11TH EUROPEAN COMMUNICATION CONFERENCE
8–11 SEPTEMBER 2026
BRNO, CZECH REPUBLIC

ECC
SHIFTING GROUNDS
2026

PATHS, CONNECTIONS, AND FUTURES

STRUCTURAL INEQUALITIES IN INTERNET ACCESS: DIGITAL PRESENCE AND BARRIERS ENCOUNTERED BY PEOPLE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

Karolína Kozumplíková, Vojtěch Dvořák
Department of Media Studies and Journalism
Masaryk University

INTRODUCTION

(Comi et al., 2024; Galperin, 2021; Gonzales, 2016; Humphry, 2022)

Continuity as a condition of digital participation

- the capacity to maintain:
  - Identifiers
  - Accounts
  - Authentication
  - Devices
  - Connectivity
  - Technological compatibility

Focus:

- How does homelessness shape the continuity of digital presence?
- How do disruptions in digital continuity generate forms of exclusion?
- What happens when this continuity is disrupted?

Digital presence as irreplaceable:

"I didn't use [social media] before, but now it's the only way to stay connected with people." – *Adam*

METHODS (Kemmis et al., 2014; McTaggart et al., 2016; Braun & Clarke, 2021)

- **Participatory Action Research** – Brno, Czech republic 2024
- Reflexive **thematic analysis** – inductive, semantic coding
- Codes – disruptions and conditions:
  - device loss/replacement, changing phone numbers, account recovery, authentication, technological compatibility, and limited data
- Organized around pattern -> precarious digital continuity

Participant account (Ex.: old number / new number / I don't remember")

➔Semantic code (Ex.: loss of account access after change of phone number)

➔Pattern across codes

(Ex.: device changes, identifiers and authentication are interdependent)

➔Analytic theme (Ex.: identity/authentication continuity)

➔Central organizing concept

DEVICE CONTINUITY

A phone is not merely a device.

It is connecting a person to accumulated digital relationships, accounts and histories.

- *“Phones unfortunately get stolen all the time. I’ve had countless ones—maybe thirty or so.“ – Mary*
- *“I can’t even access [social media] anymore. When I had a phone, I had a number, and when I tried through the computer I put in the old number, with the new one... I just don’t remember anymore.“ – Nicol*
- *“I just do not understand one thing, why, for example, electronic ID, also working through internet, no cards anymore, but over the phone,... how are pensioners supposed to afford, or people on the street, to use ID over the phone.“ – Joseph*
  - *“I simply can’t afford phones and things like that.“ – Joseph*

IDENTITY AND AUTHENTICATION CONTINUITY

Digital systems assume that the person who was authenticated yesterday can remain recognizable today.

Structural inequality disrupts not only access to technology,

but continuity of digital identity.

- *“Two-factor authentication.“ – Adam*

- *“I keep my email open on my phone because nobody else has access to it. I’m really careful about it. Is there another way to secure it?“ – Matthew*
- *“I keep using the same ones. Hardly anyone ever gets into them anyway.“ – Jack*

- *“Who is supposed to remember all of that?“ – Patrick*

TECHNOLOGICAL CONTINUITY

Infrastructure changes faster than people's capacity to replace devices.

- *“They said, ‘yes, the new network works now,’ but I took my phone, tried it—and it didn’t work. My phone wasn’t compatible with the 1900 network.“ – Tod*

- *“There will usually be someone among us who has a phone, and the other person can join them.“ – Jack*

DATA CONTINUITY

Connectivity becomes rationed. People must make decisions about which digital activities can be sustained.

Communication, navigation, entertainment, administration etc. compete for the same finite resource.

- *“With limited data, by the time the film downloads, it uses the data up. And if you don’t have a constant supply of data“ – Joseph*

- *“Well, it depends on what somebody wants to find... Like for finding news, it is fast enough, but if you want to download something... That is restricted by megabytes.“ – Joseph*

- AI usage: *“For example, where to apply for social housing or how to arrange permanent residence. That’s useful, because sometimes you need to sort these things out.“ – Tod*

CONCLUSION & CONTRIBUTION

- The problem is not only unequal access to digital technologies. It is **unequal capacity to maintain digital continuity**.
- A **disruption in one** component of digital participation can **destabilize other** components on which continued access depends.
- **Digital exclusion** can emerge **through accumulation** rather than complete disconnection.
- **Structural inequality makes the conditions required for continuity harder to sustain.**

Next

- Continuity-aware digital services
- Assisted continuity
- AI and homelessness

11TH EUROPEAN COMMUNICATION CONFERENCE
8–11 SEPTEMBER 2026
BRNO, CZECH REPUBLIC

ECC
SHIFTING GROUNDS
2026

PATHS, CONNECTIONS, AND FUTURES

STRUCTURAL INEQUALITIES IN INTERNET ACCESS: DIGITAL PRESENCE AND BARRIERS ENCOUNTERED BY PEOPLE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

Karolína Kozumplíková, Vojtěch Dvořák
Department of Media Studies and Journalism
Masaryk University

REFERENCES

- Anuyah, O., Conrado, A. M., Carlson, C., Gilbride, H., & Metoyer R. (2023). Exploring the Barriers and Potential Opportunities of Technology Integration in Community-Based Social Service Organizations. *ACM Journal on Computing and Sustainable Societies*, 1(1), 1–28.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis? *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 18(3), 328–352.
- Castells, M. (2009). *Communication Power*. Oxford University Press
- Comi, M., Smith, S., Goettlich, W. A., Alexander, P., Davidson, D., & Staples, W. G. (2024). Digital home-lessness: Exploring the links between public Internet access, technological capital, and social inequality. *Current Sociology*, 72(1), 65–82.
- Couldry, N., & Mejias, U. A. (2019). *The costs of connection: How data is colonizing human life and appropriating it for capitalism*. Stanford University Press.
- van Dijk, J. (2020). *The digital divide*. Polity Press.
- Eubanks, V. (2018). *Automating inequality: How high-tech tools profile, police, and punish the poor*. St. Martin's Press.
- Fransen-Taylor, P., & Narayan, B. (2016). *#Homeless but at home in cyberspace. Proceedings of ISIC, the Information Behaviour Conference*, 21(4), 20–23.
- Galperin, H., Bar, F., & Nguyen, H. (2021). The power divide: Mobile communication in Los Angeles' Skid Row. *Mobile Media & Communication*, 9(1). https://doi.org/10.1177/2050157920932608
- Gonzales, A. (2016). The contemporary US digital divide: From initial access to technology maintenance. Information, *Communication & Society*, 19(2), 234–248. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2015.1050438

REFERENCES

- Helsper, E. (2021). *The Digital Disconnect: The Social Causes and Consequences of Digital Inequalities*. SAGE Publications Ltd. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526492982
- Huhtasalo, J., Vähätalo, M., Niemi, V., Hietala, S., & Rasinkangas, J. (2025). Understanding the intertwined dynamics between digitalization, homelessness and social marginalization – An integrative literature review. *Finnish Journal of eHealth and eWelfare*, 17(4), 472–486.
- Humphry, J. (2022). *Homelessness and mobile communication*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Humphry, J., Hartmann, M., Marler, W., & Lowis, D. (2024). Digital disparities beyond the stably housed: Researching global homelessness and mobile media. *Mobile Media & Communication*, 12(2), 225–239. https://doi.org/10.1177/20501579241238392
- Kemmis, S., McTaggart, R., & Nixon, R. (2014). *The action research planner: Doing critical participatory action research*. Springer Science & Business Media.
- Klarare, A., Vamstad, J., Mattsson, E., Kneck, Å., & Salzmann-Erikson, M. (2024). Social rights in relation to digitalization, mobile phone, and internet use–experiences of women in homelessness: A qualitative study. *Critical Public Health*, 34(1), 1–16.
- Marler, W. (2023). 'You can't talk at the library': The leisure divide and public internet access for people experiencing homelessness. *Information, Communication & Society*, 26(7), 1303–1321.
- McTaggart, R., Nixon, R., & Kemmis, S. (2016). Critical participatory action research. In *The Palgrave international handbook of action research* (pp. 21–35). Springer.