The role of digital inclusion in mitigating social exclusion among youth in the marginalized community: a case study of Sri Lanka's tea estate

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Abstract

Access to Information and Communication Technologies is increasingly considered a fundamental right, yet systemic inequalities continue to exclude marginalized communities from meaningful digital engagement. Sri Lanka's tea estate community, descendants of South Indian Tamil laborers brought during the British colonial period, remains one of the country's most socioeconomically disadvantaged groups, facing economic, cultural, and social exclusion through low wages, limited educational opportunities, caste-based stigma, and restricted mobility. Paradoxically, youth in these communities are increasingly digitally connected, with widespread smartphone ownership and internet access. This paradox raises a critical question: does digital inclusion mitigate social exclusion or exacerbate existing inequalities? Although global literature highlights the potential of digital inclusion to enhance social participation and opportunity, few studies have explored how digitally connected youth in ethnically marginalized settings navigate this complex terrain. There is a significant knowledge gap in understanding how youth in Sri Lanka's tea estate communities experience digital inclusion—both its opportunities and risks—and how these experiences shape their economic, cultural, and social capital. This study was conducted in the Waltrim Grama Niladhari Division of Sri Lanka's Central Province, focuses on youth aged 15–29 and is guided by two objectives: (1) to understand the lived experiences of digital inclusion—including digital accessibility, internet connectivity, and digital competencies—and how these factors shape the economic, cultural, and social opportunities available to youth in the tea estate community, and (2) to explore the risks encountered by youth when engaging with digital platforms and examine how these risks affect their economic, cultural, and social capital, as well as the strategies they employ to cope with such challenges. A phenomenological research design was adopted for this study. Data was collected through in-depth interviews and photovoice using snowball sampling and analyzed thematically using Bourdieu's concept of economic, cultural, and social capital to interpret how digital engagement shapes opportunities and vulnerabilities.

Keywords: *digital inclusion, social inclusion/exclusion, marginalized community, tea estate (Sri Lanka)*