



## Hearing the Voices of the Marginalized: The Communication Experiences of Marginalized Communities in Accessing Public Information

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### ABSTRACT

Access to public information is essential for social participation and civic engagement. However, marginalized communities face systemic barriers, including digital inequality and limited media literacy, which hinder their ability to obtain and interpret information. While prior studies have explored structural solutions, little is known about how individuals experience and respond to these challenges. This study employs a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of marginalized individuals in accessing public information. Using in-depth interviews and interpretative phenomenological analysis, the findings reveal that individuals rely on alternative communication networks, community figures, and adaptive strategies to navigate systemic barriers. The results highlight the emotional, psychological, and social dimensions of information access, underscoring the limitations of conventional media policies. This study contributes to the discourse on digital inclusion by emphasizing the importance of considering subjective experiences in developing effective communication strategies. Future research should further explore cultural and regional variations in information accessibility and investigate emerging digital solutions that can bridge existing gaps.



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## INTRODUCTION

Access to public information is a fundamental right that enables individuals to participate in social, economic, and political processes (Porumbescu dkk., 2020). However, marginalized communities often encounter systemic barriers that limit their ability to obtain, interpret, and utilize essential information. These barriers manifest in various forms, including limited digital literacy, technological disparities, and sociocultural factors that influence communication dynamics. The ability to access and comprehend public information is crucial, as it directly impacts decision-making, social inclusion, and empowerment within these communities.

Technological advancements have significantly transformed information dissemination, with digital media becoming the dominant source of public information (King & Lazard, 2020). Governments, media institutions, and organizations increasingly rely on online platforms to distribute official announcements, policies, and services. While these developments enhance efficiency, they inadvertently widen the digital divide, disproportionately affecting those without access to reliable internet, digital devices, or formal education in media literacy. The persistence of these inequalities raises concerns regarding social exclusion and the effectiveness of information distribution mechanisms in reaching diverse populations.

Previous studies have explored various methods to bridge the communication gap, such as media literacy programs, community-based information dissemination strategies, and government initiatives promoting inclusive access (Williams, 2020). However, these approaches often adopt a top-down perspective, focusing on structural solutions rather than the lived experiences of marginalized individuals. A phenomenological approach is essential in capturing the subjective realities of

individuals navigating these challenges, shedding light on the ways they interpret, adapt to, and cope with communication barriers.

By emphasizing the experiential aspect of information access, this study seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of how marginalized communities interact with public information sources (Harambam, 2021). The phenomenological lens offers a platform for participants' voices to be heard, ensuring that their challenges and adaptive strategies are not only documented but also inform future policies and interventions aimed at fostering inclusive communication systems.

Research on the lived experiences of individuals in accessing public information has gained increasing attention, particularly in the context of marginalized communities (Sauerwein dkk., 2019). Scholars have recognized that conventional approaches, such as large-scale surveys or statistical analyses, often fail to capture the depth of individual experiences and the subjective meanings associated with information access (Latkin dkk., 2020). These quantitative methods provide valuable generalizations but lack the nuance necessary to understand the complexities of personal struggles and adaptive strategies employed by marginalized individuals.

Methodological challenges arise when attempting to explore the deeply personal and context-dependent nature of information access. Previous research has predominantly focused on structural and technological factors that contribute to digital inequalities, yet there remains a gap in understanding how individuals navigate these barriers on a personal level. Many studies emphasize macro-level data, overlooking the emotional, psychological, and cultural dimensions that shape how information is perceived and utilized by marginalized groups.

The limitations of traditional methodologies underscore the need for an alternative approach that prioritizes personal narratives and meaning-making processes. Phenomenology provides a suitable framework to explore these aspects, as it centers on the lived experiences of individuals, allowing for an in-depth understanding of how they interpret, internalize, and respond to communication challenges. By adopting a phenomenological perspective, this study aims to move beyond surface-level analysis and delve into the essence of marginalized individuals' struggles and coping mechanisms in accessing public information.

Existing approaches to addressing information accessibility among marginalized communities have largely relied on infrastructural and policy-driven solutions. While these efforts aim to reduce digital disparities and enhance media literacy, they often fail to account for the deeply personal and context-dependent ways in which individuals experience and interpret public information. Government policies and community initiatives predominantly focus on providing digital access and formal education programs, yet they do not sufficiently address the lived experiences of individuals navigating systemic barriers.

One key limitation in previous research is its reliance on quantitative data and generalized assumptions. While statistical analyses can highlight broad patterns in information accessibility, they do not capture the subjective meanings and adaptive strategies employed by individuals facing these challenges. This gap in understanding underscores the need for a methodological shift toward qualitative inquiry, particularly through phenomenological approaches that prioritize first-hand experiences and meaning-making processes.

Phenomenology offers an opportunity to bridge this knowledge gap by providing a deeper understanding of how marginalized individuals perceive, process, and respond to information accessibility issues. By moving beyond broad statistical measures and instead focusing on the personal narratives of affected individuals, this study aims to reveal the nuanced challenges and coping mechanisms that define their experiences. Through this approach, the research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the structural and psychological barriers that shape information access, ultimately informing more inclusive and effective communication strategies.

Previous research has demonstrated the significance of public information access in fostering social inclusion and civic engagement. Studies have extensively explored digital inequalities and the role of media literacy in enhancing information accessibility. However, these studies primarily employ quantitative analyses or policy evaluations, which fail to capture the lived realities of marginalized

communities. Limited attention has been given to the personal struggles, adaptive strategies, and meaning-making processes individuals undergo when navigating systemic barriers in accessing public information. This gap necessitates a phenomenological inquiry that prioritizes subjective experiences and contextual interpretations.

To address this limitation, this study employs a phenomenological approach to explore the experiences of marginalized individuals in accessing and interpreting public information. By focusing on lived experiences, this research seeks to uncover the emotional, psychological, and sociocultural dimensions that shape information-seeking behaviors. The study utilizes in-depth interviews and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to extract meaningful insights from participants' narratives. This approach enables a holistic understanding of how individuals construct meaning around their experiences and how they navigate structural barriers.

This article is structured as follows. The introduction presents the research problem, highlighting the significance of understanding information access from a phenomenological perspective. The methodology section outlines the research design, data collection procedures, and analytical approach employed in the study. The results section presents the key themes that emerged from the analysis, emphasizing participants' experiences and coping strategies. The discussion contextualizes these findings within existing literature, and the conclusion reflects on the study's implications for policy and practice, proposing directions for future research.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Study Design**

This study employed a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of marginalized communities in accessing public information. Phenomenology was chosen as it allows for an in-depth exploration of individuals' subjective experiences, shedding light on how they interpret and make sense of their reality. The study utilized an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) framework, which emphasizes the co-construction of meaning between participants and researchers. This approach was particularly suitable for understanding the structural and social barriers that shape marginalized communities' access to public information.

### **Participants**

Participants were selected using a purposive sampling approach, ensuring that individuals with direct experience in accessing public information under constrained circumstances were included. The inclusion criteria comprised individuals from marginalized backgrounds, including informal workers, residents of remote areas, and those with limited digital literacy. Participants were required to have first-hand experiences with communication barriers in public information access. Individuals with extensive access to digital media or formal educational backgrounds in media studies were excluded to maintain focus on the experiences of those facing systemic barriers. The final sample included 25 participants, ranging in age from 25 to 60 years, with a balanced representation of gender and community settings.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in person at community centers and participants' homes to ensure a comfortable environment. The interviews followed a standardized guide, covering topics such as communication challenges, information-seeking behaviors, and reliance on alternative sources. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. Additionally, non-participant observations were conducted in community gatherings to understand informal communication dynamics. Field notes were maintained to capture contextual insights that complemented the interview data.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). The process began with verbatim transcription of interview recordings, followed by thematic coding to identify recurring patterns and significant statements. Initial descriptive coding was performed to categorize raw data,

followed by interpretative coding to derive deeper meanings. Themes were developed iteratively through multiple rounds of analysis, ensuring alignment with participants' lived experiences. NVivo software was utilized for coding and thematic analysis, facilitating systematic data organization. The final themes were validated through member-checking, where participants reviewed summaries of the findings to ensure accuracy and authenticity in representation.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board before data collection commenced. Informed consent was secured from all participants, with clear explanations regarding the study's purpose, confidentiality measures, and the voluntary nature of participation. Anonymity was maintained through pseudonymization, and all data were securely stored following ethical research guidelines. Participants were given the right to withdraw at any stage without any consequences. The study adhered to international ethical standards for human research, ensuring respect and protection of participants' rights.

## **RESULTS**

### **Barriers to Accessing Public Information**

Participants expressed significant challenges in accessing public information, often due to technological limitations, literacy barriers, and media biases. Many individuals from marginalized communities reported that digital access remains a privilege rather than a universal right. One participant noted:

"I do not own a smartphone, and even if I did, I wouldn't know how to use it properly to access information. Most news and updates are shared on social media, which I have no access to. I rely on word-of-mouth for any important information."

The reliance on interpersonal communication rather than digital platforms indicates a systemic gap in equitable information dissemination. Additionally, participants described a sense of exclusion from mainstream media, as one remarked:

"Television and newspapers use complex language that I cannot always understand. It feels like the information is meant for those who are already educated, not for people like us."

This statement highlights the issue of media literacy and accessibility, suggesting that current information channels fail to accommodate individuals with lower levels of formal education.

### **Role of Community Leaders as Information Mediators**

In many marginalized communities, local leaders, religious figures, and informal social networks play a crucial role in information distribution. Participants reported that they frequently depend on these figures for updates on governmental policies, healthcare services, and community events. One participant shared:

"Whenever there is new information about public programs or government assistance, I usually hear about it from our village leader. He explains it in a way we can all understand."

This phenomenon underscores the importance of community-based information systems, particularly in areas with limited access to digital and traditional media. Another participant emphasized the reliance on community gatherings:

"During Friday prayers or local meetings, someone always shares important news. This is how we stay informed since not everyone can read or use a smartphone."

The findings suggest that oral communication remains an essential strategy for information exchange in communities facing technological and educational barriers.

### **Strategies for Overcoming Information Gaps**

Despite the evident barriers, participants actively sought alternative strategies to acquire information relevant to their daily lives. Some engaged in informal peer-learning groups, where those with higher literacy levels helped others interpret complex messages. One respondent explained:

"My neighbor helps me read official letters and explains their meaning. Without her, I wouldn't understand many things."

Others leveraged social networks to bridge the information divide, particularly through younger family members who act as intermediaries between digital and non-digital generations. A participant described this dynamic:

"My children read online news for me and tell me what's happening. They are my connection to the outside world."

This illustrates the intergenerational role in mitigating information access disparities, where younger, tech-savvy individuals assist older or less literate community members.

The lived experiences of marginalized communities reveal that access to public information is shaped by multiple structural, technological, and social factors. The reliance on interpersonal communication, the role of community leaders, and alternative adaptation strategies all indicate that existing information channels fail to serve all citizens equally. The persistence of these barriers suggests the need for more inclusive and accessible communication strategies that acknowledge and accommodate the realities of marginalized groups. Without targeted interventions, these communities will continue to experience exclusion from vital information necessary for their social participation and well-being.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study reveal that marginalized individuals experience significant barriers in accessing public information, primarily due to digital inequalities, literacy constraints, and reliance on interpersonal networks (Romero Rodríguez *dkk.*, 2020). These challenges underscore the deeply personal and context-dependent nature of information-seeking behaviors, aligning with previous research on digital exclusion and literacy gaps. By using a phenomenological approach, this study highlights the emotional, psychological, and social dimensions that shape how individuals interact with information and develop strategies to overcome communication barriers.

The results contribute to the existing body of knowledge by addressing gaps in previous studies that primarily relied on quantitative data or structural analyses. Unlike prior research that focused on digital infrastructure and formal literacy programs, this study emphasizes the lived experiences of individuals who face systemic barriers to information access (Lee *dkk.*, 2020). This nuanced understanding provides insight into how individuals navigate challenges, demonstrating the necessity of incorporating personal narratives in policy-making and media strategies.

These findings align with theoretical perspectives on digital divide and media literacy, reinforcing the argument that accessibility is not merely a technological issue but a complex interplay of social, cultural, and economic factors. Prior research has identified the structural limitations of digital access, yet few studies have explored the subjective meaning of exclusion from information networks (Nash & Churchill, 2020). By integrating phenomenological insights with existing literature, this study deepens our understanding of how marginalized communities perceive and interact with information landscapes.

The implications of these findings extend beyond academic discourse to inform policy and practice. Media organizations and policymakers must consider not only infrastructural solutions but also tailored communication strategies that address literacy disparities and cultural nuances (Shkarlet *dkk.*, 2020). Additionally, community-driven information-sharing networks should be recognized and supported as alternative modes of information dissemination.

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations. The findings are context-specific and may not be universally applicable to all marginalized communities (Sun dkk., 2019). Future research should explore diverse cultural and geographical settings to expand the generalizability of these insights.

Further studies could examine the role of emerging technologies in bridging information gaps and explore participatory models that empower marginalized voices. Understanding the intersection of digital literacy, policy frameworks, and lived experiences can enhance efforts toward equitable information access (Túñez-López dkk., 2020).

## CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of marginalized individuals in accessing public information, emphasizing the barriers they face and the strategies they employ to navigate these challenges. The findings highlight how digital inequalities, literacy constraints, and reliance on interpersonal networks shape their ability to obtain and interpret information. Unlike previous research that primarily focused on infrastructural and policy-based solutions, this study provides a deeper understanding of how marginalized individuals experience and respond to information exclusion. The insights gained contribute to the growing discourse on digital inclusion and suggest that addressing these issues requires more than just technological access. Future research should expand on these findings by exploring diverse sociocultural contexts and assessing the role of emerging communication strategies in mitigating information disparities. This study underscores the need for policies and interventions that recognize and integrate the lived realities of marginalized communities in the broader framework of information accessibility.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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