

Doctor of Media and Communication Studies

Exploring the Acces, Usage and Perceptions of the ICT of Women in Marginalised Communities

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ABSTRACT

The experiences and perceptions of ICT access and usage by women in marginalised South African communities is sorely under researched. Where information from a gender-based perspective reflecting potential digital gender disparities exists, it is typically a statistical view of the ICT landscape (largely reflecting access). Exploration of the complex underlying socio cultural factors affecting women's ICT usage is under-represented. There is an urgent need to hear women's own voices and perspectives on such intricate and often obscure subject matter. This research has aimed to bring traditionally overlooked perspectives to the fore by exploring the experiences and perceptions of women in marginalised South African communities regarding ICT access and usage. This qualitative study, guided by a feminist phenomenological perspective, focused on the individual lived experiences of twelve women living in three marginalised areas of the Western Cape of South Africa. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews and analysed through the Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach.

The findings showed that the women had strong attachments to ICT and had integrated it into their own individual contexts, to fit their needs and activities. ICT had been interwoven into various social, economic, educational, political, cultural, recreational and spiritual dimensions of life. A range of factors emerged as having influence on women's digital participation. Some of the more significant barriers were digital skills and confidence, poor social support systems, affordability of ICT, awareness of personally beneficial opportunities, time constraints, resistance from a male partner and poor literacy. Additionally, the women lived in highly gendered environments, with socially-constructed gender norms, roles and identities, which had a strong influence on digital experiences and perceptions. This socio-cultural gender inequality was fundamental in the time constraints, and in the power dynamics and resistance women faced from male partners. Findings indicated that gender identities and traits disadvantage females in the digital context, for example ideas of femininity being viewed as conflicting with a perceived 'dirty' ICT field. Detrimental perceptions associating sophisticated ICT activity with males were reportedly prevalent in the communities and some of the women interviewed subscribed to the

essentialist theory which considers men inherently better suited to technology. These findings have important implications for policies and practices in view of enhancing the digital inclusion of women in marginalised South African communities. Recommendations towards this end are outlined, specifically centred on gender-sensitive approaches in the planning and implementation of digital inclusion initiatives.

Keywords: women, ICT usage, marginalised communities, gender, experiences, feminist phenomenology, South Africa