

*This is a special media business report I received research and reporting attribution for. The client is an award-winning journalist who has been nominated for both an Academy and Emmy Award.*

## **The Global View of College Students**

The best word to describe today's 17- to 21-year-olds? How about global? These 'digital natives' have grown up with the Internet, which gives them instant access to information anywhere, anytime. Born between 1990 and 1994, they have been aware of the world from the get go. The first Iraq War thundered on the TV while they sat at the high chairs gobbling baby oatmeal. The war in Afghanistan has been there since they can remember. And while traditionally young people didn't travel abroad until they had finished college, international travel programs have been offered to this brood while they were in high school. This crop of Millennials knows the world better than any previous generation. To them, China isn't just a huge area on the map. It's a political conundrum, a potential economic powerhouse. We all have to wonder: how will the ever-burgeoning media world of the Internet social networking and technology shape their worldview? And how will they affect everyone else?

Much has been made in the mainstream media of the 'digital divide' between Millennials and previous generations. Some older people cannot fathom why today's youth are constantly 'plugged in' to one device or another and tend to associate their perceived addictiveness to technology with apathy. But Penelope Trunk, founder of Gen Y social networking site, Brazen Careerist, says that today's college students are anything but apathetic. Generation Z (as Trunk dubs them) "will be so good at processing information that they will open doors we can only knock on today." Marketing and branding agency Sparxoo's Senior Writer Ethan Lyon observes that "research is limited on this...generation" but there are millions of this generation so it behooves interested parties to pay close attention to today's college students as they are sure to impact the world we live in. Nineteenth century philosopher of science Auguste Comte "suggested that social change was determined by generational change and in particular by conflict between successive generations." If that's the case, this may be the most confrontational and societal beneficially 'clash of the cultures' that the world has witnessed in a long time.

According to Rasa Levickaitė of Vilnius Gediminas Technical University "social networking loses categories of time and space providing the concept of the world without borders." Levickaitė argues that Digital Natives, due to the

proliferation of social networking perceive their world as one without time and space limitations and uses their status as technology communicators to accomplish tasks faster. They are being raised by older parents and taught by older teachers than previous generations. “They are growing up faster. They are in education earlier. They are being exposed to marketing younger. This internet-savvy, technologically literate generation has been shaped to multi-task. They move quickly from one task to another placing more value on speed than accuracy. They have only known this wireless, hyperlinked, user-generated world where they are always only a few clicks from any piece of knowledge.” In fact, a 2007 research study found that out of almost 8000 respondents, 97% own a computer and spend at least 3.5 hours a day online. Today’s college students are constantly connected informed consumers who know what they want and want it right now.

### **How do the Internet and technology inform Digital Natives’ views of the world compared to past generations?**

There are many differences between the Digital Natives and previous generations. For instance, speaking with a diverse group of college students for this report I discovered that many of them have never used a typewriter, payphone, or card catalog in their lifetimes. Tools and technologies that previous generations viewed as necessary and permanent fixtures to the cultural landscape are no longer relevant to this generation. When asked about issues such as the death penalty, same sex partnerships, interracial marriage, and abortion Digital Natives seem more freethinking and open-minded than their predecessors. They’ve been exposed to more information than previous generations and they choose where this information comes from. No doubt, this informs their views on societal issues and makes these young people more global than previous college students.

As a result of growing up with the Internet Digital Natives are more likely to have friends (whether on or offline) from other cultures and countries than previous generations. Although there is not much hard data available it seems safe to infer that this early multicultural exposure has influenced their views on various social issues. Rasa Levickaitė observes that Gen Zers and Gen Y’s have four times more social network connections than Gen Xers indicating that Digital Natives do indeed utilize the Internet and social networking to forge global connections more than their older counterparts.

### **How the Internet and technology inform Digital Natives’ positions on immigration, war, other cultures, other languages?**

Keith Dugdale, director of global recruitment at KPMG feels that the Digital Natives may be more attuned to global social issues than they are commonly given credit for. "Having grown up with a raft of anti-discrimination and pro-family legislation, it is to be hoped that [they will] be more diversity-aware. I believe they will consider it unthinkable that firms would wish to discriminate against disabled people or block a new mother from being promoted." Speaking with digital natives seems to confirm this assertion. Allen M. Vickers, a senior at Pennsylvania State University studying Broadcast Journalism had this to say about America's ongoing immigration debate. "I don't think it's as bad as a lot of people say it is but I think there are definitely problems. I have no problem you know, because America started off on immigrants. Legal immigration fine, if American becomes more Latino American and it's due to legal immigration then that's fine. I don't mind anybody coming here that wants to make America a better place or make a better life for themselves." Ali Nelson, a 19 year old student in Albuquerque, NM feels similarly. "If I wanted to immigrate to Italy, I'd have to pay fees and taxes, etc. The same goes for anyone who wants to come here. It has to be fair." This desire for a fairer world isn't confined to immigration. Digital Natives seem to be more at ease with other cultures than their predecessors.

When it comes to other cultures and other languages, Digital Natives seem far more at ease than previous generations. Their peer groups and social circles seem far more multicultural than those of past generations. When asked about their friends all of the young people interviewed stated that they had diverse groups of friends and race and ethnicity was not a factor when choosing friends. When asked about interracial marriage and same sex partnerships they almost seemed shocked that these topics are still being debated. When asked about same-sex marriage Vickers referred to comedian Chris Rock's joke that "gay people got a right to be as miserable as everybody else" as his way of expressing that it should be a personal choice and not a government mandate. Ali Nelson responded "I don't think the government should even have a say in it." Two of the three Digital Natives interviewed for this report speak Spanish and the third wishes she spoke another language besides English. All of the young people took pride in the fact that they surround themselves with people who are culturally different. Some have dated members of other cultures in the past and do not view that as an especially significant fact.

Surprisingly, or perhaps not so, many Digital Natives are not well-informed with respect to the Iraq and Afghanistan wars which have been raging for most, if not all of their lives. It's hard to determine if this is because the longstanding military conflicts are viewed as 'non-events' since they took place

for the young people's whole lives or if this is due to other factors. Ali Nelson feels the wars which spanned her lifetime "should be a semester long class required to be taken in college to educate everyone" including her. Vickers, the journalism student, supports the American troops but questions the longevity of the military conflict and the American presence on foreign soil. "Maybe we stayed over there too long. The kids over there grew up seeing America and now we're leaving and they have to figure it out for themselves. I hope for the best for them. I really want the soldiers out of Afghanistan. It's like...okay...we defeated the tyrant and we should be leaving now. We're not helping them anymore by staying there."

One possible reason for the dearth of knowledge some Digital Natives have when it comes to foreign affairs and the wars is their distrust of mainstream media. Ortiz said "I don't really know if there is an accurate version because everything has a bias. But I think local news is probably a little more on the spot than big media because they're smaller...more trustworthy to me." Nelson was blunter in her assessment of traditional media sources. "I don't trust it because it's all propaganda. When I do watch/listen/read it, I understand it's only been created this way to sell as much of it as possible. I don't take it seriously." Vickers, who credits Twitter as his primary news source (he follows journalists he respects from various news outlets) is similarly distrustful. "You can't just sit there and watch what Rush Limbaugh says or Wolf Blitzer. If you want to know anything about the complete story you have to research it yourself. You can get your news from anywhere but most news media has their own agenda. To me that was kind of made clear with the whole Penn State thing. They're reporting like it's the end of the world at Penn State and it wasn't. I was in my dorm the whole time and it wasn't. They all have their own agenda."

### **Are they more likely to travel abroad and more open to experiencing other cultures?**

According to Virginia Matthews, Digital Natives "will be content to travel our world virtually. They'll consider the idea of 'teleporting' their online selves to urgent meetings in China or India a simple process." Matthews attributes this to today's college students being in tune with technology and innately eco-conscious. All of the young people interviewed expressed great enthusiasm for travel, both at home and abroad. Elena Ortiz, the nursing student, shared one of her life goals. "I want to be a travel nurse...around the world. I would like to go to Latin America and other places and experience culture." Although she hasn't participated in semesters abroad or high school international travel programs, she did say there are programs available in her city and she would

love to participate in one. Ali Nelson, a self-described frequent flyer and college student is not exactly sure what she wants to do with her life but when asked about her goals she was sure of one thing. “I know for sure that I want to travel around the world, and live in various countries for a while. My goal is to be as cultured as possible and to use that in daily life.” She also wants to go to Rome next fall for her university’s international program.

## **The Future**

As they graduate college and their influence and power grows Digital Natives will impact politics, education, entertainment, business, and the media. Only time will tell how everything will end up but with the data available it seems safe to make a few forecasts. According to Richard Doherty, sales director at talent management software consultancy Jobpartners, the economic turmoil today’s college students grew up with may have unforeseen positive ramifications. “Not being able to apply for a mortgage or hefty loans may, for many people, be as empowering as Generation X thought home ownership was. As long as there is a plentiful supply of rental accommodation, it's possible that the expectation of vast salaries, as well as the intense pressure to perform, may give way to a less frantic and more fulfilling type of working life.” The internet, a constant presence for all of their lives will continue to be a powerful influence on today’s college students. We can assume that their ease with other cultures, expanded social networks, and ingrained wanderlust will produce adults who move to where the jobs are, rather than expecting to find suitable employment in their hometown. Diversity and equality will be viewed as the norm, not an ideal to be fought for as it has been for previous generations.

Another difference between Digital Natives and past generations may also have a profound effect on politics, education, entertainment, business, and the media. When asked to describe their ideal jobs or to define their vision of a successful life not one of the students interviewed mentioned money. Virginia Matthews asserts that “high salaries will be less crucial as mortgages, bank loans and even private car ownership are consigned to the history books.” This may be true but it may be that salary won’t motivate today’s college students no matter what happens.

According to Montana and Petit, today’s college students will be “the most environmentally friendly as compared with their counterparts, they will also have an extremely high level of distrust with corporations and will be more apt to leave their job and/or career more quickly.” Digital Natives mention quality of life repeatedly as something they are increasingly concerned with. They’re

worried about the healthcare crisis, the environment, the apparent lack of results from the government, humane treatment of all people, and other social issues that seem to indicate the so-called 'Silent Generation' may have a lot to say in the upcoming years. In fact, the three Digital Natives interviewed for this report had very similar answers when asked what constitutes success. Their responses mentioned helping other people, making a lasting difference, and solving problems— not hefty paychecks and astronomical bonuses. Allen Vickers was almost hesitant to give a definition of success as he didn't want to sound cliché. "[Success is] being able to realize that what you've done in your life has touched a lot of people. Rick Ross I think said, 'You measure success by how many people you bless.' And that always stuck with me. When I get older I want my messages to reach people. It's not about money as much as knowing that I've helped somebody become a more positive person. I mean money would be awesome don't get me wrong but that's not the measuring stick."