

From Margins to Markets: Digital Inclusion and Economic Opportunities Among Youth with Special Reference to the St. Coombs Tea Estate of Sri Lanka

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Tea estate communities in Sri Lanka have historically faced systemic marginalization, characterized by limited access to education, infrastructure, and employment opportunities. Within this context, youth experience multiple forms of exclusion and restricted upward mobility. Although digital inclusion is globally recognized as a catalyst for social and economic integration, there remains a limited understanding of how digitally connected youth in Sri Lanka's tea estates leverage technology for livelihood development. This study addresses this gap by examining how digital inclusion fosters economic opportunities among marginalized youth in one tea estate (St. Coombs tea estate) purposively selected as the research site. The study adopted a qualitative methodology to capture the depth and complexity of participants' perspectives. Within this framework, a phenomenological research design was employed to explore the lived experiences of youth (ages 15–29) with digital inclusion in the St. Coombs tea estate. Data were collected through 30 in-depth interviews, with 10 participants from this group contributing to photovoice. Data were collected using the snowball sampling technique, which enabled the identification and recruitment of participants through referrals from initial respondents. Gathered data were thematically analyzed using thick description techniques to capture the nuanced role of digital technologies in their everyday economic lives. Findings revealed that digital inclusion has enabled youth to launch home-based businesses, access formal jobs, and enhance self-employment through digital learning. Young women used platforms like Facebook to market cultural skills, while others leveraged YouTube for agricultural innovation and cost-saving techniques. Additionally, many youths engage in digital finance and online marketplaces, increasing financial independence. These practices generate income and shift social status and autonomy within their families and communities. The results underscore how digital access and informal digital learning are key enablers of grassroots economic transformation in excluded regions. Digital inclusion is reshaping economic trajectories in marginalized tea estate communities. It enables agency, innovation, and household contribution among youth. Policymakers and LIS professionals should promote community-based digital literacy initiatives and gender-sensitive interventions to ensure equitable access. Future research should explore gendered digital experiences, inter-regional comparisons, and the role of institutions like libraries and telecentres in fostering digital competencies.

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