Uses and Gratification of the Internet among Mass Communication Students in Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the uses and gratification of the Internet among students in the Department of Mass Communication, Delta State University (DELSU) Abraka. The study became necessary following the influx of and increase in the use of the Internet in education, which portends functional as well as dysfunctional roles on students if not properly handled. Hence, the need to empirically evaluate uses and gratification of the Internet by students. Findings show that students in the Department of Mass Communication, DELSU Abraka, are heavy users of the Internet despite their low level of technological knowledge in the use of the Internet. Also, it was found that the students use the Internet to send e-mails, gather information for educational purposes and to chat despite being occasionally hampered by network failure. Therefore, the study concludes that students are not affected by dysfunctional roles of the Internet. Hence, the programme curriculum of the Department of Mass Communication, DELSU, Abraka, be reviewed to incorporate a broader study of the Internet in order to boost the technical knowledge of the students. Nevertheless, the study recommends that Nigerian government should work out a workable framework that would ensure that Internet Service Providers in Nigeria tackle the incessant network failure so that users of the Internet get value for the subscription of Internet services.

Keywords: Communication, Education, Gratification, Internet, Nigeria, Technology

INTRODUCTION

The 20th century witnessed a lot of revolutionary developments in communication and science and technology. These contemporary advances and innovations in the fields of communication, science and technology have led to the emergence of new technologies. New technologies here denote significant technological developments that have changed entirely the world of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). ICTs cover any product that

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store, retrieve, manipulate, transmit or receive information electronically in digital form. In fact, ICTs are computer enabled communication technologies with special features such as connectivity, interactivity and multimedia necessary for the production, communication and transmission of information. One overwhelming and magnificent Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in this 21st century is the Internet.

The Internet is a network of computer networks covering the entire world as long as there is a connection and requisite infrastructure in place. Pearson, Nelson, Tibsworth and Haster (2003) note that the Internet is a network of interconnected computers and computer networks. Adegoke (2009) adds that the Internet is a virtual library which is seen as virtual space containing a vast amount of information and documents including books, pictures, video, graphics and musical sounds that can be consulted. The Internet, Udende and Azeez (2010) write, is a collection of computers and computer networks located all over the world.

Furthermore, the Internet is a global network offering range of services governed by different protocols such as the World Wide Web (WWW) etc. It has been around for over 20 years as a network for Defense Department and Scientific communication. But today it has become an unlimited and powerful channel of communication and information retrieval and dissemination. The Internet has also revolutionized the way in which societies interact, conduct business, communicate and how students conduct research even though Ebersole (2000) study showed that many of the students sampled also used the Internet for other purposes other than research.

Nevertheless, the Internet enables people to produce, access, adapt and apply information in greater amounts more rapidly and at reduced costs and also it offers enormous opportunities for enhancing business and education. The Internet is considered increasingly important in virtually all aspects of human endeavour (Severin & Tankard, 2001). This is true because the Internet provides different types of information through networking globally to affirm its name as information superhighway. It allows greater flexibility and working hours irrespective the user’s location, especially with the spread of high speed connections. This is because the Internet can be accessed from anywhere by numerous means/devices, mobile phones and computers among others as long as there is a connection.

The use of the Internet has been extended and embraced by many institutions in Nigeria. This is because there is a general belief that the Internet would lead institutions to the promised land. This notwithstanding, the Internet is a two-edged sword. It has several dysfunctional roles that may affect its users especially the young/youths like students. With the Internet for instance, students in a classroom may dedicate most of their focus on sex sites, pornography, violence and other social vices sites. In view of this, Sparks (2002) states that at no time in human history has sexually explicit media been as readily available as it is today. We owe that fact-good or bad to the Internet.

This raises some interesting questions regarding the use of the Internet in an educational context. Even students who seek out educational content on the Internet may be thwarted by the very attributes heralded by the Internet proponents. Would this attribute of the Internet not daunt its functional uses among students? Or would what they hope to achieve (gratification) in using the Internet propel them positively? More so, studies like Ebersole (2000) have shown that most students, who visited Internet sites frequently, visited sites that are not educational. It is against this background that this study seeks to ascertain the uses and gratification of the Internet among students in the Department of Mass Communication, Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The Internet is eagerly and easily adopted by all in the educational sector administrators, teachers, lecturers, scholars, researchers and
students. This is not surprising since the Internet has several potentials that can enhance the educational system of any nature. Besides, the Internet is relatively ‘free for all’. Moreover, it has no obvious inhibitions like law and regulations. It is very useful for research, sharing information with families and friends for relaxation.

Although, Schaefer (2005) and Mansell (2009) argue that not everyone can get into the Internet and have hardly utilized it, yet, many without the Internet, like the air, we breathe, are lifeless in productivity in this 21st century. What therefore is the extent of Internet usage by Mass Communication students in Delta State University, Abraka?

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Four research questions are formulated for this study. They are:

1. To what extent do the students in the Department of Mass Communication, Delta State University Abraka use the Internet?
2. What do the students in the Department of Mass Communication, Delta State University Abraka use the Internet for?
3. What gratification do the students in the Department of Mass Communication Delta State University Abraka derive from using the Internet?
4. What are the constraints (if any) students in the Department of Mass Communication encounter in the use of the Internet?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The advent of the Internet has indeed increasingly transformed all aspects of human endeavours especially education sector. Its importance for the academic community cannot be overemphasized. Since the Internet became popular, academic and educational scholars have not failed to take advantage of the invaluable technology. It has become a statement of fact that the success of any academic pursuit in modern times is largely dependent on the level of the utilization of the Internet. This is because the Internet is a potent source of information and information is the fuel and lifeblood for optimum performance in any field of human endeavour. Educational and other institutions therefore need to be exposed to the Internet to enhance information input and output of their products.

Specific uses of the Internet include but not limited to electronic mail (e-mail), mailing, Usenet and chat rooms. It is however uncertain to estimate the number of Internet users. Current best estimates indicate that there are at least over one billion users worldwide. The younger a person is, the greater the likelihood he or she would like to access the Internet. Also, over 30,000,000 networks connecting more than 10,000,000 computers and some one billion users are connected globally (Baran, 2010). Udende and Azeez (2010) argue that unlike in the advanced societies, United States of America (USA), and United Kingdom, the Internet is considered an infant in Nigeria.

However, in Nigeria today, the utilization of Internet in virtually all aspects of human endeavours especially in higher institutions of learning has accelerated beyond the imaginations of Nigerians. There are obvious uses of the Internet by students, lecturers and even the academic and host community. The influx of Internet in education became necessary because sustainable development can only become a reality in Nigeria through education that is enhanced by ICTs such as the Internet, mobile phones and computers.

Besides, everything about human life is education. Agba (2005) notes that all societies of the world plan and execute formal education where people undertake academic studies in designated institutions, made possible most times with the aid of the Internet. This explains whyNsude (2004) states that the Internet has grown into a global communication tool of many
thousands of computer networks that share a common addressing scheme. Unlike most online services which are centrally controlled, the Internet is decentralized by design. This makes it a veritable tool for students, government, workers, businessmen and women.

Virtually everyone now has access to the Internet globally and an alarming amount of information at their disposal. The Internet also serve as a communication link that enables doctors, libraries, communicators, journalists, scientists, authors, politicians and many others to share information. It is also an acknowledged fact that the Internet has enabled entirely new forms of social interaction, activities and organization as a result of its basic features such as the following.

**World Wide Web (WWW)**

The World Wide Web is one way of accessing information files on the Internet. The web incorporates text, graphics, sound and motion enables the spread of information over the Internet through an easy-to-use and flexible format.

**Electronic Mail (E-Mail)**

To send and receive e-mail, users must access another computer or any enabled mobile devices. The popularity of the Internet has made many major web corporations such as Yahoo, Google and Hotmail etc to offer free based e-mail accounts to draw users to their sites. All of the e-mail services also include advertisement in their user’s e-mail messages, which Campbell, Martin and Fabos (2010) describe as the cost of the free e-mail account.

**Instant Messaging**

Instant messaging allows for communication that is faster than conventional e-mail. With instant messaging, any user on a given system can send a message and have it pop-up instantly on the screen of any one else logged on to another screen. Then if all parties agree, they can initiate online typed conversations in real time.

**News Group**

News group is another feature of the Internet that has made the Internet popular over time. The news groups are powerful facilitators of group communication across time and space.

These features of the Internet have continued to make the Internet very advantageous in many ways. In fact, it has introduced many new dimensions in education. Today, the Internet has made it possible for information to be updated or modified at any time and for any number of times, which aids learning and better understanding. In view of this, Rodney (2005) argues that the Internet has opened opportunity to enhance information flow as well as improved shared ideas across the globe.

Furthermore, students can contact other students or teachers/lecturers through the e-mail if they have queries about any issues. Sharing of information and dissemination of information on a particular subject etc can be easily carried out using the Internet. Also, the Internet can be useful for completing projects in schools. Since the Internet is an ocean of information covering nearly all subjects known to man, one can literally find solutions to all research matters.

Assignments and term papers among others are also made easier with the help of the Internet. This explains why Wilkinson, Grant and Fisher (2009) observe that the Internet can lead you to valuable databases that will give you insight into everything. Sometimes, encyclopaedia may not always be available to students and they may have difficulties accessing books in the library. This, Payne (2001) argues is not applicable to the Internet. This is because the Internet is available everywhere for one to access the encyclopaedia online. While one could go to the library to use the Internet, it is also available at home, in offices, in classrooms and other locations.

In addition, all latest news is constantly updated on the Internet on different news sites. Students leaving politics can have access to all current affairs through the Internet. In fact, Anim (2007) asserts that the Internet has become a
mass medium in its own right. Another use of the Internet is in distance learning education. With the Internet, one can take up short or long term course materials available online, learn and even take examination without any physical structure.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is premised on the assumptions of the uses and gratification theory and the technology acceptance model because both theories inquire into how people (students) come to accept and use the Internet technology. The uses and gratification theory perceives the recipient (students) as actively influencing the effect process. In essence, the recipient selectively chooses, attends to, perceives and retains media messages on the basis of his/her needs and beliefs. This assumption of the uses and gratification theory, aptly describes the essence of this study, which anchored on the uses of the Internet as the gratification derived.

The other theory applicable to our discussion, Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), developed by Fred Davis and Richard Bogozi, bothers on the ease of and usefulness of technology such as the Internet. The model suggests that when users (students) are presented with a new technology like the Internet, for instance, a number of factors influence their decision about how and when they should use it as well as why they should use it. All these points revolve around the uses and gratification of the Internet among active media audience such as students.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed the survey design guided by the positivism research philosophy which allows researchers to assume the role of objective analyst, systematically making detached interpretations about data collected in an apparently value-free manner. From a study population of 1,371 mass communication students in Delta State University Abraka, Nigeria, representing different levels of study and programmes, the proportionate stratified sampling technique was adopted to select 342 students who cut across all the different strata of the population of the Department of Mass Communication.

Thus, a 20-item questionnaire designed based on the 5-point Likert scale of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Neutral (N), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD) was used to elicit response from the respondents, which aided the answering of the four research questions formulated for this study. Data generated were presented on frequency tables and analyzed using descriptive statistics by taking a weighted average of the mean score of the items on the 5-point Likert scale.

The computer mean score for this study was 3.0. In essence, any factor or variable with a mean score of 3.0 or above was accepted or regarded as positive, while all others with a mean score below 3.0 were rejected or regarded as negative.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

All the 342 copies of the questionnaire distributed were the same number retrieved. The questionnaire which contained 5 sections, A-E, focused on the demographic data of the respondents such as gender, age, degree of programme, year/level of study as well as the extent of the Internet usage among the students, various uses of the Internet, gratification the students derive in using the Internet and the constraints (if any) the students encounter in the use of the Internet.

The results and discussion of the study are based on the sections in the questionnaire that have direct bearing to the four research questions formulated for the study. Thus, the results are discussed and presented with the aid of frequency tables which aided the answering of the research questions under the discussion of findings.

Table 1 shows that students in the Department of Mass Communication, Delta State University Abraka use the Internet daily since majority of the students (88.3%) strongly agreed that they use the Internet daily. Also, 306 respon-
Table 1. Extent of internet usage by respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S/N</th>
<th>ITEM</th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>Decision</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Respondents use the Internet on a daily basis</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>1505</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>642</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Respondents always use the Internet</td>
<td>306</td>
<td>1530</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>642</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Respondents rarely use the Internet</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>305</td>
<td>1.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Respondents never use the Internet</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>41</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

students strongly agreed to item 6 (Respondents always use the Internet). Items 7 and 8 were rejected since they have mean scores of 1.12 and 1.01 respectively which fell below the zone of acceptance – 3.0.

The implication of this is that students in the Department of Mass Communication use the Internet to a very large extent since they are obviously heavy users of the Internet. This finding collaborates with the study of Nie, Simpser, Stepankora and Zheng (2005) which observe that educators are correct in their assumption that post-secondary students are heavier users of the Internet than the general population.

Table 2 presents data on the uses of the Internet by students. It shows that mass communication students use the Internet to send emails, chat and Facebook (x̄ = 4.97) and to gather information for educational purposes (x̄ = 4.94). However, majority of the students (99.4%) disagreed that they use the internet to watch pornography and also 92.7% either disagreed or strongly disagreed that they use the Internet for bank transactions. Hence, both items (11 and 12) were rejected.

Ebersole’s (2000) study however contradicts this finding. Ebersole used a coder and the coder found that while students reported their purpose for using the Internet as research and learning, 52 of the time, the coder found only 27% of the sampled 500 sites were being used in that regard.

As Table 3 indicates, students derive wider exposure from using the Internet (x̄ = 4.95), relaxation (x̄ = 4.92), developed technology of skills (x̄ = 4.97) and academic development (x̄ = 4.99). Invariably, all the items in Table 3 were accepted. This funding agrees with the submission of Olise (2007) that everyone globally uses the Internet for their communication needs – gratification.

Table 2 portrays data on the constraints students encounter in the use of the Internet. The major constraints which were accepted

Table 2. Uses of the internet by students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S/N</th>
<th>ITEM</th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>Decision</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Respondents use the Internet to gather information for educational purpose</td>
<td>324</td>
<td>1620</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>94.7%</td>
<td>1620</td>
<td>342(100%)</td>
<td>4.94</td>
<td>Accepted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Respondents use the Internet to send e-mail, chat &amp; Facebook</td>
<td>335</td>
<td>1675</td>
<td>335</td>
<td>67.9%</td>
<td>1675</td>
<td>342(100%)</td>
<td>4.97</td>
<td>Accepted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Respondents use the Internet to watch pornography</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>10(87.8%)</td>
<td>342</td>
<td>4.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Respondents use the Internet for bank transaction</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5(1.5%)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>342(100%)</td>
<td>4.06</td>
<td>2.07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
were network failure (\( \bar{x} = 4.86 \)) and lack of technical knowledge of the Internet (\( \bar{x} = 4.46 \)). However, students in the Department of Mass Communication, Delta State University, Abraka do not have poor access to the Internet (\( \bar{x} = 2.29 \)) and lack of finance does not hinder their usage of the Internet (\( \bar{x} = 2.94 \)) as evident in items 17 and 18. Hence, both items were rejected since their mean scores fell below the zone of acceptance (3.0) for this study.

The findings of Anim (2007) study however does not agree with this finding as Anim study found that poor access to the Internet affected respondents’ use of the Internet. The time difference between this study and Anim’s study may be responsible for this, an indication that the Internet has saturated the Nigerian society.

### FINDINGS

#### Research Question 1: To what extent do students in the Department of Mass Communication, DELSU Abraka, use the Internet?

The data gathered from Table 1 provides answers to research question one. In Table 1, majority of the respondents said they use the Internet daily and always. Just one respondent was said to have never used the Internet. It is also possible that it is the same one respondent that said that he/she rarely use the Internet. It can be inferred from these, that students in the Department of Mass Communication use the Internet to a very large extent. It was in this light that Johnson (2007) writes that almost 95% of
college students indicated that they were online at least a few times a week. Only two of the 405 college students surveyed in Johnson’s research indicated frequent use of the Internet:

**Research Question 2:** What do students in the Department of Mass Communication, DELSU Abraka use the Internet for?

Table 2 helps to answer research question 2. It shows that respondents use the Internet to e-mail, chat and Facebook. This is evident is item 10, as the item had a mean score of 4.97 with 97.9% of the respondents strongly in support of the item. Another use of the Internet is that it is used to gather information, a mean score of 4.94. However, majority of the respondent disagreed that they use the Internet to watch pornography and for bank transactions. Evidently, this finding is consistent with the statistics Canada report of 2006 which states that the e-mail is the most common use of the Internet. Instant messaging is far more popular with participating college students than visiting chat rooms. More than one-third of students reported using instant messaging every day or almost every day; 4.9% visit chat rooms with the same frequency. This may reflect college students’ preference to control the individuals with whom they communicate online (Finn, 2004, cited by Johnson, 2007).

Results of this investigation shows that although it is expected that students would use the Internet more often to gather information for educational purposes, they use it to send e-mail, chat and Facebook which are less academic in nature. It is also however necessary to note that students did not agree that the use of the Internet to watch pornography may be because students may be responding to what they believe is socially acceptable. Finally, although Fox (2002) notes that younger Internet users and better-educated Internet users are most likely to bank online, students in Department of Mass Communication, DELSU Abraka disagree that they do not use the Internet for banking transactions. Could this mean that the environmental factors affect them?

**Research Question 3:** What are the gratification students in the Department of Mass Communication DELSU, Abraka derive in using the Internet?

Table 3 provides the answer to this research question. Accordingly, the respondents strongly agree that using the Internet develops them academically, (\( \bar{x} = 4.99 \)), develops their technology skills (\( \bar{x} = 4.91 \)), gives them a sense of wider exposure (\( \bar{x} = 4.92 \)) since they were obviously accepted. Wilkinson, Grant and Fisher (2009) write that using the Internet can lead you to valuable databases that will give you insight. Although some students may find the using of Internet very frustrating, as Johnson (2007) discovered, the Internet as this study found is a good source of relaxing. This is because Anderson (2006) states that online gaming addiction is typically reported to affect less than 1% of students population, about the same rate as gambling addiction:

**Research Question 4:** “What are the constraints (if any) students in the Department of Mass Communication DELSU, Abraka encounter in their use of the Internet?”

Table 4 answers this research question. Basically, two constraints were discovered in the use of the Internet by students in Department of Mass Communication, DELSU, Abraka. The first constraint was network failure as indicated in item 20 which had a mean score of 4.86. A total of 99.7% of respondents supported the item that network failure affects respondents’ usage of the Internet. The second constraint identified was that most respondents do not have the technical knowledge of the Internet. This constraint had an accepted mean score of 4.46 as 63.1% of the respondents strongly agreed that lack of technical knowledge is a constrain affecting their use of the Internet. This lack of computer competence reduces the urge of step into the cyber space, partly because of the fear of embarrassment. Lack of competency also
reduces the ability to navigate the endless links that are offered on the Internet (Anim, 2007).

Contrary to Terril’s (2000) findings, based on a research carried out on adult ESOL (English as a second or other language) programme that adult ESOL students have limited process or no Internet access; majority of respondents in this study disagreed with this. 84.5% of the respondents disagreed that poor access was a constraint in their use of the Internet. This is not surprising since, there is a functional digital/cyber section in the University (DELSU) and a workable electronic library in the University which render free online services to students.

Furthermore, the problem of lack of finance was also rejected though slightly below the zone of acceptance (x = 2.94). This is shocking because of the high level of poverty in the country. Garba (2006) describes poverty as a state of hunger, lack of shelter, being sick and not being able to see a doctor. It is not being able to go to school, not knowing how to read, and not being able to speak properly.

It may be possible that lack of finance is not a problem to students in Department of Mass Communication because Internet services in DELSU are relatively free of charge. Even those that use their mobile phones do that at very low charges.

CONCLUSION

The importance of the Internet especially in the education sector has been stressed in this study. Therefore, every student should be given access to the Internet for deeper understanding and knowledge acquisition of any subject. Although the Internet cannot replace books or classroom education, it is one of the best substitutes for those who wish to gain deeper knowledge on literally and subject. This study has confirmed the assumptions that the Internet has the potential to accelerate, enrich and deepen skills, motivate and engage Mass Communication students in institutions of higher learning like Delta State University Abraka, who are heavy users of the Internet due to the gratification they derive from using it.

The argument that students are seriously affected by dysfunctional roles of the Internet may no longer be applicable to the students in universities and other tertiary institutions in Nigeria. This is because despite being constrained by lack of technical knowledge and network failure, the students still utilized the Internet very frequently owing to the functional roles of the Internet in their academic and communication needs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We put forward the following recommendations as a guide to bridge any gap between the enhancement and the development of students and the responsibilities and support of stakeholders in the uses and gratification of the Internet among students in the Department of Mass Communication, Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria. They include:

1. Following the disparity in-between the extent of internet usage and their level of technical knowledge, the management of Delta State University Abraka with the support of Delta State government should organize seminars and workshops for students that would not only expose students to effective Internet usage but deepen their skills in their use of the Internet;
2. The school’s management should also develop the department curriculum to include courses that deals with the Internet and ICT generally;
3. The government should as a matter of priority increase allocation for the University to enable them make available more computers and Internet services to both students and staff;
4. There is also a need for an ICT policy to be put in place by the National University Commission (NUC). This policy will set the standard for the acquisition and
maintenance of equipments and Internet services so as to create systems that can interconnect easily with the virtual library and digitalization systems in the University. This would reduce the problem of network failure.

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