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Defining TV watching experience: Psycho-social factors and screen culture of Generation Z

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Abstract

Nowadays, the concept of "watching TV" means different things to different age groups. Even though it has barely changed in the first 50 years of the medium's history, the way we watch TV is under discussion. Changes in viewing practices derive from technological convergence but also from a set of parameters, that include industrial changes, socio-economic factors, lifestyle, culture & ethics of each generation. This research uses qualitative tools to investigate which are the viewing habits of young viewers (RQ1), which are the differences in the way they consume TV content compared to their parents (RQ2) and how psycho-social factors influence their perceptions of television viewing (RQ3). According to the findings, coexistence with new media and social media offers new psychological and emotional experiences to people of Generation Z (born after 1996). However, several traditional features of the television experience have not changed and seem to be a comparative advantage of traditional television over platforms.

Keywords: Generation Z, TV watching, screen culture, psycho-social factors.

Introduction

Television is currently undergoing a dynamic process of evolution, which began when audiovisual content became available over the Internet and the medium began to converge with the semantic web. The traditional screen is no longer the focus of the television experience. The audio-visual content is spread across various screens and becomes the product of an interactive, mobile experience, without geographical and time limitations. Content proliferates, highlighting the need for personalization and recommendation systems. Furthermore, the viewer has gained an ever-increasing control over the content (Podara et al., 2021). Evolution is about an interdependent system of audience and media. Young viewers are no longer the mass audience that traditional media was designed for. On the other hand, new media do not offer the conventional viewing experience: they offer new possibilities that shape new practices (Podara et al., 2020).

Based on a generational perspective and audience evolution theories, the present article aims to facilitate a better understanding of the screen culture of young media users (Podara, 2019b, 2019c), who are early adopters and heavy consumers of audiovisual content in the television

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streaming age. The adoption of innovation emerges as a structural element of TV's evolution. Studying the media usage of members of Generation Z (GenZers) as early adopters is a starting point for exploring and evaluating the transformation of viewing habits. It is part of an ongoing research that systematically explores the behavior of GenZers in Greece from a TV studies perspective, not only on traditional television but also on four other screens.

Media use of Generation Z

The way we watched TV may have changed little in the first 50 years of the medium's history, but the changes are now so drastic that "watching TV" means different things to different age groups, especially to those born after 1996 (generation Z), the first generation who has never known a world without internet (Tapscott, 1998, Prensky, 2001, Twenge, 2017, Seemiller & Grace, 2018). Many talk about a revolution, others about the end of television as we knew it, while the general feeling prevails that younger generations have abandoned television.

It is not only the biological age but also the social parameters of each age group that influence media usage (Strauss & Howe, 1991; Reeves & Oh, 2008; Carrè, 2013). A generation can be defined as a group of people of similar age who share historical experiences over the same time period (Mannheim, 1928). Mannheim (1928) who was one of the first to talk about generations explains the "phenomenon of first contact" according to which the first contact someone has with a medium is the one that determines all his later experiences. Members of Generation Z (Twenge, 2017), i.e., people born after 1996, have not experienced a world without the internet and this characteristic differentiates them from all previous generations (Reeves, 2008). Their "first contact" with traditional television came at a time when television content was gradually being integrated into the internet and the small screen was not the only option available at home. Those born after 1996 do not remember the transition from the analog to the digital world. They are early adopters of streaming television and avid viewers of audiovisual content (Podara et al., 2020, 2021).

For Generation Z (Gen Z) streaming is not a new way of watching television but rather a new generation's concept of what television viewing is (Tremor Video & Hulu, 2017). Socialization through the Internet is for them an extension of their daily social life - the choice of platforms defines their identity. They are emotionally connected to the Internet, developing dependencies on their mobile and other screens. The main communicational code is visual. They prefer social media mainly based on images or video (Instagram, Tik Tok, etc.). In the streaming age where audiences exert increasing control over the parameters of their viewing, streaming technology, given the capabilities of recommendation systems, should address the concerns of program selection and attention (Tefertiller & Sheehan, 2019; Podara et al., 2019c, 2021). Gen Z has a particularly high requirement for filtering relevant content to alleviate information overload (Benselin & Ragsdell, 2016).

Greek Gen Zers had mainly access to three screens. Smartphones scores as the most popular device. They show a preference for Netflix and streaming platforms for entertainment programs, and the traditional TV screen for news/documentaries and reality shows (Podara et al., 2020).

Emotional Effect of Media Use in Gen Z

Previous research in the field of Psychology shows that increased usage of social media influence the way Gen Z feels, reacts, and behave. Firstly, it has been observed that their emotional contagion, which is the tendency to mimic another and to converge emotionally without awareness is something that Gen Z appears to be high in when they communicate via video communication (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1993; Kramer, Guillory, & Hancock, 2014). This is related to the fact that Generation Z appears to create emotional connections since they arouse strong feels and a bond between people. Indeed, 73% of Gen Z students reported seeing themselves as compassionate and 80% saw themselves as being thoughtful and mainly concerned about the issues facing other people (Seemiller & Grace, 2018).

Since video chat is so accessible to Gen Z, people receive a connection mimicking the face-to-face interaction causing them to feel other's emotions. Moreover, virtual empathy has been correlated positively with live face-to-face empathy and people can show empathetic responses to others online (Carrier et al., 2015). Therefore, this means that advanced technology allows to increase empathy, the ability to understand another's feelings (Carré et al., 2013), especially for Generation Z. The emotional impact of technology and social media usage lead to shape their personality and identity. The possibility of uploading a content of interest offers them the freedom to express their views with other people. Finally, their character is also, influenced by their socialisation with users that have similar perspectives and interests. The online interaction allows them to create new friendships or keep communication with family members.

However, another study examined the relationship between cognitive empathy and cyberbullying for Generation Z (Ang & Goh, 2010). The study reported that lower levels of empathy led to promote actions of cyberbullying, especially in the male population. Another negative effect of technology in Generation Z is that they can trigger negative emotions such as anxiety, strangeness, and panic when absent from one's device or experience feelings of being afraid due to not knowing what everyone else is doing (Seemiller & Grace, 2018). One can even engage in irrational behaviour when feelings this strong connection to their phone, such as having the urge to text and at the same time, drive which can be dangerous to physical health. This can cause an internet addiction, promote harassment, cyberbullying, and surveillance with result to negatively impact their mental health and appear psychoneurotic effects such as aggressive behavior.

Research Methodology

The aim of the research is to explore the evolving viewing practices of the young audience through the findings of multi-level research regarding Generation Z's media usage. Qualitative tools were used to investigate which are the viewing habits of young TV viewers (R.Q.1), which are the differences in the way they watch television content in relation to their parents (R.Q.2) and how psychosocial factors affect their perceptions of television (R.Q.3).

Eight focus groups were conducted to members of Generation Z exploring different socio-demographical criteria [television culture, country, educational level, digital literacy level]. The qualitative approach had been chosen to understand not only what people watch but also why they watch it. This qualitative research was conducted among 18–25-year-old person from 2018 to 2020, being the first phase of an ongoing study that continues with quantitative research.

The first focus group included students from the Journalism and Media Department of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH). The second focus group was held in Cyprus, to students of the Journalism Dept. of the School of Arts, Communication and Cultural Studies at Frederick University. Learners in the field of media were chosen because, according to the literature are more likely to have a high level of digital literacy and be early adopters of innovation, two factors that have an impact on their own audio-visual viewing behavior (Jenkins 2009; Dhoest & Simons 2016, Nicolaou et al., 2020; Podara, 2020). Media users who have high level of digital literacy are using digital media easier and they can assess when to use them depending on the circumstances (Matsiola et al., 2019).

The same framework of questions was used in both focus groups to investigate whether people from different countries, with different television cultures, have developed the same viewing habits. The results showed striking similarities in the viewing habits of Greeks and Cypriots, so the decision was made to expand the research outside of these two countries. Therefore, two English-speaking focus groups were designed aimed at students from various European countries studying at the universities of Greece and Cyprus (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki & Frederick University). The goal was to investigate whether place of origin is a demographic variable that influences viewing habits. It turned out that viewing habits do not differ by country of origin, so we continued by choosing to examine another criterion, namely the different educational level.

Three more focus groups were then designed, to check if the educational level differentiates the viewing habits. The sample of the research is young people aged 18-25, who were studying in Public Vocational Education Institutes (DIEK) in Central Macedonia.

Methodology-Research sample

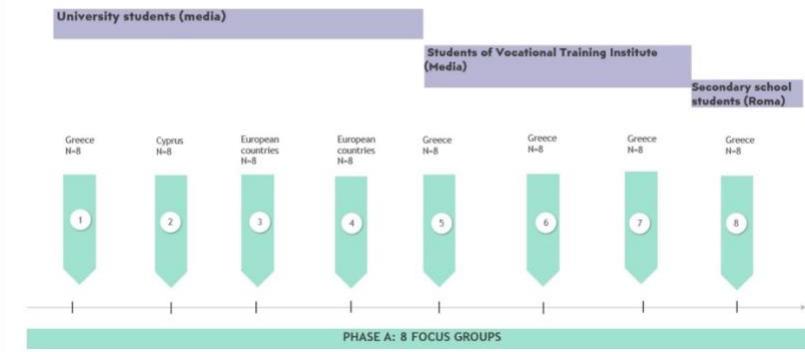


Figure 2: Methodology Research Sample

As seen in the picture in the first seven focus groups, the participants were people trained at Journalism and Audiovisual technology since according to the literature review, young people studying in the field of media more easily adopt new technological innovations and have a high level of digital literacy (Nicolaou et al. 2020; Podara, 2020).

For the latter group, deviant sampling was used (Patton, 2002); a case of an audience was selected that was special and did not constitute a wider norm. It consisted of 18-25-year-olds who belonged to a vulnerable Roma social group and had not completed Primary High School or were working young adults who had dropped out of school. This group was designed to investigate whether the lower level of education and correspondingly the lack of digital literacy affects viewing habits, at the time when television is converging with the internet.

Results

According to the results of the study, Generation Z members are avid users of audiovisual content. Generation Z watches less TV content than any other generation up to now, but at the same time, they consume much more content online than any previous generation. They are online more than twelve hours a day, stating that they are not online only when they are sleeping or have some other occupation (work, school). They watch audio-visual content online for about three hours a day. While on traditional television they spend less than an hour a day. A preference for YouTube was expressed unanimously by participants from seven focus groups. For members of Generation Z, this platform is not only a source of entertainment but also a source of information and education. The statement of a vocational school education student that "I have learned more from YouTube than from school" embodies their perception.

The factors that make them prefer watching audiovisual content online are ease of use and functionality. In the new TV era where the supply of audiovisual content exponentially exceeds the demand, participants are used to determining the time and duration of viewing themselves and therefore avoid the traditional TV experience that has various delays (e.g., commercial break). Another finding of the survey is that most of the young participants have three screens

at their disposal (mobile phone, laptop, traditional TV), while many use up to five screens (mobile phone, laptop, desktop computer, tablet, traditional TV). As emerged from the theoretical overview, today's young people, from their childhood, perceive all five screens as part of the household equipment of the family. Unlike their parents who were called upon at some stage in their lives to make a conscious decision to buy and learn to operate a personal computer, tablet, smartphone, etc.

Generation Z's relationship with traditional TV & the differences in how they watch TV content compared to their parents.

One of the demands of this research was to investigate what is the relationship of generation Z with traditional television and whether there is a “generation gap” between the traditional television's viewing patterns of generation Z and previous generations.

It seems that Gen Z hasn't completely abandoned traditional TV viewing, although it's not their first choice. The lack of focused viewing is identified as the most interesting difference between Gen Z viewers and their parents. The participants stated that their parents watch TV passively, to pass their time, to relax, not caring what they are watching, “just to listen to something while they are doing work”. The gratification they get from this way of viewing is one of the main reasons they entertain themselves by passively watching TV, since it is a familiar medium that comforts and relieves them (Ellis, 2021). Young audiences are not used to watching randomly whatever comes across a television program stream, so they find it extremely difficult to watch something they are not interested in.

It also emerged from the analysis of the results that Generation Z is turning to traditional TV for the gratification of group viewing and is doing so mainly because it perceives watching the traditional small screen as a family activity. Greeks and Cypriots are big fans of traditional television as most South European countries (Podara & Kalliris, 2022). In Greece, there is a TV paradox: although there is a high level of distrust to the traditional television, TV is the medium that Greeks love to hate (Podara & Matsiola, 2022). In a survey carried out in 15 EU countries between 2008 and 2015 (Eurostat, 2018), Greeks were by far the top screen lovers in Europe.

Also, members of Generation Z turn to it only when they need to watch the programs that everyone is watching, seeking to have a common context of discussion with their friends and participate in the conversation that is happening on social networks. That is the reason why the programs that they say they prefer on the small screen are usually the “media events”, for example a Eurovision, the Olympic games etc. They also watch popular series and reality shows.

From all the surveys a clear preference was observed to the use of mobile devices/ screens. Unlike their parents, TV for Gen Z is not a medium that they watch when they get home. It's

something that follows them everywhere: on the bus, at work, at the beach, at class. Everyone now carries their own personal television in their pocket.

The majority stated that they watch series online usually alone. They are alone but they don't feel lonely. They continue to discuss TV content and comment on it collectively with others, only now their communities have moved online.

Our research revealed that binge watching is a regular viewing habit for Generation Z as well. This practice of watching multiple episodes of a series in quick succession, was introduced seven years ago by the Netflix platform and very soon established among the general public. The analysis shows a preference of Gen Z for streaming TV content, where the viewer-user does not have to take any action to move from one episode to another.

Socio-economic variables affecting Gen Z viewing habits.

From the sequence of qualitative research carried out, it appeared that the viewing habits of generation Z do not show differences depending on social or demographic criteria.

Nielsen audience surveys examining traditional television viewing in Greece show that educational level plays an important role in viewing habits as adults with a low educational level watch traditional television almost 1.5 hours a day more than those with a medium educational level (Nielsen, 2019). As far as generation Z is concerned, this criterion did not appear to play a role in shaping viewing habits or in differentiating the time spent watching TV content.

From the data obtained in the qualitative analysis, no significant difference in viewing habits related to the country of origin of the viewers was revealed. The internet tends to create a global audience for viewing audiovisual content, where geographical boundaries converge. The evolution of new media technology has created a borderless viewing culture. The above raises a wider academic debate about the internationalization of young audiences and the global spread of television products.

As it emerged from the focus group on young Roma, members of a vulnerable social group, indeed the lower level of education led to a lack of digital literacy. This didn't resonate with internet access but with problems related to the adequate use of digital technology. Despite this, no differentiation was observed in terms of viewing habits in relation to their parents.

Finally, there are some psychological variables that could affect their viewing habits. The way they perceive socialization and communication as well as personal values and emotions are possible factors that could trigger their increased relationship with advanced technology. The choice of interacting with others with similar interests as well as of creating friendships, enhancing their existing bonds (e.g., with family) and feeling attached with this way could be some reasons they prefer social media usage. Technology offers an easier way to share opinions

as well as communicate through live chat and video cameras which makes them more comfortable to express their feelings.

Conclusions – Discussion

The answer to the question "what is television" will continue to be a matter of debate as long as the medium is at the crossroads. The possibilities, but also the limitations brought by the convergence with the internet, are changing television, without it being yet clear what the outcome will be. Traditional television is trying to redefine its place in the television landscape.

In conclusion, based on the literature review and corresponding findings, the gratifications of streaming TV were the focused, uninterrupted viewing, and the personalized, individual viewing while the gratification of watching traditional TV was mainly group viewing. It was shown that Generation Z is watching more content than ever before, but it's also more demanding than any other generation. TV for Generation Z is a mobile device, providing a mobile viewing experience without geographical and time limitations. This complies with industry surveys about Gen Z that show they are 'mobility centrics', prioritising the usage of mobile small screens for television viewing (Ericsson Consumer Lab, 2017; Tremor Video & Hulu, 2017). Coexistence with new technology and social media offers new psychological and emotional experiences to people of Generation Z because it strengthens family and friendship ties and develops socialization skills. Young viewers of Generation Z favor individual watching, perceiving audiovisual content as an individual experience.

They are alone but not lonely; through viewing they have the feeling of belonging to a global fandom. Also, a tendency to passive viewing was found since they prefer watching audiovisual content in rapid succession (binge watching). Undoubtedly, this can have detrimental effects on physical health such as it can lead to suffering from eating disorders, mental health problems, addictions etc. Moreover, they tend to perceive traditional TV viewing both as a family activity and to join the group. This means that they embrace a sense of belonging and attachment while watching TV.

Another important element of social media usage is that algorithms significantly influence their viewing options. This can result in consuming information with the same content, which can satisfy their preferred needs but also, over-use a social media platform.

Furthermore, it is note-worthy to mention that as technological structures continue to evolve, several traditional features of the television experience have not changed and seem to be a comparative advantage of traditional television over other new platforms. These are three: the preference for live, collective viewing, the preference for non-interactive content and the preference for flow-based viewing.

Until now, these findings do not support the idea that "young people do not watch (traditional) television". Nevertheless, it is awaited with great interest what will happen with the next generation of audience, i.e., the children of the Millennials, who are growing up in homes

without a traditional television set, as viewing every screen is a choice as well as a habit. Traditional TV is not dying; therefore, further research needs to redefine who and why it produces audiovisual content.

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