



Digital Transformation and the Service Economy:

Exploring the Societal Impact

Book of Abstracts

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37_Living in the digital age: a portrait of the digital divide in Valais, Switzerland

Author(s) and Affiliation:

Sarah Balet, Economic collaborator, Tourism Institute, HES-SO Valais Wallis

Florian Bürki, Economic collaborator, IT Institute, HES-SO Valais Wallis

ABSTRACT

OBJECTIVES

The digital transformation of our society is a reality for everyone. Technology is nowadays in all areas of life, either in the business sphere or the personal one. Digital transformation is commonly associated with the risk of a digital divide, which describes the gap between those who make full use of the potential of information and communication technologies and those who make little or no use of them (Ben Youssef, 2004). At present, few descriptive studies on the subject exist in Switzerland and no study offering an overview of the situation in an entire region has been carried out. With little data available on the end users, local authorities don't know enough to support the digital transformation of our society and ensure that no one is left behind. This research brings a perspective on how digital transformation is perceived, experienced, managed and valued by the end users. Using the three levels of the digital divide (access, use and benefits) explored by several authors (Drouard et al., 2021; Calderón Gómez, 2018), this study aims to determine whether a digital divide exists in the specific region of Valais and to what extent. By identifying socio-demographic factors contributing to it, this study offers valuable data on vulnerable people and ways to make digital transformation more inclusive. A good understanding and management of the digital transition on a region-wide scale is therefore an important issue to ensure the inclusion of the entire population and to develop targeted support programs.

METHODOLOGY

A mixed methodology was used to meet the objectives of the research. The first phase consisted of an exploratory study, with data collected through focus groups organized in five Valais communes. These qualitative data were used to refine the second phase (questionnaire), as well as to provide qualitative information on the various problems encountered by citizens. For the second phase, quantitative data were collected via a questionnaire distributed to the Valais population. The link of the online questionnaire was relayed through newspapers as well as published on social networks and websites of the municipalities of the canton. To also reach people who are not

connected, letters to households were sent whenever possible and paper questionnaires were distributed. The questionnaire was divided into six categories reflecting the themes identified in the literature review, namely perception of ICT, access to digital technology, use of digital technology, benefits of using digital technology, digital skills and technology-related difficulties, and recommendations for the inclusion of all in the digital society. Most questions were multiple choice or Likert scales, only the question about inclusion was an open question and has been analyzed from a qualitative point of view. The aim of the questionnaire was to measure the extent of the digital gap in Valais as well as the value of digitalization in its various forms, and thus to determine the influencing factors.

EXPECTED RESULTS:

The study shows that there is a digital divide, but that it is limited both in terms of numbers and intensity. In general, the people of Valais are positive about the digitalization of society. They have a positive perception of technology, not fearing the use of technology and showing good digital competences overall. Data reveal that there is no digital divide regarding the access of the technology (first level), neither in the benefits perceived (third level) but there are differences amongst users regarding the competences linked with the use of technology (second level). By cross-referencing socio-demographic, social and geographical factors with the results linked to the use and perception of technology, it has been possible to draw up a table showing the strength of correlation between the various factors impacting the digital transformation in Valais. The inequality between users in digitalization is multiple and depends on factors linked to age, gender, level of income, language, level of education, categories socio-professional but also geographical inequalities with disparity between regions in Valais. The results show that people on low income are more exposed to the digital divide, and even more the older they are. Similarly, women are more likely to be affected than men by this divide. With 482 responses, the analysis of the qualitative question about inclusion also gives an important insight of the opinion of users regarding how to accompany people in the digital transformation. People report the important role of the authorities in developing training, guaranteeing safe use of technologies through a clear legal framework. This research highlights the importance of better including all population segments in the digital transformation of society.

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