

USAGE OF THE ONLINE BY THE YOUNG INDIVIDUALS AND YOUNG ADULTS. A CASE STUDY OF THE ROMANIAN INTERNET USAGE

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Abstract: *The development of information and communication technologies are changing the world we live in, by changing the manner in which we communicate, interact with one and other and how we buy products and services. The current papers aimed to underline the profile of the young individuals (up to 25 years old) and young adults (25 to 34 years old) Internet users, in terms of frequency, device used, and aspects related to online consumer behaviour. The first section of the paper underlines the aspects related the literature review, regarding the evolution of the society in relation to the usage of information and communication technology form the end of the second world war (the baby boomers) to the present (Millennials and the Net Generation). The second part of the paper is presenting the results of a secondary data analysis regarding the usage of the online environment and the consumer behaviour by Romanian individuals to the age of 34 years old. We underlined aspects related to pre-purchase online behaviour, post purchase online behaviour, search information behaviour, and device use in an online environment. All this was don within the limits offered by the results obtained by the consumerbarometer.com online analysis platform.*

Keywords: consumers, internet, marketing, communication, purchase

JEL classification codes: M30, M31

Introduction

The surge in the usage of the Internet over the last two decades have changed the way individuals relate to one another, to companies, to friends or family. At the same time, the changes that have taken place at an individual level, have occurred at the business environment level. We can clearly state, that we have become somewhat a digital society, where we interact more online, than we do in person. The once face to face dialog that has taken place between companies and their clients has moved to the online environment. At the same time, this change towards the online communication, has led to the shift form the mass communication strategies to more targeted twoway communication between the company and the individual (Kotler and Keller, 2016, p. 637). We are today witnessing changes in the way the companies approach their consumers and at the same time, due to the increasing usage and sometimes even the exclusive usage of the digital environment, we see and need to be aware of the radical changes that the jump to the online brings. In their now famous "Marketing 4.0" book, Kotler et.al (2017, p. 7-15) mention that the changes that occur in our society and in the way, we do business relate to shifts form: (1) *an exclusive to inclusive environment*; (2) *form a vertical to a horizontal way of doing business*; (3) *from an individual to a social approach to consumers*.

None of these changes are more present than in the way the young people (teenagers and / or young adults) relate to the Internet, its usage, the influence of the online on their buying behaviour and much more. These changes have led to the birth of a new type of consumer, described as: "... *the one that will be the majority in the near future, ... – young, urban, middle class with strong mobility and connectivity*" (Kotler et al., 2017, p. 19). The current paper relates to how the young individuals, aged up to 35 years old from Romania, use the internet, what they search, how they

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behave online. By underlining and presenting these interesting secondary data research statistics we hope that we can offer the business environment the tools to reach and target their consumers better and faster.

Born and raised in a digital world – some aspects related to the evolution of the evolution of the society in the context of technology

Profiling the young Internet users and at the same time the consumers has never been easier. It has become increasingly simple to target the young consumers and to tailor the marketing communication strategy to them and their needs. But who is this generation of young Internet consumers? How can they be described or profiled? The answer lies within the evolution of the society in the last five to six decades.

Of course, it is a great discrepancy between the formation of the society in the western, more developed countries and the society in the former communist countries, now the central and Eastern European Countries. But for this we will concentrate mainly on the US evolution of society, which has been thoroughly investigated from a demographic and economical point of view.

The evolution of the information and communication technologies in the last century, especially after the end of the second world war, has led to the development of different stages in the evolution of the United States Society. These main stages of development are (Trapscott, 2011):

a) Baby boomers – are represented by the individuals born between 1946 and 1964, which had a significant influence on the demographic change in the United States, Canada and Australia. The well developed and strong post war economy has offered the opportunity and trust to develop families and have children. According to Frost (Frost, 1996 in Trapscott, 2011), in 1957 the average US family had 3,7 children. This segment is defined by Kotler (Kotler and Keller, 2016, p. 270 & 276) as *“college-educated, upper-middle-class, and home-owning. Like many of their peers who married late, these boomers are still raising children in comfortable suburban subdivisions and pursuing kid-centred lifestyles”*.

Demographically and from a consumer point of view Kotler continues his analysis, stating that *“they represent 76 million U.S. consumers, possessing \$1.2 trillion in annual spending power and controlling three quarters of the country’s wealth, marketers often overlook them. In network television circles, because advertisers are primarily interested in 18 to 49-year-olds, viewers over 50 are referred to as “undesirables,” though ironically the average age of the prime-time TV viewer is 51.”*

From a communication and information point of view, as seen above this generation was the TV generation. If at the beginning of the 1950s only 20% of US households have had a TV, eight years later the percentage jumped to 83% (Trapscott, 2011). This evolution of television as a communication mean lead to a change in the way marketing was made. This new communication environment has launched the development of TV ads.

b) Generation X or the “baby burst generation”, are defined by the fact that they were born between mid-60s and mid 70s (1965 – 1976). According to the US Census Bureau report of 2010 (Howden and Meyer, 2011), the generation X represented more than 80 million of the current US population. They represent the first generation that have started using the computer in a manner that is similar to the way we do today. Regarding the usage of the Internet as a mean of communication, and regarding the connectivity aspect of the online, according to Social4Retail.com and eMarketer.com, in 2012, when the US Generation X individuals were between 36 and 47 years old, they are *“highly connected on the go, with nearly 95% using mobile phones, and 60.3% of that group using smartphones. In 2012, 38.4 million Gen Xers, or 62.2% of Gen X mobile users, used the mobile internet at least monthly. That accounts for three in ten mobile internet users in the US.”* (Social4Retail.com, accessed in 2018).

c) **Generation Y or the "Millennials"** are characterised by being born in the late 1970s until the end of the century (1977 to 1999/2000). But the years that define the millennials differ according to the sources. The US Census Bureau defines the millennials as the individuals born between 1982 and 2000 (census.gov, accessed in 2018), and at the same time, other research entities vary with their estimation from late 1970s to mid-1990s. According to the Statistics Portal, the millennials are avid Internet users via smartphones, tablets, PC or laptops. Statista.com (accessed in 2018) state that "*millennials use social networks to create, share and exchange information with each other. The most popular social networking site amongst all Millennial age groups is Facebook. In 2016, about 50 percent of Americans used 30 to 34 years old stated using Facebook the most; this share stood at 41 percent for the 25 to 29 years age group, and 36 percent for Millennials aged between 18 and 24*".

d) **Generation Z or the Net Gen**, are individuals born after the year 2000. Related to the name given to the current generation, there are still debates regarding it. The names vary from Gen Tech, iGeneration, Gen Wii, Digital Natives, Post-Millennials etc. The consumers form the Millennials and the Net Gen are similar in their usage of technology and of the internet, but the latter ones have a distinctive advantage, being born with the Internet in their lives from an early age. The main characteristics of the previous two generations are mobility and connectivity.

Kotler states that regarding their online consumer behaviour, "*when they are interested in things they see on television, they search for them on their mobile devices. When they are deciding whether to buy something in-store*", *they research price and quality online. Being digital native, they can make purchase decisions anywhere and anytime, involving a wide range of devices*". (Kotler et al. 2017, p.19).

At the same time, the evolution of ICT has made the Net Gen youth take to the digital technology as fast as the baby boomers have adopted the television in the 50s and 60s. They have been born with technology, we the adults have had to get used to it, to learn how to use the online tools and the computers. The Net Gen youth use the TV less than the adults, especially those borne in the 50s and 60s, they would rather use a computer, a tablet or a smartphone to stay in touch with what happens in their community or around the world (Trapscott, 2011, p. 52-53).

The interconnectivity of the age we live in has changed the way we connect, target and communicate with the consumers. Due to the fast-paced rhythm that we live in, the consumers have less and less time to analyse the products or services that satisfy their needs. This accelerated rhythm of life leads the individuals, especially the youth that is targeted by ever more communication stimuli, to have a shorter attention span regarding the products or services that they are interested in.

The shifts brought on by the ICT and the digital economy, have slightly changed the manner in which companies should approach the 4 P's. Professor Kotler (Kotler et.al. 2017, p. 50-51) suggests that the 4 P's have evolved to adjust for the consumer participation into the 4 C's (the connected marketing mix):

- (a) *co-creation*, relates to the product and underlines the involvement of the consumer in the personalization and customisation of the products or services that they want or need;
- (b) *currency* or dynamic pricing point out the fact that the prices are similar to the currency and its fluctuation based on market demand. Dynamic pricing is based on the practice of big data analysis and the charging the price in connection to the consumer's buying history, distance to the store, frequency of purchase etc.;
- (c) *communal activation* is in essence the distribution process but seen from a peer-to peer point of view. The shift to the digital age has brought forth the development of products and mostly services generated by intermediaries rather than the producers. Such examples can be seen in the hospitality industry with Airbnb or in the taxi industry with Uber or BlaBlaCar. Instant access to certain products or services is another aspect that has been made possible by the digital world. A good example is the case of the Microsoft Corp., which up until several years ago would deliver their software physically on CDs, DVDs etc., but now you only need to log in online, pay the product fee and you can download a and install the software you need;

(d) *conversation* relates to the evolution of the concept of promotion. The changes and the usage of the online environment and especially of social media, have generated changes within the way the consumers interact and / or respond to the messages sent by the companies. Social media platforms, blogs, forums allow the consumer to interact with other consumers, to exchange positive and negative experiences about the acquisition and consumption of their products or services.

All the above mentioned evolutions of the society, the changes brought on by the advances in the usage and implementation of the information and communication technologies, of the internet and of the social media, the shift from a service delivered to a consumer to a consumer-care approach, from treating the consumers as simple clients to equals partners has been the result of integrating the traditional and the digital marketing concepts and approaches. Thus the interchanging roles of digital marketing vary from a traditional approach (when we talk about Enjoyment, Experience and Engagement) to connected marketing approach (when we underline the Awareness, the Appeal, Asking / researching, the Act and Advocacy) and show a much more complex approach to the consumer / individual and the way they use the ICT to communicate (Kotler et.al, 2017).

Starting from these points of view, even if the same evolution of the society and their usage of technology was not present in Romania, we consider that the experience of the US has become a good benchmark in order to understand and profile the young individuals and their online behaviour in our country. At the same time, the evolution and the online behaviours presented in the case of the Millennials and the NetGen can be clearly seen in our society and in our youth. We can see it especially in the Internet usage and the social media usage. According to facebrands.ro there are more than 9,6 million Facebook users in Romania, which represents about 49% of the population, containing of 57,54% users between the ages of 13 and 34 years old, with an even distribution of males and females (Facebrands.ro accessed in October 2018).

Statistical data about usage of the internet by young individuals and adults in Romania

According to the United Nations "for statistical purposes, defines 'youth', as those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years, without prejudice to other definitions by Member States" (un.org, definition of youth, accessed on October 2018).

The current paper aims to identify the profile of the internet user of Romania for the age group of up to 35 years old, that are basically part of the Millennials and the NetGen age limits. The current study is a secondary data analysis, based on the internet usage provided by the search engine Google, through its Consumer Barometer platform.

We consider that identifying the profile of the above mentioned user is going to underline the importance of a large segment of the population that uses the Internet in their daily activities, their job / business related activity and therefore it will become increasingly important to better target and communicate with the current and future consumers.

The secondary data analysis was observed by the authors between the 1st and the 15th of October 2018 and aimed to identify the following aspects related to the target group and their internet usage: frequency of Internet use; internet user segmentation; type of devices used; smartphone and computer online usage; aspects related to online research behaviour; and online purchase behaviour, all of them taking into account age and gender distribution. According to the consumerbarometer.com platform, used for this secondary data research, the number of respondents that participated in this survey were 222 individuals for the year 2017 and presented in the Connected Consumer Survey 2017 (thinkwithgoogle.com, October, 2018) as well as the the Consumer Barometer Survey 2014/2015 that was generated with the answered from 2832 individuals.



Figure no. 1. Daily usage of Internet for users under 35 years old
(www.consumerbarometer.com)

As we can see from the first figure, no matter the age group, more than 90% males and females are using the Internet on a daily basis. For the under 25 years old we can also see that 100% of the males use this communication tool. Additional information shows that, 7% of the males between 25 and 34 y.o. are using the Internet on a weekly basis and 3% of them are using it on a monthly basis. 5% of the females aged under 25, use the Internet several times/month.

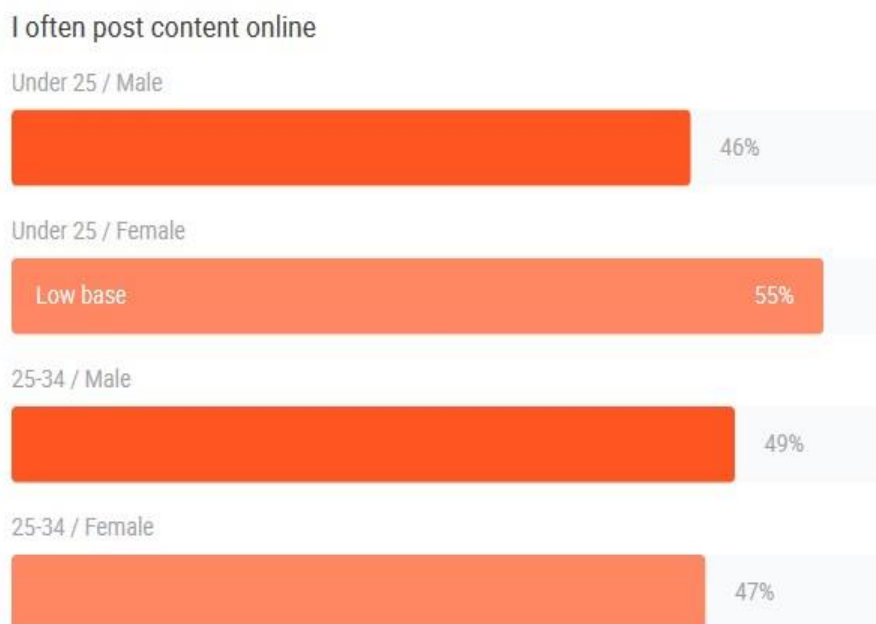


Figure no. 2. User technology savviness - posting
(www.consumerbarometer.com)

The second and third figures show what the Internet users are doing online. Regarding the online posting aspect, we can see that the 50% is surpassed by only the under 25 y.o. females, the rest are averaging between 46 and 49%. Secondly, the users are helping others use the Internet, as seen in figure 3, where the under 25 y.o. males are those that are helping (78%) and 68% of the females in the same age group are also helping.

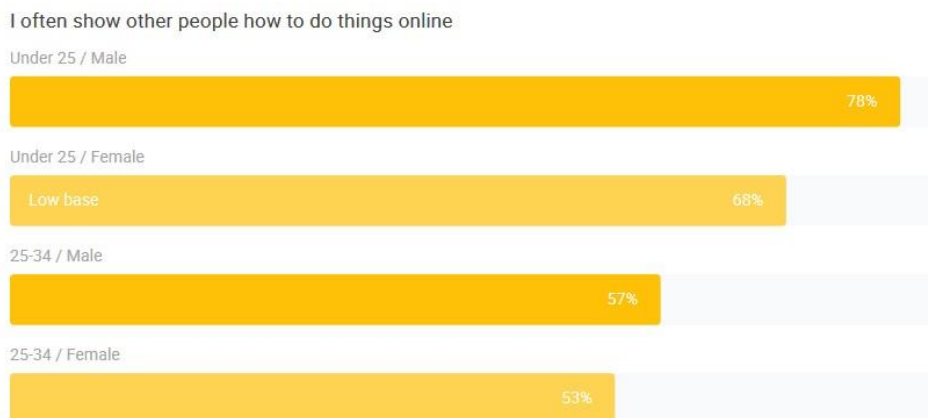


Figure no. 3. User technology savviness – helping / demonstrating usage
(www.consumerbarometer.com)

Other activities that the Internet user are doing online are: looking up information on the internet first (all age groups and genders are at over 88%); using the internet is fun for is an activity for 75% of the males from both age group, where as the females are at 70% for under 25, and 67% for those between 25 and 35 y.o.

An important aspect that has to be researched is the main type of device that is used for accessing and using the internet. According to consumerbarometer.com (October 2018), the mobile phone or the smartphone are used by all individuals of both age groups, the computer (desktop PC, laptop or netbook) is used between 67% (female between 25-34 y.o) and 90% (males under 25). The tablet barely reaches above 50% in usage by the females under 25, the rest average between 27% and 44%. Other connected devices used by the users are, the television, MP3 player, eReader, digital devices to save or record TV programs, digital devices that connect the TV to the internet in order to streamline etc.

The second great aspect in our secondary data research relates to the online shopper. Thus, we were interested in the Internet usage regarding their consumer behaviour. Following the results of the Consumer Barometer Survey 2014/15, where more than 2800 individuals participated (consumerbarometer.com, October 2018), the users usually spend several hours before making a purchase on line researching the project (32% of the under 25yo males and 24% of the females; 26% of the males between 25 and 35yo and 22% of the female). The highest percentage (26%) for the internet users that spend time online before a purchase is for the males under 25 y.o, that in the days before a purchase send time online for product/service research. The lowest percentage (11%) is registered by the 25 – 34 y.o. males that spend time researching just moments before the acquisition. There are also some Internet users that don not use the online environment to search for information before making a purchase or those that have been searching for information for months before acquiring a certain product or service, but these individuals are under 10%.

In order to understand the online consumer behaviour of the young individuals and adults, we must underline the buying behaviour. For this, the Consumer Barometer Survey 2014/15 (consumerbarometer.com, October 2018) shows that around 50% of the Internet users are buying the desired products or services from a physical store (store, office, kiosk, restaurant, agency), les than 10% of all age groups and genders buy over the phone, less than 5% of the users use the direct mail method and an average of 33% of all Internet users are buying from online stores.

For the main device used to make the purchase, 1105 respondents (consumerbarometer.com, October 2018) mentioned that 9,5% of the males and females of under 25y.o., use the smartphone for buying and 6% of the males and females of 25-34 y.o. are using the same tool. The computers (laptop, PC or netbook) are used in ann average of 83% by the users that are up to 35 y.o. (Highest – 84% by

25 to 34 y.o. males; lowest 79% by under 25 y.o. females). The tablets and other online enabled devices are under 7%. Regarding the delivery of online purchased products, an average of a little more than 50% of the responses mentioned that the individuals prefer to collect the product from the store and around 30% of the purchases were delivered at users' home.

Of course, all consumer behaviour is concluded with post purchase activities, therefore the 2832 respondents of the The Consumer Barometer Survey 2014/2015 (consumerbarometer.com, October 2018) show that an average of 15% of the Internet users post about their buying experiences on social networks (Lowest – 11% for 25 to 34 y.o. females & Highest – 19% for under 25 y.o. males). 17 % of the males of both age groups are posting review / ratings about the acquisition and only 9% of the under 25 y.o. females and 6 % of the 25 – 34 y.o. group are doing the same. Around 12% of the internet users are looking for help in using / installing the product.

Conclusions

As stated before, we are living in an increasingly digital and connected world, where almost everything you do can be observed, tracked and profiled by the governments, the companies and the Internet based companies. The evolution of the information and communication technology has developed the need to understand the Internet users and at the same time the online consumers better, to understand their need and wants, and to provide the best products or services available for them. The evolution of the society over the last six to seven decades has shown how the consumers have used the technology in order to better their lives and to get information or communicate between clients and companies. The biggest gap between the generation can be seen when analysing the Baby Boomer Generation on one side, and the Millennials and the Net Generation on the other side and how they transitioned from using mostly the television as means of information to the usage of smartphones, tablets, computers that use the internet to communicate via email, social media, blogs or forums.

The present paper has aimed, on one side, to underline the evolution of the society and the usage of information and communication technology from the end of the Second World War to the present, and on the other side, we presented several statistical data, based on secondary data analysis provided by the Consumerbarometer.com platform, that show the usage of the online by Romanian Internet users aged up to 34 years old.

Following the secondary data analysis, we have observed that: (1) the usage of the online is done on a daily basis by all the Internet users from the target group; (2) the online posting is done by approximately 50% of the young Internet users; (3) looking up information about products / services / interesting facts on the internet first 88%; (4) the main devices used for online usage are the computer and the smartphone; (5) most of the Internet users search for information, on the online environment, about the products / service that they are interested in; (6) time spent for information search: from several hours to several days before purchase; (7) after the acquisition some Internet users post online about their purchase or they review the product / service etc.

The above-mentioned results and conclusions, along with the information provided in this paper and by consumerbarometer.com, can be used by the marketers, by advertising companies, by marketing strategists and their managers to develop and aim their marketing communication using the data to better target, reach and convert the clients into consumers. The digitalization of the economy and of our daily lives, as well as the shifts that are happening in our societies, must be considered when the companies / organizations are designing their marketing and advertising strategies.

We hope that this paper is a first step in this direction for the Romanian business environment, but at the same time, we must acknowledge the limits of the secondary data research, by underlining the fact that the Romanian users are not very open in sharing information about their online behaviour, as well as certain elements of a proper online research could not be developed because of lack of

information, especially regarding the profile of the online user: income levels, education levels, location of the user (urban or rural areas) etc.

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