Sociocultural Factors Influencing Online Instruction: A Latina Perspective

Christine M. Reyes, New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, NM, USA
Cecilia Hernandez, New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, NM, USA
H. Prentice Baptiste, New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, NM, USA

ABSTRACT

Home computer ownership and Internet access have become essential to education, job security and economic opportunity. The digital divide remains greatest for ethnic/racial groups placing them at a disadvantage. The purpose of the study was to gain understanding and insight into the sociocultural factors influencing the digital divide as related to Latinos as a group, specifically a group of non-traditional Latina pre-service teachers from the midwest in a required online instructional media and technology course. The following sociocultural factors (1) generational status, (2) English language ability, (3) educational attainment, (4) socioeconomic status and (5) gender identity are defined and identified in relationship to the success of these participants. Of the five sociocultural factors explored in this study, only English language ability did not appear to have any direct influence on the success of these particular students. These sociocultural factors also influenced one another; particularly as generational status influences English language ability, educational attainment, gender roles, and ultimately socioeconomic status.

Keywords: Acculturation, Assimilation, Computer Fluency, Computer Literacy, Computer Proficiency, Digital Divide, Fluency Gap, Information

INTRODUCTION

Home computer ownership and Internet access have become essential to education, job security and economic opportunity. Computers and Internet technologies allow people to access information quickly, in many cases instantaneously from all over the world via the world-wide-web. The Internet has grown exponentially, and gained many uses since it was first use by the government for interagency communication. “The Internet is one of the youngest and fastest growing media in the world. Its growth is still accelerating at a rate of about 7.3 million pages per day, doubling every eight months” (Killmer & Koppel, 2002, p.7). The authors also believed that the Internet had not yet reached its highest period of expansion. In today’s fast
paced society, we use the Internet as a tool to gain access to information, knowledge and economic power. By the 21st century, computer use has become such an integrated part of U.S. society for teaching, learning and entertainment that some researchers have dubbed it the “new information society” (Wilson, 2003). However, there is a concern that citizens who are lacking computer skills and access will be left behind in our new economy (Wilson, 2003). Typically the people left behind during rapid change in society are those who do not have access and are less educated and poor; hence the growing gap called the digital divide (Edwards, 2005; Edutopia, 2006; Wilhelm, 2004). The digital divide is a term created during the 1990’s to identify the issue of inequitable access to technology (Gorski, 2002). This inequality is manifested in economic, ethnic, gender and social stratification (Cooper, 2000; Edwards, 2005; Edutopia, 2006; Wilhelm, 2004).

In the twenty years since the digital divide was acknowledged, much research has been conducted on the role of education and socio-economic status in computer ownership and Internet access among racial groups (Kominski & Newberger, 1999). A large gap remains between African-American and Hispanic groups when compared to non-minority groups. The 2010 Census (File 2013) found that although three quarters of all United States homes had computers, households with lower incomes were less likely to own computers than were higher income households. Similarly, Internet use by non-White minority groups has continued to lag behind White and Asian households (p. 2). Although a great deal of information has been gathered about the educational and economic patterns that drive home computer ownership and Internet access, little is known about the role of culture as an issue of the digital divide. By 2002, researchers found that although access to technology for Hispanics and African-Americans had steadily increased in the 1990’s, they were still less likely to own computers than Whites (Fairlie, 2004).

**CULTURE AND THE DIGITAL DIVIDE**

Latinos are the fastest growing minority group in the U.S., yet they lag behind in home computer ownership and Internet access. The role that culture plays in the digital divide has not yet been fully explored and has yet to be identified (Kupperman & Fishman, 2002). Research has widely shown that socio-economic factors do contribute to the lack of access and use among Hispanic and African-American communities, yet these factors cannot fully explain this difference between racial and ethnic groups (Larrison, et.al, 2002, LaRose & Metler, 1989). Several researchers have implied that factors, other than education and economics, are related to the gap between Hispanic computer ownership and Internet access and other racial and ethnic groups. They were unable to clearly identify the relationship as socio-cultural, stating that, “different data sources document large racial differences in rates of computer ownership and Internet use; we know very little about the underlying causes of these differences” (Fairlie, 2004, p.13). These underlying causes have yet to be identified in the research literature (Goslee, 1998; Kominski & Newberger, 1999).

Defining and identifying the sociocultural factors that play a role in home computer ownership and Internet access for Hispanics will aid in finding ways to close the gap in the digital divide for this group. As sociocultural factors can encompass any behavior or belief found in a society and due to the ever changing patterns within a living society, for the purpose of this study, and to provide an operational definition, the sociocultural factors investigated include: (1) generational status; (2) English language ability; (3) educational attainment; (4) socio-economic status; and (5) gender identity. These factors, individually or in combination, may contribute to the low rates of computer ownership and Internet access for Latinos. Other issues interconnected to these socioeconomic factors appear to be the amount of time available for
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