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Hope under siege: youth precarity, far-right politics, and the colonisation of the future

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates why young people, caught in precarious conditions and facing an ostensibly canceled future, may be drawn to the far right. Adopting a qualitative-interpretive methodology, the research involved twelve university students from various academic backgrounds, with data collected through semi-structured interviews enriched by visual elicitation techniques (e.g. memes). A narrative thematic analysis identified five key categories: Future expectations amid the sociopolitical landscape; expectations and concerns about the future; impact of social expectations on success and productivity; mental health struggles amid precarity and institutional gaps; and attitudes towards social transformation and youth mobilisation. The findings reveal a pervasive sense of uncertainty, fuelled by economic insecurity, unattainable housing, and an overemphasis on hyperproductivity. As institutional structures struggle to adapt to rapid change, frustration grows, making some young people more susceptible to extremist or simplistic political solutions. At the same time, participants expressed a desire for collective engagement, highlighting the potential of local initiatives and student organisations to challenge disenchantment. Ultimately, the study underscores the importance of offering meaningful democratic projects and structural reforms to counteract the lure of the far right and reinvigorate hope in the future.

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Introduction

We are living in times of complex ideological reconfiguration in which ultraliberal and anarcho-capitalist political movements have ceased to occupy a marginal position and have instead forcefully placed themselves at the centre of debate (Betancor 2025). Appealing to emotions such as fear of those who are different, disenchantment, and nostalgia for the past, populist leaders have seized control of the present and, consequently, the future of the world. This crisis of democracy reflects a process of the extinction of the models we have built within industrial societies and nation-states (Forti 2021), leaving current political institutions overwhelmed and ill-adapted. As Davies (2015) suggests, this erosion of democratic reason is not simply ideological or institutional but affective: public life is increasingly governed by emotion rather than deliberation, especially in contexts of prolonged uncertainty and perceived threat.

There is a public opinion on the major issues of democracy, freedom, and fundamental rights in society. However, today's political institutions are incapable of listening to, collecting, representing, or even encouraging the transformation of that opinion into policies and measures that respond

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effectively and fairly to current challenges for the social majority (Renault and Vega 2025). In reality, citizens tend to be absent from all the crises unfolding around us: from the genocide in Gaza to the war in Ukraine, from Syria to Libya or the Congo, from the ecosystem and climate crisis to the economic and housing crisis, it is difficult to glimpse a hopeful long-term future. This lack of perspective contributes to a sense of vulnerability and exhaustion in the face of what appears to be the breakdown of democratic systems as we know them. The latest report by the NGO Oxfam-Intermon, *Multilateralism in an Era of Global Oligarchy*, warned that global efforts to respond to the planet's greatest challenges – such as the climate crisis and persistent levels of poverty and inequality – are being threatened by the concentration of power in the hands of the ultra-rich and mega-corporations (Oxfam 2024).

Although we find reasons for mobilisation and protest, we seem unable to find reasons to build, propose, and unite in a shared and supportive way for the common good. That is why politics is reduced to just one of its dimensions: criticism and protest or, to a large extent, to more individualistic and selfish proposals of 'every man for himself', which prevail among an ever-growing segment of the population (Rocamora Pérez and Espinar-Ruiz 2021). It is this destructive half that has managed to attract a significant number of young people who are seduced by discourses promoting extreme conservatism, racism, the return to a mythical past (when our tribe supposedly held more power than others), anti-feminism, and neoliberal ideology – including cuts to social rights. This dynamic is linked to the absence of shared responses and the exploitation of collective discontent to single out culprits (Innerarity 2024).

When the future is perceived as a closed horizon – devoid of utopias or transformative collective projects – political proposals proliferate that, instead of looking forward, offer a return to traditional values or an easy enemy on which to blame contemporary problems. To paraphrase Postman (2005), when a population is distracted by trivialities; when cultural life turns into a 'perpetual party'; when serious public conversation is reduced to a sort of childish language; when people become mere spectators and public affairs are turned into vaudeville; then democracy, politics, and the common good are in grave danger. If politics does not manage to influence our daily lives, does not connect with our concerns, does not take into account our needs or those of future generations, what purpose does it serve? What is its practical value? This is the starting situation depicted in popular culture by *The Waldo Moment*, an episode from the series *Black Mirror* (2013). In it, an animated character – born as a media joke – makes a powerful impact on a disenchanted electorate despite lacking any political or social proposals whatsoever. Eccentricity, grand gestures, frenzied 'chainsaw' maneuvers, shouting, and the ridicule of opponents characterise the current political struggle led by the far right, which has contaminated right-wing politics and, to a large extent, liberals and social democracy. We are no longer talking about diverse or conflicting ideas, but rather about personalities, where the most eccentric has the best chance of being elected (Mudde 2019) in an increasingly grotesque society of spectacle. Thus, in the face of disillusionment with traditional elites, extremist movements offer simple, emotionally charged responses: by labelling certain groups (e.g. immigrants, ethnic minorities, feminists, and/or environmental activists, among others) as external enemies, they promise to restore an allegedly lost greatness and present a strong, exclusionary identity. From this perspective, the far right has successfully harnessed the discontent generated by a voracious and predatory capitalist system, co-opting the rebellion against the system (Brown 2019; Mouffe 2018). As Slobodian (2023) argues, this convergence is not accidental: certain neoliberal factions have deliberately embraced authoritarian populism as a strategy to protect market liberalism from democratic interference, thus reinforcing the very structures that produce inequality and frustration. Its anti-establishment rhetoric nonetheless conceals the perpetuation of harmful, unjust, and unequal power structures. Consequently, individualistic and tribal responses become a way to settle scores with supposed culprits, while the appeal of authoritarian models – touted for their efficiency-continues to grow at the cost of democratic principles (Rizzi 2025).

This paper aims to delve deeper into the reasons why young people – immersed in precarious conditions and the uncertainty of a future that feels cancelled – may be drawn to far-right political discourse, examining the structural and emotional factors that fuel such affinity.

The cancellation of the future and the impossibility of imagining alternatives

In *Capitalist Realism*, Fisher (2016) argues that capitalism has created a sense of stagnation and repetition, where the future is no longer envisioned as a space of radical transformation but rather as an indefinite extension of the present. Culture, politics, and the economy seem trapped in a logic that prevents new possibilities from emerging.

This sense that the future has been cancelled arises in response to a context in which late capitalism appears as the only possible logic, and young people perceive their future as foreclosed by job insecurity, ecological crises, and the dismantling of social protections, among other factors (Adam 2023; Bazzani 2022; Hickman et al. 2021; Standing 2011). As capitalism consolidates itself as an immovable horizon, any project of radical transformation becomes utopian and unfeasible, relegating calls for change to an individual and atomised dimension (Fisher 2016; Han 2024). In this sense, the future is not erased but rather colonised, stripped of its collective potential and reframed as a personal, meritocratic quest in which each individual is expected to navigate uncertainty alone (Bazzani 2022; Pors and Kishik 2023). What is ultimately cancelled is not time itself, but hope as a shared, transformative horizon. Revolutionary projects that once inspired visions of social justice and emancipation have faded, replaced by pragmatic survival strategies and privatised aspirations. The spectre of capitalism as the 'only possible reality' (Fisher 2016) thus hijacks not only political alternatives, but the very capacity to imagine them.

For decades, schools and universities were considered a path to social mobility and progress. Today, however, skepticism abounds, as academic training no longer guarantees the opportunities of the past but instead is absorbed by an increasingly fragile job market. Different authors warn that, in this new hyper-accelerated environment, old democratic structures fail to adapt, generating a sense of institutional 'dislocation' that heightens the climate of uncertainty (Forti 2021; Innerarity 2024). This phenomenon occurs alongside the growing omnipresence of catastrophe (Fisher 2016; Han 2024), reflected in the proliferation of media narratives that reinforce the idea of permanent crisis – economic, climatic, ecological, political – thereby making it even more difficult to construct shared horizons (Han 2024). All of this crystallises into a scenario of existential precariousness that intensifies anxiety and chronic stress, especially among young people (Andersen and Pors 2023; Michael 2017).

The temporal dimension of this process is central to understanding the absence of a future. Various studies on temporality (e.g. Adam 2023; Bazzani 2022; Berardi 2019; Facer 2016) describe how young people live in a present shaped by uncertainty and the impossibility of envisioning a stable tomorrow. Material and emotional precariousness creates a rupture in the timeline: there is no past to return to, nor a promising future to strive for, which imposes an urgency to survive in a volatile present. This erosion of future imaginaries may limit not only young people's capacity for collective agency but their ability to exercise agency itself. As Emirbayer and Mische (1998) argue, agency is a temporally embedded process that involves iteration, projectivity, and practical evaluation. Without the ability to imagine alternative futures, the projective element of agency is undermined, making it more difficult for individuals to envision and act towards collective transformation (Ask and Abidin 2018; Coleman and Lyon 2023).

For those of us educating future teachers, the contradiction becomes especially acute: training new generations means projecting a future that many students perceive as already closed off. Thus, we find ourselves trying to build a present that appears to offer no hope for the future. Neoliberal productivist logic has permeated education, transforming the teaching vocation into a space of anxiety and instability (Díez Gutiérrez 2018; González-Calvo 2025), generating a 'sense of a world in ruins'. In this context, despite arguably being the 'best prepared' generation, young people find no certainties or effective channels for political participation. As Facer (2016) suggests, education retains a connection to the future; however, it must now grapple with a market that demands hyper-flexible skill sets, a present inundated with media catastrophes, and an uncertain horizon (Berardi 2019).

In this climate, the far right can appear as an escape from despair, offering simplistic, identity-based solutions to everyday frustration (Mudde 2019). With the promise of a *retrotopia* or return to an idealised past (Bauman 2017), such discourses exploit the anxiety and exhaustion of a youth that sees no democratic, institutional, or inspiring alternatives. This disillusionment reinforces the cancellation of the future (Fisher 2016) by suggesting there is no room for transformative collective projects. While some young people respond through nostalgic reaction or individualistic withdrawal, it is also important to acknowledge that far-right movements often provide a strong sense of belonging and social cohesion to those committed to the scene. These tightly knit communities offer emotional and symbolic shelter amid uncertainty, though they can become devastating for those who later attempt to leave them (Mudde 2019). Nevertheless, the literature on temporality and precariousness also identifies spaces of resistance and critical ruptures (Andersen and Pors 2023; Pors and Kishik 2023). Student activism, youth associations, and intergenerational community action can become focal points challenging the 'pragmatism' of capitalism and sowing the seeds for imagining another possible future.

Young people, particularly university students, embody the paradox of constant competition amid widespread anxiety: education, once a shield against uncertainty, is now confined by the neoliberal logic demanding meritocracy and 'entrepreneurship' while obstructing the possibility of a stable horizon (Díez Gutiérrez 2025). The result, as our study shows, is an experience marked by anxiety, loneliness, and a lack of shared reference points. Understanding this phenomenon means recognising that precariousness is not a temporary state but a structural condition that colonises time, fueling the temptation towards extremist, authoritarian solutions. At the same time, it encourages us to explore the cracks where hope and activism reinvigorate the student experience, reopening political imagination and the possibility of a future that is not cancelled. In this search for meaning and connection amid structural instability, many young people turn to digital platforms – not only to express their frustrations but also to seek belonging, recognition, and political narratives that resonate with their lived experiences. Social media platforms also play a crucial role in reinforcing this perception of a foreclosed future. For many young people, especially those experiencing precarity and social fragmentation, digital spaces become both a site of expression and a channel of radicalisation. Far-right content circulates rapidly through memes, influencer accounts, and algorithmically driven echo chambers, often appealing to emotions such as fear, resentment, or irony. These platforms do not simply disseminate extremist narratives – they foster a sense of belonging and symbolic community, especially for those who feel marginalised by mainstream institutions (Ask and Abidin 2018; Chateau 2020; Mouffe 2018). Moreover, the memetic logic of online discourse – fast, visual, and affect-laden-makes it easier for simplistic or exclusionary ideas to gain traction, sometimes without users even recognising the ideological frame they are reproducing.

Methodology

This study is part of the teaching innovation project *SPAU: Exploring the Socio-Psychological Distress of Loneliness, Precariousness, and Anxiety in University Students*, carried out at the University of Valladolid (Spain) during the 2024/2025 academic year. The research is grounded in approaches that combine visual methods, focus group techniques, and creative narrative, in line with recent work on temporality and precariousness in the fields of sociology and education (e.g. Adam 2023; Bazzani 2022; Pors and Kishik 2023).

Participants

Twelve students (7 women and 5 men) participated in the study. They were enrolled in the Bachelor's Degree in Social Education, the Bachelor's Degree in Early Childhood Education, and the Bachelor's Degree in Primary Education at the University of Valladolid, ranging in age from 19

to 24. They were selected through intentional sampling (Suri 2011) to ensure a diverse range of profiles (gender, academic background, professional motivations). All participants were informed about the study's objectives and signed an informed consent form, with their privacy and confidentiality safeguarded. Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the first author's institution (code: PI 22-1995-NO HCUV), in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

Data collection

A qualitative-interpretive design was adopted to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and expectations regarding their future and the sociopolitical conditions surrounding them. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, incorporating visual elicitation techniques (Chateau 2020; Robb, Jindal-Snape, and Levy 2020) – particularly memes and other graphic materials – to facilitate reflection and dialogue. During these semi-structured interviews, participants were asked to reflect on questions such as: What is your vision of the future – professionally, socially, and personally-? What are your professional expectations? How do you define the current working and social conditions for young people? Is there anything that worries you about your future? What do you think youth mobilisations are for? When was the last time you felt motivated to change something in your immediate surroundings? The interviews lasted between 40 and 70 min and were transcribed verbatim for data analysis. Prior to the interview, participants were asked to bring an image or meme they considered relevant to their current perception of their future. This strategy encouraged free expression and the co-construction of meaning (Julien 2022).

Data analysis

A narrative thematic analysis was conducted, an approach that allows for identifying and examining patterns or themes in the stories shared by participants (Sparkes and Smith 2014). This method combines elements of narrative analysis with a thematic focus, integrating both the explicit content and the implicit dynamics in the stories. Narrative thematic analysis enabled us not only to identify the main themes but also to delve into the affective and bodily depth underlying the narratives (Chadwick 2017). This approach values the complexity of individual narratives while revealing shared patterns that offer a more holistic view of participants' lived experiences.

Table 1 (see below) presents the categories that emerged from the narrative thematic analysis, along with the emerging themes associated with each category.

Results and discussion

We present the findings of our study according to the previously mentioned categories.

Future expectations in the sociopolitical landscape

The study participants express a broad range of emotions that mirror the sense of stagnation and 'future cancellation' described by Fisher (2016):

> I feel like society is becoming emptier by the day. They say we're the fragile generation, but in reality, we've realized everything is stacked against us, that no matter what we do, things aren't going to get any better. (L., 23)

This statement resonates with the idea that neoliberal culture does not offer horizons of change, leading young people to perceive social structures as hostile. The extreme individualism that results from the neoliberal system further intensifies feelings of loneliness and powerlessness (González-Calvo 2025):

Table 1. Narrative thematic analysis: categories and emerging themes.

Category	Emerging themes
Future expectations amid the sociopolitical landscape	Feeling of stagnation and a 'no-future' scenario Omnipresence of catastrophe and proliferation of hateful discourse
	Increased anxiety and political skepticism
	Youth vulnerability to radical and simplistic messages
Expectations and concerns about the future	Job insecurity and difficulties accessing housing
	Generational divide (academic training no longer guarantees stability)
	Meritocratic discourse called into question due to lack of opportunities
	Prolonged family dependence and 'extended childhood'
Impact of social expectations on success and productivity	Demand for hyperproductivity and competitiveness
	Constant comparison (achievements, followers, résumé)
	Pressure to achieve success at a young age
	Chronic stress and normalisation of anxiety
Mental health struggles amid precarity and institutional gaps	Lack of mental health resources at universities and in the public system
	Individual medicalisation of problems (seeking therapy without addressing structural causes)
	Self-care narratives that do not consider material conditions
	Gap between institutional discourse and real-world practice (exams, demanding schedules, etc.)
Attitudes towards social transformation and youth mobilisation	Ambivalence between skepticism and willingness to act
	Youth mobilisations as catalysts for visibility (e.g. climate activism)
	Lack of clear leadership or concrete proposals in protests
	Volunteering and student associations as avenues for small-scale change

> All this hateful discourse in the media worries me. I hear that outsiders are taking our jobs, that we women have gone too far with feminism, that scientists are scaring us with the climate issue […], and I feel like we're moving backward. (G., 24)

Such uncertainties may deepen frustration when there are no clear identity benchmarks or stable social models, adding an emotional dimension to the sense of disenchantment. All of this leads to a state of anxiety and hopelessness among participants, which can be exploited politically to channel collective frustration towards vulnerable groups (Brown 2019):

> The news is more negative every day, and it seems designed only to make us feel bad, to make us appreciate just being alive one more day and feel lucky with what we have right now, because tomorrow there'll be nothing left […]. They talk about precariousness, the climate crisis, wars … How can we not be depressed and anxious? […] At least they try to tell us who's to blame for all of this and whom we should fight against. (M. C., 21)

This concern relates to the omnipresence of catastrophe (Fisher 2016; Han 2024). When the media narrative reinforces a vision of constant collapse, collective paralysis intensifies:

> They keep repeating that we won't live like our parents did, that we won't have pensions, security, or stable jobs … It's like we're doomed. (M., 24)

> I don't know what is expected of us (young people) or what we can do to improve things, to leave a legacy built on sustainability and prosperity […]. I feel like we've lost our way as a community, along with our critical sense of what's important and necessary. (J. E., 19)

> It seems to me that the political situation is just a repetitive cycle, where it doesn't matter who's in power – nothing really changes, and people's problems remain the same. (J., 19)

These excerpts underscore the crisis of meaning and the perceived lack of direction felt by young people. As Fisher (2016) suggests, *capitalist realism* has blocked the capacity to imagine collective alternatives, leaving society in a state of uncertainty and disorientation. This sense of lost direction is central to understanding why the far right can capitalise on youth disenchantment, offering simplistic narratives that appeal to the supposed restoration of a lost 'idyllic' order (Bauman 2017).

In this regard, the 'over-diagnosed' democratic crisis fosters a perception of collapse (Forti 2021; Innerarity 2024), suggesting that institutions have fallen behind in adapting to rapid social and

technological changes. When everything seems to project a bleak vision of the future, pessimism takes hold more firmly. This feeling of a 'canceled future' (Fisher 2016) is a key factor in young people's distress, serving as fertile ground for the 'siren calls' of certain far-right groups.

Expectations and concerns about the future

Job insecurity, difficulty accessing housing, and the realisation that educational degrees do not guarantee social mobility are recurring themes among our participants:

> Even if you study, work hard, do internships […], everything is so saturated that you might end up in a job unrelated to what you studied and poorly paid. (M. C., 21)

This experience illustrates what Berardi (2019) describes as the 'cognitive precariat': the paradox of training and working intensely, only to end up in precarious or undervalued positions, leading to disappointment and frustration:

> I'm afraid that even with a university degree and good grades, I won't achieve job security. I feel everything is against me, from low salaries to impossible rental costs. (M. S., 24)

> Even if I get good grades, I feel that entering the job market has more to do with contacts and luck than with genuine effort. (J., 19)

The above statements highlight the crisis of meritocracy (Brown 2019). The perception that professional success depends less on equal opportunity or fair results and more on personal connections reinforces distrust in the system and fuels feelings of injustice. This paradox is reinforced by what Mijs (2019) describes as a meritocratic illusion: in societies with high levels of inequality, people are more likely to attribute success or failure to individual effort rather than structural factors, which deepens the emotional toll on those who feel left behind despite their hard work. Such frustration can lead to rejection of mainstream politics and a turn towards authoritarian extremist (Mudde 2019).

Precarity contributes to the breakdown of traditional institutions, which struggle to adapt to a hyper-accelerated reality (Forti 2021). The world that industrial democracies inhabited is fading, leaving young people more vulnerable. A generational divide emerges, echoing our earlier category: whereas academic qualifications once reliably ensured upward mobility, now there are no guarantees of social progress – even with accumulating degrees and certificates. This situation fuels young people's sense of powerlessness and injustice (Fraser 2010) and, in some cases, such as the one below, leads them to seek simplistic explanations:

> I've seen people practically kill themselves studying and working – I mean almost literally-. But in spite of everything, without connections or money, they don't make progress. […]. I feel like everything is rigged. (P., 23)

Official meritocratic discourse shatters under the weight of reality (Brown 2019; González-Calvo 2025). These shattered expectations echo what Berlant (2011) defines as *cruel optimism*: the persistence of affective attachments to aspirations – such as professional stability or autonomy – that are structurally blocked, yet continue to organise desire and identity. When effort alone is not enough, there is a growing temptation to accept narratives blaming 'others' (e.g. immigrants, women, etc.) for one's own precarious situation:

> With how expensive everything is – despite living in a city that's neither big nor expensive – I have no idea when I'll be able to move out on my own. I feel like a perpetual teenager because I can't even imagine building my own life. And I don't know whose fault this is: the system's, or the people who come from elsewhere to rob those of us who were born here, or … But I don't care. What I really want to know is whether there will ever be a solution. (G., 24)

Participants see themselves as facing a very real difficulty in progressing towards an independent, fulfilling adult life. If this difficulty is self-attributed (e.g. 'I am incapable') or blamed on an

anonymous, shapeless 'system', or if the focus is placed solely on looking for personal or collective 'culprits' among the most marginalised groups, the deeper structural causes become obscured. This dynamic reinforces racist narratives promoted by the far right, while also intensifying the sense of personal powerlessness, giving the impression that the 'system is rigged' and there is no way out (Innerarity 2024). The result is greater frustration, rather than sustainable solutions rooted in transformative political action.

Impact of social expectations on success and productivity

The narratives include references to the worship of extreme productivity and competitiveness – factors that shape the current neoliberal capitalist system and from which young people are not exempt (González-Calvo 2025; Han 2015; Mavelli 2024):

> On social media, you see people who, at 20 years old, claim to own businesses, travel the world, speak multiple languages perfectly, and be entrepreneurs. They make you feel like you're running late for everything, that you're not good enough. (J. E., 19)

> Today, a lot of young people suffer from depression and anxiety because we live in an on-demand society, where there's no patience and everything has to happen instantly. That means people who need more time or aren't as fast get anxious about achieving their goals. (A., 19)

Capitalist logic imposes a never-ending race towards success (Zafra 2017, 2021), fuelled by the aesthetic and aspirational expectations of social media and other media outlets. This situation leads to constant stress that undermines mental health (Han 2015; Zafra 2021), while reinforcing the notion that failure is almost an individual choice – a personal failing:

> I've been to therapy for anxiety. They demand everything: good grades, a master's degree, language skills, work experience […]. All this, for what? How can you do it all without going crazy?' (M. C., 21)

The requirement to maximise one's capabilities, push past personal limits, and constantly perform leads to anxiety, depression, and chronic stress (Berardi 2019; Moreno 2018):

> It's like everything in life is a competition. Who has better grades, who has more achievements, who has more followers? […] If you're not part of that game, you're out of the system; you don't count. (A., 19)

This competitiveness further fractures social mediation structures (Forti 2021), complicating the building of shared interests and widening the gap between individualised success and collective well-being. As a result, unemployment, precarious work, and uncertainty about future job prospects and professional stability fill psychiatric waiting rooms instead of fueling union membership.

Mental health struggles amid precarity and institutional gaps

Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge the need for comprehensive well-being, particularly in a capitalist social system. In a society oversaturated with superficial stimuli, fleeting relationships, unfulfilled expectations, and constant pressure to produce, self-actualise, and succeed, mental health is an increasingly prominent and necessary element in a holistic approach to both human and societal development. Indeed, mental health emerges repeatedly in the accounts we gathered. On the one hand, participants note that it is a topic of more frequent discussion today; on the other, they point to a lack of resources and structural solutions:

> These days, there's a lot of talk about mental health and how mental health problems among young people are on the rise. […]. I waited months for an appointment with a public healthcare psychologist, and in the end, I had to pay for a private psychologist. (L., 23)

This participant's comment highlights the growing demand for psychological support and, at the same time, the weakness of a healthcare system unable to meet that demand. In this regard,

there is a pressing need for government policies that can strengthen public services (Brown 2019; McNamara, Barondeau, and Brown 2024).

Within the capitalist framework, mental health is often treated as a personal issue, disregarding the systemic causes of distress (Davies 2021):

> It's pointless to tell us to take care of ourselves if there are no working or social conditions that allow it. It seems like the solution is for everyone to fend for themselves however they can. (G., 24)

Transformative action should involve questioning the competitive logic underpinning both education and work (Zafra 2021). It is not enough to merely mention mental health while upholding structures based on hyperproductivity and the individual management of distress (González-Calvo 2025; Han 2015; Zafra 2021), as such structures ultimately undermine social cohesion and deepen individualism.

This emotional burden, often framed as a matter of individual mental health, aligns with what Davies (2015, 2019) describes as the neoliberal turn towards governing through affect: a regime in which psychological well-being becomes a site of political management and personal failure. Rather than addressing systemic causes, emotional suffering is internalised and medicalised, reinforcing the logic of self-responsibilisation. This is closely related to what Berlant (2011) calls *cruel optimism*.

> People talk more and more about mental health, but what we really need isn't just to be heard; we need the conditions that cause our anxiety to change. (J., 19)

This statement underscores the gap between the growing awareness of mental health issues and the lack of structural reforms. Thus, for young people themselves, the solution does not lie solely in individually addressing anxiety and depression, but rather in challenging the very system that creates them.

Attitudes towards social transformation and youth mobilisation

In addition to uncertainty and emotional strain, participants explored their willingness to effect change in their immediate surroundings and their views on the role of youth mobilisations. Overall, their responses revealed a mix of skepticism and a certain desire for action:

> The last time I felt like changing something was when they wouldn't let us voice our concerns at the faculty about our practicum load. I found it unfair and, even though I spoke with classmates, it all came to nothing. We're afraid to complain for fear they'll lower our grades or not let us do our internships. (E., 20)

This attitude reflects, on one hand, a desire to improve conditions in their educational environment and, on the other, a fear of reprisals that ultimately inhibits activism. Using Fisher's (2016) framework, this can be seen as another manifestation of capitalist realism: the perception that protesting will not change anything and could even have negative consequences for the individual.

On the other hand, the idea of mobilisation as a catalyst for visibility can help reignite democratic passion and pressure political institutions to respond to specific demands (Mouffe 2018):

> I think mobilizations are necessary to show that young people aren't as asleep as people say. […] When hundreds of young people take to the streets to protest for climate action or the housing crisis, it shows we're not as passive as they claim. (M. C., 21)

Although some participants acknowledge the symbolic value of protest, they question its effectiveness, possibly indicating the difficulty of imagining collective actions resulting in real change:

> I've sometimes wanted to join demonstrations, but I feel they're not all that effective. There's a lack of leaders or clear proposals. Even so, I think it's a first step to show we're not satisfied. (P., 23)

This absence of projects that ignite hope can lead to isolated protests without a strategic long-term framework. Other participants are more convinced of the potential for change through youth associations:

> I'd like to get involved in volunteer projects or student associations. I think even if it's on a small scale, we can make a difference for young people; for instance, by demanding paid internships or more scholarships. (H., 19)

This perspective points towards local, concrete engagement as a way to combat inertia. The aggregation of micro-initiatives combined with collective momentum may pave the way for new counter-hegemonic forms of organisation (Fraser 2010). From participants' responses, it appears that the cancellation of the future (Fisher 2016) has not entirely extinguished their desire to influence reality. Nevertheless, feelings of powerlessness and a lack of effective participation structures weaken their confidence that these efforts can translate into tangible changes (Berardi 2019). Even so, we see hopeful testimonials among some participants:

> I'd like to emphasize that although I alone can't change the world, I can contribute my small part whenever necessary. If everyone did that, we'd live in a much fairer world. (J., 19)

This view aligns with the notion that we must rebuild structures of solidarity and collective organisation (Fraser 2010). While this participant recognises that their individual impact is limited, the emphasis on collective effort underscores the importance of community participation in counteracting the isolation and fragmentation promoted by neoliberalism (Brown 2019).

Reflections

The aim of our study has been to understand the reasons why young people – immersed in precarious conditions and the uncertainty of a cancelled future – can feel drawn to far-right political discourse, focusing on the structural and emotional factors that foster this affinity. We have observed how the participants in this study waver between uncertainty and the quest for meaning that might address their social and psychological distress.

As we saw at the outset, *The Waldo Moment* episode of *Black Mirror* (2013) depicts a political scene dominated by a character who, at first glance, is merely a media joke. However, its success is rooted in collective anger and disenchantment; precisely the forces which, from the vantage point of capitalist realism (Fisher 2016), create fertile ground for those in the far-right or neo-fascist spheres (Díez Gutiérrez 2022) to attract young people desperate for certainty in a highly uncertain world. The rise of far-right movements can be understood, in part, as a consequence of the absence of alternative political projects capable of addressing the demands of a youth whose future horizons have been snatched away. At the same time, job insecurity, uncertainty, loneliness, and an ongoing string of crises generate a climate of discontent and anger (Forti 2021; Moreno 2018; Pors and Kishik 2023).

Much like Waldo's proposals, in real life the ideological stances of far-right politics rely more on spectacle and hostility than on actual solutions. They feed on the pain of a generation that sees its future as blocked, selling the illusion that mockery and empty disruption are enough to change the situation – or at least to channel one's anger. But as participants' accounts reveal, such grandstanding lasts only as long as an outburst of rage; ultimately, precariousness, anxiety, and the absence of real alternatives resurface, confirming what Brown (2019) calls the lack of emancipatory projects. This reinforces the concept of a cancelled future (Fisher 2016) and the temptation of retrotopia (Bauman 2017): young people who join these far-right proposals tend to cling to an idealised past as an alternative to a precarious present and a future devoid of promise, which, rather than correcting systemic inequality, merely fuels authoritarianism and social division (Rizzi 2025). This attachment, though emotionally compelling, mirrors what Berlant (2011) calls *cruel optimism*: a relation in which individuals remain bound to fantasies of stability and restoration that ultimately obstruct their flourishing. In this context, far-right narratives offer a form of hope that is affectively potent but structurally damaging, reinforcing the very conditions of disempowerment they claim to resolve. As Davies (2019) argues, this emotional logic is not incidental but central to how neoliberal democracies increasingly operate, by privileging affect over deliberation and managing collective anxiety through fear and polarisation, rather than through structural transformation.

However, Waldo's cynicism and frivolity are not the only influences. The voices of young people also underscore their determination to rise above resignation: they long for a future that reclaims empathy, collective care, and the promise of genuine transformation. Although they contend with rigid structures and a present overwhelmed by catastrophes (Adam 2023; Berardi 2019), their drive to mobilise – through climate activism, housing protests, or solidarity initiatives – demonstrates that paralysis and despair are not the only possible outcomes. These cracks in capitalist realism highlight, as Mouffe (2018) notes, the potential for democratic passion to reignite political imagination.

Ultimately, the tension between Waldo's dangerous, absolutist drift and youth mobilisation echoes the heartbeat of our era. If reality is reduced to a sarcastic spectacle that entertains but does not transform, we risk fully capitulating to the logic of no-future (Bazzani 2022; Fisher 2016). Conversely, if young people's critical energy can be channeled into effective participatory networks, the cracks in the present may lead towards a tomorrow that restores the value of the commons and the power of hope. Examples such as climate justice coalitions (e.g. Fridays for Future, Extinction Rebellion Youth, Youth Climate Movement), student union movements demanding institutional reform ('La marea universitaria', National Union of Students, #Fees-MustFall), or local solidarity networks built during the COVID-19 crisis (see Andersen and Pors 2023; Coleman and Lyon 2023; Mouffe 2018) illustrate how such participatory structures can reclaim democratic agency and counter feelings of isolation or fatalism. From this hopeful perspective, higher education must rethink its goals and its logic through the lens of a 'pedagogy of hope': not just training students to participate in a rapidly changing society and job market, but also equipping them to respond collectively and empathetically to the social, political, economic, cultural, and environmental challenges shaping young people's present. If the far right has managed to capitalise on frustration and a lack of expectations, it becomes imperative to reopen political imagination and, from teaching and critical reflection, offer horizons that acknowledge precariousness and discontent while working towards a shared future rooted in solidarity, social justice, and the common good. Making room for hope and commitment is not naive; it is necessary in order to counteract resignation and cynicism. Only then can young people be reassured that another world remains possible.

Ethical compliance statement

This work adheres to all relevant ethical guidelines. All participants were informed about the study's objectives and signed an informed consent form, with their privacy and confidentiality safeguarded. Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the first author's institution (code: PI 22-1995-NO HCUV), in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data availability statement

All data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

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