

GENERATION Z: CHARACTERISTICS, SOCIAL NETWORKS AND POLITICAL BEHAVIOR*

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Abstract: *The members of Generation Z, considered as digital natives, have become eligible voters in the recent years. Being exposed early in their lives to Internet and becoming heavy social media users, it is important to understand how they use it. This paper examines the strong relation that forms between the first-time voters, social networks and political behavior. We examine the way the young people political interest is influenced by social networks as well as how they use social networks for acquiring political information.*

Keywords: Generation Z, social networks, political behavior

Meet the Generation Z – some characteristics

Strauss and Howe define a social generation as the set of all people born over a period of about twenty years or over a phase of life: childhood, young age, middle age and old age. Generations are identified by looking for groups of cohorts of this length that share three criteria. First, members of a generation share an age-old location in history: they face historical events and crucial social trends while in the same phase of life. The members of a generation share certain common beliefs and behaviors and they share with their peer a sense of common belonging¹. Each generation comes with a unique set of features and challenges. These characteristics are the result of an economical and historical context, various cultural events, technological evolutions that affect their personality, their way of thinking and their behavior.

* This work was supported by the project "Quality, innovative and relevant doctoral and postdoctoral research for the labor market": POCU/380/6/13/124146, project co-financed by the European Social Fund through The Romanian Operational Programme "Human Capital" 2014-2020.

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¹ William Strauss and Neil Howe, *Generations*, Harper Perennial, 1991.

„Anuarul Institutului de Istorie «George Barițiu» din Cluj-Napoca. Series Historica”, LIX, 2020, Supliment, 2, *Lucrările conferinței internaționale online „ROMANIA-ITALIA-EUROPA. Evoluții istorice - Dinamici culturale - Relații internaționale”, 16-18 septembrie 2020*, p. 721-729.

Today the youngest generation, 32% of the global population², represent a special cohort called Generation Z. They precede the Millennials generation and represent the cohort born and raised between 1995 and 2010, during the most profound changes in the century who exists in a world with web, internet, smart phones, laptops, freely available networks and digital media. Because of this, Generation Z is also called: iGeneration, Gen Tech, Online Generation, Post Millennials, Facebook Generation, Switchers, “always clicking”³.

Unlike Millennials, who have adapted to technological evolution, Generation Z members are true "digital natives". From an early age they were accustomed to handling objects such as smartphones and tablets. Those gadgets made them aware of the fact that if they need information, it is easily accessible. Therefore, it is a generation that knows no barriers to connection, and therefore not even particular limits in their cultural horizons. Laptops and smartphone are used for almost everything: entertainment, as a source of information and communication. This has effects on the way they present their identity, build their values according to which they are guided.

Members of Generation Z may describe themselves as motivated, determined, open-minded, caring, a diverse generation grounded in a sense of integrity and tenacity. They value financial security, family and relationships, meaningful work, and happiness, and are motivated through relationships, engaging with their passions, and achievement⁴. They grew up in a safer, more prosperous, more peaceful world and that made them freer and bolder, more willing to take risks and change, more volatile.

Even though they are considered to be the most educated generation⁵, for them, education means imitation and their library is YouTube, and Instagram. They also believe that online gives them the resources they need to learn and question the traditional education system. Many in Generation Z are lifetime learners and have been facilitating their own self-education since they could swipe a tablet. But, their preferences for learning, especially intrapersonal, self-paced, and applied, go beyond simply the access they have to today's technology⁶.

² Lee J Miller and Wei Lu, "Gen Z Is Set to Outnumber Millennials Within a Year", Bloomberg, 2018, disponibil la [https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-08-20/gen-z-to-outnumber-millennials-within-a-year-demographic-trends.](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-08-20/gen-z-to-outnumber-millennials-within-a-year-demographic-trends), accesat in 15.09.2020.

³ Anna Dolot, "New Trends in Management The Characteristics of Generation Z", *E-Mentor* 2, 1 no. 2 (2018), p. 44–50.

⁴ Meghan Grace Seemiller, Corey, *Generation Z - a Century in the Making*, vol. 53, 2019.

⁵ Regina Pefanis Schlee, Vicki Blakney Eveland, and Katrin R. Harich, „From Millennials to Gen Z: Changes in Student Attitudes about Group Projects”, *Journal of Education for Business* Issue 3, vol.95 (2019), p. 1–9.

⁶ Seemiller, Corey, *op. cit.*

When it comes to work, Generation Z views their job in a very pragmatic way. Unlike their Millennial counterparts who often need to love what they do, Gen Z understands that work is performed for financial reasons. They'll accept employment that provides a steady income and necessary benefits even if it isn't their dream job. In terms of ideas, they are very creative and know that from good ideas profitable businesses are born. They are also very aware that all they don't know at the moment is a simple click away which makes the bold decision to be an entrepreneur less difficult⁷.

From a social perspective, as soon as they were old enough to click, those in Generation Z have had news at their fingertips about every global and local crisis, giving this generation much to worry about even at a young age. This has led them to care deeply about many issues, especially those they believe have a significant current and future impact on society. They care about the environment, equality, guns control and they accept diversity as a form of expression. They've grown up in a diverse world and it's all they know. Neither race, sexual orientation nor religion are the identifying characteristics that they may have been for previous generations.

With these new characteristics generation Z members will be the leaders and doers of tomorrow. The way they were born and the values in which they believe will shape the society.

Social media and political behavior

Social media – a source of political information

Dalton and Klingemann define political behavior as the level of knowledge, understanding and interest in political matters⁸. While adult citizens were often characterized as unformed and unsophisticated voters⁹, young citizens are considered to be worst. Today's young citizens are seen as being cynical and disillusioned with politics and, as a result, less likely to engage and participate in political processes and elections¹⁰. They are alienated from mainstream political parties and have a growing disdain for formal politics.

⁷ "10 Defining Characteristics of Generation Z" n.d., disponibil la <https://blog.tisi.com/10-defining-characteristics-of-generation-z/>, accesat in 17.09.2020.

⁸ Russell J Dalton and Hans-Dieter Klingemann, *Overview of Political Behavior: Political Behavior and Citizen Politics*, "The Oxford Handbook of Political Science", no. January 2018 (2011): 1–28, www.oxfordhandbooks.com.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ Matthijs Elenbaas and Claes H. De Vreese, *The Effects of Strategic News on Political Cynicism and Vote Choice among Young Voters*, "Journal of Communication", 58, no. 3 (2008), p. 550–567.

Social media radically changed young people and created an environment where knowledge is available to anyone, produced by anyone and accessible to anyone. The center of this digitalized society is the individual where one voice can grow into millions and where political interaction is combined with entertainment and peer socializing. Social Media networks as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram are creating an environment where displaying political opinions (slogans, logos, symbolic markers) is a consistent feature of our day-to-day life¹¹. In those spaces, liking or sharing an idea as a meme or generating a discussion over a political post becomes the natural way for young people to express their political engagement regarding a certain idea or a certain candidate.

The idea behind the use of social media as a source of political information was raised by many researchers. Some argue the positive effects of social media as an information source while the sceptics discuss its negative effects¹² implying that such forms of information can lead to “clickism”¹³. Leaving aside the negative approach we can say that most research in this field has shown that receiving political information via social media mobilizes political engagement of young people and stimulates the level of political information in various ways¹⁴. This happens because of its lower costs, energy time and commitment¹⁵. This is the way of creating informed citizens. Even though young people are preoccupied with other interests and they have little time for politics considering it boring and for old people¹⁶, under the effects of social media expansion this is changing and we are facing a “re-generation of politics”¹⁷. Social media is a potential environment to stimulate cognitive awareness of young

¹¹ Joel Penney, *The Citizen Marketer: Promoting Political Opinion in the Social Media Age*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2017.

¹² Elaine Sherman, Leon G. Schiffman and Shawn T. Thelen, *Young Voters' Trust of Information and Media Sources: The 2008 U.S. Presidential Election*, "Journal of Political Marketing", 11, no. 4 (2012), p. 246–264; Adam Shehata and Jesper Strömbäck, *Learning Political News From Social Media: Network Media Logic and Current Affairs News Learning in a High-Choice Media Environment*, "Communication Research", January 17, 2018.

¹³ Ana Adi, Roman Gerodimos and Darren G. Lilleker, "Yes We Vote": *Civic Mobilisation and Impulsive Engagement on Instagram*, "Javnost -The Public", 25, no. 3 (2018), p. 315–32.

¹⁴ Gary Tang and Francis L.F. Lee, *Facebook Use and Political Participation: The Impact of Exposure to Shared Political Information, Connections With Public Political Actors, and Network Structural Heterogeneity*, "Social Science Computer Review", 31, no. 6 (2013), p. 763–73.

¹⁵ Airi Alina Allaste and Kari Saari, *Social Media and Participation in Different Socio-Political Contexts: Cases of Estonia and Finland*, "Young", 2019, p. 1–19.

¹⁶ Clarissa White, Sara Bruce, and Jane Ritchie, *Young People's Politics*, 2000.

¹⁷ Sarah Pickard, Judith Bessant, and Constance Flanagan, *Politics in Times of Anxiety*, in *Young People Re-Generating Politics in Times of Crises*, 2018.

people about their society and about politics¹⁸ and can lead to deeper political participation¹⁹. Authors like Michael Xenos, Ariadne Vromen and Brian Loader believe that social media has the added qualities of making it more easier for individuals to engage in traditional and non-traditional forms of political involvement²⁰ and make them more politically knowledgeable²¹. This is because of its the immense connectivity and the access to a wide range of political content from different gadgets. Even though young voters still use intimate sources (as family and friends) to decide to what candidate their vote goes they will use social networks as a space of expression and political engagement towards a candidate.

Social Media – a way of expressing political identity

Young people engagement towards a different candidate or party can be shown by supporting political campaigns or becoming an active member of a certain party. As option number two seems too difficult for a generation that is considered apathetic, lazy, superficial and sometimes arrogant²² most of the young people are using their social media channels and spreadable media in order to support their candidates. This represents a low-cost form of political activity²³, a latent political participation²⁴. Support for their candidates is shown by using symbols, by sharing, posting or likes, activities that are considered to be more fun, easier than tedious legwork of traditional campaign volunteering. In an article related to UK general elections from 2017, Paolo Gerbaudo, Federico Maronga and Chiara Alzetta discuss the importance of posting during the campaign and its effects. Other studies prove that social networks as

¹⁸ Mike Wayne et al., *Television News, Politics and Young People*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

¹⁹ Gadi Wolfsfeld, Moran Yarchi, and Tal Samuel-Azran, *Political Information Repertoires and Political Participation*, "New Media and Society", 18, no. 9 (2016), p. 2096–2115.

²⁰ Michael Xenos, Ariadne Vromen, and Brian D. Loader, *The Great Equalizer? Patterns of Social Media Use and Youth Political Engagement in Three Advanced Democracies*, "Information Communication and Society", 17, no. 2 (2014), p. 151–67.

²¹ Chang Sup Park, *Learning Politics From Social Media: Interconnection of Social Media Use for Political News and Political Issue and Process Knowledge*, "Communication Studies" 70, no. 3 (2019), p. 253–76.

²² Patti M. Valkenburg and Jessica Taylor Piotrowski, *Plugged in. How Media Attract and Affect Youth*, Yale University Press, 2017.

²³ Joel Penney, *The Citizen Marketer: Promoting Political Opinion in the Social Media Age*. "Oxford Studies in Digital Politics", 2017.

²⁴ Joakim Ekman and Erik Amnå, *Political Participation and Civic Engagement: Towards a New Typology*, "Human Affairs", 22, no. 3 (2012), p. 283–300.

Facebook²⁵ are a key mean for political communications especially among young people.

When it comes to expression, social media engages users that are motivated by a desire to correct the record, persuade others or represent their social identities²⁶. During political events social media content is widely circulated²⁷. A team of researchers led by Jessica Vitak found that young people's election-themed activities on Facebook help develop their political identities and foster civic skills that are necessary for future participation in the electoral political domain²⁸. This theory was tested in 2012 with a research study made by PEW Research Centre Internet and American Life Project which showed that a quarter of those who used social networks (in U.S) became more politically active²⁹.

Social Media and offline political participation

Political participation, whether online or offline, refers to activity by ordinary citizens that has the intent or effect of influencing government action or some political outcomes³⁰. It is defined as both psychological engagement and behavioral involvement of civic and public affairs that have a clear expectation of influencing

²⁵ Souman Hong and Daniel Nadler, *Does the Early Bird Move the Polls? The Use of the Social Media Tool 'Twitter' by U.S. Politicians and Its Impact on Public Opinion*, "ACM International Conference Proceeding Series", 2011, 182–86, <https://doi.org/10.1145/2037556.2037583>; Stefan Stieglitz and Linh Dang-Xuan, *Emotions and Information Diffusion in Social Media - Sentiment of Microblogs and Sharing Behavior*, "Journal of Management Information Systems", 29, no. 4 (April 1, 2013): 217–48, <https://doi.org/10.2753/MIS0742-1222290408>; Stefan Stieglitz and Linh Dang-Xuan, *Emotions and Information Diffusion in Social Media - Sentiment of Microblogs and Sharing Behavior*, "Journal of Management Information Systems", 29, no. 4 (April 1, 2013), p. 217–48.

²⁶ Matthew Barnidge et al., *Social Media as a Sphere for 'Risky' Political Expression: A Twenty-Country Multilevel Comparative Analysis*, "International Journal of Press/Politics", 23, no. 2 (2018), p. 161–82.

²⁷ Daniel Kreiss, *Seizing the Moment: The Presidential Campaigns' Use of Twitter during the 2012 Electoral Cycle*, "New Media and Society", 18, no. 8 (2016): 1473–90; Deen Freelon and David Karpf, *Of Big Birds and Bayonets: Hybrid Twitter Interactivity in the 2012 Presidential Debates*, "Information Communication and Society", 18, no. 4 (2015), p. 390–406.

²⁸ Jessica Vitak et al., *It's Complicated: Facebook Users' Political Participation in the 2008 Election*, "Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking", 14, no. 3 (2011), p. 107–14.

²⁹ Joel Penney, *op. cit.*

³⁰ Sebastián Valenzuela, Yonghwan Kim, and Homero Gil De Zúñiga, *Social Networks That Matter: Exploring the Role of Political Discussion for Online Political Participation* "International Journal of Public Opinion Research" 24, no. 2 (2012), p. 163–84.

government actions. Digital political participation³¹ is nowadays an important characteristic of democratic countries.

A considerable number of studies have stated that political participation is enhanced by online political communication and this is most likely to generate civic manifestations³². Some consider that offline civic participation is positively associated with the digital media use while others believe that the strength and direction of this relationship depends on the type of media, personal motivations, and level of usages³³. In the case of young people studies as that of Lucia Vesnic – Alujevic (2013) states that social media gives young people's the possibility to increase their level of political participation³⁴.

Not much it is written on the way offline political engagement is reflected in social media. When we speak about this generation of young adults that are known to be more vocal we expect that is only natural that their exposed symbolic gestures from social media platforms are the result of their offline political participation. As we were previously saying, today's discussions and conversations among young people take place for the most part online. These likely to become members of a political or civic movement, they are more project oriented and their social relations are increasingly enacted through a social media networked environment³⁵. Even though they won't be classically engaged in political activities offline this won't mean that they will not share political opinions offline. Traditional offline participation can be executed online, such as signing online petitions and writing emails to politicians.

It is clear that young people political behavior changes under the impact of the internet and the explosions of social networks. Young people live in an information-rich environment which allows them to be more interested and more vocal than ever,

³¹ José Manuel Robles, Stefano De Marco, and Mirko Antino, *Activating Activists: The Links between Political Participation and Digital Political Participation*, "Information Communication and Society", 16, no. 6 (2013): 856–77.

³² Yan Tian, *Communication Behaviors as Mediators: Examining Links between Political Orientation, Political Communication, and Political Participation*, "Communication Quarterly", 59, no. 3 (2011), p. 380–94; Timothy MacAfee and J. J. De Simone, *Killing the Bill Online? Pathways to Young People's Protest Engagement via Social Media*, "Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking", 15, no. 11 (2012), p. 579–84.

³³ Kristoffer Holt et al., *Age and the Effects of News Media Attention and Social Media Use on Political Interest and Participation: Do Social Media Function as Leveller?*, "European Journal of Communication", 28, no. 1 (2013), p. 19–34.

³⁴ Lucia Vesnic-Alujevic, *Young People, Social Media and Engagement*, "European View", 12, no. 2 (2013), p. 255–61.

³⁵ Brian D. Loader, Ariadne Vromen, and Michael A. Xenos, *The Networked Young Citizen: Social Media, Political Participation and Civic Engagement*, "Information Communication and Society", 17, no. 2 (2014), p. 143–50.

while the internet becomes a powerful tool that attracts them to politics and generates engagement in political processes. Generation Z members are more likely to be more informed in political matters, to express more their political identity and in some cases, to be more active in offline political events (either formal political events as elections or other political events). Because they are more informed, they will not be lazy and apathic they will get involved in different forms of political activities.

Conclusions

Known as motivated, determined, open minded and digital natives, members of generation Z will be those in charge of our society in few years. Even though they are considered apathic and have no interest in politics, which they consider boring and for old people, under the raise of social networks, this changes.

Social media radically changed young people, there are no barriers to connection, information is everywhere, and, more important, social media gives people a voice. When it comes to politics and political behavior, social networks as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram are creating an environment where displaying political opinions is a consistent feature of our day-to-day life. One of the most important effect that social media has on political behavior in young people is that, because of it's features makes it easier for them to develop and express their political identity. Via likes, comments, post and sharing, they show their peers what they believe about political parties, politicians and other political issues. They get engaged in political campaigns but they also can get involved in other non-formal political activities.

More than a way of expressing what they believe about politics, social networks are, especially for young people, a good way of acquiring political information. Because of its the immense connectivity and the access to a wide range of political content from different gadgets its lower costs and energy time, young people become more political knowledgeable. The information they get on social media via various discussions can generate offline political participation.

We consider that in this environment, generation Z members will change the way the society sees young people.