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## **CONNECTING IN THE GULF: EXPLORING DIGITAL INCLUSION AND ACCESS FOR LOW INCOME INDIGENOUS FAMILIES**

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### **Decolonising Methodologies in an Indigenous Australian Research Context**

Digital inclusion research traditionally seeks to explore the complex inequalities among different groups in society that affects people's ability to fully participate in social, economic and cultural life. As Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are some of the least digitally included Australians, researchers have used a variety of methods to explore the social and economic inequalities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. While well meaning, much of this research lacks appropriate leadership and involvement of the people it seeks to serve. Moreover, there is a lack of quality frameworks for collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers to effectively research issues of digital inclusion for Indigenous people in Australia.

This paper outlines how our team of Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers developed a unique Indigenous ethnographic? research methodology to investigate digital inclusion challenges faced by low-income Indigenous families living on Mornington Island, a remote Aboriginal community in Queensland, Australia. This methodology applies Tuhiwai Smith's (1999) principles of decolonising methodologies to our research in an Indigenous Australian context. It blends participant photography and Indigenous yarning methods with co-design workshops, to foreground the voices of Indigenous people in articulating barriers and solutions to low levels of digital access (to internet and devices), affordability (of plans and data), and ability (digital skills work life, work and education) in their community.

In addition we demonstrate how the methodology and its methods are applied in context, by presenting findings from our year-long project on Mornington Island. Specifically, we

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discuss how low-income families use the internet to access government and social services, e-health, e-commerce and education services, particularly relevant as there is no senior school on the island. We will also discuss how the application of our Indigenous ethnographic methodology may inform policy, practices and programs designed to address inequalities of access for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia.

Our methodology and results are situated within the growing body of decolonising methodologies and Indigenous research, methods and methodologies. Informed by Martin's (2003) Relatedness Theory, our data is considered through Aboriginal ways of being, doing and knowing, forming a window through which we observed, analysed and interpreted data. Relatedness theory is framed by Aboriginal ontology, axiology and epistemology (Aboriginal ways of being, ways of doing and ways of knowing) (Martin 2003). Each interacts with the other in dynamic and flexible ways: Aboriginal ontology informs axiology and epistemology, and so forth.

Aboriginal ontology is a relational ontology, with all things respected in their place within the overall system (Martin, 2003). Relatedness requires 'establishing identities, interests and connections to determine our relatedness' (p. 11), drawing on what we know, through elders and community, as proper ways of being (Martin, 2003). Accordingly, we (as researchers) will be guided by community Elders in our processes (e.g., engagement with low income families, schools and community organisations), which are intentionally flexible to allow research to be participant-led. Our methods will be checked with community members before we start data collection, which will involve the use of yarning as a conversational tool, and the use of digital photography, including options for community members to take their own images, to discuss their technology use. Yarning is described as conversation and storying that is important to Indigenous peoples (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010), and allows Indigenous families to describe how they use the internet, the challenges they face because of low access to digital and internet services, and the impact it has on their lives. Our methods include a continual and ongoing sharing of findings back to the community in line with the principles of yarning, and designed to let the community tell their own stories of being digitally excluded in Australia.

### **An Indigenous-led Reflexive Framework for Digital Inclusion Research**

An Indigenous approach to digital inclusion research requires a research framework that encompasses Indigenous worldviews. Wilson, Wikahere-Hall & Sherwood (2021) state, "Indigenous researchers recognise the need to recover and use their own ontological, epistemological and axiological structures and the need to engage in relevant and meaningful research with their own peoples...the relational orientation of an Indigenous paradigm grounded in collective obligations and responsibilities to others is opposed to the value-free objective and detached approach to research" (p. 2). By basing our methodology and research on Martin's (2003) Relatedness Theory, and a reflective understanding of the interaction and relationships between 'all parts of the whole', we draw on thematic analysis, involving Indigenous co-leadership processes, to allow the most accurate analysis of the qualitative data while upholding the integrity of Indigenous voices and stories shared within the larger data set.

Our application of Tuhiwai Smith's (1999) principles includes honouring what is meaningful and important to Indigenous people and communities, while involving Indigenous people as engaged stakeholders throughout the research process. Privileging Indigenous voices is essential in Indigenous research (Rigney 1999). Inclusive decision-making, respect, the participation of Indigenous people, equal sharing of input and control, acknowledging and respecting Indigenous knowledge systems, and benefit for all who participate are fundamental aspects of Indigenous research (Smith 1999; Weber-Pillwax 1999; Cajete 2000), as well as participants agreeing upon the appropriateness of the objectives, procedures and ways in which data is interpreted and used (Eldridge 2008).

The paper contributes to the conference theme 'decolonising the internet' by proposing a framework for blended Indigenous and non-Indigenous research teams (focused on internet-related projects) consisting of four, inter-connected and overlapping stages:

- (1) Facilitated Indigenous involvement in research (starting with the development of concepts and design of this project)
- (2) Engaging strongly with Indigenous research and literature, both academic and community-based to interpret data and findings
- (3) Engaging with and developing Indigenous data collection methods (e.g. yarning) to ensure the effectiveness and appropriateness of this research, and
- (4) Representing Indigenous authors and voices in analysis and communication of research results.

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