

Youth Partnership

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Automating Youth Work: youth workers views on AI

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1. Introduction

The emergence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has had a visible impact on the meaning and the practical implementation of youth work in Europe (European Commission, 2022). From the use of Chatbots for online youth counselling to Virtual Reality goggles (VR) for media literacy learning, Artificial Intelligence (AI) has become increasingly present in non-formal education settings. AI-powered solutions also provide youth work spaces with new creative opportunities, and project management tools allow practitioners to save on administrative tasks and spend more quality time with young people. However, there is also the darker side of AI's presence in the non-formal educational sector.

For decades, youth work has aimed to enhance social inclusion, empower young people to become critical thinkers, and pursue authentic and meaningful communication between youth workers and young people. Nowadays, many AI-powered youth-oriented tech solutions or social media platforms might affect these processes in unexpected ways. Studies have shown social media platforms might disempower young people by, for example, exploiting their vulnerabilities, such as body image issues or low self-esteem. A 2021 study revealed that it takes TikTok about 2.6 minutes to show new subscribers suicide content and 8 minutes to serve content related to eating disorders (Center for Countering Digital Hate Inc, 2022). Similarly, Meta was found to use its so-called 'trauma algorithm' to exploit and commodify young users' mental vulnerabilities (Panoptykon Foundation, 2021). While AI affects young people's realities in different and unique ways, LGBTQ+ people, young activists, young women and people of colour are also disproportionately affected by risks associated with AI data profiling, data facial recognition discrimination, disinformation (Madarova et al., 2019, Najibi, 2020; Tomasev, 2021). The disempowering aspects of unethical AI use has been widely researched and called into question by young people themselves:

“surveillance ads, algorithms that shape what we see or not in the internet and deceptive design practices- reduce our [young peoples'] ability to organise among young people for the causes we care about, such as climate change, social justice, access to fair remuneration and employment, democratic engagement, etc. Big Tech companies should not have a free playground to decide young people's lives and future” (EDRi, 2022).

With over 95% of young Europeans using the internet daily to interact with their social networks, education, and public authorities (Eurostat, 2021), vast amounts of data are being collected and processed on who they are now and who they might become in the future (e.g. via predictive

algorithms). While most young people have no choice but to accept the ‘terms and conditions’ in the increasingly AI-fuelled digital society, there is limited understanding why young people’s data is collected, for whom, and for what purposes (5 Rights Commission, 2021; UN Human Rights Commission, 2021).

Young people - and therefore also youth workers - need to know how to continue to critically examine, learn, and find one’s way in an increasingly AI-driven way to respond to the ever-changing socio-economic dynamics. The overall AI adoption market is expected to be worth \$190 billion by 2025 and most jobs of the future will require young people to have digital competences (World Economic Forum, 2022). As digital transformation continues to shape the socio-cultural norms and landscape, digital competences will also be central to young people’s democratic citizenship and democratic education. It is certain that algorithms and AI continue to influence young people’s everyday decision making and the overall process of digital transformation, thus the role of education is to ensure they are doing so in an informed, critical and conscious way.

The use of AI and data has the potential to become a transformative tool for education. In such a transformation, it becomes important to think about the historical objectives of education, broader social changes, emerging societal needs, and the future of education and learning. At the same time, educators must know that AI has a long history that spans many disciplines from computer science to cognitive sciences, philosophy, technology studies, and learning sciences (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2022).

To date, most literature examines the topic of AI in the context of formal education. Many schools and universities have undergone significant changes in response to the Covid-19 pandemic by transferring their services online. Responding to the increased demand for digitalisation, the EdTech sector has witnessed a large-scale investment and is set to grow by \$112.39 billion in the next three years (World Economic Forum, 2022). It is expected that AI in education will be worth \$6 billion by 2024 (UNESCO, 2021). In a survey of European educators, 52% said they believed that AI would replace some teaching functions in the next five years (Microsoft, 2020). Nonetheless, in light of the sudden popularity of AI-driven education solutions, it is believed that many of these projects “engenders commercial imaginaries’ that might lead to creation or deepening of new educational and socio-economic divides (Bayne, 2023).

By default, any issues related to young people's realities become central topics of youth work. Youth work practice is often situated within an opaque and continually changing AI-system of power dynamics and consequently with limited (or no) regulations or guidelines (Siruala, 2021). To date, little is known about youth workers' experiences of AI in their practice. Youth workers play essential roles in supporting young people's achieving their full potential, enhancing their personal development and critical democratic citizenship in the digital age (Kiviniemi & Tuominen, 2017; Verke and EYWC, 2019). However, they are also often faced with an impossible ethical dilemma which is to use (or not to use) corporate driven, trendy AI-powered technologies to stay up to date and connected with young people's digital realities.

Situated outside the formal education system, youth workers are often more free to experiment with digital technologies and respond to young people's unique digital literacy and online safety needs in a proactive and meaningful way. For example, the European digital youth work platform (Digital Youth Work, n.a.) provides a range of sensitive and potentially triggering topics and projects situated within the field of digital youth work, which might not be explored within a formal education setting (often due to lack of capacity, curriculum, or funding). As later revealed in my study, one of such novel topics now includes the potential use of AI for nonconsensual deep fake porn ([Hunter, 2023](#)).

However, such a degree of learning freedom also comes with its risks and challenges, such as lack of efficient and continuous support, strategic regulation, or up to date digital safety monitoring or guidelines. This in turn might result in youth workers having to deal with impossible ethical choices, of being:

stuck between embracing (and being encouraged to embrace) digital youth work (e.g., employment opportunities) and protecting themselves and the young people from its possible side-effects (e.g., data profiling, privacy breaches). Keen to empower, youth workers might become disempowered by digital technologies. Digital technologies can interfere and therefore negatively affect the youth empowerment process (Pawluczuk & Serban, 2021)

In recent years, the need for digital literacy in youth work has become increasingly important as a result of the digitalisation of many aspects of youth work project management and delivery. The digitalisation of the youth sector was particularly visible in the light of the Covid-19 pandemic. A survey of twenty European countries (Böhler, Karsten, & Pitschmann, 2020) revealed that 70% of respondents felt that the pandemic had a major impact on their work with activities going entirely online. This sudden move to online/digital youth work environments revealed an emerging digital

divide in the European youth sector, whereby a minority of organisations are able to catch up and exceed in the context of digital transformation while others still struggle with basic connectivity and skills training (Pawluczuk, 2021).

Post-lockdown analysis has also clarified the following message: [digital] youth workers play a critical role in young people's lives and require strategic support in the digital times. Youth workers' voices and critical reflections on their practice are essential to making this happen. Digital youth work refers to the use of digital technologies, such as social media, online platforms, and mobile devices, to engage and support young people in their personal, social, and educational development. It encompasses a range of activities, including digital skills training, online mentoring and coaching, virtual youth clubs and communities, and digital storytelling.

Nonetheless, more needs to be done to bring the voices of youth workers and youth work professionals on the role of AI in youth work. Since the youth work sector addresses a large area of young people's digital citizenship education, some argue that the sectors' needs, and its potential contribution have largely been ignored when discussing AI with the tech-sector:

a debate about understanding platforms' priorities, compared to our own [youth workers'] priorities, is completely absent from the youth work field. Even when national and European authorities have the chance to discuss complex aspects, as for instance the impact of Artificial Intelligence, with the tech giants, the educational and youth fields are insufficiently present or represented in this debate. While youth work may have a limited advocacy role in this area, it is still important to consider how to contribute to these discussions and keep in mind these considerations when implementing youth work in the digital context. (Di Paola, 2021)

To address this knowledge gap, this paper aims to examine the perceptions and experiences of AI in the European youth work sector. The purpose is to establish a baseline for what the current understanding of AI might be and what future youth workers and youth practitioners' centred support is needed to ensure that any AI policymaking, education, and training actions are based on knowledge and relevant to the sector. This is to be achieved through the application of (1) desk literature review; (2) youth workers and youth work professionals centred data collection (e.g., interviews, focus groups, survey); (3) followed by an application of inductive reasoning and Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014). The following questions guided this research study:

- What is known about the presence and impact of AI in the European youth field (and non-formal education sector)?
- What are youth practitioners' and youth workers' perceptions of AI in their youth work practice?
- What can be learned about possible challenges, needs, and opportunities related to the use of AI in youth work?
- Moving forward, what support is needed to ensure that AI is implemented in line with youth practitioners' and youth workers' needs?

At the European level, Artificial Intelligence (AI) is defined as:

systems that display intelligent behaviour by analysing their environment and taking actions – with some degree of autonomy – to achieve specific goals. AI - based systems can be purely software-based, acting in the virtual world (e.g. voice assistants, image analysis software, search engines, speech and face recognition systems) or AI can be embedded in hardware devices (e.g. advanced robots, autonomous cars, drones or Internet of Things applications) (The European Commission High-Level Expert Group on AI, 2019).

While this definition provides an overarching theoretical understanding of AI, this study aims to take a closer look at the experiential and practical aspects of how AI is perceived and experienced in the youth field. In other words, it is not about what AI is technically, but about how youth workers interpret AI presence in their work and how/if its presence impacts the youth field (e.g., the quality of youth work). In line with the grounded theory approach, the emphasis here is on the study's participants' experiences and interactions (Idrees et al., 2011).

This paper begins by an overview of the methodology and the data collection methods used. The findings are then presented in three sections: (1) Youth workers perceptions of AI; (2) Perceived benefits of AI in youth work; (3) Perceived issues and concerns about AI in youth work. This is followed by a set of considerations for the youth sector and researchers. The final section provides examples of existing AI resources and projects that might be useful in the youth work context.

The paper offers some early insights into a topic and educational practice that has been largely under-researched - and continues to undergo a rapid transformation. Therefore, it is important to note that the findings of this study provide *a glimpse* into the multilayered debate about *what AI is* and *how it is perceived* in the youth sector. The analysis here is based on a small sample of participants and should therefore not be viewed as representative of the entire sector. Nonetheless, the input of those involved in this study have been important to starting this conversation and identifying some common AI related themes, hopes, and fears in the European youth sector. Despite its limitations, there is a hope that the findings will provide new knowledge and be useful for youth policymakers, researchers, and the youth workers themselves.

2. Methodology

Data collection for this study was conducted between June 2022 and February 2023. The following data collection methods were used:

2.1 AI and youth work workshop

The first set of data was collected at the symposium *Navigating Transitions: adapting policy to young people's changing realities*, organised the partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of youth on 21-23 June 2022 in Tirana, Albania. The purpose of the workshop was to facilitate an open discussion with a group of symposium participants about their experiences of AI in the youth field sector. Participants were primarily involved in direct youth work management and facilitation in youth work organisations. Despite using digital technologies in their work, none of the participants described themselves as digital and AI-experts. When joining the workshop, they indicated as the primary intention to learn about what AI means in the context of the youth sector.

2.2 Interviews with experts

Nine interviews with experts took place in February 2023. The interviews took approximately 30-45 minutes and were done using online video conferencing tools. Interviewees' expertise ranged from designing and facilitating digital youth work training sessions for youth workers, strategic coordination of youth digital inclusion and digital transformation programming in Europe, Internet and AI governance, and AI policymaking. The interview structures were guided by the key research questions of the study.

2.3 Open-ended survey

The aim of the survey was to collect general reflections about what AI means in the European youth sector. The following questions were guiding the survey: (1) What comes to your mind when you think about AI and youth work? (2) Has AI changed your youth work practice in recent years? If so, in what way? (3) What is needed to support youth workers' experiences, understanding, and use of AI in their practice? In total, 51 responses were collected with 75% participants describing themselves as youth workers (the remaining 25% included people describing themselves as youth project managers and coordinators). Survey participants described themselves as working at the following levels: (16) International, including European contexts, and the others in national context, including Armenia (1), Austria (1), Azerbaijan (1), Scotland (3), England (2), Italy (1), Bosnia and Herzegovina (2), Croatia (1), Republic of Moldova (4), Greece (1), Finland (1), France (1), Germany (2), Sweden (1), Slovenia (1), Spain (1), Poland (1), North Macedonia (1).

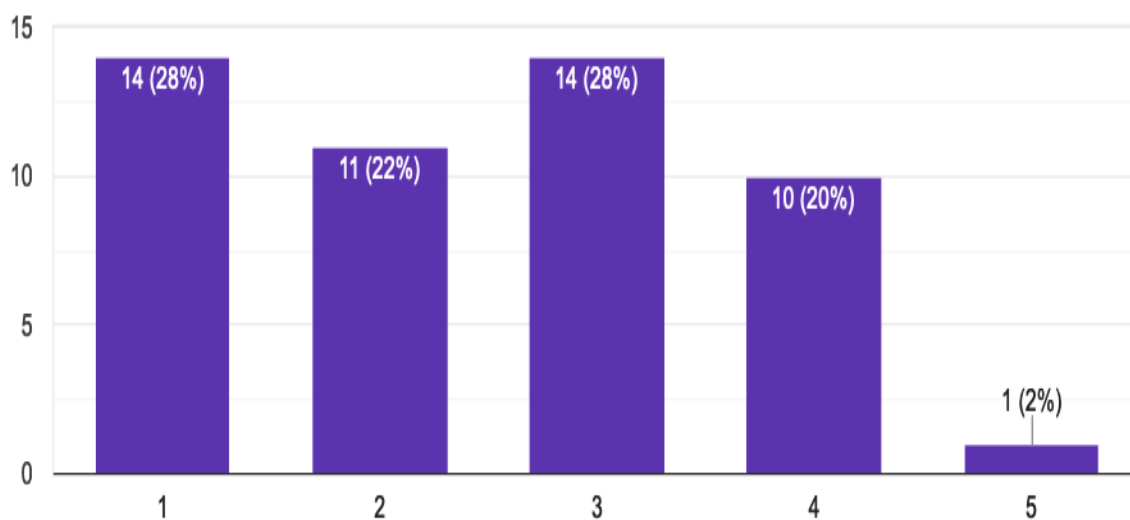


Figure 1. Survey participants rating their knowledge of AI - 1 being low and 5 advanced.

3. Findings

3.1 Youth workers perceptions of AI

In the context of European youth work, the discussion on AI seems to be in its early stages - either as a theoretical concept, a tool, or an activity. While there is some understanding of what AI does and how it can affect young people's lives, there is a lack of shared definition of how AI should be

approached in the context of youth work. the analysis revealed several thematic areas which might shed a light on the existing tensions and contradictions in the sector.

AI as a new force in the youth sector

The most common theme identified in this study is that AI seems to be an ever present but invisible and impersonal force that affects different areas of youth work practice. Some study participants described AI as “everything that is not visible” and “cannot be touched”. Despite not being able to exactly define AI in their practice, most participants agreed that its influence in the sector should not be underestimated. It was suggested that AI has become “the new kid on the block” and has therefore become a popular interest area among young people themselves.

With the rise of accessible AI-powered tools (such as Descript, ChatGPT, and MidJourney), AI has become a trend that cannot and should not be missed in youth work practice. It is estimated that NextGen chatbots and AI solutions will challenge and potentially transform the traditional education system ([Schultz-Pernice, 2023](#)). To what extent these might affect the existing youth work practice, and how are youth workers feeling about the changes that AI solutions might bring about? There seem to be mixed responses from youth workers and participants in this study, ranging from fear, scepticism, resistance to excitement and acknowledgement of its importance.

Firstly, there is a sense that AI might transform what youth work means and how it is delivered. AI is seen by many as a useful tool or even ‘a work buddy’ in youth work. One interviewed expert, who trains other youth workers in the use of AI, suggested that it is essential to approach AI with a can-do but critical attitude. He argued that AI in youth work should not be feared but be seen as “an additional intern” who can be given certain tasks and be trained to deliver specific outcomes (e.g., examples included organising a calendar, building websites and graphics).

For others AI has brought about a sense of unease related to ‘not knowing what might come next. In line with some of the dystopian visions shared by formal educators ([Houser, 2017](#)) and some youth workers ([Pawluczuk, 2020](#)), many participants implied that AI might in fact take over areas of their professions in the years to come. As one study participant put it, the increasing use of AI might lead to “dehumanisation of youth work”. No research is available on this topic so far, and there is limited evidence to say *if* and *to what extent* AI have already substituted youth workers. Examples might include mental health support (e.g., mental health support app) or basic youth work information provision (e.g., chatbots). While many of these solutions are welcomed by the young people

themselves (Götzl et al., 2022), this study reveals a sense of confusion and fear among youth workers about the future of how AI tools are going to be used in the sector.

Finally, there is also a sense of injustice accompanied by the feeling that AI is an unpredictable force that is tested and delivered *on* youth work and not *with* it. While many new AI-driven tools have been used in youth work settings, non-formal educators have limited (if any) control over current data harvesting practices - many of which can have detrimental impact on young people's beliefs, everyday choices, and self-development (5 Rights Foundation, 2021). In youth work practice, this might mean signing up to an app, where both youth workers and young people have to agree to 'terms and conditions' of data sharing that is managed and analysed in a top-down manner - often outside the European regulatory contexts. To contextualise this problem, it might be useful to look at TikTok. It is estimated that TikTok, the Chinese owned tech-giant, has access to 125 million EU citizens' devices (Chee, 2023). The ongoing debate on if and how TikTok data might be used to, for example, spread disinformation has raised concerns about user privacy (Milmo, 2022). In March 2023, the European Parliament introduced a ban on staff to use TikTok on their work devices and other public bodies in Europe and America have done the same. What do such steps mean to the European youth sector? Should the youth work sector get involved in the moderation of the use of AI in youth settings? Who should be responsible for protecting young people from privacy infringements related to algorithmic profiling and surveillance?

Such ethical dilemmas and questions have been identified in this study. AI is viewed as an unpredictable and self-regulatory power that is not legally or ethically bound by the youth work values - such as inclusion, social cohesion, youth participation and empowerment, and meaningful communication (Council of Europe, 2023). Most study participants referred to their or young people's inability to address issues such as unethical surveillance, algorithmic, and data mining (European Youth Forum, 2021). In European youth work, young people and youth workers can be viewed as passive data subjects whose understanding, ownership, and agency over how their personal data is used is limited. In this case, youth workers talked about the sense of powerlessness against possible AI driven discrimination, disempowerment, and communication issues.

"It's just a robot doing something": interest in AI divides in youth work

There are clear disparities between the degrees to which AI is being explored in the European youth sector. There is a small group of people who feel confident and are keen to examine AI either in a practical way or as a topic of discussion (e.g., ethics, AI impact on democracy). Survey results revealed

that a minority of youth workers seem to proactively engage in AI related activities in their organisations. In many cases, such activities are primarily driven by young people's interests in the latest technology trends (e.g. ChatGPT), or are grounded in previous experimentation of the use of technologies in youth work settings. Many participants referred to the use of the latest AI-driven tools as a new addition to their already existing digital methodologies (e.g. a youth worker focusing on digital filmmaking referred to the recent use of ChatGPT for script writing). It might be argued that the more digitally experienced youth workers are, the more likely they are to examine the topic of AI in their practice.

The AI-interest divide has also been confirmed in the interviews with the experts, who indicated that on a more strategic level AI related information is largely inaccessible to European youth workers. This lack of easily accessible and comprehensible information causes a sense of disconnection and disengagement from the topic. Indeed, some participants indicated that AI is of no significance to youth work, by saying that "it's hard for me to connect these two [youth work and AI] and thus find some connection other than the use for collecting some data, statistics and some analysis". There is also some evidence of a paradoxical attitude towards AI where its impact on youth work is being minimised (e.g., "AI use and awareness is very low, there is no need for it in the sector"), while calling for active resistance against its implementation in youth work (e.g. "we should protect human connection from AI influence at any cost").

Such interest divide might be framed within a wider European youth work and more broadly, within the problem of 'the big data divide' (Andrejevic, 2016). Since the Covid-19 pandemic, youth workers and youth work organisations oscillate between two spectrums - those who take the lead in the sector and those who try to catch up without burning out. Like the current study, Pawluczuk's (2022) review revealed that the digitally excluded or partially digitally excluded youth workers often struggle with a sense of anxiety, overwhelm, and digital fatigue. However, such a sense of being overwhelmed and powerless in the context of AI-driven society might also be framed as a structural issue grounded in the big data divide - "the asymmetric relationship between those who collect, store, and mine large quantities of data, and those whom data collection targets" (Andrejevic, 2014). It is important to note that digital and data divides lead to new forms of social injustice, whereby those with more access to information are at less risk of becoming socially or educationally excluded (Ada Lovelace Institute, 2021).

Youth work as a critical educational practice and democratic response to AI impact on society

A key theme emerging from the study was that youth work core values and dedication to democratic citizenship must remain the same, despite the increased digitalisation and datafication of the sector. While acknowledging the ongoing transformation of the youth sector, study participants argued that youth work in itself should continue to play a crucial role in young people's democratic and critical citizenship. Furthermore, many referred to youth work as a potential 'go to educational and experimentation space' which allows for critical co-examination of the emerging and urgent topics of AI's impact on democratic citizenship (e.g., disinformation, algorithmic bias, unethical use of predictive analytics or facial recognition). Examples of such innovative learning programmes and educational partnerships might include Data Detox Kit for Young People (Tactical Tech's Youth Initiative, n.a.) or Amnesty International's RIGHTS Click Programme (Botnar Fondation, n.a.).

While there was a common agreement that youth workers should not be expected to become AI experts, many argued that there is an urgent need to return to the democratic fundamentals of youth work as a socio-political practice. As reported during the "Artificial Intelligence – How Can Youth Take Part?" youth centred seminar in Strasbourg:

AI embeds the power of large corporations rather than redistributing power. AI is a conservative movement that serves existing power structures. Infringement of our rights by AI should be challenged (Stakelum, 2020).

As digital transformation and AI technologies continue to affect democratic power structures and processes, it is essential for young people to be able to participate in a digital society in an informed, safe, and engaged way (5RightsCommision, 2022). Youth work has already proved to be a space where many aspects of young people's digital literacy have been addressed (Digital Youth Work, n.a.). Unlike formal education settings, youth work settings are often (not always) more open to experimentation and exploration of so-called 'real world problems'. As Williamson argues, many youth work spaces are grounded in the "value-based positions such as ensuring 'anti-oppressive practice', a commitment to equalities, and the promotion of human rights and democracy" (2020). Such value-based youth work could become a central practice to ensure that young people are empowered to think critically, understand, challenge, and proactively engage in the existing AI governance and power structures. Williamson describes youth work spaces as "laboratories for democracy" which could play an important role for "the minority of one or challenge the tyranny of the majority" (2020). Indeed, the results of this study indicate that many believe that youth work spaces are becoming crucial education

and citizens resistance spaces where young people's digital citizenship and data citizenship can be approached holistically.

3.2 Perceived benefits of AI in youth work

New forms of inclusion and communication

There was an overall consensus that digital technologies allowed for new ways to reach out to new groups of young people (e.g., those from remote communities, disabled young people) and include them in planning and delivery of youth activities. For example, assistive technologies (e.g., text to speech, voice recognition) have provided new opportunities to create new forms of engagement in the context of formal education. For example, distance learning solutions have been used to communicate and meaningfully engage with learners with mobility disabilities. The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2021) provides case studies of how AI has been used in the context of inclusive digital education.

In addition, the importance of finding and reaching the right young people thanks to AI was highlighted. An example of an AI-targeted campaign (e.g., use of Instagram paid campaign based on a specific age group, interest, or region) was mentioned as a potentially useful way to target the exact group of young people on social media.

Study participants agreed that AI technologies enable creation of new ways of communication in the youth field (between organisations as well as between youth workers and young people) which in turn might lead to a more democratic, diverse, and inclusive power structure. As one participant said, "we can now collaborate with young people from all over the world and create a dialogue between different cultures digitally using Google Translate - we could not do that before as youth workers." Using Google Translate app to work with Ukrainian young refugees was shared as an example of successful use of AI in youth work context. AI was seen as a positive technological force that enabled innovative solutions for cross-country collaborations and knowledge exchange.

New forms of youth work practice have had an impact on the meaning and the practical implementation of youth work. AI affected most aspects of youth worker-young person relationships, and therefore also many practical aspects of the way youth work is being shaped and delivered. Examples might include virtual youth clubs, using online forums as communication extensions of offline meetings and the use of avatars for self-expression. Because of the increased digitalisation of the youth field, youth work practice and spaces have transformed and become increasingly trans and interdisciplinary. As one research participant stated, "it's easier to involve experts from fields such as

sustainable development and invite them to give talks or do workshops online for young people”. The connection of new areas of practice was described as one of the most important benefits of AI technologies in the field of youth.

New opportunities for data analysis and improved policy responses

AI was also seen as an opportunity in the context of data and policy analysis for the youth sector. As indicated by several experts, using existing data-based approaches to youth project design might mean a more effective targeting of youth at risks or identification of specific issues that might require youth workers attention. Indeed, such use of open and big data might be beneficial in cross-sectoral work with youth organisations and governments, offering youth workers and young people opportunities to participate in policymaking (UNICEF Innovation, 2017).

Nonetheless, it is important to note potential limitations related to the use of predictive analytics in policymaking and their potential impact on young people’s lives. Recent examples of controversial use of predictive algorithms included the UK’s A-level grading fiasco where nearly 40% of students received grades lower than they had anticipated (Kolkman, 2020). Another example is the use of a self-learning algorithm by Dutch authorities to identify potential childcare benefits fraud. For 6 years, the algorithm wrongly identified families as fraudsters leading to a thousand children being taken to foster care (Heikilla, 2022). Therefore, any algorithmically driven data analysis in the youth sector should be carried in a youth-centred and ethical manner.

Personalised support for young people

There is some evidence that AI might bring about new personalised forms of support for young people. Some youth workers talked about chatbots or automated content moderation for online communities. In addition, it was believed that AI-powered assistive technologies could be of particular assistance to young people with learning disabilities or language barriers. For example, so-called social robots have been used to improve young people’s learning and social skills, as well as visual and auditory accessibility (Tugend, 2022).

Automation of administrative tasks

AI has also made it easier to manage administrative processes such as deadlines and tasks management, digital project management, virtual office and meeting spaces. Many of the study participants referred to different tools as potential ‘game-changers’ in the way their workload is organised and managed. If applied in an efficient and informed manner, AI and automation processes

could free up youth workers, so they can spend more time with young people and deliver quality youth work.

3.3 Perceived issues and concerns about AI in youth work

AI getting in the way of ethics and youth work values

The unethical use of AI was described as one of the biggest challenges in the youth sector. As discussed in Section 3.1, AI is seen as an unpredictable force that affects the youth sector in multiple and often invisible ways difficult to understand. In this context, AI is seen as a potentially disrupting and disempowering force that might get in the way of core messages and values of youth work. In practice this might involve a youth group choosing to use social media to gather and share information about sexual health. A recent UK survey revealed that 42% of young people believe that TikTok is the most accessible way to get information about sexual health (Shearing, 2023). While the platform addresses a part of the sexual educational gap for many young people, it has also become a source of “toxic disinformation” (Brewster et al., 2022). NewsGuard investigation found that teens and young adults are constantly exposed to algorithmically selected content that feeds them with false and misleading claims. Therefore, in the case of a theoretical youth sexual project, such algorithmically driven information might negatively impact on youth work values such as youth empowerment, meaningful communication, and social cohesion.

Data profiling, polarisation, and social isolation

Negative impacts of AI also included concerns related to young people’s privacy and their agency online. Study participants talked about the disadvantages of AI technologies such as data profiling and monetisation of young people's data. The dangers of algorithmic profiling and its exclusionary and discriminatory nature were outlined. In addition, the discriminatory nature of algorithmic profiling was framed in the way of its automated decision making and racial profiling (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2022). Participants also talked about how algorithmically curated content might distort young people’s vision of reality (e.g., by pushing radical content or disinformation their way) and leading to radicalisation and social isolation (Schlegel, 2021; UN Counter Terrorism-Centre, 2022). Finally, the loss of meaningful relationship-building and an increased sense of disconnectedness (Pawluczuk & Serban, 2022) was described as problematic due to the increased use of AI-based communication technologies. As one study participant stated, “you can’t really build a true relationship with a bot [in youth work]”. The limits of machine-human connection were described as fundamental when it comes to the core aspects of establishing and nurturing meaningful youth work

practice. Some argued that the increasing use of AI and automation of the youth sector has already led to social isolation of those who might already have been digitally and socially excluded.

Digital welfare state and the automatization of youth work: we just can't catch up

The use of AI to cut operational costs for the youth sector has been outlined as a potential risk. If framed within a larger context of cost-saving oriented 'digital welfare' solutions (Larasati et al., 2022), some talked about the possibility that some youth work services are at risk of being substituted by digital solutions or even erased entirely. As one of the study participants argued, "Many people seem to think that it's a good thing that we can outsource almost everything online so that we don't have to see people anymore (...) it's harder to get help for problems from a real person. The more effective AI gets the more services go behind it".

Indeed, implementation of automated decision-making processes into education, welfare, and social services are often viewed as efficient and productive. There is a sense of fear that AI might be used as a shortcut and money saving solution to substitute youth work services in the future. However, this study reveals that AI is sometimes seen as a new and additional workload - both in theoretical and practical terms. "When these new intelligent solutions don't work, none of us can do any work either"- reported one of the youth workers. Struggling with the technical aspects of AI technologies, many feel they are unable to catch up and take time to learn what AI is or how to include it in their youth practice.

4. Conclusion and future considerations

The aim of this study was to examine the perceptions and experiences of AI in the European youth work sector. To date, this topic has been largely under-researched. The purpose of this study was to address this research gap and begin a conversation about youth workers' needs in the context of the potential automation of the sector. What is known about the presence and impact of AI in the European youth field (and non-formal education sector)? What are youth practitioners' and youth workers' perceptions of AI in their youth work practice? These questions were central to the data collection that involved interviews with experts on AI and digital youth work, a survey, and a workshop.

The analysis revealed that AI is a relatively new trend and topic in the European youth sector. While there are examples of using AI tools when working with young people or doing project management tasks, there is some evidence of youth work becoming a space for critical thinking about the AI's impact on society. There are also disparities between digitally included and AI enthusiastic youth workers and those who feel alienated and excluded from the topic. Lack of clarity of what AI means

and what its impact might be on youth work leaves many with a range of reactions such as hopeful speculations, ranging from AI-driven systems contributing to better youth policymaking to fear and resignation about not being able to catch or participate in the digital and AI developments in the sector.

With the ongoing automatization of young people's lives (and by extension the youth sector), there is a sense that youth work needs to play a critical role in ensuring that young people become informed and proactive citizens within the new tech-political structures. Youth work - seen as an out-of-school democratic educational practice - should be considered as a safe space where AI can be explored both in a theoretical (e.g. workshops about disinformation) and practical way (e.g., building chatbots). To achieve this, there is a need for a collaborative, youth-centred and transparent approach to AI education in the sector. While there is no bulletproof solution to making this happen, the result of this study offers some points for consideration, informed by analysis. The considerations are accompanied by case studies of how such suggestions might be operated in practice.

4.1 Co-shaping the use of AI in European youth work

There is limited understanding of what AI means in theoretical and practical terms in the European youth sector. This study revealed that there is a need for a more unified and accessible definition of AI that is specifically contextualised for the youth sector's needs. Such a definition could allow for a more strategic examination of how different aspects of Artificial Intelligence have influenced the sector, if and how their presence and impact might be recognised in the future. To achieve this, it might be useful to build upon the existing AI youth-driven studies, available AI literacy frameworks, and the outcomes of this study and to further research, map, and categorise the different ways in which AI can be seen in the sector. Only by learning what the shared experiences are in the sector, can the sector establish the baseline for ethical and practice standards for AI in youth work. It is important to note that any attempts to co-create AI meaning and understanding in the sector should be grounded in the youth sector values and with the understanding that it should be agile, flexible, and open-ended to continue to respond to any changes associated with the automatisisation of the sector.

4.1 Case study: Co-creation of Digital Transformation Definition for the European Youth Sector by SALTO Participation and Information

What does digital transformation mean in the context of the European Youth Sector? To answer this question, SALTO Participation and Information decided to co-examine the topic with experts. The aim

was to form an advisory board that offers a range of insights into how digital technologies continue to affect the European youth field.

In May 2021, experts from the field on digital & smart youth work, eParticipation, e-Governance, *digital skills*, *digital inclusion*, *digital transformation*, and EU policies (and more), joined the *Digital Transformation Advisory Board*. The final group was formed of experts and practitioners from the National Agencies to youth (work) organisations, academia, and the private sector.

The work of the Advisory Board on Digital Transformation aimed to build on the outcomes of previous initiatives and create synergies with existing policies and projects. Among them are the EU Youth Strategy, the Digital Education Action Plan, the Strategic National Agency Cooperation on Digital Youth Work, the work of RAY DIGI, as well as the work of other SALTO Resource Centres, such as SALTO Inclusion and Diversity and SALTO Training and Cooperation.

One of the key tasks for the group was to co-define the notion of *digital transformation* in the context of the EU Youth Programmes. Over several meetings, the group mapped out their understanding of the *digital transformation* as well as challenges and opportunities related to the process and produced a definition with supporting examples.

4.2 Considering youth work sector as a partner in AI related debates

There is a need for additional and meaningful engagement of all youth work stakeholders to learn about their day-to-day experiences and perceptions of AI. This is to better understand, ground and contextualise any future regulatory or educational solutions within the context of youth work environments. This study supports findings from the European Youth Centre's Seminar Artificial Intelligence and its impact on young people (Stefan, 2019) that the youth sector should actively be involved in shaping policies and exploring new ways to critically examine the topic of AI in the youth-sector-centred manner. Youth work sector offers unique opportunities and insights into young people's [digital] lives, their everyday emotional, learning, and employability needs. This study proves youth workers have been at the forefront of young people's digital and AI literacy education. Although the topic of AI is still not well understood in the sector, there are groups of experts (including youth workers and young people) whose expertise varies from different interdisciplinary sectors and whose input into any policy making decision might enrich the value and diversity of the process. New forms of structural support and training are needed to facilitate youth work sector's meaningful participation in the AI governance processes. To achieve this, an AI youth work cross-sector consultative group

could be formed, as proposed by participants in this study. The aim of this group would be to present a diverse range of perspectives on the use of AI and acknowledge the fact that youth workers are not a homogeneous group, but have various needs that intersect with their age, ethnicity, socio-economic background, gender identity and (dis)ability.

4.2 Case study: Seminar on Artificial Intelligence and its impact on young people

The Seminar Artificial Intelligence and its Impact on Young People was organised by the Youth Department of the Council of Europe from 4 to 6 December 2019 in Strasbourg, France. It aimed to explore the issues, roles, and possible contributions of the youth sector in ensuring that Artificial Intelligence (AI) is responsibly used in democratic societies, and that young people have a say in this process. The event brought together over 40 youth experts from a variety of sectors – ranging from representatives of youth organisations, youth work, academia, trade unions and public institutions to those from start-ups, technology, and legal experts. Designed as a consultation with youth experts, the Seminar provided a unique opportunity to advance the debate on the relevance and understanding of AI today. It identified areas and proposals for further exploration and action by the Council of Europe’s youth sector and its governmental and non-governmental partners. The seminar’s results aim to connect the work already done by the Council of Europe in the field of AI, as well as to inform the future programme of the youth sector in the years to come.

Source: [Seminar Report](#) by Veronica Stefan

4.3 Exploring new forms of AI related training and support

Knowing what AI is and how to address it in one’s work was described as important skills in youth work. As one study participant argued, “the new [AI] trends should not be disregarded and blocked, but rather explored and addressed responsibly because we never know what it could bring us in the end”. There is a need for additional education or training resources for youth workers and youth organisations. In the future, youth practitioners and youth workers would like to have easy access to resources that provide “AI education in an accessible way” and are delivered in a practical and sustainable manner (e.g., not one-off training on what AI is but an up-to-date learning platform).

4.3 Case study: Tactical Tech Data Detox X Youth

Data Detox x Youth is an activity book to help young people take control of their tech. This interactive toolkit encourages young people to think about different aspects of their digital lives, from their social media profiles to their passwords, with simple activities for reflection and play.

Source: [Tactical Tech](#)

Case study: Defending Human Rights in the Digital Age

UNESCO and UNITAR jointly launched a new, short online learning course on AI and Human Rights for youths aged 16 to 24. Experts break down complex concepts about AI into straightforward activities built around our daily technology interactions. The course focuses on how freedom of expression, right to privacy and the right to equality are impacted using AI.

Source: [UNESCO](#)

4.4 Embracing AI experimentation, speculative design, and innovation in youth work

Youth work spaces provide unique insights into young people's everyday digital realities and their interactions with AI. Youth sector has an opportunity to become a space for new forms of partnerships (e.g., between academia, technology sector, government) and youth-driven educational innovation solutions. More spaces are needed for open discussions and “co-creative speculations about the future of AI” in youth work. There is a need to better understand how youth work can support future understanding and co-creation of AI processes. Building on Räsänen’s proposal to view AI as a social imaginary, there is a need for inclusive and co-creative spaces where different stakeholders can “refer to AI as abstract concepts through which they can reflect their own social values” (Stefan, 2019). Youth workers and young people are largely curious about AI and need spaces where their interests, ideas, and concerns can be explored.

4.4 Case study: Imagine Future of Jobs - Design Learning Experience to Speculative Future of Jobs for Next Generation

This project focuses on how to educate the next generation to face the unpredictable future jobs situation using imagination and Speculative Design practice. This workshop aims to facilitate children in reflecting on their skills and passions in view of imagining interdisciplinary futures concerning their professional identities. The workshop consists of a series of creative activities through which the participants are encouraged to use their imagination to speculate about future professional identities in a futuristic “think outside the box” manner. This process includes designed prompts like the passion map template and the future worlds catalogue designed to trigger their imagination and help them initiate their own personal speculative scenarios that reflect their individual skills and interests.

Source: [SPECULATIVEEDU](#) Case Study

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