The mobile Internet: Access, use, opportunities and divides among European children

# Details

## Year

2016

## DOI

10.1177/1461444814567986

## Issued

2016

## Language

English

## Volume

18

## Issue

8

## Start Page

## End Page

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## Type

Journal article

## Journal

New Media Society

## Publisher

SAGE Publications

## Topics

* Internet usage, practices and engagement
* Access, inequalities and vulnerabilities
* Social mediation

## Sample

Children aged 9–16 years in Belgium, Denmark, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, Romania and the United
Kingdom (approximately 500 children per country).

# Abstract

Based on data collected through the Net Children Go Mobile survey of approximately 3500 respondents aged 9–16 years in seven European countries (Belgium, Denmark, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, Romania and the United Kingdom), this article examines the diffusion of smartphones among children and contributes to existing research on mobile digital divides by investigating what influences the adoption of smartphones among children and whether going online from a smartphone is associated with specific usage patterns, thus bridging or widening usage gaps. The findings suggest the resilience of digital inequalities among children, showing how social inequalities intersect with divides in access and result in disparities in online activities, with children who benefit from a greater autonomy of use and a longer online experience also reaching the top of the ladder of opportunities.

# Outcome

"Concerning ownership, the most influential factor explaining variations in the adoption
of smartphones is whether parents themselves use a smartphone or a tablet to go
online. There are also large variations by country, age and children’s experience with the
Internet, while gender and parents’ socio-economic status show little or no effect on
smartphone ownership. These findings have some implications for the access digital
divide among children. First, we can conclude that socio-economic background does not
seem to have a simple and direct effect on children’s adoption of smartphones. Rather, it
is mediated by the domestication of smart mobile devices, both at a family level and at a
country level. In households and countries with a higher domestication of the mobile
Internet, smartphones are also more diffused among children. Second, since children
who start to use the Internet later are less likely to own a smartphone, we can conclude
that smartphones do not provide alternative access to the Internet for children who have
not had any opportunity to go online regularly before.
[...] Second, we investigated how daily use of smartphones varies by age, gender, country,
parental education, parental ownership and use of mobile devices, child’s Internet experience
and ownership of smartphones. If daily use is mainly predicted by ownership, we
observed a significant interaction of age and country, whereby younger children in general,
and younger children in Belgium, Ireland and Romania more specifically, are less
likely to use a smartphone to go online on a daily basis.
[...] We found that the number of online activities varies by age, gender and Internet experience: older children, boys and those who have started to use the Internet at a younger age are more likely to engage in a wider range of online activities. Country of residence also matters, while a household’s
socio-economic status or parents’ ownership and use of mobile devices is not influential.
However, the greatest variation in the number of online activities is explained by daily
use of smartphones: as observed among adults (Hargittai and Hinnant, 2008), users who
benefit from more autonomous access to the Internet engage in a wider range of online
activities. Regarding the type of activities children undertake, beyond persisting differences
by age, gender and child’s Internet experience, we found that smartphone use is
associated with a consistent increase in social networking and entertainment activities
but is not correlated with use of the Internet for schoolwork.
[...] some variations across countries are noteworthy. In terms of access
to smartphones, children in Romania, Portugal and Belgium are generally less likely to
own a smartphone, but Portuguese children who own a smartphone are the most likely to
use it daily to go online, together with Italian children, who, at the same time, are the
least likely to own a smartphone if they start using the Internet late" (Mascheroni Olafsson, 2016, pp. 1675-1676).