

## Chapter 5

# Insights into the Culture of Young Internet Users: Emerging Trends – Move Over Gen Y, Here Comes Gen Z!

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This study focuses on the Internet user behaviour of young people, at a time when information and communication technologies (ICT) are rapidly transforming how individuals behave and interact in the online environment. The intention is to put forward a snapshot of contemporary Internet user behaviour, with reference to social networking, and thus provide an overview and understanding of the various online activities undertaken by Generation Y and Generation Z in a non-Anglophone context. The study uses a mixed methods approach to gather data on the thoughts, experiences and behaviours of young Internet users in order to explain their social networking. The findings suggest commonality and disparity between Generation Y and Generation Z. They also reveal the extent to which certain national differences are less apparent when using social networks, suggesting that the widespread adoption of Internet technology is generating a somewhat ‘standardised’ Internet user behaviour.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The difficulty of researching technology advancements is that the accelerating rate and evolving patterns of past usage do not reflect or predict current usage. When investigating the culture of young Internet users in a rapidly changing society, the challenge is two-fold:

- It requires both constant monitoring of the Internet user behaviour of this age group and an informed awareness of technological developments.

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Building on the work of Lichy and Kachour (2014; 2016) which discusses emerging trends in Internet user behaviour from a cross-cultural and intergenerational perspective, this study responds to the call for more research in this area. This study therefore investigates the factors that determine the Internet consumption of younger Internet users, the so-called Generation Y and Generation Z, with reference to web 2.0 technologies. Set in an international context, the study aims to further our understanding of the key factors that influence the consumption of web 2.0 technologies, particularly social networking sites (SNS). Specifically, the objective of the study is to test the extent to which certain variables may determine Gen Y and Gen Z Internet user behaviour with reference to web 2.0 technologies, by comparing two distinct non-Anglophone settings: France and Russia over a 5-year period, 2011-2016. Our study is inspired by the work of Simonson (2015) who contends that the current Internet environment presents us with an environment that connects many previously disconnected elements, such as the ratings and reviews of millions of other consumers, and by the response from Kozinets (2016) who underscores the need to carefully examine actual occurrences of phenomena to guide the selection or creation of variables, data, constructs, and relations.

## **Understanding How Younger Generations Drive Creative Destruction**

By drawing on the literature of technology adoption and acceptance, it is possible to provide a framework for understanding Internet user behaviour. Although the literature tends to consider ‘young’ Internet users as a homogeneous group (Lichy, 2011), there are many diverse representations of user behaviour in the online environment (Sobkowicz, 2013; Liébana-Cabanillas, Ramos de Luna and Montoro-Ríos, 2015).

Generally speaking, younger Internet users are more comfortable with embracing technological change than older or more experienced Internet users (Dean, 2008), and are able to take advantage of high-tech innovation (Venkatesh, Thong & Xu, 2012). Younger Internet users tend to be less concerned about the security issues of cyberspace (Chen & Zahedi, 2016). They are driving the pace of change by demanding more powerful technology and by challenging current management thinking. Seemingly confident, independent and goal-oriented, they are transforming the modus operandi of business, for example by introducing new channels for providing information or distribution (Wu, Ray & Whinston, 2008), introducing lean start-up concepts distribution (Blank, 2013), or by integrating a virtualised workplace (Wang & Haggerty, 2011) alongside the existing structure.

Advances in information and communication technologies (ICT) affect the way in which the Internet is consumed, in other words, new technology generates new Internet user behaviour. The challenge for businesses is to develop an innovative business model which can meet the changing needs and wants of consumers, bearing in mind that consumer expectations and behaviour are constantly evolving. Technology and consumer behaviour have always been in constant evolution but the difference nowadays is that the rapid pace of technological development and the increasing sophistication of consumer preferences are shortening product life cycles. The challenge is further magnified by the fact that today’s business environment is both global and virtual, crossing linguistic and cultural boundaries. Digitisation has drastically changed the communication process by shifting media from mass to social. Business concepts are constantly evolving; changing the traditional definition of a market as new ICT are introduced, creating new consumer behaviour, new philosophy and calling for new business models. In the current information-driven economy, much of what is taught in business schools today is likely to be obsolete within less than eighteen months’ time. New theories and models are required to help understand the complex dynamics of change within society and within business.

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