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Internet use increases social inequalities, LSE study shows

Internet use is driving a greater wedge in our communities, increasing existing inequalities between rich and poor, a new study reveals.

The study, by Dr Ellen Helsper from the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and Dutch researcher [Dr Alexander van Deursen](#), shows that educated people on high incomes derive the greatest benefits from using the internet.

This is borne out by their ability to get better deals online, including products and holidays, use the internet more successfully to expand their social life and find romantic partners, and also become more informed politically and in general.

In contrast, low-income people from socially deprived backgrounds do not receive the same benefits, regardless of access and internet skills.

Dr Ellen Helsper says that gender doesn't influence who benefits most online, but occupation does.

The study of more than 1100 people was conducted in The Netherlands, a country with a well-developed digital infrastructure and near-universal access.

Its findings have been published in the [Communication and Information Technologies Annual](#) and form part of an [LSE project on digital inclusion](#).

The researchers looked at different socio-economic groups and how their use of the internet impacted on their economic and social wellbeing, as well educational, political and institutional outcomes.

Overall, 75 per cent of those surveyed said the internet enabled them to buy cheaper products, 68 per cent said they traded goods via the internet and 62 per cent used it to book more affordable holidays. The benefits were weighted in favour of those with a higher social status.

Disabled people, along with retired and unemployed individuals and care givers, receive the fewest benefits overall by being online.

Men, particularly those aged 16-35, are more likely to find partners through online dating than women, the study showed, and people in urban areas also benefited more than those living in rural locations.

"To some extent, the findings suggest that access to and use of the internet might exacerbate existing inequalities offline. Not everyone is able to translate internet use into tangible everyday benefits," Dr Helsper says.

"While more and more people might be online these days, the internet clearly benefits those with a higher social status," she adds.

Notes for editors

The full paper, "The Third-Level Digital Divide: who benefits most from being online" is available here: <http://www.emeraldinsight.com/doi/10.1108/S2050-206020150000010002>. The study was funded by the [University of Twente](#).

To interview Dr Helsper, please contact her at: E.J.Helsper@lse.ac.uk. For any other queries, please contact Candy Gibson, LSE Press Office: +44 207 955 7440 or c.gibson@lse.ac.uk