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On youth experiences, human rights and utopias in Europe: Exploratory approach to human rights-based critical media education

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Through an exploratory approach that focuses on human-rights based critical media literacy and digital citizenship, this article aims to understand how youth in Europe experience the digital environment. A peer-to-peer workshop was designed and later conducted with 15 youth from 8 countries in Europe, following an art-based inquiry, and analysed through a reflexive thematic analysis (TA). The findings illustrate the relevant themes for youth revolving around identity, community and belonging, civic engagement, social media and freedom of expression among others.

Durch einen explorativen Ansatz, der sich auf menschenrechtsbasierte kritische Medienkompetenz und digitale Bürgerschaft konzentriert, zielt dieser Artikel darauf ab, zu verstehen, wie Jugendliche in Europa ihre digitale Umgebung erleben. Ein Peer-to-Peer-Workshop wurde konzipiert und anschließend mit 15 Jugendlichen aus 8 europäischen Ländern durchgeführt. Dabei wurde ein kunstbasierter Forschungsansatz angewandt und die Ergebnisse mittels reflexiver thematischer Analyse (TA) ausgewertet. Die Befunde verdeutlichen zentrale Themen für junge Menschen, die sich unter anderem um Identität, Gemeinschaft und Zugehörigkeit, zivilgesellschaftliches Engagement, soziale Medien sowie Meinungsfreiheit drehen.

1. Introduction

Existing research and international educational policies have demonstrated a steady interest in evaluating youth's skills and competences when it comes to media literacy. However, in addition to the focus on developing instruments to assess such literacies, in many cases youth rather being defined as "students," like the newly proposed *PISA 2029 Media and Artificial Intelligence Literacy Framework*, youth have also increasingly been seen as 'partners' for strengthening these competences (OECD). This approach provides possibilities for youth to be recognised beyond their roles as students or beneficiaries. For example, for the occasion of the *International Day of Education 2026*, has dedicated the focus to youth by acknowledging "the power of youth in co-creating education" (2026). Following the declaration of 2025 as the European Year of Digital Citizenship Education by the Council of Europe, youth were also positioned as stakeholders for the draft-

ing of the "Road Map for Strengthening Digital Citizenship Education 2027-2031" (CoE, 2024).

This research aims to contribute to these discussions by bringing youth perspectives and positioning their voices and experiences as instrumental in transforming critical media education. By considering a peer-to-peer workshop as part of the research methodology for this study, the paper focuses on the following research question:

- How do youth in Europe experience human rights in the digital environment?
- The main research question is then divided into the following three sub-questions:
- How do youth associate specific emotions and feelings with certain types of "experiences" in the digital environment?
- How do youth build the connections between concrete scenarios/events/incidents with specific "human rights"?
- How do youth imagine their own utopia through the eyes of a "regular young European"?

2. Theoretical foundation for the workshop

A proposal to bring a human-rights approach to media education is not new. Len Masterman is cited as one of the influential scholars in framing media literacy as a key to ensuring human rights (Kellner & Share, 2019). This approach is particularly relevant for children and youth, with a large body of work focusing on a rights-based approach to children's (and youth's) rights in the digital environment (see for example Livingstone, 2017; Livingstone

& Third, 2017; Matz & Share, 2025). Similarly, human rights education and critical media literacy frameworks have been studied in respect to each other and are seen as complementary (Corrigan, 2024; Geracoulis, 2024). Within this paradigm, the design of the research has been informed by the *Critical Media Literacy* (CML) theory (Kellner & Share, 2019) and digital citizenship framework (Choi, 2016), while also exploring human rights as understood by the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations (UDHR).

Critical media literacy does not only provide a framework with which individuals critically engage with media but also encourages them to come up with alternative ideas and ways to act and change by questioning power, systems, structures, representations and ideologies (Share, 2022; Kellner & Share, 2019). For educators, CML offers a framework with which they can experiment and "rethink teaching and learning as political acts of consciousness raising and empowerment" (Kellner & Share, 2019, p.14). As the main research instrument of this study, the workshop design also aimed at allowing youth to reflect on their daily experiences in the digital environment with (digital) media, to recognise the similarities of such experiences of digital participation shared among their peers, as well as reflecting on the structures that make these experiences *seem* ordinary and/or common (ibid).

Furthermore, the attempt to understand these experiences in regard to human rights requires a framework in which individual's actions, attitudes and agency are considered within the digital en-

vironment. Following a concept analysis, Choi (2016) conceptualises four categories for digital citizenship, namely ethics; media and information literacy; critical resistance and participation/engagement, while noting it as a "multidimensional" concept (p. 584). While rights and responsibilities are dealt under ethics together with responsible and conscious use of digital technologies, *Media and Information Literacy* (MIL) covers the technical skills and psychological capabilities (defined as "lower level" and "higher level" of MIL respectively) as well as issues around digital access (ibid, p. 578). Critical resistance refers to the ability (and to a certain extent willingness) to challenge existing power and engage politically. Interlinked with critical resistance, the fourth category, participation/engagement, identifies various levels of engagement in the digital environment, namely, political, economic, cultural and personalised engagement. Most relevant for the design of the workshop was the understanding of political engagement which links participation to justice-oriented citizens and to a participatory digital citizen (ibid, citing Richards, 2010). Similarly, CML seeks to work towards enhanced understanding and exercise of democracy and justice and specifically to guide younger generations to act as "social justice-oriented citizens in their communities" (Kellner & Share, 2019, p.104).

3. Methodology: Peer-to-peer workshop as a research methodology

This research considers peer-to-peer workshop as a suitable research methodology for data collection for several reasons. Although the workshop served as a method, it was not simply instrumentalised to gather data but was designed with a strong emphasis on addressing the interests of the participants to engage in a meaningful way (see similar considerations of "workshop as a research methodology" Ørngreen & Levinsen, 2017, p. 72).

First of all, the research question is exploratory and experiential in nature and recognises the experiences of youth as valid empirical data (Rodriguez & Brown, 2009). This requires an approach that facilitates the exploration of experiences by opening up a safe space for sharing, meaning making, and reflection rather than validating and/or testing a certain construct or evaluating and/or assessing certain skills or perceptions. In line with this approach, the data was analysed using a *Thematic Analysis* (TA) (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Secondly, the research aims to be participatory for youth, which means that participants of the workshop do not act merely as respondents or sources of data collection, but rather, are given the opportunity to collaboratively negotiate the meaning, facilitated by the researcher (Ørngreen & Levinsen, 2017). This means that participants' interests and needs were also taken into consideration in designing the workshop and defining not only the purpose of the research but also the expected outcome of the workshop.

Thirdly, the peer-to-peer approach in constructing and leading the workshop allowed the researcher to design the content in a way that relates and excites youth as much as it can and to collaborate with them throughout the process. This is also reflected and justified in the choice of the target group for this study. Youth participating in such research should feel comfortable and knowledgeable in contributing with their ideas and thoughts, ensuring that there is a sincere consideration for their meaningful participation (Cahill & Dadvand, 2018). Following this principle, the participants of the workshop were youth volunteers from a European youth network (elaborated below).

Last but not least, the workshop design was also inspired by an art-based approach in working with the research inquiries that lead to the main research question (Greenwood, 2012). The integrated art-based approach did not only facilitate expression through creative means but also allowed exploration of experiences which might not be fully possible with other dominant approaches like group interviews (ibid). In addition, the outputs of this art-based activities enabled collection of primary data to be analysed further (e.g. posters). It is important to note, however, that although the research is making use of art-based approaches, it is not a stand-alone art-based research at its core, since the possibilities for participants to create an art piece (e.g. a media project, a photo-voice) was limited for this study (see Barone & Eisner, 2012).

4. Target group

The target group was 15 youth from 8 European countries, engaged as volunteers of a European youth organisation, between the ages of 18-26, based in the following countries (alphabetically): Austria, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Türkiye, Ukraine. As volunteers of a European youth organisation, this target group typically has familiarity and knowledge about human rights and democratic citizenship. Since this research aims to explore youth perspectives in the field to inform the existing literature, the target group's existing engagement was considered essential.

The focus of the research is not generating a volume of data, but in-depth analysis reflecting collaborative meaning-making. In line with this, the research data reflecting the perspectives of 15 youth which is collected during the workshop were considered as the core dataset. Following the qualitative paradigm in which reflexive TA is set in, this relatively small group is not considered as a limitation (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 6).

5. Reflection on the role of the researcher and method for analysis

The workshop data has been analysed using reflexive *Thematic Analysis* (TA) (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Reflexive TA is "a method for analysis" in which qualitative data is analysed systematically to develop themes (ibid, p.4-5). It acknowledges and values the researcher's role and subjectivity in interpreting and meaning making to arrive at themes, through critically reflection (ibid). In com-

parison to a quantitative paradigm, a qualitative paradigm concentrates on the "meaning" and "meaning-making practices," positioning the researcher as an interpreter with subjectivity. This does not present itself as a bias, but rather as an "asset" (ibid, p. 54).

It is also important to note that similar to the youth participants of this research, I myself have been a European youth volunteer. My positionality, therefore, has impacted my reading and interpretation of the data, which resonates with the choice of reflexive TA. In order to differentiate this as a 'research workshop,' I clarified my position as a researcher, explaining verbally and in writing the objectives and expected outcomes of the research, as well as the research project in context. A research participation and consent form has also been administered ensuring ethical research standards.

6. Workshop design and data collection

The research question has been dissected into three research inquiries, reflected in the workshop design as three main parts: 1) youth in the digital environment, 2) mapping rights and realities, 3) Youtopia[1] (combining the words of youth + utopia)[2]. The first part explored youth's experiences and feelings in the digital environment. In the second part, specific human rights and human rights issues were tackled by discussing within the context of the latest developments and its media coverage in the last year in Europe. The third part invited youth to reflect on these issues by

creating their own Youtopia, a utopian version of a digital environment through the eyes of youth in Europe.

The individual parts of the workshop were piloted and tested with three different youth groups aged 18-26 between the last quarter of 2024 – first half of 2025, two on-site and one online workshops, each with around 12-15 participants. The separate components have been further revised and improved based on the feedback from participants as well as researcher's own observation notes and reflections. The research workshop, in which data collection took place, was conducted on-site in the last quarter of 2025.

The workshop lasted for two hours and took place in English. Each part of the workshop has been designed to shed light into a sub-question that ultimately leads to the main research question. The table in the Annex illustrates the parts of the research with corresponding research inquiry, main activity, the data as well as the themes identified at the end of TA. This paper includes the results of the three parts of the research, while the workshop also had a closing activity (fourth part), which is not included in this paper.

Part	*Research inquiry*	*Main activity*	*Data analysed*	*Themes identified*
Part I: Youth in the digital environment	How do youth associate specific emotions and feelings with certain types of experiences in the digital environment?	Reflecting on experiences in the digital environment, noting them down on cards and hanging them on the wall next to the corresponding emotions and feelings cards (*individual activity*)	Inputs (total): 101 experiences that were posted next to the 10 different feelings/ emotions	• identity at the core • community and belonging • sense of safety and security • civic engagement • environment and structure as shaping experiences • media
Part II: Mapping rights and realities	How do youth build the connections between concrete scenarios/events/ incidents with specific human rights?	Mapping 15 headlines/ media texts, published online in the last year, coming from various sources with the 18 human rights posted on the wall (*group activity*)	A map showing connections between headlines/ media texts and human rights	• information as the basis • AI vs human • concerns over data
Part III: Youtopia	How do youth imagine a utopia through the eyes of a regular young European?	Imagining a utopia and narrating a story through the eyes of a regular young European (*group activity*)	5 story posters, with text and drawings	• social media as a source of information • freedom of expression and opinion • associations with “healthy” • regulation, existence of guidelines • phone as distraction/addiction • digital environment for deliberation

Table 1: Created by the researcher (CC-BY-SA)

7. Findings and discussion

The data analysed here includes the data collected during the workshop, complemented with observation notes taken by the researcher during the workshop. First, all collected primary data (note cards, posters, map) have been manually transcribed into a digital format for research purposes, after which the coding phase began. Following the analysis, themes capturing repeated patterns were generated. This process was repeated three times for each part of the workshop. The themes were further developed by also analysing any patterns across these three different datasets. Following Big Q qualitative framework in which reflexive TA lies, the use of a quantitative vocabulary is refrained as much as possible (e.g. numbers, percentages, frequencies and such) (see Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 137).

8. Emotions and feelings as a way to reflect on experiences

Ten different emotions and feelings have been presented to the youth: angry, concerned, curious, excited, excluded, disappointed, happy, hopeful, sad, welcomed. The cards with these ten words were posted on the wall. Participants reflected on their experiences in the digital environment by noting down “when” they feel this way. After they noted their inputs individually, they posted them on the wall next to the corresponding emotion/feeling. After all inputs were posted, they reviewed each other’s inputs and leave a plus (+) on an input (if any) that particularly resonated

with them. In the end, 101 unique inputs were posted on the wall, including 10 inputs receiving a plus and one input receiving two . The research inquiry for this part of the workshop therefore reads: How do youth associate specific emotions and feelings with certain types of experiences in the digital environment?

The 101 unique inputs were analysed through TA, and the following six themes were identified: identity at the core; community and belonging; sense of safety and security; civic engagement; environment and structure as shaping experiences; and media. Inputs were tagged with all corresponding themes, meaning multiple tags per input were possible, resulting in inputs having at least one and at most three tags.

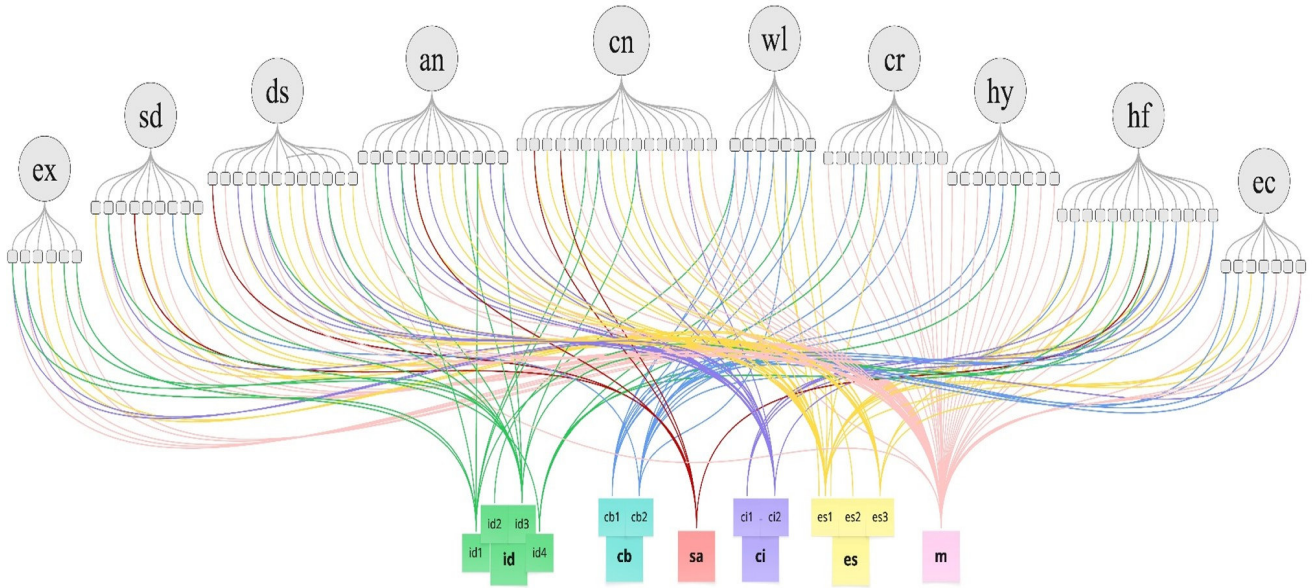

Fig.1: Data visualisation created by the researcher on Miroboard. The data visualisation is to show the interplay between emotions/feelings and the themes developed, rather than an attempt to simply count occurrences. Multiple tagging was possible (e.g. same statement being linked to more than one theme), explaining the multiple lines arising from one statement.

(On top) Emotions & feelings: *ex*: excluded; *sd*: sad; *ds*: disappointed; *an*: angry; *cn*: concerned; *wl*: welcomed; *cr*: curious; *hy*: happy; *hf*: hopeful; *ec*: excited.

(At the bottom) id: Identity at the core; *id1*: gender/sexual orientation; *id2*: mental/physical dis/abilities; *id3*: political view; *id4* origin, race, ethnicity, nationality; *cb*: community and belonging; *cb1*: sustaining sense of community; *cb2*: in search for a community; *sa*: sense of safety and security; *ci*: civic engagement; *ci1*: civil sphere; *cb2*: political sphere; *es*: environment and structure as shaping experiences; *es1*: individuals; *es2*: governments; *es3*: companies; *m*: media)

8.1 Experiences of exclusion through the identity lens

'Identity at the core' appears to be a repeated theme in youth's experiences, noticeable in nine emotions and feelings except "excitement." Identity seems to act as the main lens through which certain experiences are perceived. Although identity appears also with 'positive' experiences such as happiness and curiosity, it is much more associated with exclusion (more than half of the expressions under feeling excluded were touching on issues related to identity), being concerned, disappointment, anger and sadness. Feeling "excluded" was primarily associated with consuming media (and mostly through social media platforms), which were perceived as discriminatory, racist, extremist, sexist and thus as barriers to free expression of self (for instance "toxic masculinity propaganda," "far right parties," "extreme political opinions," or news on a draft law about LGBTQI+). Identity as being defined by political view/affiliation corresponded to most experiences, followed by inputs expressing issues about gender/sexual orientation. The other dimensions of identity were further broken down into categories as race/ethnicity/nationality, followed by mental/physical dis/abilities.[3] The politics of representation (Kellner & Share, 2019) has been linked to its impact on human rights, through a participant sharing concerns about "the fine line between freedom of speech and hate/crime." This position recalls Article 19 of the UNHR (right to freedom of opinion and expression) and resonates that there is an understanding of how human rights of individuals interact within a society and where the bor-

ders are as well as the responsibility of individuals to ensure protection of rights, Article 29 ("everyone has duties to the community").

It is important to note that identity overlaps mostly with the theme "media," including inputs regarding media representation of identity. Interestingly, in some cases three themes, namely identity, civic engagement and media overlap, for example, when the media from or about politicians/governments were perceived as problematic and concerning for identity. Issues of identity were closely associated with the local as well as global politics with references not only to the political developments in their local seatings, but also to European and global setting.[4]

8.2 Digital environment as a facilitator for community and belonging

The theme, 'community and belonging,' is analysed in two subthemes: 'sustaining sense of community' and 'in search for community' respectively. The theme was mostly associated with feelings of welcomed, hopeful and excited with a strong tendency to perceive the related experiences overall positively. The expressions about sustaining one's existing community were covered by the first sub-theme. These included inputs about getting news from or being up-to-date with their community (e.g. organisations, associations, university) and seeing/encountering posts from family and friends. The second sub-theme included inputs expressed through willingness to "communicate," finding a "certain group that accepts [them] without judging," findings "same/similar perspectives" or "same special interests." These considerations

on digital environment as an enabler for participation, brings Article 27 in mind ("right to freely participate in the cultural life of the community").

Some inputs categorised under this sub-theme suggest youth value the presence and engagement of and through virtual communities. For instance, three participants reflect that they feel hopeful, "when a [digital environment] raises awareness and helps someone in need," "when people stand for each other," and "when [they] see content creators use their platforms to spread awareness." Such a consideration of digital environment as an enabler for community building indicates that community is not only understood as people with existing connection and shared interest (as expressed in the first sub-theme), but also as broader virtual communities that can come together for specific causes temporarily (and potentially dissolve afterwards) in the digital environment (and that type of community still be regarded as valuable).

8.3 Safe data, safe self

The third theme is 'sense of safety and security.' In comparison to other themes, this theme was less frequently voiced, however, more densely concentrated (topic-wise). Concerns were related to issues around data protection: "concerned about our data being collected by companies to manipulate and control our decisions" and "concerned when I see someone getting threatened with their personal info." In addition, the discussions that took place in the other parts of the workshop regarding data and its impact on

rights were noticeable. The criticism and perceived threat regarding technology companies was also noted ("tech is costing human rights and environment" and "AI is the end of some jobs"). Although a direct link has not been expressed between these concerns and its impact on the behaviours of digital participation/non-participation, it would be revealing to explore whether the concerns translate into behaviours that would affect how youth choose to participate in a future study. The perceived relationship between data privacy and the sense of safety and security suggests that "right to security" (Article 3) in the digital environment is considered closely related to issues of data privacy (Article 12, also relevant).

8.4 Civic engagement

Experiences relating to the civil and political sphere (as two subthemes) were grouped under the theme "civic engagement." While the political sphere covers direct mentions and references to governments and policies such as "news on policies being offered around the world," "fake political campaigns/political hate," "failures in political measures" etc., the civil sphere includes references to individual and/or community actions like using the digital environment "to spread awareness" and expressed interest to learn/read about global developments.

Almost all experiences concerning the political sphere were associated with disappointment and anger, or being concerned, whereas the civic engagement in the civil sphere is reflected as bringing curiosity and hope. The ability for people to come to-

gether to “stand for each other,” or “spread awareness” were examples of hopefulness in civil sphere. The political sphere on the other hand, reflected dissatisfaction with existing policies or measures. A statement expressed anger for the inability of the individual to act: “the impossibility for singular [person] to make something hugely influential without being backed by his commander [probably as in political leader].” Focusing on the transformative role of media literacy, civic engagement for youth encompasses not only the ability, but also the interest to act as justice-oriented change agents (Mihailidis et al., 2025; Mihailidis & Thevenin, 2013). In this sense, the broader theme of civic engagement identified through the experiences can shed light on the willingness of youth to transform (rather than direct references of acting), despite the fact that the experiences in this study do not suggest so-called ‘active’ engagement.

8.5 Environment and structure as shaping experiences

Another theme was related to the ‘environment and structure as shaping experiences,’ which was broken down by actors as individuals, governments and companies. This was a result of the fact that the environment and/or the structure was described with reference to these actors, who were identified as playing a role in shaping the digital environment. The analysis indicates that the agency of individuals is recognised by youth and the understanding of individual’s role goes beyond defining them merely/passively as “user” in the digital environment. For instance, this subtheme includes “cultural exchange,” “meaningful and open deba-

te," "rais[ing] awareness and help[ing] someone in need," "content creators us[ing] their platforms to spread awareness," as well as criticism of individuals as negative contributors to the digital environment, for example their role in posting "ignorant comments, videos from misogynist men and women."

Artificial Intelligence (AI) seems to be an emerging topic of interest which was linked to all these three actors. On the one hand, there is a statement about feeling hopeful for the possibility of "AI being limited so that the information in the internet can be controlled." On the other hand, AI is recognised as a tool that can be "used" in a "harmful way." Rather than focusing on AI in general, the concern appears to be not only the existence/presence of AI, but the way people in general use it. Although there is no uniform view on AI its impacts on human rights constantly came up as a topic during the workshop. For instance, a similar discussion has taken place in the first part of the workshop, where one participant expressed that they put a lot of statements about AI on the wall as they thought "AI causes all of them," meaning that AI is associated with so-called positive as well as negative emotions/feelings.

8.6 Media

The most populous theme was "media," which was associated with all the feelings and emotions. The descriptions can almost entirely be classified as related to "consuming" media, except for a couple of statements that referred to an active engagement with media. The dominance of experiences resulting from consuming media can be interpreted in different ways. It might mean

that consuming media appeals to the emotions and feelings more than other engagements with media (e.g. creating) or it is more frequent for youth to consume media than others. In particular, curiosity and happiness were mostly associated with experiences of consuming various types of media, “travel tips,” “history videos,” “fun facts,” “food recipes” “to find some inspiration,” videos of nature” etc.

During the analysis, the experiences tagged with media as well as with identity were mostly read within the CML’s conceptual understanding of ‘politics of representation’ (Kellner & Share, 2019). These experiences insinuated an examination of the context in which the media is constructed and how. At the end of the exercise, participants reflected that coming up with examples for experiences about “disappointment” was the easiest, whereas examples around “happy” and “welcomed” were difficult. Although participants were invited to reflect on each emotion/feeling, feeling “concerned” received the most inputs, while feeling “excluded” received the fewest inputs.

9. Mapping human rights

For the second part of the workshop, participants formed smaller groups and were given three unique news/web article headlines each to work with. The research inquiry is as follows: How do youth build the connections between concrete scenarios/events/ incidents with specific human rights?

In this part, participants engaged in a mapping exercise by linking the news/web article headlines to human rights, which they thought would be positively or negatively affected.[5] Afterwards, the reflection took place at the 'final' version of the map on the wall. Following TA, three main themes were developed: information as the basis; AI vs human; concerns over data.

Following the mapping, a group discussion was initiated where they shared what they found particularly interesting, confusing or controversial. Some news headlines attracted more attention than the others. In addition, whereas some news mentioned were familiar to some, some were new or even strange to others. This also led to further deliberation on certain aspects. In particular, the group initiated a discussion on a headline about the period tracking apps and the expressed concerns and implications on data privacy (Privacy International, 2025). Another discussion was on an article about an AI, being accepted as a student at a university (Euronews, 2025). The majority of opinions were gathered around considering the so-called competition between AI and human as unfair and unjust since the time spent on assignments and homework would significantly differ. There was no specific reference to the quality of the work produced by AI, since time and effort seemed to be a more defining or relevant factor in assessing fairness.

Interestingly, although there was a strongly expressed concern over data, the presented issues were not commonly linked to the right of privacy. The most frequently associated rights were the

right to information, freedom of opinion and expression and right of communication. The right to information was considered a key to securing other rights, in a way that it serves as a foundation, or a prerequisite for others.

Following an observation from the participant on the connections drawn, a short discussion on intersectionality emerged. As a pedagogical framework, critical media literacy engages with the concept of intersectionality to unpack the layers and intersections of discrimination and oppression in different forms of identities, and in this case, was helpful in bridging it to human rights issues (Kellner & Share, 2019).

This transitioning part served as a pathway to the creation of utopias, as it allowed for an opportunity to get familiarity with human rights in context and consider various perspectives to understand the media text itself.

10. Imagining Youtopia

In the third part of the workshop, youth were asked to create a utopia (in a form of a story on a poster) about an regular young European in the digital environment, describing what they do, their daily experiences, how they feel and react during the day. They worked in small groups and with five different focuses: information, well-being, participation, freedom and media. The subquestion for this part is as follows: How do youth imagine a utopia through the eyes of a regular young European? In the analysis, therefore, there was also a layer reflecting on the understanding

of an “average/regular” young European through the eyes of the participants. Since they worked in groups, this exercise was also a process of collaboration in creating a Youtopia, in which different opinions collide, and compromises were made to give it the final shape.

10.1 Youtopia on information

The Youtopia imagination with a focus on information is about a young European called “K,” who “opens up social media each morning, hungry for information” and “his feed is full of news.” This engagement with social media is seen as an act of curiosity as he actively and consciously searches for information. The information in this imagination is defined with adjectives such as “not manipulated,” “new,” “fresh,” and “healthy.” The poster includes a drawing of a phone with an Instagram-like social media app turned on. While presenting the story, the group stressed that “K” is not tired of information overload, because he only “consumes healthy information.”

10.2 Youtopia on freedom.

The Youtopia imagination of freedom also includes a representation of social media. The person in this story is called “Freedy,” an influencer, who, upon waking up, listens to the song “Imagine” by John Lennon. Similar to the first story, Freedy engages with Instagram, which is defined to now be “a safe space,” where there is “clear information with sources” and where “everyone expres[es]

their opinion respectfully." She also "freely expresses her opinion on a current injustice situation without worrying about being attacked about her stance on this and her political view". She respects positive and negative views and "encourages her followers to discuss this topic further." Furthermore, on social media, advertisements and any editing are made transparent, and "harmful contents are not allowed in favour of a safe internet." Notifications of messages and TikTok are also viewed as distractive and therefore, in this story, Freedy has no TikTok "addiction" and no message is "interrupting" her.

10.3 Youtopia on participation

The Youtopia imagination of participation comes up with a proposal on governance and recognises the role of individuals, governments and social media companies, while essentially putting a systematic understanding of governance for the regulation of the digital environment. There are three main focuses in this vision, "participation at local level," "representation of minorities," and "meeting of social media company CEOs." Digital technologies are used to increase contribution to the discussions and "the representation of minorities is ensured so that people do not only hear about the main/dominant arguments." This imagination is put with a criticism of social media companies and not of social media as a whole. According to youth in this group, social media supports people to participate, however, companies should be held accountable to ensure that all can participate respectfully. In this proposal, "the committee" holds regular meetings with the com-

panies to ensure that "all voices are heard" and that "they are not manipulating the space."

10.4 Youtopia on media

The Youtopia imagination of media similarly brings a proposal to regulate and control the environment. This group integrates what is believed to be a good and beneficial use of AI and positions it as a fact-checker. The young European lives in a world "where there is no dis- or misinformation because all the fact-checking is done by AI." However, there is an understanding that although AI has the fact-checker role, this young person still employs a 3-steps verification, by checking it themselves, consulting the source of the information, in addition to the fact-checking done by AI, meaning they do not rely fully on AI.

10.5 Youtopia on well-being

The Youtopia imagination of well-being comes up with a detailed programme of a day. This person wakes up with a "classic alarm," and gets no "phone distraction" while starting off their day. They integrate some stretching and breathing exercise, fresh air and a "healthy" breakfast with family. While in school, this young person has a "lecture that excites and encourages critical thinking." The "no phone" remark is made three times, in the morning, mid-day during lunch and right before sleeping. These specific "no phone" policies might suggest a perceived over-use of phone at these times, which resulted in setting up this self-controlled use. Here it can be noted that the regulation comes from the individual them-

selves. During the day, an hour is allocated for “community work” and “volunteering” and digitalisation is viewed as an enabler for opportunities for well-being (e.g. therapy sessions take online).

11. Discussion: Is a Youtopia possible without social media?

Based on an analysis of these Youtopias, the following themes were developed: social media as a source of information; freedom of expression and opinion; associations with healthy; regulation and existence of guidelines; phone as distraction/addiction and digital environment for deliberation.

‘Regulation, existence of guidelines’ emerged most frequently in Youtopias, though in different ways. For example, whereas for well-being regulation is associated with self-control to mainly self-restrict phone time or usage, it meant rather more structured policies for participation. Social media appears to be a space where regulation is mostly deemed necessary. Regulation is considered important to ensure that one does not see any unrelated content, information and news are not “manipulated” or “reality is not distorted,” it is “a safe space,” “harmful contents,” hate speech are not allowed, information cites the “sources,” everyone is able to express their opinions freely and respectfully, all voices are heard meaning that not only the main/dominant arguments are repeated, social media companies are “held accountable,” and phone does not become an addiction or distraction. In all descriptions of Youtopias, social media seems to have a strong presence. Social media has either been associated as a source for information and

news or as a place for deliberation. However, while the social media visions have differed mainly in the content that they host, the general aspects have remained close to the existing reality. Although social media has not been entirely abandoned in youth imaginations of these utopias, there was an attempt to challenge certain structures.

12. Conclusion and further implications

The research aims to provide insights into how youth and their perspectives can contribute meaningfully to the human rights-based critical media education. The following points emerge in particular:

1. The agency of individuals is recognised by youth, not only regarding communication, but also in media creation, consumption and distribution (e.g. people create media, people (in companies) decide on how social media works etc.). However, in imagining alternatives, most of the agency is rather transferred to companies and governments. This resonates with the perceived inability/impossibility to act in the digital environment, especially when it comes to changing, transforming or creating something new. A deeper focus on empowering aspects of the digital citizenship could serve as foundational in guiding youth to recognise themselves as agents of change.
2. Consumption and exposure to a certain type of media is generally associated with feelings of exclusion when it relates to the issues around identity. This demonstrates the existence of critical reflection and analysis of media and of politics of representation. The perceived impact of politics of representation in media (Kellner & Share, 2019) is also linked to the broader discussion around the freedom of speech and to the limits of this

freedom. In addition, the right to information and data privacy are considered in youth's reflections, whereas the various other dimensions of human rights were not explicitly mentioned. Putting human rights at the core of such discussions would support elaboration on how critical media literacy relates to human rights (understanding, realising, advocating etc.).

3. Youth expressed an interest and willingness to civic engagement, yet, an "active" engagement, as understood in a traditional way, was missing. This provides an insight into how engagement is understood: Engagement, for youth, does not seem to be confined with certain actions, but rather, seems to be more associated with critical resistance (Choi, 2016). This understanding can support shifting how such educational approaches consider "active" engagement. Further studies can follow to explore how youth feel engaged and, therefore active, through other forms of actions (e.g. keeping oneself informed, searching for information, connecting with people/communities etc.).
4. Exploring how human rights relates to media and media education has been a long-lasting effort among researchers and educators (Tumber & Waisbord, 2017; Kellner & Share, 2019). In the digital environment for youth in Europe, this pursuit is now at least as relevant as before. This research hopes to contribute to situating human rights at the core of media education by offering an exploratory youth-focused approach. It also seeks to understand what youth really experience in the digital environment, how they perceive human rights and what they would transform. By voicing youth perspectives, it hopes to contribute to the further alignment of critical media education approaches for youth.

Anmerkungen

1 This is to acknowledge that the word “youthopia” “youtopia” “youthtopia” etc. exists in various forms and has long been used by several organisations, platforms and individuals. I use it here as the activity’s name in the workshop, as a combination of two words “youth” and “utopia”, in which youth are asked to create a utopian version of the digital environment for youth in Europe.

2 The workshop manual is available for interested parties at kansu.ekin.tanca@univie.ac.at.

3 This does not mean that identity is only formed by these dimensions, but rather, that the data covers these dimensions only.

4 Since the aim is not to conclude specific findings from/for different countries, the specific mentions to the politics of specific countries are not reported, nor analysed.

5 Participants were given two colours to use accordingly (red for negatively affecting a human right vs green for positively). However not all colours were used in this way during the activity, therefore colours are disregarded in this analysis.

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Part	*Research inquiry*	*Main activity*	*Data analysed*	*Themes identified*
Part I: Youth in the digital environment	How do youth associate specific emotions and feelings with certain types of experiences in the digital environment?	Reflecting on experiences in the digital environment, noting them down on cards and hanging them on the wall next to the corresponding emotions and feelings cards (*individual activity*)	Inputs (total): 101 experiences that were posted next to the 10 different feelings/ emotions	• identity at the core • community and belonging • sense of safety and security • civic engagement • environment and structure as shaping experiences • media
Part II: Mapping rights and realities	How do youth build the connections between concrete scenarios/events/ incidents with specific human rights?	Mapping 15 headlines/ media texts, published online in the last year, coming from various sources with the 18 human rights posted on the wall (*group activity*)	A map showing connections between headlines/ media texts and human rights	• information as the basis • AI vs human • concerns over data
Part III: Youtopia	How do youth imagine a utopia through the eyes of a regular young European?	Imagining a utopia and narrating a story through the eyes of a regular young European (*group activity*)	5 story posters, with text and drawings	• social media as a source of information • freedom of expression and opinion • associations with “healthy” • regulation, existence of guidelines • phone as distraction/addiction • digital environment for deliberation

Annex 1: Created by the researcher (CC-BY-SA)