

ROLE OF INTERNET CAFE IN BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

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Abstract- Despite the increasing technological capabilities and its affordability, a significantly large proportion of developing nations' population is still lacking information and communication technology resources like computer and internet. In addition, a large population doesn't have skill to access e-government services. These restrain the majority of the citizens in developing countries (e.g. India) from accessing and using emerging electronic government applications and services. A bigger digital divide gap exists between rural and urban as well as economically less and more able population. Despite a large number of citizens belonging to the non-adopter category, government has made some services mandatory to be accessed online where citizens have no other choice. A large number of citizens prefer online access to government services and a large number of citizens, including those incapable to access internet, are getting benefitted from e-government services. Despite the digital divide, how the government is expecting its citizens to access e-government services and derive benefits, and how the needy will be able to cope with the mandatory e-government services is an interesting topic to study.

To reduce the widening digital divide, internet cafes are a major source to access public services electronically. In such cases internet cafes' role is significant for accessing e-government services. Hence research is needed to explore this. The study aims to investigate the role of internet cafe in bridging the digital divide. This study has used qualitative research methodology using semi-structured interviews. The participants for this study were citizens who are dependent on internet cafés to access government services online as well as the owners of internet cafés. The participants were recruited through purposive sampling. The data were content analyzed manually. Emerging themes were identified after coding. The results show the significance of internet cafes to help and encourage citizens to access e-government services. The results show that internet café bridge the digital divide in four aspects: i) provide access facilities like computer, internet, and supported devices; ii) access e-government services on behalf of citizen; iii) a source for online government service related information; iv) spreading awareness that helps in building trust on citizens towards e-government services. The study then highlights its limitations and discusses scope for future study. Paper also discusses some of the challenges and obstacles of such internet cafes and offers some recommendations for their effective implementations and sustainable operations.

Keywords- E-Government, Digital Divide, Internet Café, India, Qualitative research.
