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Digital Exclusion and Essential Services: The Experiences of Older Adults Who Identify as Asian or Asian-British

Sara Bailey, Elizabeth FitzGerald, Agnes Kukulska-Hulme (Institute of Educational Technology, The Open University)

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"[I]n 2018 the percentage of internet non-users within Black communities (8.2%), Pakistani communities (8%), and Bangladeshi communities (5.2%) were lower than the national average (10%)..."

"From these existing statistics, it does not appear that a move towards using more digital channels might disproportionately exclude people of Black and minority ethnic groups."

Should we be concerned about the specific impacts of digitalising essential services on racially-minoritised communities in the UK?
Why we should be concerned about the specific impacts of digitalisation on particular racially-minoritised communities

Disaggregate the statistics!

If you disaggregate ONS data on ‘internet users’ versus ‘internet non users’ by age as well as ethnicity, the percentage of internet users among individuals of Asian heritage in particular drops significantly:
Risk factors for digital exclusion high among individuals of (South) Asian heritage:

• Socio-economic deprivation
• Low labour force participation
• Limited language proficiency
Presentation Outline

• Introduction to the PRIME project
• The digitalisation of services in the UK
• Methods
• Key findings
• Conclusions and recommendations
Introduction

• PRIME is a three-year UKRI-funded project launched in April 2022 by a consortium of universities led by Heriot-Watt.

• It brings together academics from the social sciences, applied linguistics, computer science and data science.

Objectives

• To deliver harm-reduction interventions, processes and technologies which will transform digital health, housing and energy services.

• To create safer online spaces for minoritised communities in the UK.
The Digitalisation of Essential Services in the UK

• 2014 Digital Inclusion Strategy (UK Government)
• What do we mean by ‘digitalisation’ in the context of services?
  • Our focus in this presentation is on the user facing dimensions of digitalisation i.e. using digital channels to communicate with and request services from providers
  • Other elements of PRIME will explore provider facing dimensions e.g. data-driven algorithmic decision-making
Methods

• Semi-structured interviews: 100 (mainly low income) individuals living in England and Scotland who identify as being of Indian, Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Chinese, Black African, Black Caribbean or dual heritage.

• Interviews were transcribed, anonymised and analysed using Nvivo.

• This paper reports on the experiences of a subset of the 100 interviews: 20 individuals aged 55-87 of Indian, Bangladeshi, and Pakistani heritage.
Key Findings

Three primary barriers to using digital services:

1. Digital poverty
2. Inadequate digital literacy
3. Inadequate language support
Digital Poverty

Access to a Device

• A lack of access to *any* internet-connected device
• But also, lack of access to an *appropriate* device (using web apps on smartphones, inability to read small-sized text on smartphones)

Particularly in a South Asian community, it's really bad...a lot of the older women, they don't have the phone. They might have a phone just to speak and answer the phone... they struggle with that” (Pakistani Female, 65)

Internet Connectivity

• Affordability
• But also, intermittent access (leading to postponement of online tasks), and reluctance of use public Wi-Fi

Yes, I think that's the other problem really...If I know that I have to use it [the internet], I’ll try and use it at home but not outside as much really because you don't want to kind of leak the data or leak the information, because they can tap into it. (Indian Female, 65)
Digital Literacy

• What does digital literacy mean in the context of the digitalisation of essential services?
• UK policy-makers still use statistics on the number of ‘internet users’ in the UK – defined as individuals who have used the internet in the last three months – to evaluate the impacts of digitalising services.
• But many of our participants did use the internet (e.g. WhatsApp, streaming services), but were unable to effectively use digital service platforms.

They're asking for information, and sometimes I've struggled because sometimes I don't know how to upload [photos] to the system....so, I wait for help...and that can delay, and then you miss your appointment. (Pakistani Female, 65)
Language Support

• Social housing, healthcare and energy service platforms do not appear to provide language support/translation functions.
• Prior to digitalisation, some service users with limited English language proficiency were able to rely on bilingual reception staff at service provider offices for language support.
• Subsequent to digitalisation, individuals with limited English language proficiency seem to be more reliant on relatives to translate written communications with providers, raising privacy/safeguarding concerns.

I understand this one! Short message! But for the long one, I need someone to translate (Bangladeshi Female, 55)
Conclusions and Recommendations

• Conclusions:
  • Service exclusions are likely if we fail to address digital poverty, inadequate digital literacy, and inadequate language support.

• Recommendations:
  • Improve data collection to inform policy:
    o Which demographic groups are using/not using digitalised services.
    o Are there different outcomes when using ‘traditional’ versus digital services? e.g. length of time it takes to receive the service, type of service received
    o Beyond the ‘internet user’ versus ‘non internet user’ categorisation: how can we meaningfully assess the scale of digital exclusion as it relates to access to essential services?
  • Internet access as a ‘human right’
  • Widening access to digital skills training courses