

Argentine youth long for pricey high-tech gadgets

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Ten-year-old Cloe Barrios spent a year saving for an iPod, a struggle shared by many Argentine youth scrambling to keep up with technology despite economic woes that make such gadgets exorbitantly pricey.

The third-largest economy in Latin America, Argentina was one of the most plugged-in countries in the 1990s.

But its high inflation, devalued currency and exchange controls have produced infrastructure failures and a dearth of technological gadgetry today.

Cloe, who bought her iPod with help from her mother and an aunt in France, is one of her generation's lucky ones, possessing a "toy" with the coveted Apple label.

"There are only four of us in the class who have iPods," she told AFP. "Six have cell phones and one has an iPhone but only because their mom lends it," she said of her class of 28.

Her particular iPod came from Chile, the Latin American country where technology is most readily available today.

Workers in Argentina, which still has no 4G network, must earn far more than people in the region's other countries—except for Venezuela—to be able to buy the same technological products, according to Marco Marketing Consultants.

A notebook computer costs 2.2 times the average monthly salary in Argentina, while in Chile it costs 0.96 times below the average.

The consulting firm's report, published at the end of 2014, argued that "the difference between the average wages needed in Argentina and Chile to buy an average notebook computer is 129 percent. But if high-end notebooks are compared, the gap rises to 166 percent."

"This means that for mid-range products, the comparative situation in Argentina is better, if still poor."

'Everyone reads newspapers'

While Cloe attends public school, Candelaria Zapata lives in the upper-middle-class Buenos Aires neighborhood of Palermo and goes to private school.

She loves her cell phone: "It's my best chum, it takes my selfies, supplies my music videos and connects me," the 11-year-old said.

Although Argentina's middle and upper classes often complain that it's "a shame" that there is not a larger supply of Apple products, a fetish among the country's youth, Candelaria does not stress.

She boasts of having a Samsung "that was made in Tierra del Fuego," the archipelago at the southern tip of South America, where the South Korean tech giant was drawn by generous tax breaks.

iPhones are not sold in Argentina.

Stores authorized by Apple can sell other products from the company at prices tied to the dollar, with an exchange rate of 8.60 Argentine pesos to the dollar—or anywhere from 12-13.60 pesos per greenback on the

black market.

That makes Apple products an expensive purchase even for a middle-class American.

An iPad is 12,599 pesos or \$1,465, compared to \$499 in New York or Miami.

The most basic MacBook Air—which costs \$999 in Chile, Mexico and the United States—costs \$2,813 (24,199 pesos) in Buenos Aires.

"This explains why everyone reads printed newspapers, that's what impressed me the most when I came to Argentina," Mike Snow, an American who arrived in the country last April, told AFP.

'Connect Equality'

Since 2010, the government has delivered 4.7 million netbooks under its Connect Equality plan, which made the country the leader in computer distribution in public schools.

But a lack of teacher training and the technological smartphone gap are still big issues.

Argentine technology analyst Enrique Carrier told AFP the plan was "very valuable at a national level, because in some ways it's giving a first tool that will help people understand network access, especially in distant areas."

But he acknowledged that smartphones are the tool to bridge the digital divide.

In Argentina, a country of 42 million people where 47.5 percent of

households have Internet access, "everyone buys a multifunctional [cell phone](#), and most have access to social networks," according to consulting firm Infolatam, using data from the World Bank.

As Candelaria's mother put it: "Here we are like Cubans. We may lack things, but we always manage."

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