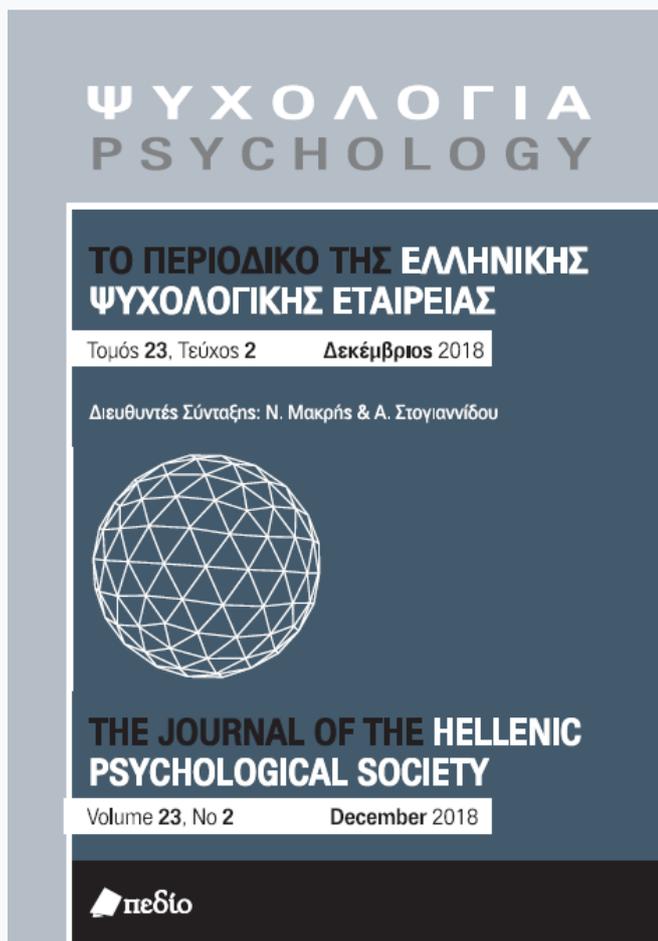


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# Multitasking of existence: Technological mediation in the daily life of the new digital generation

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## ABSTRACT

This study uses a qualitative research perspective in order to explore how young adults of the net generation get involved with ICTs and what types of meaning they attribute to ICT use. Eighteen to twenty-two years old adults in Greece constitute the first generation that were born and raised in a digital environment. Our purpose is to explore how this generation express themselves and fulfil psychological needs while in cyberspace, in what ways and to what degree fulfillment is achieved, how authentic the expression of needs is, and to what type of emotional experience this whole process contributes. Are young adults able to distinguish the psychological signification of their ICTs use? We investigated these questions by asking participants to keep a diary for a period of five days about their patterns of ICTs use, the emotional needs covered by this use, the satisfaction they receive from it, and their multitasking practices, and then to reflect and report on their personal findings. Thematic analysis of the findings and self-reports indicates that young adults do not seem to receive the psychological gratification they seek while using ICTs; this lack of fulfillment contributes in turn to extended multitasking practices, even when it comes to selected leisure activities. This mediated daily routine creates new forms of anxiety to young adults, who report feeling trapped in a permanently escaping reality that requires constant presence and participation.

## Introduction

Reviewing the literature about internet use we often come across terms like “net generation” (Tapscott, 2009), “digital natives” (Prensky, 2001) or “millennials” (a term attributed to Strauss & Howe, 1987, as mentioned by Horowitz, 2012), to determine a generation qualitatively differentiated from previous generations mostly because of the significance of ICTs in their lives. Two technological breakthroughs appear to be related to the emergence of net generation: (a) the expansion of broadband connection, a development placed around the year 2000, in Greece; the establishment of fast but, most importantly, continuously

active connections changed the texture of transitioning to digital reality, as the rituals which suggested the transition from tangible to digital reality were no longer in place (e.g. the typical dial-up sound of the modem and the on-screen window which informed us of a successful connection); and (b) the expansion of “smart phones” which according to international data is placed around 2010 (Mendelson, 2016), with Greece following approximately the same time pattern. Up until 2010, cyberspace was found within the home, but when the functions of smart phones became available, cyberspace could be transferred anywhere, thanks to small and portable devices with minimal requirements regarding

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charging and connectivity to the internet. The use of smart phones accomplishes a transition from “bedroom culture” (Livingstone & Bovill, 1999; Livingstone, 2007), to the “endless symbiotic connectivity culture” that Suler (2015) describes.

Up until a few years ago, we could make a more clear distinction -mostly for teaching and research purposes- regarding what computers, the internet, mobile phones and digital applications could offer to the user. The capabilities provided by ICTs -their software and hardware requirements along with their network limitations (e.g. slower data transfer speed)- ensured a form of use that was quite clear in its functionality, namely aiming towards information, communication or entertainment. At present, broadband connections, smart phones, and constant connectivity, as well as software and hardware upgrades concerning speed and volume of data transfer, allow simultaneous use of different technologies and applications, which in turn results in servicing different needs with devices smaller than 14 centimeters.

Davou (2005) and Davou & Sidiropoulou (2017) offer an operational distinction about how ICTs are involved in the life of individuals. ICTs are new communicating “tools” at the disposal of modern individuals, and in this sense they may constitute extensions of the body in the classical McLuhan (1964) line of thought, expanding senses and mental processes, while, at the same time, necrotizing the physiological organ they replace. ICTs also have “contents”, i.e. new images, ideas, styles of life etc., globally produced and circulated. As *tools*, ICTs expand human experience and multiply relating capabilities, i.e. in psychological terms, they have an impact on how people perceive and experience self, others and relationships. With their “contents”, ICTs have an impact on the way people understand and interpret the world, i.e. on the representations formed and the thought processes linked to these representations. These

‘operating modes’ can be silent, as all ICTs are so integrated in peoples’ lives that they are being taken for granted as they “help us lead our lives without making their presence loudly declared” (Davou, 2005, p. 43-44). At the same time the presence of ICTs is loud, since “more and more information, consumption, movement and activity are being pushed into the time available to the individual, which is relatively constant (although there exist lunatics who earnestly try to ‘sleep more efficiently’)” (Eriksen, 2001, p. 101).

Cyberspace as a psychological space is defined through representation, interpretation and social interaction (Suler, 1999). In other words, cyberspace transcends the instrumental functionality of computers and is transformed into a *space* of presence, representation, experimentation and communication as well as absence, abstention, fixation and isolation. In that sense, cyberspace constitutes another field of socialisation and experience, a space where expressing needs and deriving gratification is possible, while it co-exists with family and with social contexts such as the workplace or the school. The manner in which the individual places her/himself inside cyberspace forms an experience that results from already established psychological resources, the sense of self, as well as unsatisfied yet imperative needs related to different life stages.

### **From bedroom safety to mobile safety**

The gradual silent impact of new technologies on new generations, as we move from television to the cyberspace, is reflected in a study, mentioned by Eriksen (2001). Carried out in the early 1990s among Californian students, this study concluded that the time the students could stay focused in a lecture was, on average, seven minutes, a timeframe that corresponds to the rate of television commercials. This reference to the influence of television on how cognitive processes such as

attention are used is indicative of an impact of media that began long before the influence of interactive technological applications. Television, as the dominant medium of information and entertainment, is easily blamed for keeping children busy indoors. But a study by Clement (2004, as cited in Gray, 2011) indeed showed that many mothers admitted that they preferred to keep their children at home and watching TV for safety reasons. According to Gray (2011), media coverage plays an important role in sustaining a phobia of the outside world. In addition to the “dangerous outside world”, the increase of time spent at school and the subsequent decrease of traditional free-play time intensified the habit of watching television and enhanced its impact on shaping habits and needs (Gray, 2011). Inside the home, television sets provided potentially innumerable “intimate others” (Thompson, 1995) who intruded in face-to-face family interactions. As if family members had become more and more indifferent in or incapable of communicating with one another; and as if individuals had never mastered or had lost the developmentally essential capacity to be alone, i.e. the capacity for the experience of being alone and turned inwards, while some reliable other is quietly present (Winnicott, 1958/1990). Television not only synchronised large portions of the population to common lifestyles (Eriksen, 2001), but also constituted a symbol of free time and protected space within the household; it managed to blur the “distinctions between here and there, between face to face and mediated, and between the private and the public” (Davou 2005, p. 96).

Studying teenagers and their relationship with the media a few years ago, Davou & Sidiropoulou (2013) had found that teenagers were setting television aside, as its use constituted a habit that connected them to their parents, whom they wanted to emotionally distance themselves from, as part of their developmental process. Even if a TV set had remained inside the bedroom, viewing habits

had changed during adolescence and were geared more toward the internet and its capabilities, such as downloading TV series and live streaming.

By the time adolescence arrives, mobile phones are transmuted into symbols of freedom and independence. Parents provide teenagers with mobile phones in order to ensure their protection within the need for growing independence that coincide with their current stage of development (Turkle, 2011). The phone must be turned on at all times and teenagers must always be available to their parents, when they are away. This way, teenagers (as well as their parents) feel secure, but also at a comfortable distance from them. Naturally, all these exchanges are intensified by a non-safe external representation of the modern world. Mobile phones are now mediating between feelings of loneliness, insecurity and boredom and deprive individuals of the opportunity to experience these feelings in a constructive way that would strengthen and enrich the sense of self (Storr, 1988; Phillips, 1993).

Based upon this techno-social culture and the violent representation of external reality, ICTs found the appropriate ground to grow. The cyberspace was quickly integrated to an already existing “bedroom culture”, i.e. what Livingstone (2007) and Livingstone & Bovill (1999) had initially attributed to television, and defined as a set of conventional meanings and practices closely associated with identity, privacy and the self that have become linked to the domestic space of the child’s bedroom. With the establishment of smart phones, it became possible for cyberspace to be available everywhere and for everyone. Teenagers, who had associated their freedom with the provision of mobile phones, have now come of age, and while the outside world fears still hold both for them and for their parents, cyberspace accompanies young adults on every experience of interacting with that “dangerous” world.

### Connectivity and disruption

The endless symbiotic connectivity (Suler, 2015) through smart phones creates new capabilities but also new forms of anxiety. The experience of a reality, in which the individual through a collection of gadgets “lives at the pace of objects and to the rhythm of their ceaseless succession”, has already been described by Baudrillard in 1970. Today’s *technological objects* fulfil Baudrillard’s (1970/2005) definition about gadgets; their functional utility is secondary to their playful value, and to their psychological importance as tools of communication and organization of daily life (or omni-tools), and as gateways of escaping meaninglessness, i.e. loneliness, boredom and insecurity.

Turkle (2011) discusses extensively how involvement of young people with ICTs disrupts individuation processes in adolescence, arguing that the rite of passage from dependence on parents to independence has been transformed by technology. In the traditional variant, the child internalizes the adults in his or her world before crossing the threshold of independence. In the modern, technological tethered variant, parents can be brought along in the intermediate space of technologies, where everyone important is on speed dial. “In this sense, generations sail down the river together, and adolescents don’t face the same pressure to develop the independence we have associated with moving forward into young adulthood” (Turkle, 2011, p. 173).

According to Mendelson (2016), constant digital interference by messages and notifications on mobile phones and the acceleration of life in modern reality is saturated by ICTs, which contribute to a kind of temporal disruption that causes anxiety and pressure, disrupting contemplation and attentiveness (Shrestha & Lenz, 2007; Bushman & Huesmann, 2006; Giedd, 2012). These feelings of discomfort –anxiety and pressure- coupled

with the concomitant disruption of attention are a consequence of the individual’s over-engagement with ICTs, which is not imposed, but feels natural.

ICTs offer the possibility of constant updates on social media, despite the limitations of their scope narratives. Moreover, ICTs function to acknowledge existence through the digital “strokes” that the user receives; an acknowledgement of existence similar to that which is achieved through the ‘social strokes’ that Berne (1964/2015) considered as the fundamental units of face to face social interaction.

Long before the development of ICTs, Baudrillard (1970/2005) had already described the stressful relationships within consumer society, where humans are no longer involved in trying to assert or prove themselves, but in seeking the approval of others. Everyone “solicits” and manipulates, and everyone is solicited and manipulated. This condition is now exacerbated by the possibilities provided by ICTs. Hence, Harcourt (2015) refers to a new form of subjectivity, which is formulated through self-censorship, fear of being monitored and exposed, as well as by the consumer nature of digital applications. This contemporary sense of self that develops is “pervasive, permeable and transient” (Mendelson, 2016), and bombarded with global and homogeneous media images that allow little time for personal imagery and reflective thought. At the same time the development of the self may be delayed and confused by the infinite assumptions, theories and possibilities, which are now potentially available to the individual in the digital world.

Suler (2004) has elaborated on the phenomenon of lowered sensitivity to others, attributing it to what he labeled the *online disinhibition effect*, which he defined as the tendency of some people to self-disclose or to act out more frequently or intensely than they would in person, when they are online. Suler suggests that this effect develops because the

medium allows for a combination of dissociative anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, solipsistic introjection, dissociative imagination, and minimization of authority, as one moves from one online environment to another. It is not one single disinhibited 'online self' that is exposed, but rather different cognitive and emotional "constellations" of one's self that are activated, surface in and interact with different types of online environments. Currently, through Harcourt's definition (2015), a new foundational principle emerges which condenses the conflict between perceiving the consequences of exposing oneself and the desire for such exposure, since it is viewed as an imperative form of co-existence and participation.

The reality of the endless symbiotic connectivity leads to a need of entirely controlled, imaginary and superficial relationships (Suler, 2015). Suler refers to symbiotic connections with others, which do not allow for solitariness and self-reflection, and cause anxiety at the same time. "The phantom vibration, when we feel the phone vibrating with a notification, when in fact it did not, shows how cyberspace has seeped into our physical being at an unconscious level" (Suler, 2015, p. 180). Meanwhile, young adults coexist with other people in the direct and the digital environment, communicating with both at the same time, in such a manner that they are neither too close nor too far away, achieving a degree of proximity that doesn't activate the stress often associated with intimacy or the fear of detachment (Davou, 2005; Turkle, 2011).

All these new digital conditions have created a new social context within which modern individuals develop, interact and "inhabit"; a context dramatically different from that of all past generations. Our aim was to investigate the type of emotional "bond" young people develop with ICTs, the possible psychological investment on them and the ways ICTs mediate -often non-consciously- the experi-

ence of self and relationships. If we approach cyberspace as a psychological space that constitutes a parallel psychological reality, inside which needs are being expressed and gratified (Suler, 1999) in a way similar to how they are satisfied in family, friendship or the workplace, then the following research questions arise:

- (i) What form does expression and gratification of these needs take (if at all)?
- (ii) How authentic is the expression of these needs and how is gratification experienced?
- (iii) If ICTs become extensions of body and experience, how aware are young adults of how they use them and for what purposes?

#### **A qualitative investigation of subjective experience with ICTs**

The above research questions require that individuals reflect on their own subjective experience, that is, describe in their own words their own involvement with ICTs, and the emotional meaning they attribute to it. To achieve this, participants in this study were asked to keep a diary about their use of ICTs and then to reflect on their writings and experience. Diaries were structured in terms of themes relevant to the research questions above (e.g. which ICT used and for what purpose –informational or emotional-, for how long, whether with company or alone), and participants were invited to reflect along these themes (Oatley & Duncan, 1992). An extended description of the diaries is given below in the *Measures* section. The diaries with participants' reflections were then subjected to qualitative thematic analysis; themes comprised coherent and meaningful patterns in the data relevant to the research questions above (Clark & Braun, 2013). The study was carried out during the winter semester 2016-2017.

### **(i) Participants**

Literature on the digital generation shows variations regarding the exact moment of birth of this generation. In order to define the population of interest for the objectives of the current study, we used the two technological milestones, the expansion of broadband connection and smartphones, discussed in the Introduction section. Our participants comprised of thirty-two third-year undergraduate students (24 females and eight males) from the Department of Communication and Media Studies, National & Kapodistrian University of Athens, aged 20-22.

### **(ii) Measures**

A template diary was constructed, and distributed to participants along with instructions regarding its completion. Participants had to fill the diary for five consecutive days, on dates predetermined by the researchers in order to avoid variations regarding time management issues (during, for example, week days vs. weekends). The diary comprised seven columns with themes related to the research questions as follows: (i) ICTs used, (ii) frequency of use, (iii) motives for use, (iv) (approximate) duration of use, (v) use aiming to emotional regulation, (vi) simultaneous use of multiple technologies or engagement with multiple activities in one kind of technology, and (vii) information on whether the activity had mainly an emotional (e.g. entertainment, communication with friends) or cognitive (e.g. seeking information, reading an article) objective.

### **(iii) Procedure**

After receiving the instructions and the diary, participants filled in the diary - most of the times at the end of each day - in line with the instruction framework given to them. Some participants reported that they filled in the di-

ary during the day, at the time they realised that they made use of an ICT. After the five-day completion, they were asked to reflect on the materials collected and to record their thoughts. The excerpts of self-reports that are quoted below were collected from this section.

### **Technologically mediated life**

The analyses looked across the diaries to identify themes in the data that would give a cohesive description of ICTs involvement in young adults' lives. This description was enriched by participants' own reflections of their ICTs practices and experience. The discussion of findings that follows is a synthesis of the researchers' observations and interpretations of data with participants' own reflections.

#### **(i) Coexisting with ICTs**

Analysis of the findings began with examining types of ICTs young adults use daily, the time length of use and frequency of use, as recorded by participants. Although participants were asked to record quantitative data (i.e. length and frequency of use), researchers were aware that the data obtained might not be accurate due to multitasking. This inaccuracy did indeed happen. Recording of quantitative data had the purpose of keeping participants to the task and giving them the opportunity to reflect on their practices. Our purpose was to explore their experience as they qualitatively reflected on it in their self-reports.

The average time spent on ICTs as recorded by participants was approximately five to seven hours daily. However, many participants expressed a reservation regarding the accuracy of these numbers, as they were aware of their mechanistic non-conscious way of ICTs use. For example, one of the participants mentioned that "*some technologies*

are used almost automatically while waiting for something else or at the beginning of the day, even for a couple of minutes” (Male, 21). At the same time, they asserted that they were surprised by the results of their diaries concerning the time they spend in ICTs. Nonetheless, many participants described their relationship with their mobile phone or the internet as resembling addictive behaviour, while at the same time most of them seemed to share a sentiment that is summed up in the words of two participants: *“I felt lost and insecure without my smart phone, like I’ve lost some part of myself”* (Female, 21), and *“a day without a mobile phone would have been labelled as a ‘dead’ day. Whenever I happened to find myself in this position, I had a constant feeling of anxiety and a sense of insecurity”* (Female, 22). Regarding awareness of their relationship with ICTs, the following self-reports are indicative:

*“The use of technologies occupies a large amount of space in my daily life, which in the end creates addiction or even a ‘psychosis’ for using them constantly and for every reason”* (Female, 22).

*“Although I was aware of which types of ICTs I use to communicate throughout the day, I wasn’t aware of the frequency but also, of the energy consumed by them”* (Male, 21).

*“I realize very often that I display an addictive relationship with technologies”* (Female, 21).

In general, participants tended to maintain that they have not replaced their close interpersonal relationships with mediated ones, although they admit that often ICTs mediate their relationships with friends and family, either because of lack of time or because of long-range distance. One of the participants admitted *“we believe that if we talk every day on the internet and by text messaging with our friends, we are*

*satisfied and that is enough for us”* (Female, 22). It seems that new technologies are used to compensate for the physical absence of friends and relatives, but often in vain.

The uncertainty and ambiguity reflected in participants’ self-reports regarding the proportion of time spent in different ICTs, their exact purpose of use, and activities carried out confirm their tendency for concurrent but non-conscious multiple use, as well as the perception of cyberspace as a psychological space which is summoned to fulfill multiple needs at all times (Suler, 1999). Their comments reflect how cyberspace reality, in contrast with the tangible components of life, is characterised by a notion of continuity of time and space, with no intermissions and no commitments:

*“Using social media through a mobile phone is helpful in always finding yourself in interaction with friends and people that you know. You can also initiate simultaneous conversations, continue talking wherever you are and stop at any time, without letting anyone know about their interruption or their conclusion”* (Female, 20).

*“There is no requirement for continuity in social media. I can sign in and out in a minute, without any consequences regarding the quality of the browsing. On the contrary, reading a book requires time and attentiveness”* (Female, 21).

Ambiguity in clearly distinguishing which type of ICT they use at a particular time was also detected in participants’ recording of television use compared to the use of other ICTs. For example, many participants recorded time length of television use, including in their records the time that they watched episodes from series or films downloaded from the internet on their personal computer. As we will see in the following section, the ex-

perience of watching television programmes provides a diverse emotional experience for young adults, depending on the medium through which they watch them.

## (ii) Television and family atmosphere

Analysis of participants' self-reports indicates that television is the medium that connects them emotionally with the past, and with a pre-experienced notion of security and family atmosphere; the act of watching television, sitting in front of the old-fashioned TV set –and not watching on-demand programmes or web TV on one's tablet or PC. The experience of viewing television is quite different from watching online content, as the former imposes specific rules, such as commercial breaks and time restrictions regarding the beginning and the end of broadcasts. Also, regular television schedule is subject to change (e.g. due to breaking news or holiday programming), causing the individual who has a habit of watching a TV programme at a specific time and day to cancel their viewing. Therefore, the act of watching television contains a commitment towards the medium and imposes its own sense of time and space within the household. It was this type of traditional TV viewing that seemed to create for young adults a warm family atmosphere.

The television screen is considered (or was considered until it was replaced by other types of screen monitors) as one of the first technological media that children come to contact with. One participant characteristically expressed this distinct quality of the act of watching television, mentioning that *"TV is mesmerizing and for that reason, although I don't need it, I always sit captivated in front of the screen without even wanting to talk to my parents"* (Female, 21). Television is also used as an obstruction of silence, which is also interpreted as 'having company', while being occupied with other activities, such as doing house chores or eating a meal. One partici-

pant captured nicely this attitude towards television in the past and at present:

*"I can't say that I'm addicted to television or radio, or that these media play a role in my daily routine. This comes into contrast with my childhood years, as then the hours I spent watching television were far too many"* (Female, 20).

It seems that the act of watching television provides the possibility of filling empty time and replenishing loneliness (Davou, 2012). One participant mentioned that *"television shows keep you company often when you have the harsh feeling of loneliness"* (Female, 20). One of the conscious activities that accompany the act of watching television, which is also linked to the notion of re-experiencing a family atmosphere of childhood years, is having lunch or dinner. Either because their parents and their relatives live in another city or because of hectic schedules, several participants mentioned similar experiences that are in accord with the exact words of one of them: *"I turn on the T.V. to soothe a feeling of loneliness that I mostly have late at night or simply because it used to be a family routine while having lunch"* (Female, 22). The following quotes are also indicative:

*"When I'm having a meal I need a medium, mostly the TV. I feel it as a substitute for company only when I'm having a meal"* (Female, 21).

*"Because in our family, each one of us was used to eat meals by oneself, just because our meal-times didn't coincide. I realize that the T.V. compensated for the emptiness I felt. Every time that I had the T.V. set opposite to me while eating a meal it felt like having my parents and my brother around me"* (Female, 22).

*"I like doing that (watching television while eating a meal), because time*

*passes by more pleasantly. At that moment I was eating alone, so the T.V. could be considered as my companionship” (Female, 21).*

A student’s accommodation or a family home whose members’ schedules don’t coincide is felt as an empty house. This feeling of deprivation and loneliness, often calmed down during childhood years by the presence of a reliable other (Winnicott, 1958/1990), perhaps the mother somewhere around the house doing house-chores, seems to be alleviated by television later in adult life. One of the participants mentioned that *“watching a T.V. series induces a feeling of nostalgia”* (Female, 21), since most of the series she chooses to watch on television are not contemporary but old-style classic series, that were first aired a long time ago, several decades ago in some cases; as if the medium per se provides a “holding environment” (Winnicott, 1960/1990), associated with one’s childhood. As one participant very aptly phrased it:

*“My attitude towards the audio-visual shows is very emotional. Since I was young I used the TV as a substitute for the human presence. The sight of an empty house seems distressing to me and this creates the need to fill it in. It often happens to have the TV turned on but without watching it. I might not even be in the same room with the TV set; still I don’t want to turn it off”.* (Female, 23)

It seems that traditional TV watching may provide a “holding environment”, where distressing feelings of loneliness may be alleviated. At the same time, however, it fills this environment with boisterous “familiar strangers” (Thompson, 1995), who occupy a space which could be used for the solitary condition necessary for insight and reappraisal of the significance and meaning of existence in the way, Storr (1988) discuss it.

### (iii) Mobile phone, social networks and psychological gratification

ICTs eliminate distance, fill in the gaps by providing a barrage of information, give rise to an acceleration of experience that fragments time, and combine spatio-temporal dimensions (Eriksen, 2001). As derived from participants self-reports, if television provides a form of holding environment associated with one’s childhood and family, the use of social networks and various internet applications enable young adults to experience a controlled reality with the out-of-home world in the present; a reality that includes both the presence of the self and the access to the ‘other person’, but also the access of the ‘other person’ to the self.

The mobile phone constitutes a symbol of independence during adolescence, so the comment of one participant was not regarded as unexpected: *“phone is essential, so as to be in touch but at the same time be independent”* (Male, 21). Because of this emotional investment, the mobile phone functions as a psychological ‘object’, and getting detached from it, for any reason, generates insecurity and activates a feeling of inadequacy and insecurity, which is nicely reflected in one participant’s words: *“personally I feel extremely insecure in case I don’t have my phone with me, or in case I have it but there is no reception, or I’m out of credit”* (Female, 20).

When present day young adults were in adolescence, their mobile phones had to be turned on so that their parents could reach them. Now, young adults use their phones to reach anyone they want, at any time they need to be soothed from distressing conditions. They find a getaway into *‘something relaxing and inexpensive’* (Female, 21). This is well expressed by one participant’s words: *“There were moments when I felt loneliness and I had the intense need to video-chat with people close to me so as to feel secure and confident”* (Female, 20). Another young man

(21) noted that *“During the days when I felt particularly moody, I had the tendency to exchange more messages through social media, as I didn’t want to let my real feelings surface”*.

Social networks are used to express emotions from a safe distance that may result in some type of ‘quasi’ support, which, however, blocks the opportunity for staying with one’s feelings and discovering ways to regulate and defuse them. As a young woman (21) admitted, *“Whenever I felt down, I used to upload one of my favourite songs that I felt expressed my feelings, so that I would share my feelings with my cyber friends”*.

Young adults, who grew up ‘continuously connected’ (Turkle, 2011; Suler, 2015) tend to avoid the distressing conditions of boredom, insecurity and loneliness through their participation in social networks. A female participant (21) mentioned that *“using the social media during evening hours gives a notion of filling in for loneliness”*, while at the same time another female participant (22) noted that the distressing emotions could be reduced through the use of some ICT, *“they don’t stop existing, but they could be forgotten up to a point”*. Quasi-gratification, daydreaming and temporary dissociation from reality seem to be included in this process of alleviation from distressing feelings. One of the female participants (21) depicted this very aptly in her material when she mentioned that when looking at a digital image, she feels as if *“I’m there and I’m part of something that I know is unreal, but for me it’s important to come up with this escape plot”*.

#### **(iv) Elusive reality, lack of gratification and multitasking**

One of the most common comments in young adults’ diaries regarded a feeling of dissatisfaction that stems from communicating with significant others through ICTs. The prospect of continuous, time-unlimited communication exists, as opposed to the past, when the cost of a telephone call but also the

standards of people’s lives (work schedules, access to telephone sets etc.) would make communication harder. Young adults have the ability to communicate through calls, video-calls and text messaging with their loved ones at any time, but this type of communication leaves them unfulfilled. The quotes below, illustrate this feeling:

*“While using my phone to communicate with my family, but also with my friends, I was feeling emotionally fulfilled by having a feeling of intense happiness during that time, but these feelings used to fade a couple of minutes after our conversation”* (Female, 22).

*“In reality, after every call or text message, the feeling of loneliness wasn’t diminished. On the contrary it was boosted along with the despair, because on the one hand the communication existed, but on the other hand it wasn’t substantial. It was exactly the lack of spatial co-existence and of sharing common experiences that failed to endure the feeling of companionship”* (Female, 21).

*“After almost every conversation, instead of having a sense of fulfilment once I spoke or rather exchanged text messages to persons I know, I felt an emptiness, and a feeling that I obtained nothing substantial from our conversation. I can’t feel the person that I chat, I can’t see them, I can’t hear them, I can’t touch them. This whole procedure seems to me so isolated, despite chatting with someone”* (Female, 22).

Thus, although the prospect for unlimited communication exists, ICT users remain unfulfilled, due to the physical absence of the person they communicate; hence, the compulsion to keep on communicating through ICTs even when face to face communication is possible or to communicate simultane-

ously with different people through different ICTs (i.e. a form of multitasking). One of the participants reported that mediated contact has become a routine, even if the possibility for direct contact exists: *“On several occasions we forget that we live next door to our best friend and we’ll settle with talking on the phone instead of actually meeting up”* (Female, 21). The word “settle” symbolizes the minimum of gratification, whereas the confirmation of this form of communication being considered as imperative is demonstrated by how this participant continues her self-report, talking about an unintended loss of all the significant others in her life, *“unconsciously, all these things that we value, like our friends, family are lost from our lives and we replace them with pointless and short-lived things”* (Female, 21).

Multitasking has been associated with lonely states of dullness and boredom during classroom hours or unproductive periods of free-time, but what happens with multitasking at times during which the individual is in the company of friends or during selected leisure activities? What makes young adults interact with their digital and physical group of friends simultaneously, through different technologies?

Participants’ self-reports indicated that multitasking is often a non-conscious activity aiming to cover some type of insatiable emotional need or a sense of void. In a female participant’s words: *“sometimes one technology is not enough to keep me absorbed and focused [...] apparently, when I am not emotionally fulfilled by a certain technology I feel the need to look for stimuli elsewhere to fill in my emotional void”* (Female, 20).

This emotional ‘fulfilment’ through multitasking seems to be reinforced by the potential of viewing various, diverse and attractive activities being carried out by others and elsewhere (Davou, 2005), but also by a need to exist simultaneously in multiple, parallel dimensions of both the tangible and the digital

reality, and to ensure as many as possible digital social strokes that acknowledge existence (Berne 1964/2015). This need is reflected in the following quotes:

*“Although I was out with friends having a good time, I felt intensely the need to share that moment with my friends on Facebook”* (Female, 21).

*“It has become a habit to surf my social media, so when I don’t have anything else to do I will resort to that, but even worse, when I have to -or should- do something or when I am with a group of friends I will still be on the internet since I have the impulsive need-habit of networking with others”* (Female, 22).

*“Even when I find myself face to face with friends, my teachers and family, I still (though clearly less) can’t stay focused and I resort to my I-phone”* (Male, 21).

*“When I lose focus during class and I don’t understand the topic discussed, I turn to social media. This also happens to me when I’m with groups of friends and don’t feel like participating in the general discussion”* (Female, 21).

*“Most of the time I find it hard to focus on direct communication (in university lectures, going out with friends) without using some technology at the same time”* (Female, 22).

The last two quotes highlight, albeit indirectly, the impact of the continuous interferences and the rapid interchanges of the audio-visual material –whether it is generated by television or digital technologies– on cognitive processes, as has already been shown by experimental research (Shrestha & Lenz, 2007; Giedd, 2012; Pfeifer, 2013). Similar to the students described by Eriksen (2001), who cannot remain focused in class for more than seven minutes, and the adolescents of our study four years ago (Davou &

Sidiropoulou, 2013), who resorted to ICTs in an attempt to compensate for their perceived inability to meet their school standards, these same adolescents -now young adults- keep on resorting to technologies whenever they feel that their off-line reality is elusive. But at the same time, in a spiral of elusiveness, off-line reality is felt as incomplete if not expanded by on-line reality. Young adults report that they *"feel insecure and stripped"* when they are off-line and that abstention from *"the favourite technologies"* creates an unbearable emotional discontinuity. The following passages are indicative:

*"If I try not to sign in any of my accounts for a while, I feel that so many things are going on that I'm not aware, so I'm left behind. And all this is a part of a vicious cycle; I'm stressed when I'm inactive and I'm also stressed when I'm active"* (Female, 22).

*"When I receive a text message I can't ignore it, or leave a call unanswered. I'm overwhelmed with anxiety, and I need to respond to everything, to have the responses that I'm looking for, to send something and to avoid waiting for long for someone to get back to me"* (Female, 20).

From these self-reports it becomes apparent that this new "reality" created by technologies is constantly escaping; it requires constant presence and participation, but always leaves something missed or unfulfilled. Young adult users seem to struggle to receive more and more gratification from co-existing in both 'worlds' at the same time or from impatiently switching 'realities' but never staying in any of the two -either off-line or on-line- long enough to have their emotional/communicational needs fulfilled. Multitasking reflects this compulsive attempt for a gratification that forever escapes further and remains unreachable.

#### **(v) New codes and forms of inhibition in social networks**

Suler (2004) points to an on-line disinhibition effect related to symbiotic connectivity, which leads to negation of several social rules that cause awkwardness in the off-line world, and to excessive experimentation. Participants' self-reports confirm the need for symbiotic connectivity, but at the same time acknowledge that something is being lost in their interaction with others, communication becomes poorer, and rather than becoming disinhibited, they feel constrained by new forms of inhibitions and a new type of self-consciousness that develops within the digital environment.

One participant mentioned that *"sometimes I prefer to stay digitally connected with someone because I can better express myself and every 'awkward' moment is lost"* (Female, 21), but at the same time *"I feel I have 'friends' in Facebook, with whom we are neither too close nor too far apart, which is just right. We are close enough so as not to get too attached, something that would cause demands and expectations from them"*. In these contexts, emotions are transformed into emoticons and punctuation marks are used to replace the non-verbal communication symbols, resulting in *"hiding behind words, emoticons, and all those fancy little things that exist to converse with. You don't learn to communicate honestly and actually offer what you really think"* (Female, 21), as one participant commented in her diary.

At the same time, social networks demand the lifting of anonymity and privacy, so that the user can receive the maximum amount of available features. This leads to a new kind of self-presentation, and consequently, a self-perception that is formed under the influence of social participation and approval of a digital audience. Young adults' reports reveal signs of feeling trapped and having a dishonest, non-authentic self-expression in a context

where the rules of reflection are limited to social responses through likes and comments. *"Like everyone else"*, a participant mentioned, *"I try to show the best side of myself, the most beautiful, the coolest, the wisest, but also the funniest and most cautiously comedic"* (Male, 20). The self-reports that follow are indicative of the effects of feedback from a digital audience on self-perception:

*"I can't hide my disappointment when I change my profile picture and I don't receive enough likes. I wonder if the persons who didn't press 'like' didn't actually like my picture, or they don't care enough to do so, because even though we are called 'friends', in reality we aren't"* (Female, 21).

*"Many times I haven't received as many 'likes' as I expected in various posts I've made and I've regretted publishing them, but I don't delete them because 'I would make a fool of myself'"* (Female, 21).

*"I try to be careful with my conduct in social media, fearing criticism from others, both acquaintances and strangers. I make sure to double check my comments and likes, maybe ending up not making them at all, thinking someone might be offended"*(Female, 20).

One of the participants described the inhibited authenticity and the fear of expression which can lead to self-censorship:

*"On quite a few occasions I have thought over and over again whether I should write a comment on a post or make a post myself. Most of the times I don't do either, as I don't know how others will respond, while sometimes I fear negative comments and possible disapproval"* (Female, 21).

This technology was warmly and enthusiastically embraced at first because it came

with promises to save precious time and contribute to preserving relationships. Ultimately, however, it seems to have worked against its original intentions. One participant reported that, *"the main thing is that spontaneity and eloquence have been lost, because communication interactions have been reduced due to the long hours spent using technology"* (Female, 21). The following self-report signals quite strongly the contemporary forms of inhibition that define digital environments:

*"There are moments when I want to upload a song that is just 'stuck in my head', but I have worries that this will draw possibly false conclusions about my psychological state, thus preventing me from doing so. For example, if the aforementioned song is about old love affairs, I think that maybe my ex-boyfriend will see it and think that I posted it for him, while also my current boyfriend will assume that I'm thinking about my ex etc."* (Female, 22).

The contemporary world is marked by a barrage of external stimuli and information, by nullified distances and experiences of remote cultures and life-styles through a digital receiver. As evident by participants' self-reports, no-one can claim ignorance, even about events that are happening in a far-away place. Within the context of this digitally mediated world, young adults -the net generation- state that *"we have learned to make no mistakes, to avoid excessive expression of feelings and to take our time to think before we write so we can formulate our post exactly as we intent"* (Female, 21). Likewise, another participant describes a strict, completely pre-defined form of self-presentation, as according to him *"mistakes are not allowed, and with Wikipedia on your side, you are the smartest one in the conversation"* (Male, 21). He continues his thoughts by introducing us to the next topic of this article: *"however, you are not*

*this person in real life. But you keep having the same mentality, so you are afraid of saying the wrong thing at the wrong time”.*

#### **(vi) Symbiotic connectivity and new anxieties**

Analysis of the diaries and self-reports reveal that three new forms of anxiety emerge in the new digital world. The first is related to the internalization of the parents' anxiety about an unsafe external world, a condition that, as mentioned previously, initially favoured the development of bedroom culture and later of symbiotic connectivity. Young adults reported to be constantly in contact with their parents, friends and companions, easing their concerns regarding their physical and psychological well-being. Analysis of the diaries shows a very high frequency of communication of young adults with their parents, and the explanations behind this frequency confirms the internalised concept of a dangerous outside world. One participant gave a very indicative description regarding this particular parameter, with the statement, *“I feel worried about others feeling worried”* (Female, 22), thus attributing her need to have the mobile phone always turned on and by her side.

A second form of anxiety detected in participants' self-reports comes from a confusion between the boundaries of off-line and on-line worlds, and young adults' roles and positions in these worlds. They appear to simultaneously coexist as students doing their academic studies, as workers occupied in a workplace, as their parent's children, as friends and companions, without the ability to distance themselves from these sometimes incompatible contexts and roles, even for a brief period of time. This condition resembles a kind of 'existential multitasking', that does not allow, as in the case of symbiotic connectivity, a single moment of detachment, pause and self-reflection regarding the needs, possibilities and restrictions of each role and context.

A third form of anxiety relates to a perceived weakness of young adults to respond to the demands and needs of interaction and coexistence in the off-line world. This perceived weakness is clearly reflected in one participant's words, *“we feel trapped because we don't know how to make actual conversations anymore and so we prefer to make conversations in social media rather than face to face”* (Female, 21). Thus a vicious circle of lack of gratification and sense of weakness is created, as social networks cover the needs of young adults only in a superficial way. This vicious circle is reflected in the three following quotes, the last expressed in quite a dramatic tone by one young lady:

*“Hence these needs return later more urgently than before”* (Male, 22).

*“There are moments I want to spend with myself and I don't have them anymore”* (Female, 20).

*“Returning to reality is quite cruel for most of us and the wounds caused by it will forever mark our emotional world as well as our relationships with other people”* (Female, 21).

#### **Conclusion: Multitasking of existence**

Analysis of the diaries and self-reports sketches the net-generation's every-day life in which ICTs seem to hold a dominant position. As it appears, ICTs, as extensions of body and experience are employed to meet psychological needs of young adults, especially in instances where emotions of insecurity, loneliness and boredom arise. The degree of intensity that young people make use of social networks and contemporary digital applications does not seem to match the degree of gratification received from the reciprocal engagement with them. In contrast to their adolescent years, when ICTs were used for experimentation (Davou & Sidiropoulou, 2013),

young adults appeared more constrained and self-conscious when on-line. The cyberspace does not constitute for them a space of free expression and a benign lifting of inhibitions, as was experienced during their adolescence. On the contrary, new codes of conduct and forms of self-consciousness seem to emerge in digital environments, that significantly restrict free expression, and, in some circumstances, lead to its suspension, in the face of the fear of criticism and the individual's exposure.

Digital reality is experienced as permanently escaping since it requires constant presence and participation; at the same time it fails to provide young adults with the gratification they don't find in the off-line world. This explains the practice of extensive -and sometimes compulsive- multitasking, through which young adults attempt to satisfy the inherent human need for emotional fulfilment and interpersonal contact.

The "blurring of boundaries" between different worlds, which Meyrowitz (1985) had attributed to traditional media thirty years ago, seems now to have been transformed into a "fusion of boundaries" between the off-line and the on-line world, where everything and everybody simultaneously coexist and demand to be attended through an incessant and exhausting *multitasking of existence*. This new environment has led to new forms of anxiety about one's relationships and position in the world.

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## Η πολυδιεργασία της ύπαρξης: Τεχνολογικές διαμεσολαβήσεις της καθημερινής ζωής της ψηφιακής γενιάς

ΑΝΘΗ ΣΙΔΗΡΟΠΟΥΛΟΥ<sup>1</sup>

### ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Στο πλαίσιο της ποιοτικής έρευνας που παρουσιάζεται στο παρόν άρθρο, επιχειρήσαμε να διερευνήσουμε πώς οι νεαροί ενήλικες της ψηφιακής εποχής εμπλέκονται με τις τεχνολογίες της επικοινωνίας και της πληροφορίας και πώς οι ίδιοι νοσηματοδοτούν την χρήση τους. Οι νεαροί ενήλικες, 18 - 22 ετών, αποτελούν την πρώτη γενιά που γεννήθηκε με δεδομένη την ψηφιακή τεχνολογία στη ζωή της στη χώρα μας. Μας ενδιέφερε να δούμε πως εκφράζονται και ικανοποιούνται οι ψυχικές ανάγκες τους στον κυβερνοχώρο και ποια μορφή λαμβάνει (αν λαμβάνει) η έκφραση και η ικανοποίηση των αναγκών αυτών. Πόσο αυθεντική είναι η έκφραση των αναγκών και πώς συντελεί η προσλαμβανόμενη ικανοποίηση στην εγκαθίδρυση της εμπειρίας; Εν τέλει, μπορούν να διακρίνουν οι ίδιοι οι νεαροί ενήλικες την ψυχική σημασία της χρήσης των νέων τεχνολογικών μέσων; Η διερεύνηση των ερωτημάτων αυτών έγινε με την χρήση ενός ημερολογίου, το οποίο οι συμμετέχοντες συμπλήρωσαν για ένα διάστημα πέντε ημερών και έπειτα κλήθηκαν να αναστοχαστούν επί όσων κατέγραψαν. Το ημερολόγιο αφορούσε την χρήση των μέσων, τις συναισθηματικές ανάγκες που καλύπτει η χρήση, την ικανοποίηση που αισθάνονται από την χρήση, καθώς και την διάσταση της πολυδιεργασίας (multitasking). Από τη θεματική ανάλυση των ευρημάτων και των αυτοαναφορών προέκυψε ότι οι νεαροί ενήλικες δεν φαίνεται να λαμβάνουν την ψυχική ικανοποίηση που επιζητούν από την χρήση των ψηφιακών μέσων, κάτι που συντελεί στην παγίωση της τακτικής της πολυδιεργασίας, ακόμα και όταν πρόκειται για επιλεγμένες δραστηριότητες ελεύθερου χρόνου. Η διαμεσολαβημένη καθημερινότητα δημιουργεί νέες μορφές άγχους στους νεαρούς ενηλίκους, οι οποίοι νιώθουν εγκλωβισμένοι σε μια μονίμως διαφεύγουσα πραγματικότητα που απαιτεί συνεχή παρουσία και συμμετοχή.

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