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When the Future Feels Foreclosed: AI Resignation and the Power to Act

Jan-Philipp Siebold | Annemarie Witschas | Rainer Mühlhoff

Institut für Kognitionswissenschaft, Universität Osnabrück, Osnabrück, Germany

Correspondence: Jan-Philipp Siebold (jan.siebold@uni-osnabrueck.de)

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ABSTRACT

This article develops the concept of 'AI resignation' to capture how young people encounter AI not only as a helpful or flawed tool, but as an overpowering and seemingly inevitable force that can foreclose their sense of political and personal power to act in relation to the future. Building on qualitative work with high school students in Germany (ages 15–18), we conceptualize AI resignation as a future-oriented sensibility that emerges at the intersection of pervasive data-driven infrastructures and hegemonic narratives of AI inevitability. Drawing on Foucault's late work on subjectivation and subjectivity, as well as extensions in media and affect theory, we identify four contradictory pulls that structure adolescents' everyday engagements with AI—between enthusiasm and dependency, effortless access and eroded learning, self-governance and repeated failure, aspiration and foreclosed futures—and show how these double binds gradually hollow out experiences of self-efficacy. We further argue that AI resignation fulfils a strategic affective function within digital capitalism: by naturalizing dependence on predictive AI infrastructures and normalizing diminished expectations of the power to act, it stabilizes the very sociotechnical structures that produce it. The article concludes by outlining implications for re-politicizing AI and education, emphasizing power-critical curricula and collective spaces of reflection that enable young people to meaningfully participate in shaping sociotechnical futures.

1 | Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) has become a defining motif in contemporary debates about the future. Whether in politics, the media, or educational practice, AI is invoked as both a promise and a threat: for some, a transformative driver of innovation; for others, a risk to established institutions. Few fields illustrate this ambivalence as vividly as education. Confronted with chronic underfunding, teacher shortages and rising performance pressures in many societies of the Global North, AI is frequently presented as a 'silver bullet' solution to deep-rooted and politically created impasses in the education sector (Monett and Paquet 2025). Policy documents from UNESCO (2023) or the World Economic Forum (2024) integrate AI into their visions of digital skills and responsible citizenship, emphasizing its potential to enhance efficiency, personalize learning experiences and improve outcomes.

At the same time, critical research has long challenged this optimistic solutionism. Studies warn that reliance on generative AI in education undermines active knowledge acquisition and long-term cognitive development (Bastani et al. 2024). Empirical evaluations of automated feedback and grading systems show that algorithmic assessments are often arbitrary, error-prone and unresponsive to feedback (Mühlhoff and Henningsen 2024; Burkhardt et al. 2025). Scholars argue that such deficits are not accidental but symptomatic of the structural limitations of large language models. More broadly, the marketing of AI as an 'objective' and time-saving solution obscures how educational technologies are entangled with corporate infrastructures, surveillance practices and profit interests (Mühlhoff 2025).

Beyond these debates of opportunity and risk within the context of AI and education, this paper introduces the concept of AI

resignation to capture how young people encounter AI not only as useful or flawed, but as an inevitable and overpowering force that can foreclose their sense of political and personal power to act over the future. This reflects a wider tension in how AI is imagined in the public debate. On the one hand, AI is framed as inevitable and indispensable: as a technology that defines the very horizon of the future (Brevini 2021; Schütze 2024; Jasanoff and Kim 2015). On the other hand, critical scholars have shown that this narrative of inevitability is a strategic move by the tech industry itself, foreclosing alternative imaginaries and consolidating power (Hong 2022; Witschas 2025). Alongside such discursive strategies that form a specific narrative around AI, data-driven AI infrastructures operationalize the appropriation of futurity on a material level. The notion of 'algorithmic governmentality' (Rouvroy and Berns 2013; Rouvroy 2013) captures how infrastructures of data extraction, collection and processing as well as through practices of predictive analytics such as search 'personalization', recommendation systems, credit scoring, risk assessment and surveillance, reconfigure the conditions of action by translating uncertainty into probabilistic regularities (Mühlhoff 2020; Benjamin 2019; Eubanks 2018; O'Neil 2016), thereby narrowing the space of possible futures. AI thus operates not only as a set of tools but as a sociotechnical arrangement that links infrastructures of data extraction with technocratic governance and hegemonic visions of progress, giving rise to new forms of 'prediction power' (Mühlhoff 2025).

Young people, who could be described as 'AI natives', are situated precisely at the intersection of these twofold dynamics, where algorithmic infrastructures prefigure action in the present and powerful narratives delimit the horizon of future imaginations. Adolescents today spend more than 70 h a week online, nearly 40 of them on smartphones (Postbank 2024). Their everyday interactions are structured by recommendation systems, personalization filters and increasingly by generative AI embedded in messaging and entertainment platforms (Feierabend et al. 2024; Wiedemann and Rainer Thomasius 2025). In schools, tools such as ChatGPT have quickly become part of classroom learning, information retrieval and homework (Franke et al. 2025; Wendt et al. 2024). Educational screen time has nearly doubled since 2019 (Postbank 2024). These encounters not only mediate how young people access knowledge but also shape social relations, self-perceptions and visions of the future.

Importantly, young people are not passive consumers of these technologies. Surveys show that adolescents and young adults are more politically engaged and problem-conscious than previous generations (Calmbach et al. 2024; Albert et al. 2024). At the same time, they perceive their possibilities for shaping the future as limited. In many contexts, they are positioned as spectators rather than active participants (Jergus et al. 2025). This discrepancy—between heightened awareness of structural crises and narrow horizons of effective action—creates fertile ground for dispositions of frustration, cynicism and disillusionment. It is within this constellation that we conceptualize AI resignation. By this, we mean a future-orientated sensibility that emerges when young people, confronted with the pervasive presence of AI and the narratives of its inevitability, experience a diminished power to act and a sense that the future is foreclosed. Importantly, AI resignation is not merely an individual psychological state but a socially and politically significant sensibility that shapes perceived self-efficacy vis-à-vis digital technology, economy and power.

The idea for the concept of AI resignation emerged in our qualitative empirical work with high school students in Germany. While it was introduced with more detailed empirical reference points elsewhere (Siebold et al. 2026), this article advances the concept of AI resignation as a future sensibility. It highlights its subjectivating force, argues how it functions as a strategy of power that erodes young people's power to act and underscores its broader sociopolitical significance for debates on AI and education. Accordingly, the social-philosophical reflection guiding this article is motivated by the question of how agency becomes constrained (Celikates 2009), and by the broader concern with the conditions that enable or weaken subjects' capacities to act (Saar 2025).

Therefore, this article proceeds in three steps. First, we conceptualize AI resignation as a diagnostic concept. Drawing on Foucault's late work on subjectivity and extensions in media and affect theory, we describe AI resignation as a future-oriented sensibility and distinguish it from adjacent theoretical concepts and debates (Sections 2.1 and 2.2). Second, we identify a set of 'contradictory pulls' that delineate the subjectivating power of predictive data-driven AI infrastructures and narratives surrounding AI, thereby tracing the dynamics through which a resigned sensibility towards the future is being formed and illustrating why this constitutes a plausible subject position to adopt (Section 3). Third, we argue that AI resignation plays a strategic affective function in the reproduction of digital-capitalist power (Section 4). The concluding section reflects on implications for re-politicizing debates on AI and education.

2 | AI Resignation

2.1 | A Diagnostic Concept

The concept of AI resignation builds on earlier social–theoretical and ethnographic research with German high school students (grades 10–12) conducted in 2024 and 2025 (Siebold et al. 2026). This research was based on a series of workshops addressing topics such as reflective competencies in dealing with social media and AI tools, data protection, AI narratives, data ethics and predictive analytics. Across these workshops, participants (aged 15–18) repeatedly expressed feelings of limited self-efficacy and hopelessness about the future. These sentiments were closely linked to their deep entanglement with digital services and AI systems, the perceived dominance of AI industry actors and prevailing social narratives that portray AI as inevitable.

As Siebold et al. (2026) show, adolescents' perceptions and practices in relation to data-driven AI can be understood along four dimensions: (1) their everyday entanglement with AI through digital media, where recommendation systems, filters and classroom tools such as ChatGPT shape daily routines and sociality; (2) their shifting relation to knowledge, as AI transforms learning into a strategic performance of information; (3) their practices of self-governance and data-based self-reflection, where they see themselves as autonomous and responsible yet simultaneously transparent and influenced by algorithms; and (4) their orientation towards the future, marked

by anticipatory pressure, preventive worry and strategic self-presentation, with one's digital presence experienced as both risk and resource.

Building on these findings, we developed AI resignation as a diagnostic concept that captures this specific sensibility: it denotes the experience of limited power to act within a sociotechnical environment structured by both pervasive data-driven technologies and narratives of AI inevitability.[1] It is important to stress that when we call AI resignation a specific form of subjectivity, we are not referring to an inner essence or a private psychological state, but to historically and socially produced relations to oneself, to others and to the world. We follow Foucault's late work (1984/1999) on processes of subjectivation and subjectivity by building on its extension by Breljak and Mühlhoff (2019), who integrate media theory and affect theory with recourse to Deleuze (2006) and Guattari (2014) (see also Mühlhoff 2025). In this perspective, subjectivity is understood as an outcome of sociotechnical arrangements that shape experience, affect and self-perception. What appear as one's own thoughts, feelings, or impulses are therefore inseparable from the cultural and technological configurations through which they are generated. Subjectivity is at once a product and a medium of power: it emerges within specific constellations—in this case, digital infrastructures and discourses on AI—and in turn helps stabilize them. As a grounding mood-like orientation, the subjectivity of AI resignation structures young people's relation to themselves, to others and to the world with respect to their sense of power to act in co-shaping socio-technological futures. It is centrally a feeling with respect to the future, not only a state of passivity in the present. As such, the concept opens a theoretical perspective on the structural conditions of this resignative future orientation. It functions as a diagnostic tool that makes visible the entanglement of individual sensibilities with social power relations and opens new perspectives on the political and educational challenges of socio-technological subjectivation.

2.2 | Distinction From Related Concepts

The concept of resignation in the digital media context has not yet been used in reference to a profound, overarching form of subjectivity, but more narrowly as 'privacy resignation' in relation to data collection and privacy. Studies of young adults' attitudes towards online privacy show recurring patterns of apathy and cynicism: users are generally aware of risks but feel that protecting their data is futile and that 'opting out' of digital services is unrealistic (Hargittai and Marwick 2016). Similar findings in Germany have been theorized as 'privacy cynicism', an attitude of powerlessness and mistrust towards data handling that renders protective behaviour subjectively meaningless (Hoffmann et al. 2016). Draper and Turow (2019) gather these insights under the label of 'digital resignation', defined as the condition of wanting to control one's data but perceiving this as systematically impossible. Crucially, these authors interpret resignation not as ignorance or personal deficiency, but as a rational coping response to the structural asymmetries of commercial surveillance.

Our present work builds on this understanding of resignation, but differs from the aforementioned contributions in that resignation is not limited to the dimensions of data protection and privacy in the narrow sense. Instead, we emphasize a complex interaction between AI technology and discourses, subjectivation processes and one's outlook into the future. Our concept of AI resignation thus captures a broader sensibility with regard to the lack of opportunities to shape societal and individual futures in the face of seemingly insurmountable power asymmetries that reach deep into the individual sphere of life. Beyond a resigned attitude towards digital surveillance and data economies, AI resignation describes a deeper, technopolitical sensibility that encompasses epistemic relationships, future orientations and self-governance practices.

Crucially, in our analysis, AI resignation is not only an empirical finding but also the effect of a strategy of power: by engaging in AI resignation, subjects unwittingly participate in the wieldings of the power apparatuses of digital capitalism, because these apparatuses tend to benefit from subjects' resignation. This form of power thus operates by hollowing out the very basis of resistance—self-efficacy—so that experiences of participation, creativity, or deviation appear increasingly empty or structurally impossible.

3 | The Contradictory Pulls of Subjectivation in AI Resignation

We conceptualize AI resignation as the product of subjectivation processes shaped by algorithmic power, data economies and hegemonic future imaginaries. It should not be understood as a psychological weakness but as a structurally produced disposition in which powerlessness, adaptation and the foreclosure of futures shape everyday modes of relating to oneself. As a diagnostic concept, AI resignation aims to render the affective foundations of digital-capitalist power visible—and thus potentially open to critique and transformation. In what follows, we examine the dynamics through which this sensibility is produced. We argue that AI resignation emerges from contradictory pulls of subjectivation, that is, from double-bind dynamics that shape everyday engagements with AI. These dynamics are structural effects of data-driven infrastructures and the discursive framings that surround AI. They make AI resignation an intelligible and, in many respects, even rational position within the broader apparatus of digital capitalism. These contradictory pulls position adolescents in paradoxical ways: they are called upon to embrace AI as a source of opportunity while experiencing it as a force of dependency; to use it as a tool of empowerment while doubting their own capacities; to govern themselves responsibly while facing environments that ensure failure; and to orient towards the future while feeling it already foreclosed. Each of these tensions illuminates how adolescents' sense of self-efficacy is gradually hollowed out under sociotechnical and discursive conditions.

A first contradictory pull lies in adolescents' immersion in networked technologies and their simultaneous awareness of dependency and overwhelm. Social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat, as well as ChatGPT, structure much of their daily lives, from morning routines to peer interactions and classroom practices (Siebold et al. 2026). These services provide pleasure, social connection, convenience and learning support; yet they also create constant demands for attention, participation and responsiveness. Yet, students report moments of frustration and irritation regarding not only their

own dependency on these systems, but also how they shape the field of experiences available to them (ibid.). One significant example was the report of a student observing his loss of boredom, which has been replaced by a habitualized resort to his smartphone and the consumption of TikTok videos: 'Like, what else am I supposed to do?' (ibid.). Further, despite a largely enthusiastic engagement with consumer-facing AI systems, many students reflect on the social compulsion they engender, in which a reduction or withdrawal might lead to social exclusion, while constant participation further deepens dependency. The pull between enthusiasm and dependency, that is, adolescents' enthusiastic embrace of networked technologies, alongside a growing awareness of their own dependency and the constant demands for attention, situates them in a double bind: withdrawal risks social exclusion, but constant engagement deepens the sense of control loss. It is within this miscellaneous experience that the conditions for a sensibility of resignation begin to emerge, as students grapple with a feeling of being both captivated and controlled by AI systems.

A second contradictory pull emerges, in which generative AI systems such as ChatGPT position adolescents as subjects who can access information effortlessly while simultaneously doubting the value of their own learning. ChatGPT and similar tools have become companions in schoolwork, enabling students to bypass cognitive effort and adapt responses with ease. Yet these same practices fuel concerns about losing the capacity to think and learn independently. As one student succinctly put it: 'I think we're all just getting dumber' (Siebold et al. 2026). Moreover, knowledge increasingly appears less as the result of personal effort and more as a resource to be accessed, adapted and performed. The transformed relationship to knowledge within the relational fabric between students and teachers is vividly illustrated in the same study, which depicts students as information relays—transmission points—positioned between the teacher's questions and the seemingly 'universal knowledge' of the AI available on their devices. Here, the subject position is doubly modulated: equipped with powerful tools, yet stripped of efficacy in learning. The convenience of AI-supported knowledge production collides with fears of intellectual decline and the reduction of the learner to a mere transmitter, gradually eroding students' sense of self-efficacy within educational practice. Thus, reliance on AI is both indispensable and destabilizing: abstaining from its convenient use risks falling behind and feeling unable to keep pace with prevailing learning practices, while continued use undermines confidence in one's own capacities.

A third contradictory pull emerges from the perceived futility to gain control over one's screentime. Adolescents frequently try to limit their digital use through app locks or screen time controls, only to find these measures ineffective: 'ultimately, I end up deactivating it and spending more time on it anyways', was the standard response among adolescents (Siebold et al. 2026). Students rarely attribute such common experiences to manipulative designs in the prevailing logic of digital attention economies. Instead, failure tends to be individualized, interpreted as personal weakness or a lack of self-control (ibid.). In this, adolescents are subjectivated into a paradoxical mode: called upon to govern themselves responsibly, while placed in environments that ensure repeated failure. Settings like these illustrate how adolescents recognize a desire for control over their digital lives and time spent on platforms, but simultaneously feel powerless against the incentives and habitualizing effects of these services. This repeated failure to use these systems according to their own wishes not only contributes to feelings of frustration but also makes resistance to them appear futile. It leads adolescents to accept the bitter conclusion that even with technical means, escaping digital services and their combination of sensory overload, social pressure and algorithmic governance is hardly achievable. This common experience and the central mechanism of transforming structural impossibility into individualized self-blame can, in turn, nurture a broader sense of powerlessness in the face of technological systems, stifling both countermeasures and the critical engagement with digital technologies.

Finally, a fourth contradictory pull concerns adolescents' orientation towards the future. Siebold et al. (2026) report how students expressed both aspirations with regard to their future professions, yet perceive automation and digital traces foreclosing their prospects. 'I always wanted to become an architect, but now I don't know anymore, because AI will probably be able to do that soon anyways', is quoted as an exemplary statement by an 11th grader (ibid.). While students hope for meaningful careers and self-development, doubts grow whether such futures remain attainable in light of AI's projected 'disruptions' on the job market. At the same time, outlooks into the future are further clouded by an awareness of the long-lasting traces of their digital activities. In this constellation, they experience the present—particularly their online lives—not as a space of playful and carefree experimentation, but as permanent and potentially consequential records that can impact their future opportunities. Under such conditions, strategies of adaptation—curating digital personas, aligning with algorithmic expectations, or simply 'playing along'—become plausible responses. This tension between experiencing the future as a site of aspiration as well as foreclosure nurtures an outlook of resignation: adolescents orient themselves towards what feels like an already written future in which their power to act is severely constrained.

Taken together, these four double-binds highlight how AI resignation is not reducible to passive withdrawal but arises from contradictory demands inscribed into adolescents' sociotechnical environments. Each pull makes a resigned orientation plausible, not as a personal failure but as a specific form of subjectivity shaped within data-driven AI infrastructures and their surrounding narratives. Metaphorically speaking, adolescents resemble a vessel caught in opposing currents—enjoyment and dependence, empowerment and erosion, control and failure, aspiration and foreclosure. Although the vessel remains afloat, its ability to steer its own course is systematically hollowed out. Under such conditions, resignation does not appear as mere withdrawal but as the mode of actively making sense of the world and oneself in it—drifting along a course already charted by predictive infrastructures and future narratives. We now turn to AI resignation's strategic role in stabilizing the very power relations of digital capitalism through which it is produced.

4 | The Strategic Function of AI Resignation

A critical analysis must go beyond explaining AI resignation as the outcome of subjectivation and also examine its role in sustaining the power apparatus of digital capitalism. Drawing

on Foucault's conception of power as relational, productive and strategic (Foucault 1976/1978; Mühlhoff 2025; Vogelmann 2017; Saar 2007), we understand subjectivity as both an effect and a medium of power: it is constituted within apparatuses of power and, at the same time, becomes a vehicle through which these apparatuses are enacted and perpetuated. Power strategies, in this sense, are not consciously designed master plans but emergent effects of decentralized constellations that structure practices and subjectivities and gradually foreclose alternative modes of acting, thinking and feeling.

In this light, AI resignation can be understood as one of the affective formations through which the AI apparatus reproduces itself. Rather than being a passive outcome, resignation actively contributes to the maintenance of digital-capitalist power. By naturalizing dependency on AI systems and normalizing diminished expectations of the power to act, it stabilizes the very structures that generate it. The sensibility of resignation, therefore, functions as an affective relay within the broader strategy of power: it transforms the asymmetries of data-driven capitalism into lived experience and into practices of adaptation and compliance.

This affective relay operates most visibly in the domain of public discourse. One way AI resignation sustains the digital-capitalist apparatus is by giving experiential weight to the widespread depiction of AI as inevitable. Corporate and media narratives of inevitability do not merely describe technological progress; they draw credibility and force from the resigned affects that make them feel true. When people respond to AI's expansion with weary acceptance or pragmatic compliance — continuing to use systems they distrust, deferring to algorithmic expertise, or relinquishing the idea that technology could be otherwise—they help transform rhetorical inevitability into a social fact. AI resignation thus performs the very inevitability it presupposes: it is not simply compatible with corporate futurism but constitutes one of its affective infrastructures, enabling such narratives to circulate and solidify as common sense.

Corporate and institutional actors strategically mobilize this dynamic. By presenting AI development as an unstoppable force destined to reshape the future (Schütze 2024), companies both cultivate and capitalize on the public's resigned acceptance. As Hao (2025) shows in the case of OpenAI, executives can invoke inevitability to deflect regulatory critique: they claim that slowing development would only invite competitors to overtake them, portraying AI progress as an external necessity dictated by market logic. Each such claim relies on a tacit readiness among audiences to concede that 'there is no alternative'. Resignation makes this rhetorical move credible; it closes the gap between corporate narrative and social belief. In this way, the affective disposition of AI resignation produces the very discursive power it appears to suffer from, turning ideology into self-reinforcing reality.

Schütze (2024) theorizes these trends as ‘AI futurism’, which he defines as ‘the sociocultural sentiment that AI systems will inexorably shape and transform the societies of the future’ (p. 1). He exposes this ideology as a form of technological utopianism that conceals the ongoing ecological and social crises of the present while offering computational pseudo-solutions in their place. The cultural power of AI futurism rests on a much older lineage of technological determinism that equates innovation with progress and presents technological development as both natural and desirable (O'Donnell and Clodagh 2022; Wyatt and Society for Social Studies of Science 2008). Despite persistent critique, this myth continues to structure collective imaginaries, rendering the expansion of digital infrastructures not only inevitable but morally charged—as the only credible horizon of the future.

This ideology acquires affective force only where it connects to lived experience. From a power-critical perspective, the affective traction of these narratives depends on AI resignation. Resigned sensibilities give emotional credibility to the promise and threat of technological inevitability; they translate ideological expectation into lived experience. Through mundane acts of compliance— accepting opaque algorithmic decisions, adjusting one's behaviour to predictive systems, or internalizing the imperative to 'keep up' with innovation— subjects enact the dependency they imagine to be unavoidable. What begins as a feeling of powerlessness thus becomes a social practice that sustains the very asymmetries it perceives. In this sense, AI resignation is not merely a reflection of AI futurism but its affective engine: it animates, reproduces and normalizes the ideology in everyday life.

AI resignation, therefore, fulfils a strategic function within the AI apparatus. It constitutes the affective infrastructure through which narratives of inevitability and futurism consolidate Big Tech's dominance, depoliticize technological development and reproduce digital-capitalist power relations. The sensibility of resignation closes the circuit between discourse and practice: it transforms systemic dependency into personal disposition and converts ideological abstraction into habitual adaptation. What appears as an individual loss of the power to act is, simultaneously, the apparatus's mode of reproduction—an affective form of governance that ensures its own persistence.

5 | Conclusion: Repoliticizing AI and Education

In this article, we have introduced the concept of AI resignation as a pervasive sensibility among adolescents. Beyond the feelings of futility in resisting privacy invasions and surveillance in the digital realm, which previous scholars have addressed (Draper and Turow 2019; Hargittai and Marwick 2016), AI resignation describes the insidious erosion of self-efficacy as a central resource of resistance through an embedding in data-driven AI technologies more generally. Adolescents today are deeply entangled in digital networks where the experience of influence, participation, co-design or deviation increasingly proves to be empty, inconsequential or structurally impossible. AI resignation thus describes the form of subjectivity arising from this sociotechnical arrangement and its seemingly insurmountable power asymmetries.

In making sense of AI resignation as a form of subjectivity, we made use of a theoretical framework that builds on Foucault as well as on more recent theories of subjectivation specifically geared towards digital media culture. Crucially, calling AI resignation a form of subjectivity introduces a double structure of critique into our analysis: this sensibility of resignation is, on the one hand, an effect and product of power constellations, and at the same time it turns subjects into active—yet unwitting and unintentional—contributors to these power apparatuses.

Hence, digital capitalism and its worldwide structures of extraction, accumulation and domination benefit from AI resignation, as this sensitivity demobilizes personal resistance in everyday use habits, political resistance in the form of stricter regulation, as well as imaginative resistance in the form of alternative visions and imaginaries of digital futures beyond or outside narratives prefigurated by Big Tech.

If the erosion of a sense of self-efficacy, or power to act, is central to AI resignation, this tendency carries several broader implications. First, AI resignation may be read as a democratic warning sign. The widespread sense of powerlessness among adolescents vis-à-vis the AI industry indicates structural asymmetries that urgently demand political responses. Addressing these asymmetries requires creating avenues through which young people can participate meaningfully in decisions about technological development, not merely as passive recipients of innovation, but as active co-shapers of digital futures. Second, education must be power-critical. Students need not only technical knowledge but also a deep understanding of AI as a sociotechnical phenomenon that is always entangled with business models, regulatory struggles and social inequalities. Curricula might therefore link computer science with humanities and social sciences to foreground the economic, political and ethical dimensions of AI, rather than treating it as a neutral or isolated technology. Third, AI resignation points to the importance of creating reflexive and collective spaces within education. Feelings of resignation and helplessness should not be dismissed as individual deficits but interpreted as collectively shared responses to structural conditions. Educational settings that enable critical reflection and dialogue can transform such experiences into resources for understanding and potentially contesting the power relations in which they arise.

As an outlook, we want to emphasize that the ongoing reproduction of AI resignation—arguably an everyday effect of adolescents' deep embedding in technological infrastructures and industry-driven narratives—risks narrowing their power to act in ways that reach far beyond education. If experiences of self-efficacy are persistently undermined, democratic participation becomes fragile. It is well established that the void left by weakened experiences of political self-efficacy can be filled by authoritarian styles of politics. Especially in contexts of diffuse powerlessness, promises of order and the restoration of control appear as attractive responses (Greuel 2025; Heitmeyer 1989)—a tendency potentially reinforced by AI resignation as a sociotechnical form of subjectivation.

Against this backdrop, it becomes crucial not to mistake AI resignation for mere passivity, but to understand it as a habituated mode of adaptation and self-management under conditions of structural power asymmetries. For education policy and society at large, this underscores the urgent task of opening spaces for the re-politicization of technological futures. Critical engagement with AI futures cannot be confined to speculative imaginaries but must interrogate the power structures already inscribed in existing infrastructures and narratives. Only by unsettling what currently appears 'natural' or 'inevitable' can democratic counter-imaginaries emerge that reconnect technological development with societal interests. The task of AI education, then, is not merely to teach technical competence, but to cultivate the political imagination and collective capacities necessary to contest and reshape technological power. The future is not a promise of technology, but a right of society—and ensuring that this right can be exercised requires creating educational, cultural and political spaces where adolescents can critically reflect on, and actively participate in, the shaping of their (our) futures.

Author Contributions

Jan-Philipp Siebold and Annemarie Witschas contributed equally to the empirical work and the writing of the manuscript. Rainer Mühlhoff supervised the project and contributed to the writing.

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Endnotes

[1]We use the expression *power to act* rather than the more common philosophical term agency. From a Foucauldian perspective (Foucault 1982), power exists only in its exercise and is relationally constituted—it is not a latent capacity that a subject possesses but a situationally embedded possibility (Mühlhoff 2018; Vogelmann 2017; Saar 2007). The notion of *power to act* (Handlungsmacht) thus enables a graduated and relational description of situations, even where possibilities for action are highly constrained. Unlike agency, it does not imply an individualized inner capacity existing independently of its enactment. By contrast, when we speak of self-efficacy, we refer to the subjective perception of effectiveness—that is, the felt (in)ability to shape outcomes. Yet such perceptions are themselves effects of sociotechnical situatedness. Hence, power to act captures the relational and structural conditions of action, while self-efficacy describes their subjective experiential dimension.

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