All together now?
Inequalities in power and participation in a rapidly changing digital world

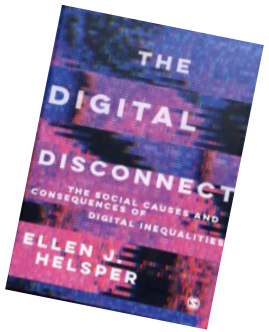
Dr. Ellen J. Helsper

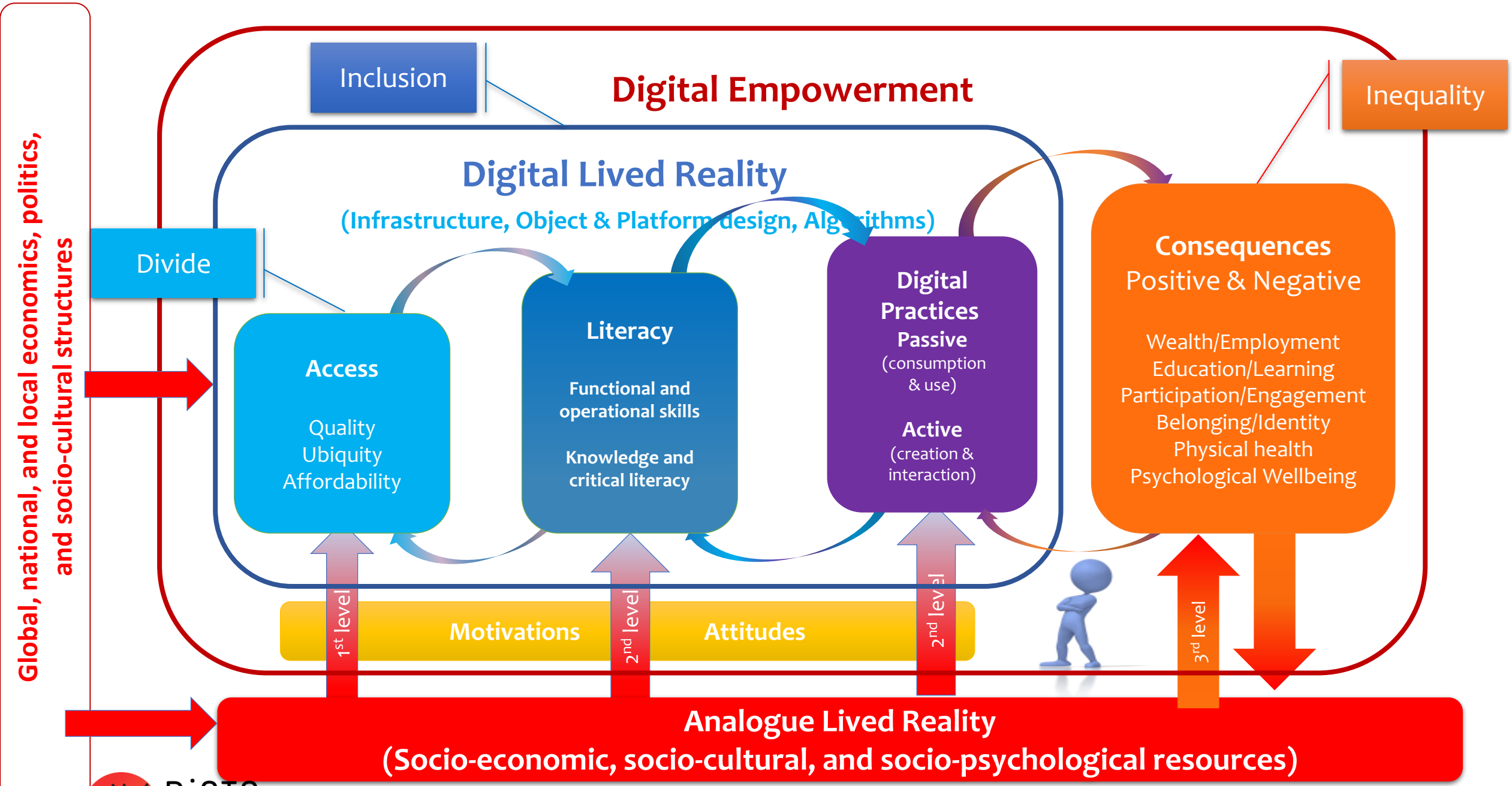
Professor in Socio-Digital Inequalities

Media and Communications Department & International Inequalities Institute

London School of Economics and Political Science

e.j.helsper@lse.ac.uk / @ellenhel

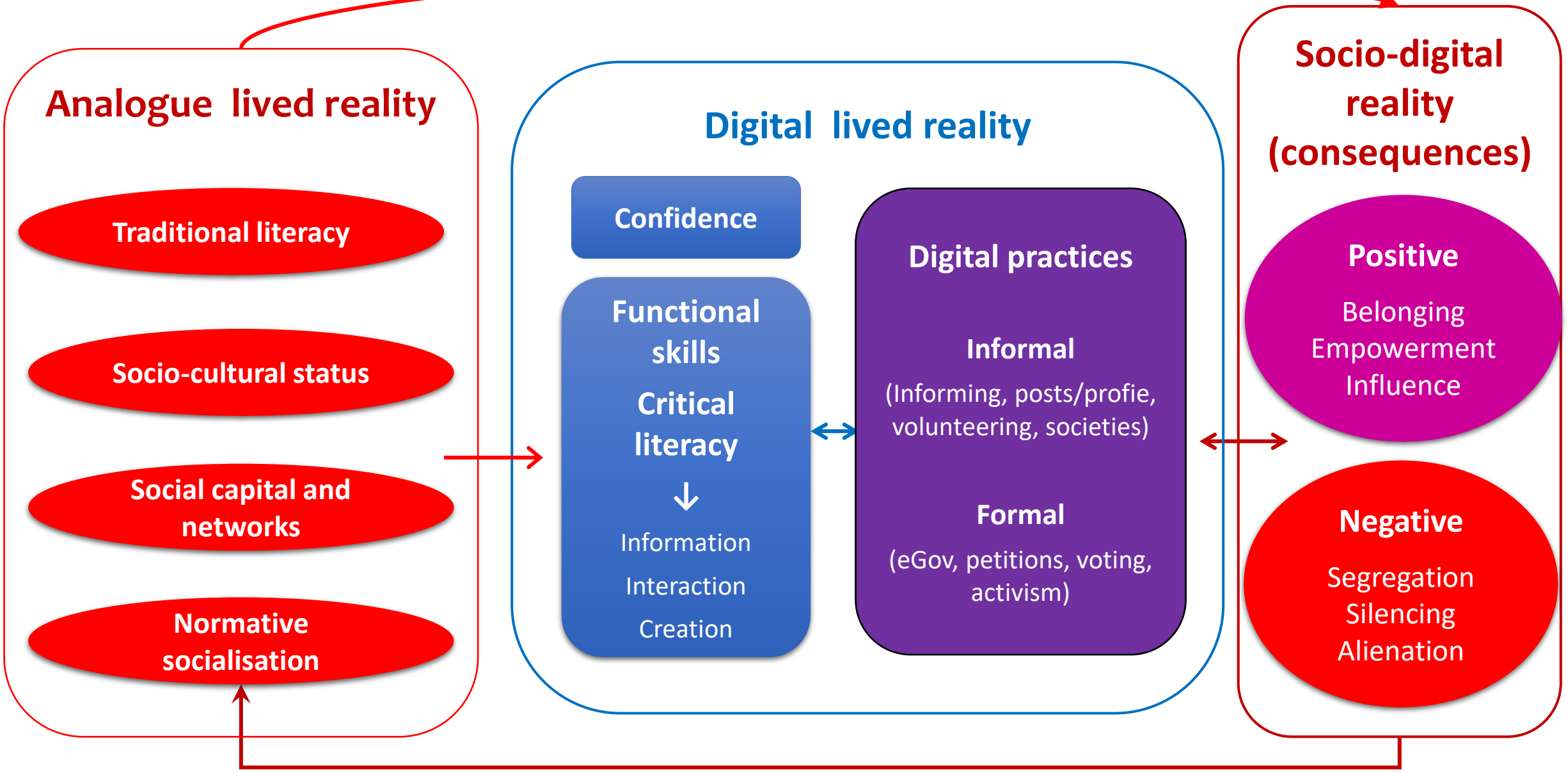




DiSTO
From digital skills to tangible outcomes

(Helsper, 2021)

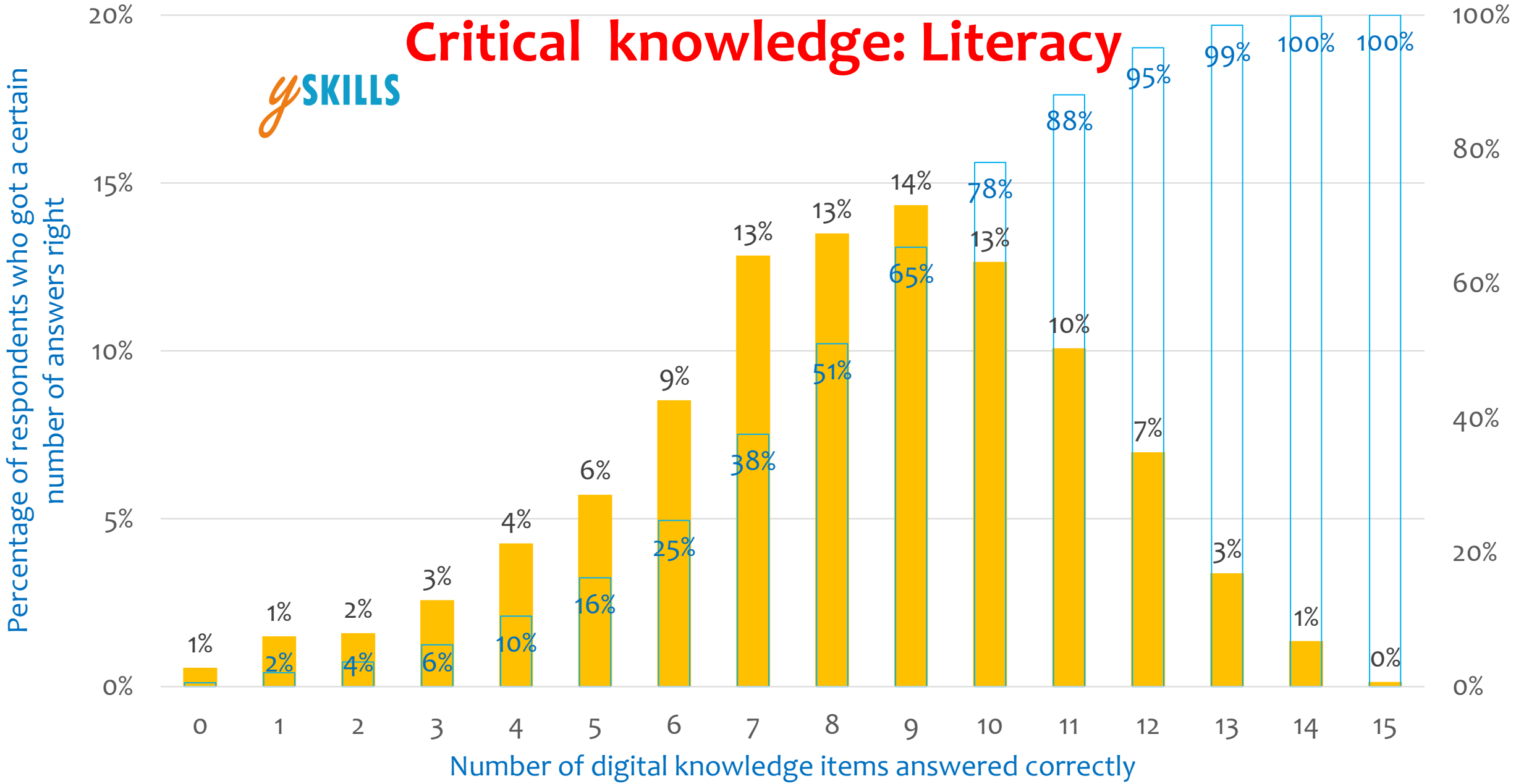
Inequalities in participation (and power)



Digital Skills and Literacy

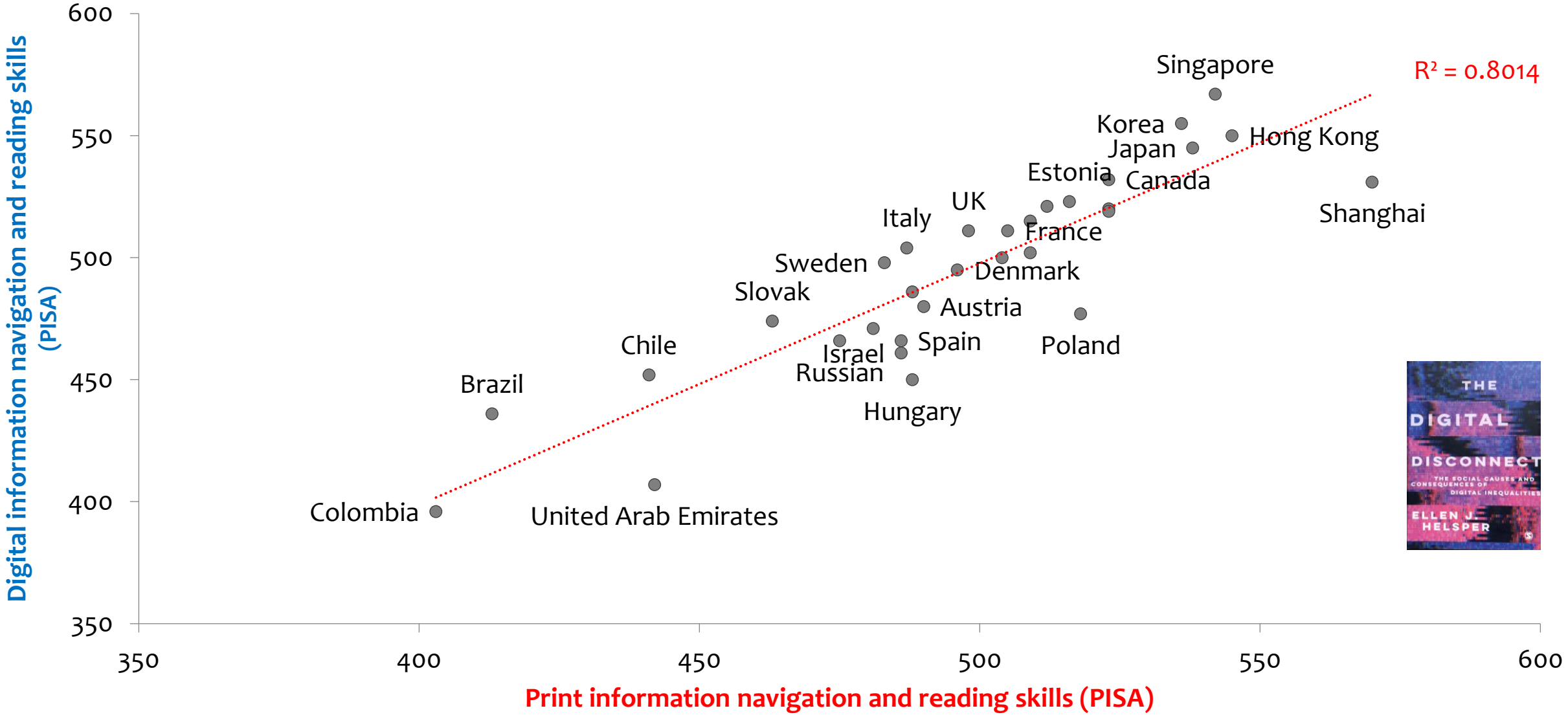
For participation and empowerment

Critical knowledge: Literacy

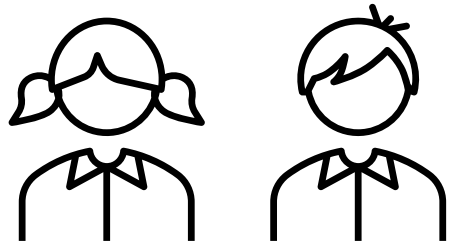


(Helsper, Schneider, Van Deursen & Van Laar, 2021)

Inequalities in information navigation and critical literacy (for passive participation)

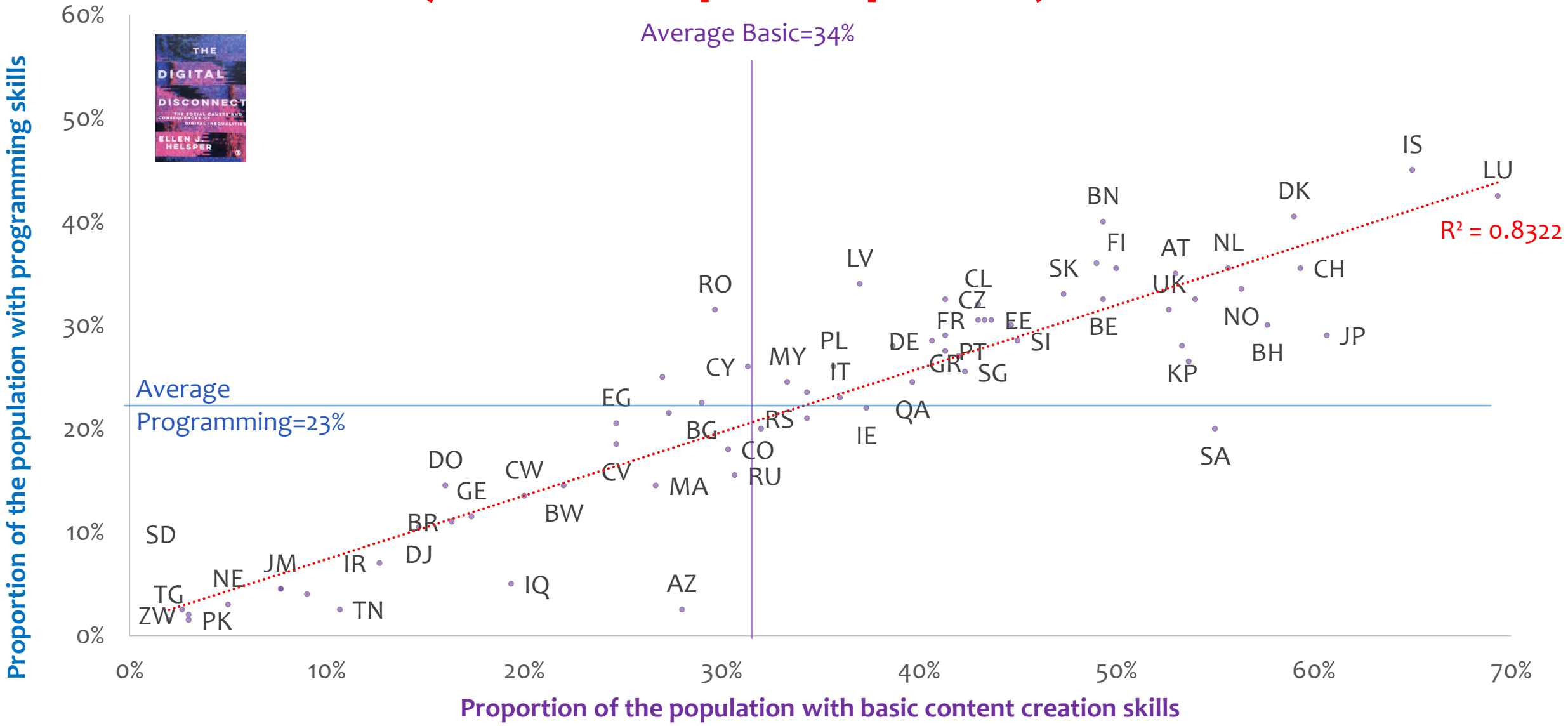


Inequalities in digital **self-confidence** and **skill** levels



DiSTO NEETs (Helsper & Smirnova, 2016)

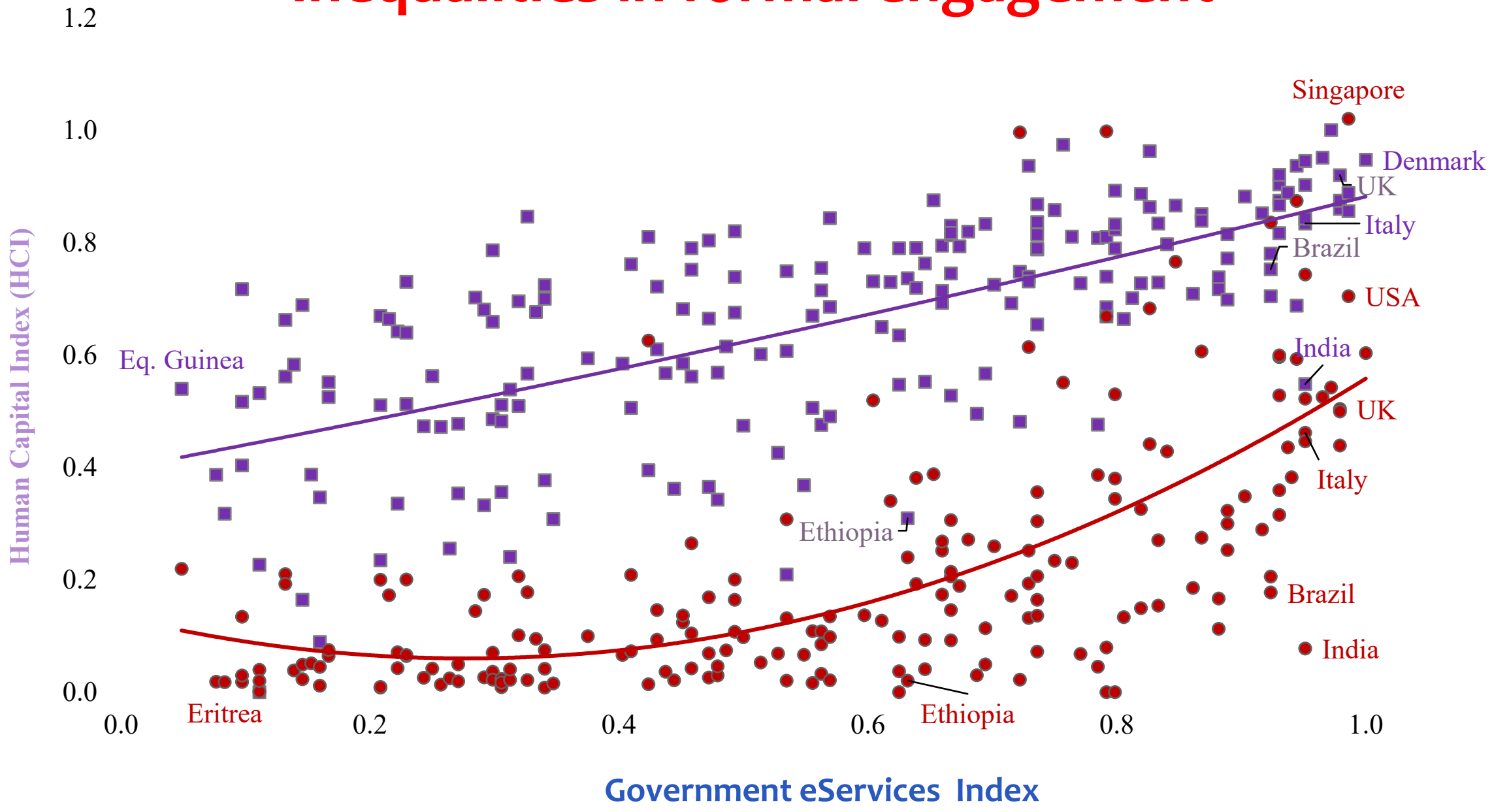
Inequalities in content creation literacy (for active participation)

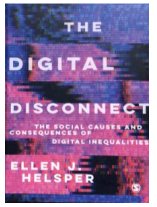


Digital Content and Engagement

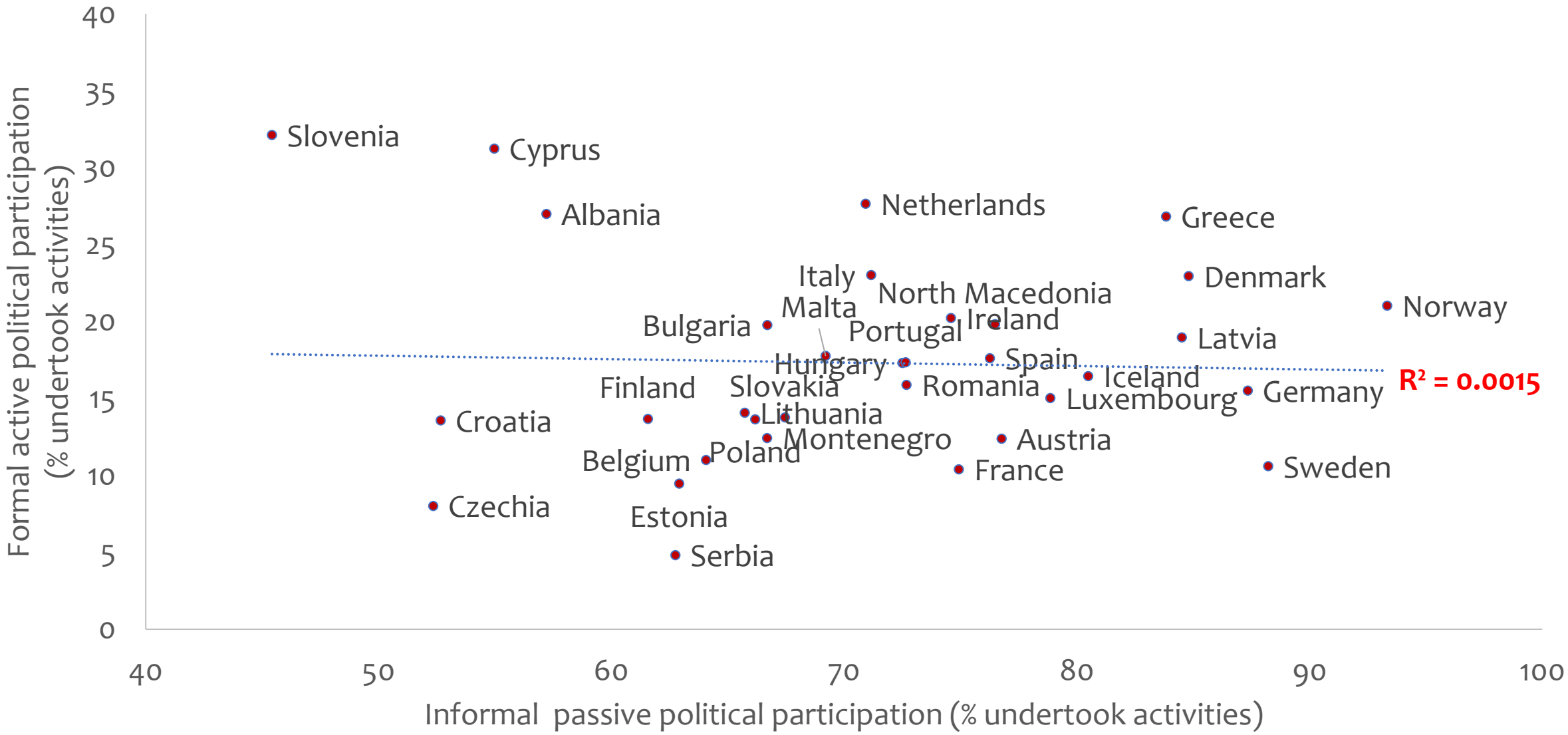
For participation and empowerment

Inequalities in formal engagement





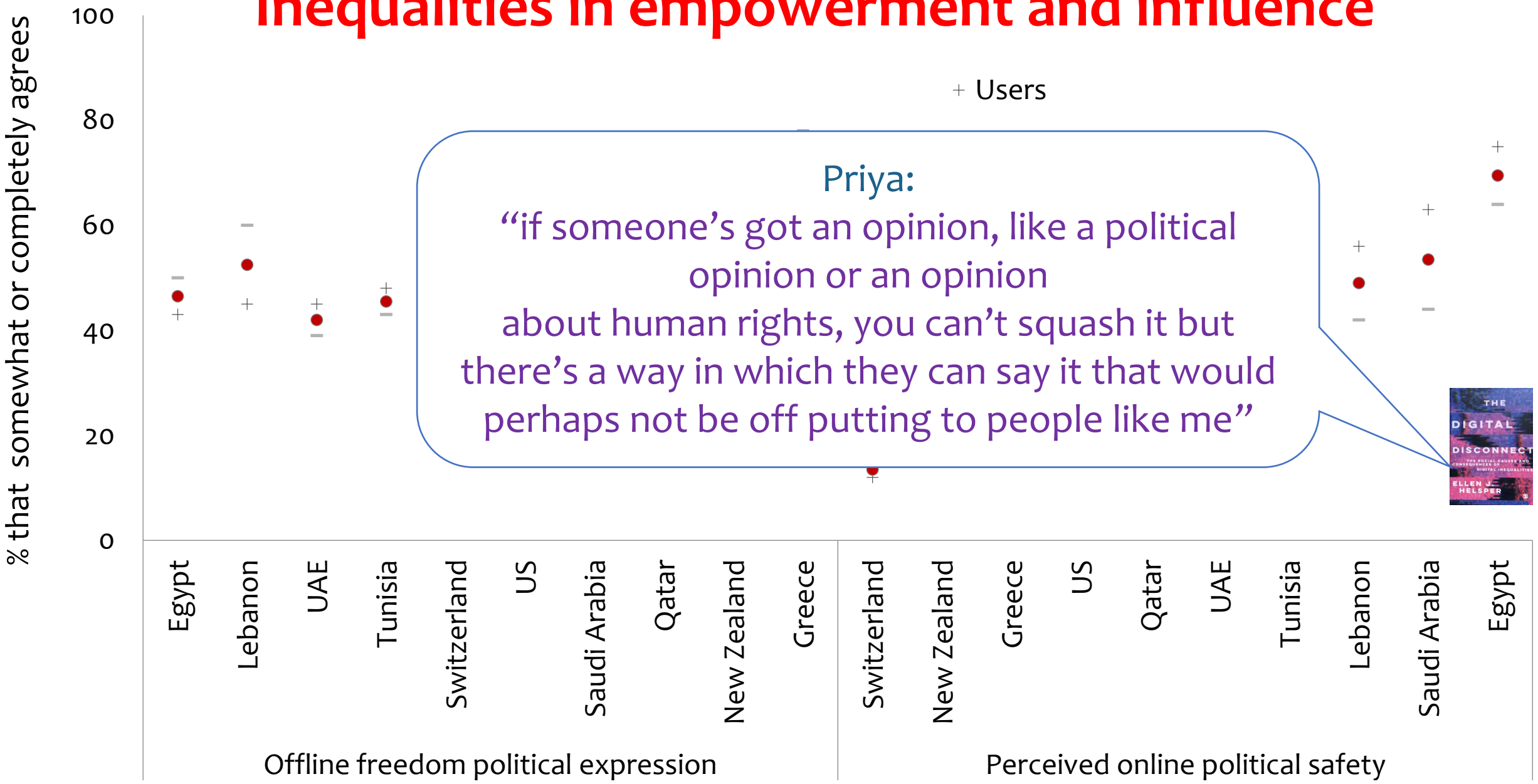
Inequalities in formal and informal civic engagement



Participation and empowerment

Outcomes of the digitisation of everyday life

Inequalities in empowerment and influence



Inequalities in silencing, alienation and segregation

Socio-economic status

Socio-cultural marginalisation

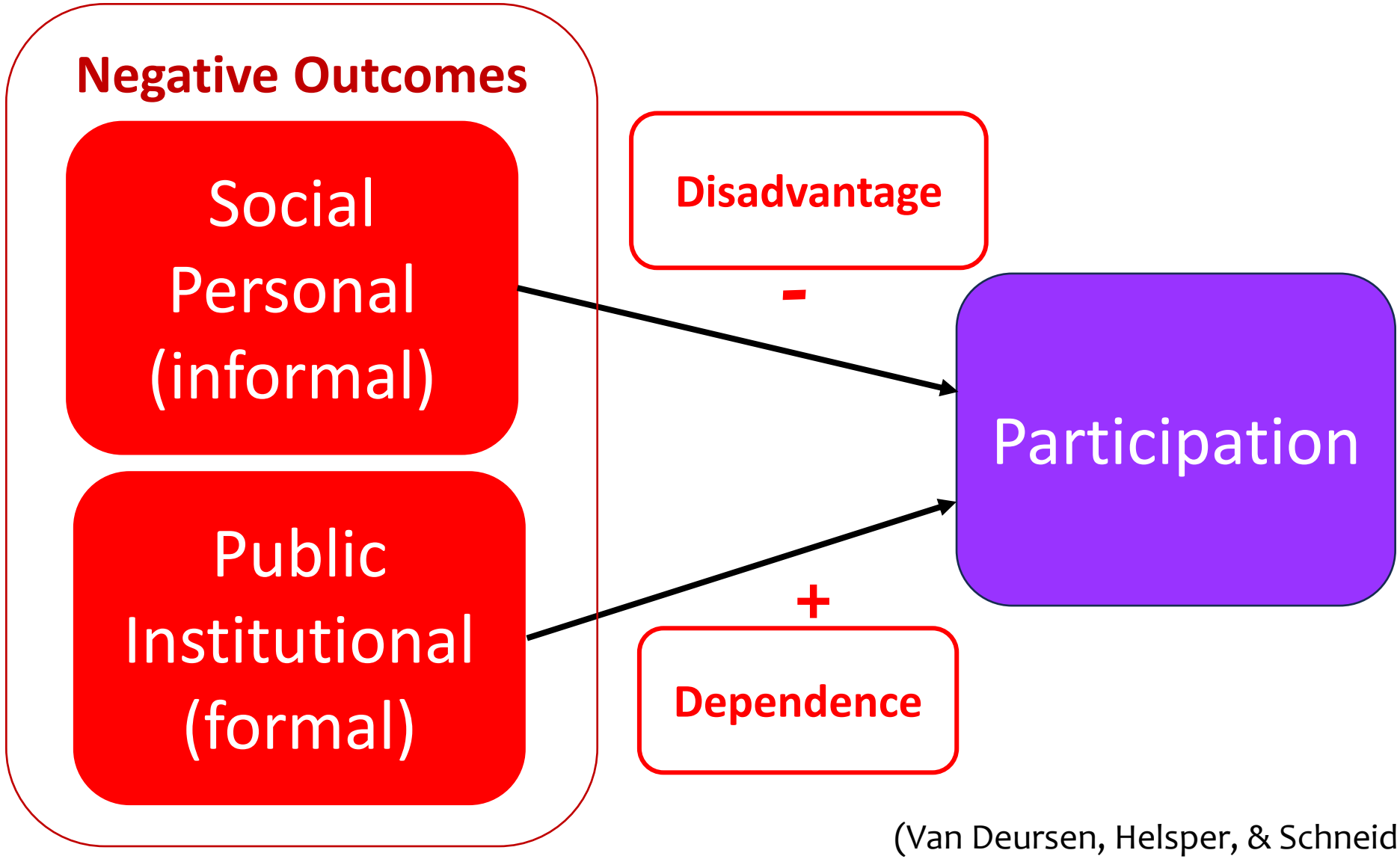
Carol:

"'The only people on my Facebook and WhatsApp are people that I know, have gone to school with, people that I've been with, people that I talk to all the time, stuff like that.'"

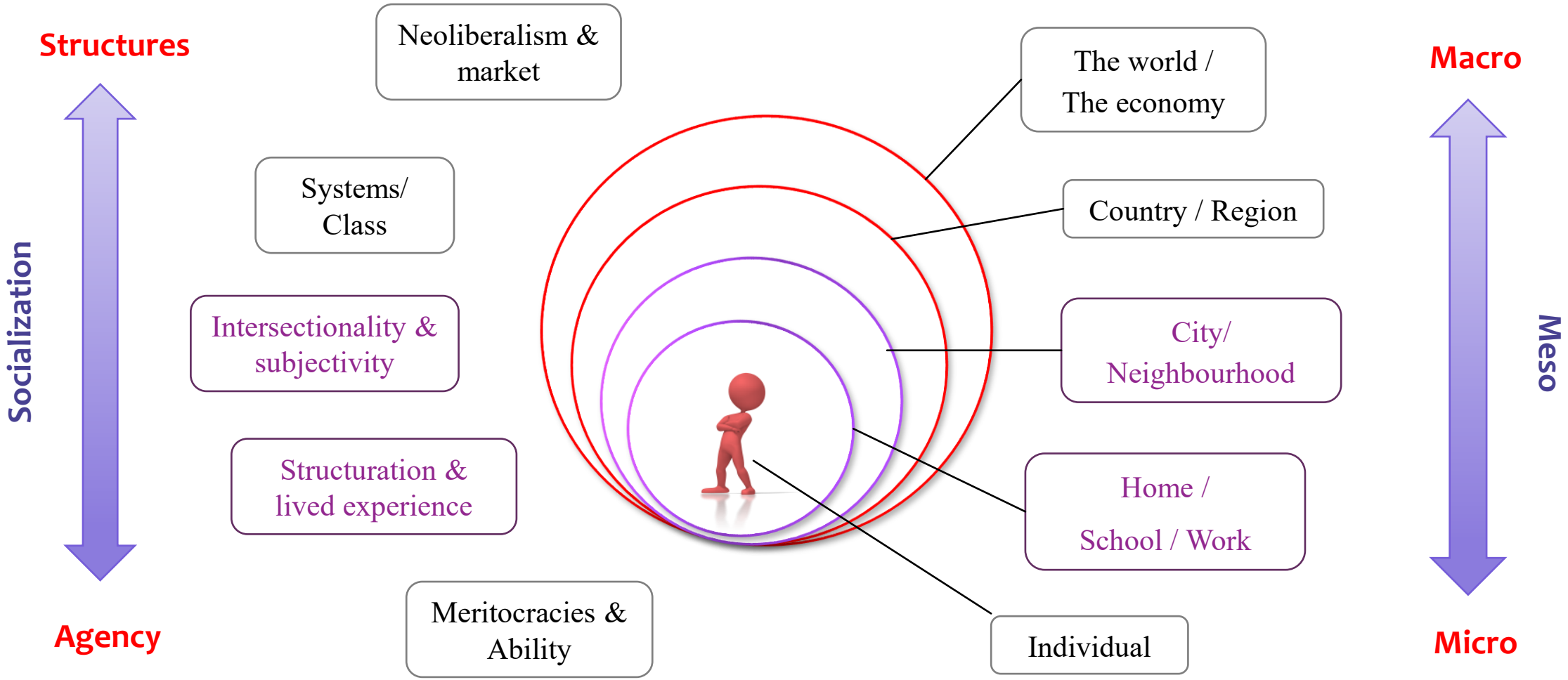
Junwen:

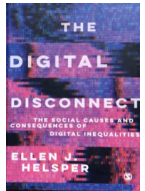
"The positive side is that it allows someone [like me] to start to explore tentatively, in a world that is full of discrimination, to get to know people that are like me bit by bit, earn the trust"

Intersectional inequalities in participation

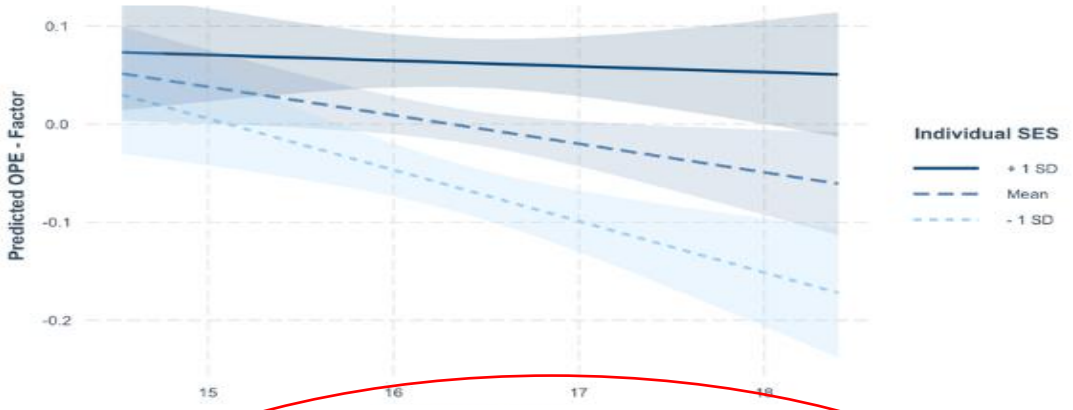


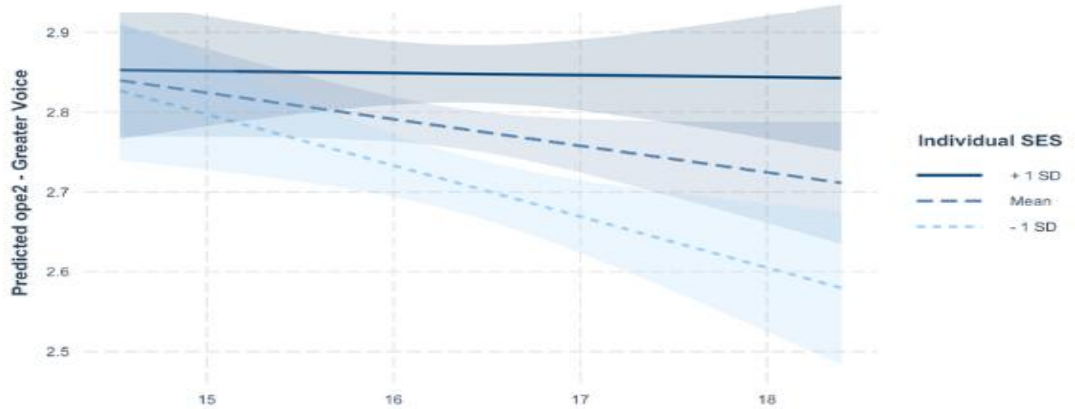
(Van Deursen, Helsper, & Schneider, under review)


Structures
Agency
Socialization
Neoliberalism & market
Systems/ Class
Intersectionality & subjectivity
Structuration & lived experience
Meritocracies & Ability
The world / The economy
Country / Region
City/ Neighbourhood
Home / School / Work
Individual
Macro
Meso
Micro

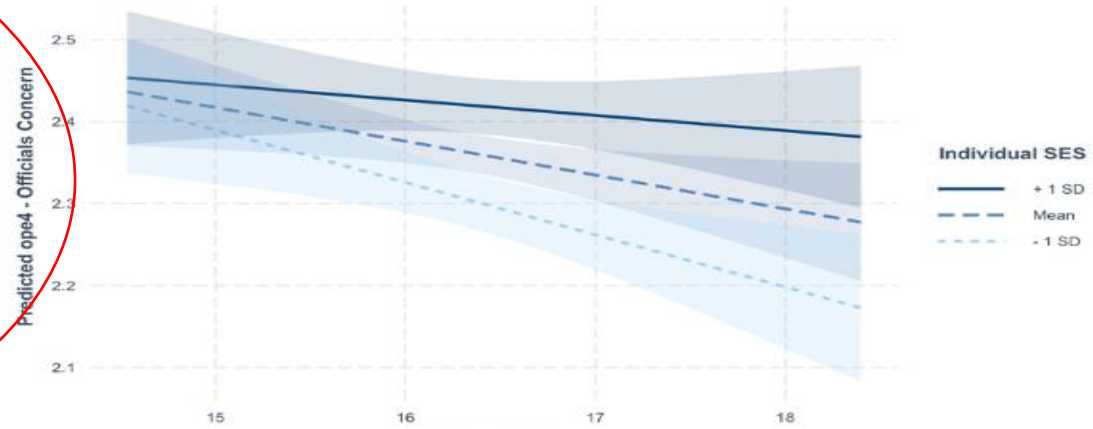

THE
DIGITAL
DISCONNECT
ELLEN J.
HELSPER

Local digital context and civic engagement





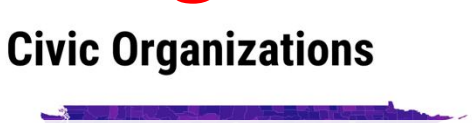
Municipal Wealth



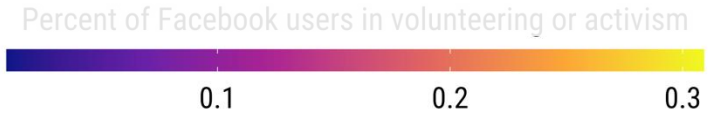
Municipal Wealth

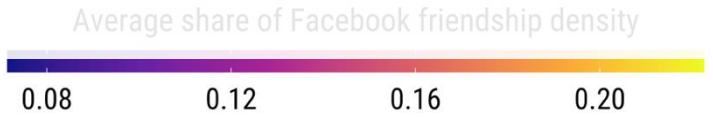
(Fierro, et al 2025)

Social digital context and political participation



- **Tightly knit communities with strong internal bonds solidified online (bonding capital)** foster environments conducive to the spread of populist or nationalist ideologies
- **Diversity and cross-class interactions online (economic connectedness/ bridging social capital)** mitigate antisystem sentiments by fostering understanding and collaboration across social divides.
- Regions that have faced **prolonged economic downturns** see the reinforcing effects of **bonding social capital** exacerbating **support for populist leaders**





(Fierro, et al 2025)

All together? Who benefits where?

- **Historical inequalities** in **literacy, participation and empowerment** shape who (can) participates and in which ways online.

→ **Digital** inequalities cannot be seen as separate from **structural** inequalities

- It is important to **distinguish different types of digital participation** and look at how the **experiences** of these types of participation **shape outcomes** in terms of empowerment and civic participation.

→**Consequences cannot** be derived from **use.**

- **Where people live and who they interact with (online)** makes a difference in terms of how inequalities at the individual level express themselves. Digitisation can create or restrict opportunities depending on the characteristics of the individual living in these communities.

→**Digital inequalities cannot** be understood at the level of the **individual.**