

Young people as a media audience: From content to usage processes



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ABSTRACT: This research describes the results of a study on young people's media usage patterns in Latvia during a period of four years from 2007 until 2010. The present study consists of three parts: it analyses the so-called "media day" of young people and shows which media, which content and for what needs are used in different parts of the day; the study collects data about a "media set" chosen by young people and tests what media technological features are used by young people on a regular basis. The results of this particular research allow the discussion of the following questions: What is the correlation between functions of media usage and the level of young people's awareness about important political, economic and social issues? What particular individual or social conditions can impact young people's media usage? How does young media users' behaviour reflect the phenomena of 'participation culture' or 'collective intelligence'? The chosen methods of this research are questionnaire and focus groups discussions.

KEYWORDS: media audience, media usage patterns, media set, media content, blogs, media technologies



INTRODUCTION

What is happening to young people as media users? Will young people continue using traditional media or shall their media usage habits change the media system and media content? Given the influence of technology and global development of media, the research focus has shifted from content to audience studies. At the same time, the biggest issue nowadays among media organizations specialists is the transformation of youth media usage habits.

Young people as media users have always been important to the media business because their involvement means long-term product participation in the market. However, the rise in competition and the dominance of advertising as the main source of media income has made young audiences even more attractive to media executives. Therefore, youth media using patterns have become significant factors in terms of media market (McQuail, 2005) that sees young people as an important

part of consumer groups (Nightingale & Ross, 2003), because attracting youth audiences means both revenues from advertising and a stable amount of print-runs, ratings and internet clicks. Young people's media usage habits also demonstrate social changes: a transformation of human values, interests, habits, social relationships, public opinion and life styles. Also a changing media environment and rapid development of technologies makes one evaluate not only media content, but changes in media usage.

AIM OF THE STUDY

The aim of this research is to provide more precise information about the behaviour of young people as media users in the current debates in which young people, as a media user group, are regarded as different from other such groups, rather than making a prognosis for the use of media business executives. When discussing individual media usage, the research data shows sociological and psychological features also found by other studies of audience behaviour (Wilson, 2009), where young people as social group's features merge with their values, attitudes and moods about media content. Secondly, young people are the social group which has always attracted a normative attitude from media theory (McQuail, 2005). This includes debates on what media content and what media habits are appropriate for them. Therefore young people's media usage has drawn attention not only from media business, but also from other social actors.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The quantitative data for the research, which reflects several aspects of media usage, was acquired by surveying young people studying BA and MA degrees at various Latvian universities. The data was collected between 2007 and 2010. The questionnaires included questions about a sense of belonging to a certain media audience, media consumption time and a choice of media products. Starting from 2008, the research data was discussed at focus groups; in total, 12 group sessions were held. At all stages of the research the obtained data was compared to those of Latvian general media usage habits, which were provided by the media and market research company TNS Latvia.

This particular age group was selected because at this stage of life people undergo significant changes: they finish schools, choose further education, become members of the employment market, become financially independent, start families or begin long-term relationships, and fly their parents' nests. These changes also influence their media usage habits.

The collected data reflects information from 3049 questionnaires and 12 focus groups. In order to evaluate young people's media usage functions, both in the questionnaires and focus group interviews questions were asked about media usage rea-

sons, driving forces and favourite media content that has been discussed with other people. Some results can be compared to recent sociological studies about youth values and spare time spending habits.

The habits of the people surveyed here are rather similar: they are not particularly influenced by their place of residence, educational institution or financial state. However essential differences are determined by people's ages. Thus the youngest of those surveyed (18–21), use different media content and for different reasons than people in the ages 21–25. Therefore, when representing data, individual data was evaluated taking into account their age group.

During the research, young people significantly changed their usage habits and their media set. Young people themselves also admit such changes. Therefore, after evaluating data differences, the results were divided into two periods:

1. The first one contains data from 2007 to 2008;
2. The second combines data from 2009 to 2010.

MOST IMPORTANT CONCLUSIONS

Media content is a constant and simultaneous companion through young people's daily routine. Most young people's media usage is ritualized, full of media routine; young people enthusiastically and constantly consume content by various media. An essential feature of young people's media usage habits is multitasking: young people divide their attention and use the Internet while turning on a radio or TV in the background.

Young people as media users are largely characterized by media usage patterns and by an extensive use of the Internet. In both stages of the study, respondents mostly used social networks and spent most of the Internet-dedicated time browsing. In the second stage the usage of social networks increased from 52 per cent of regular users in the first stage to 85 per cent in the second stage, besides that, many young people simultaneously use several social networks. Young people use social networks parallel to visiting other websites 53 per cent of respondents visit 3–5 Internet addresses regularly (2–3 of them are social networks). When evaluating young people media sets, one can notice an increase in the group that regularly uses only the Internet. Focus group discussions showed that Internet users, by rejecting traditional media, do not increase the number of regularly visited pages and information versatility. Average awareness of current political, economic and social issues among young people who use only the Internet is generally lower than those respondents who besides the Internet also use other media, watch TV news or read magazines. In the same time the study data shows a number of controversial young people's media usage trends. Media content used by young people rather precisely reflects the general patterns of Latvian media audiences, although young people's media behaviour differs in versatility of media content usage and application.

The research data shows society’s negative attitude towards excessive viewing of television. This phenomenon was defined by McQuail as something that is “leading to addiction, dissociation from reality, reduced social contacts, diversion from education and displacement of more worthwhile activities” (McQuail, 2010, p. 406), in the light of youth’s media usage, can be also assigned to use of the Internet. Young people use the Internet all day long, and a constant access to it is more important than its content. In the first stage of the research (2007–2008), the majority of respondents pointed out that they belonged to Internet (53%) and TV (26%) audiences; also the second stage is dominated by people identifying themselves with an Internet audience (56%) and TV audience (23%) (Figure 1).

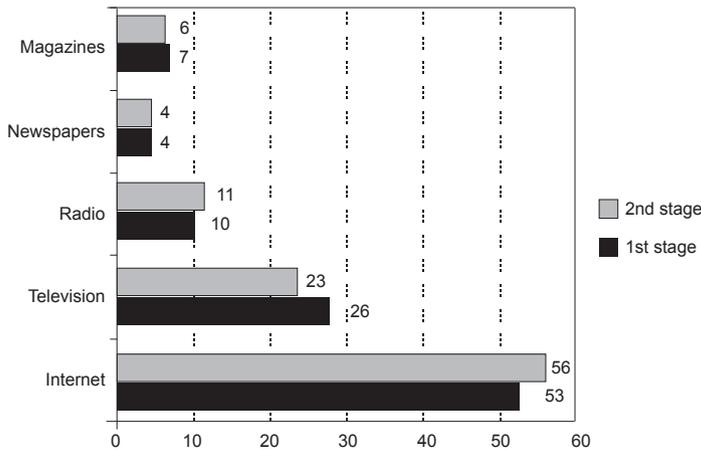


Figure 1. Identifying with certain types of media audience [%]

Source: research data.

In recent years, the increase in Internet usage in Latvia has been influenced by the following factors: reduction of Internet subscription fees, increasingly wide Internet accessibility at schools, universities, other public spaces and households, as well as a broad selection of laptop computers. As shown by TNS Latvia data, since 2007 the number of Internet users in Latvia has increased by more than 10 per cent. In 2010 the Internet was used by 65% of Latvian residents, however in young age groups Internet use in recent years exceeded 90% (Vendele, 2011).

Young people admit that in the last two years Internet usage intensity has grown, as a result of which respondents watch television ever less; some have even stopped watching TV altogether.

Young people’s ‘media days’ show that newspapers have almost irreversibly lost youth audiences as newspapers are read by 32% in the first stage and 22% in the second stage of the research. The second stage of the research is characterized by a trend where young people browse through or fully read daily newspapers mostly

out of two reasons. Firstly, when living with parents, they were used to dailies being regularly subscribed to by their parents, but they were not deciding on which media to be subscribed to. Secondly, students who also work point out that some newspapers must be read so that one can fully participate in meetings at work and conversations with colleagues. The first stage of the research already manifested the young audience's shift to social networks and an indifference to traditional media content, even if it was available on the Internet.

The media day's format allows the tracking of young people's media usage during all of the day, where one can distinguish habits that were obtained both in the family and from their own rhythm of life and interests.

Media usage in the mornings means that people want to wake up, lift one's mood and find out what happened while they were asleep (Wieten & Pantti, 2005). The data from the first stage of the research shows that (Figure 2) right after waking up young people turn on the radio (36%) and watch TV broadcasts (37%), but the Internet is used by 19% of respondents. These habits are justified by a need to know the weather forecast and also to set a cheerful start for the day.

But the second stage of the research showed a significant increase in Internet use during the morning: the Internet is used by 42% of the respondents, TV morning programmes are viewed by 30%, 19% listen to the radio, but only several of the surveyed browse through a newspaper or a magazine. Young people explain these changes with a need to constantly use the Internet: in the mornings they usually browse a news site or check into a social network.

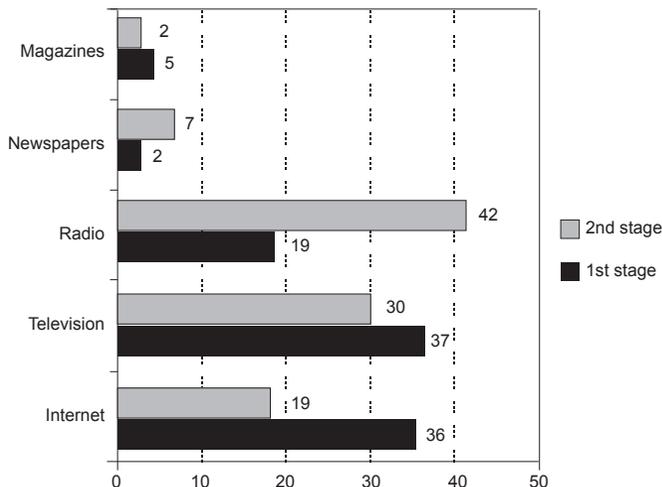


Figure 2. Media usage from 7.00 until 9.00 [%]

Source: research data.

Morning TV broadcasts have still maintained their popularity among the members of the focus groups. From radio programmes at this time of the day young people choose morning entertainment programmes that contain news or music channels that mainly offer adult contemporary format music (Kruks, 2005). From the very morning some respondents combine uses of the Internet and radio or Internet and TV.

During the working day, young people mostly use the Internet. Although for the purposes of the research a working day was divided into two parts, generally it could be said that from 9.00 until 18.00 media usage habits remain quite similar.

During the first half of a working day, the majority of respondents (Figure 3) use the Internet (36%), listen to the radio (17%) or read newspapers (11%). During this time, the Internet is mostly used for work and studying; in their spare time some respondents use also social networks.

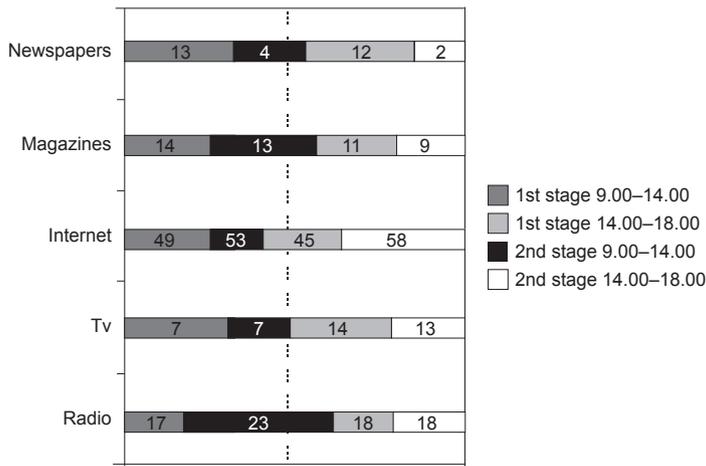


Figure 3. Media usage from 9.00 until 18.00 [%]

Source: research data.

The first part of the evening from 18:00 until 21:00 sees a considerable change in media usage: young people watch a lot of TV, use the Internet or listen to the radio (Figure 4).

The trends in the second stage of the research are very similar. It must be pointed out that TV and radio is often combined with Internet use, but loyal radio listeners spend all their day listening to their favourite music stations. On TV, young people watch news and entertainment programmes, but the Internet is used for studying, entertainment and connecting with their peers. Both research stages show that in the second part of an evening from 21:00 until 24:00 Internet and TV usage increases.

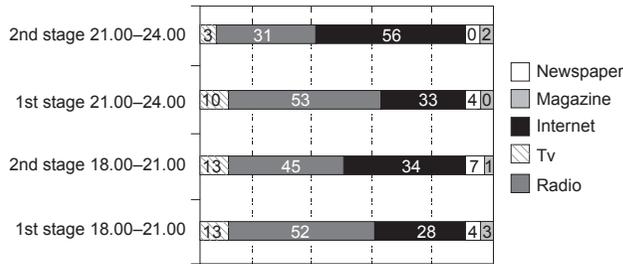


Figure 4. Media usage from 18.00 until 24.00 [%]

Source: research data.

Quantitative data confirms that in the evenings young people become TV viewers if they live together with their parents. However, in focus group interviews students revealed that watching TV allows them to forget themselves, relax, and is a common way to passively spend time. In the evenings, young people watch popular TV shows, series, as well as music TV channels.

At night only a small part of respondents use media 17% during the first and second stages of the research. At night young people mostly use the Internet and watch TV; radio usage also increases. As admitted by respondents, at this time media content helps them to fall asleep, but the Internet is used for studying or using social networks.

Although young people more positively view the Internet as a medium, they still belong to TV watching audiences. Latvian youth research also shows that 67 per cent of young people watch TV in their spare time more than four days a week (Rungule, 2009, p. 167).

Watching TV in the evenings reflects habits formed during childhood: it is mostly passive. Some focus group respondents admit in interviews that daily usage of social media is at the same time an addiction and a routine, as well as a way to get new information and connect with others. When analysing the usage of creative media and the Internet during the day, young people’s willingness to be entertained every evening must be distinguished. Some of them amuse themselves by simply remaining on the Internet and practising online tourism (Wilson, 2009). Young people clearly know what media content can help get rid of stress and can be entertaining; they believe that after certain efforts they have earned their right to relax. Therefore, they choose their usual content that is easily and quickly accessible.

YOUNG PEOPLE’S MEDIA SET

A media set reflects the types of those media and a certain number of media that are regularly used by young people because “behaviour of media users cannot be

explained without evaluating media products and contents” (McQuail, 2010, p. 420). The data acquired in both stages of the research is mutually complimentary.

Since young people use the Internet intensively and identify themselves with this medium’s audience, it is essential to evaluate the content they use. This aspect has also a methodological problem because Internet content is highly versatile. The Internet is a mixture of mass media editorial, user-generated and service provider content. However, by researching what are the most visited addresses on the Internet one can make conclusions about usage habits, content and usage functions.

In terms of the Internet, from young people’s point of view, it is possible to distinguish three main parts of Internet content: social networks, news sites and e-mail services. In both stages young people mostly used social networks and spent most of the Internet-dedicated time browsing. In the second stage, however, the usage of social networks increased from 52 per cent of regular users in the first stage to 85 per cent in the second stage, besides that, many young people simultaneously use several social networks; for example, 72 per cent simultaneously use draugiem.lv (Latvian equivalent of Facebook) and Facebook.com. In social networks, young people mostly connect with their friends, value their activities, play games, and get involved in interest groups.

The usage of social networks is a daily activity; young people use these networks parallel to visiting other websites (53% of respondents visit 3–5 internet addresses regularly, 2–3 of them are social networks). Social networks play a significant role in the process of socialization, fighting boredom and loneliness, also providing oneself with various ways of entertainment. If the first stage of the research was dominated by usage of a single social network, the second stage shows that young people regularly use 2–3 social networks.

However, the use of other Internet resources does not show changes between the first and the second stage of the research. Young people use content of news sites (1–2 addresses); they usually have more than one email address; the video upload server Youtube.com becomes more and more popular, as 32 per cent of respondents regularly use more than 5–7 Internet sites. Chosen Internet content coincides with the behaviour of the rest of the Latvian Internet audience, i.e., the most popular youth sites are in top 10 of overall mostly visited Latvian addresses.

At the same time, the analysis of Internet use habits shows a group of young people whose media habits are related to their interests, hobbies, willingness to obtain wider information on some certain topic, a habit to express oneself in the blogosphere in the form of text, video or photography. Among those surveyed, 9 per cent use more than 7 Internet addresses; they also more broadly use the Internet’s possibilities than their peers.

The use of TV and radio in both stages of the research is quite similar. In the second stage, there is a decrease in viewing public TV broadcasting. Young people regularly watch 3–4 commercial TV channels and listen to 2–3 radio stations. Television and radio are mostly used in order to lift one’s mood, as a background me-

dium, or for entertainment and killing time. The selection of radio is rather traditional young people listen to popular commercial music radio stations. The way radio is chosen is largely dependent on family habits; it could be noted that at least one radio channel chosen by a young person is the same that is listened to by their parents.

The data shows that, when analysing the habits of newspaper reading, the last two years have not seen much change in terms of title, yet the reading of papers itself has gone radically down. A small number of respondents sometimes read or browse through one of several dailies in Latvian or Russian. Young people point out that they read papers only very rarely or because of work duties. An especially important aspect here is that there is a need to regularly read the business daily ('Dienas Bizness'), which is one way to show their expertise in the field represented by their employer. This aspect shows socially determined media usage and institutionalized (Grosberg, 1998) relationships in the process of media usage.

Newspapers no longer play any role, but members of focus groups say that sometimes they visit newspaper Internet sites, as well as emphasizing that a short news summary can always be followed on Twitter.com. However the quantitative data show that young people's interest in daily news is rather low: Internet news sites are regularly visited by 56% of respondents. Yet, newspapers online editions are read only by 9 per cent.

Although young people's indifference to newspaper content is becoming widespread, their willingness to read magazines is very stable: 72 per cent of all respondents in the first stage and 71 per cent in the second stage of the research. The majority of youth read several magazines. The magazine selection is stable: young people choose to read the biggest consumer magazines (Johnson & Prijatel, 1999): gender magazines (both of Latvian origin and international editions in Latvian, for example, *Cosmopolitan*, *FHM*, *Shape*), celebrity magazines, popular science magazines. Magazine reading habits also reflect general magazine audience trends because young people read the most popular Latvian magazines that attract the biggest readership. A small part of respondents (6%) stated that they read arts, philosophy and other specific trade niche magazines. When discussing magazine reading habits in focus groups, young people confirmed regularly reading women's and men's magazines that allows them to identify with people of their generation, construct a lifestyle, obtain valuable information, learn the rules of life and entertain themselves. Reading popular celebrities magazines allows one to satisfy their curiosity, dream about one's future, and it is very entertaining; information contained in these magazines is important in the process of socialization because news about famous people's lives is regularly discussed in conversations with peers. Young people believe reading magazines is a more valuable way of spending time; they also do not mind paying for magazines.

When evaluating the young people's media set, especially in the second stage of the research, one can notice an increase in the group that regularly uses only the Internet (from 14% in the first stage to 32% in the second). Some online media us-

ers emphasize that they watch most popular TV products, for example, shows and TV series, on the Internet when it is most convenient to them. Focus group discussions showed that Internet users, by rejecting traditional media, do not increase the number of regularly visiting pages and information versatility. Average awareness of current political, economic and social issues among young people who use only the Internet is generally lower than those respondents who besides the Internet also use other media, watch TV news or read magazines. Generally, both this group and the rest of the respondents are not interested in current events and do not believe that they should be aware of local or foreign news. This attitude, however, changes with the oldest group of respondents from twenty-two to twenty-five-year-olds. At this time, when one tries to become part of the employment market, a need to follow current social issues becomes a habit, and the habits that correspond to this group begin to resemble those of the rest of the media audience.

However, the young people's media set also shows several contradictions if one regards a young people's audience from a wider perspective, into media usage including also conversations, opinions, values that go in "media direction" (Gillespie, 2005, p. 196). Although questionnaires and discussions show that young people spend most of their time in social networks and regularly read news on internet news sites, but with other young people discuss current TV shows and series or very unique news events (for example, the Chilean miners' rescue operation in 2010), bizarre criminal news and advertising. This tendency remains in both age groups. Therefore in the process of socialization traditional news content also plays some part, which is also a general trend in the society itself: the shows in question reach a mass audience, they have the biggest ratings. Besides, those are mostly TV products, and information about these products can be obtained from magazines and Internet news sites. Some research participants believe that information space is oversaturated with news, that its content is often related to disasters, accidents, negative information, and therefore is depressive and unpleasant. Because of this, some young people believe that they do not want to bother and follow current news and think that their awareness is high enough, given that they receive information from friends on social networks. Therefore, an audience is forming that is not reached or is partially reached by traditional media, yet which highly values user-generated content and has overcome "the distance that traditional media create between an audience and content" (Burgess, 2009, p. 22). Conversations among peers on social networks, daily news that is shared by friends on Facebook.com or Twitter.com seem to be as valuable as media created content for many focus groups participants.

YOUNG PEOPLE AND CONTEMPORARY MEDIA TECHNOLOGIES

Some researches confirm that young people are very active and enthusiastic about current technological updates. However, a range of contemporary media technolo-

gies is so broad that it was rather difficult to come to a decision which technologies, what media offerings and which media to include in this study. The first data of this study showed that young people do not use certain features (like mobile television), and are not aware of certain media features (for example, podcasts). Only 11 per cent use these personal iPods in order to receive mass media content as mp3 files. Respondents from 18 to 21 are a bit keener on using podcasts.

The majority of respondents have an iPod; the number of users of this device is rising (66 per cent in the first stage, 75 per cent in the second stage). Young people use mp3 players to listen to the radio and create their own playlists it helps them overcome loneliness, lifts their mood and helps distance themselves from other people in public spaces.

Young people's interest in the blogosphere has remained stable. A majority of the surveyed young people read blogs (total percentage in Latvia is 8 per cent (Vendele, 2008)). Yet, a considerably smaller number are those who write blogs. When discussing blog writing habits, youths acknowledged that only a small part of them follow a specialist, political, expert or journalist blog because they largely read their peers' micro blogs on social networks. Most of the blog content is a description of daily life or opinions; many respondents view them as a part of entertainment communication, yet for others it substitutes traditional media content. Peer opinion also forms a content created by a so-called collective intelligence (Levy, 1997).

A figure of 22 per cent of interviewees in the first stage and 31 per cent of those in the second stage of the research call themselves as being authors of blogs. The majority of these blogs are personal diaries that describe reflections (on society, on meaning of life) or private events (trips, activities with friends etc.); only some respondents admitted being willing to express their creative abilities (in the form of text, photography, video) or write blogs on issues related to their hobbies that they believe themselves to be more competent.

Many respondents pointed out that they read blogs passively because it is interesting to follow other people's thoughts, but they do not want to interactively react or share their views. Blogging is less about self-expression, and more about socialization in order to be aware about one's friends' activities and informed about collective events. This data is confirmed by information about the usage of Twitter social network which, by developing the network itself, saw a rapid increase in the second stage of the research: 47 per cent of respondents identified themselves as regular Twitter users. Focus group interviews showed that this increase is directly linked to the fact the one can express themselves in the form of 140 characters in Twitter, Facebook and other social networks. This trend is also mentioned by other authors (Atkinson, 2010) who state that the user-friendliness and speed of blog sections both extend the number of blogs and also reduce author's and reader's demands in terms of blog content.

At the same time, an increase in computer games usage is seen among young people. If in the first stage mostly young men admitted playing computer games on

the Internet (14 per cent of respondents). Then, during the second stage 37 per cent of respondents admitted to playing online games. The research has proved that the usage of online games is not determined by gender. Some focus group female participants admitted being addicted to most popular games because some games (for example, *The Farm*) are related to social network use and have become a phenomenon that engages friends and acquaintances.

By analysing data obtained by studies of media technologies, it can be concluded that young people choose the most popular technological innovations that are also used by their peers. Technology usage is also related to fashion (Featherstone, 1998) because media use and media devices can show one's status in society, help find an identity and belonging to a certain social group.

CONCLUSION

Young people's media usage rather precisely reflects the general habits of Latvian media audiences. The majority of young people consume the same media and same media content that is also the most popular among the rest of the media audiences. This data matches other quantitative media studies that show young people as a stable part of a popular media audience. Belonging to a certain age group is not the determinative factor in terms of media use: more crucial issues are values, popular life styles, social influence and traditions that manifest themselves as long-term media use habits.

In the same time the study data shows a number of controversial trends in young people's media usage patterns. Although young people's habits of media usage correspond to the general public's habits of the same kind, young people's media behaviour differs in the versatility of media content usage and application.

Young people combine various media usages, but use each separate medium or topic for a short period of time and perceive their content as a continuous flow of small, different fragments. Short, attractive and easily perceptible media content is valued higher by the focus group participants; they look for cheerfulness, a good mood and possibilities for immediate use. In the process of media consumption, as believed by young people, the role of speed, availability and practical applicability is increasing crucially. In this context, the quality of content is less valuable because what is more significant is its created mood and application. Young people see themselves as consumers in a process of media usage by actively adapting media's features to their own needs.

As the result of media convergence young people use media in a free and mixed way, without giving much attention to its carrier (medium or media platform), author or owner. Separate parts of media content, in the minds of young people, are more important than media organizations and media brands. Entertainment is the leading function for young people as media users. Young media audiences actively seek familiar ways of entertainment, to escape from reality and to reduce

young people with a sense of current affairs. For young people, it is very crucial, with the help of media content and usages, to be able to feel them being modern, stylish, and, by following current processes, gain high self-consciousness and sense of safety.

In general, the very offers of media content, accents and priorities defined within it, allow young people to grasp the ephemeral sense of their generation and define their belonging to the biggest social groups or distance themselves from values endorsed by their peers. The process of media usage reflects young people searches; what there is stable is the intensive use of many different media and its aims, but the varying factor is the very content of media.

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