Social Capital and Political Participation: a Case Study of Higher Education Students in York

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Abstract

This thesis explores higher education students' social capital and how the resources produced by the mechanisms of social capital affect their political participation. Many studies have sought to explore social capital empirically but research on HE students has been overlooked in the British context. Hence there is limited research related to the resources through which social capital affects HE students' political participation. This study involved qualitative research with 29 current and former HE students based in York, UK. The participants were aged between 18 and 24 years old and semi-structured interviews were used as the research method.

This case study discusses, first, four mechanisms of social capital which HE education students have at their disposal: family and friendship networks, community networks, social network sites, and social trust. The findings suggest that these mechanisms generate resources of both bonding and bridging social capital. The resourceful ways in which the students experienced social capital were social interaction, social support, the sharing of information, a sense of belonging and a sense of identity. Second, the findings make the case that these resources produced by the mechanisms of social capital generate a higher frequency of political information and participation in both electoral and non-electoral forms of politics. Regarding political participation, the findings show that family and friends influence electoral political participation, including voting. Community networks were found to increase political information but there was a lack of evidence on their impact on political participation. Social network sites play a significant role in non-electoral forms of participation such as protesting, signing petitions and Do-It-Ourselves politics. The findings show that social trust is not an essential mechanism for political participation. Further studies are recommended into social capital as a potential mechanism for HE students' political participation in Britain.

Key Words: *higher education students; social capital; political participation; young people; Britain.*

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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my mother and my father, who have supported me throughout this journey.

To my sisters Saliha, Djamila, Soraya, Souad and my brother Kacem, who have never left my side.

To my beloved nephew Adam and my niece Mayacine Fatima.

To my grandmother, who would have been proud of this achievement. You are no longer with us, but we will always hold you in our hearts.

Acknowledgements

Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work, and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I shall explain my personal motivation, the background to the study and the general background to the study area. I shall set out the research questions and the research aims, give an overview of the methodology chosen, present the key findings of the research and the principal contributions of the thesis, and finally I shall describe the structure of the thesis.

1.2. Personal Motivation

My academic background is in British history, civilisation and literature. In my master's thesis, I investigated eighteenth-century Britain, particularly the impact of philosophy on British politics. I associate this era with three names: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Baron de Montesquieu and Edmund Burke. Montesquieu's influence was strongly felt on education whereas Rousseau's social contract (1762) promoted the politics of social protection and Burke put forward idea of civil society or 'the third sector' of society. My British civilisation teacher admired the concept of the Big Society, an idea which sounded like a political brand to me at that time. My research into the big society showed that Burke's idea of civil society had influenced it. In 2010, the then British prime minister David Cameron introduced it as a means of putting more power into people's hands and helping them to make a real difference in their communities.

The big society represented a tremendous political idea to me, especially since I have always felt strongly about responding to our broken society by volunteering, generosity and giving. In 2016, I realised a driving ambition to research the big society for my PhD project and investigate how it could rejuvenate democracy in Britain, and I started my PhD journey in October 2017 to explore the extent to which the big society could in practice produce something positive for democracy in Britain. My reading of the literature showed that the Conservative Party had introduced two youth volunteer schemes to create the big society – the National Citizen Service and the International Citizen Service. My focus shifted to investigating the impact of these two schemes of the big society on young people.

These new policy commitments could, I believe, encourage and increase young people's level of political participation, which has become the lowest in the history of Britain. However, I was unable to continue with this subject as the government dropped these policies and there were no resources to support them. At that time, the puzzle of young people's lack of political

participation remained unsolved for me. I was very interested in why young people are portrayed as apolitical, apathetic and alienated as political agents. I was against these assumptions and thought that young people's political participation needs a more profound comprehension. My discussion was therefore based on analysing the different ways to understand the variation in that participation. I argued that young people are a heterogeneous group and that their participation inevitably varies. The next step was to understand the potential factors which explain that variation. During my reading, I came across the theory of social capital and it seemed to me to represent the productive benefits of social networks and relationships among citizens. It also interested me because it seeks to achieve common goals and collective activity, which I eventually linked to civil society.

I was curious to learn about and search the literature on social capital as the theory was new to me. I wanted to understand how it is formed and experienced by young people in Britain and how it could affect the political participation of the current generation. I was motivated by the thought that my PhD project would both contribute to the field of social capital and political participation and be an achievement for myself as a researcher who is willing to see changes happening in the political world.

1.3. Background to the Study

This study particularly addresses the impact of social capital on political participation among higher education (HE hereafter) students in the city of York, in northern Britain. Young people are the most crucial age group for understanding the relationship between social capital and political participation. In most cultures, young people cover the age range from 14 to 30 years (Côté, 2014, p. 10). The definitions of young people preferred by the UN and the WHO use a longer age range and fairly serve statistical purposes for analysing and assessing demographic, socio-economic and cultural changes. The UN (2022) recognises young people as aged from 15 to 24 in all its statistics and the WHO (2019) defines 'youth' as individuals in the 10-24 age group.

The definition used in this current study regards young people as those aged between18 and 24 years, an age range which is in line with the national results presented in official maps and charts. The UK's producers of statistics and polling companies such the Office for National Statistics (ONS), Ipsos MORI, the Electoral Commission and the ten-yearly national census

use data of young people aged 18 to 24. I therefore believe that the sample recruited for this study represents a considerable time of change, as young people experiment with educational, financial, familial, social and political developments. According to the ONS (2019), young people at the age of 18 legally become adults: they can take on debts, sign legal contracts and leave their parents' homes. They can smoke, drink alcohol, get married without parental permission and they can vote in national and local elections. I chose 18 as the starting age for my definition of young people because they can vote at this age. I also wanted to recruit 18-24-year-olds because I want to understand the relationship between social capital and political participation among university students.

Jean Spence (2005, p. 46) summarized the concept of youth in Britain as being "associated in a commonsense manner with the state of being young, particularly with that phase of life between childhood and adulthood". It is clear from this that the terms 'youth' and 'young people' are used interchangeably. According to Spence, being young involves both biological development and economic dimensions. She suggested that youth brings with it a different status, identity, social behaviour, expectations and opportunities from childhood. Youth is a status affected by real social experiences such as access to voting, employment and welfare benefits. It must also be highlighted that young people are defined by a different socio-economic status in terms of gender, class, power and wealth. According to Spence, youth is perceived as intense period of development, risky, and full of uncertainty. If young people, for example, fail to go to school, they are less likely to be employed, and this can make them poor and cause them to fail to become independent and responsible (*ibid*., pp. 46-8). In the modern world, youth brings about changes within the industrial workplace, the division of labour, education and separation of family and work. In the modern understanding of youth, young people become more aware of separate institutions such as family, education and work, and this reinforces gender, class and age differences (*ibid*., p. 51).

In brief, although we can identify youth from clear biological characteristics, we cannot generalize whether all young people fit into exact social, political and cultural dimensions or assume that they have the same complex experiences. Furlong and Cartmel (2007) stated that modern society has changed the experiences of young people, including their relationship with family members, education, employment, leisure and lifestyle. The restructuring of the labour markets creates inequalities between young people. For example, young people from advantaged backgrounds can easily apply to a university whereas a young person from a less

advantaged background might find it more difficult to obtain a place at a university. Students from disadvantaged socio-economic contexts tend to attend their local university and live in their parents' home as a result of financial issues (Turhan and Stevens, 2020).

In contemporary Britain, the lives of half of the population of young people are regulated by education. In 2019/20, 53.4% of 17- to 30-year-olds entered HE compared with 51.9% in 2018/19, and significantly 60.8% of this population were female (Department of Education, 2021). The number of British 18-year-olds applying for university places increased from 50,000 in 2019 to 320,000 in 2022. Moreover, there was an increase in the numbers of applicants from disadvantaged areas (The Guardian, 2022). UK universities saw large increases of first year and postgraduate degrees students' number even with the COVID-19 pandemic (Van Essen-Fishman, 2022). Because more young people are progressing to university, exploring the effect of social capital on political participation among the student population becomes significant. This change in the number of students going to university feeds into the justification of investigating the impact of social capital on political participation among HE students in this study.

With this increase of the number of HE students, it is also necessary to acknowledge that half of young people over 18 do not attend school or work. In the education domain, previous studies have identified several concerns of young people in this regard, such as the high cost of education (except for Scottish students attending a Scottish University), pressure to pursue a career, the lack of funding for appropriate facilities and the courses open to students. Personal safety, protection from violence, abuse and racial discrimination, and equality of opportunity and treatment were also concerns raised by young people, especially by those in minority ethnic groups (White, Bruce and Ritchie, 2000, p. 6). These facts might explain why some young people are not going to university.

A survey by Central YMCA (2016) found that unemployment is the most crucial challenge facing young people. Other significant issues reported by young people in the survey were concerns about the failure to succeed in education, body image and experiences regarding weight and attractiveness, family breakdown such as parental separation, and the abuse of illegal substances such as drugs (YMCA, 2016, p. 4). Young people by definition lack work experience and skills, and competition from older job seekers makes it challenging for them to find jobs compared with older age cohorts (Bastiaanssen, Johnson and Lucas, 2022). NHS

studies have found that young people are the least likely to experience obesity. Instead, they are the most likely age group to follow the physical activity guidelines recommended by the NHS; 19% of them use prescribed medicines compared with 90% of adults aged over 70 (NHS Digital, 2017). In terms of their mental health, a report by the BBC stated that 70% of young people reported experience of mental health problems (Shaw, 2018).

Austerity has negative consequences on the most disadvantaged individuals. Recently implemented cuts affect young people with low incomes and those dependent on welfare services. Austerity also affects their self-esteem and hopes for the future (McDowell, Bonner-Thompson and Harris, 2022). The UK's decision to leave the EU had significant implications for young people. Ellison (2017) predicted that Brexit would have a significant negative impact on vulnerable young individuals, particularly on their experience of education and employment, and this has proved to be correct. Critically, 32.6% of young people experienced poverty and social exclusion at the time (Schraad-Tischler, 2015). The decision to leave the EU created uncertainty for young people born in central and eastern Europe and for those currently living in post-Brexit Britain (Tyrrell et al., 2019). Tyrrell et al. (2019) found that 81% were not hopeful about their future. Although most felt a sense of belonging to the country, Brexit had made 45.1% of them worried and 27% scared. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected young people in several ways: they are more likely to lose their jobs than older people, they suffer from mental health issues and they face disruptions to their studies (Fox et al., 2021). School and university closures made it challenging to switch to alternative technologies of information and communication (OECD, 2020).

In contrast, some studies have seen young people as a driving source of social progress and change. A study found that HE students are career driven: 45% of them had career plans and 70% felt confident about achieving them (Tetsill, 2014). In terms of political participation, studies have shown that young people shifted from electoral participation (voting; membership of political parties) towards non-electoral forms of participation such as protesting (Sloam, 2007). They were found to embrace participation based on new media (Vromen, Xenos and Loader, 2014). Today's young people have been found to be more concerned with environmental movements than they were decades ago and are aware of the mechanisms to mobilise these movements in their society (Giugni and Grasso, 2015). Moreover, data from some studies have suggested that young people are active users of social networking sites and many consider these sites an essential source of information (Lupton, 2021; Stanley, 2017).

I fully understand that young people have no universal experiences and cannot understand all their realities and the world which they inhabit. It is therefore not possible to apply the findings of the current qualitative study to the whole population of young people in Britain. This study is designed to build an understanding of HE students at the University of York, the sources of their political participation, the social networks which are important to them and the aspects of these networks which are important to their participation. Many debates about the impact of social capital on political participation have examined the case of young people in general rather than HE students specifically (Holecz, Fernández and Giugni, 2022; Janmaat and Hoskins, 2022; Giugni and Grasso, 2022; Charlton and Blair, 2021). This is not to say that these studies have not treated young people and HE students synonymously, but the current study focused only on the social and political worlds of HE students. This close focus on HE students will develop our understanding of the social capital mechanisms which such students have, including family and friends, community networks, social networking sites and social trust, whether they have access to social resources at the university level, how they view and perceive these resources and how these resources could affect their participation in political activities. The results of the study will tell us more about previous assumptions and findings from youth studies investigating social capital and political participation. Although the research presented here cannot be generalised to the national level, future quantitative research should explore whether the findings and trends identified and discussed in this thesis are representative of the wider British context.

This empirical study involved a sample of 29 interviewees who were young people in HE. It is intended that the case studies of HE students' everyday lives will provide essential insights into how they respond to the social and political world. The recruited young people were approached as competent social and political actors understood to be full UK citizens with their own beliefs, values, rights and practices. HE students were selected as a means of improving the understanding of their lives and experiences, improving the quality of the data about them, and making their voices heard. I believe that the acquired data will develop knowledge which can bring positive changes to some students' lives.

The purpose of the study is to explore the impact of social capital on HE students' political participation. It therefore gives importance to political participation, its significance and its forms. Political researchers seek to better understand the processes which generate good participatory democracy at the national and international levels. By participatory democracy,

researchers refer to "the use of mass participation in political decision-making to complement or (in the most radical versions) replace the traditional institutions of elections and lobbying associated with representative democracy" (Hawkins, 2010, p. 32). Political participation is significant for democracy as it enables citizens to have a say in how the government is run (Bessant and Grasso, 2019). Ikeda, Kobayashi and Hoshimoto (2008, p. 83) posited that participation enables more trust in the government and greater satisfaction with the democratic system and raises awareness of the political leaders involved in the democratic processes; they argued that participation is good news for those not represented in or alienated from democratic politics (*ibid.*, p. 87).

The following sections will help to clarify what is meant in this thesis by the terms political participation, conventional and unconventional participation, and political engagement. The term 'political participation' is used in this thesis but similar to this term, another term present in the literature is 'political engagement', and sometimes these terms are used interchangeably. Before explaining the difference between the two terms, I shall first explain what we mean by political participation and its forms. 'Political participation' represents "those activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take" (Verba and Nie, 1972, p. 2). Under this definition, participation consists of activities and actions which are fundamentally political. In order to consider political participation, van Deth (2014) advised researchers to recognise participation as a voluntary activity; it concerns all citizens and affects the government and the political system. Weiss (2020) suggests that a different definition of young people's political participation is not of central importance; instead, it is the different forms of political activities practised by young people which are of more importance. Voting, which allows citizens to elect their political leader(s), is the most common example of conventional political participation. Other forms can be applied, such as party membership and making or soliciting campaign donations.

Conventional participation functions according to state law and is institutionalised in political parties (Kaim, 2021). Kaim (2021) argued that shifting focus on conventional participation, such as lowering the voting age, can generate discouraging discourses for citizens to participate in politics. Unconventional political participation tends to influence politics outside the electoral arena. Everyday unconventional political activities include demonstrations, boycotting and signing petitions (Van der Meer and van Ingen, 2009). Signing petitions is a

low-risk activity and takes only a few minutes. Demonstrations are essentially visible activities and involve much more time and commitment (Stockemer, 2014).

Previous forms and modes of political participation have thus been separated into conventional and unconventional political participation; however, it "now manifests in a mode of wide variety of individualized, creative, expressive, and everyday forms of engagement with societal and political issues" (Theocharis, de Moor and van Deth, 2021, p. 31). Vaccari and Valeriani (2021) argued that the social media increase political participation. Their analysis showed that citizens who are less interested in politics see a higher level of political participation on social media. This also suggests that the political experience on social media enhances political equality rather than widening the gap between those who are politically interested and those who are not. Participation on social media includes online petitions, content sharing and commenting (Boulianne, 2011). In 2019, Sarah Pickard developed the Do-It-Ourselves (DIO) politics concept to explain how young people take politics into their own hands. DIO politics results from the belief that elected officials are not acting sufficiently in the public interest. It involves initiating a group activity rather than leaving politics to politicians. Collectivism increases feelings of sharing, belonging and hope (Pickard, 2022, p. 3). In the current study, conventional participation will be understood as electoral participation whereas unconventional participation will be understood as non-electoral participation (protesting, signing petitions and so on). In this study, I am not interested in one particular activity such as voting, but I want to provide a bigger picture of what might constitute political participation. For the purpose of this study, electoral participation comprises activities related to the government and political institutions. In contrast, non-electoral participation is related to political activities such as protests and signing petitions. Non-electoral activities might not be aimed at the heart of government, but they are activities in which citizens take part in the hope of changing the decision process.

It is essential to distinguish between political participation as defined above and political engagement. Academic studies tend to mix the two terms. In the literature, 'political participation' means taking part in something (Livingstone, 2013, p. 24). In terms of political engagement, David Sanders et al. (2014, p. 123) argued that an "individual can be considered democratically engaged to the extent that he/she is positively engaged behaviourally and psychologically with the political system and associated democratic norms". For Afromeeva, Leifbroer and Lilleker (n.d), 'political engagement' refers to recognising the relevance and

importance of information and elaborating on connecting political thoughts. Here political engagement paves the way for political participation. In this respect, Uberoi and Johnston (2021) suggested that political engagement can include attitudes such as a belief in the voting act. This belief can predict whether citizens go to the ballot box. Other political engagement attitudes include political knowledge, satisfaction with the government and political efficacy. Some scholars have focused on political knowledge, interest in politics and political efficacy (Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995). I agree with those studies which argue that participation only takes place if it "translates into a concrete political behaviour" (Pitti, 2018, p. 8). According to Pitti (2018), political attitudes such as curiosity about politics are not a participation practice. For the current study, participation is more than an engagement in politics; it involves observable behaviour and can, potentially, change how society is run in significant ways. I shall look mainly at political participation but also reflect on how engagement in politics contributes to participation. In other words, I shall take political engagement into consideration in the analysis of the data.

In Britain, young people's political participation has puzzled scholars for the last two decades. Much of the literature on the subject falls into two categories. Early studies showed that young people were disengaged from electoral politics (Fox, 2015; Grasso, 2014; Henn, Weinsten and Wring 2002; White, Bruce and Ritchie, 2000). In these studies, electoral politics meant activities broadly recognized by the political system, politicians and media reports, which exist in many liberal democracies, such as voting. Later studies suggested that young people participate differently through unconventional forms of participation and social media use (Giugni and Grasso, 2020; Dalton, 2009; Sloam, 2007). Young people choose forms of participation such as joining demonstrations and signing petitions (Henn and Foard, 2014; Mycock and Tonge, 2011; Sloam, 2012). Online forms are also becoming more widespread (Giugni and Grasso, 2021). The use of social media increases awareness of climate change and young people today are more concerned about environmental movements than previous generations and are aware of the mechanisms which can be used to mobilise these movements in their society (Giugni and Grasso, 2015). It has been found that political information on social media is a precursor to political participation; expressing political views online, sharing stories, writing blog posts and paying attention to information from other users' networks all provide users with routes to participate in politics (Yamamoto, Kushin and Dalisay, 2015, p. 892). The variation in these arguments and findings suggests that we cannot make generalised statements about young people's political participation. The current study is therefore not designed to

examine whether young people participate in politics or not, but instead to consider the variation in their political participation. In other words, young people do not form a homogeneous group and rather than seeking to generalise that all young people participate similarly, I argue that they engage in politics differently.

A recent study showed that not all young people participate equally (Holecz, Fernández and Giugni, 2022). Why do some young people participate in politics and others do not? Studies have shown that young people from higher socio-economic backgrounds have a larger political repertoire than those with lower socio-economic status (Holecz, Fernández and Giugni, 2022; Giungi and Grasso, 2020; Quintelier and Hooghe, 2013; Henn and Foard, 2014; Stolle and Hooghe, 2011). The review of the primary literature showed that a key component underpinning the variation in political participation is education, which has influenced young people's political participation (Sloam et al., 2021; Giungi and Grasso, 2020; Pontes, Henn and Griffiths, 2019; Sloam, 2014; Henn and Foard, 2014). Other studies, however, have shown that negative economic contexts stimulate political participation, such as protests (Grasso et al., 2019; Grasso and Giugni, 2016). There is a considerable debate concerning the effectiveness of education on young people's political participation. For voting behaviour, the influence of education is still contentious. Britain has experienced a rapid expansion of the HE sector and more young people are attending university, but their voting turnout has always been lower than that of older people. An empirical study of white middle-class students whose parents were in highly paid professions argued that their attitudes towards politics resulted from limited political education received through the curriculum (Iro, 2017). Moreover, the emerging forms of participation (non-electoral politics) are less time-consuming and do not require formal education (Stolle and Hooghe, 2005, pp. 128-29). Education might still drive political participation but to a smaller extent. For example, demonstrations and boycotts were popular among the highly educated in the 1970s but gradually became normalized to a large segment of the population (Norris, Walgrave and Van Aelst, 2005). These concerns necessitate a better theoretical understanding of the arguments around what matters to young people's political participation.

The main argument of this thesis lies in the fact that some young people are politically active whereas others are less active. I argue that social capital plays a pivotal role in explaining young people's political participation. Young people engage politically through social networks and relationships. The social capital theory became popular after the American scholar Robert

Putnam published *Bowling Alone* in 2000. Putnam (1993, p. 35) had previously defined social capital as "features of social organisations, such as networks, norms and trust that facilitate action and cooperation for mutual benefit" and added that social interactions through social groups and civic associations facilitate and increase political participation. In Britain, the first approach to social capital was developed by Peter Hall in 1999. In the current study, 'social capital' is understood to comprise social relationships and networks and the resources generated by these networks which are relevant to the participants' political participation. I want to emphasise that my discussion and analysis of social capital does not mean that socio-demographic factors such as education, gender and ethnicity are less important. My intention is to enrich the understanding of young people's political participation using social capital. I firmly believe that an analysis of political participation without discussing socio-economic status, especially education, will be incomplete. Another important point that I want to emphasise in this study is that I have explored the impact of social capital on political participation rather than *vice versa*.

A comprehensive literature review showed that many studies have been conducted on social capital theory. Surprisingly, however, there has been little consideration given to HE students in Britain (Wong, 2018; Dumangane, 2017; Collings, Swanson and Watkins, 2014; Wilcox, Winn and Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). In order to explore young people's social capital, four different mechanisms of social capital are explored in this study: family and friendship networks, community networks, social networking sites and social trust. In addition, although the literature has explored social capital as a potential driver for political participation in other parts of the world, an empirical implication for HE students in Britain is not yet established. Moreover, little is known about the specific resources through which social capital mechanisms contribute to the political participation of HE students.

Some previous studies have not directly addressed social capital theory but have used different terms such as political socialisation, whereas others have drawn conclusions on the impact of social capital measurements on political participation (Janmaat and Hoskins, 2022; Power, 2020; Fox et al., 2019; Muddiman et al., 2019; Power et al., 2018; Fox and Pearce, 2018; Eto, 2012; Jennings, Stoker and Bowers, 2009). For instance, Janmaat and Hoskins (2022) focused on the impact of parental education and parental politicisation on political engagement during adolescence and early adulthood. Parents appear to have positive effects on their children's political interest and voting intentions. Fox et al. (2019) showed how family played a critical

socializing role in supporting or opposing Brexit in the 2016 Referendum. Similarly, Muddiman et al. (2019) demonstrated how parents encourage their children to participate in civic activities. A similar study considered family an essential agent in cultivating civil activism (Power et al., 2018). Eto (2012) argued that family influence can make children active agents by developing their social awareness. Earlier studies examined the mechanisms through which social learning, which includes observational learning and imitation, stimulate children to understand political issues (Jennings, Stoker and Bowers, 2009).

Family is not only the key socialising agent which has influenced political participation. A recent quantitative study by Holecz, Fernández and Giugni (2022) focused on schools, social clubs and community organisations as social settings which influence young people's political activities. That study showed that associational membership of migrants in voluntary associations, for example, develops their trust, furthers their identity and provides them with skills to participate in politics. The influence of social capital on young people's political participation found by Henn, Weinsten and Hodgkinson (2007) was mixed. They found that those with lower social capital had less faith in the democratic process than those with higher social capital. Social capital variables such as trust and associational membership were found not to be statistically significant.

The studies which have identified a relationship between social capital and political participation have been primarily quantitative. The most recent related study was conducted by Holecz, Fernández and Giugni (2022) who investigated the role of socialising spheres on young people's political activities and was based on a survey covering nine European countries, including the UK. This current study uses a qualitative approach to explore social capital among HE students in order to respond to these knowledge gaps by exploring how the resources produced by these different mechanisms of social capital affect their political participation. The methodology chosen for the current study is one of the key contributions which this thesis makes to scholarship on this subject. Although young people's participation is a matter of concern in youth studies in Britain, it has to be noted that there exist few broad qualitative detailed studies investigating the impact of social capital on HE students' political participation. Interviewing students will help to understand and analyse how their political participation and the different types of this participation are perceived and experienced by them, as well as how this participation is affected by the different mechanisms of social capital.

In brief, the findings of this study will contribute to the literature by providing a fresh look at and analysis of social capital and political participation. It is one of the few studies to give attention to the subject among HE students in a single British context using a qualitative methodology.

1.4. Study Area: the Case of York

York is a city in Northern England and is consistently voted one of the best places to live in the UK (The Sunday Times, 2018). There were 211,012 residents in York in 2022, distributed over 87,742 households (2020/21) on 27,194 hectares. More than half (51.4%) of the population is female, and 48.6% is male (World Population Review, 2022). Ninety-five per cent of the population are White British and 1.9% are Asian. The majority of the York population is Christian (117,856) and the second largest religious element are Muslims (2,072), whereas 56,646 of the total population have no religion (*ibid.*). The city of York has 62 state schools, 6 private schools and two universities. The University of York was established in 1963, has around 30 departments and centres, has 20,735 students, and is a member of the Russell Group of universities. York St John University was established as a college in 1841 and achieved university status in 2006; it has around 8,000 students from a hundred different nationalities (Gray, 2022). Moreover, York college which is based in Bishopthorpe is considered one of the outstanding higher education colleges in the UK (York College, 2023).

York is perceived as an affluent area: 111,000 residents were employed in 2020 (City of York Council, 2022) and the city has a low (below 13%) youth unemployment rate (Crowley and Cominetti, 2014). Sixty-five per cent of York's thriving businesses are independently run (City of York Council, 2022). York's libraries and archive services provide the UK's cheapest and highest-performing services (Mutual Ventures, 2021). The city of York Council established eleven LAC (Local Area Coordination) teams to provide social support to residents and respond to crises in their local communities. This helps residents to move from social isolation to active citizenship (NHS Confederation, 2022).

York's thriving education sector enables young people to enter the highly skilled workforce. More than 90% of children attend outstanding schools (City of York Council, 2022). Labour MP Rachael Maskell has held the seat of York Central from 2015. Voting turnout at the 2019 General Election was 66.1% in the city of York. In the EU referendum, the recorded turnout

for York was 70.7% (155,157 electors): 38.82% of the voters voted to leave and 61.8% to remain (Democratic Dashboard, 2019).

The present context of York will be helpful in terms of political participation and social capital. Studies have found that wealthy areas have higher social capital and political participation. Some have shown that higher socio-demographic characteristics such as education and employment contribute to political participation (Holecz, Fernández and Giugni, 2022). Similarly, education, employment and income are believed to provide higher levels of social capital (Maass et al., 2016). Taken together, and considering its high socio-economic status, I suggest that York represents a rich social capital and political participation environment. This is not to generalize that those levels of participation of social capital in York are high in all towns and neighbourhoods; it might be possible that social capital is low within some areas. According to the City of York Council (2022), 10% of children in the city live in poverty, 10.5% of households live in fuel poverty, and one neighbourhood is ranked as one of the most deprived areas in the UK.

By looking closely at how social capital affects political participation in a well-off geographical context, I shall add new knowledge about this relationship in a different context. Moreover, some of the participants were not originally citizens of York but had come from other parts of the country to study at the University of York. By restricting this study to one single geographical context, I might miss the social capital effects of deprived areas or social capital and political participation experienced by non-students. Therefore, future research should undertake a comparison of different areas to explore any geographical differences in social capital and political participation. This is further discussed in the future research recommendations section of Chapter 7.

1.5. Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to understand HE students' social capital and explore how the resources produced by the different mechanisms of social capital affect their political participation. The first focus is on how students experience social capital to contribute to this topic. This involves exploring four different mechanisms of social capital: family and friendship networks, community networks, social networking sites, and social trust. The second purpose is to shed light on how the resources produced by these different mechanisms of social capital affect students' political participation. The following research questions guided the purposes of the study:

RQ1. How do higher education students experience social capital?

RQ2. How do the resources produced by the different mechanisms of social capital affect higher education students' political participation?

1.6. Research Aims

This study has two fundamental aims. First, it seeks to develop an understanding of social capital for young people in Britain. Despite the massive research emphasis on social capital, there has been insufficient focus on young people in the British context. This study is of great importance to social scientists because it provides essential and timely information about the relationships and networks which shape young people's social capital. Second, it seeks to gain insight into the resources through which the different mechanisms of social capital affect young people's political participation. Social capital is becoming increasingly important for political participation but there is little evidence on how this relationship operates in practice for HE students.

Moreover, most of the previous research into that relationship has been quantitative. A qualitative research approach provides a better understanding of young people's perceptions and experiences of social capital. It provides information on how its mechanisms impact their participation in political activities. The key aims of this study are therefore:

1. To explore social capital among higher education students; and
2. To explore the resources through which the different mechanisms of social capital affect higher education students' political participation.

1.7. Overview of the Methodology

A case-study approach was employed to explore the impact of social capital on HE students' political participation. A qualitative design was used incorporating data collection and analysis from 29 semi-structured interviews with HE students in the city of York. First, I argue that the literature lacks an empirical exploration of HE students' social capital. Most studies about social capital theory have used survey data rather than qualitative data (ONS, 2020; Friesen, 2018; Putnam, 2000, Hall, 1999; Almond and Verba, 1963). Measures usually include survey data on membership of civic associations, social trust and reciprocity levels. Qualitative work has been conducted to give a realistic account of what constitutes social capital among young Brits. Analysis of the results from a qualitative study helps to make sense of social capital among HE students and provides a deeper understanding of how they experience it. To fulfil this aim, I explored the impact of four mechanisms of social capital: family and friendship networks, community networks, social networking sites and social trust.

Second, I used semi-structured interviews to explore how the resources produced by the different mechanisms of social capital affect HE students' political participation. Quantitative studies have shown a meaningful association between social capital and political participation, but have not looked into how this relationship operates. In other words, they did not explain how the different mechanisms of social capital affect HE students' political participation. I believe that using a qualitative research method has enabled me to conclude the impact of social capital on political participation.

1.8. Key Findings of the Research

As has already been explained, four mechanisms were used to explore how HE students experience social capital in Britain: family and friendship networks, community networks, social networking sites and social trust. The first empirical analysis chapter shows strong support for bonding and bridging social capital among young people. Bonded relationships with family members and friends are a primary source of a higher frequency of social interaction and support. Bridging social capital consisting of community networks generates a sense of belonging and increases students' access to social support and information, but with less influence than family and friends. Students use social networks to maintain their bonding social capital and increase their bridging social capital by sharing content and exchanging information. Trust is often located in students' interactions with family members and close

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friends. Social trust has been interpreted as feelings of comfort and respect with bridging social capital (community networks) and it has no significant impact on new contacts online.

Regarding the second research question, support was found for the resources through which social capital affects HE students' political participation. All the mechanisms of social capital generate political engagement such as political interest and knowledge. In some cases, being informed about and interested in politics fosters political participation. The results show that political participation is associated with different types of social capital/resources. It was not surprising that bonding social capital or the relationships which students have with their family members and friends was found to be vital for electoral political participation, namely voting. These networks provide the most effective resource mechanisms from which students develop political interest and access political knowledge. Community network involvement develops the sharing of political information but it does not necessarily translate into political activities. Social network interaction provides greater access to political information and directly impacts students' engagement in non-electoral forms such as protesting and signing petitions. Finally, the resourceful ways in which social trust affects students' political participation were found to be less important.

The findings were based on a sample of HE students attending the University of York and therefore cannot be generalized to the larger young population in the UK. It would be valuable if future research could investigate the validity and reliability of social capital among non-students and in other geographical contexts. This is discussed in further depth in Chapter 7.

1.9. The Structure of the Thesis

Chapter 2 is a literature review. It overviews recent studies on young people's variation in political participation and introduces social capital theory as an enduring variable which explains that variation. Chapter 3 highlights the relationship between social capital and political participation among young people in Britain. The conclusion of the chapter comprises a summary of the review, highlights the research gap and justifies a qualitative study of how the mechanisms of social capital affect political participation.

In Chapter 4, I explain and justify the methodology chosen and describe the data collection method. Data analysis is then divided into two chapters. Chapter 5 explores the mechanisms of social capital and how young people experience them. Chapter 6 represents the main

contribution of the thesis. I discuss the resources through which social capital affects young people's political participation. Chapter 7 is devoted to the findings and results of the study. The research implications, the limitations of the study and recommendations for further studies are presented in this chapter.

1.10. Chapter Summary

This introductory chapter situates the current study in a broad context. The author's motivation for undertaking the study has been explained and background information on the topic has been given, referencing existing studies about social capital and young people's political participation. The main terms of the study have been explained, such as young people, social capital, and political participation and how it differs from political engagement. The value which the study brings to the broader context has also been discussed. The location of the study and its participants has been described: it focuses on HE students in York. The research questions and aims have been set out and the methodology, the methods employed, and the study's key findings have been briefly described. The chapter concluded with a description of the structure of the thesis, briefly explaining the content of each chapter. The next chapter will review the existing literature around young people's political participation in the British context.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

This literature review is related to young people's political participation in Britain. Because HE students are the specific focus in this study, there are high chances that they are young people. Scholarly works on young people's political participation have been growing over the last two decades. Some studies have suggested that young people disconnect from electoral political participation, such as voting (Fox, 2015; Grasso, 2014; Henn, Weinsten and Wring 2002; White, Bruce and Ritchie, 2000). Others have reported that young people are shifting towards new forms of non-electoral participation, such as protesting and signing petitions (Henn and Foard, 2014; Mycock and Tonge, 2011; Sloam, 2012). More recent studies have shown that social networking sites influence political participation (Giugni and Grasso, 2021; 2020). The approach to understanding political participation in this study is to acknowledge that young people's participation is neither declining nor increasing. In other words, young people are neither engaged nor disengaged from politics, but they vary in their participation. I recognise young people as a heterogeneous group as they participate in politics in various ways.

The literature has emphasised that socio-demographic characteristics such as geographical context, education, gender and ethnicity are essential for that variation (Sloam et al., 2021; Giungi and Grasso, 2020; Kitanova, 2020; Pontes, Henn and Griffiths, 2019; Sloam, 2014; Henn and Foard, 2014). Although these characteristics are important, they are not the sole factors that explain young people's level of political participation. Moreover, previous studies have generalised the impact of these characteristics. It is essential to note that these characteristics, especially education, provide a platform for participation, but there are other factors that shape this participation, one of which is social capital. I suggest that social capital is a significant additional factor which needs to be taken into consideration in the study of young people's political participation. My purpose in this thesis is to enrich our understanding of young people through using social capital theory. Social capital refers to people's relationships, social networks, cooperation and shared norms such as social trust. Advocates of the theory suggest that social capital facilitates and increases political participation (Putnam, 2000). Although it is a valuable resource for political participation, social capital has not been discussed thoroughly in the field of young people's political participation in Britain. This thesis

contributes to the existing scholarship by using social capital as a landscape for studying HE students' political participation.

The structure of this chapter is as follows. First, I shall summarise the literature on young people's political participation, including the various types of political activities in which young people participate. In this body of literature, both young people's political participation and their non-participation occur. Second, I shall discuss previous studies and explain the variation in young people's political participation using socio-demographic characteristics, such as location, gender, ethnicity and education. Finally, I shall address the gap in the literature by introducing social capital as an influential variable which could enrich the understanding of young people's variation in political participation.

2.2. Contemporary Patterns of Young People's Political Participation

In this study, I investigated the impact of social capital on HE students' political participation. Recent British studies have seen much discussion about young people's political and non-political participation. These studies have explained in largely descriptive statistics the changing trends of young people's electoral and non-electoral participation. The literature demonstrates that young people are disengaged from electoral participation but are active in non-electoral participation. This literature neglects the fact that young people do not participate equally in politics. For example, there are some young people who are politically active and others who are not. Young people's socio-demographic characteristics such as geographical location, education, ethnicity and gender play a critical role in the variation in their participation. My approach in this thesis is to argue that these characteristics do not provide a full account of the variation in political participation. This approach enables me to make the case for social capital and show why we need to understand and discuss it as an important factor for young people's political participation.

In this section, I shall summarise and discuss the changing trends in young people's political participation in Britain. Some studies have suggested that young people are disengaged from electoral participation and that this disengagement is most visibly reflected in low levels of participation in electoral politics, including the decline in voter turnout rates (Mycock and Tonge, 2012; Electoral Commission and the Hansard Society, 2006; O'Toole et al., 2003).

Figure 1 shows that in the 2001 and 2005 general elections, the voting turnouts of the 18-24 age group were 40.4% and 38.2% respectively, which were much lower than the national results. For example, the total turnout in 2005 was 61.4% (House of Commons Library, 2005).

This disengagement from voting might be a result of young people's apathy. Voter apathy implies that citizens do not feel a personal obligation to participate in elections (Crewe, 1992). In survey data collected across different countries in the EU, Dahl et al. (2018) found that political apathy among young people was the lowest in the UK. Inclinations for non-voting in upcoming national elections was 12.4%. Goudi (2018) argued that disengagement from voting is not necessarily apathy and suggested that we must consider the obstacles which many young people face in electoral participation. We also need to consider their distrust of political parties and politicians. Pilkington and Pollock (2015) found that young people feel separated from political leaders and demonstrate anti-political sentiments against mainstream parties. Their analysis showed that radical movements and the level of engagement with social issues distance young people from political parties.

Some experts on young people's politics have claimed that young people were less likely to vote because they felt alienated from electoral politics (Sloam, 2014; Henn, Weinsten and Forrest, 2005). Political alienation is defined as "… a lasting form of estrangement from some aspect of one's political system, community or environment" (Fox, 2021, p. 18). Fox (2021), however, showed that young British citizens feel less alienated from mainstream politics than older people. The number of young people who feel alienated is statistically significant: 51% of 18-24-year-olds agreed that the political elites do not care what they think, and 62% did not trust politicians. The number of young people with less confidence in their understanding of politics was higher than other alienation variables; 45% of them found politics complex to understand (*ibid*., p. 24).

These criticisms of young people's disengagement from electoral politics show that political scholars have not considered that young people's voting turnout has increased in recent years. Figure 1 shows that turnout steadily increased to 51.8% in 2010. In 2015, 58% of the youngest age category of voters went to the polls. In the 2016 EU referendum, 64% of eligible young people went to the polls to vote. And young people voted to remain in the EU, believing that membership of this organisation conferred benefits such as tackling human rights, addressing inequalities and reducing tuition fees, unemployment and taxes caused by austerity (Furlong, 2013). Some young people in Banaji and Mejia's study (2018), however, reported that Brexit

was an opportunity for them to become active and more independent. This perspective rejects the core claim that all young people are disconnected from electoral politics.

In the 2017 elections, 72% of eligible young voters voted, the highest turnout since 1992 (Apostolova et al., 2019). The 2017 general election saw two-thirds of 18-24-year-old voters support the opposition party led by Corbyn compared to just one-third in 2010. The 2017 election demonstrated a political change, greater political awareness, engagement and activism, which some commentators called a 'youthquake' (Sloam and Henn, 2019). Young people's support for the Labour party could be explained by "the values and authenticity of Jeremy Corbyn and the traditional socialist manifesto largely due to social media, marking an advance for democracy and hope for the future health of political institutions" (Pickard, 2019a, p. 9). Certainly, Corbyn did gain young supporters, but some studies have questioned whether the youthquake happened. One reason is that Labour's popularity increased among all ages below 70 in the 2017 election, but the Tories still won. At the 2017 elections, there was a big shift in the age groups voting Conservative. A further reason is that youth turnout rose in constituencies with many young people (Prosser et al., 2018).

Figure 1: Estimated turnout of young people (18-24) since 1964 (Uberoi, 2019)

Estimated turnout by age: 18-24
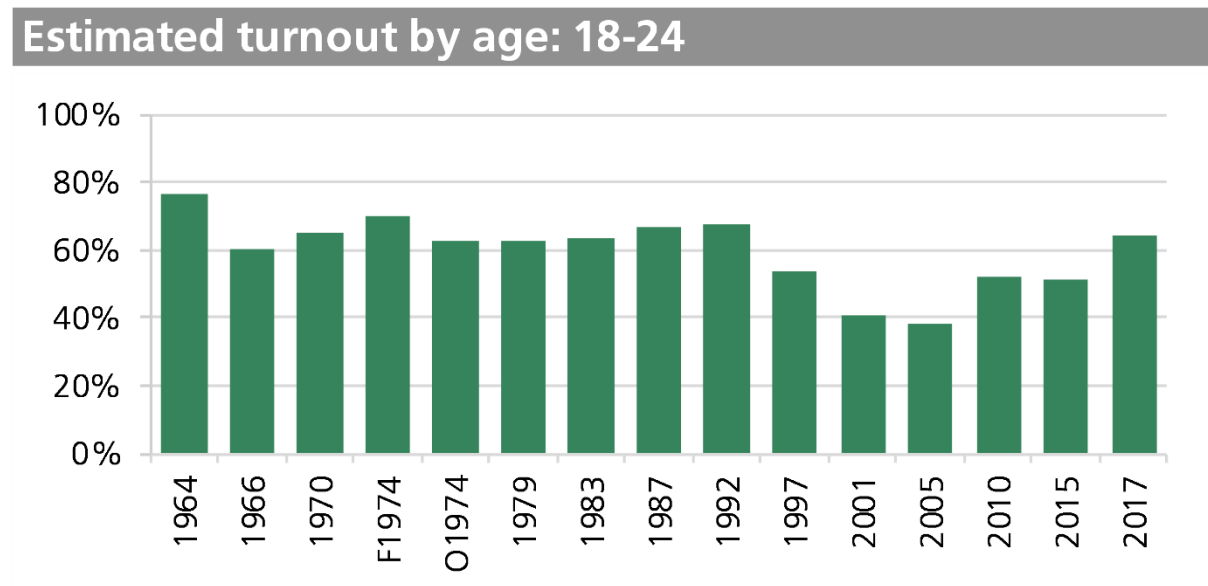
In 2019, 47% of young people voted in the General Election (Ipsos MORI, 2019). According to Sloam and Henn (2019), the outcome of that election appeared to be exactly the same as in the 2017 elections in the sense that young voters were left disappointed. Indeed, at their analysis of Labour and Conservative manifestos at the 2015 and 2017 general elections, Sanders and Shorrocks (2019) found that younger women were more pessimistic about the UK's post-Brexit

economy and austerity. Women were more affected as they rely more on benefits and tax credits and they have greater caring responsibilities. Such disappointment could mean that young people believe that their votes are ineffective. In that election, young people continued to show their support for the Labour party as it offered anti-austerity and environmental programmes. Despite losing the election, Labour won 57% of votes among young people aged 18-24 (Lord Ashcroft Polls, 2019). Figure 2 shows that climate change was the second most important issue identified by young people after the NHS. After climate change, the cost of living and poverty were reported by young people (24% and 21% respectively). Although evidence from the 2019 general election suggests that young people were left behind, their engagement in climate change protests was a step forward towards actualising their political interests (Sloam and Henn, 2019).

Figure 2: Most important issues by age (Lord Ashcroft Polls, 2019, cited in Sloam and Henn, 2019)
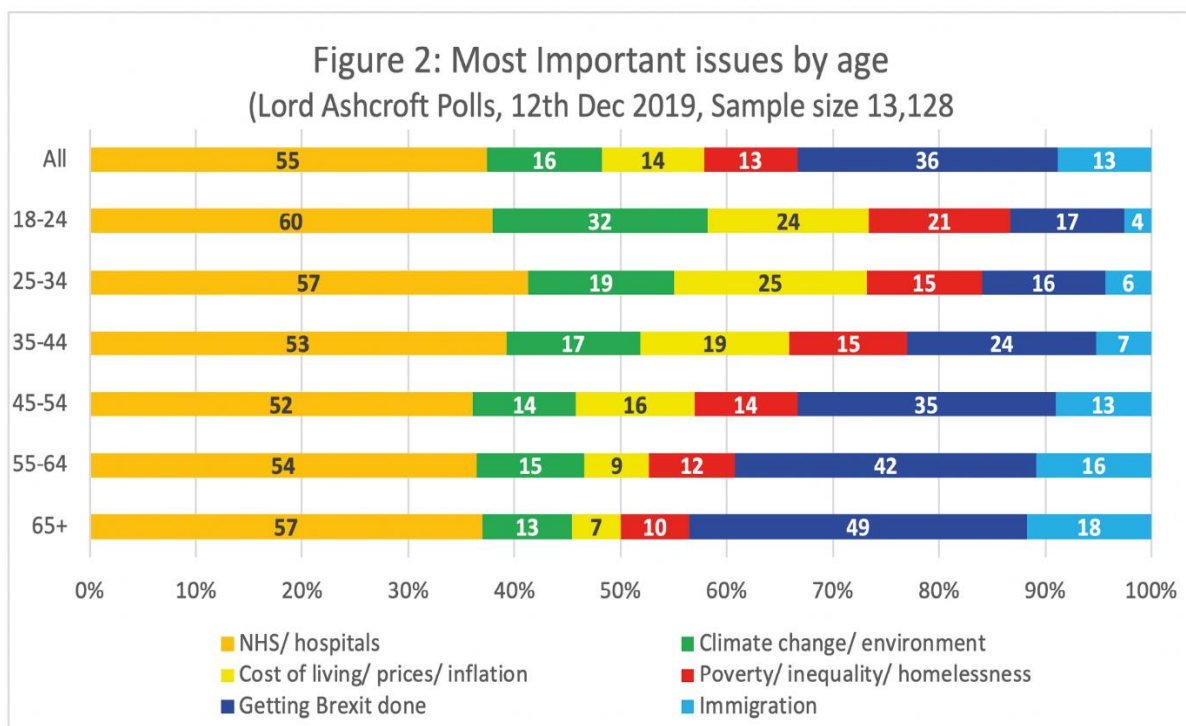
Low turnout among young voters has raised concerns about the decline in the democratic system, which suggests that it is a significant issue within the British political system (Berry and Madonnel, 2014). Passive electorates end up with their needs unrepresented and unexpressed and leave political leaders to have much freedom to decide what should be done

in the country (Dalton, 2022, p. 546). Low turnout makes young citizens more vulnerable to decisions made by others (Sloam, 2012). It indicates that few age groups believe that the electoral system is necessary for political decision-making. It could also show that those who choose not to vote do not consider political parties as the central bodies which exercise power and representation (Solijonov, 2016).

Hart and Henn (2017) suggested that neoliberalism has resulted in young people's disengagement from formal politics. Neoliberalism, which limits democracy and relies on coercion, makes formal politics less attractive to young people. According to Hart and Henn, neoliberalism's methods of governance create inequality amongst young people, especially those in lower income groups. Providing political power and state support to older people rather than young people removes the formal equality of politics. The neoliberal economic policy essentially increases young people's disadvantages and undermines their role and value as citizens. This partially resulted in lower electoral turnout (*ibid.*, p. 14).

Some studies have suggested that the fall in voting turnout might not necessarily imply any danger to the future of democracy in Britain. It could be a reasoned criticism to show discontent with government work (Norris, 2011; 1999). Young people might appear critical of how their political systems are governed and they demonstrate this criticism through their decision not to engage with them. They are more likely to support reforms designed to reduce the traditional political parties' hegemony and support smaller competitive parties (Henn et al., 2018). Valentim (2021, p. 10) stated that "democratic participation is about being critical. It is about critically assessing alternative visions for society, judging the feasibility of those visions, and evaluating who is more capable of delivering them". Critical citizens keep political leaders accountable (van der Meer and Zmerli, 2017, p. 1). Pickard (2019a) argued that describing young people as apathetic and alienated is a sweeping misleading statement and gives a negative assessment of young people. Pickard said we need to avoid the negative narrative of young people as a problem in the political participation literature because it negatively affects the representation of their citizenship and engagement. According to her, young people are part of political engagement's solution rather than the problem. However, this claim does not and should not indicate that political participation by young British voters has surged to higher levels nor does it suggest that being critical is beneficial for democracy.

Disengagement from electoral politics was also visible in political party membership. Membership of political parties was becoming "old hat" (Bennie, 2013). In Britain, political

party membership started to decline in the 1950s. In 2018, 18-24-year-olds made up 18% of the Labour Party membership and 13% of the Conservative Party (Audickas, Dempsey and Keen, 2018). Labour party membership rose significantly after Jeremy Corbyn became leader (although it started to decline after Keir Starmer replaced him). Political parties represent significant democratic bodies of government. They are the gatekeepers of parliament, they select candidates and influence the level of public engagement in the political system. They provide voters with their first contact with politics. Candidates' selection reconnects voters with the party and increases public participation in politics (Williams and Paun, 2011). Garland and Brett (2014) commented that political parties are the solution to political disengagement. However, the issue with political parties is that they mobilise voters on election day and reduce their contact at other times (Uslaner, 2006). Party members at election time become more important for the party's policy input and financial support (Bennie, 2013). These trends might result from government policies which do not address young people's concerns. In other words, relative marginalisation demonstrates their disconnection from electoral participation.

Some studies have argued that politicians and political parties are widely perceived to have made a negative contribution to governance. For instance, in *Why We Hate Politics*, Colin Hay (2007, p. 5) stated that politics had become 'a dirty word', a synonym for corruption, fraud, unjustness, failure to achieve stability and productivity and extreme interference in decision-making. Pickard (2019a) suggested that youth studies should not blame young people but politicians for that disengagement. Previous studies have found that politicians are more disconnected from this specific group (Keating, Green and Janmaat, 2015; Furlong, 2013; Sloam, 2012; Hannon and Tims, 2010; Bennett, 2008; Loader, 2007; Carpini, 2004; Henn, Weinsten and Wring, 2002; Edwards, 2001). Henn, Weinsten and Wring (2002, pp. 174-78) found that young people reported a lack of trust in politicians because they felt marginalized by them. Their disengagement was found to be due to politicians' failure to address relevant issues in young people's lives. Only 19.9% of the young participants in that study believed that elected representatives were concerned with the interests of young people and 57.5% of them agreed that politicians are interested only in their votes, not their views. Furthermore, the participants agreed that it is not significant which political party is in power, as they believed that things would not change in the end.

To build a democratic society, a government should respond to citizens' needs. When political elites become aware of those needs, democracy's quality increases (Memoli, 2011, p. 82).

Indeed, some youth-friendly policies have been proposed by the Labour Party to reduce university tuition fees, enfranchise 16- and 17-year-olds, and do away with the triple lock on pensions, which is expensive. Politicians need to make traditional politics attractive and take youth policies more seriously (Pickard, 2015). Politicians often say they address the issues that matter to young people and promise better policies. However, the issue is that politicians rely on survey opinions which consist of predetermined questions rather than asking young people about what matters to them (Dorling, 2016, p. 2).

Although there is some truth in young people's withdrawal from formal politics, disengagement does not necessarily imply any danger to democracy. Disengagement could express only "… a perfectly legitimate democratic attitude of reflexively engaged citizens conscious of their personal circumstances" (Loader, Vromen and Xenos, 2014, p. 11). Citizens might disagree with the political community or the democratic regime and its performance, but this does not signify that the ideals of democratic government are abandoned. In other words, disaffection might not alter the values of the political system or the process of democracy.

I have now described and discussed the changing trends in young people's voting habits and party membership. I have stated that turnout among young people was at its lowest at the beginning of the twenty-first century and that it has been going up in recent years up to 2017, but it decreased in the 2019 General Election to 47%. These trends imply that there are many young people who do not vote and are therefore not representing their political views. As for party membership, some young people feel marginalised. At the same time, young voters continue to support the Labour party which advocates anti-austerity and environmental programmes. In brief, previous studies have shown that young people do not participate equally in electoral politics. Later in this chapter, I shall suggest several explanations from the literature as to why young people vary in their electoral participation.

Some of the early studies focused on young people's disengagement from the act of voting whereas others have shown that young people are active in alternative forms of participation such as petition-signing and demonstrating (Henn and Foard, 2014; Mycock and Tonge, 2011; Sloam, 2012). These forms of participation are widely known as unconventional participation or non-electoral participation and include taking part in demonstrations and protests, signing petitions and supporting boycotts. As was explained in the previous chapter, the analysis in this study will use the term 'non-electoral participation' instead of 'unconventional participation'.

This term is more straightforward and valuable because it extends the scope of any political action which is not electoral. Unconventional participation refers to immediate political participation; it requires a more profound effort, produces a degree of conflict, creates a high degree of pressure and it might not reach its expected goals (Gardner, 2012, pp. 3-4).

Portos, Bosi and Zamponi (2020) suggested that those citizens who have no confidence in political institutions are more likely to embrace non-electoral political participation. Dalton (2022) stated that political participation beyond voting is strongly related to good governance and better democratic performance. Table 1 shows the most basic forms of non-electoral political participation reported by young people aged between 18 and 30 in Britain. For the current study, these include forms such as protests and petitions and I also want to understand the potential consequences of social media on these forms of participation.

Table 1. Reported levels of youth participation in various forms of non-electoral politics

Mode of Non-Electoral Participation	*% of British Young People (18–30-year-olds)*
Signing a petition	50.2%
Sharing a political post on social media	26.3%
Taking part in a boycott	18.8%
Wearing a political badge/sticker	9.3%
Participating in a demonstration	6.4%

Source: HopeNotHate Survey (YouGov) in Ehsan (2018) p. 5)

Table 1 shows that British young citizens are seeking to influence the political process and decision-making through demonstrations, marches, petitions and boycotts. The analysis of the survey responses of 1351 young people shows that half of them signed petitions, but only 6.4% of them participated in a demonstration (Ehsan, 2018). Quintelier (2007) hypothesised that young people prefer and are more engaged in these forms of politics than older people. One of the most common political activities in which young people engage in political affairs is protesting. Saunders (2014, p. 575) described protesting as "an extension of electoral politics". It is a direct action which conveys a high level of cooperation among individuals with similar interests and who are willing to bring about change (Marsh, 1990, p. 224). Young Brits are known to have been active protestors in the period between the early 1960s and the 1970s. The university represented a place which brought the collective actions of many young people to

address real practical issues. For example, students occupied university buildings in protests about the regulations and policies launched by the academic authorities. The students' movement started at the London School of Economics as a protest against the appointment of Walter Adam, a former ally of the racist regime in Rhodesia. At Warwick University, students protested at the university against assumed secret spying, and the refusals of their applications (Barker, 2008). At the University of Leeds, students protested against assumed secret spying on students and lecturers. In 1947, the pressure of massive cuts on higher education introduced by the Labour Government threatened students' conditions for entering colleges and students took part in the majority of strikes against the cutbacks (*ibid*., pp. 72-83). In 1998, around 300,000 people went to London to protest against the rural policies launched by the Labour government (Trueman, 2015).

On 15 February 2003, the largest demonstrations in the UK were held against the US and UK invasion of Iraq. Young people organised protests on their own rather than joining adults. Students absented themselves from school to attend protests arranged during school time. Well-reported protests took place in Downing Street and Parliament Square, and around 8000 pupils participated on Thursday 20 March (Such, Walker and Walker, 2005). Young people protested to make the government aware of their feeling about political issues and to show that they expected better governance from political leaders. In the case of the Iraq war, young people believed that money would be spent on the war instead of what they considered more pressing domestic priorities (Barkham, 2013). Young Brits were more likely than the general population to protest strongly about the financial crisis of 2008, which resulted in high university tuition fees and cuts in youth budgets. Examples are the Make Poverty History campaign in 2005 and the increases in university tuition fees in 2010 (Sloam, 2012, p. 674). In 2015, thousands of students gathered in central London, calling for free education (Coughlan, 2015). In 2011, there was adoption and solidarity in Britain with the US 'Occupy Wall Street' movement which opposed neoliberalism and consumerism. Young people took part in Occupy protests which opposed austerity, inequalities between the poor and the rich and the financial unrest which was affecting the country. In Britain, protests took place in places such as London, Wigan, Bath, Edinburgh and Glasgow (Kelsey-Fry, 2016; Smith, Gavin and Sharp, 2015).

The pressure of such protests gives a voice to young people who feel that they are being marginalized in the political process. Protests can succeed if they represent a larger group, especially with media coverage. More recently, young people and students have been active about global warming through the Extinction Rebellion movement in 2018 and opposing

former US President Donald Trump's visit to London (Pickard, 2019b). The climate change protests encourage young people to express discontent, show their influence over the future, and help them to be heard and seen (O'Brien, Selboe and Hayward, 2018). The landscape of protesting without students' activism is difficult to imagine. Students have contributed to many contemporary movements such as Occupy Wall Street, the Free Speech movement, the DREAMer movement, anti-apartheid divestment campus campaigns, and BlackLivesMatter which mobilises many young people on campuses (Earl, Maher and Elliott, 2017).

Sloam (2013, p. 837) stated that it is hardly surprising that there is a rise in protest politics. Recent austerity measures have created chaos and have imposed cutbacks on youth services, worsened child poverty, increased levels of unemployment and raised university tuition fees. One of the democratic challenges is how to represent young people's views and these considerations are endorsed by mass news media which spotlight the negative representation of young people in politics, regardless of the political activities in which they take part (Pickard, 2019a, p. 3).

Petitions have been considered a form of non-electoral political participation which addresses issues associated with public policy. Supporters of online petitions believe that they capture the public sentiment and increase their participation in the political sphere (Panagiotopoulos et al., 2011). Although people who sign petitions do not come together for a physical presence, they provide a channel to present their suggestions directly to Parliament. I argue that petitions, like protesting, are powerful for online activism. The level of engagement on social media can mobilise people to sign petitions and encourage them to remain engaged in this process for longer (Asher, Bandeira and Spaiser, 2017). Signing petitions is low-cost and it has gained popularity in the past decade because of the widespread use of the internet and social media. Berg (2017) argued that the success of online petitions depends much on social media coverage. In Britain, NGOs such as Avaaz and 38 Degrees are examples of electronic, solid petition platforms. According to Yasseri, Hale and Margetts (2013), online petitions have a strong and successful mobilisation, particularly on Facebook and Twitter. Online petitions or e-petitions enable young people to state their goals and achieve support through the media. They have to have a response from Parliament if a petition gets 100,000 signatures (Clark, Lomax and Morris, 2017, p. 1).

Kalogeraki (2021) found that the differences in socio-economic conditions among young people are more evident for non-electoral political participation. For instance, the economic

crisis makes young people claim their rights through non-formal political acts. In another context, some studies have shown that non-electoral participation is dominant among British students in full-time education. In contrast, Amnå and Ekman (2014) suggested that highly informed young people do not participate in politics. This suggests that socio-economic status drives non-electoral participation. A detailed explanation and discussion of the factors behind both electoral and non-electoral participation will be provided in the following sections.

Electoral and non-electoral political participation is further compounded by the fact that some young people's political participation involves just an interest in politics. Some studies have shown that young people are interested in political issues. A national survey by Henn and Weinsten (2006) found that half of the young people they surveyed were interested in political issues and public services. The findings showed that young people were interested in health, education, wars, militarism, solidarity with poor countries, animal rights, the environment, transport, economics, European matters, and law. Haste and Hogan (2006) surveyed 1136 young people (see Table 2) and found that the participants showed a significant interest in responding to the question of how crucial participation in activities reflects good citizenship. The majority were aware of what a good citizen is. The participants agreed on the importance of electoral and non-electoral forms of participation and were willing to learn about political issues. This suggests that young people recognize and value core aspects of citizenship. More information about the attributes of what makes a good citizen is shown in Table 2. White, Bruce and Ritchie (2000) found that two-fifths of their sample had no interest in politics. The rest of the sample reported interest in political issues and were concerned with the government and its political history and processes. Again, it is necessary to consider the realities of those young people who are not interested in politics and what drives their political interest.

Studies of young people's interest in these activities have provided insights into the efficacy of post-materialist values (Henn, Oldfield and Hart, 2018; Sloam, 2013; 2007). Post-materialist values, characterized by economic stability, higher educational attainment, freedom of expression, tolerance and concerns for the environment, racism and women's rights, have changed young people's political priorities. These values have replaced materialist values (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005). With post-materialist values, neoliberalism's negative portrayal of democracy and politicians pushes young people away from politics. The neoliberal critique perceives politicians as selfish and untrustworthy and people feel unable to influence decisions within the environment. However, it empowers them into political consumerism, through

which they practice citizenship. This includes boycotting or purchasing products to protect the environment or politically objecting to the market practices (Kyroglou and Henn, 2020).

Table 2. Normative action: attributes of a good citizen

How important is each of the following in being a good citizen?	*important or very important*
Obeying the law	90%
Participating in activities to protect the environment	73%
Voting in elections	69%
Taking part in activities promoting human rights	68%
Talking with your family and friends about political issues	55%
Following political issues in the newspapers or on radio or television	55%
Participation in a peaceful protest against a law you believe unjust	48%
Knowing about the country's history	45%
Joining a political party	21%

Source: Haste and Hogan (2006)

The literature indicates a strong association between social media and political participation. Stanley (2017) found that many young people consider social media a primary news source and Swart's (2021) young interviewees showed that they no longer used television, radio or newspapers to stay up-to-date but depended heavily on social media for their news repertoires. Maher and Earl (2019) similarly found that high school and university students' use of digital media and social networks had become a part of traditional social networks for activism, such as family members, friends and educational institutions. Most of the participants reported that they responded to direct invitations to sign petitions or attend political events from other online users. In this context, social media influence offline participation, filter political activity and show students that their friends and family members care about the same issues. Zhu, Chan and Chou's (2019, pp. 115-16) findings showed that social media improve online expression and that those young people actively expressing political opinions are more likely to participate in politics. When they become political participants, young people help to sustain democracy.

Similarly, earlier research by Yamamoto, Kushin and Dalisay (2015) showed that young people who express a political opinion online are more likely to participate in offline politics.

Specifically, online platforms mobilise those who write blog posts and share stories on their mobile applications. These young people tend to pay close attention to political information. This implies that social media function better when young people actively engage in online expression. Furthermore, Hassan et al. (2016) found that undergraduate students used social media to post and reply to political issues and communicate on political leaders' posts. Facebook group membership, for example, predicts a positive relationship with political participation (Yang and DeHart, 2016).

People use social media to adjust their attitudes towards political leaders. They can respond to government actions by agreeing to or opposing the ruling party (Zagidullin, Aziz and Kozhakhmet, 2021). Blog use leads to exposure to open-minded perspectives, increasing online political participation levels (Kim and Chen, 2016). Empirical findings from Alargan's (2020) study supported social media's role in political efficacy. In light of the findings that indicate a positive relationship between social media and political participation, some studies found that these findings are more applicable to those who are already interested in politics and discussants of politics than non-discussants (Yang and DeHart, 2016). Stanley (2017) suggested that those who use social media for political purposes are more likely to be politically engaged. Yang and Dehart (2016) found that online political participation varied by income, gender, age and ethnicity across different social networking sites. Female young people with higher incomes are more likely to use Facebook than their peers.

Regarding Twitter, ethnic minority females with lower income are more likely to use Twitter. Moreover, males reported that they discussed political topics on Facebook more than females and had higher political efficacy than females. Mahmood and Bhutta (2018) found that male students showed a higher level of online political participation than female students. In other studies, social media have been found to benefit ethnic minorities more than white people. Racial ethnicities use social media for news consumption and are more likely to participate in online political activities than white people (Wang, 2022).

Mahmood and Bhutta (2018) found that education is necessary for online political participation. Students enrolled at the postgraduate level were more likely to participate online than undergraduate students. This implies that we cannot generalise the findings to those who read or write. Pejic-Bach, Zoroja and Curko (2018) found that young individuals with less education tended to have a lower level of information. They mostly did not use the internet to participate in politics, such as by voting. They found that this is more visible in less-developed

countries. It would be interesting to survey and interview non-students and compare their online political participation with that of students.

Despite some variation between young people, the use of social networking sites has increased online political participation. Users can create political content, encourage other users to engage with political issues, and connect with officials (Wang, 2022). The strong presence of social media creates forms of DIO and lifestyle politics. In *Politics, Protest and Young People* (2019a), Sarah Pickard referred to new and creative methods of political participation as DIO political participation. In their everyday lives, young people are doing and living politics through campaigning against violent crimes, costly feminine hygiene products and plastic pollution. They are supporting environment-friendly lifestyle choices such as recycling and avoiding plastic. Digital technologies and social media have facilitated this activism. Pickard's (2019b, p. 6) interviewees reported that they watched documentaries about melting ice caps and the danger of the rising sea level, which empowered them with information, content, interest, communication and mobilisation. Pickard (2019a, p. 27) suggested that these reflexive acts demonstrate that young people are not apathetic; they are engaged in politics on their own terms and values. She argued that young people should be considered "full citizens capable of reasoned thinking with agency".

Like DIO politics, social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and TikTok give rise to lifestyle politics. This means that young people today are making choices about consumption in their everyday lives. Lifestyle politics refers to people acting and changing their lifestyles to address societal problems. For lifestyle politics, addressing environmental issues by boycotting, seeking alternative forms of transportation and reducing energy use has driven this participation. The effect of non-electoral participation is more apparent with these activities (De Moor and Verhaegen, 2020). De Moor and Verhaegen (2020) found that the more people participate in lifestyle politics, the more likely they are to participate later in electoral and non-electoral participation. Giugni and Grasso (2021) found that the rise in lifestyle politics through social networking sites enables young people to build a sense of community.

The discussion of DIO and lifestyle politics suggests that young people have found new ways to participate in politics, but this does not suggest that all young people have similar interests or motivations for engaging in these types of participation. For example, Prendergast et al. (2021) found that young people who care about nature and the environment are more likely to

engage in environmental protests. Their findings also suggest that the local contexts in which young people live, their membership of an organisation and higher scores for civic skills were essential for joining a climate protest. These young people tend to live in cities without political protest barriers. Local contexts shape young people's sense of agency and play a role in their perceptions of the efficacy of the environment. Prendergast et al. (2021) also found that young people who live in harmony with the environment are more likely to protest than their peers. These findings do not necessarily challenge the argument that young people are not apathetic. They tell us that some young people can participate in politics using new or alternative ways of participation.

Häkli and Kallio (2018) suggested that examining the connections between different political actors and the potential to engage in political activities help us to understand children's and young people's political agency. The variety of ways of political forms give young people more opportunities to engage in politics (Hakli and Kallio, 2018). In brief, political agency is defined as "the opportunity of each citizen to experience power and participation in the decision making within a political community" (Fudge and Leith, 2021, p. 1039). Alemanno (2017) reported that social networking sites, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and TikTok, provide young users with agency. For example, Baumer, Sun and Schadler (2018) found that using Facebook helped users to connect with social groups and enhanced their perceptions of initiating action such as fulfilling professional obligations such as connecting to colelagues. They found that their participants regained a sense of agency by knowing what is happening in their social world and being aware of other social connection activities. Regarding political participation, social networking sites allow young people to campaign for change, have more control over the shape of their future (Goudie, 2018) and challenge politics (Kaun, Kyriakidou and Uldham, 2016). Social networking sites, however, do not always enhance a sense of agency. Some participants in Baumer, Sun and Schadler's study (2018) stayed off Facebook in order to have more agency, as leaving the site gave them more self-awareness and opportunity for action.

One of the mechanisms by which to understand young people's agency is to approach their acts beyond the formal types of political participation (Suni and Mietola, 2021). Suni and Mietola's (2021) ethnographic fieldwork of a civics course designed by a multicultural NGO showed young people's enthusiasm, knowledgeable performance and skilfulness. The leaders of the course realised young people's agency and ability to discuss societal issues, and the

young people themselves realised the capabilities which they had. During the fieldwork, young people were active and innovative in the spaces which they created for political participation. They voiced their disappointment, looked for new opportunities to communicate their concerns, raised concerns about unemployment, asked for safety for non-binary people and ethnic minorities, and asked for women-only spaces to be made available, such as swimming pools and gyms. The willingness to make decisions concerning their future showed young people's political agency (*ibid.*, 2021).

Giugni and Grasso (2020) showed that young people are present as political actors but are rarely treated as such in the public domain. The depoliticisation of young people negatively affects their political agency and activism. It leaves little space for them to reshape their society and reform projects. Moreover, the assumption that young people lack political interest overlooks their skill, interest and enthusiasm. It excludes them from the political sphere and denies their political initiatives and resources (Suni and Mietola, 2021). Such findings should have significant implications for how young people can be included in policy-making decisions. I suggest that we need to look at young people in positive terms because, as Giungi and Grasso (2020, p. 17) suggested, young people should be referred to as a positive force for politics:

> … young people are to be the carriers of the society of the future, they need to have a proactive place in political and public discourse in political and public discourses and should not simply be referred to as passive objects of their capacity as political actors.

Having discussed the political activities in which young people participate, the conceptualisation of political participation in this study will turn to various political activities and broader types of political activism. Pickard (2019a, p. 61) argued for a widened and inclusive definition of political participation:

> Political participation encompasses both individual and collective shared values and actions (both online and offline) in public and in private which deliberately seek to maintain or bring about change to political, societal, or environmental contexts with a community, locally, nationally or globally.

In the previous sections, I have discussed many studies which have offered a range of different arguments about young people and their political participation. I side with the argument that

young people's political participation has changed rather than declined. Young people are not necessarily apathetic, but they are turned off by politicians and the political system. Social networking sites have facilitated young people's participation, especially in non-elective forms of political involvement such as e-petitions. In the next step of this review, I shall discuss the existing factors which explain young people's political participation, including socio-demographic characteristics.

2.3. Young People and Politics: an Exploration of the Variation in Political Participation

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, previous studies give a strong sense of generalisation about young people's relationship with politics in contemporary Britain. Some studies have suggested that young people are disengaged from electoral participation, such as voting, whereas others have suggested that young people have shifted toward non-electoral forms such as signing petitions and protesting. The current study explores different forms of participation but the most significant contribution of this thesis is to explain the variation in participation among young people. Put differently, young people are not an homogeneous group but engage in politics differently. In this respect, I agree with Sarah Pickard and others who have argued that young people have a variety of experiences with political participation. Pickard (2019, p. 397) wrote that:

> Political participation is not black or white. Some young people take part in non-electoral forms of political participation but are not electors, others participate in non-electoral forms of political participation and elections. The two forms of political participation are not mutually exclusive: a young person can vote, volunteer and be a vegan.

In this section, I discuss the factors claimed in the literature to be valid reasons why young people vary in their political participation. The review of the main literature in this field shows that key components underpinning this variation are socio-demographic factors such as location, education, gender and ethnicity. Although they can help researchers to examine participation, these factors do not determine how young people participate in politics. I suggest that social capital is the most crucial factor which creates that variation in political participation. Social capital is broadly about social relationships, access to resources, collective

actions and shared social norms such as trust. Social capital is believed to bring people together and contribute to their engagement in politics. Traditionally, the study of social capital has been focused intensely on older generations, which leaves a gap in our understanding of social capital and how it influences young people to participate politically. The first intention in this section is to summarise the literature on the understanding of young people's political participation, with some focus on socio-demographic characteristics. After that, I shall discuss social capital as a potential factor which affects that variation.

2.4. The Impact of Socio-demographic Characteristics on Young People's Political Participation

In this section, I shall discuss previous studies which have reviewed variations in young people's political participation. Based on the findings from the literature review, I suggest that young people's political participation is changing rather than declining. However, the literature reviewed here is about how young people vary in their participation. Previous studies have collected, evaluated and analysed data on young people's variation in political participation by location, education, gender and ethnicity, which are considered socio-demographic characteristics. By variation, I mean that young people are not equal in their participation. Variation means that some young people vote, others do not. It may also mean that some young people join political parties, others do not. It may mean that some young people engage in non-electoral participation, but others do not.

In the following sections, I shall summarise the contribution of these four socio-demographic characteristics to young people's variation in political participation. Although socio-demographic differences contribute to understanding that variation, there is a clear need to explore the subject from a different direction, with a focus on social capital. Social capital is a significant source for people to expand their access to political information and ideas, increasing their political participation. In this study, social capital is regarded as the accurate encapsulation of young people's variation in political participation. This is not to say that I deny the importance of socio-demographic characteristics, but I want to enrich the understanding of young people's political participation by using social capital as an approach.

Before discussing social capital theory, I shall first discuss the role of socio-demographic factors in young people's political participation. The discussions in the literature reveal some

contradictory and inconclusive results about the impact of socio-demographic factors on young people's political participation. For instance, I found that young people's participation varies according to their geographical location. Deprived areas can show high rates of political participation. Regarding the roles of gender and ethnicity, existing studies could not generalise their impact on political participation. Young people's education does not determine their participation levels: if it did, young people's political participation would have risen continuously as more and more young people attend university.

First, geographic contexts have been found to influence political participation. Norris (2011) reported that urbanisation characterized by economic prosperity, better schools and a high level of education plays a vital role in increasing political participation. People in prosperous areas tend to have confidence, skills and competence. In contrast, the disparity in income and inequality in education, healthcare, housing and nutrition lead to political disaffection. Grasso and Giungi (2022, p. 30) studied the level of participation in demonstrations across nine countries and found that young people from well-off class backgrounds were more engaged in this political activity than those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. Young people from professional/managerial backgrounds were more likely to think that politicians care about what people like them think and that people like them have a say about what the government does (*ibid.*, p. 31). Bentley et al. (1999, p. 14) found that voter turnout in thirteen deprived areas of the UK was less than 10%.

Lowndes, Pratchett and Stoker (2006), however, reported contradictory results. Hull, a city which is one of the deprived areas in Britain, had the lowest level of participation. In contrast, Sutton (a suburb of London) ranked first despite the fact it is a relatively prosperous area (31.7%). This included voting, boycotting products, and contacting politicians. Middlesbrough, an urban town and the poorest area included in the study, shared approximately the same level of participation as wealthy rural areas such as East Hampshire and the Vale of the White Horse. Contacting public officials also varied across these areas. Despite being more deprived areas, Hull and Middlesbrough had the most vital trends in political participation (*ibid*., pp. 547-48).

Any discussion of socio-demographic factors in this context includes gender and ethnicity differences. In terms of gender, studies have shown that voter turnout in recent years is becoming equal as men and women are experiencing equal education and greater workforce involvement. For non-electoral participation, Kittilson (2016) argued that it is impossible to

make sweeping generalisations as the gender differences would depend on different forms of protest, for example. Other studies have found that men are more interested in politics, more knowledgeable and have more perceived efficacy than women (Norris, 2002), but that this does not translate into lower levels of turnout among women. Women tend to be more interested in and engaged in feminism (Briggs, 2008). Feminism in the modern world is related to women's rights and equality, and it is seen as an attitude towards the perception of women (Popov, 2018).

Some studies have found that men and women vary in their political interest and participation. In one study, women who believed in traditional family structures were found to have more knowledge about family and political issues around these structures. It stands to reason that religiously conservative women might promote messages about these structures at church and with other women who share their concerns (Friesen, 2013). Coffé (2009) found that women were more interested in local politics whereas men were more interested in national and international politics. Further analysis by Coffé suggests that we need to clarify the concept of politics. Existing studies usually conclude that men are more interested in politics because they primarily examine political interest at national levels. Gittell, Ortega-Bustamante and Steffy (2000) found that women faced some barriers which affected their accomplishments, including racism and gender and class discrimination. This encouraged women to call for gender equality through the Women's March in 2017, and revelations of sexual abuse and violence led to women joining on social media by using the MeToo hashtag to achieve a wider audience (*ibid*.).

More importantly, gender differences have been found to have no significant difference in how people participate in politics, but that participation differences stem from a variety of factors (Verba et al., 1995, p. 38). Following the complex patterns found in gender differences, I believe that generalizing findings in this way is unreliable. Instead, the accurate answer, I suggest, would depend on the type of political activity, the time horizons and the representative sample of a specific gender. Intersectional differences between women (such as whether they have children, whether they work and their age) mean that we cannot generalise by gender.

Another set of explanations for the variation in participation rests upon ethnicity. Uberoi and Johnston (2021) stated that ethnic minorities are less likely to register to vote and to receive votes. Crowley (2001) argued that immigrants are expected to have specific interests and other access to the political process because they lack some political rights, such as voting. Subsequent generations would retain some of that and consequently are expected to be more interested in their homeland politics than their parents are. To secure equal rights, minorities

are expected to make their voice heard by participating in politics. However, for them to act in every political activity might be difficult if they lack the right to vote. It should be noted that these findings applied to those without British citizenship. Another reason why ethnic minorities do not participate in politics might be discrimination (Sandovici and Listhaug, 2010, p. 112). Jackman and Miller (1998, p. 53) suggested that people from distinct cultural groups handle political information differently, even if they experience the same institutional challenges and motivations. O'Toole (2014) found that ethnic minorities might take less interest in local politics because of their experience with racism and being externally categorized concerning their religion. The war in Iraq, the events of 9/11 and the London bombings in 2005 increased a sense of alienation from British politics among ethnic minority groups, possibly pulling young people to shift their interest towards homeland politics or international politics.

In contrast, Sobolewska and Ford (2020) found that political disengagement was more pronounced among white young people. Martin and Mellon (2020) suggested that ethnic minorities develop more attachments to political parties than white people. Data on the political participation of ethnic groups are challenging to compare as minorities come from different geographical contexts and have different ideological viewpoints about politics. Additionally, reliable survey data is difficult to collect on ethnic minorities because of small sample sizes, which means that inferences to the wider population cannot be made. Considering the heterogeneity of these groups, we should not expect all young people to engage in all types of political participation.

Education or 'the civic education theory' as recognized in academic thinking, has been considered an enduring variable in explaining variation in political participation. Some scholars have suggested that those who are more educated are most likely to engage in politics (Sloam et al., 2021; Giungi and Grasso, 2020; Kitanova, 2020; Pontes, Henn and Griffiths, 2019; Sloam, 2014; Henn and Foard, 2014; Verba et al., 1993). In the historical context, education improves people's interest in politics, increases their political knowledge and encourages them to participate in political activities. Verba et al. (1993, pp. 453) stated that

> Education functions in a more complicated way as a political resource: formal education itself fosters organizational and communication skills that are germane to political activity and imparts attitudes such as a sense of civic duty or political efficacy that are associated with political involvement. In addition, those with high levels of education are in a position to acquire further political resources: they are much more likely

to have the kinds of jobs that pay high salaries and, as we shall see, to have opportunities in several arenas to develop skills that are relevant to politics.

Previous studies have viewed education as a factor which affects political participation both directly and indirectly. It could be suggested that it has been treated as an asset which enhances participation: Schlozman (2002, p. 442) stated that "Not only does education have a direct impact on political activity, but more importantly, education has indirect effects through its consequences for the acquisition of nearly every other participatory factor".

Abrahams and Brooks (2019) studied HE students from England and Ireland and found that the students believed that they played an essential role politically. They saw themselves as educated, informed, critical political actors who are the future. Education provided them with resources and liberal beliefs which enabled them to challenge the establishment. Some of the students reported that they represented a threat to the government as an educated group. They wanted to be listened to because they had valid contributions to make to their community. The findings from that study showed how attending university and being exposed to diverse perspectives on the world increases students' political awareness. The English and Irish students described how protests related to gay marriage, higher tuition fees and women's rights to abortion had brought about change.

According to this argument, educational institutions create platforms where young people are introduced to political affairs and activities such as voting. Muddiman's (2020) interviews revealed that a sociology course had enhanced students' understanding of gender politics, made them feel empowered and helped them to recognise discrimination. The sociology students also made sense of moral responsibility and inequalities, which could enhance their citizenship and civic mindedness. Indeed, the course was found to have developed young people's political knowledge and citizenry skills, preparing them for engagement in democracy (Sloam, 2014). For example, a social sciences course can develop fundamental civic skills, increase interest in politics, motivate voting, encourage political attentiveness and improve political sophistication (Benoit, Munger and Spirling, 2019; Hillygus, 2005; Luskin, 1990).

Consequently, the more time young people spend in education, the more they find ways to express their attitudes towards politics and the more they have a higher sense of political efficacy (Moran, 2015; Bynner and Ashford, 1994; Marsh, 1990). The better educated hold positive political attitudes more than the lower educated (Sobolewska and Ford, 2020): 77% of

university-educated 18-34-year-olds were on the electoral register in 2015 (Electoral Commission, 2016). Davis (2021) found that education increases voter turnout by 10%. Evidence from the UK suggests that young people who study GCSEs are more likely to vote in a general elections than those who do not (Pontes, Henn and Griffiths, 2019). After analysing survey data from 28 European countries, Kitanova (2020) found that young people who left education at 19 or older were twice as likely to participate in electoral politics than those who left education at 18 or younger. The results showed that respondents who left school at 19 or above were 45% more likely to be a member of a political organisation than those who left education at 18 or younger.

The introduction of Citizenship education to English secondary schools in 2002 has suggested that those who have studied such courses have shown higher levels of civic knowledge (Henn, Weinsten and Hodgkinson, 2007). Formal education is designed to create and develop young people's political agency (Lloyd, 2018), so studies have called for schools to include political courses (Bergamini, 2014). This could include, for example, teaching students about the role of the government, laws, democracy in neighbouring countries, and ways in which they can participate in politics. James Sloam's (2020, p. 6) interviews with young Londoners showed that they wanted to receive knowledge about the impact of pollution, the environment and recycling. Taken together, this suggests that teaching politics at a younger age is more likely to help students to understand the various views around the concept of politics and the value of political parties, and to select the politicians who will bring potential changes.

Informed citizens are the pillar of democracy (Memoli, 2011). As Robert Putnam (1995, p. 35) put it: "if you don't know the rules of the game and the players and don't care about the outcome, you're unlikely to try playing yourself". Sloam (2020, p. 6) described how a young female participant felt that she lacked the knowledge and skills to participate in politics: "… all the politics I know is self-taught … I hated politics … it scared me … didn't relate to the lingo then … if you really want people to vote and be part of the political system, you have to explain it to them …". Therefore a lack of political knowledge results in political apathy, lack of trust and a low level of political participation (Henn and Oldfield, 2016; Cammaerts et al., 2014; Sloam, 2012; Tonge and Mycock, 2010; Hay and Stoker, 2009; Fahmy, 2006). This perception of political apathy and lack of trust in politicians could go back to the high centralisation of politicians and political parties in countries such as the UK (Sloam, 2018, p. 4021). Television shows and political humourists often describe politicians as self-interested,

incompetent and corrupt (Baumgartner, 2013, p. 25). This negative evaluation "places the political class at the bottom of the professions in the public regard" (Bond, 2010, p. 62).

Better-educated individuals have more political interest and knowledge and are more likely to support political freedoms. One year in education has been said to raise individuals' political interest and knowledge by 6.7% and 8.5% respectively (Le and Nguyen, 2021, p.8) and one more year increases the possibility of organising a public meeting and a protest against the government. However, the current study suggests that the better educated do not vote more or adopt specific left/right political positions. This might contradict studies which suggest that students hold the greatest support for the Labour Party (Hillman, 2020). Data from the UK suggest that highly educated young people tend to be privileged in terms of access to skills and use of the internet. Educated internet users are more likely to use and benefit from several applications, but they also experience harm and risk using it (Blank and Lutz, 2018).

Some studies have suggested that an open classroom climate which addresses social and political issues might increase turnout in elections (Weinberg, 2022). Ferreira and Menezes (2021) showed how political education contributes to movements led by young people, such as the March of Our Lives, the Fridays For Future and the Hong Kong democracy movement. Tzankova, Albanesi and Cicognani (2021) found that school influences students' civic participation. Students' participation in groups, clubs or councils teaches them the value of debates and how to deal with opposing ideas. In this context, school plays a nurturing platform in improving the political education of students. Ferreira and Menezes (2021) said that this recognition should encourage schools to support young people's political participation.

Today's young people are the first generation to feel the adverse effects of climate change (Peterman, 2017). Millions of students have taken part in the SchoolStrike4Climate around the world. Aware of television coverage, students have used visual communication such as placards to react to climate change. Placards show that visual literacy is significant in climate change pedagogy as they carry the beliefs and emotions of students. Teaching methods such as drawing, painting, typography and humour could build communication skills which can move viewers' emotions about the importance of addressing climate change (Catanzaro and Collin, 2021). Students' participation in climate change campaigns should reinforce the role of education. Anderson (2012) suggested that climate change education must include relevant environmental and climate issues, and that the educational system should be sustainable, resilient and green.

Keating and Janmatt (2016) examined the impact of school activities on youth political participation. They found that pupils in Year 11 who had taken part in school-based activities such as mock elections and debating clubs were more likely to participate in electoral and expressive activities. The outcomes also indicate that school-based activities foster a wide range of activities at once. A noteworthy finding from that study is that school-based activities were more important for participation than formal citizenship education. The latter has a limited effect on voting, and it does not affect expressive participation.

The review of the relevant literature suggested that education plays a fundamental role in shaping young people's exposure to political activity. However, suggesting that education is a direct and fundamental cause of political participation is myopic. First, politics is a complex subject (Hahn, 1998). That said, the language which political leaders use in their speeches is not something that resonates with young people. Grimm and Pilkington (2015, p. 214) went further, claiming that the language of politics is itself a means of marginalisation. Second, although young people have a long experience of mandatory education and there has been a rapid expansion of higher education, their voting rates have always been lower than those of older people. Iro (2017) suggested that this results from a low political education received through the curriculum. Third, previous studies have not tested directly the mechanisms through which education impacts political participation (Persson, 2013).

A significant example of this is the National Citizenship Education for secondary schools. The policy goals were ambitious in that they aimed at widening political culture; however, the implementation and implications for young people were ambiguous. Students are assigned specific pre-designed participation patterns such as inequality and power instead of allowing them to define and express their participation (Hedtke and Zimenkova, 2013, pp. 3-7). Interestingly, Pontes, Henn and Griffiths's (2019) results suggested that students who took the GCSE CS were less confident in their knowledge of political parties, especially in deciding how to vote, than those who did not take it. They also expressed more negative opinions about the government than their peers who did not take the course. In particular, they agreed that political parties do not keep their promises and that politicians are only interested in their votes rather than in responding to their interests afterwards. These findings run counter to previous studies which have suggested that citizenship education plays a positive role in developing young people's civic knowledge.

A recent study has shown that civic education in English schools remains peripheral. Weinberg (2022) surveyed 350 secondary school students and found that only 24% of them reported that they took lessons in politics or citizenship. Participatory activities in schools were found to be limited, with just 18% of students who voted at school elections, 71% had never had political contact with a political leader, and 96% had never visited a political institution. Surprisingly, Henn, Weinsten and Hodgkinson (2007, p. 473) found that those without educational or work qualifications were more likely to feel they could influence the decision-making process and were less hostile to political leaders than those in possession of education and work-related qualifications. Similarly, Grasso et al. (2019) found that those with lower levels of education were more likely to protest and vote than resource-rich individuals.

Ehsan (2018) found that education does not strongly correlate with non-electoral types of political activity. The emerging forms of participation are less time-consuming and do not require the distinctive qualities of education (Stolle and Hooghe, 2005, pp. 128-29). For example, although demonstrations and boycotts appealed to the highly educated in the 1970s, these activities have become normalized to a large segment of the population today (Norris, Walgrave and Van Aelst, 2005). These paradoxical explanations make it challenging to accept education as a direct and the only source of young people's variation in political participation. I argue that education can still drive political participation, but to a smaller extent than is often assumed in the literature. There is still a need for re-enriching the understanding of the factors which affect young people's variation in political participation.

This argument then leads to a second point. How these socio-demographic factors impact participation partly depends on how young people perceive, react to and use them. For example, young people from deprived areas might decide to participate in politics even if their surrounding environment does not necessarily encourage them to do so. Alternatively, young people with many educational qualifications might decide not to participate in politics, even though there is evidence to show that education usually leads to greater participation. To make sense of these examples, researchers need a better understanding of these young people as human beings, their beliefs, their knowledge and their skills. Young people are not determined by their circumstances or their environment. They can sometimes do things which these existing factors cannot easily explain or predict. One factor which might shed light on this unexpected behaviour is social capital – understood as resources which human beings acquire and develop through being social in several different relationships and networks. Social capital

might help us to understand why young people from deprived areas decide to participate in politics. Social capital (or the lack of it) might help us to make sense of examples in which young people with many educational qualifications do not participate in politics. This is why I am going to use the social capital theory to approach this issue. It might help to further understand variation in the way that young people participate in politics. Social capital is not better or more important than other factors but it can help to provide a richer understanding of young people's political participation.

2.5. The Adoption of Social Capital Theory in Political Participation Research

The previous sections have provided evidence indicating that participation in electoral politics has decreased and that new forms of engagement have emerged. However, the main argument of this thesis lies in the fact that some young people are politically active and others are not. This division is considerably affected by socio-demographic characteristics. These factors help to account for differences in young people's participation, but they have some limitations. I therefore sought an alternative factor to explain the complex processes of young people's variation in political participation more accurately. In this thesis, I argue that social capital which shapes people's social interaction plays a vital role in that variation. In the following sections, I shall introduce social capital as a factor that enriches the understanding of young people's political participation. Although many studies have been conducted about social capital and political participation, there is a lack of studies focused on young people, especially HE students.

This study focused on the influence of social capital on the political participation of young people in Britain. A Google-scholar search of articles under the term 'social capital' reveals a large amount of research. Robert Putnam is one of the leading authors on political theory and he offered an influential interpretation of the social capital theory in American democracy. In 1995, Putnam published an article entitled 'Bowling Alone', which was expanded in 2000 into a book entitled *Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital*. In this book, he discussed ways in which Americans have disengaged from politics and he explained this by a decline in social capital. According to Putnam, social capital refers to "features of social organizations, such as networks, norms and trust that facilitate action and cooperation for mutual benefit" (Putnam, 1993, p. 35). For him, the more social people are, the more likely they will be to engage in politics.

As discussed above, political participation is not always explained by geographical contexts, gender, ethnicity or education. Participation is related to how social somebody is and the skills and knowledge which they develop through being sociable. Research suggests that democracy cannot be healthy without social capital's resources (Sander and Putnam, 2010, p. 9). The interest in social capital has continued to grow as a variable to enhance political participation. In other words, empirical evidence suggests that an increase in community civic engagement and social norms results in greater engagement in politics and trust in the electoral process (Fiorino, Galli and Pontarollo, 2021; Shahin, 2016; Atkinson and Fowler, 2014; Campbell, 2013; MacKay, 2011; Teney and Hanquinet, 2012; Gil de Zúñiga, Jung and Valezuela, 2012; Henn et al., 2007; Paxton, 2002; van der Kroon, 2002; Newton, 2001; Putnam, 2000; Lake and Huckfeldt, 1998). Coleman (1988) stated that social capital represents a unique resource of shared knowledge, skills acquisition and civic engagement, and that information is the basis for political participation. For example, if someone is interested in current developments and has friends who are interested and informed, s/he could acquire that political information without reading or watching the news. Sharing political information develops an interest in political affairs and increases participation (Van der Kroon, 2002; Lake and Huckfeldt, 1998). Group ties within gender identities or shared women's interests can create mobilisation and encourage political engagement (Kittilson, 2016).

Similarly, the findings of a study with young feminist activists suggested that women gain confidence, political awareness and campaigning skills through social movements and tend to have higher political efficacy. Political efficacy is the "feeling that political and social change is possible and that the individual citizen can play a part in bringing about this change" (Campbell, Gurin and Miller, 1954, p. 187). Political efficacy improves the understanding of politics (MacKay, 2011, p. 158).

A growing trend shown in the literature is the use of social network sites. Studies by Ipsos MORI, King's College London and the Media Standards Trust (2015) showed that 60% of young people believe that social network sites break down the barriers between them and politicians, and that 88% reported participating in political activities through these networks (Ipsos MORI, 2015). Young people use social networks to raise awareness and put pressure on political leaders (Gerodimos, 2008, pp. 968-69). The British government has also set up youth political institutions to support participation around Britain, including the UK Youth Parliament, the Northern Ireland Youth Forums, Funky Dragon in Wales and the Scottish

Youth Parliament. In addition, the Hansard Society and the Electoral Commission have set up web spaces such as HeadsUp and DoPolitics to link young people to the parliament (*ibid*).

Social capital was adopted in the current study because of its validity in studies in other countries such as the US (Wright and Zhu, 2021; Gil de Zuniga, Jung and Valenzuela, 2012; Lake and Huckfeldt, 1998, Putnam, 2000; 1995; 1993); Sweden (Nygård et al., 2015; Teorell, 2003); Iran (Gerami, Rasekh and Karimi, 2020; Sheikh Mohammadi, 2017; Rahimzadeh Ghazani, 2016; Abdollahian and Kermani, 2015) and Switzerland (Lorenzini and Giugni, 2010). It should be noted that Putnam's study is now quite dated and that a more up-to-date understanding of HE students' political participation is needed.

Several scholars have tested the impact of social capital on political participation in European countries (Janmaat and Hoskins, 2022; Holecz, Fernández and Giugni's, 2022; Power, 2020; Fox et al., 2019; Muddiman et al., 2019; Henn, Weinsten and Hodgkinson, 2007; Lowndes, 2004). Henn, Weinsten and Hodgkinson (2007, pp. 472-75) found that young people with low levels of social capital had less faith in how democracy works than those with higher levels; those with high social trust were nearly one and a half times more likely to be interested in politics than those who did not trust others. Similarly, those who volunteered or had membership of associations were nearly three times more engaged in politics than those who did not, but admitted that these findings were still questionable as they were statistically insignificant. Recent studies have examined the family as a key socializing agent which influences political participation (Janmaat and Hoskins, 2022; Holecz, Fernández and Giugni, 2022; Fox et al., 2019; Muddiman et al., 2019; Power et al., 2018; Jennings, Stokerb and Bowers, 2009). Holecz, Fernández and Giugni's (2022) analysis of three social settings, schools, social clubs and community organisations, across nine European countries showed that active engagement in these settings increased young people's political repertoires. The same study found that young people who meet regularly are more likely to participate in a broader range of political activities.

Giugni and Grasso (2020) studied the relationship between associational involvement and political participation among migrants in four European cities and found that membership of voluntary associations furthered their group identity, provided them with civic skills and mobilised their political participation.

Indeed, these studies, which were predominately quantitative, opened up a path of analysis to study the impact of social capital on young people's political participation. Putnam (1993) used

survey data to examine social capital and political participation in his research comparing Italian cities. He measured indicators of civic engagement such as voting, membership of choral societies and football clubs and newspaper readership to compare its impact on the degree of governance between north and south Italy. In 1995, Putnam used findings from the General Social Survey to examine the levels of social capital in America. Early studies used surveys such as the European Social Survey, the British Household Panel Study and the General Social Survey. Later in Britain, the ONS started producing survey items about social capital measurements. These surveys focused on organisational memberships, social networks and support, reciprocity and trust, participation in civic institutions and activities, and perceptions of the local area (Yang, 2007). Many recent studies have used these measurements or have analysed similar features of them. Nevertheless, social surveys cannot enable us to connect social capital measures with young people's experiences, understandings and activities in the same way that qualitative research (face-to-face interviews) would do. Through qualitative research, we can explore the meanings behind wider trends, which we cannot do in quantitative analysis. A qualitative approach will help to establish connections between social capital measurements (Devine and Roberts, 2003), show its positive and negative effects, and understand HE students' views and perceptions about each measurement and how these measurements could generate their political participation.

2.6. Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have reviewed relevant studies which have contributed to understanding the variation in young people's levels of political participation. The review suggested that exploration of young people's political participation has been characterized by disengagement from electoral participation and a shift towards non-electoral forms such as signing petitions and protesting. I also discussed the forms of participation possible on social network sites. I argued that young people's political participation is changing rather than declining, but the most important argument that can be drawn from the review is that young people are a heterogeneous group. They do not similarly participate in politics, but they are different. In the literature, there is no cohesive body of work focused on HE students' variation in political participation. My contribution to the literature review was the exploration of the factors behind that variation. Previous studies have tended to see the variation as influenced by socio-demographic characteristics such as location, gender, ethnicity and education. Moreover, many of these

studies are predominantly quantitative. The chapter has offered explanations for these characteristics, but their impact has limitations. To bridge this gap, I introduced social capital theory to explain young people's variation in political engagement. Overall, therefore, research into young people's social capital is needed. The impact which social capital has on political participation has been discussed widely in other cultural contexts such as the US, whereas in Britain, there has been limited attention given to questions regarding how social capital is an influential variable in explaining political participation among HE students. The next chapter focuses on explaining the theory of social capital and reviews existing studies about its impact on political participation.

Chapter 3: Social Capital and Young People's Political Participation

3.1. Introduction

In Chapter 2, I surveyed the literature on young people's political participation in Britain. I began by discussing the debate in the literature about whether young people's political participation was declining or just changing. The literature predominantly shows that participation is changing rather than declining. This decline/change debate is not one which I wanted to focus on; I wanted to examine how young people vary in their participation. In Chapter 2, I discussed a second strand of literature on young people's political participation showing that it varies. I discussed several explanations for this variation, including socio-economic characteristics. This explanation seems to be of relevance as it has not been fully explained by previous studies on the subject. At the end of Chapter 2, I stated that social capital might help us to understand this variation.

This theory chapter presents social capital and investigates how previous theoretical works have linked it to political participation. I shall begin by discussing conceptual frameworks for social capital and scathing criticisms of the concept. This is followed by a brief outline of bonding and bridging social capital. After that, I shall consider what is known about young people's social capital in the British context. I shall provide an initial context to the underlying relationship by discussing four mechanisms of social capital: personal relationships, community networks, social networking sites and social trust. I shall point out that there is very little data about the social capital experienced by young people. More importantly, few studies have explored what resources are generated by social capital and how they affect young people's engagement in politics. I shall then seek to bridge this gap by carrying out a qualitative analysis of social capital among HE students and exploring the mechanisms through which social capital affects their political participation.

3.2. Social Capital Theory

This study focused on young people's social capital and how it affects their political participation. Adopting social capital theory in this study is supported by the view that young people's access to social relationships and connectedness enables them to engage differently in political activities. Social capital does not have one commonly agreed definition. The most

widely accepted definition in the political sciences originates from the American political theorist Robert Putnam, who described it as "features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitates coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (Putnam, 1995, p. 67). Putnam stated that social capital consists of networks (voluntary associations, civic institutions and relationships), a sense of belonging and solidarity with other community members, social trust, and positive attitudes toward the civic community. He described social capital as a prominent feature of the community rather than of individuals. Put differently, the benefits of social capital are collective as it consists of a population coming together to achieve a common good.

Second to Putnam, previous studies have used Pierre Bourdieu's approach to social capital. Bourdieu defined it as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 248). Unlike Putnam, Bourdieu was concerned with the individual rather than the community. For Bourdieu, the level of social capital which someone possesses depends on the size of the network and the volume of the connections which s/he has. For him, individuals are linked to other social connections which they can use for benefit and advancement. Whereas Putnam treated social capital as a public good, Bourdieu acknowledged that it is not available to all individuals. Those who invest in it are more likely to enjoy its virtue and benefits. He linked social capital to social stratification, including class, status and power. Bourdieu's conceptualisation of social capital is vital as it acknowledges that it might also reinforce inequality between individuals.

Bourdieu (1986) identified three forms of capital, economic, social and cultural capital, and suggested that possessing one form can lead to another, and that an individual must invest effort and strategies to obtain a position in social networks. For Bourdieu, the acquisition of social capital is not voluntary but is more in the hands of the powerful, thus it contributes to social hierarchy and social order (Ivana, 2017). A criticism of Bourdieu is that he did not consider the family structure, such as whether both parents are present or the number of siblings, nor did his approach include the networks accessible to members of a particular organisation, such as educational organisations (Rogošić and Baranović, 2016, p. 90). In addition, he focused on economic and cultural capital in attaining educational achievements, neglecting an individual's social capital (*ibid.*, p. 91).

One of the most influential writers to emphasize social capital theory was James Coleman (1988) who argued that social capital is a resource. According to Coleman, social capital represents "the set of resources that inhere in family relations and community social organizations and that are useful to the cognitive or social development of a child or young person" (Coleman, 1994, p. 300). For Coleman, social capital is possessed by the family, and this possession implies the quality of the child's development. Unlike Bourdieu, Coleman (1988) treated social capital as the community's property. He (1990) argued that the community generates resources such as information, norms, expectations and even relationships with authority. Whereas Putnam measured social capital by using membership of associations and choirs and many socialisation variables, Coleman (1988) used parent/teacher associations with students' school performance. Coleman (1988) found that parents' engagement in their children's studies at school leads to achievement in school and makes children believe that their parents care about their educational attainment. According to Rogošić and Baranović (2016), parents play a more important role in their children's educational achievement if they send them to study in public and private universities. That said, the economic and cultural background of parents is vital for their children's education. However, if students study free programmes, the possession of social capital will play a more significant role than family. Coleman's approach to differences within the family makes the conceptualisation of social capital simple and efficient, but he did not explain differences between individuals of different networks (*ibid.*, p. 93). Put simply, his quantitative approach did not analyse heterogenous groups with respect to their socio-economic status.

Fukuyama (2002, p. 26) said that "social capital is what permits individuals to band together to defend their interests and organize to support collective needs; authoritarian governance, on the other hand, thrives on social atomization". The social norms which form social capital can range from reciprocity between friends to norms which articulate doctrines such as Christianity. Fukuyama stated that the level of trust among family members is the strongest, followed by a small number of close friends. Fukuyama (2002; 1997) said that social capital creates social virtues such as meeting obligations, dependability, honesty and reciprocity, and truth-telling. According to Fukuyama (1997), these virtues or social norms are partible because they can be shared among a specific group but not with others in the same community. These norms, as Fukuayam (2000, p. 3) said, "must be instantiated in an actual human relationship …". According to this definition, trust and networks are actualized in dealing with other people, and they arise because of social capital and do not constitute social capital itself.

These are the most common definitions revolving around the concept of social capital. Different scholars define social capital in different ways, but this is not unusual as many terms are disputed in the study of politics. I assume that the theories of Putnam, Bourdieu, Coleman and Fukuyama have tautological aspects; they all agree that social relationships matter. Therefore, the main idea in the current study is that social capital contains value for HE students. I recognise social capital as those mechanisms of social life which enable HE students to act in a more effective way in terms of their participation in politics.

The explorations around social capital of these scholars have been used in many empirical studies, but I found that the keys aspects of Putnam's theory provide an in-depth theorisation between social capital and political participation, which is the focus of this study. I refer to Putnam's thesis on social capital because it is the most cited and has found a broader audience in social and political sciences at the beginning of this century. Not only in the number of citations, but his theory has academic significance because of the massive quantitative data he collected. Putnam was the first writer to popularise the theory in an advanced descriptive mechanism. I have adopted Putnam's theory more because he generated a potential relationship between social capital and political participation. Putnam believed in associational life and face-to-face interactions and that having the skills from these associations can bring people together to work on political projects. Moreover, he conceptualised social capital as a resource, which fulfils my aim of exploring the impact of social capital and its mechanisms. Putnam also made the distinction between bonding and bridging social capital. This distinction helped me to select the mechanisms of social capital and reduce the complexity of social capital processes. Putnam's idea that social capital is a public good fulfils the aim of my study. I have the justifiable view that, although I acknowledge that social capital can have negative consequences, I believe that it is a positive thing, and I expected it to have positive effects on political participation. This will be discussed in the next sections.

A considerable amount of the literature has discussed positive and negative social capital. Putnam (2000; 1995; 1993) originally proposed that social capital positively impacts political participation. Political scholars and academic researchers are increasingly aware that people's political behaviours are shaped and constrained by their community contexts and social networks. The publication of *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Putnam, 1993) made an essential contribution to the relationship between social capital and

politics. Putnam's research compared and evaluated the institutional performance of twenty Italian regions. In the north-central regions of Italy, he found an efficient governmental performance which he explained by the existence of higher stocks of social capital. In these regions, citizens participated in sports clubs, choral groups and mail-order book clubs.

In contrast, in the regions in the south of Italy, where the stocks of social capital are far lower, the institutional performance was inefficient and corrupt. That said, "what makes democracy work is the existence of social capital on which democracy can stand; likewise, democracy does not work properly in the absence of that capital" (Fabbrini, 2011, p. 394). In other words, the social performance among the members of a community and the level of trust affects how democracy functions (*ibid.*, p. 395). Similarly, Fukuyama (2002) argued that social capital strengthens the health of democracy, enabling countries to face development challenges and deal with conflicts and hostility. However, a singular focus on particular types of organisations such as NGOs alone will not produce democratisation (Paxton, 2002). Paxton (2002, p. 273) stated that donor policy should recognise that NGOs need an institutional environment in order to grow and expand. Donor policy should promote rights-based approaches such as assuring the rule of law, human rights and transparency in governmental processes. A detailed discussion of the impact of social capital on political participation will be provided in sections 3.4 and 3.5.

Baker and Dutton (2017, p. 23) stated that "social capital is positive if it helps people grow, thrive, and flourish in organizations and thereby achieve their goals in better ways" and that social capital leads to positive outcomes in work organisations such as high-quality connections and reciprocity. It is an inclusive property of a group of individuals. It constitutes a public good when all individuals have access to it (Aldridge, Halpern and Fitzpatrick, 2002). Therefore, having a higher level of social capital can lead to positive outcomes. Tuominen and Haanpaa (2022) stated that a person who has a higher level of social capital is one who has close connections with family, friends and acquaintances, who provides and receives help from others with ease and who considers others trustworthy. Social capital enables individuals to maintain social norms and makes them feel cared for, appreciated, valued and a member of a network (Villalonga-Olives and Kawachi, 2017). At the local level, Fukuyama (2002, p. 15) suggested that in an area where social capital is high, governments are stable and safe, people can walk safely down the street, volunteer, vote and care for other residents. In such environments, trust arises spontaneously.

Based on an analysis of 626 virtual community members, Hsu (2015) found that social interaction and trust increase knowledge sharing and create a positive reputation in the community. Virtual regular meetings help the members of the community to get to know each other, meet at events and raise subjects which stimulate conversations and discussions. Although informal organisations' benefits are small and limited, they cost less. One example is people exchanging information (Fafchamps, 2006). Regarding economic growth, social capital facilitates the functioning of markets. It facilitates the flow of information among buyers and sellers, reduces transaction costs, improves teamwork, enhances the relationship between employer and employee, and forms efficient and innovative firms. Previous studies have examined the impact of social capital on sustainable rural development. Sabet and Khaksar (2020) found that when villagers participated in voluntary rural development projects and trusted their outcomes, they were more likely to achieve sustainable rural development. Their findings showed that social capital in rural areas is a crucial factor in the participation of the local community. It empowers its members and mobilises them to meet their own needs.

Earlier studies have examined the effect of social capital on both physical and emotional health. Ziersch et al. (2005) found that measurements of social capital such as strong neighbourhood connections, higher levels of trust and safety inform people about pollution. Their analysis also suggested that home ownership, a long time of residence in the area, and time and money investments contribute to positive health outcomes. Rose (2000) found that those who have someone to rely on are better in terms of physical and emotional health. More recently, studies have given attention to the effect of social capital during the coronavirus pandemic, in particular linking social capital to a respect for COVID rules, including social distancing. Borgonovi and Andrieu (2020) found that people in communities with higher social capital remained in those communities compared with those with less social capital. This suggests that in high social capital communities, information acquisition and the ability to respond to advice such as respecting social distancing is more prevalent. Their work suggested that reinforcing communities where social capital was lacking should be a priority to protect the general public health. Bartscher et al. (2021) studied data from European countries and found low social capital areas where the spread of the virus had helped policymakers to launch campaigns and introduce health policies.

The positive outcome of social capital is associated with socio-economic characteristics. Grasso et al. (2019) argued that it is significant to consider socio-economic characteristics in examining socialisation effects as young people tend to be in education, free from employment and family obligations, and unmarried. Helliwell and Putnam (1999) connected HE and social capital, especially trust. They predicted that those with higher education levels would be more likely to trust others. Involvement in organisations could be linked to the interest of other members in the same issues. Fukuyama (2002, p.15) also emphasised the importance of education and said that educational institutions delivering primary, secondary or higher education transmit social rules and norms to young people. Almeida et al. (2021) studied a sample of first-generation college students at four-year private institutions in the US and found that students with higher than average achievements had more considerable faculty support, including receiving career advice from the staff and having a more extensive information support network. In the survey, students with above-average points had more informational support from peers than those with below-average points (*ibid.*, p. 546).

Letki (2008) found that a low socio-economic neighbourhood has lower levels of social capital: poverty, unemployment and crimes generate alienation among residents, less interaction, lower levels of interpersonal trust and a lower sense of belonging. The findings also showed that deprivation tends to be highly associated with racial diversity. Diversity limits interactions as residents are more likely to socialise with those similar to themselves and generates powerlessness and mistrust (*ibid.*, p. 105).

Some studies have presented evidence on the positive consequences of social capital but others have suggested that social capital can lead to negative outcomes. Fukuyama (1997, p. 380) suggested that creating successful groups without social capital is possible using legal systems, constitutions and hierarchies, but he acknowledged that informal norms facilitate group adaptation and reduce transaction costs. He also stated that the argument that social capital is a public good is wrong. There is cooperation and interaction between private agents, and some people seek to achieve their individual goals, which makes social capital a private good (*ibid.*, p. 3). Social capital can lead to bad results, such as creating hate groups. However, this does not disqualify its significance. Societies today have laws to control the creation and production of social issues. Fukuyama argued that having too little social capital is worse than having too much (Fukuyama, 2000, p. 8). Graeff and Svendsen (2013) said that social capital in a country with highly centralised power is negative rather than positive. When power is concentrated in

the hand of a single authority which excludes some actors, they might react by forming closed social networks to break the rules and act against the state via corruption. A high level of corruption can decrease levels of trust and thus affect the country's economic growth. This suggests that trust can be a remedy for corruption.

Portes and Landolt (1996) listed some of the negative consequences of social capital: the sources of social capital might enable conspiracies; strong ties among group members might exclude other groups of people and put pressure on their freedoms. In inner cities, youth gangs can place pressure on their community. In a case study of negative social capital in Brazil, Baquero (2015) highlighted that corruption can be produced when political elites use their ideologies to create their own code of ethics. This type of social capital is negative as it promotes solidarity and loyalty among political leaders. Because corruption increases the networks of politicians, it creates a distance between them and citizens, and it leads to negative assumptions about the whole system. Corruption nurtures nepotism, fraud and clientelism and creates conflicts of interest. Portes and Landolt (1996) suggested the need to acknowledge the downside of social capital in order to enable recommendations about effective policies.

Verba et al. (1995, p. 15) stated that people do not participate in politics "… because nobody asked". This refers to the role of social resources through which people are engaged in political activity. For example, some studies have found that community networks inform views about elections and equally increase voter turnout (Rahbarqazi and Noei Baghban, 2020; Atkinson and Fowler, 2014). Others have shown that social interactions encourage people to participate in non-electoral participation, such as attending rallies or boycotting products (Teorell, 2003). By contrast, having less social capital might hinder political participation. Gidengil and Stolle (2009, p. 748) reported that immigrant women who do not belong to social groups have less information about national politics and are less likely to engage in electoral and non-electoral political activities.

Moreover, those with no close friends are less likely to receive knowledge about government services and benefits. Although some studies have argued that the intensity of citizens in their social interaction would increase political participation (Sarker and Islam, 2018), others have shown that although some people benefit from extensive social ties, they are less likely to engage in non-electoral political activities, and they have less knowledge about national politics. This goes back to the fact that this group represents immigrants. Ethnic minorities tend to have regular conversations with people from their home country (*ibid.*, p. 747).

The previous sections have shown that social capital can lead to both positive and negative comments. Much depends on the context within which social capital is deployed. I was interested in finding whether HE students have social capital and whether this affects their political participation, so I expected social capital to have a positive impact. This does not mean that I did not keep an open mind on the negative effects of social capital, but I had the view that social capital is a positive thing following Putnam's theory (2000). Previous studies have not yet provided a rigorous assessment of the role of social capital and its mechanism on HE students' political participation.

Although a valuable resource, social capital has been described as incomplete and conceptually biased (Krishna, 2002), inherently problematic and challenging to apply in social policy (Morrow, 2008). One significant distinction which should be noted is the numerous definitions of social capital. These definitions vary depending on whether it is regarded as a resource (Yang, 2007; Thieme, 2006; Putnam, 2000; 1995: Lin, 1999; Bourdieu, 1986) or a product of the social connections which individuals maintain with others (Kenton, 2019; Atkinson and Fowler, 2014; Narotzky, 2007; Lake and Huckfeldt, 1998; Coleman, 1988). Putnam did not explicitly define social capital as a resource, but he operationalised it as such in the political context. According to him, social capital is a resource used to benefit the community, and it increases participation in politics. Others have posited that social capital is the product of cooperation among individuals. Lake and Huckfeldt (1998, p. 581) stated that social capital "is produced through structured patterns of interaction and its consequences for individuals must be assessed relative to these patterns of interaction". Throughout this thesis, the core influence of social capital will be a valuable resource whereby young people build social connections and access information and support. Table 3 shows various definitions of social capital theory as a resource.

Table 3: The various definitions of social capital theory

Name of scholar	Definition of Social Capital
(Bourdieu 1986, p. 248)	"Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition".
Baker (1990, p. 619)	"A resource that actors derive from specific social structures and then use to pursue their interests; it is created by changes in the relationship among actors".
Lake and Huckfeldt (1998, p. 581)	"It is produced through structured patterns of interaction, and its consequences for individuals must be assessed relative to these patterns of interaction".
(Lin 1999, p. 35).	"Social capital can be defined as resources embedded in a social structure which are accessed and/or mobilized in purposive actions".
Putnam (1995, p. 67)	"Features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit".
Portes and Landolt, (2000, p. 532)	"The ability to secure resources by virtue of membership in social networks or larger social structures".
Thieme (2006, p. 49)	"Social capital is a resource, and is based on a sense of belonging to a group.
Narotzky (2007, p. 409)	"Social capital is a productive function of the diachronic construction of social relations between actors and of the social context-norms, social sanctions, information channels".
Julien (2015, p. 357)	"As a public good, social capital depends on the good will of specific individuals who invest in and sustain the collective resources. Therefore, norms, shared values, and trust are necessary in sustaining social capital'.

Writers about social capital suggest that it can be measured at the individual or the aggregate level. Social capital as an individual asset or personal social capital argues that all individuals have their own level of social capital. It is measured by asking individuals about their engagement in social groups and whether they trust others (Yang, 2007; Bourdieu, 1986; Berry and Rickwood, 2000; Kawachi et al., 1997; Coleman, 1988). Others have explored social capital as a property of the collective (Putnam, 1995; Fukuyama, 1996), and other studies have suggested that it is not possible to evaluate social capital solely on the individual level because it is originally made up of social interaction and connectedness. Lake and Huckfeldt (1998, p. 580) stated "thus, social capital cannot be defined based on individual characteristics, or even on the basis of individual organizational memberships, because social capital is not possessed by individuals". Instead, social capital is about the patterns of social interaction. Moreover, individuals with personal social capital are more likely to get involved in their communities and have more social support (Berry and Rickwood, 2000, p. 35). Social capital is a resource which individuals can possess but can only acquire through interaction with others. It cannot be developed as a resource by individuals in the way that education can.

The previous section raised some interesting and difficult questions about the relationship between the individual and the collective. Putnam focused on social capital at the community level but later commentators have proposed that it can nevertheless be measured at the individual level. In this study, therefore, I explored social capital at the individual level through semi-structured interviews, but I recognised that it is not possible to evaluate social capital solely at the individual level. In other words, social capital is possessed by individuals (HE students in this study) but it is informed and influenced by the collective as the crucial mechanism. To simplify this complexity, I analysed the social capital which is relevant for students as either individual or collective.

One criticism of social capital is the excessive measurement of the number of networks, called 'structural social capital' (Morrow, 2008). Researchers investigating social capital at the individual level and those who conceptualize it as a private good are more likely to use the structural dimension (Claridge, 2018). For instance, Putnam's data was based on a large-scale quantitative analysis. His focus was on membership of voluntary associations (Milner, 2001). This measurement would have little effect without considering the quality of social networks, an evaluation of cognitive social capital (De Silva et al., 2005, p. 30). The operationalisation of social capital at the individual level overlooks the fact that individuals socialize in different

social contexts. Foley and Edwards (1999, p. 149) argued that surveys make social capital look like something which is inherent in individuals. There is a distinction here between the process of acquiring social capital – which is a social thing, and the possession of social capital – which can be an individual thing. Social capital as a resource is something which individuals possess but to acquire it they must be part of a group or community. I suggest that social capital is about the nature and quality of social networks, connections and values within the social context of many individuals. I used semi-structured interviews to better understand how HE students' experiences within their community can be an influential factor in developing their social capital.

Another justified criticism of social capital lies in the theorisations of social capital as a public good. The positive side of social relations has been explored in societies with higher levels of social capital and it has been argued that societies with a higher level of social capital are more likely to be socially connected and empowered, tolerant and trusting of others and of institutions; they enjoy fast economic development, they have minimal corruption in their political institutions, citizens' well-being and health are improved, and social issues related to violence and crimes are solved (Siegler, Njeru and Thomas, 2015; Bartkus and Davis, 2009; Halpern, 2005; Pretty, 2003; Mohan and Mohan, 2002; Adler and Kwon, 2000; Putnam, 1995; Coleman, 1990). Fukuyama (2002) argued that Putnam did not convincingly show whether social capital is positive or negative. Suppose such uncertainties exist in one of the massive data collections in one of the wealthiest countries in the world: Fukuyama said that it makes it more challenging to analyse social capital in poor and developing countries (*ibid.*, p. 31). This criticism adds to the methodological flaws in Putnam's study. I believe that Putnam's theory has primarily been criticised because it is highly descriptive and it lacks a methodological framework for use in further work.

It must be acknowledged that not all individuals have equal access to social capital (Berry and Rickwood, 2000). Moore et al. (2009) found that lower-educated individuals had lower levels of social capital than those with a university degree. However, people in low education levels have weaker ties with others and rely on their family members and friends to access social capital. This can impose a burden on those whose family and friends have low socio-economic status (p. 1076). Moreover, Portes (1998) assumed that social capital can bring about negative consequences such as exclusion, negative attitudes towards outsiders, and restrictions on people's liberties. Ethnic minorities have limited opportunities for building social capital because of racial prejudice and the concentration of racial minorities in residential territories

(Gidengil and Stolle, 2009, p. 740). Furthermore, some collective actions might lead to manipulation and decrease levels of trust (Claridge, 2018). Lin (2002, p. 787), however, suggested that social capital can bring members with rich access to information and social networks together with those who have poor social networks and resources.

Working with the social capital concept necessitates knowing how to transform it into policy (Fukuyama, 2002, p. 32). Even developing countries with higher stocks of social capital need more modern organisations connecting individuals from different ethnic, class and status backgrounds. In societies where trust is low, Fukuyama suggested that individuals start increasing the radius of trust among themselves and seek to build cooperative relationships among the various small groups with less connection. He also suggested that creating social capital at an organisational level should be done through education, which requires an appropriate institutional infrastructure and training (Fukuyama, 2002, p. 34). Considering that corrupt officials tend to use social capital to help their own relatives and friends instead of the general public, Fukuyama said that nepotism should be fought by making a cultural change in the social rules, investing in education and reinforcing social norms (*ibid.*, p.35).

A further criticism of social capital is its focus on the older generation. Morrow (2008) criticised Putnam's interpretation of social capital precisely because it did not take children and young people into account. Indeed, sociologists have devoted much attention to the social capital theory but have failed to present extensive empirical evidence of its use among young people, specifically in Britain. Remarkably, Putnam did not provide any explanation of young people's social capital and he seemed to be unaware of their vital social norms. Bassani (2007, p. 17) sought to improve the understanding of social capital in youth studies after she recognized that "… the theory's utility is limited and largely known because researchers typically only test one of the theory's core dimensions, whether social capital influences youth's well-being usually around education, health and aspects of behaviour". According to Bassani, a comprehensive review of youth's social capital should study the interactional impact of the different networks which young people have. Holland (2009, pp. 335-36) commented that researchers who have investigated youth's social capital follow Coleman's and Putnam's collective action and cohesion or Bourdieu's theory of social justice and inequality. Holland (2009) took many networks into account – families, schools, universities and workplaces – and the social interactions through these networks, and included locality, geographical context and

other international dimensions. Holland's findings guided youth studies towards the essential connective practices of social capital in young people's families and communities.

Why have academics ignored the topic of young people's social capital? Billett (2011) argued that young people were labelled according to adults' viewpoints and perceptions of social capital. Young people are usually seen as agents who lack economic, cultural and social resources as they cannot connect with older people. Some previous studies have assumed that young people are problematic, suspicious and at risk. This labelling and measurement do not give any valid data about young people's social capital, so it is necessary to assess it by talking to them rather than their families or teachers (Schaefer-McDaniel, 2004). Several studies have considered young people's social capital (Boeck, 2011; Holland, 2009; Morrow, 2008; Webster, 2004; Raffo and Reeves, 2000; Morrow, 1999). This current study focused on understanding young people's social capital and how they interpret their personal experiences through those social relationships. I believe we should not assume young people's social capital, but we need to consider and evaluate the social capital which is lived and experienced by them. In the light of these arguments, this study still recognized social capital as an essential resource for young people's lives. Social capital is more than being socially active and attending different social groups; it is about engaging with the community and benefiting from the quality of social relationships.

3.3. Bonding and Bridging Social Capital

Social capital can be divided into bonding and bridging social capital. Bonding social capital refers to resources accessible in individuals' closest relationships such as family, peer groups and friends. It consists of higher levels of connectedness, shared norms and values such as trust (Boeck et al., 2009, p. 5). This type is often associated with 'getting by' in life. Previous studies have shown that the family provides children with extensive bonding social capital (Coleman, 1988, p. 110), a robust basis for children's education and intellectual development. It develops values such as communication and cooperation and enhances the quality of their life (Beugelsdijk and Smulders, 2003). However, social interaction with family members at a high level can prevent their children from establishing new networks and from acquiring new knowledge from beyond the family.

In other words, investing too much time in the family will only produce shared outcomes of connection. Young people should therefore be encouraged to join heterogeneous interest groups to strengthen their knowledge and experience (Herrero and Hughes, 2019). Previous studies have discussed friendship networks as an essential aspect of bonding social capital: Licamele and Getoor (2006) explored the role of friends in organizing academic collaborations and networks such as conferences, and Hallsten et al. (2017) studied the impact of friendship on youth unemployment. Others have explored the role of friendship networks in times of need (Cook, 2019). Kolter-Berkowitz (2005) said that friends can be just as influential as family members and are vital providers of social and emotional support, advice and information.

Putnam (2000) stated that bonding social capital is positively connected to social support: "Social support refers to receiving voluntary assistance from other people, promoting a positive response. This kind of support can come from different sources, such as family, friends, or community and can emerge in physical, emotional (sympathy, love, and care), verbal, and financial assistance" (Abdollahpour and Keramat, 2016, p. 779). Support groups, advocacy associations and neighbourhood organisations provide long-term trusting connections crossing divisions of ethnicity, gender, race, religion and social class (Morrow, 2001, p. 37). Sharing the same cultural background, belonging to the same ethnic group and racial identity makes it easier for people to access these bodies and establish friendships and trust (*ibid*.). Bonding social capital does not have to be face-to-face. For example, a student at a particular university can be offered a scholarship with a reference from an advisor from another institution even though they have never met in person (Schneider, 2006, p. 13).

In contrast, bridging social capital includes the links created with people outside family and school. Bridging social capital is embedded with 'weak' relations (Levy, Peiperl and Bouquet, 2013, p. 322). This type is often associated with 'getting ahead' in life. Bridging social capital secures benefits for heterogeneous groups; it is about helping people in broad terms, such as helping them to seek more opportunities and horizons. Voluntary associations and civic organisations promote bridging social capital; these are groups of different people with similar interests coming together to achieve common goals. For example, if there is a group of people suffering from the same disabilities and an association which is run to benefit such people, the stock of social capital of both will be likely to increase (*ibid.*, p. 6).

Previous studies have found that bridging social capital in diverse areas has a positive impact on the perceptions between ethnic groups and generates tolerance (Laurence, 2011). As an

explanation of area effects, the absence of bridging ties leads to social isolation, especially in poor areas. Lack of information results in fewer work opportunities. In poor communities where people cannot afford to go to university, obtaining a job becomes more complex (Osterling, 2007, pp. 130-42). A recent review of the literature found that using SNSs generates many social activities, enables people to interact without necessarily meeting physically, enforces shared norms and builds trust (Matei, 2004, pp. 27-30).

For an effective analysis, it is helpful to distinguish between bonding and bridging social capital. Putnam (2000) was never explicit about the dimensions of the two types. He did not state whether all mechanisms of social capital are bonding, bridging or a combination of both. And, as has already been stated, his theory did not include young people. The distinctions between bonding and bridging social capital provide a mechanism for understanding what types of social resource are more relevant to young people, how they develop them and what type brings more social capital. In this respect, I assume that both types of social capital will play an essential role in the social development of young people. After looking into the patterns of young people's bonding and bridging social connections, I shall next investigate what and how both types of social capital might affect their political participation.

3.4. Social Capital in Britain

Social capital has been defined and conceptualized and its types explained and I shall now review important data on social capital in Britain. Writing in *The Guardian,* Putnam (2001) said that Britain was the first country to experience a decline in social capital because of the Industrial Revolution when many people were driven to work in factory cities and leave their rural communities and social ties. Over a century later, the New Right Era during the 1980s and the 1990s saw an increase in poverty, unemployment and inequality. Even when New Labour was elected to government and there were social reforms and long-term strategies to improve human and social capital, the change was tiny and the country was left with fundamental social problems (Bambra, Fox and Scott-Samuel 2003, p. 30). However, Britain was also the first country to create new types of social capital. In the Victorian era, many social institutions were formed to fill the gaps created by the Industrial Revolution: examples are the Salvation Army, trade unions, settlement houses and friendly societies (*ibid.*).

In Britain, Peter Hall was the first to develop grounded scholarship on social capital in his article 'Social Capital in Britain' (1999). Unlike the US, Hall (1999) argued that social capital in Britain remained resilient. According to Hall, associational membership grew by 44% between 1959 and 1990. Environmental organisations have increased fourfold since 1971. Trade union membership increased from 9.5 million members in the 1950s to 12.9 million in the 1980s. Another significant dimension which led Hall to argue that social capital was not in decline in Britain was the country's support for charitable endeavours. Charities Aid Foundation research has shown that Hall found a sharp increase in formally registered charities (to 166,503 charities in 1991). Cash donations to charities also increased from £5 billion to £10 billion from 1950 to 1993 (*ibid.*, pp. 421-425).

Putnam (2000) blamed television for the decline in social capital. In contrast, Hall (1999, pp. 429-33) argued that despite an increase in watching television, British citizens did not display massive changes in levels of community engagement from those of the late 1950s. British people spent the same amount of time watching television as they used to listen to the wireless during the Second World War. Moreover, Hall gave considerable attention to other factors which had significantly affected social capital levels in post-war Britain, including educational policy, the impact of the post-industrial class structure and the government's development of public services. Between 1959 and 1990, there was a radical shift in secondary and tertiary educational policies. People became more educated and were more involved in community affairs by 1990. Hall also considered social class to be a significant dimension of social capital. Since 1950, British society has witnessed a rise in the middle class because of socio-economic development, which sustained higher levels of social capital than the working class. Those in the middle class made more organisational affiliations than those from the working class, but the latter had a more comprehensive range of social clubs and trade unions (Hall, 1999).

A typical example of increasing social capital was involvement in voluntary associations. Researching the National Council for Voluntary Organisations, Hall found that significantly more voluntary associations had been set up since the Second World War. A quarter of them were founded before 1944, another quarter in the 1970s, and another quarter was established in the 1980s (which means that three to four thousand voluntary organisations were founded each year) (*ibid.*, p. 422). Hall found that the British government and voluntary associations worked hand in hand. In 1976, young people were encouraged to volunteer to join programmes abroad in poor areas. The government led by Margaret Thatcher in 1979 envisaged the voluntary sector providing housing and healthcare and Cameron's coalition government

launched the Big Society agenda in 2010 to encourage young people to take an active role in their local community. This was supported by the introduction of a National Citizen Service, a programme based primarily on bringing together young people from different backgrounds, helping them to take part in social activities, to build skills for work and to meet new friends (Mycock and Tonge, 2011). Examples of other local projects included The Community First Neighbourhood Match Fund (2014), the Big Lunch, the Our Place! Programme, and Neighbourhood Planning (*ibid.*, p. 31). Nevertheless, the subsequent demise of the big society marked a decline in social capital discourse and by extension a decline of the theory within academia (Ferragina and Arrigoni, 2017).

Voluntary youth associations can be traced back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These associations were established to associate young people with older people's duty and citizenship. They offered ways for young people to extend their network range by forming connections with adults outside their families. These associations help young people to achieve educational objectives, find jobs and enjoy greater participation (Cotterell, 2007, pp. 223-226). Young people reported they held a very positive attitude to volunteering and that it helped them to develop resilience, responsibility, self-defence, team collaboration and enthusiasm (OFSTED, 2011, p. 1). In an Ipsos MORI (2009) survey, 68% of young people responded that they had volunteered formally or informally. Another study by the Community Life Survey reported an increase in volunteering among young people from 39% in 2010 to 44% in 2013 (Cabinet Office, 2013). An ONS survey found that young people aged 18-24 were more likely to volunteer than those over 25 and those over 75 (ONS, 2017). The UK Civil Society Almanac (2017) reported that 41% of young people aged 16 and over had volunteered formally.

More recent studies have suggested that young people are still interested in volunteering and view it in positive terms, but this does not translate into regular volunteering. A quarter of young people surveyed said they did not want to volunteer and a significant number of them referred to barriers which limit their participation (Carregha et al., 2022). Statistics show that 31% of young people aged 16-26 volunteered at least once a year and 17% volunteered at least once a month in 2020/2021. Moreover, the level of volunteering was the lowest for young people aged under 34 during the coronavirus pandemic (UK Civil Society Almanac, 2021). In this study, I interviewed university students to understand these statistics in a more nuanced way.

Letki (2008, p. 117) found that in Britain, informal contacts with others are more important for social cohesion than formal organisations. Informal sociability, trust and group involvement are reciprocal. However, involvement in reciprocal networks does not necessarily mean that people will perceive their neighbourhood more favourably. The effect of already existing networks such as friends is more significant than the neighbourhood. Regarding trust, it has been shown that British citizens are socially connected (ONS, 2015, trust their neighbours and exchange resources: 56% of people trusted their neighbours, 72% helped their neighbours, and 71% were pleased to provide help to others in 2011/12. Only 11% of the respondents reported that they felt lonely. Similarly, an ONS (2017) survey showed a positive picture of social capital in Britain. In terms of informal relationships, the findings showed a positive and high level of social interactions. The number of people who had close friends was extremely high (97% in 2015), and only 4% of them felt lonely; 61% of them met relatives, colleagues and friends weekly.

The same survey showed that British people were engaging more with social media: 63% of the respondents used social media in 2016 compared with 53% in 2013. With the growth of the internet and social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, many users can communicate with each other, send messages to people they know and sometimes to people they do not know, share photos and videos with many people and build new relationships. Volunteering was affected by the budget cuts caused by the global financial crisis in 2008. With the slow growth in the economy and the introduction of austerity programmes, voluntary associations and charities were reduced (*ibid.*, 2017). Brexit was also found to have had an impact on the voluntary sector: voluntary organisations had had to reduce their services as they had to lose funding streams estimated at £258m per year for charities. The latter were concerned about the no-deal exit from the EU and the lack of guidance from the government about the consequences. Leaving the EU generated fear in the sector particularly since it contributes billions of pounds to the UK economy (The National Council for Voluntary Organisations, 2020).

In the HE context, only some studies related to social capital are relevant in the UK. Wong (2018) found that family, siblings, cousins, partners and in-laws supported the academic success of 30 university students, providing advice on proofreading, grammar, assignments and submission. Collings, Swanson and Watkins (2014) highlighted the experiences of 109 first-year undergraduate students with peer mentoring and found that peer-mentored students were four times more likely to stay at university than non-peer-mentored students. Similarly,

Wilcox, Winn and Fyvie-Gauld's (2005) study of 34 first-year HE students found that compatible friendships provided both emotional and academic support. Similarly, tutors have been shown to have a crucial role in providing informational and appraisive support. Dumangane (2017) explored the significance of faith networks for fifteen British African Caribbean male students and found that faith was a motivator for good behaviour and a source of skill acquisition and support during their university years. A university-based choir, for example, acts as a buffer to protect students from pressure and enables them to develop skills helpful for their academic and professional careers.

Few studies have used variables of social capital for HE students. Analysing the social capital of HE students could offer more insights into the mechanisms which affect their political participation and this has the potential to develop new perspectives focusing exclusively on HE students in a single context.

This study explored the links between social capital and political participation. Specifically, it was designed to explore how the resources generated by social capital affect the political participation of university students in York. Some studies which have focused on the role of social capital have use alternative terms such as socialisation, and others have focused on a single measure or many measures of social capital. Many of the measures used by scholars to measure socialisation are also found in social capital. I therefore reviewed the variables suggested by these studies which are also considered measurements of social capital, including family, membership of community groups, levels of trust and other social networks. Several studies have examined how family affects their children's social context, including their political participation. Parents help shape the political traits in their children's formative years, a term which refers to "the period of youth in which people are first developing political attitudes and values, and are particularly receptive to the influence of external factors" (Fox and Pearce, 2018, p. 21). In the case of Brexit, parental views played a crucial role in how some participants in Fox et al.'s (2019) study responded to the 2016 Referendum. The findings showed that having parents advocating disengagement from the EU during children's formative socialisation resulted in greater susceptibility, particularly if the parents' attitudes were expressed clearly and consistently. Muddiman et al. (2019) stated that the family is a crucial socialising agent in its children's social world. If parents are active in volunteering or campaigning, their children are more likely to get involved with them.

In a survey of 976 young people in South Wale, Muddiman et al. (2019) found that 53.2% of their involvement in civic activities was encouraged by their parents. This was more applicable for individuals with a positive relationship with their parents. Political discussions with parents encourage young people to seek clarification about political issues or to be present when their parents are watching television programmes connected with politics. In addition, parents encourage their children to sign petitions and participate in demonstrations (White et al., 2000). Young people perceived memories and political values passed from their family members, and this perception makes family more trustworthy as source of information than the school curriculum, for example (Pilkington and Pollock, 2015). However, Pilkington and Pollock's (2015) findings suggest that the level of political activism is high among young people who feel distant from their family members' political opinions. Interestingly, young people's political views and values were more associated with their peers than their family members (*ibid.*, p. 14). The findings from the current study showed how HE students' political activism was influenced by their family members.

Scholars have paid increasing attention to other socialising agents in European countries, including the UK. Holecz, Fernández and Giugni (2022) examined the impact of socialising practices in nine European countries, including schools, social clubs and community organisations, and reported evidence of a more substantial impact on political participation. Giugni and Grasso (2020) showed how associational membership affected the political participation of migrants in four cities in Spain and Switzerland. Their analysis produced interesting results about the mobilising role of voluntary associations in developing the political participation of migrants. Giugni and Grasso (2020) said that the socialisation which occurs through the family is crucial, but that other agents such as voluntary associations might have smaller effects. Younger individuals are less likely to be involved in such associations than older ones because they are still in education.

Loader et al. (2015) explored the relationship between student societies and political participation. Student societies are social spaces for social organisation and rules in which the members can engage in social action. They allow active political participation to those with political enthusiasm and provide potential relevance to those with latent political interest. Student societies enable the members to participate in political activities and enrich their skills and political knowledge. Prior socialisation through the family was found to influence students' decision to join a society. The participants reported that societies open opportunities for

students to debate politics and develop a passion for sharing their desire to campaign. Facebook was the most used networking site for widespread communication (Loader, 2015, p. 832). Crossley (2008) had previously found that the Students' Union is the most important mechanism that has a politicising effect on students.

Andrews's (2009) findings suggested that community organisations in urban English areas appear to have higher social capital, mutual respect and social cohesion, which seems to promote democratic participation such as voting (2009). Brady, Chaskin and McGregor (2020) examined youth work in London, Belfast and Dublin and found that youth work occurred in youth clubs, community centres and other peer group settings. The respondents reported that youth work helped them to understand the political forces which form their everyday opportunities and to develop the skills necessary to promote political mobilisation. They were more likely to engage in social, political and social activities if the youth work was genuine and meaningful. Art activities such as photography and video making, music and drama were used by young people to share their views with political leaders. Larger youth organisations also used online campaigns to encourage young people to see the political issues in which they are interested, communicate with politicians and vote. These methods used in youth work can awaken the political participation of young people as they allow them to express their views and make them see themselves in a new light, in which they can become involved in political activities which are is relevant to them rather than focusing on party politics.

Brady, Chaskin and McGregor (2020) also identified challenges at the community level, including young people's disadvantages in urban cities, including poverty, violence, crime, physical and mental health, racial tensions and discrimination. These issues might contribute to the disenfranchisement of young people from their communities. For NGO leaders, resource limitations such as financial resources and budget cuts were frequently raised. On their part, young people emphasised the need for relational youth work, and they suggested that this can be achieved through open access to youth clubs, community centres and cafes, according to their time availability and on their terms. These issues and challenges present additional hurdles to young people's political participation.

Other studies have linked religion, social capital and political participation. Religious beliefs and church attendance build social capital for following political issues and voting (Friesen, 2013). Park and Bowman (2015) examined the relationship between religion and bridging

social capital among white, black and Asian American students and found that religion formed both bonding and bridging social capital at the university. Students of faith found commonality regardless of their religious groups and place of worship. Religious groups were found to have values of unity and harmony which encouraged students to engage in other activities across their campus. Data collected from 735 high school students in Los Angeles demonstrated a positive relationship between religion and social capital (King and Furrow, 2008). Religiously active young people have higher levels of social capital resources. Findings from that study suggested that religious practices and interaction with others with support and trust increased moral orientation (*ibid*.). Glanville, Sikkink and Hernández (2008) found that religious attendance provided additional networks for young people to form and maintain friends with similar values. Their survey of students from 129 schools showed that religious involvement led to academic engagement and achievement. The students were also less likely to skip school and more likely to do sports.

Putnam (2000) argued that religious involvement is positively associated with civic participation. Kaasa (2013) found that informal religiosity promotes social trust, encourages engagement in voluntary associations and develops civic skills. Brown and Brown (2003) found that attending church was insufficient to support African Americans in voting or participating in non-electoral political activities. Instead, those churches with a civic culture led to political participation, as their members were exposed to political discussions. These churches provide civic skills such as organising, writing, communication and confidence, increasing young people's likelihood of participating in costly and risky political activities. In Britain, Oskooii and Dana (2018) showed that attending places of worship positively correlated with voting and found that Christian churches encouraged members to vote more than mosques. Christians who frequently attended their church were 27% more likely to vote in the 2010 general election. Muslims attending their mosque frequently were 14% more likely to vote than those who did not. In addition, 44% of the Christians reported that their church asked them directly to vote, compared with 35% of Muslims who were asked to do the same by their mosque (Oskooii and Dana, 2018, p. 1488).

Interestingly, Oskooii and Dana's (2018) results showed that Muslims attending mosques volunteered to take part in political affairs, protest, donate money for a political cause and engage in community groups. Christians attending church reported less participation in non-voting political activities. These findings suggest that despite these differences, churches and

mosques engage ethnic minorities in British politics and society. In a Swiss context, Giugni, Michel and Gianni (2014) found that religious bonding social capital was significant to Muslim migrants. Their findings showed that involvement in religious organisations increases political participation. Using Norwegian data, Strømsnes (2008) found that frequent church attendance led to more political participation and that active organisational membership in a voluntary religious association affected that participation. In contrast, Huckle and Silva (2020) found that frequent attendance with social capital at religious places was not statistically significant for political participation.

Kolpinskaya and Fox (2019) added useful findings on how religious affiliation had shaped individuals' political attitudes towards Brexit in the UK referendum. They found that groups with close relationships to the Church of England and who felt connected to the national identity were more Eurosceptic than non-conformist Christians and those without religion. Church of England members had less support for EU integration, and British Catholics also had a negative assessment of the potential of EU membership. Interestingly, non-religious populations were more likely to support EU membership and continuing integration.

The literature demonstrates the positive effects of religion on political participation, but little is understood about the impact of this relationship on young people and specifically HE students in Britain. Research at St Mary's University Twickenham and the Institut Catholique de Paris reported that 70% of young people aged 16-29 had no religion and only 7% attended religious services (Bullivant, 2018). In the light of these statistics, the effect of social capital might suggest that religion alone cannot increase political participation or might not offer a deep understanding of its effectiveness. According to Fox et al. (2021), religion is a limited factor in young people's socialisation and public affairs. One reason for this is that today's internet facilities have transformed young people's social networks and bonds. The internet forms new communities based on beliefs, identities and agendas outside the context in which young people live. The findings showed that young people have fewer religious characteristics and acknowledged that it is not easy to encourage them to engage with religion (*ibid.*).

In summary, therefore, many researchers have studied the impact of social capital on political participation, but a solid and extensive mechanism to capture this relationship among HE students is lacking in the British context. This helps to explain my choice of semi-structured interviews as a research method when trying to understand the formation of social capital and

its relationship to participation. As Putnam argued, charting the number of friendship groups, clubs and other social activities in which people might be involved will be crucial to understanding their social capital. However, participating in these activities will not necessarily generate social capital, or at least social capital which will lead to political participation. It is the quality of these connections and relationships, not just their quantity, which matters. If a student is chatting with friends, attending clubs and volunteering, what kind of interaction takes place? If this interaction does not involve discussing politics and current affairs, is it likely to lead to greater political participation? How social a person is and thus how big their social capital is does not determine whether they will participate in politics or not. It is necessary to understand the quality of their social relationships and whether they help to cultivate resources which might encourage participation. One obvious way to do this is to ask young people about these things in interviews. This explains my choice of a qualitative as opposed to a quantitative approach.

3.5. The Mechanisms of Social Capital

In this study, I investigated social capital as a socially beneficial resource for young people's participation in political activities. I shall discuss the relationship between social capital and political participation in this section. I suggest that theoretical propositions have neglected the discussion of young people's social capital mechanisms and how they might affect their political participation in Britain.

It can be seen from the previous sections that the impact of social capital on political participation is not clear in the literature. Very few of the previous studies provided a precise analysis of the impact of social capital on young people's political participation in the British context. I used Putnam's measures of social capital in the US and his work inspired all my mechanisms. I drew on social networking sites which have become common today. The mechanisms used in this study do not deny or remove previous mechanisms of social capital. Putnam (2000) set out many indicators such as volunteering, association membership, social participation, the feeling of trust and safety, and the impact of television and the internet. In the UK, the ONS (2020) captured social capital through 25 indicators, covering social network support, trust, personal relationships and civic participation.

In terms of exploring mechanisms, an important distinction must be made. I looked at how young people experience the mechanisms of social capital. It is crucial to highlight that I considered how these mechanisms might or might not generate resources to participate in politics.

> Mechanisms are not only existent when A leads to B, but also when A does not lead to B: this is a cardinal point in critical realist causal analysis. The mechanism has to be triggered to operate and it might even not ever be triggered and when it is triggered the conditions or circumstances determine whether it will operate at all. To make matters even more complex, the actual effects also dependent on the conditions. [...] The outcome of this – that is the events – is therefore a complex compound effect of influences drawn from different mechanisms, where some mechanisms reinforce one another, and others frustrate the manifestations of each other. (Danermark, Ekstrom and Jakobsen, 2019, pp. 1440-1447)

Through the four mechanisms, I was able to explore how young people in Britain experience social capital and what resources are generated by the different mechanisms of social capital and how they affect young people's political participation. In the following sections, I shall provide context for the four mechanisms. I shall then conclude this chapter by arguing that there is little data about these mechanisms among young people in Britain. This also emphasises the need for an empirical study to explore how resources generated by these mechanisms can affect young people's political participation.

3.5.1. Family and Friendship Networks

Family and friendship networks are at the centre of bonding social capital. According to Bales and Parsons (1998, p. 7), "the family after all is a residential unit in our society". Prandini (2014) argued that familial ties have been neglected as a mechanism of social capital. In Britain, several studies have looked at the mechanism of the family (Symlie, 2015; Lee, Shah, and McLeod, 2013; Reynolds, 2009; Holland, 2009; Bassani, 2007; Hébert, Sun and Kowch, 2004; Morrow, 2001). Family is the first place where children learn about fundamental social life and have their first communication and support. Helve and Bynner (2007) stated that families play

the most crucial role in intergenerational solidarity, especially in times of stress and crisis. Previous studies have argued that the family promotes children's well-being and facilitates educational attainment (Sandefur, Meier and Campbell, 2006; Coleman, 1988). Data collected by Morrow in two schools in Springtown (30 miles from London) showed that familial networks were the primary source of knowledge, plans for education and guidance in finding jobs. Several respondents reported wanting the same jobs as their parents (Morrow, 2001, pp. 43-45). The communicative competencies of young people also start to improve early through communication between parents and their children (Lee, Shah, and MacLeod, 2013, p. 672).

Moreover, the family dramatically influences children's political engagement. Well-educated parents support their children to learn and stress the importance and advantages of education, and they are likely to provide a political environment for their children. In social learning theory, this is called 'observational learning'. The model claims that children decode and imitate their parents' behaviour. For instance, a child might be influenced by seeing its parents going to the polling station to vote. Parents can also encourage their children to vote and explain why it is essential. Others teach their children how to register to vote and describe exactly what happens in the voting booth (Gidenqil, Wass and Valaste 2016, pp. 373-75). Educated parents are likely to fill their houses with books and newspapers and help their children's future engagement in politics (Verba, Burns and Scholzman, 2003, p. 47). Although there is some literature on the role of family, I believe that linking family and young people's social capital is necessary. It is necessary to understand the richness and complexity of this relationship. Does this relationship only represent bonding social capital? Or does it extend to influence bridging social capital? Does familial social capital have any negative impact? Is this relationship important to the community in general? More importantly, what does this mechanism generate for its members? How do the social relationships embedded in the family contribute to young people's political participation? I included the family in the social capital debate to answer these questions.

Friendship is a vital component of an individual's social life. It is positively associated with trustworthiness, advice, mutual emotional aid, sympathy, respect, protection, giving and fun (Morrow 2001, p. 48). Friends provide opportunities, power and choice (Boeck, Fleming and Kemshall, 2006). Within the social capital framework, however, few scholars have investigated friendship as a mechanism of social capital in Britain. Licamele and Getoor (2006) explored the role of friends in organizing academic collaborative networks such as conferences. Hallsten et al. (2017) studied the impact of friendship on youth unemployment and Cook (2019)

explored the role of friendship networks in times of need during the Soviet era. Holland (2009) found that friends can provide support in cases of bullying. In a quantitative study, 88% of young people said that they enjoyed several leisure activities with others, including going to shopping malls, restaurants, pubs and cinemas, and over 70% met up with friends in nightclubs (ONS, 2015). At the political level, friends significantly impact political preferences; they share political information, mobilise political activities and influence daily decisions by challenging current debates about the political system (Levinsen and Yndigegn, 2015; Kolter-Berkowitz, 2005). In this study, I used a qualitative approach to enhance the understanding of the friendship networks among young people in the British context. I understand the essence of friendship, but what are the resources embedded in this relationship? How much does it count as a mechanism for social capital? Does the existence or the absence of friends mean anything to bonding social capital? Addressing these questions will depict how friendship relates to social capital.

In Britain, there has been little interest in the idea that family and friends make a valuable and necessary contribution to HE students' political participation. After this discussion of how HE students experience family and friendship networks, I shall turn my attention to the resources under which these mechanisms affect political participation.

3.5.2. Community Networks

Putnam's (2000) exploration of social capital focused on people's engagement in their community. He argued that community networks are a necessary condition to affect social changes. They provide bridging social capital by linking individuals to many people (MacCulloh, Mohan and Smith, 2012; Maraffi et al., 2008; Schaefer-McDaniel, 2004; Teorell, 2003; Wollebaek and Selle, 2002). Participation in community networks derives from people's desire to make a change and to voice their choices, all to make their context a better place (Piškur et al., 2014, pp. 215-16). Putnam (1993) argued that community activities promote cooperation and solve collective problems in society without relying on institutional mechanisms (Fukuyama, 1996; Putnam, 1993). He measured civic engagement by identifying the memberships of bowling leagues, voluntary associations, sports clubs, book clubs and the like and he gave particular attention to the membership and the activities which take place in voluntary organisations. For him, volunteering is essential under conditions of war and conflict.

Voluntary associations and charities preach solidarity through helping orphans and providing healthcare services (Putnam, 2002, pp. 17-18). The UK Household Longitudinal Study found that those who volunteer are more likely to have higher levels of social capital (Fox, 2019). Volunteering creates platforms for people to interact and builds a strong sense of belonging and social inclusion. It strengthens citizenship and teaches people to be responsible, trustworthy and civically mature (Wu, 2011; Boeck et al., 2009).

Another agent of young people's bridging social capital is the school. Morrow (2001, p. 54) described a school as a community where young people develop social interactions and tight relationships with other students and teachers. The school represents a resource network where young people learn about social life and how to face difficulties (Hébert, Sun and Kowch, 2004, p.236). It guides young people about employment and future choices of secondary and higher education (Morrow, 2001, p. 45). However, school is not always a place for social cohesion; some young people gather in gangs, smoke and fight (Morrow, 2004, p. 215). Several young people complained to Morrow about social exclusion at schools because of their ethnic backgrounds and their struggle with harassment and hostility (*ibid.*, p. 53). Interestingly, not many studies have discussed the impact of the university in terms of students' social development. Some have examined whether attending university changes students' political attitudes and whether it makes them more liberal or social about issues (Mintz, 1998). The intention in the current study was not to examine the impact of university education but to exploring the impact of the networks available at the university and what effect they might have on students' political participation.

Exploring the role of community networks can be complicated in two ways. On the one hand, not all members of groups have a higher level of involvement in these communities, and they tend to change their memberships regularly. On the other hand, community groups vary in structure and size, which might affect the establishment of cooperation and trust among the members (Davis, 2014, p. 2). In addition, some methodological problems arise when investigating these networks' roles. In general surveys, the impact of community networks is narrowed to specific social groups, such as advantaged social classes which already have resources and skills for participating in associations. As a methodological consequence, community involvement among disadvantaged groups remains unexplored (Teney and Hanquinet, 2012, p. 1215).

Among all types of community network, voluntary associations' impact on political activity is one of the most established findings (Nygård et al., 2015; Teney and Hanquinet, 2012; Letki, 2004). Research has shown that voluntary associations function as a "school in democracy" (Teorell, 2003, p. 50). Teorell found that being socially connected to several voluntary organisations matters for political participation more than actual membership of these organisations. To engage with an organisation, the members need to establish connections with other members and to participate in a variety of activities. These connections can be used to develop civic skills, which explains the increased political engagement among active members (2003, pp. 49-51). Putnam (2000, p. 132) made another causal claim by suggesting that "volunteering is part of the syndrome of good citizenship and political involvement". At the same time, he expected volunteering to affect political activity, such as voting (*ibid.*, p. 404). The current study explored the impact of volunteering on political activity in Britain instead of treating them as the same. It is important to examine this relationship in the British context as Britain explicitly highlights the importance of volunteering: "Volunteers work tirelessly to help others and strengthen our communities; givers know the pleasure of making a difference. Our society is strengthened by the relationships and trust built" (HM Government, 2011). In this study, I took this expectation and examined whether volunteering is part of young people's community networks and how voluntary activity affects political activity.

Some researchers have discussed interest groups. When an interest group favours a specific policy, its members seek to convince decision makers by mobilizing public opinion using the media, campaign posters and online petitions. Moreover, the members who trust their interest group give their support to the attitudes advocated by that specific group (Duer, 2019, p. 516). Other studies have considered social movement associations. Participation in protest and grassroots movements helps people to resolve local problems and thus improve their living conditions. Additionally, when people become involved in these movements, their engagement in electoral politics increases (Sarker and Islam, 2018).

In terms of community networks, the literature review suggested that they matter to social capital. This idea needs to be empirically supported. To increase the understanding of young people's bridging social capital, I wanted to understand how community networks affect young people's social capital and to know the possible resources which these networks have and their possible strengths and weaknesses. In addition, I investigated whether the presence of these networks mobilises resources to pursue political outcomes. I sought to show how the resources generated by community networks affect young people's political participation. I am not

arguing that there is a positive empirical relationship. This depends on young people's individual experiences and perceptions.

3.5.3. The Role of Social Networking Sites

Social networking sites, also known as social media, have become essential tools in individuals' communication and maintenance of social relationships. With the increased use of these sites, I suggest they represent a natural fit analysis of the debate on social capital. A social network site is defined as:

> … a web-based service that forms relationships between individuals by providing profile bases which include individual information, makes social interaction between participants easy by providing users with functions to communicate with each other, and provides a platform for users to share information and contents. (Ji et al., 2010, p. 1104)

Social networking sites are essential features of social capital as they help users to share news and information about life events and chat with peers (Quinn, 2016, p. 593). Two decades ago, Putnam (2000) emphasized the benefit of face-to-face interaction but this cannot be applied entirely in recent years. Sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram have become fundamental tools for communication (Qi and Mackie, 2014). Facebook was founded in 2004 and is based in the US. It has 2.8 billion monthly users as of January 2021. Recent estimations suggest that there were 44.68 million users in the UK as of December 2019 (Social Films, 2022). Twitter was founded in 2006 and is based in California. It has 300 million active users as of 2023 (Iqbal, 2023), and in the UK there are an estimated 18.4 million users (Woodward, 2022). Twitter is therefore the second most popular social media platform after Facebook. People generally use Twitter to post about their everyday activities and share opinions and funny pictures (Bansal, 2018). Politicians, journalists and academics are some of the most significant users of Twitter. They Tweet to update citizens with the latest news. Instagram was created in the US in 2010. It was released for users to upload pictures and videos. Instagram quickly rose to prominence, with over a billion monthly active users in 2022 (Dean, 2022).

In the recent social capital literature, studies have started to explore the relationship between social capital and social networking sites (Kumar, Goh and Balaji, 2021; Venter, 2019; Cox et

al., 2019; Faucher, 2018; de Zuniga, Barnidge and Scherman, 2017; Utz and Muscanell, 2015; Hwang and Kim, 2015; Brooks et al., 2014). Social capital has mainly benefited from the dramatic growth of social networks. Even before the creation of these sites and because of the enormous growth of technology, over twenty years ago Lin (1999, p. 45) commented that "we are witnessing a new era where social capital will soon supersede personal capital in significance and effect". Participation in online spaces brings greater comfort for young people. Social networking sites have facilitated social interaction, which lies at the heart of social capital (Dumas et al., 2020). Those who spend more time interacting with others are more likely to make faster decisions about the received information. In addition, they are more likely to interact better with people from different cultural backgrounds (Jenkins, 2007, p. 10). Jenkins (2004) encouraged the use of social networks and suggested that they help to educate young people, raise awareness about the ethical choices which they need to make as users and participants, and motivate them to affect decisions.

Putnam (2000) argued that technology and television individualize people's leisure time, decreasing social capital. I agree with Putnam that spending much time watching television instead of attending community activities decreases offline social capital. However, this cannot be applied to the current generation. Social networking sites do not affect young people as novelties because they have grown up with them. It is clear that the internet and the media are not going anywhere and the use of these sites is dramatically increasing. Social networks have changed how young people learn, make decisions, collaborate and solve problems. They create the conditions for facilitating social development by allowing diverse groups of young people with new ideas to congregate in common interests. Putnam's study is useful, but since it was published in 2000, technology and the nature of it have changed considerably, so a more updated study of social capital is needed. The current study was designed to meet this need.

The discussion of social networking sites has carried on the processes of information sharing and communication. Before social networking sites expanded, researchers suggested that soft power provided an information age to politics (Nye, 2004). Social networking sites represented platforms for activism, mobilizing information and joining causes (Valenzuela, 2013). Facebook and Twitter are widely used to discuss politics, especially during elections (Stieglitz et al., 2014; Baker, 2009). Young people stay updated about their friends' political activities and receive information from online political organisations (Breuer, Landman and Farquhar, 2015). People share political content to achieve solidarity (Klein and Robinson, 2020). The media place issues and deliver goals on a national level and ensure continuing consideration of

social issues. For example, anti-war activists use various media to attract local and global coverage, form alliances, organize events and mobilise supporters (Jenkins, 2004, pp. 35-6). Brooks et al. (2014) found that Facebook is a site for both bonding and bridging social capital. Individuals with low transitivity networks experience more bonding social capital as they have fewer contacts on Facebook. In the case of bridging social capital, individuals who use Facebook for information might find a resource of available jobs (*ibid.*, pp. 10-11).

One example from the existing literature was the protests organised by British students against education cuts in 2010. Students aimed to create a student movement which would hold a mass protest in London outside Westminster. They created a Twitter account to collect all students to cluster, plan events, find resources for the campaigns, devise a common strategy and coordinate their plans effectively. From the day of the creation of that Twitter account, many users followed the updates; they were all connected through Twitter, they exchanged messages and they numbered thousands of followers in a few weeks (Whittaker, 2010). Twitter enabled students to organize their actions better, compose standard practices and solve common problems. Twitter also allowed them to build a mobilisation with particular features of organisations and cooperation to voice their concerns by protesting (Hensby, 2013). It has been shown that different social media platforms promote political expression (Velasquez and Rojas, 2017). Olteanu et al. (2015) found that Twitter generates attention as prominent and influential as associations and governmental institutions. Due to the development of social media, Bennett (2012) claimed that there is a new form of citizenship which he called 'actualizing citizenship'. This form "emphasizes new repertoires of political action based on personal expression through social networks often using digital media" (*ibid.*, p. 128). The current study explored how the resources generated by social networking sites affect young people's political participation as a mechanism of social capital.

The purpose of the current study was to examine these arguments empirically among young people in Britain and to add to the body of knowledge regarding the effects of social networking sites on young people's social capital. An analysis of bonding and bridging social capital will help to map and extend the understanding of this relationship.

3.5.4. Social Trust

Social trust is one of the key mechanisms of social capital. Putnam (1995) focused on reciprocity, cooperation and tolerance norms and argued that they have a significant effect on the success of a democratic society. Foley and Edwards (1999, p. 145) suggested that these norms can be aligned with the civic culture tradition, which assumes that the mixture of these norms and attitudes will contribute to a successful government. I decided to focus on social trust among other norms and values of social capital as I found little empirical work to represent them. Learning about the different norms and values would create many arguments, so it was necessary to consider issues and concerns about these norms and values' conceptualisations and operationalisations. The use of social trust in this study can be explained by the fact that it has been massively discussed in the literature. In this study, social trust was seen as an independent mechanism and not part of the definition of social capital (Jackman and Miller, 1998). In this respect, I favour Foley and Edwards's (1999, p. 146) view that "neither resources in general, attitudes and norms such as trust and reciprocity, nor social infrastructures such as networks can be understood as social capital by themselves".

In many cases, social trust has been equated with values and norms. The American Heritage Dictionary (1991, p. 1300) defined trust as "confidence in the integrity, ability, character, and truth of a person or thing". Fukuyama (1996, p. 26) stated that "trust is the expectation that arises within a community of regular, honest, and cooperative behavior, based on commonly shared norms, on the part of other members of that community". Similarly, trust was linked to good intentions and expectations by Dennis and Owen (2001) and Newton (2001, p. 2014) wrote that trust is synonymous with "mutuality, empathy, reciprocity, civility, respect, solidarity, toleration, and fraternity". Trust has also been linked to cooperative behaviour: Coleman (1990, p. 91) stated that trust is "an incorporation of risk into deciding whether to engage in the action". That said, the willingness to trust depends on the assumption that others will also cooperate. In response to these studies, Gambetta (2000) suggested the need to differentiate between social trust and moral values as they have different properties.

Social trust has been operationalized as a resource of social capital (Goetzmann, 2021; Fukuyama, 1996) and at other times as a product of social capital (Gonga et al., 2020; Kwon, 2019; Van der Horst and Coffé, 2012; Stukas et al., 2005; Warren, 1999; Putnam, 1995). For some authors, trust generates resources related to social capital. Goetzmann (2021) said that trust enables members to interact and cooperate and Wilson (2007) stated that trust generates

cooperation. He suggested the formula of 'commons', which says, 'I will if you will' and 'I need to trust others, and they need to trust me'. Bicchieri (2006, p. 140) argued that social trust benefits social issues in the sense that "… everyone in the group is better off if all group members further the common interest". Another group of researchers treat social trust as a product of social capital. Kwon (2019) claimed that trust is a product of success, wealth, education, and better socio-economic status. When in-group members' behavioural conformity is high, their trust is vital. Other authors expect a higher number of contacts and social interaction levels to increase people's trust (Van der Horst and Coffé, 2012). Previous studies have found that volunteers who act supportively are more likely to build social trust (Stukas et al., 2005) and Varshney (2002) found that face-to-face contact in the local associational life between Hindus and Muslims in India guarantees mutual trust. This view was supported by Edwards and Ogilvie (2012) who argued that trust is established, not given. It is a process which evolves.

It is confusing to conclude that trust can be treated as both a resource and a product (Gambetta, 2000). In this study, my argument is that social trust is a mechanism that generates social resources for individuals and the community. Although it is a separate mechanism from family and friendship networks, community networks and social networking sites, social trust is closely related to them all. I asked the interviewees whether they trusted their contacts with family members and friends, members of community networks, and contacts on social networking sites in order to investigate the role of social trust through strong and weak ties. By distinguishing social trust to include both types of tie, I would be able to understand how different mechanisms experience social trust and what resources this trust generates. I explored the concept of social trust in participants' own words rather than passively through surveys.

As already mentioned, survey questions in political science have assessed social capital, and the same has been the case for social trust. But social trust has rarely been tested with qualitative methodologies, and this motivated me to gather qualitative data which might explain the concept of social trust and how young people understand it and identify its relationship with political participation. In this way, I would be able to shed light on the challenges in the social trust field and identify the next steps for future research.

Social trust is high among family members, relatives and neighbours, but it is also crucial between strangers, people in large organisations and those who rarely engage in standard input (Dasgupta and Serageldin, 2000). Advocates of the social capital theory argue that social trust

enables people to act together, achieve shared goals and collective actions, it facilitates communication, maintains stable relationships, widens personal and professional future opportunities, increases the well-being of individuals and boosts their feelings of security (Shahin, 2016; Suh, 2013; Davis, 2014; Crow, 2002; Newton, 2001; Putnam, 2000; 1995). Coleman (1988) said that a group without a high degree of trust cannot exist and cannot achieve a common goal. Some authors have contended that having positive experiences in one person can build trust in society. As Dasgupta (1988, pp. 64-65) put it:

> In dealing with someone you learn something not only about him, but also about others in his society. You learn something about population statistics. Therefore, if you meet several honest persons and no dishonest ones you might want to revise your prior opinion of society at large.

These findings provide evidence for the idea that social trust affects community participation. Almond and Verba (1963) suggested that stable democracies tend to have higher levels of trust. Countries with high levels of trust have better institutional performance (Delhey and Newton, 2003). Trust among citizens would improve the functioning of civil society and contribute to an efficient democracy. Societies with high levels of social trust are more likely to be responsible and more politically active (Gerami, Rasekh and Karimi, 2020; Chen, 2018; Abaee, 2016; Putnam, 2000).

In contrast, areas of conflict are likely to have lower levels of trust. Crime and violence are expected to lower social trust and respect (Coffé, 2009, p. 159). In non-civil areas, people are less likely to trust each other and less likely to participate in public and political affairs. In such areas, corruption is widespread, laws are violated and citizens are unhappy (*ibid.*). Rothstein and Eek (2009, pp. 106-107) found that when a government exercises deceitful behaviour, citizens lose trust in it and in people in general. Therefore, policies cannot be applied in institutions with inequality and weak institutional frameworks (Peiró-Palomino and Tortosa-Ausina, 2013).

Studies have argued that there is a relationship between social and political trust: "Political trust thus functions as the glue that keeps the system together and the oil that lubricates the policy machine" (Van der Meer and Zmerli, 2017, p. 1). When social trust is high, political trust rises and falls depending on the political leaders (Uslaner, 2018, p. 41). It has been highlighted that social trust and political trust are not the same. They do not share the "common

origins in the same social conditions; they are different things with different causes" (Newton, 2001, p. 201). For Putnam (1995), the two types of trust had a reciprocal relationship. The current study was more interested in investigating how social trust might influence trust in government. For Zmerli and Newton (2008, p. 706), trust is the foundation of an effective government. According to Uslaner (2018, p. 38), social trust is related to political trust in the sense it builds wealthy societies, promotes citizenship and public services and creates political agreements.

Similarly, Rothstein (2005) argued that social trust can generate public policies and improve citizens' quality of life. The literature adds that those who trust others tend to positively view their political parties (Rothstein and Uslaner, 2005, p. 41). According to this view, trust plays a positive role in political participation.

These findings pose an intriguing question about the role which social trust can play in the lives of young people. Moreover, given the multiple possibilities regarding the relationship between social trust and political participation, I used a qualitative research method of semi-structured interviews to determine how the former more strongly predicts the latter among university students. Most of the studies reviewed in this literature review have not explicitly tested the relationship between social trust and young people's political participation, which presents a clear gap in the literature.

3.6. Chapter Summary

This chapter has introduced the central theoretical approach to social capital. I have discussed social capital as a resource for social interaction. The literature shows that many studies have been conducted on social capital in national contexts, but young people, and specifically university students, in the British context are still excluded. The current study suggests that the way young people engage in political activity is increasingly facilitated by social capital. Social capital represents social relationships and networks, enabling cooperation among members of society. Sociological thinking led by the American scholar Robert Putnam viewed social capital as a resource for political participation. In this chapter, I have reviewed the relevant literature on young people's social capital and provided a theoretical discussion of the various mechanisms through which social capital might affect their political participation. These mechanisms are family and friendship networks, community networks, social networking sites

and social trust. I have discussed the different resources that might affect HE students' political participation by these mechanisms.

Moreover, the studies which explored those mechanisms predominantly used a quantitative approach. To test these theoretical research propositions, I carried out a case study using a qualitative approach to enhance the understanding of young people's social capital and explored how the mechanisms of social capital explain young people's political participation. In the next chapter, I shall discuss the research design, the selection of cases and the data collection methods of the study.

Chapter 4: Research Methodology

4.1. Introduction

After establishing the extent of the literature, including the underpinning theory and the gap identified in the literature, this chapter provides an overview of the research methodology used for this study. First, it describes the philosophical considerations of the study and justifies the selection of the University of York for the project. Then, it discusses why a qualitative study was needed and why interviews were employed. After that, it presents the ethical considerations regarding the study and how the qualitative data were analysed. The chapter concludes with an outline of the interview process, including what happened before, during and after the interviews. This primary purpose of the study was to explore HE students' social capital and to understand the mechanisms through which social capital affected their political participation. I shall therefore set out the specific methods chosen to achieve these intentions. The research interrogated two main questions:

RQ1. How do higher education students experience social capital?

RQ2. How do the resources produced by the different mechanisms of social capital affect higher education students' political participation?

4.2. Research Paradigm

In this section, I shall describe the paradigm in which the research was located. In political research, the term 'paradigm' "constitutes the abstract beliefs and principles that shape how a researcher sees the world, and how s/he interprets and acts within that world" (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017, p. 26). A paradigm shows the researcher's philosophical orientation, methodology selection, and data collection and analysis methods (*ibid*., p. 26). The choice of a paradigm is informed by 1) assumptions of the reality and knowledge (what you know and how you know that your view is accurate); 2) theoretical framework, literature and practice (assumptions about what could inform the questions and the available literature in the research area); and 3) value systems and ethical principles (how the researcher's own values help to select the appropriate paradigm) (Kawulich, 2012, pp. 2-3). In Chapter 3, I stated that explorations of HE students' social capital and political participation frameworks are lacking. First, we cannot simply apply adult data and general knowledge to students' social capital. Second, a lack of data on the resources generated by the different mechanisms of social capital

and how they affect HE students' political participation makes it necessary to ensure that we have a deeper understanding of the topic. In keeping with the identified gaps in the knowledge, I was interested in understanding how HE students would reflect on the topic. To achieve this, I adopted the philosophical position of interpretivism.

4.2.1. The Interpretivist Research Philosophy

Interpretivism is one of the philosophical research paradigms used to inform research design and data analysis: "Interpretivism argues that truth and knowledge are subjective, as well as culturally and historically situated, based on people's experiences and their understanding of them" (Ryan, 2018, p. 17). Interpretivism takes people's routine attitudes and beliefs in their everyday life to understand their practices (Curry, 2020, p. 907). Interpretivism argues that reality is created and mediated by the researcher's senses, which can be seen in their own values and beliefs to inform how they interpret and analyse their data (Ryan, 2018; Abdul Rehman and Alharthi, 2016).

For this study, I found interpretivism to be the most appropriate paradigm for answering the research questions. The research topic requires an explanation from a qualitative research approach, elaboration, detailed answers and interpretation of results. For example, I assumed that every HE student would have his/her own perspective and experience of what constitutes political participation, which might be informed by previous experiences and interactions with other people. I also suggest that different mechanisms of social capital will influence a student's political participation. These mechanisms, in turn, will inform how social capital shapes HE students' political participation. Students' multiple perceptions and interpretations of the issue were obtained by asking open-ended questions in the interviews.

For analysing the acquired data, the approach used was inductive rather than deductive. Inductive research starts with unanswered questions about a particular subject; therefore, no hypotheses are needed as the researcher seeks to discover beyond what is already known (Locke, 2007), whereas researchers using the deductive approach collect and analyse statistical data to test their hypotheses deduced from the theory, and then discuss whether the findings confirm or reject the theoretical base (Woiceshyn and Daellenbach, 2018). Inductive research plays a different role and follow a different logic from deductive research. Researchers use the inductive approach to limit theories and only present the most important themes (Thomas,

2006). This approach usually makes the scope of the study narrower. It is used to explore a new phenomenon or research an existing phenomenon from different perspectives. Inductive approaches are usually associated with qualitative research (Gabriel, 2013). The current study required an inductive analysis to explore data derived from broad themes to understand particular phenomena in their context (Abdul Rehman and Alharthi, 2016, p. 56).

This is an inductive study. It was not necessarily intended to explore a new phenomenon as both social capital and political participation have already been reviewed in the literature, but it explored how the former affects the latter among a specific age group in a specific geographical context. The data produced through interpretations would lead to better knowledge and understanding of the topic. The inductive analysis of the qualitative data consisted of the following procedures:

- Transcribing and printing the interview responses, highlighting questions and making comments;
- Reading the material, becoming familiar with it and starting to explore the themes which emerged;
- Creating core themes: multiple readings of the texts generated themes which were frequently used and mentioned by the interviewees;
- Assigning the themes which were relevant to the research questions and objectives; and
- Refining the themes: within each core theme, searching for similar and contradictory points. Selecting the quotations which represented the core themes.

4.3. The Research Design

In order to address a research problem, researchers need to think systematically about a research design which will help them to acquire appropriate findings. A research design is a logical action plan for selecting appropriate research methods for collecting data to answer the primary questions (Yin, 1989, p. 26). In practice, a research design should give details about the research questions, hypotheses, research area, sampling process, data collection methods and analysis. As a result of many modifications which might be necessary as the research progresses, a research design might be vague and tentative (Nayak and Singh, 2015, p. 61). A qualitative approach was selected to explore social capital in HE students' lives and its impact

on their political participation. The rationale for this approach was that it would help to explain the participants' views in more depth.

4.3.1. Case Study Method

For this study, a case-study approach was used to explore the impact of social capital on the political participation of HE students in York. A case study is usually defined as a method of qualitative research (George and Bennett, 2005): "Case studies are often used for inductive exploration of yet unknown phenomena" (Gammelgaard, 2017, p. 910). Hyett, Kenny and Dickson-Swift (2014) said that a case study explores a particular identified object and that the classification of the case provides detailed information about the study design and the research question. Case studies have a flexibility which is not offered by quantitative approaches (*ibid*.). A case study pays close attention to the experiential knowledge of respondents or interviewees and shows its impact on social, political and other contexts (Njie and Asimiran, 2014). In-depth data were gathered in this study to learn more about a not well-established topic. It should be noted that this study was designed to dig deep into a single context. The number of participants can add to the depth of the information but a specific context will not justify the generalisation of the findings.

According to George and Bennett (2005), selecting a case study based on prior knowledge makes a significant research design. It strengthens the theoretical base for the study and makes the theory testing more thorough. Cases selected on prior knowledge also protect the researcher from bias and ensure an accurate and comprehensive description of data documentation. This achieves the reliability of case studies (*ibid*., p. 10). George and Bennett (2005) said that case studies have the potential to attain conceptual validity, strong hypotheses and applicable causal mechanisms of individual cases, and they can address causal complexity. The use of a case study in this current study is significant as it connected to the everyday life of the HE student participants, and to elements and details of their different views. A case study can reveal different experiences and various ideas of reality**.**

Flyvbjerg (2006) set out five disadvantages of case studies: generalisations cannot be made from a single case study, practical knowledge is more valuable, generating hypotheses is more practical, case studies are difficult to summarise and they can contain bias. Despite these disadvantages, a case-study method is still relevant for explaining real-life contemporary situations and providing detailed information. Case studies promote an understanding of

respondents' experiences and add strength to prior studies (Krusenvik, 2016). Similar to other research methods, the case-study method has advantages and disadvantages, and it should be used according to the research problems and aims.

4.3.2. Study Area

Few studies have been conducted into social capital in British cities, let alone about York. York is an ancient walled city in North Yorkshire; its population was 211,012 in 2022. York covers an area of 105.00 square miles (271.94 km²) (World Population Review, 2022). York has more young people (20-24 years old) than the national population (10% compared with 6.8%) (*ibid*.) This is important to point out when thinking about the representativeness of young people in society and how their social context and environment impact their (dis)engagement in politics. In terms of ethnic composition, statistics from City Population (2021) show that 91.6% of the city's population is white, 2.1% mixed, Asian at 4.4%, and black at 0.7%. According to the World Population Review (2022), the majority of the York population is Christian (117,856), the second largest religious population are Muslims (2,072) and 56,646 of the total population have no religion. The service industry dominates York's economy, including the public sector, healthcare, education, finance, technology and tourism. Every year, York has 1000 new jobs and supports 57 new businesses, 70% of which succeed (York Economy Strategy, 2015). Skill level is high as well as the level of earnings. The city is now recognized as the intellectual place for distinctive industries in the Northern Powerhouse (*ibid*.).

Moreover, York leads the UK's agri-tech and bio-economy research, attracting multi-national companies and innovative small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The east of the city has become a central place for a rapid global industry (York Economy Strategy, 2015). Internationally, York is a home for competitive enterprise and research expertise. Regarding education, York is a leading home to universities: the University of York, which is among the top 20 British universities and the top 100 world universities, and York St John (Gray, 2022). York college which is based in Bishopthorpe is considered one of the outstanding higher education colleges in the UK (York College, 2023). Tourism represents a significant economic element, accounting for almost 11% of York's employment. The city offers many historical attractions such as York Minster, the City Walls, the Yorvik Viking centre and Clifford's Tower. These attractions and others attract around 8.4 million visitors annually (YorkMix, 2020). Table 4 shows basic information about the city of York.

Table 4: York at a glance.

Households	• 87,742 households (2020/21). • 26,980 full-time students (2020/21). • 10% of children in child poverty. • Second-least deprived local authority district in the Yorkshire and Humber region (2019). • York has one neighbourhood ranked in the top 10% most deprived nationally (2019).
Education	• 50 primary schools (including 31 academies). • 9 secondary schools (including 6 academies). • 46 outstanding or good schools.
Economy & Skills	• 111,000 people employed (2020). • 8.4m visitors per year (2018). • £6.3bn economy (value of the goods and services (2019/20).
Health & Social Care	• 79.9 years male life expectancy (2020/21). • 83.6 years female life expectancy (2020/21). • 84% of residents said they had very good or good health.
Transport	• 86% of bus passengers satisfied or very satisfied (2019).
Environment	• 3.8 CO_2 emissions (tonnes) per head of population (2019). • 73 trees planted (2021/22).
Culture & Leisure	• 20 libraries including one mobile (May 22). • 70% of a residents' panel felt that the council is conserving York's heritage well (2021/22). • 96% of properties with access to superfast broadband.
Crime and Community Satisfaction	• 84% of a residents' panel were satisfied with their local area as a place to live (2021/22). • 74% of a residents' panel felt that York is a safe place to live. • 72% of a residents' panel felt that their local area is a good place for children and young people to grow up (2021/22).

Source: City of York Council (2022c).

Labour MP Racheal Maskell currently holds York Central constituency (from 2015). Voting turnout at the 2019 General Election was 66.1%. In the EU Referendum, the recorded voting turn-out of York was 70.7% (155,157 electors), of whom 38.82% voted to leave and 61.8% to remain (Democratic Dashboard, 2019).

In terms of social capital, there has been no accessible framework that assesses local-level indicators to measure and inform social capital across smaller geographical areas in the UK. In its latest publication, the ONS (2020) reported social capital measurements across geographical areas through 25 measures, covering social network support, trust, personal relationships and civic participation, but did not break data down by city, producing instead a set of areas of more significant density and a larger population suitable for data publication, such as London, Wales, Northern England, and Southern England. In light of the lack of data from the ONS, this study provides an initial study of more granular regional data and presents qualitative evidence for the first time on HE students' social capital in the city of York.

As an urban setting, York is likely to be primarily an area with higher social capital levels. Previous research has shown that living in urban areas affects people's well-being and makes them feel better about their local areas, and those who live in such areas are more likely to get involved in politics. It has been suggested that urban areas have a higher level of socio-economic status for individuals, which accounts for more social resources and networks to bring them together. Scholars have said a higher level of social capital leads to a higher level of political engagement (Putnam, 2000). This is not to say that York has no deprived areas. Critical accounts can provide interesting insights into the advantages of everyday sociability and various social networks but can also investigate the production of inequalities among residents (Holt, 2008, p. 228). Social inequality prevents community social cohesion and affects residents' self-esteem (Mohan et al., 2005, p. 1267). It is therefore helpful for the results of the current study to contribute, challenge and debate whether geographical contexts matter to social capital.

This study's conclusions do not contain confusion and ambiguity as it was a small-scale study with a specific target population of only HE students. However, the findings clearly cannot be generalized to the general population of young people in the UK. Smaller-scale studies involving qualitative methods, such as interviews, present an in-depth picture of the topic, but there is a need for further research in other contexts.

4.3.3. The Qualitative Research Approach

In this section, I shall explain the rationale for choosing a qualitative approach to the research questions. Qualitative research asks questions about 'how' instead of 'how much' (Brinkmann, 2013, p. 49). Mason stated that through qualitative research, we can explore everyday life's experiences and imaginings and understand how the social world works (2002, p. 1). Being a qualitative researcher implies generating explicit knowledge, knowing the previous literature, analysing life, showing understanding and wisdom and offering profound revelation. Qualitative researchers need to be deeply involved in the empirical materials, to make probable reasoning and to generate insightful configurations of the social world. They need to express their voice and trust it, to represent a deep investigation and analysis and to consider the relevant ethical issues (Saldanã, 2018, pp. 5-6).

The empirical investigation of social capital and political participation usually constitutes quantitative data. Reflecting on social capital, Putnam (2000) relied extensively on quantitative research methods to measure the theory. He used large numbers of charts and graphs from World Values Survey to measure the strength of social networks, belonging to a wide range of associational groups and social movements, social trust, interactions developed through the internet, and watching television. In the British context, Peter Hall (1999) used statistics from the Civic Culture Survey (1995) and the World Values Survey (1981-1990). In recent years, the UK General Household Survey (GHS) and the ONS have started giving updates on social capital in more prominent parts of the UK. For political participation, the types of political activity in which HE students take part are measured hugely through surveys, such as the European Value Study and the World Value Survey. In the UK, as in democratic countries, there is significant dependence on voting as the primary variable of political participation. The focus on voting, elections and referendums can be quantified more accurately than other forms of political activity. However, this excessive emphasis on electoral political participation has led to the exclusion of wider creative, diverse and rich types of political activity. Therefore, contemporary researchers interested in young people's political participation need to expand the topic using qualitative analyses. In the current study, a qualitative approach was used to provide a more representative and in-depth account of HE students' engagement in politics in all possible creative and diverse means. Undertaking qualitative research enabled me to explore the interviewees' anecdotal experiences through their own words and to explore the patterns in their thinking and reasoning, which would not have been possible from quantitative research.

In researching social capital and political participation, previous studies have predominantly used quantitative methods to acquire statistics about the number of social capital measures a person has and how these measures affect young people's participation in multiple political activities. In Britain and in some comparative studies in Europe, surveys are the most common research method used to gather data on the topic of social capital and political participation (Janmaat and Hoskins, 2022; Holecz, Fernández and Giugni, 2022; Power, 2020; Fox et al., 2019; Muddiman et al., 2019; Henn, Weinsten, and Hodgkinson, 2007; Lowndes, 2004). This current study used a qualitative approach to explore original evidence on how HE students experience and perceive social capital and the mechanisms which influence their political participation.

4.3.4. Semi-Structured Interviews

As stated above, many studies on social capital and political participation have used quantitative methods. This leaves a research gap in how the former affects the latter. For this study, I chose semi-structured interviews as a qualitative method. Interviews are data collection methods in which an interviewer puts questions to participants. In this type of interview, the interviewer has more flexibility in the order of the questions. The interviewer asks open-ended questions and has a clear list of issues to be developed. The interviewee is given the opportunity and time to elaborate on points of interest and can speak widely on the questions asked by the interviewer.

Semi-structured interviews were used in this study because they would enable me to uncover details of HE students' experiences, views and thoughts about social capital and political participation which have been underexplored in previous theoretical explanations in surveys. It is essential to highlight that the interview questions were not designed to measure new indicators of social capital and political participation but to explore these two issues and how they are related. By using semi-structured interviews, I could leave it to the interviewees to elaborate on the questions, add their own account about what constitutes social capital and political participation, and express their perspectives on the contextual nature of the subject matter. Semi-structured interviews can be conducted face-to-face or online (Nayak and Singh, 2015, p. 127).

Interviewing might look straightforward as it is based on asking questions and recording the answers; however, some researchers have found this frustrating (Brinkmann, 2013) because of the massive numbers of interviews, data and transcripts, which hinder the interviewer from being able to analyse the acquired material with relevant thought and knowledge. Another problem with interviewing has to do with timing. If researchers spend a more extended period on the interviewing process, less time is spent preparing the questions, analysing the responses and reflecting on the produced knowledge (Brinkmann, 2013, p. 5).

In conducting the interviews, I did not set a strict time limit for each question or set of questions. Whenever I felt I had sufficiently detailed answers to one of the questions, I moved on to the next question. Although listening to participants is a crucial feature of interviewing, some of them would give more information than I needed whereas others were less forthcoming, and I had to prompt them to offer more details of their experiences. When an interview is finished, it is important to write notes on it immediately. For example, I wrote down the things I wanted to remember, such as observations about an interviewee's changing intonation. Some of my participants laughed or giggled when I asked 'What do you think about the word 'politics'?' After the first interviews, I began to feel familiar with the core themes, such as the issues about which the young people felt strongly. For instance, women were more likely to show an interest in women's issues, such as feminism.

4.3.5. Sampling

An essential step in conducting interviews is the selection of participants. Nayak and Singh defined a sample as "a set of selected individuals, items, or data taken from a population of interest" (2015, p. 247). Samples for interviews are smaller than those of quantitative methods. However, samples have to represent a range of people's viewpoints, which is not significant to the point that data becomes repetitive (Mason, 2010). Sampling in qualitative research follows the logical definition of empirical research. This includes the number of interviewees, their gender, age and profession. Demographic features help an interviewer to assess the research project's variety and explain the impact of these features in the sample. Moreover, sampling in qualitative research is conceived as an instructive way to manage possible cases and materials and justify this selection for the study (Flick, 2007).

The group of people studied in this research included students at the University of York. Because they were students, there was a high chance that they would be young people. There is no agreement on what constitutes 'young people' in the main literature. As has already been explained, according to the UN definition, youth are those aged 15 to 24 years. In Britain, studies by market research agencies and offices such as Ipsos MORI, the Electoral Commission and the ONS define youth as those aged from 12 to 24 years old. This study specifically targeted those aged from 18 to 24 years because:

♦ Youth is a critical time of individual development within the social and political life course;

♦ Young people necessitate research as they have been ignored in most systematic research;

♦ Young people's social life is interesting in contemporary society due to the changes brought by technology and social media. The current generation has different perspectives on different aspects of life; and

♦ Young people's voices are not heard today. This current study could therefore be a significant tool to allow them to share their ideas and experiences, and also their concerns.

To deepen the understanding of the research subject, 29 interviews were carried out. Face-to-face interviews were significant in this research as they would help to capture feedback on the students' social capital and engagement in political activities. Although in-person interviews represent the best method to communicate, online chatting through Skype or social media platforms was also used when a participant could not physically attend. Online interviews are also useful; they can save time for the participant and the interviewer. Students were able to talk from a place where they felt comfortable. Employing these easy-to-use technologies allows geographical flexibility and recording (James and Busher, 2016). Two of the participants selected Skype as their preferred medium for the interview. There was no lack of signal from participants during the online interviews. Obtaining consent and protecting the privacy and confidentiality of the participants were similar to that for face-to-face interviews.

This study did not involve a random population. Purposive sampling matched the objective of the study. The main goal of this sampling technique is to focus on specific characteristics of the population to be studied. Usually, the sample recruited by a purposive technique is smaller than that in probability sampling techniques (Rai and Thapa, 2015). For this study, 29 students

in York aged from 18 to 24 years were targeted. This sample is not representative of the wider younger generation in Britain. However, as Rai and Thapa (2015) suggested, this is not considered a weakness if a researcher is employing qualitative or mixed methods. The chosen method gave the required relevance and depth to the subject.

Since purposive sampling produces a small sample and serves a specific purpose, it can be highly prone to bias. The findings cannot be generalised beyond the selected sample (Acharya et al. 2013). Selection bias can also impact the analysis of the results (Harbour Fronts, 2022). For example, many of the students interviewed claimed that they had an interest in political affairs. This finding does not appear to reflect the wider population: only 15% of those aged 16-25 have been found to be highly interested in politics (Redfield and Wilton Strategies, 2021). This is likely to be because those who report a higher interest in politics may be more willing to volunteer to take part in political research. In other words, the participants may have been more forthcoming to attend an interview because of their higher relative interest in politics. Selection bias has been noted especially in internet panel surveys (Malhotra and Krosnick, 2007), but can also be identified in qualitative research. This bias is exacerbated when there are no incentives for interviewees to participate in a study. Therefore, the analysis of the acquired data in the current study cannot be representative of all students or of the wider younger generation in Britain.

4.3.6. Validity and Reliability

The trustworthiness of the findings is highly significant in qualitative research. Nayak and Singh defined validity as "the accuracy and trustworthiness of instruments, data, and findings in research" (2015, p. 24). Data validity is associated with instrument validity. Data retrieved by instruments are valid when the researcher asks valid questions about participants' behaviour. The derived results and conclusions are valid when instruments and data are valid (*ibid*.).

To ensure that the interview data collected for this study were valid, I sent transcripts of the interviews to the participants in order for them to check them for accuracy and relevance. All of the participants confirmed that they had checked the transcripts and accepted them without modifications. Such member checking or respondent validation involves participants reading their responses in a written form. This ensures transparency about the study's objectives and

how their responses fit with the research design. Member checking reduces potential bias for the researcher and improves data accuracy (Birt et al., 2016).

The semi-structured interview questions were submitted to my supervisors and the Thesis Advisory Panel to determine their content validity. Evaluation of the pilot interviews led to revising leading questions, ambiguous and repetitive questions, complex concepts and language clarity, and improving the interview questions to achieve the goals of the study. To improve the content validity, I made the necessary changes to the interview questions and recognized the necessary type of information which should be included for interviewees to respond to the questions appropriately. For example, social capital is a complex concept, so content validity was achieved by including the four key mechanisms of family and friendship networks, community networks, social networking sites and social trust.

Face validity "evaluates the appearance of the questionnaire in terms of feasibility, readability, consistency of style and formatting, and the clarity of the language used" (Taherdoost, 2016, p. 29). Face validity in this study was achieved by explaining the objectives of the research to the interviewees before the interviews began. The advantage of face validity is that participants can be more aware of the context and thus provide more accurate responses and useful examples. Face validity is based on an agreement between the interviewee and the interviewer. For example, in this study, the students agreed to be asked about their age, ethnicity, education and occupation.

One of the most important aspects of a research design is reliability. Reliability is the degree to which the researcher's instruments produce similar results in other settings. Instruments can be scales or the questions which a researcher asks participants (Nayak and Singh, 2015, p. 24). A single participant completing an instrument should give consistent answers every time the instrument test is completed. Reliability helps the researcher to decide whether the results can be used in practice (Heale and Twycross, 2015, pp. 66-67).

A pilot study is beneficial for the reliability of any research. Pilot testing uses a small population to identify and thus prevent research design problems and ensure that the questions are intelligible and the measurement instruments are reliable. After pilot testing, the researcher can use the collected data to make any necessary adjustments (Nayak and Singh, 2015, p. 38). The interviews in this study were piloted with 7 current HE students based in the city of York, and studying at the University of York. The pilot study helped me with the formulation of the questions. Through this exercise, I learned that I should not finish the participants' sentences

for them or interrupt them in the middle of the conversation. The interview was tested for its length and adding more open-ended questions was necessary instead of leading questions. For example, I changed a question from *Are you a member of a social group? to What do you do in your free time?* The pilot interviewees preferred talking about how they got into politics and were more interested in discussing Brexit and how it affected their life. When a participant gave only a short response, I encouraged the respondent to give more thoughtful answers by pausing, waiting, and asking the interviewee to elaborate with more details and examples. This is another benefit of qualitative interviews as opposed to survey research; a researcher can probe participants and ask them follow-up questions. Moreover, the pilot testing taught me that I must not show any approving or disapproving expressions, such as nodding or smiling. I wrote down crucial observations and keywords immediately after the interviews were completed, which proved useful in the interpretation of the participants' responses.

4.3.7. Ethical Considerations

Before carrying out research with higher education students, I required ethical approval. Ethical approval was sought and received from the ELMPS Ethics Committee at the University of York in February 2019. The following documents were submitted to the committee: 1) the ELMPS application form, 2) the proposed informed consent form for the participants, 3) the privacy notice and participant information sheet, and 4) the ELMPS compliance form. Points requiring explanations in the ethical application were:

1. Details of the project.
2. An outline of the aims of the project and the key research questions.
3. A summary of the proposed data collection methods.
4. The sampling and recruitment of participants.
5. Obtaining informed consent.
6. The guarantee of participants' anonymity.
7. Anticipated risks or ethical problems.
8. Data protection procedures.

Informed consent was obtained by providing the participants with a form which they had to complete and return before the interviews began (see Appendix 3, p. 229). The consent form

was checked to make sure that the participants would understand the objectives of the research. It was made clear that participation was voluntary and that participants were free to withdraw from the project at any time without having to give an explanation. Participants were reassured that any information recorded would remain confidential and that the data collected in the interviews would be stored confidentially and used only for presentation in my PhD thesis and any related publications or other research studies. An information sheet was given to all participants, and this contained details of the researcher, her main supervisor and the Chair of the Economics, Law, Management, Politics and Sociology group (ELMPS). Participants were informed that they could contact these individuals to discuss any concerns which they might have.

The population of this study was 29 British higher education students. I interviewed 19 current and former university students initially from York and ten others from other cities who were currently studying or working in York. This enabled me to understand what York offers to newcomers: does it have enough opportunities for students to establish contacts and build social relationships? To get easy access to students, I approached British students at the University of York, sent text messages, and made phone calls to individuals with whom either I or some of my friends had had previous contact. I requested these potential participants to pass on my invitation to their colleagues and friends. Through this snowball method, I was able to recruit most of the interviewees. A characteristic of snowballing is engaging research assistants informally to access the relevant population of the study. These people communicate the interviewer's needs and send out information on his/her behalf. This approach reduces scepticism and reluctance from potential participants (Streeton, Cooke and Campbell, 2004).

I also used other methods of recruiting participants. The call for participants explained that I was looking for the lived experienced of British HE students in the areas of social capital and political participation. I emailed the Graduate Student Association at the University of York and the president advised me to post my call for participants on the Association's website, but this produced no responses. I also emailed different charities and youth groups. Eventually, two female workers from two different charities based in York (former HE education students) contacted me and offered to participate and three students contacted me from York College, which is based in Bishopthorpe, a suburb of York. The interviewees had a mixture of ethnic backgrounds: fourteen were White British, six were British Arab, three were mixed race, and six were British Asian (from Pakistan). The sample comprised thirteen male and sixteen female British people aged 18 to 24. Overall, the genders of the participants did not affect their

responses although gathering demographic data about potential participants is a necessary part of demonstrating that the participants had the relevant knowledge to provide the insights which an interviewer seeks (Rowley, 2012, p. 264).

The focus of this study was one-on-one interviews: 27 interviews were conducted in person, and two were conducted via Skype. I started the interviews before I had recruited all the participants. These one-on-one interviews helped to facilitate the fieldwork and enabled me to establish new contacts and ask them to recommend other potential participants. They also helped me to explain the research objectives clearly to each interviewee, and we had an opportunity to exchange ideas after completing the interview. There were no risks to participants such as physical harm, emotional distress or conflict of interest. The interviews take place in a public area, and no participant has a close relationship with the researcher. I was respectful of participants' values and opinions which might differ from my own. The two online interviews were easier to schedule, and I did not notice any significant differences between offline and online interviews in terms of the depth of data.

Anonymity was explained at the beginning of each interview and ensured for every interviewee. I assured the participants that the information which they provided would not be traced back to them in my report. I also assured them I would replace their names with pseudonyms but would mention their age, ethnicity, education and geographical background as these details provide context for each participant's interview and were relevant to the data analysis. Mobile numbers and social media profiles were collected for contact purposes only. The personal data acquired was used only for the research project and was kept separately and securely only for the project duration. Hard copies were kept in a locked office on University premises and electronic data were saved only on the University's secure and password-protected server. I encrypted the folders containing data on my personal computer and used a password to protect the data. All personal data were thus secured and no third party could analyse any of the data. The University of York's policy states that "Where possible, relevant elements of research data must be deposited in an appropriate national or international subject-based repository, according to their policies. Data should be kept by the researcher in an appropriate manner when suitable subject repositories are not available", and these requirements were fully met.

4.4. The Interview Process

Some of the interviews were conducted in the Morrell Library at the University of York and eight were held in café locations elsewhere in the city. I conducted all the interviews personally and the locations and times were suggested by the participants. Inviting students to take part in the research was not an easy task. At the beginning of the fieldwork, my frustration was how to get people I did not know to participate in the study. As a full-time student, I understood that they were busy and valued their time. Students' reactions to taking part in the research were different. Some willingly took part in it and recommended their friends to me, others did not as they were not interested in being interviewed, and others hesitated to take part as I had not been sufficiently clear about the purpose of the research.

Two of the 7 participants I interviewed in the pilot study told me that they had expected questions that would test their knowledge about political affairs, politicians and political parties. I questioned what message I was giving about the research in the first call for participants: 'Do students think they have to be knowledgeable in politics, more interested or more engaged to participate in my study?' I considered that this issue was communicated clearly in a revised draft of the call for participants. I stated that my participants were welcome to take part in an interview without knowing anything about politics because I was more interested in their experiences and perceptions of politics, so it did not matter whether they were interested in politics or not. After I made the objectives of the study clearer, more students were encouraged to participate. It might be expected that those who volunteered to take part were likely to be studying politics or to be interested in politics, but I interviewed both categories. Those interested in politics did respond quickly to my call for participants, but I held several interviews with students who were less interested or not interested at all in the subject.

For the interview, I prepared and memorized a list of questions, but I wanted to have flexibility rather than strictly following the question order. The list of questions was modified after the pilot interviews. I removed leading questions in order to allow my participants a free and open discussion. Before I started each interview, I explain briefly what social capital means, what political participation is and why I was interested in investigating these topics. My main intention was to encourage the students to talk freely about their experiences with politics. I explained to them that all their experiences and perceptions, whether positive or negative,

would be helpful and lead to an interesting result which would continually allow improvement in youth studies.

No interview took longer than an hour; the two shortest interviews took 20 minutes. I got concise responses from the shortest interviews, despite trying to develop the questions or ask alternative questions. In such a situation, short answers might not fully respond to the questions.

In the interviews, social trust was found to be a sensitive topic. Most of the interviewees did not go into detail. When she gave feedback about trust, a young female interviewee asked me to put her name anonymously. The students were generally open to saying they trusted their family members more than their friends or people they meet in groups or online. Within the political participation framework, some students giggled when asked what they thought about when they heard the word 'politics'. This made me wonder why politics is a laughing matter. It was not immediately clear why students seemingly laugh about it. Perhaps students shape their perceptions of politicians rather than politics. Laughing might also express scepticism and disappointment.

All the interviews were tape-recorded with the participants' consent. Interviews can bring up a lot of thoughts, but sometimes participants expand on the topic after the interview is completed. I therefore asked the participants to add anything which they had forgotten to mention in the interview or to comment on any questions. It was surprising how many times this prompted interesting responses which they had missed out during the interview. Some students reflected on how they felt about contemporary British politics. They expanded on issues in which they were interested, such as Brexit, race, racism and feminism. Overall, the interviewees were genuinely helpful and their comments tended to be positive and supportive rather than negative. They gave me valuable answers and even asked me further questions about the nature of my research and its contribution. After the interviewees had left, I made notes to ensure a better subsequent analysis. The participants did not receive any incentives for taking part in the interviews.

4.5. Qualitative Data Analysis Procedure

If researchers are not clear about the process of analysing data, the evaluation of the trustworthiness of the data becomes challengeable (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 2). Thematic analysis was used to describe and analyse themes resulting from the qualitative data acquired from the

interviews. Nowell et al. (2017, p. 2) defined thematic analysis as "a qualitative research method that can be widely used across a range of epistemologies and research questions". Thematic analysis identifies and organises themes across a dataset in order to offer insight into shared meanings, thoughts and experiences. Many patterns could emerge across a dataset but the focus should be on identifying those relevant to answering the research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2012, p. 57). A trustworthy thematic analysis should provide readers with credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, audit trails and reflexivity (*ibid*., p. 3).

All the recorded interviews were transcribed only by me into Microsoft Word 2016 documents. The transcription included the spoken words, laughter, pauses and speech sounds (such as 'mm', 'hm' and 'ah'). When I was not able to grasp the spoken words, I listened to the recording again in order to ensure the accuracy and objectivity of the transcription process. Moreover, observing students' changing intonation such as laughter, excitement and anger helped me in the data analysis. For example, some participants laughed when asked about politics and when they were referring to some politicians. Others showed excitement and at other times anger when talking about the things about which they felt strongly, such as feminism, Brexit and poverty. This is an advantage of interviews as it would not be possible to examine such observations with quantitative survey research. During the transcription, confidentiality and anonymity were carefully preserved. After transcribing the interviews, I read through the transcripts to become fully familiarized with the information which the students had provided. After that, their responses were organised according to the research questions. For each research question, the data were analysed manually and then coded. Coded data which fitted into the analysis were transferred into themes. I diagrammed the themes on a whiteboard and included all relevant themes. This included writing down the most important quotes from the interview responses and analyse them to see what they show.

Codes for analysis involved both themes already discussed in the literature review and emerging themes from the dataset. During the coding process, students' accounts of social capital and political participation were demonstrated. I learned about numerous social networks which the students used and how important they were to their social life. I could also identify patterns of the political activities in which they participated and know their opinions about these activities. Finally, the mechanisms of social capital which affected their political participation became evident.

4.6. Researcher's Positionality

It is essential to acknowledge my positionality in this research. The term positionality "reflects the position that the researcher has chosen to adopt within a given research study" (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013, p. 71). Researchers must locate their beliefs and values about the study design (Holmes, 2020, p. 2). I am an outsider to the culture being studied. My position as a woman of North African origins discussing issues of British politics made me concerned throughout the drafting of the study. I have lived in Algeria for most of my life, and citizens there struggle to engage in conversations about politics. I did not know what to expect from young British people.

As an outsider, I do not have an intimate knowledge of HE students in the UK and did not share the same characteristics and experiences as the participants. What emerged from my semi-structured interviews was interesting and helpful. Through conversations with students of different ethnicities, geographical backgrounds, religious beliefs and interests, I heard interesting stories in which they shared their experiences about social and political activities. The participants were open to discussing issues which mattered to them. The male participants were more reticent, not revealing their thoughts and feelings, compared with the females. The females can best be described as expressive, forthcoming and communicative. However gender did not affect the analysis of the findings. My study show that context is the key to when the female participants were more expressive. Women's issues such as gender-based violence, underrepresentation of some women and sexuality were a few subjects that the female participants explained. Being an outsider researcher helped me interact with the participants based on their own experiences only. I was far away from reflecting on my own lived experiences and was more aware of any assumptions, judgements and analyses of the emerging themes.

I told the interviewees that my role was simply to ask questions and that they were free to withdraw from the interview at any time they wished. No participant did this; instead, they were open to engaging in our conversations. There was mutual respect and feelings of comfort. I was able to receive valuable information from the participants. They responded to my questions when I contacted them for further explanations after the interviews were completed. I did not feel unrelated to them at all, but at best, my experience restored my faith in young people, and I was motivated to share their experiences and make their voices and thoughts heard. They made me realise that my background has no limitations and helped me stay

motivated during the data collection and analysis. My positionality in the study taught me to be mindful, forthright and transparent in communicating my research aims.

4.7. Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have described and justified the research methodology and the interview process. I stated the paradigm and explained the philosophical position of the research, the use of a qualitative method and the advantage of using this method. I explained the selection of the study area and the sampling techniques. This was followed by describing the process of data collection. Finally, I briefly explained how the acquired data were analysed.

The following chapters present the results from the interviews to understand HE students' social capital and explore how it affects their political participation. This study has two research questions and each will be addressed in a separate chapter. Chapter 5 which follows is about the interviewees' social capital.

Chapter 5: Mechanisms Shaping Social Capital: a Case Study of Higher Education Students in York

5.1. Introduction

This thesis combines the study of political participation and social capital among HE students in York. There have been many theoretical studies of social capital but only a few broad studies have addressed how HE students experience social capital in Britain. Furthermore, the underlying resources through which different mechanisms of social capital affect students' political participation have not yet been explored. This chapter presents the results of a qualitative analysis of 29 semi-structured interviews with 18-24-year-old students in the city of York. Arguably, the use of a qualitative approach is distinctive in the field in seeking to understand this topic from extensive survey data. A qualitative study was deliberately employed in order to understand the students' perceptions of social capital and explain how it affects their political participation. The findings are presented in two separate chapters. This current chapter will present the analysis of the mechanisms which shaped the HE students' social capital and Chapter 6 will analyse the underlying mechanisms through which social capital affected their political participation.

In this chapter, I shall advance the understanding of the mechanisms which shaped social capital for a group of HE students. The significant results show how the 29 young participants perceived social capital based on their experiences. Four different important mechanisms which influence students' social capital were analysed: family and friendship networks, community networks, social networking sites and social trust. 'Mechanisms' refers to the social resources which the students had. Exploring these resources will help to understand what they generate in terms of other resources and what outcomes they might have. Quotations from the participants' responses are used to illustrate ideas and support the interpretations. The findings show that the four mechanisms were influential and complement each other. To have access to social capital, the students used both their bonding and bridging social ties. However, I argue that each mechanism has a different result. The mechanisms of family and friends proved more advantageous in producing bonding social capital, whereas community networks were valid in the case of bridging social capital. Social networking sites influenced social capital by helping the students to maintain their bonding social ties and connect to new information through weak ties. Regarding the mechanism of social trust, the analysis shows that the participants had higher levels of social trust through bonding social ties than through bridging social ties. The findings show that these mechanisms generate other resources, including a higher frequency of social interaction, social support, information and a sense of community.

5.2. Analysis, Presentation and Discussion of Data: HE Students' Social Capital in York

RQ1. How do higher education students experience social capital?

The participants' answers were obtained from 29 semi-structured interviews held in 2019 and early 2020. The first research question explored how HE students understand social capital. In Britain, few studies have been particularly concerned with exploring the mechanisms which shape HE students' social capital (Wong, 2018; Dumanage, 2007; Collings, Swanson and Watkins, 2014; Wilcox, Winn and Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). This empirical study explored the diversity and quality of social capital mechanisms among HE students. The analysis is based on how the interviewees used the resources emerging from their relationship networks and to what extent it was important to have social capital in their life. The following points were considered during the data analysis:

- the operationalisation of social capital characterizes it as a resource which enables HE students to have access to other resources;

- the mechanisms of social capital should not be regarded as social capital. Social capital enables HE students to access social resources whereas the mechanisms enable social capital from a resource to put into action;

- I distinguish between bonding and bridging social capital. Bonding social capital (strong ties) is a resource which helps HE students to build ties with their family and friends. Bridging social capital (weak ties) helps them to build relationships with people across a wider group of individuals;

- social interaction, social support, information and a sense of community are resources generated by the mechanisms of social capital. Social interaction and social support (emotional support) are achieved through bonding social capital whereas a sense of community is achieved through bridging social capital. With the latter, social support and social interaction are less influential.

The findings show that the mechanisms of family and friendship networks, community networks, social networking sites and social trust are valuable assets. The results show that among the interviewees, higher social interaction and support were strongly related to family and friendship networks. Community networks generated social interaction, a sense of community and social support, but the impact of both social interaction and support was not as

influential as with family and friendship networks. The findings show that the students used social networking sites both to maintain their bonding social ties and to increase their bridging social capital through content and information sharing. The influence of trust was more apparent in family and friendship networks, otherwise the interviewees spoke of trust in terms of feelings of comfort and respect in community networks. They reported the lowest levels of trust in social networking sites. The findings related to the first research question are presented next.

5.2.1. Family and Friendship Networks

The purpose of this section is to explore how the participating HE students experienced family and friendship networks. Overall, the findings supported the argument that interaction with family and friends helps to build bonding social capital: most of the interviewees had frequent interaction with family members.

> *I talk a lot with my family. We are very close.* (Priyanka, 20, female, mixed race)
>
> *I live with my parents. So I see them every single day and I talk to them every single day. I am very close to my mum. With my mum, conversations matter hugely to me.* (Lilly, 22, female, White British)
>
> *Well, I live with my family now, so I talk to them every day.* (Idris, 21, male, mixed race)

Widmalm (2005) stated that bonding social capital is more relevant to day-to-day activities. The conversations which the participants had with their families revolved around talking about personal issues, university/college, things that had to be done around the house, going to cafés, clubs, mosques and churches together, and discussing politics, social issues and human rights. The like-mindedness of parents and the tendency to have social interaction is helpful for increasing young people's self-esteem, creativity, individual abilities, exploration and leadership (Alamolhoda, 2021). There is further evidence about the role of the family in employment. For example, Idris spoke about his experience of engaging with the mosque. His family's love for the mosque had encouraged him to learn Arabic and study the Qur'an. After he had developed an interest in Arabic and learned the language, he became a teacher of Arabic,

worked as an office administrator at an Islamic centre, and was a member of a mosque association. He was influenced by the role his parents had in the mosque. He reported that they frequently donated to the mosque and met together to pray every Friday. This finding is an example of the effect of social capital on students' career choices (Hallsten et al., 2017).

The interviewees said that social support was the most crucial aspect of their relationship with family. For them, social support was having emotional links, sympathy, positivity, love, care and deep conversations about many things.

> *I talk to my mom about anything and everything with my mom which is nice… she is open-minded; obviously I am quite left wing so when similar ideas I come up with like taboos because she is Indian, it is quite uncomfortable, but she is really open to listen and so my dad they are really good.* (Emma, 24, female, mixed race)

In this respect, this relationship enhances the quality of life as parents and children tend to share similar values. The findings showed that family members play a positive role in their children's lives (Stuhlsatz et al., 2021; Hoffmann, Jared and Dufur, 2020; Jarvis et al., 2020; Claridge, 2018; Abdollahpour and Keramat, 2016; Beugelsdijk and Smulders, 2009). The resources generated by the family were found to represent the positive side of social capital. The findings also showed that mothers' social interaction and social support were more relevant to the participants. Most of the interviewees mentioned their mothers' emotional presence, reporting that mothers were more influential than fathers. They described their mothers as caring, sensitive and open-minded. Lilly reported that her mother's presence was hugely important to her:

> *My mum, that's the most important relationship in my life and I wouldn't be able to cope without her. Even if it is just as simple as like getting up in the morning and like offering each other a cup of tea. Having someone there makes a big difference I think.* (Lilly)

This finding supports the literature that family plays a significant role in the social capital of women, particularly in maintaining their emotional support (Ferlander et al., 2016; O'Neill and Gidengil, 2006). The female interviewees were more expressive than the males when discussing their relationships: they said how much they valued the presence of their family in their lives, whereas the males reported how often they talked to their families. This finding

does not suggest that the men did not benefit from family contact, but they were less likely to express their perceptions about their relationship with their parents. Akram was the only male participant who reported interacting with his friends more than his family. This might be in line with the ONS (2015) finding that men are less likely to rely on their families in the case of a problem.

The results provide interesting evidence of the bonding social capital experienced by the interviewees. As already discussed, Emma explained how much she appreciated her relationship with her mother, especially since she was relatively isolated in York. She said that she enjoyed having deep conversations with her about almost everything (news, politics, religion) but she nevertheless believed that ringing her mother twice a day was quite unhealthy. This aspect of social capital has been previously identified and has been called "too much of a good thing" (Herrero and Hughes, 2019). That said, social capital is generally desirable, but it can be unpleasant when expressed excessively.

The findings enrich the understanding of some HE students' bonding social capital by illustrating the networks of some minority groups. As discussed above, family members provided social and emotional support to the students, but the findings also showed that members of the LGBT community were unlikely to receive the same social support from their family as their peers. Two participants, Jane, a lesbian, and Kate, a bisexual, reported that their families did not support their homosexuality. The both said they knew that they would lose their families' support before coming out. Kate spoke about her inability to show physical affection to her female partner outside the home. She mentioned a man who had asked her not to kiss her girlfriend in front of his children. When asked how important it was for them to feel welcomed in their community, Jane and Kate said that it is essential to have family support when coming out. Although it might have seemed a negative experience for her, Kate expressed her gratitude for having friends in the LGBT community and being able to get involved in LGBT-related activities. She made positive comments about having a community which shared her values. This finding supports the idea that young people are more likely to befriend people whose sexual orientations are the same as their own (Trinh et al., 2019; Yuan and Gay, 2006).

In this next section, I explore the friendship network, a bonding social capital mechanism which has been less studied than the classic networks of Putnam and his followers' membership of civic associations. Beyond the circle of family, the interviewees reflected on strong ties with friends. They reported having three to six close friends. Those who lived with their family in

York reported that they talked to their friends daily, and that these conversations tended to be shorter than those with family members. However, those who lived away from their family reported that they talked to their friends more often and the things which they talked about with friends were often personal, such as university/college life, what they see on social media, movies, television shows, books, feminism, available jobs, UK and international politics, and religion:

> *Now my friends matter so much to me. Being able to tell them things like what is going on with me and being able to say 'Oh my God I am so stressed right now'. They can do something to take my mind off at that. They are so helpful, and I make a conscious effort to try to see them outside of study. So, like doing a movie night tonight or going for food with my friend next week. I have to work on the friendships because they are so important to me now.* (Lilly)

The findings are consistent those of with Holland (2009) that friendship is a valuable source of young people's social capital. They also show that friendship served as an interactive network of people with whom the students frequently communicated. Similar to previous studies, it was found that these young people spent most of their time with friends (Uink et al., 2016). Interestingly, the participants reported that they were more likely to be with their friends during university hours, they engaged with them in physical contexts such as clubs, university societies and charities, and they called and texted them on a daily basis. Being with friends during stressful times opens up a supportive space which helps to reduce young people's emotional turbulence. The participants said that their friendships were frequently formed through similar characteristics and common interests (Claridge, 2018; Fowler, Settle and Christakis, 2011).

> *… so, like, one of my friends, I always talk to her if I have issues like religiously and morally … we kind of have the same values so if there is something I am worried about, something I am not sure about, and she is there, I know she will tell me the right thing to do… so I will discuss that with her but I won't discuss it with my classmates because I know we are different.* (Sarah, 19, female, British Asian)

> *My friends and I share similar interests. We go clubbing together and we love the same sports, and we agree on most things in life. I think it's easier this way. However, I don't mind being a friend with any race or religion as long as they are nice people and respectful.* (James, 21, male, White British)

Given that the friendship network represents a space for frequent communication, it is not surprising that the participants strove to have deeper conversations and to exchange information about various subjects (Fowler, Settle and Christakis, 2011). However, sharing information and discussing controversial topics is not always an essential characteristic of friendship. Emma thought that deeper networking should be avoided:

> *I've got friends from London that I visit often, and with them, it is more of a shallow conversation, like how we are doing and what we are up to and personal stuff rather than big stuff like political stuff.* (Emma)

Emma believed that when friends meet, the main reason is to have fun. Difficult topics such as politics would make them feel uncomfortable.

The findings showed that the women's friendship relationships were characterized by higher social and emotional support. Compared with men, women have reported they are more satisfied with their friends and receive more social support from them (Antonucci and Akiyama, 1987). The findings showed that the female interviewees devoted much more time to visiting and talking to their friends than the males, which corresponds with previous findings (Lowndes, 2004). This finding does not imply significant differences between the women and the men in the current study. The men tended to have as many friends as the women and to make friends similarly, but this element of social capital tended to be more pronounced in the women. For both genders, the findings suggest that friendship networks improve young people's bonding social capital. They form higher levels of personal contact, sharing the same interests and valuable information. Only one participant reported that having too many friends can be distracting and overwhelming. This is the second piece of evidence that bonding social capital can be experienced excessively:

> *I think it is good to have a good social network of friends that you can rely on. But I think I always try to limit that because if it gets too much it can be overwhelming, sometimes even distracting from your goals and what you should be doing at the moment. So, I like to balance between my work and my social life.* (Nada, 22, female, British Arab)

This section has presented the findings regarding bonding social capital, including family and friendship networks. Family and friendship networks are social capital mechanisms which help

to produce bonding social capital understood as resources. These resources include social interaction and social and emotional support and can help to facilitate political participation; this will be investigated in more detail in Chapter 6.

5.2.2. Community Networks

Community networks are social gatherings which bring people together (Foley, 2006, p. 157). In the current study, community networks helped the HE students by connecting them to people across weak ties or bridging social capital. Bridging social capital "encompasses people across diverse social cleavages" (Putnam, 2000, p. 22). The community network literature suggests that it is an active mechanism in social capital research. However, few studies have explored the distinct community networks that HE students join, and little is known about the benefits they derive from their stocks of bridging social capital. In this section, I shall explain the context for the community networks which students become part of. These are social groups, voluntary organisations, social gatherings and any other networks in which young people join in social activities. The findings showed that bridging social capital, which includes HE students' engagement in community networks, provides a sense of belonging, identity and social support.

To explore the mechanism of community networks, I asked the interviewees what they did in their free time. They replied that they got involved in different social groups and associations. The young people's community networks reported in this study can be divided into educational and group based. Table 5 illustrates the distinctions between those networks. Community networks are a mechanism of social capital which people can join and membership produces resources in the form of bridging social capital which might help young people to participate in politics.

Table 5. Students' networks mentioned in the interviews

College/university-based networks	Group-based networks
The students tended to socialize with others whom they met in student societies, such as the Islamic Society, the Arab Society, the Palestinian Solidarity Society, York's Philosophy Society, reading clubs and youth clubs.	The students tended to spend time in identity and interest groups, such as volunteering for LGBT charities, mental health groups and groups addressing trauma.
Those from outside York were more likely to join societies.	They tended to meet people with shared characteristics, values and interests.
College students tended to join youth clubs	Locality was important. The students preferred going to groups which were close to where they lived.
Locality was not important: the students met from different geographies.	They showed a high level of unpaid volunteering, such as helping charities, teaching children for free and volunteering for hospitals.
Student societies make students feel more connected, especially those who were not from York, giving them a strong sense of belonging.	They tended to work out and play different sports, but social interaction was minimal.
	Few students tended to go to places of worship, such as a church or a mosque. They might go with family members but there was minimal social interaction.

Overall, the interviewees reported that they were members of at least one community network. When asked about the frequency of meetings, most of them said that they went to them once a week to twice a month. Most of the time, they reported positive experiences with members of their community networks. They commonly used the terms interaction, inclusion, belonging, optimism, self-confidence, cooperation, support, experience sharing and information sharing. It is not possible to represent and interpret all of these resources due to the limited scope of this study, but I selected three resources which the students emphasized in the interviews: social interaction, a sense of belonging and a sense of identity were reported to be resources produced by the mechanism of community networks. Community network refers to student societies, clubs, charities and all kinds of networks where young people take on social activities.

First, the participants joined community networks in order to interact with other members socially. This participation was emphasized more by students from other cities. Because they spent a substantial amount of time at the university or college and interacted with other

students, this directly influenced their participation in student societies. For example, Aya from Bradford spoke about her involvement in the York community. She stated that

> *… within the university, I am involved in the Pakistani Society, the Islamic Society, the Feminism Society and the Women's Society. I interact with everyone at the events. If I did not join the societies, I would feel less welcomed.* (Aya, female, 18, British Asian)

This supports the findings of previous studies suggesting that students' participation in their institutions reinforces positive norms, increases their self-esteem, makes them feel responsible and valued, and sets an example for others (World Assembly of Youth, 2015). These findings inform us that student societies are open to university and college students, so it can be difficult to tell whether these results apply to non-students.

Second, the students reported joining social networks to satisfy the sense of belonging to a group. They felt the need to be included, linked and accepted somewhere. This sense of belonging represents a human need to survive and a source of motivation (Afroz and Tiwari, 2016).

> *I started volunteering in 2018. The refugee forum gathers some Syrian youths for gardening. It is a good experience as I feel part of my community. I also learned new skills related to gardening.* (Akram, 20, male, British Arab)

> *If I did not go to the international organisation, then I would just be individually sitting at home not doing so much.* (Idris)

> *I think I am glad I have social connections with course mates. I feel if I didn't connect with them, I wouldn't have them. That is something I like because it means I have a group of people to talk to.* (Sarah)

Third, the interviewees reported joining networks to enhance their sense of identity (Hixson, 2014). Their responses showed that a sense of identity represents the will to fit in with others. Gender, race, and religious differences were only found in this study in relation to students' community networks:

> *I chose societies depending on my culture because I feel we can understand each other more and the interaction feels easier and more natural.* (Akram*)*

I think the point of me going to the Islamic Society is to meet people who are like me. In general, people who come to the Islamic Society come for the same reason and I became more involved and approachable. (Sarah)

Back home in Somerset, I had a group of friends but I was very close to those who were from the LGBT and a lot of us had not so great relationships with our families, so we have been relying on supporting each other and then working with the LGBT charity; it gets me a lot of people who maybe if it wasn't for that charity, I wouldn't have other LGBT people in my life. (Kate, 24, White British, bisexual)

This sense of identity has a strong correlation with social support. In line with some previous studies, social support is not random; there is a strong association between the sense of identity and the social support received by group members (Haslam et al., 2005). Conversely, some students reported joining social networks to support group members who needed it. A support group enables students to engage with weak ties and provide social support, both emotional and informational, to vulnerable people. Aya stated that it is important to provide social capital without receiving anything back. This finding contradicts previous suggestions that social capital is a reciprocal process (Coleman, 1988). Emma reported that she provided practical support to vulnerable women who were experiencing sexual abuse. This finding is consistent with the literature suggesting that women provide support, solidarity and care values, all of which encourage them to organize collective actions (Westermann et al., 2005):

I provide something called companionship at the hospital. People who are lonely tell me about their lives and I listen. They are nice. Just being with them and engaging with them, writing letters, like speech therapy, is important. Doing something without getting anything in return is precious. (Aya)

I work for a children's charity and basically, we have a course called Beyond Trauma for women who experience trauma, and they can bring their children and we provide cooking facilities. (Emma)

In many ways, bridging social capital which encompasses community networks has been linked to positive resources that might help students to participate in politics. Idris said that his experience with student societies had always been positive as "*they show the diversity of everybody's experiences, and they help me gain knowledge*". However, not all of the participants reported a positive experience in their community. Sarah from Nottingham and a

student at the University of York described her unpleasant experience with people in the building where she lived:

> *I think my community would be my flat. Some people below me knocked on my door a couple of times and they were rude and said you have been making a lot of noise and that was a bad experience. Sometimes I feel like whenever I see these people, they kind of give me a weird look and that makes me feel uncomfortable.* (Sarah).

The findings suggest that the women and men participated differently in community groups and associations. Supported by the literature, the findings showed that young women were more likely to be part of diverse groups and organisations than men and to invest more in associational life than men (Putnam, 2000; Moore, 1990). The findings also showed that the women were more likely to participate in networks related to charity work (Fluskey, 2017; Lowndes, 2004). Female participants reported that they volunteered for charities and gave to charities, and one reported that she bought clothes from charity shops. Often, this was linked with a personal experience. For example, young people volunteer because charities provide them with social support and support for other vulnerable people. Nada's response in the interview supports this finding:

> *A charity called Student Action for Refugees helped me in so many ways, and it made a difference in my life. So I wanted to give back and contribute to the charity … I wanted to raise awareness about the UK legal system for immigrants and asylum seekers.* (Nada)

The participants also talked about the importance of community groups on mental health:

> *… it is definitely important to feel part of the community, and it affects you even sometimes mentally. Seeing someone and having a conversation with them can improve your mood and improve your day.* (Sophie, 22, female, White British)

The men in this study were more likely to participate in education networks for career purposes than the female participants. Examples from their interview responses about college and university societies were the Politics Society, the Palestinian Society, York's Philosophy Society, the International Association Society, a youth club and a reading club. Bilal reported

that he went to a youth club to interact with his peers interested in the automobile industry. Many of Bilal's interview responses were about car-related interests. He studied computing and had a part-time job at a garage because he wanted to pursue a career in vehicle engineering. According to Idris, it is essential to go to student societies. He stated that he wanted to keep on top of the news and know about others' opinions because he wanted to be a diplomat or work in international relations. This finding is consistent with the literature that suggests that men benefit from student networks to get career advice (Fang, 2015; Fang and Huang, 2017).

The gender difference in the students' networks was minimal as the male and female participants shared the same characteristics related to age, education and community purpose, and both genders had the same access to social capital. Both males and females joined student societies, volunteered for charities, engaged in social gatherings, and acknowledged their importance in the community (Charity Commission, 2016). They joined those societies to feel connected and welcomed in their community. Whether women have less or more access to social capital than men, they are identical in their political participation; this will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

The findings showed that some community involvements were solitary regarding social interaction, such as places of worship and the gym:

> *When I go to the gym, I do not really interact with people. I just go hoping to get something out of it. I just like to keep myself to myself.* (Sarah)

This example shows that network membership is insufficient for exploring social capital. Instead, "social capital is a quality between people" (Burt, 1997, p.339). 'Quality' here refers to the value that a specific network adds to students' opportunities, power and well-being. Overall, the interviewees felt optimistic about their involvement in various community groups, including feeling supported and included. Kate, Nada and Idris explained the potential benefit of the charity for which they volunteered:

> *Uhm, I think volunteering is really validating and reassuring, to know that there are other people in the world who are equally focused on doing something good for the community they live in as opposed to everyone living in their own world and focusing only on money, so it is reassuring and positive in that way.* (Kate)

I volunteer with a charity called Student Action for ... they work on empowering students who welcome refugee students in the UK ... they support students, they have volunteering project things in the community to help refugees like conversational clubs, homework clubs and they have their own conferences and different speakers from different governmental organisations coming and speaking and delivering workshops so they educate students in the UK around how we can support and welcome refugees. (Nada*)*

At the mosque, I am either teaching the kids about Islam or talking to their fathers. Sometimes, I talk about the mosque situation, like raising money for charities or donating zakat. (Idris)

A sense of community not only resulted from student societies and volunteering. Leisure activities such as clubbing and theatre-going shaped the students' bridging social ties. The white students were found to be more likely to go clubbing. They said that clubs are places for social interaction. When drinking alcohol, Mike said that people are open to saying what is in their minds:

I talked about Palestine in pubs at least ten times last term in the pubs in the area. It's a very interesting thing to do. I recommend it to people because when people drink, they become a lot more open, and I had a lot of people telling me that they do not want to get involved because they think Palestinians do just as bad things as the Israelis do. People think they are being completely neutral and people after that will tell you 'no, I didn't mean to say that, I was just drunk'. But it's insane, so I had to explain the reality of the world, that the rest of the world supplies Israel with weapons and they bury Palestinians' houses. (Mike, 20, male, White British)

This extract reflects how some young people perceive pubs. This finding is consistent with previous studies which showed that pubs are "the most important social institution for promoting interactions between people from different backgrounds at the local level" (Muir, 2012, p.33). Another body of research has shown that pubs have deep interactions which enhance social cohesion (Sforzi and Bianchi, 2020). It is therefore essential to support engagement in these networks by keeping local pubs active and purchasing shares in new pubs (*ibid*.). These findings suggest that community networks which enable young people from a wide range of backgrounds to interact generate positive social resources related to social capital.

It can be assumed that social interaction through weak ties, a sense of belonging and a sense of identity cannot be achieved except through young people's strong networks. For example, leisure networks, student societies and voluntary associations are unavailable through family and friends.

In exploring the mechanism of community networks, the findings showed that geographical context plays an important role. Previous studies have shown that the context in which people live shapes the quality of their social networks (Mohan et al., 2005, p. 8). The procedure applied in interpreting this topic in this study involved asking participants about the geographical areas they came from and where they live now, their views on the city of York and how it feels like part of their community.

To preview the participants' views on their geographical context, Table 6 shows the themes which emerged from the data. These themes are helpful in that they provide a clear analysis of the role of geography in the community involvement mechanism.

Table 6: The role of geography in the community networks mechanism

General theme	*Sub-theme*	*Example*
Sense of belonging	Size of the geographical context	*'It is nice. I enjoy living here, but I miss being in big cities … I did my undergrad in Cardiff as well so that's a big city… Uhm, York is nice as there are a lot of interesting people who do some really great stuff and because it's a small place, it's easy to connect with them and work together on different things'.* (Emma, originally from London)
	Safety	*'I think it does matter to feel part of the community because you need to feel somewhat safe and somewhat comfortable when you are walking around … you don't want to feel that you don't belong here … I think belonging here is really important, uhm, and a lot of people take it for granted … so when you are new, and you come to the city and you don't feel comfortable, it does not really sound nice'.* (Sarah, originally from Nottingham)
	Diversity	*'Now I live in York. I did not always love York when I first moved to York, before that I had been living in Nottingham and Nottingham as a city is very multicultural and vibrant. There is a whole range of people who live there whereas York is more of a white community. It is very middle class, very, like, everyone is the same. So, when I first moved to York, I did not like it at all, and I said that as soon as I have done my masters, I am going to move away.'* (Olivia, 24, White British, originally from Nottingham)

The analysis provides helpful information on how geographical contexts impact involvement in community networks. First, the participants described York as small. According to Emma, the benefit of living in a small city is that it eases the process of connection between people, which could lead to social interaction. This would enhance the possibilities of the development of bridging social capital for new residents (students from other cities in this study). This finding supports a previous study that small areas enhance the process of community cohesion by creating bridging social capital. Residents in smaller areas are more likely to know each other (Mohnen et al., 2011).

Second, the interviewees reported that they appreciated that the city of York is safe. Sarah said that feeling safe made her feel comfortable and part of her new community. This finding supports the literature which correlated high levels of social capital with low levels of violent crime. Safety is at the heart of social capital because residents' interactions with their local community and social associations and their perceptions of the global community depend on the existing safety among people (Neal, 2011, p. 2).

Third, diversity represents a response to the challenges faced by young people in attempting to create and build new social capital. It is important to note that York has a low representation of minorities. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has reported that 11% of York's population were ethnic minorities in 2009 (Craig et al., 2010). Ten of the interviewees came from more prominent and diverse cities such as Nottingham, London and Manchester. The findings showed that diversity affected the interviewees' sense of belonging. Emma (from London) described herself as an outcast in York. Being of colour made her feel that she did not fit in an homogeneous community. To feel connected, Emma tried to join various activities and meet new people. Sarah, from Nottingham and living in York for two years, said that she felt that she was less a part of the community because she did not know the city. Both Sarah and Emma said they would feel more connected to their community if they had lived in York for longer. This finding contradicts Putnam's (2007) suggestions that people in less diverse communities experience less isolation and more social solidarity.

Given that some students had reported feeling uncomfortable since York is predominantly white, a lack of diversity might lead to a lower level of social acceptance (Portes and Vickstrom, 2018; Piekut and Valentine, 2016; Chen and Hamilton, 2015; Putnam, 2007). Sarah reported that York lacked the aspect of social acceptance and that it was difficult for her to cope in a less diverse area. Sarah said that it was not her experience in the city which did led

her to social exclusion in York but probably her previous experience in her hometown of Nottingham. Living in a society with diverse backgrounds and cultures would make you feel more connected. There will be no cultural group superior to another. Discrimination will be less and people will acquire other behaviours and customs. As a result, people can assume they are shut out by moving to a less diverse city where these aspects are low. It is not about the geographical context but what people want their surroundings to look like.

Surprisingly, students originally from York did not refer to neighbourhood social capital. Adam was the only participant who referred to the neighbourhood as part of his community: '*I have close networks of neighbours, and our neighbours are very kind. I feel they are my community; it is like I meet people similar to me*' (Adam, 20, white British). This finding does not support previous research. The neighbourhood has benefited from research into macro-level social capital (Knudsen et al., 2006). Previous studies have found that people in urban areas benefit from their neighbourhood social capital, including their physical health (Mohnen et al., 2011; Ziersch et al., 2005). Neighbourhood social capital influences decisions: for example, residents of the same neighbourhood are likely to vote in the same way and voice local interests (Johnston et al., 2005).

The interviews explored what prevents young people from engaging in community networks. The findings showed three reasons why this might be the case: time horizon, lack of networks and lack of funding. First, a key factor leading to low involvement in community groups and associations was time:

> *When I was younger, I tried to volunteer and help my community, but now I really do not have time.* (George, 21, male, white British)

> *I will not be able to do as much because I have to do my degree first then the York's Philosophy Society. It is something that I enjoy. I do enjoy going to events and meeting new people, but no, because it takes a lot of my time,* (Noah, 21, male, White British)

One possible solution is to make social engagement more accessible by including evening or weekend activities (Yotopoulos, 2013). I asked Neveen, who was very engaged with the Islamic Society at the University of York, if she would consider participating in it in the future. She hesitated at first, and then said no. She referred to some gender issues:

> *Yes and no! Uhm … No in the sense that it takes a lot of time and sometimes, I feel that one issue is that I am the only girl. For me in the*

committee, I feel there are things to encounter. There needs to be a balance between males and females because there are obviously different opinions between the genders and also, in fact, sometimes, I feel that I am not listened to, but that is just a personal reason. (Neveen, female, 20, British Asian)

Second, for other participants, a lack of engagement in social activities was linked to a lack of networks. Souha from Fulford and Nancy from Clifton (two areas in the city of York) were less optimistic about the organisation structure in their communities as most of them were for older people, such as community coffee mornings. The absence of supportive groups affected both participation and the social capital level.

Third, some students, especially those active in charities and voluntary associations, talked about a perceived lack of funding for the causes for which their networks fight. Sabrina said that she was not surprised that charities lose some funding with many things being underfunded because of the government's austerity policies. For her, charities and services for young people are not the first things the government will invest money in.

Similarly, Hayat said that there were few organisations in her area of interest, and low priority is given to them in the UK. Kate, who volunteered regularly, said that the charity which she had worked for had been shut down after it lost all its funding. These findings provide context and draw attention to young people's challenges and what should be done to encourage and include them in their community.

In brief, the findings showed that bridging social capital, including involvement in community networks, generates potential resources for social interactions, a sense of belonging and a sense of identity. A few challenges which emerged from the data were the lack of time, community groups and funding. However, students very much liked and valued their community networks.

5.2.3. Social Networking Sites

With the increasing use of technology among young people, social networking sites and social media represent a natural fit analysis of social capital. Most of the interviewees reported that they used social networking sites every day. The results showed that using social networking sites encompasses bonding and bridging social capital. The resources associated with these two types of social capital were a higher level of online interaction and information sharing. Table 7 shows extracts from the interviewees' responses about how social networking sites maintain their bonding social capital and develop their bridging social capital.

Table 7: Examples of how social networking sites activate bonding and bridging social capital

Bonding Social Capital	*Bridging Social Capital*
'I speak to my friends. It's personal stuff – I send them funny things'. *'Social media improve access to your friends'.* *'It opens a network to meet people I know in real life'.* *'I use Facebook because all my friends are on it'.*	*'I log onto Facebook every day and I read a few articles'.* *'I use Twitter to know about gender and race stuff'.* *'I use it as a place to share articles and stories that have interested me'.* *'It is important I stay knowledgeable about current things'.* *'Reading about politics and being able to access other people's viewpoints. That's what I use social media for'.*

As Table 7 shows, having personal interactions with offline contacts is more of bonding social capital. The participants used social media to maintain bonding social capital rather than to create or increase contacts online. They said that social media are a great way to communicate easily and quickly with friends. By communication, they referred to texting and calling:

> *It opens a network to meet people I know in real life. I have to message them online, so it facilitates communication.* (Idris)

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> *I talk to my friends online. I do not follow my family. I just ring them. I would probably interact more privately with my friends, and I don't tend to do that with general people online. I just tend to look at what they share and what they are broadcasting and then I interact more privately about it.* (Priyanka)

Interestingly, the students did not say that they maintained contact with their family members through texting online. Instead, most said they either talked to them face-to-face or called them on the phone. This depended on what they were using social networking site for. They said in different contexts that they used social networking sites to maintain contact with people in their lives, probably with those whom they could not see on a daily basis. They might not need to talk to their family online as they can already see them in person and call them on the phone. Another reason could be that some students used social networking sites essentially to post pictures and find interesting content rather than being social and interacting with people. Social networking sites enabled the students to access information within bridging social capital. The interviewees mentioned photo and video sharing, blogging, sharing articles, following pages which reflected their interests, and sharing personal opinions and experiences. Sharing personal information and opinions increases social ties (Chen and Li, 2017).

Other results suggested that some of the students did not like texting:

> *I am not great at messaging to be honest; I always tell my friends 'if you need to talk to me, you have to ring me'; I don't really like speaking online that much, I just leave a voice message with my friends in York. The only time I message them is to arrange a meeting.* (Emma)

> *I prefer Snapchat because I am terrible at talking to people. But on Snapchat you have to. When you open it, they notify you if you see people's messages, so you have to reply.* (Neveen)

Given their age group, Emma and Neveen could find texting overwhelming, so they might prefer to call because it takes less time, and facial expressions are easier to interpret. Less texting frequency does not necessarily mean that young people are socially isolated. A study at the University of Windsor found that those who texted continuously had to break the cycle of over-engagement with social networking sites: continuous texting might mean that people can have experiences which are shallow (Brockman, 2016).

When asked about what they used social media for, most of the participants emphasized the information aspect of social networking sites. Moreover, most of them agreed that social networking sites are an excellent source of information:

> *I think it's good as long as you don't believe anything you see and not to make it a huge part of your life. I think it can be dangerous, but it can also be very rewarding to get knowledge and information.* (Akram)

> *I think it's good in that it allows people easy access, so I never read a newspaper. With social media it's very easy for me to generate content, for example. I might talk about my opinion on this and then, I can share it so that other people can learn from it as well.* (Lilly)

This finding supports those of previous studies suggesting that weak ties provide information for network members (Page-Tan, 2021). Interestingly, the interviewees sought to increase their information by connecting to opposing ideas:

> *I do look at the content of those I don't agree with because I like to be open-minded instead of just looking at one opinion, I like to look at other opinions, but I don't specifically follow them.* (George)

The interviewees had a variety of motivations for using different social networking sites. They reported that they were primarily active on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Table 8 shows these networks and their functions.

Table 8: Social networking sites' types and impacts

Social Networking Sites' Types	*Impacts*
Facebook	- Maintaining offline connections/daily contact - Content sharing - Learning about social events
Twitter	- Less communication than Facebook - Mainly used to follow political news and updates - Negative experiences
Instagram	- Visual/superficial - Rare communication (communication is made through photos and stories) - Spreads awareness

All of the participants were Facebook members. They spent between one and three hours each day on Facebook. This finding differs from Facebook statistics for the UK, which show that the use of the platform decreased from 24% in 2012 to 16% in 2020 by people between the ages of 18 and 24 (Herd Digital, 2022). The interviewees reported that they used Facebook to maintain their bonding and bridging social capital. Regarding bonding social capital, the findings showed that Facebook helps users to reach out to people with whom they have an offline connection. Regarding bridging social capital, Facebook is also used to share content. Sharing content on the News Feed allows public interaction through links and status updates. The interaction is between one user and her/his friends, but it can extend to more people through sharing. As a result, the degree of information and openness is available to a broader audience.

One issue with Facebook usage is the vast amount of content. Nada said

> *I like to go on Facebook, but I get distracted because I feel there is so much content on it ... things that sometimes I need to be more interested in, so I spend longer on Facebook.* (Nada)

The students reported using Facebook to find social events organised by their departments and various student societies. These pages on Facebook usually post about several events to bring students of similar interests and identities together as well as random events for all students. Facebook notifies those interested in events and it has an option to remind users about the specific date and location of an event. Tufekci and Wilson (2012) found that social media, especially Facebook, were a valuable source of information in individuals' decisions to participate in the Tahir Square protests in Egypt.

As previous studies have similarly found, Twitter was mainly used by the participants to post in order to share news and everyday activities (Bansal, 2018). Although the respondents were less interactive with messaging on Twitter, they were likely to use it to get updates on the latest news. They were also more likely to discuss subjects around politics and human rights. They said that since most accounts on Twitter are public, it is easy to retweet a post and get involved in more tweets, especially if the topic is controversial. Some of the participants stated that Twitter reduces social boundaries and makes them express themselves more freely.

The social networking site on which there was only minor social interaction was Instagram. Emma, Neveen, Idris, Matt and Lilly described Instagram as visual, superficial and aesthetic. Lilly described it as a platform for aesthetic things and relaxation:

> *Instagram is my non-political escape space; it is all cute animals, pretty landscapes and so much food. You know, like a space I go where I don't have to think about politics. I follow a few celebrities I like. So, as I said it is very non-political. If I get really heads up about political stuff, I'll go on to Instagram as a conscious decision to relax.* (Lilly)

Consistent with the literature, Instagram was nevertheless found to beneficial for the interviewees because it supplies a visual service that relies extensively on graphics in communication (Manca, 2020, p. 11). Social interaction through Instagram can take the form of a picture, a video or a story. Posting can tell about people's activities. Young people have an additional platform on which to share ideas and resources with a more significant number of users. Not having social interaction on this platform will not necessarily decrease social capital as young people have several social networks and social networking sites which they can use. Emma and Aya said that they could use Instagram to raise awareness about various subjects. On Instagram, they could tag or mention people in their posts or use hashtags to show something to the public. Emma regarded these features as incredible and she wished more celebrities with huge followings would use them to spread awareness and talk about important things such as mental health, feminism and human rights in general. Emma and Aya explained this:

> *I am really jealous of these celebrities that have millions of followers. That sort of platform allows you to say so many important things, but they don't do it and it annoys me. It's good to share important messages.* (Emma)

> *I use Instagram for political activism, feminism, racism and Islamophobia … and things that raise awareness of issues that are going on in the world. I find activism very interesting, and I repost what they post to spread awareness … if I don't agree with something, I will write it and sometimes I get into debates into people's public accounts.* (Aya)

These two extracts show that there is information through which Instagram raises awareness. Instagram can reinforce opinions about social issues and encourage behaviour in people. After all, a lack of social interaction should not mean that Instagram is inefficient enough to generate

social resources to mobilise political participation. Citizens and the government can benefit from shared knowledge and information to increase their understanding of the community.

Social networking sites did not always have benefits for all of the students. Hayat drew a different conclusion on the benefits of social networking sites by saying, '*I am not affected by social media in any way. I think if it was not there, I would survive, and it would be okay'.* Moreover, social networking sites are not without unpleasant consequences. Sometimes they turn from sharing opinions and self-representing ideas to a space of personal attack. Such an experience might undermine people' inclination to participate – they would be worried about getting attacked and criticized. Emma gave the reasons why she was off Twitter:

> *I am off Twitter. I don't really get along with it very well. I go to Twitter when something big is happening, for example the general elections; I was like 'oh my God, read Twitter', but the thing with Twitter is kind of like it just upsets me because you see some responses and some tweets I don't think I need in my life because I know these ideas exist but the way they are represented is so horrific and I really don't engage in that sort of language and hate speech basically, so I avoid Twitter for that reason as well.* (Emma)

Other participants reported avoiding online discussions because of hate, bullying, rudeness and disrespect. Idris said that there is a lot of bullying and negative opinions online. He suggested that people should not use these things. Emma said that she had stopped engaging in online conversations after witnessing how her friend's online activism had broken her. George suggested that people must be respectful and avoid interacting in the comments section for these reasons. According to him, respect is essential:

> *I think respect is a big thing. I think it is very easy to get meaningless, like controversial, over social media so I try to avoid that because it could get very hateful; I don't like that, and I don't want to see this, and I am not going to put myself in that position where I almost feel compelled to answer back. I don't want to be disrespectful to anyone. Absolutely, at the end of the day you don't agree with what they are saying. So, I would rather not directly interact with that post.* (George)

Social networking sites only worked for some interviewees as a mechanism that produces social capital. It can, however, undermine people's social capital, including resources of social support, security and confidence. Another issue with social media is the inaccuracy of information. Some participants reported that they

tended to verify the accuracy of information as not all sources are genuine and reliable. This is important because, as has been previously stated, in the mechanisms of family, friends and community networks, information is a resource which the mechanisms of social capital can produce, and this information might help students to participate in politics:

> *Since I was a child, I remember I used to watch the news even though I would not understand everything but now with social media and with the revolution happened in my home country [Syria], I started to tell myself that politics is important as I can know what is going on in the world.* (Akram)

> *The problem with social media is that we have got a lot of information. For me, I will look at who wrote it, where it comes from, maybe look for opposing views. I take social media with a pinch of salt all the time. I mean like if it is coming from the Daily Mail and the Sun, I am not going to believe it; when you read a blog it is more you are learning someone's opinion not the facts, whereas I think people cannot see the difference. They think that someone's opinion is a fact then that is the truth, but it is a different truth, and we must be careful, and I think there is no education on how to access information. I guess we get it from university in the way we have been taught to think critically about what we read rather than just reading it and believing it.* (Emma)

The findings have shown positive outcomes of social networking sites and have also identified some disturbing experiences. For example, commenting on someone's post can result in several forms of cyberbullying. Mike suggested that users should set their privacy settings correctly to avoid any form of bullying, and commented that social networking sites could be both positive and negative depending on how people use them. He added that if people can avoid online heated debates, then social networking sites are positive.

In this section, I have discussed the findings which suggest that social networking sites have enormous potential for social interaction and information sharing and I have also illustrated how they could be disturbing for some of the interviewees. Although this can be interpreted as negative experiences, it does not mean that social capital is damaged or lost. I have shown that some of the students exposed themselves to negative experiences, especially in the comments section. The findings have shown that intensive use of social

networking sites was associated with such negative experiences. Although some studies have implied that adverse outcomes from the use of social networking sites reduce social capital, make people less social and caring, and disrupt feelings of belonging (Claridge, 2018), the findings of this study have shown that social networking sites can facilitate social capital, including the resources which it can provide.

5.2.4. Social Trust

The analysis of social capital explored the mechanisms through which the participating HE students experienced trust. In this section, I shall first discuss how the interviewees experienced trust in three different networks: family and friends, community networks and social networking sites. It is important to highlight that social trust cannot be understood unless the relevant actors are identified. Second, I shall discuss how social trust helps to develop resources related to social capital. Survey questions about social trust usually ask 'Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted?' In this qualitative study, the HE students' experiences of trust were found to differ according to bonding and bridging social capital. The findings showed that higher levels of trust tended to be associated with the participants' family members and friends (bonding social capital). Regarding community networks, trust is maintained over time. The interviewees reported that they trusted only their well-established contacts, but had the lowest trust in new people whom they met through social networking sites.

Trust in different mechanisms produces different resources related to social capital. The findings suggest that trust in family members and friends generates emotional support. Regarding community networks, trust produces the values of comfort, respect and information sharing. Regarding social networking sites, trust helps young people to maintain social interactions with their offline contacts (family and friends). With new contacts online, trust is negatively associated with any resources related to social capital. At the same time, although they relied on social networking sites to get information, the findings suggest that they did do not trust that information entirely.

The building of bonding social capital has been explained in the interviewees' connection with family and friends. The findings support the argument that trust in bonding social capital

appears to be higher than in bridging social capital. The participants reported higher levels of trust in family and friends but attached different meanings to trust:

"I feel comfortable with them".

"My family have known me for my whole life".

"My family should have a better idea of what is better for me".

"I talk about everything and anything with my family".

"I trust my family with my life. They raised me, and I will always trust them".

"I trust my family, that's what my religion teaches me".

"Yeah, I trust my family fully".

The findings showed that trust played a crucial role in the relationship between the participants and their family members. Social interaction and social support are resources which come from family trust. As was discussed in the family section of this chapter (section 5.2.1), the students had a strong relationship with their families related to higher levels of interaction and social support. Higher levels of family trust support these resources.

The findings also showed that increased trust in family members resulted in frequent social interactions and social support. Responses from most of the participants showed consistency with studies in the literature which argued that trust increases individuals' well-being and their sense of security (Shahin, 2016; Suh, Yee and Chang, 2013). For example,

> *In the first weeks of living in York, you are expected to pick people to live with. For me, I don't feel comfortable, and I will not trust anyone ... I live with my sister who goes to the university as well. I talk to her all the time. As for my parents and siblings, I call them every day. When I came to York, I turned from childhood to adulthood and having that support from my family was very steadying for me, and I think having my sister with me here helps to prevent me from needing to make friends. So, a lot of university students will form important connections and friendships with someone that perhaps they should not because they feel the need of that far from home, whereas for me, I don't need to do that. So having my sister here is very fortunate.* (Neveen)

> *I do trust them of course. They keep my secrets safe, for example, and I still live with them. I always ask for their help. Also, they can speak on my behalf.* (Ahmed, 21, male, British Asian)

Nibal and her brother Bilal, who came from Syria to York as asylum seekers, spoke about how much they trusted and relied on their family. In many contexts, Nibal stated:

> *My mum told me not to be trusting of others ... I go to the Youth Club, but I need to tell my mum before I go ... I always wanted to hang out with my classmates and try a new food I want to try Korean and Japanese food, but my mum is a bit sceptical about me meeting people from different religion ... My mum needs to know where I go. She is not comfortable with me knowing people from different backgrounds. She prefers that I make friends who are originally from Syria.*

Bilal said that he had only one friend who was Egyptian. He said that he could not trust other people and that this was his mum's advice. He said he would call his mother if he needed anything:

> *I trust my mum, and I believe she is the only person that listens to me ... I need to tell her everything because I trust she will guide me. I tell her about what happens in my workplace, the people I work with and everything.* (Bilal, 23, male, British Arab)

Frequent social interaction with family members can be due to a general fear of foreigners, experience with the government in their home country which had forced them to leave their homeland, and cultural and religious differences between their homeland and the host country. There is evidence that asylum seekers mistrust others (Hynes, 2003). Nibal and Bilal both had a great deal of trust and dependence on their family members, particularly their mother. This might create obstacles to trusting others and mean that they continually miss out on other social resources.

A considerably important finding about the family network and the resources and emotional support which it provides seemed to be related to the interviewees' mothers more than their fathers. Sarah, Emma, Nibal, Bilal, Akram, Ahmed and Souha showed evidence of this. Sarah and Abdu said:

> *I am mummy's girl, and my mum tells me everything right and wrong, like, 'you should do this', 'you should not do that'. So being at the university was difficult for me and I felt that I didn't know who to go to.* (Sarah)

> *In terms of solving problems, I count on my mum a lot. She even keeps my IDs cards.* (Abdu, 20, male, British Asian)

These extracts show that trust was a coping mechanism which enabled some respondents to act and react based on their great trust in their mothers. In the case of Sarah, trust helped her deal with the complex situations which she encountered when she moved from Nottingham to study at the University of York. This finding also suggests that mothers benefit young people's mental health more. This is consistent with studies in the literature which found that when trust in mothers is high, depression and suicide attempts are of little significance (Venta et al., 2017). In other words, trust in mothers is a resource for emotional support.

As highlighted in the section on friends (section 5.2.1), having friends is among the most important social interactions and support mechanisms. The participants' views and perceptions about their friendship networks were straightforward. They described their friends as those they had made in secondary school and had known for several years. Meeting friends in institutions such as schools reduces the social costs of identifying with a group with shared interests and provides opportunities to initiate social interactions (Frank, Mueller and Muller, 2013, p. 241). The interviewees reported higher levels of trust with close friends or real friends:

"We talk about more profound things and more personal stuff".
"I am close to my friends, and I talk to them quite a lot".
"I have my group of friends, and I am close to them".
"They are friendly and very nice".

According to most of the participants, a close friend or a real friend was someone they turned to when they needed help; someone who listened to them carefully, offered encouragement and motivation, shared personal and sensitive things with them and had similar characteristics and interests. When individuals put trust in others, this increases their commitment to the relationship. Trust fosters empathy and resolves problems (Holmes and Rempel, 1989). Akram said:

> *I would say that I trust my friends, because I chose my friends, and they tend to have similar values. They don't ostracise me for my opinions. My friends are very accepting. I trust them because I can be myself without self-censorship.* (Akram)

Indeed, the texture of friendship differs from other types of personal relationship. The findings confirm those of previous research which showed that people tend to trust friends with a shared

sense of identity (Van der Horst and Coffé, 2012). The participants' experiences comprised a variety of factors, such as race and sexuality; they tended to trust friends of similar race, gender or religion. Nada and Akram, British Arabs and Muslims, said they had close networks of friends, most of whom were either Arabs or Muslims. They said they were more likely to trust people like themselves:

> *Yes, I trust my circle of close friends the most, out of all relationships I have in my life. I would go to them for opinions and help in my personal and professional life. I trust that they have the same values and morals as me, and I also know that they will understand me because they know me well, they have the same background as me and they get their information and views from very similar resources to me.* (Nada)

Defined by their sexual orientation and gender identity, the findings showed that LGBT people are more likely to trust their friends, especially those who identify as LGBT. Kate, who is bisexual, said:

> *I have a group of friends, and I am very close to those who are from the LGBT … We have been relying on supporting each other … they give me a sense of commonality and community.* (Kate)

In this case, trust not only generated a higher frequency of social interaction and social support, it also generated a sense of identity.

The interviewees tended to trust those with similar interests. Mike reported that if he agreed with a friend about one or many things about anything in life, the friendship was stronger, so they could trust each other more. Sharing interests with friends was essential to developing trust. Joseph said,

> *I have a close friend at work and two in my course. The one at work I am closer to him, and I trust him more. But the ones in my course, not really, as we don't share the same opinions on games [laughs].* (Joseph, 19, male, White British)

The findings showed that trust is an important mechanism that brings about social interaction, social support and a sense of identity. Matt was the only participant to say straightforwardly that he did not trust his friends:

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Friends are important to me. I enjoy socializing but I do not rely on them. I am probably happy to do stuff by myself. For instance, this weekend I am not meeting anyone. I don't automatically trust them, and I guess it is the case with life in general. I don't put a massive amount of trust in anyone, but I don't, I don't have suspicions about that. I pretty much take what they say at face value, and I don't worry about thinking about them. (Matt, male, 20, White British)

Low levels of trust can mean that no resources will develop. Matt's response can be interpreted as that he did not need resources because he was not vulnerable to a lack of social life (Meltzer, Muir and Craig, 2018). Despite Matt's reasons, trust would develop a more positive emotional attachment towards friends. The findings showed that trust generates feelings of confidence and security, making individuals less vulnerable in personal relationships (Holmes and Rempel, 1989). Again, it is important to highlight that Matt was the only participant to say that he did not trust his friends.

In this chapter, I have mentioned that community networks are relevant to bridging social capital and provide a sense of belonging. Unlike the mechanisms of family and friendship networks which have given us a clear understanding of whether the participants trusted these networks, the analysis of community networks reveals an interesting finding. Trust in their community networks was understood as a lengthy process for them. The interviewees emphasised that they needed time to trust community members fully. This suggests that students might need to have a particular level of trust before joining a community network, and this increases over time. Previous authors have seen trust as a cyclic process (Greif, 1989). Priyanka, who joined the Tamil Dance Society at the University of York after her friend recommended it to her, explained this trust process:

So, I am half Indian and I always loved Bollywood dance. One of my friends goes to a Tamil Dance Society. She said 'please come along, it is so much fun'. She was there the first day and here I met great people. At the Tamil Dance Society, I mean, they were completely new people, but I trusted my friend who introduced me to them, and now we do dance competitions and stuff so we become quite close; so I would say yes, I trust them. (Priyanka)

Akram stated that he trusted the people who joined the same societies as him, but he would be more trusting if he could confirm that they are accepting and kind:

I go to societies which either share my politics or if they are to do with my ethnicity. I would say I trust them a bit. The reason why ... often both political and ethnic society groups attract a whole spectrum of people, so you don't know who is going to be offended by your beliefs and lifestyle and who isn't. I think knowing who I am speaking to and what their values are would encourage me to be more trusting, especially if it becomes clear they are accepting and kind. (Akram)

Hayat referred to the time horizon influencing her trusting relationship. She volunteered once a week at the hospital, which made it difficult to build trusting relationships. She trusted people in the charity shop in a very superficial sense because she did not have the opportunity to see them very often. Previous studies have suggested that limited trust in social networks decreases social cooperation and collaboration (Kwon, 2019). In response to this suggestion, it could be assumed that higher levels of trust are based on the performance of community networks against students' expectations. Trust necessarily develops through their interaction with members of their community networks. This is conditioned by time and positive experiences.

Understanding how the participants experienced trust in community networks might need to be clarified. Indeed, social trust can be understood as a resource or a product of networks. In practical terms, the findings have shown that social trust is a resource contributing to other social capital resources. This trust encouraged the willingness of the students to place their information and interaction at the disposal of members of their community networks:

I trust them in the sense that you do not cross the lines, but I trust them in the sense that if you have different opinion it will matter. They will still be, like, genuine and respectful. We often discuss sensitive stuff, especially feminist stuff. For example, we all had different views about abusive relationships, but I think we all felt comfortable. I speak for myself but, I should imagine that we all felt comfortable sharing our views. (Jane, female, 24, White British)

In this respect, trust improves the common interest of group members (Bicchieri, 2006). As Jane's comment shows, trusting other individuals generates cooperation, characterized by social interaction and the sharing of information. Some members know why they join a particular group and whether it shares their values. When some students meet, they already know what to expect and trust in a group. This trust makes interaction and information available

to all members. Conversely, this suggests that some students will only cooperate if they are trusting.

The findings covered trust within physical proximity, including family members, friends and community networks. Some questions were included to unpack trust within social networking sites. Most of the participants reported that they tended to maintain and trust their friends from real life and were less likely to trust new people whom they met online:

> "You never fully know the person because they are presenting themselves in one way online".
> "If they are not my real friends, I have got that space".
> "I wouldn't chat with people I didn't know".
> "I only speak to my friends on social media".
> "I don't trust strangers; I have never really talked to one. I only have meaningful conversations with my friends".

If HE students do not trust new people online, should they expect no available resources related to social capital? For the interviewees, using online resources was limited to reading content on social networking sites, sharing information with their contacts, and even interacting in the comments section (see section 5.1.3.) The interviewees explained that they did not trust strangers for a few reasons. Overall, they referred to personal privacy concerns. Idris, for example, said that adding new people to his Facebook account or making it visible to everyone to see what he shared could result in personal information being leaked. That said, social networking sites can generate some harmful resources related to social capital. Some authors have suggested that a lack of trust results in a limited depth of interpersonal interactions (Friedman, Khan Jr and Howe, 2000). The interviewees showed more social interaction with their family members, friends and community networks than with social networking sites. This could be because many students choose not to interact socially with strangers online because of the negative experiences usually linked to social networking sites. A previous study showed that trusting people online might negatively affect users psychologically and financially (Jones and Moncur, 2018). It might cause abuse and manipulation, steal people's money through a bogus transaction, and physically harm those who use dating applications, for example (*ibid.*, p. 110).

As discussed in section 5.2.3, social networking sites provided great resources of information to the interviewees, but some of them said that they did not fully trust the information that they read:

> *I don't usually trust it completely. I will look at the information and then go on researching from there. I think it's a good thing to look at it to get your mind thinking or to give you an idea of what to research. Then you can read, but I don't think you should solely rely on social media because anyone can put the information on there.* (George)

> *I don't tend to trust it fully, but I would say I always check. If I see someone saying that something comes up, I would be most likely to go and check the news outlets first before interacting with that. I don't trust it from the first time, and I wouldn't believe it.* (Priyanka)

No gender differences were found in the interviewees' trust in online information. However, a recent study found that men are more likely to mistrust someone's information until they have checked it with further information (Bunting, Gaskell, and Stoker, 2021).

Not trusting the information does not undermine the role of social networking sites in generating a high volume of political information. The findings have suggested that social networking sites are an excellent resource for sharing content (see Section 5.2.3) and that they play a significant role in generating political information (see Chapter 6, Section 6.3). Young people show awareness of the need to check the accuracy, trustworthiness and reliability of the information on social networking sites. Double-checking the information should be encouraged, especially with the dynamic nature of such sites. The findings have provided an insight into a small cohort of HE students in York. Future research should explore these findings to see if they are generalisable to all HE students in Britain.

In summary, the findings suggest that trust in family and friendship networks is higher because HE students look for individuals like themselves. The resources which flow from trust in family and friends are of a higher frequency of social interaction and social support. The most important conclusion from the analysis of trust in community networks was that trust is a process. The interviewees were more likely to trust their community networks, and this trust increases and develops over time. Trust in community networks was found to generate social interaction and information.

Regarding social networking sites, the interviewees tended not to trust strangers online. A lack of privacy explained this reluctance. Identical results are applicable to the information available to them through social networking sites. Some students reported that they could not completely trust the information on social networking sites, which suggests that since there is a lower trust in such sites, students are less likely to benefit from them. At the same time, this does not mean that social networking sites do not generate resources for HE students. On the contrary, it has been shown that social networking sites are essential for information sharing.

5.3. Chapter Summary

The first aim of this study was to explore how HE students experienced social capital in York. Four mechanisms of social capital were used to explore this topic. In this chapter, bonding social capital, including family and friends, has been shown to influence social interaction and support. Family provides the necessary social resources for young people, and few reported that they did not feel this. Relatively poor support from the family was found among the LGBT participants, and rich support was found from members of the same community, mainly friends. Bridging social capital, including community networks, provides social interaction, a sense of belonging and a sense of identity. Among various community activities, students from places outside York were more engaged in university societies. Students and residents of York were involved in volunteering. Overall, the students joined social activities based on their geographical contexts. Social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram supported bonding and bridging social capital. They maintained the students' offline contacts and bridging social capital through content and information sharing. At the same time, some of the participants reported some negative experiences with social networking sites. Regarding social trust, the interviewees reported resources of social interaction, social support and information.

Chapter 6: The Impact of Social Capital on the Political Participation of Higher Education Students in York

6.1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, I explored how a group of HE students experienced social capital and the resources produced by the different mechanisms of social capital. In this chapter, I shall analyse the data related to the second research question about social capital and political participation: *How do the resources produced by the different mechanisms of social capital affect higher education students' political participation?* I shall explore and explain how the resources produced from the mechanisms of social capital affected the HE students' political participation. Four mechanisms of social capital are identified and analysed: family and friends, community networks, social networking sites and social trust. The findings presented in Chapter 5 suggested that family and friends (bonding social capital) generate a higher social interaction and social support level and that community networks (bridging social capital) generate social interaction, a sense of belonging and a sense of identity. Social networking sites generate information and social trust generates social interaction, support and information resources. This chapter contributes to these findings by representing and interpreting the effects of these resources on the HE students' political participation. Analysis of the interview responses showed that the different resources produced by different mechanisms of social capital have different effects on that participation. In brief, the resources produced by family and friends contributed to the students' political interest and knowledge and increased their tendency to vote. Social interaction, a sense of belonging and identity produced by community networks led the students to talk more about politics, but there needs to be direct evidence that these networks lead to political activities. The information sharing generated by social networking sites directly affects participation in non-electoral forms of political participation, such as joining protests and signing petitions.

6.2. The Impact of Family and Friendship Networks on the HE Students' Political Participation

In Chapter 5, it was shown that family and friendship networks (bonding social capital) generate resources of higher frequencies of social interaction and social support. In this section, I shall discuss how the resources that flow from family and friends affected the interviewees' political participation. The findings suggest that these resources create political interest and political knowledge and enable participation in electoral forms of politics, including voting. As was highlighted in Chapter 5, there was a higher frequency of interaction between students and their families than the rest of the social capital mechanisms. This interaction resulted in

political interest and knowledge and increased voting participation. Before discussing voting, I shall start by explaining political interest and political knowledge resources. Thirteen participants reported learning about politics from their family members, as the following extracts show:

> *My oldest sister is part of the Palestinian solidarity campaign. So, she helps me to know about these organisations and my second oldest sister is on Twitter with me and she posts on politics too. We go to protests together and we share articles.* (Maria, 20)

> *My brother is quite into politics. So, when I go back home, he mentions it sometimes and I would ask him about it. I remember he is interested in US politics. I would ask what he means by that, and ask him for more information.* (Sarah, 19)

> *With family members, I talk about everyday things. We talk about international news. I think the environment you grow up in influences how you see different things.* (Sabrina, 23)

As these extracts show, family members influenced the students to be interested and knowledgeable about politics. These resources are created through the interaction and support from family members and translate into electoral political participation, mainly in voting. This is consistent with studies in the literature that found that young people's political conversations with family members teach them basic democratic skills (Janmaat and Hoskins, 2022; Fox et al., 2019; Muddiman et al., 2019; Levinsen and Yndigegn, 2015; Eto, 2012), as the following extracts show:

> *Since I turned 18, my family encouraged me to vote. When I was 18, I was legally allowed to vote but it was not a priority for me, but my parents made sure I did.* (Souha, 23, female, British Asian)

> *My family always say if you've got the right to vote you should use it. I was 18 and it was my very first vote. For me, it was such a significant vote. It's not like you are picking a party but it's a massive decision.* (Hayat, 21, female, British Asian)

These extracts suggest that family members motivate their children to express their opinion at the ballot box. This finding adds to the empirical evidence that suggests that older people feel strongly about the right to vote (Goerres, 2007). Older people tend to have longer voting

experience and find voting easier. At the same time, this finding contradicts that of Alesina and Giuliano (2011, p. 817), who emphasized that "the more individuals rely on the family as a provider of services, insurance, transfer of resources, the lower is one's civic engagement and political participation". The encouragement of families to get their children to vote also results in young people adopting positive views about voting. For instance,

> *Voting is the thing in the ground scheme you put in, but it's your chance to say what you want. It's the only time when you can contribute to all the change rather than just saying your opinion.* (Abdu)

> *If it is the General Election, at the end of the day it's our main manner of protest. If we vote against what we dislike, we are sending a message about what we think about particular political parties and politicians. Last time we gave our voice showing that we were not happy with the Brexit deal.* (Maria)

> *I think it's important to show that I am politically engaged and that is one of the only ways that government notices.* (Mario, male, 20, White British)

Most of the participants who were registered to vote reported that they had voted in the most recent general election. Some of those eligible to vote but did not have an opportunity to vote reported that they might vote in the next elections. The findings showed that the political party for which these HE students voted for was, in fact, similar to their parents. The findings support previous research which demonstrated that there is a strong relationship between young people's voting and their parents' voting (Gidengil, Wass and Valaste, 2016):

> *My family; I would say that my family is originally where I got my interest in politics from. My dad was involved with the Labour Party previously and he talked about it a lot.* (Mario)

> *I speak about politics every day. When I have a particular thought, I normally bring it up with my dad.* (Ross, male, 23, White British)

> *Me and my family have the same political ideas and usually would vote for the same political party. They are more knowledgeable about Iraqi politics because they moved to the UK ten years ago. So they tend to encourage me to take part in Iraqi politics and information. In terms of UK politics, they keep me encouraged and informed about what is happening. There is an interesting area of exploring this because my parents emigrated and because of the language barrier, their political views are still tied to their home country, but they try to integrate here at the same time.* (Nada)

Jane was the only participant to report that she did not support the same political party as her parents; she voted Labour whereas her father voted for the Conservative Party:

> *I grew up with my dad, but he was very right wing and I think as a grown up I have realised that I am not on the side with the Tories. The way he used to talk to us about politics, I think it was him trying to push us in that direction because he is conservative; he is so rude.* (Jane)

This finding is rather surprising. Although Jane came from a home where there were frequent political discussions, she had adopted a different political viewpoint. Dinas (2014) suggested that if parents insist on their children adopting the same political views as their own, the children are more likely to reject these views once they become young adults.

Except for voting, the findings did not produce strong evidence of the influence of family members on other political activities. One example might be the experience of Maria, who reported that she joined protests to support the Palestinian cause with her sister. Compelling evidence from this study was that a few times, family members, especially parents, did not want their children to take part in some political activities, such as protests. For example, Sarah said that her parents did not want her to go on protests organised against a conflict, and Neveen said that her mother was afraid that she would become an activist:

> *With my family, we hardly talk about politics and the reason for that is that my mother is very much afraid that I will get involved in politics. She does not like the fact that I am very political; she thinks I will become a crazy activist.* (Neveen)

The violence which HE students might experience while walking with a crowd can explain this. Another explanation could be that post-materialist values do not influence older people (see Section 2.2.). Students are more likely to have positive attitudes towards non-electoral activities because they grow up with these values.

The findings suggest that engaging in political conversations with family members can cause political triggers. A few of the participants reported arguing about politics with their families. Those who often discussed politics might adopt different political viewpoints. The split happens because of the ideological direction of political parties and politicians. For example, Jane grew up as a Conservative but changed to Labour when she got older. She said that she argued with her father because he supported the Conservative Party and spoke rudely about

politics. Emma said that her mother asked her not to talk about politics because most people in her area were Tories. Priyanka, who supported the values of the Labour Party, said that her brother played devil's advocate and liked to provoke her for supporting the party. Lilly said her relationship with her father was not great because he opposed gay marriage, which drove her insane. The evidence presented above would seem to reflect the findings of previous studies that being part of a family which supports a particular political party increases the chances of the children supporting that party (Fieldhouse, 2014). At the same time, the evidence also opposes findings previous studies which suggested that young people discuss politics mostly with family members because they already agree with them (Bennett, Flickinger and Rhine, 2000). This is not to suggest that family does not play an essential role in students' political participation. These findings affected only a few of the participants. Moreover, differences, arguments and disagreements do not necessarily affect the development of social capital within a family and do not necessarily lead to an environment which alters political participation.

Again, although few participants reported that they did not support the same political party as their parents, this finding is interesting as it sheds light on the political divide between the two generations. It helps us understand and explain contemporary patterns of young people's political participation (see Section 2.2). Indeed, young people acquire their political information from their families. Lilly and Nancy commented on this information and described it as biased because their parents relied on limited political resources. According to them, limited resources reduce the flow of information and do not allow their family to accept challenging views. Lilly said that her father did not look deeper into political issues because he listened only to the BBC, which she described as biased and racist and does not pay people equally.

Similarly, Nancy said that her father was very engaged with the government and Brexit, but that he had a superficial knowledge of politics and had never had a chance for a proper political debate. This could be interpreted from the fact that both age groups had different perceptions of their lives. This could also be interpreted that HE students have various mechanisms which inform their political participation. The mechanisms of social capital and the resources related to them will be explained later in this chapter.

As highlighted above, the family might not influence HE students' political preferences. Although I cannot assume what political party the participants' families vote for, most reported

that they supported and voted for the Labour Party. This might emphasise the role of post-materialist values. Mario commented that

> *… old people today do not feel passionate about the major themes young people are interested in, but they would vote Labour and take an interest in social and cultural issues such as gender, discrimination and environmentalism if they were young.* (Mario)

Mario concluded that older people today are less concerned with the issues young people are interested in because the changes will not affect them. Hay (2007) argued that the change in social, economic and cultural movements produces an extended and agitated transition into adulthood, thereby undermining the traditional societal role of family. This is due to the post-materialist values which the older generation endured during Britain's austerity years (Sloam and Henn, 2019). Young people tend to have an inherent flexibility to embrace new forms of political engagement which reflect contemporary issues (Kimberlee, 2002, p. 91).

The analysis revealed an interesting pattern of some parents who did not want their children to be engaged with politics at all. Two interviewees were siblings whose parents were Syrian refugees from Aleppo. Nibal, an 18-year-old female and her 23-year-old brother Bilal reported that they were not interested in politics and had never engaged in any political activity. Nibal said that her mother had asked her not to talk about politics with her friends at school. She said that this was because her mother did not want to be discriminated against because she was from Syria, a country which had become known for conflict, war and instability. When asked if she would consider voting in the future, Nibal said she would not because she was not sure whether she would benefit.

Bilal said that his family did not discuss politics at home and that his mother had similarly asked him not to discuss it at school. He said he has no interest in politics and that his only interest was cars. This could be interpreted as that some ethnicities might avoid political participation because of expected inequality and discrimination (Crowley, 2001). It is important to highlight that Nibal and Bilal were the only two participants in this study to show no interest in politics among the rest of the ethnic minorities.

Interaction with family members did not account for all political activities in this study. Family members were found to encourage and motivate participation mainly in the act of voting. However, as young people get older, they form their own political preferences and can arrive at different politics with post-materialist values.

It is important to highlight a significant limitation which was encountered during this emerging argument. These findings of the differences in political preferences between old and young people and what could explain them were found to be a concern of fewer than half of the participants, whereas the rest of the participants reported and showed the same patterns of post-materialist values, their preferences in voting and their support for the Labour Party, but I cannot assume whether they shared a similar opinion with their parents or whether they also disagreed with their parents about politics. Future research should explore this further.

In the previous sections, I have explained how the resources produced by families affected the HE students' political participation; I shall now discuss the friendship network. The literature on the relationship between friends and political participation has yet to be discussed (Levinsen and Yndigegn, 2015; Kolter-Berkowitz, 2005). The analysis of the interview responses presented in Chapter 5 suggested that friendship is a crucial source of social interaction and support. Here again, the students' engagement with politics was shaped by experiences with their friends. This interaction and social support provided them with more resources for political information. Two interviewees reported talking about politics to their friends because they were studying politics at the university. Neveen said that politics was often brought to the table because she was studying economics and politics was part of her course. She said that politics represented a significant part of her life as 70% of her friends either studied politics or had been affected by political regimes in the Middle East. This political information could make a difference in how students view the world of politics.

James said that he was attracted to politics at the age of seventeen by a politically engaged friend from school. He said that he became more knowledgeable about politics and tended to debate issues with friends. Nancy said that she mostly turned to her friends to get more information and asked them questions about books and articles.

Friends encourage political engagement by sharing political information, mobilising others to participate in political activities and influencing daily decisions by challenging current debates about the political system (Kolter-Berkowitz, 2005). According to some of the participants,

social interactions with friends increased their engagement with political news and exchanging political information:

> *I have political discussions with my friend Emily who I mentioned earlier; actually she was further to the left than me. We support socialism and we feel that capitalism should be fought.* (Ahmed, 21, male, British Asian)

> *They definitely influenced my ideas to some degree. I think because I try to be a very open-minded person. I think that if you become closed minded, you become stuck. So, yeah, my friends often change my views. It may not seem I like it right now, but generally when we talk about politics, I will listen more that I speak because I'm of the belief that there is something that everyone knows more about than I do and so I do everything I can to learn basically.* (Neveen)

> *Sometimes they do definitely change my mind. Sometimes, they point out a new story or an issue that is happening. Those who could definitely help inform my views. I would not say that because my friends think a certain way on a new story. I am more than happy to disagree with my friends but to only a limited extent, like I am not going to do that with someone that is right wing. Morally we need to have smooth opinions.* (Mike, 20, male, White British)

The findings suggest that family is the primary mechanism through which the HE students received basic political information. Their interaction with their friends was likely to increase and develop this information within a friendship network. Jane stated that her friends reinforced her political opinions mainly because they shared similar preferences, were not homophobic or racist, and listened to her attentively. Lilly reported that she talked to her best friends about politics every day. She pointed out that they were broadly similar in political views and that they argued a lot, but it was more that they disagreed over individual points rather than a whole principle. The literature showed that political discussants talk politics with people of similar opinions to their own and that such discussions display higher levels of agreement and reinforce existing preferences (Fieldhouse, 2014).

Priyanka said she found it interesting to discuss politics with her closest friends, even though they might disagree. She believed that it was easier to voice her political views because her friends would not shut her down for thinking differently. Although the family appeared to be the first place the students received political information, friendship provided additional information which might facilitate political participation. This finding suggests that people are

more likely to feel comfortable sharing their outlook towards the political system with their friends than with their family. This mechanism is not surprising. As was mentioned in the family section, the interviewees were more likely to have post-materialist values. Interestingly, the extracts above from the responses of Ahmed and Mike show that the students tended to befriend those with the same political preferences.

At the same time, the interviewees showed their willingness to participate in protests if their friends decided to go too. Sarah expressed this willingness:

> *I see those people protesting about saving the planet. I think that is important and I would like to participate if my friends go too.* (Sarah).

This extract shows the importance of friends in students' social environment and increases the possibility of being mobilised to participate in a few political activities. In contrast, Idris said that he went on protests by himself and that his friends did not encourage him to participate in politics. When asked whether any network had influenced him to be more engaged in politics, Idris answered that it was his self-motivation: he wanted to be a diplomat or to work in international relations, so he kept on top of the news and went on protests alone. According to Idris, friends might not be sufficient for political participation, but they are undoubtedly necessary:

> *(Laughs) No! Uhm, I think the most important thing is your personal conviction and what you believe is right or wrong and how much you value the things you value. Friends just inform me, and I take the information with my own opinion on the issue, but they don't encourage me to participate.* (Idris)

One of the most important conclusions drawn from the section on family and friends' impact on the interviewees' political participation lies in the resources related to social capital. The findings have shown that the bonding social capital represented in family and friends creates social interaction and support, which translates into political information. Although political information was influential from both family and friends, the family had more influence on voting. Students with high levels of interest and information can follow political issues, engage in policy debates, make reasoned civic judgments and significantly participate in different political acts (Galston, 2001, p. 218). These democratic skills develop in a broader

environment of social interaction and social support, which encourages students to engage in the first place. That interaction and support comes from family networks, friendship networks or both. It is important to highlight that the resources of social interaction and social support are not the same and cannot be used interchangeably with participation in political activities (voting in the section above). However, they play an essential role in mobilizing participation in voting.

In sum, the impact of bonding social capital from family and friends on these HE students' political participation had mixed results. Social interaction and support resources increase the political information through which students can participate in politics. The findings show that resources have the most substantial impact on a student's likelihood to vote. Resources from friendship networks provide a higher level of political information.

6.3. The Impact of Community Networks on the Higher Education Students' Political Participation

In the previous chapter, it was shown that the interviewees participated in several community groups and associations, including student societies and charities. It was found that students from places outside York were more likely to create and develop bridging social capital at university/college. They joined students' societies representing their ethnic background, religion and interests. Those from York itself were more likely to volunteer for charities than those from other cities. The findings showed that engagement in community networks generated interaction, a sense of belonging and a sense of identity. These resources seemed to increase political information, but they were insufficient to lead to participating in political activities.

In this section, I shall explore whether and how the resources produced by community networks affected the HE students political activities. Key findings from the interviews showed that social interaction within community networks positively impacted political communication and discussion in the sense that it increased them among the students. However, no direct evidence shows how this translates into political activities. In other words, the interviewees did not refer to any political activity which they took through resources from their community networks. Political information was more recognized in student societies at the University of York. This evidence is particularly predictable in political societies. Members of university societies such as the History Society, the Palestinian Solidarity Society, the Politics Society, York's Philosophy Society and the International Student Society reported that they tended to

talk about politics. These results are also consistent with the literature which explored the importance of university-based networks on political engagement (Loader et al., 2015; Crossley, 2008)**.** Neveen explained that political discussion was based on her course:

> *So, in social activities it is subject based. If the activity has to do with law I will speak about law; if it's about economics I will talk about the financial world; if I am at a Palestinian event I will talk about Palestine.* (Neveen)

The findings showed that the interviewees who joined university/college societies with political purposes were more likely to discuss politics and organize political events inside the societies. These events are organised regularly to discuss issues in national and international politics. Neveen said that she spent much time with international students and met more politically aware students of the Israeli/Palestinian cause, which had helped her to become aware of what is happening in the world rather than just focusing on British politics. Similarly, Idris, who was a member of the International Student Society, said that the members usually discussed what is happening in conflict areas such as the Middle East, and they even tended to suggest what should be done to stop the conflicts. This finding suggests that student societies had expanded the students' political information, but there is no evidence of whether members of the societies took up this information to participate in political activity.

In keeping with the things which the interviewees experienced in community networks, most of their answers revolved around the issues which they discussed in these networks. Outside the circle of student societies, some students said they discussed politics in charities which advocate human rights. Most of these discussions were about Brexit, climate change, mental health issues, veganism, LGBT community rights, racism, refugees' rights, immigration, animal rights, feminism and women's issues, and Islamophobia. This highlights post-materialist values. The participants also showed high interest in these issues. On a scale of 1 to 10 ('not interested' to 'very interested'), one participant gave 10, four of them gave 9, three gave 8, five gave 7, five gave 6, six gave 5, three gave 4, one gave three and one gave 0. The highly interested students tended to share their opinions on why they felt strongly about these issues. Ross said that students were generally interested in the same issues:

> *I feel strongly about racism because it impacts people in an active way. I think everyone should be interested … a lot of White British people would say they*

are not interested in racist issues because it does not impact them, but in a way, it does impact them because they all benefited from their privilege. (Aya)

I am interested in combination of subjects; I can't put my finger on any particular one. I am interested in abolishing capitalism and I have talked about it with my friends but in terms of British politics, taxation, economy, the NHS. I think the environment is important as well and general cultural issues as well, like race issues are quite interesting; that is something that young people generally talk about. (Ross)

Following these two extracts, I want to highlight that both young men and women were interested in politics but, unsurprisingly, young women were more likely to highlight women's issues and evaluate them. These findings match those of Briggs (2008), who found that women are more interested in women's issues. The young female interviewees reported that they went to groups and societies which are interested in issues around feminism, abuse against women, sexual violence against women, perceptions of Muslim women in the Western world and women's representation in the UK. They were more opinionated on these subjects and showed how puzzled they were by the discussions. Emma described feminism as ridiculously political: '*I wish feminism were not as political as it is, but it is'.* At the charity she volunteered for, Emma said that she took a massive interest in women's issues after she had seen how women are mistreated. She said that awful things happen to women, but there is no support or understanding about it. She also hoped that the public attitude towards those who use drugs and alcohol would be changed as they experience awful things. Jane said that she talked about feminism in the book club because she and her partner were lesbians. Most of their discussions were about women's rights, gender equality and the public's attitude towards women (Popov, 2018). Neveen, who went to the Arab Society and the Feminism Society, described how she got engaged in discussions around the perception of Muslim women in the Western world. This is evident in the following comment:

I am a relatively traditional Muslim in the western world; I think that I've been exposed to a lot. I pray five times a day, but I also go to clubs. I don't drink but I'll be around people that do, and a lot of people have trouble getting their heads around Muslims. Similarly, I have a very open mind, but traditional parents and people have a hard time understanding that, like people always assume that I have parents who are strict because I'm brown. Yes, my parents are strict, but all parents are. I think that there's a strong misrepresentation of women within the UK. I understand that people see Saudi women as trapped when it comes to driving but the reality is that the

driving thing hit the news because the government in Saudi Arabia passed a law allowing women to drive and the reason they couldn't wasn't because they don't think that women should be allowed to do it, but because women can't defend themselves and there's a lot of deserts and it's dangerous. People hung their heads around that, and I find that very odd. (Neveen)

Briggs (2008) showed that women are interested in politics but that the kind of issues they tend to be associated with are formal politics. The female interviewees were highly interested in political issues and they spoke about more issues related to women than the males did. They also highlighted their dissatisfaction with sexual, ethnic and racial lines and were more likely to emphasise the importance of these issues, how they affect them, and the policy response they expect from the government. As recent studies have shown, women are more cautious about politics because they are not represented enough (Bunting, Gaskell and Stoker, 2021). Lilly reported becoming more open to discussing women's issues after joining university societies. At sixteen, she was vilified, unpopular and bullied because she used to speak up for herself. She said that she was bothered about what other students thought of her. In this respect, if young women are involved in groups supportive of their problems, their self-confidence will likely improve. These results reflect those of Stuhlsatz et al. (2021) who suggested that women's networks affect their political views. First, women have more autonomy in expressing their political opinions. Second, women who have ties with other women tend to receive information that reinforces the views which they favour (Stuhlsatz et al., 2021).

An interesting finding was that some of the female interviewees tended to advise others to be interested in politics because of its value:

I don't think enough value is given to it [politics]. A lot of my friends and family say to me 'Oh, I find it so impressive that you know what's going on' and other comments like that and my response is always 'I don't know how you can't care'; that's what I am constantly saying to people: 'I care about this, and you should care about this'. (Kate, 24, White British)

When asked if they felt strongly about the issues which mattered to them, Ross and Ahmed said that they did not:

I don't feel really strongly about issues; I think sometimes it's better to adopt a less emotional attachment about politics. There are some

methods which you might regret, for instance Extinction Rebellion. I think maybe they feel slightly too strongly about that cause and some of the factual aspects of environmental policy. (Ross)

I like learning about politics and reading about it, but you don't have to be angry because it can often lead to angry things. Things like protesting are obviously flamboyant in their protests and they just sat around typing in their computers. I try not to let events make me really angry. (Ahmed)

This does not mean that men are less interested in politics than women. As was highlighted in Chapter 5, some of the interviewees volunteered and worked in the context of supporting the network's purposes. They said that they volunteered and got engaged in these networks to support and get support from others, interact with other volunteers, and discuss issues which matter to them. None of the participants mentioned that these networks played a valuable role in their political engagement. In this respect, it is worth highlighting that community networks positively affected the students' political information and engagement with political issues. However, it was not found that they used these resources to take up an electoral/non-electoral form of participation.

The literature suggests that political participation consists of electoral and non-electoral forms (De Rooij, 2009). There is a gap between a piece of growing political information within community networks and how young people act on it. The fundamental explanation could be that HE students' engagement in community networks is that associations and charities are legally required to establish events for charitable purposes only. Campaigning and political activities are not allowed if the network is not political (Charity Commission, 2008). As the findings have shown, most community networks in which the students were engaged were university/college societies, youth groups, social justice groups and associations, voluntary associations and charities which advocate human rights. In these networks, students might not express their political views or deliver resources for political purposes. That is not to say that volunteering for a charity prohibits somebody from participating when they are not volunteering, but some political discussions might not take place if charities represent themselves as non-political bodies. This also does not mean that students who work for these charities are not political. I have already suggested from the findings that the participants showed a high interest in politics.

This finding was also applied to religious associations such as mosques. Idris reported that he went to the mosque to teach children the Qur'an, pray and attend events. He said that:

> *The mosque is not political in the inside. It is just a community that focuses on the Muslim and non-Muslim community in the area. A lot of non-Muslims come around for events that the mosque puts on. We have a good sense of community with the wider York community, but it does not get political. Uhm, things not being political is beneficial here, especially when it comes to having an accepting community and accepting people.* (Idris)

According to Idris, the mosque gave him a sense of community but did not add value to political participation. Eight of the participants stated that they were Muslims but Idris was the only participant to speak about the impact of a religious affiliation on his life. This finding might be consistent with statistics which show a decline in religion in the UK. As has previously been stated, according to St Mary's University Twickenham and the Institut Catholique de Paris, 70% of young people aged 16-29 reported that they had no religion and only 7% said that they attended religious services (Bullivant, 2018). The lack of impact of religious affiliations has been explained by the disconnection of politicians from religious affiliations (McAndrew, 2017).

The findings have shown that participation in community networks provided the HE students with opportunities to interact with other members and embrace and broaden their knowledge and self-expression. It has also been suggested that the students had adopted new social movements as political ideas within these networks. They expressed their engagement with feminism, environmentalism, refugees' and immigrants' rights, racial equality, world poverty and gay rights. This engagement included being highly interested in these issues, discussing them, raising awareness and public support, supporting people in need and discussing how to communicate these issues to the government.

The HE students' engagement in community networks implies that they provide resources essential for increasing their political information. It is important to note that these findings do not fall under the same conceptualisation of political participation in the theoretical background (see Chapter 1). Political participation is an action, including political activities such as electoral and non-electoral activities and Do-It-Ourselves politics. The resources mentioned by the students are far more critical because they strengthen democratic skills, contribute to the

inclusion of younger citizens in politics and motivate them to change public policies. Engaging in these networks can lead to active participation, but there is no evidence to support this hypothesis from the current study. Future research should explore this.

This study addresses the impact of community networks on political activities, but the participants probably did not refer to any political activity because they were more likely to be influenced by people similar to them (bonding social ties) than by people whom they meet only once a week (bridging social capital). Although the findings have shown that participation in community networks was associated with feelings of belonging, it did not increase protest activities, as a recent study has shown (Renström, Aspernäs and Bäck, 2021). So rather than concluding that community networks do not influence political participation, I believe that it is better to consider some resources such as political knowledge and discussions. In the above sections, I have highlighted the significance of resources generated from community networks, such as the sharing of information and political discussions, but it was not clear whether or how they translated into various political activities. In the responses in the interviews, there was a conscious effort by the interviewees to think back about political activities encouraged by repeated and deep political conversations and discussions with family members and friends. It takes time to become more active after only a limited or short exposure to political activities. This finding means that exposure to political discussion is not a magic bullet for political participation (Klofstad, 2013). Community networks include bridging social ties, so conversations and discussions alone cannot encourage action. Unlike bonding social ties, it is difficult in a network with people who do not know each other and do not meet regularly to accept more profound disagreements and expect other members to be open-minded and take political action.

We can learn from this analysis that although it seems evident that the mechanism of community networks generates resources which influence political knowledge and discussion, further work is needed to prove that these mechanisms lead to active participation. Further research can explore this relationship by tracking HE students' and young people's political participation over months and years.

6.4. The Impact of Social Networking Sites on the Higher Education Students' Political Participation

In Chapter 5, I showed that social networking sites generate growing information sharing. In this section, I shall examine the impact of social networking sites on the HE students' political participation. The results show that information sharing resources through social networking sites were the most reported reason for the students' non-electoral political participation. The findings show that the majority of the interviewees were actively online. Social networking sites are widely used as places on which to interact, learn about politics, share political content and encourage political participation. Sharing political content such as images, videos, memes, articles and blogs, signing petitions, following politicians and political parties, searching online for news, visiting websites of political parties are all potential mechanisms which contribute to engagement in politics. The connection between social networking sites and political participation was more visible and the most important for non-electoral forms of political participation compared to the rest of the social capital mechanisms. Protests, signing petitions and several forms of Do-It-Ourselves politics were the interviewees' most reported political activities. This section explores how the resources produced by social networking sites as a mechanism affect these political activities.

Before I discuss political activities, it is worth explaining how social networking sites present a platform for political engagement. Most of the participants reported that social networking sites are a great source of political information; they are very convenient and easily accessed and helped them to see things from different perspectives. These results were consistent with those of recent studies of the impact of social networking sites on political engagement (Swart, 2021; Maher and Earl, 2019; Zhu, Chan and Chou, 2019; Stanley, 2017). Ahmed was highly interested in politics and said that he regularly talked about politics on Facebook with his close friend from Germany. He said that she helped him to understand issues around capitalism and what it would be like to abolish it. Matt commented that:

> *Social media are good for news. I would say it keeps you updated with politics, and it tends to give refreshing views from young people's perspective because I follow a lot of people of a similar age to me. I often get tweets on their opinions which probably relate to me more than if a 60-year-old was writing it.* (Matt, 20, male, White British)

Moreover, social networking sites are a great way of learning about politics for those without much political knowledge. Nada said:

> *I have not studied politics and I do not read much about politics. So, it is mostly what I see on social media. When I see facts, reports, references and trusty resources, it can easily change my political opinions.* (Nada)

This finding supports those of earlier studies which suggested that social media are more useful for young people who do not read newspapers, watch the news or listen to the radio (Baumgartner and Morris, 2010, p. 24).

Many of the interviewees used social networking sites to connect to political activities, such as

- disseminating political information among social media contacts,
- sharing links for articles,
- uploading pictures and videos with political content,
- posting political publications in the user's profile,
- writing comments in private and public groups and pages, and
- getting into debates about politics.

With these activities, people can engage with the government and discuss other people's views in a public debate (Charalabidis and Koussouris, 2012, p. v). Emma, Lilly and Aya said that they used Instagram to raise awareness about political issues, such as human rights, feminism and environmentalism, indicators of post-materialist values. Emma, who said that she was jealous of celebrities with more followers on Instagram, explained that the popularity of some social networking sites creates a larger space for raising awareness. Reaching more people with the available resources, information and discussion is very helpful for raising awareness. Raising awareness stimulates the power of young people's opinions in support of issues and has a significant effect on political participation. It improves knowledge of politics and politicians, gives a better understanding of governmental issues, bridges the gap between politicians and citizens and changes perceptions about them (Saroha, 2016), and can build knowledge to inform and involve citizens who are conservative on some issues (Boulianne, 2016). Awareness-raising was more visible on social networking sites than in community

networks because of the content and sharing of information in those sites. Social networking sites are quicker in reporting issues happening around the world.

The interviews showed some association between social networking sites and formal types of politics, such as voting and membership of political parties. When asked who they followed on social networking sites, some of the interviewees reported connecting with political leaders and political parties on Facebook and Twitter. Social networking sites therefore played a significant role in reinforcing the political opinions of those already interested. Casteltrione (2015) referred to these people as 'normalizers'. The interview responses suggested that the political use of social networking sites is strongly related to political information about politicians and parties. The consumption of this content leads to a greater tendency to opinion expression. However, the results did not indicate the reason why social networking sites affected the participants to vote or to join a political party. I have already explained the factors which motivate students to vote (see Section 6.3). Nevertheless, one of the interviewees suggested that active participation in political parties might encourage people to vote:

> *I think through twitter there are many inspirational people and lot of information. For example, I saw something in the day about Jeremy Corbyn posting a tweet and he was looking into his glasses saying that the deadline is due, and I thought that was funny and a really good way to get people to vote and also to get people joining the Labour Party, so I think this is a way to get a message across.* (Noah)

In addition to voting, the HE students' likelihood of receiving information about political parties was mostly through social networking sites. Seven of the participants (five females and two males) reported belonging to a political party, and all of them were members of the Labour Party. However, they had not joined through social networking sites, but their motivation was to support the party:

> *I was a member for quite a while. I started believing that the Labour Party was not really moving on, so I decided to join it.* (Nancy, 21, female, White British)

> *I am a member of the Labour Party. It costs only £2. I became a member because I want to be able to leave the party if I don't like the elected leader. That is quite cynical, but to me that is the best way that you can do to show them your unhappiness.* (Lilly)

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The results show that social networking sites encouraged the interviewees to participate in protests, petitions and Do-it-Ourselves politics. A quarter of them reported that they had participated in protests through social networking sites. They listed the following protests: climate change, conflict in the Middle East (Iraq, Palestine and Syria) and the increase in tuition fees. They reported that protesting represents a great way to bring people together and raise awareness. Aya said that protesting is essential because if people are afraid to speak up about something, gathering with others gives them the confidence to express their opinions. Previous studies have demonstrated that protests seek to shift and review policies, call attention to incompetence in public services, involve new political forces, bring dissatisfaction to the fore, fight for social and political rights, and challenge the government's legislation (Margetts et al. 2016, p. 2). Akram highlighted the impact of protesting:

> *The involvement of Russia, Iran and Turkey in the Syrian case is so complicated. I see social media is full of protests on LGBT community rights. I think it's powerful, but I wouldn't protest with them because it is not something I care about. However, if it is something I care about, I would go. I think social media here is huge and effective. Many people protesting will change many things.* (Akram)

Some participants explained why they tended not to participate in protests. Three of them said that they did not protest for safety reasons. Nada and Lilly said they disliked crowds and were afraid that they would struggle with protesters. Lilly worried that she would have issues getting a job in academia if she were to be arrested by the police. Mario suggested that he would protest if the protesters did not use extreme methods of violence. In Chapter 5, I showed that safety is paramount to strengthening communities (Wasserman and Ginsburg, 2014; Neal, 2011).

Only two participants reported that they had never signed petitions. Unlike protesting, the other interviewees reported having signed many online petitions regularly. The students interviewed in this study sign petitions related to injustice, poverty, conflict, climate change, animal rights, bullying in schools, making cannabis legal, and improving asylum and refugee employment conditions. Most of them reported that they signed current petitions shared on social media. Petitions require minimal effort; they are easy to sign, cost nothing and take little time. Most have a political purpose and are targeted at the government (Halpin et al., 2018). One popular petition that most of the interviewees mentioned concerned environmental issues. For instance:

I sign many online petitions on whatever grabs my intention on social media. I sign those that have to do with climate change, equality within education and jobs, race, and pollution. (Nancy)

I think it is [petitions] strong enough. I think signing petitions and protesting have the same useful effects. At the end of the day, they will be issues that will be discussed by the government anyway. (Joseph, 19, male, White British)

Mario said that he would sign more petitions if he thought that policy makers would pay attention to them, but questioned their effectiveness:

I have done that [signed petitions] a couple of times. I have seen it on Facebook. I will sign more if it affects the government. Am I wrong? Is that a misconception? Do you think that the government pays attention to it? (Mario)

Although the participants signed many petitions, one female participant reported she did not necessarily have faith in them. Kate stated that petitions on change.org do not have the power to force the government to debate issues. She said that young people should be signing petitions on the government website because if you get 100,000 signatures, the government must raise the issue in Parliament. Panagiotopoulos et al. (2011, p.91) suggested that failure to make a change in a government is the responsibility of citizens rather than the government. Citizens should aim to build a sustainable, inclusive participation process.

I asked the interviewees what the word 'politics' meant to them because I wanted them to describe and discuss it in their own terms. Sharing their views of politics would show variations in the activities in which young people are interested. The several political activities mentioned provide insights into young people's environmental activism, also known as Do-It-Ourselves politics (see Chapter 2, page 29). Apart from protesting against the climate change crisis, most of them listed the environment when asked about the issues which they felt strongly about. The findings support those of recent studies by Sarah Pickard (Pickard, Bowman and Arya, 2020; Pickard, 2019a) on what young environmental activists are doing in Britain to protect the environment. Emma said that her activism had started after she saw the Swedish activist Greta Thunberg on social media. References to climate-related actions reported by some of the participants were shopping at charity shops and vintage shops, reusing clothes, recycling, riding a bike to university, and switching to a plant-based diet to help save

the planet. Four of them said they had become vegan for the environmental benefits. Here my argument is that social networking sites share information about the danger of the environmental crisis, create more awareness about the climate change crisis, enable people to search for vegan recipes, use reusable bags (Emma showed me her handmade bag after the interview), avoid dairy products and commute by bike rather than driving. For instance,

> *I follow Greta Thunberg on Twitter and I think she is quite impressive. She has been very good for the environment. Everything she advocates is just amazing, so we need to protect the environment as much as possible. It's weird because now I care a lot about climate change, and I do a lot of things about it. I am vegan for animal rights and for the environment. I also decided I am not buying any new clothes, I am going just to shop in charity shops and vintage and try to rework all the stuff I have for the sake of the environment.* (Emma)

These results support those of previous studies which suggested that non-electoral forms of political participation are predominant through social networking sites (Ehsan, 2018). The evidence that students have faith in Do-It-Ourselves politics should encourage youth studies to widen the definition of politics. This finding refutes those studies which say that students have few opportunities to engage in politics and that the conception of politics is restricted to electoral political participation (Quintelier, 2007). The several ways in which students are engaged in politics should be embraced. This might offer a solution for the literature which notably argues that young people are disinterested in and disengaged from politics.

The analysis revealed an association between social networking sites and participation, with a few exceptions. First, social networking sites can take over students' lives when used in excess. The findings from this study support evidence from previous research about the idea of too much social capital (Jarvis et al., 2020; Herrero and Hughes, 2019). Second, from the students' perspective, social networking sites might generate negative emotional experiences. Studies have shown that negative experiences on social media have an enormous effect on people's sense of well-being, causing them to lose their perspectives on events and putting them at risk of becoming victims of those experiences (Pidcock-Reed, 2016). Nancy and Matt referred to these issues:

> *I use Twitter every day. You can see everyone is free to scrutinise and everyone is free to join, but it is very chaotic, and I feel part of me worries so much about joining too much. I get into debates about racism, and I met a lot*

of racist people. You cannot do much about it, and if there is an accidental debate, I will be like 'OK, I'll leave'. There was a time I left Twitter for three hours and when I came back, I found 80 comments, and every one was angry. (Nancy)

I put up a post recently and people commented on it. The problem on social media is that people feel they can criticise their political opponents, so I tried to close it due to other people on the [political] left. Some passionate feminist activists got slightly annoyed with me and they insulted me, so I avoid that problem and I stay uninsulted. (Matt)

In short, these extracts suggest that social networking sites increased the HE students' activism in politics. Many of the participants shared political content, raised awareness about different issues and discussed them with others online. The findings showed that social network activities are expanding, resulting in citizens' willingness to participate in politics. They also suggest that social networking sites affect participation in non-electoral political activities such as protesting and signing petitions, showing evidence of Do-It-Ourselves politics, and that these sites provide a platform on which to connect with politicians and elections. Even so, it is necessary to find clear evidence of whether voting or membership of political parties is coordinated through these sites. The findings reported here are about a small group of students in a single location who were active users of social networking sites, so no assumptions can be made about those who do not use them.

6.5. The Impact of Social Trust on the Higher Education Students' Political Participation

In Chapter 5, I presented the results regarding trust and showed that the HE students who participated in this study had strong bonds with family and friends, and that there was a higher level of trust within these networks. Social trust in family and friends results in a higher interaction frequency, social support and information. The responses in the interviews to a question about the people whom the interviewees met in community networks showed that they used resources such as interaction, a sense of belonging and a sense of identity. Trust in community members was found to generate social interaction and increase information. The findings showed that trust was lowest in social networking. When asked about such sites, most of the participants said that they did not trust new people whom they met online. However, students' resources should be able to use social networking sites. Social networking sites have

been shown to be a platform which makes information widely accessible. In this section, I shall show how trust in the different mechanisms of social capital affected the students' political participation. The resources generated from those mechanisms should help to understand and explore this relationship.

In this chapter, I have shown that the interviewees had a higher trust in their family members, resulting in a higher frequency of interaction and support. The resources generated from trust increase the likelihood of becoming involved in electoral political participation. The findings showed a correlation between trust and political participation in voting. Akram said that he voted similarly to his family members because they got information and views from similar resources. Ahmed, Ross, Nada and Aya shared similar viewpoints. For example,

> *I often befriend other Muslims and other Arabs, or people who are from ethnic, religious or other minorities; similar interests are also a big factor. I usually trust them more and I only connect with them as they have similar politics and they accept my political views.* (Ahmed)

> *Trusting a friend to me means believing that this person will have my best political interests at heart.* (Ross)

These extracts suggest that trust in family and friends played a vital role in the students' political engagement. This provides additional evidence that students are more likely to vote for the same party as their family and friends. Chapter 5 showed that only a few participants did not share similar political preferences to their family members, and as has been reported earlier, one participant said she did not vote like her father. This should not undermine the importance of trust in family members and resources in engaging students with electoral forms of political participation.

The analysis of trust presented in Chapter 5 suggested that trust in community networks generates social interaction and information. In this section, I shall present the findings regarding how resources produced by trust impacted the students' political engagement. The findings have shown that interaction and information sharing with members of their community networks were associated with political discussion and information sharing. For instance,

> *I think there are different kinds of trust so I when I meet people, for example at Stop the War events here, I know that we had an event that was about, like, Saudi Arabia and Yemen and what was going on there*

and how we wanted the UK government to stop selling weapons. The people I met there, I trusted them in terms of their political beliefs. I trusted that they agreed with me largely because they had come to the meeting and sat through it and they had not stormed out in anger or anything, but I don't know that I would trust them on a personal level until I got to know them better. I wouldn't trust them, but it would take time because I don't just meet someone and go like 'Oh, here are my deepest, darkest thoughts', but I trust them politically. (Lilly)

Lilly's answer suggests that trust can lead students to share their political beliefs freely and openly. This finding supports that of Uslaner (2002) that trust positively and optimistically influences cooperation with others. Moreover, the findings did not reveal evidence that community networks make students distrust the world of politics or create a negative evaluation of the practice of the government. This finding contradicts Kim's (2005, p. 197) findings that distrust in political institutions is produced by associations which expose national issues. Indeed, evidence from the current study showed that some of the interviewees had higher levels of trust in the Labour Party when it was led by Jeremy Corbyn. Some participants showed low levels of political trust in how the Conservative Party could change the political landscape in Britain. For instance,

The Conservative Party leader was accused of saying something about Islam. I think that choosing the prime minister should be about the manifesto, what is going to happen to the NHS, what is written down, and the increase in taxation. (Ahmed)

The Conservatives won so I do not think that change is going to happen. After the last election, I am saying we cannot rely on the elections because the Tories can do what they want. They can allow as much fake news as they want. We shouldn't have the responsibility for eradicating poverty on our own. (Kate)

These comments can be explained as consequences of Brexit, "which has radicalised a generation of younger voters who will now forever see the Tories as the party that threw them away from their future" (West, 2020). This data was collected when Corbyn was the leader of the Labour Party. The findings are therefore restricted to a limited period of UK politics.

In student societies where students can discuss political issues, there seems to be some understanding that some participants had supported the Labour Party in elections. Maria, a

member of the History, Arab and Palestinian Solidarity Societies, said that she enjoyed being part of them because most members supported the Labour Party and believed that they could make a change. The trust of the individual members adds meaning to these societies and facilitates political discussions. Moreover, trust is required for positive cooperation and the willingness to enhance community ties and solve common and collective issues. These cooperative relations, in turn, facilitate the formulation and application of public policies (Rothstein, 2005). For instance, Kate, who was engaged in volunteering, said that she always advised people to volunteer for the issues that matter to them and to use voluntary groups to be politically engaged:

> *I want people to talk to everyone in their life about politics and how hard the government will make it for vulnerable people to live. Talk about lies, the deceit and the manipulation they will see. Start volunteering and use this opportunity to be politically engaged all the time. Join your local mutual aid group and write to your MP when they vote against the NHS, against schools, and turn out onto the streets when they vote against these things. Throw your weight behind the genuinely left-wing candidate the Labour Party presents. Don't let them do what they've done to Corbyn to whoever that is.* (Kate)

In this chapter, the findings have suggested that information sharing through social networking sites has the potential to turn into a wealth of political information and, in turn, increase participation in non-electoral political activities. In Chapter 5, I argued that students do not trust strangers on social networking sites, but they still need to access relevant information. In this section, I have raised an important question about the role of trust in this relationship. Trust will add practical significance to social networking sites because this mechanism provides direct and visible evidence of students' political participation.

Indeed, social networking sites enabled the HE students to access relevant data on politics. The majority of the interviewees agreed with the statement that social media are a good source of information (see Chapter 5, Section 5.1.3, pp.112-13). However, some of them said that they tended to check the reliability and relevance of the information which they read on social networking sites. That said, not all information can be trusted (see Chapter 5, Section 5.1.4, pp.126-27). The double-checking of information minimizes the risks to which online users are exposed; it shows that the students were aware of these risks and wanted to avoid fake news. In Section 6.3, I reported that the participants got involved in several non-electoral political

activities through resources generated by social networking sites. For example, they joined protests and signed many petitions without necessarily trusting strangers. Information exchange and mobilisation from Facebook and Twitter informed and facilitated protests and rallies. Several students reported that they had protested in the street several times. They met with other people they do not know in real life and probably had never known them personally, but they all gathered in a collective action. This finding suggests that trust is essential to politics. As demonstrated by Neveen:

> *I took part in human rights marches in the city of London, and I did not know one single person and I am all for that. I know how much of a difference it makes but I think it definitely spreads awareness and enables people who are already looking to get involved with the cause to feel more attached to it. If you involve yourself in a protest, you will suddenly be in a space with loads of people who care just as much about something as you.* (Neveen)

In summary, although trust does not appear to be the most effective mechanism of social capital, it appears to have had a minimal influence on the students' political participation. Within family and friends' mechanisms, the findings indicate that trust generates more interaction and discussion of politics and has the potential to increase the likelihood of voting. Within community networks, trust inspires resources for political interactions and discussions. Trust in social networking sites might not increase students' political participation, but it does not weaken it.

6.6. Chapter Summary

After clarifying how the participants experienced social capital and the resources related to the mechanisms of social capital, this chapter has explored how the resources generated by social capital affected the students' political participation. There is little evidence that the mechanisms of social capital impact all types of political participation equally or even at all. Different mechanisms of social capital and the resources related to them affect different types of political participation. Based on the qualitative data, it seems that the mechanism of the family generates a higher frequency of social interaction and social support which, in turn, increases political interaction and influences the act of voting compared with other political activities.

It was found that close friends had facilitated the discussion of political preferences. Community networks inspired more political interaction and discussions, but they did not directly affect engagement in political participation. The findings reported in this chapter help to shed light on the mechanism of social networking sites and the significant importance of such sites, and this has the most decisive influence on the students' participation in non-electoral political activities such as protesting and signing petitions. In addition, online political activism, such as posting on political issues, sharing images or videos to express a political opinion, being involved in political pages and commenting, may help students to increase their political knowledge, exchange opinions about politics and engage with political activities. Trust appears to be a supporting mechanism for political participation but its influence is limited. For example, even if they did not entirely trust social networking sites, the students interviewed would still participate in political activities which matter to them.

Chapter 7: Interpretation and Discussion of the Results

7.1. Introduction

This study explored social capital mechanisms among HE students in York and investigated their impact on political participation. The responses from 29 semi-structured qualitative interviews with the students were presented and analysed in the previous two chapters. The analysis showed how these HE students experienced social capital and the resources associated with it, and how the resources generated by the mechanism of social capital affected their political participation. In this chapter, I shall discuss their responses in relation to the two research questions:

RQ1. How do higher education students experience social capital?
RQ2. How do the resources produced by the different mechanisms of social capital affect higher education students' political participation?

In this section, I shall discuss the mechanisms of social capital by looking at how the interviewees experienced and perceived them. The first purpose of this study was to address the first research question about how students experience social capital. I shall discuss this in relation to how four particular mechanisms, family and friends, community networks, social networking sites and social trust, were experienced and perceived by the students. The findings showed that the different mechanisms of social capital generate different resources. Chapter 5 showed that social capital mechanisms have both bonding and bridging social capital characteristics. Bonding social capital encompasses homogeneous groups such as family and friends, whereas bridging social capital encompasses networks accessible to individuals from weak ties (see Section 3.3). In this study, bonding social capital characterised the HE students' connection with their family members and close friends. Bridging social capital characterised their connection with community networks. Social networking sites show evidence of both types of social capital. In the case of bonding social capital, the students used social networking sites to maintain and facilitate interactions with their close networks. In the case of bridging social capital, social networking sites allowed them to share content and exchange information. Regarding trust, the interviewees reported greater social trust in their close networks than in their weak networks. Bonding and bridging social capital allowed me to compare the different mechanisms of social capital.

How valuable is social capital for HE students? The findings showed that social capital generates social resources. Some differences exist between resources according to the different social capital mechanisms. Although all of the mechanisms provide social interaction and information sharing, bonding social capital provides more social support and bridging social capital provides more of a sense of belonging and identity. In the first section of this chapter, I shall discuss these findings in more detail.

7.2. A Discussion of the Resources Generated by Family and Friends

The findings showed that family members, especially parents, played an essential role in the HE students' bonding social capital. Family members generate resources with a higher frequency of social interaction and social support. These resources were associated with several interpretations. They were relevant to day-to-day interaction, more frequent contact, sharing and exchanging information, not being alone, being understood and supported, showing feelings and receiving emotional support. These findings supported those of previous researchers who asserted that family provides a resource for understanding and support (Sjolander and Ahlstrom, 2012; Caughlin et al., 2011; Holland, 2009).

As has previously been mentioned, some of the interviewees reported spending too much time talking to their families. Ling and Li (2019, p. 67) argued that the quantity of time spent with family is needed to cultivate and maintain close networks. Moreover, evidence of emotional support reflected the close relationship between the students and their family members. Emotional support should be vital to students as government statistics have shown that one in ten young people have a mental health issue, and the numbers could be higher as many suffer in silence (YMCA, 2016).

More data on friendship networks shows evidence for social support. Here, I want to explain the term 'friends' as used in this study. The group of HE students described friends as those they usually interacted with, friends from school or college, friends whom they have known for an extended period, and friends with whom they share and exchange information without any limits or conditions. One of the most notable findings of the friendship network was homogeneity, by which I mean people with the same characteristics, such as race, gender, religion and individual interests. Different examples from the findings have explained this evidence. The Muslim participants tended to have more Muslim friends, the white British

participants tended to connect with other white people, the Arab participants also tended to be friends with Arabs, and the British Asian participants tended to connect with British Asians.

Further shared characteristics were age and gender. This finding points to the essential benefits of shared identity (Gray and Stevenson, 2020). However, there is a need to make existing homogenous friendship networks more ethnically and religiously mixed. We need to promote diversity, tolerance and cohesion among young people in Britain.

As mentioned earlier, the interviewees reported receiving social support through their friendship networks. This support is similar to the social resources which family connections provide. The finding supports Putnam's (2000) idea that bonding social capital generates social support. The homogeneity of friendship networks can explain this. This finding is consistent with the existing literature that suggests that homogeneity is positively related to higher levels of subjective well-being (Churchill and Smyth, 2020, p. 11).

These findings should be considered rational as the HE students' familiarity and direct experiences with their family and friends led to the influence of social capital on their lives. This is not to say that all of them stated positive experiences. A few participants responded differently to their experiences of personal and support relationships. Despite being a significant source of social support, excessive bonding ties carry a small number of negative experiences. For Emma, ringing her mother every day was an overwhelmingly disturbing experience. Nada said that keeping up with her friends and talking to them often made her less able to focus on her goals. This finding implies that there is such a thing as too much social capital (Jarvis et al., 2020; Herrero and Hughes, 2019). In this respect, Herrero and Hughes (2019) believed that social interaction with family members at a high level can hinder children from establishing new networks and prevent them from getting new knowledge from other networks. In other words, investing too much time with family will only generate shared resources within that restricted circle. However, if students join heterogeneous interest groups, this will strengthen their knowledge and experience. Svendsen and Svendsen (2006) went as far as suggesting that too much bonding social capital can nurture and increase nepotism, social isolation, poverty, distrust and conflicts. The findings of the current study, however, suggest that the students benefited from both family and friendship networks. These networks are complementary. Having said this, I also suggest that being included in a heterogeneous community group can lead students to experience a more significant level of information and development. Weak ties connect people with new and different ideas and life experiences.

Although the findings showed that it was unusual for the HE students to feel disconnected from their family members, they showed that two young women had received less social support because of their sexual orientation. After losing their families' support, Jane and Kate had turned to their friends with the same sexual orientation. This finding supports reports in the literature that people are more likely to interact with others of the same sexuality (Trinh et al., 2019; Yuan and Gay, 2006). Previous research has suggested that the current generation is more accepting and less prejudiced than their parents and grandparents in this regard (Janmaat and Keating, 2019). Therefore, a friendship network is more likely to develop stronger bonds with this group. The idea that the current generation is more accepting and tolerant can be associated with post-materialist values. It can also be explained by Britain's expansion of education levels (OECD, 2015). This tolerance might be higher than average since university/college students were taken as the baseline for this study, who are disproportionally likely to hold more liberal views.

These explanations anticipate an optimistic perspective on the role of friendship networks. Friendship can be necessary, but does it replace the feeling of validation and acceptance from family members? Although ties among the LGBT community networks provide emotional support, Yuan and Gay (2006) argued that homophily is a divisive power among people with different characteristics. This division makes it challenging to actualize this community in a larger community. Previous studies have suggested that the inclusion of the LGBT community remains incomplete as many LGBT people still experience discrimination and lack of involvement opportunities, resulting in lower social capital levels (Westwood and Wathern, 2017). The LGBT community needs more social support and care (King and Cronin, 2016).

This finding partially challenges the argument that social capital is a public good (Julien, 2015; Putnam, 1995). I do not wish to suggest that this argument be read as that bonding social capital is nasty or negative. The resources generated by family and friends are clear and enormous, but there also exist some disturbing experiences. Among the interviewees, the lack of bonding ties did not make any students feel hopeless and struggling because they had further bonding and bridging networks to maintain and enhance their social capital. This result can be taken further to explore the potential social networks of excluded LGBT+ people in Britain and examine how they can be engaged in their community.

7.3. A Discussion of the Resources Generated by Community Networks

The findings suggest that the HE students enhanced their bridging social capital by joining community networks. When asked what they did in their free time, the participants reported that they engaged in one weak tie at least. The main results of the mechanism of community networks showed that they generated an additional network for social networks, a sense of belonging, and a sense of identity. Results associated with these resources were student societies and charities. The interviewees widened their networks by joining student societies and attending their events. This was, in part, more significant for those students who came from outside York. Most of the societies which the participants joined were subject-based, such as the Pakistani society, the Islamic Society, the Feminism Society, the Women's Society, the Palestinian Solidarity Society, the Politics Society, the International Association Society, York's Philosophy Society, the Creative Writing Society and a Reading Club. The interviewees had joined and attended events in societies with similar characteristics to their own, such as ethnicity, religion and race. Ethnicity, religion, and race homogeneity makes members of student societies familiar with each other and makes it easier for them to communicate and share experiences and stories. The participants reported that they had found students at the societies to be nice, friendly and supportive, and most of their experiences were positive and had enhanced their sense of community. These societies provide students with new networks to create their bridging social capital. They enable them to discuss their subjects more informally.

This social and interactive side of the university or college was essential to the interviewees because, as Sarah said, societies had helped her to fit into university life and face the struggles of campus life. Bridging social capital does not necessarily replace bonding social capital. This suggests that even if someone has substantial bonding social capital, they might still need resources generated by weak ties (student societies, for example). This finding contradicts those of previous research which had assumed that support from bonded ties reduces students' opportunities to have further resources to help them with their educational careers (Todman, 2018). HE students' engagement with societies is important because a lack of these networks at the university or college might reduce their resources for jobs which can fulfil their aspirations and could reduce their post-graduation achievements (Gaskell and Lingwood, 2017). Creating linkages among group members mobilises information sharing and encourages collective actions (Beyerlein and Hipp, 2005).

The findings showed that some student societies generate a sense of identity, such as the Islamic society, the Pakistani Society and Arabic Societies. Some of the interviewees assumed that these societies are more supportive and make connections easy and natural. In this sense, societies provide greater inclusion. At the same time, the findings produced no evidence of whether these societies replace feelings of exclusion and defensive behaviours against discrimination. Waldinger (2003) suggested that social capital within minorities develops from exclusion and discrimination, but none of the interviewees reported an experience when they had felt socially excluded from wider Britain. One explanation could be that young people in contemporary Britain become more tolerant as they are raised with a higher level of diversity (Jamnaat and Keating, 2019). Therefore, further research should explore this.

This might seem to be bonding rather than bridging as people who are members of society have something in common, but I have intentionally regarded them as networks of bridging social capital because the students in these networks took time to build a relationship in these networks, and the members are still diverse people who come from different cities and have different life experiences and various viewpoints. Further, in view of the findings about minorities, I want to highlight that my intention was not to describe them as discriminated groups. As a researcher, my goal is to ask questions and interpret results from students, regardless of their sexuality, gender or race, to express their opinion.

In this study, volunteering was found to expand bridging social capital in young people's communities (Putnam, 2000). The benefits of volunteering for the students were evident, confirming the results of a national survey carried out by the British Heart Foundation which found that young people are committed to volunteering and strongly agree that it is beneficial for their mental health (Brett, 2019). This finding is significant for young people when volunteering is found to be statistically low (UK Civil Society Almanac, 2021). These results indicate that there are crucial elements which influence young people's decisions to volunteer. In this case, there is a need to consider future studies combining the use of quantitative and qualitative methods to reach a fuller understanding of this topic.

A further interesting finding is that the students in this study did paid and unpaid volunteering beyond their race, ethnicity or religion. Whereas student societies provided them with a sense of identity, voluntary associations and charities provided a sense of belonging. For example, the interviewees reported that they volunteered at hospitals, donated money, supported vulnerable people such as women with mental health issues and refugees, and taught children

at the mosque. They could see the desired resources of volunteering. The responses of the interviewees suggest that volunteering is validating and reassuring and generates a sense of belonging. As such, their willingness to help rather than acting to harm should show their goodwill towards making a positive change in society. Stukas et al. (2005) stated that students' positive expectations from volunteering are critical social capital outcomes. As in many previous studies, volunteering was found to be associated with a sense of belonging and social interaction, strengthening citizenship (Wu, 2011; Boeck et al., 2009). Feelings of belonging improve the quality of life and strengthen social integration (Hombrados-Mendieta, Gomez-Jacinto and Dominguez-Fuentes, 2009, p. 673). These findings are helpful because policy-makers could use them as critical motivations to engage young people in volunteering.

In this study, the gender differences between the participants had little impact on the type of community networks they joined. Both genders had the same access to resources based at the university or college and in the local community. This finding does not reflect previous research which has suggested that men have larger social capital space than women (Brashears, 2008). Even so, it could be said that it is better to acknowledge young women's bridging networks because they are more likely to be interested and engaged in networks related to women/feminism issues. Examples from the female participants were abuse against women, sexual violence against women, perceptions of Muslim women in the Western world and women's representation in the UK. These networks generate young women's sense of belonging and add value to women's issues. By having these networks at their disposal, young women develop values and goals and accumulate power for the wider community, which characterise the process of bridging social capital (Franklin and Thomson, 2005, p. 5). This finding also suggests that community networks can be invested in and expanded to accumulate the power of specific groups (Bruegel, 2005, p. 5).

The outcomes received through the participants' weak networks were affected by their geographical context and where the community networks occur. This result confirms those of previous studies which found that proximity to a geographical area significantly impacts community action (Agnitsch et al., 2006). Indeed, the students' outlook on York had positive connotations. They reported that they regarded York as a safe place to live. York helped them to have peace of mind and to feel a sense of belonging to their community. Safety is also essential in the trust area. A high level of trust among community members makes it easier to solve crimes, depending on the residents' knowledge of events in their neighbourhood. When

there is higher cooperation from residents, law enforcement can have the necessary information to reduce violent crimes (Wasserman and Ginsburg, 2014).

Even so, the lack of diversity in York generated some different views. Participants from multi-cultural cities such as London and Nottingham reported wishing that York was more extensive, diverse and multi-cultural. This can be expected with students' prior assumptions of the social dynamics of both multi-cultural and white geographical contexts. These views about York did not prevent the participants from having access to several social networks. Most of them showed positive views about the city. In terms of size, Peters (2019) showed that residents of small areas enjoy a better quality of life, are more civically engaged and have positive views about their community; they tend to possess more social capital. Thus, small towns and cities make it easier for local political leaders and policymakers to understand community life and local situations (Besser, Recker and Agnitsch, 2008).

Putnam (2007) argued that the impact of diversity could be reduced by creating new forms of social solidarity. The history and relationships among people affect societies in the long run. The longer people live together, the more they experience tolerance and coexistence towards minorities (Tatarko, Mironova and Van De Vijver, 2017, p. 554). Indeed, the participants reported that feelings of belonging would be increased with time. Further research can investigate how young people from different cities (urban/rural) experience their sense of belonging.

Some participants mentioned the lack of funding when asked what would stimulate them to be more engaged in community networks. Austerity policy may well provide a reason for this. Austerity measures caused a reduction in youth services budgets (Sloam, 2013). Studies have therefore offered some suggestions to enhance their community involvement. On the one hand, it has been suggested that young people should be included in their community because they know the strengths and vulnerabilities of their neighbourhoods and community. Their understanding of the shared values of their community would inform collective actions (Flores, Goeke and Perez, 2014). On the other hand, young people need to be part of community networks to promote their well-being, enhance their understanding of democracy, and encourage them to participate in decision-making (Schild, 2011).

As has been repeated throughout this thesis, bonding social capital describes the participants' relationships whereas bridging social capital describes their relationship with members of community networks. Having explored both types of students' social networks, I do not

consider one to be more important than the other. As the findings have shown, the students' social capital had both bonding and bridging social capital characteristics. In this context, Claridge (2018) advised researchers and policy-makers to consider the two as mutually inclusive, reducing to a binary nature in analysis. The current results make it difficult to determine whether the students had more bonding social capital or were more likely to get involved in community networks. Bonding social capital provided more social interaction and support than bridging social capital, whereas the latter developed a sense of belonging for them. Both types of social capital are available for students; both are necessary, complementary and mutually inclusive.

7.4. A Discussion of the Resources Generated by Social Networking Sites

The third mechanism of this study, social networking sites, generated essential resources for the participating students, mainly information sharing. The participants were asked what they used social networking sites for. Maintaining offline contacts was reported to be essential for bonding social capital, whereas connecting to information and online content represented bridging social capital. This section discusses these findings.

In Chapter 5, it was shown that social networking sites connect students to their bonding ties with family and friends. Most said that they wanted to know what their bonded ties were doing and saw these sites as virtual platforms for light and heavy conversations. Facebook was the biggest platform to do this. The participants reported that they enjoyed seeing their family members' and friends' pictures and having personal conversations with them. They said that the easy and accessible nature of social networking sites maintained their feelings of connectedness to their relationships with family members and close friends. The ability to talk to friends and family any time they wanted should bring a sense of security (Nair, 2019). Indeed, the interviewees said that sharing things about their lives should only be seen by their contacts. Several of them want to keep their privacy and seemed aware of the potential negative consequences of social networking sites.

Meeting strangers was not often the goal of using social networking sites. Most of the participants were on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram and reported spending two or more hours daily on these sites. Only one female participant thought that she spent too much time on social networking sites. It is worth acknowledging here that this is not representative of the wider

younger population. The findings showed that the students did not add or accept friend requests or chat with people they had never met offline. This is against the assumption that young people tend to be more inclusive than previous generations; in a sense, they allow new and different kinds of groups in their social networking sites (Cabral, 2011). Previous studies have found that people must interact with people from different backgrounds, gender, race and religion. Such behaviour means that individuals are open-minded and more comfortable sharing perceptions and trying new things outside their immediate circle (Williams, 2006). This does not suggest that social networking sites are less useful as a bonding mechanism. The inability to connect with strangers should not necessarily imply limited social resources for HE students. Access to valuable resources on social networking sites should be considered with attentiveness.

The findings did not show whether the intensive use of social networking sites negatively affected offline communication with the participants' networks. Salgur (2016, p.29) suggested that social networking sites might interfere with the face-to-face social activities of young people who spend too much time on them. Similarly, Turkle (2011) stated that spending too much time discussing interpersonal bonds cannot help lonely people. However, social networking sites might replace face-to-face interactions when isolation is enforced. For example, the coronavirus pandemic produced loneliness and isolation and isolation has been discussed as something which can negatively affect physical and emotional health (Erickson, 2011). The findings suggested that social networking sites compensate for students' inability to meet other members of their networks. This study was conducted before the Covid-19 outbreak, which leads me to suggest that further work is needed on how social networking sites impacted young people's social capital during the pandemic.

Unlike offline connections with family and friends and the emotional support which the participants received from them, the findings did not provide any examples of how social networking sites affected their emotional well-being. This supports the finding of Shensa et al. (2020) that social networking sites play no role as a resource of emotional support. This means that even though students' connection with social networking sites has increased, they still find face-to-face connections more effective for their emotional well-being. This could also mean that the frequent use of social networking sites cannot replace traditional face-to-face interactions.

A key to the participants' bridging social capital was their ability to access relevant information, share various content and be aware of current issues. Although the interviewees said that they did not add people to interact with personally, they explained that they followed famous people such as politicians, celebrities, athletes, motivational speakers and artists, which is also in line with the finding of Croes and Bartels (2021). Following celebrities enabled the participants to connect with weak ties to people whom they admired or felt influenced by. In this vein, social networking sites were seen as mechanisms to become aware of the news, especially political news, to keep up with current issues and to be informed about things which they cared about. Putnam (2000, p. 22) emphasized that bridging social capital is "better for linkage to external assets and information diffusion". This fits the findings of the current study because the students could communicate with more accessible and faster new information without necessarily reading newspapers, for example. This finding is perhaps not representative of the wider younger population. Ofcom (2022) reported that three-quarters of UK adults said that there was nothing that would encourage them to go online in the next twelve months, and Steele (2021) suggested that old people prefer face-to-face contact than following others.

Moreover, people's news awareness has been enhanced by getting into debates in the comments sections of social networking sites and awareness develops people as future citizens (Davies, 1965). It could therefore be argued that social networking sites make information more accessible than face-to-face relationships.

The type of information which the interviewees spoke about was general information about current issues, politics, human rights and funny stories. Because the participants were students, there needed to be empirical evidence showing that social networking sites are tools for studying and improving their learning about their academic subjects. The results might have been different if the students had used professional networking platforms such as LinkedIn. Further research can explore how specific social networking sites contribute to learning.

The participants reported some negative experiences. An aspect relating to the use of social networking sites was their role in their interaction in the comments sections. Some of them raised issues about inappropriate language and disrespect. Political and human rights debates were more likely to generate these negative comments and this experience had led some to stop getting into debates rather than ignoring them. They said that dealing with those debates takes a tremendous mental effort. The downsides of social networking sites, however, are the exception rather than the whole story. The participants reported that they attempted to avoid

engagement with online debates. Indeed, cyberbullying is not as familiar as offline harassment. Offline harassment puts young people at risk of depression, anxiety and even suicide (Samat, 2018).

The analysis of the role of the social networking sites raises a broader question about whether offline bonding and bridging social capital work differently from online ones. First, both types were present in the findings and were positive in the students' lives. Second, social networking sites can increase the number of weak ties. This might not be applied to connecting to new people but following famous people, for example, is more accessible. This indirect interaction is less likely to happen offline.

Conversely, it is easy and costs nothing to join online communities, whereas offline communities need investments of time and sometimes money. As a result, we should expect more weak ties online than offline. These ties do not necessarily mean new personal relationships but may consist of online groups and pages. Moreover, face-to-face interactions provide more emotional support than online contact. Alternatively, as the findings showed, online resources did not provide any emotional support for the interviewees. In bridging offline social capital, gender, ethnicity and religion had affected the types of community networks which the participants joined. This is less likely to be revealed from online bridging social capital. There needed to be more evidence of the types of online communities. As has already been discussed, the participants said that they followed celebrities, politicians, motivational speakers and athletes.

7.5. A Discussion of the Resources Generated by Social Trust

There is extensive literature on the relationship between trust and social capital, and the idea that social trust is positively associated with social capital has much empirical backing. Some studies have even further argued that strengthening social capital is impossible without social trust (Valadbigi and Harutyunyan, 2012). In this study, the analysis of social trust showed different results among different networks. The interpretation of trust is a significant contribution of this study as it is interconnected with the other mechanisms. This section will discuss how the participants experienced social trust alongside related resources.

The findings showed a higher level of trust in personal relationships. Trust in family members and friends was positive and implies belief in the other (Lewicki and Wiethoff, 2000).

Characteristics of this trust are associated with love, self-revelation and faithfulness (Larzelere and Huston, 1980). Trust generates resources with strong ties, including family and friends, emphasizing a higher frequency of personal interaction and social support. In general terms, these resources were identified by the extent to which the participants shared details of their day-to-day lives and exchanged information and viewpoints without limits. Similar experiences, background, religion and values increase the resources of interaction and support. This interaction, in turn, results in information sharing. This supports previous claims that information is positively associated with established trust (Håkansson and Witmer, 2015, p. 518). The frequency of communication, shared values and quality of information contribute to this relationship.

Uslaner (2018, p.40) argued that if people express trust in family and friends, they are more likely to find others trustworthy. Moreover, they are more likely to interpret others' behaviour positively (Holmes and Rempel, 1989). Indeed, there appears to be no dark side to trusting in family members and friends in the findings. This finding should be valued and expanded, as families were found to represent a positive resource for the HE students' social capital.

The analysis of trust not only included trust in personal relationships but also in bridging ties, including community networks. The findings showed that trust was necessary for the performance of community networks (La Porta et al., 1996), and as highlighted in Chapter 5, trust within community networks was found to generate more social interaction. Trust is important because it enables young people to exchange information in more extensive networks. Trust in student societies, voluntary groups, associations and clubs leads to more cooperation. The findings confirm those of previous studies which stated that trust is the basis for cooperation among community members (Ma et al., 2019; Valadbigi and Harutyunyan, 2012; La Porta et al., 1996). Hume (1969, p. 574, as cited in Gambetta, 2000, p.227) explained this clearly:

> When each individual perceives the same sense of interest in all his
> fellows, he immediately performs his part of any contract, as being
> assured that they will not be wanting in theirs. All of them, by concert
> enter into a scheme of actions, calculated for common benefit, and agree
> to be true to their words; nor is there anything requisite to form this
> concert or connection, but that every one have a sense of interest in the
> faithful fulfilling of engagements, and express that sense to other
> members of the society. This immediately causes that interest to operate
> upon them and interest is the first obligation to the performance of

promises. Afterwards a sentiment of morals concurs with interest, and becomes a new obligation upon mankind.

Trust influences how people communicate information within young people's community networks (Geller, 2005). For example, Jane said that someone who gives a negative opinion about sexual orientation and race should be mistrusted – in other words, trusting that community members are accepting and respectful encourages cooperation in networks. In this respect, trust is essentially an issue of interaction and cooperation. Gambetta (2000, p. 215) said that "… even if people have perfectly adequate motives for the cooperation, they still need to know about each other's motives and to trust each other, or at least the effectiveness of their motives".

The findings showed that the interviewees naturally preferred to engage in networks representing their identity, including religion, race and individual interest. They expected other members to be accepting. The trust exists because the members understand and value each other's backgrounds, preferences and choices. A shared sense of identity leads to cooperation with other members in this context. This is consistent with Puusa and Tolvanen's (2006) findings which suggested that trust in identity organisations generates a collective commitment and cooperation.

The findings showed that trust is based on levels of interaction among members of community networks. The participants agreed on one mechanism to increase trust in their community networks: time. Although trust is essential for young people to join networks, it is not enough to fully trust someone based on a few meetings. Humphrey and Schmitz (1998) described trust as an inductive process established through repeated interactions and I agree with Lewicki and Wiethoff (2000) who stated that trust does not happen overnight. People need to come together, have experience with other members, and learn about their reputations before developing the ability to trust them fully. Trust increases with commitment (Larzelere and Huston, 1980), honesty in others and the accuracy of knowledge:

> Having trust is the trustworthiness of the individuals or organizations with regard to a series of consequences or incidents where this trust expresses having trust in the honesty or love of others or the accuracy of technical knowledge. (Giddens, 1988, p. 34)

Following this, members of community networks must engage consistently to develop trust. Lewicki and Wiethoff (2000) proposed several ways that networks can do this: an explanation of the members' expectations, agreement on the mechanisms to accomplish tasks, and evaluation of performance based on systematic procedures.

The findings showed a scepticism about a positive relationship between social networking sites and trust. The participants in this study neither trusted the public nature of social networking sites nor the new people connecting on these sites. The amount of contact with students and strangers influenced trust levels. Trust can remain at the lowest level because young people consistently do not contact strangers online.

This finding was not surprising because many theoretical and empirical works have discussed this digital divide. First, there is the concern about the lack of privacy. To accept someone's request on a social networking site, a person must see that the user's profile is accurate. Considering that people must trust everyone, should individuals also trust on matters of health and safety? Giddens (1988) argued that individuals need to be aware of the risks of trusting others. Evaluating trust in close networks is more accessible as it results from repeated interactions, shared potentials and motivation. This might be harder to achieve with people you have never met.

Trust is relevant for HE students' social capital. The interviewees talked about how far they could trust their networks, but the findings did not tell us if they think it is necessary; they are trusted. The analysis showed that a lack of trust in social networking sites did not prevent the students from having a wide range of resources for information. That said, these resources generated from social networking sites did not depend on trust. Social networking sites merely made the gathering and exchange of information accessible and easy to achieve. It is said that we could live in a community which motivates us to cooperate through virtuous moral and religious beliefs, but these are not readily available compared with trust (Gambetta, 2000). Although the findings clearly showed that the interviewees had a lack of trust in social networking sites, it is difficult to say whether we need too much or little trust. The analysis presented in this study adds further credence to the argument that trust needs further conceptual nuance (Bunting, Gaskell and Stoker, 2021).

Trust existed in the HE students' experiences at different levels. There was a degree of social interaction, support and information which flowed from the trust. The discussion of trust above showed that trust becomes relevant for resources related to social capital in bonding and

bridging ties. Trust makes social interaction and social support more relevant among family and friends. Within community networks, trust was relevant for interaction and cooperation. Within social networking sites, the resources generated from this mechanism did not depend on trust.

7.6. A Discussion of the Mechanisms through which Social Capital Affected the Students' Political Participation

In Chapter 5, the exploration of the data showed interesting results regarding the social resources generated by the different mechanisms of social capital. In that chapter, I discussed social capital among the HE students and social resources. In the literature review, I presented social capital as an essential coping factor that impacts the political participation of young Brits. In the literature, I found that despite a growing interest in social capital, little is known about the resources generated by the mechanisms of social capital and how they affect HE students' political participation in Britain. In the following sections, I shall discuss the second question:

RQ2. How do the resources produced by the different mechanisms of social capital affect higher education student's political participation?

The analysis of the data showed that the different social capital mechanisms encourage both electoral and non-electoral types of political participation. In the empirical examples discussed in this thesis, I am not claiming that one particular mechanism or type of social capital is the only conductive mechanism of political participation: "A combination of bridging and bonding social capital may sometimes be what is needed in order to transform efforts at political mobilisation into political victories" (Widmalm, 2005, p. 86).

7.6.1. Family and Friendship Networks and the Electoral Participation of the Higher Education Students

The findings showed the strength of ties between a group of HE students and their family members and friends (see Chapter 5, Section 5.2.1). Considering the importance of family and friends in HE students' social capital, it can hardly be denied that these networks play a significant part in their political participation. Overall, I found that the social resources generated by family and friends allowed for a higher frequency of political interaction and

participation in non-electoral activities, mainly voting. This political information informs political participation (Galston, 2001). Prior studies called this an instrumental approach. According to this approach, citizens engage in efforts to access information, and when they acquire and assimilate it, they engage in action toward their purpose (Bimber, 2001, p. 55). A higher level of political interaction should expose students to the world of politics. Additionally, the free cost of information might lead to participation in more than one political activity. Dinas (2014) found that political discussions between parents and their children expose students to viewpoints and motivate them to talk about politics outside their homes.

An enriching result from the current study was that political discussion is considered to be political participation. Idris said that political discussion with his family and friends is a form of political participation:

> *Probably we discuss politics more than any other subjects, but what is politics is a very broad question. So, it is very easy to slip into politics and technically even when you are talking about politics with your family and friends, it is a form of politics.* (Idris)

Indeed, some researchers have contended that political participation takes a psychological involvement and consists of political interest, keeping updated about political issues and engaging in political discussions (Almond and Verba, 1963). The current findings tell us that political discussion with family and friends matters, at least for developing the HE students' knowledge about political issues. A deeper empirical examination is needed of whether political information and discussion can be synonyms for political participation.

Concerning acts of political participation, the analysis showed that direct interactions with family members increase the likelihood of an eligible student voting. This contradicts the findings of Kwak et al. (2005) that individuals with homogeneous networks are less participatory. As a result of this influence, political scientists advise legislators to consider family relationships in order to accomplish policy goals (Strach, 2006). Although the family presents a valuable resource for HE students' political interest and information, a few of the interviewees reported that they did not share their parents' political beliefs and judgements. One participant said that she supported a different political party from her parents. However, this did not appear to influence their likelihood of voting.

As was highlighted in the second analysis chapter, family members, especially parents, provide high social support. A few of the participants said that their parents had asked them not to engage in large demonstrations where they might be exposed to risks such as violence (see Section 6.2). The parents' worry can be interpreted as part of a democratic society which views protests as a threat which has to be eliminated (Article 19, 2014). Instead of seeing them as such, I believe that protests provide HE students with practical opportunities to participate in democratic life.

The findings do not reflect those of previous studies which argued that a high level of parental politicization prevents children from accessing other socializing agents (Jennings, Stoker and Bowers, 2009, p. 787). Instead, the findings showed that the participating students tended to identify their political preferences with their friends rather than with family members. Sharing the same political preferences places young people closer to political information, and this was visible in the interviewees' tendency to vote for the same political party as their family and to share the same positive messages about it. This finding raises essential questions regarding the importance of post-materialist values (see Section 2.2).

The findings suggest the need to rethink HE students' voting preferences. Some of the participants reported that they voted for the Labour Party and that they would support the Party in the future, led by Jeremy Corbyn. Their voting turnout was associated with Labour's opposition to austerity policies (Sloam and Ehsan, 2017). This was also associated with youth anti-austerity protests in recent years. Research has suggested that Labour supporters are more likely to engage in non-electoral political activities to show their discontent with austerity. The Labour Party then becomes a place for grassroots movement (Ehsan, 2018). These findings cannot be generalised as they referred specifically to the period when Jeremy Corbyn was the Labour Party leader.

Statistics from YouGov (2022) showed that 26% of 18-24-year-olds trusted the Labour Party in November 2022 compared with 19% in July 2019. This shows that there are still relatively low levels of trust for the Labour Party. It is also worth noting that there is a difference between trust in an opposition party and trust for the national government. A report by the John Smith Centre (2022) stated that just one in five young people stated that they trusted the national government, elected politicians or the civil service: this is only 20%, so most young people do not trust the government. The same report predicted higher levels of trust with the growing

number of younger age groups accessing higher education, which might explain why some participants in this study reported higher levels of trust and support for the Labour Party.

The Intercollegiate Studies Institute Archive (2014) suggested that families' ability to influence the political participation of the current generation was limited, but the findings of the current study show little evidence of political disagreement between the participants and their families. The AAMFT Blog (2017) suggested that politicized conversations with family members should be reduced, or they must follow a tolerant and civil discourse when dealing with a divide in political opinions. Other studies have suggested that if parents want to affect their children's political views, they should communicate with them consistently, and their views should stay crystallized and stable over time (Jennings, Stoker and Bowers, 2009).

Altogether, therefore, family and friendship networks have been shown to advance understanding of the impact of bonding social ties on the participants' political participation. The analysis presented above provides support for the role that close networks play in the act of voting. The findings also give insights into political puzzles, such as why students support the political party they do, why they support specific political policies more than others, and what mechanisms possibly shape their political opinions. In the following sections, I shall discuss how community networks and the immense mobility of social networking sites have blurred participation in politics.

7.6.2. How Important Are Community Networks for the Higher Education Students' Political Participation?

The findings on the participants' community networks were set out in Chapter 5, Section 5.2.2. I have explained that student societies, charities, voluntary groups and even clubs generate resources of social interaction, a sense of belonging and a sense of identity. Regarding political participation, these resources were found to influence the students' political knowledge/information, but the findings gave no direct evidence of their influence on political activities. Such influence was more visible in student societies such as the Politics Society, the International Association and the Palestinian Solidarity Society. That said, if you are not part of a Society which speaks about politics, you are unlikely to expand your volume of political information. I have shown the importance of political information within family and friendship networks. Although the participating students were exposed to politics in student societies

within community networks, the resources generated there were less important than those with family and friends. Of course, students' exposure to information in those societies is minimal compared to close networks, as they only attend meetings a few times a month. Moreover, the students who join these societies are more likely to be interested in politics, which means that their opinions are already formed, which might explain why community networks did not directly impact the participants' political participation.

Further to this, as was shown in Chapter 5, the mechanism of community networks generates a sense of belonging and a sense of identity. HE students are more likely to go to societies and charities representing their own ethnicity, gender, race and shared interests. This might suggest that the information structure is the same for the community members. Previous studies have shown that people having a shared culture might weaken ties between people and the government (McLaren, 2011). Apart from the nature of community networks, information should be combined with the frequency of political discussion. Eveland and Kleinman (2013) and Kwak et al. (2005) suggested that political participation depends on how frequently people discuss politics with their partners. If individuals are only sporadically discussing politics, they are less likely to engage with political information.

One participant reported discussing politics in clubs (see Mike's comment, page 99). Beyond the networks discussed in this study, Eveland and Kleinman (2013) stated that people need to discuss politics with those with whom they come into contact. Although this study has provided little evidence of how community networks affect political participation, it has shown that political discussion is vibrant. This leads to the question: What if HE students only consume political information as observers? As a researcher, I find that participation in political activities has more positive benefits than engagement in politics. Students have plenty of resources to learn about politics and expand their political knowledge. By participating, they see the value of what is happening in the political world.

An important finding in this study was that those who volunteered viewed volunteering in positive terms and explained its impact on their lives and their communities. This finding does not reflect recent statistics that suggest that the level of volunteering among young people is low: 31% of those aged 16-26 years volunteered at least once a year and 17% of them volunteered once a month in 2020/21 (UK Civil Society Almanac, 2021). Empirically, no evidence was found on whether voluntary groups and associations provide access to opportunities for political participation. I acknowledge that it is complex to link volunteering

and political participation. The evidence from previous UK studies suggests that the nature of the voluntary sector has moved to using more professional services, which would give citizens a limited and complex scope to influence political contexts (Fyfe and Milligan, 2001). Moreover, those who volunteered and those who were interested in volunteering expressed some barriers which limited their participation. I maintain that such disempowerment and lack of funding fail to consider the role of volunteering in encouraging political participation (see Section 5.1.2, page 103). Another possible interpretation is that students need to be connected to multiple voluntary associations. According to Teorell (2003), associational memberships matter in weak ties. Therefore, if students fail to maintain a closer network with the government through associations, they are less likely to influence decision making.

Although the participants operated with a broader conception of political participation, none of them regarded volunteering as political participation. This is contrary to Putnam's assertion that volunteering is part of political participation (2000, p. 132). The findings could be interpreted differently if volunteering was practised in political associations. The participants volunteered in hospitals and charities advocating for vulnerable people's rights, and we can assume they would seek the government's goals; however, this is beyond the scope of this study.

The findings showed that religious affiliations were important in some participants' lives, but did not lead to political participation. It is difficult to explain whether this is understood according to the structure of religious affiliations or whether HE students avoid talking about politics. This raises an interesting question regarding the importance of religion in British politics. Mobilizing faith communities might reinforce politics; therefore, politicians need to engage with these communities and learn from their richness. It is important that politicians should not approach them only for electoral purposes (McAndrew, 2017).

It is important to state again that the participants viewed community networks positively. I found strong evidence of the importance of a sense of belonging through networks available for young people (see Section 5.1.2). Theoretical grounds predict that a sense of community strengthens a belief in the efficacy of political engagement. Their conviction that they share the exact needs of others and their emotional connections might reinforce political action (Davidson and Cotte, 1989). Although they increase HE students' feelings of belonging, community networks do not make a robust mechanism for engagement. This finding might be more commensurate with studies which included that if a sense of community was to affect

political participation, this is more likely to apply to adults rather than young people. A sense of belonging increases over time; that is why it is more vital for adults (Talo et al., 2014).

In brief, the findings showed that engagement in student societies, voluntary associations, charities and clubs had less influence in terms of political participation. However, these networks enable HE students to engage in political conversations and discussions. Political participation is far less understood throughout the analysis of community involvement mechanisms. Future research could benefit from re-thinking some resources to enhance political activism through student societies and the voluntary sector.

7.6.3. The Impact of Social Networking Sites on Non-Electoral Political Participation

> This generation has been very vocal because they have the tools to get their voices heard, they are out there, day in, day out, posting and sharing and demanding action. (NAMLE, 2020, as cited in Rainier, 2020)

The analysis of social networking sites revealed a significant association with bonding and bridging social capital (see Section 6.3). Social networking sites allow a wealth of political information sharing. The participants demonstrated clear evidence of social networking sites encouraging them to becoming involved in non-electoral political activities such as protesting, signing petitions and Do-It-Ourselves. The outcomes did not seem surprising, considering today's widespread use of social networking sites. This finding contradicts previous research that suggested that online users become less politically active when they recognize that access to resources is easy and effortless (Filipek, 2019).

The effect of social networking sites is consistent with the findings of previous studies which focused on information as the most remarkable outcome of these sites (Akhavan, 2015). The current findings showed that social networking sites support the diversity of information gained through the considerable sharing of political news. Facebook, Twitter and Instagram allow easy login to political parties' and politicians' pages, news pages, websites and blogs. These politics-related accounts are flexible and inexpensive means of producing and circulating political information. The political information to which students are exposed online is from public pages, not from users whom they know and trust. The participants reported that they used social networking sites to find out what political parties are doing, express what they think about

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politics and learn about political issues. This also influenced those with lower levels of political information. This result supports Bimber's (2001) finding that younger people are more likely to acquire political information online than from other age groups.

Although I did not find direct support for voting, social networking sites were found to enable direct communication with political parties and leaders. One of the most exciting findings was that most of the interviewees followed political leaders' and political parties' profiles on Facebook and Twitter. This confirms Mellon and Prosser's (2017) finding that social media users are better educated. Following politicians on social media is positively related to political interest (Marquart, Ohme and Möller, 2020; Bene, 2017). According to Calderaro (2018), the constant activities of politicians establish contact with party supporters and encourage voting. This virtual connection and support have even been equated with belonging to a political party (Barlett et al., 2013). The current findings relate to social networking sites users in general: the participants were young people who were in higher education, interested in politics and followed political leaders on social media. Ofcom's (2022) UK social media usage report showed that 98% of young people aged 16-24 had a social media profile. The current findings clearly cannot be applied to the whole young generation or to the general population in the UK, especially those who do not use social media or those who are not in higher education.

I do not argue that social networking sites are sufficient to connect with political actors, but they allow an open space for political discussions, which cannot be achieved through the restrictive environment of the government. Political leaders should invest in social networking sites to connect with young users and understand their aims and conditions for political participation. Recent research has shown that political candidates need to use social networking sites to communicate their social, economic and political policies (Elareshi et al., 2021).

Although online political activism is at the bottom of the ladder of political participation, the present results show that it is highly important. Politics necessitates a great deal of work and effort, so understanding online collective actions and re-evaluating the possibilities enabled by social media should be considered (Margetts et al., 2016, p. 11). If we are still to misplace a deep cynicism in online political activism, we might fix the democratic deficit and foster a sense of belonging. If we are sceptical about these forms to revive democracy, it will be challenging to adopt and reinforce policy approaches (Farthing, 2010, p. 187). At the same time, suggesting that these networks are sufficient is disempowering for students. As Farthing (2010, p, 188) put it:

While it is problematic, then, to dismiss the existence of these new forms of politics, to simply claim that these new forms are deeply 'political' - therefore young people are political - falls into the same troubling trap of disempowerment. To simply suggest that young people are being political - just in new forms - denies the critical transformation happening in young people's actions.

One might wonder whether these results are applied to the less interested or most politically interested students. The sample comprised HE students, and most of them reported that they were interested in politics. Therefore, the role of social networking sites as sources of political information mean that many of them were primarily influenced by the content of these sites. This can be explained further by the intensive use of social networking sites among students and their dependence on these sites to learn about politics. Again, these findings are not representative of the wider younger generation in Britain, although some studies have shown that most students use social networking sites for political information and awareness (Ahmad, Alviand and Ittefaq, 2019).

However, information exchange through social networking sites was found to be more likely to produce disturbing experiences than offline contacts among a few of the participants. Political disagreements in the comments sections of online sites led some of them to withdraw from expressing their opinions. This finding can be interpreted as HE students' unwillingness to endanger their peace of mind, mainly when these discussions involve hatred and rudeness. Mutz (2002) referred to these experiences as cross-cutting networks and argued that they are responsible for ambivalence towards political issues and leaders. Based on the responses of the participants, it is not possible to conclude that bridging ties online decrease political participation. Social networking sites are platforms containing a wealth of information and directly influence non-electoral participation. Indeed, the various privacy regulations which social networking sites have limited these disturbing experiences for the interviewees. Debates on whether social networking sites have positive or negative outcomes will continue. Long-term studies can explain the extent to which we can rely on social networking sites in the political sphere, under what conditions we can use them, and whether their constant use adds value to politics. Moreover, there are multiple platforms when it comes to social networking sites, so they might bridge ties in different ways.

The findings showed that social networking sites are a direct tool of information which provides HE students with opportunities to participate in political activity quickly and

effectively. They also showed a positive relationship between social networking sites and political participation (Boulianne, 2009). This suggests that Putnam's (2000) view might not apply in this context. A significant conclusion drawn from this study is that political participation in one form or another tends to be strong. Much political information is directed towards more than one non-electoral political engagement. Online petitions, protests and Do-It-Ourselves politics are good examples of political activities generated by social networking sites (see Section 6.3, page 128). Social networking sites provide a platform for collective political activity such as protests and demonstrations, and they help students to participate in political activities, such as signing petitions. This finding is consistent with Ehsan's (2018) results that non-electoral politics through social networking sites are dominant among students in Britain.

The interviewees drew attention to how they supported social movements such as protests about climate change. The findings suggested that political participation on social networking sites might be associated with post-materialist values. The results are similar to those of Theocharis (2009) in a Greek case study, but they contradict his case study of the UK, where post-materialism was not associated with internet use and did not predict online political participation (Theocharis, 2011). Some of interviewees in the current study might be post-materialists as they are well-educated (Theorcharis, 2011; De Graaf and Evans, 1996). The current sample comprised HE students. It is therefore vital to state that post-materialism is not representative of the younger population in Britain.

This study supports previous findings which suggest that social networking sites are valuable platforms for promoting protesting (Scherman, Arriagada and Valenzuela, 2015; Breuer, Landman and Farquhar, 2015; Hensby, 2013; Segerberg and Bennett, 2011). Interestingly, the current findings are consistent with those of previous studies which have suggested that those involved in protests identify with the left wing (Scherman, Arriagada and Valenzuela, 2015; Dalton, Sickle and Weldon, 2010). Inglehart predicted in 1977 (as cited in Savage, 1985, p. 429) that post-materialists are more likely to be on the side of the political left. In the current study, more participants reported that they voted for Labour than Conservative. Savage (1985, p. 439) also suggested that left-wing post-materialists have lower levels of satisfaction with their society and how democracy functions. Indeed, the current participants believed that the government should launch policies to deal with the climate change crisis, for example. Analysing social networking sites in the context of political action enables us to move beyond

information sharing and start rethinking their role as organising mechanisms of evolving collective protest practices (Segerberg and Bennett, 2011).

As the literature suggests, social networking sites influence petitions (Yasseri, Hale and Margetts, 2013). The current participants, except for two, had signed online petitions on social networking sites, a low-cost activity. Social networking sites encourage early streaming and rapid growth of petitions, so users do not actively have to seek them out (*ibid*., p. 9). Yasseri et al. (2013) suggested that petition organizers need to reach individuals early to achieve this. One potential mechanism to achieve this is social networking sites. One issue which was not revealed from the interviews is whether young people actively seek to sign petitions. It is interesting that previous studies suggested that most users of social networking sites do not (Lin et al., 2013). The current participants did, however, attach empowering meanings to signing petitions. Previous studies have shown that most petitions are political and targeted at the government. Undoubtedly, online petitions engage people broadly with politics (Halpin et al., 2018). Panagiotopoulos et al. (2011) suggested that petitions help to increase integration between citizens and authorities, including supporting key policy issues.

Participation in non-electoral activities, including online petitions, protests and Do-It-Ourselves, primarily represents HE students' voice in climate politics. It is essential to recognize that climate change activism has extended worldwide (Pickard, 2019a). In the current study, social networking sites were seen as positive platforms for informing and responding to students' claims about the climate change crisis. Activism in climate change is empowering because "participation in social movements has long-term powerful and enduring effects on the political and personal lives of those who have been involved" (Bosi, Giugni and Uba, 2016, p. 6). In engaging with environmental issues, young people learn about consumption, biodiversity, pollution, using energy and injustice in decision-making (O'Brien, Selboe and Hayward, 2018).

Activism in climate change protests also empowers young people to seek for the voting age to be lowered (Piper, 2019). It is interesting to consider how activism in climate politics changes from visible protests in the streets to everyday activities such as Do-It-Ourselves politics. The literature, along with the findings presented in the previous chapters on climate change activism, should encourage researchers to discuss the lasting effects of this activism.

Climate change activism has political advantages, particularly engaging students with political acts. Students' ability to engage with the political process extends their political rights which

in turn advances young people's self-realisation (Melo and Stockemer, 2014). Along these lines, what can be emphasised is that scholars and political leaders need to rethink young people's political participation (Loncle and Cuconato, 2012). There are several convincing arguments that young people are politically active, so we should view all actions as potentially engaging (Walther, 2012). Equally, we need to hold favourable beliefs that social networking sites have elements which support political systems and democracy.

In conclusion, the findings do not suggest that social networking sites are more effective and empowering. Easy access to those sites makes it easier to act politically. The findings show that it is possible to start mapping and asking more critical questions about the effectiveness of online activism on British politics. The intensive use of social networking sites, the information revolution and the free cost need to be investigated more in future studies. I can foresee a growing influence of social networking sites on politics, especially with the increased use and the growing number of these networks today. All of the participants reported that they were active users of social networking sites so the findings cannot be applied to people who do not access these sites.

7.6.4. Why is Trust less likely to be Associated with Higher Education Students' Political Participation?

In Chapter 5, I highlighted that the interviewees' highest levels of trust were for their families and friends and that their lowest levels of trust were for new people whom they met in community networks and on social networking sites. Regarding political participation, the findings showed that trust increased their electoral participation but did not affect other forms of political involvement.

I have discussed the influence which family members, notably parents, had on the interviewees' decisions about voting. The findings showed that the students had higher levels of trust in their families and that this trust was translated into the act of voting. The analysis of trust showed the mechanism that appears to matter in turning out to vote (Burns, Kinder and Rahn, 2000). This finding contradicts that of Filipek (2019), who went as far as to suggest that people who trust their family are inactive in political life. Students' relationship with family members is essential for the political party they vote for. Most of the participants had been encouraged to vote by their parents. Trust in parents relates to access to much information about various

aspects of government. Political discussions in the family can promote political trust (Marien, 2017). The interviewees were found to have greater trust in the Labour Party and were more likely to vote for it. This finding might manifest in different ways if young people are supporting the national government.

Some of the interviewees reported that they did not trust the Conservative government in the decision-making process and whether it can keep its promises. Some participants showed concerns about Brexit (see Maria's and Kate's comments, page 147). The UK's decision to leave the EU caused challenges to trusting politicians (Rotenberg, 2016). Being politically trusting has benefits for democracy because it reduces burdens between young people and the government. Scepticism about political leaders can be partially helpful and does not necessarily mean apathy. As the literature review showed, young people show discontent with how their political systems are governed by not participating in the democratic system. This shows confident post-materialist citizens who believe in democracy: "… falling political trust could be good if it means that citizens are now more attentive and expect more of their officials" (Vallier, 2019, p. 14). Szreter (2002, p. 612), however, stated that this is challenging to achieve as "it requires citizens to see and believe that government makes real and valued net contributions to citizens' lives, to earn their support for, and trust in the state". Myeong and Seo (2016) argued that political parties must show citizens the specific process of decision-making based on accurate information. If they do not, this could decrease people's trust.

Decisions regarding non-electoral political activities were found to be absent from family and friendship networks. The participants and their friends voted for the same political party because they were more likely to hold similar political views and engage in political discussions with them. A few of the students reported that they were likely to get involved in a protest if their friends contributed their time and efforts. This perhaps explains why trust in friendship networks can shape a person's motivation to participate in politics. Research has shown that friendship is an essential social strategy in developing the well-being of citizens through protests (Marais, 2019). Similarly, Foley (2006) argued that friendships are essential in times of protest as they provide a higher mechanism of experience, sociability, relationships and behaviour. Friendship would encourage protests because young people today tend to share the same post-materialist values (Renström, Aspernäs and Bäck, 2021).

Trust in community networks was found to be associated with social interaction, identity and belonging. However, when I analysed these resources, I found they had influenced the

interviewees' political information rather than their active political participation. This finding supports those of previous studies which argued that trust increases cooperation in social groups (Ma et al., 2019; Valadbigi and Harutyunyan, 2012; Widmalm, 2005; La Porta et al., 1996). Regarding political participation, the findings showed no direct evidence. One possible interpretation of this is that since maintaining trust is an ongoing process, political participation must also be maintained over time. These networks require good structure and funding (Abdalla et al., 2021).

Overall, the interviewees reported that social networking sites do a positive job. The findings showed that these students engaged in several non-electoral political activities, but these were activities which do not depend on trust. They had the lowest level of trust in social networking sites, particularly in trusting strangers. Social networking sites have implications for signing petitions, protesting and engaging in Do-It-Ourselves politics. This supports Kim's (2014) finding that trust does not matter regarding non-electoral political activities such as signing a petition, boycotting and joining a legal demonstration. Kim (2014) argued that trust is less significant in liberal democracies because citizens are accessible politically. Paradoxically, this contradicts other researchers who have found that trusting people are more likely to engage in non-electoral political activities (Neilson and Paxton, 2010). Others have argued that trust is necessary to create a democratic government (Zmerli and Newton, 2008).

Social trust is a mechanism for supporting a political system, but we need to renew our intention about its implications, especially with the dramatic increase of social networking sites, notably in Britain. The low levels of trust should offer opportunities to force political decisions and create a new generation of responsive citizens. We need to acknowledge the political activities being practised in the existence of reliable and massive knowledge about the world of politics. Even with low levels of trust in social networking sites, the participants were engaged with the government, including following politicians and political parties (Barlett et al., 2013), getting into debates, reading political news, and acting on it.

When it comes to political information sources, the interviewees believed that not all information can be trusted. They showed themselves to be critical citizens because they were aware of misinformation and tended to check whether available information is accurate (Valentim 2021; Norris, 1999; 2011; Van der Meer and Zmerli, 2017). This makes young people feel good and confident about identifying false news and misrepresenting reality (Eurobarometer, 2018). The respondents said they were more concerned with fake news about

political issues, but this does not imply danger to democracy, as some studies have suggested (for example, Sippitt, 2019). The interviewees reported that they relied heavily on social networking sites to learn about politics. The findings did not identify whether these young people were informed by television and radio or whether they trusted them more than social networking sites as sources of news. This supports my claim that students today turn to social networking sites to learn about politics.

The results on the relationship between trust and political participation are interesting but they were hard to interpret. Significant responses arose because of differences in the level of trust according to a different group of people, difficulties in interpreting what it means to trust a specific group of people, or how the ability to trust someone impacts one's political behaviour. One factor contributing to these results is that the participants did not want to answer when asked face-to-face about trust, a mechanism which can be sensitive and personal. The results remind us of the continuing difficulties of conceptualising and operationalising social trust and the social capital theory.

7.7. Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have discussed the key findings of the study. I have presented material which explored a group of HE students' social capital in York and its impact on their political participation. The data about social capital present a clear case at least that the four mechanisms of social capital which have been explored were important in the students' lives. I found that family and friendship networks were important for their social interaction and social support. Community networks generated social interaction, a sense of identity and a sense of belonging. Social networking sites were a dominant feature of the students' lives. The findings on trust showed that the interviewees were more likely to trust their bonding networks, such as family and friends. Although they identified trust with respect and a feeling of comfort, they were found to have the lowest levels of trust in people whom they meet online.

I have discussed in this chapter the impact of social capital on the HE students' political participation. Overall, the findings make a strong case that the different mechanisms of social capital impacted the political participation of the interviewees. With family and friendship networks, they engaged and participated in electoral political participation by voting. Their experience of community networks such as student societies and voluntary networks was a force for raising political engagement such as political interest and knowledge, but it did not

reveal a strong case for participation in political activities. In addition to giving and improving HE students' political interest and knowledge, social networking sites played a vital role in their participation in non-electoral political activities. Finally, the levels of trust in the four different mechanisms of social capital did not appear to have a strong impact on the interviewees' political participation.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

8.1.   Summary of the Thesis

This study explored the relationship between social capital and political participation among HE students in York. The empirical discussion led to explaining the driving force for their political participation. There have been many studies on young people's political participation, so my intention was not simply to review them but to consider new ways of understanding this participation. My argument points in this direction: young people vary in political participation. Throughout this thesis, I have emphasized social capital theory and its influence on participating in several types of politics. It was a striking finding from the political literature that there has yet to be an agreement on how social capital affects HE students' political participation in a particular geographical context. The study was designed to answer two research questions on social capital among HE students and its impact on their political participation. I sought to answer these questions by interviewing 29 HE students in York.

In the study, I took care to identify social capital as a resource and examined four potential mechanisms of social capital which might influence HE students' political participation. These mechanisms have been commonly used in previous studies; they are family and friendship networks, community networks, social networking sites and social trust. This study therefore contributes to the social capital literature and particularly to understanding how HE students experience the four different mechanisms. The mechanisms have demonstrated the relevance of resources related to social capital to propose themes for future studies. It was found that family and friendship networks, and also mechanisms of bonding social capital, generate resources of a higher frequency of social interaction and social/emotional support. I showed that community networks, a mechanism of bridging social capital, promote social interaction, a sense of identity and a sense of belonging. There were some gender, race and religious differences in access to community networks but no significant differences in the resources related to social capital. The findings showed that social networking sites are essential in both types of social capital. The students used social networking sites to maintain their offline contacts and invest less in connecting to new people. Social networking sites are a rich resource of information. The mechanism of social trust increases resources of interaction and information. Although each mechanism predicts different results, they all have important implications for students' social capital. No mechanism proved more important than another; instead, they work more effectively when combined.

A collective understanding is that social capital positively affects HE students' political participation. The findings showed interesting results regarding the impact of the resources of HE students' social capital in several acts of political participation. The political participation of the students varied across the four different mechanisms of social capital. In other words, the HE students whom I interviewed were engaged in different political activities based on their ability to mobilise resources from these mechanisms. The resources generated by family and friends affected their exposure to a higher frequency of political information and interaction and to participation in the act of voting. Resources flowed from engagement in community networks to develop political information and discussions, but there was little evidence of their effect on participatory political activities. Social networking sites provided the students with a high volume of information and facilitated engagement in non-electoral political activities, such as signing petitions, joining protests and Do-It-Ourselves activities. No direct evidence was found for the assumption that social trust leads to higher levels of political participation. Although it is an important mechanism, political participation does not appear to depend on it.

This thesis contributes to the field of young people's politics. First, the study adds to the growing number of studies on the understanding of young people's political participation in Britain. This study argues that young people cannot be treated as an homogenous group where political participation is concerned. That said, they vary in their levels of participation. The findings do not suggest that young people are disengaged from formal politics, nor do they suggest that they are politically engaged in non-electoral political activities. The social capital theory provides a further understanding of how young people participate in political activities. I have identified contemporary patterns of young people's political participation and discussed social capital as a critical theory which affects political participation. Second, I have provided a qualitative account of four mechanisms of social capital and how they affect political participation. Social capital has previously been measured using data from large-scale surveys. This study has identified useful proxies for social capital using a qualitative research methodology. Another contribution of this study is the analysis of how a number of HE students in York experienced social capital and an explanation of how the resources produced by the different mechanisms of social capital affected their participation in politics.

8.2. Research Implications

In this thesis, I have argued for a shift in the operationalisation of political participation. This study was essential because it stands against the blame discourse of research which suggests that young people are apathetic and alienated, and moves away from describing young people as disengaged/engaged in politics and adopts a different approach by exploring the variations in their participation. My point here is not that the literature which generalises young people's political participation is wrong, but I suggest that political analysis should consider young people's differences and preferences when it comes to their participation.

The findings of the study help readers to understand the conceptualisation and operationalisation of social capital. In academia, social capital is a concept with vague definitions and interpretations. It has many measurements and is open to many empirical implications. The current study operationalised social capital as a resource for HE students' social interactions, allowing them to participate in politics: "Better conceptualisation and operationalisation of social capital theory are helpful to attract more investment on its development, design appropriate social policies, and promote sustainable development" (Bhandari and Yasunobou, 2009, p. 480).

Previous research has suggested that social capital must be embedded in an "empowering agentic process". This includes empowering young people by engaging them in opportunities and creating environments in which they are able to contribute to policy development. This also recognises young people as active social agents (Boeck, 2011, p. 292). Members of community networks should participate in decisions (Carnevale and Wechsler, 1992).

This study has implications for how we can understand democracy in Britain. By recognising the potential of social capital for increasing political participation, the government could engage young people by launching social policies for developing social capital (Henn et al., 2007, p. 469). In 2016, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation suggested that the British government should bring strong social capital to cities. Cities can develop into engines of growth, reinvent identity and bring people from different cultural backgrounds together. The government, along with the officials of cities, the JRF added, should work to understand what is around their neighbourhoods, make the voices of the poor heard and create more significant opportunities for them to fight poverty and isolation.

This research supports previous suggestions to develop the voluntary sector to create a dynamic society (Shahin, 2016). Motivating young people and HE students in particular to participate and develop trust within these associations is also necessary. Moreover, voluntary associations can organize political events and use their relations to influence politicians, parties and stakeholders.

There should be more social resources for everyone to participate in political activities regardless of gender, marital status and sexual orientation. One of the interviewees illustrated this very well:

> *With gender, I feel sometimes women are treated differently. As a girl, I know that when I start speaking about something, I feel like people won't listen to me or my voice will be muted. I am a girl and I think if I know what I am talking about, people should appreciate what I am saying.* (Sarah)

Moreover, political parties should work to empower women. As Emma stated,

> *I have been a member of the Labour Party since the day after the elections [2019]. I was with the Women Labour Party, and I was the branch leader of York for a year. Half of that was voluntary, but I left that party because it did not allow me to use my views anymore. It was a shame because I think women have great ideas, but it is not good enough. It was not transgender friendly, and the women were just old feminists who cannot change my mind.* (Emma)

The findings showed that social networking sites influenced the HE students' social capital by maintaining social interaction and providing social participation. These results showed a crucial role in political participation. Accordingly, social networking sites should reflect young people's needs to the government by creating an environment for both parties to interact and develop social trust (Shahin, 2016). Organizing social-political programmes on these sites is also recommended based on young people's understanding (Gerami, Rasekh and Karimi, 2020, p. 506).

Since the interviewees reported issues about trusting information online, media need to control fabricated news and ensure the verification of stories, information, images and videos.

From a practical aspect, sustaining social and political trust is fundamental in democratic government. To do this, Vallier (2019, p. 16) proposed that the government should work to

protect liberal rights, protect democracy, fight corruption, protect the rule of law and improve economic performance by investing in markets.

Finally, the government, political leaders and the media should acknowledge that young people will probably refrain from engaging in political parties at a higher rate. It is important to encourage more engagement from a regime which satisfies and guarantees political equality to citizens. We need "an institutional check that incorporates citizens' voices into the democratic system but does not rely on widespread citizen participation" (Parvin, 2018, p. 33). One way to accomplish this is to ease the pressure on formal types of participation, such as voting, to allow more mechanisms to incorporate people's voices in the decision-making process, such as by protesting (*ibid*.).

Young people provide an active workforce for the economy and bring active engagement in democracy. Politicians should design strategies and initiatives to get young people making their voices heard. Specific efforts can be dedicated to reach out to those marginalised in society. Communication efforts from politicians would strengthen the legitimacy of their decisions and increase young people's trust in their officials (OECD, 2019). The government should invest in youth networks and help them to access better education, housing and employment. It should ensure that young people overcome mental health issues and tackle the root causes of violence.

Due to the interest and engagement of young people in climate change, scholars and policymakers should work together to bridge the gap between young people and the government. Despite the vital role the UK has played in shaping environmental policies, austerity and Brexit have limited the budgeting towards renewable energy projects. Researchers needs to inform and advise policymakers on strategies to limit the effects of climate change crises. Future climate change scholarship should explore how social media platforms inform citizens of various aspects of climate change in Britain (Anderson, 2012).

8.3. Limitations of the Study

In this section, I shall discuss what this study does not tell us. First, researchers in the field of young people's political participation usually present evidence to suggest that young people are either disengaged from electoral politics or highly active in non-electoral political activities. In the literature review chapter, I suggested that young people are diverse in their political participation: some of them are active, others are not.

One of this study's unique challenges was the social capital theory's conceptual framework. Vague definitions of the theory in the literature contribute to this challenge. I have contributed to the literature by focusing on social capital among HE students in York and its mechanisms for political participation.

Second, this study is restricted by the sparse literature on social capital in a British context, especially among HE students. Most of the available social capital research papers in Britain were published by the Office for National Statistics, which quantitatively measures people's social capital: HE students have never been part of their research. While reviewing the literature, I found few research papers on the relationship between social capital and young people's political participation (Holecz, Fernández and Giugni, 2022; Brady, Chaskin and McGregor, 2020; Muddiman et al., 2019; Kolpinskaya and Fox, 2019; Oskooii and Dana, 2018; Andrew, 2009; Henn et al., 2007; Lowndes, 2004). The results from those studies were mixed and inconclusive, and few examined HE students. As a result, I developed my narrative in the light of the social capital literature on the available participating sample, mainly in the American and British contexts.

Selection bias is another limitation in the design of this study. I recruited participants directly from York. Therefore, I missed cases of young people who did not attend a university or college. Because of this, it is impossible to generalise the findings. Selection bias also appears in the selection of HE students aged 18-24 years. In this case, the results do not reflect the wider younger population in Britain.

This study focused on a specific area, York. Many of the interviewees came from York and the rest came from Nottingham, London and Manchester. Different results and interpretations could be evident in other cities in Britain. Young people's social capital and political participation will change in different geographical areas.

In this study, I interviewed HE students. It is not a surprise that students tend to join student societies. It would be interesting if future researchers explored the experiences of social capital and political participation for those who did not continue their education after school. For example, my study suggests that students join societies to create their social capital. Societies support them and create a sense of belonging for those who embrace engagement in their new community.

In the empirical part of the research, I found that gender, race and religious differences were more apparent in the mechanism of community networks. However, these differences did not

appear to lead to differences in political participation among the interviewees. Similarly, the results did not show any differences based on gender, race and religion in the other social capital mechanisms. I suggest that further studies could benefit from considering the abovementioned variables, aiming to understand better how social capital affects political participation.

One of the limitations of this study was identifying political knowledge, political information and discussions, and resources generated by the various mechanisms of social capital. I have not used political knowledge tests to capture these variables. Further work could use knowledge tests to capture what political information young people have.

8.4. Recommendations

This study is significant for future research into social capital and the political participation of HE students in York. The literature review identified several gaps. In the following sections, I shall make some suggestions for future researchers.

This study has considered four mechanisms which influence social capital: family and friends, social networks, social networking sites and social trust. It would be more informative if social capital research could focus on one mechanism and explore it further using a qualitative approach. Moreover, future studies could explore these four mechanisms, understand how they interact with one another, and get a clearer picture of their influence. For example, further studies could address how and to what extent trust is established by family, friendship, colleagues and neighbours relationships.

The discussion of social capital has tended to overlook gender. Some studies have assumed that social capital benefits the wider community (Brayne, 2017; Aldrich, 2010; Overcamp-Martini, 2007; Putnam, 1995), ignoring how men, women and other genders experience social capital. This does not suggest a gender conflict among social capital theorists, but the social capital theory would benefit from research into further critical aspects of social capital.

My analysis of trust adds to previous studies which questioned the conceptual and methodological difficulties in explaining whether social trust plays a vital role in social and political behaviour (Hardin, 2002, p. 74). Considerable further evidence is needed from youth studies around Britain.

Further studies can also investigate the relationship between faith communities and political participation among young people. The findings raised questions regarding how HE students in faith communities think about politics and pose challenges as to how they can affect political participation. This should also make us consider whether there are new ways to discuss the relationship between religion and politics in the modern era.

Social capital cannot be investigated strictly through quantitative instruments. A significant area of investigation can be a comparative study of the relationship between social capital and political participation in different geographical contexts. Previous studies pointed out that social capital can be unevenly used and distributed in societies (Wiesinger, 2007). Qualitative instruments might produce empirical evidence by exploring social capital in different geographical areas. For example, in a qualitative study, Pantoja (2000) found that poor social cohesion in a village was a major impediment to community development and rehabilitation.

The findings strengthen the argument that young people are interested in politics, have much political knowledge and participate in several political activities. More importantly, they believe in political activities and they support them. These findings must be considered, especially after some studies have assumed that young people are disengaged from politics (Fox, 2015; Grasso, 2014; Henn, Weinsten and Wring, 2002; White, Bruce and Ritchie, 2000).

Future research could also consider the importance of mediators such as political interest, political information and motivation in which young people use social capital mechanisms to participate in politics. Further research can examine these relationships and could incorporate a full range of mechanisms into the analysis of political participation.

The findings on social capital were collected and the experiences which the interviewees reported took place before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. All of the interviews took place before the pandemic and before lockdown. It would be interesting to examine the impact of Covid-19 on young people's social capital and how they used their experiences during this period.

The thesis emphasises the need for further research on social networking sites and their effects on several types of political participation. I found that different social networking sites played a crucial role in the interviewees' social interaction and engagement. Social networking sites produce information and present content which encourages students to engage with political issues and participate in political activities such as signing petitions and joining protests. It might be partially true that there is a lack of certainty and credibility as to whether we can rely

on social networking sites to conduct research, but it is reassuring to some extent. Further research should explore this.

As stated above, the empirical part of this study was conducted before the Covid-19 outbreak. Young people's politics have been affected by the ongoing cuts in public spending, the coronavirus pandemic and racial protests (Black Lives Matter) (Sloam and O'Loughlin, 2021). Sloam and O'Loughlin (2021) argued that these issues have specifically affected socially liberal and left-leaning young people, and they called on the government to integrate the voice of younger generations into policymaking. Further efforts are needed to provide them with the skills and confidence which will enable them to engage with public policies and political leaders. Further research could therefore investigate the role of social networking sites in the more recent movements and protests, particularly those which broke out after the pandemic.

Appendix 1: Interview Questions

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Interview Questions

Part one:

- Where did you grow up?

- How long have you been living in York? What is it like?

- Do you feel part of York? Is it important to feel part of it?

- What do you do in your free time [social activities]? How did you get there? Why did you take part? Do you interact with other members? Do you consider taking part in the future?

- Would you say you trust people there?

- Which group of people do you talk to often? [family, friends…] Would you say you trust them?

- Do you use social media? What do you use it for? How often?

- How do you follow on social media? Do you follow people who have different opinions from yours? Do you get into debates?

- Do you trust people online?

- Do you think that social media is important as a resource of information?

Part two

- What do you think about the word 'politics'?

- How much you would say you are interested in politics on a scale of 1 to 10?

- Do you talk about politics? With whom do you talk about politics?

- Do you vote? Why? What do you think about voting?

- Are you part of a political party? If you are, why? What do you think about political parties?

- Do you protest/sign petitions? Why? What do you think about it?

- Where did you get your knowledge about politics from?

- Are your family and friends interested in politics?

- Do conversations about politics affect your opinion?

- Do you think political participation is important? Why?

- Are there any issues you feel strongly about in life?

- What can stimulate you to be more interested in politics?

- Is there anything that you want to add?

Appendix 2: Key background data of the participants

Name	Age	Gender	Principal place of residence	Education	Ethnicity
Abdu	20	Male	York City Centre	College	British Arab
Adam	20	Male	Acomb (York)	Law	White British
Ahmed	21	Male	Clifton (York)	Computer Science	British Asian
Akram	20	Male	York City Centre	Computer Science	British Arab
Aya	18	Female	Bradford	Social Work	British Asian
Bilal	23	Male	Haxby (York)	Computer sciences (York College)	British Arab
Emma	24	Female	London	Women Studies	Mixed Race (British Indian)
James	21	Male	Heslington (York)	Medicine	White British
Jane	24	Female	Clifton (York)	Women Studies	White British
Joseph	19	Male	York City Centre	Computer Science	White British
Hayat	21	Female	Heworth (York)	Psychology and Education	British Asian
Idris	21	Male	Huntington (York)	Philosophy, Politics and Economics	Mixed Race (British Malaysian)

Kate	24	Female	Somerset	Women Studies	White British
Lilly	22	Female	Westfield (York)	History	White British
Maria	20	Female	London	History	British Arab
Mario	20	Male	Fulford (York)	History	White British
Matt	20	Male	Hull Road (York)	Economics	White British
Mike	20	Male	Fulford (York)	Law	White British
Nada	22	Female	Manchester	Biomedical Sciences	British Arab
Nancy	21	Female	Clifton (York)	Womens' Studies	White British
Neveen	20	Female		Economics	British Asian
Nibal	18	Female	Haxby (York)	Health and Social Care (York College)	British Arab
Noah	21	Male	Holgate (York)	Law	White British
Olivia	24	Female	Nottingham	Biology	White British
Priyanka	20	Female	Heslington (York)	Economics	Mixed Race
Ross	23	Male	Hull Road (York)	Criminology	White British
Sarah	19	Female	Nottingham	Medicine	British Asian
Sophie	22	Female	London	Biomedical Sciences	White British
Souha	23	Female	Fulford	Criminology	British Asian

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PROJECT INFORMATION SHEET

My name is Fawzia Slimani. I am undertaking a research project as part of my PhD in the Department of Politics at the University of York. My thesis supervisor is Dr Jim Buller.

Title of study:

'Social Capital and Political Participation: The Case of Youth Engagement in Britain'

What is the research about?

This study will explore the influence of social capital on political participation among young people in Britain.

Who is carrying out the research?

Only the researcher of the study.

Who can participate?

Young people aged 18-24 years can participate in the research. Participants have to be students in higher education living in the city of York to be able to take part in the research.

What does the study involve?

This research will use in-depth interviews. These can be conducted face-to-face, by telephone or online. The time it will take for an interview varies, depending on how much you have to say, but most interviews are expected to last for at least an hour. If you want to stop the interview at any time, you can do so without giving any reason at all. A face-to-face interview will take place at an agreed public place. Your responses in the interview will be audio recorded by the researcher with your consent and will subsequently be transcribed so that your responses can be analysed. Everything you say will be treated in the strictest confidence and your real name and personal details will not be revealed at any point. The final report will be seen by the researcher and her main supervisors before being produced in the form of a PhD thesis.

Do I have to take part?

No, taking part is entirely voluntary. If you would prefer not to take part you do not have to give a reason. If you decide to leave after an interview has taken place, all video recordings, transcripts and typescripts of your responses will be destroyed.

What are the possible risks of taking part?

Given the nature of this study, it is highly unlikely that you will suffer harm by taking part. The research will not cover any sensitive or embarrassing issues. However, if you feel uncomfortable during the interview, the interviewer will pause for a break, and after that you can choose to carry on with the interview or stop.

Are there any benefits to participating?

By taking part, you will help me to understand youth's social and political attitudes, and the results might be used in future research in the field of both social capital and political participation.

Will you pay my expenses?

Unfortunately we are unable to pay you for your time. The interview is voluntary and unpaid.

What will happen to the data I provide?

Your information will be recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Any data will remain confidential within the research team from the Department of Politics at the University of York. You will be given a pseudonym and the researcher will ensure you will not be identified from the information you give.

What about confidentiality?

Your identity will be only known to the researcher. Your real name will not be used and your identity will remain anonymous in all publications and presentations of the findings.

Will I know the results?

You will have the opportunity to receive feedback from the researcher in a short report of the overall interview findings if you wish to.

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please do not hesitate to contact me:

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Appendix 4: Participants' Consent Form

Consent Form

Title of project: 'Social Capital and Political Participation: The Case of Youth Engagement in Britain'

Name of Researcher: Fawzia Slimani

Consent form for participants

This form is for you to state whether or not you agree to take part in the study. Please read and answer every question. If there is anything you do not understand, or if you want more information, please ask the researcher.

Have you read and understood the information leaflet about the study?   Yes ❑ No ❑

Have you had an opportunity to ask questions about the study and have   Yes ❑ No ❑
these been answered satisfactorily?

Do you understand that the information you provide will be held in
confidence by the research team, and your name and any identifying
information about you will not be mentioned in any publication?   Yes ❑ No ❑

Do you understand that you may withdraw from the study at any time
before the end of the data collection session without giving any reason,
and that in such a case all your data will be destroyed?   Yes ❑ No ❑

Do you agree to take part in the study?   Yes ❑   No ❑

Do you agree to excerpts from the audio/video recording of your responses to be used in presentations or in teaching by the researcher, without disclosing your real name?

Yes ❐
No ❐

Do you agree to the researcher keeping your contact details after the end of the current project, in order that she might contact you in the future about possible participation in other studies?

Yes ❐
No ❐

Your name (in BLOCK letters):

Your signature:

Researcher's name:

Date:

All data is held in the University of York's Central Storage System in accordance with the Data Protection Act.

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please do not hesitate to contact me:

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Abbreviations

AAMFT: The American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy.

BBC: British Broadcasting Corporation.

DIO: Do-It-Ourselves.

ELMPS: Economics, Law, Management, Politics and Sociology Ethics Committee.

EU: European Union.

GCSE: General Certificate of Secondary Education.

GHS: General Household Survey.

HE: Higher Education.

HM Government: Her/His Majesty's Government.

ID: Identification.

IPPR: The Institute for Public Policy Research.

LAC: Local Area Coordination.

LGBT: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender.

MP: Member of Parliament.

NAMLE: The National Association for Media Literacy Education.

NGO: Non-Governmental Organisation.

NHS: National Health Service.

OECD: Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.

OFSTED: Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills.

ONS: Office for National Statistics.

UK: United Kingdom.

USA: United States of America.

SMEs: Small and Medium-sized Enterprises.

SNSs: Social Networking Sites.

WWII: The Second World War.

YMCA: Young Men's Christian Association.

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