

## **Generation of content-producers? The reading and media production practices of young adults<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract:**

This paper investigates how changes in reading habits and recent developments in computer-mediated communication manifest themselves in the user-generated content production of Finnish young adults. We use the concepts of ‘collective intelligence’ and ‘participatory culture’ as the basis for producing empirical research for the discussion of the idea of ‘active audiences’ in the age of online media. We explore whether there is collective intelligence and participation in our respondents’ own media production and ascertain what media forms they favour. The most common modes of content creation are connected to writing and commenting on blogs and discussion forums, but several other types of media production also show up in our data, such as publishing photos and drawings, transmitting links and content, and writing fan-fiction. However, our study reveals that most of the reading practices of young adults are rather passive or banal everyday media use rather than manifestations of collective intelligence or participatory culture. Then again, the creative user-generated activities are more common in certain recreational communities such as fan clubs.

**Keywords:** user-generated content, participation, collective intelligence, online communities, young adults, Net Generation, Finland.

## Introduction

In recent years there has been a good deal of research on children and young people with regard to how they use the Internet, social media, and digital games (e.g., Livingstone et al., 2011; Rideout et al., 2010; Ito et al., 2010). Various studies (Kangas et al., 2011; Uusitalo et al., 2011; Ito et al., 2010; Noppari et al., 2008) have revealed diversity in children and young people's media activities and also their preferences for multitasking and the simultaneous use of different media. However, some research indicates that the media use of children and young people is not as creative and active as some commentators have suggested (Ito et al., 2010: 39; Buckingham, 2008: 14; Jenkins, 2006: 23). Except for marketing and consumer research (see e.g., Pardee, 2010; Dolliver, 2010; Grønhoj, 2007), there have been relatively few studies on older young adults (aged 20–30), although they are often seen as innovative media users and early adopters of new media.

Our research focuses on young Finnish adults between 18 and 30 years of age, and our data consists of a survey, interviews, and media diaries from a study on the ways in which young adults read a variety of materials, ranging from printed to electronic texts. These young people, often referred to as the Net Generation (N-Gen) or the Digital Generation, have spent their youth surrounded by the Internet, computers, and mobile phones (Tapscott, 1998). The idea of a Net Generation has also raised debate and questions as to whether there really is a generational difference (Buckingham, 2006: 1-13); therefore, we also study the suitability of the term among Finnish young adults.

In our research, content creation is understood broadly as the act of making texts, images, video or such, and publishing it for other people online. Henry Jenkins suggests that 'participatory culture' is something that contrasts with older notions of passive media spectatorship. Rather than seeing media producers and consumers taking separate roles, they could nowadays be seen as participants who actively interact with each other (Jenkins, 2006: 3). Writing on online communities, Jenkins draws on Pierre Lévy's (1997) ideas of knowledge communities that are 'defined through voluntary, temporary and tactical affiliations and reaffirmed through common intellectual enterprises and emotional investments' (Jenkins, 2006: 27). Jenkins himself uses the term 'collective intelligence' for describing the gathering of information and developing ideas collectively in digital social media networks (2006: 52-54).

This paper aims to provide new empirical evidence for the discussion on the idea of the 'active audience'. The primary question in this paper concerns (i) how changes in media use and recent developments in computer-mediated communication can occur in the user-generated content production of young adults. We apply Henry Jenkins' (2006) thoughts on participatory culture and collective intelligence to the empirical data on the young adults' content creation. Hence, we also ask (ii) if collective intelligence and participation are discernible in the respondents' own media production and in what forms these manifest themselves in the interview and survey data. We also compare the respondents to typologies of Web users and participation (Waller, 2012; Kangas et al., 2011).

In the survey, we approached the respondents' content creation through three

questions, asking whether the young adults read blogs or commented on them, wrote on open or closed discussion forums, or published images or videos online. In an open question we also asked if they had other hobbies which included producing media content online or offline. The qualitative data (media diaries, focused interviews, and focus group interviews) yielded more detailed in-depth information on the participation and content production of young adults. Fifteen students of communication studies at the University of Tampere kept media diaries and participated in focused interviews. The three focus groups consisted of a group of Japanese pop culture fans, a group of RPG gamers, and a book club whose members were older than the participants in the other two focus group interviews and did not represent the Net Generation.

The background for this research is multidisciplinary; hence, we take into account research in the fields of media education and literacy, media studies, and communication research. We approach media production and consumption from a reading and text practices point of view (Lankshear and Knobel, 2006), viewing reading as a socio-cultural phenomenon rather than as a private cognitive activity. The reading communities that function in the social media and online environment make possible a transition from an individual culture of reading to shared reading and writing practices (Hartley, 2005: 12). Reading and writing cannot be separated from each other in these communities where commenting, communicating, and the reworking of ideas are combined with various practices of reading.

### **Collective Intelligence and Passive Consumption**

In many social media websites and services, the users produce the content, or at least circulate it from other sites. Social media sites are built on the activity of the users themselves, and this has been said to blur the boundaries between users and producers (Leadbeater, 2008; Tapscott and Williams, 2008; Brown, 2000). Readers of short texts—people who navigate the Web and participate in communities, discussions, and media production as browsers and interactive agents—challenge traditional views of reading and literacy (Gee and Hayes, 2011). As some researchers and literacy theorists (Leu et al., 2004: 12–14; Livingstone, 2002: 229–253; Brown, 2000) have noted, a participatory culture requires multiple or ‘new’ literacies because social and technological environments are changing constantly. Since the early days of the World Wide Web, this has provided a productive platform for hobby communities and a location in which ordinary people can produce and publish their media productions or solve problems together (Gee and Hayes, 2011: 3–4; Jenkins, 2009: 109–125; Consalvo, 2003: 74).

Because the Web environment offers a fairly uncontrolled platform for production and publishing, virtually anyone can become a creator of media content. With the appropriate software and applications, it has become relatively easy to produce and edit text, images, and sound. These possibilities have also led to the Web being described as a communication environment that promotes participation and interaction (e.g., Tapscott and Williams, 2008; Lessig, 2008; Jenkins, 2006; Lessig, 2004).

Collective intelligence<sup>2</sup>, as Henry Jenkins uses the concept, refers to gathering information and developing ideas collectively (Jenkins, 2006: 52–54) using the combined expertise of the group (ibid., 27). In an online environment, reading also changes from immersion in individual works into communication and discussion. Jenkins shows how this practice of collective intelligence happens in online fan communities, such as the spoiler community formed around the reality television show *Survivor* (2006, 28–29). For Pierre Lévy, collective intelligence is constantly enhanced, universally distributed intelligence, coordinated in real time (1997, 13). Nevertheless, the simple availability of many tools for publishing and creative efforts does not automatically make all of us capable media producers; one must also have specialized skills, confidence, and support from the environment. Most of the members of N-Gen are still fairly passive media consumers (see Buckingham, 2008: 14; Jenkins, 2006: 23; Bird, 2003). It has been shown that people do not automatically use the Web in a participatory or creative way. The online environment also offers ‘passive’ consumption of media content, allowing people to read, watch, and browse professionally created products (see Matikainen, 2011: 22–23).

## **Methodology and Data**

In our research we used both quantitative and qualitative methods to ascertain how the reading habits of young adults are interconnected with their media production. The aim of the survey (n=323) was to gain a more general impression of the daily media practices, reading habits, and content production of young adults. The survey yielded quantitative information on the young adults’ media use (e.g., what media devices they habitually use and how much time they spend using different devices and applications). With the fifteen qualitative focused interviews, fifteen media diaries, and three focus group interviews we gathered more specific information on some of these students’ reading, writing, and other forms of media production. The focus groups illustrate the reading and writing practices of specific communities, whereas the focused interviews of students illustrate their daily practices as individual users and producers of media. In the two focus groups where the participants took part in a sub-culture (Japanese pop culture fans, RPG gamers), the participation in online communities and collective peer production was significantly more common than in the survey or interviews with the university students.

The majority of the student respondents were between the ages of 18 and 30. In their current phase of life, studying, hobbies, spending time with friends, consuming popular culture, and finding a profession are topical issues. The research material was collected in the spring of 2011. Young adults (n=323) from upper secondary schools, various university courses and vocational schools in the Tampere region aged 16–35 participated in the survey, most of them being from the University of Tampere (see Appendix 1). Fifteen students with communication as a major or minor subject at the University of Tampere took part in focused interviews, and the same students kept a media diary for five days (from Wednesday to Sunday). The interviews were focused especially on the informants’ personal and social reading practices. Three focus group interviews consisted of groups of Japanese

popular culture fans, role play gamers, and a book club (a total of ten participants). The participants in the first two groups were born between 1986 and 1990; the participants in the latter group were born in the sixties and seventies and therefore not representative of the Net Generation.

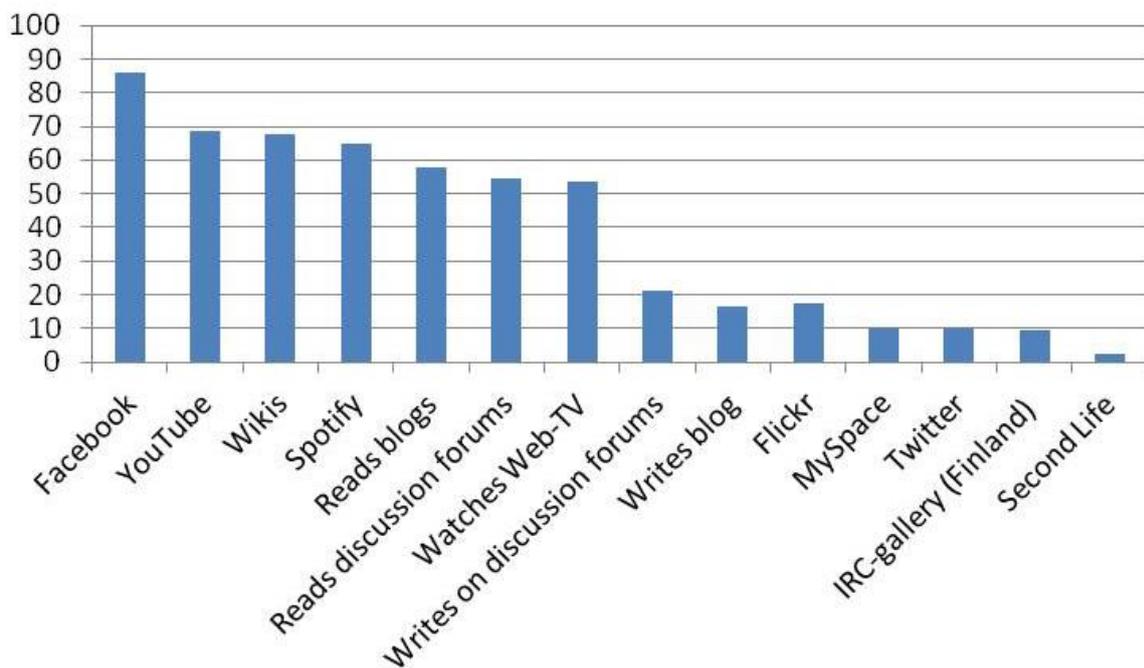
Limitations of the research include the use of a convenience sample in the survey. The survey data are, therefore, not generalizable to the population of young adults in Finland as a whole. Our research is in the nature of an exploratory study into young adults' media use focusing on qualitative findings into different ways of reading and the effects of computer-mediated communication on reading and user-generated content production. Although the data does not include those young adults who are working full-time, living in rural areas, or marginalised outside education or working life, it nevertheless covers the most common life stage of the age group in question in Finland, namely student life, part-time work etc. Moreover, the results concur with earlier findings on media use (Uusitalo et al., 2011; Noppari et al., 2008).

In the following sections, we first explain the results of the survey as background information for these Finnish young adults' content creation. Then, we discuss blogging and other forms of online participation in more detail in light of the survey and focused interviews. Finally, we contemplate the community aspect of the user-generated content production as observed in the focus group interviews. In the conclusion, we consider the results of our empirical analyses in relation to the ideas of collective intelligence and participatory culture.

### **User-generated Content According to the Survey**

It is not entirely clear what is meant by the term 'production' in social media (Matikainen, 2011: 22–23). Are we content-producers when we update our Facebook profiles or write something on an Internet discussion forum? In our survey, for example, almost nine out of ten students named Facebook as an arena of their media participation (see **Figure 1**). In general, those services where use consists more of following content by other users (Facebook, YouTube) were more popular than those that require active content production (blogging or writing on discussion forums). However, the figure does not reveal how many of the users of Facebook or other services also create and post content, whereas for discussion forums and blogs the creation and following of content were differentiated in the questionnaire. On Facebook, it is possible to publish photographs, status updates, comments, and notes. Nevertheless, a Finnish study of Facebook shows that its use consists largely of audience-like practices such as following updates or link suggestions made by other Facebook users rather than of their own content production (Ridell, 2011). In our study also the students interviewed generally stressed that they do not publish so much on Facebook and that they are rather careful about their privacy in social media forums. The same applies to other social media platforms, such as YouTube, wikis, etc., as two thirds of the survey respondents mentioned using these services but only a small minority of these users uploaded their own material online.

The communication consultant Gregor Waller (2012) has described six ‘digital lifestyles’ or Internet user profiles: 1) ‘influencers’ acting as enthusiastic pioneers, 2) ‘communicators’ who want to express themselves and their thoughts in different channels, 3) ‘knowledge-seekers’ for whom the digital culture is mostly a means for learning and information seeking, 4) ‘networkers’ who are mostly interested in building their social relationships, 5) ‘aspirers’ who are only beginning to build their own online spaces, and 6) ‘functionals’ who have a very practical relationship with the Internet. Sonja Kangas and others have made a somewhat similar classification of young people as media culture participants (especially in the social media): developers, critics, collectors, linkers, and consumers (Kangas et al., 2011: 12–15). The developers continually produce and publish content; the critics comment and review content made by others; the collectors gather information and interesting content for their own needs; the linkers get other people to join social media networks and also distribute content, whereas the consumers use the Web actively but do not want to produce or take part in communities as actively as those with different user profiles. One person may have different roles in different services and the passives are the sixth group who do not use the Web at all.

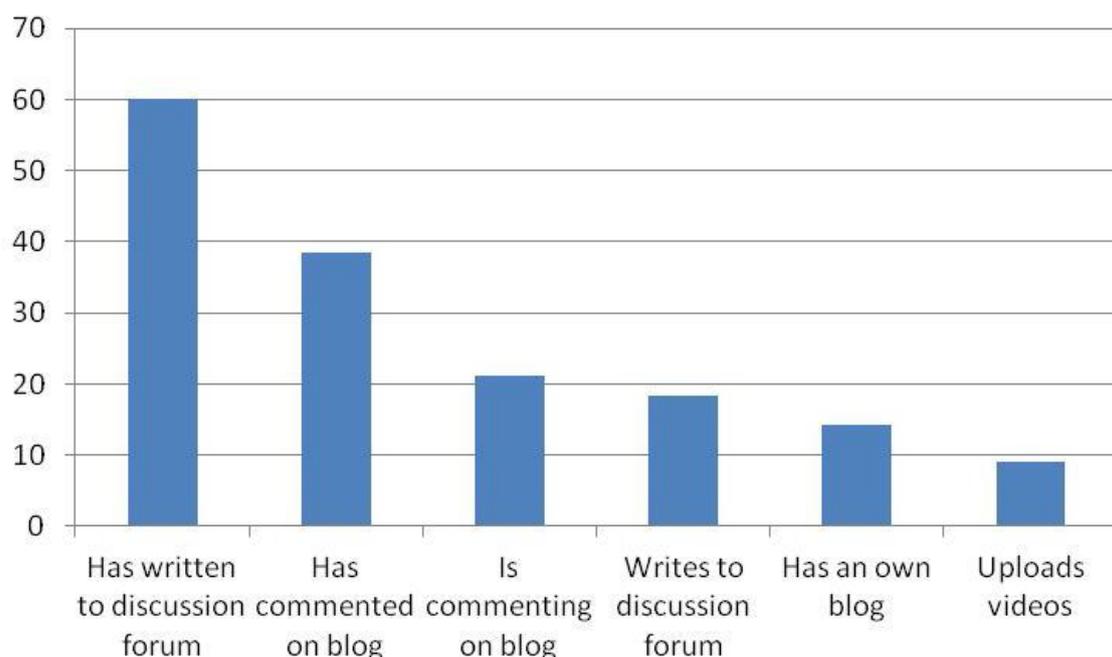


**Figure 1:** Use of social media applications (per cent of survey respondents)

Most of the young adults in our study had fairly good circumstances for producing and publishing various types of material digitally. Virtually all of them (98 per cent) had a personal computer at their disposal. Software applications for listening to music and watching videos (iTunes, Spotify, Windows Media Player) were popular with the respondents, ranking third after the most used applications for word processing and browsing the Web. More than two thirds of the respondents had music and video software,

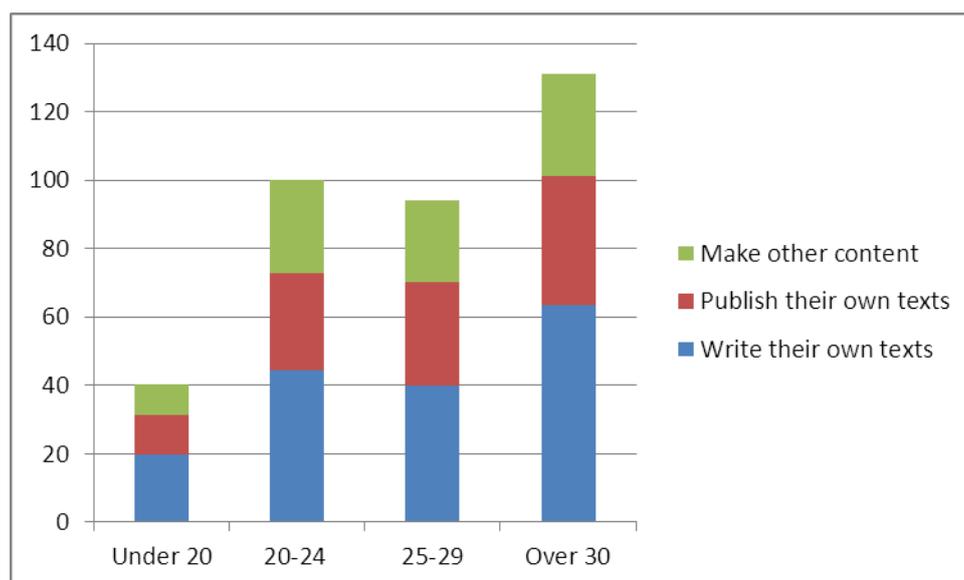
and almost all those who owned a computer also had software for word processing. Naturally, word processors are needed in studies and most home computers include these programs. More advanced media production software was, however, not as common among the respondents; 60 per cent of them had image processing software, and only one third of them had software for desktop publishing or 3D computer graphics. Only one fifth of the respondents had audio editing software on their computers. The respondents were mostly followers of online videos, with only a very small minority of them uploading content to the Internet. Hence, they could be described as ‘consumers’ following Kangas et al. (2011: 12–15). Therefore, most of the respondents who watch videos do not make their own video material and publish it online. This phenomenon has often been referred to as the ‘one per cent rule’ or the ‘90-9-1 rule’ (van Dijck, 2009: 44; Nielsen, 2006), where one per cent of the population creates the content that 99 per cent either actively or passively follow.

The survey elicited the respondents’ views on their own content production through three questions (see **Figure 2**). Keeping in mind the different interpretations of content production, the survey tells us about the respondents’ blog writing and commenting, writing on open or closed discussion forums, and publishing pictures or videos online. With some follow-up questions we hoped to see how the young adults took part in producing online content. In our survey, 60 per cent responded that they had sometimes written on an open discussion forum, but only 18 per cent reported currently writing on discussion forums. Those participating in discussion forums would probably have several user-roles: networker, communicator, information-seeker, and developer as many of the discussion forums have a topic and also some space for open discussion and networking. However, in our survey data, blogging was interestingly a popular social media activity.



**Figure 2:** Content creation in social media (per cent of survey respondents)<sup>3</sup>

In general we found that the media production of young adults is more frequent in our data than in most studies measuring user-generated content in Finland (Statistics Finland, 2010). This may be related to the fact that most of our respondents were students either in upper secondary school, university, or other educational institutions. The humanities and social sciences students especially were prolific and presumably also fluent writers, as they wrote constantly as a part of their studies. Quite surprisingly, the older the respondents were, the more media content they produced (see **Figure 3**). Explanations for this could include increased skills, increased confidence, and possibly even the requirements for studies, hobbies, or friendship groups. Respondents younger than 20 years of age produced less content than the older ones, but they were eager consumers of media (cf. Buckingham, 2008: 14). Most often, the younger respondents still lived in their parents' households where watching television, playing digital games, and consuming entertainment media were the most popular 'reading practices'. Therefore, the younger ones seemed to be more consumers (Kangas et al., 2011), whereas the older young adults could be seen more as communicators, knowledge seekers, and some even as influencers (Waller, 2012).



**Figure 3:** Students of different ages as content-creators (number of survey respondents in the age group, n=323)

### **Blogging as a Special Form of Activity**

In our study, young adults were active writers, with 38 per cent of the survey respondents writing texts unrelated to their studies. According to the open-ended questions, these texts were prose or other fictional texts, diaries, poetry, song lyrics, blog texts, and journalistic texts. Prose was the most popular text genre, but the differences between genres were very small. However, not all of this text production was meant to be published; 22 per cent said they published their texts, most often in their own blogs, various papers, the Internet, or fan-fiction forums. Publishing in papers is explained, to an extent, by the fact that some of

the respondents were journalism students. Other places for publishing were Facebook, discussion forums, band gigs and recordings (for song lyrics), websites, online papers, books, and social media. Some of the respondents mentioned they only publish for 'a few people' or 'for friends'. The writers in our data would best fit into the communicator (Waller, 2012) or developer categories (Kangas et al., 2011).

Depending on the question, 60 to 70 per cent of our survey respondents reported that they had read blogs or read blogs regularly, and 15 to 20 per cent reported writing blogs. Around 40 to 65 per cent of young adults in the general population had read blogs (Statistics Finland, 2010), so in our data the young students were, by Finnish standards, very active blog readers and relatively active bloggers. The popularity of blogging can be explained at least partly by the background of the survey respondents in humanities and social sciences, but it can also be connected to the age group of young adults as a transition group between older generations familiar with print media and younger 'digital natives' who have grown up in the hectic communication environment of mobile technology.

Not surprisingly, in our survey, students of media and communication were the most active bloggers. Women also favoured blogs more than men, whereas men interested in technology favoured discussion forums more than the average of all students. This result is contrary to the results of Statistics Finland where a gender difference in reading blogs and discussion forums was not found, although men were more active in following online content daily (Statistics Finland, 2010). In our survey, students of computer science were active bloggers, but even more active in discussion forums. They followed Internet discussions, but their own content creation was mostly for closed discussion forums, and so they were even more concerned about their privacy than other students.

Open-ended questions in the survey and the interviews revealed that the students' blogs were concerned with either their hobbies or personal interests or, alternatively, blogs were diary-like in form and aimed at friends and relatives. Such blogs included for example travel blogs written during a student exchange year.

I wrote [a blog] in the autumn when I was travelling in Africa. I started a week before the trip and quit before Christmas when I came home. (Interviewee 15, female, 26)

I write a blog mainly when I'm abroad or travelling, and then I write it for my mother and friends, to tell that everything is okay and what we've been doing. (Interviewee 4, female, 25)

Some used their blog as a writing exercise or for a combination of the above mentioned purposes. Following Janne Matikainen's (2009) three motives for active blogging, namely, developing the Web and oneself, a desire to tell about oneself, and sharing content (72–73), the students' blog writing, or life-publishing, as Sari Östman (2011) describes blogging,

seems to be mostly self-development and communication with others. Developing the Web and a desire to tell about oneself were not especially prominent in the interviews.

Some of the respondents mentioned the topic of their blog. According to the survey responses, the variation in blog topics is great. The answers reflect what Marika Lüders, Lin Prøitz, and Terje Rasmussen (2010) have claimed—blogs should not be seen as a genre but as a medium. They see genre as defined more by the content than the format. The answers concerning blogs can be divided into three categories: 1) a blog without mentioning the topic, 2) a blog as a contact channel between friends, and 3) a blog about a specific topic. Blogs in the third category can include some of the somewhat established blog genres, such as lifestyle blogs, travel blogs, and craft blogs. Some of the blog topics mentioned were, for example, dogs, baking, and films. Some respondents used blogs for keeping in touch with friends and relatives living far away, and sometimes these blogs were shared with more than one contributor. The following interview quotes exemplify the special topics of the students' blogs.

I train dogs with positive reinforcement, usually with a clicker, and when it became more of a mission for me and I wanted to spread awareness, the ambition with the videos, and all that, grew. I wanted to make them good so that people can learn from them and see that dogs can be trained otherwise than by hitting them and by dominating. (Interviewee 6, female, 25)

I write a wedding blog because my parents live far away and my sister and maid of honour live far, so through the blog I've been able to maintain the discussion and plan everything. (Interviewee 11, female, 24)

People have gravitated from personal diary-like blogs towards blogs around a certain topic that may include personal elements, just like an online diary, but focused on a specific theme. Thus, according to our study, the main function of blogs has turned towards subjects around a certain theme since Facebook and other community sites have, at least partly, replaced them as a forum for interpersonal communication. The specialization of blogs may also reflect the main change in blogs in recent years, the professionalization of the blogosphere (Lövheim, 2011). Blogs are becoming more and more professional in Finland too, as the research on Finnish fashion blogs has demonstrated (Noppiari and Hautakangas, 2012). The professionalization of blogs decreases their use as a channel for personal communication and emphasizes them as sources of information on a specific topic.

In our survey, book ownership did not correlate with blogging or activity in discussion forums. However, blog reading was positively correlated with reading books; especially active readers of fiction read blogs a little more than the other respondents. In general, according to the survey, active readers seem also to be active in the online environment. However, in the focused interviews, the students' own text production was low and mostly blog writing, diary writing, or writing to community-related sites, such as the websites of

certain associations. Being mostly students of media and communication, the interviewees wrote rather professional journalistic texts than other, more informal text forms. None of the fifteen people in the focused interviews mentioned taking part in fan communities that produced content such as fan-fiction.

The bloggers exemplified the user types of communicator and developer, sometimes even the critic or the collector, when commenting on other people's blogs and writing about a specific topic of importance to them. In many recreational or fan communities the community itself, along with the friendships formed, were more important than the online communication (Nikunen, 2005), so the role of the participant was more that of a networker than a communicator.

### **Other Forms of Online Participation**

Young adults write many kinds of texts, of which only some are meant to be public. Their writing can be seen as an example of participatory culture, but in many cases it is more of an individual than a collective activity. According to our survey, activities in wikis (e.g., Wikipedia, Wikispaces, and OpenWiki) were relatively little used among these young adults, and therefore, it is not so apt to describe their media use in terms of collective intelligence. Around one fifth of the survey respondents reported that they make and distribute their own media content. All in all, the number of respondents publishing prominent content was relatively small, which also deflates the idea of participatory culture as something typical for N-Gen. However, this is still more people contributing than usual, for example compared to the often cited 'one per cent rule'. Participatory culture as an experience is not exclusive to one generation, but has been talked about as something that the members of N-Gen are accustomed to (Tapscott and Williams, 2008: 54).

The people involved in the survey preferred open forums and blogs to closed ones, and the majority of their involvement was 'passive' consumption rather than active content production. Hence, the idea of the importance of social media communities may be overestimated, and co-creation or community practices did not feature prominently in the survey results. In the focused interviews, some of the interviewees reported actively reading different online texts, such as blogs and columns, although they did not especially emphasize the social aspects of reading. According to our survey, Facebook was the most common social networking site, and in interviews, commenting and writing on Facebook was seen more as daily discussion than media production (cf. Ridell, 2011; Ito et al., 2010: 39; boyd, 2008). For instance, one interviewee said,

And then one thing about Facebook comes to mind, I have a lot of friends abroad, people I've met while travelling, who live there or are foreigners and some who are doing a student exchange. When I was in exchange myself the ease of communication was even a bigger motivator for using it. (Interviewee 9, female, 25)

The majority of our young adults did not produce their own content for online communities, but creative hobbies, such as photography, image processing and publishing them online, outside of Facebook, were relatively popular. Some published pictures only for friends, but others also published them world-wide in services such as Flickr. Those who watched the most television produced the least material, and the most active content producers were moderate TV viewers. Of those who watched relatively much or very much television, less than six per cent published their own texts and seven per cent produced other media content. These figures are significantly smaller than the previously mentioned averages of content production (one fifth of all survey respondents). In the groups of active content producers, media production is more common and there are not so many heavy television users. This is related to age because upper secondary school students watched a lot of television, but produced less of their own online material than the university students.

Alongside photography, composing and playing music was a relatively popular hobby. Some of the music enthusiasts published their demos and songs online in places such as MySpace and YouTube, as well as some Finnish music services. Some mentioned being active in music sub-cultures, maintaining an Internet radio and making podcasts as their media production. Making videos and graphic art were not as common hobbies as photography and music. The students' video productions included short films, YouTube videos, art, or making music videos. Fine art could include publishing drawings online (in places such as DeviantArt) or making computer graphics. In addition to these production formats, some mentioned content production related to studies, such as writing articles, working as a journalist or in film and television productions, and translating various texts.

All the forms of content production above, however, were quite traditional individual endeavours in which online communities merely provided the forum for publishing and getting feedback, rather than a site for genuine collective co-production. Even if commenting is an essential part of these forums, their content production resembles more traditional one-to-many production than the practices of 'collective intelligence' or collaborative content production. The latter activities emerged more clearly in the analysis of the interviews with the focus groups where like-minded individuals had created a relatively restricted online community for their bottom-up peer production purposes and communication between friends.

### **Content Production in the Focus Group Interviews**

Contrary to our initial expectations, the community aspect of user-generated content did not emerge in the survey or the focused interviews where the community practices seemed rather more related to spending time and communicating together or just having fun than collecting and circulating information (cf. Ito et al., 2010) or creating something new.

I do, in a way, passively use it [Facebook]. I do read what other people post there, but I don't really participate myself by commenting or producing my

own texts. So my social media use is pretty passive, I guess. (Interviewee 14, female, 23)

In the light of this study, to say that the whole generation is a 'generation of collaborators' (Tapscott and Williams, 2008: 54) would be a gross overestimate. Although the premise for online communication is always in some ways collaborative, at least at the level of online discussions, our survey results do not permit a conclusion on how the respondents may use collective intelligence, for example, in the discussion forums. One reason for the absence of collaborative practices in the general data from the students could prove to be the naturalness of these processes (cf. Ito et al., 2010: 246; Tapscott, 1998: 40). For most, the Internet is a medium like any other and the naturalness and banality of its use (Buckingham, 2008: 14–15; Herring, 2008: 77) was apparent in our data where most of the online participation consisted of 'mundane forms of communication and information retrieval' (Buckingham, 2006: 10).

I start the morning, as usual, by browsing online news. I also check my email. In Facebook I reply to a message from a friend. I'm going to work today so I don't have a lot of time for surfing on the Web. (Media diary, female, 24)

Communication via the Web is for some 'as natural as breathing' (Tapscott, 1998: 40). However, being an active Internet user does not automatically mean contributing to discussions or producing content, but instead the active users may be consumers (Kangas et al., 2011) and knowledge seekers (Waller, 2012) who read, browse the Web, and watch videos.

The content production of the focus groups differed from that reported in the general survey and interview data. All three focus groups interviewed (the book club, the Japanese pop culture fans, and the RPG gamers) shared the practice of reading different types of texts and discussing and commenting on them. For the people in these groups, the texts represent, besides a shared resource, a common 'meaning universe'. Some of the group members also produced their own texts. The online participation of young people has been divided into friendship-driven and interest-driven participation (Ito et al., 2010: 15–18). All the focus groups combined both of these motives and also arose out of the participants' own interest in the topic. The groups included a good deal of enthusiasm and a desire to share experiences with others and could therefore be seen as quite cohesive and intensive communities. The communities served as a place for reflection of experiences and identities. All the communities were also relatively small and closed groups where many of the members knew each other (cf. Brint, 2001), so they could also be seen as groups of friends.

The members of the book club were older than the interviewees in the other groups, and the group also differed from the other two groups in that it met fairly infrequently and always face-to-face. In the other two groups, constant online communication was an

integral part of the community activities. The participants communicated online on a daily basis. The two communities of younger interviewees also had members who were online acquaintances, and the virtual dimension was all in all very important in these groups.

Well, IRC, yes, we used to have an IRC channel for a group of friends in secondary school, and since then I've pretty much stayed there. (Respondent 2, focus group 1, male, 24)

The book club also differed from the other two focus groups in its media production practices. Only one of the members of the book club reported publishing online and taking part in discussion forums or online community discussions. His media production was not related to the book club, but to his own hobbies and work. The other members of the book club were more traditional in their media production and the production was related to their home or working lives. The members of the other two communities, the role play gamers (RPG) and the fans of Japanese popular culture, were younger than the people in the book club. They had started using the Web as adolescents, whereas the members of the book club had started to use the Web later, typically in early adulthood at university. This difference produced a different kind of approach to the Web; whereas the book club members were mostly functionals (Waller, 2012), the members of the other two recreational communities could be seen as communicators, networkers, developers, and even influencers; The active minority of the 'usual suspects' (Buckingham, 2008: 15) with access, interest, and potential for online content creation. Although all the focus group participants were fairly skilled Web users and the Internet had become an important medium for them, the younger interviewees practically lived their lives online. For them the Web was a place where most of the communication, collaboration, information gathering, and entertainment took place (see e.g., Matikainen, 2011: 26). As one respondent said,

Online games, especially the ones like World of Warcraft, they take a lot of effort if you seriously start to play. I've sometimes spent from six to eight hours per day on it, but not so much anymore. (Respondent 2, focus group 1, male, 24)

Nevertheless, the interviewees did not perceive anything special in their own content production. For them, online participation was an integral part of everyday life, a form of communication among peers that they did not specify as their own production (cf. Ito et al., 2010: 251). The naturalness of online media use and the fluidity of boundaries of consumption and production (Brown, 2000) also make the practices difficult to pinpoint. The most common forms of participation in the fan and RPG groups were playing games and taking part in online discussions, but many of these young adults also took part in making their own media productions. Many of the focus group participants produced pictures and distributed them online. Two of them were interested in photography and some were

enthusiastic artists, publishing drawings online. The role play gamers also produced texts for online distribution, one as fan-fiction and as a blog, the other as an online diary. This writing included some community elements, so that even the themes and points of view for the fan-fiction stories could be community based and created collaboratively (cf. Lee, 2011).

People make lists with topics and then you write based on that. I've been able to make quite a few [fan-fiction stories] that way. (Respondent 2, focus group 2, female, 20)

I have met, or I know most of these friends through the Internet, but I have then met some of them, mostly Finnish people, but I've met a lot of foreign people too, later. (Respondent 1, focus group 2, female, 25)

Therefore, the focus group interviews best represent knowledge communities (Jenkins, 2006: 27) in our study, and the collaborative fan-fiction stories can also be seen as a form of collective intelligence in action. For the young adults in the two focus groups, the Web represented a space for active participation, where something should be 'going on' all the time.

## **Conclusions**

In their book *Wikinomics*, Don Tapscott and Anthony D. Williams (2008) describe the consequences and possibilities of 'many-to-many' collaboration and networking for businesses and working life in general. They posit that a democratic revolution will evolve with a new participatory culture, and they refer to this as 'wikinomics', a metaphor for a new era of collaboration and participation and a process where the rise of the Net Generation and participatory economy may also create changes in the workplace (Tapscott and Williams, 2008: 18). The term 'participatory economy' is used to describe the collectively produced, shared, and consumed items in the social media, many-to-many distribution, and networking. Tapscott and Williams (2008) have a very positive view of the future when the collaborative and communal workings of N-Gen start to take place in businesses and society in general.

Sometimes the emphasis on collective intelligence is seen as a manifestation of what is called the 'hive mind', shared beliefs and attitudes that serve as a unifying force within a group of people. Jaron Lanier (2010), for example, criticizes the advocates of cloud services and social networking sites who, in his opinion, ignore individuals in favour of the hive mind. In his criticism of Web 2.0 development, Lanier sees a danger where, by emphasizing the crowd and the hive mind, personality, individuality, and humanist values may be forgotten and the opinion of the masses takes over. Robert W. Gehl (2011) also notes that while Web 2.0 puts emphasis on the wisdom of crowds, the objective of commercial Web 2.0 sites is most often to capture the processing power and the time of their users, while collecting their data as well. Lanier (2010) highlights preserving personality and culture in the online

environment instead of encouraging herd-like behaviour (16–22). He refers to Facebook as organizing people into multiple-choice identities and to Wikipedia as something that strives to remove opinions altogether (60), using it as a prime example of the hive mind. In this respect, social networking sites could be named, in the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman's terminology 'cloakroom communities' (Bauman 2000: 199–201) where people come together for short periods of time around a common cause. In his criticism of Don Tapscott's book, *Growing Up Digital* (1998), David Buckingham (2006) sees this ethos as 'cyber-libertarianism' where technology functions as an autonomous force outside human society.

Lanier and Gehl's criticism seems to be aimed at certain commercial Web 2.0 applications (see also Hinton and Hjorth, 2013: 25–29). There is, however, more to peer production and collective intelligence in many discussion forums, fan-fiction sites, and other independent areas of content production that are mostly regulated by the users themselves. A distinction could be made between often short-lived and corporate-based social networking sites that usually feed networks with loose ties and cloakroom communities and those of committed bottom-up peer communities, for the most part controlled by the members themselves. There seem to be two cultures for using the Web 2.0 services, one a shallow one and the other a committed and personal one that forms relatively strong ties (cf. Hodkinson, 2007; Hinton and Hjorth, 2013: 43–44). All in all, the issue of who controls the environment in which all this sharing and collaborating takes place is an important one (see Gehl, 2011).

According to this empirical research, collective intelligence seems to be fairly rare. Most often it can be seen in communities such as certain fan cultures. In our opinion, for collective intelligence to function, a certain degree of freedom and self-organization is needed, as in Wikipedia or the *Survivor* spoiler community (Jenkins, 2006) as opposed to institutionally controlled platforms. Pierre Lévy (1997) sees collective intelligence as something that is aimed at 'the mutual recognition and enrichment of individuals' (13). In this study, the majority of online participation was revealed to be linked to commercial Web 2.0 applications and the communicative practices of social media, whereas a minority of it could be categorized as original content production or committed peer-community participation. Most of the content creation and online participation consisted of banal everyday activities (cf. Buckingham, 2008; Buckingham, 2006), such as chatting on Facebook or checking online news. Structurally limited and commercially controlled online spaces such as Facebook (boyd, 2008) may not encourage collective intelligence, but rather impede it. It became clear that the extensive use of computers and social media correlates with the participation and production of media content because media production is nowadays most often something created and distributed via the computer.

The online media use practices of young adults in this study are fairly fragmented between blogs, discussion forums, and other sites, although at the time of the survey Facebook was clearly the dominant online space for the students. Taking into account the different platforms and diverse use cultures of social media sites might help in making sense of what user-generated content production is in these different services. As Joseph Turow

(2012) has pointed out, the online advertisers increasingly construct audiences, and users in general are not very aware of the data-collecting practices in different services. An important consideration is whether the online audiences and users are empowered (Jenkins, 2006) or rather sold as audiences (Turow, 2012) for the media elite in the name of cyber-libertarianism (Buckingham, 2006). Members of the Net Generation actively use different Web services in their everyday lives, but they are cautious of speaking of the sites they use as communities.

The more genuine online communities, in my opinion, are found in online forums, where there may be a very tight group of people, sometimes only 10–20 people, who have posted very much, done things in real life also. (Respondent 2, focus group 1, male, 24)

As Internet user types defined in earlier research (Waller, 2012; Kangas et al., 2011), the younger people in this study would seem to be mostly consumers and networkers, whereas the older ones are mostly communicators, but also developers and networkers with minorities in the other user types described.

The young adults in this study have relatively good settings for creating and distributing their own media content. Their media production is more frequent than in most Finnish studies measuring user-generated content production and their own content production also increased with age. The respondents' student status explains some of the results and, predictably, communication and media students as well as students of computer science were the most prolific content producers. The students read texts both online and offline and are fairly active bloggers. Writing on discussion forums is also a common form of online media use among the students as is writing in general. The use of blogs and discussion forums could be seen as exemplifying participation but not so much the practice of collective intelligence (Jenkins, 2006; Lévy, 1997). The respondents did not emphasize the community aspect of their online participation, but writing was seen more as an individual pursuit. The students' blogging was mostly for self-development and communication with others (Matikainen, 2009: 72–73). Less popular forms of content production were photography, music, and film making. The use of wikis, which best represents collective intelligence (Tapscott and Williams, 2008), was very rare. The communal writing practices that could be described as collective intelligence were, therefore, not prominent in the focused interviews or in the survey.

The participation that has been understood as a characteristic of the Net Generation does not seem to be an experience that resonates with most members of the N-Gen. User-generated content is often connected to certain community practices, which is especially obvious in the focus group interviews with the two recreational communities of Japanese popular culture enthusiasts and role play gamers. There, the media production of the participants was mostly somehow related to their interests in the recreational community. There are changes in the generations of media users, but these are gradual rather than

sudden (cf. Buckingham, 2006). This research confirms that online content production is mostly in the hands of the 'usual suspects' (Buckingham, 2008: 15), the one per cent who create the content (van Dijck, 2009: 44) or in this case, the 15 to 20 per cent of students who write blogs. Therefore, the activity of the special groups of active producers in recreational communities or sub-cultures cannot be generalized to the whole age group.

The N-Gen focus group members lived their day-to-day lives in a participatory culture where they used many ways to take part in online activities. The fan groups were actively involved in a participatory culture; they took part in online communities, discussions, read and kept blogs, and shared visual materials online. Here, the reading communities of the Net Generation were different from the book club of older readers who were more traditional in their media use. The 86 per cent of the young adults who had created a Facebook account were not active participants in the sense described by Henry Jenkins. The content production of young adults in general was more traditional one-to-many publishing rather than collaborative efforts.

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## Appendix 1.

**Table 1:** Survey respondents (n=323)

Age	Female	Male	Universities	Upper secondary schools	Vocational schools	Other
Under 20	54	34	-	85	-	3
20–24	108	45	134	7	8	4
25–29	35	17	46	2	4	-
Over 30	15	15	24	4	2	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>212</b>	<b>111</b>	<b>204</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>7</b>

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> The article is based on a research project ‘New reading communities, new modes of reading’ funded by the Helsingin Sanomat Foundation in 2010–2012 and carried out in the Tampere Research Centre for Journalism, Media and Communication COMET, University of Tampere.

<sup>2</sup> Before research on fan cultures and describing shared human knowledge (e.g., Wikipedia), the concept of collective intelligence was used in biology, mathematics, and robotics either as ‘swarm intelligence’ or ‘collective intelligence’ (Beni and Wang, 1993; Krause et al., 2010) in describing how a group of animals works for a shared goal. Our use of the terminology refers to the former fan studies use of the concept.

<sup>3</sup> The amount of users writing to discussion forums in this question is somewhat smaller when compared with **Figure 1**. The practice of writing on discussion forums was addressed in two different questions, which produced slightly different results, 21 and 18 per cent, respectively.