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Who does what and why in the household?

Insights into factors influencing children's and adolescents' participation in household longitudinal surveys

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Non-technical summary

This study aimed to answer the following research question: in households that take part in Understanding Society, who makes children's and teenagers' participation happen, and why does it sometimes break down?

We interviewed 11 families with young people aged 10–16 and one parent/carer. The findings show that youth participation is usually a household process, not a private decision by the young person. Parents (often mothers) typically receive the letters, start the process, remind children, and sort out practicalities like returning booklets. Parents also sometimes limit participation if questions feel too sensitive or if they have safeguarding concerns.

Young people's experience depends heavily on how the survey is delivered. Paper feels "tangible" and helps them see progress; online is convenient and private, but only when the system works smoothly. Problems such as delayed youth materials, lost post, or failed online access create friction.

Gift cards help, but their impact is often shaped by parents, and some families find vouchers awkward to spend. Trust in the study underpins everything: many families take it for granted, but they also protect privacy by skipping questions they dislike.

The study suggests practical improvements: better support for the move from youth to adult participation, more reliable youth access (including direct links where appropriate), clearer progress indicators online, and more flexible incentives.

Who does what and why in the household? Insights into factors influencing children's and adolescents' participation in household longitudinal surveys

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Abstract:

Household longitudinal surveys increasingly depend on children's and adolescents' continued cooperation, yet evidence on what sustains youth participation is limited. This study explores how participation in Understanding Society's youth self-completion survey is initiated, organised, and maintained in households. Semi-structured remote interviews with 11 households (young people aged 10–16 and one parent/carer) were analysed thematically using social exchange and leverage-saliency lenses. Participation is typically household-mediated, with parents acting as facilitators and gatekeepers. Engagement is sustained through routine and study legitimacy but becomes fragile during transitions. Implications include improving youth access, digital usability, incentive delivery, and trust-signalling at key handover points.

Keywords: youth survey participation, survey response, household survey, longitudinal survey

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1. Introduction

While there is a substantial literature on the drivers of adult survey participation, far less is known about how children and teenagers decide to take part, and evidence is especially limited for household longitudinal surveys (Murray & Xie, 2024). Due to a scarcity of child-focused methodological research, it is often assumed that young people's motivations and perceptions mirror those of adults. These and similar assumptions about how children perceive and experience the world, including research participation, are risky (Greene & Hill, 2005; Prout & James, 2015). Children's participation in research is shaped by different constraints and dependencies, including parental permission, household routines, age-appropriate materials, and heightened sensitivity to privacy and safeguarding (Punch, 2002; Gross-Manos, Kosher & Ben-Arieh, 2021).

Household longitudinal surveys offer a distinctive opportunity to collect rich data from early life and to examine how health, development, and well-being shape outcomes through adolescence and into adulthood. They also enable analysis across family networks (for example, between siblings and across generations) and across cohorts, allowing researchers to study change over time rather than rely on single snapshots. Yet these analytical benefits depend on sustained cooperation, and retaining younger respondents remains a persistent challenge (Burton, 2024; James 2024; Murray & Xie, 2024; Seibold-Simpson & Morrison-Beedy, 2010). Existing research suggests that children's and adolescents' survey participation is influenced not only by individual willingness but by household dynamics, the lived experience of completing the survey (including burden and mode fit), incentive arrangements, and trust in the study and its data practices (Scott, 2008; Alderson & Morrow, 2011).

This paper draws on qualitative interviews with young people aged 10–16 and their parents who take part in a long-running UK Household Longitudinal Study, Understanding Society. It examines how youth participation is initiated, experienced, negotiated, and sustained within households, and how parents and young people make sense of the request to participate over time. The analysis focuses on four connected influences that emerged from both the literature and the interview data: household ecology and parental gatekeeping; participation experience (burden and mode usability); incentives; and trust and legitimacy. A

central argument is that these influences are not independent for younger respondents. In practice, youth participation is closely tied to parents' own relationship with the study and to the household systems that make participation possible year after year.

To interpret these processes, the paper is anchored in two complementary perspectives from survey methodology: social exchange theory and leverage–saliency theory. Social exchange theory highlights participation as an ongoing interaction in which households weigh the practical and psychological costs of taking part against both tangible and intangible benefits, including feeling respected, contributing to a valued purpose, and sustaining a positive relationship with the study. Leverage–saliency theory adds that different features of the survey request (such as the sponsor, topic, incentive, or mode) carry different weights for different people, and that their influence depends on how salient they become at the point of decision. This is particularly relevant in household surveys involving children, where key "levers" are often filtered through parents, and where participation is shaped by family routines and negotiations rather than by an individual choice alone.

2. Methodology

The study employed a qualitative interview design to explore children's and adolescents' experiences of participating in the UK Household Longitudinal Survey (Understanding Society), alongside parental perspectives. A qualitative approach was selected to capture household processes, meanings, and negotiations that underpin participation but are difficult to observe in survey data.

The sample comprised 11 households, each including a child or young person aged 10–16 years who had participated in the youth self-completion component of the survey, and at least one parent or carer. In all but one cases interviews were conducted jointly with children and parents. In one case, the parent chose to remain in another room while the child was interviewed.

Participants were recruited from households already taking part in the longitudinal study. Some parents were original Understanding Society sample members recruited in 2009, while others joined later through sample boosts. Two parents also reported having participated in the study's predecessor, the British Household Panel Survey,

which started in 1991. The purposive sampling strategy aimed to capture variation in children's ages, the length of households' engagement with the study, and the UK region.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using a topic guide covering experiences of participation, motivations and barriers, household roles, survey burden and mode, incentives, and trust and communication. Interviews were conducted remotely over Zoom between May and September 2025, audio-recorded with consent, and typically lasted between 20 and 45 minutes. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and anonymised. Analysis followed a thematic approach. An initial coding framework was developed deductively from the topic guide and relevant literature, and refined inductively through close reading of transcripts.

Analysis focused on identifying patterns across households, contrasts between child and parent perspectives, and interactions between household dynamics and survey design features. Findings are reported under four analytic themes that align with the literature. Illustrative quotations are attributed using anonymised interview identifiers (e.g. I3, Child; I1, Parent).

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Essex Ethics Committee. Given the involvement of minors, a two-stage consent process was used: parents or carers provided the initial informed consent, and children provided age-appropriate assent. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed that they could decline to answer questions or withdraw at any point. As a token of appreciation for their time, the children were sent a £15 Love2Shop gift card after the interview. Interviews were conducted using age-appropriate language, and topics were approached cautiously and sensitively. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured, with personal identifiers removed from transcripts and reporting. Data were stored securely and accessed only by the researcher/interviewer.

Background to Understanding Society

Understanding Society is a longitudinal household study that began in 2009, with annual data collection. In selected households, all adults aged 16+ are invited to complete an adult interview (online, face-to-face, or by telephone), and young people aged 10–15 are invited to complete a self-completion youth questionnaire.

This has historically been a paper booklet; an online youth survey option was introduced from 2024 (Wave 16). A small proportion of the sample also has a longer participation history through the British Household Panel Survey, which began in 1991 and was incorporated into Understanding Society in 2010.

As a household study, fieldwork begins with an enumeration grid to confirm who is currently living in the household. Once the household is enumerated, individual interviews become available and can be completed independently by eligible household members. In addition, one person in the household completes a household questionnaire.

In the online-first design, once the responsible adult has completed their own interview, a paper youth booklet is sent to the household for the young person (aged 10–15) to complete and return in a pre-paid envelope. The booklet cover letter is addressed to the parent. In interviewer-administered cases, the interviewer can provide the booklet for the young person to complete while parents complete their interview and collect it once the visit is finished.

Incentives are provided to recognise participants' time. Adults receive a £30 Love2Shop gift card, and young people receive a £15 gift card. The adult incentive is sent with the advance letter (unconditionally) to those who completed an interview in the previous wave and provided after the interview (conditionally) to those who did not respond in the previous year. The youth incentive is sent with the booklet in all cases (unconditionally). Adults in the online-first group can also receive an early-bird bonus (£10) if they complete the interview online within the first five weeks of fieldwork, before the interviewer follow-up begins.

3. Theoretical framework and literature review: factors influencing youth participation in surveys

3.1. Social Exchange and Leverage-Saliency Theories of Survey Participation

In a long-standing household survey context such as Understanding Society it is important to acknowledge that sample members' motivation to take part in the study repeatedly, and introduce new household members to it, is first and foremost

grounded in their relationship with the study and their commitment to it rather than other factors usually discussed in survey methods literature such as monetary reward, survey design features or topic. This paper, therefore, argues that a decision to take part in a household panel survey is above all social. In line with this argument, the discussion below is embedded in the framework of social exchange theory and leverage-saliency theory, both of which are useful in understanding the empirical findings that follow.

Social exchange theory is widely used in survey research to explain why people do (or do not) participate. The central idea is that agreeing to participate reflects an internal weighing of what the task will require against what it will offer. Importantly, those "returns" are not limited to money. Many respondents respond to social and psychological payoffs, such as feeling acknowledged, supporting a cause they see as worthwhile, meeting perceived expectations, or maintaining a positive sense of self. Participation, then, is shaped not only by the incentive on offer but by how the study positions itself and relates to the person being asked.

Reciprocity is a key part of this logic. If the invitation and materials communicate respect, fairness, and consideration, completing the survey can feel like an appropriate response to that treatment. This helps explain why many practical design choices are effective. Dillman's Total Design Method (1978), for instance, showed that small features can add up by lowering the "hassle" and increasing the sense that the respondent's effort is valued, such as simplifying return procedures (e.g., including postage), using personalised communication, and producing clear, user-friendly materials. Prepaid incentives can also contribute in this way, because they can be experienced as an upfront gesture of goodwill rather than as payment contingent on completion.

At the same time, survey researchers caution against treating social exchange as a complete explanation for response and nonresponse. Robert M. Groves and colleagues note that other influences may also shape decisions in ways not fully captured by a simple cost–benefit or reciprocity account. Leverage-Saliency Theory is another useful framework in this discussion (Groves, Singer & Corning, 2000). It adds that people do not weigh survey features uniformly. Elements such as the topic, sponsor, incentive, and presentation can matter a great deal for some respondents

and very little for others. The model is often explained using a balance-scale metaphor: particular features can "tip" the decision towards participation if they are both noticeable (salient) and evaluated positively by the individual. Because what counts as persuasive differs between people, the same design feature can increase participation in one group while having little effect (or even a negative effect) in another.

This framing is particularly relevant for Understanding Society, where young people's participation sits within a household design, and invitations are typically routed through the responsible adult. For young people, therefore, the balance between costs and benefits or salience and leverage of participation is rarely calculated by the child alone. Instead, it is often, if not always, negotiated within the family and strongly shaped by parental action and reassurance.

3.2. What do we know about children's survey participation?

We know that children's participation in survey research is not simply a matter of whether a young person is "willing" to take part. Evidence across household panels, birth cohorts, and cross-sectional studies shows that participation is shaped by a set of interacting conditions, which includes parental influence in addition to things such as whether taking part feels worthwhile, manageable, and safe. These conditions can broadly be organised around four core influences: parental role, the experience of participation, incentives, and trust.

Parental role: gatekeeping, facilitation, and the negotiation of autonomy

Parents play a central role because they often control both access and practical conditions for children's participation. Where parental consent is required, parents are structural gatekeepers: they decide whether the child can be approached, what information is acceptable, and whether participation feels appropriate. Parents also act as facilitators by arranging the time and space for completion, reminding children, helping manage competing commitments, and sometimes supporting the completion process itself. In household longitudinal surveys, this facilitation role becomes especially important because children's participation is embedded in wider household routines and fieldwork. Evidence from Understanding Society indicates that young people's response is shaped by whether participation is made salient in

the household, whether families have capacity at the time, and whether parents perceive the study as legitimate and manageable (Parutis, 2023).

Research on consent procedures makes the gatekeeping role especially visible (e.g. Leakey et al., 2004). Studies repeatedly show that active parental consent requirements, such as needing to return a form, can reduce youth participation and affect representativeness, often with stronger impacts on disadvantaged groups (Esbensen et al., 1996; Pokorny et al., 2001; Liu et al., 2017). This pattern suggests that participation is partly shaped by household resources such as time, organisation, literacy, and stability, rather than by young people's preferences alone. At the same time, engagement research indicates that decision-making changes with age, but not in a simple way. Families often expect adolescents to have more say, yet within the same age range, autonomy varies widely and depends on parental assessments of maturity and household norms (Ipsos MORI, 2013). Many young people also prefer to involve parents even when more independence is available, implying that participation decisions often require shared discussion, adequate information, and reassurance for both child and parent (Ipsos MORI, 2013). How the leverage shifts and changes over time is very relevant for Understanding Society, which is built on the sample members' longitudinal participation, which in the case of children includes the period of multiple transitions: childhood-adolescence-young and later adulthood.

Participation experience: burden, clarity, and mode fit

The second major influence is the experience of taking part, because survey experience determines the practical "cost" of participation. People, including children, are less likely to start or continue if the questionnaire feels long, repetitive, confusing, or emotionally uncomfortable, or if the mode of completion introduces friction (Dillman, Smyth & Christian, 2014; Parutis, 2023). This matters particularly for longitudinal surveys, where effort and inconvenience are not one-off costs but recur over time.

Evidence consistently points to three aspects of experience that affect youth participation. First, the burden and clarity of survey questions, as well as participant materials, matter. As children move into adolescence, questionnaires may become

longer and cover more abstract or sensitive topics, increasing cognitive and emotional demands. Engagement research suggests that if questions or participant materials do not feel age-appropriate or easy to understand (or if the task feels too effortful), even previously cooperative families may disengage (Franke et al., 2022). This supports the view that instruments and communication need demonstrated developmental sensitivity rather than assuming stable comprehension and tolerance across adolescence (Kantar Public, 2023; Park, Calderwood & Wong, 2019). Second, context matters: young people may experience survey completion at home as "homework" competing with leisure, and some prefer completing surveys in settings (such as school) where the task is clearly bounded and socially normalised (Jong et al., 2023). Third, mode fit matters. Digital modes can reduce some logistical barriers but can also introduce new ones, such as access, logins, device compatibility, or a sense that the task is impersonal. Evidence cited in work on children and teenagers suggests that in some cases, e.g. with sensitive questions, online approaches can yield a higher response than interviewer-supported methods, although in other cases interviewers can be very effective in actively motivating, guiding, and reducing uncertainty (Flanagan et al., 2015; Kantar Public, 2023). Broader retention research reinforces a practical conclusion that strategies that reduce barriers and friction tend to be more effective than those that increase engagement (Teague et al., 2018).

Incentives: increasing salience, supporting retention, but limited on their own

Incentives are a third influence, and evidence generally suggests they help by increasing the perceived benefits of participation and signalling appreciation (Singer & Ye, 2013; Rudy et al., 1994). In longitudinal studies, incentives (especially unconditional ones) can support response and retention across repeated waves, and may become more important as young people experience participation as more effortful during adolescence (Young et al., 2020). However, incentives tend to work best when the experience is already acceptable, and the study feels credible. They rarely compensate for high burden, poor usability, or low trust, and their impact depends on whether the format is practical and meaningful for young people (Parutis, 2023). Incentives may also operate indirectly by increasing parental consent, bringing in families who might otherwise decline (Hussemann, Mortimer

& Zhang, 2016; Mann, Lynn & Peterson, 2008). This reinforces the point that, in many designs, incentives shape a household decision rather than only an individual choice. It also raises ethical concerns about undue influence, particularly for younger participants (Murray & Xie, 2024).

Trust: legitimacy, safeguarding, and confidence in data use

Trust is often the foundation that determines whether the other influences matter at all. Trust includes confidence in the study sponsor, data protection, confidentiality, safeguarding, ethical oversight, and the basic legitimacy of being asked to take part. Where trust is high, families may tolerate higher burden, more sensitive topics, or repeated requests because participation feels safe and worthwhile (e.g. Lothen-Kline, Howard, Hamburger, et al., 2003). Where trust is low, even small inconveniences can feel unjustified, and refusal becomes more likely.

Across the literature, trust is strengthened by clear explanations of purpose and how findings will be used, transparent communication about confidentiality and data handling, consistent, respectful treatment, and personalised and relevant feedback that demonstrates value and impact (Parutis, 2023; Ipsos MORI, 2013; Cleary & Balmer, 2015). For some parents, legitimacy comes from recognising a reputable organisation; for others, it relies on practical reassurance, such as safeguarding cues and confidence that contact and materials are appropriate (Ipsos MORI, 2013; Franke et al., 2022). Trust also shapes preferences for communication pathways. Parents may accept more direct contact with older adolescents while still wanting oversight of what is being sent, suggesting that transparency can support trust without removing young people's agency (Wallace et al., 2013). In cross-sectional adolescent surveys, trust and legitimacy are especially decisive at the consent stage, and active consent procedures can amplify distrust-related drop-off and associated bias (Esbensen et al., 1996; Liu et al., 2017). In longitudinal surveys, trust develops over time through a sustained, reciprocal relationship with the study and research team (Franke et al, 2022; Murrey & Xie, 2024).

Implications for Understanding Society

Bringing these strands together, the literature suggests that youth participation should be understood as a household process shaped by four connected influences.

Parents determine access and provide practical support; participation experience determines whether the task feels manageable; incentives can increase salience and recognition but work best alongside good design; and trust underpins both consent and sustained cooperation. This synthesis aligns closely with evidence from Understanding Society, which highlights the importance of parental facilitation, household salience, competing family demands, perceived effort and usability, and institutional trust in shaping young people's survey response (Parutis, 2023). For research on youth participation, the key analytical implication is that "nonresponse" is often not an individual refusal, but the outcome of a household-level negotiation shaped by time, capacity, reassurance, and confidence in the study.

Together, the evidence suggests that household studies involving children should look beyond a simple "why did the child refuse/agree?" framework and instead consider the household decision-making context. Grounded in a commitment to "listen" to the voices of child and parent participants (Calderwood et al., 2015), the interview analysis below therefore asks how participation decisions were made within the household; who carried the practical work of children's participation; which aspects of burden or mode created friction for children and parents; what cues of legitimacy mattered; and how autonomy was negotiated within the family.

4. Findings

4.1. Parents as facilitators and gatekeepers

Across households, participation in the youth component of the longitudinal survey was embedded within family routines and was rarely an individualised decision by the teenager alone. Parents (most often mothers) acted as the primary facilitators of participation: receiving communications, initiating the process, coordinating timing across household members, and managing practical tasks such as reminders and returning youth booklets.

At the same time, parents also operated as gatekeepers, monitoring (and at times constraining) young people's engagement when questions were perceived as developmentally sensitive or potentially "opening up" topics such as substance use

before a child was "ready". Importantly, facilitation did not seem to guarantee continuity. Maintaining participation across adolescence and during transitions out of the parental home required ongoing parental effort, and "movers" (those leaving home or shifting into the adult mode) appeared especially vulnerable to attrition.

Parents as organisers of participation: "rounding up" the household

A consistent pattern was that the survey arrived into the household as a family administrative task. Teenagers described being mobilised by parental prompts, with the survey framed as something that "comes through" and is then enacted as part of household life. One child's account illustrates this dynamic clearly: "our mum will normally call us down… The Understanding Society sent your test" (I7, Child). The phrasing positions the mother as the household "dispatcher" who translates institutional contact into a concrete action for the child. The child's response ("we'll like, just take it and do it", I7, Child) signals that the task is accepted with low friction, but also that agency is structured by parental initiation rather than arising from the young person's own motivation.

Parents similarly narrated participation as requiring someone to "start the process", particularly where the household grid or initial setup created a front-loaded burden: "Somebody has to start the process… we make sure it all gets done" (I11, Parent). This "process ownership" was frequently gendered. Mothers often described completing the household grid and "getting the… millions of bits at the start" (I9, Parent), while partners completed their individual questionnaires later. A child recognised this implicit division of labour: "whoever does the 1st one has to put in all the family stuff… the second one is not as long… he's [father] sort of like, 'Oh, I'll let you do yours first'" (I9, Child). Household ecology here seems quite complex. It distributes the burden unevenly, shaping who does the work of sustaining participation and who can "opt in" later with less friction.

Intergenerational socialisation into the survey, and the limits of routine

For many families, participation was narrated as a long-running household practice transmitted across life-course transitions. Parents described beginning alone, then adding partners and children ("it was me initially… and then… we've grown a little family" (I4, Parent). Teenagers' participation, in this sense, is less "recruitment" and

more "inheritance": an expectation normalised through family history. This intergenerational continuity was often linked to routinisation: "We've done it for years now. It's just something we do every year" (I1, Parent). In one extended account, the survey is described as easy, bounded, and therefore uncontentious: "I'll just take half an hour… you log on… it's done… it is a yearly thing" (I1, Parent), with the additional sense that it becomes a shared household marker: "we laugh about it all… we'll be getting our email soon… it is a family thing" (I1, Parent).

However, routinisation within the parental home did not automatically translate into durable participation once children left. The added excerpt foregrounds this fragility: within one family of four children, participation persisted unevenly across siblings and across household transitions. One daughter "continued it when she moved out" and established participation within a new "little unit" with her partner and child, and she was described as actively enjoying it (I9, Parent). In contrast, another daughter required repeated prompting ("We used to have to push her every year to do it") and once she moved out, the parent was uncertain whether participation continued (I9, Parent). This suggests that routine can be sustained by household infrastructure (parental reminders, shared timing, collective completion) but may not be internalised as an individual practice for all young people. When the scaffolding of the parental household is removed, participation appears to depend more on intrinsic motivation or on the emergence of a new organising figure in the new household.

The same account highlights a clear vulnerability among "movers" during late adolescence. A son "moved out and he just stopped doing it… he was… 16… he just couldn't be bothered" (I9, Parent). Notably, this dropout is linked to a mode transition: "when it went digital… He just didn't bother… it would have then moved up to the adult one, and… it never transitioned with him" (I9, Parent). This points to an interaction between household ecology and survey design: the digital shift and the move from youth to adult instruments may create a discontinuity precisely at a life stage already characterised by mobility and competing demands. In this reading, attrition is not only a matter of individual disinterest; it is also produced at the intersection of (a) reduced parental oversight after moving out, (b) weakened household routines, and (c) a structural "handover" moment in the panel design

where the survey relationship must be re-established in a new mode and identity category.

Mode shifts and the meaning of credibility

Several parents contrasted earlier interviewer-led participation (at the beginning of the study) with online completion. Early interviewer visits were remembered as inconvenient yet reassuring because they provided visible legitimacy (ID badges, explanations). One participant contrasted this with online participation as an act of trust: "online… like anything we have to trust… it's going to be safe as much as anybody knows anything these days" (I6, parent). Here, the interviewer functions as a credibility device. At the same time, households accustomed to online administration (particularly since Covid) described digital participation as normalised and straightforward (I10, parent). These accounts suggest a tension between the comfort of completing the interview online and how easy it is *not* to complete it online. On the one hand, digital modes reduce logistical burden and support routinisation, but on the other, they can make participation easier to ignore, particularly for young people whose engagement is already at risk or whose survey "transition" requires extra effort.

Participation as family conformity and parental meaning-making

Teenagers sometimes framed involvement as conformity rather than personal commitment: "I just do it because my family does it" (I8, Child). This contrasts with parents' richer rationales, which positioned participation as reflective ("take stock of your own life") (I2, parent) or as social documentation ("a measure of the times"(I11, Parent)) and intergenerational continuity ("the next generation") (I11, Parent). Such parental meaning-making can legitimise the time spent and provide a narrative that sustains participation. Yet the "pushing" described in interview number 9 ("We used to have to push her every year to do it", I9, Parent) demonstrates that parental motivation does not necessarily transfer to the child. Some young people comply within the family home but do not adopt the practice as their own, especially when they leave, and the survey must compete with new routines, relationships, and responsibilities.

Managing logistics: reminders, students, and household coordination

Households varied in how smoothly participation unfolded, with reminders often described as necessary and useful. Reminding was typically described as conversational rather than coercive ("have you done yours? I've done mine" (I8, Parent)), but some quotations suggest that for some adolescents, sustained participation required persistent parental "push" (I9, Parent). This matters analytically because it distinguishes households where participation is self-sustaining (thanks to a combination of habit and ease) from those where it is sustained by ongoing parental effort (having to "push"). It also suggests that the survey's household-based participation can mask underlying individual disengagement. As long as notifications and materials flow through the parent, "pushing" can keep a reluctant teenager in the panel, but once the teenager moves out, that mechanism collapses unless the survey successfully re-anchors itself directly with the young person.

Autonomy, privacy, and gatekeeping

Despite parents' central role in initiating participation, many accounts emphasised norms of respecting children's privacy ("top secret") (I11, Parent) and children described completing independently (I05, Child). Parents also provided reassurance to reduce anxiety about "right" and "wrong" answers (I6, Parent). Alongside facilitation, parents sometimes constrained participation due to perceived sensitivity, particularly around drugs and alcohol (I1, Parent; I2, Parent), and expressed uncertainties about safeguarding and disclosure processes (I3, Parent). Some parents reframed sensitive items as prompts for discussion (I5, Parent; I6, Parent), indicating variation in whether the survey is treated as a private task or integrated into family dialogue.

Overall, teenage participation emerged as relationally organised but not uniformly stable. Parents (especially mothers) provide the infrastructure that makes participation possible and often routinise completion as a household practice. Yet participation can remain contingent on parental "pushing", and this becomes particularly consequential at moments of mobility (leaving home) and survey transition (youth-to-adult, paper-to-digital). The accounts suggest that attrition

among “movers” is not simply a matter of individual apathy, but reflects the withdrawal of household scaffolding combined with design features (online mode) that make re-engagement easier to postpone or miss entirely.

4.2. Survey experience: burden, clarity, and mode usability

Participants’ accounts positioned “survey experience” as a practical, embodied activity shaped by time, effort, comprehension, and the usability of the mode through which questions were delivered. Across interviews, perceived burden was typically described as manageable, but unevenly distributed by age and by whether completion occurred on paper, via phone/tablet, or online through a computer. Young people’s narratives foregrounded concrete features of the task: how long it took, how repetitive it felt, whether they could see “the end”, and whether the technology “worked”. Parents, meanwhile, evaluated the adult survey in terms of logistical feasibility, the adequacy of prompts and reminders, and the design quality of the interface. Importantly, mode was not simply a neutral channel. It altered perceptions of privacy, control, and effort, and it structured how households coordinated completion.

Burden as time and pacing: “a few goes” versus “all in one”

Younger participants often described completing the youth questionnaire across multiple sittings, suggesting that burden was experienced less as total length than as sustained attention and the capacity to “sit with” the task. One younger participant (12) recalled that the first time they “did it like for a few minutes… and then… in a few goes”, whereas the second time they “did it all in one” (I8, Child). This contrast implies a learning effect: familiarity reduces cognitive and motivational costs, enabling consolidation of the task into a single session. Other accounts echoed this “one sitting” ideal (“all in one go” (I11, Child)), indicating that smooth completion is an important experiential marker of low burden, even when the absolute length remains similar.

These temporal descriptions also highlight that “burden” is partly about perceived control. It involves the ability to pause and resume without losing momentum, and

to fit participation into everyday routines. Where this control was supported (by mode flexibility, reminders, and clear entry points), participants framed the survey as easy to accommodate.

Clarity and the value of visible progress: paper as "tangible" and bounded

A prominent theme in young people's accounts was the importance of being able to see progress. Paper booklets were valued because they made the task concrete and finite: "it's something tangible you've got in your hand… rather than when you're online… You don't know how many more pages there are to go… it's… an invisible one" (I8, Parent). The key distinction is not merely preference for paper per se, but the visibility of length and proximity to completion. The ability to "see the end" was also reported across households (I1, Child; I11, Child), suggesting a widely shared experiential logic: bounded tasks feel less burdensome.

Paper was additionally associated with a sense of ease in responding, particularly for open-ended writing. Children, as reported by parents, were able to "write as much as you like, or as little as you like" (I11, Parent). Here, paper functions as a flexible response space, whereas digital formats may be experienced as more constrained or less legible. For some, paper also aligned with a preference for manual interaction, i.e. "actually ticking the boxes instead of just going through on my phone" (I1, Child), and with anxiety about technology ("technology can act up… really overwhelming for me" (I7, Child)). These accounts point to affective dimensions of mode: paper reduces uncertainty and performance pressure by minimising technical risk and making the task feel predictable.

Online completion as convenience, but also as design-dependent

Older teenagers and parents more often preferred online completion, primarily for logistical reasons. Compared with interviewer-led participation (described as requiring "everybody in the same place at the same time"), online was "much, much easier… we can all just do it as and when" (I9, Parent). A 16-year-old (who in the past completed a paper youth booklet and has since completed their first adult questionnaire online) similarly framed online as "easier to complete" (I9, Child). In these narratives, "ease" is produced by temporal flexibility and the removal of scheduling constraints, rather than by enjoyment of digital interaction itself.

However, these benefits were conditional on usability. Some young people encountered basic access failures: "I tried to do it online, but I couldn't even get onto any of the questions" (I8, Child). Parents also reported friction in online design, including repeated scrolling caused by (mobile phone) screen size and layout ("a lot of scrolling up and down") and a perception that the interface looked "dated" or less familiar than contemporary "Google form" style layouts (I6, Parent). This matters because digital participation shifts the burden from physical handling (paper, postage) to interface navigation and device compatibility. When design and ease of use align with familiar digital standards, online completion was described as "very smooth" with "no… integration issues" (I11, Parent); when it does not, the same mode becomes a barrier.

Mode logistics and the problem of parallel systems: youth booklets as fragile objects

A specific source of burden arose from the separation of youth and adult instruments. Parents reported that children's materials often arrived later than adults' and were vulnerable to postal "hiccups": "we always get it a lot later… it often got lost… we sent it back… got a chase up… 'Where is it?'" (I6, Parent). Even during the period of interviewer visits, youth components were once described as being "sent afterwards" (I6, Parent), suggesting that the survey's operational sequencing can generate household friction. The consequence is twofold: first, it increases administrative labour for parents (tracking items, responding to chases); second, it interrupts the household routine of "doing it together" and can undermine young people's motivation if their task arrives out of sync.

These logistical problems also illuminate why some households wanted children to complete online. If the whole family "do it online now", children may prefer the same mode for coherence and convenience (I6, Parent). Yet the same parent noted that when the child "had the opportunity to do it online… it didn't work" (I6, Parent), highlighting a compounded burden: postal unreliability on the one hand and unreliable access/technical failure on the other. In practice, this creates a risk that youth participation sits in a "gap" between systems, where neither paper nor digital delivery is consistently reliable.

Privacy and authenticity: online as less socially shaped than interviewing

Beyond convenience, mode affected perceptions of privacy and response authenticity, both for children and for parents. One parent suggested that talking to an interviewer "has the opportunity to twist the answer somewhat", whereas online completion reduces social influence (even if unintentionally) because responses are given without interpersonal contact (I6, Parent). Relatedly, interviewer visits were described as increasingly frustrating over time due to scheduling (waiting, missed availability), while the move online was "a lot easier because you can do it… at a time that suits you" (I6, Parent). These accounts position digital completion as both more private and more controllable, which can reduce burden and potentially improve perceived response validity, at least from the participant's standpoint.

Repetition, boredom, and perceived relevance

Young people generally characterised the questionnaire as repetitive but not pointless: "It can get a little repetitive and boring, but… I wouldn't say any of the questions are unnecessary" (I7, Child). This distinction is analytically important. Boredom does not automatically translate into rejection if the task is still seen as legitimate or meaningful. Some young people suggested that varying questions or activities annually could reduce monotony: "You could change the questions, and then it wouldn't get too boring" (I11, Child), implying that repetition is noticeable and may shape engagement, particularly for those with weaker intrinsic motivation.

Sensitivity, selectivity, and the management of "optional" burden

Parents' and older teenagers' (13-16) accounts also show that "burden" includes emotional or normative discomfort, not just time. Adults described selectively skipping items perceived as overly personal, particularly earnings, arrears or political views. In one account, questions about financial strain were answered, but earnings were not, because they felt "not… relevant" (I9, Parent). Political questions were treated similarly: participants differentiated between "society" questions (answered) and "personal" questions that felt "prying" (I9, Parent). This suggests that participants actively manage burden through selective non-response when perceived intrusiveness outweighs perceived legitimacy. Such strategies may preserve overall cooperation while shaping item-level data quality.

Engagement infrastructure: reminders, newsletters, and "dependent interviewing"

Parents generally evaluated the survey's engagement strategy positively. They described a sequence of prompts ("email warm up… emails… a letter… the Newsletter") as "pretty well covered, in terms of the engagement" (I2, Parent) and saw reminders as an acceptable form of "chipping us along" rather than harassment (I3, Parent). The newsletter, in particular, functioned as an adult-facing benefit, reinforcing legitimacy and interest. Young people, by contrast, often disengaged from supplementary materials (e.g., "don't read magazines or leaflets") and suggested shifting paper communications to digital to reduce waste ("less of a… waste of paper… if it was just like an email" (I9, Child). This indicates a misalignment: engagement materials that reinforce meaning for adults may not translate into salience for younger participants, potentially limiting their capacity to motivate independent retention.

Parents also valued "dependent interviewing", i.e. the survey "remembering" past information (e.g., prior circumstances before a move), as cognitively supportive and interesting (I11, Parent). This is a subtle but important usability point. Features that reduce recall burden can enhance perceived quality and may contribute to continued participation by making completion feel easier and more personalised.

Youth-facing improvements: visibility, direct access, and peer normalisation

Young people's suggestions for improvement emphasised awareness and direct access. One participant noted that friends "haven't known what I'm talking about", suggesting that participation depends heavily on being "born into it", and advocated "more online promotion" to build visibility and a sense of community (I7, Child). Another practical suggestion concerned login delivery. Youth access codes routed via parents can slow completion ("I'd have to use your [mother's] phone… wait for you to email it to me") and participants (both children and parents) proposed emailing links directly to children where age-appropriate (I9, Child). The discussion implicitly recognises a developmental constraint (not all younger children have email), but also proposes a staged approach, with direct youth delivery becoming feasible around early adolescence when personal phones and school email become

common (I9, Parent). Taken together, these suggestions point to a broader pattern: as young people age, usability and autonomy become more central to retention, and continuing to treat them as dependent "add-ons" to adult participation may inadvertently increase friction and cause drop-out.

Overall, participants described the survey as broadly manageable, but the experience was highly mode-sensitive and age-graded. Paper offered tangibility and visible progress, while online delivery offered flexibility and privacy, provided the interface was reliable and modern. Burden was amplified when youth instruments arrived out of sync or were lost, when online access failed, or when design required excessive navigation. Finally, young people's accounts suggest that sustaining participation through adolescence may require not only low burden, but also autonomy-supportive delivery (direct logins where possible) and greater peer-level visibility so that participation is not experienced solely as a private family routine.

4.3. Incentive structure

Incentives were a salient and widely discussed feature of participation, shaping both motivation and household management of survey completion. Accounts suggest that incentives operated through multiple pathways: as direct rewards for young people, as a household "bonus" that justified time investment, and as a behavioural lever used by parents to prompt and pace completion (particularly via early-bird bonuses). At the same time, participants raised practical concerns about gift card usability (especially restrictions on where and how cards could be spent) that could dilute the incentive's perceived value. The data also indicate that incentives were rarely experienced as purely individual: within households, gift cards and their value were often mediated by parents through conditional access, conversion into cash, or collective spending decisions.

Incentives as motivation, but not the whole story

Most participants acknowledged that incentives mattered. Parents and young people described gift cards as motivating and appreciated, even when framed as secondary to other reasons for participation. A parent articulated this candidly: "I'm not gonna sit here and go… we don't do it because there's a benefit… of course… it's a bonus" (I6, Parent). In this framing, the incentive is not positioned as the sole driver but as

an added justification, enabling treats the household might not otherwise prioritise ("a treat as a family" or "a piece of clothing we wouldn't get potentially") (I6, Parent). Another parent described participation as an explicit time–money trade-off: they did "not all" surveys, instead "balancing… your time against the money that you're going to earn" (I10, Parent). This explicitly economic logic suggests that incentives contribute to a broader calculus of burdens and rewards, particularly when families are saturated with competing demands.

Other narratives framed incentives as especially relevant at particular ages: "they are at the age where we… would like the dollars" (I4, Parent of an 11- and a 12-year-old). This points to incentives as developmentally timed, becoming more motivating as adolescents' discretionary spending needs increase and as costs (time, boredom) become more salient.

Household mediation: parents as "brokers" of children's incentives

A striking feature of the data is that incentives were frequently managed within household power dynamics rather than delivered as an autonomous (unconditional) reward to the child, which is intended by the survey design. In some families, children's access to gift cards was explicitly conditional on completion, with parents enforcing a norm of reciprocal exchange: "you can't have something for nothing" (I4, Parent). This converts the incentive into a household governance tool, rewarding compliance and signalling that participation is a contribution that must be "earned".

In practice, parents sometimes physically controlled the gift card until the child finished: "Mom always… took the gift card and she'd give it to me when I'd finished it" (I1, Child). In other cases, parents facilitated cash conversion, buying the gift card from the child so the child could spend money more flexibly ("I would buy the card off him… so he could… put it towards… the game" (I1)), which suggests that households actively adapted the incentive to make it usable for young people's preferences and consumption patterns. This brokerage role is analytically important. It implies that the incentive's motivational force can be amplified (or constrained) through parental control, and that the "incentive" experienced by the young person is sometimes not a gift card at all, but cash or a negotiated household benefit.

These dynamics align with broader findings in the household ecology section: parents are not only facilitators of participation logistics, but also mediators of the reward structure, shaping how incentives are interpreted (as "reward", "bonus", "duty", or "earnings") and how immediately they are received.

Early-bird bonuses as a behavioural lever for timing and follow-through

Time-limited bonuses emerged as particularly effective for parents (they are not available for children under 16). Parents described early-bird incentives (£10) as prompting faster completion: "if you do it within this week you get an extra voucher… which makes me go… I want to do [it] extra quickly" (I2, Parent). Another participant framed this as motivational design: "sometimes they give you motivation… if you do it… you get an extra £5… we do it quicker" (I3, Parent). Beyond individual motivation, the bonus also provided parents with a concrete "nudge script" for chasing other household members. Reminders could be framed not only as duty but as avoiding loss: "you might be losing out on… 10 quid bonus… that will spur people" (I6, Parent). This suggests that early-bird incentives function as a coordination tool at the household level, offering a shared deadline that helps families align completion and reduces procrastination among less motivated members (including older teenagers (16+) and student children).

Youth motivation: incentives, identity, and perceived fairness

Young people's accounts often positioned the incentive as straightforwardly valued ("it was good… it's nice to have" (I11, Child)) and linked it to willingness to complete. Being "rewarded" makes one "more willing to finish it" (I9, Child). Some accounts also show how incentives interact with identity and sibling dynamics. In one family, a parent described one child as having a "business head" and being "keen" because of "the money incentive", while another child joined in partly through sibling comparison ("doesn't want him to think he's earning more money than her") (I10, Parent). Here, incentives operate not only as financial rewards but as socially meaningful tokens that can signal competence, fairness, and status within family relationships.

For older teenagers (14-16), incentives were described as particularly salient due to financial need: "people my age are always in need of… extra cash… to go out with

your friends or buy something you want" (I7, Child). Parents similarly recognised that university students especially benefit from any additional money and described leaving vouchers for a university-aged child to collect when home (I6, Parent). These accounts reinforce that incentives may be most effective where discretionary income is constrained and where young people have immediate consumption goals.

Perceived legitimacy: being "chosen" and a sense of duty

Not all incentive talk was instrumental. Some parents described feeling "lucky to be chosen" for the study (I4, Parent), and another participant linked selection to a moralised sense of obligation. Realising that "not everyone is picked" generated a feeling that "it was kind of like a duty to do it" (I9, Parent). Here, incentives appear alongside (rather than replacing) civic or participation meanings. The same participant described interest in seeing the "picture that's built" through feedback and suggested that being in the panel may place the household "on that radar", leading to other survey invitations (and therefore more gift cards) (I9, Parent). This indicates a layered motivational structure in which incentives support continued participation, but legitimacy and identity ("being selected") can also sustain engagement.

Usability constraints: where incentives lose value

Despite broad appreciation, several participants reported usability problems that reduced the incentive's effectiveness. Some noted limited choice online ("not as much choice online" (I10, Parent), while others described practical difficulties (cards not accepted in many shops, and challenges with part-payment: "you have to spend the exact amount… because not all shops know how to… [do] part payment") (I5 Parent). These friction points matter because they transform a reward into an administrative task, potentially undermining the positive effect associated with incentives. In response, households sometimes adapted by converting cards to cash (as above) or by accumulating cards over time to spend on larger purchases: "we tend to… accumulate them… and… spend them all at once" (I11, Parent). This "stockpiling" strategy suggests that when usability is limited, the incentive's value becomes more delayed and collective, which may reduce its immediate motivational effect for young people but preserve household-level utility. There is also a risk that

accumulation leads to gift cards expiring and participants not being able to use them at all.

Participants also implied that the value of gift cards may increase with age and online spending autonomy. Older teenagers may "find more use for it" (I9), aligning with broader patterns of increased digital purchasing and personal control over spending as adolescents mature.

Toward more effective incentive delivery for young people

The data point to two design implications for youth retention. First, conditionality already operates informally through parents, suggesting that incentive systems interact with household governance. Making incentives more directly deliverable to young people (where appropriate) could support autonomy and reduce reliance on parental mediation. Second, participants' interest in e-incentives (receiving vouchers promptly after online completion) suggests that immediacy may strengthen motivation, particularly for adolescents who respond to short feedback loops. One participant explicitly linked reward expectation to completion willingness, arguing that when you "know that you're going to get rewarded… you're more willing to finish it" (I9, Child). From this perspective, e-vouchers and early-bird bonuses operate not only as financial compensation but as behavioural reinforcement structures that can counter procrastination, especially among less organised teenagers and students.

Overall, incentives were interpreted as meaningful and motivating, but their effects were mediated by household practices and constrained by usability. Gift cards functioned as a direct youth reward, a household "bonus", and a parental lever for completion, with early-bird bonuses particularly effective in shaping timing. However, limited spend options and practical difficulties in using cards could dilute their value, prompting households to convert, delay, or pool incentives. These findings suggest that incentive effectiveness depends not only on amount, but on delivery format, spendability, immediacy, and how well the incentive fits young people's everyday consumption practices and autonomy.

4.4. Trust and legitimacy

Trust emerged as a foundational condition of continued participation, particularly in long-standing households where the survey had become routinised and largely unquestioned. Participants often described trust less as an active, repeatedly evaluated judgement and more as a background assumption that enabled effortless cooperation. At the same time, accounts indicate that trust was not absolute. Some parents periodically queried why certain information was needed, and a small set of practices (most notably item skipping) functioned as pragmatic mechanisms for managing confidentiality concerns without withdrawing from the study. For younger participants, legitimacy was frequently inherited rather than independently formed, reflecting limited awareness of the study's purpose and reliance on parental endorsement.

Trust as habituated, taken-for-granted participation

Long-standing participants expressed high levels of trust, often using language that signals automaticity rather than deliberation: "I've always just trusted you guys" (I9, Parent) and participation as "second nature" (I1, Parent). These formulations suggest that trust is embedded in practice: repeated, uneventful participation over years generates a sense that the survey is safe and legitimate. In one account, trust is explicitly linked to non-interrogation ("I've never queried it. I've always just done it… Trusted you guys that it'd be okay" (I1, Parent)), with confidentiality assurances treated as self-evident (the materials state it is "strictly confidential, private, and we just take that for granted" (I1, Parent). Here, legitimacy is not continually "proved"; it is stabilised through institutional messaging plus the absence of negative experiences.

This taken-for-granted trust is also reflected in limited engagement with study communications. One participant described only briefly "glancing over" letters and "might not take it all in" (I1, Parent). Rather than undermining trust, this selective attention arguably indicates it is already secured: participants feel sufficiently confident to comply without needing to repeatedly scrutinise information. In practical terms, high trust may therefore reduce perceived burden (less time spent evaluating risk), further reinforcing habitual participation.

Legitimacy cues: institutional affiliation and "not a scam"

Participants also identified institutional cues that supported legitimacy. For some parents, the association with a university and with recognised governance structures (e.g. Ethics committees) provided reassurance. One participant explicitly invoked university ethics as a trust anchor, assuming the study is "governed appropriately… sensible… signed off" (I3, Parent). Another described trust as arising from being "under that blanket" of a reputable institution, which prevents the survey from being interpreted as "some sort of scam" and frames participation as "helping out" (I9, Parent). These accounts highlight legitimacy as relational and symbolic: institutional branding functions as a shortcut for trustworthiness, especially in a context where digital communications and online data entry can otherwise evoke concerns about fraud or misuse.

Questioning data needs and negotiating boundaries

Despite generally high trust, some parents expressed occasional uncertainty or scepticism about particular items in the survey (e.g. financial information, political views): "Sometimes you do think, why do they need this information?" (I9, Parent). This illustrates that trust is not uniform across content domains. It can be stronger for the survey as a whole than for specific questions that feel intrusive or difficult to justify. Importantly, these doubts did not necessarily lead to dropout. Instead, participants described managing concerns through selective non-response. One parent noted they did not provide "a lot of personal data" because they "always skip" some questions, which reduced concerns "in terms of" confidentiality (I8, Parent). This suggests that the ability to skip items functions as a safety valve: it allows participants to preserve overall engagement while maintaining personal boundaries around sensitive information.

Analytically, this points to a form of "conditional trust". Participants accept the legitimacy of the study and the general confidentiality promise, but retain agency to withhold information when questions feel too specific. In doing so, they negotiate participation on terms that feel acceptable, rather than treating participation as an all-or-nothing decision. This also implies that design features that clearly

communicate optionality and make skipping straightforward may indirectly support retention by reducing perceived risk.

Trust as inherited among young people

Young people's accounts often indicated limited independent awareness of the study's aims, with legitimacy mediated through family membership and parental endorsement. One child noted they "probably wouldn't know about it if I wasn't born into it" (I3, Child), underscoring that for many adolescents, the survey is encountered primarily as a family practice rather than a civic or research activity they have chosen. In this context, trust is inherited. Young people participate because the household participates, and because parents frame the survey as safe and legitimate.

This inherited trust is consequential for retention. Where legitimacy rests on household routines rather than personal understanding, continued participation may be vulnerable at transition points (e.g., moving out) unless trust becomes re-anchored through direct engagement, clearer youth-facing explanations, or other legitimacy cues that do not rely solely on parental mediation.

Overall, trust and legitimacy were sustained through routinisation, institutional cues, and practical boundary-management strategies. Long-term participation appeared to normalise the survey as "second nature", reducing the need for active scrutiny and enabling smooth compliance. However, trust was not unqualified: participants sometimes questioned why certain data were needed and managed these concerns through item skipping, effectively maintaining participation while protecting perceived confidentiality. For young people, legitimacy was frequently inherited through the household, implying that strengthening youth-specific understanding and trust may be important for sustaining participation beyond the family context.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

These findings support the claim that participation in a long-running household panel is primarily social, not simply a response to design features or rewards. Teenagers' participation was rarely an individual, self-contained decision. Instead, it was produced through a household-level process in which parents (often mothers)

interpreted survey contact, organised completion, and set boundaries around privacy and sensitivity. This pattern fits a social exchange account, where continued cooperation rests on an ongoing relationship with the study and a sense that the request remains reasonable, respectful, and worthwhile, rather than on any single "trigger" such as money or topic alone (Dillman, 1978; Dillman, Smyth & Christian, 2014). It also reinforces the wider point that youth response in household surveys is structurally mediated through adult gatekeeping and facilitation, meaning that "youth participation" is frequently a household achievement rather than an individual act (Parutis, 2023).

The results also extend leverage–saliency theory by showing that, for adolescents, the most influential "levers" are often made salient by parents, not by the survey itself. In practice, the balance of participation was tipped by whichever features parents highlighted and operationalised (such as legitimacy cues, convenience, or incentives) rather than by teenagers independently weighing the request (Groves, Singer, & Corning, 2000). This helps explain why the same survey feature can have different effects across households: families vary in what they see as beneficial or risky, how strongly they value the sponsor, and how much capacity they have to manage the task. It also aligns with evidence that participation is negotiated rather than automatic across adolescence, and that parents often remain involved even when young people are older (Ipsos MORI, 2013; Calderwood et al., 2015).

A key contribution is the way "cost" and "burden" were described. Participants talked less about length and more about control, visibility, and reliability, i.e. being able to pause, knowing how much is left, and trusting the mode to work smoothly. This reframes burden as an interaction between the respondent and the survey system, not a fixed property of the questionnaire. In social exchange terms, these features directly shape the perceived "cost" side of participation. In leverage–saliency terms, they change the weight of mode and design as participation levers, sometimes turning digital convenience into digital friction (Dillman, Smyth & Christian, 2014; Groves, Singer, & Corning, 2000; Parutis, 2023). The fact that late or poorly sequenced youth materials disrupted routinisation further supports the idea that participation is embedded in household routines and fieldwork systems, not just individual motivation.

Incentives functioned as meaningful benefits, but the mechanisms were more relational than purely economic. Consistent with social exchange theory, incentives can act as a symbol of appreciation (a "gift") that supports reciprocity, especially when combined with low-friction participation (Dillman, 1978; Singer & Ye, 2013). At the same time, the data suggest that in household contexts, incentives often become instruments of household governance (as parents may hold or conditionalise vouchers), so the incentive's motivational force can be indirect and unevenly experienced by teenagers. Leverage–saliency theory helps interpret this. Incentives are not a universal lever; their leverage depends on whether they are salient, usable, and experienced as personally meaningful, and this varies across households (Groves, Singer & Corning, 2000; Parutis, 2023). Where incentives were awkward to use, their immediate "pull" weakened even if the nominal value remained the same. Other survey evidence indicates that adolescents might prefer flexible e-incentives to physical gift cards (Burton, 2024).

Finally, trust operated as a foundational condition that shaped whether other levers mattered at all. Where trust and legitimacy were established, families were willing to tolerate repetition, effort, and occasional discomfort; where trust was fragile, even small inconveniences could tip the balance towards refusal. Importantly, trust was negotiated rather than absolute. Selective skipping of particular questions allowed families to maintain participation while protecting privacy. This suggests that continued cooperation can be sustained through conditional consent at the item level, rather than requiring full acceptance of every question, and it underlines the role of clear purpose, confidentiality assurances, and visible safeguarding cues in supporting legitimacy (Ipsos MORI, 2013; Parutis, 2023). It also connects to broader evidence that consent procedures and trust concerns can disproportionately reduce youth participation and affect representativeness, especially where additional administrative steps are required (Esbensen et al., 1996; Liu et al., 2017).

Taken together, the theoretical implication is that youth participation in household panels is best modelled as a household-mediated social exchange in which leverage and salience are distributed across family members and are sensitive to routine, usability, and legitimacy signals. This also explains why participation becomes most fragile at key transitions (e.g., moving out, shifting modes or instruments): the

household "scaffolding" that previously maintained reciprocity and salience weakens, and the study must effectively rebuild the exchange relationship more directly with the young person if it is to retain them over time (Groves, Singer & Corning, 2000; Parutis, 2023).

Implications for design and fieldwork practice

Several practical implications follow from the findings and the cited literature:

1. Support the "handover" from household-based to individual-based participation. Retention efforts should anticipate moves out of the parental home and the youth-to-adult transition as high-risk moments. Proactive communication, clearer youth-facing explanations, and streamlined survey access may help re-anchor the study relationship directly with the young person.

2. Reduce logistical discontinuities for youth components. Delays and postal losses undermine routinisation and increase parental administrative burden. Integrating youth completion into consistent timelines and reliable modes may sustain household coherence and reduce friction.

3. Design for progress visibility and low cognitive load. For younger respondents, visible progress cues (e.g., clear "how many pages left" indicators) and easy pause/resume functionality may reduce perceived burden, aligning with established burden and usability principles.

4. Optimise incentives for immediacy, autonomy, and spendability. Early-bird bonuses appear effective, but incentive usability constraints can erode value. More flexible e-incentives and clearer redemption pathways could strengthen motivational impact without increasing burden.

5. Strengthen legitimacy through youth-facing purpose and transparent optionality. Trust is often inherited, but sustained participation beyond the household may require direct youth understanding of purpose and data use. Clear explanations of sensitive items and reassurance about skipping may reduce gatekeeping and maintain both participation and comfort.

Limitations and future research

While the qualitative approach enables detailed insight into household processes and meaning-making, the findings likely reflect the perspectives of families already engaged with the panel. This may under-represent households that refused participation or dropped out earlier, for whom trust, burden, or gatekeeping concerns may be stronger. Furthermore, joint interviews may have influenced children's responses, and reliance on self-reported experiences introduces potential bias. Finally, findings are situated within a specific UK household panel context and should be interpreted accordingly.

Future research could usefully compare accounts from stayers and leavers, and examine how specific design changes (e.g., direct youth email invitations, interface redesign, alternative incentives) affect engagement at transition points through embedded experiments.

Conclusion

This study reinforces the methodological insight that teenage participation in household longitudinal surveys is not simply a function of individual willingness. It is shaped by household facilitation and gatekeeping, by the usability and perceived burden of survey modes, by incentive structures that operate through both individual and household dynamics, and by routinised trust anchored in institutional legitimacy. Most critically, the findings suggest that sustained youth participation is vulnerable at moments when household scaffolding weakens, particularly during moves out of the family home and instrument transitions, underscoring the need for youth-specific engagement strategies and design interventions rather than assuming that household inclusion alone will secure longitudinal retention.

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Appendix

The sample characteristics.

Interview number	Participating child age	Participating parent/ child	Household's time in the study
1	16	Mum + son	34 years
2	12	Dad + son	33 years
3	10	Mum + daughter	16 years
4	11 & 12	Dad + daughters	16 years
5	11	Dad + son	Around 15 years
6	16	Mum + daughter	16 years
7	14	Daughter (no parent present)	Not provided
8	12	Mum + son	Around 8-9 years
9	16	Mum + daughter	More than 10 years
10	12 & 14	Mum + daughter (12) + son (14)	More than 10 years
11	10	Dad + son	16 years