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Disconnected: The Digital Divide and Its Impact on Marginalized Communities

As a native of the Southern United States, more affectionately known as “The South,” and specifically Alabama, I have come to realize that while the region has an abundance of historical connections to the civil rights movement, deeply rooted religious fervor, and hospitality like no other, there is a baseline vulnerability entrenched at the core: the lack of technological access among people living in rural and low-to-moderate income Southern communities. Our current society is technology-dependent, data-driven, and increasingly intertwined with the ideas of automation, computerization, and network interconnectivity. Everything we do centers around data. In that data are trends, culture, information, and the keys to unlock what embodies the entirety of the world when used correctly. The term digital citizen can be defined as a person using information technology (IT) to engage in society, politics, and government. However, it must be noted that digital citizenship is only accessible when IT is available, and with the level of dependence that our nation has on it, having little to no access to these resources can prove detrimental to an individual’s freedom, education, financial opportunities, informed decision making, and even livelihood. Therefore, as a necessary and urgent research topic, I choose to lean into: *The Digital Divide in Southern, Rural Communities: Examining Disparities in Access to Technology and Its Societal Impact*.

Among several common themes such as technological and broadband speed challenges, affordability, and social determinants of health, throughout the texts I took note of three major themes: 1) The impact of the COVID-19 (C19) pandemic and its exacerbation and highlight of the digital divide, 2) impact on educational development and learning, and 3) geographic disparities, especially within rural

communities. Infamous and world-changing, the C19 pandemic shaped the world in the most unexpected ways. Warm embraces turned into mandated masking and a wave from 6 feet away. In-person activities turned virtual rapidly. As a result, society leaned further into digital connectivity, expanding the gap and effect of the inability to access technology. Graves et al. emphasize that "...remote learning is a COVID-19 mitigation strategy until the pandemic is controlled, rural youth are at risk for having unmet health care and education needs" (Graves et al.). Concurrently, Pierce and Cleary note, "the crisis has significantly raised the educational stakes for those without Internet access, computing resources and expertise" and "...altered how education is delivered and significantly highlighted the growing gaps in educational technology in the delivery of academic services" (Pierce and Cleary). Furthermore, Sanders and Scanlon speak to how "glaringly oblivious... The role of technology and importance of access to high-speed broadband has become..." (Sanders and Scanlon). Greiman et al. also found that the disparities "have been amplified by the pandemic, further illustrating not only the value of access but also the digital divides between groups and communities" (Greiman et al.).

While all in agreement that the pandemic revealed how deeply rooted the digital divide reaches, telehealth and remote learning are still ever-present as society moves from the trenches of the pandemic into a more peaceful, healthier era. Though short-term solutions such as handouts and supplementary non-technology means were provided to aid in bridging the gap between students with and without technology, it is not a viable, equal, or long-lasting solution. More study of the digital divide is necessary, underlining a likely research gap in the texts in how these digital changes in the classroom will enable/disable students to engage in learning activities further. For many students, according to Sanders and Scanlon, "learning starts and stops at the classroom door" due to the lack of access and adoption of technology in their homes (Sanders and Scanlon). They go on to stress that "unfortunately, technology is not distributed evenly in schools. Teachers in low-income districts tend to incorporate digital resources in a less than optimal manner

compared with those in wealthier areas” (Sanders and Scanlon). Additionally, “geographical location is also a leading factor, with rural communities much less likely to have access to high-speed Internet” (Sanders and Scanlon 136) and “reported access rates were generally lower in interior counties with the lowest rates of access reported throughout the South and Southwest. Low rates were also detected in areas with sizable minoritized populations, such as counties with high Black populations along the Mississippi River delta, Hispanic and Indigenous communities in New Mexico and Western Texas, and Native American reservation counties in Oklahoma, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Montana. Lower rates of access were also reported in counties with higher rates of poverty and disability” (Greiman et al.). For example, in predominately rural states such as Alabama, 55 of its 67 counties are rural. Furthermore, it has been listed as one of the top 10 poorest states for several years, even with the cost of living in the South much lower compared to other states. One could ask what educational, economic, and social distinctions have surfaced due to this lack of financial stability and technological accessibility. Unfortunately, these marginalized groups in Alabama are not the only ones affected. This is a wide-reaching issue, especially, when “broadband providers are less likely to enter rural markets due to the actual or perceived lower profitability of markets with lower population densities or rugged terrain which may be difficult to reach or build technological infrastructure (GAO 2006),” emphasizing the intentional disregard and implementation access to the Internet, despite The United Nations General Assembly declaring it a basic human right (Sanders and Scanlon).

Nonetheless, in analyzing the literature, it is clear that the digital divide, especially in rural and marginalized communities, has vast consequences on education, healthcare, and social progress. The COVID-19 pandemic served as a critical point, expanding the gaps in technology access and further cementing disparities in communities already facing significant challenges. While short-term fixes provided some relief, they fail to address the structural, systemic, and long-term inequities in digital access. While I

could not address every aspect due to the constraints of this review, the texts provide a foundational understanding of how geographic location, socioeconomic factors, and educational disparities intertwine and preserve the digital divide. As I continue to explore this topic, my final paper will further key into how these systemic challenges persist, while exploring possible solutions for mitigation and resolution.

Works Cited

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