



# The Rise of Digital Immigrants: Beyond A Pandemic

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“We are not in normal times.” You are probably tired of hearing this as much as I am.

Before the COVID-19 narrative and the endless clichés surrounding the use of phrases such as “new normal”, “social/physical distancing”, “quarantine”, etc., numerous pre-millennials - Generation X, Baby Boomers and earlier - may have never bothered to ask about Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Hangouts or Whatsapp video calls. A few people who match this description may have just crossed your mind.

In Ghana, three weeks of a partial lockdown of Accra, Tema, Kasoa and Kumasi, brought us to the realization that, the need for connectivity was very much inherent in the older generation as much as it was in their younger counterparts. The first quarter of 2020 saw Telecommunications companies such as MTN, record a 19.4% increase in data revenue due to the significant

spike in active data users and smartphone adopters, according to their Quarter 1 results, released on April 29, 2020.<sup>1</sup> As at October 29 2020, the company reported a 20.7% growth in data revenue ascribed to similar reasons.<sup>2</sup> Others such as Vodafone Ghana, launched a virtual assistant, TOBi to provide 24-hour customer service to enhance customer engagement during this period of COVID-19 and beyond.<sup>3</sup>

Emerging from the devastation caused by a pandemic, is a growing community who are claiming their fair share of the ‘Digital Pie.’

**Digital Immigrants** are widely described as the older generation (aged 41 to 65 years) who were born before the proliferation of digital technologies and the internet. Though generally associated with an older age group, the term could also refer to millennials and Generation Zs who may not have been exposed to digital technologies due to their socio-

economic disposition; or those who are now learning how to use them. Digital Immigrants can be categorized into **3 sub-groups** namely, **Avoiders** - who generally stick to traditional media and refuse to adapt to new technology; **Reluctant Adopters** - who are aware of the technology but adapt slowly; and finally, **Eager Adopters** - who are enthusiastic about new technology and the opportunities thereof.<sup>4</sup>

Juxtaposed to the Digital Immigrants, are the **Digital Natives**, whom Prensky, a renowned thought leader and writer ahead of his time, describes as the younger generation, who are the “native speakers of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet.”<sup>5</sup>

The intersection of Natives and Immigrants increases the Inclusive Internet Index and creates a multiverse of opportunity for all stakeholders.



# As Digital Immigrants explore the nuances of digital technologies and the internet which permeate every aspect of contemporary life, they leave us wondering - how big a piece of the Digital Pie can they really consume?

## Digital Immigrants and Digital Financial Services

Money, money, money. In their 1976 Pop Classic, ABBA alluded to how sunny it is in a rich man's world and expressed desires about all the things they could do with a little money. Whether little or much, sunny or gloomy, one thing is for sure; accessibility to money is a matter of great concern for Immigrants as much as it is for Natives. Immigrants may not understand the innerworkings of the technology facilitating their banking transactions, but they are satisfied when it meets their present financial needs.

According to the 2020 KPMG Ghana Banking Industry Customer Experience Survey<sup>6</sup>, 73% of Millennial respondents who constituted a major part of the population, use ATM channels; 64% and 42% use Mobile Banking and Internet Banking channels respectively.

Digital Immigrants on the other hand, represented only 7% of total respondents. However, out of this small representation, about 84% of this group use ATMs, while 66% prefer Mobile Banking applications and 67% use Internet Banking channels on a daily to monthly basis.

Branch visits received the least score, as 55% of Digital Immigrant respondents visited branches on a daily to monthly basis for cash withdrawals, deposits, among others.

Although, outshined by their Millennial counterparts in terms of representation in the survey, Immigrants' growing desire for digital touchpoints should not be underestimated especially in the era of COVID-19, given the potentially higher value of their disposable incomes and transaction volumes in contrast to Natives.

The results of this survey bring to the fore, issues of enhanced customer experience, simplicity of digital touch points and operational efficiency for Immigrants.

Every other year, financial institutions develop digital strategies with an eagle-eyed focus on Digital Natives and their preferences in order to capture their hearts.

Relatively, little attention is paid to Immigrants and their digital needs. COVID-19 may just be gradually transforming the way financial institutions think about digital strategy, as we witness a cultural shift in the banking preferences of Immigrants (from traditional to digital) which has been expedited by this pandemic.

It will be interesting to see in coming years, how digital strategies are transformed to cater to the needs of Immigrants ranging from simplified user interfaces for mobile applications, to customized digital products that meet their unique financial needs.

## Social Outlook: Creating Digital Footprints

While Digital Natives revel at the thought of being one like richer on Instagram and compete to be influencers on Twitter, Digital Immigrants are still finding friends on Facebook; which is understandable. This is a group that has had to adapt to digitization later in life. Their pace of adoption is naturally expected to be slower depending on the kind of Immigrant that they are. The Avoiders and Reluctant Adopters have taken a longer time to adapt to technology compared to their counterparts, the Eager Adopters.

Their unwillingness or inability to adapt may be underpinned by several other factors which include low digital literacy, the high cost of mobile data and poor internet accessibility which hamper their ability to use technology in the first place.

The **2020 Inclusive Internet Index**, developed by Facebook and the Economist Intelligence Unit, ranked 100 countries across four categories: **Availability, Affordability, Relevance and Readiness.**



# 66%

of Digital Immigrant respondents prefer Mobile Banking

# 67%

of Digital Immigrant respondents use Internet Banking channels

Out of this, Ghana ranked 72nd overall, with our best categories being readiness (56th) and affordability (52nd) where we demonstrated our preparedness to use the internet and our lower costs respectively, appearing ahead of peers such as Kenya and Egypt; but falling behind Nigeria and South Africa in the area of affordability. Our main deficiencies, however, are relevance (82nd) and availability (76th) where we must significantly improve on local (language) content provision and network infrastructure quality correspondingly.<sup>7</sup>

These statistics show us that transforming Avoiders and Reluctant Adopters into Eager Adopters will require substantial investments in developing local content and providing reliable network infrastructure. Additionally, affordable data packages from telecommunications companies also go a long way to influence Immigrants' utilization of digital platforms, and enable them to see technology as a life enabler in contemporary times.

Keeping in touch with family, friends and co-workers via WhatsApp, Facebook, Zoom and others during the lockdown phase of COVID-19, proved to be more beneficial than detrimental to Immigrants. Herein lies an opportunity for Immigrants to also increase their social media footprints and claim their share of this territory which has long been dominated by Natives.

As Natives and Immigrants ruffle their feathers in the digital space, there is also the emergence of a small group

whom I refer to as 'Digital Refugees.' These individuals have been impacted negatively by insidious forms of psychological stress and angst powered by these technologies. These include people such as Jaron Lanier, a Silicon Valley tech pioneer, who in his 2018 book, **Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now**, has made arguments against the use of social media.



## Digital Immigrants and Cyber Security

Despite the slower pace at which they are adapting to digital technologies, Digital Immigrants, who are mostly elderly persons, are the most frequent targets of fraud scams, according to the Association of Certified Fraud Examiners.

There is a higher propensity for the older generations to be prime targets of fraudulent schemes attributed to health and anti-aging products, home improvements, investments, banking or wire transfers and insurance.<sup>8</sup>

Older groups, despite their ages and wealth of experience in their chosen fields, fall within the naïve segments of the population as they are not accustomed to the sophisticated or simplistic forms of attacks used by cyber criminals as compared to Natives.

Natives at least, get the opportunity to learn about the evils of the internet in their school curriculum.

Research published by the journal, *Science Advances*, suggests that older generations are four times more likely to have shared fake news on social media platforms such as Facebook, than the younger generation.<sup>9</sup>

In Ghana, this held true when we recorded our first two cases of COVID-19. 8 out of 10 Natives questioned, revealed that they had received fake information on COVID-19 remedies from their concerned parents via WhatsApp.



There remains an opportunity for Immigrants to be educated about the dark aspects of the digital space in which they play, and take the necessary precautions to ensure that they do not fall prey to fraudulent schemes. They are also presented with an opportunity to improve on their digital literacy skills, so that they can benefit more from digital transformation.

## Where do we go from here?

As the digital world evolves to include more sophisticated technologies that seek to enhance our social interactions, and generally, automate our way of life, Immigrants in Ghana are faced with conundrums such as low digital literacy, unavailable or inadequate network infrastructure and insufficient local content.

However, these do not prevent the Reluctant and Eager Adopters and even Avoiders, from catching up with Natives as we are witnessing a cultural shift in the face of a pandemic. The use of digital platforms by Immigrants could linger on even after the pandemic as they have experienced first-hand, their benefits.

One of the positive outcomes of COVID-19 as we have observed and could agree with, is the accelerated digital transformation of several businesses which are widely led by Digital Immigrants.

Given the unlikely possibility of the world going backwards or remaining stagnant, Digital Immigrants must be armed with the tools and support they need to cut deeper into the 'Digital Pie' to face **a dynamic present and an unpredictable future.**



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