

# Chapter 19

## U.S. Children's and Adolescents' Internet Access, Use, and Online Behaviors

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### ABSTRACT

*Technology has dramatically changed the frequency with which US youth access the Internet as well as what they are doing while they are online. In this entry, the authors first examine US children's and adolescents' Internet access and use by age, ethnicity, and device (e.g., mobile phone, computer). Next, they discuss how US youths' earlier online behavior trends, such as visiting chat rooms, have been replaced with activities such as communicating and creating content via social-networking sites. Finally, the chapter examines emerging trends in US youths' online behaviors that have yet to be researched and explored.*

### INTRODUCTION

The 21<sup>st</sup> century brings to the forefront a new generation of children and youth who live and develop in a world characterized by rapidly changing media interfaces. Today's youth are digital natives of these emerging technologies, interacting with them and forging new pathways and

trends, while older adults are relegated to a world in which they are digital immigrants (Prensky, 2001). In this entry, we describe the ubiquitous nature of Internet experiences for U.S. children and youth, particularly teens. We then explore the online behaviors of youth, focusing on earlier trends, current behaviors, and emerging areas for empirical exploration.

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## **U.S. YOUTHS' INTERNET ACCESS AND USE**

Youth are early adopters of new technological interfaces, and children and adolescents have indeed embraced the Internet. In fact, the Internet is a staple in the lives of teens. As of September 2009, 93% of a nationally representative sample of US adolescents ages 12 to 17 were going online, compared to 75% in 2000 (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). Not only are more teens going online than ever before, the frequency with which teens surf the Internet is also increasing dramatically. Of the teens that go online, 63% reported accessing the Internet daily in 2009, compared to 42% in 2004 (Lenhart et al., 2010). Thirty-six percent of teens go online several times a day (Lenhart et al., 2010).

The household media environment plays a large role in youths' Internet use. Teens' overall increase in Internet use is likely due, in part, to the increase of broadband access across American homes. Broadband access increases the speed of data transmission and allows more content to be transmitted than other forms of Internet connections, such as dial-up phone connections (Accessed on April 14, 2011 at [http://www.broadband.gov/about\\_broadband.html](http://www.broadband.gov/about_broadband.html)). Compared to 2004 when just half of all households with teens had broadband access, 75% of homes with teens now have broadband access (Lenhart, Madden, Macgill, & Smith, 2007).

There is a difference in broadband access by ethnicity across the US. For example, in 2010, 67% of Caucasians, while 56% of African-Americans were broadband users (Smith, 2010a), which likely contributes to the discrepancy in teen Internet use by ethnicity and social-economic status. For example, White teens are more likely to go online several times a day than Hispanic teens who report going online once a day, or three to five times a week (Lenhart et al., 2010). Moreover, teenagers of parents who are less-educated and have lower

incomes are less likely to go online than children of parents who are more educated and better paid. Specifically, 98% of children whose parents have college educations are online, compared to 82% of children whose parents have only a high school education (Lenhart et al., 2007).

Parents' perceptions of television use versus computer use also affect the amount of exposure youth get to screen media. Although parents are more likely to establish rules on the types of sites their teens can visit online than the types of television programs they can watch (Lenhart et al., 2007), compared to television viewing, more parents of 6-month to 6-year-old children find educational value in computer or Internet use (Rideout & Hamel, 2006).

Ninety-three percent of teens use computers to access the Internet. However, teens are now using multiple devices to access online content. In 2009, 83% of U.S. youth owned a cell phone, 51% owned a portable gaming device, and 80% owned a game console (Lenhart et al., 2010). As of September 2009, 27% of teens used their cell phones to go online, 24% used their game console, and 19% used their portable gaming console (Lenhart et al., 2010). Data from a 2010 Nielsen report show that one-third of US youth now own a smart phone that offers advanced computing ability and connectivity, suggesting that the number of youth who access the Internet via their cell phone is increasing. Interestingly, minority youth are more likely to access the Internet using their cell phones than White children (Smith, 2010b).

## **EARLIER TRENDS IN YOUTHS' INTERNET BEHAVIOR**

### **Chat Rooms and Multi-User Domains**

Early teen Internet behaviors involved interactions that were primarily among strangers, as in chat rooms (Greenfield & Subrahmanyam, 2003;

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