

Internet Use among Young People in the Kingston Metropolitan Area
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The effective use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) is pivotal to Jamaica's thrust to develop a knowledge-based economy and achieve developed country status by 2030. Over recent years, the Government of Jamaica (GOJ) has invested in and expanded the ICT infrastructure in a bid to boost efficiency and production; improve telecommunications and increase access to global knowledge through the internet.

Internet penetration within the country has been on the increase reaching 39.4 per cent¹ in 2006. While data on internet penetration are available, information on how young people use the internet in Jamaica is sparse. In 2006 13.7 per cent² of households in Jamaica reported having a computer. Of those households having computers, 44.6 per cent reported having an internet connection. Households in the KMA have both a higher percentage computer ownership and internet connection.

Jamaica presently has a fairly large proportion of young people within the age group 10-29 (36.5%)³ who are expected to play a major role in the transformation of the country to developed status. Accepting that transformational capacity is enhanced by technological awareness and access, it is critical to assess to what extent the young people in Jamaica are aware of the diverse opportunities the internet can provide in making their lives and their country better.

This study is the pilot for a more comprehensive research on internet use among young people in Jamaica. It examines internet use among young people (age 10-29) in the KMA, in terms of location of access, purpose of use and canvasses the views of the youth on impacts of the internet on their lives now and in the future. The study will contribute to the scant body of literature on internet use among young people in Jamaica.

Methodology

The study targeted young people in the KMA within the age group 10-29 years old. The sample consisted of 130 persons drawn randomly from high schools, tertiary institutions and the general public. Five high schools and two tertiary institutions within the KMA were selected randomly. A total of 130 questionnaires were administered to persons. The sample was weighted⁴ to allow for analysis by gender, age group and level of education.

Limitations of the study

The study is a rapid assessment of internet use among young people in the KMA. The relatively small sample size may limit any conclusions made to the sample alone and not necessarily to the population under study. It was assumed that responses to the questions were reliable, adequate and appropriate.

¹ Economic and Social Survey Jamaica 2006

² Survey of Living Conditions Jamaica, 2004

³ Population Unit, Planning Institute of Jamaica

⁴ Probability Weight

Literature Review

Developed countries usually have higher levels of computer access and internet penetration and they usually boast knowledge-based societies. According to Gay, Mahon, Devonish & Alleyne, (2006), increased access to computers and the internet by the citizens of a country is an important indicator of technological progress. Additionally, Larsen and Vincent-Lancrin (2005) highlighted the importance of ICT (especially the internet) as a powerful tool for diffusing knowledge and information which is critical to the education process and fuelling the knowledge economy. The use of internet in academic institutions has allowed students to have wide and ready access to information and exploit instructional and reading material from diverse sources. Research has shown that students especially wanted to use the internet for information exchange or research (Mancinelli, 2005). Although the gender gap in internet use is closing differences still exist in how the sexes use the internet. There are also some differences in age and educational level in terms of internet use (Bautier, 2005).

Although the internet is used by people of all ages various studies on internet use across the globe have identified young people as the main users (Livingstone, Bober & Helsper, 2005; Rotterman, 2001). Therefore, given the critical role young people play in the development of their countries the internet can provide opportunities to improve education, skills and global competitiveness.

Findings & Discussion

Table 1 shows the demographic profile of the study. Majority of respondents were female (70%), persons 15-19; 20-24 (29%) and secondary school students (85.7%). The dependent variables location of access, frequency of use, purpose of use and impact of the internet were analysed by gender, age and educational level.

Table 1. Demographic Profile for the Sample

Independent Variables	N	Percentage
Gender		
Male	60	46.0
Female	70	54.0
Age		
10-14	22	16.8
15-19	38	28.8
20-24	38	29.1
25-29	33	25.3
Educational level		
Secondary	112	85.7
Tertiary	19	14.3

Notes: Table based on weighted ends

Most respondents (97%) within the sample were aware of the internet and were familiar with how to use it. However, while there was no difference in knowledge of the internet by gender, awareness about the internet seemed to increase with age. For example, within the sample, 82.4 per cent within the age group 10-14 reported knowing what the internet was but awareness increased to 100 per cent within the age groups 20-24 and 25-29.

Young people within the sample accessed the internet from multiple and varied locations. Sixty-seven percent of those sampled reported having internet at home. The most common location of access was home followed by school and friend's/relative's home respectively (Table 2). The access rate at home is supported by the percentage with internet within the home and is congruent with Rotterman (2001) who argued that internet use from schools, libraries and other locations may be constrained by time. Notwithstanding, computer ownership and internet penetration within the home is low when compared with developed countries such as the United States (69.7%)⁵, Canada (67.8%) and the United Kingdom (62.3%).

Table 2. Percentage responses by Location of Access by Gender, Age and Educational Level, 2007

Location of access	All	Gender		Age				Educational level	
		Male	Female	10-14	15-19	20-24	25-29	Secondary	Tertiary
Cybercafe	5.7	6.2	4.9	5.5	8.4	0.0	0.0	8.4	2.4
Home	29.7	26.5	35.0	50.2	26.1	33.8	28.6	30.8	28.3
School	23.3	25.3	19.8	5.5	22.2	33.8	28.6	18.1	30.3
Work	5.0	6.5	2.6	0.0	1.2	7.7	21.4	0.6	11.3
Library	14.5	14.1	15.1	16.7	18.6	2.6	7.1	17.7	10.8
Friend/relative's home	19.2	19.1	19.4	16.7	20.9	18.6	14.3	20.7	16.9
Other	2.6	2.3	3.2	5.5	2.7	3.5	0.0	3.8	0.0

The relatively high access rate at school may indicate the increased level of computer and internet penetration in schools. There was no notable difference in accessing the internet by gender which is in line with findings from Livingstone, Bober & Helsper (2005). However, a higher proportion of males within the sample accessed the internet at school while a higher proportion of females used the internet at home. In addition, a greater proportion of 10-14 year olds access the internet at home than the other age groups and persons 20-29 tend to equally favour school and home as the most common access points. Similarly, a greater proportion of tertiary students access the internet at school compared to secondary students. This could be due to the longer hours spent by tertiary students at school and also the greater availability of internet facilities in tertiary institutions. The lower rate of access via cyber or internet cafes may be related to the pay per hour cost compared to unlimited access at home for a specific fee. Another reason could also relate to the fact that cybercafés are still not popular in Jamaica. The presence of web-enabled cell phones in the marketplace has further diversified internet access. While 41 per cent of respondents accessed the internet by cell phone, males (29%) were more likely to use this method of access.

Gender and age seem to have a bearing on the frequency of internet use. A greater proportion of young men used the internet more frequently than females, a pattern observed by Livingstone, Bober & Helsper (2005) and Schumacher and Morahan-Martin (2001). Also frequent use increased with age (Figure 1). This could be due to greater demands for internet use with increasing age or relaxed parental controls as one gets older. While a number of research have shown that internet use decreases after age 40 years (Bautier, 2005), it should be noted that this internet study was limited to the mentioned age categories and it was not determined whether a similar pattern exists for persons over 29 years old. The frequency of internet use also increased with educational level as supported by Bautier (2005). For example, the proportion of tertiary students (25.5%) using the internet “many times a day” was almost three times that of secondary students (9%).

⁵ Internet penetration based on International Telecommunication Union statistics, 2006/7

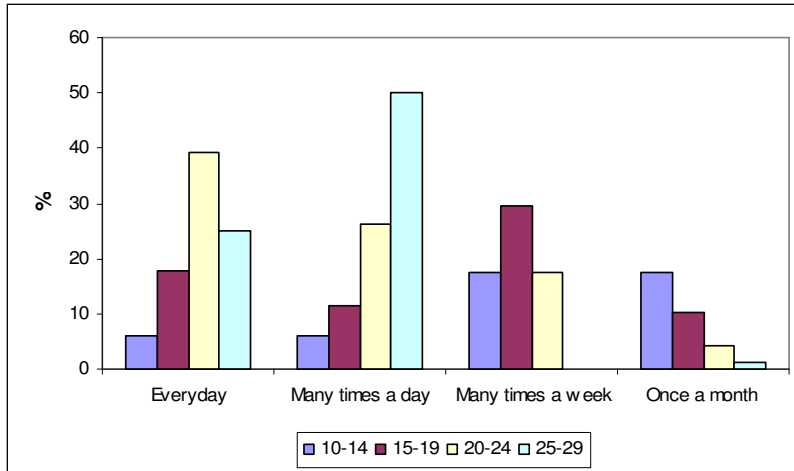


Figure 1. Frequency of Use by Age, 2007

Young people use the internet for a variety of reasons which include research, entertainment, email, visiting chat-rooms and using instant messenger. The dominant activities were research (26.7%), entertainment (24.5%) and e-mailing (20.5%). Visiting chat-rooms was the least favoured activity. While females were more likely to use the internet for research, there were no significant differences between the sexes for entertainment, emailing, visiting chat-rooms and utilizing instant messenger. The greater use of the internet by females for research is supported by Rotterman (2001). Both sexes reported using the internet to play games and download music and movies.

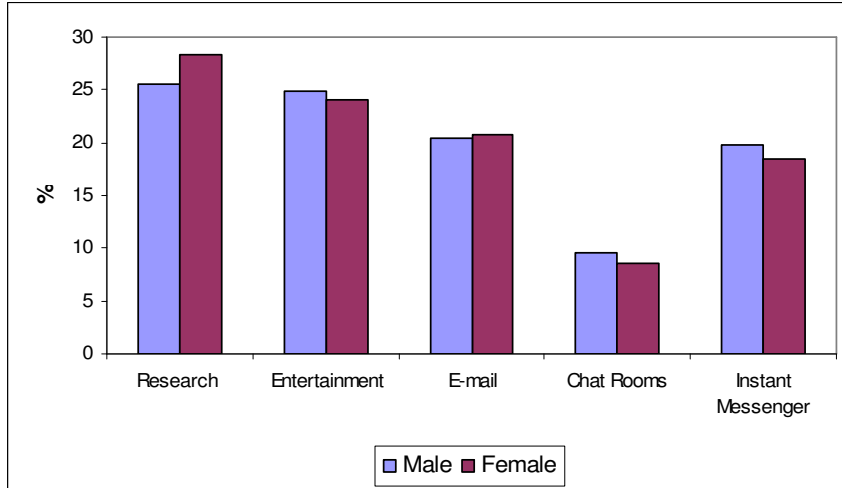


Figure 2. Percentage Use of the Internet by Gender, 2007

Although no relationship could be established for the purpose of internet use by age, it would appear that a higher proportion of the older users were more likely to use internet to participate in chat-rooms. This might be related to the fact that younger users are constrained (in using chat-rooms) by parental restrictions. The most popular websites visited were primarily search engines (34.2%) such as Yahoo and Google which is probably linked to the most common activity being research. Other popular sites fell into the categories of entertainment (24.7%), social networks (22.1%) and e-mail (19.0%).

All persons within the sample stated that the internet played a role in their lives now. Both sexes thought that having access to a variety of information and being able to communicate with friends and families were the major ways the internet was influencing their lives (Figure 3). While most persons said that the internet affected their lives now, approximately one third of respondents said that they did not see how it would affect their future.

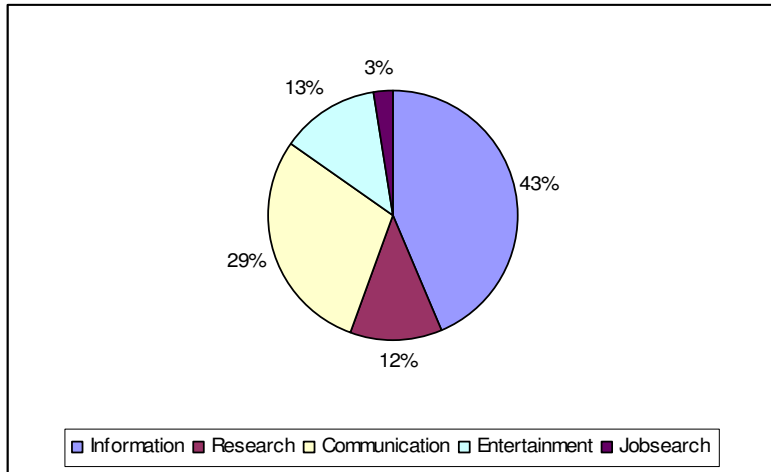


Figure 3. Influence of the Internet

Among the two-thirds of respondents who linked the internet to their future, access to information, providing educational and career opportunities and facilitating communication with friends and families were the major ways that respondents thought the internet would impact them (Table 3). Other ways cited include: providing entertainment; as an avenue for e-business; and meeting new people. A higher proportion of females than males identified access to information and educational opportunities as major impacts of the internet. Additionally, respondents within the 15-24 age group were more likely to think that the main future impact of the internet would be in the categories of information access and educational opportunities. A similar pattern was observed for secondary student. However, a higher proportion of tertiary students highlighted communication as a major impact.

Table 3. Percentage responses:How can the internet impact on future?

Impact of Internet on Future	All	Male	Female	Age				Educational level	
				10-14	15-19	20-24	25-29	Secondary	Tertiary
Access Information	30.7	28.0	34.0	20.2	34.8	32.4	22.2	30.2	30.5
Educational Opportunities	18.0	15.6	21.0	13.4	18.7	24.4	11.1	20.7	13.6
Career Opportunities	12.0	12.1	11.8	13.4	14.1	6.0	11.1	12.7	11.5
Communication with friends and family	11.1	14.7	6.6	6.5	7.9	14.1	22.2	7.3	16.2
Help with creativity and innovation	5.7	7.7	3.3	13.0	4.7	0.0	11.1	6.8	4.7
Waste time	5.3	5.1	5.6	13.4	6.0	2.8	0.0	8.9	1.2
E-business	4.8	6.5	2.7	0.0	1.5	11.6	11.1	0.9	9.6
Entertainment	4.8	5.0	4.6	0.0	3.7	5.8	11.1	3.0	7.2
Invasion of privacy	4.7	2.8	7.0	20.2	4.3	0.0	0.0	7.4	1.4
Meet new people	2.9	2.5	3.4	0.0	4.3	3.0	0.0	2.0	4.1

A relatively small proportion of respondents stated that use of the internet could lead to wasting time and a few had privacy concerns (mainly respondents below 20 years old and attending secondary school).

Access to information as the greatest future impact of the internet is consistent with findings of (Gay, Mahon, Devonish & Alleyne, 2006) and Mancinelli (2005). Through the internet persons can get diverse information which improves knowledge and progress in school. Persons also believed that the internet can provide access to educational opportunities such as searching for universities and scholarships abroad and e-learning or facilitating distance learning. Larsen & Vincent-Lancrin (2005) emphasized valuable role ICTs and the internet can play in expanding access to tertiary education at relatively high standards and cheaply, especially in developing countries. While some respondents proposed possible careers in information technology, others stated that the internet could afford an accessible and reliable source to search for jobs both locally and internationally.

Conclusion

Despite the small size and geographical restriction of the sample, the study is indicative of some general trends in internet use among young people as supported by a number of studies. Notwithstanding, it is expected that variations of findings would occur, especially by geographic location in a more thorough study. The internet was being used for a variety of purposes which include research, entertainment, e-mailing and visiting chat-rooms and males were more frequent users. While all respondents used the internet, of concern, is the one third who identified it as having no impact on their future.

Given the importance of accessing and using information in the development of societies it is important for Jamaica to continue the expansion of ICTs. One positive identified in this exploratory study is that young people are mainly using the internet for research, especially in doing school assignments and searching for school related information. Educational policies should support greater internet penetration in schools. This drive has already begun through the E-learning project. Young people should be educated on the various opportunities provided by the internet if they are to be critical players in the development of the country. Further research should include a comprehensive examination of internet access and use within the general population and identify gaps to bridge the digital divide.

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