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INTERNET AWARENESS AND UTILIZATION AS AN INFORMATION SOURCE AT A NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the level of accessibility and the benefits derived from utilizing the Internet as an information source by final year undergraduate students of Ladoko Akintola University of Technology, Nigeria. A questionnaire was used to gather data from undergraduate students in the Faculties of Agriculture, Science, Technology and Environmental Science. The results revealed that Nigerian undergraduate students appreciate and know the benefits of utilizing the facilities provided by the Internet for their academic pursuits. However, they are faced with problems such as exorbitant charges by commercial centres where they browse the Internet, erratic power supply, and poor telecommunication infrastructure. The study also discovered that the private sector computer business is really flourishing in Nigeria because most Nigerian Universities do not have Internet facilities except the one provided by private organizations.

KEYWORDS: UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES, ELECTRONIC INFORMATION, INFORMATION LITERACY

Introduction

The Internet has become a craze amongst users such as students, researchers, teachers, businesses, professionals etc in Third-World countries that it amply demonstrates that a real need is being met, despite some of the shortcomings experienced by its users. Almost all of Africa's 55 countries are connected to the Internet and Nigeria has not been left out. According to Sangowusi (2003), the Internet is seen to be transforming the way in which research is being conducted. However, in Africa, scientists and researchers were the first to understand the importance of the net but now students in tertiary institutions are very much involved in navigating the Internet. The Internet can simply be defined as a global network of computers. The Internet is the name given to the cumulative electronic networks of computers and computer networks which are interconnected throughout the world and which constitute a vast information resource facility (Hinson, 2005). The Internet, according to Ojo-Igbinoba (1997) has made organizations and individuals, even those without the benefit of good information services to begin to see the advantages and opportunities that the creative and rapid utilization of information for decision making and production will bring to their survival and effectiveness. The Internet is important to Nigerian students especially because the educational system is in great crisis due to diminishing budget resources as a result of structural adjustment measures put in place by the Nigerian government. This explains the incessant strikes by university workers over the deteriorating

state of Nigerian universities, which has disrupted academic calendars. This has also affected poor funding of libraries and documentation centres necessary for teaching, learning, research and knowledge dissemination. The emergence of the Internet has had a profound impact on library and information services in particular. However, most university libraries in Nigeria are unable to provide Internet services to their academic community. The Internet is therefore becoming a stopgap measure, offering access to current scientific publications. It has also given African researchers and students the chance to publish research reports and browse through the large amount of information available through the Internet.

Nigeria, like most developing countries is an "Information-poor" country. The scarcity of public current information is particularly acute in the informatics area, which has joined the Internet at the end users and providers. However, there are many end users in Nigeria and few providers. This is because the country cannot afford its own resources to mount the infrastructure necessary for the Internet.

Different studies (Mensah, 1996, Roach, 1989, Huber, 1990, Lucey, 1995 and Ibegwam, 2004) have highlighted the disadvantages that a nation and its industrial sector would face if they do not position themselves to harness and use the Internet. However, much research has been conducted on the Internet's impact, awareness and usage at universities in developed countries but a great deal has been done in developing countries (Hinson, 2005). This is because the use of Information Technology (IT) is a tool for leveraging different activities in the global economy and the young ones should not be left out. The problems encountered in navigating the Internet in developing countries are likely to be different from those encountered by Internet users in developed countries.

Therefore the objectives of this study are:

- (a) To investigate the benefits derived from browsing the Internet;
- (b) To investigate how accessible the Internet is to Nigerian undergraduates;
- (c) To ascertain types of facilities utilized on the Internet; and
- (d) To examine the problems that hinder the use of the Internet and how they may be addressed.

Literature Review

The Internet is a cooperative computer network of networks that links governments, schools, libraries, corporations, individuals, and others to each other and to vast information resources. According to Bostid (1996), the Internet can be used to send electronic mail messages and access public services, magazines and newspapers, library cards and catalogues and databases, college discussion groups, satellite images, speeches, scientific papers etc. Else quoted by Ebijuwa (2005) listed other things that could be done on the Internet. According to him, "users can exchange private messages with friends, publish journals electronically, set up a 'reading group' and access data banks on enormous variety of subjects. In his survey of literature

about ongoing research information systems, Freeman (1994) quoted Hersey who pointed out that individuals, students and managers use Internet services in order to:

- (a) avoid duplication of work already done or under way elsewhere;
- (b) locate sources of financial support;
- (c) stimulate ideas for definition and selection of projects;
- (d) identify gaps in areas where research has been done;
- (e) locate individuals with expertise;
- (f) gain intelligence about the progress of competitors; and
- (g) Complement researches of completed research.

The inadequate funding for the purchase of books and subscriptions to academic journals, coupled with the general absence of up to date information required for research and teaching in most African universities makes electronic communication very attractive to research, teaching and general acquisition of information (Chisenga, 1997). However, the Internet has become more commercialized in Nigeria. It is being used by all sectors of the society as opposed to its origins when it was the domain of academics and researchers. According to Yimba (1997), the Internet has made information resources of the world more accessible to ordinary people all over the world. Access to the Internet has made available valuable information at the fingertips of people, and this is making people information conscious.

The Internet can be utilized in the following ways: sending and receiving of electronic mail messages; contacting and searching other computers at different locations; copying of files between computers; getting the latest news and information and chatting with people through electronic newsgroups; shopping and business. The Internet also supports a range of services like the Remote Log In, World Wide Web, ListServe, Newsgroups etc. The Internet as Yimba (1997) listed below provides the following benefits to its users.

- Powerful search utilities to locate information stored on millions of computers around the world
- Access to colleagues through nearly instantaneous transmission/ receipt of e-mail messages and files
- Access to a large and growing array of online journals and databases on various subjects
- Use of remote computer resources and instrumentation
- Distance education and other cooperative projects
- Facilitation of peer review, thereby strengthening research and journal publication
- Dissemination of all kinds of data and information

Africa in general and Nigeria in particular has a lot to gain from the vast information available on the Internet. This however depends on being able to gain adequate access to the available information on the Internet. According to Brosse (1996), the benefits to be gained from the Internet for the black continent lies in the fact that African surfers are anxious to break free from their scientific, cultural, or economic isolation. This comes not only from relationships between Africa and the rest of the world, but often from relationships between regions and countries on the African continent itself. Bringing electronic networking and Internet capability to the continent opens many avenues of communication that create a variety of other opportunities. Therefore people who have the need or desire to communicate about a particular subject can do so without being either physically present in the same location or even available at the same time. However the importance of the Internet for Nigerian browsers lies in being able to transmit greater quality of information more cheaply than by using other communication techniques.

Methodology

The survey design was adopted as the technique to be used for this study. The study was designed to cover a representative sample of final year students from Ladoké Akintola University of Technology (LAUTECH), Nigeria in 2006.

Selection of Population

The population of the study consisted of final year students from the Faculties of Agriculture, Science, Technology and Environmental Sciences. The information was obtained from LAUTECH Full Time Students Head Count Enrolment List for year 2004/2005 academic year. The statistics showed that the total population of final year students was 2,079. This was made up of 1,438 male students and 641 female students respectively. In all 416 (20%) of the final year students were selected as sample for the study.

Sampling Design

The sampling design used for the study was the proportional stratified sampling design. The sample was stratified according to the faculties that existed in the University. This includes the faculties of Agriculture, Science, Technology and Environmental Sciences. The following procedure was followed to obtain the stratification of the final year students as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Distribution of Sample by Faculty

Faculties	Total	Sample Size (20%)	Respondents
Agriculture	595	119	68
Science	306	61	37
Engineering	1036	207	82
Environmental	147	29	17
Total	2079	416	204

Source: Field Survey, 2006

Data Collection

Undergraduate students who participated in this study were randomly chosen using the balloting procedure. However, two hundred and twenty three (223) copies of the questionnaire were completed and returned representing 53.6% of the distributed questionnaire. However, two hundred and four (204) copies of the questionnaire were found usable and analyzed for this study. The study included 119 (58.3%) male students while 85 (41.7%) were female students.

The data for this study were collected between March and April, 2006. Copies of the questionnaire were given to the students' representatives of each department. The data collection took seven and a half weeks.

Analysis of Data

The data generated for the study was analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The data was analyzed using frequencies, tables, percentages and bar charts.

Results and Discussions

As represented in Table 2, the respondents were asked to indicate when they became computer literate. The study revealed that 11.3% of respondents became computer literate less than one year ago, 16.7% undergraduate students became computer literate two years ago, the majority (44.1%) indicated that they became computer literate three years ago, while 27.9% students became computer literate more than five years ago. They were likewise asked to indicate when they started browsing the Internet (Table 2). In respect of this, 5.4% indicated that they started using the Internet a year ago, 34.3% have been using the Internet for two years, 59.3% for three years, while only 1% have used this facility for more than 5 years. Comparing when they started browsing the Internet and when they became computer literate, it was discovered that majority of these students had known how to operate the computer long before they had the opportunity to browse the Internet.

Table 2: Years of Internet browsing and computer experience

Years of Internet browsing	Years of computer experience			
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
1 years	11	5.4	23	11.3
2 years	70	34.3	34	16.7
3 years	121	59.3	90	44.1
Above 5 years	2	1.0	57	27.9
Total	204	100	204	100

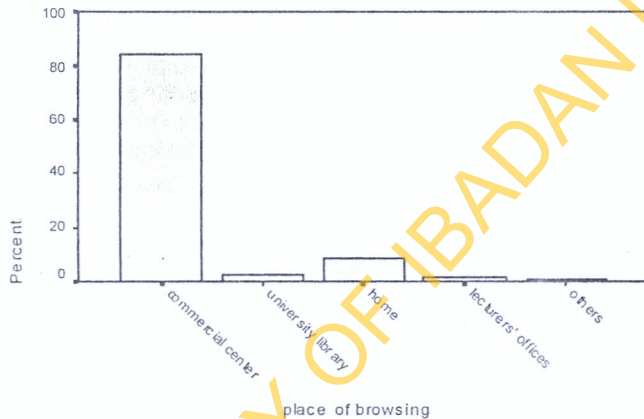
Source: Field Survey, 2006

The study investigated how frequently the respondents utilized the Internet as a source of information. It was discovered that majority of the students (68, constituting 33.3%) utilized the

Internet occasionally. This could be interpreted to mean that they browse the Internet but they cannot quantify how often they do this. On the other hand, 67 (32.8%) browse the Internet on a weekly basis. This result indicates that very few undergraduate students of the University can afford to surf the Internet on a daily basis.

The respondents were asked to state where they browse the Internet. According to Fig. I majority of the students browse the Internet by using commercial/business centres (84.8%) while few respondents browse the Internet at home (8.8%) and from other university libraries (2.0%) because LAUTECH is yet to also procure and install an Internet service in the University Library. The study found out that very few respondents browse the Internet in their lecturers' offices (2.0%) and in other places (1.5%) like their fathers' offices, uncles' offices etc.

Fig. I: Place of browsing the Internet

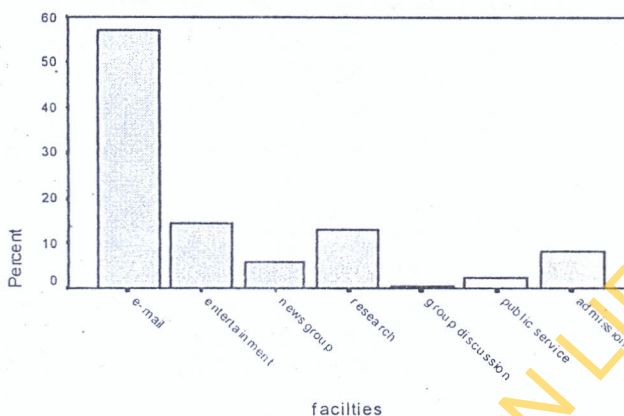


When the respondents were asked to indicate the facilities they use most on the Internet (Fig. II), most of them indicated that they use the Internet to check their e-mails (56.9%), followed by entertainment (14.2%), research (12.7%), admission and scholarships (7.8%), newsgroups (5.4%), public services (2.5%), while only one person indicated participation in discussion groups (0.5%). This shows that majority of Nigerian undergraduate students use the Internet to check their emails, for research and entertainment while participating in newsgroups/discussion groups is still a facility that is not utilized by most Internet users in Nigeria.

The respondents were then asked about the benefits that they derive from using the Internet as an information source. From their responses it was observed that undergraduate students derive a lot from the Internet due to the fact that the university library does not have adequate books to go round the students and the students cannot afford to buy textbooks for all their courses because most science and engineering related textbooks are very expensive.

According to Table 3, majority of the respondents indicated that they use the electronic mail to send/receive mails from friends and relatives around the world, while others use the electronic

Fig II: Facilities used on the Internet



mail to receive/send mails from their lecturers, participate in discussion groups and to receive information from different organizations.

Table 3: Use of Electronic mail

Use of Electronic mail	Frequency	Percent
Send/receive mails from friends and relatives	180	88.2
Send/receive mails from lecturers	10	4.9
To participate in discussion groups	5	2.5
Others	9	4.4
Total	204	100

Source: Field Survey, 2006

When respondents were asked to indicate what materials they downloaded most from the Internet, majority of the respondents (51.5%) indicated that they downloaded academic materials from the Internet while 60 (29.4%) download e-mail messages. Other downloads included newspaper articles (5.4%), computer software (3.9%), audio files (3.9%), computer games (3.4%), phonographic materials (2.5%) and automobiles (0.5%). This result shows that majority of the undergraduate students are interested in downloading either academic materials or sending and accessing e-mail messages from the Internet. Moreover the study discovered that the favorite search engines for the students included Yahoo (43.6%), Google (23%), one box (13.2%) and Hotmail (8.3%). On the other hand less than 5% of the respondents indicated 37.com, WebCrawler, Excite, Justice, Infoseek, Alta Vista as their favorite search engines on the Internet.

In Nigeria, majority of the commercial centres with Internet services operate what is known as "Night Browsing" where they charge less amount of money per hour than they do during the day from their patrons. This study affirms that 118 (57.8%) of the respondents go for night browsing

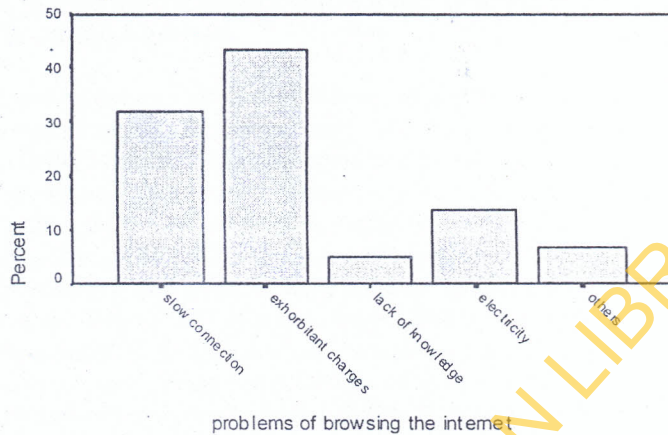
while 86 (42.2%) browse during the daytime. They were then asked to give the reasons why they prefer browsing the Internet during the night. It was found out that 48 (23.5%) of the respondents navigate the Internet at night because it is more convenient for them while 44 (21.6%) go for night browsing because it is cheaper than browsing during the day. However, 19 (9.3%) respondents felt the search engine will work faster because less people will be on the net while 7 (3.4%) gave other personal reasons like low patronage of cyber cafés at night. Some of the respondents did not respond because they do not browse at night.

The respondents were asked about how accessible the Internet service is to them. Majority (66%) felt that the Internet service is not really accessible because there is no such service within their university. They still have to go outside their university to visit commercial /business centres where the facility is available at a high cost. When asked if browsing the Internet had improved their academic and intellectual performance they all answered in the affirmative. Jensen (2000) posited in his study that in spite of the huge development of the African continent, Internet development on the continent has been confined to capital cities. In other words, LAUTECH as a university situated in a suburban community in Nigeria may find it difficult having access to the Internet. The respondents were then asked to compare the resources found in their university library with the resources found on the Internet. Their responses revealed that what they gain from the Internet can not be compared to what LAUTECH university library offers because the latter was not well stocked. Moreover, they cannot borrow the library books until Friday of every week which does not adequately meet their academic needs.

The respondents were asked to indicate how long they spend in surfing the Internet per week. In all 76% of the respondents spend between 1-3 hours on the Internet, 9.3% between 4-6 hours, 13.2% spend between 7-9 hours, and 1.5% spend over 10 hours in a day on the Internet (especially at night). This could be due to financial constraints as shown below in Figure 3. In Nigeria, many people cannot afford to spend more than 1-3 hours whenever they browse the Internet because of higher charges by the commercial centres.

The study sought to identify the problems that students face in using the Internet. Figure III reveals that exorbitant charges by commercial centres was rated highest by the respondents, slow Internet connection or low transmission speed is another problem that the Internet users are facing, fluctuation of electricity has also hindered adequate access to the Internet in Nigeria. Some respondents lacked knowledge on how to search on the Internet while few others gave other reasons such as bad connectivity and poor telecommunications infrastructure.

Fig. III: Problems faced in the Internet browsing



Conclusion

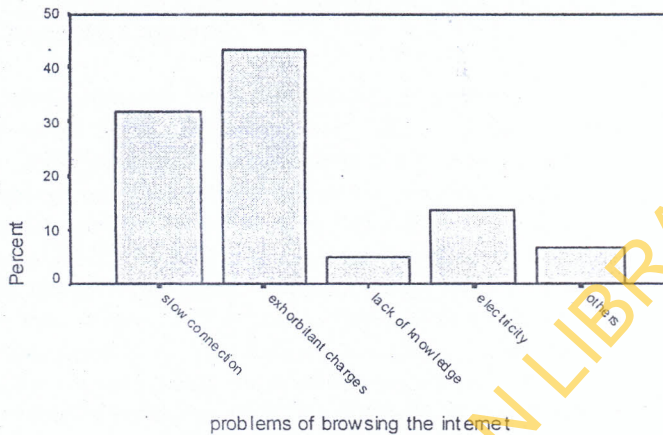
The creation, processing, storage, retrieval and dissemination of information have been tremendously enhanced because of recent developments in information technology. The Internet has become a major development that allows access to information resources. This research has confirmed that undergraduate students derive several benefits from utilizing the Internet especially for academic purposes, sending e-mails, downloading information and entertainment. Nevertheless, they have not been able to utilize the Internet to the fullest. The results indicate that the use of the Internet is still basically for electronic mail purposes while surfing for general and specific usage is still low. Although the IT situation has been changing gradually over the years in Nigeria as a developing country, it is prudent to say that there is still much to be done regarding digital information through telematics.

Recommendations

The improvement in the quality of research and education by undergraduate students in Nigeria can be achieved by linking all higher education institutions to the Internet. In addition, Nigerian researchers can participate in the use of knowledge on the Internet when their institution is linked.

The Nigerian government has been paying attention to the national need for communication and information. The government has also been organizing workshops for policymakers and IT managers on troubleshooting and system maintenance. There is still the need for continuous training for technical personnel, plans for computer education at all levels of education and the formulation of a national policy on information technology. Information technology, if planned and developed properly can bring about greater efficiency in research, library operations, better working conditions, faster decision making and efficient information retrieval services especially when the Internet is utilized. According to Onu (2004), for libraries and information centres in this

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The creation, processing, storage, retrieval and dissemination of information have been tremendously enhanced because of recent developments in information technology. The Internet has become a major development that allows access to information resources. This research has confirmed that undergraduate students derive several benefits from utilizing the Internet especially for academic purposes, sending e-mails, downloading information and entertainment. Nevertheless, they have not been able to utilize the Internet to the fullest. The results indicate that the use of the Internet is still basically for electronic mail purposes while surfing for general and specific usage is still low. Although the IT situation has been changing gradually over the years in Nigeria as a developing country, it is prudent to say that there is still much to be done regarding digital information through telematics.

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part of the world to remain relevant and attract the patronage and support of the users, general public and government of the day, they should be dynamic and proactive by adapting to the modern ICT age in serving their clients by establishing a vibrant Internet that would not be hindered by electricity power supply. With this, the library will not in anyway complain of poor patronage and complain about government negligence. However, the issues of stable electricity power supply, good telecommunications, foreign currency to purchase equipment and subscription to network need to be tackled.

It could be seen that undergraduate students in Nigeria appreciate and utilize the Internet. As wonderful as teleconferencing has become, most researchers, academics, businessmen and even students have not had any encounter with this Internet facility (Sangowusi, 2003). Teleconferencing is far from being reached in Nigeria because the technological knowledge about teleconferencing is still at the initial stage. According to Evan (1977), "in every country... a certain amount of scientific and technological information... is processed and stored in some fashion for the benefits of the user". Unless these users know how to find relevant information available to them, the information "machinery" falls short of its main goal. It appears that, not only must they know how, but also they must be motivated to use this knowledge.

Thus, the Nigerian government should make adequate funds available to tertiary institutions in order to procure and install the Internet within the academic community. The use of the Internet, according to Lwehabura and Matovelo (1999), has enabled researchers and scholars in African universities to get access to international online systems and databases, electronic journals and other full text documents, bibliographic references, factual and numeric data available from libraries and information centres in different parts of the world. This is necessary because students and researchers need access to the latest research and need to keep abreast of international developments in their field. Ojedokun (2001) noted that access to information technology in libraries has the potential to achieve unprecedented gains in economic and human development in Africa. For linkages of information, library centres should aim at facilitating information sharing among researchers with the use of information technology which is better than depending on conventional means

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