needs are heard by the municipality?

Yes, a lot	Quite enough	Neutral	A little	None
------------	--------------	---------	----------	------

2.4 Privacy consent

44. I consent to the processing of my personal data for the exclusive purposes of academic research at Palacký University Olomouc and Université de Strasbourg.

Yes	No
-----	----

45. I consent to receive a reminder when the final survey is available to complete the cycle and aid research.

Yes	No
-----	----

46. Would you like to be contacted to help collect data through an interview lasting no more than one hour?

Yes	No
-----	----

Annexe 3. Second questionnaire questions.

1. Have you subscribed to the adhocracy platform?

Yes	No
-----	----

2. Have you proposed ideas or interacted with other users on the platform?

Yes	No
-----	----

3. Can you explain why?

...

4. Did you find easy to switch from the questionnaire to the platform?

Yes	Enough	Neutral	A little	No
-----	--------	---------	----------	----

5. Do you think that if the municipality used a platform to listen to citizens' ideas it would be good for democracy?

Yes	Enough	Neutral	A little	No
-----	--------	---------	----------	----

6. The ability to make proposals on the platform has given you more confidence in democracy

Yes	Enough	Neutral	A little	No
-----	--------	---------	----------	----

7. Do you think the proposals can be seriously considered by the municipality?

Yes	Enough	Neutral	A little	No
-----	--------	---------	----------	----

8. Any suggestion, comment?

...
