

RESEARCH ARTICLE

An Investigation of Parental Control Practices, Internet Use Behaviors of Elementary School Students, and Their Relationships with School Performance

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Abstract: It is widely known that children nowadays use the Internet for communication, entertainment, and educational purposes. Parents try to control their children's Internet use in various ways. Within this context, an investigation was carried out into the practices used by parents of primary school children to monitor Internet usage, as well as the impact of this usage on their academic performance. Through qualitative research and interviews with eight parents who were also educators, several conclusions were drawn regarding children's Internet use and its effect on school performance. The results of the present study showed that parents monitor their children's online activity by observing the websites they visit and try to limit the time they spend on the Internet. The responses indicated that the more time children spend online, the lower their academic performance tends to be. Moreover, the greater the parental control over Internet use, the higher the academic performance of primary school children.

Keywords: elementary school, parental control, school performance

1 Introduction

Of note is that in many countries, the use of computers and the Internet by children is increasing at a very rapid pace. As a result of this situation, many questions have arisen regarding the benefits of computers and the Internet for children, the risks associated with Internet browsing, and the attitudes of families toward this issue. Several studies to date have shown that the use of computers and the Internet is beneficial for children. Hasebrink et al. (2008) argue that the advantages for children include access to entertainment, information, education, communication, networking, creativity, and play. In addition, Kuhlmeier and Hemker (2007) believe that technological and digital skills—which are now essential in daily life—can be developed from early childhood through access to electronic media and the Internet at home. Moreover, other researchers such as Jackson et al. (2006) claim that children who use the Internet perform better academically than those who do not. In fact, according to Holloway et al. (2013), many parents support their children's engagement with the Internet.

Apart from the benefits, children's engagement with the Internet also involves various drawbacks or potential risks, such as exposure to inappropriate content, disclosure of personal information to strangers, and even addiction (Marinos et al., 2011; Andreou & Svoli, 2013; Fiorini, 2010; Wang et al., 2013). For this reason, many parents are divided regarding Internet use—especially in relation to academic performance—with some believing it brings benefits and others seeing negative consequences (Livingstone & Bober, 2004).

1.1 The Internet in Children's Daily Lives

Today, children around the world are increasingly connected to the Internet or wish to be constantly online, with themselves, their families, and their schools relying on it for every aspect of their childhood (Livingstone et al., 2018). With the Internet of Things on the horizon—bringing smart homes, portable devices, robotics, augmented and virtual reality—children and young people more broadly are at the forefront of adopting these technologies (Gubbi et al., 2013; Manches et al., 2015; Thomas & Lupton, 2015).

Children's Internet use is shaped by how they access it. A major shift occurred with the emergence of smartphones, which, since 2013–2014, have been widely used by children aged 9

to 16 (Mascheroni & Ólafsson, 2014; Armakolas, Lora, & Waligóra, 2024). Thanks to their portability and the ability to host the apps each child wants, smartphones have become integrated into various social settings and activities. With the recent rise of the Internet of Things and the Internet of Toys (Mascheroni & Holloway, 2019), the Internet has become a part of children's everyday lives. For this reason, Livingstone et al. (2018) suggest that there should be no distinction between the digital and the real world, as the world and relationships are now shaped through the Internet.

In a UNICEF study using the Global Kids Online toolkit (Stalker et al., 2019), which included data from 11 countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America—not just Europe—it was found that children aged 9 to 11 participate in social activities online at rates ranging from 9% in countries like Uruguay to 44% in Albania and Brazil. Additionally, the average percentage of children in this age group who use the Internet at school is 25%. This type of Internet use is less frequent overall, with no significant differences observed between genders. Among children aged 9 to 11, the frequency of Internet use for schoolwork ranges from 9% in Switzerland to 32% in Lithuania (Smahel et al., 2020).

In a survey conducted in the United Kingdom (Ofcom, 2019), the results showed that 57% of children aged 5-7 have their own tablet and 14% have a smartphone. Of these, 77% use a tablet to browse the Internet, 51% use a computer (desktop or laptop) and 40% via a smartphone. Most students in this age group utilize online video sharing platforms (96%) and 50% play online games, while about a third of children use social networks and exchange messages online. The applications that children use the most are TikTok, Snapchat, Instagram and Facebook.

1.2 Parental Control

Many studies have been conducted in terms of the relationship between parental involvement and academic achievement, and Fan and Chen (2001), in a review of earlier studies on this topic, concluded that parents' expectations for their children's academic performance were more important than the supervision they exercised at home. Such supervision includes setting the time children spend studying or watching TV, creating a suitable environment at home for studying, and ensuring that children come straight home after school. Jeynes (2005), in a review of research on parental involvement in elementary school children, concluded that the factors that most influenced academic achievement were parents' expectations and parenting style. In contrast, parental actions such as monitoring school activities, setting rules at home, and checking homework did not have a significant impact on academic performance.

Moreover & Jeynes (2007), in his studies on secondary school students, reached similar conclusions. The findings from the synthesis of the research he analyzed indicated that parental involvement had a positive effect. Patall et al. (2008) concluded that parental involvement yields positive outcomes when it is expressed through actions such as setting rules for completing schoolwork, especially when and where it should be done, as well as providing direct assistance to children with their assignments. According to Hill and Tyson (2009), aspects of parental involvement that positively influence academic achievement include, besides parents' expectations, instilling those expectations in their children, discussing the learning strategies the children will follow, and planning the children's academic future.

1.3 School Performance

Studies have been conducted on the impact of technology on the academic achievement and development of children and adolescents. Both positive and negative effects of technology have been identified. Espinosa et al. (2006) examined the role of technology in early childhood development and concluded that it supported students' learning potential and that parents should encourage its use to improve academic performance. Lei and Zhao (2005), in their research on the "quantity" versus the "quality" of technology use, found that when the quality of technology used was poor, computer use may do more harm than good for children.

Other studies have focused on specific uses of the Internet and their impact on students' academic achievement. For instance, Kirschner and Karpinski (2010) studied the effect of Facebook usage on college students and found that Facebook users had lower grades compared to non-users, even though the total time spent online was the same. This difference was attributed to variations in study habits between users and non-users.

The overall conclusion drawn from research on Internet use and academic performance—whether school-related or higher education—is that performance depends on how the Internet is used. When used for learning purposes, academic achievement increases; however, when

used for social purposes, performance tends to decline (Kirschner & Karpinski, 2010; Junco, 2012; Soegoto & Tjokroadiponto, 2018). Research by Sholekah et al. (2022) reveals that the relationship among parental influence, students' learning motivation, gadget use, and their impact on learning outcomes is strong and significant. The positive feedback regarding the effectiveness of mobile learning applications emphasizes their role as valuable educational tools. The user-friendly interfaces, interactive features, and alignment with diverse learning styles contribute to their efficacy (Ghoulam et al., 2024).

1.4 Purpose and research questions

The aim of the present study is to investigate parental practices regarding elementary school students in order to monitor their children's Internet access, as well as to examine whether their engagement with the Internet affects their academic performance. More specifically, the study attempts to explore the following questions:

- (1) In what ways and how frequently do elementary school children use the Internet?
- (2) Do parents follow specific methods to control their children's Internet access?
- (3) Is there a correlation between parental control of Internet use and academic performance?
- (4) Is there a correlation between the frequency of Internet use and academic performance?

2 Research methodology

2.1 Participants and data collection process

Regarding the present study, semi-structured interviews were used. The interview guide contained questions focused on the research questions, while also allowing the interviewees to express their own opinion on the topic. Regarding the interviews, the sample consisted of eight (8) individuals who were parents of children attending elementary school. The interviews were conducted online using the Skype application. This method of interviewing offered advantages, as both the researcher and the participants had the comfort of their own space. It was essentially equivalent to a face-to-face interview, in which participants had the freedom to express their answers (Paraskevopoulou-Kollia, 2019).

2.2 Research tool

In developing the interview guide, specifically the section concerning children's Internet use and parental control, international research conducted as part of the Global Kids Online project—funded by UNICEF in collaboration with the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and the EU Kids Online network (Smahel et al., 2020)—was taken into account, as well as the study “Children and the Internet in Greece” (Tsaliki et al., 2012). The first of the aforementioned studies investigated both parents and children's use of the Internet, while the second focused on children's access practices to the Internet and new technologies. The questions used in the present questionnaire were derived from the findings of these studies. The interview themes corresponded to those of the questionnaire, namely:

A. Ways in which children use the Internet
B. Methods and extent of parental control
C. School Performance

Before conducting the main research, a pilot study was carried out (Panagiotakopoulos & Sarris, 2015). More specifically, three parents were asked to answer the interview questions in order to identify any potential ambiguities in their wording. More specifically, those three parents, who had children attending elementary school and met the criteria to participate in the present study, were accessible to the researcher. Based on their feedback and comments, the interview guide was then revised and finalized for use in the present research.

3 Results

This section presents the findings from the analysis of the data collected through the interviews.

3.1 Thematic Axis 1

Question 1: “Are you aware of your children's online activities? If so, to what extent? (Do you know everything in detail, or do you have a general idea?)” More specifically, six out of the eight parents stated that they were quite well informed about what their children do on the Internet. A representative response was given by one mother: “They are quite young, so they

need supervision and guidance when it comes to these kinds of activities. They are also more accepting of this kind of ‘monitoring’ compared to older children who are in adolescence. So, I know in detail what they are doing.” Another mother said: “Yes, I know everything in detail. During the times when the child uses the Internet, either I or his father is always present, so we have a complete picture.” There were also two participants who stated that they were aware of their children’s Internet activities, but not in detail. Indicative responses included: “I believe I know enough about how my children use the Internet, but I’m not present all the time, so I only get an idea from what they tell me. I don’t check the browser history,” and “I have a general idea.” In conclusion, most parents were largely aware of how their children use the Internet.

Question 2: “Where does your child use the Internet? (home, school, relatives’ or friends’ houses)”. Regarding the place where children use the Internet, it was clear from all the participants that this place was the home. To be more specific, three of them clearly stated that their child used the Internet at school while two of them said that their child used it when he/she was at relatives’ or friends’ houses. From the statements, the conclusion that emerged was that home is the most common place for children to use the Internet.

Question 3: “If your child uses the Internet at home, in which space does this happen? (In their own room? In a room where others are present?)” Only one out of the eight parents stated that their children used the Internet exclusively in their own room. The remaining seven reported that the Internet was mainly used in shared spaces where others are present, such as the living room. However, four of these seven also mentioned that their children sometimes used it in their room. One interviewee characteristically stated: “Last year during online learning, they mostly used the Internet in their rooms with the door closed so they wouldn’t disturb each other, since they had classes at the same time. Of course, in this way, there were quite a few times when YouTube was on along with Webex...” Based on the responses, children primarily used the Internet in shared spaces where others are present, and to a lesser extent in their own rooms.

Question 4: “What device does your child use to access the Internet? (desktop or laptop computer, tablet, gaming console)” Regarding the devices children use to browse the Internet, answers showed variety, as children could utilize a combination of devices to browse. Most frequently (five responses), parents reported that their children used a laptop and a tablet. Four responses included mobile phones as a means of browsing, while desktop computers and gaming consoles were each mentioned only once. The conclusion drawn from the above responses is that laptops and tablets are the most frequently used means of Internet access for children.

Question 5: “When your child uses the Internet, do you monitor their online activity? For example, the friends/contacts they have on social media or in games, the messages they send, the websites they visit, the apps installed on their device?” The overwhelming majority of parents (seven out of eight) who participated in the study reported that they monitored their child’s online activities. One indicative response was: “Yes, I do monitor my child’s Internet use, but discreetly. I don’t put my child in an uncomfortable position, but I need to know what they are doing. I control the websites which they visit as well as the applications they have installed. I also check the type of games they play on the Internet and the contacts through them.” Only one participant stated that she did not monitor her child’s Internet activity. Specifically, she said: “I rarely check the websites they visit or what games they play online. I can’t really monitor their online activity due to both lack of time and knowledge. I generally know that they play games with some acquaintances but as far as the websites they visit are concerned, I have never checked their browser history.” The conclusion that emerged was that parents monitor their children’s Internet usage.

Question 6: “Do you use any other method to monitor your child’s online activity? (e.g., software, filters, website blocking, time limits)” Among the participants in the study, only two used technical means such as software and filters to monitor their child’s online activity. The remaining six did not use any technical tools but instead ensured that they imposed time limits on their child’s Internet use. From the responses, it was observed that Internet use was primarily controlled through time restrictions rather than technical monitoring methods.

3.2 Thematic Axis 2

Question 1: “Have you talked to your child about the Internet (about risks, about desirable activities, about benefits)?” From the interview recordings, it emerged that six out of the eight parents had spoken to their children about the Internet. As one of the mothers mentioned: “... we’ve had several discussions about the Internet, its benefits and its dangers. We’ve also set rules regarding how much and in what way it should be used.” Another mother stated the following: “I have talked to my child about the dangers on the Internet, but also about its benefits.

They know exactly what to watch out for and that there are websites that can't be safeguarded. I emphasize that we should mainly use the Internet to gather information and knowledge, and not for playing games, but due to our daily routine, the children end up spending quite a few hours in front of the computer." Two of the participants in the study stated that they had not spoken to their children about the Internet. The conclusion that emerged from the responses is that parents talked to their children regarding the Internet.

Question 2: "Have you ever had to help your child with something related to the Internet? (for example, to find something, to avoid something or someone, to deal with a problem they faced, or something that bothered them)" Except for one of the interview participants, who had not needed to provide any help to her child regarding the Internet, the remaining seven had to assist their children, mainly with technical issues. One of the interviewed participants stated that she helped her child with connectivity problems or application crashes. Moreover, they had helped their children in searching for information for a lesson or regarding their interests. More specifically, a particularly concise response was the following: "I've had to help the children several times to find information on topics they are interested in or have been assigned for school projects. My help mainly focuses on teaching them how to distinguish which information is reliable and how to cross-check it across different websites. This is somewhat complicated at the age of 10 or 8. Other than that, nothing unpleasant has happened that has bothered them. I think things like that tend to happen more often on social media and involve slightly older children." From the responses, it emerged that parents helped their children with internet-related technical issues or when searching for information online. However, there was no need to help in cases where technical issues were not the problem.

Question 3: "Do you allow your children to engage in specific activities on the Internet, such as sending messages, downloading music or songs, watching video clips, having their own social media profiles, sharing personal information online, or sharing files (photos, videos, music)?" Regarding the above question, which refers to the activities that parents allow their children to engage in, only one of the interviewees stated that "Yes, I allow them to do all the above, but only with people they know well." Among the remaining participants, five stated that they allow their children to listen to videos and music via the Internet, while two said they do not allow any of the above activities. The conclusion drawn from the responses is that listening to videos and music is the most frequent form of Internet use that parents allow their children.

3.3 Thematic Axis 3

Question 1: "Does your child use the Internet for the assignments given by teachers?" Regarding the use of the Internet for completing assignments, seven out of eight parents stated that their children used it. A difference was noted in the extent of this use: five interviewees stated that their children used the Internet to a great extent, and two stated to a lesser extent. As is evident from the responses, children utilize the Internet for the school assignments given by teachers.

Question 2: "Do children complete the assignments successfully? (on time, quickly, are they legible, do they make sense) Do they need help to do their assignments? If yes, from whom (an adult parent or another relative, a friend, another teacher as part of educational support)?" Regarding the completion of assignments given to children by the school, all parents stated that their children complete them successfully and that they offer help when necessary.

In relation to questions about children's academic performance, the parents' responses indicate that the children perform well, and they study and write easily for their age. All parents stated that their children's academic performance is overall good.

4 Discussion and Conclusions

Specifically, regarding children's ways of using the Internet, watching videos and listening to music—observed in the present study—align with the findings of other studies, such as the literature review by [Rachmayani \(2017\)](#), and the research conducted by [Ofcom \(2019\)](#) and the Pew Research Center (2020). Regarding the low frequency of engagement with online video games observed in the present study, this contrasts with the findings of other studies such as that of [Rachmayani \(2017\)](#) and [Ofcom \(2019\)](#), which report an increasing trend (75% of children play online games), and [Holloway et al. \(2013\)](#).

Regarding browsing time, the results of the study align with the study by [Tsaliki et al. \(2012\)](#), where students spend up to one hour per day online in most cases. The relatively short time spent online may be attributed to parental control, which can impose restrictions, as noted by

[Livingstone et al. \(2011\)](#).

The exercise of parental control over Internet use, as found in this study, confirms the findings of earlier studies, such as that of [Lee and Chae \(2012\)](#), and [Tsaliki et al. \(2012\)](#). Moreover, parents stated that they are aware of how their children use the Internet—a finding also observed in the Pew Research Center (2020) study, whose results showed that parents are aware of what their child watches, plays or does online. Regarding the methods of parental control, it was observed that the most common method is monitoring the websites their children visit. However, this contrasts with the results of [Livingstone et al. \(2011\)](#), where a larger percentage used website filters, as well as with the studies of [Pavlovic and Kuzmanović \(2020\)](#) and Pew Research Center (2020), which reported that time restrictions are more frequently applied. The use of technical tools by parents to control their children's online activity is minimal, although parents are aware of their existence. This finding is consistent with the results of the [Ofcom \(2021\)](#) study. It is concluded that the methods of parental control consist of rules set by parents to monitor the content and quantity of online exposure, as described by [Shin and Huh \(2011\)](#), and fall under the strategies that [Warren \(2003\)](#) refers to as “parental mediation.” From the answers, it is evident that the more children use the Internet, the more negatively it affects their performance. This specific finding has been validated by earlier research ([Fairlie & Robinson, 2013](#); [Beuermann et al., 2015](#); [Vigdor, Ladd, & Martinez, 2014](#)). Parents' answers showed that the more parental control is exercised over Internet use, the better the children's performance—as confirmed by the study of [Malamud and Pop-Eleches \(2011\)](#), which found that setting rules for use has positive effects.

Interesting insights emerge from parents' views regarding their children's Internet use. It seems that parents are aware of the Internet's role and value in their children's daily lives, recognize that they cannot prevent their children from using it, and wish to establish limits on its use (determined through supervision) to ensure that its use is beneficial for their children—especially in the field of education. This attitude aligns with the recommendations of [Smahel et al. \(2012\)](#), who argue that parents must be actively involved in their children's online activities through support and discussion. In this way, a positive atmosphere will be created within the family, and the desired outcome of parental mediation in Internet use will be enhanced. In general, parents believe that Internet use should be controlled not only in terms of time spent but also in relation to the content with which children engage. According to some of the parents interviewed, controlling Internet use was more difficult during the pandemic—a finding that agrees with the results of the [Ofcom \(2021\)](#) study. The conclusions of the present research are presented according to each research question:

Research Question 1: In what ways and how frequently do primary school children use the Internet? Children's Internet use is shaped by a combination of factors: the place where they use it, the device they use, and the activities they perform online. Regarding children's online activities, the most common are watching videos and listening to music—likely because parents permit these. Other activities, such as social media use, profile creation, sharing personal information, and file exchange (*e.g.*, photos), are not allowed. In terms of frequency, Internet use is daily, ranging from 1 to 2 hours per day during the week, with increased usage on weekends.

Research Question 2: Do parents follow specific methods to control their children's Internet access? Two types of parental control were identified: direct parental control (stricter) and indirect parental control (based on children's supervision and guidance). Direct control involves monitoring the websites visited and using technical tools to block or filter content. Certain activities (*e.g.*, watching videos and listening to music) are allowed, while others (*e.g.*, social media use, file exchange, and revealing personal data) are not permitted. Under this type of control, messaging is also limited. Indirect control is more relaxed and centers on guidance: parents talk with their children about how to use the Internet safely, explain why certain websites are inappropriate, suggest best practices, and guide them on how to interact with others. At the same time, parents provide support, helping their children when they encounter disturbing content.

Research Question 3: Is there a correlation between parental control of Internet use and academic performance? Collected data indicate that parental control positively impacts academic performance. Both strict (direct) and indirect control methods are associated with timely and accurate completion of homework, better test scores, and improved reading and writing skills.

Research Question 4: Is there a correlation between the frequency of Internet use and academic performance? Based on the findings and parents' views, it is concluded that parents recognize the value of the Internet but want it to be used constructively, with controls over both time and type of use.

However, the present study presents some limitations. The most significant is that it relied on a questionnaire that had not been previously validated. Additionally, it would have been useful to assess the parents' ICT literacy, as higher ICT knowledge may enable more effective use of technical control tools.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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