Internet Utilisation and Abuses in Selected Cybercafés in Ogun State, Nigeria

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Abstract

The Internet provides numerous resources and services that enable communication, information sharing and improved research, innovation and productivity. However, alongside the positive uses of the Internet are also negative uses, which are of growing concern. This study investigated perceptions and experiences of positive and negative uses of the Internet among users of cybercafés in Ogun State Nigeria. Using survey research design and stratified random sampling technique, a questionnaire was designed and used to collect data from 765 Internet users and managers of 24 cybercafés selected by stratified sampling technique. The results showed that the major reasons for positive Internet uses are exchanging e-mail (85.1%), searching for research materials (68%), and web browsing and chatting (58.6%). Major users of the Internet in the cybercafés were students of higher institutions, job seekers, unemployed graduates, lecturers and other workers in higher institutions, secondary school students, and school leavers. These users reported that they had observed or been the targets of the following kinds of negative uses of the Internet: online fraud and deception (78% of the them), pornography (70.6%), chatting with dubious intent (64.7%), unauthorised access to files (55.6%), posting of provocative and sexually suggestive photographs (54%), spamming (51.8%), overuse/addiction (51.5%), and use of harmful influence sites (50.6%). Respondents reported that Internet abusers were mainly students of higher institutions, unemployed graduates, school leavers, students in secondary school, and job seekers. The study recommends Internet education campaigns, Internet use policies, and monitoring and access control measures to combat Internet abuses in the country.

Keywords

Introduction

Technology has changed our world and continues to alter the way we do things, bringing with it not only tremendous benefits, but also tough challenges. The Internet is a major aspect of today's technology with its ever growing worldwide acceptance and usage. Internet use had tripled in the last few years with continued growth expected (Suhail and Barges, 2006). The Internet is the worldwide, publicly accessible network of interconnected computer networks that transmit data by packet switching, using the standard Internet protocol (IP). It is a network that consists of millions of smaller domestic, academic and government networks which together carry various information and services, such as electronic mail, online chatting, file transfer, the interlinked web pages and other documents of the world wide web (Hutchison and sawyer, 2000; Capron and Johnson, 2004).

People use Internet today for so many reasons. The Internet allows the user a range of positive practical applications such as ability to conduct research, perform business transactions, access international libraries etc (Rheingold, 1993; Turkle, 1995; Levey, 1997). Its benefits are overwhelming; however, in the view of Peters (2002), youths are very good at figuring out how to use computers and the Internet in ways that are not necessarily in their or society's best interest. Children and youths have now found new ways of positively using and abusing the Internet with incredible sophistication. This according to Peters (2002) is a product of the fusion of immaturity, curiosity and sometimes mischief, culminating in Internet abuses that might have dire consequences

Internet utilisation in this paper refers to positive and complementary uses of the Internet for general information sourcing, education and learning, social networking, professional information exchange, business transactions, etc. Internet use is becoming more and more mandatory in schools and colleges, and in business. Access to computers is increasing and with increased access worldwide, Internet has become an integral part of our lives (Huang and Alessi, 1997). Studies, such as Shotton (1991) and Griffiths (1997) had reported on the positive effects of Internet use.

Increasingly, as Internet use has proliferated worldwide, there have been debates on whether some users actually develop disturbing patterns of use or abuse (Morahan-Martin, 2005). Many studies, such as Morahan-Martin and Schumacher (1997) and Young and Case (2004), have provided evidence of the negative uses of the Internet. Although studies have shown both positive and negative impacts of Internet use, the evidence for the latter is growing (Kausar and Barges, 2006). In many African countries, negative uses of the Internet seem to hold sway among the youths, and such abuses are on the ascendancy, despite the fact that connectivity is still limited (Mutula, 2003). Ojedokun (2005) had warned on the evolving sophistication of Internet abuses in Africa.

In Nigeria, as in many African countries, cybercafés are commonplaces in major cities and towns offering access to Internet at affordable rates (Ojedokun, 2002; Omotayo, 2006). Such cybercafés offer opportunities for low income people to access the Internet. Cybercafé users in Africa are mainly youths with majority being males (Sairosse, 2003). As unemployment of the youths, school leavers and graduates increase across the continent, many of the unemployed youths use computer and Internet access facilities in the cybercafés to while away time, playing computer games, surfing the web, chatting and dating, etc. Most probably use these facilities for positive and legitimate purposes. Despite this, a growing number become addicted, watch pornography, engage in online fraud and deception, gambling, posting of sexually suggestive photographs, seduction and harassment, etc, as Ojedokun (2004) had warned.

Why is Internet abuse common? Case and King (2002) clarify that increased and continuous use of Internet comes with the risk of misuse. Access and opportunities, affordability, anonymity, convenience, escape, disinhibition, social acceptability, long and continuous use are reasons for Internet misuse (Griffiths, 2003). With the Internet, one can be relatively friendless in real life and have hundreds of friends online, and be who one wants to be rather than one actually is. Someone can become a whole different person because nobody really knows one (Awake, 2007).

Statement of the Problem

Previous studies that explored Internet addiction and its consequences includes: Young (1996), Young (1999), Chou, Condron and Belland, (2005). Internet addiction had resulted in academic failure (Murphey, 1996); in gambling (Mobila, 1993), eating disorders (Lesieur and Blume, 1993) and compulsive sexual behaviour (Goodman, 1993). Internet abuses by youths have come under scrutiny. Ybarra and Mitchell (2004) reported that Internet youth aggressors face multiple psychological challenges including poor parent-child relationship, substance use and delinquency. Six percent of youths who use the Internet in the United States have been harassed (Finkelhor, Mitchel and Wolak, 2000). Problematic Internet experience as revealed by young and adult users in a study (Mitchell; Becker-Blease and Finkelhor, 2005) were overuse, pornography, infidelity, sexual exploitation and abuse, gambling, harassment, isolative avoidant use, fraud, stealing and deception among others.

Observations and recent studies (Ojedokun, 2005; Furnell, 2005; Adebayo, Udegbe and Sunmola,

2006) suggest that Internet abuse is growing in Nigeria despite evidence to the effect that many people still use the Internet positively for personal, professional and business purposes. Internet usage, along with its associated anomalies such as overuse and avoidant use, can precipitate other misuses; especially among the youths. Internet users with good intentions to share information, undertake research, connect with friends and shop can be easily lured into abuses. The web had been continuously exploited by unscrupulous sites and individuals who post and encourage negative ideas and images to unsuspecting users.

In Nigeria, most studies of the usage of the Internet have focused on the positive purposes and benefits of use, and very few studies have been undertaken to assess the nature of Internet abuses, particularly in commercial cybercafés. This study aimed to fill the missing gap and provide insight into the prevalence and motivation for such abuses in cybercafés.

Research Questions

The study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the reasons for Internet utilisation in selected cybercafés in Ogun State Nigeria?
2. Which categories of people utilise the Internet in the cybercafés?
3. What Internet abuse activities are undertaken in the cybercafés?
4. Which categories of users are responsible for Internet abuses in cybercafés?

Hypotheses

The study also tested the following hypotheses at the five per cent level of significance:

Ho1   There is no significant gender difference in perceptions of positive uses of the Internet in the cybercafés.

Ho2   There is no significant gender difference in perceptions of negative uses of the Internet in the cybercafés.

Literature Review

The literature on Internet positive usage confirms the fact that Internet has facilitated increased collaboration and communication of richer information and knowledge which are less tied to locations. Pallen (1998) simply referred to it as a place of hope and unbounded potentials. Peters (2002) affirmed that Internet has helped students in the United States to conduct research and extend their learning beyond the confines of the library, classroom and immediate community. Internet has become a critical factor in the success of most corporations and large organisations all around the globe.

A study of Internet dependence of Taiwanese adolescents (Lin and Tsai, 2002) found that dependent and non-dependent Internet users viewed Internet use as complementary and enhancing positive peer relations. Internet has been found to improve studying hours and studying (Korgan, Odell and Schumacher, 2001). From Indonesia, Wahid, Furuholt and Kristiansen (2006) revealed that users with better education, greater personal capability and experience tend to use Internet in cybercafés for more serious purposes than others. Internet use has been found to positively affect education of students by enhancing communication with professors and classmates and by increased accessibility to research and library materials (Jones and Madden, 2002). In Africa, Ajuwon (2003) has reported increasing and positive uses of the Internet, especially by students. Ojedokun (2002) reported that 77% of students at the University of Botswana used the Internet for academic purposes, while Odero (2003) found that postgraduate students in South Africa used Internet cafes mostly for educational purposes, while undergraduates used it to chat, listen to music and to access other forms of entertainment.

Cyber sexual abuse, friendship/relationship abuse, activity abuse, information abuse, and criminal abuse, are some of the misuses of Internet users in the workplace (Griffith, 2003). In respect of Internet abuses and their effects, Li and Chung (2006) reported a relationship between indices of Internet functional use and those of Internet dependence and abuse. Suhail and Barges (2006) found positive

association between time spent on the Internet and various abuses, indicating that excessive Internet use can lead to a host of problems of educational, physical, psychological and interpersonal nature. Family and acquaintance Internet sexual offenders against minors were nearly as numerous as offenders who used the Internet to meet victims (Mitchell, Finkelhor and Wolak, 2005).

Methodology

The ex-post facto research design was used in the study. The target population was the Internet users that patronise the selected cybercafés, and the cybercafé managers in Ogun State, Nigeria. Using the four geo-political zones of Egba, Ijebu, Yewa and Remo in the state as a stratum, two prominent towns from each zone were chosen, and three cybercafés in each town were selected for the study. The eight towns where the cybercafés were located are Abeokuta and Ifo (Egba zone), Ijebu-Ode and Ijebu Igbo (Ijebu zone), Ilaro and Ota (Yewa zone), and Sagamu and Ilisan (Remo zone). The 24 cybercafés were purposively selected based on their popularity, location and patronage within each chosen town.

The cybercafé managers could not estimate the sizes of their user population, but gave estimates of the average numbers of patrons of their cybercafés per week. The total number of patrons of the selected cybercafés per week was 1,205 users. Stratified random sampling technique was used to sample 765 respondents comprising cybercafé users and the cybercafé managers.

A questionnaire titled "Internet Utilisation and Abuses Questionnaire (IUAQ)" was designed for the study. The questionnaire was examined by experts in information technology for suggestions and comments before the final version was produced. The questionnaire items had a Cronbach alpha co-efficient of 0.723. The questionnaire was distributed to respondents at two different periods of time in the morning (8.00 am - 11.00 am) and evening (4:00 pm-8.00 pm) for a period of three days. In all, 765 copies of the questionnaire were successfully administered (63.5% response rate) and used for the study.

Most of the respondents were male (68.8%), and most were single (82%). More than half of the respondents (51.8%) were students of higher institutions of learning, while 69% of them were aged 21-30 years.

Results

Research question 1: *What are the reasons for Internet utilisation in selected cybercafés in Ogun State, Nigeria?*

Respondents were asked to identify reasons why people use the Internet for positive purposes. The findings reveal that checking and sending of e-mail (85.1%) is the topmost reason for Internet use (Table 1). Other reasons include: searching for research materials (68%), general web browsing (58.6%) and chatting with friends and acquaintances (58.6%). Other less notable reasons for Internet use were finding useful information on job placement (47.7%), sporting and entertainment information (45.2%), downloading and listening to music (36.1%) and participating in news and discussion groups (27.3%).

Table 1: Frequency of Selection by Respondents of Reasons for Internet Use

S/N	Reasons for Internet use	Response frequency	% (N=765)
1	Checking and sending e-mail	651	85.1
2	Search for research materials	520	68.0
3	Chatting with friends	450	58.8
4	General web browsing	448	58.6
5	Finding information on job placement	365	47.7
6	Sporting and entertainment information	346	45.2
7	Downloading and listening to music	276	36.1
8	Participation in news and discussion groups	209	27.3
9	E-commerce	197	25.8

Research question 2: Which categories of people utilise the Internet in the cybercafés?

The results in Table 2 show that the categories of users who utilise the Internet for positive activities, in the opinion of the respondents, are: students in higher institutions of learning ($\bar{x}$=0.92), unemployed graduates ($\bar{x}$=0.69), lecturer and workers in higher institutions (=0.56), secondary school students (=0.54), school leavers (=0.48), and job seekers (=0.25).

Table 2: Categories of People who use the Internet for Positive Purposes

S/N	Categories of Internet users	$\bar{x}$ (Mean)	Standard deviation
1	Students in higher institutions of learning	0.92	0.28
2	Job seekers	0.75	0.44
3	Unemployed graduates	0.69	0.46
4	Lecturers and workers in higher institutions of learning	0.56	0.50
5	Students in secondary schools	0.54	0.50
6	School leavers	0.48	0.50
7	Organised private sector workers	0.32	0.47
8	Self-employed persons	0.23	0.42
9	School teachers	0.18	0.39
10	Civil servants	0.14	0.34

Research question 3: What Internet abuse activities are undertaken in the cybercafés?

Respondents were asked to identify the activities through which, in their experience and opinions, the Internet is often misused or abused. Online fraud and deception (78% of the respondents) and pornography watching (70.6%) were the leading Internet abuse activities (Table 3). Other abuses were chatting with dubious intents (64.7%), unauthorised access to files and data (55.6%), posting of provocative and sexually suggestive photographs (54.6%), spamming (51.8%), overuse/addiction (51.5%), and use of harmful influence sites (50.6%). Isolative avoidant use (23%) and online teasing (28.6%) were the least methods of Internet abuse.

Table 3: Ranking of Methods of Internet Abuse in the Cybercafés

S/N	Methods of Internet abuse	Response frequency	% (N=765)
1	Online fraud and deception	597	78.0
2	Watching of pornography	540	70.6
3	Chatting with dubious intents	495	64.7
4	Unauthorised access to files, data	425	55.6
5	Posting of provocative and sexually suggestive photographs	418	54.6
6	Sending of spam mails	396	51.8
7	Overuse/addiction	394	51.5
8	Use of harmful influence sites	387	50.6
9	Posting of deceptive personal details to unknown people	348	45.5
10	Online gambling	341	44.6
11	Searching and chatting for dates	310	40.5
12	Online harassment	236	30.8
13	Spreading of rumours, gossips, false information	226	29.5
14	Relentless online teasing	219	28.6
15	Isolative avoidant use	176	23.0

Research Question 4: Which categories of users are responsible for Internet abuses in cybercafés?

The respondents perceived that Internet abusers are mainly students of higher institutions of learning

(=1.07), unemployed graduates (=1.05), school leavers (=1.05), students in secondary school (=1.03) and job seekers (=1.02). The least abusers were civil servants (=0.40), secondary school teachers (=0.89) and private sector workers (=0.91).

Table 4: Ranking of Categories of Internet Abusers in the Cybercafés

S/N	Categories of Internet abusers	$\bar{x}$ (Mean)	Standard deviation
1	Students of higher institutions	1.07	0.93
2	Unemployed graduates	1.05	0.91
3	School leavers	1.05	0.88
4	Students in secondary school	1.03	0.95
5	Job seekers	1.02	0.95
6	Self employed persons	0.97	0.71
7	Lecturers and workers in higher institution	0.96	0.44
8	Organised private sector workers	0.91	0.60
9	Teachers in schools	0.89	0.59
10	Civil servants	0.40	0.73

Test of Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant gender difference in perceptions of positive uses of the Internet in the cybercafés.

The results of the student t-test comparing perceptions by male and female respondents on their perceptions of positive uses of the Internet are shown in Table 5. The test is not significant, as the probability of the calculated t is $0.442 > 0.05$. So the null hypothesis accepted. There are no significant differences between male and female respondents in their perceptions of the nature of positive uses of the Internet.

Table 5: Comparison of Internet Positive Utilisation based on Gender

	Gender	
	Male	Female
N	526	239
χ	29.7947	29.5888
Standard Deviation	9.0214	8.5984
DF	763	
t-calculated	0.301	
P	0.442	
Remarks	Test not Significant	

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant gender difference in perceptions of negative uses of the Internet in the cybercafés.

The results of the student t-test comparing perceptions by male and female respondents on their perceptions of negative uses of the Internet are shown in Table 6. The test is not significant, as the probability of the calculated t is $0.109 > 0.05$. So the null hypothesis accepted. There are no significant differences between male and female respondents in their perceptions of the nature of abuses of the Internet.

Table 6: Comparison of Internet Abuse based on Gender

	Gender	
	Male	Female
N	526	239
$\bar{x}$	41.3346	42.9540
Standard Deviation	13.1683	12.3132
DF	763	
t-calculated	-1.608	
P	0.109	
Remarks	Test not Significant	

Discussion

Weiser (2000) has noted that the gender gap in favour of men with regards to Internet use is diminishing especially among teenagers and early adult users who grew up in this digital age. However, this study has

confirmed that the majority of Internet users in cybercafés in developing countries were males, and students, as was also found by Wahid, Furuholt and Kristainsen (2006). The male gender has shown more interest for technology than the female. This could be as a result of the aggressive and adventurous nature of male gender.

The study found that checking and sending of e-mails, searching for research information, web browsing and chatting are among the major reasons for Internet use in the cybercafés. This is consistent with the finding of Jones and Madden (2002).

The study also suggests that because males engage more in these activities than females, they are also likely to constitute the majority of Internet abusers.

The categories of persons who utilise the Internet most were discovered to be students of higher education institutions, job seekers, unemployed graduates, staff of tertiary institutions and secondary school students. Students are heavy Internet users in cybercafés in many developing countries probably because of inadequate Internet access facilities in their universities, colleges and schools, coupled with high drive for adventure and opportunities, and the need to meet academic information needs.

It was revealed that Internet abuses in the cybercafés largely occur through online fraud and deception, watching of pornography, chatting with dubious intents, unauthorised access to files and data, posting of provocative and sexually suggestive photographs, spamming, overuse/addiction, and use of harmful influence sites, among others. These findings agree with those of Griffith (2003). This indicates that young Internet users in Nigeria are becoming sophisticated in their use of the Internet for unwholesome activities, in line with global trends. Indeed, online fraud and deception constitute a growing menace among unemployed youths in Nigeria seeking quick financial gains by any means. Pornography is of course a global problem with many websites featuring explicit sex images for the unwary to stumble upon.

This study also found that Internet use in the cybercafés in itself is associated with Internet abuse, with high users of the Internet for positive purposes being also reported as the most likely perpetrators of Internet abuses. This corroborates Li and Chung (2006) and Suhail and Barges (2006). The fallout

from these findings is that unrestricted and unmanaged Internet access, especially among students and youths, can lead to misuse with dire consequences for other users and the society. If left unchecked, initially minor and individual Internet abuses can easily result, through social networking among youths and students at commercial cybercafés, into widespread pattern of abuse. Thus, those youths and students who would not typically want to misuse the Internet would eventually succumb to peer pressure.

This study found no gender differences in respondents' perceptions of the positive or negative uses and users of the Internet. In recent times, the female gender has been measuring up to the males in Internet usage (Enochsson, 2005). By implication, the female gender could also be effective users and abusers of the Internet, and this is likely to be true of the Net generation of users (Enochsson, 2005).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Students, and particularly of the male gender, are dominant users of the Internet who positively utilise and abuse the Internet with increasing sophistication. The finding of this study suggests that Internet use by itself, when uncontrolled, easily precipitate misuse with costly consequences. The Internet is a veritable tool for global communication and enhancement of social and educational benefits. However, it is crucial to understand the danger that the Internet poses. especially to our unsuspecting young citizens. The youths in developing countries have quickly bridged the digital gap in terms of sophistication in Internet usage, which has also encouraged abuses. This same scenario prevails in developed countries and clearly reinforces the need for policy regulation of Internet uses and abuses in order to protect the youth and society. Based on the findings of this study, it is therefore recommended that:

-   Internet utilisation, especially among youths and students, should have restrictions within reasonable limits.
-   Internet service providers (ISPs) and cybercafé operators should support and undertake periodic Internet education campaigns in schools that highlight the positive uses of the Internet and its attendant benefits. ISPs and cybercafés should

also collaborate with relevant government agencies to raise the awareness of Internet abuse in schools and higher education institutions through orientation programmes and sponsored seminars.

- Government should develop and enforce effective Internet use and abuse policies and legislation in collaboration with stakeholders in the information and communications technology industry.

- Cybercafés should install server-based monitoring and access control software to effectively check all sorts of abuses, including blocking harmful sites.

- It is suggested that a similar study be carried out in other states and geo-political zones of Nigeria, as well as among specific Internet user groups, as this would enable useful comparisons.

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