

Believability Of Internet Sources: An Assessment Of University Undergraduate Communication Students’ Use And Perception

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Abstract

The study examined university regular undergraduate communication students’ use and perception of the internet as information sources. The main objective of the study was to find out whether the students use and perceive internet information sources as credible. The study was inspired by the researchers’ classroom interaction experience with undergraduate communication students on internet credibility and the seemed unending global debate about the credibility of the internet as information sources. The study was designed as a survey. Data were collected from 580 regular undergraduate communication students of three sampled universities in Anambra State through a structured survey. Results of the survey revealed high use of internet sources of information among the students. Result also revealed that the students perceived the internet as credible information sources. The perception was borne out of the students’ belief that internet sources have authors’ details, henceo their regular use of the sources for academic purposes. This implies that students believe in the credibility of the internet as information sources and therefore utilize them in their academic researches and projects. It is recommended that lecturers should expose and guide students more on the use of internet and in particular the most credible websites for academic interactions.

Keywords: *believability, internet source, perception and credibility*

I. Introduction

Information seeking is and has become an important part of people’s everyday life especially with the evolution of the internet. There is an obvious increasing interest in seeking and searching for facts and figures from the internet between and among people of various strata who are internet literate and have access to it. Prior to this evolution, academics and students sought for information mainly from primary sources of information such as books and other printed

materials especially from school libraries. But with the internet, information seeking has taken another tremendous direction and a positive one too. Internet access and use is a lot faster and easier as far as information seeking is concerned. This explains why multitudes of people have keyed into it by becoming internet literate and friendly as asserted by Marie (2016) in this statement: ‘The internet has gained about five million users in just five years. There are over one billion internet users today which are about 20% of the world’s population’. To access the net, one needs just a click of the mouse of an internet device.

Internet can still be graded as a recent innovation in the developing countries judging that it was hardly heard of in the 70s and 80s. It is still evolving and has come to stay as permanent sources of information on almost every aspect of human endeavour. Information on anything can be accessed from the net and it is a positive development in the world today. Christiansen (2018) shared this view when she writes that ‘the internet is very important because it is the limitless space where people have access to pretty much infinite amount of information.’ Baeza-Yates (2019) corroborates by stating that ‘the internet is a good place to rapidly collect large amounts of data. But if you don’t watch out you will collect very biased, one-sided data’. It is like an endless virtual library where thousands of new sources of information are added every second of the day (internet research, n.d). Access to the net has eased the stress of regular visits to school libraries to seek for information from books and other printed materials before one could write academic papers and projects. The presence of the net has obviously widened human horizon and improved teaching and learning in schools. It has changed the face of knowledge acquisition because people make more researches and write more academic papers much easier now than before.

People use the net for different reasons. Weber (2011) gave ten reasons why people use the internet to include information, communication, entertainment,

work, school work, relationships, markets, sexuality, self expression and ask for help but the concern here is on the use of the internet for information sourcing for school work. A study on internet utilization pattern of undergraduate students in College of Agriculture and Technology Pant Agar shows that 61.5% male respondents and 51.6% female respondents use the internet for undertaking their academic assignment (Okafor, 2015).

II. Statement of the Problem

Many critics have voiced that internet information is credible while some have viewed it as bias and not reputable for reasons that anybody who is internet literate and has internet access can write and post anything whether correct or incorrect on the net. The debate seems unending not just in Nigeria but globally when most of the materials researchers, professionals, academics and students use to write academic papers, thesis and projects are now accessed more from the internet. Even our communication students in one of our class interactions, engaged us in a serious argument about internet credibility when we asked them to browse the internet and write an assignment. Internet involves user generated contents and therefore the source and truthfulness of these contents are sometimes in doubt or uncertain with the credibility problem associated with the net.

The study sought answers to the following research questions thus:

1. Do Nigerian university regular undergraduate communication students access the internet for information?
2. How do they rate internet information in terms of credibility?
3. What influences their perception of internet information credibility?
4. To what extent do these undergraduates' reliance on the internet to write assignments and class notes influence their perception of internet information credibility?

III. Literature Review

Literature search for the study revealed that people have really written a lot on credibility of the internet as information sources. While some view it as credible sources of information, some undermine it as full of bias and not reputable and yet others are neutral about it. Pow and Sandy (2015) assert that 'due to the ease of publishing information online in the Web 2.0 environment, information is being added to the Web at an amazing rate... Much of the information we can now acquire from the net is unproven'. Evaluating source credibility becomes necessary because of the

overwhelming size of the internet which has grown from being a source of scholarly information to a mass medium of all kinds of communication. Even citizen journalists seem more active in news generation and dissemination these days than the professional ones. A citizen journalist is one who is not a professional journalist but who disseminates information using web sites, blogs and social media (Albarado, 2019). Citizen journalists are this active because of free internet access and its non censorship. Many people are into this kind of journalism with the proliferation of websites.

Commenting on the multiplicity or proliferation of web sites and their free access, Connors (2019) writes that 'as at 2018, there were over 1.8 billion websites in the world, many of which are protected by free speech and anti- censorship laws. Website owners can print anything they want, true or not, without worrying about the consequences'. This brought up the credibility debate among scholars. As much as the debate may seem unending, one cannot just write off the indispensable role internet sources play in today's literacy because not all internet sources are biased. The academia must continue to make use of the net for information.

In a study carried out by Apuke and Iyendo (2018) on university students' usage of the internet for research and learning in North-East Nigeria using 250 undergraduates, the finding revealed that the students believed that the use of the internet enabled them to perform research ahead of the time, tackle multiple homework, widen their scope of reading and learning, promote self-learning, encourage and enhance peer learning as well as ameliorate students' examination preparation. This is true to the net and it is undisputable and no wonder Kriscautzky and Ferreiro (2014) on their part, maintain that 'the frequency of internet use for the purposes of study among the youth and children highlights the need to use the medium... using the internet to find information for study has been incorporated to educational practices at different levels. At the university level, internet searches have become indispensable for longer than a decade'.

Still on usage of internet by students, a study of internet use by students of University of Lagos found low use of internet among students in the faculty of Law and Education though net use have very high influence on their academic carrier (Okafor, 2015). Okafor (2015) again carried out a study on internet use by students of Obafemi Awolowo University and his result showed that 89.9% of the students used the net, access point being mainly through cybercafé and major hindrances to efficient internet use included slowness of the server and payment for access time. Similar study was carried out among students of Federal University Technology, Akure, Nigeria. The study examined the

internet access and use by the students. The result showed that only 3.4% of the respondents were not using the internet (Okafor, 2015) meaning that greater percentage of the students was using the net. Ani (2010) studied undergraduate students in three Nigerian universities to investigate the extent and level of internet access and use as well as the electronic resources used by the students. The findings of the study revealed that the internet is extensively used by the undergraduate students in the sampled universities.

In as much as using the net for research among university students is acclaimed to be indispensable, there should be concern over how the students perform such searches. Do they just goggle and paste without acknowledging the authors? Do they also read and interpret the contents for credibility before use? Kricautzky and Ferreiro (2014) ask whether students copy and paste almost without reading what they have selected and without considering the validity of the information because they are unable to address issues of validity and credibility. The question is significant till date because academic papers are built on credibility. They advise that it is important to know whether youths or students have resources to make decisions while selecting information for study. The need for students to be guided better must have prompted the incorporation of internet use in some schools. Internet use includes evaluating sources for authenticity, reliability and believability because for a source to be credible, it must show these evidences (Harris, 1999). Lack of trust on internet information runs counter from making it an even more important and influential source.

On source credibility, the result of a study carried out on online daily newspaper journalists' perception of the credibility of internet news information revealed that internet news information was viewed as moderately credible overall and that online newspaper journalists rated internet news information as significantly more credible than did print newspaper journalists (Cassidy, 2007). Baize-Yates (2019) reiterates that the internet is teeming with fake news and fake review while Chamorro-Premuzic (2019) asserts that most of the stories we consume online are as valuable as daytime television. For online information to be acclaimed as valuable, it implies that it is also credible because it is its credibility that makes it valuable. Chamorro-Premuzic (2019), however, adds that 'since online content is often curated to fit our preferences, interests and personality, the internet can even enhance our existing biases and undermine our motivation to learn new things'. Chamorro-Premuzic is of the view that internet information is valuable even though it can also enhance our existing biases and concludes that the internet is best understood as a

cultural lens through which we construct or distort reality.

On the perception of electronic resources and services by undergraduate students of Calabar, Nigeria, the finding revealed a mix of positive and negative perception (Odu & Afebende, 2015). This implies that some students of Calabar perceive electronic resources to be credible while some do not.

IV. Methodology

The study was designed as a survey. It was domiciled in Anambra State of Nigeria using one Federal university, one State university and one privately owned university in the State. The choice of the universities reflected the various university ownership patterns in the country. The population for the study was all regular undergraduate communication students of every university in the State but only three universities in the State were purposively decided on using a simple random sampling. The three universities are Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Unizik (a Federal university) with regular undergraduate communication students' population of about 600; Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University Uli, COOU (a State university) with regular undergraduate communication students' population of about 400 and Paul's University Awka, Unipaul (a private Christian university) with a population of 60 undergraduates students. Total number of the population for the study was about 1,060. The choice of only the undergraduate communication students was borne out of the experience we had with our students as a communication teachers; the series of arguments we had over the credibility and utilization of internet sources on occasion we had asked them to browse the net and research on issues. As communication students, they are expected to be in the fore front of making use of the net for information generation.

A sample of 530 undergraduates (300 from unizik; 200 from COOU and 30 from unipaul, Awka) was used for the study using multi-stage sampling technique. The sample was arrived at based on suggestions by Stacks and Hockings (1999) that, 'the larger the sample, the more representative of the population the sample will be and smaller your error will be' and the ranking of sample sizes by Comrey and Lee (1992), as 100 = poor, 200 = fair, 300 = good, 400 = very good, 500 and above = excellent. Data were collected by asking the respondents questions on access and use of internet for information; rating of the internet in terms of credibility; influences of internet credibility and the extent of students' reliance on the net to write assignments and projects. Copies of questionnaire were administered to the respondents. Five hundred and twenty (520) completed copies were returned while ten

(10) copies of the questionnaire were not returned. The response rate is seen below:

Table 1: *Response rate*

University	Number of questionnaire shared out	Number of questionnaire returned	Percentage
Unizik	300	293	98%
COOU	200	197	99%
Unipaul	30	30	100%
Total	530	520	98%

V. Analysis

Result of the response rate in Table 1 shows that 300 copies of questionnaire were shared to unizik regular undergraduate communication students and 293

copies were returned representing 98% return rate. Out of the 200 copies of the questionnaire that were shared to regular undergraduate communication students of COOU, 197 copies were returned representing 99% return rate. In Unipaul, 30 copies of the questionnaire were shared and 30 copies were returned representing 100% return rate. In all, 530 copies were shared and 520 were completed and returned representing 98% return rate which is very good for the study.

A. Access to Internet and usage of the information

Here, the researcher wanted to find out whether the students access and use the internet for information and they were asked: Do you access the internet for information?

Table 2: *Access and use of the internet for information*

Variables	Unizik respondents	Unizik % response	COOU respondents	COOU % response	Unipaul respondents	Unipaul % response
Yes	293	100%	197	100%	30	100%
No	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	293	100%	197	100%	30	100%

From the Table 2, it can be seen that every student said that they access the internet for information. It is a 100% access across board and it is most expected of mass communication students. The difference would be the type of information the

students access from the internet most of the time and they were asked:

What type of information do you access from the internet most of the time? Their responses were as presented in Table 3 thus:

Table 3: *Type of information accessed from the internet most of the time*

Variables	Unizik respondents	Unizik % response	COOU respondents	COOU % response	Unipaul respondents	Unipaul % response
Politics	02	1%	04	2%	00	0%
Health	05	2%	10	5%	00	0%
Academic matters	261	89%	153	78%	28	93%
Sports	10	3%	09	5%	00	0%
Fashion	15	5%	21	10%	02	7%
Total	293	100%	197	100%	30	100%

Table 3 shows that respondents in the three sampled universities access information on academic matters most of the time than on other matters. Unipaul ranked highest with a high of 93% followed by unizik, 89% and COOU, 78%. Unipaul respondents do not access information on politics, health and sports most of the time compared with respondents from the other two universities even though percentage response from

the two universities is very low, less than 6%. Fashion is second to academic matters with unizik, 5%; COOU, 10% and unipaul, 7%. COOU ranked highest on fashion information. The data seem to suggest that privately owned university students are more committed to their studies than their counterparts in government owned universities.

Next, was a question on what the respondents use the information they access from the internet to do thus: What do you use the information you access from

the internet to do most of the time? Their responses were as recorded in Table 4.

Table 4: *What they use the information accessed from the internet to do most of the time*

Variables	Unizik respondents	Unizik % response	COOU respondents	COOU % response	Unipaul respondents	Unipaul % response
Writing assignments and class notes	261	89%	153	77%	28	93%
Connecting with friends	17	6%	13	7%	02	7%
Improve on personal health	05	2%	10	5%	00	0%
Fashion trending	10	3%	21	11%	00	0%
Total	293	100%	197	100%	30	100%

Data from Table 4 show that 89% (261 out of 293) of the unizik respondents use the information they access from the internet to make class notes and write assignments given to them by their lecturers. COOU and unipaul have 78% (153 out of 197) and 93% (28 out of 30) respectively. Unipaul ranked highest. In all, the data show that 442 out of 520 respondents representing 85% of the respondents use the net meaningfully rather than for frivolities. It is a good use really. Improvement on health which is expected to rank second because of its importance to human existence unfortunately ranked the least, 2%, 5% and 0% for the three universities respectively. Again,

Table 5: *Rating of internet information credibility*

Variables	Unizik respondents	Unizik % response	COOU respondents	COOU % response	Unipaul respondents	Unipaul % response
Credible	258	88%	160	81%	28	93%
Not credible	15	5%	11	6%	00	0%
Neutral	20	7%	26	13%	02	7%
Total	293	100%	197	100%	30	100%

Table 5 shows that a high percentage of the respondents rated the information they access from internet as credible. More than four-fifth of the students rated it as credible across the three universities sampled. Also, less than 10% of the students across the three universities did not rate internet information as credible while 13% and below were neutral about it. This means that the 13% and below were uncertain about internet information credibility. Comparatively,

Table 6: *Influences on rating of internet credibility*

	Unizik respondents	Unizik % response	COOU respondents	COOU % response	Unipaul respondents	Unipaul % response
I use internet sources to write class notes and assignments and my lecturers accept them	138	47%	101	51%	20	66%
The sources have the authors' details/are verifiable	109	37%	57	29%	08	27%
My friends said that the sources are credible	11	4%	02	1%	00	00%
The sources are not verifiable	15	5%	11	6%	00	00%
Anybody can write and post anything on the net	20	7%	26	13%	02	7%
Total	293	100%	197	100%	30	100%

government university students are into fashion trending unlike their private university counterpart. This indicates that the private university students seem more committed to their academics rather than to frivolities.

B. Internet Credibility

The respondents were asked questions on their rating of internet information sources in terms of credibility thus: How do you rate the information you access from internet in terms of credibility of the information? Their responses were as shown in Table 5 thus:

unipaul undergraduate students rated net information sources as credible more than the other two universities studied.

Question on what influences the respondents' rating of internet information sources credibility then followed thus: What influences your rating of internet sources credibility? Their responses were as stated in the matrix Table 6:

Data in Table 6 show what influences the students mostly in their rating of internet sources credibility. It can be seen that the students, irrespective of their universities, rated internet sources as credible mostly because they use them to write class notes and assignments and their lecturers accept them. Unipaul students ranked highest with 66%, COOU came second and unizik came third with 51% and 47% respectively. The sources have authors' details came second with unizik 37%, COOU 29% and unipaul 27%. It is apt to observe that most of the respondents did not rate internet sources credibility based on what their friends say. The percentage falls from a high of 4% to a low of 0%. While 5% and 6% of respondents from unizik and COOU respectively rated internet sources as not credible because the sources are not verifiable, none of the respondents (0%) from unipaul rated it as not credible because the sources are not verifiable. It is

remarkable to note that the numbers of people who were neutral about internet sources credibility in Table 5 were also the numbers who believed that anybody can write and post anything on the net and therefore feel neutral about its credibility. The same thing applies to the number of people who believed that internet sources are not credible. They were also the people who based their judgment on the belief that the sources are not verifiable.

Next, was a question to those respondents who said that they were influenced to rate internet information sources as credible. They were asked to explain the extent their reliance on the net influenced their perception of internet information sources credibility thus: To what extent does your reliance on the internet influence your perception of internet credibility? Their responses were as recorded in Table 7.

Table 7: *Extent of reliance on internet and its influence on perception of internet credibility*

	Unizik respondents	Unizik % response	COOU respondents	COOU % response	Unipaul respondents	Unipaul % response
To a large extent	131	95%	100	99%	20	100%
To a small extent	07	5%	01	1%	00	0%
Total	138	100%	101	100%	20	100%

The Table shows that almost all the students (95%, 99% and 100% respectively) said that their reliance on the internet to write class notes and assignments influenced them to a large extent to rate internet information sources as credible. Only very few of them said that it influenced them to a small extent. This shows that the students believed so much on their lecturers' sense of judgment as far as internet credibility is concerned. Invariably, it implies that the students would cease to rate internet information sources as credible once their lecturers begin to fault their internet based assignments.

Conclusion

The study explored in detail, university undergraduate communication students' perception of internet information sources in terms of credibility using three sampled universities in Anambra State. The main purpose was to find out whether the students actually believe internet information sources following the global debate on internet sources credibility. Survey research design was used and questionnaire was the instrument of data collection. Copies of questionnaire were distributed to 530 students and 10 copies were not returned meaning that only 520 students completed and returned their copies of the questionnaire. This represented a 98% return rate which was good for the

study. The study found out that the students perceived internet information sources as credible partly because they use information they get from internet to write class notes and assignments and their lecturers accept them and because the materials contain the authors' details. Also their reliance on the net to write class notes and assignments influenced their believability and perception of internet information sources as credible to a large extent. The study furthermore found out that the students access information on academic matters more from the net than on any other matter. The study therefore recommends that university lecturers should expose and guide students more on the use of internet and in particular the most credible websites for academic interactions seeing that the students trust their lecturers' sense of judgment as far as internet information sources are concerned. Different universities' curriculum should include internet literacy if it is not yet in the curriculum to really educate the students more on the use various internet sites.

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