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Speaking Youth to Power: Tokenistic or Meaningful Representations?

A Critical Discourse Analysis of the 'European Year of Youth 2022' and the 'Year of ASEAN Youth 2022'

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Abstract

This thesis examines how young people are represented in the discourse and policy outputs of the 'European Year of Youth 2022' and the 'Year of ASEAN Youth 2022' and in what capacity the neoliberal logics of development are reflected in the discursive representations of youth. The analysis presented continuously explores how these initiatives construct and frame youth political participation and, importantly, whether they offer meaningful or tokenistic representations that may be supported or contested by youth. The findings indicate that young people are recurringly portrayed in four ways: (a) youth as "*agents of change*," (b) "*future-ready*" youth, (c) "*young entrepreneurs*"*, and* (d) youth as "*strategic partners.*". While each of these four figures of youth appears relevant to the policy discussions at hand, these discursive representations are not devoid of implicit meanings and, more often than not, convey significant ideological inferences in their use.

Keywords: Representations of Youth; Youth Political Participation; Neoliberal Developmentalism; Year of Youth; EU; ASEAN

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To all the young people I have worked with over the years, this thesis hopes to honour our generation's determination to disrupt the status quo. We may be angry and disillusioned by the current state of international affairs, but our urgent demands for transformational change and intergenerational justice will prevail. If not by the doings of decision-makers with a seat at the table, then by our own doings.

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Abbreviations

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
AC	Advisory Council on Youth (Council of Europe)
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
CDEJ	European Steering Committee for Youth
CoE	Council of Europe
CoR	European Committee of the Regions
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019 (SARS-CoV-2)
CS	Commonwealth Secretariat
DA	Discourse Analysis
DIO	Do-It-Ourselves (Politics)
DNP	Discursive Nodal Point
EC	European Commission
ECHR	European Convention on Human Rights
ECJ	Court of Justice of the European Union
EESC	European Economic and Social Committee
EYY	European Year of Youth
EU	European Union
EYF	European Youth Forum
FFF	Fridays For Future
'Gen Z'	Generation Z
GN	Global North
GNI	Gross National Income
GS	Global South
IGO	Inter-Governmental Organisation
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal

UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
USA	United States of America
XR	Extinction Rebellion
YAP	Youth Action Plan (EU External Action 2022–2027)
YAY	Year of ASEAN Youth
YDI	Youth Development Index
YSB	Youth Sounding Board for EU International Partnerships
4IR	Forth Industrial Revolution

1. Introduction

Over the last two decades, a 'rising tide' of youth has transformed the political landscape of international development cooperation. While the political counterculture of 'revolutionary youth' is a familiar and well-documented trope, there is newfound consensus among policymakers and scholars alike that recognises Gen Z's[2] incoming voters as an already extraordinary political force (see, e.g., Rice & Moffett, 2021; Gash & Tichenor, 2022a, among other academic publications). Although "Gen Z is the latest chapter in the decades-long encyclopaedia of young activists"—and is known for joining forces with Millennials[3] on shared political issues—"this cohort appear to communicate, mobilise and rally support in a way that sets them apart from the generations before them" (Carnegie, 2022).

Facing disenfranchisement and disillusionment in the realm of *conventional* politics[4] (Barrett & Brunton-Smith, 2014), millions of young people worldwide continue to contest their traditionally liminal status in society and affirm their capacity as political agents elsewhere (van Deth, 2001; Norris, 2007; Larkins, 2014; Pickard, 2022). Since the early 1970s, youth have used *unconventional* political means and modes[5] (Barrett & Brunton-Smith, 2014) to assert themselves on issues of anticolonialism and liberation, civil rights and social reforms, as well as participatory democracy (Braungart & Braungart, 2001; van Deth, 2001). This continued into the 1980s and 1990s, during which young people became central actors in broadening social engagement and civic participation and, in turn, shaping principles of political consumerism and lifestyle activism, both of which continue to inform our contemporary understandings and networks of youth political participation (van Deth, 2001; García-Albacete, 2014; Lorenzini & Forno, 2022; Gash & Tichenor, 2022a, pp. 137–188). Moreover, youth issues associated with this period (such as, but not limited to, human rights, democracy, environmental destruction, and mini-nationalism) remain policy priorities within youth agenda-setting (Braungart & Braungart, 2001) (see Figure 1).

Today, however, the once-rigid binaries of conventional and unconventional political participation have been blurred, and synergies between the two have become essential to "disrupting policy paralysis" (Gash & Tichenor, 2022a, pp. 172–173) on urgent issues and leveraging transformational changes. Unsurprisingly, this landscape shift is strongly tied to the digital transformations of the 21st century and the ever-growing networks of global connectivity, which (a) platform and amplify minority voices, (b) unite similar calls for change, (c) mobilise global audiences, (d) coordinate political participation and collective action on transnational issues, and thus (e) invigorate the lukewarm and decoupled relationship between elected representatives and their constituents, and (f) champion improved public accountability from decision-makers (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013; Hosch-Dayican, 2014; Pickard et al., 2020; Gash & Tichenor, 2022a, pp. 137–188).

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[2] Generally refers to the demographic cohort born between 1997–2012.

[3] Generally refers to the demographic cohort born between 1981–1996, also known as 'Generation Y'.

[4] 'Conventional' politics, i.e., voting in elections, party membership, campaigning, contacting officials, etc.

[5] 'Unconventional' political means and modes, i.e., petitions, protest actions, and social movements, etc.

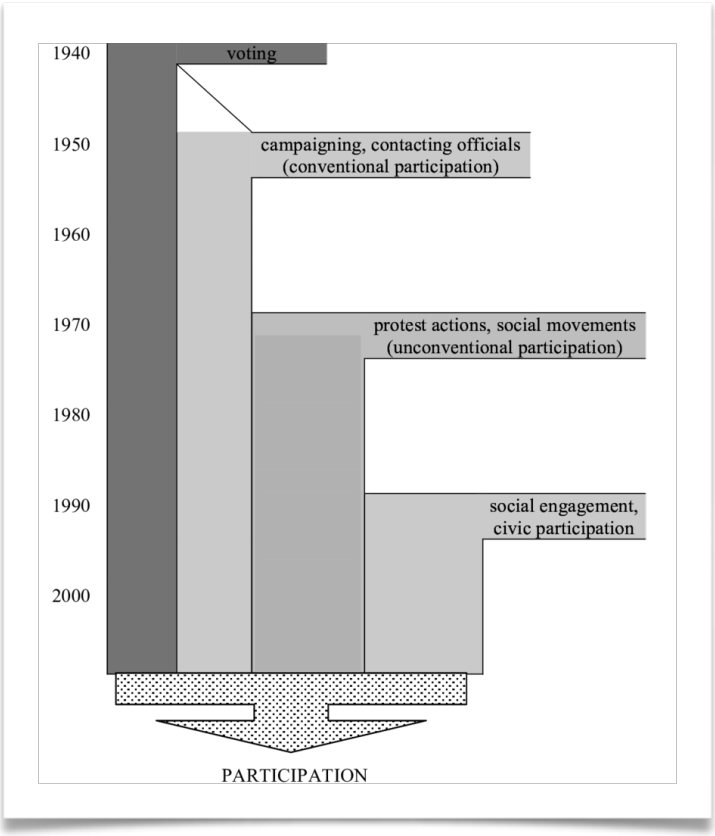

Figure 1: The Expansion of the Political Repertoire
Source: van Deth (2001, p. 14)

Raised as *digital natives* (Prensky, 2001) in the unprecedented era of social media, Gen Z's technological fluency serves as a unique catalyst for this type of change — "anywhere that young people congregate, there is an opportunity for young people to advocate and organise" and, in effect, "[…] any young person with a digital audience is capable of transforming the policy landscape" and taking up the mantle for change (Gash & Tichenor, 2022a, p. 182). Much like their predecessors, the incoming generation of voters has pushed the envelope of the political repertoire available to citizens and, uniquely managed to operationalise a dual approach to political participation: utilising conventional democratic functions and institutionalised influences, while concurrently disrupting the status quo through unconventional acts of activism and widespread (digital) mobilisation (Halupka, 2014; Kristofferson et al., 2014; Wielk & Standlee, 2021). Within this new praxis, Gen Z's political engagement is driven by a remarkable sense of urgency over the hand of existential threats they have been dealt. Rather than colouring within the loyalty lines of partisan politics and stalling change until the 'right' candidate with the 'right' agenda comes along, today's youth are keen on dismantling silos and generally vote for whomever best meets their policy aspirations[6]. As Gash & Tichenor (2022b) aptly summarise in their op-ed, "today's young voters can fuse movement activism with voting in a way we have not seen in the past" and have the potential to deliver a game-changing "one-two punch" that will help cement their role as a "juggernaut of political conscience and influence."

[6] See e.g., Booth et al. (2022) regarding the midterm elections in the USA, where abortion was a major issue for young voters and, ultimately, veered the outcome. Contrary to the vast majority of political forecasting ahead of the election.

1.1. 2022: The Year of Youth

With this undeniable show of agency and a remarkably united front, youth issues and policies have come to receive considerable attention within key institutions of transnational governance. Looking at overarching global trends, we see European countries achieving very high levels of youth development relative to other regions, as is also depicted in the map of world countries (see Figure 2), using the YDI Index[7]. While the enhanced status of European youth may not come as much of a surprise, it is worth noting that Southeast Asian countries have maintained a higher average compared to Africa, Central America and South Asia. In fact, within the global rankings, Singapore is ranked first (an overall YDI score of 0.868)[8], Brunei is ranked twenty-seventh (an overall YDI score of 0.810), and Malaysia is ranked thirty-fifth (an overall YDI score of 0.802) (CS, 2024).

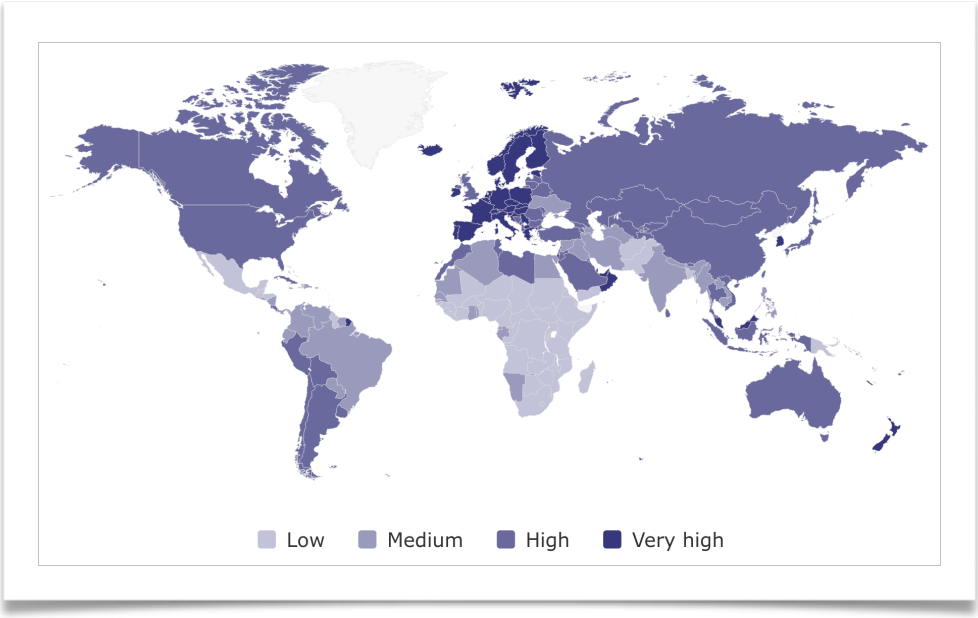

Figure 2: Youth Development Index World Map (2023)
Source: CS (2024, p. 9)

As evidenced by their nearly five decades of regional cooperation and, as of 2020, a newly opened chapter of Strategic Partnership, the EU and ASEAN have fostered a mutually beneficial relationship which often sees the IGOs spearheading complementary agendas on a variety of policy issues. Moreover, "this elevates their partnership with a commitment to regular summits at leaders' level" and (re)emphasises their collaboration on four key areas: economic cooperation, security cooperation, sustainable connectivity, and sustainable development (EEAS, 2020). Youth, as both a target constituency and key agent in achieving growth and development across these policy areas, have taken high priority in both the individual regional agendas and across existing EU-ASEAN exchanges.

[7] Briefly summarised, the YDI is informed by Agenda 2030 and its SDGs; it evaluates youth development across six domains, with 27 indicators in total: (a) health and wellbeing, (b) education, (c) employment and opportunity, (d) political and civic participation, (e) equality and inclusion, and (f) peace and security.

[8] YDI Score ranges: low <0.675; medium 0.675–0.738; high 0.738–0.798; very high >0.798.

Culminating in a cross-continental 'Year of Youth'—whether by coincidence or by design—the EU Parliament and the Council decided to implement President von der Leyen's State of the Union proposal and designated 2022 as the EYY (EU 2021/2316), while ASEAN, under the chairmanship of Cambodia, also declared 2022 the YAY (ASEAN, 2022b). Speaking to this unique situation and an upcoming youth programme, Igor Driesmans, the EU Ambassador to ASEAN, commented,

> "In 2022, the EU and ASEAN mark the 45th anniversary of their partnership. Over these years, EU-ASEAN relations have grown into a strong, multifaceted and comprehensive Strategic Partnership. Building on this momentum, we look to the next generation of leaders from across the EU and ASEAN to share their ideas and hopes for the future. With this in mind, the EU is pleased to organise this year, in cooperation with ASEAN, a new edition of the EU-ASEAN Young Leaders Forum" (ASEAN, 2022c).

In turn, the Secretary-General of ASEAN, Dato Lim Jock Hoi, remarked,

> "As strategic partners, ASEAN and the EU continue to enjoy a long-standing and robust relationship, with cooperation expanding in many areas in the past 45 years. This includes promoting initiatives to strengthen youth engagement and people-to-people connections, such as the EU-ASEAN Young Leaders Forum. I believe that the youth should play a larger and meaningful role in building a more participatory, inclusive, sustainable, resilient, and dynamic global community. To foster stronger ties between ASEAN and EU, it is important for the youths of ASEAN and Europe to learn from each other and develop networks for collaboration" (ASEAN, 2022c).

Arguably, on each end of Eurasia, the year-long designations in 2022 worked to further mainstream youth policy, serving both as a net for capturing and centralising youth issues across the wide spectrum of policy areas, as well as a dedicated vehicle for young people to participate directly in transnational political discourse, influence policy decisions, and engage both with their elected representatives as well as their like-minded peers.

1.2. Knowledge Gap and Research Focus

In tandem with the evolving role of young people in the global political landscape, the interdisciplinary field of youth studies has seen considerable expansion, particularly on issues tied to citizenship, civic education, political participation, and democratic representation. Notably, over two decades, youth scholars have achieved a degree of saturation in the academic understanding of *conventional youth political participation* and corresponding declines in voter turnout, party membership, political interest, and institutional trust among young people (see e.g., Willems et al., 2012 for an overview). On the other hand, *unconventional youth political participation* has only recently established its research credibility and gained mainstream academic traction; comprehensive scholarly

accounts have emerged in the last five years or so[9]. Arguably, this shift in academic focus is primarily credited to the momentum and visibility of the 'emergent' environmental movement in 2018 and its unique youth-led, youth-centred fingerprint. The creation of the XR environmental movement and Greta Thunberg's FFF movement[10] triggered what the scholarly community, in hindsight, considers a "watershed moment" across the green political landscape and the broader climate change discourse (Pickard et al., 2020).

Figure 3: Climate March in Montréal
Source: Bernardon, (2019, under Unsplash Liscensing)

1.2.1. The Epistemic Hegemony of the Global North

While the 'novelty' of European youth climate activism has undoubtedly grasped the attention of scholars, the resulting research shows a selective focus on Thunberg's role as a spearhead — positioning her as a proxy for youth environmental movements on a global scale (see, e.g., Zulianelllo & Ceccobelli, 2020; Murphy, 2021; Sabherwal et al., 2021; Nordensvard & Ketola, 2022, among other scholars). As a result, the depth and width of environmental youth activism beyond the GN are routinely overlooked to the detriment of our academic understanding and its real-world accuracy; not only apropos e.g., Thunberg's current peer and Ugandan counterpart, Vanessa Nakate (Bessant, 2021), or her Marshallese predecessor, Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner (Jetnil-Kijner, 2014), but also in the context of youth who voiced their concerns in the years prior, unheralded (Ison, 2009; Fisher, 2016; Foran et al., 2017; Cocco-Klein & Mauger, 2018; O'Brien et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2020). Pursuant to this logic, it is reasonable to assume that such epistemic fixation has occurred elsewhere within the multi-disciplinary field of youth studies; likely, common (non-Western) features and functions of youth political participation have, at best, received less comprehensive exploration and, at worst, been largely neglected by the mainstream research agenda.

[9] Barring a few scholars that were ahead of their time (see e.g., García-Alabacete, 2014; Sukarieh & Tannock, 2014; France, 2016, among other scholars), most comprehensive publications on unconventional youth political participation date between 2018 and 2023. See, for example, the publishing years of most books referenced throughout this thesis.

[10] Also known interchangeably as the 'School Strikes for the Climate' movement.

Secondly, as seen in this chapter alone, most foundational literature within the field contextualises theories and derives data from Euro-American contexts. While this is a ubiquitous issue across the vast majority of social science disciplines, the peripheral status of Southern youth studies scholars within the hegemonic scientific community of the GN presents significant issues for our understanding of young people's political participation. As Swartz (2022, p. 336) poignantly outlines, there are three key issues relating to the inequalities of global knowledge production and dissemination in the field of youth studies: (a) "[t]he first is the way in which Northern knowledge is assumed to be universal knowledge," (b) "the second is that when data from the South is extracted, it is often transported to the North for analysis and to be turned into theory using Northern lenses," and (c) "the third is that Southern scholarship is frequently ghettoised, i.e., what is produced and theorised in the South remains in the South and is ignored by the North" (see e.g., Demeter, 2020 for a multi-disciplinary overview of this epistemic hegemony).

Lastly—and most tangibly—the implications of Western-centrism in youth studies are best contextualised by the simple fact that "around 85 per cent of 15–24 year-olds live in developing countries, a figure projected to grow to 89.5 per cent by 2025" (UN, 2008, cited in Furlong, 2013, p. 228). In other words, "many of the theories we use to understand the lives of young people are meaningless in non-western contexts" (Nilan, 2011; Larson & Wilson, 2004) as they are derived from the experiences of a minority and are falsely and/or forcefully generalised to encompass the global majority. Key concepts within youth studies such as "choice biographies" and "individualisation" are effectively rendered immaterial in describing young people in societies where "collectivist traditions remain strong, and family traditions and obligations continue to shape youth and young adulthood, while marriage and parenthood define adulthood" (Furlong, 2013, p. 229).

1.2.2. Aims and Guiding Questions

While reviewing the existing body of literature, I noted that the knowledge gap pertained, more often than not, to incongruent representations of youth as political subjects, objects and agents. Specifically, scholarly shortcomings in connection to the (a) nuances of unconventional youth participation and non-participation (O'Toole et al., 2003b; O'Toole et al., 2003c; Theocharis & van Deth, 2018), (b) use of top-down methodologies and the ensuing dissonance between what adults vis-à-vis youth define as *the political* (O'Toole, 2003a; Pontes et al., 2018; Bessant, 2021) and (c) relegation of GS youth perspectives, especially in the climate change discourse (Taylor, 1997; Sealey-Huggins, 2018; Cooper et al., 2021; Sultana, 2022). To this end, my main aim with this thesis is to, first and foremost, capture the current state of scholarship and engage with each of the three knowledge gaps identified above, albeit to varying degrees and capacities,

With an existing interest in the discursive representations of young people within the international political landscape, I have positioned this thesis at the intersection of youth studies, citizenship studies, and comparative politics. Naturally, my research focus is also informed by development studies and will bring Southern scholars to the fore as I situate lesser-known contributions from developing contexts within the broader literature. I was hugely inspired by the monumental work of Swartz et al. (2021) in 'The Oxford Handbook of Global South Youth Studies' and Bessant's (2021) highly captivating chapter on the

'Representations of Young People and Neoliberal Developmentalism in the Global South'. As such, I hope to further corroborate the theorised link between the neoliberal logics of development and the discursive representations of 'youth' in politics. Recognising the agenda-setting and discursive influence of IGOs, my inquiry is based on two opportune regional case studies: the EYY 2022 and the YAY 2022, each a year-long designation set by the EU institutions, collectively, and by ASEAN under Cambodia's chairmanship. Uniquely, to the benefit of this thesis' analysis, these designations and their corresponding discourses were each captured by milestone (internal and external) action plans for youth.

The guiding research questions for this thesis read as follows:

i. How are young people represented in the discourse and policy outputs of the 'European Year of Youth 2022' and the 'Year of ASEAN Youth 2022'?

    i.i. In what ways are the neoliberal logics of development reflected in the discursive representations of youth?

ii. How are these representations supported and/or contested by youth?

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Conceptualisations of 'Youth'

The foundational challenge of any youth-related academic endeavour is tied to the very subject/object of study: *youth*. As posited by Bourdieu (1993, pp. 94–102), youth is not a universal category but a context-dependent social construct that is highly variable in its expressed meanings and interpretations. Although the social construction of age largely mirrors the foundational logic of other well-researched categories—such as, e.g. the social constructions of *race* (Omi & Winant, 1986) and *gender* (Lorber & Farrell, 1991; Butler, 1991)—it has yet to receive comparable academic saturation (Gordon, 2007).

As a result of this continued ambiguity, a "clear-cut or absolute definition of 'young people'" has yet to be overtly nor explicitly articulated within youth studies (Heinz, 2009, p. 4) and "might explain why saying who actually counts as young people is so often omitted in studies on their relationships with politics" (Pickard, 2019, p. 27). In the absence of agreed-upon academic definitions, the existing body of literature lacks a clear, unified direction. In its current state, I would argue that a large portion of the scholarship (a) perpetuates a flawed premise of social homogeneity across a broad and diverse global demographic of young people and (b) arbitrarily combines complex (Western) sociocultural notions of *childhood*, *adolescence* and *young adulthood* under the umbrella term of *youth*, while omitting peer notions within the Southern scholarship — e.g., *waithood* and *precarity* (Honwana, 2012), *degrees without freedom* (Jeffrey et al., 2004) and *istambays* (Batan, 2021). Lastly, it (c) facilitates an uncharted degree of *adultism* within its produced theoretical paradigms and research methodologies due to top-down approaches and a continued shortage of collaborative academic input from young people. Adultism[11] refers to the "sociopolitical status differentials and power relations endemic to adult-child relations" and—as with other 'isms'—encapsulates the "oppression experienced by children and young people at the hands of adults and adult-produced/adult-tailored systems" (LeFrançois, 2014, pp. 47–49; Conner et al., 2016). Targeting these criticisms, Pickard (2019, p. 27) presents a more nuanced conceptualisation of youth,

> "[…] one thing is clear: it is important not to generalise and not to lump all young people together as if they constituted in some objective way a homogenous demographic collective. Young people have different backgrounds, attitudes and interests; they have diverse political orientations, as well as varying types and levels of participation in politics. At the same time, young people are neither trainee citizens nor just numbers in the dataset. I prefer to consider young people as full citizens capable of reasoned thinking with agency."

[11] Note that 'adultism' is conflated/used interchangeably with 'ageism' in the literature and broader discourse. However, adultism describes specific power relations between adults and young people, whereas ageism refers to the broader stereotyping and discrimination of people on the basis of age (encompassing, e.g., ageism towards the elderly).

Noting the dichotomy of 'trainee citizens' and 'full citizens', Pickard (2019) points to the predominant logic of adultism within youth-related research — the *youth deficit model* (Osler & Starkey, 2003; Earl et al., 2017). This model describes an analytical premise where young people are assumed to be politically apathetic, incomplete members of society, and entirely reliant on adult counterparts for their political socialisation (Gordon, 2007; Henn & Foard, 2014; Andersson, 2015). These perceived 'deficiencies' have, however, been challenged, with several studies arguing in favour of young people's agency and ability to politically socialise themselves (e.g., Yates & Youniss, 1999, among other scholars) and, at times, even socialise their parents (Bloemraad & Trost, 2008). Despite this, debilitating representations of youth remain consequential to the broader discourse; in fact, critical scholars have ascertained that "discourses that position young people as 'becoming' rather than 'being' [political agents] have served to define young people as incapable, partial, and deficient in contrast to an imagined vision of the capable, complete, and rational adult" (Taft, 2017, p. 29; Wyn & White, 1997; James et al., 1998).

These representations, in turn, "marginalise and disempower young people" and, especially in the context of youth political activism, "dismiss their experiences in the present by focusing primarily on their status as future adults" (Taft, 2017, p. 29; Gordon, 2007; 2009). As a result, the epistemic issues of youth studies arguably extend beyond the vague understandings of 'youth' — once coupled with pervasive adultist paradigms, a large portion of the literature not only perpetuates the portrayal of young people as "citizens-in-training" but also frames unconventional political participation as a means of "practising for the real thing" ahead of their entry into the 'legitimate' realm of conventional political participation (Gordon, 2007, p. 635; Henn et al., 2002, p. 178; Marsh et al., 2007; Farthing, 2010, p. 184; Gordon, 2009). Concerningly, as these adultist views become increasingly rooted in mainstream political discourse, some studies have found these oppressive narratives to be somewhat naturalised in young people's representation of themselves (see Budgeon, 2003; Taft, 2017).

To my knowledge—and with the particular purpose of this thesis in mind—the clearest conceptualisations of youth as subjects, objects, and agents within political discourse appear in Sukarieh & Tannock (2014), Pitti (2018), Bessant (2020), Levison et al. (2021) and Gash & Tichenor (2022a); with Ansell (2016) and Swartz et al. (2021) providing tailored insights and applications from the GS. While the following sections will unpack these conceptualisations in detail, the keynotes are best captured in Lofquist's (1989, pp. 29–42) 'Spectrum of Adult Attitudes Towards Youth' —outlining (a) *youth as objects,* i.e., "adults exercise arbitrary and near total control over youth; programs and activities are *to* youth," (b) *youth as recipients,* i.e., "based on what they think is in the youth's interest, adults determine needs, prescribe remedies, implement solutions, and evaluate outcomes with little youth input; programs and activities are *for* youth," (c) *youth as resources,* i.e., "youth help adults in planning, implementing, and evaluating work; programs and activities are *for* and *with* youth," and lastly, (d) *youth-adult partnerships*, i.e., "youth and adults share decision-making power equally; programs and activities are *with* youth" (VSCA, n.d., p. 01). Interestingly, Lofquist's (1989) spectrum—despite being less visible in mainstream academia—shares notable similarities with Hart's (1992) highly influential 'Ladder of Children's Participation' within youth studies (see Figure 4 and Figure 5) (Bečević & Dahlstedt, 2022, p. 364).

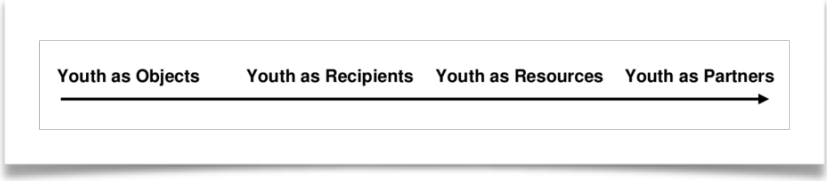

Figure 4: Lofquist's 'Spectrum of Adult Attitudes Towards Youth'
Source: Horstmeier, 2006, p. 15.

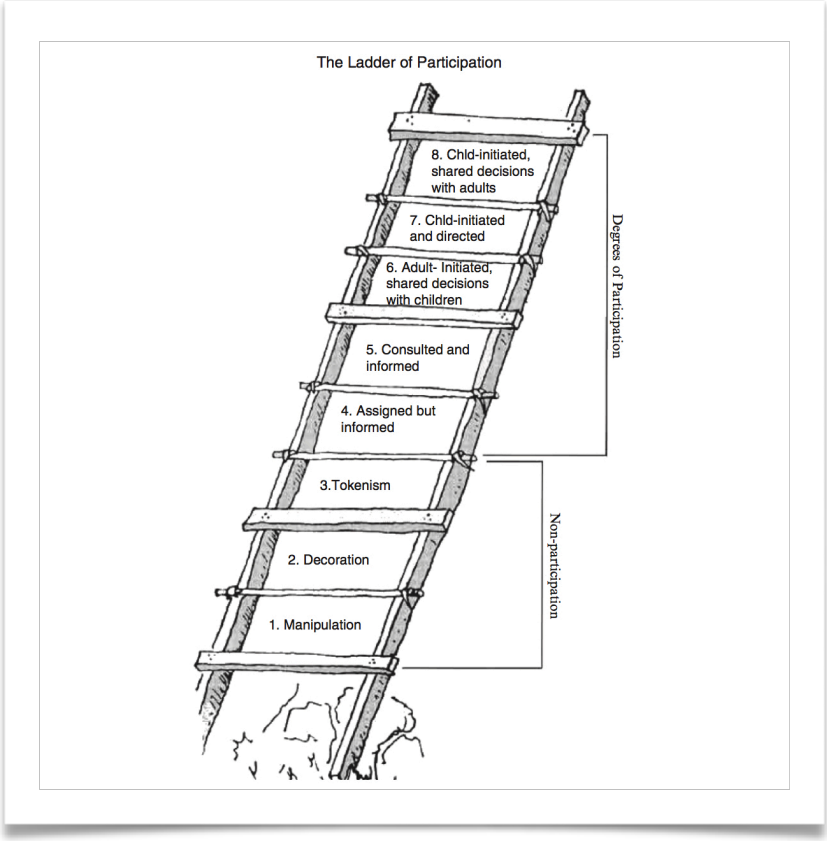

Figure 5: Hart's Ladder of Children's Participation
Source: Hart (1992, p. 08)

2.1.1. Threadgold's 'Figures of Youth'

In response to some of the conceptual grievances outlined in the previous sub-section, Threadgold (2020) suggests the creation of material-semiotic *figures of youth* and argues their utility in tracing the various ontological spaces in which youth are/can be situated, developing more explicit, more unified constructions of young people as research objects and, lastly "[reducing] confusion" amongst the definitions of 'youth' summoned across various disciplines and, therein, mitigating the risk of "talking past each other" in academic research (Threadgold, 2020, p. 686). Notably, to lay the foundation for further scholarly contributions, Threadgold outlines a first iteration of 'figures of youth' across four ontological spaces, each with a pair of corresponding typologies (see Figure 6).

Ontological Spaces	Typologies
1. Political Figures	**1.1.** Figures of Moral Panic
	1.2. Revolutionary Figures
2. Figures of Capitalism	**2.1.** Figures of Consumer Dupes, Civilisational Vandals and Homo Economicus
	2.2. Sexy, Cool, Edgy Figures of Co-Optation and Immaterial Labour
3. Personalised Temporal Figures of Affect	**3.1.** Figures of the Immanent Future
	3.2. Figures of Romanticised Nostalgia
4. Risk Figures in Youth Studies	**4.1.** Cognitive Figures of 'Risk-Taking' Youth
	4.2. Social Figures of 'At Risk' Youth

Figure 6: Steven Threadgold's Figures of Youth
Adapted from Threadgold (2020, pp. 691–696).

Starting with the political, Threadgold (2020) outlines *figures of moral panic*, which refer to when a "condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests" (Cohen, 2011, p. 09). Here, youth moral panics are typically centred around "practices, lifestyles, popular culture consumption and social media usage" and "framed through a generational lens (Davis, 1999), where older generations denigrate the young" for seeming "lazy, irresponsible, disloyal, vapid, ignorant, narcissistic and the like" (Threadgold, 2020, p. 691). Paradoxically, however, youth are also portrayed as *revolutionary figures* within politics — positioned "at the vanguard of progressive and emancipatory politics" and framed dichotomously as "exuberant" youngsters yet "dangerous" agents of change (ibid.).

As figures within capitalism, Threadgold (2020, pp. 692–693) highlights the characterisation of young people as "empty vessels to be filled by the false needs of political manipulation, commercial interests and instant gratification" (consumer dupes and civilisational vandals), or "rational decision-making machine[s] coldly making choices to ensure maximum efficiency and profit" (homo economicus). Recognising the irony of these normative judgements, the author points to the way young people's "practices and bodies are [concurrently] mined for profit" through capitalist systems of co-optation and the immaterial labour of "subcultural capital" (ibid.). On a more positive note, "young people are invoked as an effective proxy for 'the future'" within the temporal space; "in the constant panics over and about young people, there is a [hopeful] moral imperative that if young people are 'good,' the future will be 'good'" (Threadgold, 2020, p. 693). In effect, the sociology of youth becomes fundamentally interlinked, if not synonymous, with any sociology pertaining to the future (ibid.).

Lastly,[12] within youth studies, Threadgold (2020, pp. 695–696) argues that "young people are consistently positioned as a problem to be disciplined, regulated and fixed." On

[12] Note that Threadgold (2020) also identifies the 'figures of romanticised nostalgia' (Typology 3.2 in Figure 4). Although interesting, this heading is not relevant to this thesis and is only included for the purpose of completeness.

the one hand, "young people are underdeveloped 'risk-takers' that need to be protected from themselves;" on the other, they are seen as 'at risk' and vulnerable members of society, "needing to be protected from [larger] social and economic risk" (ibid). Herein, Threadgold (2020, p. 696) echoes criticism towards the framing of young people as always 'becoming' rather than 'being' and, upon entry into adulthood, suddenly experiencing the significant leap from "irresponsible to responsible; promiscuous to monogamous; minor to citizen; ignorant to wise; apathetic to committed." Arguably, the representation of 'youth' as a perpetual state of transition contributes to scholarly inertia; "despite [it] being 20 years since Wyn and White (1997) asked us to rethink this model of youth, it is still the one that dominates public perception and political discourse" (ibid.).

2.1.2. The Disengagement and Engagement Theses

Despite the increasingly complex and multifaceted relationship between young people and contemporary politics, much of the discourse within youth studies remains equivocal in its representations of 'youth'. In fact—counterproductive to much-needed nuance—scholarship tends to characterise young people in binaries and often dichotomises their mere existence as either a societal asset or a burden.

> "Youth are embraced as either agents of change or perpetrators of violence, as consumer/client of cultural products or subject of/subjected to 'cultural imperialism' and radicalisation; they are seen as 'threat' or are 'threatened'; they are 'securitised' or 'empowered', or they are treated both as as-risk and at-risk, they are 'in' crisis or they 'are' the crisis"
> (Carpenter et al., 2016, cited in Wood, 2022, p. 02)

In the same vein, the scholarship pertaining specifically to youth political participation mimics this binary; within the existing body of literature, as Farthing (2010, p. 181) articulates, "[young people] are often chastised as the apolitical harbingers of an incipient 'crisis of democracy' (Bessant, 2004; Furlong & Cartmel, 2007) while simultaneously [being] heralded as the authors of sophisticated new forms of politics, most notably within electronic realms (Coleman, 1999; 2006)." Arguably, this characterisation is derivative of two prominent yet conflicting paradigms within the literature: the *disengagement* thesis and the *engagement* thesis. To briefly recapitulate the typologies previously presented, *conventional political participation*—also known interchangeably as 'formal' (Ekman & Amna, 2012) or 'elite-directed participation' (Ingelhart, 1990; 1997)—concerns cultures and systems of enfranchisement that are facilitated by political elites (Marsh, 1990) and occur through institutionalised frameworks of action (Conway, 1991; van Deth, 2001). The typology of *unconventional political participation*—also known interchangeably as 'informal' or 'elite-challenging participation' (Ingelhart, 1990; 1997)—concerns cultures and systems of enfranchisement facilitated by ordinary citizens, often with a degree of disillusionment or antagonism toward governance, and occurring through 'extra-parliamentary' (Ekman & Amna, 2012) frameworks of action (i.e., beyond the confines of existing political institutions) (van Deth, 2001).

Notably, these 'camps' share a common linchpin in their worldview — as far as the status quo outcome is concerned, both observe an unprecedented decline in youth engagement in conventional politics. Here, causality appears to be the culprit of the

dichotomy; one thesis perceives the incoming generation of voters to be indifferent in their political socialisation, while the other points to a broader cultural shift away "from the politics of loyalties towards the politics of choice" (Norris, 2004, p. 17).

On the one hand, most *disengagement* scholars depict young people as politically apathetic (Bennett, 2007), arguing that the tangible decline in civil society engagement (Putnam, 2001), partisanship (Kimberlee, 2002) and, importantly, voter turnout (Dalton, 2002), evidently point to youth indifference towards politics. Others within this camp subscribe to a more nuanced view, arguing that young people's apathy is not directed towards the political process; instead, it is channelled as indifference towards the status quo — youth are still inclined to participate electorally if they are, e.g., unsatisfied with the current government (Miroff et al., 2009). On the other hand, *engagement* scholars interpret this decline in conventional engagement as the natural and inevitable by-product of expanded and more favoured political repertoires (Zukin et al., 2006). Aided by their natural integration into youth-dominated online spaces, political activism in single-issue social movements has become a standard path of political participation for young people (Putnam, 2001; Henn et al., 2002; Dalton, 2007; Gordon, 2009; Norris, 2007; Pitti, 2018).

Thus—if the desire is indeed to capture the nuances of real-world developments—omitting unconventional forms of political participation when defining *the political* is fundamentally counterproductive for social scientists. Not only does this selective voyeurism (a) exacerbate the dissonance between young people's lived experiences vis-à-vis representations in mainstream academia and policy discourse, but it also (b) further perpetuates the political disillusionment of youth and (c) impairs the ability of both GN and GS scholars and policymakers to be "attuned to [youth-driven] historical events that are unfolding before our eyes" (Oinas et al., 2018, pp. ix–xi). Crucially, "[u]ndermining the legitimacy of young people's new political forms is yet another way of silencing their voice in society" (Farthing, 2010, p. 187).

Over the years, as the engagement paradigm gained greater endorsement, scholars in the field have generated a steady output of publications that delineate this 'new era' and expand existing theories and conceptualisations accordingly. Typically, these academic inquiries aim to decipher the 'en masse appeal' of unconventional avenues of political participation and, in turn, offer policy solutions to rehabilitate conventional cultures and systems of democratic enfranchisement in the eyes of young people[13].

Moreover—distilling the motivations behind young people's antagonistic stance towards conventional politics—the conceptualisation of DIO politics was "developed to help understand why and how young citizens especially are increasingly taking politics into their own hands metaphorically and literally through participatory actions outside institutional politics, in order to bring about change" (Pickard, 2019, p. 5; Pickard, 2022, p. 731; de Almeida Alves, 2023). Most interestingly, within this new research, studies show that global activist movements have invoked unprecedented levels of interaction between young people in the GN and GS. As a result, youth-led DIO movements are consistently "developing internal efficacy" within these ever-growing international networks to "collectively and collaboratively" petition their shared political concerns and demand change from their locally relevant governing institutions as well as IGOs responsible for transnational and global governance (Pickard, 2022, p. 743).

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[13] Ssee, e.g., Sukarieh & Tannock, 2014; Pitti, 2018; Banaji & Mejias, 2020; Bessant, 2020; Guigni & Grasso, 2021; Levison et al., 2021; Bečević & Andersson, 2022; Gash & Tichenor, 2022a.

As Pickard (2022, pp. 743–745) cautions, however, "the young generation's DIO politics cannot be a tool to mend what they perceive to be broken democracy, i.e. the lack of external political efficacy from politicians engendering the end of the social contract and generational responsibility." Thus, because of this outstanding gap in understanding, the engagement paradigm also falls short of capturing the complexities of youth political participation in the status quo. In fact, "[…] to simply claim that these new forms are deeply 'political'—therefore young people are political—falls into the same troubling trap of disempowerment" (Farthing, 2010, p. 188).

2.2. Analytical Application

Returning to the big picture for a moment, ahead of the methodology section, it is essential to underscore the foundational logic behind my research endeavour — why do discursive representations of youth matter to begin with? Put succinctly, the "dominant regimes of representation" (Solomos, 2014, p. 1671) exist irrelevant of real-world accuracy and serve to uphold the narrative and political agendas of their hegemonic creators. "According to Hall, the hegemonic culture is not secured primarily through coercion but through consent. Consent is achieved because the ruling groups framed definitions of reality according to their own worldviews" and the "'subordinate' groups accept that ruling reality" (Bessant, 2021, pp. 676–677). Here, it is particularly important to emphasise that 'being seen' purely in terms of being platformed by key institutions—the very same that uphold the power dynamics of the status quo—does not inherently translate into 'being seen' accurately in discursive representations. By contrast, "when a young person engages in debates that redefine a given reality and affirm their own political capacity they question the authority of the 'adults in the room'" (ibid.; Hall & Jefferson, 1976, p. 39).

Delving deeper into these ideas, this section on analytical application will unpack what Hall (1980, 1996, among others) characterises as "tendencies by elites and experts to engage in 'usurpatory ventriloquism' (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 211), in which they speak for or on behalf of young people, often conflating their own interests with those for whom they claim to speak" (Bessant, 2021, p. 673).

2.2.1. The New Political Economy of Youth

Articulated initially by Côté (2013, p. 2), the new *political economy of youth* refers to a new scholarly perspective that "investigates the root causes and consequences of the positioning over time of the youth segment in relation to those (adults) in a given society with political and economic power," and as a result seeks "to imagine radical solutions to youth exploitation." As the author goes on to argues, it provides an alternative approach within youth studies, which is otherwise (a) "increasingly preoccupied with subjectivities" and "psychological states" (Côté, 2013, p. 1, p. 12, p. 13), and (b) highly ignorant of both "material conditions" and the overarching influence of "neoliberalism in the current prolongations of youth, the deterioration of youth living conditions and their diminished economic prospects later in life" (Côté, p. 1, p. 3). Building on Côté's rationale, scholars

now argue that the very paradigm that underpins the global dichotomy between the so-called 'West and the Rest' has a vested interest in shaping the discursive representations of youth in politics. Youth, particularly Southern youth, provide utilitarian value and/or functional significance to *neoliberal developmentalism*[14] and serve as "the latest vehicle for quieting ideological challenge and re-building consensus" across the global political landscape (Sukarieh & Tannock, 2008, p. 308; 2015, pp. 12–32; 2016). In effect—and rather cynically so—these neoliberal rhetorics "serve the [primary] goal of insulating the increasingly contested neoliberal project from further political and ideological challenge" (Sukarieh & Tannock, 2008, p. 301).

From there, the authors address the outstanding question — "what exactly is it about the concept of youth that has led youth to becoming such an extraordinarily popular and productive social category and identity in neoliberal society?" (Sukarieh & Tannock, 2015, p. 24). While this is predominantly associated with "an old phenomenon of youth being used to package and promote social change" (Ewen, 1976, cited in Sukarieh & Tannock, 2015, p. 24), other conceptual characteristics contribute to its desirable utility. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the first is the ambiguity of the term 'youth' itself (as previously outlined in Section 2.1). Here, the liminal status of "neither child nor adult" (James, 1986, p. 155) is an asset in controlling the narrative — "as the category of youth is extended *downward* into childhood, the adultlike characteristics of children are emphasised" yet "conversely, as the category of youth is extended *upward* into adulthood, the childlike characteristics of adults are emphasised" (Sukarieh & Tannock, 2015, pp. 24–25). In other words, in the first scenario (i.e., youth ↓ childhood), youth are met with, at best, the transference of agency (e.g., emphasis on the decision-making capacities and accountability of juveniles to 'hustle' and achieve social mobility) and, at worse, elite-directed scapegoating through the invalidation of concerns brought by youth, as a constituency. The argument returns to the youth deficit model (see Section 2.1) in the second scenario (i.e., youth ↑ adulthood). It highlights the inability of youth to function confidently in adult-produced and adult-tailored systems without support. These tactics "normalise the erosion of social and economic standards of living that has taken place for large segments of younger generations under conditions of neoliberal restructuring" (Sukarieh & Tannock, 2015, p. 25).

As the authors convincingly motivate, why else would young people become, in such an unprecedented manner, "a primary centre of concern for international development organisations" and have their otherwise long-standing "marginal social and economic conditions" handled unceremoniously as "a topic of the utmost urgency" (Sukarieh & Tannock, 2008, p. 302). Interestingly, bringing the earlier discussion regarding binary conceptualisations of 'youth' full circle, the authors underline that the odd co-existence of two paradoxical sets of youth representations is maintained in the interest of neoliberal developmentalism (ibid.).

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[14] *Neoliberalism* is an ideology and political project that is characterised by "its belief in sustained economic growth as the means to achieve human progress, its confidence in free markets as the most efficient allocation of resources, its emphasis on minimal state intervention in economic and social affairs, and its commitment to the freedom of trade and capital" (Britannica, 2024). *Developmentalism* presumes "the superiority of the 'West' or [GN]" (Huntington, 1996) and—although initially based on the notion of an "interventionist state" (Smith, 1985)—it now adheres to the policy prescriptions (e.g., "avoiding budget deficits, deregulation, privatizing state enterprises, tax reform, deregulating currencies," etc.) as well as "structural adjustment programmes" as pathways to development (Bessant, 2021, pp. 06–07; Reinert, 2010). In sum, it argues that these reforms promote economic growth and "generate productivity dividends and that everyone will be better off because the wealth will 'trickle down'" (Bessant, 2021, p. 03).

> "[A]ny such paradox is resolved when we consider the place that youth are occupying in contemporary political and economic development discourse. What is at stake here is the incorporation of youth in a global, neoliberal economic system. When youth stand inside this system as willing and enthusiastic participants, their identities and voices are to be welcomed and celebrated; standing outside this system, questioning or challenging its basic precepts and promises, they become framed instead as global society's worst nightmare."

Hence, usurpatory ventriloquism manifests when "agents of global neoliberalism generate representations of young people in the Global South," not in pursuit of 'true' or accurate portrayals, but rather "in efforts to elicit their support for the existing global socioeconomic order by incorporating them into discourses of what is labelled youth participation" (Bessant, 2021, p. 673).

3. Methodology

3.1. Critical Discourse Analysis

With the intent to analyse the "power relations between a variety of policy actors that shape dominant meanings of specific political concepts" and, in turn, give importance to the "context in which meaning is produced and shaped," the CDA methodology appeared to be the suitable option within DA (Bee & Guerrina, 2015, pp. 384–385) (see Figure 7). Furthermore, the overarching aim is to "understand, expose, and ultimately resist social inequality" (van Dijk, 2005, p. 352), offering the researcher an opportunity to also serve and advance advocacy and/or emancipation, if relevant to the topic of study.

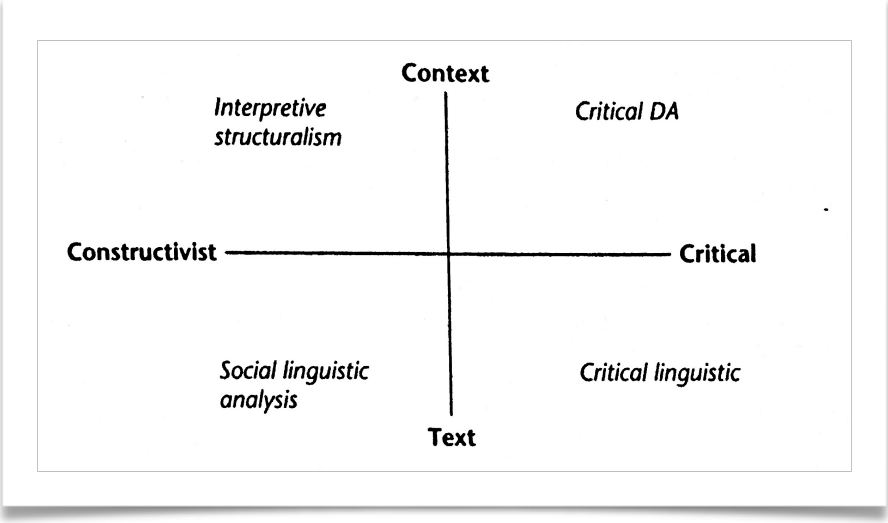

Figure 7: Traditions of Discourse Analysis
Source: Phillips & Hardy (2002, as depicted in Bee & Guerrina, 2015, p. 385)

Within that, adhering to Fairclough's (1989, 1995) 'three-dimensional analytical model' invokes interrelated layers of discourse: (a) *text analysis* — i.e., description, "the object of analysis, including verbal, visual or verbal and visual texts," (b) *processing analysis* — i.e., interpretation, "the processes by means of which the object is produced and received by human subjects," and (c) *social analysis* — i.e., explanation, "the socio-historical conditions which govern these processes" (Janks, 1997, p. 329).

Although the following chapter of analysis is not as compartmentalised (see Figure 8), the model served both as a structure for my research process as well as a guiding red thread in the development of my arguments and conclusions. Notably, I used the three dimensions to systematically categorise my mind map of the existing literature and relevant empirical materials, as well as my annotations of the key policy documents and other supporting materials. Moreover, inspired by the approach of Bee & Guerrina (2015, p. 377–390), I

used DNPs—i.e., a (temporary) fixation point of meaning—to identify key areas of discourse, the processes associated, as well as the dominant narratives. Interestingly, the authors also investigated and analysed the emerging discourses and policy development in European youth policy, albeit based on the outputs of the EC between 2004 and 2010 (ibid.) (see Figure 9); it bears similarities to those identified on my end, indicating at the very least my characterisations and interpretations are on the right track.

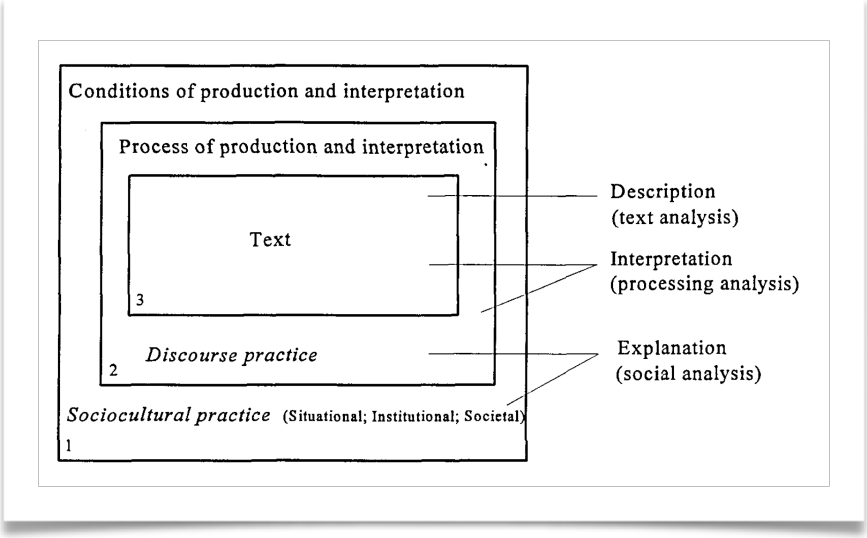

Figure 8: Fairclough's Dimension of Discourse and Discourse Analysis
Source: Janks, 1997, p.330.

Processes (DNPs)	Dominant Narratives
Democratisation and Public Sphere	Recognition of young people's centrality in the development of the public sphere
Europeanisation and Transnationalisation	Enhancement of transnational cooperation between organisations representating young people
Political Participation	Mechanisms to foster active engagement
European Social Dimension	Priority areas: education and training, employment and social inclusion, health and anti-discrimination

Figure 9: Emerging Discourses and Policy Development in Youth Policy (EU 2004–2010)
Adapted from Bee & Guerrina, 2015, p. 389.

3.1.1.Material Selection

Uniquely—and promisingly for future youth scholarship—this impactful year and its corresponding discourses on youth political participation were captured by the EU and ASEAN in the form of two key policy outputs. As such, these milestone (internal and external) action plans are accessible as reference material for researchers, policy-makers, and engaged youth alike — offering both a sense of recognition for youth as apolitical

actors and accountability through documentation. Key documents (i.e., the primary material for the CDA) include the "YAP in EU External Action 2022–2027: Promoting Meaningful Youth Participation and Empowerment in EU External Action for Sustainable Development, Equality and Peace" (JOIN/2022/53 final) and the "ASEAN Work Plan on Youth 2021–2025" (ASEAN, 2022a). Additionally, this thesis will also make use of a variety of supporting documents which I have reviewed—albeit in lesser detail—in an effort to gain a good understanding of the broader policy context (see the sub-section titled 'analysed material' in the bibliography for a complete list).

3.2. Ethical Considerations and Limitations

This thesis has adhered to the four foundational principles of research ethics (i.e., informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality) (Robson & McCartan, 2018, pp. 212–216; 219–220) and has heeded both the broader guidelines for conducting documentary research (McLennan & Prinsen, 2014) and the specific considerations of CDA (Gorup, 2019). McLennan and Prinsen (2014, p. 84) identify two vital ethical concerns in using old and new documents: "The first encompasses matters such as ownership, access and permission to use, while the second consideration relates to representation and fair use of material." In other words, researchers are duty-bound to, e.g., (a) explicitly state the source/ownership of the data presented in their research, (b) ensure that the data is represented accurately and fairly, and, in turn, (c) offer transparency about data shortcomings, conflicting findings, etc. Additionally, "contextual integrity" became essential when processing data; "this means being aware of the political purpose of the repository and the values, etiquette and choice of words at the time in which the records were created" (McLennan & Prinsen, 2014, p. 83).

Reflecting specifically on the considerations and limitations within CDA, critics tend to latch onto the "unscientific" and interpretive/subjective nature of the methodology; questioning on what grounds "judgements" are made by analysts and pointing out the risk of bias within unstandardised practices (Graham, 2018, p. 186, p. 200). Thus, as Gorup (2019) underscores in the concluding remarks, these issues only "emphasise the need for analysts to be explicit about their methodologies, reflexive in regard to their biases, and open to alternative interpretations and critiques of the studied phenomena." Practices such as theoretical triangulation (Reisigl & Wodak 2001) and the use of established analytical tools and procedural models can effectively reduce the risk of bias. This is the fundamental reason why this thesis is theoretically heavy and aims, at every stage, to invoke references in support of the arguments presented; much of my time was dedicated to establishing an extensive understanding of the literature within, in close proximity to and—at times—far outside the field of youth studies. The same logic extends to the methodological use of Fairclough's three-dimensional analytical model (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2018) rather than choosing free and/or flexible procedural reign.

4. Analysis

Now informed by the theoretical application of "dominant regimes of representation" (Solomos, 2014, p. 1671), manifestations of usurpatory ventriloquism (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 211) and, certainly, the new political economy of youth (Côté, 2013; Sukarieh & Tannock, 2008; 2015; 2016), it is clear that the EU and ASEAN maintain significant agenda-setting and discursive influence through their institutional framework. Not only in 'painting the picture' of the issue or subject at hand—in this case, youth—but also in dictating the narrative of corresponding policy measures, i.e., youth mainstreaming. As Diez (2001) argues, the EU and ASEAN can be seen as *discursive battlegrounds* in which meanings and representations can lose or gain dominance.

At a glance, the case studies of the EYY 2022 and the YAY 2022 appear to exude a positive and empowering tone in their representations of youth, and young people are recurringly discussed as key generational stakeholders in the targeted development of their respective regions. After reviewing the key documents produced in association with these year-long designations (i.e., the 'ASEAN Work Plan on Youth 2021–2025' and the 'YAP in EU External Action 2022–2027'), both arguably portray four recurring representations: (a) youth as "*agents of change*," (b) "*future-ready*" youth, (c) "*young entrepreneurs*" and, (d) youth as "*strategic partners*" (ASEAN, 2022; JOIN/2022/53 final).

4.1. (Mis)Representations of Youth

4.1.1. Youth as "Agents of Change"

Starting with an overarching observation, the baseline across discourses leans heavily in favour of the engagement thesis and traditional conceptualisations of youth as active citizens. Neither of the key documents portrays young people as politically apathetic, nor do they make explicit mention of youth who do not participate politically; perhaps this was an intentional omission to ensure an overall uplifting message in their policy outputs rather than highlighting 'problem areas' and alienating their target audience. Although alternative paradigms (i.e., beyond the predominant disengagement and engagement theses) have yet to be explicitly put forward or widely acknowledged within the literature—either because these ideas have been omitted by mainstream agendas or are simply in their scholarly infancy—these colloquially 'glass half-full' portrayals may conflict with conceptualisations that better align with the self-representations of young people.

Referencing Beck's (2001) seminal theories on *freedom's children* and youth in risk societies, Farthing (2010, p. 188) sets aside the binary notions of disengaged and engaged and proposes, in their stead, a new conceptualisation of *radically unpolitical* youth. Stepping away from these generationally misrepresentative paradigms, this alternative

"envisages new *agendas* for youthful politics, new *spheres* of power and novel *forms* of action, including, powerfully, the ability to do nothing" (ibid.). Notably, the notion of empowerment through political rejection rightfully frames youth political participation as multifaceted and adaptive to both its operating context and its aspirations — young people "are simultaneously disengaged and engaged; to address their new agenda, within new spheres of power legitimately, they must disengage from what we currently understand as the 'political' and live their agenda elsewhere" (Farthing, 2010, pp. 190–191). Additionally, as inferred in the previous paragraph, this conceptualisation addresses a long-standing scholarly shortcoming tied to the issue of non-participation (see Section 1.1) (O'Toole et al., 2003b; O'Toole et al., 2003c; Theocharis & van Deth, 2018).

The clearest example of this alternative categorisation can be found in a recent assessment of contemporary Tunisian youth, who primarily catalysed the Arab Spring (2010–2012) and its seismic shifts to political landscapes across the MENA region[15]. Analysing the qualitative portion of the study (i.e., data collection from in-depth individual interviews, focus groups and individual reflective reports), Mansouri's (2022, p. 115) findings indicate:

> "[...] the perceived post-revolution political apathy among youth should not be seen as an aversion to politics altogether but a deliberate choice by Tunisian youth to show 'their disapproval of the political system as a whole' [Honwana, 2013]. This is an agentic act that directs youth voices and their practices away from formal political processes towards more informal local social activism, with this shift negatively impacting engagement with political institutions and in political processes, in particular elections."

While the abovementioned example may not be applicable to the European and Southeast Asian contexts, the notion of youth empowerment through the rejection of institutionalised political engagement is not particularly far-fetched; especially if the vast global precedent of youth-led and/or student boycott movements is considered (see as far back as the early twentieth century, e.g., the Young Turks and the Boycott Movement).

Conversely, non-participation may also trace back to the disillusionment of incoming generations of new voters. Looking at South Africa, Oyedemi and Mahlatji (2016, cited in Chikane, 2018, p. 27) argue that this deliberate disengagement from political processes is an unsurprising result of young people's broader sociopolitical disenfranchisement. Furthermore, it may speak to the particularly incapacitating nature of contemporary social inequalities as experienced by today's youth — e.g., labour market exclusion, social violence, intergenerational transmission of poverty, disappearing prospects of social mobility, among many other inequalities (Cuervo & Miranda, 2019). "The combination of being labelled as a social liability and lacking the required civic competence [or circumstances] to influence policy adequately creates the conditions for the emergence of a group that is apathetic towards its own advancement" (Chikane, 2018, p. 27).

Moreover, as Earl et al. (2017, cited in Kubow et al., 2023, p. 5) posit, young people's growing disengagement from political participation "results from changing dispositions about the meaning of citizenship." As current and future generations of youth anticipate—for the first time in history—being markedly "worse off than their parents," the authors

[15] For additional case study material on radically unpolitical youth and the power of non-participation, see also Gunjan Wadhwa's book chapter titled 'Silence as Collective Resistance among Adivasi Youth in India' for a critique of 'modern liberal conceptualizations of agency and resistance' in Swartz et al. (2021, pp. 618–631).

implore scholars and practitioners to ponder: "What does it mean to come of age under these circumstances? What does it mean to develop a sense of belonging (or not), and to what do young people seek to belong?" (ibid.). Importantly, these reflective questions underscore the role of local, regional, national and international sociopolitical contexts in (a) shaping notions and understandings of childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood as sub-categories within the overarching genus of 'youth', as well as (b) informing what young people, themselves, consider to be *meaningful* political participation.

Moreover, as the literature has evolved, it has become apparent that the narrative of youth disengagement is only sustained when conceptions of what constitutes *the political* are limited to means and modes within conventional political participation (i.e., when the breadth of unconventional alternatives is omitted from consideration). To exemplify, claims that today's youth are politically apathetic and 'increasingly individualistic' are by and large inaccurate, especially within the vast majority of African contexts.

> "In Africa, young people's discontent and aspirations were seldom voiced through democratic channels, as their political participation was hampered by 'Big Man politics', gerontocratic power structures and daily struggles to make ends meet, among other factors. The established research paradigm defined 'the political' so that young people were seen as either excluded from politics or not interested in it in the first place" (Oinas et al., 2018 p. X).

Thus, arguendo, it must be emphasised that the notion of non-participation—although it can be a deliberate choice—misguidedly liberates policymakers from the responsibility of remedying the widespread alienation of their constituents and removing existing barriers to youth political engagement and participation (Chikane, 2018, p. 27). In light of these difficulties, the promise of increased engagement and capacity-building is welcome, but the "success of the plan hinges on the ownership and active involvement" of youth, and it is "imperative that indicators reflecting meaningful youth engagement are integrated into the YAP monitoring framework; without these, the commitments risk appearing hollow" (PLAN International, 2023, p. 3).

4.1.2. "Future-Ready" Youth

As predicted by the existing literature, the sociology of both young Europeans and Southeast Asians is discursively presented and reinforced as fundamentally interlinked —if not synonymous—with any sociology of the overarching EU and ASEAN future, as well as their respective governing institutions. Looking initially at the EYY 2022, several notable discursive representations appear already in its outline.

> "2022 was the European Year of Youth (EYY), shining a light on the importance of European youth to build a better future — greener, more inclusive and digital. During the EYY, young people seized many opportunities to engage in more than 13,000 activities in 67 countries. Youth were given a voice, and it was heard! Through social media, during debates and encounters between our politicians and young citizens, young people expressed their views and aspirations. Now it's time to reflect and act on the Year of Youth legacy!" (EU, 2023a).

Setting the tone and informing the interpretation (i.e., production and reception) of youth as key actors within this context, European youth are affirmed as important contributors "*to [building] a better futur*e" (EU, 2023a) and, as Threadgold (2020, p. 693) argued, "invoked as an effective proxy for 'the future'." While these futurist or forward-looking associations with young people are rather typical of a variety of (non-political) youth discourses, there are indeed degrees of emphasis worth noting. The use of the term "*future*" in the 'YAP in EU External Action 2022–2027', for example, appears more fitting and/or subdued compared to the rather relentless "*future-ready*" narrative that dominates much of the ASEAN Work Plan on Youth 2021–2025'.

> "Together, we declare our commitment to enhance ASEAN Youth cooperation and to foster a future-ready ASEAN Youth generation, which is among the purposes of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 with the three ASEAN Blueprints and the Sustainable Development Goals to ensure the realisation of a people-oriented and people-centred ASEAN where all ASEAN youths are able to reach the fullest of their potentials" (ASEAN, 2022, p. 78).

The remainder of the paragraph posits that European youth "*seized the many opportunities to engage*" in the platformed EYY activities and "*expressed their views and aspirations*" across a variety of digital platforms — in sum, "*[y]outh were given a voice, and it was heard! […] Now it's time to reflect and act on the Year of Youth legacy!"* (EU, 2023a). Although the intention may be to convey the agency of young people, these portrayals tether a thin line between Lofquist's (1989, pp. 29–42) notions of youth as "recipients" and "resources." Particularly, the phrasing of youth being "*given a voice*" and thereafter being "*heard*" is a linguistic distinction with discursive implications as it colours our understanding of the status quo. (EU, 2023a). While this analysis cannot decipher the intentions encoded, broad-stroke decoding conveys a few concerning presumptions: the first being that (a) young people lack a voice of their own and are otherwise unable to ascertain a voice on their own, (b) IGOs are in a position to give and, counterfactually, take away the voices of constituents and, lastly, (c) it is left ambiguous whether young people were heard and *also* listened to; the latter is not a defacto outcome of being heard and, in Hart's (1992) view, an essential component in distinguishing tokenism from the first level of youth participation.

4.1.3. Youth as "Strategic Partners"

Notably, these issues extend a step further in the European context relative to their Southeast Asian counterpart; the 'YAP in EU External Action 2022–2027' and its expressed goal to "promote meaningful youth participation and empowerment globally for sustainable development, equality and peace" (JOIN/2022/53 final). Emphasised at the outset, the document indicates the involvement of youth in its production by quoting Alda Soraya at the top of the page, "[w]e deserve to be heard, empowered, protected and also given the opportunity to lead" (JOIN/2022/53 final, p. 1). This is not only representative of the consultation process behind the policy document—which included "extensive consultation[s] with over 220 stakeholders across the globe, including, of course, youth organisations" as well as the YSB (EU, 2023b; JOIN/2022/53 final, p. 2–3)—but also infers, colloquially, a youth 'stamp of approval'.

The main text then opens with a scene-setting of the status quo and posits that "[a]t a time marked by multiple challenges and rapidly shifting paradigms, including the ongoing Russian war of aggression against Ukraine," the EU clearly identifies a "need to strengthen our partnership with young people across the globe to achieve positive transformative change" (JOIN/2022/53 final, p. 1). Conveniently, Lofquist (1989, pp. 29–42) offers a benchmark for assessing "youth-adult partnerships," i.e., "youth and adults share decision-making power equally; programs and activities are with youth" (VSCA, n.d., p. 1). By this definition alone, this "partnership" appears untenable; invoking these linguistic associations appears to serve a discursive political purpose rather than a practical commitment to better democratic representation and to "share decision-making power equally" (ibid.).

Often presented in EU forums as "the first-ever policy framework for a strategic partnership with young people around the world" (EU, 2023b), this seminal document unfortunately—perhaps unsurprisingly—reflects the shortcomings of the existing body of literature which lacks a clear, unified understanding of who 'youth' are. This is exemplified most clearly in the YAPs targeting of an impossibly broad audience — encompassing youth from 0-30 years old within the EU and across the globe. In its current state, I would argue that this 'all-inclusive approach' risks (a) perpetuating a flawed premise of social homogeneity across a broad and diverse global demographic of young people and makes the mistake of (b) arbitrarily combining complex (Western) sociocultural notions of of *childhood*, *adolescence* and *young adulthood* under the umbrella term of *youth*, while omitting peer notions within the Southern scholarship — e.g., *waithood* and *precarity* (Honwana, 2012), *degrees without freedom* (Jeffrey et al., 2004) and *istambays* (Batan, 2021).

4.1.4. "Young Entrepreneurs"

Switching gears, the discursive representations of the 'ASEAN Work Plan on Youth 2021–2025' are particularly significant to the notion of "young entrepreneurs." "They, we are told, will drive the so-called Fourth Industrial Revolution in the Global South" (Bessant 2021, p. 681). This contextualises the extensive focus on digital capacity-building and the designed path "towards future-ready ASEAN youth by fostering 21st-century skills and digital skills, and the institutionalisation of youth engagement mechanisms, including in the region's policy discourse" (ASEAN, 2022a, p. 6). This is, without doubt, the clearest illustration of the new political economy of youth and the neoliberal developmentalist agenda, which asserts "its belief in sustained economic growth as the means to achieve human progress, its confidence in free markets as the most efficient allocation of resources, its emphasis on minimal state intervention in economic and social affairs, and its commitment to the freedom of trade and capital" (Britannica, 2024). In this context, ASEAN may be seen as presuming "the superiority of the 'West' or [GN]" (Huntington, 1996)—or, more specifically, in this case, the advanced position of the EU as its Strategic Partner—and is open to adheres to the policy prescriptions of neoliberalism as well as "young entrepreneurship" and "digital disruption" as pathways to development (i.e., the 4IR) (Bessant, 2021, pp. 6–7; Reinert, 2010). In sum, it argues that these reforms promote economic growth and "generate productivity dividends and that everyone will be better off because the wealth will 'trickle down'" (Bessant, 2021, p. 3).

5. Conclusion: Tokenistic or Meaningful Representations?

To summarise, my findings indicate that, in the discourse and policy outputs of the 'European Year of Youth 2022' and the 'Year of ASEAN Youth 2022', young people are recurringly portrayed in four ways: (a) youth as "*agents of change*," (b) "*future-ready*" youth, (c) "*young entrepreneurs*" and, (d) youth as "*strategic partners.*"At first glance, contextually speaking, each of these four figures of youth appears relevant to the policy discussions at hand; however, as the analysis has outlined, these discursive representations are not devoid of implicit meanings and, more often than not, convey significant ideological inferences in their use. As shown in this thesis, this is especially true for the representations of youth as "young entrepreneurs" and, specifically, the means by which neoliberal developmentalism leverages achieving a 4IR as a means of 'enfranchising' Southern youth either through outright acceptance or internalised favour for neoliberal subjectivities. Referring back to the theories of representation put forward by Hall, it is clear to see "the neoliberal fixation on making young people in its image (Bessant et al., 2021) and co-opting and appropriating young people into its agenda" (Bessant, 2021, p. 690), especially those emerging in the Asia-Pacific.

Unfortunately—as far as tokenistic or meaningful representations are concerned within policy contexts—"once the youth label is embraced, all else can fade into the background;" key features of positive youth development (e.g., youth participation and leadership, civic organisation and social activism, etc.) can be "easily deployed to present a facade of engagement with radical, oppositional, grassroots politics that in the end works toward little more than fostering a generic and benign set of designated youth skills, competencies and character traits" (Sukarieh & Tannock, 2015, p. 27).

In response, today's youth are proactively challenging Hall's (1980, 1988; 1992, 1993; 1996, among others) *consensus reality* and forcibly positioning "themselves in the ongoing struggles over who gets to say what is real and what is possible" (Bessant, 2021, p. 690). In doing so, today's youth continue the long-standing generational trend of creating and engaging in *prefigurative revolutionary movements* that "create the future in the present" (Sitrin, 2007, p. 45). Central to this ethos is the Southern—specifically Argentinian—principle of *horizontalidad*[16], which is seen as a method of non-hierarchical organisation and a desired social relationship devoid of authoritarian ideals and dogma. By maintaining a passionate conviction for change, young people's near-exclusive engagement in an elite-challenging political repertoire not only serves to "broaden the boundaries of individual freedoms" within the social contract but, crucially, also impugns the state's arbitrarily enforced "monopoly on political discourse and practice" (Honwana, 2019, cited in Bessant, 2021, pp. 688–689), especially in youth-dominated digital spaces. These final sentiments are perhaps best summarised by Bessant (2021, p. 532),

[16] Widely referred to as 'horizontalism' within academic literature.

> "It is odd that established political leaders now look back and celebrate times when young people took to the streets in Soweto in 1976, or Tunisia in 2010, and describe those involved as positive models for young people to emulate today—as 'change makers' striking 'blows for freedom and opportunity' (Clinton, 2012). Perhaps it is the historic nature of those events that makes them 'safe' to celebrate and allows contemporary leaders to call on young people to follow those 'fighters' for democracy, equality, and freedom. But perhaps they are agreeing with Moscovici (1976), who argues that when 'the minority' breaks the consensus and unanimity of the majority, such action captures the majority's attention, and change can happen."

5.1. Suggestions for Future Research

In charting future research agendas, I urge scholars to recognise and address the systematic relegation of young people's perspectives, especially those of the global majority: Southern youth. As this thesis has recurringly underscored, the conventional and unconventional political participation of youth in the GS has struggled to compel the full attention of mainstream academia to the degree of, e.g., European youth and, in some respects, even Greta Thunberg as a standalone proxy. This is hugely problematic—by the standards of academic research alone—considering that "around 85 per cent of 15–24-year-olds live in developing countries, a figure projected to grow to 89.5 per cent by 2025" (UN, 2008, cited in Furlong, 2013, p. 228). Particularly within the already-disproportionate climate change discourse, future scholarship must better investigate Southern youth's unheralded role in championing issues within global policy discourse and the implications this political engagement may have on their countries' development trajectory (Taylor, 1997; Sealey-Huggins, 2018; Cooper et al., 2021; Sultana, 2022). While the epistemic hegemony of the GN will likely remain, for the foreseeable future, a ubiquitous issue across all scholarly endeavours, it is essential to realise its exceptionally expansive scope of damage within youth studies. Capitalising on the seminal work of Swartz et al. (2021), among others, will undoubtedly help to charter the path ahead, pivoting away from the minority-driven focus on Western youth and keeping up with the rest of today's trailblazing youth. Promisingly, as seen throughout this thesis, recent publications within youth studies indicate a growing trend towards more holistic understandings of youth political participation; rightfully viewing the GS within its own unique contextual realities and frameworks rather than as a presumed extension of 'truths' developed by the GN[17].

The exacerbated inequalities of global knowledge production and dissemination in youth studies also bring to the fore *who* gets to tell the story of 'meaningful' political participation. While recognising adultism as a form of unconscious bias in scholarship can undoubtedly serve to appraise problematic representations of 'youth' within the existing literature, I would contend that the naturalisation of top-down methodologies

[17] See, e.g., Pickard & Bessant, 2018; Oinas et al., 2018; Cuervo & Miranda, 2019; Bessant, 2020; Brough, 2020; Swartz et al., 2021; Kubow et al., 2023, among others.

is far more damaging to the accuracy of this discipline. To truly understand 'youth' as objects of study, there is an undeniable need to empower young people within academic contexts and grant them a central role in shaping research agendas; ideally, this would involve youth participatory action research or other types of bottom-up research methodologies that provide young people with the opportunity to represent their perspectives directly. As Neas et al. (2020, p. 02) fittingly note, this thesis pushes for "an epistemological shift that recognises young people's claims to knowledge, expertise and research itself" and endorses the arguments of "Cutter-Mackenzie and Rousell (2019), who call for the recognition of young people's 'political agency, creativity and theoretical acumen as legitimate researchers' […] (2018, p. 90)."

To end on a hopeful note, it appears that the implementation of bottom-up research methodologies is gaining some popularity and will hopefully serve to—slowly but surely—saturate scholarship with youth perspectives and begin remedying the most straightforward case of usurpatory ventriloquism[18]. Moreover, the emergence of the *childist standpoint theory* (Medina-Minton, 2019) is promising as it offers a critical lens and situates itself within the broader discourse on intersectionality and breadth issues connected to youth studies (Konstantoni & Emejulu, 2017). In brief, the theory seeks to underline young people's subjective political agency and tackle adultism within academia, its produced theoretical paradigms and research methodologies, and the political practices within policymaking (Medina-Minton, 2019). The past years have seen a few notable applications and growing interest among scholars (see, e.g., Josefsson & Wall, 2020; Biswas & Matthei, 2021, among others).

[18] See, e.g., Luna & Mearman, 2020; Navne & Skovdal, 2021, among others.

‘The Hill We Climb: An Inaugural Poem’ (Excerpt)

“We will not be turned around or interrupted by intimidation because we know our inaction and inertia will be the inheritance of the next generation, become the future.

Our blunders become their burdens.

But one thing is certain.

If we merge mercy with might and might with right then love becomes our legacy and change our children’s birthright.

So let us leave behind a country better than the one we were left.

Every breath from my bronze-pounded chest, we will raise this wounded world into a wondrous one.”

~ Amanda Gorman ~
Adapted from Liu (2021)

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