Chapter 6
Millennials are Digital Natives?
An Investigation into Digital Propensity and Age

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ABSTRACT

The abundance of opinions about Millennials has made it very difficult to separate reality from conjecture, especially with regard to the suppositions made about their propensity towards technology. Labeled as digital natives, Millennials are thought to possess learning traits never before seen as a result of growing up in the digital information age. In this chapter, we present the findings of a study in which postsecondary students (N = 580) were surveyed to quantitatively investigate the differences between digital natives and digital immigrants. Findings revealed that of the ten traits investigated, only two showed significant difference, and of these two traits, only one favored the digital native notion, shedding doubt on the strong digital propensity claims made about today's Millennials. Although differences were found, we cannot say with any certainty that there is an unambiguous delineation that merits the digital native and digital immigrant labels. The findings raise a variety of implications for institutions training pre-service teachers; educators interested in using digital media, devices, and social networks in their classroom; curriculum developers designing instructional material; educational leaders developing information and communication technology policy for school; and researchers investigating digital propensity with today's youth.

INTRODUCTION

The Millennial Generation (Howe & Strauss, 2000), Generation M (Roberts, Foehr, & Rideout, 2005), the Net Generation (Tapscott, 1998), Digital Natives (Prensky, 2001a), or whatever you choose to call today's generation of tech-savvy students, they are by far the most investigated, most marketed to, and most captivating generation to date (Cone, Inc., 2006).

To most of you, this should not come as much of a surprise. Considered to have been "born digital" (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008) into the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (actual dates are in question; see Kelan & Lehnert, 2009), rough estimates place Millennials at over 80 million in the U.S. alone (Howe & Strauss, 2003). And while Americans have always had an enormous interest with the notion of generational change, which has been traditionally discernable by specific events, famous individuals and/or products, and character traits of the people found during a specific era (Fishman, 2004), the "contagious" (Hoover, 2009) nature of Millennials has turned them into an industry.

There have been countless articles and books written about Millennials in the past decade. They have found their way into primetime television, when the CBS news show, 60 Minutes, originally broadcast *The Age of the Millennials* in November of 2007 (Safer, 2007). There are even individuals who regard themselves as subject matter experts, and consult for huge fees to large companies (Hoover, 2009), such as Merrill Lynch and Ernst & Young (Safer, 2007), as well as universities and colleges, to help these institutions understand how to keep this generation happy, motivated, and productive.

Yet, even with the big business this age bracket has generated and all the information that has been made available, our understanding of Millennials is, by and large, muddled (Hoover, 2009). Granted, understanding each new generation of young people has always appeared to be a lesson in futility, with every older generation looking unfavorably on the new. However, other than a number of popular books, whose theories are considered to be largely based on anecdotal evidence, there is scant empirical data to support many of the assumptions put forth about Millennials (studentPOLL, 2010).

Take for instance the widely cited theories by Howe and Strauss (2000). As strong as many of their arguments appear to be on the surface, they are fueled by an assortment of questionable research. Hoover (2009) explains that the presumptions made by Howe and Strauss (2000) "were based on a hodgepodge of anecdotes, statistics, and pop-culture references, as well as on surveys of teachers and about 600 high-school seniors in Fairfax County, Va., which in 2007 became the first county in the nation to have a median household income of more than $100,000, about twice the national average" (¶ 9).

It goes without saying that the abundance of opinions about Millennials has made it very difficult to separate reality from conjecture. Regrettably, as one delves deeper into specific aspects of this generation, the subject becomes no less jumbled, but is instead filled with even more contradictions and bafflement. In fact, one does not need to go any further than the suppositions made about their propensity toward technology to find contradictions and disagreement.

DIGITAL PROPENSITY

Those holding a sympathetic and optimistic view of this generation insist that Millennials are native speakers of the digital age—that is to say, *Millennials are Digital Natives*. They do not have to translate or learn technology, but instead merely experience it. They have spent their entire lives so immersed in a digital culture that it has fundamentally changed the way in which they process information (Prensky 2001a; 2001b), resulting in learning styles and preference never before seen.

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