



Digital Inclusion Project: Findings and Implications, A Canadian Perspective

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Summary: Research on digital inclusion has predominantly relied on large-scale quantitative data to understand reasons for non-use. The Digital Inclusion project engaged with individuals who live in low-income housing units located in Southern Ontario, Canada. The aim of the project was to learn first-hand from inhabitants of those units what it meant to be connected or disconnected to the Internet in the context of their lives. There was an emphasis on the experiences, attitudes, and opinions of inhabitants. This approach allowed for a more nuanced understanding of why low-income individuals have considerably lower rates of Internet adoption. We found that for many participants in the research, the response ‘*no need/no relevance*’ was rooted in another barrier such as cost, lack of digital literacy, lack of confidence, and little understanding of what kinds of activities the Internet can facilitate. Our study shows that further unpacking the meaning of ‘*no need/no relevance*’ is critical, as individuals in low-income housing units have a desire to be a part of the digital world. The findings suggest that it is about creating the right conditions for this population in terms of pricing, availability of equipment, technical support, and mentorship. Digital participation is a complex social process, rooted in existing inequalities.

Unpacking the meaning of “no need/no relevance”

The Digital Inclusion project aimed to more effectively unpack the reasons low-income individuals give for not adopting the Internet. By asking follow-up questions such as “*If cost were reduced to 15-20 dollars a month would you be interested?*”, “*What if you could receive a computer that was subsidized?*”, and “*Would a training or mentorship program help get you online?*”, we were able to gain a more nuanced understanding of the barriers to adoption for non-users of the Internet than past studies. The findings from this research suggest that while some

users may genuinely see no need or interest in using the Internet, oftentimes that feeling is grounded in another explanation.

When comparing the results of this project with other research on digital inclusion, the different methodological approach employed in this project has clearly yielded important findings. Based on our research, the key explanations for why residents of low-income housing units are not yet online are: cost of the computer and of the monthly Internet service; lack of digital literacy/lack of confidence in using the Internet; and no relevance/interest. The table below presents the reasons respondents gave when asked why they had not used the Internet. They were able to select all that applied to them. The key reasons for non-use were identified as “cost of monthly Internet fee” by 65%, “cost of computer equipment” by 45%, “lack of confidence, knowledge, or skills” by 45%, and “no Internet ready device” by 40%.

Reasons you do not use the Internet	Non-users (Percentage)
Cost of monthly Internet service	65
Cost of computer equipment	45
Lack of confidence, knowledge, or skills	45
No Internet ready device	40
No need or interest	30

Barrier 1: Cost of monthly Internet service and equipment

The most-selected reason as to why the participants were not online was the *cost of the monthly Internet service*, with 65% of non-users identifying this option.

Cost of computer equipment and *no Internet-ready device* were selected as being important reasons for non-use with 45% and 40% choosing these options, respectively. A key barrier to adoption is the perceived cost of entry or the lack of having access to an Internet-ready device. For many participants, it was both the *cost of the monthly Internet service* as well as the *expense of an Internet-ready device* that was a significant factor in them not being online. Fourteen of the twenty residents (70%) who were not online responded that the costs associated with using the Internet are reasons for not being online. Every non-user who identified *cost of a computer* also identified *cost of the monthly Internet service* as a barrier to adoption with the exception of 1 respondent. One participant commented, “I can’t afford a computer right now, they are expensive. The monthly service is quite a bit. There are bundle services and everything, but it is more expensive than it needs to be. I use the Internet at friends’ houses and the libraries quite a bit.” When asked if there were any reasons other than cost why she did not use the Internet at home her response was: “The only reason I can’t have it right now is because of cost, I just can’t do it right now.”

Barrier 2: Lack of skills, training, and confidence

Lack of skills/training or the *Internet being too difficult to use* is the second-most selected response in the Canadian Internet Use Survey (CIUS), with 24% of the non-Internet use population and 21% of those respondents with less than \$25,000 income (CAD), selecting this option as a barrier. In our study, nearly half (45%) of non-Internet users from the low-income housing study identified *lack of confidence, knowledge, or online skills* as a reason for their non-use.

Despite the fact that the emphasis on cost was echoed throughout a number of the interviews, some residents suggested that the cost is, in part, difficult to justify given other circumstances, mainly their low skill level. One respondent, when asked the reasons why he is not online, said,

It does cost money, and I really can't afford it right now...it is just like a car. If you buy a new car and you don't have a license, you don't know how to drive it, well it is not much good to you until you learn these things.

This analogy suggests that while this person may be able to afford the Internet at some point, even if cost is not an issue, he would have difficulty spending money on something he does not understand or know how to use. When asked the reason why he does not use the Internet, the respondent elaborated that,

I would have to do some upgrading... I don't have the knowledge to do the pictures online and all that stuff. My ex, she's got all that information, she is like right into it, so I just sit down and watch her and go, 'OK do that again!'

He went on to explain that he had previously used a computer but he did not keep up with it. As such, he would need to improve his computer skills before he could use the Internet.

Barrier 3: No relevance/no interest

There are also some non-adopters who simply did not see value in using the Internet. In the Canadian Internet Use Survey (CIUS), looking at both the entire population as well as respondents with less than \$25,000 (CAD) household income, *no need/no interest/not useful* is overwhelmingly the most selected category of non-Internet users, with 67% and 66% identifying this reason, respectively.

In our research, too, we identified people with little interest in adopting the Internet. But this number was much lower, 30%, amongst the respondents in the Digital Inclusion Project. And, when we examine the responses more closely, we find that only 10% of non-Internet users reported relevance or interest as the *only* reason why they were not online.

Many non-users may initially say they are not interested in going online, or it is just not relevant to their life. In fact, in our study, over 50% of non-users initially identified relevance/interest as an explanation for their non-use. However, when asked a series of follow-up questions "What if the cost of the Internet was very inexpensive?" or "What if you learned how to use a computer?", many people, who might have selected on a questionnaire *not interested/not relevant*, provided a different answer. An important finding emerged when we asked these follow-up questions to the respondents who initially identified no relevance/no interest as their reason for non-adoption. For a portion of non-adopters, their lack of interest in going online is rooted in the cost of the service, their lack of digital literacy, or their inability to get an affordable computer. This finding is difficult to capture with strictly large-scale quantitative data. The approach used in this project allows for a more nuanced understanding of why low-income individuals have considerably lower rates of Internet adoption.

What do the findings mean for non-users of the Internet?

The findings from this research highlight the need for a more nuanced understanding of the barriers to adoption as experienced by non-users of the Internet, who live in vulnerable communities, such as low-income housing units. Survey research and big data, while effective at providing a snapshot of Internet use, often fail to capture the intricacies surrounding the barriers to access for non-adopters of the Internet and how these intersect. For many non-users, the reasons for not using the Internet are multifaceted and complex, particularly when asked if the Internet is something relevant or of interest to them. A shift towards acknowledging this complexity and attempting to unpack the question of no relevance/no interest is a key contribution of our research. For many non-users, the relevance of the Internet is *not* dependent on the relevance of the Internet itself, but rather it is often linked to external factors, mainly cost, confidence, and a lack of digital literacy. For researchers, this means they need to shift their thinking about non-users as a group who is not interested in being online towards one which aims to provide a better understanding of how interest in the Internet is being mediated by cost,

confidence, and/or digital literacy considerations. For policy makers, these findings suggest that digital inclusion initiatives need to look at issues of cost and equipment first and also provide adequate support to address digital literacy barriers.

Methodology

In a Southwestern Ontario municipality with approximately 100,000 residents, the Digital Inclusion project used qualitative approaches, including semi-structured interviews lasting about 30 to 60 minutes, to gather data in August of 2013.

The responses provided by residents living in two subsidized government-housing buildings form the basis of the findings for this research. These buildings had a combined residency of approximately 200 units. Accounting for data quality, there are 60 valid interviews that are included in the analysis for a response rate of approximately 40%. It is important to highlight that it is difficult to recruit participants from low-income housing units, as they often do not have stable schedules, are reluctant to interact with researchers, and are hesitant to share their views and perspectives.

Prior to the interviews, two pilots were conducted to ensure the appropriateness of the questions, ease of understanding, and adequate length. A number of adjustments were made to the research design based on feedback from the pilots, which consisted primarily of a move from structured to semi-structured interviews to allow for clarifications on the part of the interviewees, follow-up questions, and opportunities for more deeply engaging the residents. Furthermore, the semi-structured interview method resulted from the pilots, in response to accessibility concerns about having the residents fill out a survey/answer interview questions in a structured manner. This mixed methods approach is important to gain a greater understanding of the barriers to adoption that exist in these residences.

Background

Research on digital inclusion has predominantly relied on large-scale quantitative data to understand reasons for non-use. The 2012 Canadian Internet Use Survey (CIUS), conducted by Statistics Canada, is an example of such research. The first column below presents the results for the entire population of non-users of the Internet identified in the survey and the second column presents the findings from only those individuals who are non-users of the Internet and have household incomes below \$25,000 (CAD). An analysis of this dataset finds that for both the entire Canadian population as well as those with household incomes below \$25,000 (CAD), *no need or interest in the Internet* is the predominant reason for non-adoption. This finding seems to suggest that those who are not online may be “want nots” instead of “have nots”.

Descriptive statistics for reasons you do not use the Internet from the 2012 CIUS (N=3750)		
Reasons you do not use the Internet	All non-users (Percentage)	Non-users less than \$25,000 household income (Percentage)
No need/no interest/not useful	67	66
Lack of skills/training/too difficult to use	24	21
Cost of service or equipment	8	14
Limited access to a computer	8	10

A 2013 report from the Pew Research Center used a similar methodology when attempting to understand barriers to access for non-users in the US context. Pew asked respondents what was the main reason why they did not go online and then categorized responses into four main categories: (1) relevance, (2) usability/confidence, (3) price, and (4) lack of availability/access. Nearly 35% of respondents reported that they did not use the Internet because it was not relevant to them. This was followed by concerns about usability/confidence at 32% and price at 19%.

These quantitative approaches have historically yielded fairly similar results, the primary reason for non-adoption being relevance, followed by cost, and then digital literacy/understanding.

Helsper and Reisdorf (2013) argue that quantitative approaches for furthering our knowledge of digital inclusion ought to move away from asking participants why they do not adopt technology, and adopt a more nuanced approach to the understanding of technology non-use, one that looks at people's social context. The approach used in Helsper and Reisdorf's paper consisted of asking the respondents first what reasons they had for not being online, and then further probing participants by asking what among the listed reasons is the single most important one for non-use.

About the Authors

Michael Haight graduated from The University of Western Ontario with an MA in Sociology with a specialization in program and policy evaluation. Currently he is a PhD candidate at The University of Western Ontario in Sociology, researching internet use over the life course. He is a member of the SocioDigital Lab at Western. His research interests lie in the area of the digital divide, internet utilization, engagement and use of the internet, barriers to access of technology, and social/digital inequality.

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