

## YOUTH UNDER SIEGE: DIGITAL MIGRATION PANIC, RIGHT-WING POLITICS, AND THE RADICALIZATION OF MARGINALIZED IDENTITIES

In this article, I developed the concept of Digital Migration Panic (DMP) to explain how far-right actors use digital platforms to spread migration fears and exclusionary narratives. Focusing on Finland, it links debates on youth, digital media, racism, bullying, and radicalization, showing how algorithmic amplification and moral panics increase vulnerabilities among young people from immigrant and Finnish backgrounds. Racism and bullying deepen marginalization and make young individuals more vulnerable to extremist recruitment. By framing immigrants as threats, far-right discourse fuels polarization in digital platforms. The article calls for media literacy, inclusive education, and cross-sector collaboration to counter DMP and protect youth from radicalization.

Keywords: youth, digital migration panic, digital space, racism, radicalization, far-right politics, disinformation

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### Introduction

Youth is defined as the transition from a dependent childhood to independent adulthood, during which young people shift from a comparatively stable developmental phase to one characterized by choices and risks (Eurostat 2009, 17; Perović 2016). The rise of internet use, smartphones, and social media has significantly altered society and everyday life in a short period, creating a new environment for young individuals to participate in novel activities, communicate with each other, exert influence, and form connections. This change has also influenced their identities and stimulated social change. The relationship between youth and digital technology is multifaceted (boyd 2014) and is frequently framed through narratives of moral panic (Drotner 1999). Cohen (2004) defines moral panics as situations in which a condition, individual, or group is constructed as a threat to dominant social norms and values, a conceptualization that continues to inform contemporary analyses (Adams & Behl 2023). Moreover, far-right groups instrumentalize such forms of panic by deploying anti-migration rhetoric and accentuating security concerns through strategic media framing (Kollias, Kountouri, & Kalamanti, 2025). Additionally, they utilize digital spaces to disseminate conspiracy narratives and circulate radical and extremist ideological content (Sengul 2025). Nowadays, social media enables far-right groups to engage with young people in novel ways, illustrating how these organizations exploit digital platforms to disseminate conspiracy theories and misinformation, thereby shaping youth beliefs and attitudes (Morozova et al. 2024). As noted by Simi and Futrell (2015), individuals aged 15–25 are most likely to support far-right ideologies. Furthermore, the article also recognizes that categorical nationalism has gained significant traction among youth, a phenomenon that, as Mudde (2014) explains, reinforces the racialized divide between “us” and “the other”, a dynamic central to right-wing populism. Today’s youth have broad access to the internet and regularly participate in social networking activities across diverse social media platforms and devices. This is a trend that hate groups leverage through “digital racism” (Ekman 2024) to spread their propaganda (Harriman et al. 2020) against immigrants.

In this article, I introduce the concept of Digital Migration Panic (DMP), which I define as the digitally mediated production of anxieties and hostilities surrounding migration that shape the everyday lives of immigrant people by positioning them both as targets of racism and bullying and

as potential participants in reproducing exclusionary narratives. I will elaborate on the term more thoroughly within its broader theoretical context, showing that exposure to DMP not only exacerbates vulnerabilities to psychological harm but also heightens the risk of radicalization, as youth navigate digital spaces where identities, prejudices, and political ideologies are negotiated.

The article offers insights into youth radicalization, which has become an escalating concern across Europe (Campelo et al. 2018) and is increasingly viewed as an antagonistic threat in the Nordic region (Ekwall 2010; Ekwall & Lantz, 2012; Nord-Forsk 2023), particularly in Finland. Radicalization refers to the process through which individuals adopt extreme political, social, or religious beliefs that may culminate in acts of violence (Doosje et al. 2016; Misiak et al. 2019). A 2021 report by Save the Children Finland highlights that extremist movements are actively recruiting young people online and that incidents of violent radicalization and related activities have risen both in digital and offline contexts (Zogg et al. 2021). Consequently, the article aims to analyze how youth are under siege within the context of digital migration panic. Methodologically, the article adopts a literature review approach, synthesizing existing research on youth, digital media, racism, bullying, and radicalization to establish DMP as a new analytical lens. The focus is therefore conceptual, aiming to demonstrate how right-wing digital narratives and racist rhetoric influence the lived experiences of both local and immigrant youth in Finland.

### Trends in Youth Demographics and the Rise of Using Digital Communication in Finland

Globally, there are over 1.2 billion young individuals aged 15 to 24 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2015). Within the European Union, this population comprises approximately 73 million people (Eurostat 2022), while the Nordic region accounts for about 6.2 million (Nordic Statistics 2025). In Finland, young people make up 31.6% of the total population (State Youth Council, 2023). The demographic landscape in Finland is increasingly marked by a growing presence of young people from diverse backgrounds, with a significant increase in the number of second-generation immigrants. Data from the Finnish National Youth Council and Youth Sector (FYCS) (n.d.) indicate that in 2021, approximately 97,000 individuals aged 15 to 29 in Finland identified as having a foreign background, underscoring the evolving multicultural nature of Finnish society.

Mobile communication and internet usage are also on the rise, particularly among young individuals. In Finland, nearly all 16–24-year-olds (98 %) as well as 25–34-year-olds (97%) use the internet several times a day (Official Statistics of Finland 2020). Collectively, these figures highlight the deeply embedded role of mobile and digital technologies in the everyday lives of young Finns.

### Digital Migration Panic: Far-Right Exploitation of Fear in Liquid Modernity

Digital spaces not only mediate but also magnify social fears around migration. Zygmunt Bauman's theory of liquid modernity helps explain why such fears resonate strongly in the digital age. In liquid modern societies, identities, relationships, and social structures are fluid, unstable, and constantly reshaped by globalization and technological change (Bauman 2000). This instability produces widespread insecurity and a longing for fixed boundaries (Bauman 2000). Furthermore, Bauman conceptualizes the so-called "migration panic" as a politically constructed moral panic. Media, political discourse, and sensational headlines frame migration as an existential threat, portraying refugees and migrants as harbingers of societal collapse, which fuels intense but short-lived moral alarm that ultimately fades into fatigue (Bauman 2015; 2016). Although migration has long been a feature of modernity, in liquid modern societies, it has become a symbol of chaos and unpredictability. While certain capitalist sectors may benefit from cheap migrant labor, citizens already grappling with social fragility perceive migrants as further undermining their economic and existential security (Bauman 2015). The resulting "crisis of humanity" emerges from fear-driven politics that prioritize exclusion over empathy (Bauman 2016; Davis & Campbell 2017).

Moreover, digital environments exacerbate these dynamics: by highlighting the fragility of human life and our collective vulnerability, the presence of displaced individuals reminds us of our own insecurities, intensifying hostility rather than compassion (Macaulay 2017). Recent scholarship confirms that such ontological fears endure, while new digital-era anxieties, such as surveillance, data manipulation, and algorithmic instability, have emerged and interact with migration fears in complex ways (Matera & Matera 2022).

As a result of the above discussion, I define Digital Migration Panic (DMP) in this context as the digitally mediated moral panic in which far-right actors exploit migration-related fears to construct exclusionary narratives that portray immigrants as

existential threats. Far-right actors exploit this uncertainty by offering simplistic narratives of cultural purity and national homogeneity, narratives that particularly appeal to youth navigating precarious social conditions.

### Immigration, Populism, and the Rise of Anti-Immigration Discourse in Finland

In the early 2000s, immigration discourse in Finland changed significantly due to the rise of the Finns Party (*Perussuomalaiset*). Founded in 1995, the populist party promotes a strong anti-immigration agenda, amplifying exclusionary attitudes and pushing mainstream politicians to engage more directly with immigration issues (Keskinen 2009; Lähdesmäki & Saresma 2014). By the 2010s, nationalist and anti-immigrant activism had gained significant visibility within Finnish society, reflecting a broader European trend marked by the proliferation of right-wing populist movements and rhetoric (Wilson & Hainsworth 2012; Wodak & KhosraviNik 2013; Wodak 2015). Finnish debates on immigration thus draw heavily upon transnational discourses that exhibit strikingly similar patterns across national contexts (Wodak 2019).

A pivotal moment in these developments occurred during the 2015 "refugee crisis," when Finland received nearly 32,500 asylum applications, nearly nine times more than the previous year (European Migration Network 2016). This sudden increase intensified public anxieties, fueled political disputes, and coincided with a 52% rise in hate crimes, mostly targeting Muslims (Tihveräinen 2016). Simultaneously, online platforms became key spaces for racist and xenophobic discourse (Awan 2014; Horsti 2017; Merrill & Åkerlund 2018). Research shows recurring patterns in these discourses, with migrants often framed as burdens, criminals, or threats, in line with theories of "othering" (Wodak 2019). Empirical analyses of online discussions in 2015 further demonstrate the dominance of hostile sentiment, with roughly 80% of messages expressing anti-immigrant views (Lahti 2022). Together, these dynamics illustrate how political mobilization around migration, the refugee crisis, and far-right narratives have contributed to increasingly polarized public debates in Finland and beyond.

### Racism, Bullying, and Discrimination Faced by Youth in Finland

Finland is widely recognized as a welfare state, known for its robust social security systems, high-quality healthcare, and strong educational

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institutions, which contribute to its citizens' high living standards (Jungerstam & Wentjärvi 2019). The country consistently ranks high in global happiness and quality of life indices, reflecting the effectiveness of its welfare policies (Helliwell et al. 2024). However, Finland faces significant challenges related to racism, bullying, and discrimination. In 2018, a survey by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) ranked Finland as one of the most racist countries in Europe. According to the EU Kids Online survey (2020), approximately 40% of young people in Finland had witnessed online bullying or hate speech (Smahel et al., 2020). According to Kuusio and others (2024), the National Study on the Health, Welfare and Services of the Foreign-Born Population found that nearly 42% of people with foreign backgrounds in Finland reported experiencing discrimination in 2021.

In Finland, racism has also evolved beyond skin color and ethnic background (Nurmi 2019), which the young people are likewise facing. In a recent survey by the Finnish Red Cross, 82% of young people aged between 15–24 living in Finland had witnessed or experienced racism against themselves or others (Turja 2024). Individuals within the 15–19 age group with immigrant backgrounds face more significant discrimination than their peers with Finnish backgrounds (Myllyniemi 2017, 54). The 2023 School Health Survey in Finland reveals that the number of children bullied in school at least once a week is increasing (EDUFI 2023). Toiviainen, Hyytiä and Kuusipalo (2020) reveal that young people experienced discriminative bullying both at school and during free time: in basic education in 8th and 9th grade the share was 26%, in the first two years of upper secondary school it was 12%, and in vocational college (university of applied sciences) 13%, showing the problematic scenario faced by this specific age group in Finland.

The consequences of racism and discrimination can have very damaging effects on youth, increasing feelings of isolation, exclusion, and marginalization (Kolstrein & Jofre 2013; Toiviainen et al. 2020). The marginalization of young people involves being left out of societal structures and experiencing a build-up of various factors that contribute to marginalization. As per Mellor (1997), young people who experience such incidents may remain anxious about their recurrence and feel powerless to prevent them. Such incidents can profoundly impact the well-being of the child and youth (Berman & Paradies 2008; Elias & Paradies 2016; Trent et al. 2019). In Finland, much of the discussion related to racism and bullying focuses

on society as a whole rather than specifically on schools. There is limited research on how these issues affect youth in school settings (Souto 2011: 16; Zacheus et al. 2019). A recent study by Miklikowska and others (2023) on young people shows that experiencing racism and bullying can increase the risk of radicalization.

### Digital Space as a Site of Disinformation and Racism

Digital space refers to the environment in which people interact or communicate through digital technologies, encompassing virtual reality, online databases, media content, and social platforms (Benyon 2014; Scheffer 2024). Referring to more than a mere infrastructure, digital space highlights the communicative practices and social dynamics embedded within cultural and power structures (Sassen 2002).

As such, digital platforms have become critical arenas for examining issues of racism and migration. Online spaces facilitate both community-building and the reproduction of exclusionary attitudes, with racism increasingly manifesting in digital environments (Daniels 2013). In multicultural contexts, these platforms amplify public debates on migration, often reinforcing hostility toward marginalized groups (Farkas et al. 2018; Ekman 2019). Mediated representations in digital media frequently outweigh objective reality (Tharib 2023), as their broad reach shapes public perceptions and political discourse (Strömbäck 2008; Street 2021).

Alongside these dynamics, digital platforms are increasingly exploited for disinformation campaigns. Unlike traditional propaganda, modern disinformation uses personal data to craft highly targeted messages that bypass resistance, thereby undermining individual autonomy, deepening polarization, and eroding social trust (Clemons et al. 2025).

### TikTok's Dual Role in the Digital Space: An Example

TikTok, since its launch in 2016, has become a dominant short-form video platform prized for its filters, music, and engaging interface. As of 2025, the platform records approximately 2.2 billion monthly users, with 27.2% aged 18–24 and 39.7% aged 25–34 (Duarte 2025). However, the platform has also been misused to disseminate extremist content, particularly anti-refugee and far-right narratives that depict migrants, especially people of color, as inherently violent (Ekman 2019;

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Özdüzen et al. 2023; Gruzd 2024). Such content is often reposted from white nationalist sources as white supremacist messages like “Europe for the Europeans”, enabled by the platform’s short “snackable” video format and misleading slideshows that mischaracterize political discourse (O’Connor 2021; Özdüzen et al. 2023).

Research further reveals that TikTok’s algorithmic recommendation system actively amplifies radical content by reinforcing engagement through trending hashtags and personalized feeds (Boeker & Urman 2022). These algorithmic dynamics accelerate polarization, pushing users toward increasingly extreme content aligned with their interests. Additionally, extremist groups have targeted younger audiences with propaganda, such as “jihadi lover” messaging, exploiting TikTok’s youth-focused culture (Scheuble & Oezmen 2022). This highlights TikTok’s dual role as a vehicle for entertainment and as a catalyst for radicalization in the digital space, demanding sustained scrutiny and policy intervention.

### Digital Pathways to Radicalization: Youth Vulnerabilities and Online Recruitment

Social media has created a global online space that fosters connections, but which also serves as a platform for discrimination, hate speech, and racism. Moreover, social media have become a tool for extremist groups to recruit members (Etumnu et al. 2023). Young people today navigate rapid and complex global, social, and economic changes. Experiences of poverty, exclusion, inequality, and marginalization further heighten their susceptibility to extremist narratives (Mok et al. 2018). As a result, young adults are frequently targeted by radical groups for recruitment (Aiello et al. 2018; Wong et al. 2019). Radical groups display their work as social movements that aim for fundamental change and pursue it through direct action and high-risk strategies, sometimes including violence, in order to achieve their objectives (Cross and Snow 2011). To sustain these efforts, they often target young people for recruitment. Today’s radical recruiters utilize digital technologies, employing the internet and social media rather than traditional face-to-face interactions (Sugihartati, Suyanto & Sirry 2020).

Radical groups are using various features of digital environments, including gaming culture, social media campaigns, memes, and short-form videos, to expand their reach. Social media platforms, in particular, provide significant structural advantages such as low-threshold accessibility, vast audience exposure, limited regulatory over-

sight, and rapid dissemination of content (Scheuble & Oezmen 2022). As a result, extremist communication, recruitment, and propaganda strategies have migrated into diverse domains, ranging from mainstream social networks and chat forums to websites and the darknet (Weimann 2016). At the same time, gaming and livestreaming platforms have emerged as fertile ground for extremist mobilization (Schlegel 2021). Platforms such as Steam, Discord, DLive, and Twitch offer relatively unregulated spaces where far-right communities gather, interact, and disseminate propaganda (Allchorn & Orofino 2025).

Young individuals who experience racism, bullying, or discrimination on digital platforms may become primary targets of online recruitment efforts. According to a report by Save the Children Finland (2021), the recruitment of young people in Finland predominantly occurs through digital means, including social media, online gaming environments, and dark web forums, as well as through direct interpersonal contact (Zogg et al. 2021). The report further notes that recruitment efforts often employ visual media, humor, the dissemination of conspiracy narratives, and grooming practices as mechanisms for attracting and influencing young people. Additionally, other young people who perceive immigrants as a symbolic threat due to right-wing narratives may also find themselves targeted by these recruitment strategies. A symbolic threat emerges when members of the host society view immigrants as fundamentally different from themselves in terms of values, culture, language, religion, morals, worldview, or lifestyle (Croucher 2017; Nshom 2021). Extremist organizations concentrate their propaganda and recruitment efforts on those young people, as this developmental stage renders them especially susceptible to external social influences. Furthermore, structural constraints, limited opportunities, and widespread feelings of hopelessness may drive young people to find alternative ways to seek meaning and belonging, where extremist ideologies can take hold (Zogg et al. 2021), and recruiters view those chances as an opportunity for recruitment.

Besides this, several previous studies show that radical recruiters also use social media to spread radical religious ideologies and the recruitment of young people (Sugihartati, Suyanto & Sirry 2020). Recent developments highlight growing concern over the online radicalization of young women, particularly through grooming for jihadist causes and, in some cases, recruitment for travel to Daesh-controlled territories (Shaban 2020). Research indicates that extremist actors deliberately

exploit gender-specific vulnerabilities, such as experiences of discrimination (both online and offline), the desire for belonging or sisterhood, and insecurities tied to identity and sexuality (Scheuble & Oezmen 2022). These dynamics illustrate how extremist groups strategically exploit economic, social, psychological, and gender-based vulnerabilities within online society. This manipulation transforms social media from a mere platform for entertainment and communication into a pivotal digital space for the ideological grooming and recruitment associated with radicalization.

## Conclusions

This article argues that young people today face unique vulnerabilities shaped by the digital era, particularly through far-right online narratives of identity, belonging, and migration, which create and feed into digital migration panic. The rapid growth of online communication has made youth particularly prone to extremist influence, as far-right actors strategically weaponize digital platforms to frame immigrants as threats, intensifying “us” versus “them” divisions, and normalizing exclusionary politics. Algorithmic recommendation systems further intensify these dynamics by amplifying radical content, directing users toward increasingly extreme material, and deepening patterns of polarization (Marino et al. 2024). These narratives not only distract youth from constructive civic engagement but also expose them to pathways of radicalization. Young people who experience discrimination, bullying, or racism in Finnish society may find themselves marginalized, which increases their risk of becoming targets for extremist recruitment. Thus, Digital Migration Panic serves as both a political tool and a catalyst for societal conflict in a highly digitalized era.

To address these challenges, greater emphasis must be placed on strengthening media literacy, fostering critical thinking, and ensuring inclusive education that equips young people to recognize and resist extremist narratives. In Finland, the Ministry of the Interior published a National Action Plan for the Prevention of Violent Radicalization and Extremism in 2019, while the Ministry of Education has issued guidelines and manuals for preventing violent radicalization within schools and other educational institutions. However, these guidelines do not provide specific measures for identifying and preventing harm for young people on digital platforms. Furthermore, the recent hardening of political rhetoric in Finland, along with recurrent use of racist language by right-wing politicians, is likewise affecting young peo-

ple by deepening social divisions. In either case, the consequences are harmful, underscoring the need for greater responsibility and awareness in political discourse.

For this reason, policymakers, educators, and civil society actors must work collaboratively to create safer digital environments, promote intercultural dialogue, create local and international networks, build trust, and support marginalized youth in order to reduce their vulnerability to radicalization and counteract the divisive effects of digital migration panic. Moreover, there remains a pressing need for more detailed, interdisciplinary research on this emerging issue to inform evidence-based policy and practice.

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