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# (Self-)Representations of youth as political actors in Lower Austria

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Edma Ajanović & Katharina Fritsch

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### At a glance

- Lack of representation of youth as political actors in local and regional mass media and political discourse: Mass media discourse reproduces a traditional image of political youth as part of party politics, passive recipients of politics and if engaged in manifest political practices (e.g. demonstrations)
- Youth's self-representations show a lack of identification with classic (local) politics, which reveals a gap between politics and young voters
- Self-representations indicate latent forms of participation among youth which follow a cause-orientation: Their interests and engagement is oriented towards local problems and solutions, related to their life-worlds. Youth's causes further reflect youth-led social movements in the domain of climate activism, feminism and anti-racism
- Digital media practices shape youth's political causes and create spaces for connectivity



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“The participation of young people in the political process is very important; after all, they will be the next generation of voting adults and some may even want to pursue a career in politics. It is therefore even more important to show young people how they can participate.” (Student cited from Essay\_6\_2)

## I. Introduction

In the citation above, the student identifies the main issue regarding the political participation of youth – it is not that they are uninterested in politics, but they often do not know how to make themselves heard. The project “Digitalizing Youth Politics” ran between November 2019 and October 2021. Organized jointly by the Danube University Krems and the St. Pölten University of Applied Sciences (FH St. Pölten), it sought to address the question of youth participation in politics and to work with students to improve their possibilities for political action. The central focus of the project was an analysis of the opportunities for and obstacles to youth participation through social media in the public sphere in relation to the 2020 municipal elections in Lower Austria. We wanted to find out how first-time voters located in peripheral areas used and appropriated online channels in the context of Lower Austria’s municipal elections and how they made sense of the political issues that came to the fore during the campaign. Furthermore, we wanted to identify similarities and differences between the concerns of first-time voters, political party actors and the mass media. Finally, we wanted to analyze how youth perceive themselves as political actors and to provide them with tools enabling them to take part in political exchanges.

We approached these different questions by conducting three sub-studies over a period of seven weeks around the time of the municipal elections that took place on 26 January 2020. Firstly, we conducted an analysis of 140 articles from local (Mein Bezirk, Tips), regional (Niederösterreichische Nachrichten, NÖN) and super-regional mass media (Krone, Standard). Secondly, we carried out a quantitative and qualitative analysis of political tweets by political actors. Thirdly, we implemented a participatory (offline and online) ethnography involving 120 students aged between 14 and 18 drawn from three schools and two youth centres in three districts of Lower Austria in the periods January to February 2020, and November 2020 to February 2021. Regrettably, the participatory ethnography was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, as we could not hold our workshops as planned due to lockdowns. The pandemic also meant that the focus of our project had to shift towards COVID-19 and the problems youth were facing in this new setting (see forthcoming article Ajanovic/Fritsch). We conducted three series of workshops, with the last series held digitally due to the COVID-19 pandemic measures. In the online workshops we were able to continue our work with two classes involving a total of 43 students during their winter semester on possibilities for political participation through digital media. During these workshops, we generated a corpus of empirical material ranging from workshop protocols through social media content to essays written by the students.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper, we focus on representations of youth in mass media and on how young people living in Lower Austria perceive themselves as political actors. All the direct quotations were translated by the authors and are presented here only in that English version. In our analysis, we follow a frame-analytical approach (Bacchi, 2009; Verloo, 2016). Frame analysis is a qualitative research method for analysing content and its broader patterns of meaning-making in terms of discourses in the context of political and public communication. The central focus is on frames, which can be understood as “forms of explanation” (Bacchi, 2009, p. 20) or supra-individual systems of meaning-making that include both conscious and unconscious processes: A “frame reflects actors’ organizing principles that structure those perceptions” (van Hulst & Yanow, 2016, p. 94). In a frame analysis, the focus lies on the “problem” – its diagnosis and proposed solutions. In this regard, a frame analysis also locates the actors’ relationship to specific discourses – either as producers or as addressees of a problem, solution or action (Verloo 2016, 26). Thus, for the purposes of our study, we define framing as referring to social processes of meaning-making that are reflected in broader media discourses as well as in individual ascriptions of meaning by young people, both to themselves as political actors and to topics that matter to them. Throughout this paper, we will show that mass media representations of youth as political actors remain within a “classic” conception of politics as consisting of manifest forms of political participation (Ekman & Amnå, 2012), including not only party membership but also forms of political engagement such as demonstrations. To some extent, young people accept this conception, and by this sometimes shape their self-representation as “apolitical” although, as our research shows, they do engage politically. However, as they do so mainly in latent or informal forms, including

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<sup>1</sup> The whole data corpus consists of 14 workshop protocols, 14 padlet exports (online whiteboards), over 70 sent social media content, 54 self-created memes and 42 reflection essays.

through social media activism, with a focus on specific causes (Norris, 2004) rather than adherence to a party or ideology their participation is often framed “non political”. This article outlines their different forms of participation and argues that it is not youth who is apolitical but that mainstream media and politics are rather conservative in viewing what political participation is.

## II. Youth, digitalization and political participation

The forms of participation by young people in democratic processes are often viewed in a rather generalized way as “non-existent” or “deficient”. In this context, youth are ascribed a lack of interest or maturity and a failure to follow traditional role models (Farin, 2020, p. 131). Such negative representations or misrepresentations of youth as political actors reflect dominant understandings of political engagement as associated with traditional forms of involvement such as participation in a political party or sub-organization, participation in elections or engagement through interest groups (school representatives, year representatives, trade unionists). Such formalized collective political participation, however, was not popular among the young people we talked to during our research, reflecting a more general tendency towards individualized political participation in post-Fordist Austria (Ulram, 2006, p. 515). Young voters have also moved away from formal politics because they do not feel they are taken seriously and do not see their concerns represented (Cammaerts et al., 2014). Globally, those over 60 and older are three to five times better represented by their age group in the chambers of different countries’ parliaments than younger people and especially 18–35-year-olds. This also affects the (lack of) identification of younger generations with formal politics (Stockemer & Sundström, 2018, p. 470). Research from the UK and the US further shows that existing representation, or rather the lack of it, and misrepresentation in media and politics also contribute to young people’s disengagement from politics (Henderson, 2014, p. 149; Levinsen & Wien, 2011, p. 841). Particularly in the national contexts cited, youth are often portrayed in the media as “troublemakers” (Levinsen & Wien, 2011, p. 838). These representations could also be observed in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, where young persons were portrayed as “super-spreaders” when they for instance met in public spaces despite lockdowns and other restrictions (Bengtsson et al., 2021, p. 327). There are no studies on the representation of youth in the Austrian media. However, it should be noted that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated and continues to exacerbate long-standing stereotypes and racist representations of ethnicized and racialized youth, and especially “Muslim youth”, in public discourse as “problem cases” (SOS Mitmensch, 2021, p. 64). Against this background, it can be assumed that non-existent representations and/or misrepresentations of young people, especially marginalized youth, lead to their disidentification with public discourse and consequently to a reduced interest in political participation.

However, in fact, even if the trend is moving away from formal membership in parties or trade unions, young people cannot be described as “apolitical”. In elections, young people and first-time voters in Austria are very committed. For example, in 2008, when 16-year-olds were able to vote in National Council elections for the first time, their level of participation was around 80%, and in 2017 it was as high as 90% (Kritzinger et al., 2018, p. 39). Moreover, young people participate in other ways. The literature therefore increasingly argues that young people do participate in party politics, but that they are continuing to turn towards new, or so-called latent, forms of political participation (Ekman & Amnå, 2012, p. 292), including digital methods (Soler-i-Martí, 2015, p. 408). Such forms of participation are said to be driven by “cause-oriented repertoires” (Loncle & Cuconato, 2012, p. 6; Norris, 2004). This means that political participation is more strongly oriented toward specific concerns, whereby young people become politicized through consumption decisions, petitions, online appeals, online sharing or demonstrations and less through traditional forms of political participation. This is reflected not least in the response in Austria to the Fridays for Future (FFF) movement (Daniel et al., 2020, p. 372). In this regard, existing research identifies a change in forms of participation which not only entails greater individualization, but also enables new or temporary types of collective (Soler-i-Martí, 2015, p. 398). In the literature, participation in social media is especially strongly associated with such an individualization tendency, which, it is argued, encourages a consumerist understanding of politics (Harris et al., 2010). Digital practices of “slacktivism” or “clicktivism” (Morozov, 2012) reflect such individualization processes in post-Fordist societies.

Thus, online media are “not per se supportive, neutral, or preventive regarding democratic ideas and structures; [their] relation to democracy depends on the actors, the content of communication, the goal of communication, and the social context” (Waechter, 2019). Anti-pluralist forces, among other marginalized discourses, enjoy equal access to the Internet (Bartlett, 2014; Brodnig, 2016; Kuhar & Ajanović, 2018; Montgomery, 2017). This became even more evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, in which online platforms facilitated the spread of conspiracy theories and right-wing to far-right discourses as well as the mobilization of such actors in the streets (Nachtwey et al., 2020). However, digitalization also enables publicity for marginalized issues, including those of concern to young people, who can sometimes overcome the ‘gatekeepers’ of mainstream media and reach a wide audience via social media and the Internet and influence the framing of topics. Accordingly, young people are increasingly appropriating digital spaces and bringing their issues and social ideas into debates that were not primarily shaped by them (Pathak-Shelat & Bhatia,

2019). However, opportunities for participating in the digital sphere depend on a range of not only societal, but also technical preconditions. The so-called digital divide as well as digital literacy are affected by social categories such as class, gender, ethnicization and racialization, by family circumstances and the school environment as well as by educational opportunities in general (Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2011; Watkins, 2018; Zillien & Hargittai, 2009). Not all users are or will be equally empowered to co-create content. Nevertheless, it is clearly positive that digital practices are diverse and hybrid rather than monolithic and have increasingly been appropriated by marginalized youth (Johns, 2014; Watkins, 2018).

Against the background of these transformations of political participation and of the few studies that provide information about the situation in Austria, we discuss to what extent young people are represented – including as political actors – in traditional media and how they represent themselves and what role digital practices play in this context. This gives us an idea of how the public sphere is developing in an age of digital platforms and how young people are contributing to setting issues and framing them, that is, giving them a possibly alternative meaning to the one found in the mainstream.

### III. Representations of youth in mass media discourse

In our first section, we discuss representations of youth in selected articles from the mass media including local, regional and super-regional media, in the period before, during and after the municipal elections in Lower Austria on the 26th of January 2020. In this way, we aim to describe the presence of young people in media reports, both in the general discourse and in the context of local politics. In our frame analysis, we focus on articles that show a clear reference to youth in their titles or teasers. Our sample comprises 66 articles. Regarding the framing of youth as political actors, we focus on titles because they can be presumed to summarize the central content. Titles are usually the first thing that readers notice, and they tend to provide information about the ideological and political positioning of the author(s) or even the newspaper as a whole (Dijk 1991, 50ff). Titles also offer readers a range of interpretative options, indicating their significance for the reconstruction of the frames behind them: "Headline information signals to the reader how to 'define' the situation or the event" (Dijk 1991, 51). Based on this title analysis, we found a very low presence of youth in the respective media. Despite this low level of representation, we could identify four frames which define the image of youth as political actors in local and regional media discourse: namely "junior candidates", "youth and climate", "youth as digital actors" and "youth as recipients of politics".

#### Junior Candidates

In the context of the municipal elections, the regional and local media talk about younger generations primarily in relation to the election campaign. Thus, 23 articles refer to the nomination of young candidates before the elections (16 titles) and far fewer to their presence after the elections, for example in local councils (4 titles). In terms of party affiliation, a focus on the ÖVP can be observed, reflecting political realities in Lower Austria. In these articles, the ÖVP is often framed as a "young party", as can be seen from the title "ÖVP focuses strongly on young people" in the NÖN Horn (issue 2, pp. 32f.). This local political discourse reflects and reproduces the nationwide ÖVP discourse, which propagates a "rejuvenation" of the ÖVP. At the federal level, this discourse further intersects with discourses on gender equality usually framed as "women in politics", as can be seen from the description of the current government in the Krone NÖ as "young & female" (issue 21,448, p.3). On the one hand, young candidates are presented as "active" and pursuing clear ambitions. Such a framing can be observed with regard to titles like "Setting the tone" which deals with the housing policies of the ÖVP Zeillern (NÖN Amstetten issue 2, p. 20) or "There is still much to do" (NÖN Amstetten issue 2, p. 28), referring to projects planned by the ÖVP Aschbach and linked to the list of candidates, of whom half are younger than 40 and a third are women. On the other hand, young candidates are presented as part of a "natural order" – "Juniors advance" (NÖN Horn issue 4, 33), "A mandate for a birthday" (Krone NÖ issue 21.477, p. 30) or "Renunciation of mandate brings forward young people" (NÖN Baden issue 6, p. 23). The respective representations reflect a conservative framing of politics in terms of a "given order", a kind of natural linear succession of actors and practices in which young candidates are primarily perceived and represented as perpetuating the existing political system.

#### Youth and climate

Besides being presented as young politicians, local and regional mass media discourse mentions young people as political actors in the field of environmental and climate politics. 15 articles mention youth in relation to climate politics, with a focus on protests (8 titles), and education and school (4 titles). Climate protection appears here as the central issue, which is addressed not only by political and social movements, but also in schools.

The reporting on protests mostly relates to actions by local FFF groups, mainly in Amstetten, and here the majority of the reporting is about the form of protest, namely the demonstration: "Fridays for Future Demo for Austria" (NÖN Amstetten issue 4, p. 14) or "Student demonstration parades through the city centre" (Mein Bezirk Amstetten issue 4, p. 4). The attention paid by local media to young people as environmental political actors points to the pre-COVID-19 worldwide boom in climate activism. While local media discourse covers FFF protests, it is striking that local youth climate movements do not appear in discussions of climate and environmental policies in the context of the municipal elections. Instead, climate protection is framed as a party-related topic, thus: "Young People's Party is counting on more green in the district" (Mein Bezirk Bruck/Leitha issue 2, p. 7). If the framing of students as activists is clear from the previous titles, the titles devoted to the topic of "environment and education" reflect a framing of the relationship between students and environment as an educational one, as a subject that students are meant to study - "The path of the mobile phone" (Tips Amstetten CW6, p. 7). It is no longer the students who are politically active, but the school, as the title "HLW Haag for Future" (Tips Amstetten CW3, p. 16) makes clear.

### Young people as digital actors

In the context of educational politics, digitalization is the second most important topic in local and federal political discourse and is thus represented as a politically relevant topic. While young people and students are only marginally represented in this context, the few representations that do exist clearly express a framing of youth as digital actors. On the one hand, digitalization is seen as an educational opportunity, as implied by an article titled "Students score high with an app for women" (Kronen Zeitung NÖ issue 21,467, p. 29). On the other hand, titles such as "Fit in using cell phones and PCs" (Mein Bezirk Horn issue 5, p. 16) or "Becoming a student with 'Poldi'" (NÖN Baden issue 4, p. 40f.) point to digitalization as a "challenge" or "problem" for the current education system. The first article refers to the issue of security when using digital media, while the second critically examines an app that is supposed to determine children's "readiness for school". Digitalization is thus defined as both an opportunity and a problem, which results in a framing of young people as "skilled actors", but who still have to learn how to deal with the challenges of digitalization.

### Young people as recipients of politics

Approximately a third of the articles that address youth frame young people as the recipients of political measures. Young people are discussed in relation to the future, but the problems specific to them get less attention, as we can see, for example, in an article from the NÖN Baden titled "A generation's fear of the future" (NÖN Baden issue 7, p. 36-37). Here, young people are presented not as actors, but as recipients of policy measures, primarily in the areas of education, social and employment policy and as a population group to be invested in: "More space for youth as a goal" (NÖN Baden issue 4, p. 11), "Millions for the youngest" (NÖN Amstetten issue 3, p. 21) or "Roof track for 'young living'" (NÖN Baden issue 4, p. 22). Questions of education and employment are addressed primarily in relation to teaching and the promotion of MINT (Mathematics, Informatics, Natural Sciences, and Technology) subjects in schools. Migration and education are discussed very rarely (2 titles), which indicates the neglect of migration policy in local political debates on education.

The framing of the political participation of youth in local and regional mass media discourse not only reflects traditional understandings of political engagement in terms of manifest political engagement, but also presents young people as passive recipients of politics instead of active and engaged citizens. A major exception could be observed in the domain of climate politics. The emphasis on this can be interpreted as part of a global trend, as media coverage is often event-driven (Hansen, 2017). However, the predominance of the theme of youth and climate politics also reveals the intensity of climate activism in Austria from March 2019 onwards organized by FFF activists (Daniel et al., 2020). The predominant framing of climate politics as party politics further mirrors the political narrative at the national level, where environmental politics gained further momentum when the Green Party substantially increased its share of the votes in the September 2019 national elections and was then invited by the overall winner, the ÖVP, to enter a coalition government. The lack of representation of youth in this policy field in the context of the municipal elections confirms the more general trend of "missing youth" in representations on environmental issues (Graham & Bell, 2020). In terms of digitalization, youth representations are shaped by discourses of "gaining skills" and "educational opportunities", framing youth as "skilled actors". These framings reflect more general discourses on digitalization and education in terms of digital literacy and the digital divide, which focus on access to the digital sphere as well as the skills required in order to participate and navigate in digital lifeworlds (Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2011). However, what is missing are representations of youth as political actors, both as regards non-formal types of political participation and also in relation to the digital sphere. As we will show in the next section, traditional understandings of political participation also shape the self-representations of youth as political actors, which indicates the role of the dominant mass media and political discourses in affecting youth's self-perceptions. However, the youth's self-representations also indicate the role of cause-orientation in shaping their political interests and engagement as well as the role of the digital sphere in this regard.

## IV. Self-representations of young people as political actors

In this section, we discuss the self-representations as political actors of students who participated in the workshops. In this regard, we analyse workshop protocols, essays and social media content sent to us in the course of the workshops, as they reveal much about the student's self-representations, their framing of topics and their changing understanding of "what is political". We show that their self-representations are shaped by the traditional framing of politics in terms of manifest political engagement, which results in a self-perception of being "apolitical". However, our frame analysis of topics which matter to youth also suggests a strong cause-orientation among younger generations in their political engagement. This cause-orientation is reflected in the way youth point out particular issues with regard to the local level, global causes and the digital sphere. Additionally, the students themselves referred to the effect of the workshops in changing their perspective on politics, thus highlighting the role of participatory ethnography, especially in youth research.

### Acting on a local level

In the workshops, it became evident how traditional understandings of politics shape self-perceptions as political actors, as outlined by a student in the following quote:

"Since I only turned 16 last year and haven't had a chance to vote yet, I haven't really internalized my role in politics. It was only when I signed my first petition for a referendum a few days ago that I felt politically active for the first time." (Essay\_7\_6)

Here, the student frames politics as manifest political engagement represented by the right to vote, which had resulted in a feeling of not being "political". However, signing a petition has changed this perception, which reflects the role of latent forms of political engagement in pursuit of a specific cause. Latent forms of engagement – like signing a petition or taking part in an online survey – are framed as being far more accessible than the realm of "real politics", which seems "far away" and not related to the lived realities of younger generations. Another student describes this distanced relationship between politics and teenagers as follows:

"The workshop made me realize that politics can be much smaller and more tangible than I thought. When you think of politics, you immediately have the image of the Federal Chancellor standing in the National Council and discussing with the other Members of Parliament. It seems incredibly distant, completely out of the reach of a 16-year-old teenager and also incredibly complicated. But you don't start at the top. As I said, political participation in the community is incredibly easy. If you don't want to be active in public yourself, it's enough to talk about it with family and friends. That's how you get new opinions and how you can develop." (Essay\_7\_2)

The student expresses a change in perspective on where politics takes place, a shift facilitated by our project workshops. In this regard, the immediate social circle of friends and family as well as the larger "local community" is portrayed as a space for action, in which younger generations too can achieve something. Politics is conceived of as something which also takes place in interactions and discussions and thus in everyday life, resulting in a feeling of empowerment. This focus on the local level is also due to the fact that local political relations often intersect with social and family relations, producing a feeling of proximity to politics, as is evident in the following statement by a student during one of the school workshops:

"On a small scale, in the local community, I think it's relatively easy here. Because in small villages like this, people know each other and know the mayor, and if you have a request, you can simply go and say: It would be cool if this or that would be done." (WSP\_H12012021\_7)

Whereas the local level of politics is perceived as more accessible, politics in general – particularly at the federal and national level – tend to be associated with dishonesty and corruption:

"I often think about getting more actively involved in politics, as I have many causes (e.g., women's rights) that I want to campaign for. But the more I learn about politics, the more suspicious it becomes to me, because there is hardly a party that is not out for profit and money seems to rule the world. Politicians often



get this money illegally and if there's one thing I can't stand, it's dishonesty! That's why I dismissed this idea [...]” (Essay\_7\_9)

The student again expresses the cause-orientation of political participation among younger generations, represented in this specific case by “women’s rights”. However, the causes which mobilize youth are portrayed as not equating with real politics, which leads to demoralization and depoliticization among youth. This mismatch also shapes their self-representation as political actors, since, despite the possible imagining of oneself becoming politically engaged, the student does not envisage him/herself as belonging in politics. As previously discussed, the tendency to dis-identify with politics reflects the absence and misrepresentation of youth as political actors in traditional media and politics. Another student further frames the de-politicization of younger generations as the result of the diminishing role and weak profile of established parties: “I find it very difficult to choose an exact political party because I find ideas that I like in most of them and others that I don't like so much” (Essay\_7\_15). As the younger generation and an important future electorate, this mismatch between party politics and causes that concern youth reflects the larger problem of an increasing gap between parties and electorates in contemporary democracies.

### The cause-orientation of youth’s political engagement

In our (digital) ethnography, we aimed to find out how the students frame issues or political topics which matter to them. In this section, we discuss how they frame problems related to specific causes as well as what solutions they propose. Some of the most important issues (pre-COVID-19) for them were the environment, education, mobility/infrastructure, and feminism and racism. During the pandemic, there was a shift to issues of home-schooling, social distancing, free time and democracy and societal divisions, as we will show in our forthcoming article. The students’ cause-orientation reflects the importance of (political) concerns related to their personal situation but also the influence of and identification with cause-driven social movements, where young people often play a leading role and in which social media are of central importance.

Mobility is a crucial topic for youth, especially in rural areas where public transport is limited and because it affects their day-to-day life. In this regard, youth are highly critical of the state of public transport, which they describe as “deficient” and “too expensive”. Regarding deficiency, some students highlight “unreliability and waiting times” (WSP\_T24012020\_2) and the lack of good connections, especially between smaller and larger towns (WSP\_B10012020\_6; WSP\_T24012020\_2). Inadequate public transport strongly affects their everyday activities, not only in respect of travelling to and from school – “one does not come home from school” (WSP\_H21022020\_2) – but also with regard to their access to leisure activities, which are also hard to reach (WSP\_H13012020\_1). The lack of public transport further restricts their autonomy, as they mostly depend on their “parents in order to be mobile” (WSP\_H13012020\_1). The youth’s framing of mobility problems indicates a lack of attention to their needs in the sphere of public transport by political representatives. In terms of solutions, youth mainly propose “the promotion of public transport” through better organization and more funding. In this regard, they make concrete proposals such as “shorter intervals”, “newer busses/trains”, “better timetables”, “fewer delays” and “cheaper tickets” (WSP\_T24012020\_2). In the workshops, we discussed ways in which the young people’s demands could be brought to the attention of political decision makers. In the course of these discussions, youth emphasized the role of social media, petitions, and political mobilizations as important means for influencing local politics, bus companies and the regional transport company VOR (WSP\_H17022020\_1; WSP\_T19022020\_1), indicating the importance of the digital sphere in promoting awareness of these issues.

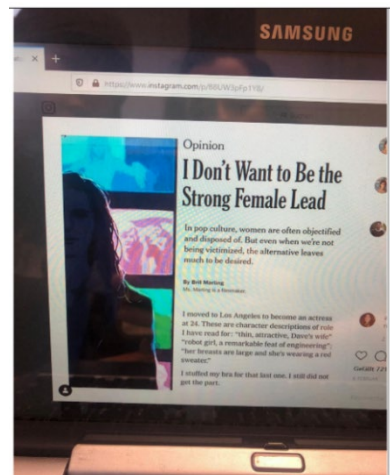
Climate is another important concern of the youth involved in our study, reflecting both the relevance of issues which directly affect their daily life and the influence of global social movements, especially the FFF Movement, which, as previously mentioned, is active in Lower Austria. Youth mainly relate the climate crisis to “a lack of environmental consciousness”, which they tend to describe in terms of personal behaviour. Thus, one student states: “In the town people regularly park their car with the engine running in front of the supermarket” (WSP\_H13012020\_1). In this regard, youth show a tendency to present themselves as environmentally conscious in contrast to elder generations (WSP\_H17012020\_2). Framing climate politics in terms of a lack of consciousness and personal behaviour reflects the tendency among youth to focus on political topics that are connected to their lived realities and where they can find solutions in everyday life. As regards solutions, for youth the main ones are “getting active for climate protection” and “laws and consciousness-raising for environmental protection”, which reflect the importance given to policies and changing behaviour. In this regard, they emphasize concrete behavioural changes like “eating less meat” or promoting vegetarianism (WSP\_T24012020\_2), which they also relate to more education on nutrition in schools (WSP\_T19022020\_1). Political agency is hence mostly seen as operating at the local and individual level and involving non-formal, consumer-oriented, forms of political participation (Harris et al., 2010).

The importance of climate protection further indicates the impact of global movements like #metoo, Fridays for Future and Black Lives Matter (BLM) on youth. Thus, the social media content shared with us in the context of the workshops was often related to these movements. The presence of feminist struggles in these social media posts reflects the fact

that the causes shaping current global social media debates on feminism and violence against women are also part of the respective youths' political discussions. The students highlight four topics relating to feminism: violence against women, anti-feminism, gender equality and gender gap/underpaid work. Violence against women is framed as an issue that needs "attention", as presented by a social media post from the NÖN shared by a student, which refers to a flash mob of mostly female teenagers against violence against women in the city of St. Pölten. The second social media item thematizes violence against women in relation to the problem of "objectifying women in the film business". The post reflects a broader discourse on "rape culture", strongly related to the #metoo movement and shows the latter's presence on the social media channels used by youth.

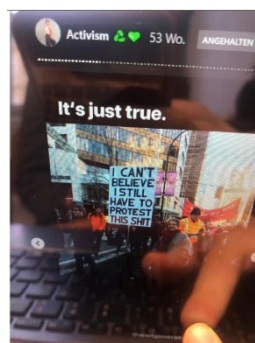


Social Media Content No. 1



Social Media Content No. 2

Regarding the topics of gender equality and anti-feminism, emotions such as anger can be observed. Thus, gender equality is an issue, which "one still has to protest for" – as stated in the following social media content, showing the popular slogan "I can't believe I still have to protest this shit" that has been used in different protests, including those over feminist issues.



Social Media Content No. 3

The youth's feminism-related discussions further show that their perspectives on political topics are not homogeneous. Rather, the shared social posts and memes as well as discussions during the workshops reveal different, often conflicting, views on specific issues and also about forms of activism. Regarding feminism, a student makes a critical remark on the current presence of feminist discourse and politics: "I think feminism is good. However, it is sometimes practiced 'too much'" (WSP\_B24022020). In a similar manner, some students frame climate protests as "embarrassing" and "inefficient" (WSP\_H21022020\_2). The impact of demonstrations is also addressed with regard to BLM, as reflected by the rather cynical statement one student shared in a padlet discussion: "surprise, surprise, racism still exists" (Padlet\_Topics\_6). However, other students emphasized the value of demonstrations for raising awareness of racism and for sending a signal of solidarity to those experiencing racist discrimination (WSP\_H17112020\_6). The act of showing solidarity reveals the racialized positionality of most of the students involved in the workshops, namely as part of the white majority. At the same time, the role of BLM as a reference for political movements in Austria reflects its presence on the social media channels used by the youth in our study and influences their own opinions on racist inequalities in Austrian society. In the shared social media posts, the students discuss racism with regard to issues such

as the revival of National Socialist activities or racism in the context of migration (Social Media Content no. 4, 5). However, racism in football is the dominant topic here (Social Media Content No. 6, 7). The fact that racism is discussed mainly in relation to racist incidents at football matches shows the influence of global popular culture on the respective youth and the role of social media in shaping forms of connectivity online.

These forms of digital connectivity reflect the political potential of social media for shaping the practices of “networked young citizens” (Vromen et al., 2015). However, while the students’ engagement with political topics on social media indicates its role in shaping young people’s interests, some students also critically reflect on the limits of social media. Thus, one student addresses the problem of gatekeeper mechanisms which affect the digital public, influencing the reach of certain issues and actors:

"I think it's hard to do it alone. You need at least a few more people to really make a difference and, also, I think you need reach, but that's just hard to achieve as a young person." (WSP\_H12012021\_6)

This student’s reflective account addresses the limited impact of social media activism as an individual act outside of collective mobilization processes. What becomes evident is the high level of digital literacy among youth. The young people involved in our project are not only highly aware of how to use social media, but also of how to do so in order to reach a target public. This form of digital literacy indicates that they are aware of their often-limited possibilities as younger people, confronted with the gatekeeper mechanisms operating in traditional mass media discourse and a continuing traditional understanding of politics, also at local level.

## V. Conclusions

Our research shows that youth have much to say about current societal and political issues and that more attention needs to be paid to their views by the dominant media and political actors, if they are to be accountable to younger generations as first-time voters and newly active citizens. Young people’s agency, however, is generally neglected both in local and regional mass media and local politics. The general lack of representation of youth as political actors in mass media reflects a traditional understanding of politics, as younger generations are mainly discussed as members of a political party, recipients of politics or when they engage in manifest political practices such as demonstrations. Such a focus on specific forms of participation, however, overlooks the various latent forms of participation by young people, including social media activism, which follow a cause-oriented logic.

As our research shows, traditional understandings of politics also shape the self-representations of youth in the sense that they tend not to consider their forms of participation and engagement – online and offline – as part of “politics”, which they see as the preserve of politicians. The students’ self-representations as political actors reveal a cause-orientation, since they mainly feel entitled to get engaged at local level and in domains where they are personally affected. Their perceived possibilities for action reflect a cause-oriented approach, expressed in local calls for actions such as consuming and buying regional and sustainable food or supporting cause-driven (online and offline) mobilizations around issues of climate protection, feminism or anti-racism. Youth clearly consider their main agency to lie at the local level, which indicates the importance of feeling personally affected as a spur to political engagement.

Against the backdrop of our research, we also emphasize the importance of digital media for political participation, especially among young people. These forms of political participation also reflect a tendency towards the individualization and economization of political practices (Brown, 2017), especially in the context of digitalization. In line with such tendencies, the workshops indicate that young people tend to perceive themselves primarily as consumers of politics and act accordingly. However, and given the centrality of digital spaces to youth, we need to continue to address the relationship between digitalization and democratization (Dahlberg, 2011, p. 859; Ranieri, 2016; Rasmussen, 2014). The centrality of digital spaces and practices to youth not only indicates their relevance as social spaces (Ito et al., 2013); it also shows how digital media correspond to cause-oriented forms of participation among youth. The constantly changing and ephemeral nature of digital spaces and the often-spontaneous mobilizations that accompany them correspond to the precarious and individualized life worlds of younger generations (Loncle & Cuconato, 2012). Far greater attention needs to be paid to these latent forms of political participation by traditional media and political representatives to encourage younger generations to engage with politics.

## VI. Empirical material

### Media issues

Kronen Zeitung Niederösterreich, issue 21.467, January 22, 2020  
Kronen Zeitung Niederösterreich, issue 21.477, February 1, 2020  
Mein Bezirk Amstetten, issue 4, Jänner 22/23, 2020  
Mein Bezirk Bruck/Leitha, issue 2, January 8/9, 2020  
Mein Bezirk Horn, issue 05, January 29/30, 2020  
NÖN Amstetten, issue 2, January 8, 2020  
NÖN Amstetten, issue 3, January 14, 2020  
NÖN Amstetten, issue 4, January 21, 2020  
NÖN Baden, issue 4, January 21, 2020  
NÖN Baden, issue 6, February 4, 2020  
NÖN Baden, issue 7, February 11, 2020  
NÖN Horn, issue 2, January 9, 2020  
NÖN Horn, issue 4, January 22, 2020  
Tips Amstetten CW6, February 5, 2020

### Essays

Essay\_7\_2, 8.2.2021  
Essay\_7\_6, 8.2.2021  
Essay\_7\_9, 8.2.2021  
Essay\_7\_15, 8.2.2021

### Padlets

Padlet\_Topics\_6

### Social Media Content

Social Media Content No. 1: "Tanz gegen Gewalt an Frauen"  
Social Media Content No. 2: "I don't want to be the strong female lead"  
Social Media Content No. 3: "It's just true"  
Social Media Content No. 4: „Nazi-Schmierereien in Horn und Eggenburg-Horn“  
Social Media Content No. 5: "Terror in Hanau: Was über die Bluttat bekannt ist"  
Social Media Content No. 6: "Der Rassismus hat gewonnen!"  
Social Media Content No. 7: "Erneuter Rassismus-Vorfall: Portos Marega verlässt den

### Workshop protocols

WSP\_B10012020  
WSP\_B24022020  
WSP\_H21022020\_2

WSP\_H13012020\_1  
WSP\_H17012020\_2  
WSP\_H17022020\_1  
WSP\_H21022020\_2  
WSP\_H17112020\_6  
WSP\_H12012021\_6  
WSP\_H12012021\_7  
WSP\_T24012020\_2  
WSP\_T19022020\_1

## VII. Literature

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