

THE Y GENERATION: Outbound Communication Methods

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ABSTRACT

Y Generation citizens are communicating with each other and the government in ways that are distinct from previous generations. In this study, we examine the data collected from undergraduate students from the National University of Singapore to explore which media Y Generation citizens prefer to use to give formal information and to communicate their ideas effectively. An analysis of the course deliverables for three New Venture Creation classes, comprised of students from the National University of Singapore's Overseas College in Shanghai, was conducted to determine the preferred method of communication of these students. It was found that when sharing information, students used a wide range of media, both as basic media for their deliverables and as additional tools to enhance their presentations. Visuals, graphically-intensive formats and complex fonts were used heavily by the students. These findings have important implications for governments, which will need to take into account these preferences when engaging, educating, communicating with and receiving feedback from members of this generation.

INTRODUCTION

The Y Generation, or Net Generation, is a group of individuals born between 1977-1997. This generation grew up with ubiquitous exposure to digital technologies, and this has shaped their preferences and behavior when acting as consumers, employees, students and citizens [1].

The Y Generation has exhibited a strong decrease in political participation and voting, and developed cynicism and distrust for government. Their actions and attitudes with regards to political engagement and civic participation are different than their parents [2].

eGL's previous report, "Understanding Generation Y and their Perception of e-Government," helped to reveal the Y Generation's views on e-Government services, the influence of technology in their lives, and their expectations as citizens and employees.

As a follow up, this report explores Generation Y's media preferences for communicating knowledge and formal information, using data collected from undergraduate students from the National University of Singapore's Overseas College in Shanghai. These students were given the freedom to choose the format of their course required deliverables, which provided an excellent opportunity to uncover their preferred media choice for presenting and communicating their ideas. As the employees and citizens of the future, understanding their preferences for communication will be crucial for governments as they reach out to this generation.

This report intends to present more evidence and motivation for a deeper understanding of how governments can best engage this group of citizens. Where are they, what tools are they using and how do they use them? Presently, these questions are currently insufficiently answered.

We expect to corroborate published research that Y Generation citizens prefer to use a range of tools and graphically-intensive media to communicate their ideas. This will have important implications for governments as they attempt to engage this group of citizens.

SUMMARY OF PRIOR Y GENERATION RESEARCH

Each generation is exposed to a different set of social, economic, and technological circumstances and norms, shaped by the shared life experiences and events at that moment in history. It is argued that the circumstances of a particular era shape the values, motivations, preferences and attitudes of that generational cohort [3].

Norms of the Y Generation include freedom, customization, scrutiny, integrity, collaboration, entertainment, speed and innovation [4]. These individuals are “prolific communicators” with a preference for full motion multimedia, color images and audio [5]. They enjoy “loud graphics, rapid edits and moving cameras” in their advertising [6].

The use of web 2.0 applications is prevalent among Y Generation individuals. Popular web 2.0 tools include social networking sites, video/photo sharing sites, blogs, wikis and RSS feeds. Some examples of these are Facebook, MySpace, Youtube and Flickr. These tools are used for a wide variety of purposes, from accessing news, videos/photos and other types of information, or to keep in contact with family and friends.

Various studies have helped to demonstrate the importance of the internet and web 2.0 tools to the Y Generation. For example, prior research has shown that:

- 61% of people under 25 use web 2.0 applications daily [7]
- 64% of people in their teens and 20s create content on web 2.0 sites [8]
- 59% of those in Singapore spend more than 20 hours per week online [9]

Additionally, members of this generation are heavy users of mobile technology. One study showed that over 80% of the Y Generation worldwide owns a mobile phone, and over 60% of those are text messaging. The same study showed they are also increasingly using mobile browsing [1]. In Asia, this proportion may be even higher: a study of youth in Shanghai and Hong Kong showed that 96% and 98%, respectively, owned mobile phones [10].

CONSUMERS:

Past research has shown that Singapore’s Y Generation consumers will spend time researching products of interest and visiting merchant websites [9]. Word of mouth is an important marketing tool; however, TV ads are still most influential in encouraging the purchase of a product [11].

With the onset of social media, advertising in the traditional “push” sense to the Y Generation is under question [12]. It has been found that:

- 65% read customer ratings or reviews [12]
- 60% would positively reinforce a product [11]
- 51% would speak negatively about a product [13]
- 60% say they help companies to develop their products and services [11]

The proliferation of information which is accessible through many different sources means that the “push” advertisements are no longer where the Y-Generation gets all of their information on products and services. Given their willingness to communicate among themselves and with companies, marketing to the Y Generation in the age of web 2.0 may entail more engagement and collaboration than in the past.

Moreover, it is important to recognize that to the Y Generation, word of mouth includes much more than just face to face interaction with their peers. Online communities and forums, in addition to other web 2.0 tools can now be used to pass along information or to ask for opinions. The many channels available to reach out to one another and share their views on products and services make this concept an important focus for attention.

For example, a complaint about a company’s product or service can be posted within seconds on a site such as Twitter or Facebook. That user may have upwards of several hundred Twitter followers or Facebook friends; moreover, these two social media may be integrated, allowing for simultaneous posting on each site.

Businesses have already recognized and harnessed the power of web 2.0 tools to reach consumers. For example, television stations and musicians have begun to broadcast shows or music videos over Youtube, include mandatory previews or advertisements prior to the episode or song. In other words, if someone wants to watch a music video, they must first sit through an entire advertisement. The revenue for many social networking sites is derived from advertising and businesses are willing to make an investment because they recognize the potential to narrowly target users of these platforms.

Additionally, web 2.0 platforms are working together and becoming increasingly integrated. Facebook, for example, allows the embedding of Youtube videos and also displays the Skype status of friends who have input their contact information. Users can also post links to different websites, blogs or Flickr accounts.

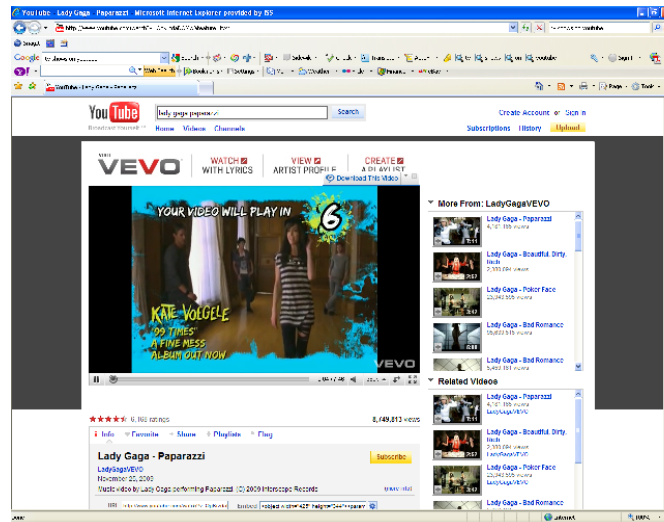


Figure 1: Advertisement before a Youtube music video



Figure 2: A Twitter post integrated into Facebook, reaching an audience of 600 [19].

CITIZENS:

Y Generation citizens tend to feel disconnected and distrustful of their governments. In a 2008 survey conducted in the United States of America, only 15% felt a personal connection to the government, however, 72% thought the next president could strengthen that [14]. In the same study, Y Generation members were much more likely than Boomers to say that various web 2.0 applications should be used by the government to forge a connection and keep in contact with citizens [14].

For example, previous research also found that 58% of Canadians thought that online means would be the main method of contact with governments in 5 years. Many felt disconnected with government, but saw potential to improve relations using the internet. In particular:

- 49% thought the government was doing a poor job consulting with citizens
- 66% thought bringing decisions to the grassroots level would probably help to solve most big national problems
- 63% thought that new media would be either “somewhat” or “very” useful in communicating with Canadians [7]
- 81% of Singapore’s Y Generation believe government information and services should be made available through web 2.0 communities and social networks [9]

Overall, this generation feels alienated from the political process, however, 43.9% of youth still believe that politics are important [15]. While the Y Generation feels that the government and politicians have essentially failed to engage them [11], a study conducted by eGL in Singapore showed that 88% of the Y Generation citizens surveyed felt that governments could improve the services they deliver by using web 2.0 technologies. Similarly, Singapore’s Y Gen population thought that the policy outputs could be improved if governments integrated citizen input more readily [9]. These data demonstrate that while this generation currently feels unengaged, there is great potential for future government-citizen relationships using the web as a medium.

EMPLOYEES:

The characteristics of the Y Generation can also be seen in their work habits and preferences. They would like the flexibility to customize their job descriptions, as well as freedom to choose where and when they work. The majority believe that work can and should be fun [11].

The Y Generation’s desire for technological and web 2.0 integration also affects the way in which they work while at the office. eGL’s study of Singapore has shown that this generation sees the value of web 2.0 at work in helping to make faster and more informed decisions, and increasing teamwork and collaboration [9].

The vast majority see the ability to use online and web 2.0 applications as important to their work:

- 54% say it is “very important”
- 40% see it as “important” [9]

This proves that when envisioning the workplace of the future, Y-Generation citizens are likely to want or have these tools in place.

Up to now, this research has focused on how the Y Generation prefers to receive communications, in particular the ways in which they are getting information from new media sources. It is now important to examine how this generation prefers to give information, and present their ideas.

STUDENTS:

Previous research has found that students from the Y Generation value active and experiential learning, as well as convenience and flexibility at school. Multimedia and collaboration are important in keeping this cohort of learners engaged in the classroom [5].

In their learning environments, Y Gen students prefer:

- Student/group centered over teacher centered,
- Multimedia over single media,
- Collaborative work over isolated work, and
- Critical thinking/informed decision making over fact/knowledge-based learning [16].

Universities are also beginning to incorporate web 2.0 tools into their admissions and recruitment process. For example, for the first time this year, Tufts University has allowed applicants to include short Youtube videos as a portion of their application package. Approximately 1,000 of the 15,000 applicants chose to post videos, spanning a wide range from simple to elaborate [17]. This shows the growing recognition in various industries about the importance of incorporating these technologies and communication styles when working with the Y Generation.

NEW RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

The question then remains, what are the Y Generation's preferred media for communicating their ideas? When given the ability to choose freely, what method of communication do they believe can best be used to grab the attention of and engage fellow members of their generation?

A study of students in recent New Venture Creation classes at the National University of Singapore's Overseas College in Shanghai has helped to answer these questions, and determine Y Generation preferences in situations where they are asked to communicate their ideas. We examined the data inductively to determine the choices that students in this class will make, when given the option of selecting a medium in which to present formal information.

NEW VENTURE CREATION CLASS STUDY

The New Venture Creation class is a unique and interactive business class offered to NUS Overseas College students at Fudan University in Shanghai. The students in the program at NUS Overseas College in Shanghai are from various schools and colleges, and are completing a minor in Technopreneurship. They are sent to Shanghai for a one year internship, during which time they are required to take the New Venture Creation course, worth 8 modular credits. Since 2004, the New Venture Creation class has been taught within this program, designed to encourage and foster entrepreneurship.

These students are upper-year students, representing the employees and citizens of the future. Understanding the ways in which they prefer to communicate, and the media through which they most often express their ideas, will have important implications for governments in the future, as they attempt to engage the Y Generation.

In the Fall 2008, Spring 2009 and Fall 2009 sessions of the class, teams of students were asked to develop 5 to 6 deliverables (depending on the term), communicating various specified concepts of entrepreneurship. In the Fall 2008 class, 3 out of 6 of these deliverables were specified to be in presentation form, and the other 3 in free form. For the Spring and Fall 2009 classes, 2 of 5 were to be in presentation format, and the remaining 3 in free form. Some of the suggested formats for deliverables included:

- PowerPoint
- Written report
- Media clips
- Photo collage
- Large-sized poster boards
- Any other form

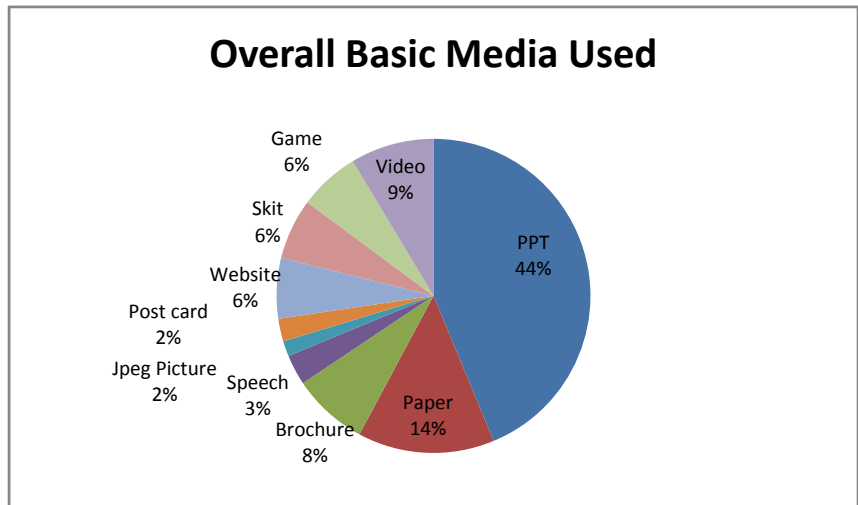
Students were encouraged to not limit themselves to this list, and were given complete freedom to decide the contents of the reports, presentations, posters, online compositions, etc. This provided an excellent opportunity to evaluate what the Y Gen feels is the best medium to engage and communicate with their classmates, when they have a variety of options available.

This data set was selected for a number of reasons. Firstly, students were making these media choices within their natural work environment, not an experimental setting. They were presenting to their peers, and the groups were composed solely of Y Generation citizens. There was no outside interference or influence by others, and students had free reign over the media they could select for their deliverables. Additionally, the quality of deliverables mattered to these individuals: their projects accounted for a total of 60% of their final grades, providing an incentive to strive for the most effective way of communicating their ideas. Lastly, students were working in teams, helping to demonstrate how this generation communicates both within and as a group, in a collaborative setting.

eGL conducted an assessment of the deliverables for these terms, evaluating what the students chose as their basic or primary medium to present their ideas, as well as any additional media used for each deliverable.

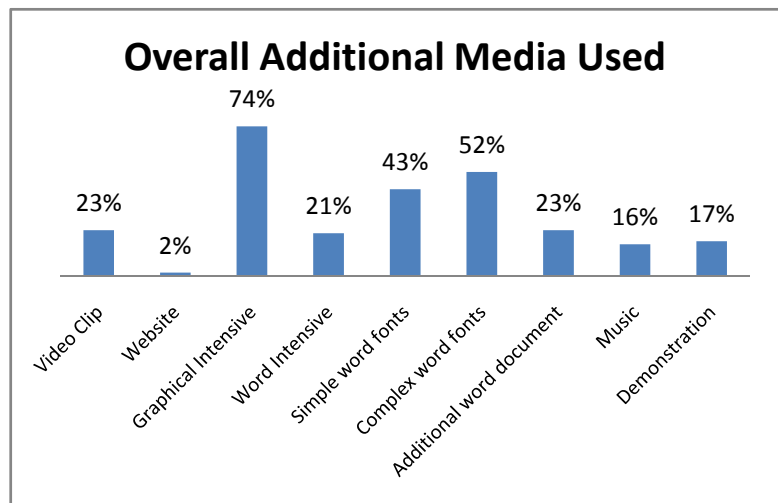
OVERALL RESULTS:

Overall, PowerPoint was the most commonly used by students as their basic medium, with 44% of deliverables being presented in this format. This was to be expected, due to the requirement that a number of the deliverables be in presentation form. The remaining deliverables were presented in a wide variety of ways. Printed reports were the second most frequently used medium, reaching a total of only 14% overall. Brochures, speeches, jpeg pictures, postcards, websites, skits, games and videos were each used, to a lesser degree.



In addition to their basic medium for sharing their ideas, the students used a range of additional media forms to enhance their submission, to make it more interesting and engaging for their classmates. For example:

- 23% used video clips
- 2% used websites
- 23% included additional word documents
- 16% used music
- 17% used a demonstration



EXAMINING FREE CHOICE:

These results can be broken down further to examine the “free choice element” in the creation of course deliverables. In short, for the presentation deliverables – 2 to 3, depending on the term – students were required to use PowerPoint presentations. When the deliverables which were required to be PowerPoint are excluded, we see a shift in the data. By analyzing only the unspecified deliverables, the media used when truly under the circumstances of free choice is revealed.

Some students chose to use PowerPoint for their unspecified deliverables, or chose to use an alternative method for presentation deliverables; these are included in this analysis of the “free choice element”.

This analysis shows that when students had a variety of options available to them, the media they chose to use in order to communicate their ideas was wide-ranging. While paper-based reports were the primary media for 22% of the deliverables, there was no strong preference displayed for any one type of media. Overall, other popular choices included:

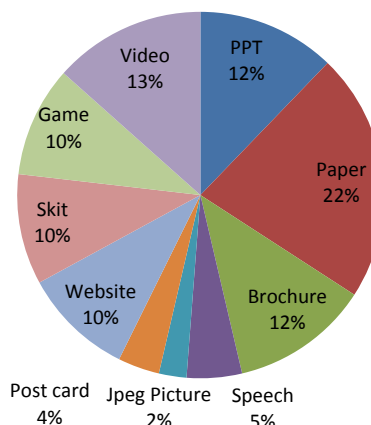
- Video (13%)
- PowerPoint, Brochure (12% each)
- Game, Skit, Website (10% each)

Some changes can be seen over time in the basic media chosen by students for each term. Notably, the use of games and videos has increased dramatically since the Fall 2008 session of the course. While videos were not used as the primary medium for any deliverables in Fall 2008, they were used as 22% and 18% of the media for the unspecified deliverables in Spring 2009 and Fall 2009, respectively. Of the freely chosen deliverables in both Fall 2008 and Spring 2009, games were used 4% of the time; this increased to 21% in Fall 2009.

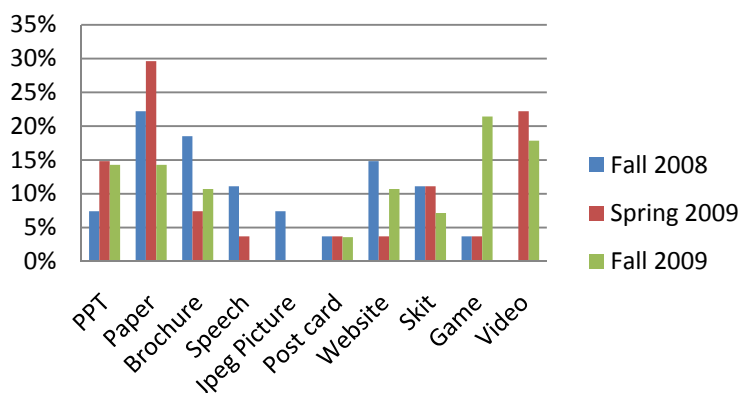
The use of speeches, skits and jpeg pictures showed declines. Speeches represented 11% of the Fall 2008 free choice deliverables, decreasing to 4% in Spring 2009 and finally to none in Fall 2009. Skits were used by 11% in the first two terms, declining to 7% in the Fall 2009 class.

With the exception of postcard use, which has remained constant, the other media have shown mixed patterns of use over the course of the three terms. PowerPoint and paper-based reports each showed an increase in Spring 2009 over Fall 2008, followed by a decline in the final term. Brochures and websites, on the other hand, showed an initial decline followed by an increase in use; however in these two cases, the increase in use in Fall 2009 did not reach the popularity experienced in Fall 2008.

Basic Media Used (Free Choice)



Basic Media Used (Free Choice)

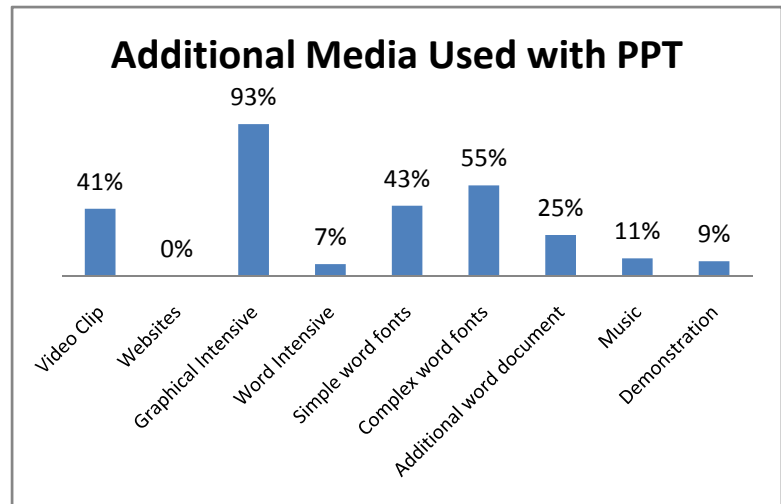


A CLOSER LOOK AT POWERPOINT:

While PowerPoint was essentially required for the presentation portions of the deliverables, we can also analyze the use of additional media types alongside PowerPoint to determine the students' true preferences when creating engaging content to convey their ideas. In doing so, it is found that students who used PowerPoint as their primary delivery method were above average utilizers of additional visual media. To enhance their submission:

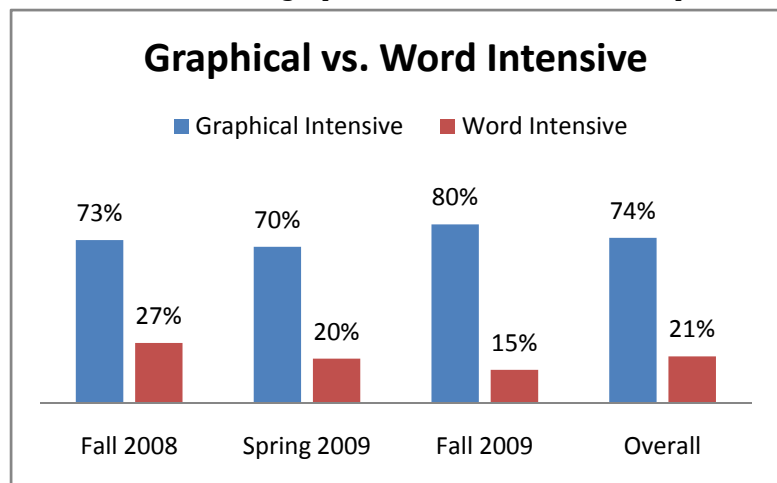
- 41% of PowerPoint users incorporated a video clip
- 93% were graphically-intensive (versus word-intensive)
- 55% used complex fonts over simple fonts

This shows that although students were constrained in the basic media they could use for a number of their deliverables, they felt comfortable integrating other media types in order to present their information in a way they believed would be effective and engaging for their classmates.



Overall in their deliverables, students strongly favoured using graphically-intensive visuals to express their ideas, rather than word-based visuals. This meant that for their deliverables, more than half of the combined physical space of their content used graphics to communicate concepts, rather than text. For example, a PowerPoint presentation consisting of 10 slides would be considered “graphically-intensive” if more than 5 slides cumulatively used graphics to express ideas. Of the total deliverables from the three terms:

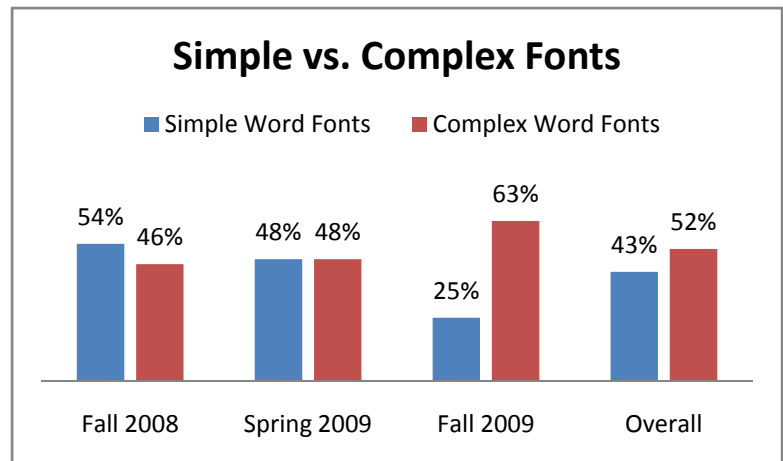
- 74% used graphically-intensive formats
- 21% used word intensive formats (in some cases this distinction was not applicable)



Increasingly, complex word fonts were preferred over simple word fonts. While in Fall 2008 simple word fonts were preferred, the trend shows a shift towards complex font use over time. “Simple fonts” included those on the font list for Microsoft Office, such as Times New Roman or Arial. “Complex fonts” were defined as text which used fonts embedded with graphics or colour; as well

as those fonts not typically found in word-processing applications, such as Chinese calligraphy fonts. If there was a combination of complex and simple fonts used, the deliverable was considered complex if the majority of pages or slides contained this type of font. Of the total deliverables:

- 52% of the overall cases used complex word fonts
- 43% used simple word fonts (in some cases this distinction was not applicable)



LIMITATIONS:

Limitations of this study include the small sample size, and perhaps the sample bias in using classes of students oriented towards innovation, technology and entrepreneurship. One student described that he “felt that the structure of the class gave teams the impetus to do better than the previous teams and it forces teams to be creative in their deliverables. Towards the end of the class, the overall standards of presentations have improved and the class is always left wondering on what “competitive strategies” the other team has up their sleeves.” [18] Arguably, leaders and creative individuals within groups may have also influenced their team towards these media choices.

On the other hand, the fact that these results were exhibited when there was intra-class competition to create the best deliverable demonstrates that this class understood that the most effective way to grab and hold the attention of their classmates and beat their competitors, was through visual media. Group dynamics will always be a factor in collaborative work, and in this case may have pushed teams towards choosing the most effective media for their deliverables. This positively reinforces the findings of this study.

Secondly, this study did not have a control group, and the longitudinal data was slightly short. However, this data set was chosen because it provides an accurate picture of Y Generation citizens working collaboratively in a natural setting, without outside interference. Further studies would negate the longitudinal limitations, and provide a means to confirm the findings of the New Venture Creation class data.

Additionally, it could be argued that because PowerPoint was encouraged for 2 to 3 of the deliverables for each term, this may bias students towards *not* using PowerPoint when creating their other deliverables. This may artificially inflate the popularity of other media forms.

However, it has been shown that even within their PowerPoint presentations, students felt comfortable using a wide range of additional media. In fact, the use of additional media forms was more common within PowerPoint presentations than it was overall. As well, some students chose to use PowerPoint for deliverables even over and above what was required. Since the students took

the liberty of combining and customizing their media forms, this indicates that the results shown in this study should be accurate in helping to explain the media preferences of the Y Generation.

IMPLICATIONS

The results of the New Venture Creation class study corroborate past research on Y Generation media choices. In this case, Y Generation students took advantage of the opportunity to customize their deliverables, and present their ideas using multimedia in collaborative, interactive and innovative ways. While a plurality of the overall deliverables used PowerPoint due to the presentation requirements, when students utilized their free choice many avenues were explored and implemented.

The media preferences and penchant for web 2.0 tools of the Y Generation have important implications for those wishing to reach out to and engage these citizens.

- Governments need to engage and reach out to Y Generation citizens where they are, rather than waiting for them to approach a government portal [8]. This may mean creating a stronger presence in social networking communities, or using other web 2.0 tools to solicit the opinions of these citizens. Previous research has shown that this is where the Y Generation wishes to meet government, however the presence of these tools alone does not predicate use. In marketing engagement tools to Generation Y, graphics and multimedia must be used to attract citizens to use the website.
- Recognizing the various media through which Y Gens choose to express their ideas, governments should develop methods in order to receive citizen feedback in a broad range of formats when soliciting input on policies and decisions. Governments need to invest real resources and manpower to listen to this feedback and respond quickly.
- As citizens increasingly express their ideas and opinions through social media tools, governments must ensure that these platforms are being mined for information. Media monitoring must be expanded beyond the traditional sense to include these tools.
- In developing civic education programs to foster Y Generation engagement, attention should be paid to their preferred learning and communication styles, as well as the best ways to gain the attention of students to educate them about the importance of involvement in the political process.
- Governments should recognize that the methods used to communicate policies to previous generations, such as through newspapers and traditional media, are not as effective with the Y Generation [2]. Alternative means, such as through web 2.0 tools, should be used when communicating with Generation Y in order to effectively deliver government messages.
- Generation Y has an appreciation for choice. Providing different mediums for communications may help individuals present their ideas in a way that makes logical sense to them and others of their generation while also improving the quality of each output.

FUTURE RESEARCH:

Engagement of the Y Generation through e-Government remains an important topic for exploration. Suggestions for future research include:

- Further longitudinal studies of student media choice and communication patterns in the New Venture Creation class. Additionally, these studies should ask students to reflect on or critique the various presentation methods available, for their effectiveness both in the transfer of information and audience engagement. Students should be asked to indicate the reason for choosing a certain method of communication over the others.
- An assessment of the current formatting of government websites worldwide. Successful websites used to engage citizens, such as REACH or Myhometown.sg incorporate graphics and colour visuals, which are attractive to the Y Generation. Other government websites should be compared with these standards, to identify gaps and ways in which they could better attract the Generation Y citizens.
- Case studies of current initiatives in place by governments worldwide to engage Y Generation citizens in this way, and accept feedback in these formats.
- Comparative studies of individuals from previous generations to examine how these media patterns differ, and the various needs to which governments will need to cater when engaging citizens.

CONCLUSION

Through this study of course deliverables from the New Venture Creation class offered by the NUS Overseas College in Shanghai, eGL presented evidence for a firmer understanding of the preferred methods of communication of the Y Generation. Unlike published research, which predominantly examines how Y Generation citizens prefer to receive information, this study examined in further detail what media this generation uses to best convey ideas and concepts.

eGL found that when communicating with their peers, Generation Y prefers to use graphically-intensive and interactive media. The students in this class took advantage of the ability to choose from a variety of media, and customized their deliverables in innovative ways. This generation is comfortable using a broad range of media, as well as combining multiple media forms to enhance presentations and communicate concepts in an effective way.

These findings are important, as they have implications for governments who wish to engage the Y Generation. Governments must be prepared to receive information in this broad range of formats, as well as keep their preferences in mind when reaching out to them to attract their attention. Without doing so, governments risk maintaining a disconnect between themselves and this generation, which will make up the employees, citizens and leaders of the future.

Follow-up reports assessing current government websites against these generational preferences, further longitudinal and comparative studies, as well as case studies on current engagement initiatives are recommended to achieve a deeper understanding of this topic.

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