

Original Article

Bridging the Gap: The Lived Experiences of Dormitory Students on Digital Access

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Abstract

Digital technology has become central to modern education, yet access disparities persist, particularly among dormitory students subject to institutional restrictions. This phenomenological qualitative paper explored the lived experiences of Grade 12 dormitory students at Lipa Adventist Academy (LAA) regarding limited digital access and its impact on their holistic development. The study employed semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis to address a localized research gap concerning how institutional restrictions create a "digital gap" in technology-driven learning environments. Grounded in Jan van Dijk's Theory of Digital Divide, evidence revealed a lived tension between academic requirements and restrictive policies, highlighting significant obstacles to academic equity and social connectivity. The study also emphasized the influence of adaptive coping mechanisms, such as proactive task management and seeking external assistance, on the students' ability to remain competitive. Results indicate that successful students focus on self-discipline and time management to turn systemic constraints into opportunities for personal growth. The research recommends providing flexible academic windows for device use, synchronizing faculty communication with dormitory schedules, and formalizing peer-led monitoring to support both academic success and communal well-being.

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1. Introduction

Digital technology has transformed education into a dynamic, hybrid learning environment, enabling flexible and interactive learning experiences (Bhandari, 2024; Timotheou et al., 2023). However, access to such technologies remains unequal, creating disparities among learners (Dale, 2022).

Dormitory students, particularly in regulated institutions, face a unique form of digital inequality due to restricted device usage policies. At Lipa Adventist Academy (LAA), students are allowed limited access to devices, often confined to weekends, creating a “digital gap” despite increasing reliance on digital platforms for academic tasks. Previous studies highlight that digital access significantly influences academic performance and engagement (Limniou, 2021; Monserate, 2020; Viña et al., 2024). However, these studies largely overlook dormitory contexts where institutional policies restrict access.

Grounded in van Dijk’s Digital Divide Theory, which emphasizes motivational, physical, skills, and usage access (van Dijk, 2020), this study investigates how restricted physical access impacts students’ academic and social experiences. This study aims to explore the lived experiences of dormitory students in managing academic responsibilities, maintaining social connections, and coping with limited digital access.

2. Methodology

This study employed a phenomenological qualitative research design to explore the lived experiences of Grade 12 dormitory students at Lipa Adventist Academy regarding limited digital access and its effects on academic performance, social interaction, and personal development. A purposive sample of four participants was selected based on the criteria of having resided in the dormitory for at least four years and having access to only one to two digital devices. While small, this sample size aligns with phenomenological research, which prioritizes depth over breadth.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis, allowing for in-depth exploration of participants’ narratives. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained, and participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity through the use of pseudonyms. The data gathered were transcribed verbatim and analyzed following Moustakas’ (1994) modification of Husserlian phenomenology, which focused on identifying significant statements, clustering codes and patterns, and synthesizing these into thematic structures that reflect the essence of participants’ experiences. Bracketing was applied throughout the analytic process to minimize researcher bias, consistent with the study’s aim to foreground the participants’ own meanings. The analytic process followed Moustakas’

(1994) systematic steps: (1) horizontalization of significant statements; (2) formulation of codes; (3) clustering these codes into themes; and (4) synthesis of textural and structural descriptions to articulate the essence of the experience. This unified phenomenological method ensures epistemological coherence and analytic rigor. Data saturation was reached when no new codes or experiential insights emerged across interviews, indicating that the core structure of the phenomenon had been sufficiently captured.

To ensure the credibility and validity of the findings, the researchers applied bracketing to minimize personal biases and employed data triangulation by integrating interview responses and documentary sources. Ethical standards were strictly observed throughout the study, data gathering approval was secured to the Principal Office and including voluntary participation of the participants, the right to withdraw, and secure handling of all collected data.

3. Results

This section presents the findings that reflect the phenomenological reduction of the participants' lived experiences, organized according to the key themes that emerged from the data analysis. Through horizontalization and clustering of codes and meaning units, three thematic structures emerged that capture the essence of navigating academic responsibilities, social relationships, and personal adaptation under restricted digital access. These themes represent not only descriptive patterns but also the deeper meanings participants ascribed to their experiences. The phenomenological analysis of dormitory students lived experiences under restricted digital access yielded three major thematic areas: academic management under device constraints, social connectivity and sense of belonging, and coping mechanisms and adaptation strategies. These themes describe how students navigate a persistent tension between institutional limitations and their academic, social, and personal demands.

3.1 Academic Management Under Device Constraints

Theme 1: Restricted Study Routines

Participants consistently described how limited device access reshaped their study habits and daily routines. They reported needing to study or complete tasks in advance because devices could only be accessed during specific hours, often at night. This led to anticipatory academic behavior and constant adjustment of schedules to meet requirements despite structural constraints. They mentioned:

“Nag aral na’ko... before pa pumasok sa dorm... kasi gabi mo lang siya maa-access.” [“...I already studied before even entering the dorm... because you can only access it at night.”] (PA)

Theme 2: Academic Disadvantage

Participants perceived themselves as academically disadvantaged compared to non-dormitory students who enjoyed unrestricted digital access. They emphasized that peers outside the dorm were “much privileged,” while their own limited access resulted in missed announcements, delayed updates, and difficulty keeping pace with academic demands. This perceived inequality contributed to feelings of being at an “immediate disadvantage” in their studies. They stated:

“... [non-dorm students] are much privilege... and if you don't have digital access, it's like... you have disadvantage na kaagad.” (PA)
“Sometimes, I feel left behind because it's like they [non-dormers] already know exactly what to do while I am still groping/struggling to figure it out.” (PD)

Theme 3: Barriers to Compliance

Participants reported that restricted access created tangible barriers to completing academic requirements, especially collaborative tasks such as research projects. Limited device time delayed group work, hindered communication, and made it difficult to submit tasks on time. These barriers affected not only performance but also motivation and emotional well-being, with late or missed submissions described as disheartening. They verbalized:

“Hindi nausad yung aming research... limited yung access namin sa device...” (“...Our research did not progress... our access to devices is limited.”) (PA)
“Kapag hindi nakakapagpasa on time, nakakasira ng loob...” (“When I fail to submit on time, it is disheartening.”) (PC)

3.2 Social Connectivity and Sense of Belonging

Theme 1: Enhanced Local Socialization

Participants described how restricted digital access fostered stronger face-to-face interactions within the dormitory. With fewer digital distractions, they spent more time talking, sharing stories, and building relationships with fellow residents. This environment made them feel more connected to their immediate community and encouraged deeper interpersonal engagement. They mentioned:

“Wala kang gagawin kundi makipagkwentuhan... I feel more connected pag may limited access.” [“...You have nothing else to do but chat... I feel more connected when there is limited access.”] (PA)

Theme 2: Disruption of Relationships

At the same time, participants reported that limited access disrupted communication with family and loved ones outside the dorm. They experienced emotional distress when important family events or news did not reach them promptly due to connectivity constraints. This loss of contact underscored the emotional cost of restricted digital access. They stated:

“Mahirap... mawalan ng connection sa pamilya... hindi namin alam na namatayan kami ng tita.” [“It’s hard... to lose connection with the family... we didn’t even know that an aunt of ours passed away.”] (PC)

Theme 3: Feelings of Isolation

Participants also expressed feelings of isolation and being “left behind” in academic and social activities that occurred online. Inability to access real-time updates made them feel excluded from group tasks and classroom communications, reinforcing a sense of disconnection from non-dorm peers. They verbalized:

“Feeling ko... nale-left behind kasi parang sila alam na nila yung gagawin while ako nangangapa.” [“Sometimes, I feel left behind because it’s like they already know what to do while I am still struggling to figure it out.”] (PD)
“Limited access becomes a hindrance to participation in collaborative tasks.” (PA)

3.3 Coping Mechanisms and Adaptation Strategies

Theme 1: Proactive Task Management

Participants described proactive strategies to cope with restricted access, particularly by completing academic tasks ahead of time or maximizing device use during allowed periods. They treated phone release schedules and limited access windows as critical opportunities to comply with requirements and manage deadlines. They mentioned:

“Nagcocomply na ako... before pa pumasok ng dorm.” [“I study beforehand or I already comply with my tasks even before entering the dorm.”] (PA)

“I complete requirements during phone release periods to make sure I don’t fall behind.” (PB)

Theme 2: Emotional Coping

Participants employed emotional coping mechanisms to manage stress and frustration, including reframing challenges as opportunities for growth and engaging in alternative activities such as exercise. They emphasized adopting a positive mindset to endure the constraints and continue functioning effectively in their academic roles. They stated:

“These things are... for us to grow.” (PA)

“Exercise and other activities help me manage the stress of limited access.” (PB)

Theme 3: External Support

Participants relied on peers, seniors, and dormitory authorities as important support systems to navigate restricted access. They sought help from those with device access for updates, submissions, and coordination of tasks. This collaborative approach highlighted the role of community in overcoming structural barriers and sustaining academic engagement. They verbalized:

“Nanghihingi ako ng tulong... sa may access sa phone nila.” [“...I ask for help from villagers who have access to their phones.”] (PA)
“Support from peers and authorities helps us cope with the limitations in device access.” (PB)

4. Discussion

The discussion of this study interprets the participants’ lived experiences by situating the findings within broader theoretical and empirical contexts. Building on the phenomenological reduction presented in the results, the following sections deepen the analysis of how students navigate academic responsibilities, social relationships, and personal adaptation under restricted digital access. The narratives reveal a persistent “lived tension” between institutional limitations and demands of modern, digitally mediated learning environments, highlighting how students continuously negotiate their academic and social realities within these constraints. Their accounts, ranging from completing tasks in advance due to limited device access to feeling “left behind” in both academic and familial communication, illustrate the multifaceted impact of digital restriction on daily life. At the same time, the participants’ resilience, expressed through proactive planning, time management, and reliance on peer and institutional support, underscores the adaptive strategies they employ to maintain academic performance and emotional well-being. These insights provide the foundation for the three thematic discussions that follow, each elaborating on the complex interplay between restricted access, student agency, and other broader digital divide.

Based on the findings, dormitory deans and educational institutions are encouraged to adopt flexible and balanced device-use policies that address students’ academic needs while promoting discipline and responsible digital engagement. Faculty members should align the release of announcements, learning materials, and academic requirements with dormitory device-access schedules to prevent students from missing important information. Institutions should also strengthen peer-led support systems and provide appropriate communication opportunities to help students maintain social connections and support their academic and emotional well-being. Furthermore, future researchers should examine the effects of restricted digital access using larger and more diverse samples and across different institutional settings to validate and expand the findings of this study.

4.1 Academic Management Under Device Constraints

The struggle with digital access and its impact on academic performance is evident in the participants’ daily narratives of constant adjustments. Through Jan van Dijk’s Digital Divide Theory, these experiences highlight a disruption at the foundational level of physical access. The findings support van Dijk’s assertion that

when physical access is restricted, here, through institutional restrictions, students are prevented from achieving consistent usage access, which is essential in hybrid learning environments. Participants uniformly described limited digital access as a major barrier to academic equity, echoing the findings of Dale (2022) and the GoGuardian Team (2023), who emphasize that disparities in technology availability widen educational gaps and restrict future opportunities. Their experiences of missing late-night academic updates reflect the “lived tension” between the demands of hybrid learning (Bhandari, 2024) and restrictive dormitory policies. This aligns with Amjad et al. (2024), who argue that marginalized groups in restricted environments face heightened educational inequalities.

While the participants’ narratives highlight the need for greater digital access, some educational perspectives emphasize the importance of discipline. Guntu et al. (2025) note that phone restrictions are often implemented to prevent distraction and excessive use. However, Ulumiyah et al. (2024) warns that complete bans may hinder students from keeping pace with technological advancements. In van Dijk’s terms, such restrictions not only remove physical access but also stunt skills access, limiting students’ development of essential digital competencies. The participants’ experiences suggest that the current restrictions may outweigh the intended disciplinary benefits. This supports Safi’i, et. al (2025), who advocate for a harmonized approach that balances responsible use with academic freedom.

4.2 Social Connectivity and Sense of Belonging

Restricted access also shaped students’ social connectivity, as reflected in their daily emotional negotiations. Using van Dijk’s framework, this theme illustrates how limited physical access alters social usage access. While restricted digital access fostered stronger local dormitory relationships, it simultaneously created barriers to maintaining long-distance support systems. Participants consistently described disrupted communication and feelings of isolation, aligning with Pineda (2024) and Kim et al. (2019), who note that dormitory life often involves coping with homesickness and communication challenges. These experiences reflect the tension between physical residency and digital inclusion. The findings also resonate with Al-Marroof et al. (2021), who argue that while digital spaces offer opportunities for personal development, limited access can negatively affect student well-being.

Participants’ desire to strengthen in-person dormitory relationships aligns with Liang’s (2023) assertion that innovating dormitory interactions enhances social experiences. However, persistent feelings of being “left behind” mirror the concerns of Amjad et al. (2024) and the GoGuardian Team (2023), who warn that digital access disparities contribute to social and educational marginalization. This marginalization represents a deficit in social usage access, limiting students’ participation in broader online communities. While students valued local connections, the disadvantages of digital exclusion remained a significant concern, reinforcing Dale’s (2022) argument that equitable access is essential for holistic student development.

4.3 Coping Mechanisms and Adaptation Strategies

Participants' coping mechanisms reveal their efforts to remain academically competitive despite being "disconnected." Within van Dijk's model these strategies demonstrate high motivational access. While the theory typically positions motivation as a precursor to physical access, these students extend the concept by maintaining strong motivation despite systematic barriers. These behaviors align with Bhandari (2024), who emphasizes the importance of coping strategies and communication tools for dormitory students navigating environmental challenges.

By leveraging motivational access, students temporarily bypass institutional barriers and achieve functional usage access. Their resilience reflects the need for balanced technological policies, as advocated by Guintu et al. (2025), to ensure that restrictions do not hinder academic achievement. Their experiences also resonate with Kim et al. (2019) and Pineda (2024), who describe dormitory life as requiring strong communication and coping skills. However, scholars such as Ulumiyah et al. (2025) and Sipayung (2024) caution that device bans may impede students' long-term digital capacity. Despite these challenges participants maintained a functional balance, supporting Rachmad's (2017) argument that harmony is achieved not by eliminating contradictions but by integrating them.

Based on the findings, dormitory deans and educational institutions are encouraged to adopt flexible and balanced device-use policies that address students' academic needs while promoting discipline and responsible digital engagement. Faculty members should align the release of announcements, learning materials, and academic requirements with dormitory device-access schedules to prevent students from missing important information. Institutions should also strengthen peer-led support systems and provide appropriate communication opportunities to help students maintain social connections and support their academic and emotional well-being. Furthermore, future researchers should examine the effects of restricted digital access using larger and more diverse samples and across different institutional settings to validate and expand the findings of this study.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that limited digital access creates a localized form of digital divide that shapes students' academic management, social connectivity, and coping processes. The findings confirm that limited digital access creates a localized digital divide, consistent with van Dijk's theory. While restrictions aim to maintain discipline, excessive limitations hinder students' academic engagement. Furthermore, the dual impact on academic performance and social connectivity highlights the need for balanced policies that support both discipline and digital inclusion. These findings emphasize that equitable access is essential for holistic student development. While the experiences reflect broader patterns described in van

Dijk's framework, the conclusions remain grounded in the specific context of Lipa Adventist Academy and the lived realities of the four participants. Restricted digital access significantly affects dormitory students' academic and social experiences. Despite these challenges, students demonstrate resilience through adaptive strategies. As such, the recommendations offered are contextually informed rather than universally generalizable. This study contributes to understanding digital equity in restricted educational environments.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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