

THE *Current*

July 17, 2025

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To benefit from the internet, ‘not all screens are created equal’

In modern households, access to myriad resources and services begins with a speedy and affordable broadband connection. User devices — from smartphones to desktop computers — are also essential, particularly in the context of accessing important healthcare, employment and government services.

However, “not all screens are created equal,” according to Amy Gonzales, [an expert in digital equity](#) and associate communication professor at UC Santa Barbara.

“Owning a large-screen device, such as a laptop or desktop computer, and using it in beneficial ways, such as looking for a job, is more valuable than simply having good internet access at home.”

Gonzales’s findings, coauthored by UCSB graduate student Cecily Zhang, are part of a study [published](#) in the Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication.

Using census data from 2021 and 2024, Gonzales and Zhang found that in-home internet access and computer and smartphone use are all generally associated with internet benefits. “However,” Gonzales said, “we found that computer ownership seems to be the biggest determinant of beneficial internet use. We were surprised to see that the use of laptops and desktops was consistently the most important in shaping whether someone used the internet for healthcare, employment and government services.”

Generally, home computers are associated with “more serious” uses, such as bookkeeping, job searches and accessing healthcare portals, while smartphones tend to be more effective for texting, talking, social media, entertainment and navigation. This could have implications for households that only connect to the internet via smartphone.

“In the cases of homes that had smartphones but did not have internet access, smartphones were often negatively associated with use of the internet for healthcare or government services,” Gonzales said. “This is consistent with research that suggests that smartphone use may actually distract from more functional uses of the internet. We’re all familiar with the frustration of having to fill out forms or navigate complicated websites on a phone.”

Their research may also have ramifications at a policy level as lawmakers decide how to best fund access to technology, particularly in areas where households struggle financially. Funding programs have often focused on expanding and improving residential internet services without considering the variety of critical components, particularly subsidies for computers, Gonzales noted.

“Internet access is really a holistic experience of devices, services and skills,” Gonzales said. “For many, including seniors, non-native English speakers and those with little income or education, when one piece of the puzzle breaks down, it becomes difficult for them to stay in touch with doctors, teachers, employers, social workers and loved ones.”

“There is a reason that digital equity has long been a bipartisan issue,” she added. When residents in red states and blue states alike have problems getting internet access, it impacts regional economic growth. As we consider investments in the education, wealth and health of Americans, we need to make sure that computers are part of that equation.”

About UC Santa Barbara

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