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INTERNET ABUSE BY UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: A NEGLECTED THEME IN AFRICA

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to investigate potential Internet abuse by university students, an area lacking research focus in Africa. A case study was conducted at the University of The Gambia (UTG) in 2012. A total of 200 questionnaires were randomly administered to UTG students and 181 valid responses were available for analyses. The result indicates that about 18% of UTG students use the Internet for unspecified activities, demonstrating attributes that could reveal potential Internet abuse. Considering the negative implications of this phenomenon, African researchers cannot afford to neglect this theme.

Key words: Africa, Internet abuse, The Gambia, university students

1. INTRODUCTION

The Internet is important in human life [16] and its use has a great impact on students' academic career. It forms one of the largest knowledge depositories in the world [31]. The Internet is an inseparable part of today's educational system [34] and enables students to communicate in order to share ideas, knowledge, experiences and cultures [12]. According to these researchers, more students are relying on the Internet than other source areas for their academic needs. This finding is supported by other researchers [22, 8]. On the contrary, [11] claim that more students in their study use the Internet for entertainment while others argue it is used for communication and academic purposes [18, 34, 32].

However, previous studies conducted in Africa on students' use of the Internet seem to neglect the issue of Internet abuse. Therefore, this paper aims to initiate a continental research spectrum on the subject in order to bridge the research gap between Africa and other more widely studied regions. As the first research of its kind to be conducted in The Gambia, its findings will be equally vital to university administrator and policy makers in the country and beyond.

This paper utilizes the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory as its theoretical framework. The U&G theory explains that media do not do things to people; instead, people do things with media [20, 33]. In other words, this theory seeks to highlight how individuals use mass communication to gratify their needs [6]. Users of mass media actively use whatever the media can offer [7, 13]. These researchers stress that the Internet is one of the most dominant media which enables students to enjoy selecting the information that best suits their need. Of course, they may also use it for other reasons. This theory was used by [40] in an article entitled “Internet access and use among students of the University of Illorin”. This research aims to answer the following questions:

- RQ1: What do you use the Internet for?
- RQ2: How often do you use the Internet and where do you access it?
- RQ3: How much time do you spend on each Internet related activity per session?

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: *Section two* covers the literature review and *Section three* presents the research methodology. *Section four* covers the data analysis and presentation of results while *Section five* concludes the paper.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Internet is a very important and indispensable resource for students [35] and there is a strong relationship between its use and educational performance [37, 30, 10, 38]. Despite the potentials of the Internet, the aforementioned researchers argue that inappropriate use of this vital technology can significantly affect students' academic performance. According to [36], Internet use is said to be inappropriate when it undermines one's ability to fulfill his or her responsibilities. [9] stress the need to ask questions about Internet use as it exhibits warning signs to identify Internet addiction. Studies related to students' use of Internet and their attitudes towards it have attracted great interest from other parts of the world, as well. In fact, this subject has been investigated by other researchers [12]. It is important to obtain relevant information on students' educational use of the Internet [16]. Doing so would enable the identification of Internet abuse related issues. University students are considered to be high risk group for Internet addiction [44, 23]. It is a new disorder that was first described by psychologist Kimberly Young [45]. Internet addiction is one danger of Internet abuse in addition to online gambling, trafficking of pornographic materials, cybersex and cyberbullying [43, 29].

Africa has seen significant number of research focusing on university students' use of the Internet. An earlier study by Luambano and Nawe [22] that was conducted at the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania revealed that most of the students who used the Internet did not do so for academic purposes. A study by Fatoki [17] contradicts this finding by stating that two thirds of the students in their

research used the Internet for academics. Similarly, [40] also highlighted that most students in Nigeria use the Internet for academic purposes. However, subsequent study on the continent strengthened the findings by Luambano and Nawe [22] that more university students use the Internet for communication [5]. Several research have been conducted in Africa related to Internet use in a university environment [1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 15, 17, 21, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28].

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employed case study design. Yin [42] defines this research design as an “empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context: when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident, and in which multiple sources of evidence are used.” The case study is a valuable method of research with distinctive characteristics that make it ideal for many types of investigation. Tellis [39] considers it as a triangulated research strategy which could be used for a single case or multiple cases.

3.1 CASE CONTEXT

The University of The Gambia is the only university in The Gambia. The country is the smallest mainland nation in Africa with a population of about 1.8 million people and an Internet user percentage of just 7.6 [41] – see Table 1. The Gambia experienced a real GDP growth average of about 6.5 percent a year from 2008 to 2010 [19]. The same report indicates that it has recorded the best GDP growth from 2007 to 2010 among all Sub-Saharan African countries with the exceptions of South Africa and Namibia. The Gambia currently has six Internet Service Providers and it is the headquarters of the Africa Coast to Europe (ACE) submarine cable. The project was launched on December 20th, 2012 and will provide direct cable connectivity to Equatorial Guinea, Liberia, Mauritania, Guinea, Sao Tome & Principe, Sierra Leone and The Gambia.

3.2 SURVEY ADMINISTRATION

The survey in The Gambia was conducted from September 19th to November 12th, 2012 at the University of The Gambia. In order to seek the consent of our potential respondents and also minimize the number of unreturned questionnaires, we first visited individual classes from the selected faculties and enlightened the participants about the research. During that period, those who were interested in participating in the research were asked to write their names under the administrative region they came from in The Gambia. This approach helped us to have participants from every region of the country. A simple random sampling method was conducted to select the research participants. This was due to the fact that more people were willing to participate in the research than the target number of 200. Each selected participant was then given a questionnaire to complete within

a week. Participants were sampled from four randomly chosen faculties, namely, Art & Science, Information and Communication Technology, Law and Business Administration. Out of the total 200 administered questionnaires, 181 valid responses were received representing about a 91% return rate. Among the valid respondents, 63 claimed to be females, 114 males and three did not indicate their gender.

Table 1: Country statistics (Source: adapted from tradingeconomics.com)

Country name	The Gambia
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • capital city • geographic coordinates 	Banjul 13 27 N and 16 34 W
Area (square kilometers)	11,295
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • land • water 	10,000 1,295
Land boundary (kilometers)	740
Coast line (kilometers)	80
Age structure (%)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 0-14 • 15-24 • 25-54 • 65 and above 	39.2 21.1 32.5 3.2
Population	1,883,051
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • population growth (%) • birth rate • death rate 	2.29 32.59 births/1000 population 7.38 deaths/1000 population
Life expectancy at birth (years)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • total population • male • female 	64.09 61.78 66.47
Adult prevalence rate of HIV/AIDS (%)	2
Literacy rate (age 15 and above who can read and write) (%)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • total population • male • female 	51.1 60.9 41.9

4. DATA ANALYSIS & RESULTS

The data analysis phase in this paper comprises of descriptive statistics and quotations from respondents. The qualitative results reveal that most students from the University of The Gambia mainly used the Internet for social communication, followed by academic use and entertainment. However, about 18% of UTG students used this technology for unspecified activities at excessive levels (see Table 2). This demonstrates attributes that could reveal potential Internet abuse.

Table 2: Internet usage per session

usage purpose	extent of usage (%)							
	≤ 10	11-20	21-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	61-70	> 70
academic	0	5	10	25	30	35	40	16
work	8	20	13	20	4	12	2	1
social communication	6	8	12	50	14	50	14	16
entertainment	13	20	26	40	4	8	2	0
shopping	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
downloading movies	0	10	1	0	0	0	0	0
unspecified activities	1	2	0	0	3	4	15	6

Total respondents = 181 (11 of them did not indicate their Internet use pattern)

The percentage frequency of UTG students' use of the Internet for various purposes is illustrated by Figure 1. Further qualitative analysis shows that most UTG students use the Internet on a daily basis primarily at Internet cafés (see Table 3). One respondent wrote the following comments:

“The Internet infrastructure in the university is really poor which makes most of us to go to Internet Cafés. We have a very high tendency to use the Internet for non-academic activities once we are off-campus.” (Anonymous)

Table 3: Use frequency and place of access

Internet usage	frequency	place of access	frequency
daily	79	university	70
weekly	62	home	38
every 2 – 3 weeks	25	work	37
rarely	9	Internet café	89

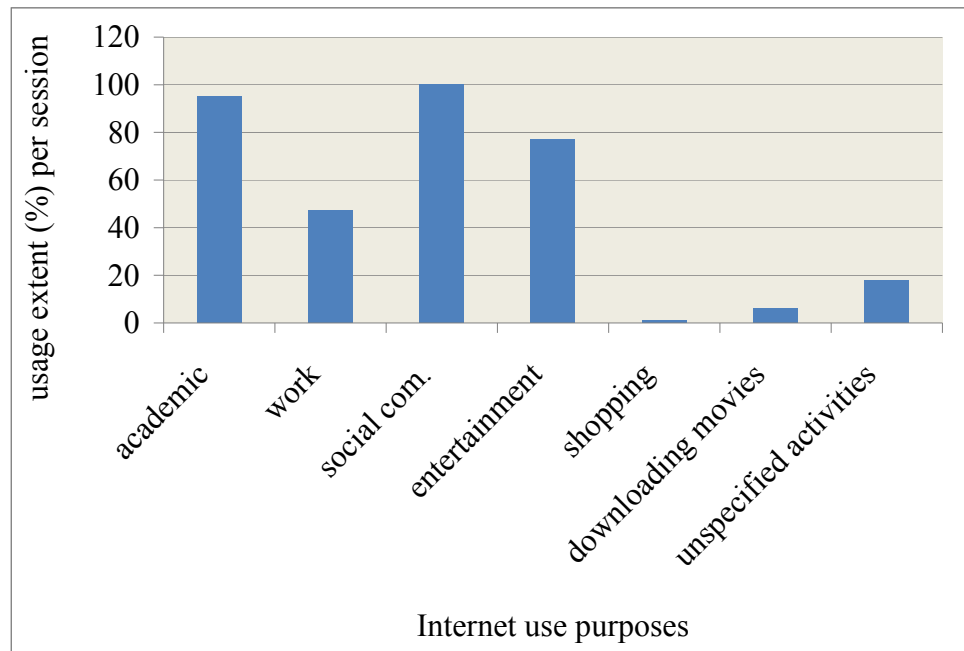


Figure 1: Internet usage pattern

In order to effectively benefit from the potentials of the Internet as a knowledge repository, one UTG student assert the following statement:

“The UTG as the nation’s only university should have an efficient Internet infrastructure for the students. The terrible Internet infrastructure force[s] us to learn using hard ways when there are modern learning tools such as the Internet. We have to utilize the full potentials of [this innovation] if we are to compete with our counterparts from other regions.” (Anonymous)

5. CONCLUSION

The findings of this paper indicate that about 18% of students at The University of The Gambia (UTG) use the Internet for unspecified purposes. The key results can be broadly summarized as follows:

- There is evidence of potential Internet abuse by UTG students.
- Most UTG students access the Internet away from UTG campuses, mainly at Internet cafés.
- The majority of UTG students use the Internet for social communication followed by academic use and entertainment, respectively.
- Majority of UTG students use the Internet on a daily basis.

The findings of this paper suggest the need for a new research spectrum on the issue of Internet abuse or addiction by university students in Africa as it happened in other regions. A significant number of African scholars have investigated the continent's university students' use of the Internet. However, one can barely find any study that looks into inappropriate use of this technology such as Internet abuse patterns. The University of The Gambia needs to provide effective Internet access on UTG campuses. As one student asserts, they tend to explore the funny view of the Internet once they access it outside university campuses. Considering the negative implications of Internet abuse on individuals and societies, African researchers cannot afford to neglect this research spectrum.

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