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Youth, new media, technology and communication

Julian Rolfe and **Mischa Gilbert** of Synovate help us to understand the nature of young people's relationship with technology and endeavour to explode a few myths about their affection for it.

THE MEDIA and popular opinion say that young people have a natural affinity for digital technology; that they have become totally dependent on it; that they are becoming alienated from each other because of their addiction to it; and that it is causing them irreparable damage in all manner of unspeakable ways.

We think that popular opinion is, at best, suffering from a great deal of hyperbole and is, at worst, totally misguided. The nature of young people's relationship with digital technology is of vital importance, it dictates the media channels that they are most disposed to and so how best to communicate brand messages to them.

It is important to clarify at this point that we are not trying to deny that digital technology is more prevalent in our society than ever before. However, we also feel that there are a huge number of misnomers relating to young people and digital technology and it is these that we set out to identify.

We held 18 recorded ethnographic sessions countrywide throughout summer 2005 in urban, suburban and rural locations. The respondents were 18–24, and were drawn from both genders and all socio-economic groups. The interviews were conducted with individuals, and among friendship groups.

To reinforce our qualitative findings with some robust quantitative research, We utilised Synovate's new Online Youth Panel, to survey 432 18–24 year-olds throughout the UK.

We also interviewed academics specialising in Youth, New Media and Communication; David Buckingham – Professor at The Centre for the Study of Children, Youth and Media, IOE, and a consultant to OFCOM; Bill Osgerby – Reader in Media, Culture and Communications at London Metropolitan University and author of *Youth and Media*; Kevin McCarthy and Steve Jamieson – Founders of 'one deep breath', brand communication experts who have worked with brands such as Vodafone, Foster's, Motorola and Gillete.

Societal factors

Digital technology and class

One of the key findings for us was that accessibility and usage of digital technology is a class issue. The lower classes are far less likely to have information/communication technology at home and particularly at the workplace. This means that the middle class parents are much more likely to be net-savvy and so able to support their children in this respect.

Although we found many young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds who were technophobes, we really struggled to find a middle class technophobe. Among the lower classes, an anti-technology stance is generally a result of fear of the unknown. They haven't had much experience of digital technology in their everyday lives and consider it to be safer to take an anti-technology stance than to be embarrassed by their lack of knowledge.

Technology: it's not for girls?

We also discovered, contrary to popular belief, that a surprisingly large percentage of young females feel like they have a natural affinity for technology. Many actively embrace it for the way it enables them to communicate and pursue their interests. This finding is born out in several areas: the rise of gaming culture aimed at females – e.g. The Sims and other MMORPG games; the increased attention given to the feminine aesthetic – visual/design cues are now feminised, as can be seen with the i-pod; and communication – young men are adopting what is traditionally a more female role of ‘micro-tending’ their relationships by regular texting, MSN messages, etc.

Typologies

We identified three typologies that are distinct in terms of:

- their lifestyle/social class;
- their attitudes to technology;
- their attitudes to communication – both personal and commercial, and the media channels they are disposed to.

Cybernauts

Our on-line panel found that this typology accounts for 27% of 18–24 year-olds, with a male bias. They tend to come from C2 background and above, and are often B. There are two groups within the Cybernauts – those who have a sedentary/ insular lifestyle...

“I spend most of my money on technology. I’ve always got the latest graphics card and processor in my computer. I update it every three months or so...I don’t go out much of a week.”

Chris 24, Leeds

... and those for whom technology makes them a hub of a thriving social scene. This group are

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into music and/or visuals while the line between their passion and their job often blurs, Technology being a *part* of their entertainment rather than the whole thing.

“I’m obsessed with taking photos so whenever I go to a club on the weekend, my digital camera comes with. I took 62 photos last weekend, airbrushed a few and sent them to my friends.”

Kelly 22, Wembley

Both groups overspend on the latest gadgets and like to be ahead of the game. They both consider e-mail to be out of date, preferring to use MSN, and they would feel completely lost without it or a mobile.

In terms of the media channels they are disposed to, PCs are integral to their work so internet is key. They keenly absorb a wide variety of media, which often drives them to websites. They have 3G phones, Blackberrys or PDAs and they subscribe to techie magazines like T3, Stuff, PC User, etc. They also have a limited number of trusted website that they visit often.

“I’ll be watching TV in my bedroom while making a CD but will have MSN on in the background, so I can stay in touch with all my mates.”

Kelly 22, Wembley

Average Joes

Our on-line panel found that the vast majority of young people would class themselves in this typology – 53% of 18–24 year-olds in fact, with a slight female bias. This typology comes from a wide range of social backgrounds and they spend a lot on phone bills despite heavy MSN-usage. They are constantly busy socialising, consuming and entertaining themselves. Average Joes do not love technology per se but they view it as a facilitator that enables them to communicate or entertain themselves.

“If I don’t get a message on MSN for a couple of hours, I get a bit twitchy.”

Louise 20, Sutton Coldfield

They are not addicted to Technology but to Communication. Communication *is* entertainment for this group so they need the technology to be as personalised, easy and instantaneous as possible.

“I never turn my phone off at night. Ever. Nobody ever calls me on it but I don’t see any reason to turn it off, really.”

Paul 22, Portsmouth

In terms of the media channels they are disposed to, they watch and listen to a lot of TV and radio and frequent the cinema. They will only be into virals if they have a pass-on value, which gives them cultural currency.

Digital Dissidents

Our on-line panel found that this typology accounts for a surprisingly large 20% of 18–24 year-olds, with a slight female bias. They tend to come from lower socio-economic groups, D and E, and their life and work are local and routine. They are unlikely to use a PC for their job, and they are also unlikely to have a PC at home. They actively dislike using Technology and avoid using it wherever possible. What’s more, they don’t feel like they’re missing out because

they are unaware of the benefits and scared of new innovations.

“I used to use [computers] at school but even then I didn’t enjoy using them...I’d rather actually just write something than type it out. I think it’s to do with time: I don’t actually have the time to just sit and use a computer.”

Amy 20, Brighton

In terms of the media channels they are disposed to, forget about reaching this group via the internet – they are simply not using it. They listen to local radio and watch a lot of TV. They tend to live in inner cities so they pay attention to billboards.

“My girlfriend’s got that messenger thing, and all sorts like that, but I don’t know how people can sit in front of that for that amount of time.”

Steve 23, Watford

We then explored 8 myths about young people and technology.

1. Myth – Conventional wisdom says that all young people are ‘Digital Natives’. ‘Digital Natives’ are those who have grown up with Digital Technology, ‘Digital Immigrants’ are those who have only come to Digital Technology in adulthood.

Reality – Adults are often ‘Digital Immigrants’ and therefore perceive all young people to be ‘Digital Natives’. However, young people are not all tech-savvy. We have already seen that 20% say they actively avoid using Technology, while the vast majority are massively into communication & entertainment, with new technology merely being the facilitator.

“I’ve never used the internet and I don’t feel like I’m missing anything.”

Dermot 23, Slough

COMMUNICATION

2. Myth – The popular belief is that Digital Technology has democratised information and that we are now one free-flowing global village.

Reality – Many young people are excluded from the digital revolution, e.g. rural youth (who use internet as an information source not for communication), people from lower SEGs and certain ethnic minorities. New Technology incorporates rather than eclipses existing forms of youth culture

“There’s this mythology that the internet has effaced global boundaries but kids mainly use it to reinforce local networks and relationships.”

Bill Osgerby

To verify this, we sub-divided our on-line panel answers according to the level of education they left school with, and according to where they live.

As we’ve seen 27% of young people would describe themselves as Cybernauts but among those only educated to GCSE level and below, that number drops to only 14%; while among those living in London and the South East, the number of Cybernauts rises to 33%. Therefore those who stay in education or live in London/The South East are far more likely to be into technology.

3. Myth – Most adults presume that young people have more of an affinity with Technology than previous generations, because they learn all about IT at school

Reality – In fact IT lessons are very prosaic. They focus on file management, Word, Excel and other basic skills. Many young people use more complex programmes at home so it makes school seem out of touch.

To verify this, we asked our on-line panel: How do you learn about new technology?

Our survey said:

- from friends 71%;
- what I teach myself 67%;
- school 44%;
- family 41%

4. Myth – Young people use new Technology in a way that is complex and impenetrable to older generations.

Reality – Most Technology use is actually rather prosaic and merely reinforces existing interests. Youth reach their technological peak around their mid 20s – due to increased resources and accessibility at that age.

To verify this, we asked our on-line panel: How many of you use the internet for communicating with friends? And how many use it for creating blogs? Our survey said:

- to communicate with friends 85%;
- to create blogs 5%

Our online panel said that the reasons they use the internet most frequently are:

- to communicate with friends by e-mail (85%);
- random surfing (82%);
- shopping (79%);
- to communicate with friends via Yahoo/MSN (60%);
- online banking (59%);
- research for work/college (56%);
- downloading music (53%).

The least frequent reasons were:

- creating a blog (5%);
- online dating (6%);
- reading blogs (9%);
- chatrooms (15%);
- catching up on celeb gossip and downloading film (both 19%).

5. Myth – Kids can't retain information anymore, whether it's school work or brand messages, and it's technology's fault!

Reality – Young people's attention spans, when immersed in something they find genuinely interesting (i.e. playing games) disprove this.

Young people have become 'Borrowers'. Previous generations learnt by rote and had to retain this for exams. They could be dubbed 'Retainers'. Assessment in education is continual so 'retaining' is not as valued now. The priority is knowing how to 'find and filter' relevant information.

6. Myth – New media creates generations of isolated, alienated youth.

Reality – The home was traditionally the domain of the family. Now, friends have a 'permanent presence' in the home (via mobiles and MSN).

Young people have a real need for constant contact and 'micro-tending' their relationships so they are constantly using technology to arrange their social life.

"New technology has facilitated wider and deeper friendship networks. Sending a text is like sending a little present so they're spending much more time grooming their relationships."

Bill Osgerby

To verify this, we asked our on-line panel: Have you ever made any friends solely through the internet? Our survey said:

- Yes 53%;
- No 47%.

7. Myth – Young people are empowered by technology.

Reality – They can go to a site and research things so they are empowered as consumers. BUT the rights for youth to be out in a physical space are being curtailed through curfews, ASBOs, etc. So technological power is being used as a poor substitute for real power.

8. Myth – Young people *love* getting anything by text or email.

Reality – Young people hate getting brand messages by text – as they expect it to be a friend that's messaging them. Emails are not quite as irritating, but are generally discarded, unless they are opt-in services.

"Texting is a very personal thing. It's not a platform for brands to get at youth."

"Young people don't trust promotional messages by e-mail. E-mail can work as a news platform but not a sales platform."

Kevin McCarthy, one deep breath

To verify this, we asked our on-line panel : How many of you find SPAM e-mails annoying? Our survey said:

- Yes – 98%

We also asked our on-line panel : What are the best ways for companies to tell you what products and services they have to offer? Our survey said:

- terrestrial TV 69%;
- satellite TV 35%;
- internet sites 28%;
- poster campaigns on the street 27%;
- adverts in lifestyle magazines 28%.

E-mail fared less well with only 16%; sponsored events only registered 11%; while by text registered just 3%.

COMMUNICATION

We then broke these results down by typology:

- Cybernauts are susceptible to satellite TV with 43% citing it as the best way for companies to communicate with them; and internet advertising (31%); but not lifestyle magazines (21%); poster campaigns (9%); or by SMS (5%).
- Average Joes are susceptible to poster campaigns (30%); and adverts in lifestyle magazines (29%) but hate SMS messages (1%).
- Digital Dissidents are susceptible to commercial radio (27%); but not to dedicated websites (10%); internet advertising (19%); sponsored events (8%); or SMS (5%).

Implications

The medium *isn't* the message

As soon as a new technology appears, marketers leap on it before they've understood how it resonates with the group they're trying to connect with. Many brands spend huge amounts on high-tech campaigns without first understanding whether it is relevant.

"I spend a lot of my spare money on beer and going out – most of my student loan, in fact – but I've never been to a website of an alcohol brand. I don't really see what the advantage would be."

James 19, Portsmouth

Trust me: I'm a website

The internet has become much more trusted than previously e.g. online banking, music reviews. Young people increasingly take information from the internet at face value so search engines are trusted implicitly. Youth are not as cynical or media-literate about the internet as one might imagine, and so do not recognise web-based promotions as advertising in the same way that they recognise TV or magazine advertising.

"I definitely trust information that I find on the internet. I get a lot of my electronics goods on the internet and I use Wanadoo money section to learn about mortgages or credit cards."

Chris 24, Leeds

Music and technology

The relationship between young people, music and technology is quite complex. Many respondents use the internet to access a wider range of music than previously but are still purchasing new CDs. They now trust sites like i-Tunes, Play, Wanadoo, BBC and Amazon more than magazines for reviews, particularly the personal recommendations.

"I've downloaded about 3,000 songs illegally but I still buy as many CDs as I used to. I also listen to a lot that I wouldn't have listened to previously. If you like the music it's only fair to buy it."

Chris 25, Leeds

Yet conversely, many of our respondents are still accessing music in a very prosaic way. Only 12% of our on-line panel have i-pods and many watch music TV and listen to radio rather than buy CDs. "*Why would I spend money on music – it's free?*" Was how one respondent phrased it.

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Many actually spend very little on music.

“15 quid seems a lot to me to buy a CD when I can just download it off the internet or get a mate to burn it for me.”

Louise 20, Sutton Coldfield

E-mail: best before 2005

Surprisingly few respondents ever use e-mail to communicate with friends. The e-mail has been usurped by MSN Messenger and is now perceived as being quaint, unwieldy and out of date. E-mail accounts are often only used for ‘forwards’, newsletters and when people are travelling.

To verify this, we asked our online survey, what is the most frequent way you communicate with friends? Our survey said:

- text 55%;
- calling from mobile 16%;
- MSN 13%;
- e-mail 8%;
- calling from landline 7%.

“I don’t think I’ve ever sent an e-mail. I know how to but I never send one because I never need to with MSN. I don’t know anyone who sends e-mails.”

Daniel 18, Sutton Coldfield

Other media

Youth are still very keen on cinema. They view advertising at the cinema differently from adverts on TV. They have positive emotions towards it and so are much more susceptible to it. They also take notice of commercial radio (often listening to it in the car) and have a particularly strong connection with local radio, especially those who live outside of London. However, they often change channels when the adverts start.

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Cross-platform campaigns

Numerous studies show that TV advertising is having less impact than on previous generations. For brands to communicate successfully with our three typologies, they need to approach them in different ways. This means cross-platform promotions, ‘stealth advertising’, sponsorship, product placement with an emotional connection (to create goodwill), etc. Virals work for those working in offices but may pass by other groups.

Successful brand messages are a cultural drip drip which people don’t perceive as advertising...they see it as part of the cultural environment and so are more accepting of it. The secret is a drip drip effect which is friendly and helpful rather than irritating.

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