

IS FACEBOOK REALLY FACING THE NEEDS OF ITS CURRENT USERS?

Robert Witek¹

Abstract

In the fast changing world social media change even faster and the changes they undergo try to address the demands of their users. The process of addressing the requirements is as complex as the users in question and their approach to social media. This study tries to look at possible reasons for the downfall in the number of active users in the biggest numbers of Facebook users nowadays the age 11 – 34 population. As this group constitutes the biggest target for Facebook's activity it is crucial to understand if and how their expectations change. The complexity of the tool versus other social media is considered together with the problem of addressing the needs of its users in the time of their transition from childhood to adulthood.

Keywords: Facebook, social media tools, downfall of users, complexity, expectations, needs

Introduction

Today's teenagers are the first generation that has grown up being totally immersed in social network sites (Palermo, 2016) and therefore their way of interacting with these tools is a unique phenomenon and should be studied to give an understanding of how the teenagers consume social network sites and what they expect them to be. Cordeiro et al. talk about detecting communities in evolving network (Cordeiro, 2018). But each time we think about changing environment as in the case of social network sites we need to understand that communities that operate within previously mentioned evolving network are also evolving and undergoing constant social, economic and cultural changes. The fact that the use of the home computers by teenagers is by far for recreational activities (Lee, 2009) provides additional argument in favour of the fact that this community of users will be constantly changing the way they interact with social media.

Facebook is, by large, the strongest and most widely recognized social network site in the world. As for the second quarter of 2018 Facebook's active users accounted to 2,23 billion worldwide (Statista, 2018). As the number of active users itself is big, the age distribution is showing, that the target group that should be considered when thinking about the actions to be taken in order to address the users' needs, is divided into several importantly different age groups. In this article we would like to take a closer look at the group that constitutes the majority of the Facebook users that is the people in the age range of 11 to 34 – who represent the total number of 65% of all active users, 26% female and 39% male (Statista, 2018). The purpose of this paper is to look into the specifics of the population in question in order to analyse and discuss the various factors that

¹ Robert Witek, e-mail: robert.witek@gmail.com, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8973-3443>

may have impact on the a significant trend to limit the time spent on Facebook or even switch to other social networks instead. Understanding and addressing the needs of the biggest in number for Facebook age group is crucial but doing so in this ever changing environment is a very difficult task. By identifying the elements responsible for this shift of interest we will be able to provide answers to the question how should Facebook change to stay in contact with the users aged 11 to 34. One of the questions is whether or not young people experiencing all the spectrum of changes during puberty period and the time of forming their adult life really find what they expect in this tool for social networking.

In this study we will try to look at available data about the young people's activity on Facebook and their expectations towards social media in general to analyse them and provide answers for the shift in their interest in some aspects of their online activity. By trying to identify the reasons for the loss of interest in Facebook's offer we will make an attempt to draw conclusions on how the offer should change. In search for the paths for further development we will look closer at the social network sites' offer in relation to the expectations of the age group in question and how the members of this group spend their online time generally.

The practical question to this text is what should social media providers look at when designing changes to their tools to better equip them for the imminent and inevitable changes.

Methodology used in this article

The data presented and analysed in this text is mostly statistical data presenting the numbers of Facebook users and how they change both in time and online "space activities". The author looked at the changes in the numbers of active users in a given age group and crossed them with studies on online users' expectations in the field of interest. The data presented provide the information about the amount of time the 11 – 34 age group users spend online and how that time is divided into particular social media activities. Furthermore, a descriptive analysis is provided to explain the numbers and search for insights on future developments for the social media tools in discussion.

The downfall trend for Facebook users

This article will look at different age groups and their specific needs in terms of social media use and try to address the issues of their accessibility, relevance to the discussed age groups requirements as far as these channels are concerned. We will contrast what Facebook has to offer with other social media and by analysing the data cited we shall look for the trends that can provide answers to the trend stated in the introduction to this article. The features offered by Facebook and other social media respond to the changes in the expectations of social media users and analysing the trends can present a panel of actions to be considered by the media providers to allow them to keep their users close. When looking closer just at the 11 – 34 age group totalling to 1,45 billion of active users worldwide it is important to ask whether Facebook is addressing their needs in a manner that satisfies them and creates even more interest on the site within the addressed population. One can easily see that any change in the percentage of users in this group will not be that easily compensated in the same rate of movement in the other age groups that represent the remaining 35% of the total number of Facebook users. Because of the importance of this age group, it is necessary to recognize the trends and foresee any changes in users' behaviour that can lead to the downfall of the number of users or active users. As recent studies show the number of users – especially the youngest ones is falling down. The 2018 will show a decline in the number of Facebook users in the US but one can expect that due to globalisation of media behaviour especially among young generation the trend will be noticeable worldwide. The users loss will differ in numbers depending on the age – with the most substantial decline in the age

group of 11 years old and under to be by 9,3% but the decline in the 12 – 34 years of age group at the rate of 5,7% is also a new phenomenon registered (Emarketer, 2018) as for the first time in the US Facebook history the numbers are on the downfall at such a high rate. The question arises whether this is just a temporal situation or a trend that needs to be further investigated in order to see if Facebook has started losing its attractiveness in this age group, and if yes, what may be identified as the cause or causes of the situation. Whether the competition of other social media that require less input and are far less time consuming is too strong and therefore attract the attention of the age group.

Social media tools and their users

One of the important facts when discussing the 11 – 34 age group is the fact that the majority of them discovered or decided to join the Facebook community, therefore started consuming this medium during their formative years thus, their media related experience will differ from the older generation (Aroldi, et al. 2011). What is to be learnt from this point is that this age group uses a big variety of social media Facebook, being the most popular, followed by: Snapchat, Instagram, YouTube and Twitter (Kallas, 2018). And as the most popular networking sites are constantly changing so is Facebook, with their most recent changes to the Messenger, they want to divert some attention from other popular communicators and therefore keep their users from using alternative media for communication. What was once an integral part of Facebook site, took off in 2014, as a separate app and as much as it was confusing for some of the users at the beginning, is now becoming more popular than Facebook itself, at least in some regions of the world (Press, 2017). What has already been mentioned in the introduction to this text, yet another significantly differentiating factor for this age group as compared to the older users of Facebook, is the fact that the majority of them are known as digital natives (Prensky, 2007) – they were born into the environment of social media – did not have to learn to use them. This has its advantages as well as disadvantages, the biggest advantage being how easy it is for the younger users to adopt and start effectively using a given medium of communication. The biggest disadvantage for some here may be the fact that they did not choose to use a given medium but started using it because of the conformist approach as most of their peers did so. Whereas the older users tend to decide to choose a given social medium based on their needs and are more aware of the function they want a given medium to serve in their lives. And as the level of awareness is higher, having decided to log into Facebook they, on average, use more of its functions as compared to the younger users.

The point that different generations use social media differently is rather clear and needs no deep analysis and explanations. What one can focus on, is why Facebook which offers a wide range of tools like expressing oneself, communication, gaming, newsfeed and others, has started to lose users in the younger generation. As the young generation spends more time being online than the older users we need to look deeper in the way they spend their time and try to fully understand their needs to be able to give answers and try to explain the decline in the number of Facebook users amongst them.

A report presented in 2016 discovered that 32% of teenage social media users spend on average over one hour a day watching video online, what is even more surprising 21% of this population spends over three hours on watching videos online (TargetInternet, 2018). This is a very important factor to be taken into consideration when discussing the issue of the young users of social media. When we compare the number of three hours of online videos watching a day multiplied by seven days a week to the total number of hours that the teenagers spend online a week which is estimated to be 27 hours (Anderson, 2015) we may come to a conclusion that there simply is not much time left for other online activities – at least in the considered group. When we look at the total number of hours a week and remember of schooling time, time for sleep and outdoor activities we may come to a conclusion that there simply is not enough time for the

younger generation to devote to “distractors” on social media. Thus, they become active users in a number of social media apps because their use is more targeted and therefore allows them to use their time more effectively. When they want to spend time watching online videos they turn to YouTube, to exchange pictures and entertain themselves and their peers they turn to Snapchat or Instagram and when they want to communicate they turn to Messenger or Whatsapp for instance. As this may be one of the possible explanations of the decline in the number of users in the young generation we need to look at other aspects of the phenomenon and see how the active Facebook users behave in their natural environment.

Facebook’s offer to the 11 – 34 age group in terms of their expectations

Facebook is a means of communication but moreover, it allows its users to create profiles filled up with whatever sort of content they may feel they want to put in. Since teenage users are constantly searching for their identity (Palermo, 2016) and the social network sites substitute a big part of their social life some of the users think very carefully about the materials they publish on their walls and the sites they decide to “like” and follow. The social networking sites allow to create reality of their users to a certain point but at the same time they allow them to create their online image and this leads us to another important aspect of social media awareness. The reality the users create to be in, the online friends they choose to have or to delete from their profiles, the sites they decide to be a part of, or the online world they choose. The choices they make set them in a given online frame, but they need to think of themselves in the online environment as well, not only as a part of online communities and fan groups. The selection of pictures they post on their walls or the statements they publicly make enable them to present what they stand for and who they want to be viewed as individuals.

Studies conducted among the younger age group of Facebook users prove that they do have an understanding of that fact that they create their online reality both as community members and individuals but the vast majority of them does not create fake images of themselves. On the contrary, researchers from Germany and the US come to a conclusion that most of the Facebook users through their online activity try to express their true identity (Back, et al. 2010). This is a very important finding because it can also add to explaining factors as far as the decline of young generation is concerned. As it should be quite comforting for the older users to have the tool to show and express their identity online and to be able to stay in touch with their keens and friends, it may be quite difficult for the youngsters to have the understanding of the potential on one hand but the demand from Facebook to be fully utilised. The fact that Facebook users - through their profiles - express their actual personalities may be troublesome to the users who are at the stage in their personal development where they are struggling with adolescence. And as they fight their own battle for their identity, they look for idols and communities to relate to – this may be one of the reasons they turn to Facebook in the first place as a medium that offers the widest selection of all sorts of interest groups, fan groups and idols of all types. But as much as Facebook gives opportunities to access all sort of interest areas for the young users it gives a space for self-expression and building up ones identity in terms of the values and beliefs one may hold. For some, this space may be a problematic aspect of using this social medium. The very fact that it holds ones name and allows easy identification of the user to others requires certain level of accountability for the statements and pictures that one publishes but also on the actions that one makes in the online environment that Facebook allows to create. This, during the troubled time of adolescence, may result in some of the users deciding to quit using this means of public identity building. The 21st century online social networking changed the way people construct their identity entirely. Before the introduction of social media people had to actually do something, achieve something in real life to be recognised for their achievements and gain a given social position. Nowadays, using the

social media sites people tend to create their identity by relating to the people, interests groups, idols of their choosing so that they are presented in a given aspect and in a given light – regardless of their real life achievements. The young users may find this part difficult as their ideals are still changing, they are seeking for the values they will hold dear in their lives and that time of their lives is characterised by constant change – thus posting something that others will use to perceive who they are and what they stand for may be just too much for them at that stage of their lives.

Social media teenagers' time coverage

So far, we have investigated two aspects of Facebook reality that may present a problematic issue for the younger generation of users and result in their withdrawal from this social medium. We have looked at the complexity of Facebook as a tool of social media habitat and the aspects of teenage identity struggle as another key player. But what is also worth considering is the fact that social media are used to simply stay in touch with other people (Wersm, 2018). Over 42% of the online social media users say that their primary purpose in being online and actively using social media is to stay in touch with their friends and family and to check on their latest activities. We may now think and look at how teenagers compared to adults spend their time and what activities are the biggest consumers of their time daily. Clearly school and homework would amount to the number of hours per day thus we need to see how they use social media during that time (Shapiro, 2015). As the study shows teenagers spend on average nine hours a day in front of a screen – that is a total number of screen viewing time for all the activities that they have during the day so this includes the schooling hours as well. A surprising 50% of teenagers say that they use social media during doing homework, but they do not see the correlation between being online for social interference and their lower results in terms of homework assessment. This may suggest that the quality of time devoted both on homework but also on social media is poor, as the quality of homework performance is not in the interest of this article we will focus on how this time sharing influences their online activity. Facebook with its complexity requires the users to be aware of their performance and the fact that it is being constantly evaluated by others therefore it needs to be addressed with some level of awareness and consciousness. Teenagers spend their schooling time with their peers who are their friends and in some cases siblings so family members are also accounted for during that time. They do not need to spend quality time in social media on building relations or keeping them as they do so in real life world. For them social media are just an addition to what they can socially achieve so they may do not want to focus on them that much in terms of quality input that Facebook is by some regarded to demand to be fully utilised as an online social networking tool. Another important factor is that social media is strongly influencing our relations with other people and among many other ways in which they are doing so they allow mistakes in evaluating the level of intimacy of a given relationship (Rachna, 2010). Teenagers as a group struggling for their identity may find this aspect of social media relationship building more difficult than other groups and therefore drop on them. Real life relations building makes it easier to erase mistakes and react accordingly as there is room for body language and interpretation of intentions as opposed to virtual reality.

Summary

In this article we have tried to look at some of the aspects that may result in the decline of number of the young generation Facebook users. The phenomenon should be closely observed to identify whether it is a matter of temporal fashion change, a trend that will lead to an emergence of a new social medium site that will try to address the needs of the younger generation more accurately or just a part of the natural evolution cycle that drives the change in every aspect of our lives. We have briefly looked at the aspect of the complexity of the tool as opposed to other means of social media world,

the problems with identity building as a part of Facebook reality and time management issues in terms of using social media and their impact on relationship building aspects. The spectrum of social media has never been wider than what we are experiencing nowadays, the very important aspects of their adaptation to the rapidly changing needs of their users have been addressed in this article only from few angles and to fully understand the trends we need to keep on analysing the data that are available through the social media. As the data analysis is crucial to understanding the symptoms – one should be constantly investigating the changes in the age groups of the users and the way the new generations are consuming social media environment. In this article we wanted to present that understanding the symptoms needs to be accompanied by looking for the cause and here we always need to see how generally the new generation is different in their approach to the world because their approach to social media is strictly related to the way they learn to experience the changing world they come to live in. What should also be considered in addressing the issue of the downfall of the number of Facebook users is the problem of security of data with the very recent security breach that resulted in millions of people being exposed to a situation in which their data could be accessed by parties that were not authorised to do so. Our world is constantly changing and social media will be victims to that change as much as they will lead that change themselves. What we need to remember always is the fact that they should always be subject to our will and our purpose and not the other way round and if there are people deciding to drop from Facebook both their motivation but also their right to do so should be acknowledged. The most important point is that online social networking sites should serve as a tool for developing a better society and promoting individuals potential rather than limit users to their form and capacity, once a person grows beyond a given format they should seek for a medium that suits their needs more accurately.

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