Addressing Digital Inequality For the Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Through Government Initiatives: Forms of Capital That Affect ICT Utilization

By

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ABSTRACT

Digital inequality, or unequal access to and use of information and communication technologies (ICT), is a severe problem preventing the socio-economically disadvantaged from participating in a digital society. To understand the critical resources that contribute to digital inequality and to inform public policy for stimulating initial and continued ICT usage by the socio-economically disadvantaged, we drew on capital theories and conducted a field study to investigate: (1) the forms of capital for utilizing ICT and how they differ across potential adopters who are socio-economically disadvantaged (SED) and socio-economically advantaged (SEA); (2) how these forms of capitals are relatively impacted for the SEA and the SED through public policy for ICT access; and (3) how each form of capital influences the SED’s intentions to use initially and to continue to use ICT. The context for our study involved a city in the southeastern United States that offered its citizens free ICT access for Internet connectivity. Our results show that SED potential adopters exhibited lower cultural capital but higher social capital relative to the SEA. Moreover, the SED who participated in the city’s initiative realized greater positive gains in cultural capital, social capital, and habitus than the SEA. In addition, we identify the relative importance of the constituents of habitus, cultural capital, and social capital for the SED’s intentions to initiate and continue using ICT. Finally, we make several recommendations for future research including incorporating the macro-societal structure and the capital perspective to examine contemporary phenomenon related to ICT use.

Keywords:
Capital theory, habitus, cultural capital, social capital, economic capital, digital divide, digital inequality, ICT policy, socio-economic inequality