

Youth Partnership

Partnership between the European Commission
and the Council of Europe in the field of youth



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Online Communication Tools leading to Learning, Identity and Citizenship for Digital Natives

Digital Natives are communicating differently: email, IM, chat![...] Digital natives are sharing differently Blogs, webcams, camera phones. (Prensky, 2004)

Information and communication (ICT) plays an increasingly significant role in young people's life. Even it had been disagreement about whether ICTs has positive or negative force on young people, it is also widely argued that given the widespread and pervasive impact of ICTs on young people's lives is important to understand these new forms of communication and to employ them for positive purposes, having them defining feature of modernity. (Bauman, 2004) Research has not yet systematically addressed significant new tendencies and definitely the research outcomes are not able to integrate the constant innovation happening in the field. Going over the traditional ways of participation, the 'digital natives', (Prensky, 2001) are using Internet more and more *to communicate* and less primarily to get information.

When it comes to the approach that young people have on using the online communication tools, the outcomes of the research processes vary from having these tools used to create new instruments for social inclusion and freedom from discrimination and violence and access to resources to having young people using the online communication tools to disengage , to create communities that would be from the traditional structures or to isolate. (Wyn, Cuervo, 2005)

The exchange of e-mails and of instant messages became for the digital natives the most common form of communication. The availability, the presence, the personal log and using these tools to learn social norms (Stald, 2008) would be the first determinants for young people's preference for the online communication tools. Even if the access to the online tools is still unequal and theorists also claim that the preference for the online communication might digitally divide young people and expose them to harassment and risk, considering the fact that there are still on their way of developing the critical thinking skills that would allow them to choose, most of young people would prefer these tools as it allows them to being simultaneously present in several spaces. (Stald, 2008; McKay S. B., Thurlow C., Toomey Zimmerman H., 2005).

In terms of usage of the forms of online communication, young people are choosing different forms for specific reasons. When it comes to searching for information on Internet, Google is the first tool. For engaging with friends, the over 82% of the young Europeans have profiles on the social networking sites (Eurostat, 2015) and they would prefer using Facebook, most of the times ignoring the advertising on it. (Barefoot Creative, Communicating with Teens and Young People). The preferences for the mobile instant messaging (MIM) applications have gained as well considerable importance for young people. Consequently, applications like WhatsApp or Viber allowing 'native digitals' to send real time text messages both to individuals and groups at no cost essentially shifted the preferences of young people for the online communication tools. The preference for these tools is determined by the low cost, intent, community, privacy, reliability and expectation. Except for planning and coordinating with friends and peers, the advantage that young people see in using these tools is related to the gift-giving rituals where certain text messages as exchanged as gifts among friends. (Church, de Oliveria, 2003).

When speaking of the preference of the digital natives for the online communication tools, 3 crosscutting themes are constantly being discussed: identity, citizenship and learning. (Stald, 2008, Wyn J., Cuervo H., Woodman D., Stokes H., 2005). In terms of learning, the "Net generation", the "cyber-kids", divided between the "ICT havers" and "ICT have-nots" (McKay S. B., Thurlow C., Toomey Zimmerman H., 2005) have the opportunity to get to develop new skills and competencies through using the online communication tools, having them developed in an era where the nature of social interaction had been changed. (World YOUTH Report, 2003) In terms of learning, the net generation is developing differently its social behavior - socializing online and "being socialized". Even if the cyber space had been exposing young people to hate speech and discrimination and in

some cases the online violence had been transferred to the offline world, most of the young people would prefer to use synchronous forms of chat and online discussion stating that in the online world what you say and produce allows people to judge you, while the “lookism” highly rated in the offline world. (Prensky, 2004). Their learning process is definitely impacted by the media culture but together with their peers, they get to build new communities, communities that have different boundaries and are structured in a totally different manner than the traditional ones.

What is definitely sure is the fact that young people master the online communication tools and have been creating online communities that go over the traditional boundaries, out of the physical space and in demand of new possibilities. Through the online communities, young people are able to get involved, to find opportunities to participate, to act for international causes and to have as well communities of interest. Consequently, the approach goes definitely closer to the maximal citizenship theories and offers new means of political involvement and active citizenship. Essential for the online communities is the fact that young people would see them as spaces where they can learn and discover where they can share information and acquire knowledge.

When it comes to the new means that contribute to young people’s identity building processes, the ICT and using the online communication tools ensures the access to this age segment to new ways of expressing, to giving the opportunity to the introverts to make their voice heard in the cyber space. (Wyn J., Cuervo H., Woodman D., Stokes H., 2005) As with the online communities, the new cyber-identities that are being built through the online communication tools are global identities, dynamic ones, essentially determined by other types of interaction that are happening in the online world. More than this, the online communities would allow young people to link to different groups and to build up their identity based on the belonging to a wide range of groups.

In terms of citizenship and participation, the Net generation, using the messaging, emails, blogs and websites, is able to create new forms of political participation and of civic engagement. Just like adults, young people often use internet to build up meaningful social networks. Using the synchronous forms of chat and online discussion allow young people to discuss subjects that haven’t been invested with great interest by the “offline generations”. The digital natives meet in discussion groups, are able to cooperate and to plan activities that would decisively contribute to social change.

"Europe's future depends on its youth. Yet, life chances of many young people are blighted".
(An EU Strategy for Youth – Investing and Empowering - A renewed open method of coordination

to address youth challenges and opportunities, 2009) If Europe's future depends on youth, then is the high time for the European countries to focus more on encouraging the social and political participation of young people. Even if different measures and policies had been put in place to ensure the dialogue between the decision makers and the youth, few of these mechanisms permit the online dialogue and are offering the online communication tools that young people are keen on using. Young people use mobile phones, tablets, netbooks, laptops and computers and ICTs are more and more used in schools for teaching. Consequently, the 'cyber-kids' would definitely participate if the dialogue mechanisms would be tailored to their needs and preferences.

In the digital era where young people are constantly present in the online space through video streams, chat rooms, blogs or social media, their exposure to risk is inevitable. In this context, the way risks are managed is to be of a concern for the decision makers. For this purpose, the No Hate Speech Campaign had been an excellent tool for raising the awareness of young people and for promoting equality, dignity and diversity in the online space. With all the concerns regarding the isolation and disengagement of young people in the digital era, it is essential for the practitioners, policy makers and adults around them to understand that the digital natives have different preferences for the communication tools nowadays. Young people communicate differently, build up identities that allow them to be in several places at the same time, create and develop online communities, having new modes of participation based on online participation and click-activism. Consequently, the digital natives' preferences for the new communication tools had definitely determined the need for a new approach on youth policies and for new mechanisms to be involved with the decision making processes, mechanisms that would be based on their preferred tools of online communication.

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