

## DEEP DIVE INTO THE MEDIA WORLD OF YOUTH\*

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### ABSTRACT

*The emergence of internet technologies and social media platforms has affected all aspects of life, especially among younger generations. In this new media world of social media, for stakeholders dealing with the 15–24-year-old population it is important to understand how to communicate and engage with them. Using a combination of qualitative/quantitative research methodology, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive, descriptive view of the values, perception, and behaviour of youth (15–24) in Croatia when it comes to digital media channels and especially social media. Research results confirmed that social networks, messaging services and browsing internet are the dominant activities of young generation. YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook are the most popular social network, and principals in content creation are authenticity, customization, and interactivity. These results should serve as a basis for communication strategies within this target audience. And since the way young use social networks and create/consume content changes daily, legal framework should follow.*

**Keywords:** Youth 15–24, qualitative/quantitative research, descriptive analysis, social media usage

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Change in the media landscape is constant, but we are witnessing the greatest changes in media history, especially among the young population. Young people are growing up in a completely new digital environment. Whole new world of social media evolved. It is getting more and more complex for businesses and marketing industry to make communication strategies and media channels optimization when communicating with young people. The speed of change in technology, communication channels, ways of creating and consuming content, making decisions, new business models of the social network industry... requires up-to-date reactions in creating relevant legal frameworks. Therefore, for the legal profession to respond to the challenges of emerging issues related to the development of the use of social networks, it is important to understand how and why young people, as a population that is the bearer of change, use them. Platforms and applications that are used “for free” in the social network industry are of foreign origin, and there are no borders in social network communication, so legal issues are wider than Croatian borders as well.

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The rise of social media is an extraordinary example of how quickly and drastically social behaviours can change: Something that is today part of the everyday life of one-third of the world population was unthinkable less than a generation ago.<sup>1</sup> The term “social media” (SM) was first used in 1994 on a Tokyo online media environment, called Matisse. It was in these early days of the commercial Internet that the first SM platforms were developed and launched. Over time, both the number of SM platforms and the number of active SM users have increased significantly, making it one of the most important applications of the Internet. Furthermore, there are big differences in social media usage over time: before 2010, SM was commonly approached as a tool of connectivity for people with common interests. After 2010, the focus changed to creating and sharing user-generated content.<sup>2</sup> Some studies from 2010 already pointed out the importance of considering platform and access mechanism when researching online social networks and that even the difference in level of access means that the experiences are quite distinct; the type of access transforms a longer-lasting, thorough experience, exploring pictures and other people’s details, to a lightweight experience, a simple

<sup>1</sup> Ortiz-Ospina, E., *The rise of social media*, *Our World in Data*, 2019, [<https://ourworldindata.org/rise-of-social-media>], Accessed 10 June 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Aichner, T.; Grünfelder, M.; Oswin Maurer, O.; Jegeni, D., *Twenty-Five Years of Social Media: A Review of Social Media Applications and Definitions from 1994 to 2019*, *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, Vol. 24, No. 4., 2021, pp. 215-222.

checking of status and personal messages. It is therefore essential to examine on-line social network use in relation to these new technologies and from a more holistic viewpoint.<sup>3</sup> In reviewing the social media ecosystem and considering where it is heading in the context of consumers and marketing practice, it is concluded that this is an area that is very much still in a state of flux. The future of social media in marketing is exciting, but also uncertain. If nothing else, it is vitally important that we better understand social media since it has become highly culturally relevant, a dominant form of communication and expression, a major media type used by companies for advertising and other forms of communication, and even has geopolitical ramifications.<sup>4</sup> Previous exploratory studies addressing teenagers discussed that advertising in the online social networking environment is not as successful as originally anticipated. The future success of online social networking sites as an advertising medium depends on its acceptance as an advertising vehicle that can deliver a message to a micro-target in a manner that will be well received and that increases the likelihood of interaction.<sup>5</sup> Technological developments create different effects on different generations. Young generation (high school/student age, 15 - 24) are specially interesting since, in this generation, social media promotes civil society and public opinion. The generation called digital natives is in contact with their families and friends from all over the world, can find a spouse or romantic relationship, can participate in civil protests, as well as can receive e-mail or online therapy support via social media.<sup>6</sup> Although generational approaches can be rightly critiqued as over-broad and dismissive of important racial, ethnic, national, and regional differences, and yet, we persist in finding utility in this shorthand. It is difficult to know whether the trends being captured will endure into adulthood, which is one of the reasons that generational studies mature along with the population.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Barkhuus L; Tashiro J., *Student socialization in the age of Facebook*, in: Proceedings of the 28th International Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, ACM Press, New York, 2010, pp. 133–142.

<sup>4</sup> Appel, G.; Grewal, L.; Hadi, R. et al, *The future of social media in marketing*, J. of the Acad. Mark. Sci., Vol. 48, 2020, pp. 79-95.

<sup>5</sup> Kelly, L.; Kerr, G.; Drennan, J., Avoidance of Advertising in Social Networking Sites: The Teenage Perspective, Journal of Interactive Advertising, Vol. 10, No. 2, 2010, pp. 16-27.

<sup>6</sup> Kahraman, A., *The relationship of generation Z with digital technology*, Uluslararası Anadolu Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi, Vol. 4, No. 2, 2020, pp. 113-134.

<sup>7</sup> Rue, P., *Make Way, Millennials, Here Comes Gen Z*, About Campus, Vol. 23, No. 3, 2018, pp. 5-12.

### 3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY APPROACH

Greater personalization typically increases service relevance and customer adoption, but paradoxically, it also may increase customers' sense of vulnerability and lower adoption rates.<sup>8</sup>

This paper aims to answer how 15 – 24 years old population in Croatia consumes media, content, and social media, to provide comprehensive view on Croatian youth by covering wide scope of topics related to values, perception, and behaviour of this target group, with an insight into their lifestyle and value system. The research was conducted in September 2022 in two phases. First phase was exploration through qualitative methodology: 4 focus groups (two 15 – 18 years old., two 19 – 24 years old), n=32, urban, 2 cities. Second phase was validation of collected insights through quantitative methodology: online survey, n=400, 15-24 years old, national representative sample of the target group. Descriptive statistics were used to provide an overview and foundation for further data analysis.

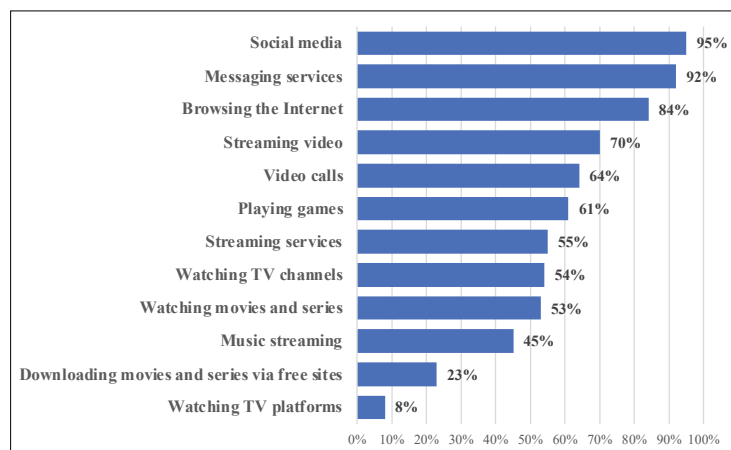
### 4. RESEARCH RESULTS

Qualitative phase gave an insight in fundamental life values of young generation. Focus groups results showed that They are eager to fully embrace and experience all that life has to offer, which is quite typical for this stage of life. Additionally, they hold close relationships with their loved ones and friends dear, and many still seek the support and guidance of their families and feeling rooted in their communities. Ability to stay true to oneself and be open about one's thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and identities is highly valued. It is also about honesty – there is a strong desire to see transparency in people, brands, and organizations. Authenticity builds trust. It fosters deeper relationships, as it encourages being open and vulnerable, so to be able to establish meaningful connections. Boundaries are blurred between fun, education, interests, hobbies, and work. There is no one profession, neither one career. There is not just graduating from school or faculty but creating a portfolio of skills. Hobby can become a source of successful business idea. Traveling is a school of life. They play active role in creating own personalized life path, based on exploration and flexibility. There is no one, formal, prescribed way. There is only “my way”. Starting from creation of own curriculum to own business. Not following predetermined path along with flexibility is also their way to deal with unstable social and political context (unlike the older generations prone to stick to familiar and offered as solutions for insecurity). Young

<sup>8</sup> Aguirre, E.; Mahr, D.; Grewal, D.; Ruyter, K. D.; Wetzels, M., *Unraveling the personalization paradox: The effect of information collection and trust-building strategies on online advertisement effectiveness*, Journal of Retailing, Vol. 91, No. 1, 2015, pp. 34-59.

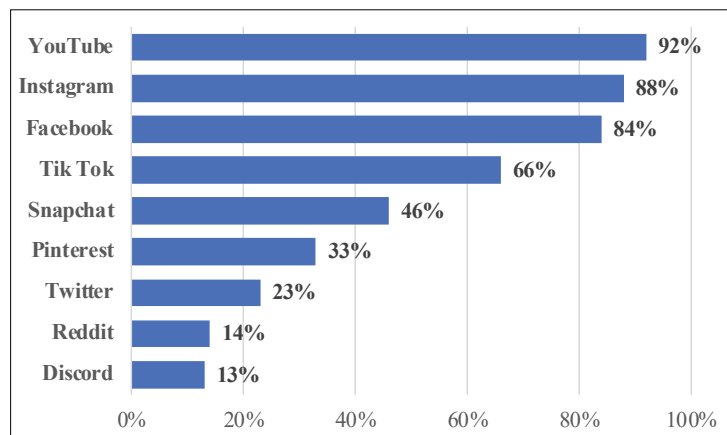
generation appreciate brands who get to know them and approach them with offers that address their specific needs and interests. Balance is the solution: work and life, technology and human contact, self-care, and care for the community. This generation is ambitious and strive for success, but not at the expense of well-being and leisure. Therefore, work-life balance is priority – it is their definition of success. It is imperative for them to find time for loved ones and self-care. Mental health issues caused by discrepancies between online and real world are becoming significantly more relevant. While technology can provide various benefits, it can also contribute to some well-being challenges. Excessive screen time, social media comparison, fake news is some of concerns. Embracing entrepreneurship over traditional employment is essential to overcome financial challenges, gain independence and even to become wealthy. They feel responsible to act regarding issues such as climate change and sustainability, inequality, community well-being. The same is expected from companies and brands. This generation has a strong desire to enhance society and the world at large, so brands that can associate themselves with positive change are more likely to attract them. Media for this generation is social media: social networks and browsing internet are the dominant activities of young generation (graph 1).

**Graph 1.** Which of the following services do you personally use at least once a week? Base: all respondents



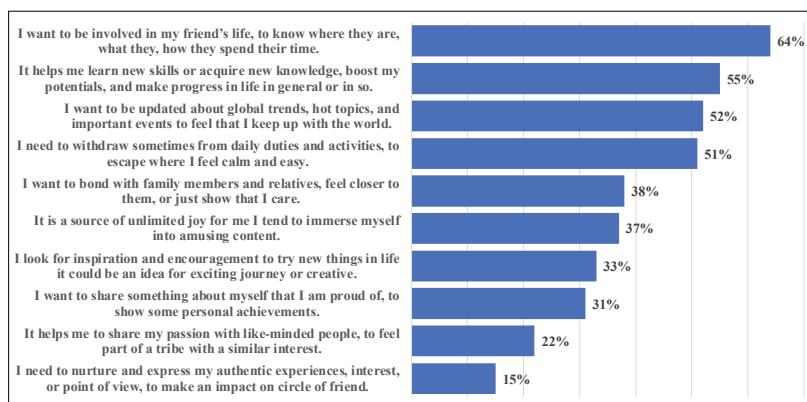
As presented in graph 2, YouTube, Instagram and Facebook are the most popular social networks, while Instagram is the most often used.

**Graph 2.** Which social networks do you use at least occasionally? Base: all respondents



Among social network users, Instagram is most often used by 38% of social network users which means that Instagram is the number one platform to be used for interaction with young generation. Though Facebook has been losing relevance and considered outdated (and for their parents), it should not be neglected. It still has some role – more for practical reasons/communities. Tik Tok is also important “place” where young generation spend a lot of their time (even they feel a bit addicted to it), but careful approach is needed. Social media has multiple usage purpose. In the first place, getting informed, learning, connecting, but escaping too. The use of social media is driven by the desire to be informed. Young Croats perceives social media as necessary in their everyday life, although it causes serious concerns: sometimes they feel unproductive, guilty for overuse, and fearful of spreading negative content or fake news. They enjoy using it but also feel excessively dependent, distracted, and unable to imagine life without it. They’re worried about its addictive nature and its potential impact on mental health and the pressure to maintain an online image. There is a need to control and limit the use, protect privacy, and balance it with non-digital activities. To understand the behaviour, it is important to know the motives for using the social media.

**Graph 3.** What people look for in social media.

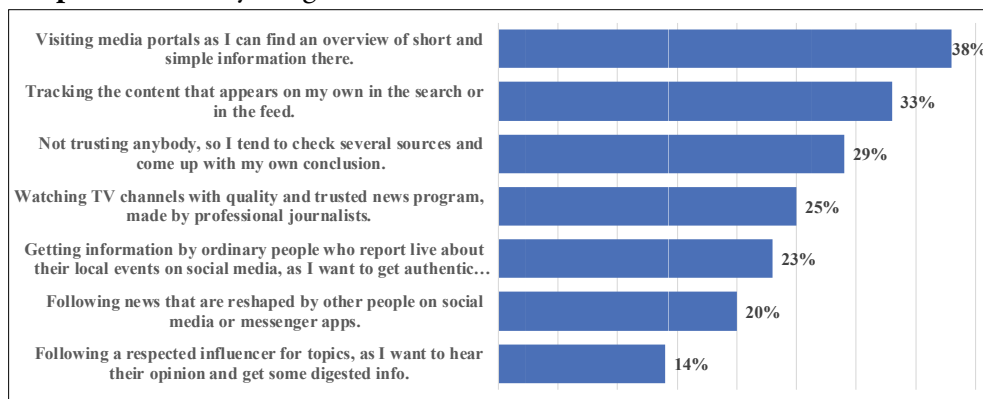


Since almost all needs are met on social networks, there are many opportunities how to utilize its power to engage successfully with young generation. Previous theorizing and research suggest that brand social networks engagement (beyond just basic “liking”) may positively impact consumer attitudes and behaviours when members are induced to engage with them, exerting effort after joining.<sup>9</sup> Social media should be used for offering them opportunities for exploration, learning and socialization. Brands that leverage social media in an ethical and responsible way can differentiate themselves by taking on a supportive role. The young population is united by their interest in music. To attract young generation, focus should be on creating engaging and relevant content that aligns with generational trends and interests, with dose of exploration and fun involved. Music, travel, food, and sport are topics of high interest for the majority. Companies, universities, brands trying to capture young target attention should consider incorporating elements such as storytelling, humour, and interactivity to captivate their attention and provide a memorable experience. As for staying informed, checking several information sources is typical. TV news is still relevant, along with feeds and media portals. Young Croats prefer to visit media portals for information. Similar results can be found around the world: students mostly use smart phones, tablets, laptops. With these tools, it has been revealed that students perform activities such as listening to and downloading music, watching TV, watching, and downloading videos from the internet, browsing social networks, surfing the internet. The students stated that digital technologies make life easier, but they can affect life negatively when

<sup>9</sup> John, L. K.; Emrich, O.; Gupta, S.; Norton, M. I., *Does “liking” lead to loving? The impact of joining a brand’s social network on marketing outcomes*, Journal of Marketing Research, Vol. 54, No. 1, 2017, pp. 144-155.

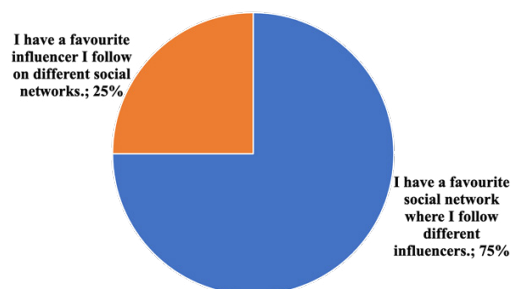
they are not used for the purpose and will lead to laziness, addiction and to blunt their imagination.<sup>10</sup>

**Graph 4.** Main ways to get informed



There is no one dominant way of consuming news. Young people tend to come up with their own point of view after checking several sources. Also, they prefer digested digital update, simple, short, and customised. In depth analysis of conducted focus groups or the young generation short, simple, visually striking doesn't mean superficial. They appreciate personal point of view – it gives value and credibility to news. These should be principles in content and format creation when trying to inform young generation. When it comes to their interest in influencers, the majority of analysed target group has a social network they prefer, where they follow different influencers. When asked to name up to three influencers that they like and follow, 254 names came up in total.

**Graph 5.** Favourite influencers and social networks

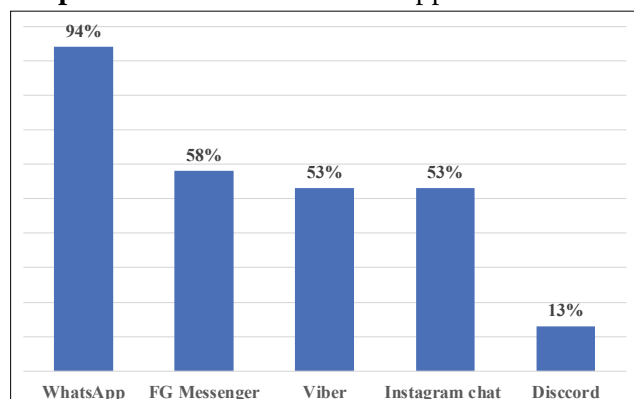


<sup>10</sup> Erten, P., *Z generation attitudes towards digital technology*, Gümüşhane University Journal of Social Sciences Electronics, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2019, pp. 190-202.



Focus groups insight analysis shows that authentic and inspirational is important: influencers who are seen as authentic, sharing personal experiences, relatable, and inspiring are favoured by young. They prefer influencers with a purpose, focusing on activism, positivity, open-mindedness, and humour beyond just popularity. Stories of real-life success and motivational content are highly valued. They also prefer local celebrities with authentic backgrounds. Nevertheless, controversial personalities gain attention and cause ambivalent feelings. Influencer marketing is worth investing in. However, selection of impactful and relevant influencers should be done with cautious. Question of authenticity is even more important for influencer appeal – honesty, genuine life stories, motivational narrative, but also purpose are some of the features. As for the usage of communication apps, young Croatians mostly use WhatsApp, although the number of multiple answers shows that the majority use multiple applications.

**Graph 6.** Used communication applications.



## 5. DISCUSSION

Earlier research on social media within young generation argued that active usage of social media platform has already changed the virtual bazaar, the place of work and the society; this will gradually pave way to develop innovative commerce models, products, and techniques. However, some questions are there concerning how young generation and their use of social media will shape individual, organizations and societal outcomes in different situations.<sup>11</sup> Our research confirmed that media for 15-24 generation is social media: social networks (95%), messaging services (92%) and browsing internet (84%) are the dominant activities of young generation. YouTube (92%), Instagram (88%) and Facebook (84%) are the most

<sup>11</sup> Prakash Yadav, G.; Rai, J., *The Generation Z and their Social Media Usage: A Review and a Research Outline*, Global Journal of Enterprise Information System, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2020, pp. 110-116.

popular social networks, while Instagram is the most often used (38%) which means that Instagram is the number one platform to be used for interaction with young generation. Though Facebook has been losing relevance and considered outdated (and for their parents), it should not be neglected. It still has some role – more for practical reasons/communities. There is no one dominant way of consuming news. Young people tend to come up with their own point of view after checking several sources, which is important for positive impact in terms of digital media use and youth. Other research confirmed that the positive impacts depend on directly political uses of digital media, such as blogging, reading online news, and online political discussion. These online activities have off-line consequences on participation, such as contacting officials, talking politics, volunteering, and protesting.<sup>12</sup> When analysing how young population in Croatia consumes content, based on focus groups insights there are several principals in content creation: authenticity, customization, and interactivity. Almost all their needs are met on social networks. Content they prefer should offer multidimensional and multisensorial experiences, encouragement, and inspiration. When thinking strategy, elements such as storytelling, humour, and interactivity should be integrated to captivate their attention and provide a memorable experience. Personal, subjective experiences, points of view and life stories are engaging and credible. Focus groups insight analysis also show that they prefer influencers with a purpose, focusing on activism, positivity, open-mindedness, and humour beyond just popularity. As for the usage of communication apps, young Croatians mostly use WhatsApp, although the number of multiple answers shows that the majority use multiple applications. The way they use media, social network, and create/consume content changes daily, so legal framework should follow.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Change in the media landscape is constant. Young people are growing up in a completely new digital environment. Complexity of creating communication strategies and media channels optimization when communicating with young people and speed of change in technology, communication channels and ways of creating and consuming content requires up-to-date knowledge about motives, preferences, and behaviour, followed by relevant legal frameworks. Therefore, understanding values, perception, and behaviour of youth when it comes to social media is ground zero for further analysis. Since this paper is based on descriptive statistics there are some limitations in interpretation, primary that there is no in-

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<sup>12</sup> Boulianne, S.; Theocharis, Y., *Young People, Digital Media, and Engagement: A Meta-Analysis of Research*, Social Science Computer Review, Vol. 38, No. 2, 2020, pp. 111-127.

formation on relationships, causes, or effects of analysed data, which should be the focus of further research on this topic.

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