Understanding the Culture of Young Internet Users in a Rapidly Changing Society

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ABSTRACT

The context of this study is Internet user behaviour among young people, at a time when information and communication technologies (ICT) are rapidly transforming how individuals behave in the online environment. The intention is to provide a snapshot of Internet user behaviour, with particular reference to social networking, in order to further our understanding of the various activities pursued by young Internet users in a non-Anglophone perspective. The study uses survey method to gather data on the thoughts, experiences and behaviours of young Internet users in order to explain their online routine activities. The findings reveal the extent to which certain national differences are indeed apparent when using the Internet, suggesting that the widespread adoption of Internet technology has not generated 'standardised' Internet user behaviour.

Keywords: Business Model, Consumer Behaviour, Culture, Generation Y, Internet, International

INTRODUCTION

The challenge of understanding the culture of young Internet users in a rapidly changing society is two-fold. It requires not only ongoing monitoring of the Internet user behaviour of this segment, but also an awareness of technological developments. This study explores the factors that determine the Internet consumption of younger Internet users, the so-called Generation Y, with reference to web 2.0 technologies. The study is set in a cross-cultural context, and thus the aim is to further our understanding of the determining factors that influence the consumption of web 2.0 technologies, particularly social networking sites (SNS).

Consumers react differently to technological change; younger tech-savvy consumers, Generation Y, seem generally more capable of embracing change and taking advantage of high-tech innovation. They are driving the pace of change, demanding more powerful technology and challenging current management thinking. This younger generation is confident, independent and goal-oriented; they will undoubtedly influence styles and trends in the business environment, while learning from the mistakes and successes of the previous generations.

Innovation in ICT (information and communication technologies) invariably produces new patterns of consumer behaviour in the online environment, in other words, new Internet...
user behaviour. The challenge for businesses is to develop a new approach or business model which can meet the needs and wants of consumers whose expectations and behaviour are constantly evolving. Technology and consumer behaviour have always been dynamic but the difference now is that the pace of change is accelerating, as innovation shortens product life cycles. The challenge is further magnified by the fact that today’s business environment is both global and virtual, crossing different languages and cultures. Digitization has radically changed the communication process by shifting media from mass to social. Business concepts are evolving; thus the traditional definition of a market is changing as new ICT is introduced, creating new consumer behaviour, new philosophy and new business models. New theories and models are required to help understand the complex dynamics of change within organizational networks seeking to harness the power of modern ICT. More specifically, much of what is taught in business schools today is likely to be obsolete within the following eighteen months or less.

Insights into Generation Y: Driving Creative Destruction

The concept of generational difference was first put forward by Mannheim (1952) who considered a generational cohort to be a group raised in the same general chronological, social and historical context. Thus, the position in time and the impact of certain common experiences and events are fundamental in formulating generational cohort commonalities (Loroz and Helgeson, 2013). Mannheim’s (1952) perspective on generations has been refined over past decades to consider that generational cohorts have attitudinal, preferential, emotional and dispositional similarities.

Much has been published in academic literature and in the international business press about Gen Y, the oldest of whom turned 34 years old in 2014. They have been dubbed with various labels including Generation Facebook, Generation Connected and Generation Why Not. As experienced Internet users, these young adults stand out from previous generations in their predisposition to communicate, work and socialize online. They can be described as the generation who will break with traditional thinking to develop new models—both professionally and recreationally—owing to their familiarity with ICT. They may at times appear unconcerned or unaware of the potential dangers of divulging too much data online, believing that employers and recruiters cannot use personal data retrieved online (Benraïss-Noailles and Viot, 2012). Paradoxically, Gen Y seems to be experienced with using digital technology yet there are a number of online activities that Gen Y should know not to engage in, but still do, such as falling for a phishing scam or trusting a self-generated company product review.

There is no shortage of role models for Gen Y; they are influenced by the celebrity status of entrepreneurs from seniors like Richard Branson to younger pioneers like Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg (born in 1984) who in 2010 was one of the world’s youngest billionaires. Yet, the recent economic crisis has made the job market extremely competitive. Gen Y is leveraging its own technology to benefit career development via sites like Branchout and Silp which allow people to discover career opportunities through their friends and to facilitate introductions into organizations that they want to work in. For the time being, however, many young people are currently unemployed or underemployed, moving back home with their parents in greater numbers, and postponing marriage, childrearing and home buying as they try to scrape by financially, waiting for the situation to improve. The dismal economic picture has contributed to an overall change in expectations. In the 21st century, the forces of continual disruption will make consumers and organizations feel the pressure of rapid change (Blank, 2013).

Gen Y has grown up surrounded by technology. These young adults can be described as experienced computer users who use technology to get information from each other, rather than from traditional institutions like corporations. Adept at media multitasking, this generation is comfortable using a vast array of digital technology to enhance their
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