

An Investigation of the Social and Academic Uses of Digital Technology by University Students

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Abstract

In most developed countries university students use digital technologies and the Internet in all facets of their daily life. These students represent the first generation to grow up with this new technology and have been given various names that emphasize its affinity and tendency to use digital technology such as digital natives, Net generation and Millennials. Given the lack of empirical support for the notion of a "digital generation", this study presents a different perspective of what these learners think about their use of digital technologies for academic and social purposes and how they feel about the "Digital Native Generation" phenomenon. This study examines this issue in depth to gain an understanding of what the growing use of new digital technologies means for teaching and learning in higher education.

To address the aim of this study, the researcher adopted an interpretivist approach and developed a mixed-method research strategy. The main data collection techniques used in this research study are integrative literature review, online questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The research was conducted in two main phases. In the first phase, the quantitative data was collected via an online questionnaire. The goal of this phase was to provide a general picture into how first-university students communicate with peers and professors and their general study habits and to examine the possible relationship between students' use of ICTs and

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communication and study habits. In the second phase, qualitative data was collected via semi-structured interviews with a sample of 40 students who participated in the first phase of the study. The goal of this phase was to delve deeply into students' use of digital technology for academic and social purposes, and to understand interviewees' views on their situations, experiences and lives as expressed in their own words. This study was conducted in the Faculty of Educational Sciences and Psychology at the Rovira i Virgili University (URV) in Tarragona, Spain.

Face-to-face interaction, social networks, personal email, text message and mobile cellphone were the preferred modes of communicating and connecting with others. Results indicate that most students feel comfortable with digital technologies and they see social networks as more about connecting and interacting with friends. Regarding study habits, students prefer to learn by themselves, used to perform various tasks simultaneously. Besides, the results indicate that students now depend on digital technology, specifically mobile technology, to help fulfill their communication and academic, social, and emotional needs. SNS use has been integrated into student lives (social and academic). Most of students' communication is in groups (Facebook and WhatsApp groups). Most of the students integrate Facebook, as part of the learning process where the students were sharing with their friends' class-related information. The results suggest that the technological knowledge of the students is not what would be expected for representatives of the digital native generation. The range of digital technologies (devices and softwares) used for academic and social purposes is rather limited. In particular, our findings show that the vast majority of students were using different and particular digital technologies in their everyday lives, for their in-university and out-of-university contexts. The findings of this study do not support the claim that there is a substantial gap between more technologically adept younger students and their older classmates. Indeed, both used many of the same technologies in their everyday lives, with computer, mobile phones (WhatsApp), the Internet, e-mail (personal and institutional account) and Facebook; but this should not lead to the conclusion that the new generation of students has developed sophisticated technological abilities.