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Social Media use and Covid-19 in Higher Education:
Generation Z versus Millennials

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Abstract

This study focuses on the pandemic period, during which the relationship between social media and education appears to have been redefined. Due to the pandemic and the extensive liquidity, social media and emergency distance learning and teaching became entrenched. The result of the successive processes that were taking place was the use of different social media as tools, in order to carry out the educational process, which had the students of the Universities. The question that arises concerns the reasons for the use of social media during the pandemic, as well as the contribution to the public sphere. The present study aims to contribute to the discussion on the measures taken and amended at regular intervals regarding the provisions of emergency distance learning and teaching and how they deal with this hybrid process in Higher Education during the pandemic. Another question that this paper aims to answer is whether Millennials could cope with a similar situation and engage in emergency learning and teaching, such as Generation Z - according to the results of this study. Its significance is also enhanced by the fact that according to recent research generation Z, young students currently in the amphitheater, and subsequently future teachers (undergraduate students studying in education sciences) are particularly familiar and well prepared for the use of new technologies. This is the main reason that the sample was selected from the university student population. More concretely, our research is implemented using techniques from the multi-method approach toolkit – as research data collection tools, the questionnaire and the semi-structured interview were used. The sample of the survey includes future teachers – undergraduate students of the Department of Education Sciences and Social Work of the University of Patras. More specifically, 145 students participated, and sampling was carried out between March and May 2020. Regarding the Millennials, the 2010 sample includes 55 students who studied in the same department and University as the 2020 sample participants. We will proceed with a comparative approach of the two samples to clarify our goal. As a critical finding of this study, we can present the successful adaptation of Generation Z to emergency distance learning and teaching and, at the same time, the possible weakness of Millennials in a similar case.

Keywords
Education, social media, pandemic, covid-19, university students.

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1. "Crisis continuum": The Millennials, the Generation Z and the Greek Higher Education Area (GHEA)

Under the consequences of the debt crisis, the daily situation in Greek society is -since 2009-characterized mainly by the phenomena of liquidity and risk. As a result, Greek scholars refer to a common framework of renegotiation and reorientation of identities as liquidity and risk have been important emerging features of the ongoing crisis since 2009.

The place of analysis is common: the downturn in the international and European economies has highlighted several contradictions at the level of national economies as well as in the overall structure of the European Union. Particularly important is the state's withdrawal from critical areas such as education.

So in the fields of education and Health, the social subject becomes a customer/consumer with implications for identity consolidation, while dynamic management emphasizes the issues of efficiency and effectiveness. and based on the logic of the Market (Gouga 2021; Ball 2008).

Thus, in the context of the current study, this period characterized by the SARS Covid-19 pandemic crisis, can be considered as a time frame, as a framework for understanding and interpreting the actions of social subjects, where the pandemic crisis followed the refugee and the Greek socio-economic debt crisis.

Before further analysis, we wish to introduce the terms Generation Z and Millennials and approach them as we mean them here. Generation Z people were born in the 1990s, and their childhood is traced back to the 2000s (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008; Tapscott, 2008). This generation not only share the information offered by the internet, but at the same time, they are co-creators of the content provided (Jones et al., 2010). Probably, this generation is the most specialized and better-educated compared to each other. In addition, it seems to be characterized by an effortless transition from the physical to the digital world. Consequently, the digital world is becoming very familiar, and people of this generation are dealing with it and the physical one. This Generation Z may spend its youth and adulthood in an era of economic and social renewal. (Dolot, 2018; Eddy & McGinnis Johnson, 2015).

Millennials are the people who lived through the financial crisis, the refugee crisis, and the health crisis. They had intense experiences of these crises, and almost all

the years of their lives are faced with a crisis at regular intervals - as paradoxical as it sounds.

The separation of generations is a tricky part of any research. The approach to this research is chronological but considers both political and economic developments. To begin with, Millennials were born in the 1980s or later and entered the job market in the 2000s. They are more educated than previous generations, acquired knowledge of New Technologies, and become accustomed to social media in their lives. The Millennials came of age in the 2000s and entered the labor market where normalcy had been restored. But again this generation experienced growing uncertainty as a result of the financial crisis that began in late 2008 (Pyöriä et al., 2017). We must point out that from the economic crisis of 2008 until today, the Greek economy does not seem to be recovering significantly, while unemployment remains at very high levels.

But "the continuum of crises" as we describe it above, is not only economic. As the SARS-Covid 2 crisis has highlighted the transformation of the Greek Welfare State that has been underfunded for decades, the "Crisis Continuum" is also a crisis of trust in scientific reason and institutional reason, transforming the economic crisis into a crisis of democracy (Gouga & Kamarianos 2011; Eurobarometer 2021). On the other hand, the economic, educational, social and political importance of the digital machine[5] (in our case the social media), emerged as significant to the extent that digital networking platforms such as Facebook or Instagram become social environments, in contradiction to what we thought until now as for decades it has been commonplace that these digital tools promote uncertainty, and, most of all, constant change (Clark, 1996).

The transformation of the European welfare state has been a common topic of Greek and international literature since the 1970s. During the period of the '90s, the debate at the level of European institutions was characterized by the White Paper on social policy. The decline of the welfare state is directly linked to deregulation, liquidity, privatization, and finally the consolidation of a differentiated digital capitalist model of production (Gouga & Kamarianos 2020; Pace 2018; European Council 2000; Skamnakis 2011; Olssen & Peters, 2005).

Contributing to this debate, under the weight of the repercussions of the crisis, J. Habermas raised the question of the economic determinism of social policy - and

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[5] We use the term Digital Machine according the theoretical framework of Deleuze and Guattari For more see : Evens A (2010) Digital ontology and example. In: Gaffney P (ed.) The Force of the Virtual: Deleuze, Science, and Philosophy. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 147–168.

therefore of educational policy - under the hegemony of the market space and the relevant regulatory reason produced (Habermas 2012; Olssen & Peters, 2005). More specifically, Habermas in his writings redefined the issue of the debt crisis as a European problem, which concerns the quality and social cohesion of Western societies (Habermas 2012). As a consequence of the crisis, the amphitheater changes from one relatively "closed and stable framework of a pedagogic relation" both concerning its material institution and to its symbolic meaning, into a changing context of actions with strong elements of risk for the success of subjective expectations.

In conclusion, as it appears from according to the international and Greek literature, the "Crisis Continuum" (debt crisis-refugee crisis-covid-19 crisis) has a direct impact on the transformation of the welfare state factors such as education which has subsequent implications recorded in the international and Greek literature, has important effects especially on young people (Gouga 2021; Kamarianos, Kyridis, Fotopoulos & Chalkiotis 2019).

More concretely the debate about the underfunding of the Greek Higher Education Area is not new.[6] Furthermore, the Greek Higher Education Area as well as the European Higher Education systems all over Europe have been going through considerable changes because of the recent European economic and health crisis (Covid-19). The changes because of the "crisis continuum" were much more aggravating in Greek Higher Education (Gouga & Kamarianos 2020).

Society locally, as well as at a supranational level, seems to be threatened by serious crises that emerge at different points in time. Crises vary, as they may come from acts of man, but they may be the result of the processes of nature. Some crises can last for a short time, while others for several years. They may affect every day social life in a country or even have a global reach. In the event of a crisis emerging with some of the features we have just mentioned, then social media acquire special weight and dynamics as to the citizen and the benefits that exist towards him.

In the context of COVID-19, many institutions and companies, both in the public and private sector, proceeded to provide their services via the internet and in particular, social media was used as a tool to achieve transmitter – receiver contact. The COVID-19 pandemic brought to light the fact that there was a need to develop an integrated

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[6] For more see: Kamarianos, Kyridis, Fotopoulos & Chalkiotis 2019.

strategy for emergency distance learning and teaching (the so-called "telework") and at the same time to exploit applications that can assist in this route. Some distance learning models that were thought to be ideal and intended for future use now needed to operate within the unprecedented framework introduced by the COVID-19 pandemic.

We note that in Greece, universities stopped their formal operation and in-person lectures, following government orders, in March 2020. While until today, an effort has been made to bring Higher Education back to normality through local or national traffic bans, forcing university institutions into a perpetual cycle, which as a starting point carries distance education and as a point of completion the in-person education – as a point of return to normality.

However, what we mentioned in the previous paragraphs raises several questions, both about the experience of students and teachers in terms of educational work, and about the future of Higher Education and more focused, about how it will be provided and about the tools that will be used to implement this process. Throughout this period and up to the present time, we must note the significant difficulties encountered by the social subject, the recriminations observed, both at the level of so-called, and at the level of acts, as well as the short-term or even long-term effects outlined (Williamson et al., 2020). These are already being identified and are likely to be intensified in society (at the macro level), but also in education (at the micro level).

2. Generation Z's intimacy with social media and new technologies

Generation Z was born and raised in a completely different environment compared to Millennials. As her experiences are recorded the most radical changes that have occurred in the century, such as the internet, smart phones, laptops, freely available networks in a wide area, as well as a variety of digital media. It seems that for this generation it was almost a given that it would take an active part in social and economic renewal. The young people of Generation Z perceive the digital world as something natural, being able to move from it to the physical world and vice versa with ease. Still, they can instantly find information and share it. The communication between them is continuous, since social media exist, and their social relations develop basically through them. The most distinctive feature of this generation in the context of the digital world

is perhaps that it not only uses the internet but creates the content that is shared and has control over it (Dolot, 2018).

Recent research in the field of Higher Education in Greece confirms in the best possible way what we have mentioned in the previous paragraphs of this section. It became obvious that students responded successfully to the new circumstances posed by the pandemic in terms of new technologies, since they themselves used electronic/digital media and before the pandemic, shifting to a small extent their daily digital habits amid the pandemic. Familiarity with technology seems to have as a starting point in their childhood, with most of the participants stating that they have smartphones and internet connection several years before they are admitted to Higher Education (Kamarianos, Adamopoulou, Lambropoulos & Stamelos, 2020). In the context of Greek Higher Education, another survey was conducted, in which it is noted that most participants in distance courses did not experience any difficulties and did not consider the transition to digital teaching as an issue (Karalis & Raikou, 2020).

Therefore, there are several researchers at the international and Greek level, who through the findings that have emerged from studies they have conducted, argue that this generation does have high-level skills in managing the digital world and treats it essentially as a world that complements the physical.

In addition, the pandemic crisis has emphatically highlighted pre-existing educational inequalities. According to Zagos et al. (2021) there are statistically significant differences between individuals depending on their demographic and social characteristics.

3. Neoliberalism and liquidity: In search of the digital narratives recorded by students amid a pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic was one of the biggest challenges for the education system, as well as the society. The pandemic led to the closure of universities around the world, as in-person education was seen as another health threat. And this measure, like the rest, was implemented in order to achieve social distance (or "physical distance"), which in turn could help reduce deaths from this disease (Murphy, 2020). Therefore, distance learning and the provision of it through applications from global companies were key parts of the narrative that many states around the globe provided to their citizens, incorporating these processes into the political and economic approach they were taking

during a pandemic. We point out that the virus spread throughout the world, so it was, and continues to be, a global issue, not forgetting that this crisis occurred almost a decade later than the global financial crisis, which as its starting point was the crash of the banking system in 2008. The pandemic seems to have confirmed the power that the neoliberalism has.

While the crisis due to the pandemic was raging, well-known companies that deal with technology and combine it with the everyday life of the individual, evangelizing the facilitation in everyday life, perceived this new framework as an opportunity to control public education. The promotion of education-related products by companies intensified with the closure of educational structures and this process evolved, both through social media, and via e-mail. There were not a few companies that "moved" the school to home, providing advice and precise instructions to parents, school students and university students. Magnus opus for the largest and most successful companies in the world, including Google, Microsoft, Amazon, magnification and Cisco has been the rapid development and provision of education-related services. During these processes pandemic cast off the prospect of making a profit (Williamson et al., 2020).

Through deregulation and the gradual retreat of the state, the Market and the neoliberalism seem to dominate (Gouga & Kamarianos, 2011). The conditions created are characterized by flexible arrangements and in this way the soil is affluent for the introduction of new partnerships and environments. In many cases, the public cooperates with the private and usually through this process the needs of the Market are met (Kiprianos et al., 2011). The undoing of security, the liberal capitalist conception of the Market and the consciousness of risk were the trigger for the transition to new narratives, which are based largely on new technologies (Adamopoulou & Kamarianos, 2016). New technologies and by extension social media are a key factor in providing fertile ground for individualization and continuous change of social networks being built.

In addition to the above, the social state is gradually descending, and with it its basic pillars, such as education and health. To this long process of disintegration of the social state, we add the economic crisis, which brought insecurity and uncertainty to the social subject. Twelve years after the global economic crisis, the social subject is again faced with a new crisis, that of the pandemic, realizing that insecurity and uncertainty

deepen even more. The intense liquidity that dominates now, after the outbreak of the
pandemic, makes it more difficult and even more unclear to determine the identity of
the social subject (Gouga & Kamarianos, 2011).

Within the framework that we have outlined so far, the ever-increasing
dominance of social media can be noticed, as well as their entry into educational
practice as tools. It is a common finding that adults especially invest more and more
individual time in social media, becoming partakers of the culture that is being
promoted. At the same time, they often seem to sideline friends, the University and the
family environment in order to "interact" as much as possible on social media. It is
therefore imperative to redefine this peculiar relationship, as well as the contribution of
social media to the educational process. Optics are differentiated, new aspects appear,
and the diffusion of mass information is rapidly increasing. Liquidity is intensifying and
as a result the Reason of the Market is dominating again.

But let's analyze this route a little more. The students who are currently in the
country's auditoriums are the most familiar with social media and new technologies. At
the same time, they perceive the historical vibrations and observe the changes of the
social situation. The market economy has a decisive influence on the social structure.
Social media is the tool that conveys to Higher Education the demands and pressures of
the economy. Gradually, the educational practices and the educational good offered are
differentiated (clearly, we should note the contribution of many other factors to the
completion of this long-term process). Social media sometimes stimulates the institution
of education, while at other times they stand by it as the promised "substitute" or simply
as the provider of knowledge and information.

In closing this section, we point out that through social media knowledge is not
at stake, but the path of social subjects. In fact, modern social structures are entering the
vise of social media. In the following chapters, we will try to answer a series of issues
related to social media, neoliberalism, pandemic, Millennials and Generation Z in the
greek context of Higher Education. First of all, if students have the necessary means to
engage in emergency distance learning (for example, internet connection, computer
etc.). The second is the relationship between students and social media for educational
purposes. The third issue is whether we can talk about a partial (or complete)
replacement of in-person education by distance and talk about post-pandemic education.
The fourth is about whether neoliberalism was an intervention in education and,

consequently, through the new processes introduced in the public sphere. Moreover fifth, the comparison between Millennials and Generation Z in adaptation to emergency teaching and learning.

4. The selection and implementation of the mixed methods approach

For the present research it was considered that the approriate approach is mixed methods, since it was an issue, which has not been studied and not even by numerous researchers, while at the same time we had in mind that the present student force is characterized by distinct dynamics, since it largely shapes the digital developments and has a leading role in the modern era of new technologies. Regarding the mixed methods approach, it could be defined as the approach in which the researcher collects and analyzes data, integrates findings and draws conclusions, using both quantitative and qualitative approaches in one study (Creswell & Plano, 2018).

Patton (1999), comparing the use in surveys of a mono-method approach and mixed methods approach, states that the former makes the research more exposed to errors, while the latter provides greater validity. The difference between the two, lies in the fact that through the mixed methods approach, the data are controlled, cross-checking them by different methods or tools, coming from different sources within the same research.

To sum up, data collection tools were used in this research, both from the quantitative and qualitative approach. For the quantitative approach the questionnaire was used and for the qualitative approach the semi-structured interview. The questions of the questionnaire, as well as of the interview, were structured after a literature review, considering the needs of the research. In our research, 145 future teachers–undergraduates of the Department of Education and Social Work of the University of Patras participated (both in quantitative and qualitative approach). The sampling was carried out in the period from March 2020 to May 2020 and was convenient.

We note that in the context of the quantitative approach, a comparative analysis of the sample of the current research (2020) was carried out with the sample of the research conducted by the Laboratory of the Sociological Data Analysis in 2010. The sample of the 2010 research included 55 students of the Department of Education and Social Work Sciences of the University of Patras. The University as a foundation carries the student potential, so we assume that the importance of the study is highlighted by

the participation of the protagonists of this period in the attempt to outline new processes from within. This is the main reason that sample for our research was selected from the student population.

5. Presentation and analysis of data: comparing 2010 sample to 2020

To begin with, we briefly present the sample of 2010 and that of 2020. The sample of 2010 included 55 students, of whom 43 (78.2%) were women, and 12 (21.8%) were men. Their age ranges from 19 to 31 years, and most are 21 years old (44.4%). Therefore, most of the participants in the sample are in the 3rd year of study at the University in the Department of Education and Social Work Sciences. Regarding the education of the father and the mother, we noticed that the father of most students has graduated from the High School (47.2%), and regarding their mother, she has graduated from the University (34%).

Continuing with the 2020 sample, which included 145 participants - of whom 122 (84.1%) were women and 23 (15.9%) were men. Their ages ranged from 21 to 35 years, and most were 22 years old (38.6%) and 21 years old (38.6%). Most participants in the 2020 sample were in the 3rd and 4th year of study at the University in the Department of Education and Social Work Sciences. Regarding the education of the father and mother, according to the students, the father of most had graduated from High School (27.6%), and also the mother of most had graduated from High School (33.8%).

Trying to explore the use and contribution of social media to education in times of pandemic and especially within the University, we started by asking students about the basic requirements that are necessary to be met, if we really want to observe the way this scheme works. These conditions include the internet connection in their place of residence, as well as the devices they own, in order to achieve internet browsing in general, as well as in the applications and platforms through which the education is carried out.

Almost all students in 2020 sample (95.2%) appear to have an internet connection at their place of residence. The same seems to apply to the 2010 sample, as 98.1% had an internet connection. So at the level of Higher Education, it seems that there is no problem with internet access for students.

In Figure 1 is observed that the average age of first use of the internet is 14 years of age for the 2010 student sample. While for the 2020 student sample, the average age is nearly 13 years of age. Proceeding to T-Test analysis, comparing the two samples, we found that there is a statistically significant difference between the two sample-groups of students (Sig. 0,014). Therefore, we observe that Generation Z individuals gain access to the internet for the first time a year earlier than the age of Millennials in the past. Consequently, we can talk about a generation that comes in contact with the internet faster than the previous one.
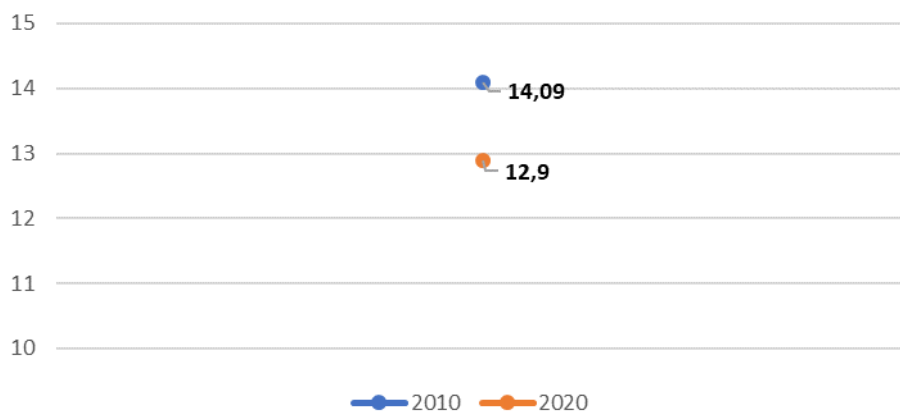

Fig. 1: Average age of using the internet for the first time

As for the devices they own in 2020, we note that 9 out of 10 participants have a laptop (93.8%) and a smartphone (92.4%). It is worth noting that all participants in our sample have at least some devices from the ones we mentioned in the question, since the statement "None of them" collects a 100% negative answer (Figure 2). As for the devices owned by the students in 2010, we observe from the data that at that time, 94.5% owned a computer (either a desktop or a laptop), and 32.6% said they owned a smartphone.
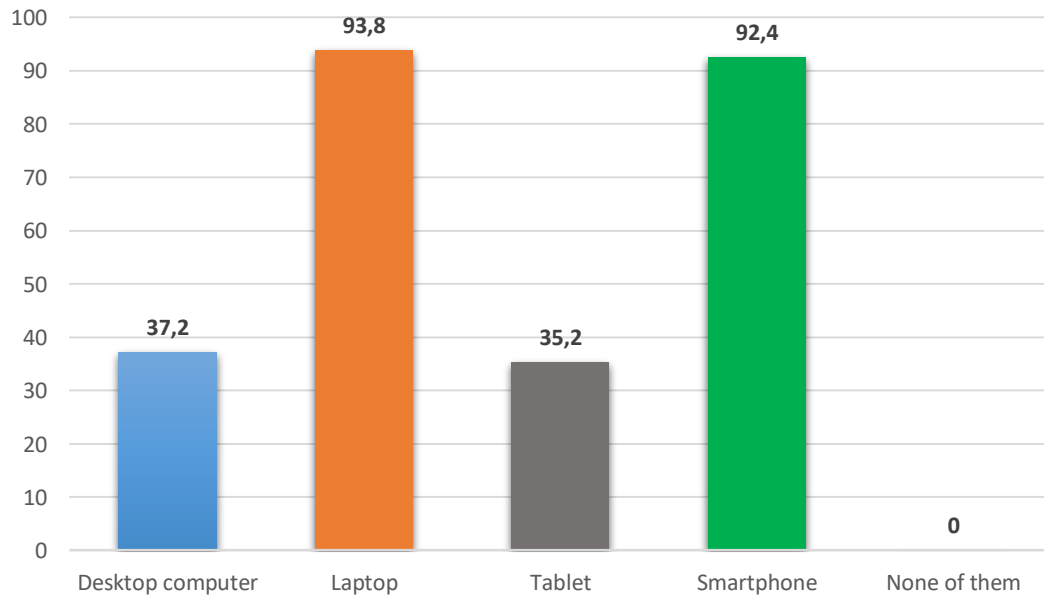
Fig. 2: From the above you have (2020 sample)

More specifically, we observe that in both the 2010 sample and the 2020 sample, there are technologically advanced generations, as most of the participants got their first mobile phone at the age of 14 (28.3%) for the 2010 sample and the age of 13 (22.9%) for the 2020 sample. Of course, we must point out that the generation now in the amphitheaters seems to have received their first mobile phone a year earlier than the generation that attended the University in 2010.

Comparing the samples of students from 2010 and 2020, we note that the use of social media for educational purposes related to the University is noticeably higher for the students of the 2020 academic year sample compared to those of 2010. We can observe that social media existed in the everyday life of students before the lockdown and the pandemic, but now fully dominate the everyday life of students. There was a statistically significant difference in both weekly use (independent t-test, sig=0,000), and as to daily use between the two samples (independent t-test, sig=0,000).
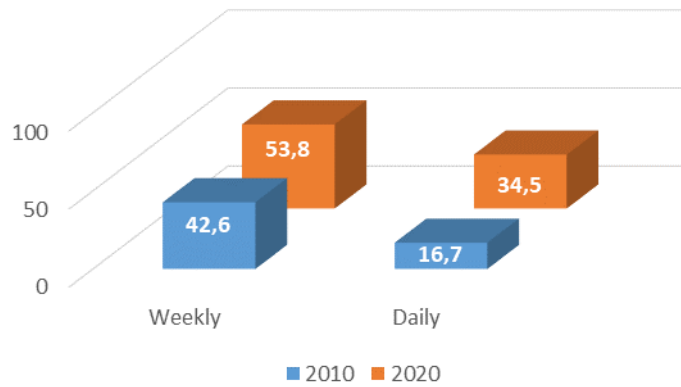
Fig. 3: Use of social media for educational purposes related to the University

In addition, comparing the students who participated in the research conducted in 2010 with those who participated in the research of 2020, focusing on communication with their fellow students and their professors, we can observe that the rates are much higher in 2020 in terms of using social media for communication with fellow students, as well as with their professors. We notice there was a statistically significant difference both in the use of social media for communication with fellow students about courses (independent t-test, sig=0,000), as well as for communication with their professors about courses (independent t-test, sig=0,000).
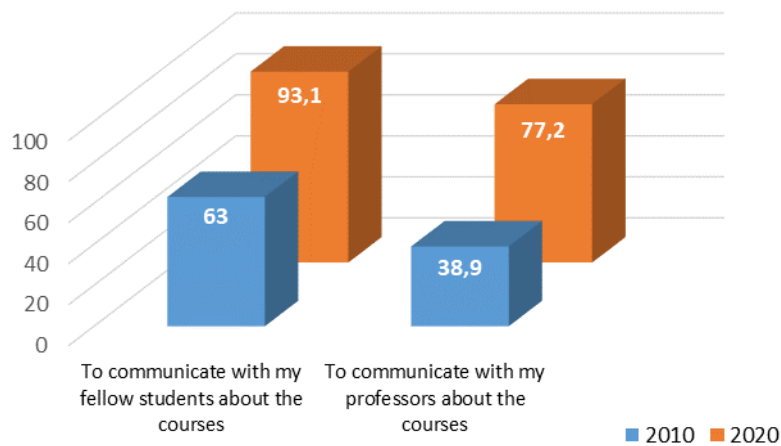

Fig. 4: Why do you use social media?

Completing the comparative analysis of the 2020 sample with the 2010 sample, we would like to point out three noteworthy findings concerning the Generation Z – the students who participated in the 2020 sampling.

First, aiming to capture the habits of the students (2020 sample) and to become more aware of certain points of their identity, in order to achieve their connection with the educational and learning part later, we proceeded to the question about which is the social media they use the most. In other words, the "kind" of social media they focus on. Those who dominated this question were the following three: a) purely social networks (89%), b) instant messaging (85.5%) and c) YouTube (video sharing app) (80%). Therefore, we can note that these applications for the university students are the most "familiar".

In addition, the regression analysis (R = 0.372, sig = 0.00) showed that the variable "are your parents familiar with social media?" had a statistically significant effect in the variable "how familiar are you with social media?" (b = 0.316, p = 0.000).

Second, almost 9 out of 10 (93.1%) participants in our research stated that the use of social media positively affects the interaction they have with the professors of their department.

Third, emergency distance learning and teaching during the quarantine period was a key topic of discussion at both social and political level. A vital point was whether the structures of public education were able to carry out this new process for the Greek education system. The question we addressed to the students was whether they consider that emergency distance learning and teaching can be continued in the frame of in-person course. Most of the participants stated that they "disagree" (41.4%) as to whether they consider it possible for hybrid e-learning to be continued in the frame in-person course. Essentially in this matter, they are entirely negative, since if we add the answer "disagree" and the answer "strongly disagree" together, the result is 65.5%. Thus, this hypothesis seems to be, to some extent, impossible so far (Figure 5).
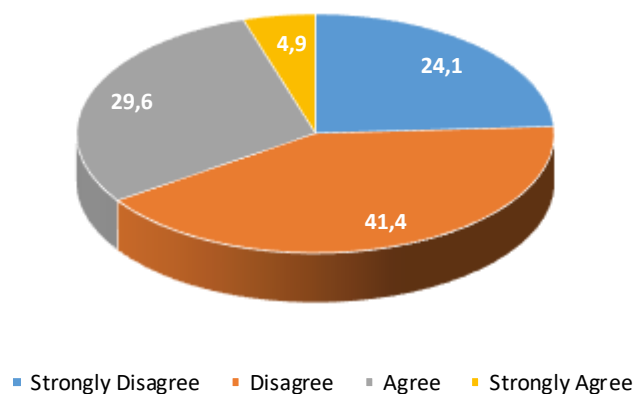
Fig. 5: To what extent do you think emergency teaching and learning can be continued in the frame of in-person learning because of the crisis effects? (2020 sample)

6. Qualitative approach: The digital narratives of the Generation Z

Aiming to penetrate in depth, as well as to gain greater access to the experiences of students, we also moved to a qualitative approach. We assume that in combination with the quantitative approach, the qualitative approach can offer us a complete picture of this period just as it is reflected by the narratives of the university students.

Through the analysis of 145 narratives of the 2020 sample[7] - concerning the use of Social Media during the education pandemic, which were analyzed thematically - it became obvious that social media before the pandemic was basically used by students to communicate for free with other social subjects. Social media seems to maintain this character through the pandemic, being a communication tool, but their auxiliary function for the provision of online courses, as well as for the two-way communication between the professor and the university student, is now emerging. We quote from the interview of the 19th participant, who points out: *"I use social media first to communicate with friends and relatives... in the era of the pandemic the reasons why I use social media are the same. However, the attendance of online courses, academic and foreign language was also added"* (female, 22 years old, 8th semester). In fact, social media offers to the public sphere the communication (not specified exactly the

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[7] As for the demographics of the interviewees, we focused on the theoretical system for Generation Z as the funnel and took into account students' gender, age, and semester of study; According to this theoretical system, researching for details about the parents' occupational status was not considered essential.

type and style), as well as the possibility of providing emergency distance learning and teaching.

There is a strong tendency to increase the time spent amid the pandemic. This is obvious throughout all the interviews. We record the words of 25th participant: *"in the era of the pandemic I started using social media even more"* (female, 22 years old, 8th semester). Social Media, apart from the tool to perform educational work, was also the vehicle for entertainment, as well as for information. The 27th participant states *"...these days (he means in the frame of pandemic and lockdown) I use social media more, compared to before, for my personal entertainment and information, e.g. I watch more movies, read online books and articles, play online games with friends and more"* (female, 22 years old, 8th semester). There are not few students who treat social media with an instrumental logic, focusing exclusively on practical issues of everyday life, such as the 36th student, who said *"... they (social media) provide an alternative, so as not to miss the semester. If there were no social media in the pandemic, then the semester would be lost, and students would have a big problem"* (female, 22 years old, 8th semester).

Participants seem to think that social media helps students in the learning process. These platforms assist students, as social media can act as a tool for finding information and as a trigger for interaction and cooperation both among themselves, as well as between themselves and their professors. We record the approach of 41st participant and 53rd participant *"I believe that social media helps students in the learning process, because it is an additional information tool..."* (female, 22 years old, 8th semester) and *"...through social media I believe that students can exchange ideas, collaborate and find information on issues that concern them..."* (male, 22 years old, 8th semester). Students also argue that social media can make all social subjects partakers of the provided educational material. They can also help organize the work more successfully, as well as a useful tool in the hands of the professor. We quote the 80th student's approach: *"... the professor may post for the next course paper, article for the students to study later at home..."* (female, 22 years old, 8th semester).

We should note that there are several students who said that social media cannot replace the traditional, live, course. At the same time, for many, we emphasize that the simultaneous use of social media (emergency distance learning and teaching) with the "classic" in-person education seems ideal, essentially providing the visual for a hybrid model. We quote some of the words of 129th participant: *"Through in-person education*

values, social consciousness, friendships and collective spirit are formed. No technological means can replace this relationship. They can enrich it. The hybrid education may in other circumstances be a tool that can work in conjunction with the lesson in the class" (female, 21 years old, 6th semester).

But how do social media relate to public sphere? Social Media is essentially an abstraction of the real social world, not being able to replace in-person communication and this is revealed by many participants. We record the words of the 4th student: *"I find that social media does not improve social relations as face-to-face communication is lost and we all see only one screen. There is no direct contact, and gradually individuals are lost. The community lacks the spirit of cooperation and solidarity, because everyone is devoted to the social world and not to the real one"* (female, 22 years old, 8th semester). A similar perspective is also presented by the 11th participant, wondering if our smartphone is necessary to achieve the process of communication *"...a screen has the power to alienate people and face-to-face contact is sidelined... should we try for a moment to think about what it would be like to go out to the neighboring cafe without our mobile?"* (female, 21 years old, 6th semester). And the 104th participant points out: *"I believe that social media not only does not improve social relationships, but makes them impersonal, superficial and formal. More specifically, they lose the immediacy of automation and the vibrancy that is necessary to govern them. This implies a shrinking of human relations, resulting in a lack of social spirit"* (male, 21 years old, 6th semester).

The reports that students make about the culture that social media promotes are of particular importance, as well as the changes that often bring about the identity of the social subject. The 1st participant states: *"I believe that social media have the ability to shape or change someone's identity... it is not a few times that I have seen my relatives (friends and acquaintances) "change" because of the patterns displayed in the social media they are watching or because they are trying to keep up with the image that they may have created for themselves in social media"* (female, 22 years old, 8th semester). The 3rd participant observes for himself: *"I publish e.g., ideal photos in ideal places, creating a wrong impression of my socio-economic level"* (male, 22 years old, 8th semester). Thus, a culture is promoted those acclaims who have an economic surface, those who have an "ideal" life and those who successfully imitate shooting stars. Characteristics we quote excerpts from the words of the 51st and 80th participants

respectively: *"Everyone publishes their good moments and hides the bad ones, in order to share the message that everything is perfect, that life is perfect"* (female, 22 years old, 8th semester) and *"on the internet are circulating images of famous people that many young people tend to idolize them and then imitate them"* (female, 22 years old, 8th semester). Clearly and within a few lines it is not possible to outline issues related to culture and identity, but it is important that we can address them in a research that focuses on the narratives and experiences of students amid a pandemic.

While there are also references to the Market, as well as to what has been brought about by the neoliberalism through social media. The 4th participant characteristically points out *"The stimuli, stereotypes and prejudices are many, and those that are constantly projected are only fake formulations of multinationals, aiming at profit and are peddled to unsuspecting citizens and we embrace them without control"* (female, 22 years old, 8th semester). Still the subject becomes a consumer, often unable perhaps to adapt to this context. We record the words of the 85th participant: *"There are also the ads e.g., products, which invite the consumer to buy... This results in the passive attitude of the individual but also in commercialization"* (female, 22 years old, 8th semester).

In conclusion, throughout the text there is no particular reference to social inequality which can occur through the use of social media, as the findings from our quantitative approach revealed that our sample has almost absolute access to the internet, as well as the necessary tools for access to the digital world. Therefore, there is no question of social inequality, related to social media at least, for this sample of this research. However, the students' special mention of social inequality was strongly revealed through the interviews, which is why we assumed that it is important to make a concise report, exposing one of the perspectives of the present study and providing the stimulus to other scholars to deal with this issue.

Therefore, the students argue that social media can offer, but they can also remove the equality of opportunity in learning. There are not a few who point out that there is a sense of equality, but it is not tangible. Inequality in their opinion relates to the internet connection, as well as with the possession of modern electronic devices. While some are harshly critical of the state, they argue that it would be important to ensure that the necessary means are met to conduct training on the use of new technologies. We mention that the 25th participant emphasizes *"...I believe that online courses do not offer*

equal opportunities in learning because many do not have the ability to attend the courses either because they do not have the means or because they do not have internet connection..." (female, 22 years old, 8th semester). In addition, the 26th participant states that: *"Online courses seem to perpetuate social inequality..."* (female, 22 years old, 8th semester).

7. Instead of conclusion: the crisis of the pandemic, the importance of social media and the university student's familiarity with social media

The reason for recording the digital narratives of Generation Z (future teachers – and current students) was the pandemic caused by COVID-19. As a result of the measures implemented to reduce the incidences, Higher Education has entered in a strictly framework of emergency distance learning and teaching, giving social media and consequently Online Platform Economy a dominant role. Gradually throughout the world, the model of "emergency distance" learning began to dominate.

The result of these global processes was the creation of a new everyday life for university students, but also for professors, with a reference to adaptation and coping with any difficulties that arose (Stamelos et al., 2020).

Under the pressure of the crisis "distance" education, as well as the applications that were used to implement it, seems that in general they are adapted positively by the student potential in terms of their offer in a special and unprecedented period. However, what emerges from this research is the fact that "distance" education cannot, for university students, replace in-person education. Clearly it can act as an auxiliary but setting the model of in-person education as the main one. From the narratives of the students there is an expectation for their return to normality, for their return to the amphitheater.

Social media from a purely communicative character (pre-pandemic), acquire educational character (as tools for providing education during the pandemic) through the lectures offered, the educational material uploaded, and the groups created. As positive points of social media, students record the direct interaction they have with their fellow students, but also with their professors. At the same time, social media amid a pandemic is becoming entertainment media, as well as information media. We can observe at this point through the previews the liquidity that characterizes the identity of social media, since it is constantly changing, depending on what serves the Market. At

other times their capacity to provide non-billable communication is projected, at other times that of providing news feed and lately their entry into education, changing once again their role, providing education in a special way.

What the students "blame" on social media in times of pandemic and intensified within this framework is the fact that a culture is offered to serve market interests, the social subject is massaged, not functioning as a citizen and at the same time are largely responsible for the formation (or even the transformation) of the identity of the social subject. There are extensive reports of the students in the interviews that highlight the culture of social media commands a certain code of values, as well as a code of "communication". The social subject imitates personas, in order to meet the conditions, set by social media, to become known and successful in the digital edifice. He basically sidesteps his own experiences and replaces them with other people's experiences that he probably does not know on a personal level, except in the context of the digital world. Social media and its products could be presented as "sweets" of existence, with the social subject drifting and unable to trace the action of the mechanisms in another perspective, as well as their relationship with the educational system as a whole and with the University in particular.

It has to be pointed out that the sample of this research seems to have a fairly high percentage of internet connection (only 5% of the sample does not have) and at the same time almost 94% of the sample said that it has a laptop. Therefore, the present research did not highlight an issue of social inequality, at least arising from the conditions set by the entrance of "distance" education. It is necessary to recall that in the Panhellenic examinations, the success or failure of admission depends on the social and economic capital of the candidate. Therefore, we assume that within each university department include individuals, who have basically secured their living and as an extension can proceed to all the processes necessary to become users of new technologies. Giving stimulus for subsequent studies, from the above we can deductively assume that the inequalities in the context of emergency distance learning and teaching become more obvious and more pronounced in primary and secondary education.

Comparing these two generations, the generation that graduated (Millennials) and the one that immediately entered the University (Generation Z), we can note that these are two different generations. In terms of the background they had and still have

regarding New Technologies and their familiarity with them and the technological tools they had in their hands and the environment in which they grew up. From the comparative study we conducted, it appears that both generations had access to the internet during their years at the University. However, for the first time, Generation Z has access to it at a younger age than Millennials.

In addition, in terms of technological devices, the Millennials in the sample seem to own almost all computers. Still, only 1/3 of the Millennials sample own a smartphone, while the Generation Z of the sample owns both a computer and a smartphone in percentages that reach 100%. Of course, the reference made here also concerns the technological progress that had been made and the environment in which they moved every day. At the same time, regarding the use of social media for communication with fellow students and professors regarding the courses, the rates are higher for Generation Z than Millennials. Continuing, the use of social media for educational purposes is done daily by Generation z to a twice greater degree than Millennials.

To the question of whether Millennials could respond to emergency teaching and learning like Generation Z, the answer would probably be no - at least not with the same success. And this is evidenced both by the data we presented and by the fact Millennials do not have the same familiarity with the digital world as Generation Z. Consequently, the Millennials seem to be facing some difficulties in the continuous transition to the digital world from the physical and vice versa.

Of course, this outcome is not only responsibility of the Millennials themselves, their perspectives, their experiences, and their approaches in general but also the living conditions, the environment in which they lived, the technological achievements that had been made, and the opportunities provided by the state itself. So the question that arises is whether Higher Education could have successfully managed emergency learning and teaching ten years ago?

From the other side, Generation Z is now in the auditoriums of the country, seems to have been fully prepared for this unexpected transition from in-person education to "distance" learning. Better prepared for new technologies than any previous generation and considering the familiar environment of the digital world, is the key factor for the successful transition to emergency distance learning and teaching (hybrid online learning and teaching). The findings and the so-called presented in a

previous section of this research, confirm the conclusions of previous research conducted on the characteristics of Generation Z, namely its familiarity with digital media, its easy adaptation and its contribution to the emerging Online Platform Economy.

So, as a result of the pandemic crisis, new and existing technological skills of Gen Z form social and economic relations in the emerging Online Platform Economy, towards the retreat of the Welfare State and the development of more flexible semi-governmental institutional structures of cooperation between the public and the private, linked to the ratio of market needs, colonizing the public sphere in order to fulfill big companies claims and assert control over public education (Archer, Wolf, & Nalloor 2020). There were not a few governments around the world and their representatives, who in the first phase, publicly thanked big companies for the free provision of applications through which emergency distance learning and teaching would be implemented, in the second phase signed contracts for cooperation with them (no longer free provision) and in the third phase, protected them for "mishaps" that occurred in the provision of the services that had been agreed. At the same time, through this process these companies gained even greater scope and prestige within a country. The same companies on their official websites listed and "packages" paid, which included more benefits, addressed to both students, as well as primary and secondary school students. Series in sequence was the development of educational content applications by specific companies, which in the past were not involved in this field (OECD 2020 & 2020a).

The dominance of the neoliberalism is pushing universities, as well as schools, breaking their contractual relationship with society and at the same time these two areas of Education encapsulate logical actions, which come from the field of Economics. The imposition of the Market was also seen through the debt crisis, where social subjects and their needs (whether political or social) were sidelined, and the democratic framework was fragmented. The result of this was the completion of linear and long narratives and the consolidation of liquidity.

Within a few years the social subject faces a second crisis, that of a pandemic, in which again uncertainty and liquidity dominate. In conclusion, the social subject is no longer able to do anything, since it simply follows unperceived developments and

growth of the public sphere, becoming exclusively a consumer and not a modulator, trying to adapt to the new framework introduced each time.[8]

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