

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](http://www.sciencedirect.com)

Poetics

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/poetic](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/poetic)

# Meanings of (dis)connection: Exploring non-users in isolated rural communities with internet access infrastructure<sup>☆</sup>



Isabel Pavez<sup>a,\*</sup>, Teresa Correa<sup>b</sup>, Javier Contreras<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Communications Department, Los Andes University, Monseñor Alvaro del Portillo 12.455, Las Condes, Santiago, Chile

<sup>b</sup> Communications Department, Diego Portales University, Vergara 240, Santiago, Chile

## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Internet  
Digital inequality  
Rural communities

## ABSTRACT

While public policy worldwide has focused on providing digital connectivity infrastructure in remote areas, there remain people who are digitally excluded. Hence, it is important to explore why people, despite having access to a digital connection, do not go online. As the third part of a three-year project on digital inclusion in isolated communities in Chile, this study draws on findings from focus groups conducted with non-Internet users who live in three remotes but digitally connected villages, to unravel the elements associated with their decision to remain digitally excluded. The main findings indicate that strong ties within the community shelter their sense of isolation providing a feeling of closeness, whereas the internet is perceived as disruptive. In addition, negative attitudes about the Internet emerge from the discussions: the internet is associated with addiction and isolation. Finally, the absence of digital skills makes smartphones and computers unknown entities, a black box people feel unable to or overwhelmed at the thought of learning how to use. However, many are facing a hard choice due to their need to remain in contact with those outside the community as well as promote and develop their small business ventures. Therefore, there is a cultural construction of the internet as a required form of progress that nonetheless does more harm than good to a tight-knit community.

## 1. Introduction

In the digital inclusion literature, it has become increasingly common to compare urban to rural settings as opposing scenarios for technological adoption. In fact, despite their different research contexts, it has been well established that rural people are in a considerably disadvantaged position regarding ICT infrastructure and connectivity in comparison to urban zones (Martínez, Agra, & González, 2015; Roberts, Anderson, Skerratt, & Farrington, 2016; Rivera, Lima, & Castillo, 2014; Scuro & Bercovich, 2014). Yet, these comparisons are neither impartial nor necessary because they refer to practices, discourses and cultural codes to standards usually set by the urban counterpart, hampering the uniqueness and richness of a rural setting (see Correa & Pavez, 2016; Skerratt, 2008). Furthermore, it leads to conclusions in which the rural part is inevitably tagged as left behind, less technologically developed, with less skilled inhabitants than their urban peers. However, despite the variety in terms of national contexts, what we are actually witnessing is a different sociocultural scenario, in which concepts such as social networks and connectivity have different meanings that need to be addressed in order to understand the particularities of technological adoption in isolated rural communities. Therefore, in the same way that technologies are not normative elements that are experienced uniformly among different types of users (Klein & Kleinman, 2002), when researching how ICT are constructed and adopted there should be an account of the context of

<sup>☆</sup> The data collection of this paper was funded by Fondecyt 1140061 while the report of results was supported by Fondecyt 1170324.

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [isapavez@gmail.com](mailto:isapavez@gmail.com) (I. Pavez), [teresa.correa@udp.cl](mailto:teresa.correa@udp.cl) (T. Correa), [Javier.contrerasu@gmail.com](mailto:Javier.contrerasu@gmail.com) (J. Contreras).

such use (Hine, 2000; Leung, 2005; Miller & Slater, 2000). By doing so, it is necessary to embrace rurality beyond standard comparisons with urbanity, and also by looking closely at its particularities, which in this paper is framed by the unique Chilean rural context.

Although it is important to stress that researchers have encountered different kinds of rural settings, there is an aspect that cannot be overlooked, and this is that in rural areas the meaning of connection takes a new form. As Skerratt (2008) says, they “have distinctive characteristics which mean that people’s actual experiences of ‘being connected’ differ greatly from the apparent metropolitan mode of being ‘totally digital’” (p. 83). In her work, which is based on rural communities within the UK, she invites to explore how people live and work in a specific village, which enables to showing how connectivity can be indeed experienced in specific ways. Authors from other disciplines have also pointed out the importance of exploring the concept of rurality from a holistic and locally contingent point of view in order to enhance a richer understanding and analysis (Williams & Cutchin, 2002). Therefore, the objective of this paper is to provide context as well as to report discourses and experiences of non-Internet users from rural isolated areas in Chile that have received internet infrastructure between 2010 and 2011. The aim is to understand why they remain as digitally excluded and to explore what to be connected means for them.

This is the third part of a larger study that has explored digital adoption processes in 22 communities benefiting from the program “All Chile Connected,” a public-private initiative funded by the Telecommunications Development Fund that provided subsidies for 3G wireless connections to 1474 rural isolated areas in this country. The previous stage, a representative face-to-face survey (n = 1000), showed that 61% of the sample had no internet at home and 63% of them have never used it (Correa, Pavez, & Contreras, 2017). This data helped to draw a very specific picture of the main characteristics of this rural population. It also points out to social and cultural aspects embedded in the rurality of the Chilean context that play a key role in how technologies are socialized that may not be necessarily transferable to other rural settings (Correa & Pavez, 2016). Yet, despite sociodemographic aspects such as costs and age, it was not immediately apparent why a significant proportion of the population studied did not use the internet. Therefore, we aimed to address a characterization of their decision-making processes and practices, as well as a nuanced understanding of how they experience isolation, technologies and the pressing need to be part of the digital era. Consequently, by exploring non-users’ discourses and experiences, this paper aims to move forward the discussion of digital exclusion from structural and socioeconomic parameters to motives and discourses linked to social and cultural settings. To focus on non-users and rural populations is a relevant matter because isolated communities face challenges linked to their contexts that need to be addressed by public policies. This would improve their opportunities to explore internet adoption, an aspect that goes beyond the sole provision of infrastructure, such as a tailored training that meet the daily lives of inhabitants, their interests and needs. It is therefore relevant to consider this situation from a qualitative, more inclusive and place-based approach that accounts for discourses and perceptions of this technology.

## 2. A closer examination of non-users

Theoretically, there is a consensus that digital inclusion has evolved into a multidimensional and complex process that incorporates the effective use of internet potential and promotes social mobility (Van Deursen, Helsper, & Eynon, 2016; Van Dijk, 2005, 2006). That is why digital inclusion combines technical aspects—such as the access to devices and signal quality, digital skills and types of use—with social and cultural contexts that shape the experience (Helsper, 2011, 2012). This allows a reflection on the role of the internet in everyday life and how it is adopted—or not—in a given environment. From a constructivist perspective, it is possible to find concepts that account for the nuances of appropriation of technological artifacts as possibilities for action (Hutchby, 2001). This means that devices do not offer the same range of possibilities to everyone and that the context of use is of great relevance to understand how a particular population shapes ICTs. In other words, the internet becomes meaningful according to the eyes of the users and their context (see Miller & Slater, 2000). Thus, it is possible to argue that it is not the same for everyone, and that its meaning is built daily, according to the beliefs, expectations, experiences and social networks of those who use it, in accordance with the social and cultural contexts in which it is inserted (Hine, 2000; Pavez, 2014). Technological appropriation is, therefore, a complex process that incorporates a number of dimensions ranging from the place of access to the quality of the experience, including digital skills, purposes, expectations of use and social and cultural contexts (Berker, Hartmann, Punie, & Ward, 2006).

These elements have been used to explore technological adoption, but are also aligned with research of non-use of technologies. The majority of the findings agree that those remaining in the digitally excluded spectrum come mainly from vulnerable backgrounds (Helsper & Reisdorf, 2016; LaRose, Gregg, Strover, Straubhaar, & Carpenter, 2007). Furthermore, over the last decade social, economic and educational disadvantages have increased in importance as predictors of non-use (Helsper & Reisdorf, 2016). As expected, attitudes toward technologies play an important role in the decision (Salman, 2012). For instance, non-users tend to evaluate the internet mainly from a negative standpoint, such as a way to escape the real world and a source of addiction (Reisdorf, Axelsson, & Söderholm, 2012; Reisdorf & Groselj, 2015).

Lack of interest has also emerged in recent years as a reason not to use the internet as shown in a study conducted in England and Sweden. The researchers found that life stage and social networks are more relevant than age and costs to explain why people decided not to go online (Helsper & Reisdorf, 2016). Isolation and lack of social networks, are therefore, important elements that have also been found in a study of non-use among young people (Eynon & Geniets, 2012). Although none of the authors focus their claims specifically on rural populations, other studies have found that socialization is a driver of digital adoption (Correa, 2015, 2016; Reisdorf, 2011; Salman, 2012). This has to do with the importance of the social network of potential users and the particularities of its composition. Yet in a qualitative study it was found that the social network could even prevent non-users from developing digital skills thus maintaining their status as proxy-users (Reisdorf et al., 2012). This research also explored the claims of lack of need and interest, however, these were cases of absence of digital opportunities and skills. Therefore, it is difficult to distinguish the genuine

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5126693>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5126693>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)