

Internet Use among Filipino Public High School Students

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Introduction

The Philippine Government offers free elementary and secondary education in the country. A public elementary school is present in practically all *barangays* (villages), and a public high school, in all municipalities. The government runs the majority of secondary schools in the country. Due to rapid population growth and increasing cost of private education, it has been reported that, since 1997, private school enrolment in elementary and high school has been declining, while that in public schools has been increasing.

About 40% of the country's public high schools have computers that have potential for Internet connectivity. However, only 4% of these schools give students access to and training on the use of the Internet. To assist the government in connecting schools to the Internet, the Gearing up Internet Literacy and Access for Students (GILAS) Program, a private sector led initiative headed by the Ayala Foundation, was launched in 2006 with the aim of connecting 1,000 schools to the Internet per year until 2010, and provide teachers and students training on ICT. The Program is a response to the recognition that the quality of public education in the Philippines has been deteriorating and that public school graduates are inadequately prepared for further education and the competitiveness of the labor market.

Much has been said about the potential benefits of the Internet, primarily with respect to its being a medium of social change. Sociologists have given focus to five domains that are affected by the Internet: 1) inequality or the "digital divide", 2) community and social capital, 3) political participation, 4) organization and other economic institutions, and 5) cultural participation and cultural diversity.

In the developing countries, however, little is known about the nature, extent and consequences of Internet use, particularly among the youth and the less affluent sectors of society. No information thus far has been obtained with respect to Internet access, and the gains and costs of Internet use among Filipino adolescents. Given that these youths are at the crossroad of key life transitions, it should be worthwhile knowing whether the Internet has significant contributions to make for these youths' transitions.

It is therefore the aim of this study to explore the nature, purpose and consequences of Internet use among public high school students in the Philippines. Further, the study will examine associations of Internet use in relation to knowledge, attitudes and practices regarding major life transitions such as enrolment in college, entry into the labor force, and marriage.

Data and Methods

The study uses qualitative and quantitative data from the evaluation study of the GILAS (Gearing up Internet Literacy and Access for Students) Program. The qualitative component consists of eight Focus Group Discussions—four FGDs for male students and four FGDs for female students—from four selected public high schools in the country. The schools were chosen from among GILAS-participating schools dispersed geographically and across the urban-rural spectrum. One school in northern Philippines was chosen to represent the more urbanized sector of the country; two schools in southern Philippines represent peri-urban and rural sectors; while the fourth school in the Visayas represents the most rural/remote schools in the country. A total of about 70 students participated in the FGDs, the majority of whom were 15 years of age.

Quantitative data are taken from self-administered questionnaires given to over 11,000 third year high school students in about 120 GILAS-participating public high schools in the country. Being a recipient of the GILAS Program is an eligibility criterion for the study to guarantee the school's Internet connectivity (though not necessarily universal student use) and the inclusion of ICT training in the curriculum. In schools with multiple sections in third year high school, one section was selected at random for the study. The student questionnaire contains information on individual, household/family and socioeconomic characteristics; educational and employment history and aspirations; life style and life skills. Imbedded in the latter, is information on attitudes and practices relating to life transitions for adolescents. Descriptive statistics will be used to obtain a profile of Internet users versus non-users, and multivariate analysis will be applied to explore associations between Internet use and pertinent life transitions, as modified by potential confounders.

Preliminary/Expected Findings

A. Qualitative Analysis

The salient findings culled from the FGDs can be summarized as follows:

- 1) The students make use of the Internet for their studies, i.e., to help with their assignments and research. They also use it as a major source of information.

“With the Internet, we are not left ignorant about events and current issues. We prefer to do research using the Internet because it is entertaining and we are enticed to read more because of the graphics. It is tiring for us to read just black and white such as those found in the books. There are also some books, such as the Social Studies textbook used by the sophomore students, which has been found to have erroneous information. Even the Social Studies book we are using now also has some errors. Our teacher also admitted this to us.” –female, 15 years old, Cugman National High School

“With the Internet, we don’t need to open so many books when we do our research work. It helps us make our school projects faster.” –male, 18 years old, Calaanan National High School

- 2) Although most schools allow their students to use the school computers and the Internet, the limited time of use (within school hours) and crowding in the schools make Internet Cafés a more attractive and more frequented place for Internet access among students. The only disadvantage of the Internet Café is the cost of use (around 60 cents per hour), which the students can hardly afford. Only a small fraction of students have computers with Internet connection at home.

“We only have 10 computers in the laboratory that is why only 10 students can be accommodated at a time. The senior students alone are already 60 in a section” –female, 15 years old, Cugman National High School

“I start to panic whenever there is research work because I can only afford the use of the Internet (in the Internet Café) for an hour.” –male, 15 years old, Cugman National High School

“I am not in favor of using the Internet at home because it can cause our electric bill to rise. It is also addictive to be using the Internet at home because there is no control since it is always available compared to using in the Internet café where we are limited by the time we are paying.” –male, 15 years old, Calaanan National High School

- 3) In general, boys and girls use the Internet for different reasons. Boys play online games and watch pornography, while girls prefer to listen to music and engage in social networking. It is perceived that online games are oftentimes addictive and can be detrimental to their studies; while social networking is generally harmless but can also lead to adverse consequences for women, such as sexual exploitation by foreign chat-mates, and searching for online romantic relationships or marriage partners.

“Some schoolboys tend to use the online games and engage in betting with each other. Some of them devote much of their time building their game characters and then sell it to interested gamers.” –female, 16 years old, Cugman NHS

“The Internet café is not good for children because they can see women chatting with foreigners and posing seductively in the camera. It is not a good exposure for them” –female, 15 years old, Cugman NHS

- 4) The students report addiction as the main disadvantage of Internet use. This then causes problems with their studies and relationship with their parents. There are also those who report health problems (eye strain) as a negative consequence of prolonged Internet use.

“I was addicted to the Internet. I limited my purchase of cell phone load so that I can save money to pay for the Internet. I often resorted to telling lies to

my parents, asking for bloated amounts for our school projects. Nowadays, I'm already satiated with the Internet; my eyes get sore and I have blurred vision" –female, 15 years old, Cugman NHS

"They used to stand straight but due to using the computer or Internet too often, they now slouch." –female, 15 years old, Calaanan NHS

- 5) Although students are aware of some negative effects of Internet use, they are largely unaware of other ethical concerns such as plagiarism and piracy. Many claim that they print entire pages directly from the Internet, photocopy this for their classmates, and submit it as their assignment. Downloading of files and videos are done indiscriminately. Teachers have not included ethical guidelines in the use of the Internet in their classes.

B. Quantitative Analysis

Over 11,000 students participated in the GILAS evaluation study; 44% of them are males and 56%, females. On the average, the boys were 15 years of age, while the girls were 14 years old.

About 80% of the sample students ever-used a computer, but only two-thirds of them have used the Internet. About 12% of students own a computer, but less than half of these students (43%) have Internet connection in their home computers. There are no gender differences with respect to having used a computer, or having accessed the Internet. There are, however, geographical differences, with those who are nearer the National Capital Region (in Luzon) having more access to the computer and the Internet than those farthest from it (in Mindanao).

Bivariate analysis has shown that Internet use among third year public high school students is positively associated with the intent to go to college, the postponement of entry into the labor force; and preference for marriage after completion of studies. This association holds for both male and female students. From a negative standpoint, the use of the Internet is likewise shown to be positively associated with risk taking behaviors, such as smoking among girls (but not boys) and alcohol consumption by both boys and girls. Ongoing analysis will employ multivariate techniques to explore modifying effects of possible confounders (individual, family and community factors) on these relationships. The expectation however is that these associations will persist, and that the enabling personal and social benefits of the Internet can be demonstrated among the less advantaged group of students now enrolled in public schools. It is also expected that there are costs to the use of this technology. Lessons for program and policy will therefore be underscored to help avert or mitigate these costs and enhance the benefits.