Internet Diffusion and Social Inequalities in Greater China Region via Six Key Socioeconomic Indicators

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates social inequalities associated with the Internet diffusion in various territories in the Greater China region, focusing on the six key socioeconomic indicators that reflect different aspects of social inequalities: gender, age, marriage, education, income, and occupation. First, the statistics of the Internet diffusion in Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao are compared and contrasted to find out 1) the territorial differences among the major social inequalities caused by the Internet diffusion, and 2) the territories that have the highest or lowest social inequalities in the Greater China region. Then, a correlation is found among the key socioeconomic indicators in various territories in the Greater China region. Also, patterns of social inequalities associated with socioeconomic indicators were found in different territories in the Greater China region. Finally, based on the findings of this study, future research directions are outlined in the conclusion. [Article copies are available for purchase from InfoSci-on-Demand.com]

Keywords: Digital Divide; Greater China Region; Internet Diffusion; Social Inequalities;

INTRODUCTION

Social inequalities as an inevitable phenomenon around the world have drawn attentions from many social thinkers, government officials, politicians, economists and researchers for a long time (Blackburn, 1999, 2008; David, 2008; Duran, 1978; Park, 1984; Preston, 1999; Wong and Yu, 2002). As defined by Preston (1999), social inequalities are “the exclusion of people from full and equal participation in what we, the members of society, perceive as being valuable, important personally
worthwhile and socially desirable”. Social inequalities also refer to “the lack of access to housing, health care, education, employment opportunities, and status. It is the exclusion of people from full and equal participation in what we, the members of society, perceive as being valuable, important personally worthwhile and socially desirable” (Wikipedia, 2008). As a very important characteristic of all societies, social inequalities have been increasingly tied to the socioeconomic structure of a society. In addition to being traditionally linked to occupation, education and the control of production of goods and services, social inequalities in today’s information society are more likely to be linked to the differences in the access to and use of the Internet (Willis and Tranter, 2006). Taking the territories in the Greater China region for example, in recent years, the Internet has experienced significant development in Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao. For the people in different age groups in Mainland China, their access to and use of the Internet are far from equal in comparison to their counterparts in Taiwan or Hong Kong. Beside age, the other key socioeconomic indicators reflecting different aspects of social inequalities are: gender, marriage, education, income, and occupation. This study will compare and contrast the demographic statistics of the Internet diffusion in Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao. Firstly, the background information is provided for a better understanding of Internet adoption by multilingual users, demographic correlates of internet use, Internet diffusion and social inequality, and Internet diffusion in the Greater China Region. Secondly, the methodology for conducting the study is outlined for data collection and data analysis. Thirdly, the statistical data from the selected sources are compared and contrasted to answer the four questions. In addition, the implications of Internet diffusion are discussed in the context of virtual communities and social networking. Finally, the significance of this study is briefly mentioned with the future research directions in the conclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Internet Adoption by Multilingual Users

It is obvious now that the power of the Internet is in its ability to enable people of different languages, cultures and countries to communicate and share information. In the early time around 1997, the Internet was monolingual with English as the dominant language: 80-85% of the websites were in English, and the majority of the users were English speaking (Jenkins, 1997; Wallraff, 2000). The dominance of English on the Internet and the Web came to an end in 2000 when the number of non-English users surpassed the number of English users. According to Global Reach, a marketing communications consultancy that has been tracking non-English online populations since 1995, in December 2000, 49.1 percent of the Internet users were English speaking while 50.9 percent of the Internet users were non-English Speaking. Since then, there have been more non-English speaking users than English speaking users on the Web (Global Reach, 2004). The statistics provided by Internet World Stats, an international website specializing in Internet usage and population statistics from 233 countries and regions, show that between the years of 2000 and
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