

Scripture Engagement in the Digital Age: “Voice of the New Generation” Survey Report

Introduction:

As Bible publishing and Scripture engagement become increasingly digital, it is correspondingly strategic to know how the next generation of indigenous adults — today’s youth and young adults— are thinking about digital technology which is replacing paper-based Scriptures. 1 Chronicles 12:32 speaks of the sons of Issachar as “men who understood the times and knew what Israel should do.” Taking a cue from this verse, we want to understand the times and help the Body of Christ know how we should approach this “seventh wave of mass media,” as a media analyst has called it¹ and especially how this relates to Scripture access and engagement. This report is an overview of our discoveries.

From January to October of 2015, SIL’s Americas Area Scripture Engagement Services team worked with indigenous native leaders to design and implement a multinational survey which is the first phase of the “Every Cell Phone A Bible” project. The goal of the survey was to measure the current use of cell phone technology among 12-24 year olds —especially native speakers of indigenous languages— as well as attitudes which would be indicators of their future use of technology. Pains were taken to get out of metropolitan areas in order to survey the youth living in rural communities. These were targeted because they tend to live in economically depressed areas and are least likely to already have smartphones and are therefore more likely to indicate a significant future change of the status quo to adopt new technology and to access Scripture on their phones.

“The Voice of the New Generation” (La Voz de la Nueva Generación) was chosen as the name of the survey to encourage the participants to realize that they do have a voice and that by expressing their opinions they can participate in shaping the future of what is available to them in their language on their phones.

Most of the survey data was obtained by surveyors who, with the permission of school directors and classroom teachers, surveyed entire classrooms of students. This was done to maximize the number of students surveyed in the minimum amount of time. After taking the survey, the directors, teachers, and students who participated were all

given a business card that displayed a Web address where the survey results can be viewed on-line, as well as where Scripture and Scripture-based media are available in the minority languages spoken by those surveyed.

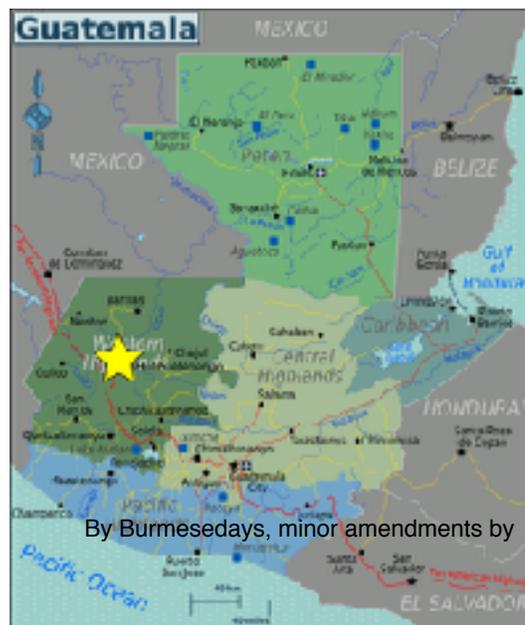
Our team would like to publicly express our gratitude to WBT USA for making this project possible and enabling us to explore this new frontier. Their provision made it possible for us to work alongside our brothers and sisters in Mexico, Guatemala and Peru, learning how to begin engaging this generation with Scripture on their phones.

Execution:

The survey was done using volunteers from churches and evangelical organizations. They traveled out to schools and communities away from the highly populated areas to survey youth who were less likely to already have smartphones. In each country, a coordinator trained the surveyors how to administer the survey and to enter the results into an online survey database. A translation of the questions asked can be downloaded here: [Survey English Translation](#)

In Peru the survey was conducted in the outlying areas of Huánuco in April 2015. The survey was coordinated by Adolfo Bravo of ILMAV* who worked closely with JAWCA**, a Scripture promotion organization in Huánuco that relates to all of the evangelical churches in the region. Surveyors collected 7299 surveys and entered the responses into the on-line survey service. The results can be viewed here:

[Peru Results](#)



In Guatemala the survey was done in cooperation with the Berea Bible Institute in July 2015. The students administered the surveys when they did a week of ministry practicum in the outlying towns and villages around Huehuetenango. They brought back

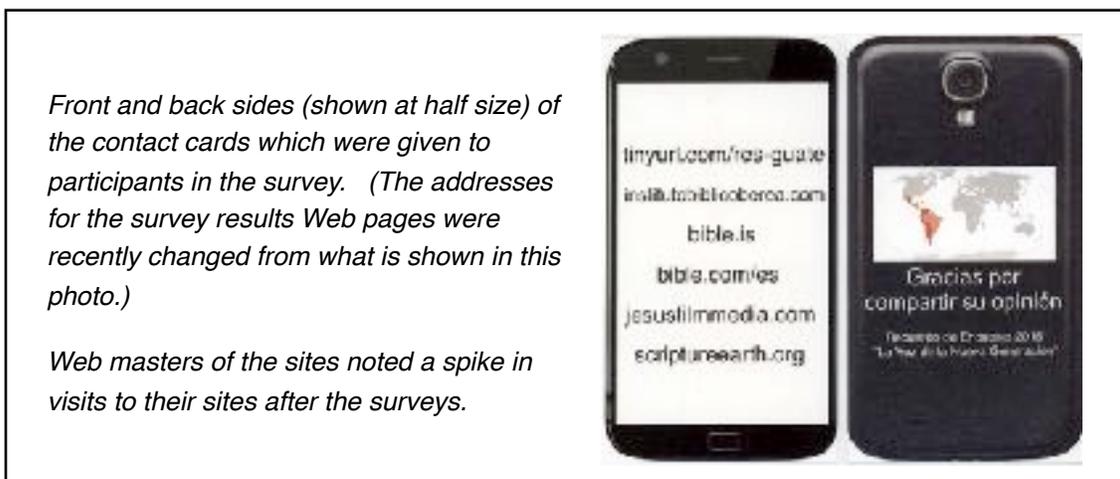
4525 surveys and entered them into the online database service. The results can be viewed here: [Guatemala Results](#)

In Mexico the survey took place in September 2015 and resulted in the collection of 9213 surveys. Overall supervision was provided by Mike Hadinger of the Assemblies of God and the survey work was coordinated by Oscar Jiménez, a Zapotec



pastor who works for the Bible League, and who was recommended by Jim Loker of Audio Scripture Ministries. The results can be viewed here: [Mexico Results](#)

It was important that the survey not be perceived as gathering secret information. We wanted to let the participants, and especially the administration of the schools, know that the results would be made publicly available on the Internet. After the survey was completed, each student and teacher were given a business card that looked like a miniature smartphone. On the “screen” were printed links that the participants could visit on the Internet. The first link took them to the on-line survey service which displayed the results of the survey they had taken. The rest of the links directed them to websites that had Scripture-based resources in the minority languages of their country, like the JESUS film, the audio New Testament by Hosanna, and SIL’s ScriptureEarth.org web site.



The contact cards earned for participating in the survey were a big hit.



A few months after the survey was completed in each country, we contacted the web masters of these sites and asked if they had seen any noticeable uptick in visits from these particular countries. Upon reviewing their analytics, they were surprised to find that they had several hundred more visits from those countries in the month after the survey had been done.

In total, 21,037 surveys were completed and entered into the on-line survey service. The successful execution of a survey of this magnitude was a testimony of the Body of Christ working together with a common goal and vision. More than one hundred people from four different nations worked together to complete this survey. Without the participation of the donors, field coordinators, local churches, surveyors and data entry teams, we would not have been able to carry out this project.



Students in Peru showing off their survey forms.

Findings:

Several questions on the survey asked how youth are using their phones in order to assess current usage and most popular activities. The remaining questions measured attitudes toward the technology and the kind of content, including Scripture, that

interested the user. The numbers revealed some facts we already knew, but there were also some surprises.

CURRENT USAGE:

Language:

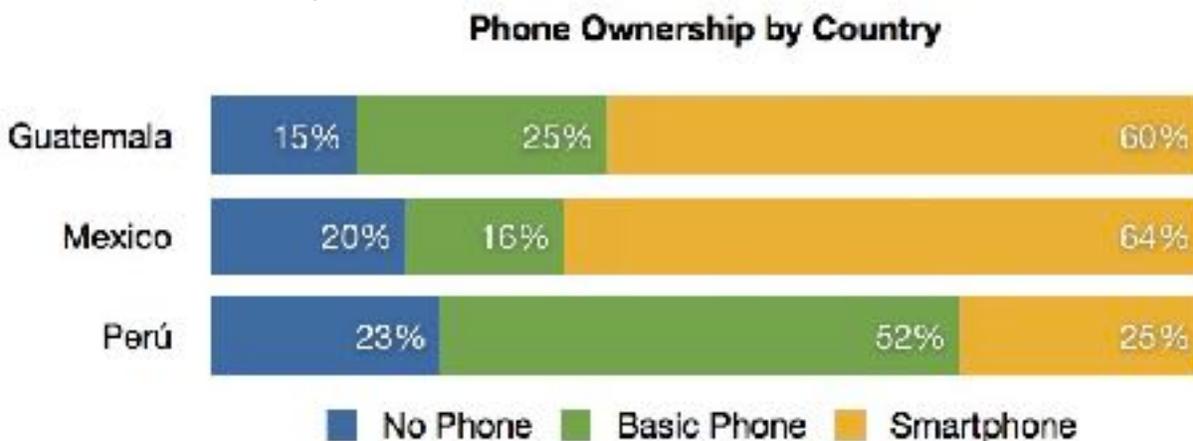
It is important to know if the minority languages are dying, surviving or thriving. The survey showed that youth in the areas we targeted are still speaking minority languages and are willing to freely admit it on a survey. Even though the majority in each country speak Spanish, minority languages are alive and well among the youth, indicating there is a large potential audience for those who take the time to produce apps and Scripture-based media in the minority languages of these countries.

Internet:

In Peru, more than 80% of those surveyed have used the Internet. In Guatemala and Mexico, that number was greater than 90%. The most popular use of the Internet is to find information and music. On-line chatting played a lesser role, but was still popular.

Hardware:

Since phone manufacturers are predicting almost universal adoption of smartphones by 2019, we wanted to see how this trend was playing out among the youth who live away from the major metropolitan areas. Surprisingly, the number of youth that own smartphones was more than 60% in Guatemala and Mexico. In Peru, that number was 25%. The percentages varied greatly between those who own basic phones and those who still do not have a phone.



Spending:

Across the board, the majority do not spend more than \$10 USD each month for phone service. This is not surprising, as they send text messages (SMS) much more frequently than they talk on their phones. In fact, some of the telephone companies in these countries are offering access to social media accounts without charge.

Access:

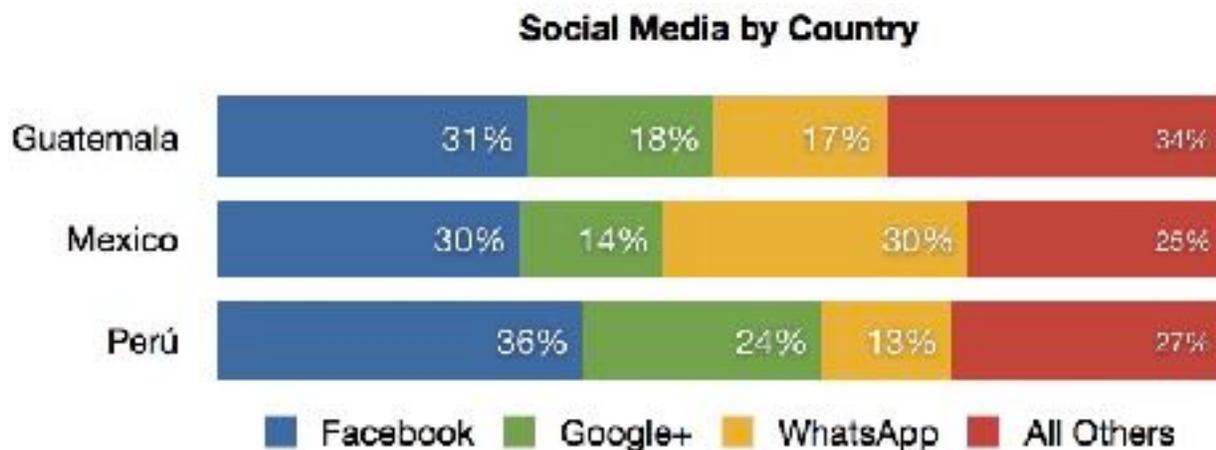
Half of those who own cellphones always have them in their possession, night or day. In Guatemala, 66% said they always had their phones with them. It is the last thing they look at before going to sleep and the first thing they see when they wake up.

Multi-tool:

A phone is no longer just a phone. It can be used as a flashlight, alarm clock, music player, etc. One surprise in the survey was that these youth are taking advantage of the majority of functions that their phones offer them. Sixteen options were listed in the survey, such as camera, alarm, texting, etcetera, and all of them were being used.

Social Media:

It came as no surprise that Facebook is the most popular social media channel, but Google+ is also very popular among this generation. The other major player that is rapidly gaining popularity is WhatsApp (which is now owned by Facebook). Others included Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn, but their numbers were too small to be significant.



Most Popular Usage:

The survey asked those surveyed to list their three most frequently used functions. Considering the age group we surveyed, the fact that the number one usage of cellphones is **listening to music** is significant. Essentially, they are not purchasing a phone, but rather a multi-media player that also makes calls and sends texts. Other popular uses were SMS, social media and games.

Sources:

Those surveyed were asked where they learned what they could do with their phones. The two main sources were the Internet and their friends. Family members were another, less significant source.

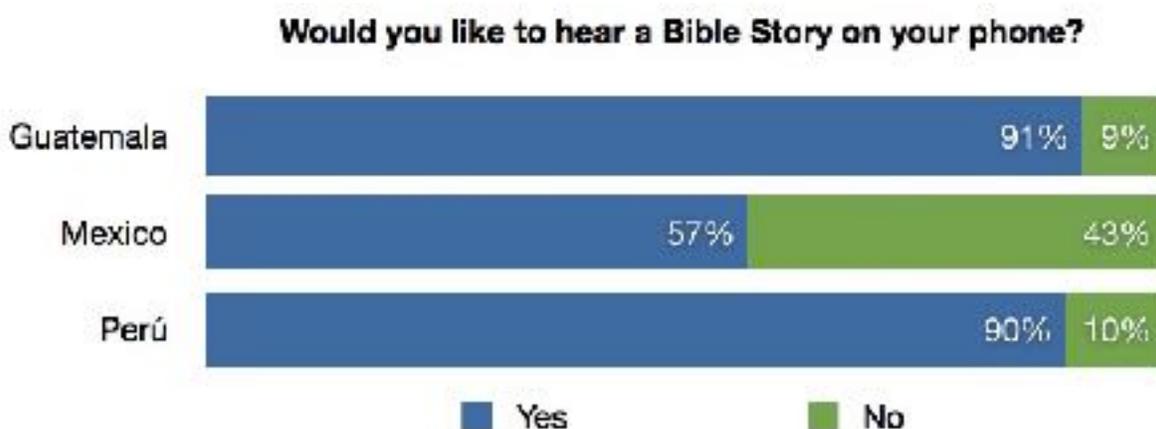
ATTITUDES:

SMS:

When asked if they would like to receive texts with encouraging words or prayer, the response was a loud and clear “YES.” Peru and Guatemala nearly shouted with an 84% positive response, while youth in Mexico chimed in at 62%.

Bible Stories:

The most positive response of any question on the survey came when those surveyed were asked “Would you like to hear a Bible story on your phone?” Peru and Guatemala’s response came in at 90% positive — nine out of ten youth surveyed want to hear a Bible story on their phone! In Mexico that number was 57%, which matched their overall responses to anything dealing with Scripture.



Minority Language Texting:

We desired to know if the youth are sending text messages in their mother tongue. The results from Guatemala were notable. Just over 21% of those surveyed said they had sent text in a Mayan language, indicating that literacy among them has developed to the point that people are texting in minority languages. Although 21% is not a majority, we nevertheless believe it is significant given the relatively recent adoption of this technology, and is a trend that needs to be watched for potential growth.

Bible Reading:

When asked if they would like to read the Bible on their cellphone, a huge majority (87%) in Peru and Guatemala said “yes.” In Mexico, that number was significantly lower, but still encouraging, at 51%.

Bible Awareness:

Following on the question of Bible reading, the survey asked if those surveyed knew that the Bible was available in their language in a form that could be read or listened to on their phone. The data shows that fewer know the Bible is available than those who want to read it. This is significant for ministries serving in Scripture distribution.

Perceived Need For Smartphones:

The question “Do you think having a smartphone is necessary?” was designed to measure if this generation perceives smartphone ownership as a necessity. In both Peru and Guatemala, 80% of those surveyed believe that having a smartphone is “necessary.” In Mexico, that number was 67%.

Religiosity:

The last question of the survey was designed to show the percentage of those who are involved in a church, either Evangelical or Catholic. This gives a glimpse of how important religion is in the lives of those surveyed. From the results, it is obvious that in Mexico (55%) this generation is more secularized with lower church attendance. Peru (77%) and Guatemala (88%) both show a much higher participation in church.



Students in Mexico filling out the survey form.

CONCLUSIONS:

Since the survey was completed, there have been two developments that make owning a smartphone even more attractive.

First, the WhatsApp application has been released as a completely free service, without the subscription fee they were planning to charge. This makes it very attractive, since users can talk (think Skype), send text messages and images to anyone in the world that has the WhatsApp application installed. Users of WhatsApp don't have to pay for SMS when they can send messages via WhatsApp for free.

Second, some cellphone network operators have begun offering free Internet access via Internet.org, without counting it against their data plan. This means that any of their subscribers with a smartphone can read or post anything to Facebook, Wikipedia and some other selected sites without having to purchase phone credit.⁵

These two factors have made smartphone ownership very attractive, especially since full-featured touchscreen Android phones can be purchased for less than \$50 in all three countries where the survey was conducted.

We are seeing a very rapid adoption of cellphone technology, and, in particular, the adoption of smartphones.² Many are predicting that smartphone ownership will almost double between 2015 and 2019.³ It has been forecasted that video will account for 60% of app traffic by 2020.⁴ Since smartphones are icon-based, oral-tradition learners are able to leap the print boundary and make the phone do what they want it to do, without having to learn to read.

Interestingly, even youth who may have limited access to the cellphone network and Internet are still buying smartphones because of the multi-function nature of the device.

By 2020, 70% of the world's population will own a smartphone.⁴ A good portion of these new users will be minority language speakers. Despite significant language decline among some minority languages, many other minority languages continue to be in vigorous use, including by today's youth. These languages are not dying out any time soon, and those who speak them are content to make smartphones one of the domains where the mother tongue can coexist with majority languages.

Is the Church ready for a billion new smartphone users?

Final Words:

Cell phone technology, and especially smartphones, are rapidly changing the way we interact with each other and the world around us. Instead of the tourists taking pictures of the natives, the natives are taking pictures with their phones of the tourists and of one another. Education, finances and news are now being handled on phones in places where 20 years ago it would have been impossible.

Now is the time for the Church to catch this seventh wave of mass media and leverage it to evangelize and disciple. If the sons of Issachar were alive today (1 Chron. 12:32) they would be telling the Church to invest itself in this new technology in order to present God's Word in a relevant way to the world.

The late Francis Schaeffer said, "Each generation of the church in each setting has the responsibility of communicating the gospel in understandable terms, considering the language and thought-forms of that setting." Were he still alive today, he would be encouraging the Church to embrace this technology in order to communicate the Gospel to the world.

From the survey "The Voice of the New Generation" it is clear that the world is embracing mobile telecommunications technology. The Church has the opportunity to be an active participant in how cell phones and smartphones are incorporated into corporate worship and personal engagement with the Bible.

We are grateful to those who funded this project, as it allows us to not only see the current state of events in Latin America, but also to plan for adopting new technologies and strategies for making God's Word accessible to the new generation in a way that keeps them coming back for more. We have now begun to implement solutions in that direction.

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Footnotes:

1. See Tomi Ahonen Almanac 2015, ch. 7 “Seventh Mass Media” pg. 99
2. See Tomi Ahonen Almanac 2015, ch. 19 “The Digital Divide” pgs. 179-189
3. See <http://www.statista.com/statistics/285611/number-of-smartphone-users-in-latin-america> and <http://letstalkpayments.com/mobile-money-are-the-keys-to-latin-america>
4. See <http://techcrunch.com/2015/06/02/6-1b-smartphone-users-globally-by-2020-overtaking-basic-fixed-phone-subscriptions/>
5. See <http://gestion.pe/empresas/facebook-y-entel-ofreceran-internet-gratis-peruanos-2143760>

* ILMAV = Impactando las Lenguas Minoritarias con AudioVisuales (Impacting Minority Languages with AudioVisuals)

** JAWCA = Jesucristupa Alli Willacuyninta Cushisha Apagcuna (Happy are those who carry the Good News of Jesus Christ)