

ABSTRACT

Background – Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are said to bring with them a promise of addressing developmental challenges. The debate about the potential contribution of ICT to development is still controversial with limited empirical results to back it up. While there is currently published literature on the role of ICT in social change and development, there exists limited empirical evidence that supports the impact ICTs have on social change and development. This study builds on these existing concerns and tries to understand how free public WiFi hotspots that have been rolled out in the City of Johannesburg (CoJ) impacts the development of city residents.

Purpose – The purpose of this study was to explore and better understand the impact that free public WiFi hotspots have on the development of City of Johannesburg residents, and determine if any development at all was experienced.

Design/methodology/approach – This study was guided by the interpretivism paradigm where an inductive approach was employed. The Choice Framework was utilised to theoretically underpin this study. This study followed an explanatory research approach where qualitative research design was employed. This cross-sectional study used non-probability sampling, where convenience sampling technique was selected as the appropriate sampling method for the study. Semi-structured open-ended interviews were conducted with twelve respondents in the City of Johannesburg.

Practical implications – This study provides an understanding on how Information and Communications Technology for Development (ICT4D) projects, in this case, the free public WiFi hotspots rolled out in the City of Johannesburg impacts the development of the city residents. This research will enable ICT4D researchers and practitioners to better understand how these ICT4D initiatives are impacting the development of residents. This study will also help ICT4D project implementer to ensure that any barriers to the impact of free public WiFi hotspots on development is addressed to ensure that the CoJ addresses residents' development needs. The study will provide direction that will guide ICT4D projects implementers on how to better roll out more of these WiFi hotspots in other parts of the CoJ and how to better address residents' development challenges through free public WiFi hotspots.

Findings – The study found that the availability of free public WiFi hotspots in various locations in the CoJ region does positively impact the development of residents, however, development is a choice. Only those who chose to use the free public WiFi hotspots will be able to achieve the development outcome to achieve the life that they value and have a reason to given the confines of their social structures. After all, it is only through the successful use of ICTs that real developmental benefits will be realised.