

**The Web Generation?
The (De)Construction of
Users, Morals and
Consumption**

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Executive Summary

This EMTEL project and report is concerned with the relationships between young adults and ICT-use. The focus of the empirical study was the use and perception of ICTs among young adults aged 18-25 in Flanders.

However, both categories –youth and ICT use – were shown to be problematic in terms of existing research and analysis. “Youth” is challenging as a research category, because it aims to homogenise something rather heterogeneous. It is equally tricky to limit it to a life phase or an age group, since these definitions are in flux due in part to other social changes. The term is also problematic when the youth are described as a “web generation”, because this implies a general and radical uptake of ICTs in the everyday lives of either a majority of current youth or a specific subculture and this has implications for the rest). “Web generation” is also problematic, because it is only one amongst many constructions of the relationship between young people and new media, but it is often portrayed as the necessary relationship. This particular discourse defines young users in certain ways, but not necessarily through their own forms of use, creation and consumption. The empirical findings of this project were used to question this prevalent academic and popular discourse. In final analysis, the “web generation” was seen to provide more hype than reality, but still to exist – albeit with nuances and primarily as an indirect, negative form of identity.

The question of the “web generation” also relates to the broader concept of domestication, which was chosen from a range of ICT use research concepts as the most appropriate. Here the researchers asked whether the new technologies are potentially domesticated in society overall or whether specific groups, such as these young adults, domesticate them in rather specific ways. This project made two adjustments to the domestication concept. First, an emphasis on the content of ICTs (as opposed to practices and discourse) was used. Second, the concept of the “moral economy away from home” was adopted to describe the rather specific ICT use (in terms of discourse), but also life situations of the youth researched here.

Methodology/Research Questions

The project was carried out with the help of students, who conducted interviews among their own age group. A selection of these 550 semi-structured, in-depth interviews provided the basis for the later analysis in the form of a thematic qualitative analysis (some of these interviews were self-interviews of the students).

The research questions that guided the interviews were as follows:

- How do young adults engage with new media and ICTs?
 - (i) What do young adults do with media and ICTs and to what extent?
 - (ii) Why do they do what they do?
 - (iii) How do they perceive current and future changes?
- How is this engagement linked to consumption in terms of:
 - (i) Consuming the technologies
 - (ii) Consuming through the technologies
 - (iii) Consuming identities and lifestyles?

The project as a whole concentrated on questions of use, that is, the how and “why (not)” of uses and perceptions and this raised two broader questions:

- (i) Do young people (adults) domesticate technologies in specific ways?
- (ii) Is there something that could be called a web generation?

Summary of findings and their implications

Youth

Defining youth has become increasingly problematic. A de-standardisation of the youth phase is taking place as a result of the increased recognition not all the markers of adulthood necessarily occur in everyone’s lives and that some experiences are drawn out much longer while others start earlier. Some theories claim that youth is not a life-phase, but a lifestyle; others extend the existing markers of youth to an increasingly long period.

Traditional and current youth discourses

Definitions of youth have for a long time concentrated on a binary logic of either “youth as deviant” or “youth as a potential for societal change”. Media studies of youth followed this line of analysis with most research concentrated on either media effects (especially of violence) or on education. The cultural studies approach (primarily from Birmingham) allowed the first concentration on everyday life and subcultures, in relation to questions of class, gender and race. This project took some inspiration from the cultural studies approach and tried to move beyond the binaries to look at youth overall.

In parallel to these earlier theorisations of youth, the relationship between youth and new media has also been described as dangerous or believed to provide hope for a different future society (but empirically substantiated analyses challenging such claims are now coming out although most of them relate to children or teenagers). One strand in this

research has given rise to the web generation discourse. This predominantly proclaims the current youth as using ICTs creatively and extensively to push existing boundaries of communication and interaction. It also describes youth as being at ease with the technologies and, in principle, living a very different kind of life.

These kinds of claims cannot be substantiated in this research project. While most everyday practices can be described as far-reaching and "naturalised", the assessment of different uses and the range of use of content turned out to be rather limited. Nonetheless, the negative image is used to define aspects of identity. Thus, a web generation with nuances has been detected.

Use, perception and domestication of ICTs

Most of the young adults in this study use ICTs in one form or another. Thus if we regard domestication as an incorporation of new technologies into everyday life, domestication of the technologies is taking place at least on some level. So for instance, computers have been given prominent places in the homes of interviewees and mobile phones are used according to personal rules.

The student interviewees mostly use ICTs every day from morning until night, but use them differently in the weekend. Among working young adults, use of ICTs depends very much on the job they do. Mobile phones are more widespread than computer and Internet use (or any of the other peripheral technologies). They can be found nearly everywhere, while computer and Internet use are much more problematic and contested. However, not all respondents felt comfortable with the idea of mobile phones being used "everywhere" and "anytime". Here the concern was with issues of constant availability, of privacy, of communicative rules. In contrast, the Internet is used more consciously, especially when it comes to choosing the content.

Given that many of the young adults had recently changed their home environments (or at least radically changed their routines) and many of them were still in a period of transition, ICTs were not perceived to have disrupted routines or environments. Even so, strategies of dealing with the "intrusion" are being developed.

Thus, one of the most prominent findings was of an overall feeling among young adults that they *have to* use ICTs. It is not a matter of choice, but a matter of need particularly if they do not want to lag behind the rest of society. However, they want to keep control and they do this by making value judgements and describing other people's "bad" uses to declare

boundaries of their own use and make clear-cut distinctions between the “real” and the “virtual”. In a similar line of argument, communication takes place primarily with people (family and friends) that are already known.

Those studied tended to limit or structure his or her own of content. Sites accessed online are mostly the same; chatting or other communication devices are only used to communicate with people one knows; and e-commerce is mistrusted. The content has to be personally relevant, which often means keeping in touch, finding information for hobbies or studies or catching up on news. Overall, play is not really allowed personally or with others nor were many actual games played. These findings present a stark contrast to the web generation discourse and to studies of younger users. Instead, a rather conservative “moral economy away from home” seems to emerge. Thus while everyday practice brings with it radical change, the underlying values are not easily adapted. This is more evident if a distinction is made between “content” and “practice” – a distinction the domestication concept has tended to use theoretically rather than apply.

Major Implications

- Policy has to address and deal with the notion of the rejection of developments more consciously. If only some of these young people carry their discomfort further, other ways of inclusion (in terms of democracy, education and others) have to be guaranteed. Opting out should remain an option.
- This means the individual user needs to be addressed more clearly as does the particular age group. Youth in Europe is too broad a focus.
- A distinction needs to be made between the impact ICTs on everyday practices and their impact on longer-term values. Although ICTs have been widely adopted into everyday lives, they have not been allowed to radically change communication and information patterns of behaviour.