Reading and Internet Use Activities of Undergraduate Students of the University of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria

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Abstract

Students' learning in the digital age depends on both adequate search for learning materials through Internet use activities, and adequate reading and study of the materials. Nevertheless, a lack of balance between the amount of time and effort devoted by students to reading and Internet use activities could affect negatively their learning achievement. This study explored the patterns of and relationships between reading and Internet use activities of undergraduate students of the University of Calabar, Nigeria. A descriptive survey design and the random sampling technique were used to administer 200 copies of a designed questionnaire to the undergraduate students of the university who used the university library during April 2009. Of these, 133 usable copies were returned, for a response rate of about 65%. Results showed that the students appreciated the importance of reading to their academic achievement, and were also highly aware of the importance of the Internet for the timely acquisition of new information and knowledge. Although 61.5% of the students preferred Internet browsing to reading of printed books, journals and newspapers, only 36.8% of them agreed that Internet use encouraged laziness in reading. The study recommended adequate library and Internet access facilities and programmes in Nigerian universities to promote balanced reading and Internet use activities among undergraduates. University librarians should also explore means of meeting students' rising demands for electronic resources, and provide effective publicity and current awareness of the variety of existing and new information resources and services available to students in the university libraries.

Keywords

Reading, Internet use, learning, universities, students, Nigeria

Introduction

Reading is an attempt to absorb the thought of an author and know what the author is conveying (Leedy 1956, as cited by Unoh, 1968). It is principally through reading that people obtain knowledge. People who can neither read nor write are described as illiterate, and such people are often limited to the knowledge gained from oral communication channels. Many activities of ordinary life require the ability to read. Moreover reading enriches one's understanding of how language is used, thereby improving one's spoken and written language. Additionally, in-depth reading helps to develop the mind and personality of a person; it enriches intellectual abilities; provides

insights into human problems; and influences attitudes and behaviour. In other words, reading helps to mould a person's character. This, of course, depends on reading the right type of books; that is, books that entertain but, at the same time, educate (Busayo, 2005).

The Internet is one of the defining technologies of the digital age. The Internet, which is a global system of interconnected computers, provides many benefits to its users, including access to information from distant documents and databases that can be read and studied to improve knowledge. The Internet combines and presents through the same medium the virtues of print and multimedia resources. With the Internet, students can improve their learning by gaining access to information and materials available online, which they might read online or download and print to read later. The Internet is also not just a passive medium that students might explore to obtain information on their own. It is increasingly also being used by education institutions and teachers as a flexible medium for delivering online education to distant or on-campus students.

In spite of the benefits of the Internet for education and learning, there is a growing concern as to whether the increasing number of hours spent by students browsing the Internet limits the amount of time and effort devoted by them to the actual reading and study of the materials obtained from or outside the Internet. This concern is similar to the motivation for a study, by Bussière and Gluszynski (2004), of the patterns and interrelationships between the computer use and reading behaviour of 15-year olds in Canada. The study found that promoting effective access to computer among such teenagers may not guarantee the use of computer for serious educational purposes by them, and that policy should also address the latter objective.

Research Problem

In Nigeria, there has been concern on the possible effects of daytime and sometimes all-night Internet browsing on reading time and effort among students. Some studies, for example, Oji (2007), have highlighted the growing incidences of students using the Internet not necessarily for academic purposes,

but for anti-social activities such as racketeering, blackmail, fraud, pornography, and so on. This probably explains why cybercafés patronised by students in many Nigerian cities and towns are often raided by law enforcement officials. Igun and Adogbeji (2007) have found out that the postgraduate students of Nigerian universities they surveyed often studied to acquire personal knowledge and skills and to prepare for examinations. However, there is potential, among less mature undergraduate students, for conflict between the time and effort devoted by them to positive educational uses of the Internet such as information search, browsing, communication and study and other less educational uses such as entertainment and pleasure seeking or anti-social behaviour. Hence, the importance of studies that investigate the relationship between the reading and Internet use activities of undergraduate students.

Research Objectives

The persistent problem of poor reading habits among Nigerian students has been attributed to major causes like listening and chatting culture, insufficient libraries, absence of appropriate reading materials, and some environmental factors (e.g. Ogunrombi and Adio, 1995). Whereas the Internet offers information and systems of instruction that complement the traditional ways that students study and learn, some students seem to be preoccupied with it essentially for activities that entertain rather than educate. Accordingly, this study aimed at collecting and interpreting data to describe the current reading and Internet use activities of undergraduates at the University of Calabar, Nigeria. Reading, as used in this study, refers to the reading of printed books, journals, magazines and other documents. Specifically, the study aimed to achieve the following objectives:

(i) determine the frequency of reading and Internet use among the students;

(ii) ascertain the students' purposes for reading and Internet use;

(iii) ascertain whether the students prefer browsing for information to reading from printed books, journals and magazines; and

(iv) obtain students' opinions on the effect of Internet use on reading habits.

Literature Review

Internet usage has increased tremendously over the last few years, with continued growth expected. Like any other technology, the use of the Internet has both beneficial and negative consequences. Bargees and Suhail (2006) distinguish between healthy and unhealthy Internet use, positing that excessive time spent on the Internet in purposeless activities can often take people away from their actual goals.

Although there seems to be a growing concern about the potential effect of Internet use on students generally, studies relating Internet use and reading variables among undergraduates are not commonplace. However, forecasts of the demise of the printed book and the associated changes in the academic library have fostered valid questions about the continuing place of reading and print media in tertiary institutions. Deekle (1995), writing on books, reading and undergraduate education, highlights the increasing interest paid to information technology by higher education and the competition from radio, television, motion pictures, video and a changing campus culture. He recognises a nearly universal expectation among information searchers and users of immediate gratification of a need for answers rather than in-depth understanding of issues that may surround the answers. Nevertheless, he opines that reading remains a fundamental building block for a liberal education, providing a broad basis for knowledge and understanding. He also advocates for reinforcing students' critical reading skills and habits and giving them a contextual framework for a lifetime of self directed learning. It is undeniable that reading is important and that good reading habits play critical roles in the development of academic and intellectual prowess and the associated socio-economic benefits. However, the seeming decline in the art and practice of reading should be of great concern if, as Yeoh (cited in Pooi Fang, 2008) posits, "reading for knowledge and information will become a critical source for competitive advantage besides development in the 21st century."

Usman (1982) and Fanoiki (1985) describe reading for specific purposes as 'utilitarian' and 'purposive' reading respectively. Various studies have found that Nigerians do not read as a habit, but in order to succeed in examinations necessary to obtain paper qualifications for jobs. Muhammad (1982) and Adedeji (1983) posit that undergraduate students in Nigeria read mainly prescribed textbooks to enable them pass examinations and this is in spite of the availability of other resources. In a study of the reading habits of undergraduate students as deduced from their library use at the University of Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria, Busayo (2005) reports that 75% of the sample engaged in utilitarian reading. Also, 82% of them used the library mostly during the session and deserted it the moment they were through with examinations. Uwa (2007) reports similar findings on students of tertiary institutions in Imo State, Nigeria, revealing that reading to pass examinations, tests and continuous assessments is the main motivator for the students' reading in the sampled libraries. Furthermore, high percentages of students often read only their lecture notes and handouts in the libraries.

From a different but related perspective, Osunade and Ojo (2006) submit that, in Nigerian tertiary institutions, students use the Internet as an alternative to scarce and outdated library resources. They evaluated the behaviour of tertiary level students in the use of the Internet and library at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. Their results indicate that the Internet is fast becoming a source of academic information among students due to easy access, correctness, availability and up-to-datedness, while the library is used mainly as a reading place. They suggest the need to appraise and upgrade library and Internet facilities in tertiary institutions so that needed academic information can be obtainable from whichever source students choose to use. Ray and Day (1998) surmise that the Internet has greater potential for desirable information, is a faster means of accessing information, provides access to a wider range of information; provides access to electronic journals, enables access to multiple files at once; provides access to information from home, and gives more satisfactory answers to queries than library staff.

In spite of these benefits, Gilbertson (1992) challenges the reliability of some Internet information, while Ojedokun (2006) points out that many students use the Internet mostly or only to search and retrieve information on entertainment, sports and news, and attributes this trend to lack of necessary searching skills for effective usage. Oji (2007) considers Internet use to be one of the causes of the decline in

the reading culture of Nigerian youths. She posits that, some youths are often seen in cybercafés browsing the Internet and engaging in activities that entertain rather than educate, adding that perhaps some of the ills of today's society could be attributed to wrong use of information gotten from websites. Suhail and Bargees (2006) posit that the misuse of the Internet often leads to unhealthy consequences, while heavy Internet use leaves little time for anything else. They investigated the positive and negative effects of excessive Internet use among undergraduate students in Pakistan and found positive associations between time spent on the Internet and the various dimensions of the Internet Effect Scale (IES), indicating that excessive Internet use can lead to a host of problems of educational, psychological, physical and interpersonal nature. Although a high proportion of the students reported positive than negative effects of Internet use, the authors suggested that Internet use should be within reasonable limits, so that adequate time can be focused on activities that enhance productivity.

Methodology

The descriptive survey research design was used to collect data. A sampling fraction of approximately 10% was decided upon as adequate sampling depth, and this led to the selection of 200 respondents from a population of 2053 undergraduates in years 1-5 of their degree programmes who registered at the University of Calabar Library for the 2008/2009 session. A structured questionnaire titled "Internet Use and Reading Activities Questionnaire (IURAQ)" was the main data collection instrument, supplemented with unstructured field observation. The study was conducted in April 2009 when 200 copies of the questionnaire were randomly distributed to respondents during one week as the students used the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences, Science and Technology, Law, and Medical libraries of the University of Calabar library system. The students were instructed to fill the questionnaire during their use of the library and submit it on their way out to the library officers on duty. Out of the 200 copies of questionnaire that were distributed, 133 retrieved copies were found usable for a 66.5% response rate.

Table 1 summarises the distribution of the respondents by age, gender and level of study in their programmes. There were more males (62.4%) than females (37.6%), with the majority (81%) in their twenties (20-29 years), and with only 4.5% being 30 or more years old. About 30 of the respondents each were at the second, third and fourth year of their programmes, while slightly under and slightly above 20 respondents were at the first and fifth years of study respectively.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents

Characteristic	Number	%
Gender		
Male	83	62.4
Female	50	37.6
Total	133	100
Age (In Years)		
<20	19	14.3
20 – 24	72	54.1
25 – 29	36	27.1
>30	6	4.5
Total	133	100
Level of Study		
100	18	13.5
200	31	23.3
300	33	24.8
400	30	22.6
500	21	15.8
Total	133	100

Results

Frequency of Reading and Internet Use

Most of the respondents read regularly (Table 2). A total of 84 (63.2%) admitted to reading on a daily basis, while most of the rest either read on a weekly basis (14.5%) or occasionally (15.0%). However, for Internet use, the 'occasionally' response option had as many as 57.1% respondents, followed by weekly (21.1%) and bi-weekly (12.0%). It is clear that the respondents read more often and probably also for longer time periods than they used the Internet.

Table 2: Frequency of Reading and Internet Use

S/N	Option	Reading		Internet Use	
		Freq.	*%*	*Freq.*	*%*
1.	Daily	84	63.2	6	4.5
2.	Bi-weekly	10	7.5	16	12.0
3.	Weekly	19	14.3	28	21.1
4.	Monthly	0	0	7	5.3
5.	Occasionally	20	15.0	76	57.1
	Total	133	100	133	100

Purpose of Reading and Internet Use

The data presented in Table 3 show that the three main objectives for reading. They are: studying for examinations (82.7%), write term papers/ assignments (75.9%), and searching for information (60.2%). In terms of Internet use, searching for information was the most important purpose, followed by writing assignments and term papers (52.6%) and entertainment (24.8%).

Table 3: Purpose of Reading and Internet Use

Purpose	*Reading*		*Internet Use*	
	Freq.	*%*	*Freq.*	*%*
Entertainment	38	28.6	33	24.8
Studying for Examination	110	82.7	28	21.1
Searching for Information	80	60.2	114	85.7
Writing Assignment/Term papers	101	75.9	70	52.6
Others	0	0	0	0

Preference for Browsing the Internet for Information to Reading

In order to provide relevant and adequate information on this issue, it was deemed necessary to analyse respondents' Internet use activities in terms of duration of use, choice of access points and reasons for use. The findings show that a majority of respondents (55.6%) had been using the Internet for 1-4 years, while 22.6% and 21.8% of them had been using the Internet for less than one year or over four years respectively. Table 4 shows further that the respondents preferred off-campus commercial cybercafés to on-campus facilities. This is indicated by the highest frequency of 103 (77.4%) for cybercafés outside the university campus, followed by 16 (12.0%) respondents using the Afrihub ICT centre, 8 (6.0%) for the College Portal, and only 3 (2.3%) each for the University Library IT Centre and departmental/faculty facilities. The preference for commercial cybercafés is likely due to the inadequacies of the university-based Internet access facilities. However, commercial cybercafés do not usually provide ergonomically convenient facilities for online reading of materials, which can affect negatively the amount of Internet access time actually used for real-time browsing and reading activity by the students.

Table 4: Choice of Internet Access Point

Access Point	Frequency	%
Afrihub ICT Centre	16	12.0
University Library IT Centre	3	2.3
University College Portal	8	6.0
Departmental Cybercafe	3	2.3
Commercial Cybercafe outside the Campus	103	77.4
Total	133	100

On preferences for browsing the Internet for information to reading from books, magazines, journals and newspapers, almost two-thirds (61.5%) of the respondents agreed, stating their reasons in order of importance as: availability of information (56.3% of the respondents); up-to-datedness and currency of information (53.3%); quality of information (45.1%); time saving (43.6%); ease of access (39.8%); ease of transferring information (29.3%); saves cost of accessing information (17.3%).

Effects of Internet Use on Respondents' Reading Habits

The responses to an open-ended question on the effect of Internet use on reading habits were tabulated into three categories. The top category of opinions,

was that prolonged Internet use kills time for reading (36.8%).They provided a variety of reasons such as entertainment packages and Internet chatting destroys reading culture making students lazy and dormant. For some others in this category, the 'ready made answers' the Internet seems to offer for students discourages the use of printed books and journals and the use of libraries to access books and journals. By contrast, respondents who wrote in favour of Internet use (34.6%) stated that it brings about self improvement by providing faster access to information when compared to the stress of having to wade through catalogues and bookshelves. They also stated that the use of the Internet broadens knowledge by providing lots and lots of materials from diverse sources which could be downloaded and printed later for reading. Moreover, that the Internet exposes one to happenings around the world even as the events unfold. All of the foregoing may have been summarised by the opinion by one respondent that "Internet use complements reading". The last category that did not respond to the question or stated there was no effect constituted (28.6%).

Discussion

The finding of this study that the respondents read regularly seems to contradict the findings of some previous studies. Busayo (2005) found that the undergraduates in his study were not habitual readers; that they used the library during the session and normally deserted it the moment they were through with examinations. But these findings are not inconsistent with the possibility that the students in Busayo's study actually read regularly, but outside libraries and during holidays.

This study also found that respondents used the Internet only occasionally. This departs from the mostly daily Internet usage among students reported by Bao (1998) in the USA and Hamade (2009) in Kuwait. The difference may however be due to differences in ease of Internet access between Nigeria and those countries.

The findings of this study that the respondents read more for academic purposes and less for entertainment objectives are consistent with those of Nweke (1990), Unoh (2000) and Uwah (2000), that reading is very important to undergraduates in Nigeria because it helps them succeed in examinations in order to obtain the paper certificates that society emphasises so much. Thus, the majority read their handouts and lecture notes, while very few students read for other purposes like satisfying recreational interests, meeting intellectual curiosity and making proper use of leisure time.

This study found that the most important purpose for Internet use among the respondents was searching for information, which various other studies (e.g. Goldfinch, 1990 and Ray and Day, 1998) had also found. The use of Internet for entertainment purposes reported by only about a quarter of the respondents in this study seems to negate Ojedokun's (2006) finding in respect of students in Botswana, although it may be inferred that some of the information sought for and retrieved by the majority were for both academic and entertainment purposes.

Another finding of this study is of relevance to academic libraries. Students expressed confidence in the quality of the information found on the Internet. This is similar to that made by Osunade and Ojo (2006). This finding, when combined with the possibility that university libraries might also not be acquiring adequate and current books and journals, explains why students used the Internet more for obtaining academic information, while the library was used mainly for reading material obtained from outside the library. Nevertheless, Osunade and Ojo (2006) and Pooi-Fong (1998) respectively reported fewer respondents actually using the Internet to access and obtain required information relative to library usage and reading.

Ojedokun (2006) had explained that students were more comfortable with commercial cybercafés outside the campus than university-provided facilities for accessing the Internet for various reasons. These include lower prices, faster access, more privacy and freer opportunities to browse "any subject under the sun". However, other explanations are possible in the setting for this study that computer facilities provided by the University library and the faculties are inadequate. One might also consider Quarton's (2003) observation that university undergraduates are often largely unaware of the myriad of information resources available to them in their university libraries, thereby relying on publicly accessible Internet sites for their research information needs. Quarton asserted that this practice seriously undermines the academic research efforts of

undergraduates, and suggested that students must learn to use specialised research tools and approach all information sources with a critical eye.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study found out that undergraduates at the University of Calabar had favourable perceptions of the importance of both reading and Internet use in relation to their academic activities. Nevertheless, there is need to continually educate students on the proper balance that they should maintain between utilitarian and other purposes of reading, and between reading and Internet use activities for academic related purposes. The problem of inadequate computing and Internet access facilities in university libraries should also be tackled so as facilitate adequate Internet use by students, and limit students' exposure to potential anti-social activities in commercial cybercafés. Up-to-date library collections, user-friendly services and effective user awareness programmes should also be provided by university libraries in order to redefine the role of the academic library in higher education in the country. In view of the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

(a) The management of universities should monitor and implement programmes to promote and facilitate healthy reading culture among undergraduates, as well as guide their undergraduates to strike a healthy balance between reading and Internet use activities in their learning activities. In order to achieve this, undergraduates should be exposed to orientation programmes where the practice of reading as a life-long skill can be imparted to them.

(b) University librarians should explore various strategies to satisfy adequately undergraduates' rising demands for electronic resources, including the participation in library consortia. Additionally, university libraries need to promote, through effective publicity and current awareness programmes, adequate awareness among students of the variety of existing and new information resources and services available to them in their university libraries.

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