

Electronic Communities - Catalysts or Rotten Apples of Traditional Agents of Socialization for 'Generation-Y'?

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Abstract: Whoever considers himself/herself a *young* person will have to cope with more or less acceptable social challenges to distinctive social identities based upon age differentiation. Clearly different from those they consider to be *older*, young people and various 'wannabes' face the contemporary community sociology phenomenon of *electronic communities*. As such communities are derived from patterns of modern electronic communication, possession of advanced computer skills is a valuable social asset for young people who are quite 'at home' in communicating/expressing themselves using interactive media and messaging. The issue of being 'at home' in interpreting the social world in terms of electronically mediated interaction is often mixed (or even confused) with the (in)ability to apply 'traditional' forms of social interaction and socialization. Therefore, it is important to ask whether contemporary theories/models of the electronic community apply to the identification and socialization of the generation acquainted with information technology at a very early age (the so-called '*Generation Y*'). It is believed that some new patterns in socialization/community building may be identified by analyzing the interactions among the 'offline' and 'online' social worlds/experiences of '*Generation Y*' and even extended to a wider group, as society as a whole reflects the behavior and fundamental characteristics of youth culture.

Key-Words: Electronic communication, youth culture, agents of socialization, mobile communication, virtual community

1 Introduction

Contemporary society *emphasizes and emulates the behavior and fundamental characteristics of what used to be known as 'youth culture'*, while on the other hand, *youth culture is being transformed by the widespread adoption of computer-mediated communication*. This paper analyzes these two trends through the lens of the socialization process in order to identify common themes/areas of convergence.

The paper focuses on assessing the impact of new technologies on the socialization patterns of '*Generation Y*' - the first consistent social group to experience the mass introduction of personal computers and affordable telecommunications, i.e. those born from 1982 onwards [30]. The consequences of this approach are later discussed in terms of the possible effects, which have already been analyzed in terms of advancing both the economy and society (see, e.g. [56]).

Nevertheless, any discussion of socialization patterns should not overlook the most common traditional agents: *family, school (i.e. workplace for the high school drop-outs), church and other organizations running organized youth programs, peer groups/networks and the media* [22]. In this context, it is essential to assess whether new information and communication technologies (ICTs) have actually (re)configured the social impact and functioning of these agents.

2 New wine in old bottles: (re)configuration of traditional agents of socialization?

The family, often considered the most significant agent of primary socialization, is frequently said to be 'under siege', as many of its primary functions are being transferred to other institutions [61] and the divorce rate is rising. A 50% divorce rate is cited to

reinforce the idea of the traditional family as a declining social institution, but this may be a mythical/social construction [43], or an erroneous conclusion due to problems in census data [48] and other research limitations.

Therefore, current trends related to family life in contemporary societies may only mean the breakdown of the idea of a 'functional' nuclear family, as presented by Talcott Parsons, based on the gender division of labor and expressive support (as opposed to the impersonal mechanisms of mass society). The new realities may include different cohabitation options and alternative forms of marriage [4], which (re)configure the patterns of traditional socialization.

Since the epoch of Emile Durkheim, educational institutions have been considered as significant contributors to the socialization processes. According to Bourdieu, the education system does not distribute equally the effects of its socialization efforts, as it merely reproduces or reflects the existing *habitus*, which can be defined in terms of a "common set of material conditions of existence to regulate the practice of a set of individuals in common response to those conditions" [17, p. 213]. The *habitus* corresponds to the amount of *cultural capital* so that the school as an agent of socialization serves the interests of the elite by *reproducing the existing class structure and social order* [15, pp. 324-325].

The introduction of recent ICTs has the potential to redistribute, or even deconstruct the classical notion of *habitus/cultural capital*, as electronic networking provides increased opportunities for both informal and formal learning, but only if institutional efforts exist [27]. Although new technologies are supposed to provide new opportunities for the lifelong education of excluded individuals and groups [23], enhance their capacity for collective action [40], as well as increase social capital [46], the *digital divide* among the ICT 'haves' and 'have nots' impedes from actual access to the technology and its benefits. The relevance of the idea of wealth (and class) reproduction according to access to technology is further confirmed by this topic becoming the subject of global policy analysis [49]. Accordingly, overwhelming changes in socialization patterns due to developing ICTs may be restricted to a handful of privileged groups in the most developed (post)industrial societies.

The workplace had also proved to be a significant traditional factor, influencing the socialization of young adults, leaving secondary education to gain both useful practical skills and work discipline in the workplace setting [45, p. 11]. Along with the

demise of the traditional apprenticeship and the crisis of youth programs, which were usually run by religious organizations, young people now often find themselves in a series of temporary jobs. Although these may adequately address young people's material needs and affirm them as consumers, they do not provide adequate financial support for a young person to provide for his or her own family, and they deny the traditional socialization experiences evolving from the feeling of a workplace community [cf. 45].

Traditional social science singles out three common denominators of *peer group/network* influence in the socialization process [14]: (a) most members are of similar age and have similar social standing or interests; (b) power is unequally distributed within the group; (c) some social practices and outlooks can be identified as specific to individual groups/networks. Peer groups use social pressure and the fear of exclusion to ensure members' compliance. Bullying, or more severe forms of violence are used in youth groups to reinforce leadership and voluntarily shared identity. This is of special significance in deprived youth groups, which may draw from their newly acquired cultural capital to reconstruct their existing social status and identity [11]. In extreme cases, such practices lead to the development of deviant groups which engage in hooliganism and other forms of 'antisocial' behavior. On the other hand, youth culture is not a counterculture *per se*; on the contrary, it usually fits into the social mainstream by emphasizing *development of personal style and fulfillment of social needs within the peer/age groups, which emphasize consumption and leisure patterns* [1].

The *electronic media* easily find their place within such social arrangements or patterns, due to the image of 'cool' or 'hip' practices, which reinforce the personal style and/or social status of young people within their peer groups. Their impact to the socialization of young adults is especially visible in the developed countries, such as the US, with television playing a decisive role in the social life of families and communities, which is especially applicable to young people [cf. 22]. Hepburn [ibid.] argues that the *mass media* even transforms the traditional socialization process, as it produces the '*TV lifestyle*', which both influences the youth directly, as well as shapes the other 'classical' agents of socialization.

Although the Internet could be certainly 'filed' as electronic media, interactivity of computer-mediated communication (CMC) sets it apart from a predominantly unidirectional electronic mass media,

such as radio and TV. With the advancement in ICTs and lower prices of both computer equipment and the telecommunication services, tools of CMC, such as e-mail, SMS, instant messages, etc., which were once simply fashionable status symbols, become 'standard' facts of life in developed countries. Therefore, it could be suggested that the notion of standards in social communication is changing radically. Such a *transformation of normality*, accompanied by the already described (re)definition of the traditional agents of socialization, can be theoretically linked to two opposing 'schools' of social theory.

On the one hand, gloomy images of traditional social theory, identifying electronic communication as a major cause of escalating alienation, may be associated with Baudrillard's notion of *simulacrum* [18, pp. 601-602]. The social impact of new technologies could thus be explained as a sophisticated extension of existing media manipulation. On the other hand, more optimistic theorists believe that the evolution of traditional forms of socialization is an inevitable part of overall post-modern social structures.

At the individual level, several studies argue that individuals who do not fit into the mainstream patterns and routines of 'normal' communication prefer electronic (online) to traditional (offline) communication [39]. However, various sorts of online communication may also serve as 'therapeutic' tools, enabling such individuals to develop their social skills and transfer them to the 'old-fashioned' offline world [38].

On the level of social groups and society as a whole, the Internet and other electronic virtual spaces may represent an opportunity to revive the public sphere, as suggested by Habermas [18, pp. 118-119]. In this context, the idea of *virtual community* gains importance, as it signifies the intangible social structure, linking individuals together who share common interests and experience(s), engaged in a more permanent form of communication, mediated by an electronic medium, such as the Internet, mobile phone infrastructure, etc.

Thus, being embedded into a larger social structure might not be a lost experience for the 'Gen Y'-ers, but rather an experience (re)configured by new technologies. Common (individual) interests and traits may become the new social 'glue', expanding the limits of time and space to communal developments and creating one of the new community forms [54]. It could be argued that the new generation(s) are just adapting to new social

realities instead of losing their ability to deal with the 'real' world behind their screens.

3 Virtual community forms – (new) agents of socialization?

Some electronic forms of personal communication, such as electronic mail (e-mail) have often been discussed from various social points of view, while much less attention has been paid to the use of e-mail via mobile devices (mobile phones, hand-held computers/'Pocket PCs', BlackBerries, etc.). Inadequate attention has been also paid to instant messaging (IM) platforms, usually provided by the major Internet service companies (including *Yahoo!*, *Microsoft MSN*, *Google*, etc.), as well as smaller, specialized competitors (e.g. the Israel-based *ICQ*).

Some recent empirical evidence [34] suggests that the intensive use of IM could be linked to more intrinsic social motives, including the level of individual sociability, while casual users tend to be more motivated by 'me-too' reasons. In addition, the same study has indicated that the intensive use of other electronic communication tools could be linked to more intensive instant messaging (*ibid*). However, such a finding may be interpreted in terms of a *vicious circle* (i.e. inadequate social skills/attitudes lead to more intensive usage of e-tools, causing a deteriorating situation), or a *virtuous circle*, in which the positive effects of the initial experiences of belonging to a virtual community are intensified by using multiple, more advanced (or more appropriate) tools and techniques of electronic communication. Whichever is the case, this issue remains open to further research.

Some Web sites, such as *MySpace* (<http://www.myspace.com>), *Facebook* (<http://www.facebook.com>) and many of their imitators, have attracted a large following of adolescents and young adults. Those who use such social networking services/Web sites can easily design their own personal virtual spaces – '*profiles*' - along with photos, video clips and other multimedia, as well as using the functions included to receive or send comments to other users.

Probably the most important feature, alongside the *personal profile*, is the list of '*friends*', which is prominently displayed on the profile home page. Boyd [9] advises that, in this context, the term cannot be used in the traditional sense. The friends list serves as a signifier of a specific form of '*imagined community*' [2] consisting of other members of the same site who possess the social characteristics viewed as desirable (regardless of

whether those are real or constructed). By choosing a representation of themselves via their personal profiles, as well as choosing and displaying the friends list, individuals create and manage social impressions, i.e. practice *impression management* [7].

However, this can prove to be difficult, as social networking sites usually compress social networks into a single category ('friends') and display these publicly, which may link the user to socially objectionable individuals and lead to misinterpretations of his or her public image [6]. In addition, the actual term *friend* can be interpreted from different viewpoints, as it can be used to denote (and signal) completely divergent forms of social relationships, from intimate relationships, to people called 'friends' in front of others just to 'save face' [8]. All these are significant problems in creating a '*digital body*', representing the person in the range of e-communities he/she will join during his/her lifetime.

Other challenges, usually not really comprehended, yet addressed by the 'Gen Y'-ers, are the *persistence, searchability, replicability and low level of control which can be applied to personal information once entered into the online service*. In essence, an individual may be "tracked" in other social contexts (such as background checks performed by prospective employers), and personal information given on the Web site may be misunderstood or misinterpreted [10].

These social and technological trends open the 'dark side' of the 'virtualization' related to interpersonal communication and the social processes, in general. With the development of advanced technical capabilities for 'logging' online activities (see, e.g. [5]), it becomes increasingly easier to track individuals' activities and build their behavioral profiles. Those can be used for unethical purposes, with or without the permission of the profiled individual. This topic becomes especially sensitive if a young person is being identified as a potential 'threat to society' on the basis of some behavioral issues, which can be attributed to the 'normal' socialization. For instance, a young Korean female has refused to clean up after her dog while riding the Seoul subway. While certainly showing an inadequate degree of socialization and/or respect for social norms, this person has been photographed by one of the passengers, who has then posted the story (and the photo) on the Internet [51]. Although the arguments of 'deserving' such an exposure could be raised, it is a fact that this person (being referred to as a 'dog poop girl') has been publicly humiliated for a single 'unsocial' act. Her future

reputation will be probably shaped by this single act which has been widely propagated on the Internet.

Therefore, it may be concluded that *online reputation* becomes both a significant and a vulnerable asset for members of the contemporary society. This is understood even by (young) professionals who might be using the Internet to find new jobs and advance their careers, which is the reason for the appearance of specialized social networking sites. Of those, the *LinkedIn* (<http://www.linkedin.com>) seems to be the most popular means of connecting professionals in virtual networks. Although such specialized online services might be the solution to the problems of preserving and enhancing online reputation, they might not be open to the 'Gen Y'-ers, as they might lack the qualification to join such communities. For instance, *LinkedIn* is a commercial online community which only accepts individual professionals and helps them connect on the basis of previous education and work experience. The more 'general' e-communities will probably continue to be burdened by the problems of interpretation and simplification of social networks.

In addition, such communities may be used to purposefully ruin one's reputation. Contemporary digital communication tools are sometimes used as a '*norm police*', with individuals posting information about other people who might be in breach of social norms [53, p. 6]. The ethical questions of such behavior are immense as there is no due authorization for the posting of inherently personal information on the Web, as well as no assurance that the information posted is accurate. The Internet could be, therefore, used as a contemporary enabler of the traditional 'gossip on steroids', as it becomes increasingly easy to post (or even fake) pictures, stories, e-mail communications and other information on 'targets' of purposeful defamation [cf. 53]. On the other hand, even if the posted information is true, the ethical dilemmas related to this issue cannot be easily discarded. Namely, as the information on the Internet does not actually disappear (as implied by the concept of *personal data persistence*), it becomes easy to 'google' (i.e. to search on the *Google* service) on individual acts, constituting parts of one's 'digital body'. In this manner, certain individuals can be 'branded' as social outcasts for the rest of their life because of a single imprudent act committed during their youth, as was the case with the questionable behavior of the young Korean female.

The arena of digital influence to the social processes of socialization, building identity/reputation, etc., is not limited to the social

networking sites. As the different communication tools and technologies actively compete with each other, social networking services are easily substituted or replaced by *Web logs (blogs)*. Blogs can be defined as online platforms enabling individuals to display their diaries (i.e. collections of 'blog posts', related to different subjects), as well as featuring multimedia and the capability of recording comments from blog visitors. In the same way as the personal 'profiles' on *MySpace*, *Facebook*, or similar services, multiple blogs are usually hosted by one or more major provider, either at the national (e.g. the Croatian Blog.hr, located at <http://www.blog.hr>), or the global level (such as *Blogger.com*, located at <http://www.blogger.com>). Blogs can be also searched by major Internet search engines (for instance the *Google Blog Search*, located at <http://blogsearch.google.com>), which makes it easier for individuals to find and connect with other bloggers writing about similar subjects and/or sharing similar interests and attitudes.

It is rather unassuming to conceptualize a *blog* as a form of a *personal online diary* since the traditional ideas related to the privacy of a diary, which has sometimes been considered even as a 'sanctuary' for most intimate personal thoughts, are obviously being deconstructed. In this context, a blog provides a medium for expressing self-awareness and communicating the sense of 'being special' to the wider social environment [cf. 50], rather than serving as secretive venues of 'personal confessions'. The role of blogs in assisting young people to better express their emerging individuality may be the reason for their attractiveness; as demonstrated by somewhat older, but still useful data from mid-2005. Namely, out of approximately 31.6 million blogs existing at this time, hosted by a major blog provider, as much as 58.3% were authored by individuals aged 13 to 19 [44]. Another 36% of blog authors were aged 20 to 29, with only 5.8% being older than 30 [ibid.].

Although blogs may be analyzed in the context of the individual/personal expression of the youth, some authors believe that they should be also considered a form of virtual community. This may be true as long as the blog has 'digital artifacts', which make it comparable to a *virtual settlement* [28]. The virtual community environment should contain at least a *minimal amount of public interactions, encompassing different forms of communication, over an extended period of time* [cf. 28]. In the case of blogs, Blanchard [6] argues that a virtual community can be found in a blog if it can sustain a steady flow of publicly available comments, enabling (preferably) both author-reader,

as well as reader-reader communication. In addition, blog software should enable authors to link back and forth to other community members' blogs, i.e. to create a so-called '*blogroll*', in order to let the virtual social system develop. Another useful technological feature in the '*Blogsphere*' (the term for the social space created by bloggers) is the '*link-back*', or '*track-back*'; a software feature sending acknowledgment to a blogger that another person has linked to an entry on his or her blog. In addition, relevant information from the article linking to one's blog is also automatically transferred [58], enabling the spanning of discussion over several blogs (i.e. within a certain *blog community*).

Most of the existing studies are of a technical nature (e.g. looking at the issue of the tools or approaches appropriate for identifying community patterns – see Chin & Chignell [12]). However, it will be important for further research to analyze the use of blogging in different social contexts, such as business settings [36].

Another technology which can be identified as a tool for virtual communities is the *Wiki concept*, enabling Web site visitors to change the content provided by the original developer and thus participate in the online publishing process. Wikis truly enable a community to develop around a common theme, activity, or interest, as showcased by the largest collaborative online encyclopedia (available at <http://www.wikipedia.org>). The attractiveness of Wikis to the '*Gen Y*'-ers could be attributed to a certain level of '*playfulness*' associated both with the complete lack of restrictions imposed on participating in Wiki communities, and the values of openness and freedom associated with such a collaboration model. Additional appeal can be found in the (apparent) absence of hierarchy (or a very flat hierarchy model) in the Wiki-centered social structures, which usually leads to high levels of individual empowerment and diversity among the participants or members of related social processes [cf. 13, pp. 21-30].

4 Mobile communication platforms and the virtual community building

Mobile phones are a constant companion of many individuals in Western-type societies, but their social attraction is especially high among adolescents and younger adults (i.e. '*Gen Y*'-ers) who view them as a source of personal freedom or an expression of individuality. Geser [19] emphasizes that the functioning of societal systems is changing due to mobile phone use, as *individuals*

are being empowered to communicate with other individuals of their own choosing and, thus, create their own social environment(s).

This is even more important for teenagers or young adults who may use mobile phones to *circumvent forms of social control* perceived as limiting to their personal freedom. For example, some teenagers may stop using their mobile communication devices if they feel their parents use them to exercise 'excessive' control [3]. On the other hand, the mobile phone is sometimes a useful 'hub' in collecting friends and emotional partners, as the act of giving someone your mobile phone number represents trust, signifying the beginning of a more committed (social) relationship.

For instance, a study on Japanese youth [25] suggests that they wish to create more personal space within a changing, but still traditional, society by using their mobile phones. Parental control and the lack of space in urban housing are replaced by meetings in 'neutral' places (instead of homes) and complemented by short text messages (SMS), mobile electronic mail, or similar means of electronic communication. Taking into account the fact that parents are often not so 'tech-savvy', such a form of communication is regularly preferred to talking on the land-line, which may be monitored by other household members [20]. A lack of technical skills essentially keeps many parents (and other traditional figures of social authority) from the gate-keeping position, as they may not perceive the social potentials of electronic communication.

Apart from providing an entry into social groups or networks not structured or controlled by the sanctioned social authorities, technology may be also used to escape from inappropriate social contexts and structures. The 'exit barrier' from an unwanted social situation may be as low as changing one's mobile phone number, which is relatively easy, particularly with pre-paid mobile phone vouchers. Switching mobile phone numbers enables young individuals to switch their identities, schizophrenically adapting to changing social situations, as the real (offline) world moves toward more stringent means of controlling identity and behavior (for the purpose of preventing tax evasion, identity fraud or even terrorism).

In this way, new virtual social spaces are created ad-hoc, and rides on public transport or waiting in queues become ideal opportunities to drift away occasionally from the 'real' (offline) into the personal online community. However, in another study, Ito & Okabe [24] suggest the existence of 'full-time intimate communities' for heavy users of mobile platforms, who seem to expect their virtual

community members to be continuously available. Such isolation from physical surroundings may be analyzed in terms of diminished social skills or a lack of interest in one's own social environment, but generalizations prove difficult. Japanese society may be a special case [47] due to: (a) the intense Japanese motivation to avoid unnecessary disturbance in social situations and (b) the common cultural characteristic of '*cocooning*', i.e. creating privacy within public spaces (by reading a book, listening to music on a portable device, etc.), instead of interacting with a social environment which they do not find attractive enough [26].

The '*cocooning*' concept is of utmost importance for further empirical research on individualization vs. community-building patterns in using new technologies. Although the means and technologies of electronic communication *enable individuals to disrupt the 'natural' barriers of time and space, they also disrupt the 'normal' flow of interpersonal communication in the physical environments, traditionally used for social interactions* (restaurants, cafés, public transportation, etc.).

Multimedia capabilities, which are being continuously added to mobile platforms, also play a part in the transformation of existing communication practices and patterns. On one hand, the 'marriage' between multimedia and mobile phones can be associated with the cocooning concept, as the new technical capabilities enable owners of mobile devices to seamlessly receive audio and video content [55]. This form of using mobile communication devices might certainly add to the cocooning practice, as it enables individuals to further distance themselves from the environment (e.g. by 'getting absorbed' into the TV programming and other multimedia content delivered via the handheld device).

On the other hand, the cameras included in the most contemporary handheld devices may be used to achieve practical tasks, but also as open opportunities for 'paparazzi'-style communication. In this manner, images of individuals and current events can be captured and widely shared by posting them on the Internet, or sent to another mobile platform via *MMS - Multimedia Messaging Service*. However, the subjects being photographed may not even be aware of this fact, which creates new legal, social and ethical issues and challenges [31].

Of those, the most significant issue could be identified in drawing the line between public and newsworthy events, which may be of legitimate interest to the wider community/society and the citizens' right for privacy. Namely, the very fact that a certain event takes place publicly does not

automatically exculpate individuals posting its descriptions and photographic records without proper authorization from the parties involved [cf. 53]. With multiple media offering prizes to readers or viewers who submit attractive news content, issues of privacy and the way in which ordinary people start to practice journalism become hot topics both for contemporary social and legal sciences. An especially difficult task will be faced by the legal scholars, who need to set the standards for reasonable expectations of privacy in the electronic communities, without interfering with the right of individual citizens to freely express their ideas and opinions online.

5 In search of the comprehensive (and applicable) theory: An overview of empirical findings

The large-scale empirical studies, such as the *Pew Internet & American Life Project*, have unambiguously established the fact that the *Internet and other digital media have become a major social force in the lives of youth* in the advanced (post)industrial societies [37]. For instance, in the US, 93% of the surveyed youth have Internet access, along with 94% of their parents [ibid]. This might be an encouraging fact, demonstrating that, at least in developed countries, the 'generation gap' in computer and Internet-related skills might be closing, empowering parents to better understand what their children are doing online. This is reflected in a general opinion that the Internet might not always be a 'good thing' for children and young adults, which motivates parents to be involved in the way their children use the electronic media [ibid].

These empirical findings are related to the already discussed issue of the influence exerted by the electronic media to the 'Gen-Y'-ers. The idea that being online actually increases solitude and alienation is a common theme among the critics of the electronic media. Empirical methods analyzing the accuracy of such a statement usually try to link *online behavior patterns to the feeling of well-being*. They should be performed with extreme caution in order to isolate the factors that influence the relationship of these two variables. A recent study suggests that young people usually use the online media to stay in touch with their close, 'offline' friends, usually via instant messaging and assures that there is no causal relationship between the time spent online and the level of social adjustment [21]. This might mean that the Internet is rather a new and convenient social medium, than an 'identity

laboratory' [ibid]. It is even indicated that the social similarity is important in meeting new friends online [41].

However, young people who are *already reporting symptoms of depression* seem to differ in their Internet use from those who report mild or no symptoms of depression [60]. For instance, youth suffering from depression are more likely to be online excessively, interacting both with people they already know, as well as with strangers [ibid]. It has also been confirmed that the young people defined as 'troubled', or being alienated from their parents, are more likely to engage in close online relationships [59]. This could mean that the Internet is used as a replacement for more traditional social contacts and a tool for self-therapy. Therefore, being online sometimes may serve only as the inadequate replacement of psychological counseling and solving root causes of depressive behavior.

Young people who already experience social and psychological problems might be more susceptible to different forms of anti-social or, even, criminal behavior online [cf. 60], including sexual abuse [42]. However, the more critical forms of abuse are rather rare and can be avoided by parental supervision and more cautious use of online media [ibid]. Online harassment is usually performed by forwarding private e-mail or instant messaging communications, spreading rumors online, threatening or aggressive messages, etc. [32], with bullying often mirroring the social aggression in the 'offline world'.

However, the use of some online services, such as hugely popular social networking sites, which have already been discussed in this paper, certainly increases the risk of being approached by strangers [52]. On the other hand, the contemporary media, looking for attractive stories, might be tapping the collective 'paranoid mind' by emphasizing the cases of online victimization and the use of private information posted online by future employers. Young people should be probably made more aware of the need to manage their online privacy and it might be happening, as a recent study shows that 66% of teens do not make their profiles on social networking sites publicly available [33]. They use multiple techniques to protect their identity and avoid uncomfortable online contacts, with parents playing a much more significant role in regulating the online behavior than before [ibid].

This review of empirical results suggests that the electronic media cannot be perceived as inherently positive or 'evil' social structures. They only mirror various developments in the society.

6 Instead of a conclusion: Challenges for further research

It is difficult to reach definitive conclusions related to electronic community-building and its related effects in shaping the social outlook of the 'Gen Y', as well as its impact on society at large. Undoubtedly, the development of electronically mediated communication is a great area of potential for community-building, as proved by commercial ventures, which start setting up online 'customer communities' as a tool of increasing customer satisfaction and loyalty [57]. As a consequence, simple 'how-to' manuals have appeared, providing applicable advice for those wishing to purposefully design different kinds of online communities [29].

The potential of individual technologies for virtual community-building, as well as their social impact, will definitely be evaluated over an extended period of time. However, it is difficult to evaluate the practical implications of individual tools of electronic communication, as heavy users tend to 'mix and match' multiple tools and technologies. Further research will need to assess empirically whether these users could be 'on the frontline' of developing new (virtual) social structures. All these new developments are supported by 'post-modern' developments related to the traditional agents of socialization, which are reflected by comparable trends in virtual social spaces. Simultaneously, trends in electronic networking and virtual community-building are reinforcing trends in the offline world, as socialization itself may be viewed as a *constant process of social learning* [35], rather than an event confined to a certain environment and age.

In this context, patterns of youth behavior could influence wider social realities, fuelled either by the society-wide 'Peter Pan syndrome' [16] (i.e. the socially accepted postponing of 'adulthood' and related obligations and commitments), or – simply – striving to keep pace with the new (professional and personal) opportunities brought about by ICTs. If socialization can be derived from social learning, new developments might as well become new sources or catalysts of social change. However, Descartes' famous motto "*I think, therefore I am*", reinterpreted as "*I am open to changes, therefore I am*", or even "*I play, therefore I am*" still applies. It might be better to be Peter Pan rather than Dorian Grey.

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