

Young People Are Not as Digitally Native as You Think



More than 90 percent of young people in many developed countries are digital natives, with South Korea leading the way at 99.6 percent, according to a new study

Everyone knows young people these days are born with smartphones in hand and will stay glued to the Internet from that time onward. Right?

Well, not quite. Actually, fewer than one-third of young people around the world are “digital natives,” according to [a report published Monday](#) and billed as the first comprehensive global look at the phenomenon.

The study, conducted by the Georgia Institute of Technology and the International Telecommunication Union, shows that only 30 percent of people ages 15 to 24 have spent at least five years actively using the Internet, the criterion used to define digital nativism.

In many developed countries, more than 90 percent of young people are considered digital natives, with South Korea leading the way at 99.6 percent. But many developing countries lag far behind — all the way down to the Pacific island of Timor-Leste, where a mere 0.6 percent of 15- to-24-year-olds are digital natives.

A digital divide between rich and poor is nothing new, but the new study identifies an interesting twist on the phenomenon. It shows that in the developed world, there is hardly any generational gap anymore between Internet users. Most people in wealthy countries are online — more than 84 percent of the total adult population, both young and old, in South Korea, for example.

Yet there is a very real generation gap in many developing countries. In countries like Burundi, Eritrea and Timor-Leste, young people are nearly three times more likely to be Internet users than the overall adult population. In many other African, Asian and Latin American countries, the divide between digital natives and the rest of the population is also far more significant than in the developed world.

Michael Best, a Georgia Tech professor who coordinated the study, said the findings highlighted a paradox about the concept of digital natives, a term that is often bandied about for marketing purposes. The supposed distinction between always-on members of the millennial generation and their older counterparts is actually much less pronounced in industrial nations than elsewhere in the world.

“Everyone’s fascination with digital nativism in the U.S. or, say, Scandinavia is fine, but the places where this phenomenon probably has the most impact is low-income countries in Africa or Asia,” Dr. Best said. “The places where it is most salient are those where the least amount of attention has been paid to it.”

There are also striking differences among developing countries. Malaysia, for example, fares well even against many wealthier countries. Seventy-five percent of 15- to-24-year-olds are digital natives.

As a percentage of the total population, 13.4 percent of Malaysians are digital natives. Malaysia ranks fourth, behind Iceland, New Zealand and South Korea, on this measure, which the study suggests will be an important determinant of a country’s future potential to take advantage of the economic, political and cultural opportunities of Internet use.

A variety of factors, including demographics, contribute to a higher percentage of digital natives; a country with a booming young population might have more digital natives than a country with older demographics, even if more people over all are online in the “older” country. In Japan, for example, 99.5 percent of 15- to 24-year-olds are digital natives, but this equates to only 9.6 percent of the total population, putting Japan in 47th place by this measure.

In addition to demographics, other factors, like network investments and education, play a role. One reason for the strong performance of Malaysia, Dr. Best said, is active information technology use in schools. Countries that promote education for girls also tended to fare better than those that discourage female students from pursuing secondary and tertiary education, he added.

“Youth are transforming our world through the power of information and communication technologies,” said Hamadoun Touré, secretary general of the telecommunication union, a United Nations agency based in Geneva.

That is especially true in developing countries. Elsewhere, it seems, we’ve all gone native.