

Generation Y Students in Social Media: What Do We Know about Them?

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to estimate what we know about Generation Y students' behavior in Social Media (SM), especially in our country. The correct identification of their traits is crucial for the academic community, primarily from the perspective of understanding their real needs, as beneficiaries of teaching act, followed by a serious and consistent adaptation of our offer. In an extended literature review, we try to determine the reasons for SM use, their preferences for one medium or another, the way, place and time of SM use, and the Romanian particularities in the general personality portrait observed and explained by literature. We discuss the advantages and disadvantages of their intensive SM use, show how the time spent in SM affect the individuals and the universities, and try to find out what their needs and expectancies are. In our opinion, the problems treated here are of interest both for professors as individuals, and for the universities' and faculties' management – especially in a world in which the borderline between the physical and virtual life is becoming more and more difficult to draw.

Keywords: Generation Y, Generation Next, Millennials, Social Media, Social Media Use in Universities

1. Introduction

The problem that generated the idea of this paper is the difficult alignment of academic offer with the requirements of current students, digital natives who are resident rather in Social Media (SM) than in amphitheatres. These students are described as well educated, internet savvy, and eager to learn (Vasilescu, 2011, Bolton et al., 2013, Pînzaru and Mitan, 2013), but also as more shallow, skeptical, blunt, critical, cynical, narcissistic, difficult to wow and impatient relative to their predecessors (Twenge et al., 2008, Carr, 2010, Bergh and Behrer, 2011). They are multitaskers, filter and consume relevant and interesting information with great speed, have high expectation and are headed to fast achievements (Vasilescu, 2011, Airinei et al., 2014, Horváth et al., 2014, Radu, 2013, Țugui and Șiclovan, 2013). The Y, Me, Thumb, Next or „Peter Pan” generation consist of individuals who do not want to grow up, stay home longer than their parents or grandparents did, „want it all” and “want it now”, particularly in relation to work pay and benefits, career advancement, professional/personal balance, interesting tasks and being able to make a contribution to society via their jobs, but in the same time are more tolerant, loyal and social responsible (Agheorghiesei Corodeanu, 2015, Bergh and Behrer, 2011). As (Ernek and Eyuboğlu, 2012, Friedl and Tkalac Verciĉ, 2011) have noticed, Social Media (SM) help digital natives to define and redefine themselves, to satisfy their need for autonomy, recognition and achievement, as well as the need for affiliation and belonging. Their intrinsic characteristics are augmented by SM, which adds more challenges and dilemmas to their personality portrait definition.

The first step towards solving this problem is, in our opinion, a solid review of what we know about Generation Y students, especially in our country. The correct identification of their traits is crucial for the academic community, primarily from the perspective of understanding their real needs, as beneficiaries of teaching act, followed by a serious and consistent adaptation of our offer. In an extended literature review, we try to answer the following general questions: Why do

Gen Y students use SM? What are their preferences for one media or another? How do they use SM tools, for how long and from where? How much do we really know about their behavior? Are there any flaws/particularities/irregularities in the general personality portrait observed and explained by literature? What are the advantages and disadvantages of their intensive SM use? How does the time spent in SM affect the individuals and the universities? What do they expect from us?

2. Why do Gen Y students use SM?

According to (Friedl and Tkalac Vercîc, 2011), social relationships with other persons are universal human needs, critical to the psychological well-being of individuals, which are very well addressed by SM. (Santos and Čuta, 2015) add that the SM, especially social networks (SN) use provides an important backdrop for the social, emotional, and cognitive development of youth, accounting for a large part of their time.

Beyond these general observation, recent studies (Santos and Čuta, 2015 – a study that implied 561 university students of different nationalities, Whiting and Williams, 2013 – an exploratory study which consisted of 25 in-depth interviews with individuals, Tkalac Verçiç and Verçiç, 2013 – a study in which 308 undergraduate students in four marketing classes at a School of Economics and Business were involved) have identified the following reasons for SM use by the Gen Y members:

- social interaction with old or new friends, regardless of the intensity of the relationship and physical distance, with a special mention for making new friends;
- seeking out information about school, businesses, sales, deals, or products and also on events, birthdays, and parties;
- keeping up to date with new information;
- passing time when idle or bored, by playing games, listening to music, watching videos, browsing through profiles or reading statuses and comments;
- self-promotion and expression of opinions;
- convenience (the network is easy available, anywhere and anytime);
- surveillance/knowledge about others;
- self-education.

Focusing only on Facebook, 706 individuals questioned by (Ujhelyi and Szabó, 2014) affirmed that their motivations for use are experience sharing, positive self-presentation and popularity seeking; reducing loneliness and boredom and information spreading. Addressing 221 students, (Pînzaru and Mitan, 2013) discovered that they use Facebook because they need to be in contact with long-distance friends and acquaintances, and also for the newsfeed's presence, which helps them stay informed on various topics of interest. The novelty of the medium triggers their enthusiasm related to technological innovations. They appreciate also the entertaining aspects of the most popular social networking site (SNS). After 50 in depth interviews carried with SN users living in Iași, Romania, (Andrei, Iacob and Iacob, 2010) identified “connecting with close ones, discussing, getting information and relaxing” as the main reasons for Facebook use.

3. How do digital students use SM tools?

The Y students have different needs, different levels of technological knowledge, and use technology in different ways, according to (Waters, 2011). (Ruleman, 2012) and (Friedl and Tkalac Vercîc, 2011) showed that even though digital natives prefer digital media in their personal lives, this is not necessarily reflected in their academic lives. By quoting (Moran et al., 2011), (Pînzaru and Mitan, 2013) mention that Facebook is mostly embraced by students for personal use as opposed to academic use, so they prefer to maintain a distance between personal stuff and institutions.

In Ruleman's study (2012), the student body of University of Central Missouri (UCM) was tested in order to find out their pattern of Web 2.0 technology use while studying/researching. Participants reported use of their mobile phone, Facebook or other SNS, instant messaging, online gaming, or text messaging *while they study or prepare for classes*. A similar study carried by

(Santos and Čuta, 2015) showed that the overwhelming majority of the tested students claim they are using SN while they are working, listening to music, studying or watching TV. Asked about the access to SN during classes, more than 80% of the students admit *often* doing so. Also, the intensity of use is higher than in case of general population. SM use is part of college and university students' daily routine, especially because they have grown up with computers, and they spend at least 1 to 2 hours daily on social networks. In regards to the place of accessing SM, home is the place mostly chosen, followed by mobile devices (Tkalac Verçiç and Verçiç, 2013, Santos and Čuta, 2015).

4. What are students' preferences for one media or another?

There is a difference in students' preferences for one media or another (Facebook, YouTube, MySpace, texting, reading wikis, reading blogs, Twitter, podcasting, Second Life etc.). In (Ruleman, 2012), the uncontested student's favorite was Facebook. The results of a study presented in (Tkalac Verçiç and Verçiç, 2013) showed that nearly all students use some form of SNS, whereas more than 60% use online photo management and video sharing platforms (e.g., Flickr or YouTube), a quarter of them read blogs and other forums, and less than 5% of the participating students occasionally use Twitter or other microblogging sites.

Some factors were identified as influencers of users' preferences. For example, age plays a key role in which content and communications technologies are preferred. Students over 23 are more likely to use web calling, blogs, and podcasts, while students under 23 favor text and instant messaging. The use of wikis, Second Life, and Twitter varies little by age. According to (Ruleman, 2012), SN usage has not changed much for the youngest students surveyed since 2007, but there have been dramatic increases with the older students, who were attracted in massive numbers in this medium. (Bolton et al., 2013) added a set of environmental (economic, cultural, technological and political/legal) and individual factors (socio-economic status, lifecycle stage, goals, emotions, and social norms) that affect SM use. A Romanian author (Vasilescu, 2011), showed that affordability is another important predictor of penetration of SM use because it captures the ability to pay for devices and services within countries and markets.

5. What are the advantages and disadvantages of students' intensive SM use?

There are beneficial consequences of Gen Y's social media use. Existing studies (Al-Khateeb and Abdurabu, 2014, Cheston et al., 2013) indicate a positive correlation between integration of SM into education and students' attitudes toward acquiring knowledge and improving their skills. (Drulă, 2014) mentions that SM use determines an increase in public engagement and citizenship, and (Agheorghiesei Corodeanu, 2015) shows that SM are more and more seen as beyond-doubt information sources and propagation channels for efficient, good, and correct news/facts, and also as means to penalize un-ethical behavior.

On the other hand, there is evidence of negative long-term consequences for society arising from Gen Y's SM use, such as a deterioration of civic engagement, a loss of privacy and public safety, an increase in cybercrime, a bad influence on adolescents' school activities and sleep, and decreasing the participation in important offline activities (as shown by Bolton et al., 2013, after a serious literature review, and also in Păvăloaia and Grama, 2014, Măzăreanu, 2010, Munteanu et al., 2008). (Santos and Čuta, 2015, Ernek and Eyuboğlu, 2012) mention the loss of time in SN, the security risks, and addiction, mentioning that the students compulsively check social network profiles and updates.

Some of the authors fear that these new media may cause irreversible damage to young people's brains, eventually causing psychological disorders, as mentioned in (De Bruijn, 2014). In the beginning of 2010, the American Psychiatry Association (A.P.A) nominated new forms of addiction to be introduced in the fifth edition of DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders), among which the Internet addiction, and especially, the Facebook addiction. The doctors' observations say that the persons (in our case the students) who use the SN become

infantile in real life. According to the psychotherapist Cristiana Haica, “the rules are very different in the two worlds, and the increase in communication abilities and in relationship frequency in one of them makes the relationship in the other one become less significant.” This unilateral view on depression, loneliness and social anxiety, affirmed by (Yoo et al., 2004, Toma, 2010, Carr, 2010, Immordino-Yang et al., 2012) is counterbalanced by (Kittinger et al., 2012), who, in a recent study of college students, found that only a minority reported frequent or occasional problems due their online behavior.

Also, even if the common assumption is that in SM users neglect the potential security dangers and threats and are excessively confident in the trust and truthfulness of the online available information, (Benson et al., 2015 and Bolton et al., 2013) founded in their studies that an overwhelming majority of SN users define the privacy settings on who can access their profile information, and pay a lot of attention on their posts and actions, not exposing themselves to hackers, viruses, spam and other attacks.

6. Meanwhile, in Romania...

(Iordache et al., 2015) observes that there is still little available data regarding the variations across countries, towns, faculty profile, and gender in SM use. As noticed in (Bolton et al., 2013), the literature has reviewed in particular the SM usage patterns of young people of relatively high socio-economic status who live in developed countries. (Vasilescu, 2011) shows that there are significant differences between members of Generation Y in the US and Romania, explaining that for the latter, due to political conditions, access to ICT was made later, not in their early childhood, and is still, in many cases, too expensive. After a small study, which addressed a number of 30 undergraduate Marketing students from the Spiru Haret University, the author found out that students consider that academic education is still important in the perspective of finding a good job. Even if they admit depending on the Internet in doing their homework, students believe meeting face to face with a professor is necessary. They want to communicate with their peers while learning, to receive instant gratification, and require classes adapted to their needs and preferences. Students recognize that, in general, they cannot be obedient and patient during lessons, and recommend 1 hour and a half as the maximum length for a traditional course or seminar meeting.

As a result, the author proposes a diminishing of the share of traditional lectures by replacing them with online classes and recommends the faculty to give students the opportunity to learn actively, in an interactive and fun environment (using role playing, case studies and so on).

A study of (Marinescu and Velicu, 2010) on a number of 1041 Romanian children aged from 9 to 16 years concludes that in 2010, 30% of them use the Internet at least for 2 hours on days school and for 3 hours in non-school days, especially from PC/laptop, both at school and at home. 35% of respondents said they were using the Internet to do their homework, almost 50% were using SNS, and the declared reason in doing so was entertainment. The authors observed a rather cautious attitude in use, as the majority of subjects recognized that the Internet can be a danger to children of their age. They mentioned risks as meeting strangers, cyberbullying and sexting. Also, De Bruijn (2014) shows that an increasing number of European schools are nowadays replacing textbooks with tablets, and a similar decision was adopted recently in Romania. These studies are interesting for our work because the analyzed children are now or will soon be students, and they came/will come in faculties with their habits of Internet and SM use, that are worth to be known well in advance.

(Pînzaru and Mitan, 2013) show that, after too many years of computer and software supremacy induced in an artificial way by the former e-learning solutions, SM are giving the human being its place back in the information and knowledge transfer processes. By questioning 221 students of the College of Communication and Public Relations from the National University of Political Science and Administrative Studies from Bucharest, they discovered that those students are digitally literate and extremely proficient with technology, or at least that is their perception regarding themselves. They also claim to be flexible, adaptable and well prepared to solve problems, result-oriented and not necessarily patient. An interesting finding is that they tend to

investigate the problems by themselves and rarely share the answers they get with others, they are rather individualist and usually do not trust others. When asked about the degree to which they communicate with their professors using Facebook, the students appreciated it as “extremely small”. Most of them did not have any professor in their friend lists and, even if they befriended professors, they do not read their posts at all. They do not even wish to be contacted by professors using Facebook private messages and they suggest professors to put in place professional pages and disciplines-related groups. Also, the Facebook utility in group creation and administration is presented by (Iordache et al., 2015). Concluding a study that involved 62 Electronics students from Bucharest, the authors mention that Facebook is used in order to find out what happens in university, to get access to shared resources, and to participate in group discussions. The time spent daily in the network is between 30 minutes and 3 hours for each student (with the mention that females use the network longer than males).

7. Recommendations

On the other side of the story, according to (Grosseck and Holotescu, 2013), only some Romanian universities have adopted coherent strategies and policies for SM integration in pedagogical teaching and learning activities. In our opinion, there is a real need for institutional involvement and individual actions at the academic level, regarding the SM in general and SNS use in particular.

Firstly, the prejudices regarding the power ratio between professors and students must be left aside and the need for the universities to become more market-oriented must be admitted. After that, for each university/faculty/specialization, the Gen Y students’ personality profiles, preferences, needs and expectations must be identified, understood and taken into consideration. Their massive SM presence and the really important time spent by students in SNS are worth to be exploited, and the universities can use these communication channels to become closer to their beneficiaries. The teaching/learning methods should be adapted to a pragmatic generation, who has high expectations and wants immediate results. The students’ involvement must be encouraged, existing teaching methods must be changed and the students’ real-life knowledge must be exploited. Feedback should be sought and given in a constant, coherent and consistent manner. The permanent availability of SM and its capacity to remember can be used to keep in touch with graduates, whose help can be required for providing support to their younger colleagues, in the form of information, advice, internships or job offers. The informal nature of SM can be the source for an increased communication between professors and students, with positive results on both categories’ satisfaction level and on university’ reputation.

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