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The Increased Likelihood of Identification as EU Citizens among Critical Yet Positively Minded Young Digital Users

Abstract: In this article, we provide empirical evidence demonstrating that both identification with EU citizenship as well as active digital engagement depend significantly on young people's abilities as critical thinkers. More specifically, we demonstrate that critical yet positively minded young people are more likely to identify as EU citizens. Such healthy sceptics are also more likely to report that they know their citizens' rights and obligations and claim to be well informed about EU decision-making. We provide a more detailed analysis by distinguishing between four categories of youth digital users based on variety in their critical thinking modes and their identification as EU citizens; they can be described as rejecting, engaged, trusting or disinterested. They vary in their level of digital media use, modes of critical thinking, fact-checking and EU identification. We offer evidence indicating that the category of engaged youth demonstrates digital literacy traits that contribute to fostering digital citizenship. In other categories, there is ample opportunity for the enhancement of digital literacy skills. We offer empirically based guidelines tailored to the unique needs of the different groups of youth digital users that we have identified.

Keywords: digital citizenship, EU citizens, youth, critical thinking, digital literacy, e-governance

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Introduction

Being an EU citizen means having the nationality of one of the Member States of the European Union. It is associated with several rights and privileges granted by EU law, including freedom of movement, voting rights, consular protection, access to social benefits and consumer rights. EU citizenship complements national citizenship and does not replace it; it offers individuals additional rights and opportunities within the EU and promotes a sense of European identity, unity between citizens and participation in the EU's democratic processes (Adams, 2006; Golob et al., 2024; Mazur & Ramiro Troitiño, 2024; Ramiro Troitiño & Mazur, 2024). But there is more to EU citizenship than just rights: EU citizens are expected to respect the laws and values of the EU, participate in democratic processes and contribute to the common good of society. They are encouraged to inform themselves about society and public affairs and to actively participate in shaping EU policy. EU citizenship fosters a sense of belonging by promoting mobility, political participation, shared values, cultural exchange, social and economic integration, and solidarity among citizens. These multifaceted approaches help individuals feel connected to a larger European community, enhancing their sense of identity and belonging.

Digitalisation significantly impacts the processes related to EU citizenship and the feeling of belonging by enhancing connectivity and participation (Rek, 2024). In the digital age, citizenship straddles both offline and online worlds, referred to as 'real life' and 'immersive reality'. It is claimed that regardless of the extent of convergence between the physical and virtual worlds, citizens must be digitally competent to be active citizens (Costa, 2023; Frau-Meigs et al., 2017 Mokrá, 2023; Rūse, 2014). A key element of digital citizenship identified in many definitions is the notion of digital engagement, brought about by the competent use of digital technology (González-Cacheda & Outeda, 2021; Kerikmäe et al., 2019; Outeda, 2024; Ramiro Troitiño et al., 2023). The specific know-how or skills required for digital citizenship are also frequently referred to in the literature.

At the heart of e-democracy lies the concept of media literacy, an indispensable skill set that empowers citizens to critically engage with digital media and navigate the complexities of the information age (Ayata, 2024; Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 2018; Hobbs, 2010; Livingstone, 2004). Media literacy encompasses the ability to access, analyse, evaluate and create media content in various formats, from traditional news outlets to social media platforms. In the context of e-democracy, it plays a transformative role in fostering informed citizenship, combating misinformation and promoting a vibrant public discourse (Giovanola, 2023; Hamuľák, 2016; Maatsch, 2024; Martens, 2015). Critical thinking is a core element of media literacy; it is the ability of individuals to use and at the same time autonomously and critically interpret the flow, content, values and consequences of the use of various media messages (Ferretti, 2022). It also enables them to participate in the creation of media messages (Golob

et al., 2021; Martens, 2015). Improving critical thinking and digital media literacy has thus become of strategic importance for active citizenship in the EU (European Commission, 2018, p. 25).

A digital citizen is someone who, through the development of a broad range of competences, is able to actively, positively and responsibly engage in both on – and offline communities, at the local, national or transnational levels. As digital technologies are disruptive in nature and constantly evolving, building competence is a lifelong process that should begin from earliest childhood at home and at school, in formal, informal and non-formal educational settings (Richardson & Milovidov, 2019). The Council of Europe has been very active in fostering digital citizenship in the EU by promoting digital citizenship education. Our children and young people are our future, and they spend a lot of time nowadays connected to digital media. To communicate, learn, work and play responsibly in this environment, they need to develop a whole range of media literacy competences that will enable them to take advantage of benefits and opportunities and overcome the pitfalls they will encounter. Young people today are in the vanguard of new media practices (Sarrica et al., 2010), so equipping them with critical digital and media literacy skills is essential for them to navigate the online public sphere and make informed decisions as citizens (Bečević & Dahlstedt, 2022). Rapid social change and the unprecedented exposure of children and young people to digital media imply that digital media education cannot rely solely on obtained information and/or pre-given norms; instead, reflexive deliberations on the ongoing challenges brought forwards by social complexity and dynamics are needed (Golob et al., 2023).

In this article, we present the results of a survey that was carried out in 2024 on a nationally representative sample of high-school students in Slovenia, exploring their digital media habits and certain elements of media literacy (Rek, 2024). In addition to reporting on their own media habits and issues related to such use, the students were asked if they feel as if they are European citizens and how well informed they are about political decision-making in the EU. We explore whether identification with EU citizenship and active digital engagement is related to young people's digital media habits. We speculate on whether young critical thinkers are more likely to identify as EU citizens, and we look for consistent patterns of digital media use as well as critical thinking which could explain the diversity in their identification as EU citizens and differences in their levels of information about political decision-making in the EU (de la Guardia, 2005).

The central objective is to identify the key categories of young people in terms of their feelings of EU citizenship and their patterns of using digital media, while attempting to understand them in a broader context. This way, potential target groups for future policies can be identified. Our basic assumption is that active EU citizenship requires both identification with EU citizenship and competent digital media practices that involve critical fact-checking. We believe that our research can contrib-

ute to future efforts in digital citizenship education by providing a nuanced understanding of young people's feelings of EU citizenship. There is a lot of diversity in the way children and young people use digital media, and our research enables an understanding of this diversity and its impact on the sense of EU citizenship they have. By leveraging these insights, we can better equip young people with the critical thinking skills, media literacy and sense of EU identity necessary to thrive in an increasingly digital and interconnected world.

1. Materials and methods

In empirical terms, our research is primarily based on a survey conducted on a representative sample of 2,314 high-school students in Slovenia that took place from 13 February to 13 April 2024, as a part of longitudinal studies on media literacy and digital practices within the Infrastructure Programme in Media Literacy in Slovenia supported by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (Rek et al., 2024). The survey questionnaire and its implementation were designed in a way to maximise the response rate and minimise response biases and missing values. For these purposes, the survey was tested through a pilot. The analyses revealed no biases or inconsistencies that could affect overall validity.

Within the survey questionnaire we focused on the relationship between, on the one hand, feelings of European Union citizenship in a more classical sense, and on the other, competences and behaviours in the digital realm as a bridge to digital European citizenship. A classical commitment to European citizenship, a feeling of belonging to the European demos, is approximated through a five-level Likert scale measuring agreement with the statements 'I feel like a citizen of the European Union' and 'I am well informed about political decision-making in the European Union'. The ways in which the high-school students are able to manage digital (public) spaces was assessed through a combination of four questions that combined doubting and checking the content found on social networks and on web information portals through a five-level Likert scale ranging from 'never' to 'always', namely:

- 'How often do you doubt the information you have found on social networks?'
- 'How often do you doubt the information you have found on web information portals?'
- 'How often do you additionally check the information you have found on social networks with another source?'
- 'How often do you additionally check the information you have found on web information portals with another source?'

This way, not only the critical but also the active stances taken in the digital space can be observed.

While the combinations of answers to these six questions may lead to a rather complex variety of views and behaviours, we have enabled a more systematic and straightforward analysis by distinguishing between different categories of high-school students based on the responses to these questions. K-means clustering based on Euclidean distances has been applied for this purpose, including the six above-mentioned variables as criteria to define the clusters.

The most concise yet still sufficiently nuanced solution suitable for meaningful interpretation consists of four clusters. In this way the model can provide two-by-two combinations between the two major conceptual dimensions: patterns of digital media use and attitudes towards the EU. We have analysed and compared them to each other in terms of basic demographic features, current position in the educational system, digital and media habits, and some general attitudes towards life. The demographic variables include the respondent's gender, age and whether they are living in shared custody (implying that their parents have separated or divorced). Within the education section, we distinguish between general secondary education (typically a gymnasium finishing with a general Matura exam) and vocational secondary education (typically finishing with a vocational Matura consisting of a smaller number of subjects). We also asked them whether they were planning to continue their studies after finishing secondary education and about their previous year's achievement in terms of their average grade.

Regarding their digital behaviour and media habits in general, we asked them to report their frequency of watching TV, videos or movies (recorded or live), listening to the radio, using a computer or tablet for any purpose, using a mobile phone for any purpose, listening to music, reading magazines, newspapers and other printed media in a paper form, playing video games (on any platform), playing video games with violent content (shooting, fighting and similar), using a computer or tablet for learning or other work, being present in a room where a TV is on, and being present on social networks (Facebook, X, Instagram, Pinterest, TikTok, etc.). They were also asked to report their level of agreement on the five-level Likert scale with statements about regularly following information content in the Slovenian or foreign media.

General features and attitudes towards life were observed in terms of agreement with the following statements (on five-level Likert scales): 'My health is excellent'; 'My life is empty and meaningless for me'; 'I am satisfied with the course of my life'. For the purposes of our analyses, Likert-scale variables were considered as interval ones, enabling us to apply a broader range of statistical methods and tests. A chi-square test was applied while comparing categorical (nominal) variables and analyses of variance tests checked the relationships between categorical and interval variables. A Scheffé test was applied to test the significance levels of differences between the categories.

2. Results

The identification of the high-school students included in our sample with the EU is rather high, with 26.8% fully agreeing and another 19% agreeing with the statement that they feel citizens of the European Union. Only 10.6% claimed that they strongly disagree. However, they mostly do not feel well informed about the political decision-making in the EU: a clear majority of 54.8% disagreed or strongly disagreed, while only 5.5% fully agreed that they are well informed about it.

Regarding information found on social networks, they are quite doubtful: 14.5% always doubts it, while only 5.5% never doubts. The majority leans towards moderate doubt, with 38.8% choosing the middle value of 3, and 29.6% expressing somewhat higher doubts with the value of 4. There is less doubt about online information portals, with 7.1% never doubting them and 9.3% always doubting them. Almost half – 48% – chose the middle value. Nevertheless, while those who doubt are also more likely to check, doubt does not always lead to checking the information with another source. Only 9.4% of respondents always check social network content, and only 6.8% always checks information portals' content, with another 19.7% and 13.5% respectively mostly doing this (the value of 4 on the five-level scale). 17.8% of respondents never check social networks' content with another source, and 24.6% never do this for the online information portals.

The clusters identified through the k-means clustering of these six variables are presented in Table 1. Comparatively the largest cluster (38.2% of respondents) expresses strong feelings of EU citizenship and also feels rather well informed about political decision-making in the EU. On the other hand, they are below average when it comes to frequency of doubting or checking digital content. While they feel informed as citizens, they gladly accept digital content without major doubts. We may see trust as their key feature in this regard, so they can be called trusters.

Table 1. Differences from the overall mean for the identified clusters.

Variables Clusters	Feels like an EU citizen	Well informed about EU decision-making	Doubts information on social networks	Doubts information on online information portals	Checks information on social networks	Checks information on online information portals
Detachers	-0.84	-0.55	-0.97	-0.88	-1.28	-1.25
Trusters	0.77	0.36	-0.15	-0.11	-0.34	-0.33
Engagers	0.81	0.56	0.77	0.71	1.31	1.36
Rejectors	-1.13	-0.53	0.37	0.30	0.49	0.42
Overall mean	**3.44**	**2.41**	**3.36**	**3.09**	**2.87**	**2.60**

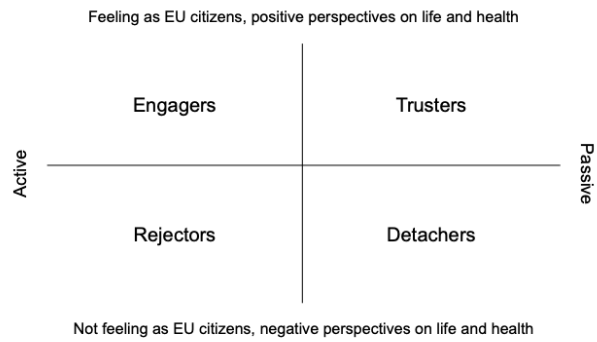
Source: Own calculations

The second biggest group (25.6%) is their direct opposite. They strongly reject feelings of EU citizenship, do not consider themselves well informed about EU political decision-making and are above average when it comes to doubting and checking information published on social networks and web information portals. They seem to be characterised by serious doubts or even rejection when it comes either to identifying with the EU and its politics or to using digital spaces. They can thus be denoted as rejectors.

The third group (18.2% of the respondents) also tends not to feel like EU citizens and not to be well informed about EU political decisions. On the other hand, they seem to rather blindly accept the information they find on social networks and online information portals, as they are the least likely to doubt or check the information in digital spaces, when compared to the other clusters. As they seem mostly detached from the EU and its politics, while also not being interested in taking a more active stance in digital public spaces, they can be called detachers.

The final group, of roughly the same size (18% of respondents), can be seen as their direct opposite. They have strong feelings of EU citizenship and feel well informed about its political decision-making. They are more likely than any other category to doubt and check digital content – even more than the rejectors' cluster. They seem to be the category that is comparatively most actively engaged as EU citizens, both in terms of classical and digital citizenship, as they seem to follow political news about the EU, while also being capable of engaging in digital public spaces, demonstrating not just a healthy scepticism but also conscientious checking of digital content. We can therefore denote them as engagers. The four groups and their key differences through the two major dimensions are summarised in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Statistically significant differences between the clusters.



Source: Authors' own elaboration

In Table 2 we provide a more detailed overview of the differences between the four clusters in terms of basic demography, position in the educational system, digital and other media habits, and some perspectives about life that have turned out to be statistically significant. While the differences between genders are not major, they are statistically significant. There are slightly fewer engagers and slightly more rejectors among women. Those who declared themselves as non-binary are slightly more likely to be detachers and rejectors and less likely to be trusters or engagers. It also seems that the share of trusters declines and the share of detachers increases as the students get older. Living in shared custody, on the other hand, demonstrated no statistically significant effect on belonging to any of these categories.

Table 2. Statistically significant differences between the clusters.

		Detachers	**Trusters**	**Engagers**	**Rejectors**	**Statistical test applied***
Demography	Gender	Non-binary	Less among other	Less among women	More among women and other	Chi-square (0.002)
	Age	More among older	More among younger			Scheffé (0.018)
Education	High-school type		More in vocational education	More in general education		Chi-square (0.012)
	Plans for further education	Less likely to continue studying		More likely to continue studying		Chi-square (0.000)
	Average grade	Lower than trusters and engagers	Higher than detachers (0.008)	Higher than detachers (0.001)		Scheffé
Media habits	Using computer or tablet		Less often	More often		Scheffé (0.052)
	Using mobile phone	More often	Less often			Scheffé (0.010)
	Reading printed media		Less often	More often		Scheffé (0.012)
	Using computer or tablet for study or other work	Less often than engagers (0.010)	Less often than engagers (0.000)	More often than detachers and trusters		Scheffé
	Present when TV on	More often than trusters and rejectors	Less often than detachers (0.009)		Less often than detachers (0.048)	Scheffé
	Presence in social networks	More often	Less often			Scheffé (0.036)
	Following information content in Slovenian media	Less often than all	More often than detachers (0.000) and rejectors (0.000)	More often than all	More often than detachers (0.002)	Scheffé

	Following information content in foreign media	Less often than all	More often than detachers (0.000) and rejectors (0.020)	More often than all	More often than detachers (0.001)	Scheffé
Perspectives about life	Reported health	Worse	Better	Better	Worse	Scheffé (0.000)
	Seeing life as empty and meaningless		Less likely		More likely	Scheffé (0.021)
	Satisfied with course of life	Less than trusters and engagers	More than detachers (0.000) and rejectors (0.000)	More than detachers (0.002) and rejectors (0.008)	Less than trusters and engagers	Scheffé

** Statistical tests are provided with significance levels in brackets. When differences are detected between more than two different groups, significance levels are provided separately under each group.*

While trusters are slightly more common in vocational high schools, engagers are more frequent in the general education high schools. Engagers are more likely than detachers to continue their studies after high school, according to their own claims. On top of that, detachers have statistically significant lower educational performance in terms of average grades when compared to trusters and engagers.

Trusters are the least frequent users of the media, both digital and traditional, especially when compared to the engagers. They use computers or tablets and mobile phones less often, and they are less present in online social networks; they are less likely to be exposed to the TV and less likely to read classical printed media. On the other hand, despite the comparatively lower frequency of their media practices, they are far from being totally excluded from following the news, as they are more likely to report following the information content of Slovenian and foreign media when compared to rejectors and detachers.

Engagers, on the other hand, seem to be the most frequent users of computers or tablets, both in general when compared to trusters and for educational and other work purposes when compared to trusters and detachers. Heavy use of digital media in their case, however, does not mean ignoring the traditional media, as they also report more frequent use of printed media. Consistently with that, they also report following the information content in Slovenian and foreign media to a higher extent than any other group.

Detachers are also quite heavy users of digital media, but their patterns of use are rather different from those of the engagers. Detachers use their smartphones and are present on social networks more frequently than trusters. They are more exposed to TV screens than trusters and rejectors. However, they are less likely than engagers to use computers or tablets for study or other work. Among all categories, they report the lowest following of information content in Slovenian and foreign media.

Finally, the rejectors do not stand out in most of the digital and classical media behaviours, being typically in between when compared to the behaviours of other

groups. They are not excessive media consumers, but they are also far from being excluded from the digital or offline media spaces. They are less often exposed to turned-on TV screens when compared to detachers, but are also more likely than them to follow information content in Slovenian and foreign media.

The four clusters also differ from each other in terms of perceptions of their lives. Trusters and engagers report significantly better health than rejectors and detachers. Rejectors are more likely to see their lives as empty and meaningless when compared to trusters. On top of that, engagers and trusters report significantly higher satisfaction with their lives than rejectors and detachers.

Conclusions

The clustering of high-school students into the four clusters provides a truly valuable tool, both for a better understanding of predispositions and challenges for digital EU citizenship and as a starting point for further research and the development of policy recommendations in this field. The cluster denoted as engagers is clearly the closest to a normative ideal of an active European digital citizen. They feel like EU citizens, competently and extensively navigate digital spaces, extensively use digital tools and keep themselves informed from a variety of media ranging from the classical to the digital. Their healthy scepticism towards media content combined with a readiness to check the media content with other sources makes them least vulnerable to extremist perspectives, fake news and political or other manipulation.

On the other hand, detachers seem to be the most vulnerable category in this regard, especially because of their lack of doubting and checking digital content, combined with their detachment from EU politics and established information sources. Like engagers, they are heavily involved with digital technologies, but they follow clearly different patterns: more smartphones instead of computers, more social media instead of information media (perhaps mostly obtaining information from social networks instead of the established media) and a lower ability and/or readiness to exploit digital technologies for study and work.

Although the trusters share their trust in digital content with the detachers, they are less directly vulnerable than the latter because their online presence is more moderate and they are more open to a variety of information sources. However, as they are typically slightly younger, one may at least partly see them as a transitional category that may develop either towards becoming engagers if they establish a more mature attitude towards digital content, or towards becoming detachers if they become disappointed by political and/or other developments. This could become a very relevant topic for future research, especially in longitudinal terms.

Finally, while the rejectors do not feel very close to the EU, they do possess some features that could make them active digital citizens. They do not seem to be exces-

sively exposed to the most harmful digital media practices, and they share at least some inclination to doubt and check digital media content with the trusters. Some of their critical attitudes may even become a positive source for change – for themselves and for society. On the other hand, if some of their more questionable features prevail, such as their pessimism about life and lack of interest in politics and in established information sources, they may become closer to the detachers, and also a vulnerable target for fake news, conspiracy theories and other forms of manipulation. Again, these kinds of potential transformation would be a very relevant research topic with significant policy implications.

While observing these four categories, we should pay particular attention to the problem of social inequalities. Different positions in the social structure may strongly affect to which cluster an individual belongs. Trusters and engagers are healthier and happier than detachers and rejectors. While this may be a result of fully subjective psychological features, it may also result from the objective factors to which individuals have been exposed – including a variety of possible social deprivations. We should also be aware that the educational system is not fully meritocratic, so the differences in plans for further education and the educational achievements in terms of grades are not just a result of individuals' hard work, creativity and other competences, but also of their social backgrounds.

The gender issues should also not be neglected in this regard, though the differences are slight. Active digital citizenship as represented by the engagers seems to be slightly more accessible to young men than to young women. It may also be indicative that detachers and rejectors are slightly more common among those who reported their gender as 'other'; this may reflect some problems with social exclusion facing non-binary youth. While it is also possible that some of the students choosing this category were not fully serious about it (and would otherwise define as either men or women), it would still demonstrate a particular attitude towards dealing with the questionnaire used in our survey – perhaps indicating some form of detachment, self-exclusion and/or protest. These may again be compatible with the digital practices of detachers and rejectors.

The results we obtained show that young people vary widely in terms of their digital practices, perspectives on life and social embeddedness that impact their identifications with EU citizenship. This variety should be of great importance for the EU when developing and implementing policies related to different areas within education, media literacy, digitalisation skills and civic engagement. On that basis, we suggest three different pillars of recommendations, emphasising general policy orientation and simultaneously embracing the diversity of the young population in the EU.

1. Enhancing general knowledge about EU citizenship

Firstly, it is important to invest in the general knowledge about democratic practices and the advantages of political participation. Young people, who represent the

pillars of our future society, should be well informed about their rights as EU citizens. It is important to expand citizenship education in a formal context and upgrade the existing curricula, but simultaneously also in more informal ways through different events, platforms and activities that bring young people together. Such actions are especially relevant for the rejectors group, who are not only strongly present online but also critically check media content and doubt information, while they express a low level of being informed about EU decision-making. They should be encouraged to utilise their digital skills for enhancing their digital citizenship practices for strengthening democracy in the EU.

Increasing general knowledge about the EU and citizenship is also fundamental for the trusters group, which is the youngest. Steered education about EU citizenship and democracy could contribute to enhancing their potential to become engagers. Educational activities are also important for the detachers group, where a lack of knowledge is combined with overall passivity in media fact-checking and related media literacy.

2. Boosting competences for digital citizenship

This brings us to the second pillar of recommendations, which emphasise that the general European citizenship skills should be combined with digital platform competences. The European legal framework increasingly expects both platform operators and users to understand and engage with transparency and data-sharing mechanisms that underpin digital participation within the EU (Nyka & Zapolska, 2024). Youth from all four clusters are to be approached as active agents who can contribute to the meaning and practice of citizenship itself. For that purpose, the establishment of digital platforms where they can exchange their concerns and ideas seems crucial. Campaigns such as the European Citizens' Initiative, based on a digital platform, allow citizens to propose legislation, and such digital platforms can feed into a more targeted youth platform. Young people should be encouraged to express their creativity, needs and expectations in conceiving EU policies (Sime & Behrens, 2023 and the role of citizens in implementing them. Such initiatives should be provided from local to EU levels, thus presenting a key to fostering a sense of belonging to the European Union (Bečević & Dahlstedt, 2022).

Creating a proper infrastructure is a necessary condition to boost identification with EU citizenship; however, the skills for using it are equally important. Youth from all four clusters should be equipped with the knowledge and skills to enable the EU to fully harness the potential of digital tools to empower its citizens. Policymakers should invest more in digital competence education to foster digital literacy, which is especially important in the context of detachers and trusters. For engagers and rejectors, those initiatives could contribute to bridging the gap between citizens' digital skills and their declining faith in media.

3. Strengthening trust in media content about the EU

Thirdly, as the EU works to strengthen its digital identity and online services, it should also address the issue of disinformation and invest heavily in combating the corrosive effects of fake news and echo chambers arising in social media (Kiratli, 2023). At the same time, this process must be accompanied by a strong commitment to privacy protection and the ethical use of personal data, recognising the growing risks of profiling and data misuse in the digital sphere (Kuźnicka-Błaszkowska & Jabloński, 2024; Rejmaniak, 2021). These activities are especially important for the detachers group, and to a certain extent for the trusters, who are strongly present on social media but rarely check the content source or doubt the information. They are most vulnerable to fake news and harmful propaganda that undermines the basis of EU democracy. The EU should provide more active implementation of strategies and activities, such as EUvsDisinfo, which directly target the young population. The latter is crucial to combatting the spread of information that is demolishing the legitimacy and reputation of the EU as a political entity that safeguards citizens' rights and assures economic prosperity and sustainability. In addition, the EU should invest in promoting itself widely through social media, as these are the only information channels that the detachers group is following. Regardless of the variety within the youth clusters, the EU should strengthen its transparency and accountability through regular updates from EU bodies via their official websites and social media. It should provide accurate information and expose false narratives to enhance trust in digital media sources.

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