

First year and final year Undergraduate Students' Academic use of Internet. Case of a Zimbabwean University

Ms EUKERIA MASHIRI
MIDLANDS STATE UNIVERSITY
FACULTY OF COMMERCE (Accounting)
P. BAG 9055, GWERU, ZIMBABWE

Abstract
The use of internet, started as a thinking in the early 60s, and Zimbabwe started using it in the 90s. Now internet usage has spread to various areas of the country including rural areas. Internet can be used for various purposes, entertainment, education or social reasons. Given the immense rise of internet usage and its wide use it would be interesting to note to what extent the internet is being used for academic purposes. The study looked at level of internet skills, method of internet use, method of information search, pathways and search engines used, academic use of internet and quality of learning using internet. This study was carried out with 100 university undergraduate students to determine the extent to which they use internet for academic reasons. Data was collected and analysed using descriptive statistics. Findings showed that final year students use internet for academics more than first years and the way forward was discussed. Gender differences in the use of internet were also discussed.
Keywords: internet, academic use, undergraduate students

Introduction

The growth of internet usage has been tremendous, since its beginning. Internet is used for various reasons which include social, entertainment and educational purposes. Its continuous growth has imposed a question on the extent to which it is used for academic purposes. Studies have been carried out in other countries and not much has been done with regards to Zimbabwe. Most researches, however, have looked at determinants of internet addiction such as shyness and loneliness. This study will not look at predictors of internet addiction, but rather usage of internet for academic purposes. In addition, most of the previous studies that have been conducted have not considered the differences in usage resulting from different academic levels. The author believes the use of internet by first year students and that of final students who will have embarked on research as a module (dissertation) may not be the same. As such it may not be fair to generalise the results across all levels. This study therefore, will conduct a research at a Zimbabwean university to establish the extent of internet usage for academic purposes.

The world statistics show that internet users in Africa have increased by 94% between 2010 and 2012, which is an immense growth. Such a high increase shows a massive internet usage rate. It is therefore, important to note the extent to which internet is used for academic purposes. Following is a table showing the world internet usage between 2010 and 2012:

World internet usage and population statistics June 30 2010 and 2012

World regions	Population (Est.)	Internet users Dec. 31, 2000	Internet users latest data	Penetration (% population)	Growth	Users % of Table
Africa 2010	991,002,342	4,514,400	86,217,900	8.7	(2000-2009) 1,809.9	4.8
Africa 2012	1,073,380,925	4,514,400	167,335,676	15.6	(2000-2012) 3,606.7	7.0

Source: Miniwattsmarketing group. Available at: www.internetworldstats.com

Literature review

Researches have been conducted on the use of internet. Past studies have indicated that social attributes that result in addiction of internet use, e.g. loneliness, looked at gender differences in internet use patterns, shyness and locus of control (Hamburger & Artzi 2003; Chak & Leung 2004). Weiser (2000) looked at gender differences in internet use patterns. He found that males use internet mainly for entertainment purposes and leisure than their female counterparts. On the other hand, females use it for interpersonal communication and educational assistance. George et al (2006) found that information search is mainly through the internet and intranet facilities in his study on scholarly use of internet by graduate students at a university in the USA. Muniandy (2010) also conducted a research on the use of internet for academic purposes among undergraduate

students. Using a sample of 92 randomly selected undergraduate students at a university in Malaysia the findings were that the use of academic data- bases such as university E-learning resources is low. The 92 students were made up of 80 females and 12 males, there was an imbalance in terms of gender representation in the study. This study will try to bring a balanced representation from both sexes and also establish the behaviour between first and final years.

Other researchers who have looked at internet use for academic purposes include Lazinger et al (1997), who looked at internet use by faculty members in various disciplines, Lubans (1998) looked at first year university students' use of the internet. Other studies include those carried out about by (Rena et al (2007) and Matthew (1998). Kubey et al (2001) also investigated internet use and collegiate academic performance. He found that heavy recreational internet use is highly correlated to impaired academic performance. This therefore warrants this study which seeks to establish the extent of internet use for academic purposes.

Value of internet use for educational purposes was emphasized by Charp (2000) when he said internet had positive impact on teachers and instructors. Laurillard (1992) added that computer-based learning increased understanding of theoretical and critical concepts. Warren et al (1998) also highlighted that the internet has two key benefits; information and communication. Muniandy (2010) added that students have positive perception about the quality of learning through the internet and also identified online interactive learning, electronic research, innovation, communication and global education as some of the functions of internet in education.

According to Becker & Ravitz (1999) certain types of changes in practice and teacher perception are the main factors determining the use of computers and internet. They also added that the major effect of the internet was on having students to work more independently without procedural direction. Dryli & Kinnaman (1996) stressed that internet allows students to find information, promotes creativity and collaboration as well as solve problems. Given the contributions of internet, there is need to find to what extent students use the internet for academic purposes.

Methodology and Discussion of results

Questionnaires were administered among first year students and final year undergraduate students at a local university in Zimbabwe. 100 randomly selected students formed the research participants. The questionnaire was sub-divided into seven sections: Demographic information, level of internet skills, method of internet use, method of information search, pathways and search engines used, academic use of internet and quality of learning using internet. Results were statistically analysed using descriptive statistics.

Research participants included 100, first year and final students (50 females and 50 males). Their age ranges were 19-21 = 44; 22-24 = 49 and those aged 25 were 7. The results below show comparison of results between first years and final year students.

Level of internet skills

44% of the first years have fair internet skills, while 42% believed their internet skills are high. On the other hand, 60% of the final years rate their skills as high, while 22% believe theirs are very high and only 18% rated theirs as fair. The results show that at final level, the level of internet skills improve and this is expected given the knowledge they will have acquired during their time at the university.

Method of internet usage

68% of the final years against 28% first years use personal computers very often, while 4% of the finals have never used personal computers, yet 28% of first years have never used personal computers. 54% of the finals use their laptops and WIFI while only 28% of the first years use WIFI. This was also supporting the fact that only 2% of the finals said they use the computer laboratories while 36% of the first years use the laboratories. Of Africom, Econet wireless and Powertel, econet is the widely used. An insignificant number of both the first and final years use the internet cafe. 4G technology is not yet common among students and they have barely used it.

Usage of the internet for academic purposes

Although more final year students claimed to use the internet for finding books, 10% of finals compared to 2% of first years said they never used it for finding books. Generally students use the internet to find information about the university and barely any have not used it for finding books. Majority of the students, both first and final years use it to find information from websites. An average number of students download software. 46% of the finals use the internet for downloading notes against 26% of the first years. 56% of the finals use internet for finding journal articles while only 22% of the first years use it. Students hardly use the internet for communicating with lecturers. 62% of the first years use the internet for communicating with friends and other

students more often against 46% of the finals. A very insignificant number contributes ideas on the internet; however, more final years contribute than first years. More first years upload files than final years. However, collectively results show that final year students use the internet more for academic purposes compared to first years. This outcome has tallied with the reasonable expectation and that it could also be explained more by the issue of want versus need. The final years need the internet for academic reasons than first years given the demands of their research module (dissertation). Despite the final years using internet for academics than first years, still the use of internet for academic purposes has proved to be on the low.

Method of information search

20% use the home pages more often compared to a 32% of the final years. 16% of the finals use the subject directory often against a 14% of the first years. 72% of the finals use university e-learning resources very often compared to only 34% of the first years. 42% of the finals use the university e-library resources against only 26% of the first years. In addition, none of the finals have ever used both the e-library resources and the e-learning resources while 20% of the first years have never used them. 52% of the final year students access the university publications and 10% never searched for them while 42% of the first years accessed them and 32% never. Again in terms of information search, final years are on the lead.

Search engine used

None of the students have ever used google and 84% of the finals use it more often compared to 78% of the first years. In addition, Google is commonly used than yahoo. A significant number has not used meta search engines such as dogpile and info.com. 18% of finals use academic.us compared to 10% of the first years. Wikipedia is popular among the first years, unlike with the finals. 20% of the finals use the online dictionary very often while 16% of the first years use it.

Quality of learning through internet

The internet is perceived to be enhancing the quality of learning by majority of the students. Many strongly agreed that the quality of learning increases and is always up to date. This concurs with Muniandy (2010). More of the finals strongly agreed that they get references from around the world though there are mixed responses with regards to whether they are at par with students around the world or not. This could be attributed to the fact that some students do not use the internet for educational purposes and they are not sure on whether they are at par with international students.

Findings also showed that males use the internet for academic purposes than females. This does not concur with Weiser (2000), whose findings suggest that males use internet for entertainment more than educational purposes as compared to females.

Results have shown that internet enhances the quality of learning, but its use for academic purposes is on the low. This is a cause for concern given that a research by Kubey et al (2001) has found heavy use of internet for recreation leading to impaired academic performance. As such there is need for universities and other tertiary institutions to consider putting in place measures which restrict the use of university resources to academics other than anything else. If this becomes a policy, it should inculcate a culture of using the internet for educational purposes in students regardless of whether they are in the first or final level.

Conclusion

The study has found that the use of internet for academic purposes is low and that final year students use the internet for academic purposes than first years and this behaviour may be attributed to the demands of the research module. Furthermore, the use of internet by females and males differs. This therefore, calls for authorities to help students realise the benefits derived from using the internet for academics and persuade them to use it more for educational reasons. Given the numerous benefits derived from using the internet, students are encouraged to utilise it for educational purposes and keep searching latest information to keep abreast with international standards.

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