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Bridging the Digital Divide in Hospitality and Tourism: Digital Inclusion for Disadvantaged Groups

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Abstract

As technology continues to revolutionize the hospitality and tourism industry, the issues of digital equity and digital divide have gained increasing prominence (Minghetti & Buhalis, 2010; Reverte & Luque, 2021). While digital advancements offer unprecedented opportunities for businesses and consumers, they also risk exacerbating existing inequalities (Wu & Yang, 2023). This is particularly evident in the growing digital divide, referring to the capabilities gap of individuals, groups and regions to access and process digital information technology (OECD, 2001). The rapid pace of technological advancement has left certain groups struggling to keep up. These digital disadvantaged groups—comprising individuals with limited access to technology, low digital literacy, or socio-economic barriers—are increasingly at risk of being excluded from the benefits of technological innovations in hospitality and tourism (Shin & Baek, 2023). This viewpoint paper explores the challenges faced by digital disadvantaged groups, emphasizes the importance of shaping their experiences in the hospitality and tourism industry to promote digital inclusion and equity, and advocates for focused research in this area.

Keywords: digital divide, digital inclusion, disadvantaged groups, technological innovations

Digital Disadvantaged Groups and Digital Inclusion

In the hospitality and tourism sector, vulnerable groups often face significant challenges in accessing and using digital technology due to factors such as age, income, education levels, ethnicity, and the type of region in which they live (Durand et al., 2022). Previous literature has identified multiple levels of the digital divide, including the digital access gap, digital literacy gap, and digital impact gap (Korovkin et al., 2023; Maurer & Lutz, 2011). These gaps affect digital disadvantaged groups differently across the industry (Table 1).

Low-income individuals and residents of rural or remote areas frequently struggle to afford the necessary technology, such as devices and reliable internet, or live in regions with limited technological infrastructure (Durand et al., 2022), leading to a digital access gap. This gap prevents them from taking advantage of digital services like online booking platforms, travel apps, and digital payment methods.

Older adults and low-education individuals often lack the skills required to effectively use digital tools, making it difficult for them to navigate online platforms or utilize digital resources (Wu &

Yang, 2023). This results in a digital literacy gap, where the lack of digital proficiency leads to missed opportunities, such as accessing special discounts or using apps that enhance the travel experience.

Table 1. Digital Divide Hierarchy and Disadvantaged Groups

Digital Divide Hierarchy		Digital Disadvantaged Groups
Level 1	Access	Low-income
		Rural or remote areas
Level 2	Literacy	Low-education level
		Older adults
Level 3	Impact	Disabled
		Immigrants and refugees
		Non-English speakers

People with disabilities, non-English speakers, and immigrants and refugees may encounter barriers in accessing content that meets their specific needs, whether due to accessibility issues or language barriers (Ali, 2023; Ono & Zavodny, 2008). This creates a digital impact gap, where these groups are unable to fully benefit from digital services. Poorly designed websites or apps that lack accessibility features make it difficult for them to find information, understand service options, book accessible accommodations, or communicate specific needs to service providers.

Bridging the Gap for Digital Inclusion

To promote digital inclusion and equity in the hospitality and tourism industry, it is crucial to address the needs of digital disadvantaged groups by shaping their digital experiences. First, ensuring that digital services and devices are affordable and accessible to all is essential (Minghetti & Buhalis, 2010). This can be achieved through public-private partnerships, subsidies, or discounts aimed at reducing the financial barriers to technology adoption. Second, implementing educational initiatives focused on improving digital literacy among disadvantaged groups is vital (Leung et al., 2025; Wu & Yang, 2023). These programs should be customized to meet the specific needs of each group, whether it be older adults or low-education groups. Finally, developing digital platforms and services that are user-friendly, accessible, and tailored to the needs of diverse groups is key (Maurer & Lutz, 2011). This includes ensuring compatibility with assistive technologies, offering multilingual options, and designing interfaces that are easy to navigate. Providing continuous technical support is also important to help users navigate digital platforms and troubleshoot issues.

Future Research Directions

The existing literature on digital equity in the hospitality and tourism industry predominantly addresses the first and second levels of the digital divide – digital access and digital literacy – and often reflects the perspectives of tourism suppliers (Carlisle et al., 2023; Minghetti & Buhalis, 2010; Reverte & Luque, 2021). However, there is a significant gap in the research regarding the diverse digital disadvantaged groups, the differential impacts of the digital divide on these groups, and strategies to achieve digital equity. This gap may be due to social biases and stereotypical misconceptions that overlook the specific needs of these populations (Ali, 2023; Zhong et al., 2023). To effectively address the challenges faced by digital disadvantaged groups, a comprehensive research agenda is essential. This agenda should aim to capture the complexity of

the digital divide in tourism and hospitality while advancing theoretical understanding of the issue (Korovkin et al., 2023).

First, future research should investigate the effectiveness of various strategies aimed at reducing financial barriers to technology adoption and investigate the role of government policies in bridging the digital access gap. For example, how do public-private partnerships, subsidies, or discounts impact the digital access of low-income individuals and residents of rural or remote areas in the tourism industry? What are the regional disparities in technology infrastructure, and how do these disparities influence tourism participation among digitally disadvantaged groups?

Second, research is needed to understand the digital literacy levels of older adults and low-education individuals within the context of tourism. For example, how does their digital literacy level prevent them from enjoying the full tourism experiences? What are the most effective educational initiatives for improving digital literacy among older adults and low-education individuals in the context of tourism? How can social support networks be leveraged to enhance digital literacy among disadvantaged groups in tourism?

Lastly, there is a critical need for research that examines the digital impact gap among people with disabilities, non-English speakers, and immigrants and refugees. This includes exploring the effectiveness of accessibility features, multilingual support, and user-friendly design in enhancing the tourism experience for digital disadvantaged groups. For example, how does digital divide impact these digital disadvantaged groups in terms of travel and life satisfaction? How can tourism digital platforms be made more inclusive for people with disabilities, non-English speakers, and immigrants and refugees? What is the role of continuous technical support in helping these groups fully benefit from digital tourism services, and how can it be effectively provided?

Digital disadvantaged groups face significant challenges in accessing and utilizing technology within the hospitality and tourism industry. Focused research in this area is critical to understanding the barriers these groups face and developing effective strategies to promote digital inclusion and equity. By addressing these challenges, the hospitality and tourism industry can move towards a more inclusive and equitable future where all individuals and communities can fully participate and benefit from digital advancements.

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