

Emerging Voices: Up-and-coming scholars in youth research gather at Budapest conference

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On Tuesday, May 14, 2024, the Youth Research Institute organised a PhD conference geared towards young researchers studying the hottest topics related to youth today.

*The conference, entitled **Emerging Voices: Perspectives from the Next Generation of Scholars** in Youth Research and held in Budapest, Hungary, had four areas of focus: youth and artificial intelligence, education, political activity, and mental health. Researchers from all across Europe, Asia, South America and Africa joined to bring these timely topics to the forefront.*

The opening lecture, “The Participation of Anthropomorphic Virtual Characters in Social Movements,” revolved around CGI (computer-generated imagery) technology and its effects on the youth population. Speaker Evelin Horváth, PhD student at Corvinus University of Budapest, spoke of the growing trend of young people creating anthropomorphic characters in the metaverse to represent not only their individual personalities, but also their political and social beliefs. Horváth spoke of major social and societal changes during the last few years, such as the MeToo movement, the Trump movement, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Horváth explained the purpose and importance of creating these characters as a means of self-expression and to connect with others sharing the same views. However, she also questioned the effectiveness of these characters when it came to advertising purposes and to create social awareness. Horváth was concerned that the novelty of creating CGI characters may overshadow their intended purpose or reflect the creator’s dedication to making an original character over the message itself. However, she ended on a more positive note by speaking

of the environmental advantages of using CGI characters, namely that they do not require a list of materials and personnel for production, and do not leave environmental damage in their wake.

The second lecture, “Code Culture,” was presented by Michele Varini of the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, Milan, Italy. The main theme of this lecture was the relationship between virtual characters in gaming and fashion in the real world. Varini emphasised that class distinction and fashion trends are being replicated in the virtual community, even more so as more gamers connect with one another at rates not seen before. Varini used the COVID-19 pandemic as an example. As so many people were forced to stay home, more people played games. Even games that are traditionally aimed for younger audiences, such as “Animal Crossing,” became more popular with older gamers. Since there were barely any new fashion innovations in the outside world during this period, gamers around the world used their custom-made characters to showcase not only their own designs, but they replicated their own cities as well (one noteworthy example being the Milan fashion week performed in a virtually reconstructed version of Milan). Varini successfully made the case that virtual reality increasingly mirrors fashion in the real world.

The next lecture, “Behind the Filter: A Study on the Effects of Instagram Selfies on Body Image Perception Among Young Indian Adult Females,”

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was presented by Nilotpal Bhattacharjee, PhD student at Assam University in Silchar, India. The lecture primarily revolved around the negative consequences of selfies among young Indians. Data presented in this lecture showed that India has the highest rate of selfie-related accidental deaths on earth. Bhattacharjee's findings also presented why so many young Indians take selfies, such as for social validation, gaining followers, and emulating celebrities. Very few respondents in the surveys took selfies just for personal pleasure. The presentation ended on a positive note, calling for an effort to embrace body positivity and acceptance, instead of demoralising comparison and competition by means of social media.

The next panel focused on education among youth. The first speaker was Byambasuren Nyamkhuu, PhD student at Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest. Her lecture was titled "Coping with Academic Stress: My Doctoral Journey in Hungary as an Asian Student." The focus of this lecture was learning to balance the tedious schedule of university classes, relaxing, and maintaining a social life. Nyamkhuu also spoke of the initial culture challenges of coming from Mongolia to Hungary, such as less of a power-distance between herself and her Hungarian professors and being encouraged by her professors to address them on a first-name basis. Nyamkhuu spoke of her life changing with the advent of COVID -19, and how she was forced to slow down and adapt to a slower, yet more tranquil pace of life, while still maintaining her academic diligence. Her positive message reminded us all not to be intimidated by changing situations in life, and to remember to cultivate relationships in our busy schedules.

The next speaker of this panel was Adrian Estrela Pereira, PhD student at Eötvös Loránd University. His lecture was titled "Digital Transformation: A Pathway to Connect Higher Education Institutions to the Requirements of

Increasingly Digitalised Interrelated and Global Societies." Pereira focused on how schools do and must continue to adapt to technology for the benefit of their students. He also emphasised the importance of effective budgeting to help schools invest in new technology, and the need for teachers to be receptive to continuing professional development to effectively use new technology.

Following Pereira was PhD candidate Thiri Pyae Kyaw, also of Eötvös Loránd University, presenting "Epistemological Beliefs and Teaching-Learning Perceptions: A Systematic Literature Review." The main focus of this presentation was on how presupposed beliefs and conditionings affect the acquiring of knowledge, and the need for more research in how young people learn in various cultural settings. Key findings in this lecture pointed to the importance of students and teachers being aware of how they acquire knowledge and taking a nuanced approach when seeking to understand the learning process.

The third panel of the conference revolved around politics. The first speaker was Mark Gabriel Wagan Aguilar, PhD student with Southern Philippine Academy College and Director for Research and Publication with Calayan Educational Foundation Inc., in the Philippines. His lecture was titled "Generational Perspectives Toward Premature Campaigning And its Perceived Influence on Voting Preferences." The primary focus of this presentation was the negative impacts of premature campaigning in Filipino elections, despite laws against doing so. Findings in this study concluded that different age groups have different perspectives on the ethics of early campaigning, with the popularity of certain candidates also playing a role in the public's perception of early campaigning. Aguilar recommended that the public be better educated about the specifics of early campaigning before reaching a definite conclusion for who to vote for.

Next was PhD candidate Chiao Li, studying at the Center for European Studies and Comparative Politics (CEE), Sciences Po Paris. Li mainly focused on voter turnout among youth, specifically during the 2019 EP election. In contrast to older generations, younger voters have a different view of civic pride, identity within the EU, and the tendency to vote based on new ideas of their place within society. Li concluded that young voters would continue to be active if their “cohort characteristics,” the uniting factors for why those within their age group are politically active, are recognised and encouraged by candidates prior to an election.

Following Li was Dr. Shalini Garg, Inspector of the Department of Cooperatives in the Government of Rajasthan, India. Her presentation was titled “Youth Led Cooperatives.” The theme of this lecture, cooperatives, refers to the common goals groups within a community can reach through democratic means. Dr. Garg outlined innovation, advocacy, capacity building, and leadership to achieve cooperative goals. Notably, the United Nations has projected 2025 to be “the year of the cooperatives,” with a prediction that more countries will meet cooperative goals. Dr. Garg concluded by stating that cooperatives can continue to thrive if members participate democratically, cooperate economically, and value independence and autonomy.

The final panel dealt with mental health. The first lecture, “A Psychodynamic Interpretation of Suicide in Young Adulthood,” was presented by psychologist and PhD student Nurdan Kozan Caki, with the University of Essex. Key points of this lecture included risk factors for suicide among youth, the vulnerability of youth during the adolescent phase, and the prevalence of suicide among young adults. Caki also spoke of personality disassociation, mental pain, and the desire to self-punish as catalysts for suicide. Caki concluded by reiterating the importance of diagnosis, prevention, and long-term

psychotherapeutic intervention for preventing suicide.

The next speaker was Erna Földvári-Uricska, ESP teacher and PhD student with Corvinus University. Her presentation, “The Coronavirus Pandemic: Challenges and the Aftermath” revolved around the changing of lexicon reflecting how individuals coped with the COVID-19 pandemic. New mediums of expression, such as virus diaries, virus memes, and virus poems were developed to relieve stress, as well as entertain. New expressions like “coronaspeak” were invented. Földvári-Uricska concluded that social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram helped youth come together and form a new lexicon based on the COVID-19 pandemic, with benefits for their mental health.

The next lecture, “Interrogating the Impact of Religious Cults on the Mental Health of Youths Involved in Zimbabwe: A Case Study of Johane Masowe Gore Jena Penyera Nyika Cult,” was presented by Crispin B. Marasha from Stellenbosch University, South Africa. The main theme of this lecture was the dark side of alternative religions, and how they can manipulate youth with pre-existing mental struggles. Marasha used the raiding of Lily Farm in Nyabira as an example, in which 251 children were rescued from a religious cult. Marasha concluded by speaking of Bronfenbrenner’s Theory, that youth may be more likely to join a cult based on their early childhood environment, and that more research is necessary to understand this.

The final speaker of the conference was Hubert Antokolski of Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland. His lecture, “Psychoactive Substances in Modern Society”, was an overview of the development and use of drugs within modern society, a notable example being the American opium epidemic of the 1880s. After a further evaluation of other countries’ drug epidemics, with varying results in preventing

abuse, Antokolski shared that sometimes overregulation of a substance can cause more problems and create more addicts. Ironically, alcohol is legal in most societies, yet possibly the most dangerous drug. This lecture concluded a productive conference, which offered hope and solutions for today's youth.

The Emerging Voices Conference concluded on a hopeful note, offering innovative solutions and strategies for youth to navigate the challenges of the modern world. Each speaker brought unique perspectives and valuable insights, making the conference a resounding success and sparking motivation for further cooperation among international actors and the Youth Research Institute.