

Cell phones helping to bridge the digital divide for low income teens, but online visits costly

May 19 2011

(PhysOrg.com) -- Without Internet access at home, teens from low income households are more likely than their wealthier counterparts to use their cell phones to go online.

But those teens with the least money who are using their phones for Internet access are likely paying the most to get online, according to a new study by University of Michigan researchers.

U-M researchers Katie Brown, Scott Campbell and Rich Ling wrote the findings in an article recently published in a special issue of the journal Future Internet.

While most teens use their phones to make calls and to text, the study revealed that 27 percent of them used the [mobile devices](#) to access the Internet. This figure jumps to 41 percent among teens living in households that earn less than \$30,000 per year. Of the lower income teens, 70 percent had computers in the home, compared to 92 percent from families earning more than \$30,000 annually.

The study is based on a [national survey](#) of teens in the United States, complemented by nine focus groups in four U.S. cities in 2009. The research was conducted by U-M and the Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project.

About 25 percent of all teens who own cell phones performed Internet functions including visiting social networking sites. The data show that 21 percent of teens used their phones to email, while 11 percent shopped online.

Cell phone plans that include Internet access are expensive, and tend to be slower than computer Internet service. [Mobile Internet](#) access was also higher among minority teens who are less likely than white teens to have a computer in the home, with 44 percent of African American teens and 35 percent of Hispanic teens using their phones to go online.

Researchers note that teens from higher income households are more likely to be on family plans paid for by someone else. In contrast, 31 percent of teens from households earning less than \$30,000 per year are on a family plan paid for by someone else, with 23 percent paying for their own entirely.

Paying for their own phones, as well as having their own contract, is associated with using more of the service's features, especially those that require Internet access, such as email, instant message, sharing pictures and videos, accessing [social networking sites](#), and making online purchases.

In 2009, 40 percent of teens in the study who paid their entire [cell phone](#) bill used their phones to access the Internet, compared to 23 percent of teens who paid part of their bill and 26 percent who paid none.

"The willingness of poor people to pay for Internet access underscores the idea that net access is not just "nice to have" but that it is increasingly seen as a necessity," the researchers wrote.

Among black and Latino teens with household incomes less than \$30,000, 63 percent paid for some or all of their mobile phone use,

compared to 29 percent of teens in general. Forty-four percent of black teens and 35 percent of Latino teens with mobile phones use them to access the Internet, compared to 21 percent of white [teens](#).

Provided by University of Michigan

Citation: Cell phones helping to bridge the digital divide for low income teens, but online visits costly (2011, May 19) retrieved 20 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-05-cell-bridge-digital-income-teens.html>

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