



# EXPLORING THE HABIT OF INTERNET USE AND PERCEIVED PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT AMONG ADOLESCENTS FROM LOWER SOCIOECONOMIC GROUPS IN UTTAR PRADESH

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## ABSTRACT

*The use of the internet is a major developmental factor in the lives of adolescents. While the relevant correlations of internet use have been documented previously, there is a lack of information specifically regarding adolescents from lower socio-economic groups. This is particularly important because adolescents are more sensitive to the negative aspects of online experiences. The current study aims to explore the internet usage and parental involvement among adolescents from socio-economically disadvantaged areas in five urban school districts in Uttar Pradesh. A total of 250 students participated, with 90% being between the ages of 14-16. Virtually all socio-economically disadvantaged adolescents had access to the internet, and 88.5% reported spending more than two hours online daily, often on apps like Instagram and YouTube. A consistent finding across various countries was that girls are more likely to discuss their internet use with their parents and ensure that their parents are aware of what they are doing online. However, for boys, parents do not monitor whether they are using the internet appropriately or how much time they spend online. The results indicate that parents play a crucial role in showing interest in their adolescents' internet usage, with a particular need for attention towards boys.*

**KEYWORDS:** Internet use; adolescents; socioeconomic disadvantage; parents

## INTRODUCTION

In this century, the use of the internet has grown rapidly, especially among youth, and they are predominantly active on social networking sites. Although the average age restriction for social networking sites is typically 13 years, even younger children are increasingly joining these platforms. A survey conducted by Hesse et al. in England with a sample of 883 children aged 7 to 12 years found that 40% of the children accessed social networking sites, and half of them did so at least once a week, while the other half did so almost daily. In the UK, Ofcom reported in 2018 that 99% of children aged 12 to 15 years used the internet. Additionally, a survey conducted in 2018-2019 across Europe revealed that in 19 European countries, the majority of children aged 9 to 16 years used their smartphones 'every day' or 'almost all the time,' and children now spend almost two to three hours online daily.

The use of the internet is considered a significant developmental factor in people's lives, especially among adolescents. A narrative review on adolescents, screens, and social media highlights that there is generally a relationship between internet and social media use and well-being, but this relationship is often negative and complicated, on average. Moreover, the relationship between the extent of internet use and well-being may be curvilinear rather than linear, as seen in the "Goldilocks Effect." In this context, moderate use of the internet can help adolescents take advantage of the opportunities provided by the internet, develop new skills, and deal with the associated risks. However, excessive internet use can serve as a risk factor for cyberbullying and other harmful activities. Between 4.5% and 9.4% of European adolescents have reported problematic social media use.

This suggests that while the internet can offer numerous benefits, its overuse can lead to significant negative consequences, including exposure to online bullying and addictive behaviors. Thus, a balanced approach to internet usage is crucial, particularly for the well-being of young users.



The internet is a medium with unlimited possibilities and learning opportunities. Children and adolescents are the primary users of the internet, which has become an integral part of their lives and a constant companion (Steventon, 2021). According to Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2005), we focus on parental involvement at home, which means that parents actively engage in their children's education. This engagement can be understood as the interactions parents have with their children, such as checking or monitoring homework, or providing educational enhancement activities at home, all of which contribute to promoting academic success (Durisic & Banijevac, 2017; Epstein, Sanders, Sheldon, Simon, Salinas & Jansorn et al., 2018; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler & Hoover-Dempsey, 2005). Parental involvement plays a crucial role in the development, achievement, and academic performance of children in secondary school (Jeynes, 2007; Lee & Woo, 2013; Lee, Hu, Gee, & Auden, 2019; Papadakis; Zarní).

Since the internet plays a significant role in children's daily lives (for both personal and school-related matters), and children learn a lot about its use from their families, the involvement of parents in this context should also be examined (Huang, Lee, Chen, & Strohbahr, 2018; Loricella, Wartella, & Rideout, 2015).

This indicates that while internet use is an essential part of children's education and daily routine, parental engagement—especially in how the internet is used—can significantly impact their learning and development. Therefore, it is important to examine how parents interact with their children in the digital space to foster academic success and well-being.

Socially disadvantaged adolescents are a vulnerable group when it comes to risky or addictive behaviors, making it crucial to consider specific factors associated with adolescents from structurally disadvantaged areas while developing health programs. Several studies indicate that problematic internet use is a risk factor, particularly for adolescents from socio-economically disadvantaged areas.

This highlights the disparity in internet use and skills between socio-economically advantaged and disadvantaged adolescents. Adolescents from disadvantaged backgrounds may face additional challenges, including limited access to technology, lower digital literacy, and greater susceptibility to harmful online behaviors. As a result, targeted interventions are needed to address these issues and promote safe, productive internet use among adolescents from disadvantaged communities.

This research paper reports the findings from the first phase of a study on internet use and perceived parental involvement. The exploratory study has two main objectives. First, we will explain the scope and frequency of internet use in socio-economically disadvantaged areas, including the popular apps and sites used, as well as the perceived parental involvement in adolescents' internet usage. Relevant demographic details, including the children's age, gender, disability, school performance, and economic status, will also be included in this description. Second, our aim is to identify which demographics are most strongly associated with internet use and perceived parental involvement.

This study, which reports data from five districts in Uttar Pradesh, specifically seeks to examine consistent and inconsistent findings across these districts. However, we did not use statistical tests to investigate district differences, as such comparisons would require specific measurement-theoretical conditions.

This study provides an initial exploration into the patterns of internet use among adolescents in disadvantaged areas, as well as the role of parental involvement. By analyzing demographic factors and their association with these variables, the study aims to uncover critical insights into how internet usage is shaped by socio-economic and familial contexts.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### **Participants and Procedure**

In each of the five districts, schools located in urban areas that provide meals to children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds were selected. A total of 30 schools agreed to participate and provided informed consent. In Lucknow (7 schools) and Kanpur (3 schools), convenience sampling was conducted without any refusals. However, in Unnao (5 schools), Sitapur (6 schools), and Agra (9 schools), initial contact was made with over 50 schools. Parents were informed about the research and were required to provide active informed consent. Informed consent from the school representative was also necessary to collect data within schools. Parents could withdraw their child's participation at any time. Students were required to sign informed consent before filling out the questionnaire. In total, 208 students completed the questionnaire (age range = 10-25 years). As recruitment was conducted at the grade level, some early entrants (age = 13, n = 135) as well as late entrants or repeaters (age = 17-18, n = 73) also filled out the questionnaire. These students were included in the analysis.



A total of 66 students were excluded from the dataset due to not meeting the age criteria (age <13, n = 9; or age >18, n = 12), incorrect age entries (i.e., age = 1-4, n = 17), or missing age information (n = 28). This resulted in a final sample size of 142 students. No other exclusion criteria were applied besides the age criterion.

The study was conducted between May 2023 and March 2024. Students were reminded about the voluntary nature of the survey and informed that they could withdraw at any time or choose not to answer certain questions if they wished. One or two teachers and/or research staff members were present and available to assist with answering any questions. The research teams provided instructions to both participants and teaching staff. Some schools requested feedback on the work, which was always arranged.

### Measurements

The described measures were part of a study on adolescents' online experiences. These included demographic characteristics, aspects of internet use, and aspects of parental involvement in internet use. We asked about age, gender, residence (urban/rural), disability (sensory, physical, learning), the number of books or e-books in your home or the place where you usually live (just a few/about 10 or 15/more than 15), and the type of grades you usually receive in school (above average, average, below average). The number of books at home serves as a proxy for socio-economic status.

This approach highlights the multi-dimensional nature of the study, where both online behaviors and socio-economic factors are considered in understanding adolescents' experiences and parental involvement with internet use. The inclusion of questions about books and academic performance provides insight into the socio-economic context, which can influence internet access, usage patterns, and the role of parents in guiding digital engagement.

### Aspects of Parental Involvement in Internet Use

Students were asked few questions about parental involvement in their internet use. The first question focused on communication regarding internet use: **"Do you tell your parents which websites you visit online?"** with four response options:

- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- No

The second question inquired about the level of parental interest in the students' internet use: **"Do your parents show interest in your online experiences?"** with four response options:

- Yes, they are very interested
- They are somewhat interested
- They are slightly interested, but not much
- No, they are not interested

These questions aimed to gauge the extent to which adolescents communicate with their parents about their online activities and the degree to which parents are involved in or concerned about their children's internet experiences. The responses provided insight into the level of parental engagement, which is an important factor in understanding adolescents' online behaviors and overall well-being.

### Statistical Analyses

All analyses were conducted using the SPSS version. First, demographic details and internet usage were provided. To examine similarities and differences, separate results were presented for the entire sample as well as for each district.

For the frequency of internet use, the first two categories ('I don't or maybe once' and '2 to 5 times') were combined for analysis due to the relatively low percentage. Similarly, for the amount of time spent online, the first two categories ('I don't or less than half an hour' and 'one hour') were combined for analysis.

Secondly, we were interested in identifying which demographic characteristics were most strongly related to internet use and parental involvement. More specifically, we tested whether age, gender, disability, number of books at home, and grades were correlated with the following interval variables: frequency of internet use, time spent online, frequency of informing parents about websites visited, parental interest in internet use, and whether parents are okay with their adolescents' internet use.

For the results, we created a binary variable based on whether the parents were okay with their own internet use versus not okay, and examined its relationship with these demographic variables. This approach allowed us to identify patterns and correlations



between internet use, parental involvement, and socio-demographic factors, providing a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing adolescent internet behavior.

These analyses were conducted with four linear regression models and one binominal regression model for each district. Here, gender was coded into dummy variables, with 'male' as the reference category. Age, residence, and Internet access were not included in the model due to expected low variation.

## RESULTS

**Demographic Data:** Overall, the average age of the participants was 14.77 years (SD = 0.88), and this was consistent across the districts. In terms of gender, 55.9% were male, and 44.1% were female. The percentage of children with disabilities was higher in the sample, which aligns with the purpose of selecting schools from disadvantaged areas. On average, 18.3% of students reported having a learning disability, 10.5% had a sensory disability, and 5.0% had a physical disability.

**“I have only a few books in my house which are of my need.....”**

**“If I talk about books, I have at least 10 to 20 books which I look at once or twice a week.....”**

**“I have more than 20 books, I don't remember the names of them, but they are more than 20.....”**

When asked about the number of books in their home, on average, 32.2% of students reported having only a few books, 20.7% indicated having around 10 or 20 books, and 47.2% reported having more than 20 books.

Regarding school grades, 34.2% of students reported receiving above-average/good grades, 60.0% indicated average grades, and 5.8% reported receiving below-average/poor grades.

This demographic breakdown provides valuable context for understanding the socio-economic and educational background of the participants, as well as potential correlations with internet usage patterns and parental involvement. The higher percentage of students with disabilities and the diversity in the number of books at home can offer insights into the relationship between these factors and adolescents' online behaviors.

### Internet Usage and Parental Involvement with narratives:

**“I have my own internet connected device in my home. I use it daily.....”**

**“Sometimes I use it even without any work. Mostly I use it for surfing.....”**

Overall, 98.4% of students indicated that they had access to internet-connected devices within their homes.

**“My brothers and sisters have their own smartphones and tablets..... Earlier I did not have a tablet or a smart phone but when my brother and sister got smartphones and tablets in school, they gave them to me. Now I have my own smartphone and a tablet, I am into gaming apps and also have gaming gadgets.....”**

**“Where my mother works, she was given a smartphone. My mother gifted it to me, so the smartphone has become mine.....”**

In terms of ownership, 96.5% reported having smartphones, 55.1% had tablets, and 67.8% owned gaming consoles.

**“I do not have internet facility available in my house but internet has become very big nowadays, I mostly go out of the house and use internet.....”**

**“Many times, I go to my friend's place to use the internet facility or I go to my relatives' place to use the internet. I like using the internet, downloading movies and playing games.....”**

Additionally, 79.0% of students had access to the internet outside their homes.



*“I don't need to use the internet or go online much.....”*

*“If I talk about using the internet, then I use the internet or go online 2 to 5 times in 24 hours.....”*

*“Today, internet has become a big part of our life. Whenever you need anything, you directly take yourself online and don't take it out of the house...”*

*“If we talk about me, then I use the internet more than 10 times or keep it open many times.....”*

*“I don't keep myself offline; I am mostly found online. When my friends also want to know about me, they check online to see if I am available or not.....”*

When asked how often students use the internet on a typical day (whether from school, home, internet points, mobile devices, tablets, or other devices), 2.3% responded that they don't go online or do so only once, 17.2% reported using it 2 to 5 times, 20.3% said they go online about 10 times, and 60.2% stated that they go online more than 10 times per day.

*“I spend less than half an hour online every day.....”*

*“I spend about an hour online.....”*

*“I spend at least 2 hours online.....”*

*“If I talk about internet usage, I spend 3 to 5 hours online....”*

*“I spend more than 5 hours online or maybe even more....”*

Regarding the daily time spent online, 1.9% reported no time or less than half an hour, 7.5% spent about one hour, 20.0% spent about two hours, 33.2% spent between 3 and 5 hours, and 37.4% spent more than 5 hours online daily. A significant correlation ( $r = .49$ ) was found between the frequency of internet use and the daily time spent online.

*“In the survey conducted for district data collection, when the children were asked which website they use most, the children named Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat, and Facebook as the top 4 websites..... “ I mostly like to be on Instagram, I also keep using YouTube, I use Snapchat for chatting and I also use Facebook regularly.....”*

When students were asked about the apps they use and the websites they visit. Across the districts, the top four mentioned apps were Instagram (55.7%), YouTube (50.1%), Snapchat (40.9%), and Facebook (17.9%). While Instagram and YouTube were popular across all districts, the specific preferences varied, but these platforms were consistently used by the majority of students.

This data highlights the extensive nature of internet usage among adolescents, with a clear preference for popular social media apps like Instagram and YouTube. The significant amount of time spent online underscores the importance of addressing digital habits and the need for parental involvement in guiding healthy internet use. As adolescents spend considerable time on these platforms, it becomes crucial to provide them with the necessary support and guidance to navigate the online world responsibly, while balancing their digital activities with other aspects of life.

### **Correlates of Internet Usage and Parental Involvement**

Various demographic characteristics play a significant role in studying internet usage. Specifically, when discussing students with physical and sensory disabilities, it is essential to see how parents' communication styles and interests can influence these students' internet usage.

The study focuses on several key points:

- 1. Demographic Characteristics:** Parents' communication, interest, and concern affect internet usage. These characteristics can significantly impact students' frequency and duration of internet use.
- 2. Combining Sensitivity Groups:** Due to the low number of students with physical and sensory disabilities, they have been combined into one group. This facilitates analysis; however, it is essential to keep in mind that different disabilities can exert different effects.



**3. Inclusion of Grades:** The decision to merge 'average' and 'below average' grades suggests that perhaps due to the smaller number of students or score variations, a detailed analysis could be challenging.

**4. Duration and Correlation:** It is noteworthy that no solid correlation was found between the frequency and duration of internet use across districts and countries. This might be the result of various socio-economic contexts or local policies.

Additionally, the study regarding parents' concerns and interests could indicate that if parents actively engage in understanding and discussing internet usage, it could positively influence students' usage patterns. This study could pave the way for further thought and research in this area, helping us understand how to enhance safe and effective internet usage for students with disabilities.

## DISCUSSION

The current study aimed to investigate internet usage among socio-economically disadvantaged adolescents in five districts of Uttar Pradesh: Lucknow, Kanpur, Unnao, Sitapur, and Agra. This study had two primary objectives: first, to explore the self-reported internet usage among adolescents and their perceived parental involvement in that usage; and second, to identify which demographic factors are most strongly associated with internet usage and perceived parental involvement.

The results provide significant insights into the current internet usage of socio-economically disadvantaged adolescents and suggest key points for future programs aimed at promoting safe and responsible internet usage. A major strength of this study is that we were able to collect a sample of adolescents from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds across five districts of Uttar Pradesh. The consistency of the results across the districts argues for the generalizability of these findings.

Firstly, adolescents participating from these five districts had substantial access to the internet both inside and outside their homes. More than half of these youths reported using the internet more than 14 times a day, and nearly two-thirds spend three or more hours online daily. In terms of app popularity, Instagram, YouTube, and Snapchat were the most frequently used platforms.

Secondly, communication and involvement with parents varied among the adolescents. Fewer than half of the adolescents in this study often or always informed their parents about the websites they visited; however, the rate of disclosure was higher among girls compared to boys. Less than half of the adolescents reported that their parents had a fair amount or strong interest in their activities on the internet, yet again, girls indicated a higher level of parental interest than boys. More than half of the adolescents expressed that their parents were generally okay with their internet usage. Concerns were greater for girls, minority children, children with disabilities, children with more books at home, and those with lower grades, although uniformity was not observed across all districts.

Studies have shown a lack of parental involvement, which should be a cause for concern. Parental monitoring is considered a protective factor in relation to cyberbullying and other negative online experiences. The literature suggests that parents should strike a good balance between granting their child freedom in internet usage and actively monitoring online behavior, imposing clear restrictions, and being available when the child faces negative online experiences. The lack of interest from parents is linked to a higher likelihood of the child being victimized or subjected to cyberbullying. The current study indicates that lower parental involvement may pose greater risks for boys. The results of this study support this perspective, showing a moderate correlation between adolescents discussing their internet usage and the perceived interest from their parents.

## LIMITATIONS

The study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its results. The first issue is that all data were self-reported by the adolescents, meaning we do not have information on the concerns and levels of involvement from the parents' perspective. This is an important aspect since parental monitoring and communication can significantly affect adolescents' online activities.

Secondly, the assessment of app popularity was based on an open-ended question. Thus, the reported most popular apps rely solely on recall and may not objectively represent actual usage statistics. This could lead to a lack of depth in the statistical analysis.

Thirdly, the results do not show any significant differences from other studies, which complicates generalization. As mentioned above, comparing the levels of socio-economic disadvantage across five districts was challenging, which could lead to substantial variations within the samples. Ultimately, this may influence the interpretation of the results or conclusions, and we must keep in mind that our findings may be affected by these limitations.

Considering these limitations, future research should attempt to gather more comprehensive and diverse data to better understand parents' perspectives and their online involvement, so that the viewpoints of both adolescents and their parents regarding internet usage can be included.



## CONCLUSIONS

The conclusion confirms that adolescents in all five districts have easy access to the internet and spend a significant amount of time on it. This is particularly true for a large proportion of low-SES (socio-economic status) students in our samples. Parental involvement varies and is notable for this group. Adolescents indicated that most parents pay very little attention to online activities or generally agree with their children's internet use. It is true that most parents do not closely monitor their children's internet activities, and excessive use (such as social media and gaming) is often overlooked by them. However, showing interest, discussing what parents should and shouldn't do regarding internet use with adolescents, and emphasizing the importance of addressing issues when things go wrong are significant aspects of parental involvement. The study reveals that parental involvement is considerably lower for boys compared to girls. Therefore, it is important that parents receive appropriate training to recognize problematic internet use and to engage actively with their children's internet use in a constructive and cooperative manner.

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