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**МОЛОДОЕ ЕВРОПЕЙСКОЕ ПОКОЛЕНИЕ.
КОММУНИКАЦИОННЫЕ ТЕХНОЛОГИИ И СОЦИАЛЬНЫЕ СЕТИ
YOUNG EUROPEAN GENERATION. COMMUNICATION
TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIAL NETWORKING**

Ключевые слова: социальные сети, технологии, коммуникация, участие, молодое европейское поколение

Keywords: social networking, technology, communication, involvement, young European generation

1. A brief foray into the young European generation

Social and political transformations, produced in many European Union countries (including Romania) and worldwide in the last decades, have generated various problems the younger generation is faced with. But notwithstanding the chances and emerging opportunities in the development of pluralist democracy, the level of youth participation in public life and politics is not very high.

Today we are eyewitnesses to what we could call a clash of the European society, namely its members' – especially the young ones - lack of involvement in European politics or national politics.

The great potential the young generation has would allow them to develop themselves and contribute to society's development, successfully including the leading of their own destiny, but most of European young people seem not to not have full confidence in their own powers. However, young people, through their positive thinking, dynamism and energy they own, ambitions and aspirations to a more prosperous future, should be the driving force in a changing European society (a dynamic, complex society).

If we analyze the surveys performed of EU countries, we notice that 30% of youth say that they do not know what the future holds, 10% confess that they live only for today, 20% of them believe that the future will not be good, 16% believe that the future will be more depressing than the present and only 24% of young respondents hope the future will bring them a better life than the present one.

Most European young people seem to have lost their hope for a prosperous life, they do not believe in promises, nor do they have full power to change anything, although the European policy encourages decision-making processes and participation in various debates. This position is shown by the data of a different surveys (The theoretical background we use will be supported by a research study conducted in the period May2011- August 2012 on a sample group made up of 160 young people (undergraduate and graduate students) aged 18-26) conducted by CCRSE (Centre of Research, Resources and European Studies) last two years where 30.6% and 37.2% of young people aged between 18-29 years, answered the question “How do you think people like you can influence important decisions

taken at national level?” using “to a small extent”, “to a very small extent” and “not at all”.

The distance between the young people, public institutions and democratic process is probably due to the lack the tradition of youth participation in some EU countries regarding the building of a democratic and prosperous society. Young people eventually become indifferent to social and political life. For example, most young people in Romania (the academic environment) distance themselves from policy more and more, they are not interested in political or economic events taking place in the country, although Romania needs the involvement of civil society now, and particularly, of young people.

Despite the very different situations, young people share similar values and difficulties, and they often speak with one voice: they want their dreams and expectations to come true.

“The colossal World Values Survey shows that only one-third of young people across Europe are interested in politics, and three-quarters said they did not think politics was important for their lives. Only a minority of young people were shown to have actually engaged in politics - 28 percent had signed a petition, 22 percent had attended a demonstration, and nine percent had joined boycotts.

Only six percent belonged either to a political party, a trade union, an environmental organization, or a professional association” (Kaila Krayewski, *Generation Y and why they matter*, 2009).

There has been widespread fear that they are disengaging from politics, instead tending to focus on their own immediate surroundings, while blocking out seemingly distant problems. It seems that a rather small part of this generation, born during the economic boom, but struggling to make a way during the economic crisis, is eager to be involved in the community life. That is why the main target of many EU policies and funded programs is to train young people to become active citizens, to play an active role in society. because they have something to offer. As compared to their predecessors, they may not just listen and execute, but force a change in the contents of things.

2. Varied names for a fast changing YEG (young European generation)

The European Young generation has witnessed and have been living in a fast changing, fast-developing environment; the double nature of this change process – political and economic on the one hand and communicational on the other hand has been certainly influencing the way the young generation conceives social and political action and involvement.

The democratization process has faced many obstacles in countries from South-Eastern Europe, where many changes have taken place at different levels: political, economic, institutional and everyday life and where a slight change regarding the mentality and civic and political behavior has been noticed. Therefore one of the main targets of many EU policies and funded programs is to lead young people to become active citizens, to play an active role in society.

Two main characteristics of today’s young generation depicted by numerous social, cultural, political, anthropological studies are their special relationship with

communication technology and their new communicational features on the one hand and their low involvement in the “life of the city”, their weak political, social interests on the other hand. Whether there is a connection, a cause-effect relationship between the two realities we are going to discuss in the following lines.

The first step in our attempt is to define the target group making the object of the present study. The contemporary young generation has been given varied names: *Generation Y, the Net Generation, the Digital Natives, the Echo Boomers, Generation Next, the Facebook Generation*, in an attempt to enter and decode their world to the benefit of the whole society. They are the generation born between 1978 – 1995, although this time interval varies from one country to another, from the USA, to Europe and Romania. This is the digital generation, no doubt, who has grown along with the computer, and the other technology developments they are so keen of and experts in. But, while the computer was a common item in the early ‘90s in the USA, in Romania only the children born after 1990 have had the opportunity of benefiting from the modern technology in their first life decade.

As far as the young generation’s relationship with communication technology and social network sites is concerned, existing research (Vasilescu: 2011) point out that young people are motivated to join such sites to keep a strong relationship with friends and equally to strengthen relationships with acquaintances and not ultimately, but less important, to meet new people online.

Social networks or social communities such as Facebook, Hi5.com, YouTube, MySpace, Xing or Friendster are currently the most popular ways of meeting people. These networks meet the young people’s needs of communication, help them develop / find their identity, (re) present themselves, practice peer-group experiences, offer them spaces of freedom, experimentation and crossing any boundaries. The popularity of these communities could be explained by children and young people’s needs to be noticed, recognized and to become popular. They want to be seen and, in the same time, to see how appreciated and sympathized they are – or how they seem to be.

All the detailed reports and studies on the GenY show there are common characteristics defining them worldwide, with few historical differences. These characteristics have been approached from two points of view: the intrinsic features of the members of the technology-conditioned generation and from the point of view of their values and attitude towards work.

Among the agreed common intrinsic features the most relevant for the present study are the following:

- *Familiar with and reliant on communication technologies* (technosavvy) – use and integrate technology in all forms into their lives
- *Short attention spans* – the instant click of a mouse is the info rate they are ready to accept, every topic should be short and to the point
- *Multitaskers* – while listening to a topic, they may send an e-mail or an SMS or look up something on the mobile net at the same time, which does not mean they are not interested in the topic under discussion; but time is too precious not to make the best of it

- *Filter and consume info quickly* – easily select information and are able to process it immediately and apparently, effortless.
- *Information must apply directly and be relevant for them* – Skype, ICQ, MySpace, Facebook are the channel of communication for them, where they select the information they need at a high-speed rate, any background or general information is irrelevant, therefore, useless and left aside.

We have conducted a practical research study among the target group appointed (young Romanians aged between 18-26), all of them undergraduate (93) or graduate (67) students in order to find out more information on the way they integrate social network sites in their involvement into public life and in the civic action they take.

The main criteria for choosing the respondents were to: their age and their membership to a social network site. The questions we asked the respondents were:

- Q1: Do you use the social network to comment on / discuss public issues or you use it only for discussing private issues?
- Q2: Are you a member of any civic organization / NGO having a profile on the social network site(s) whose member you are?
- Q3: Do you participate in the actions organized by such civic organizations / NGO-s a) on the social network site(s); b) in the non-virtual environment (meetings, actions with various purposes)?

The answers we have received were as follows:

- Q1: 62 respondents (62%) answered that they use a social network site to comment on public issues as well, not only on private issues while the other 38% use the social network sites only for discussing private issues. Of the two categories, 42 undergraduate respondents and 20 graduate students gave a positive answer.

- Q2: 5 respondents (5%) (2 undergraduates and 3 graduates) answered that they were members of a civic organization / NGO.

- Q3: 46 respondents answered that they participate in actions (Voting, signing petitions, supporting a public cause financially / non-financially, etc) / debates organized by civic organizations / NGO on the social network site (28 undergraduates and respectively 18 graduates) and 1 undergraduate respectively 2 graduate students answered that they participate in actions (Voluntary activities, support or protest meetings/ marches, etc) organized by civic organizations / NGO-s in the non-virtual environment.

Table 1. Respondents' perceptions on social networking and public involvement

| Question (Q) | Total number of positive answers | Undergraduates | Graduates |
|--------------|----------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Q1 | 62 / 100 (62%) | 42 / 73 (57.5%) | 20 / 27 (74%) |
| Q2 | 5 / 100 (5%) | 2 / 73 (2.7%) | 3 / 27 (11.1%) |
| Q3a | 46 / 100 (46%) | 28 / 73 (38.3%) | 18 / 27 (66.6%) |
| Q3b | 3 / 100 (3%) | 1 / 73 (1.3%) | 2 / 27 (7.4%) |

It becomes obvious from the above mentioned figures that age and the degree of maturity play an important role in the way the young generation gets involved in public issues.

As far as the topic of our study is concerned, we believe that the figures demonstrate that although public involvement is indeed low among young people social network sites are a useful environment for creating civic consciousness and increasing public involvement among young people.

4. Communication technology and social networking. Understanding English language

Social networking is “the grouping of individuals into specific groups, like small rural communities or a neighborhood subdivision, if you will. Although social networking is possible in person, especially in the workplace, universities, and high schools, it is most popular online. When it comes to online social networking, websites are commonly used. These websites are known as social sites. Social networking websites function like an online community of internet users. Depending on the website in question, many of these online community members share common interests in hobbies, religion, politics and alternative lifestyles. Once you are granted access to a social networking website you can begin to socialize. This socialization may include reading the profile pages of other members and possibly even contacting them. While there are a number of social networking websites that focus on particular interests, there are others that do not.” (<http://www.whatissocialnetworking.com/>) The websites without a main focus are often referred to as "traditional" social networking websites and usually have open memberships. This means that anyone can become a member, no matter what their hobbies, beliefs, or views are. However, once you are inside this online community, you can begin to create your own network of friends and eliminate members that do not share common interests or goals.

A social networking service (<http://mashable.com/category/social-networking/>) is an online service, platform, or site that focuses on facilitating the building of social networks or social relations among people who, for example, share interests, activities, backgrounds, or real-life connections. A social network service consists of a representation of each user (often a profile), his/her social links, and a variety of additional services. Most social network services are web-based and provide means for users to interact over the Internet, such as e-mail and instant messaging. Online community services are sometimes considered as a social network service, though in a broader sense, social network service usually means an individual-centered service whereas online community services are group-centered. Social networking sites allow users to share ideas, activities, events, and interests within their individual networks.

Online social network like Facebook, Talk 2 and My Space are the new technologies in today's world (Allen, 2005). These technologies with active users worldwide (Kabre & Brown, 2011) provide opportunities for people to have active role in socializing process (Delambo, Homa, Peters, Delambo & Chandras, 2011; Urista, Dong & Day, 2009).

Social networks are web-based services that allow individuals to:

- construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system,
- articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and
- view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Harrison & Michael, 2009).

Bibi Eshrat Zamani and Somaye Mohammadzade (2012) consider that “social networking enriches the learning environment”. This could be done through:

- early recognition of student needs and formative assessment,
- establishment of classroom community,
- student engagement,
- increased sense of student achievement,
- information management and
- access to marginalized students.

Newgarden(2009) believes that the true social networking tools is in their potential to extend learning beyond the boundaries of the classroom community.

These online networks with unique features such as online games and world chat encourage users to communicate with family and friends (Brown, Handrickson & Littau, 2011).

But since most of the features are in English and one has to understand English in order to participate in the activities and functions provided by these networks, these online social networks can be used to provide an authentic language interaction and motivation and improve the performance of English language learners (Blattner & Fiori, 2009).

Many studies relating Internet technologies have used TAM model to predict users' online acceptance behaviour (Sheng, Jue & Weiwei, 2008). For example, Selim (2003) in his research investigated the student use and acceptance of course websites based on the variables of the perceived usefulness of the courses, perceived ease of use and usage and found that there exists a significant relationship between usage and ease of use in determining usage of a website course (Selim, 2003). VanRaaij and Schepers (2008) in their research found that perceived usefulness has a direct effect on Perceived ease of use (VanRaaij & Schepers, 2008). A study conducted on Business Administration and Management (LADE) and Infant and Primary School Teaching degree courses of the University of Huelva, et al (2010) showed that system usage is directly influenced by ease of use and attitude but very weakly by perceived usefulness. Sheng and Weiwei (2008) in a research called extending TAM for online learning systems: an intrinsic motivation perspective found that PEOU has a significant impact on learners' acceptance behavior towards using a WLS and helps students accept the importance of the system to their study performance (Sheng, Jue & Weiwei, 2008).

Bibi Eshrat Zamani & Somaye Mohammadzade (2012) argue that “we live in a century that the subject of global village is propounded, the language of most of science is in English and students must know English to find new scientific information, English teachers have not enough time for doing active group conversations in English, learning English efficiently is one the main concerns of

curriculum authorities, because despite spending time energy and capital, millions of students cannot communicate in English language effectively, online social networks have unique features such as Internet games and chat and most of these features are in English, this study is going to determine whether these networks can be a valuable environment for learning English and what are the factors affecting on English learners to use these technologies?”

Conclusion

It is a generation whose thinking patterns are fundamentally different from the previous generations, mostly due to the different way of processing and thinking information in a time of technology boom. Their learning preferences, their motivation and expectations from education are different and while they are seen as ‘growing without values’, they have something new to offer: directness, pragmatic goals, high expectations, fast achievements. Organizations fighting for a public cause should re-shape and re-design their strategies of reaching their goals if they want to attract the young generation and gain their support.

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