



EQUAL ACCESS OF ONLINE PLATFORMS: A PATHWAY TO DIGITAL INCLUSION

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

The digital divide has become a significant concern in today's technology-driven world. This paper explores the concept of digital equality and discusses strategies for promoting equal access to digital technologies. It highlights the importance of addressing the digital divide and provides recommendations for policymakers, educators, and industry leaders. The rapid growth of digital technologies has transformed the way we live, work, and communicate. However, this transformation has also created a significant gap between those who have access to digital technologies. This digital divide has far-reaching consequences, including limited access to education, employment, and healthcare opportunities. The paper highlights aspects of online platforms in digital inclusion.

Keywords: Digital, Technology, Inclusion, Online

Introduction

The digital divide has become a significant concern in today's technology-driven world. This paper explores the concept of digital equality and discusses strategies for promoting equal access to digital technologies. It highlights the importance of addressing the digital divide and provides recommendations for policymakers, educators, and industry leaders. The rapid growth of digital technologies has transformed the way we live, work, and communicate. However, this transformation has also created a significant gap between those who have access to digital technologies and those who do not Rampasso et al., (2019). This digital divide has far-reaching consequences, including limited access to education, employment, and healthcare opportunities. The digital divide refers to the unequal access to digital technologies, such as computers, smartphones, and the internet. This divide is often characterized by socioeconomic factors, including income, education, and geographic location. In many countries, marginalized communities, including low-income households, rural communities, and indigenous populations, are disproportionately affected by the digital divide Mossman, (2018). Promoting digital equality is essential for bridging the gap in the digital age. By increasing access to digital infrastructure, providing digital literacy training, developing inclusive digital content, and promoting digital inclusion policies, we can reduce the digital divide and promote equal access to digital technologies. This, in turn, can help to create a more equitable and just society Nikitina et al., (2021).

Equal Access of Online Platforms

In today's interconnected world, equal access to online platforms is a fundamental right, ensuring that every individual can harness the power of digital technologies, regardless of their background, location, or abilities.

Why is equal access crucial?

- Bridges the digital divide, fostering a more inclusive society.
- Unlocks economic opportunities, promoting growth and development.
- Empowers individuals, communities, and societies to reach their full potential.

Key dimensions of equal access

- i. Digital Empowerment: Equipping individuals with essential digital skills and knowledge.
- ii. Inclusive Design: Crafting online platforms that are accessible, usable, and enjoyable for all.
- iii. Socio-Economic Equity: Ensuring online platforms are affordable and accessible to diverse socio-economic groups.
- iv. Cultural Diversity: Celebrating and incorporating diverse cultural contexts into online platforms.
- v. Geographic Accessibility: Expanding online access to rural, remote, and underserved areas.
- vi. Responsive Platform Design: Creating adaptable, user-centered online platforms.
- vii. Policy and Regulatory Frameworks: Establishing safeguards to protect user rights and prevent digital exclusion.

Challenges to overcome

- i. Digital Divide: Addressing disparities in digital access and literacy
- ii. Accessibility Barriers: Removing technical, linguistic, and cultural obstacles
- iii. Socio-Economic Disparities: Mitigating the impact of income, education, and social status on online access
- iv. Cultural and Linguistic Diversity: Accommodating diverse cultural and linguistic contexts
- v. Geographic and Infrastructure Constraints: Overcoming limited internet connectivity, infrastructure, and digital literacy
- vi. Equal access to online platforms is a cornerstone of digital inclusion, essential for fostering social inclusion, economic growth, and cultural diversity. By addressing the challenges and dimensions of equal access, we can create a more just, equitable, and connected world.

Background of the Study

The Power of Digital Technologies

The unprecedented growth of digital technologies has revolutionized the way we connect, learn, and participate in the global economy. Online platforms have emerged as indispensable tools, offering unparalleled benefits, including enhanced connectivity, improved education and healthcare, and increased economic opportunities Surjit & Ranjit, (2024).

However, despite the vast potential of online platforms, significant barriers persist, excluding many individuals and communities from accessing and utilizing these technologies Titi, (2022). The digital divide, a stark reminder of the gap between the digitally empowered and the digitally disenfranchised, has been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Key Insights

- i. **Global Digital Divide**
A staggering 3.7 billion people, or 47% of the global population, remain disconnected from the internet (ITU).
- ii. **Disparities in Digital Access**
In the United States, a concerning 34% of low-income households lack broadband internet access, compared to 10% of middle-income households (Pew Research Center).
- iii. **Digital Literacy**
A report by the OECD reveals that 40% of adults in developed countries lack basic digital skills.

By acknowledging these disparities, we can begin to bridge the gap and ensure equal access to online platforms. In today's world, underdeveloped countries like ours are facing a new problem more inclusive and connected world.

Rationale of the Study

While online education and various necessary activities are very common due to the lack of equal access to technology for people at all levels, which we can call digital divide. On the one hand, while digital platforms are showing the possibility of opening a new horizon beyond all kinds of discrimination like gender, religion, village-city, physical disability etc., on the other hand, a large part of the marginal population is still far behind in the use of technology. The need for various initiatives for technological awareness from the government is being realized. Necessary steps should be taken to make technology accessible to the marginalized people.

Further changes need to be made in the design of online education methods for people with disabilities so that the inclusiveness of education can be increased."

Digital literacy training

The government should take the initiative to ensure equity in the availability of digital learning.

Screen readers should be introduced to increase online availability

Efforts should be made to increase the availability of technology keeping in mind the affordability of all. Digital services should be made financially accessible. In many remote villages and border areas of our country, the facility of internet use is often disrupted due to network problems. Many people are still unaware of the use of technology, as a result of which they are becoming isolated from the mainstream of society.

Community Engagement

The local community should have access to digital. It should be kept in mind that language or culture does not become a barrier. Since there are options for using certain specific languages in technology, many minority language communities are lagging behind as they do not have the opportunity to use technology in their mother tongue.

Digital Discrimination

Various types of financial and social discrimination are creating divisions in the use of digital platforms among individuals, communities and societies, which must be eradicated.

Digital Inclusiveness

Everyone should be included in the digital platform. Arrangements should be made so that everyone can use ICT.

Statement of the Problem

The statement of the problem is entitled as "Equal Access of Online Platforms: A Pathway to Digital Inclusion."

Operational Definition

Equal access

The idea that every single person of a community or society should have equal opportunities regardless of their background, caste, gender, religion etc.

Digital platform

software-based infrastructure by which users can interact, transact and exchange information.

Research Questions

- i. What are the most important core concepts for an equal access digital platform?
- ii. How do social, economic, and cultural factors influence access to online platforms?
- iii. What research designs and methods are suitable or appropriate in the case of equal access?
- iv. How can researchers ensure that equal access is diverse for all?
- v. What are the most significant barriers to using online platforms, and how can these affect different communities?
- vi. How do online platforms create social inequality?
- vii. How has the online platform brought about social change after Covid-19?

Objectives

- i. To identify the barriers to online access.
- ii. To identify differences in online access among different communities.
- iii. To publicize the rules and policies regarding equal online access to everyone, such as its benefits, usage rules, etc.
- iv. To evaluate and identify the advantages and challenges.
- v. To find ways to address the fear or hesitation that works among common people in using online platforms.

Discussion

Equal access on online platforms means that everyone should have the opportunity to access online services and information. It is important to ensure that geographical location does not become a barrier. It should be ensured that all people, regardless of religion, profession, economic status, education, language, culture, or physical disability, have access to online platforms from cities to remote villages. Online use should be encouraged, and care should be taken to ensure that digital platforms can be used by all types of people. Various training programs should be undertaken to promote online access, reduce all kinds of discrimination, increase social justice, overcome barriers, improve infrastructure, and reduce the cost of internet use. It should be ensured that everyone can use it according to their ability. Online access should be made usable for local communities.

This report analyzes primary data from a survey conducted by the Center for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) from January 2018 to December 2021.

- i. Among the various types of digital divides, the gender divide is particularly noteworthy.
- ii. The number of Indian women owning mobile phones is 15 percent lower than men, and women make up only one-third of internet users in India.
- iii. The rural-urban digital divide is also highlighted in the study.
- iv. The report states that only 31 percent of the rural population uses the internet annually, compared to 67 percent of the urban population.
- v. The ethnic divide is also quite noticeable. In rural India, the tendency to use formal financial services is lowest among ST families, followed by SC families and OBC families.
- vi. The number of computer users is higher among the general and OBC categories compared to the SC and ST communities.
- vii. The difference between the general category and the tribes was about seven to eight percent between 2018 and 2021.
- viii. On the other hand, analysis of the religious divide shows that among all religions, Sikhs are most likely to be aware of computer use, followed by Christians, Hindus, and finally Muslims, who have less awareness of digital technology than people of other religions.
- ix. Among the Indian states, Maharashtra has the highest internet usage, followed by Goa and Kerala. Bihar has the lowest number of internet users.
- x. Opportunities for Computer and Internet Use for Education
- xi. According to the National Sample Survey [NSS (2017-18)], only 9 percent of students have access to computers.

The term “equal access on online platforms” means that everyone should have the opportunity and convenience to access online services and information. It is important to keep in mind that geographical location should not be a barrier. It should be ensured that everyone, from cities to remote villages, regardless of religion, profession, economic status, education, language, culture, or physical disability, can access the internet, encourage online usage, and ensure that digital platforms are accessible to all types of people. This includes taking various training programs to promote online access, reducing all kinds of discrimination, increasing social justice, overcoming barriers, improving infrastructure, and reducing the cost of internet usage. It should be ensured that everyone can use it according to their ability. Online access should be made usable for local communities. This report analyzes primary data from a survey conducted by the Center for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) from January 2018 to December 2021. Among the various types of digital divisions, the gender division is particularly noteworthy. In our country,

the number of Indian women owning mobile phones is 15 percent lower than that of men. Among internet users in India, women make up only one-third. During the pandemic, when online education was going on, not only rural students but also many school-going girls in Tajpur Pahari area of our capital Delhi could not attend online classes because there was an Android mobile at home which was used by their brother or elder brother. The picture of the rural-urban digital divide has also been highlighted in the research. The report states that only 31 percent of the rural population uses the internet annually, while 67 percent of the urban population enjoys internet services. The ethnic divide is also quite noticeable. In rural India, the trend of using formal financial services is the lowest among ST families, followed by SC families and OBC families. The number of computer users among the general and OBC groups is higher than that of the SC and ST communities. Between 2018 and 2021, the difference between the general category and the tribes is about seven to eight percent. On the other hand, analyzing the religious divide, it has been seen that among all religions, Sikhs are most likely to be aware of computer use, followed by Christians, Hindus, and finally Muslims have less awareness about digital technology than people of other religions. Among the Indian states, Maharashtra has the highest internet usage, followed by Goa and Kerala. Bihar has the lowest number of internet users. Opportunity to use computers and internet for education. According to the National Service Scheme [NSS (2017-18)], only 9 percent of students get the opportunity to use computers.

In the present era, digital payment i.e. digital money transaction is a very normal and necessary part of life, especially when the whole world was confined to their homes due to the outbreak of Covid 19 in 2020. At that time the number of digital transactions increased. As a result, in 2021, the number of digital transactions in India was the highest at nearly 48.6 billion. However, the number of digital transactions of the poorest 40 percent of people in India is much less than that of the richest 7 percent of the world's population. The category of people who need technology the most in the whole world is the students with physical disabilities. It is difficult for students with disabilities to cross the primary stage of education without technology. But in India, only 29 percent of people with disabilities get technology assistance. In some areas, this number is around 3 percent. Among the disabled, visually impaired students need technology the most. But statistics say that only one percent of visually impaired students in India get various technological aids including Braille. Despite the invention of various technologies like screen readers, magnification tools etc., it has not yet been available to a large section of the disabled.

The language option becomes a big problem for the people of the local language community in the case of using technology. In the case of technology, there is no alternative other than some specific languages. Some software like Vokal, Khabri, and Niki.ai are trying to fill this gap. On the other hand, software like skillverry, Avanti is trying to get rural boys and girls employed through trainings.

Platform like shop kirana is working for helping rural retailer to connect with big brands by allowing them to order products through mobile apps.

Conclusion

Mainly, students studying in various branches of technology can be trained and employed to increase digital literacy in rural India. The number of young men and women in our country of India is huge. If this huge number of young men and women are appointed as institutions and suitable teachers for teaching technology, the young men and women of rural areas will be encouraged and they will be able to engage themselves in the work of spreading digital literacy among the elderly citizens and the children of the coming generation. Students and young businessmen and entrepreneurs under various branches of technology should collectively take various initiatives and necessary steps to make digital medium indispensable for the students and working people of rural areas for earning. On the other hand, besides inventing new technologies for disabled people, reaching the available technologies to all levels of physically challenged people is a big challenge. Although the Government of India has taken the initiative to expand Digital India. But a large part of the rural population has not yet been able to be a part of that Digital India. Incidentally, increasing digital literacy is closely related to increasing the literacy rate, raising awareness to eliminate all kinds of divisions, etc. Besides increasing the digital literacy rate, it is also necessary to take care of various issues like the issue of security, especially women's safety is being severely hampered in the age of social networks, the number of women trafficking and other criminal activities is increasing. For this, it is necessary to take strict steps against cybercrime and make it effective.

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