

PRIVACY CONCERNS ON THE INTERNET: INVESTIGATING
THE ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOURS OF YOUNG INTERNET USERS
TO ONLINE ANONYMITY

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ABSTRACT

Privacy on the Internet is a multi-faceted issue that requires attention on the user's part, both to protect information from third-party data collection and to manage personal impressions across a variety of contexts and relationships (Ellison, *et al*, 2011). This study investigated the notion of online anonymity, as a privacy issue, among young Internet users in Nigeria. Situated within the framework of the deindividuation, uses and gratifications, and technological determinism theories, the research was designed as a survey. A sample of 400 respondents was selected from the study population (which was the undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, in South-East Nigeria) and a structured questionnaire employed as the data collection instrument. Findings showed that online anonymity is common among a significant part of the users; and that they utilise online anonymity mainly for the purposes of protecting their privacy, shielding themselves against fraud and other Internet harms and abuses, and for fun. Similarly, it was found that while the youths perceive online anonymity as socially beneficial, they at the same time view it as potentially destructive. The study also discovered that anonymity has not had significant impact on the Internet use habit of the respondents. This means that it is not a motivating factor that draws them to the Internet, and that it has neither made them feel free to communicate nor lured majority of them towards communications that are ethically and legally undesirable.

Keywords: *Anonymity, privacy, young Internet users, social network sites, uses-and-gratifications theory.*

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BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The use of the Internet is increasingly becoming a marked feature of today's communication culture the world over. In Nigeria, this trend is no less visible, especially considering the impressive statistics of Internet access and use. The country has an estimated 28% for Internet penetration in Africa, followed by Egypt (10%), making her top in Internet population in Africa. In world ranking, Nigeria has ranked 7th in the top 20 countries with the highest number of Internet users, after China, India, United States, Brazil, Japan and Russia (*Internet World Stats*, 2016). All this is testament of the vibrant Internet culture already existing and growing in the country.

While this trend is definitely a positive one given that Internet access and use has become a fundamental element of social empowerment in the contemporary world, there might still be some causes for worry considering the perceived potential danger equally posed by the Internet. Amongst the features of the Internet that has given rise to this sentiment is anonymity—a feature that enables online users to effectively conceal their identities either by communicating anonymously or by using the pseudonyms (Palme & Berglund, 2007). Though the Internet's amenability to anonymous use has been seen, in a number of respects, as advantageous – particularly in the area of enhancing free speech (Davenport, 2012; Nwagwu, 2007) – the potential social hazard of this feature has not also been lost on scholars and other stakeholders (Dreyfus, 1998; Armstrong & Forde, 2003; Longe *et al.*, 2007; Adeniran, 2008; Mayer, 2009; and Davenport, 2012). Armstrong & Forde (2003, p.3) summarises this fear:

Money laundering, drug dealing, terrorism, hacking, fraud, child pornography and the distribution of objectionable material are crimes that are perpetrated using the Internet. Criminals utilise software tools and valuable knowledge from the Internet as well as embracing the Internet's global communications system to participate in virtual communities of disguised people. The Internet provides the facilities for people with criminal intent to associate and exchange intelligence with reduced risk to their personal identification.

Admittedly, the fact that the Internet is amenable to anonymity would not necessarily mean that users would always explore this feature, and the fact that users explore this feature would not necessarily mean that they do this negatively. In other words, the possibility that online anonymity would have negative impact on the society would be dependent on how much people utilise online anonymity and how they utilise it. Secondly, whether and how they utilise it could be greatly influenced by their perception (i.e. judgment and attitude) towards it. Against this backdrop, this study proceeded to investigate the notion of online anonymity among young Internet users in Nigeria.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

The Internet's amenability to anonymous use has been hailed as beneficial in certain respects (Davenport, 2012; Nwagwu, 2007), however, its social risks in terms of exposing the society to possible value crisis and insecurity have equally been documented (Dreyfus, 1998; Armstrong & Forde, 2003; Longe *et al.*, 2007; Adeniran, 2008; Mayer, 2009; and Davenport, 2012). Thus, Tardanico (2012) posits that the Internet technology and the anonymity it affords make it possible for anyone to hide behind any social network to post or project any image they fancy, and thus creates a fantasy they will. This possibility could create a range of undesirable developments including thriving of social ills such as fraud, pornography, drug abuse, etc, in the society (Longe *et al.*, 2007; Adeniran, 2008). As observed by Orson Scott (2008, p.16); "With false names, on the right nets, there could be anyone, as long as they are careful about the way they wrote. All that anyone could see were words, their ideas." This dilemma arguably becomes a cause for worry, particularly in the light of the increasing use of the Internet in today's communication culture, most visibly among the young populations.

Added to this concern is the fact that majority of the Internet users in Nigeria are young persons (Amaefule, 2012; Uzuegbunam, 2015), with many of them obviously teenagers and young adults who are naturally very adventurous and often overly excited by technology.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The general purpose of this study was to understand the attitudes and behaviors of young Internet users towards online anonymity and the reason behind the anonymous identities they took on the Internet.

Research Questions

To meet the above objectives, the following research questions were pursued:

1. To what extent do young Internet users utilise online anonymity?
2. How do these users perceive anonymity on the Internet?
3. What are these users' motivations for anonymous identities on the Internet or the attraction the online anonymity holds for them?
4. What are the effects of online anonymity on these users?

Significance of the Study

Many studies have focused on the Internet use habit of young Nigerians; these efforts appear to have left out an aspect of this habit, which is anonymity.

Apparently, they have failed to investigate the occurrence and role of this phenomenon as a component of Internet use habit among this population. Filling this gap constitutes the significance of this study. This research may be relevant to the work of media educators as they endeavor to develop media literacy of the people, especially young users. Through the insight they might gain from the results of this study, they could be in a better position to impart in their trainees the relevant media literacy as it relates specifically to anonymity and privacy on the Internet. The research also enriches scholarship, especially in the aspect of new media and its usage culture. More specifically, the study throws light on the culture of online anonymity, the nature of its utilisation among young users and likely effects of such. Generally, the study adds relevant information to the existing literature as well as generates data for scholarly reference.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the words of Palme & Berglund (2007, p.11), anonymity “means that the real author of a message is not shown. Anonymity can be implemented to make it possible or very difficult to find out the real author of a message.” A common variant of anonymity is pseudonymity, where another name than the real author is shown. The pseudonym is sometimes kept secret; sometimes the real name behind a pseudonym is openly known (Palm & Berglund, 2007).

According to Mayer (2009, p.16), there are two general properties of anonymity on the Internet:

- A service or user cannot gain significant knowledge about another user’s identity from the actions they take;
- A service or user cannot determine whether a set of actions were committed by the same user or group of users.

An advantage of a pseudonym, compared with complete anonymity, is that it is possible to recognise that different messages are written by the same author. It is possible to have long discourse between two persons using pseudonyms with none of them knowing the real name behind the other’s pseudonym. However, a disadvantage for a person who wants to be anonymous is that combining information from many messages of the same person may make it easier to find out who is the real person behind the pseudonym (Mayer, 2009).

The construct of anonymity has long been of interest to social psychologists and other social scientists (Christopherson, 2007). Anonymity has traditionally been conceived as the inability of others to identify an individual or for others to identify one’s self. This may be within a large social context, such as a crowd, or in smaller context, such as two-person communications on the Internet (Christopherson, 2007).

However, it has been suggested that there are really two broad categories of anonymity; technical anonymity and social anonymity (Hayne & Rice, 1997). Technical anonymity refers to the removal of all meaningful identifying information about others in the exchange of material. This can include the removal of one's name or other identifying information from Internet communications. Social anonymity refers to the perception of others and/or one's self as unidentifiable because of the lack of cues to use to attribute an identity to a certain individual. In other words, it may not be the case that one is truly anonymous in a social context, but the individual perceives himself or herself to be anonymous to others. Both categories of anonymity have traditionally been investigated by social science researchers (Christopherson, 2007; Hayne & Rice, 1997).

Online anonymity has been viewed as advantageous in some sense, particularly as related to freedom of expression and growth of democratic culture. Citing American Association for the Advancement of Science, Davenport (2012, p. 33) states this school of thought:

Anonymous communication is seen as the cornerstone of an Internet culture that promotes sharing and free speech and is overtly anti-establishment. Anonymity, so the argument goes, ensures governments cannot spy on citizens and thus guarantees privacy and free speech. The recommendations of the American Association for the Advancement of Science's conference on "Anonymous Communication Policies for the Internet" support this view. Among the findings were that "online anonymous communication is morally neutral" and that "it should be considered a strong human and constitutional right..."

However, critics of online anonymity have continued to point out its potential risks for the society. Notable among these risks are Internet fraud and pornography. Thus, Longe *et al.* (2007, p.195) argue that "The Internet, aided by technology-induced anonymity has popularized the sex business more than any other means of advertisement." Similarly, Mayer (2009, p.9) contends that despite "its popular veneration, anonymity is not without its flaws; by rendering accountability impossible, anonymity enables libellous or criminal activity without fear of retribution."

Equally commenting on the dangers posed by Internet anonymity, Adeniran (2008, p.369) says:

The anonymity and privacy that the Internet provides to potential users has excessively enhanced the degree of fluidity and structural complexity of the yahooboy's operations in Nigeria. Today, they get access to the Internet without exiting the home. Embezzlements, electronic frauds, fictitious sales of properties and cars are all being carried out without leaving a trace.

Arguing against the notion that anonymity is fundamental to free speech which is at the heart of democracy, Davenport (2012, p.35) contends that "Accountability lies at the very heart of the democratic tradition and is crucial to

the continued stability of a free and fair society.” Without accountability, there is little or no trust which is the key to securing effectiveness of communication. Davenport (2012, p.34) writes further:

Besides, messages sent anonymously are unlikely to have much impact on their own. Only if the recipient of a message knows and trusts its writer is action likely to ensue. Trust is built up as a result of numerous encounters, but if the communications are truly anonymous then it is difficult to establish such a relationship. Messages sent anonymously are thus unlikely to have much impact on their own and hence reliance on anonymous communications for whistle-blowing, informing the world of human rights violations, or promulgating a political platform would seem to be misplaced.

Experience suggests that a society relying solely on the goodwill and conscience of its citizens would unlikely succeed in ensuring law and order. Similarly, attempting to guarantee law and order by adopting measures preventing the very possibility of wrongdoing is unfeasible since there is little hope of covering all eventualities (Longe *et al.* 2007; Adeniran, 2008; Davenport, 2012). Hence, Internet anonymity would remain a source of dilemma for societies as they try to balance free speech and public order.

Many studies have focused on the patterns of use of the Internet among youths in Nigeria. Findings have generally shown that Internet access is widespread among this category of population (Ojokoh & Asaolu, 2005; Mishra, 2009; Bankole & Babalola, 2012; Fasae & Aladeniyi, 2012; Ekweli, 2014; Uzuegbunam, 2015). Statistics from these studies, when read together with those from other sources such as the International Telecommunications Union (ITU, 2004) and Internet World Stat (Amaefule, 2012), strongly suggest that most of Internet penetration in the country has concentrated on this young population.

Internet platforms which youths in Nigeria have been found to use mostly include search engines (Mishra, 2009; Bankole and Babalola, 2012; Ekweli, 2014); E-mails (Bankole and Babalola, 2012; Ekweli, 2014); and social networking sites (Bankole and Babalola, 2012; Uzuegbunam, 2015). These three—E-mails, search engines and social networking sites—featured consistently as the most prominently accessed Internet services among the students.

Literature has shown that young people in Nigeria have used the Internet for information and knowledge seeking; in fact, they have adjudged the Internet as more viable than older sources of information and knowledge (Jagboro, 2003; Awoleye, Siyanbola, Oladipo, 2008; Mishra, 2009; Kayode-Edebor, 2011; Fasae and Aladeniyi, 2012). Furthermore, Mishra (2009), Anasi (2006) and Udende (2010) have discovered that this pattern of use have had real positive impact on the academic life of students. But, in addition to this, Awoleye, Siyanbola & Oladipo

(2008) have also found that the Internet have positively impacted the social life of the students. Apart from information and knowledge-seeking purposes, young users have—to a significant extent— utilised the Internet for the purpose of networking, interaction and leisure (Jagboro, 2003; Awolaye, Siyanbola, Oladipo, 2008; Mishra, 2009, Fasae & Aladeniyi, 2012; Ekweli, 2014).

However, while a plethora of studies have focused on the Internet use habit of young Nigerians, these efforts appear to have left out an aspect of this habit, which is anonymity. These studies may have failed to investigate the occurrence and role of this phenomenon as a component of Internet use habit among this age group. This constitutes the gap which this study intended to address.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

One of the most influential theories describing the effect of anonymity on behavior is deindividuation theory propounded by Zimbardo in 1969. The deindividuation state was described as a state in which individuals within a group are not “seen or paid attention to as individuals” (Christopherson, 2007).

Thus, under the anonymity provided by being a member of a crowd, it was predicted that when “under conditions where the member is not individuated in the group, there is likely to occur for the member a reduction of inner restraints against doing various things” (Festinger *et al.*, 1952, p. 382). According to Postmes (2001), “deindividuation is a characteristic of the individual in the crowd. It is a psychological state of decreased self-evaluation, causing anti-normative and disinhibited behavior.” Deindividuation theory is rooted in some of the earliest social psychological theorizing, more than a century ago. It seeks to explain the apparent transformation of rational individuals into an unruly group or crowd. It posits that the group provides “an environment in which the individual—submerged and anonymous – suffers from a loss of self-awareness. Deindividuation hinders reflection about the consequences of actions, rendering social norms impotent while increasing suggestibility to random outside influences” (Christopherson, 2007, p.13).

The deindividuation theory would help to conceptualise the tendency of individual Internet users to act “irresponsibly” while they remain anonymous on the Internet. An anonymous individual might feel him/herself “lost” in the crowd of multitude who exist in the cyberspace; his/her sense of individual responsibility could be lost, thus the user could be lured into doing acts he/she could not have done were his/her identity known. Citing Saldarini & DeRobertis (2003), Longe & Longe (2005, p.61) summarise this position thus:

The impact of a technologically induced feeling of anonymity has generated a “new self”; one that will continue to expand in the 21st

century. An online-self that exists in the arena of the cyberspace has been unleashed with a potential to behave in a way that is ethically suspect. They noted sex offenders find the anonymity of online interactions to be the Internet's most attractive feature.

The uses and gratifications theory is also relevant to the subject of investigation here. This theory postulates that the nature and extent of the effect of the mass media on the audience is conditioned by the uses which the audiences make of the media. The bottom line of uses and gratification theory is that media do not do things to people; rather, people do things with media (Ojobor, 2002). Specifically, according to Burgeon, Hunsaker & Dawson (1994, pp.374-375), the objective of uses and gratification theory is to explain how individuals use mass communication to gratify their needs.

The uses and gratifications theory also highlights the positive consequences of individual media use. In their contribution, Baran and Davis (2001) conclude that audience members actively seek out the mass media to satisfy individual needs. These include learning, passing time, companionship, escape from tension, excitement and relaxation.

In the context of this study, therefore, the uses and gratifications theory helps to view the young Internet user in Nigeria as an active user that seeks to satisfy certain personal gratifications in accessing the Internet. It is such gratifications that would determine his/her decision to be or not to be anonymous online as well as his/her behaviour under such anonymity.

Also relevant here is the theory of technological determinism which affirms that technology is at the root of all social phenomena including development. It is a reductionist theory which believes that humans are conditioned by technological advancements as they actualise their existence; that their actions are inevitably shaped by the nature and the extent of technological structures existing in the society at any point in time (Leonard, 2008; Baran and Davis, 2001). In other words, we are without choice and freewill as far as technology is concerned. Thus, the technological determinism perspective will view online anonymity as a creation of technology. That is, according to this theory, Internet users cannot but be anonymous; they are compelled to be anonymous according to the determination of the technology known as Internet.

METHODOLOGY

This research was designed as a survey. In the researchers' view, this study, being an investigation of uses, perception and effect of online anonymity on a particular population, would best achieve its objectives through surveying the concerned population.

The area of study was Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, in South-East Nigeria. This is a federal government's higher education institution with 14 faculties. The population of this study was the undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University. They number about 34,650 according to the information sourced from the university registry in 2015. Using Taro Yamane's formula for sample size determination we arrived at a sample size of 399 (approximated to 400). The sampling procedure was multi-stage in approach. The researchers conducted their sampling in three stages: selection of four faculties; two departments from each of the four faculties; fifty students randomly selected from each of the total eight departments earlier selected. The questionnaire consisted of twenty close-ended, structured questions. The instrument was pre-tested via a pilot study. Its validity and reliability were established in this way.

Data Presentation and Analyses

Of the 400 copies of the questionnaire distributed, 393 were recovered, representing 98.3%, while 7 were not recovered, representing 1.7%. Thus, the response rate was 98.3%. Demographically, while 66.3% of the respondents were males, 33.7% were females. The figures indicate that the number of males was almost twice that of females—the difference between the two being as wide as 32.6%. This situation occurred for the reason that, at the last stage of the sampling procedure, the researchers selected their respondents at random without seeking to balance the sexes. Furthermore, the respondents were between 15 and 19 years; 67.3% were between 20 and 24, 14% were between 25 and 29, while 6.1% were 30 and above. These data imply that majority of the respondents were between 15 and 19 years; collective only 32.7% of the respondents fell out of this age bracket.

Patterns of Internet Use

Data collected show that all of the respondents said they use the Internet. In other words, there is 100% Internet use among the respondents. This, however, does not necessarily imply that all of the respondents are personally connected to the Internet.

Table 1

Respondents' Major Purpose of Internet Use

	Frequency	Percentage
News/Information	96	24.4%
Academic Research	56	14.2%
Social Networking	91	23.2%
Entertainment	91	23.2%
Others	49	12.5%
Not Certain	10	2.5%
TOTAL	393	100%

The above-table shows that 24.4% of the respondents used the Internet mainly for news/information; 14.2% use it mainly for academic research; while 23.2% use it principally for social networking. Similarly, 23.4% use the Net mainly for entertainment; 12.5% use it for other purposes; while 2.5% were uncertain as to their major aim of use. These data show that news/information ranked highest, though with a very slight margin over social networking and entertainment as the main gratification which the respondents seek to satisfy via the Internet. The fact that the respondents were all young people could help to explain the prominence of social networking and entertainment here.

Patterns of Use of Online Anonymity

Table 2

Hiding of Identity or Use of Pseudonym on Online Account
(Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc) by Respondents

	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	242	61.6%
No	151	38.4%
TOTAL	393	100%

The table 2 shows that 61.6% of the respondents have any online account (such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube etc) which hides their true identity because it bears neither their real name nor photograph; while 38.4% do not own such. The implication of this is that slightly more than 60% of the respondents have at least one online account that does not show their identity by way of either name or photograph.

Table 3

Hiding of Identity while Making Posts Online

	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	298	63.4%
No	144	36.6%
TOTAL	393	100%

The above-table shows that 63.4% of the respondents have hidden their identity while making any post online by not using their real name or photograph; while 36.6% have not. This is different from the data in previous table which concern online accounts only. Table 3 concerns all posts made online whether through one's account (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc) or through any other platform. The data in this table indicate that about three-quarter of the respondents have not made such anonymous posts.

The table 4 shows that none (0%) of the respondents always hide their identity while making any post online; 23.2% do this sometimes; 1% hide theirs rarely; while 75.8% gave no answer – probably because they had earlier indicated that they have not in this way hidden their identity. However, when the number who gave no answer is eliminated, then 95.8% hide their identity sometimes; while 4.2% hide theirs rarely.

Table 4

Frequency of Hiding of Identity Online

	Frequency	Percentage
Always	0	0%
Sometimes	91	23.2%
Rarely	4	1%
No answer	298	75.8%
TOTAL	393	100%

Purposes of Use of Online Anonymity

Table 5

Purposes of Online Anonymity

	I hide my identity on the Internet for fear of getting into trouble about what I post?	I hide my identity on the Internet for fear of Internet fraudsters and other online harmers?	I hide my identity on the Internet for fear that my contribution might not impress others all the time?	I hide my identity on the Internet to preserve my privacy?	I hide my identity on the Internet because I am reluctant to associate?	I hide my identity on the Internet just for the fun of it?
True	7.6% N = 30	17.6% N = 69	0% N = 0	26.2% N = 103	0% N = 0	17.6% N = 69
False	92.4% N = 363	82.4% N = 324	100% N = 393	73.2% N = 290	100% N = 393	82.4% N = 324
TOTAL	100% N = 393	100% N = 393	100% N = 393	100% N = 393	100% N = 393	100% N = 393

The table 5 shows that 7.6% of the respondents hide their identity online for fear of getting into trouble about what they post; while 92.4% do not. Also, 17.6% of the respondents hide their identity on the Internet for fear of Internet fraudsters and other online harmers; while 82.4% do not. Similarly, none of the respondents hide their identity on the Internet for fear that their contribution might not impress others all the time; while all do not do this. In the same vein, 7.6% hide their identity on the Internet to preserve their privacy; while 73.2% do not. Furthermore, none of the respondents hide their identity on the Internet because they are

reluctant to associate; all do not. Lastly, while 17.6% hide their identity on the Internet just for the fun of it; 82.4% do not.

Perception of Online Anonymity

The table 6 shows that 60.3% of the respondents believe that hiding of identity on the Internet enables people to freely give their views on issues; while 44% believe that hiding of identity on the Internet makes people irresponsible regarding what they post. Also, 62.6% think that hiding of identity on the Internet could spell danger to the society; while 56% believe that hiding of identity on the Internet could be good for the society. These data show that while a good number of the respondents have positive perception of the social consequences of online anonymity, a good number as well foresee some danger in that.

Table 6

Perceptions of Online Anonymity

	The fact that people can hide their identity on the Internet enables them to freely give their views on issues?	The fact that people can hide their identity on the Internet makes them irresponsible regarding what they post?	The fact that people can hide their identity on the Internet could spell danger to the society?	The fact that people can hide their identity on the Internet could be good for the society?
True	60.3% N = 237	44% N = 173	62.6% N = 246	56% N = 220
False	39.7% N = 156	56% N = 220	37.4% N = 147	44% N = 173
TOTAL	100% N = 393	100% N = 393	100% N = 393	100% N = 393

Effects of Online Anonymity

Table 7

Effects of Online Anonymity

	Anonymity boosts my motivation to use the Internet?	I feel safer expressing myself while anonymous online?	Being anonymous tempts me into making unethical/unlawful communication?
True	41.2% N = 162	27% N = 106	34.9% N = 256
False	58.8% N = 231	73% N = 287	65.1% N = 137
TOTAL	100% N = 393	100% N = 393	100% N = 393

The table shows that anonymity boosts the motivation of 41.2% of the respondents to use the Internet, while it does not do so to 58.8%. Also, 27% feel safer expressing themselves while anonymous online as against 73% that do not have the same experience. On the other hand, being anonymous tempts 34.9% into making unethical/unlawful communication online, while 65.1% are not so tempted.

Answering the Research Questions

Research Question 1: To what extent do young Internet users utilise online anonymity?

Firstly, it was established that all the respondents use the Internet. The most dominant uses they make of the Internet consisted of sourcing for news/information and for social networking. In the main, data gathered and analysed show that majority of the respondents have an online account (such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube) which hides their true identity because the account bears neither their real name nor photograph. Similarly, majority admitted to have hidden their identity while making any post online by not using their real name or photograph. Based on the foregoing, it can be stated that because all of the young people use the Internet, it was no surprise that a significant proportion of the young Internet users are supposedly aware of what online anonymity entails and that they utilise online anonymity.

Research Question 2: How do these users perceive anonymity on the Internet?

The majority of the respondents are of the view that online anonymity promotes free speech, but do not think it makes people irresponsible in communicating online. However, while they are of the view that online anonymity could be dangerous for the society, they still believe that the society has something to benefit from it. Consequently, in answer to the second research question, while young Internet users perceive online anonymity as socially beneficial, they at the same time view it as potentially destructive.

Research Question 3: What are these users' reasons to be anonymous on the Internet?

In approaching this question, the data show that the number of respondents that utilise online anonymity due to privacy concerns emerged as the highest (26.2%), followed by the number that utilise it for fear of Internet fraud and other online harms, and the number that utilise it just for the fun of it—both of which stand at 17.6%. Therefore, the second research question is answered by admitting that the young Internet users utilise online anonymity mainly for the following purposes: first, to protect their privacy; second, to shield themselves against fraud and other online harms; and third, for the mere fun of it.

Research Question 4: What are the effects of online anonymity on these users?

Evidence from the data presented indicate that for majority of the respondents, anonymity does not boost their motivation to use the Internet, and neither does it make them feel safer expressing themselves, nor tempt them into making unethical/unlawful communication online. All these suggest that impact of anonymity on the Internet use habit of the respondents may not have been so strong. Consequently, it could be stated that being anonymous is not a motivating factor for using the Internet among the respondents, and that this has neither made them feel free to communicate nor lured majority of them towards communications that are ethically and legally undesirable. Still, the fact that those who agreed that being anonymous online tempts them into making unethical/unlawful communication, was a significant 35%, leaves room for further consideration of the possible negative effect of online anonymity on these users. This is further accentuated by the earlier significant 44% who affirmed that the fact that people can hide their identity on the Internet makes them irresponsible regarding what they post.

IMPLICATION AND CONCLUSION

Specifically, the findings of this study suggest that the youths in Anambra State in Nigeria are aware of what online privacy, Internet anonymity and disclosure are, as well as what are the attendant risks and benefits involved. Yet, it remains unclear why their attitude towards privacy, anonymity and self disclosure appears to be 'unserious' and dilemmatic. For instance, they know what these portend but they are unsure why they appropriate them. This suggests that these young people may not be fully ready to play by the rules of Internet privacy, Internet safety and cyber security. It may be safe to conclude that this is a cohort that wants to do their "own thing their own way", defying any conventions and schemas. Furthermore, this may be all too potentially destructive as more and more real life shared and lived experiences in Nigeria point to the dangers associated with youths not following the Internet safety rules: sexual harassments, identity thefts, hacking, cyberbullying, sex killings, ritual killings, frauds, etc.

Broadly put, the findings of this research generally suggest that anonymity has become an important component of Internet use culture among youths and it could have both positive and negative impacts on the users and the larger Nigerian society. However, these young users are not totally unaware of the possible social hazards of online anonymity. In other words, while they appreciate its potential social value, they are not totally oblivious of its potential dangers. This awareness, possibly, would contribute to cushioning the likely negative impact of anonymous use of the Internet in the Nigerian society. At least, being aware that hiding of identity on the Internet could compromise social norm and order, the conscientious ones among the young Internet users could be properly guided for healthier use.

Reflecting on the theories upon which this study was based, the findings of this study have opened some space for further reflection and analysis. For instance, the deindividuation theory has helped to conceptualise the tendency of individual users of the Internet to act “irresponsibly” while they remain anonymous on the Internet. According to the theory, an anonymous individual might feel him/herself “lost” in the crowd of multitude who exist in the cyberspace; his/her sense of individual responsibility could be lost. Thus, the user could be lured into doing acts he/she could not have done were his/her identity known. This scenario seemed emblematic of the university undergraduates that were studied in this research. Besides, the technological determinism perspective has itself proved that online anonymity—and other online behaviours—are creations of technology. In other words, the young Internet users in Anambra State, Nigeria, cannot but be anonymous—they are compelled to be anonymous according to the determination of the technology known as the Internet. Notably, it had earlier been surmised that past research literature have generally shown that Internet access is widespread among this category of Nigeria’s population (Ojokoh & Asaolu, 2005; Mishra, 2009; Bankole & Babalola, 2012; Fasae & Aladeniyi, 2012; Ekweli, 2014; Uzuegbunam, 2015).

This study has attempted to address the tensions surrounding anonymity among selected young Internet users in Nigeria in contemporary social media platforms. It ultimately contributes to a tradition of research on the dualism of privacy, privilege, and social interaction (Walther, 2011) that online communication has incurred over the times.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations were deemed germane by the authors:

1. More studies pertaining to the subject could be conducted, especially to utilise other research methods such as focus group and participant observation, to unravel the earlier noted point of why young people’s attitude towards privacy, anonymity and self disclosure appears to be unserious and dilemmatic. Furthermore, it may be important to also have a comparative analysis of online anonymity and privacy issues between and among other places in Nigeria.
2. Internet literacy education should be incorporated in the Nigerian school curriculum beginning from the primary school level, as this is currently largely non-existent. This is with the view to start educating people from their early years on not just the skill but on ethics and other principles of healthy Internet use. This is particularly relevant today when new media access is becoming more common even amongst children.

3. Civil society groups, political educators, health educators and other development communicators in Nigeria should be encouraged to optimise use of the Internet in engaging the audience, particularly the young ones. If the youths are so usefully engaged online, possibly, it may be that they could be occupied with more socially useful communication while on the Internet as against playing mischief and engaging in other socially destructive habits.

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