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THE ROLE OF THE INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA AMONG YOUNG POPULATION IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETIES

Abstract

Young population in the twenty-first century is a generation with the best technical and technological conditions for education, personal development and success. Completely aware of the digital technologies, this generation accepts the innovations and the new developments, trying to keep pace with the trends. They are flexible and fully opened to the future horizons. The Internet can be massively found into all spheres of life. However, do young people know how to use properly the benefits of the new social media? Is the awareness ofyoung people at a sufficiently high level for them to use digital tools, to engage themselves in solving the social problems that affect them? Are young people sufficiently educated and involved in the processes of electronic engagement?
There are many national youth studies whichlead to the conclusion that it is necessary to improve key competences and skills of young people out of their everyday educational environment. The reason for this is to enable better usage of their potential and all of the benefits of technologies, as well as to raise awareness among them to use the advantages of advanced new technologies for involvement in solving social issues that have an influence on them.It is necessary to enhance the development of young people through a combination of knowledge, skills and technologies that will motivate them to upgrade and promote themselves, and also to exploit suitablythe potential and the benefits of new technologies and social media.

Key words: Internet, digital technologies, social media, electronic engagement

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, the young population is very well educated in the field of information and computer technologies since their early age. The new generations have already accepted the new technologies and new developments in the digital toolsand now are using them in all the fields of everyday life, trying to keep up with the trends. Digital competence is the most recent concept describing technology-related skills. In recentyears, several terms have been used to describe the skills and competence of using digitaltechnologies, such as ICT skills, technology skills, information technology skills, 21st century skills, information literacy, digital literacy, and digital skills. All of them refer to the ability to use digital systems and tools such as: computers and other hardware, software applications, and also accessing, creating, communicating, integrating and organizing information. While there is no standard definition, digital skills can be understood as the ability to locate, organize, understand, evaluate, create and share information using digital technology (A Report of the International ICT Literacy Panel, 2002).

The reality is that without basic digital skills, people cannot participate fully in today's society. But that doesn't mean that they are using digital technology to access core services or to improve their life chances. Similarly, we assume all young people are digital natives. But although they may manage their social lives using Facebook or SnapChat or WhatsApp, many cannot fill out an on-line form or create CV in simple text editor. So whilst people may technically know how to use a mobile phone applications or a digital interface in one area of their life, it doesn't mean they can apply that knowledge to do the other things that the society increasingly expects them to be able to do (Neaman2015). Furthermore, we all need to know how to use digital tools, find good quality information, becritically aware of the strengths and shortcomings of such information, be able to make sense, interpret and apply that information for our needs, then communicate our findings and, potentially,also develop both confidence and creativity in using and engaging with tools and resources.

The growth in use of tablet computers, mobile phones and other portable and personal technologiesmeans that young people can engage with learning 24/7, and may have high expectations regardingresponsiveness. Distinctions between formal and informal modes of communication (as well as typesof learning) are increasingly blurred, and this can be a challenge. The range of resources available tothe students is much broader than the information provided just by their institution, and students needsupport in developing the skills to analyze the quality ofresources for themselves and to be aware of protocols around, for example, fair use and copyright.Some students, comfortable with technologies, are increasingly

seeing themselves as creators, not justas consumers, and it will be to the benefit of all to engage at that level (All Aboard, 2015).

THE ROLE OF THE INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA IN EVERYDAY LIFE

The internet can be massively found in all spheres of life, mass-adopted technology easily used by hundreds of millions around the world. The internet is the decisive technology of the new information age, and with the explosion of wireless communication in the early twenty-first century, the humankind is now almost entirely connected, although there are great levels of inequality in bandwidth, efficiency and price.At the heart of these communication networks the internet ensures the production, distribution, and use of digitalized information in all formats. A study published by Martin Hilbert in Science (Hilbert and López, 2011) states that 95 percent of all information existing in the planet is digitized and most of it is accessible on the Internet or other computer networks. Our society is a network society established on personal and organizational networks motorized by digital networks and internet. This contemporary society is a global network society with a specific social structure resulted from the digital revolution and some major sociocultural changes. These changes are primary focused on the process of individuation and the weakening of community in terms of space, work, family and attribution in general. The process of individuation is produced by the new forms of organizing, economic activities, political and social life, shifting toward a reconstruction of cultural and personal relations based on individual interests, values and projects. But individuation does not lead to isolation or an end of community. Sociability is reconstructed as networked individualism and community through a quest for like-minded individuals in a process that combines online interaction with offline interaction, cyberspace and the local space (Castells, 2014). Networking is a form of organization based on the individual or collective,creating the new network society, new culture and new social structure relying on the digital technologies.

A lot of academic researches and studies have shown that internet is not isolating people and reducing their sociability. It is evident that the use of internet empowers people by increasing their personal freedom, feelings of security, and feelings that have positive effect on personal well-being and happiness. The use of internet is significant for all ages, especially young people between the age of 16 and 26. At this point in time, the most important activities on the internet are not only social networking, chatting and e-mailing, but also e-commerce, marketing, online education, distance learning, cultural activity, media and entertainment distribution,

fashion and health applications, and social activism.

The usage of information and communication technologies in everyday life in Republic of Macedonia is measured every year by the StateStatistical Office of Republic of Macedonia. The information received for the first trimester of 2015 shows that 70,4% of the users of internet is a population aged from 15 to 74 years, from whom 94,7% are students. The same research shows the huge increase in the use of mobile/ smart phones for browsing on internet outside of their home or at work, and also the growth of 2% in broadband internet connectivity in the households (69% in 2015 compared with 67% in 2014). There is a Program for development of information society in Macedonia coordinated by the Ministry of Information Society and Administration that has a target number of 80% which is the part of Macedonia's population that has broadband internet access. This program has a focus on the expansion of online trading and stimulation of e-businesses, as well as rise of electronical public services and price reductions of roaming. The main point is to ease the access on internet for everybody, and especially to stimulate the youth for free, wise and creative use of all the electronic services, applications and features online.

Since 2002 (creation of Friendster, before the breakthrough of Facebook) a new socio-technical revolution is emerging on the internet: the rise of social network sites and social media. That is where now all human activities are present, from personal interaction to business, to work, to culture, to communication, to social movements, and to politics.Social Network Sites are web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (Boyd and Ellison 2007). There is a great diversity of social networking sites by social media, countries and cultures. Facebook continues to be the most popular social media site, but its overall growth has slowed and other sites continue to increasetheirusership since 2013. Every other social media platform measured saw significant growth between 2013 and 2014 (Pew Research Center, 2015).

Facebook, started for Harvard-only members in 2004, is present in most of the world, but QQ, Cyworld, and Baidu dominate in China, Orkut in Brazil, Mixi in Japan, etc. In terms of demographics, age is the main differential factor in the use of social networks showing that it's not only a teenager's activity. Females are as present as males, except when in a society there is a general gender gap.

Other social networks, such as Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest and LinkedIn are urged to expand, including not only professionals and graduates, but also a variety of demographic groups. These platforms are chosen for all kinds of activities, through social networking and personal friendships, to education, career and

lifestyle, becoming a significant trend for the society in global.All these sites are tailored by users themselves, built on specific criteria of grouping, on different levels of interconnecting, becoming a self-presentation of a real person connected to real people. These self-constructed virtual societies are making very close connection with real life networks. The need of being with others is leading people to build these hybrid networks (connection between virtual and networks in life) with people who they already know, family, friends, co-workers, and also making new friendships with people with same interests. This is a different kind of sociability facilitated and dynamized by stable, long-lasting connectivity and social media networking on the web. The time spent on social networking sites is not just about friendship or interpersonal communication, but people do things together, share, act and make things as in a real society, although the personal dimension is always there.

The young population has the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make positive changes in the contemporary society using the potential and benefits of the new digital technologies. The youth should be socially aware and eager to continuously improve their life standards in the community in which they live, but also in the society as a whole. The access to digital tools, information and shapes of creating and spreading an opinion, idea or theory, is not an issue in this era of internet and social networking. But still, there are three main questions that are arising: (1) Do young people know properly to use the benefits of the new social media? (2) Is the awareness of young people at a sufficiently high level for them to use digital tools to engage themselves in solving the social problems that affect them? (3) Are young people sufficiently educated and involved in the processes of electronic engagement?

RESEARCH

There are a lot of youth studies for improving key competences and skills of young people out of their everyday formal educational environment. Research reports have documented in great detail how the rise of social media has affected such things as work, politics and political deliberation, communication patterns, as well as the way people get and share information about health, civic life, news, communities, teenage life, parenting, dating and even people's level of stress.

In 2013, the Academy of young researchers from Macedonia made a research within the Project for strengthening the capacity of the non-government sector, Youth perspectives through process of researching. Considering the

information received from the research, it is obvious that we should start with basic education about what constitutes electronic citizen participation, how it is implemented and which are the benefits for citizens and society (government, NGO and private sector) (Janceska 2013). From the findings of this survey it is clear that young people do not take advantage of the options that are available while they are still away from implementing new technologies and tools. Hence, it is extremely important to implement alternative instruments for explaining and enclosing the idea of e-participation and e-democracy. This research is suggesting conducting a combination of educational workshops and a Guideline for electronic engagement for the Macedonian youth. It is obvious that there is a need for young people to get closer to the idea of basic digital media culture, and also to understandthe theory and practice of electronic engagement.

Inspired from these findingsand from the actual popularity of the digital and social media, a survey named:*General Knowledge of Internet and Microsoft Office*, was implemented at MIT University, Skopje. This analysis was expected to prove that: students know how to use digital technologies, regularly use internet for different purposes, communicate online, and that the use of social networks is in high increase. The objective wasstudents of the first year studies who are enrolled to the course of Informatics which is an elective course at a university level. The survey was held every September from 2013 to 2015 on the introduction class of the mentioned course. The instrument of the survey was an anonymous questionnaire on paper. It was composed of 12 questions: six of which refer to access and use the Internet, and the othersix to the basic knowledge of the program package Microsoft Office. The figures reported here are based on analyticaland comparative analysisof five of the questions from the year 2013 to 2015.The results are represented with adequate charts followed by legends and explanations.

On the first question: "What kind of internet do you use?" the proposed answers were: from cable operator, from fixed phone operator, from mobile phone, wireless or I don't have access. The numbers show that all of the students have access to internet, but during the three years of research the types of internet connection varies. In 2013 and 2014 the internet access from fixed phone operator (line) dominated, and in 2015 the access from mobile phone is in drastic increase, as shown on the chart 1. This is explained by the mass popularity and sale of mobile phones, especially smart phones which have a really simple access to Internet and phone applications.

**Chart 1.** *Comparison of the values from the years 2013, 2014 and 2015*
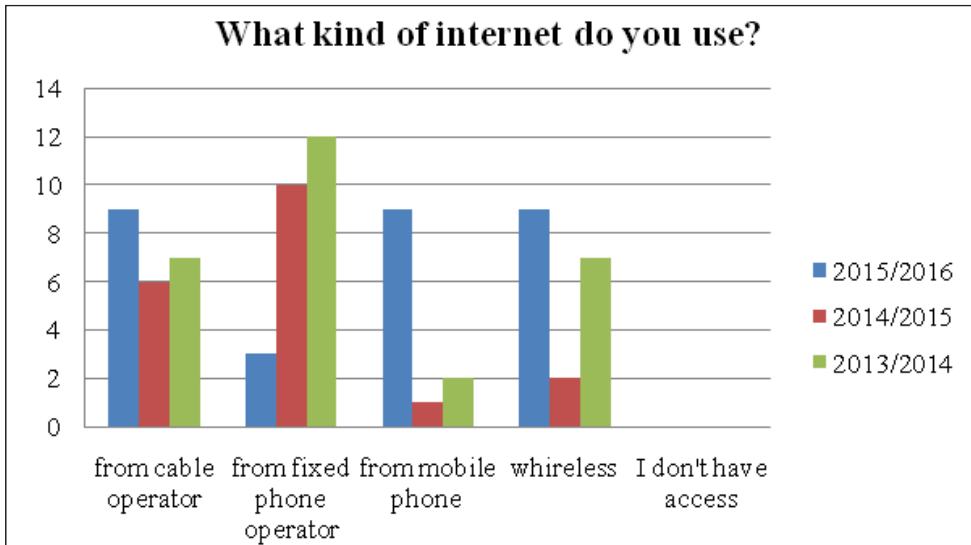
The second question was: "Which search engine do you use?" with suggestions: Mozilla Firefox, Internet Explorer, Opera and Google Chrome. The chart 2 is showing that every year there are no users of the search engine Opera, but constantly high use of the search engine Google Chrome. This indicates the popularity and common use of Google and all of its products and applications among young population.

Chart 2. *Comparison of the values from the years 2013, 2014 and 2015*
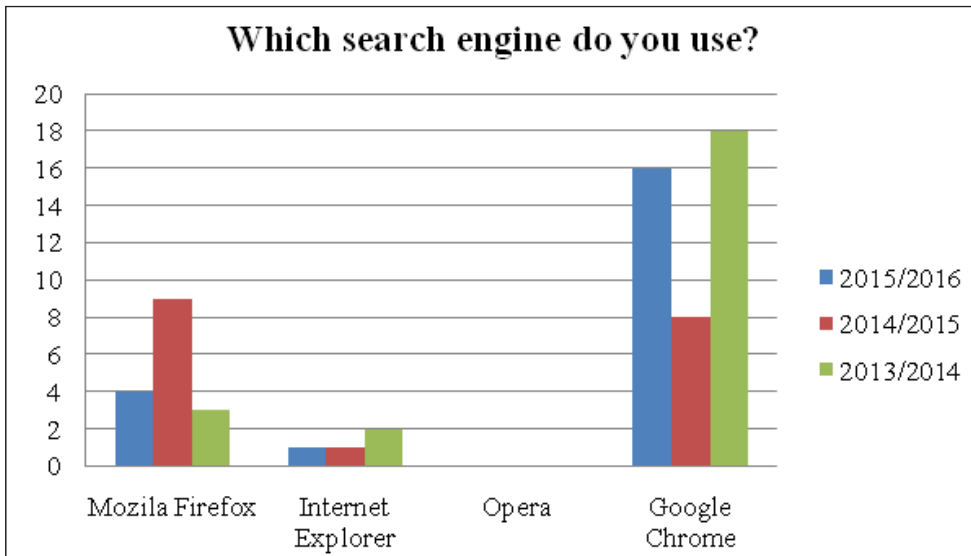
The next question was: "You use internet for …" with proposals like: for playing on-line games, for communication, for downloading movies/music or for education (learning/ books/ tests). The figures shown on the chart 3 below, leads us to two conclusions. First, the drastic fall of the interest for playing on-line games, which is a surprise because there are a lot of new kinds and ways to play computer games with advanced options for playing on-line. And second conclusion is the continuously high level of the purpose of internet for communication. This confirms the statement mentioned previously that the Internet is not isolating peopleand reducing their sociability, on contrary, the virtual life becomes more social than the physical life. In all three years of the research the students are equally using internet for education purposes (on-line learning, e-books, tests) and for downloading movies and music.

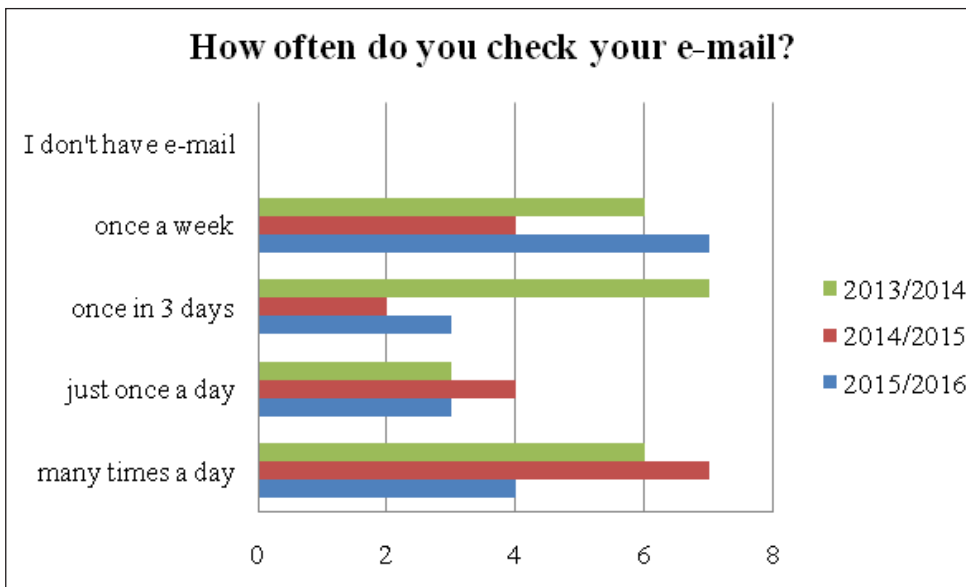**Chart 3.** *Comparison of the values from the years 2013, 2014 and 2015*
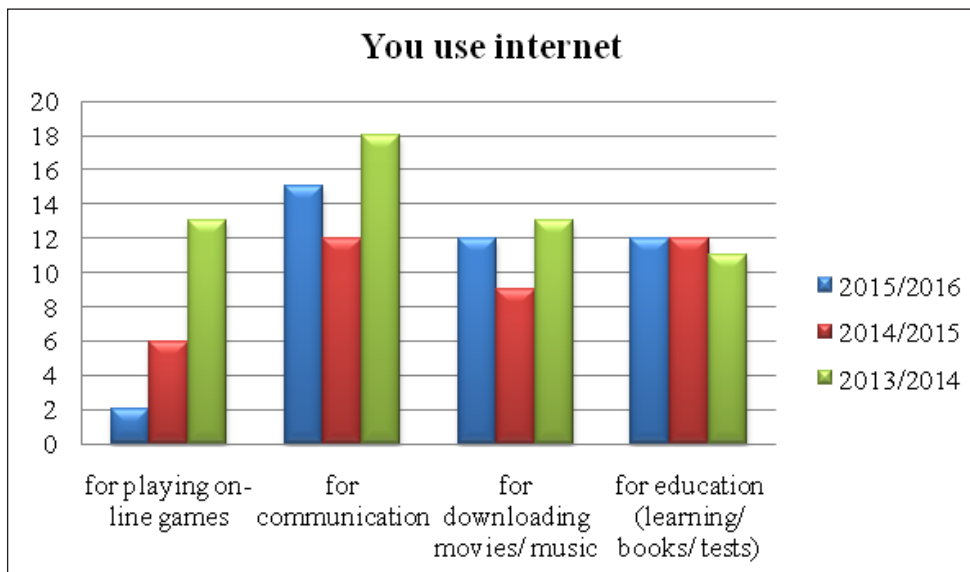
Because the internet is mostly used for communication the next question spontaneously arises: "How often do you check your e-mail?" As the chart 4 represents, all of the students have an e-mail address, but the frequency of checking differs during the years, starting from "many times a day" or "once in 3 days" in 2013, to increasingly high "once in a week" in 2015. The logical explanation of this drastic change is that the young people are frequent users of the social networks, which facilitates messaging option. They use these networking features not just for chatting and connecting with friends, but also for sending and receivingtext documents, photos, videos or other files. The e-mail providers will continue the
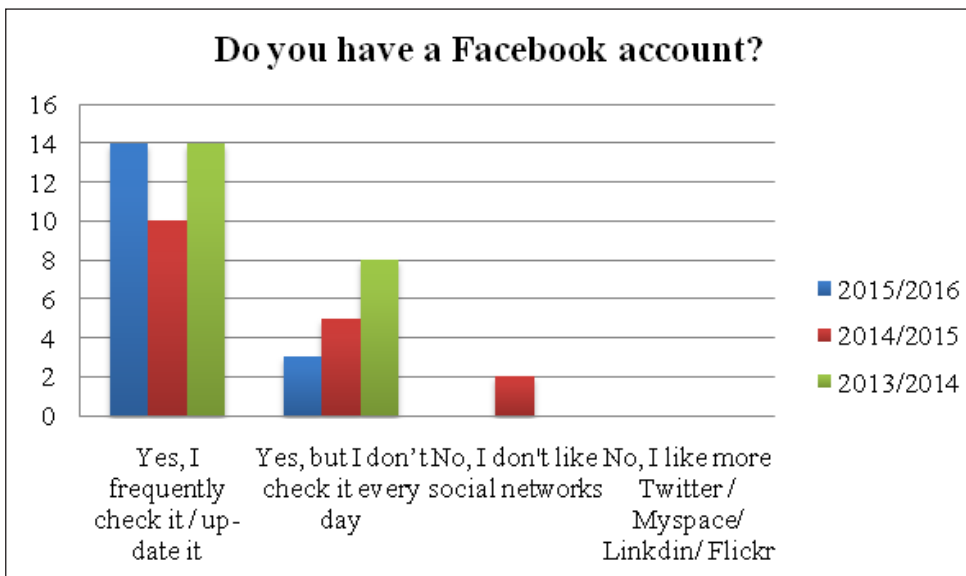
process of broadening their services implementing some new features for interconnection of the users. It's only a matter of time when social networks will overcome the simple e-mail providers.

Chart 4. *Comparison of the values from the years 2013, 2014 and 2015*

Chart 5. *Comparison of the values from the years 2013, 2014 and 2015*

The last question used for this analysis is: "Do you have a Facebook account?" Every year the students answered that they have a Facebook account, but the frequency of their use of this social network is different. In 2013 one third of the answers were "Yes, but I don't check it every day", and in 2015 almost all of the students said "Yes, I frequently check it and update it" (referring to the profile they have on this social network).

None of the students answered that they like more other social networks, like Twitter, Myspace, LinkedIn or Flickr. This indicates the huge popularity of Facebook among young population (students) in Macedonia and the fact that updating and reviewing profiles on social networks have become a normal daily routine.

CONCLUSION

It is evident that the use of the internet empowers people by increasing their personal freedom, feelings of security, and feelings that they have a positive effect on personal well-being and happiness.

Since 2002 a new socio-technical revolution is emerging on the internet: the rise of social network sites and social media. The social networks today are where all human activities are present, from personal interaction to business, work, education, culture,communication,social movements, and politics.

The young population has the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make positive changes in the contemporary societies using the potential and benefits of the new digital technologies. The youth should be socially aware and eager to continuously improve their life standards in the community in which they live, but also in the society as a whole.

In conclusion, the research represented in this paper showed that young people are electronically engaged and they connect on internet from their mobile devices when- and wherever they feel the need. They are aware that digital tools can help them and ease their everyday life, especially in education and communication. They use the social network features not just for chatting and connecting with friends, but also for sending and receiving text documents, photos, videos or other files. The results point on the very frequentdaily use of the social networks, mainly Facebook, usually for updating personal profiles or pages.

The suggestion is that the educational programs should be readjusted including more digital tools and skills for encouraging electronical engagement, like: technical, information and digital literacy skills, and relational or social skills. The courses and classes not only in the area of information technologies, but in every educational field,should adopt newprograms and applications that will

keep the students' attention, and will introduce the concept of e-engagement, e-participationand e-learning. Students should realize that we live in a digital era, era of new technologies, so they should use the maximum of all the digital tools, internet access and virtual world.

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