

DIGITAL NATIVES

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Definition

Building on Ellen Helsper and Rebecca Eynon (2010), a *digital native* can be understood as someone who develops in a media-rich environment, routinely turns to the internet for information, multitasks with ICTs, and uses online resources for a wide range of activities. Crucially, this view treats digital nativeness as learned: it is continuously *performed* and *reshaped*, not simply *possessed*.

The term initially circulated in a more essentialist vein, implying a quasi-natural attribute of a generational cohort, popularized through the native/immigrant contrast and most associated with Marc Prensky (2001). He argued that post-Generation X cohorts, raised with digital technologies, would “think and process information fundamentally differently” (p. 1), an argument resonant with earlier generational labels such as Don Tapscott’s *Net Generation* (1998). Across these accounts, digital natives are portrayed as characterized by rapid information intake, parallel processing and multitasking, networked collaboration, and a preference for interactive, visual, or game-like media, paired with expectations of immediacy and frequent feedback.

This framing contributed to a period of technological-exceptionalist debate sometimes described as the “Prensky Decade”. Given that digital environments have changed substantially over time, some authors propose speaking instead of different waves of digital natives, as infrastructures, platforms, and norms vary across cohorts (e.g., Generation Z, Millennials).

Context

Subsequent research reviews and empirical studies, however, have repeatedly challenged the idea of a uniform cohort (e.g., Evans & Robertson, 2020; Bennett et al., 2008; Bennett & Maton, 2010; Lee, 2005; Li & Ranieri, 2010; Margaryan et al., 2011; Mertala, 2024; Mertala et al., 2024; Ng, 2012; Reid et al., 2022), and the label is now widely treated as a contested shorthand resting on limited evidence and common-sense assumptions about digital generations. In this sense, the digital native is best understood as a *myth*, namely, the claim that a birth-cohort label can

reliably predict technical fluency, multitasking capacity, learning style, or, more strongly, cohort-wide cognitive change.

Three critiques usually recur: a) strong neurocognitive claims are difficult to substantiate and risk lapsing into technological determinism; b) overgeneralizations about young people's technological sophistication - where everyday familiarity is taken as evidence of competence - can lead institutions to presume digital literacy rather than teach it, despite substantial variation in critical skills such as effective searching, source evaluation, and information literacy; and 3) it has fueled policy moral panics, legitimizing techno-optimism and technology-first reforms even as evidence suggests that students' learning uses are often conventional, and that observed digital differences are frequently differences of degree rather than kind. Ethically and politically, native discourse may also obscure inequalities in support, safety, privacy, and opportunity, while aligning with processes of datafication and the expansion of educational technology markets.

These criticisms did not eliminate the term; rather, they prompted its reformulation. A common defensible usage shifts attention from *being digital native* (emphasizing internal processes and exposure) to *becoming digital native* (emphasizing social processes and preparedness), foregrounding the roles of education, experience, breadth of use, gender, and social context.

Even if Prensky-style claims persist in public and policy discourse, on this account *nativeness* does not denote a homogeneous generation. Rather, it refers to immanent developmental processes, best conceptualized as learned capacities and languages for proficient participation in a digitally mediated social world. Such capacities are shaped by uneven trajectories of access, resources, support, and experimentation. Digital experience is rarely binary; it is cumulative, irregular, and contingent on digital transitions. It concerns whether subjects can interpret digital communicative codes, navigate changing interfaces, search for and evaluate information, manage privacy and security, create and share content, collaborate in networked environments, and adapt to platform change, while remaining attentive to the uneven distribution of risks associated with visibility, datafication, and social control.

Related Concepts

Digital divide; Digital engagement; Digital inclusion; Digital literacies

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