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# CAN TRUST BE AUTOMATED? YOUTH CONTENT CONSUMPTION AT THE THRESHOLD OF SINGULARITY

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**Abstract.** This paper examines the evolving relationship between young people, media consumption, and new technologies, particularly artificial intelligence (AI). In the digital age, the lives of young people are increasingly shaped by information and communication technologies (ICT), with a marked shift from offline to predominantly online engagement over the past two decades. The COVID-19 pandemic has further accelerated this transition, increasing young people's reliance on ICT while simultaneously highlighting the enduring importance of in-person interaction. Despite their increasing media consumption, young people continue to rely primarily on family and friends as their main sources of information. However, growing insecurity and social uncertainty - exacerbated by global events such as the pandemic - have contributed to heightened anxiety, particularly among younger generations. The increasing integration of artificial intelligence into digital communication has raised concerns about the potential loss of human interaction, as AI-generated content becomes more prevalent. This study investigates the emergence of a possible "AI Generation", shaped by AI-mediated content consumption and information seeking. It further explores the broader implications of AI's role in media and communication, considering how young people must adapt to rapidly evolving technologies and develop new forms of literacy to navigate an increasingly AI-driven world.

**Key words**: Youth, generations, media use, new media, artificial intelligence.

## 1. Introduction[2]

Whether we refer to our era as the Information Age or the Network Age (Castells, 1997), there is consensus that information and communication technologies (ICT) have profoundly transformed daily life in recent decades. Virtually no area of human activity has remained untouched by this transformation. In the 21st century, the majority of individuals' waking hours are characterised by interaction with ICT, a phenomenon that has become constant due to the proliferation of smartwatches and other wearable digital devices – resulting in near-continuous engagement, 24 hours a day.

The changes in the media landscape have significantly reshaped content consumption, particularly among young people. In industrialized societies, youth, over the last two to three decades, have transitioned from a demographic predominantly characterised by offline connections, leisure activities, and content consumption, to one that now engages almost exclusively in digital environments. The lives of young people are increasingly permeated by digital technology, which is present in virtually every aspect of their lives. The COVID-19 pandemic has further intensified this

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[2] This culturally oriented paper is based on a description and analysis of the successful features of an international distance course as a joint teaching project and does not contain any quantitative methods and measurements of the students' performances. The data of this course cannot be applicable to other cases due to its originality: the results only demonstrate the cultural opportunities for the students' development during the online teaching.



trend, prompting more frequent and extensive use of ICT. Nevertheless, the increase in media use has not diminished the enduring importance of personal relationships.

A large-sample survey of Hungarian youth conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic provided the important insight that analogue relationships have gained renewed significance within the digital environment. Although digital technologies now mediate not only content consumption but also interpersonal relationships, education, and even employment, young respondents indicated that their most common leisure activity remains socialising with friends or family. The same study also found that while the media, including new media, is an important source of information, family and friends are more likely to be seen as primary sources of information by young people. Three quarters of respondents considered family and friends to be an important source of information, while 1 in 2 respondents also felt that they were their favourite form of media, too (Székely & Veszelszki 2021).

Parallel to increasing media use, another global trend has emerged: a rise in perceived insecurity across society. As highlighted in Székely (2023), while uncertainty and unpredictability can stem from concrete experiences and real risks, the subjective feeling of uncertainty may also exist independently of direct negative experiences.

This broader security crisis can be understood as a lack of peace. In 2023, the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP) published the 16th edition of the Global Peace Index (GPI), assessing 163 countries across 23 indicators. The report noted a 0.3% decline in the global peace index – modest but significant, as it marked the eleventh such decline in the past fifteen years. Over the last fourteen years, the global average peace score has fallen by an average of 3.2%. Notably, despite the general decline, more countries improved (90) than worsened (71) compared to the previous year. Of the 23 GPI indicators, 13 deteriorated and 10 improved. The most significant declines were observed in categories such as terrorism, interstate relations, internal conflict intensity, the number of refugees and internally displaced persons, and political instability.

According to the GPI, Europe remains the most peaceful region globally, hosting seven of the ten most peaceful countries. Although the general perception of safety has not changed dramatically, the GPI 2023 report indicates that the perceived risk environment deteriorated significantly between 2019 and 2021. The proportion of people who reported feeling safe in their daily lives halved during this period, while the proportion of those who felt threatened without being able to identify the source of the threat nearly doubled. In 93 of the 118 countries surveyed, more respondents reported a vague sense of threat. This trend was observed across all demographic groups - by gender, age, and educational background – but was particularly pronounced among the youngest age group. In 2021, one in five young people between the ages of 15 and 19 reported feeling exposed to an unknown risk or being unable to articulate the source of their fear.

The GPI 2023 report identifies the increase in such ambiguous risks as an impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, suggesting that the impact on the risk environment was indirect rather than direct. These effects include the potential to contribute to increased anxiety about personal safety and to create uncertainty by disrupting routines and established patterns of thinking. Early in the pandemic, the lack of personal experience with the virus, combined with uncertainty about the duration of the restrictions, contributed to a pervasive sense of unpredictability. The isolation brought about by both legal and voluntary restrictions further exacerbated mental health issues, particularly anxiety and depression. The report also highlights the role of social media in amplifying feelings of insecurity. While platforms served as vital communication tools during periods of lockdown and isolation, they also became conduits for misinformation, which in turn heightened stress and anxiety levels.

Uncertainty and unpredictability are not new phenomena, they gained central importance in the post-Cold War era (Black & Walsh, 2019) and can be understood through various interpretive frameworks. In the business world, the VUCA model – referring to volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity



– has been adopted to describe the post-global crisis economic landscape. Rab (2015) also discusses uncertainty in digital culture in his doctoral thesis on the natural history of digital culture. This ambiguity is reflected in the proliferation of information infrastructures, with devices once used in laboratories becoming everyday tools and conquering ever new spaces. Partly rejecting the risk society approach to uncertainty (see Beck 1992), he emphasises that medieval man, unlike the people of the information society, lived in a more vulnerable position, not only to society but also to nature (Rab, 2015).

Technology reduces this vulnerability and can therefore reduce uncertainty, but the data still points to an increase in frustration about the future. Frustration about unknown risks is particularly widespread among young people. In recent risk analyses – including the Safety Perceptions Index 2023 and Global Risks Report 2023) - environmental risks are most frequently mentioned, followed by social risks and mental health concerns. Mental health challenges, in particular, are more prevalent and more intensely feared among younger people. These anxieties, when combined with fears of unforeseen negative future events, contribute to a form of generational frustration – or what could be termed generational insecurity.

This paper provides an overview of evolving trends in young people's media consumption, focusing on key recent developments, and the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) in particular. Our central research question was whether the contemporary media environment could give rise to a distinct generational identity. Can an “AI Generation” (Székely, 2025) emerge – defined by AI-driven content consumption and information-seeking behaviour?

The limitations of our research lie primarily in the complexity of the topic, especially given the lack of consensus regarding the criteria for defining a generation. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the relationship between media and generational identity, identifying dominant and secondary trends. To that end, our Hungarian case study offers a more focused analysis by exploring the presence of artificial intelligence in the lives of young people and their attitudes toward it.

## 2. Media and generations

### 2.1 The significance of media use in shaping generational characteristics

In the international sociological discourse on youth, generational theories have gained renewed prominence in recent decades. The dynamic nature of the generational approach has extended well beyond academic circles, achieving considerable traction in public discourse. Publications, articles, and lectures on various generational topics – particularly within the field of human resource management and marketing, which are mainly based on psychological frameworks - have become increasingly popular.

A critical look at the generational approach reveals that it often functions as a technical classification. Typically, generations are defined by grouping individuals according to their birth years – a categorisation that is, to some extent, arbitrary. The widespread interest reflects a broader paradigmatic shift: in the context of a rapidly changing world, there is a growing tendency to seek reference points that provide orientation and meaning.

As Karl Mannheim (1928) argued, the effects of change can be observed in the distinct characteristics of generations. Generational differences, according to Mannheim, emerge from variations in the lived experience of socialisation. If socialisation serves as a vehicle for change – and if such change occurs during the most formative periods of life, namely childhood or adolescence - it can significantly shape the identity of a generation. This means that we must look for the origins of a generation's character in changes in socialisation.

To the traditional agents of socialisation (family, school), which are themselves undergoing change, have been added the mass media and a digital world characterised by global trends, both exerting a significant influence on the closeness of connections and the norms they embody. The emergence of tertiary and quaternary socialisation agents clearly coincides with the rise of the information society, which has been steadily developing since the 1960s. A (by-)product of the rationality of industrial society is the leisure time of children and young people, only part of which has been institutionalised. During non-institutionalised leisure time, electronic media have become increasingly important: First radio, then television, and now the Internet fill a substantial portion of this time.

The most frequently employed generational approach is the so-called ABC generations (Generations X, Y, Z and Alpha), which has been widely criticised for being essentially tailored to describe American society and, therefore, less suitable to characterise others. In most cases, we find variants of the original generational classification - as there are several classifications in terms of age boundaries (Székely, 2014). Another feature of ABC generations is that while their technical breakpoints are age-related, their content and even their names are essentially based on their patterns of media consumption (e.g., "television generation", "net generation"). In defense of adapting the original approach, McCrindle and Wolfinger (2010) argue that the (shared) characteristics of generations have now transcended previous cultural and socio-economic boundaries. This suggests that the younger generations may share more similarities than differences, at least in the developed world. However, it is worth noting that in the ageing populations of the developed world, young people constitute a shrinking social group, both in terms of numbers and proportion. Conversely, societies with younger populations are predominantly found in the developing world.

So far, few attempts have been made to empirically refine the logic of generational classification, despite the fact that the ABC concept of generations is largely based on differences in media consumption. Even alternative labels for generations reflect these differences, especially for younger generations (Székely, 2014). Research into the relationship between media consumption and age suggests that such differences can persist for years, thereby allowing generational identities to be established (Pintér & Székely, 2006; Székely, 2006, 2007). The existence of media generations is statistically verifiable and aligns, to a large extent, with the generational boundaries of American society. However, empirical data also indicate that adjusting generational boundaries by a few years yields similar results, suggesting that this method is not suitable for drawing more precise boundaries, or that such sharply defined boundaries may not, in fact, exist (Székely, 2014).

It is noteworthy that classifications based on media consumption and self-identification lead to similar generational boundaries (Székely, 2018). In other words, people tend to define their own generational membership using age boundaries that align with media consumption patterns. Our study examined the common characteristics that people of the same generation consider being specific to them. In a questionnaire survey, respondents were asked: '*What is your generation like? Please tell us three words that best describe your generation.*" The results show that people across different generations perceive their own generation in distinct ways. In many instances, the character that can be derived from their self-characterisation is similar to the actual character of their generation. We can see the strong presence of media influence in the character of the generations confirmed by the frequent mention of the word "internet" among Generations Y and Z, but we can also infer this for the oldest generations through the expression "sitting at home" (Székely, 2018).

### 2.2 Trends in media use

Over the past three decades, access to and use of the internet has fundamentally transformed the ways in which media content is produced and consumed, as well as the associated technologies, tools, and business models - in short, the entire media ecosystem. Young people constitute one of the easily identifiable and substantial social groups to rapidly adopt new technologies. Data on ICT diffusion also

show that a significant proportion of young people belong to the innovator and early adopter categories in Rogers' diffusion of innovations model (Rogers, 2003). This rapid adaptability has contributed to the expansion of the generational approach over the past three decades the generational approach - originally applied to American and later Western European societies - to the entire developed world, thanks to globalisation and the revolution in information and communication technology for the new generations. In practice, this means that the East-Central European region has caught up with Western trends, particularly in the case of Generation Y. Earlier international data on internet penetration showed that 10 to 20 year olds used the internet to a similar extent across industrialised countries, while significant differences persisted among older age groups in North America, Western Europe and the East-Central European region. Today, these differences have narrowed considerably, due both to generational change and increased uptake among older populations.

According to the latest data from Eurostat (2024), internet access increased by an average of 25% points across the European Union between 2010 and 2023. The largest increase occurred in Romania (53% points) and the smallest in Sweden (7% points). As of 2023, 91% of Europeans aged 16 to 74 had used the internet at least once in the three months preceding the survey date. Bulgaria had the lowest percentage of internet, at 80%. Among young people aged between 16 and 29, daily internet use is over 90% in all European countries, indicating the presence of a digitally unified youth across Europe. Older populations also show high levels of internet use, typically between 80% and 90%, although some countries – such as Bulgaria, Romania, Greece, and Croatia – still lag behind. Overall, international statistics show that the digital divide between countries has continued to narrow over the past decade and a half, and that access to and use of the internet among older age groups has increased.

### *2.2.1 Dominant trends*

The vast majority of young people who use the internet are members of a social networking site. Facebook is the most popular social networking site for people aged 15 and over, whereas TikTok is clearly the most popular for people under 15. Other social networking platforms are much less popular. The popularity of TikTok content aligns with the prevailing trend of time compression or expansion, which also corresponds with the trend of declining attention spans. Time as a flexible parameter has never been as important as it is today. Time-based competition and the resulting abundance of products and services drive people in the information society into a time spiral. On the one hand, resource-intensive activities (e.g. deadlines, exams, etc.) require flexibility; on the other, the increasing availability of free time encourages more effective time management. The disruption of time is no longer limited to night shifts or the permanently 'open' internet, but is also evident in the convergence of core activities (e.g. lifelong learning) and life stages (e.g. the emergence of various forms of adolescence) (Székely, 2014).

The trend toward acceleration affects content consumption in several ways, as the life cycles of content are now shorter than in the past. Across all content types, there is greater choice, faster access, and a shift toward brevity and focus, with minimal need for preparation or sustained attention. This trend applies not only to online media, but also to other forms of content, such as music at festivals, for example.

Time pressure is also changing consumption habits through acceleration, parallelism, and micro-timing. Guld (2022) reports on the phenomenon of acceleration, which is mainly practised by young content consumers and is often incomprehensible to older people. Young users tend to watch video content at 1.5 to 2 times the normal speed and prefer condensed summaries of full-length films. This practise is mirrored in earlier generations' consumption patterns, such as the popularity of abridged versions of required reading. These behaviours reflect a fear-driven tendency toward overconsumption – seeking more digestible, shorter formats that still contain the essentials.

The promise of efficiency in multitasking encourages simultaneous engagement with multiple tasks. The fear of missing out (FOMO) and the need for constant online presence are most evident in the phenomenon of parallel media consumption, where selective attention and partial mindfulness are common. Short intervals of time that were once spent waiting or daydreaming are now filled by the digital tools readily available. The utilisation of microtimes is not solely due to mobile devices, but the sheer scale of their proliferation is most apparent here, likely because of the unique functionality and range of experiences that smartphones offer. Smartphones are commonly used for leisure activities (e.g. instant gaming, browsing, social networking, checking e-mails, etc.) and increasingly, for other activities as well. However, this parallelism does not support the same depth of information processing as single-source content consumption, where focused attention is maintained. Consequently, superficiality becomes an inherent aspect of modern content consumption.

This superficiality favours memeing, which is a significant trend in digital media. The abundance of content and time pressure reinforce pattern-seeking behaviour, and the ability to recognise patterns helps consumers manage volume and complexity of content. Memeing offers younger generations a navigational tool to help them interpret and make sense of the complex maze of information. The meaning of new content is often derived from contextual references that may diverge from the original meaning, yet the meme form enables connections that facilitate understanding. This phenomenon is often observed in humorous content, where humour may not be intrinsic but is identified through forced associations, typically by visually rerefencing familiar content or structures. These recognisable units - memes - enable the absorption and interpretation of new information.

Glózer (2020) emphasises the modular structure of media content, which allows users to easily edit and combine elements, creating a variety of ways to engage with new content. Ultimately, memes contribute to the global construction of shared cultural knowledge that can be interpreted through a generational lens, wherein the meaning and comprehensibility of content may vary across generations. de Saint Laurent (2022) emphasises that popular memes often foster a sense of belonging and community. The creation of memes helps to make the content easy to understand while maintaining the character of the inside joke across generations.

Another important characteristic of the new generation is sensation seeking, which is a key user attitude toward online content consumption and one of the earliest indicators of problematic internet use. Fast-paced and concentrated content increases the stimulus threshold and reduces the ability to maintain prolonged attention. Guld (2022) points out that the youngest users prefer simple, easily accessible content, but tend to lose interest and quickly switch to other content when faced with more complex or less accessible material. Kiss and colleagues (2020) argue that sensation seeking significantly contributes to the development of problematic behaviours, with tendencies toward boredom and the pursuit of flow experiences during internet use increases young people's vulnerability.

### *2.2.2 Counter trends*

The Youth Report 2023 (Székely and Kiss-Kozma 2024) emphasises that the mental health of young people has deteriorated internationally over the last ten years, a trend further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Young people are increasingly likely to lack adequate mental health support, with many experiencing loneliness, and suicide remaining one of the leading causes of death among them. Recently, the map of youth problems has shifted from specific to more diffuse and general concerns. According to the 2023 survey by the Youth Research Institute, young people identify uncertainty and an unpredictable future as the most pressing issues facing their generation. In the top tier of the problem map -aside from financial hardship - psychosocial issues dominate, including the aforementioned uncertainty, lack of goals, and absence of friendships and community ties.

Heightened awareness of young people's mental health is also contributing to deliberate, self-limiting

responses to overuse of technology and media exposure. These responses include monitoring and reducing screen time, periodic cessation of use ("digital withdrawal"), and avoidance of specific applications, features, and content, which can be interpreted as a counter-trend. Deloitte (2023) reports that people are increasingly concerned that their devices may render them vulnerable, with broader digital exposure harming not only their safety but also their overall health. People are concerned about physical impacts such as reduced time for physical activity due to device use and the negative impact on their emotional wellbeing, contributing to anxiety or depression. The level of concern varies by generation, with younger people finding it harder than older generations to limit their screen time. In an effort to restore balance, three-quarters of users have already taken steps to limit their digital activities, according to Deloitte (2023). Among the youngest cohort, more than half report feeling helpless in controlling their device use, and nearly half of teenagers themselves admit difficulty in limiting their own screen time.

In addition to slowing down and (self-)limiting digital use, a counter trend has emerged: analogue nostalgia.

Technostalgia - or analogue nostalgia - is not a new phenomenon. Niemeyer (2014) discusses the phenomenon of retro-enthusiasm in detail, associating it primarily with the media, and arguing that nostalgia is inherently a mediated processes. Media content can adopt a nostalgic style and act as a trigger for nostalgia, while the media itself can be understood as a platform for the expression of nostalgic sentiments. According to Niemeyer (2014), the media often reflect nostalgically on their own past - their structures, content, and formats. Thus, media can be understood as an essential component of nostalgia, which increases with the development of new communication technologies.

According to Bolin (2015), techno-nostalgia is about the use and appreciation of analogue technologies that preceded digital technology, with a focus on the device rather than the content. This is evident in the renewed popularity of now nearly obsolete forms of communication such as postcards and handwritten letters, or in the resurgence of traditional comic books and cassette tapes, and also the renaissance of vinyl records. These trends reflect a longing for pre-digital forms of connection and a desire to revive memories. Research into young people's nostalgia for the Kádár regime illustrates that nostalgic attitudes can emerge even without lived experiences. Data from the Hungarian large sample youth survey reveals that a proportion of 15-to 29-year-olds, who could not have experienced socialist Hungary firsthand, nonetheless expressed nostalgia for a predictable and secure world known only to their parents and grandparents (Székely, 2012). Bolin (2015) no longer characterises this as nostalgia per se, but sees it as a kind of nostalgic envy, or a form of phantom pain.

Marks (2002) contrasts the virtual with the real, arguing that young people who have grown up in the digital era, and are accustomed to computer simulations, are rediscovering analogue technologies in their longing for unmediated experiences. When analysing data from the Hungarian large sample youth survey, we observed, albeit indirectly, a longing for slower, pre-digital practices in young people's responses. It is striking that despite increasing ICT usage prompted by external pressures, analogue leisure activities have become dominant. In interpreting this data, we hypothesise that young people may have only limited recollection of the pre-digital world. While the COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly contributed to increased online time, the restriction of face-to-face interactions has led to an appreciation of analogue forms. Even where time spent on such activities has not increased, their symbolic value persists in young people's minds.

In summary, the main trends in young people's media consumption are characterised by mobility and convergence. These factors, combined with the overwhelming abundance of content, contribute to a dynamic of time compression and acceleration, which in turn promote consumption habits such as simultaneous media use and memeification. The heightened threshold for stimulus, coupled with an experience-oriented attitude easily leads to overconsumption and problematic consumption patterns.

## 3. A Hungarian 'case study'

### 3.1. Generational uncertainty

Our everyday interest in youth stems from our efforts to understand an increasingly forward-looking and rapidly changing world, and to address the question of what kind of world - and what kind of people - the future will bring. If it is indeed humans who shape history, and if the future of our planet depends solely on us, then the character of the new generation that will shape this world is of paramount importance (Székely, 2021). It is also generally true that the interpretative and discursive framework has changed, and the future has become a more prominent subject of interest (Aczél, 2018). At the same time, our knowledge of the future is increasingly uncertain - or at least we perceive our assessments of the future to be uncertain - and we are now experiencing a number of significant changes that could not have been predicted even immediately before their occurrence. For instance, the two most recent systemic changes, - the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in our neighbouring Ukraine - have upended fundamental assumptions overnight, which easily accounts for our frustrations and anxiety surrounding the future.

Our interest in and uncertainty of the future give rise to narratives that attempt to address that interest and explain the whys, even if they cannot predict the future. Recent technological advancements have inspired contrasting narratives about youth - some extremely positive and some extremely negative. Prensky (2001), for example, refers to "digital natives" as the clear beneficiaries of the information society, in contrast to the "digital immigrants" of older generations. Zimbardo (2015), on the other hand, paints a bleak picture of the youth of our time, especially young men, whose identities, he argues, are being destroyed by technological development. Ironically, it is the same technological advancement that Prensky sees as a competitive advantage for the younger generation.

It is clear that many of the central questions we are asking ourselves today about the future relate mainly to issues such as the security and resultant economic crisis, climate change, and pandemics. However, the former has been displaced from the public discourse almost overnight by the pandemic, while the latter has been displaced by the threat of war some time later. Looking further ahead, we see a number of critical issues in the future to which we currently have no viable answers, such as overpopulation, the migration crisis, or the aforementioned climate change. In the context of our inquiry, we also encounter fundamental future-related concerns that remain on the agenda, such as the rise of artificial intelligence and increasing robotisation.

The use of technology is expanding rapidly, and accordingly, solutions are constantly evolving, and the perspectives are broadening. Freely available AI-powered tools are creating possibilities that were unimaginable just a few years ago. Artificial intelligence can compose our reading journals or solve complex mathematical problems for us. But these are only the most visible applications - lean solutions based on AI are now embedded in everyday life, with numerous applications built upon artificial intelligence. The crucial question, therefore, is to what extent this potential also harbours dangers that go beyond the possibility of misuse for school homework. The opportunities and dangers of robotisation are much more apparent: with robots now entering both production and service sectors, work processes have become more efficient through partial facilitation and replacement of human labour. Yet this same shift is also creating a risk of mass unemployment.

When young people in Hungary are asked about their vision of the future, their responses are both optimistic and pragmatic. Overall, young people are more positive than fearful regarding their personal future. Among 15-29-year-olds surveyed, 45% are confident about the future, 43% adopted a neutral stance, and only around 1 in 10 (13%) reported fears about the future. In 2020, our large sample Hungarian youth survey also inquired specifically about these fears. The data clearly indicate that young people are particularly concerned about a future pandemic, climate change, the economic crisis, and the country's poor governance. By contrast, they are less apprehensive about the challenges



associated with technological progress. Only one-quarter to one-fifth of respondents fear that robotisation could lead to unemployment, or that the rise of artificial intelligence might have harmful consequences.

The Youth Research Institute's 2023 survey[3] has also assessed a range of potential threats that are commonly associated with future dystopias, as well as those already relevant in the present. Although we have just overcome the COVID-19 pandemic, the fear of a new pandemic remains as significant as that of climate change. In the shadow of war, half of the young people surveyed (51%) perceive the risk of another world war as a threat. The greatest fears about the future, however, relate to a potential economic crisis and poor governance, with the majority of respondents (56-57%) expressing fear regarding these issues. By comparison, four-tenths (40%) reported concerns about migration targeting Europe. Technological developments - such as artificial intelligence or the proliferation of robotics -was cited as a concern by 1 in 3 respondents (31-32%) (see Figure 1). A comparison with the findings from the 2020 survey is revealing, as reported levels of fear were lower across all the threats assessed at that time.

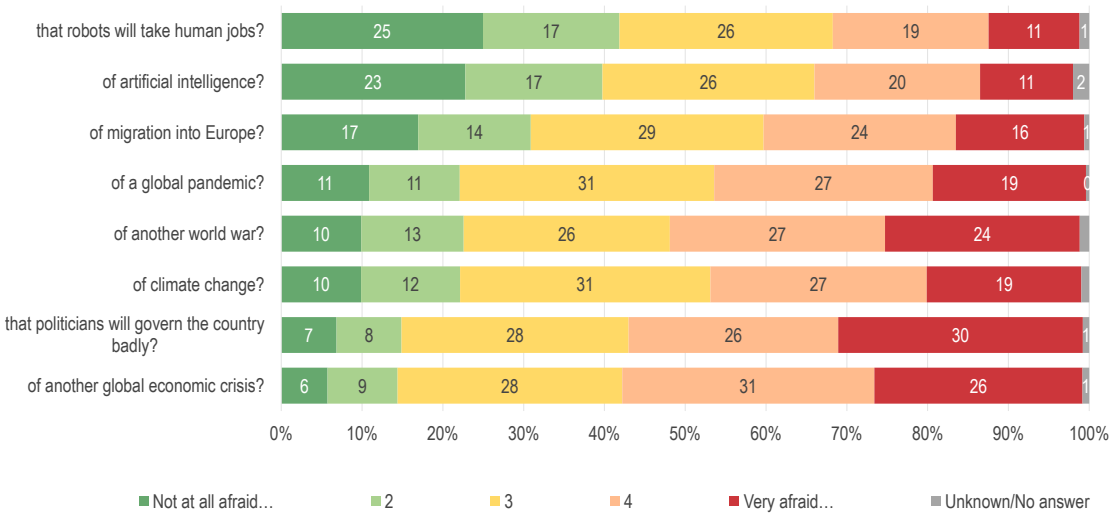


**Figure 1. Future concerns.** Question: Are you afraid…? Please answer on a scale from 1 to 5 with 1 being not at all afraid and 5 being very afraid. Sample: Total sample (N=1000) percentage distribution

### 3.2 Hungarian trends in media use and their relationship to generations

The internet is the primary medium within the contemporary media ecosystem. In Hungary, by 2020 a significant gap between had emerged between the proportion of 15-29-year-olds who watched television daily (59%) and of those who used the internet daily (97%), indicating that legacy media play an increasingly marginal role in the content consumption habits of young people. According to the *2023 Media Market Report* by Hungary's National Media and Infocommunications Authority's (NMHH), the age of transition is set at 13, marking the point at which children begin to shift from television to online content consumption - even if not yet permanently.

The most significant technological trend of the past two decades has been the move toward mobility and convergence, as content consumption devices have become portable and access has shifted from cable connections to being location-independent. The smartphone has now become the most

[3] The Youth Research Institute's survey was conducted among Hungarian citizens aged 15–29, using a representative national sample of 1,000 people, through personal interviews (TAPI) between December 2022 and January 2023.

important device for media consumption, and the vast majority of young people own one. Beyond enabling access to various formats - text, video, and audio - the smartphone also functions as a filter: if certain media content is not available via smartphone, it is, for all practical purposes, inaccessible to this demographic. Young people do not read print media, they hardly listen to the radio, and their news consumption is largely based on social media.

In the first wave of the large sample Hungarian youth survey[4], conducted at the turn of the millennium, 29% of 15-29-year-olds reported having a personal computer in their household, while only 9% had access to the Internet. At that time, household internet access typically relied on dial-up connections, which were generally unsuitable for streaming online video content – something considered standard today. Audiovisual content consumption was predominantly tied to the television. At the turn of the millennium, 95% of young Hungarians between the ages of 15-29 had a colour TV in their household, and 30% also had their own set for personal use. Of audio devices, CD players were present in less than half of young people's households (46%). The majority of young people's households (79%) also had a landline telephone; while mobile phones were available in 1 in 2 households (51%), and almost 1 in 3 (31%) owned a mobile phone.

In the two and a half decades since the turn of the millennium, information and communication technology (ICT) has evolved from a luxury into a fundamental necessity. This period of transformation was briefly disrupted by the global financial and economic crisis between 2008 and 2012. However, the subsequent decade of economic recovery and growth spurred further ICT. This era also marked a significant technological shift in mobile telephony, with mobile phones being replaced by smartphones. Since the economic crisis, the vast majority of 15-29-year-olds in Hungary (86%) have been connected to the internet, a further 8% have access to the internet at home, and 3% have access to the internet via a mobile phone or smartphone, while a further 3% cent have no direct access to the internet. As internet access has become more widespread, both usage and engagement have intensified. Today, young Hungarians spend a large part of their free time in virtual environments; their media consumption is dominated by digital culture, and their social interactions largely take place within mediatised spaces.

The vast majority of internet users are active on social networking platforms, with Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok being the most popular. Social media usage has intensified in recent years, but Facebook has maintained its relevance despite the emergence of newer platforms. Recent data from the Youth Research Institute indicate that at least half of teenagers and 20-year-olds use TikTok on a daily basis. According to young people, the most important functions of social media are obtaining information and entertainment. Overall, nearly one-third (31%) use social media at least daily to access information, while one-fifth (21%) use it for local news, and one-tenth (8%) for political and public news. 29% of respondents use social networks for daily entertainment, while a small proportion report using them to organise community events (8%) or for professional purposes (7%). It is, therefore, clear that the role of social media has also become established in content consumption. Young people now regard the informational function of social media as more important than that of radio or books, and much more so than the printed press.

The nearly two-decade-long dominance of social media is being challenged by a new technological element, artificial intelligence, which is also influencing young people's content consumption habits. Young people represent a particularly important social group in the context of AI development, as many key innovators and early adopters emerge from this demographic. Research conducted by the Youth Research Institute in 2024 shows[5] that half of young Hungarians aged 15-29 perceive the impact

[4] The Hungarian large sample youth survey, an outstanding research program by international standards launched at the turn of the millennium. The survey is directing at young people between the ages of 15-29 residing in Hungary with fieldwork conducted every four years on a sample of 8000-item (Székely, 2024).

[5] The Youth Research Institute's survey was conducted among Hungarian citizens aged 15–29, using a representative national sample of 1,000 people, through online interviews (CAWI) between December 2023 and January 2024.

of AI in their daily lives. The majority of respondents consider AI to be generally useful, although clear gender differences exist: males are more likely than females to hold this view. A more frequent use of AI applications is also associated with more positive attitudes; by contrast, those who have only experimented with tools such as ChatGPT once tend to be sceptical about their usefulness. Concerns about AI are also evident among young people, as also reflected in the fact that 15-to 29-year-olds are split on the question of whether or not humans can retain control over AI. A slight majority are confident that humans can retain control over AI. There is also a clear divide between the genders, with most females being concerned that control over AI could ultimately be lost. The study also reveals that there is a significant amount of information noise surrounding AI. The majority of 15-29-year-olds surveyed in this study believe that there is too much talk about AI. This perception, in addition to raising concerns about ethical issues for developers and users, and ongoing regulatory challenges, also suggests a growing sense of moral panic and points to the responsibility of those who communicate about AI. (Figure 2).

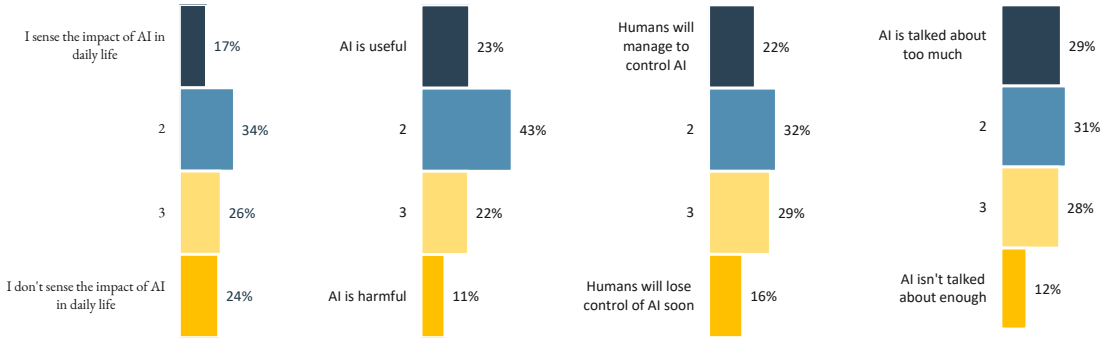


**Figure 2. Attitudes toward AI.** Question: To what extent do you agree…? Sample: Total sample (N=1000) percentage distribution

The study also shows that half of young people have used ChatGPT or a similar application, with 1 in 10 reporting regular use. Our most recent survey shows that a third (34%) of 15-29-year-olds use some form of generative language model at least once a week. These findings suggest that, despite ongoing concerns, the frequency of AI tool usage - such as ChatGPT - is steadily increasing. The growing intensity of use draws attention to the importance of artificial intelligence literacy and the development of AI-related skills (Bokor & Szabó, 2025).

Our findings show that more than half of users of generative language models rate their own skills as good. We find significant age-related differences: nearly two-thirds of 15-to-24-year-olds, half of 25-to-34-year-olds and 40% of 35-to-39-year-olds consider their user skills to be good. The difference between students and employed individuals is particularly large, 70% of the former and 47% of the latter consider their user knowledge to be good. No significant differences between genders are observed. Regional disparities are not linear; however, it is more common in smaller settlements for people to rate their AI literacy as low.

| | Insufficient | Sufficient | Average | Good | Excellent | I don't know |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Total** | 2 | 14 | 28 | 37 | 17 | 2 |
| **Male** | 1 | 13 | 28 | 37 | 19 | 2 |
| **Female** | 3 | 14 | 28 | 37 | 15 | 3 |
| **15-17 years old** | 0 | 3* | 28 | 49* | 17 | 3 |
| **18-24 years old** | 1 | 5* | 28 | 38 | 26* | 2 |
| **25-29 years old** | 2 | 18 | 26 | 33 | 18 | 1 |
| **30-34 years old** | 2 | 22* | 27 | 33 | 16 | 1 |
| **35-39 years old** | 3 | 21 | 30 | 35 | 5* | 5 |



| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **studies** | 0 | 3* | 25 | 43 | 26* | 2 |
| **works** | 3 | 18 | 30 | 33 | 14 | 2 |
| **neither** | 2 | 18 | 24 | 44 | 10 | 2 |

**Table 1. AI literacy.** Question: On a scale of 1 to 5, similar to school grades, how would you rate your knowledge of using ChatGPT or other similar generative language models (e.g., MS Copilot)? User's sample (N=579) percentage distribution. *p<0,05

## 4. Conclusion

The influence of the media on the lives of young people is profound and cannot be overstated. Popular generational theories also distinguish between generations primarily based on their media consumption patterns and point out that differing socialisation contexts determine different generational identities and thus distinct consumption styles and preferences. Research shows that the attitudes of the youngest cohorts towards technology and their media use differ both quantitatively and qualitatively from those of older generations.

Over the past two decades, the most significant technological trends have been mobility and convergence. Devices have become portable, enabling content consumption independent of physical location and reducing dependence on wired infrastructure. Social media has come to play a central role in information access and content consumption. The popularity of brief, instantly accessible, and easy to consume content aligns with broader societal trends such as the compression and acceleration of time, which in turn correlate with diminishing attention spans. Time as a flexible parameter has never been as important as it is today, reinforcing consumer behaviours characterised by simultaneous consumption and memorisation. This heightened threshold for stimulation – driven by an experience-oriented attitude easily leads to overconsumption and problematic media use patterns. A counter-trend is also emerging: a conscious slowing down in response to the mental health impacts of technological overuse and media exposure. This shift toward self-regulation is partly a reaction to the shock of the COVID-19 pandemic, which not only increased time spent online but also restricted opportunities for in-person interaction. As a result, analogue forms of communication have gained renewed value – even if time itself is not reclaimed, the quality and authenticity associated with analogue interactions are increasingly appreciated. Nevertheless, this shift does not break the prevailing trend of increasing media use and interaction. Over the past nearly two decades, we have witnessed the rise of social media. Social media has not only taken the lead in communication and community-building, but also in content consumption. While the rise of social media characterises the recent past and present, the near future will also be shaped by the role of AI-related developments in young people's media consumption.

AI solutions have made spectacular inroads into the field of digital communication with innovative tools such as generative language models and deepfake content. New AI-driven innovations are announced almost daily, many of which are specifically designed for media and communication contexts. Thanks to the accumulation of vast datasets, these developments are leading to extremely rapid and far-reaching transformations. Mass adoption enables continuous testing and feedback, creating the basis for exponential growth.

However, alongside the benefits that progress brings, there is no shortage of concerns. Beyond general anxieties surrounding technology, specific fears related to AI are emerging, some of which are rooted in negative user experiences, others in the unprecedented speed of development, and the fact that we may not really know what is happening 'inside the box'. While we understand the inputs and outputs generated by AI systems, the inner workings of these technologies often remain opaque. The media content created using AI is baffling and contributes to a sense of vulnerability as we are less and less able to distinguish between authentic and AI-generated content.

As the capabilities of generative language models become increasingly apparent, concerns arise regarding the potential "dumbing down" of humanity. One might question the necessity of individual cognitive effort in acquiring lexical knowledge when artificial intelligence processes information on our behalf and possesses access to far more data than any human. In considering such concerns, it is instructive to recall the advent of mass-produced printed books, which similarly made vast amounts of information available – far beyond what individuals could memorise – yet ultimately served to enhance, rather than diminish, human intellectual development.

Will this technological revolution lead to increased loneliness, or will we, as humans, begin to reconnect with one another? Machines may soon become our conversational partners, friends, and companions - capable of easily simulating human interaction and potentially replacing human relationships. There are already examples of this today: chatbots used for impersonal communication, AI-based assistants performing routine tasks. But to what extent will we desire this shift, and how much will we fear that communication and content mediated by digital technologies are merely images and sounds manipulated by AI? Will we be able to regulate AI in a guaranteed way? In some ways, applications like ChatGPT are already more efficient, more accurate, and perhaps even more creative than humans. Today's young people will have to navigate a world inundated with AI-generated content, from which they must identify what is meaningful. To do so, they will require new forms of literacy.

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