
**Online Information Search Skills among University of Ilorin Postgraduate
Students**

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ABSTRACT

Online information search skills are important in every academic pursuit today. Online search skills affect the frequency and success of online information search by university students. Observation however showed that students search severally but often could get the desired results. Thus, this study investigates the online information search skills among postgraduate students at the University of Ilorin, Nigeria. A descriptive survey design of ex-post-facto type was adopted for the study, and the population of the study consisted of 1,366 postgraduate students of the University. Using the purposive, stratified, proportionate and random sampling techniques, a sample size of 272 was obtained at 20% sampling fraction. Data collected through a questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The findings revealed that nearly all the students possessed keyword use and search term use skills; many of the students also possess Boolean use and search narrowing skills, but a significant percentage lack these skills in addition to the majority who lack the proximity search skill. The study concluded that the students still need a lot of training in deploying online search skills, and recommended that the University should take this up to enhance the success of their academic activities in the institution.

Keywords: Online Search Skill, Information Search, Postgraduate, Nigeria

Introduction

The pervasive use of the internet has facilitated the sharing of ideas, information, and knowledge throughout the world. Through the use of the internet, online information search and retrieval has been serving as a means to intellectual resources for students undertaking learning and research activities (Ani, 2010). Thus, online information search has become an important aspect of learning, teaching and research in higher institutions today, while the skills needed to deploy such search, a necessity. Students embark on online searching to obtain information that can enhance or even determine the success of their academic activities. This enables the students to gain access to enormous electronic information. Online information search became necessary due to the shortage of relevant information resources locally, as well as the resourcefulness attributable to this mode of acquiring information, which provides students with quick access to global information and knowledge.

Postgraduate students, throughout their course of study, need information for various purposes. While some require information to update their knowledge on the things they are taught in the classroom, others search for information to write essays, term papers, carry out given assignments, and conduct research. The information need that may make a postgraduate student engage in online searching is limitless. Thus, each student visits the internet on a need basis to search for information. However, owing to the architecture of information stored on the internet, the students need the right skill and expertise to successfully search and locate the information they need on the Internet. This online searching skill could determine the frequency and success of online information search.

It is expected of postgraduate students to source information materials needed to support learning and research. In Nigeria, most of these students often resort to the internet for online information searches. However, it has been noticed that some of these students spend enormous time on online searching but could not obtain enough information as required, while others do not even bother to search all; this may be due to the lack of the needed skills to conduct online searching successfully.

The internet is a robust network with several information resources embedded in it. As such, it is important to have the right skills to search and retrieve the information that is relevant to an information need at any point in time. However, it has been observed that, usually, students do not have adequate online search skills to obtain the information they need from the internet. For postgraduate students to search online and retrieve relevant results, they need to have some level of skills in online searching. Thus, this study was conducted to investigate the online search skills and the frequency

of online information search among postgraduate students at the University of Ilorin, Nigeria.

The University of Ilorin is located in the ancient city of Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria, about 500 kilometers from Abuja, the Federal capital. The university is one of the seven institutions of higher learning established by a Decree of the Federal Military Government in August 1975. Presently, the Postgraduate School of the University offers programmes for Postgraduate Diploma, Masters' and Doctorate Degree.

The following research questions were investigated in the study:

1. Do University of Ilorin (UoI) Postgraduate students possess search term and truncation use skills?
2. What percentage of UoI PG students has proximity search skills?
3. Do the PG students of UoI use keywords to conduct online searching?
4. Are the PG students of UoI using Boolean operators while searching for information online?
5. What percentage of UoI PG students possesses online search narrowing skill?

Literature Review

Students search for information for various reasons and through various means. Nowadays, online resources are frequently used as information sources by students. These sources are easy to use and can be accessed from any location, provided there is Internet access (Henry, 2005). The Internet has become a commonly used electronic resource today. This was reported by Ani (2010), who noted that the use of the Internet has become a common practice among university students. This is because most students have devised means of accessing the Internet from any location because it is an easy and fast means to access information.

Several factors determine whether a user will make an online search, continue with a search, or will perform a search that will yield the required results. One of such factors may be online search skills. Online search skills are the expertise and knowledge that are needed to carry out a successful search. Education beyond the undergraduate years is often directed towards preparation for entrance into a profession in which advanced training is necessary for recognition as a practitioner. Thus, postgraduate courses embody a high need for information search and retrieval.

Internet facilities enable individuals to search lonely to get information stably and comfortably (Isman and Dabaj, 2003). The ability of an individual to source for information on the Internet can be associated with the searching skills of that

individual. In a study of 1,500 students, during the study of The INHALE (Information for Nursing and Health in a Learning Environment) Project, Brook, Pattern, and Anderson (2005), reported that there is “the continuing need for information skills teaching” because most of the students (80%) have beginner and intermediate search skill level. Similarly, Zhang, Liu, Liu, and Cole (2013) in a survey of 35 respondents found out that search skills are closely related to the feeling of gaining new knowledge that the user gets after searching online. This infers that the ability to conduct online searching and obtain needed information can be influenced by the inherent search skills of the searcher.

Meanwhile, postgraduate students, particularly the Ph.D. students, with a higher levels of search skills make more use of online searching to gather information as reported by Chu and Law (2007). The researchers found that the number of searches reduces as the search skill of the student improves. This suggests that individuals with higher search skills easily find the information they need. A previous study by Haltunen and Jarveli (2005) who surveyed 57 students, reported that as students' search skills developed over the three months of the study, the students “made steady progress in their use of Boolean operators and in the construction of search terms”. Similarly, Ozoemelem (2009) found out that there is a low level of skillfulness in the use of ICT among respondents that were studied, noting that the skills required to maximize the potential of electronic resources are much greater than those required for searching printed sources. These skills include knowledge of the structure of the database and the instructions on the search input by the searcher as well as understanding of the ways in which the instructions are linked with one another.

Despite the report of several authors on how search skills influence online searching success, Ding and Ma (2011) conducted a study on 141 undergraduate and graduate of Wuhan University, China, and found out that the “average web searching competency” was low among students. This is in contrast with the findings on Information Literacy Test (ILT) conducted by Camerson et al (2007) in which it was discovered that 77% of the students surveyed are at the proficiency level of information literacy and online searching skills. Also, Okiki and Asiru (2011) revealed that versatility in the use of electronic information sources has a greater influence on actual use of the resources; majority of their respondents expressed high confidence in their search skills. The study revealed that 1548 (70.78%) of the respondents had formal training. The training they had also influenced the frequency of use of electronic information system. Another study by Ahmad, Karim, Din, and Albakri (2013) revealed that the development of ICT competency test was based on the fact that one’s cognitive skills (how they think, solve problems, and learn) have a greater impact on the person’s ability to function in a

technologically rich society than just being knowledgeable about specific software packages or hardware.

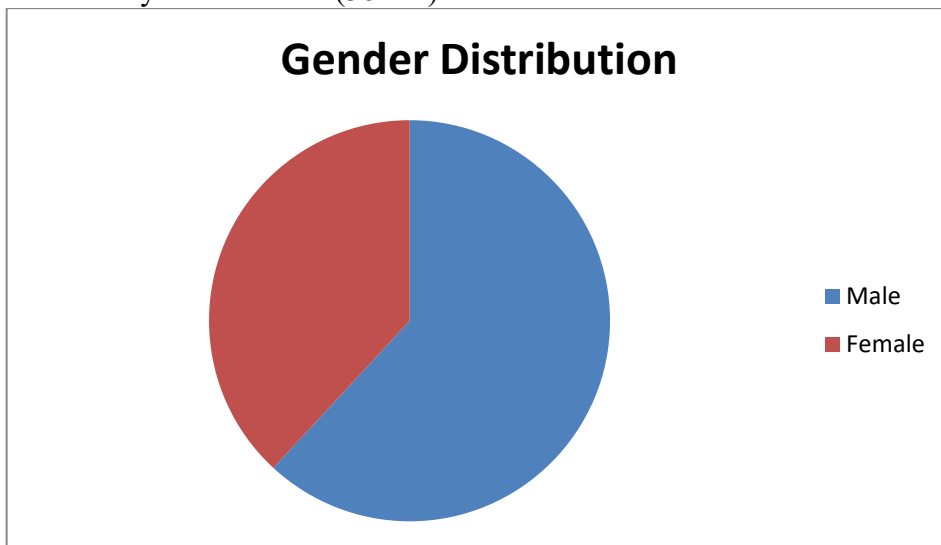
Research Methodology

The research design adopted for this study is the descriptive survey of ex post facto type. The design was adopted because the existing information search skills and the frequency of online information search by the students were studied without any manipulation. The sample size for the study was 272 selected using a 20% sampling fraction from a total population of 1366 Masters' degree students at the University of Ilorin. Data for the study was collected using a questionnaire with 83.2% response rate. Statistical analysis was carried out using descriptive and inferential statistics, including frequency bars, percentages, tables, mean, and standard deviation, and the Pearson's correlation.

Results

Gender Distribution of Respondents

The gender distribution of the respondents showed that more males (61.9%) responded to the study than females (38.1%).



Age Distribution of the Respondents

The overall age distribution showed that there were more respondents (139) within the age range of 20 – 29. However, there were no respondents within the age range of 40 – 49, 50 – 59 and 60 and above (Table5).

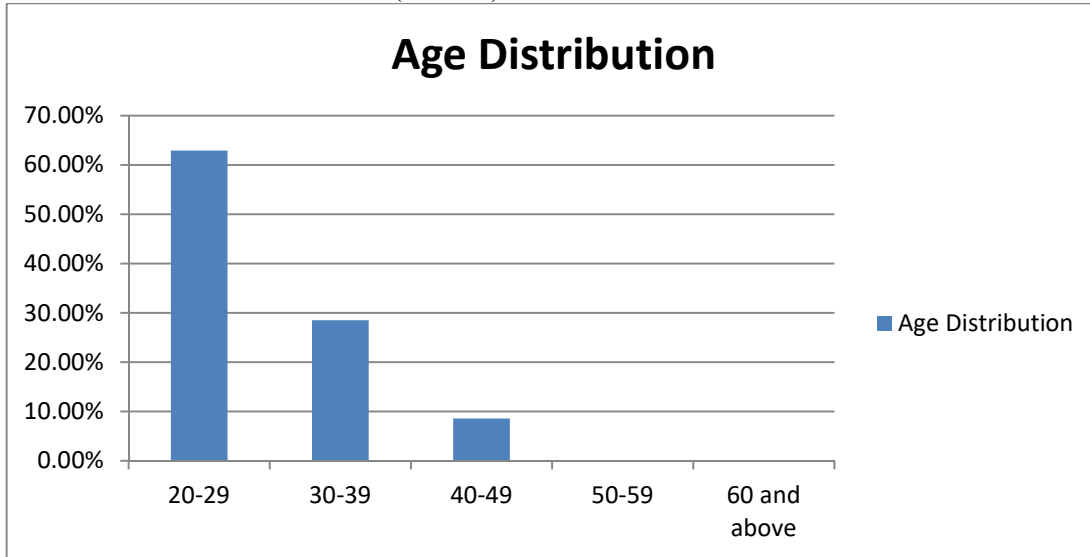
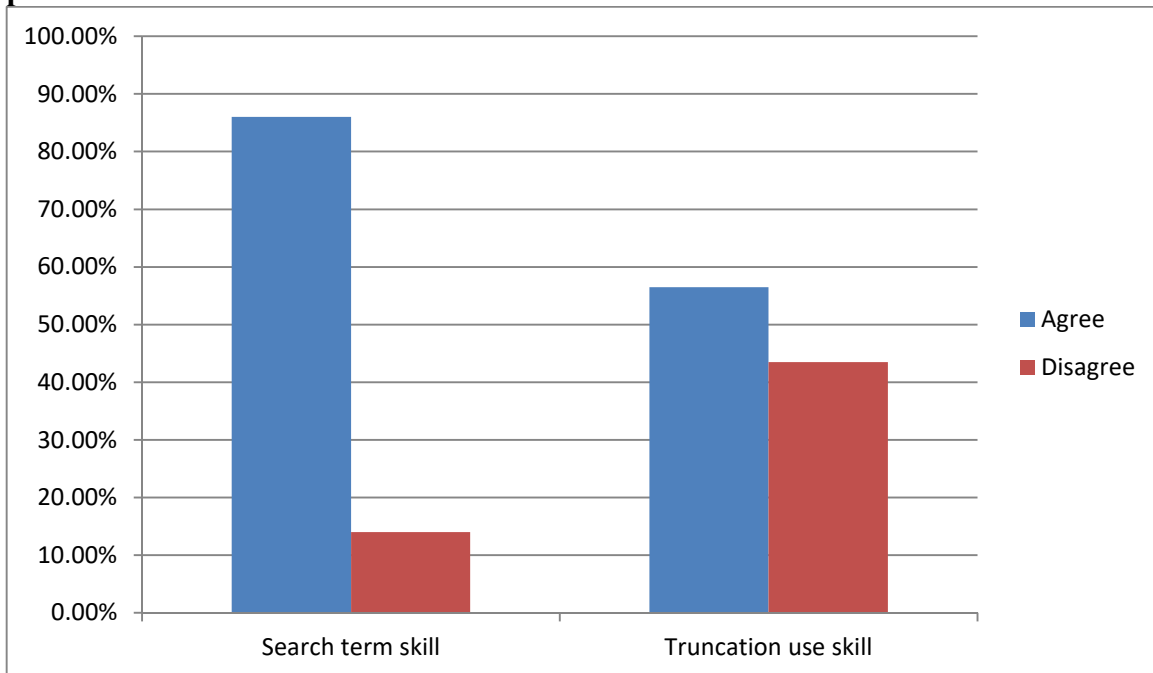


Figure 5: Age Distribution of the Respondents
Research Question One: Do University of Ilorin (UoI) Postgraduate students possess search term and truncation use skills



Findings from the study, as shown in Figure 5, revealed that majority of the postgraduate students of University of Ilorin possess search term skill (86%) while about half (56.5%) of the students deploy truncation use skill while searching online for information. The finding shows that even though majority of the students know how to construct search term, not many of them know how to deploy truncation skills to delineate what they are searching for.

Research Question Two: What percentage of UoI PG students has proximity search skills?

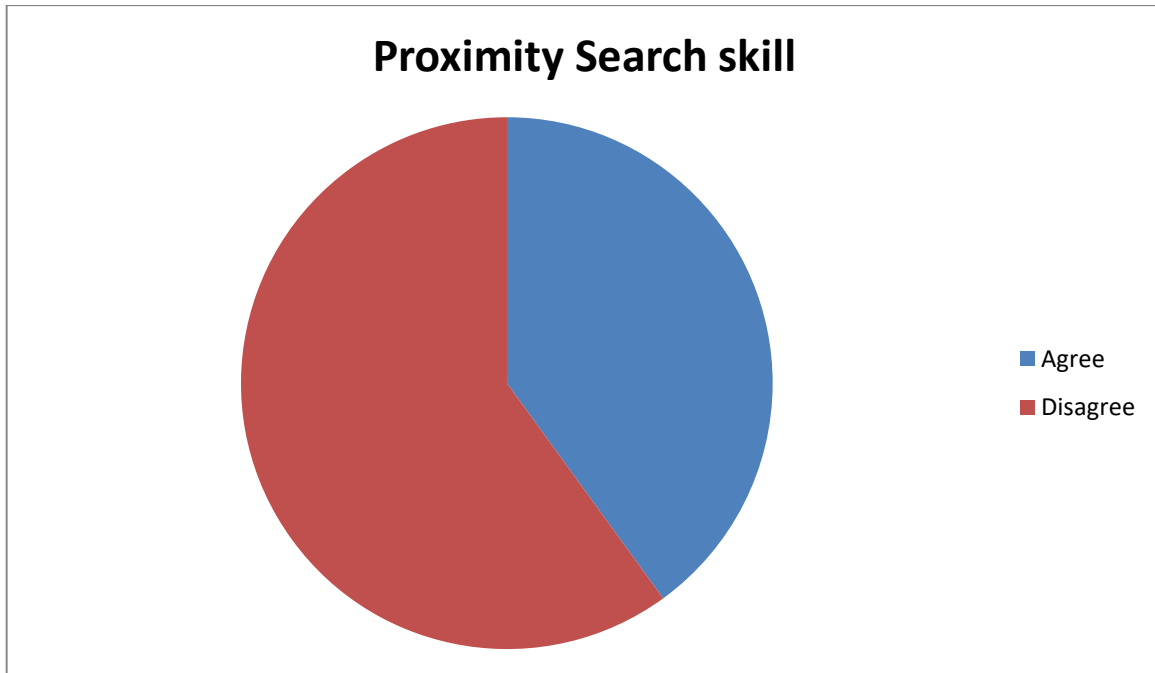


Fig. 6: Use of proximity search skill among postgraduate students

As revealed in Figure 6, majority of the students (60%) do not possess proximity search skill to search for information online. This shows that the students do not make use of proximity functions while conducting online searching.

Research Question Three: Do the PG students of UoI use keywords to conduct online searching?

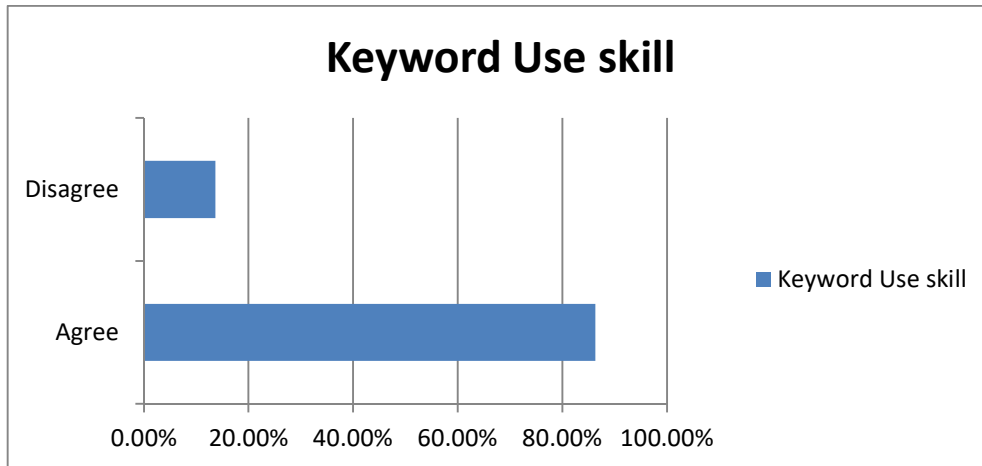


Fig 7: Use of keywords for online searching by postgraduate students

Results from the study – presented in Fig 7 – show that most of the postgraduate students at the University of Ilorin (86.3%) agreed to use keywords that are related to the information they search online. This means that majority of the students know the right keywords to use for online information searching.

Research Question Four: Are the PG students of UoI using Boolean operators while searching for information online?

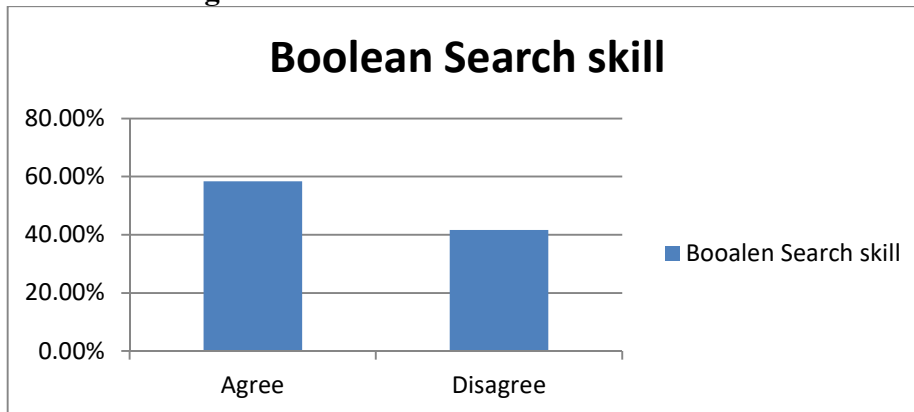
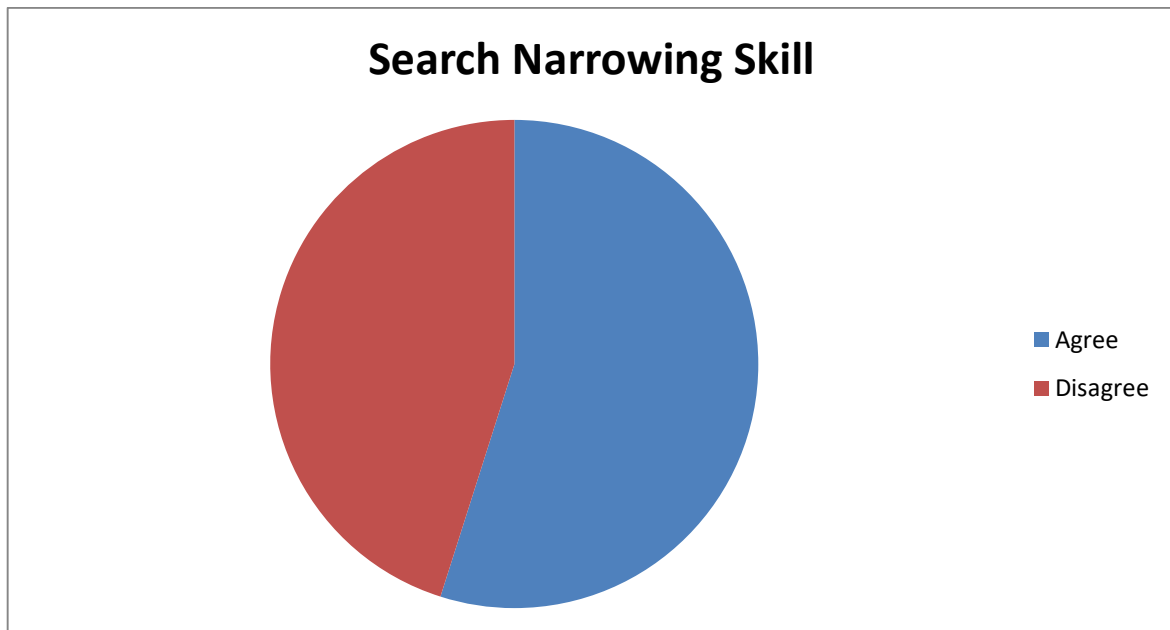


Fig 8. Use of Boolean operators in online searching

As revealed in Fig. 8, most of the postgraduate students (58.4%) of the University of Ilorin use Boolean operators while searching for information online, although a significant percentage (41.6%) do not have the skill yet.

Research Question Five: What percentage of UoI PG students possesses online search narrowing skill?



Results from the study – presented in Fig 9 – show that most of the postgraduate students at the University of Ilorin (54.9%) possess search narrowing skills. Most of the students therefore, know how to narrow down their search to obtain specific information.

Conclusion

From the results obtained in this study, it can be concluded that: the major online search skills possessed by nearly all the postgraduate students of the University of Ilorin are the search term and keyword use skills. Although the study revealed that more students have search narrowing and Boolean use skills, the percentages of the students that do not have these skills can however not be overlooked. This is in combination with the higher percentage of the students who do not possess the proximity search skill to carry out an online search for information. This finding infers that postgraduate students of the University of Ilorin still have a lot to learn in terms of online search skills and will be able to conduct a better online search if the majority or nearly all of them possess these skills. Expectedly, this will significantly enhance their academic activities in the University.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made based on the findings of the study.

1. The University should organize training sessions for the postgraduate students on online search skills. This will enable the students to learn the intricacies of online information search.
2. Also, an Information Literacy course should be introduced for postgraduate students various faculties to enhance the online searching skills of the students
3. The University Library should make it a priority to train every newly admitted postgraduate student in online information search literacy.

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