

Chapter 13

Digital Divide and Its Socio-Psychological Implications on Rural Dwellers in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Unprecedented growth in the use of ICTs has contributed to digital divide in Nigeria. Despite global efforts in bridging the digital divide in developed and developing nations, digital equality is yet to be achieved in nations. Government's effort in bridging the digital divide in Nigeria has become a daunting task due to several barriers hindering the use of ICTs by the rural dwellers such as low income, low deployment of telecommunication infrastructure, lack of skills, access, language and cultural challenges, among others. In view of this, the aim of this paper is to unravel the socio-psychological consequences of the digital divide on rural dwellers in Nigeria. This paper further discussed dimensions and perspectives to the digital divide, causes of digital divide, global efforts in bridging the digital divide, barriers militating against digital divide, and social psychological consequences of the digital divide on rural dwellers. Policy recommendations were made towards addressing the socio-psychological implications of digital divide on rural dwellers in Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

The unprecedented growth in the uptake of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) such as computers, mobile phones, broadband, internet among others have contributed immensely to the economy of both developed and developing nations in numerous ways such as sharing of global knowledge and expertise across nations, better communication with trading partners through e-commerce, marketing tourism and participating in trade opportunities (Cullen, 2002; Callegati, Giallorenzo, Melis, & Prandini, 2018). However, the use of ICTs have continued to widen the gap between the developed and developing nations across countries, states, races, ethnic groups, urban and rural areas respectively. For instance, Samuelson (2002) pinpointed that the growth of the internet is unevenly distributed, it reaches fewer

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than 7% of the world population; it tends to reach the wealthier and educated elites who appreciate the usefulness and relevance of ICT tools. These inequalities created through the use and non-use of ICTs has been widely referred to as “digital divide” around the globe- internationally, nationally and at local levels.

Digital divide can simply be defined as the gap between the “information – haves and have-not” that is, those who use or have access to telecommunication and information technologies such as computers, internet cable, telephone, satellite, wireless among others and those who do not or have limited access (Lennard, & Angela, 2013). In another sense, digital divide is the disparity between the technology rich and the technology poor or have- not. For instance, PC ownership levels differ dramatically and numerically between developed and developing nations. In South Asia, for example, 4 persons per 1000 own a PC compared to 585 per 1000 in the United States. These figures depict a high level of inequality across nations in their internet usage and PC ownership. Apart from the internet and PC ownership, levels of disparities have been found in the use of other types of ICTs across nations such as broad band deployment, mobile phones and other telecommunications infrastructure (Lennard, & Angela, 2013). Global initiatives such as UNICT task force, G8 Digital Opportunity Taskforce (DOT) among others have been embarked upon to bridge the digital divide taking into consideration specific groups of people that are marginalized in the uptake of ICTs across nations.

Specifically, in a country like Nigeria, digital divide also cuts across different categories of people both in the urban and rural communities respectively. These categories of people are digitally divided along the lines of gender, age, class, socioeconomic status, disability among others in varying proportions. Rural people are those living in the remotest areas such as villages where the basic amenities of life are lacking such as pipe borne water, electricity and facilities such as hospitals, information centres, cybercafés etc. According to the literature, rural people have demonstrated a low uptake of ICTs due to reasons of low income, low education, health status, cultural differences, and lack of telecommunication infrastructure among others (Caspary, & O’Connor, 2003; Gbenga-Ilori, & Ibiyemi, 2010). Rural population are digitally excluded from the rest of world in the use of ICTs due to their backwardness and high level of illiteracy which account for lack of skills and inability to use information for their personal and collective advantage. Chowdhury (2000) identified a number of factors that characterized the rural people such as lack of access to accurate information, lack of telecommunication infrastructure and appropriate skills which accounted for the gap in technology use.

Coming down to the African Continent, high level of poverty and low level of education are prevalent factors responsible for low internet usage among the rural poor, with a resultant high level of digital divide across nations (Joseph, & Hollifield, 2003; Akanbi, & Akanbi, 2012). Similarly, Fong (2007) also found a significant relationship between GNI per capita and adoption of ICTs such as mobile phones, personal computers and telephone. This implies that majority of rural poor are low income earners and as such, accessing and procuring ICTs for use appears challenging. Amidst such challenges, the rural poor first considers his immediate needs- food, shelter and clothing before he/she engages in the utilization of ICTs. Therefore, in making the benefits of ICTs realizable, rural people need to be aware of the usefulness and relevance of ICTs to their development and the various ways it can contribute to meeting the Millennium Development Goals (MDG).

In the context of Nigeria, the situation experienced by the rural people are not totally different from the experiences of rural dwellers in other parts of the world; except that the government of some of these countries have enacted digital inclusive programmes and policies for the rural poor to promote ICT use for development. A low level of ICT use is still apparent in rural communities in Nigeria due to socio-economic factors that have been identified in the literature, therefore, widening the digital

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