

## Readers' Perception of Nigerian Online Newspapers among Newspaper Readers in Benin City

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### Abstract

*This researcher assessed readers' motivation for reading of Nigerian online newspapers with a view to ascertaining the level of exposure and motivational factors for reading online newspapers, by surveying readers in Benin City metropolis. The researcher intended to find out the extent to which readers in Benin City are exposed to online newspapers; ascertain their motivation for reading online newspapers and likely problems encountered by readers. Anchored on the uses and gratifications theory, the study adopted a survey research design which employed quantitative research method. Questionnaire was employed as research instrument and 384 copies of the questionnaire were sampled on respondents using the multi-stage sampling technique. The research findings show that most respondents who participated in this study are exposed to online newspapers because of their accessibility to the internet and they perceive that online newspapers poses a significant threat to the readership of the printed versions. It was also found that slow loading of contents, unavailability of follow-up pages and too many adverts are the prominent problems encountered while trying to access Nigerian Newspaper on the internet. It is, therefore, recommended that telecommunication and internet service providers should improve their data connection network so that there will be easy access and timely loading of web contents of online newspapers. Also, publishers of print newspapers in Nigeria should continue to take advantage of the potentials of internet as a convergence media in order to ensure their survival.*

**Keywords:** Readers, perception, newspapers, the Internet, uses and gratifications theory

### Introduction

In the present screen age, the emergence of internet has revolutionized the communication landscape to become a significant source of information sharing and dissemination. The internet, regarded as a global network of interconnected computers employs the use of telecommunication resources. Scholars have defined the internet as a system of large number of computers throughout the whole world that has the capacity and capability to communicate and share data with another system within the network (Aina, 2003). As foretold by Marshall McLuhan in his "villagisation" thesis, the myriads of potentials and capacity of the internet have transformed the human society by changing the way we live, relate, learn, work

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and most importantly, communicate with one another by providing a platform and channel to share ideas and communicate with more people around world, regardless of location and proximity, by transcending the all-known barriers associated with traditional mass media, thus making it a global village. A closer observation of the internet industry over the last two decades will afford one the opportunity to understand the series of endless possibilities and transformations brought about by the internet into the field of communication, particularly, in the area of the mass media. One of those areas where internet contribution has been enormous is the newspaper industry.

The emergence of the internet has absolutely transformed and altered every facet of the printing industry and newspapers have taken the lead. In the present era of globalization and digitization made possible by the internet, the public do not have to linger for 24 hours before newspapers provide them with an up-to-date happenings on issues and events around the world as newspapers now have 'breaking news' which was hitherto exclusively available to the broadcast industry. People do not have to wait until the vendor(s) deliver the newsprint to them in person before knowing what is happening in the dailies of their choice – which is fast becoming a trend in Nigeria today due to the high rate of internet users, mainly amongst the younger generations. According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project (2006) report, more than 50 million Americans get their news from the internet on a daily basis and that virtually one-quarter (24%) of Americans say the Internet is their major source of getting news, while 44% obtain news from online sources at least once a week (Pew Research Centre, 2006).

The mass media in the present age of globalization and digitisation, as Kasmi (2015) pointed out, are fast overlapping and converging into what is now becoming a convergent media or a set of interrelated networks. Invariably, modern technologies are defining the reach, coverage and range of the traditional mass media, thereby creating a common convergence point for all channels of mass media and the new media. Arguably, the internet has utilized its advantage of speed and interactivity in diverse ways and leaving its overwhelming influence in all facets of human endeavours. One of such impacts could be readily seen in the internet newspapers phenomenon that has significantly improved the accessibility of members of the society to information services which the mainstream mass media channels such as radio, television, newspaper, etc are chasing, especially in the developed and less-developed societies where the internet, computers, smart devices and other electronic gadgets usage are excitedly being embraced (Okoro & Diri, 2010). Linking this to Nigerian Mediasphere, Kperogi (2012, p.35) notes that:

Two momentous developments have defined the Nigerian journalistic landscape in the last ten years. The first is the migration of all major Nigerian newspapers to the Internet (while actively sustaining their print editions) in hopes of reaching the highly educated Nigerian migratory elite in the diaspora). On the surface, these developments seem contradictory, even counter-intuitive: the migration of news content from homeland legacy newspapers to the Internet should have functioned to satisfy the thirst for domestic news by geographically displaced diasporan

Nigerians and therefore obviated the need for diasporan-run citizen news outlets.

From the foregoing, it can be seen that nations around the world are quickly applying modern technologies in all facets of life and the newspaper industry, surely, do not want to be left out. The changing face and continuous survival of the Nigerian newspaper industry has only been possible due to their acceptance and embrace of the internet and all its endless possibilities and capabilities. However, writing on convergence, Baran (2012) affirmed that the emergence of internet and information and communication technologies (ICT) has enabled newspapers around the world to re-established their brands and titles in the media ecosystem by becoming more dyadic and feedback-oriented, more user-friendly, more casual, more lifestyle-oriented, and more in touch with the younger generations. In line with this, this researcher seeks to assess the perception of newspaper readers on Nigerian online newspapers among newspaper readers in Benin City.

The internet is, arguably, the greatest communication inventions of man in modern times. This is mostly as a result of the convergence power which it has, and which has also been used to bring other traditional media to a common plane. In Nigeria, the face of the newspapers can be said to be changing greatly. In recent times, many Nigerian newspapers like *The Nation*, *This Day*, *Vanguard*, *The Punch*, *Guardian*, amongst others, can now be read on the internet just like *The London Times*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Financial Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and other international titles.

In spite of the obvious benefits which the internet has brought to the print industry, many people still do not fancy the reading of newspapers online as a result of their biased notion of the internet as a place where any faceless individual can post whatever he likes for public consumption. To this school of thought, the newspaper hard copy is the only authentic news source. It is obvious from the foregoing that, there is a perceived problem about credibility of news stories or information on the internet from Nigerian online newspapers. Oyero, (2007) asserts that because there is no gatekeeping mechanism that allows for editing, verifying facts and establishing accuracy before web information is posted, trusting stories online becomes difficult. This study therefore examines how Nigerian newspaper readers perceive Nigerian newspapers on the internet, in terms of credibility of the online stories. In other words, how do the readers see Nigerian newspapers online and what do they think about them being able to stand as recognised news sites like their foreign counterparts?

### **Research Objectives**

The study seeks to:

1. Find out the extent to which newspaper readers in Benin City are exposed to online newspaper.
2. Ascertain how newspaper readers in Benin City perceive Nigerian newspapers online.
3. Ascertain the likely problems encountered by readers of Nigerian newspapers online

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Uses and Gratifications Theory**

Though the perception of Nigerian online newspaper reading can be explored using various theoretical approaches, Uses and Gratification theory is adopted for the purpose of this study, as it centres on media usage and satisfaction derived from the usage of such medium. Uses and Gratification theory was first theorized and tested in Elihu Katz's article in 1959 (Asemah, Nwammuo & Nkwam-Uwaoma, 2022). The theory proposed two inferences about audiences of media. First, audiences are active in the selection of media and their messages. Second, audiences are mindful of their reasons for choice of a particular medium vis-à-vis both information and entertainment. They consider these reasons as they ardently search for media messages for information needs and gratification. Therefore, not only the content defines media preferences but also audience's characteristics and their relationship with the media content. According to Asemah et al., (2022), the basic tenets of Uses and Gratification theory formed five claims:

- i. communication behaviour is purposive, motivated and goal directed;
- ii. individuals initiate the choice and usage of communication medium;
- iii. communication behaviour is mediated or guided by a host of psychological and social factors;
- iv. in the gratification of needs, the media contend with other forms of communication; and
- v. People are naturally more powerful than the media in the course of effects.

In the context of this study, it is a well established fact that in the last two decades, rapid changes has occurred in print and online newspaper readings due to emergence of the Internet. Readers make decision regarding choice of either print or online version, depending on their information needs and the accompanying gratification they derive from their utilization of such platforms. This implies that by offering online news content, readers of a particular newspaper can actively gain personal gratification from either of the newspaper versions of their choice and the said newspaper can gain more readerships, albeit through web traffic on their website, thereby remaining relevant. For instance, if the readers of *Guardian* newspaper decide to read more online version than its print counterpart, although the readership circulation of the print version might be affected, they might not necessary lose their readers to other competing media if their readers derive the much-needed satisfaction and gratification from their consumption of the online version. This is based on the inferences of Uses and Gratification theory.

### **Review of Related Literature**

McQuail (2010) describes 'online newspapers' as newspapers that are widely accessible as text on the internet. While Okonofua (2012) defined online newspaper as a newspaper that exists on the internet either separately, or as an online version of a printed periodical, Mathew, Ogedegbe & Adeniji (2013) saw it as 'web newspaper'. There are two classes of online newspapers: those that exist exclusively online without a print version ('online-only newspapers') and those that have online versions as well as the print version. Such newspapers as *The Atlantic*

*Herald* in the US, *Southport Reporter* in the UK and *Daily Post* in Nigeria are examples of online-only newspapers. *The New York Times* in the US, *The Telegraph* in the UK and *The Punch* as well as *The Nation* in Nigeria are examples of newspapers that have both online and print versions.

According to Kperogi (2012), the *Post Express*, under the direction of the late Distinguished Dr. Stanley Macebuh, is widely recognized as the first Nigerian newspaper to operate an online newspaper when it started publishing its contents on the internet in 1996. Also, other newspapers such as the *Guardian*, *Punch*, *Vanguard*, *The Nation*, and *ThisDay*, have websites where they regularly republished selected contents from their print editions for their online readers. Kperogi (2012) noted that at the dawn of the 2000s, nearly all the leading newspapers in circulation in Nigeria had some online presence, aided in part by the aggregation and distribution of their content, along with those of other African newspapers, by the AllAfrica.com, the Washington DC-based multimedia content service provider renowned as the world's largest Africa-centred site. Since online newspaper trend began, newspaper publishing house have used the opportunity to bridge the gap between the print media and the broadcast media in terms of speed of information dissemination about issues and events and this has significantly transformed journalistic practice and mediasphere in Nigeria. While corroborating this view, Nwora (n.d.) cited in Kasmi (2015) affirmed that:

One does not need to search very far to begin to see some of such impact. To their credit, some Nigerian media organisations have already established a strong presence in cyberspace, amongst the pioneers are The Guardian Newspapers ([www.ngrguardiannews.com](http://www.ngrguardiannews.com)), The ThisDay Newspaper group ([www.thisdayonline.com](http://www.thisdayonline.com)), The Independent Newspaper group ([www.independentng.com](http://www.independentng.com)), New Age Newspaper ([www.newage-online.com](http://www.newage-online.com)) and so on. It can be said therefore that the Nigerian media are measuring up with their counterparts in other parts of the world by their maintaining strategic presence on the information super highway.

This assertion by Nwora cited in Kasmi (2015) has, lend credence to the fact that there has been a remarkable modification and transformation in the readership of newspaper on the internet made possible by the emergence of internet connectivity. However, regardless of the visible and obvious accomplishments of the internet as a news medium, studies and scholars are sceptical and wary thereby raising genuine concern over the credibility and integrity of the internet as an online news source (Lasica, 1998). These concerns are important due to the OTA virtues (objectivity, truthfulness and accuracy) which are the core tenets and principles on which journalism is enshrined. This is because majority of members of the public have a niche for only showing interest in a medium that they perceive to be trustworthy and credible since trust and credibility are crucial elements in media-audience relationship trajectory. This, as Johnson & Kaye (1998) cautions, is important to maintain the information gateway, as lack of trust in contents obtained from online sources has the potential

to disrupt the believability of such information, thereby hindering the internet from becoming an important and dominant source of information to the society.

As globalization and digitization continues to gain significant acceptance all over the world, Nigerian newspaper industry has also joined the trend of publishing their contents daily on their respective websites. It is a well-established fact that majority of Nigerian newspaper now have a website for connecting with their digital generations of news readers via the internet (Kasmi, 2015). The challenge that many online newspaper readers grapples with, however, is the issue of source or medium credibility and the identification of the writer or authors of such stories due to the lack of regulation and restriction on the internet –in other words, the audience believe that nobody is taking responsibility for internet stories as obtained in the mainstream media. In spite of these seemingly mammoth challenges, the emergence of the internet has not only transformed the dissemination of information by the mainstream media but also revolutionize the conventional methods of information gathering and processing. According to Baran (2010, p.121)

Television forced the newspaper to change the way they did business and served their readers, now online computer networks pose the greatest challenge to this medium. Online job hunting and auto sales services are already cutting into the classified advertising profit of newspapers.

The 21st century and its emphasis on online journalism have also seen the introduction of online-only or 'paperless' newspapers. Iglesias (2012) cited in Rogel, Pereira-Fariña, and Quichimbo, (2015) points out that a news medium created only for the internet works in a more agile manner, and is not pressured to delay publication of certain news until the print edition is published. Thus, in the past 10 years, many web-based news outlets or news portals have emerged with Nigeria *NewsDesk*, *Information Nigeria*, *Daily Post*, *YNaija*, and news blogs, among others, being in the lead.

In a related study, Hassan, Latiff, & Atek, (2015), examined readers' motivations towards reading online newspapers. The study employed descriptive survey method in which questionnaire was administered to a randomly selected sample of 330 newspapers readers. The findings demonstrated a high overall motivation level of the readers towards reading online version of newspapers. A further analysis of the findings revealed that readers are motivated to read online version of newspapers because they have access to the internet. Also readers are motivated to read online version of newspapers because of its interactive nature. Meanwhile, readers are motivated to read online version of newspapers because of its ability to provide timely updates. The study concludes that online newspapers are gaining popularity in the newspaper industry. Therefore, newspaper publishers should strategize ways to fully embrace their technological fate and enhance quality print run.

Also, Babaleye, Oluwasola, Layefa & Aletor (2017) examined new media, e-publishing and the fearful realities viz-a-viz its implications for the survival of traditional print media in Nigeria with particular focus on news media

consumption patterns of university students in Ado Ekiti, South-west, Nigeria. Anchored on the uses and gratification and diffusion of innovations theories, the survey research design was applied for the study. Questionnaire was administered on 200 respondents but 192 of them adequately responded and were analyzed. Stratified and convenience sampling techniques were employed to draw samples. Findings from the study revealed that new media in journalism practice poses a threat to the readership of traditional print media. It was found that majority of the respondents have regular access to the internet. Majority of the respondents read online newspapers more than they read traditional newspapers which show that there is a drastic downward trend of the readership figures of traditional print media. The study recommends that print media publishers in Nigeria should re-strategize to improve readership among students of tertiary institutions because they form a large percentage of newspaper readers in the country.

Similarly, Hassan & Azmi (2018) examined the extent of readership preferences for both print and online newspapers in North-Western Nigeria. *Daily Trust*, being the largest circulating newspaper in the study area was selected for case study. The study employed quantitative approach, in which descriptive survey method was used to gather and analyze data from print and newspaper readers in the study area. Structured questionnaire was used as data-gathering instrument. The questionnaire was distributed to a sample of 330 newspaper readers using simple random sampling. The findings revealed a moderate readers' preference for the online version of the newspaper to its print counterpart. Further analysis of the findings revealed that majority of the readers find themselves reading less print copy of the newspaper because they have access to the free online versions. However, the study also found that majority of the readers will continue to read the print version despite the availability of its free online counterpart. Also, majority of the readers spend less time reading the print copy of the newspaper due to the availability of its online versions. Meanwhile, majority of the readers are confident that the newspaper will continue to survive despite the availability of its free online versions. The study concluded that advancement in technology may not lead to the complete demise of the print newspapers; the readership of print versions may decline, but readers will never substitute print newspaper with its online counterpart. The study recommended that newspaper publishers should take advantage of the new technology to maximize their potential.

Therefore, the present study goes beyond online newspaper reading in relation to its print counterpart, to examining the readers' motivations towards reading online version of newspapers. Meanwhile, the study measures the level of readers' motivations towards reading online version of newspapers particularly in the Benin City, Nigeria where the related literature suggests little attention by researchers.

## Methodology

The researcher used the Survey research design in collecting data for the study. According to Asemah, Gujbawu, Ekharefo and Okpanachi (2017), a survey is an empirical study that uses questionnaire or interviews to discover the descriptive characteristics of a phenomenon. It is also an efficient means of gathering data from large numbers of people. The choice of survey research design

for the study is justified because the work proposes to evaluate the perception of newspaper readers of online newspaper in Benin City. The population of this study is made up of Benin City residents with a population of 1.905 million according to Macrotrends (2023), with specific interests in newspaper readers. A sample size of 384 respondents was drawn using Taro Yamane sample size formula. The sampling technique was the multi-stage sampling research design. In the first stage, the researcher picked three (3) most populated Local Government Areas within Benin metropolis; namely: Egor Local Government Area, Oredo Local Government Area and Ikpoba-Okha Local Government Area. In the second stage, the researcher randomly selected highly populated areas in the three local government areas. For Oredo, Sapele road were selected. For Egor, Uselu was selected while for Ikpoba-Okha, Aduwawa was selected. In the third stage, the researcher chose purposive sampling technique to distribute 384 copies of questionnaire to newspaper readers in Egor, Ikpoba-Okha and Oredo respectively. Thus, 384 copies of questionnaire were distributed face-to-face to respondents in Benin City. However, 371 were retrieved while 367 were found usable. Therefore, our data analysis was consequently based on 367.

### **Data Analysis and Presentation**

**Table 1: Awareness and exposure to Nigerian online newspapers**

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentages</b>
Strongly agree	137	37.3
Agree	203	55.3
Undecided	27	7.4
Disagree	-	-
Strongly disagree	-	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>367</b>	<b>100</b>

The data in the above table show that most newspaper readers in Benin City are very exposed to Nigerian online newspapers. This is based on the fact that majority of the respondents answered to that effect.

**Table 2: Extent of awareness and exposure to Nigerian online newspapers**

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentages</b>
Very high	98	26.7
High	106	28.9
Can't tell	39	10.6
Low	68	18.5
Very low	56	15.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>367</b>	<b>100</b>

The above data indicate that the extent of awareness and exposure to Nigerian online newspapers is high among most newspaper readers in Benin City.



**Table 3: Respondents' perception of Nigerian newspapers on the internet**

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentages</b>
Nigerian online newspapers are easily accessible and less expensive compared to the printed versions	130	35.4
Nigerian online newspapers' contents are as credible and factual as their printed versions	95	25.9
Nigerian online newspapers' incorporates breaking news and timely updates	86	23.4
Contents of Nigerian online newspapers are easy to react to compared to printed versions	56	15.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>367</b>	<b>100</b>

It can be deduced from the above table that majority of the respondents perceived that Nigerian online newspapers are easily accessible and relatively inexpensive compared to printed versions.

**Table 4: Problems encountered by readers of Nigerian newspapers online**

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentages</b>
Slow loading of web pages	77	26.7
Difficulty in page follow-ups of continuing stories	95	5.7
Too many advertisements	123	42.8
All of the above	72	19.6
None of the above	-	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>367</b>	<b>100</b>

From the table above, it can be deduced that the major challenge encountered by majority of the respondents while reading Nigerian newspapers online is that there are too many adverts.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The findings showed that majority (92.6%) of the respondents are very much aware and exposed to Nigerian online. This percent is drawn from those that jointly indicated "strongly agree and agree." This suggests two things: the popularity of Nigerian online newspapers and the active engagement of readers in Benin City with these online newspapers. Attempt to measure the extent of the awareness and exposure to Nigerian online newspapers among the readers, reveals that the degree is extent is relatively high as alluded to by 55.6% of the respondents. Considering the high rate of internet accessibility among urban dwellers in Nigeria, it is safe to say that Nigerian online newspapers are still a vantage source of information consumption among newspaper readers. These show that, through their surfing of the web, they usually come in contact with the Nigerian newspaper online, which they read. These findings reveal that people are exposed to the Nigerian Newspapers online and not only in Nigeria but perhaps other parts of the world. Hence, the level of accessibility and exposure to Nigerian

online Newspapers by readers can be linked to the fact that the medium through which they access online newspaper contents, the internet, offers specific gratifications sought after by the readers. The awareness and exposure of the respondents to Nigerian online newspapers is in line with the thrust of the uses and gratifications theory which surmise that that individual media consumer makes choices of a particular media content or programme based on the value, gratification, satisfaction, reward or benefits expected from such media (Asemah, et al., 2022). Hence, readers make decision regarding choice of either print or online version, depending on their information needs and the accompanying gratification they derive from their utilisation of such platforms. This lends credence to the findings of Hassan (2015) that majority of those who read online newspapers do so because of internet access and that online newspaper is gaining acceptability among Nigerians.

Research objectives two, which seeks to ascertain how newspaper readers in Benin City have different perceptions of Nigerian online newspapers. It was found that majority of the respondents are of the view that Nigerian online newspapers are easily accessible and less expensive compared to the printed versions. This could be linked to the fact that a newspaper reader who already has access to the internet, will be able to read as many newspapers online as possible while also surfing the internet and satisfying his/her personal gratifications. Also, another major perception of the respondents is the belief in the credibility and factuality of Nigerian news stories on the internet, which also attest to the fact that Nigerian online Newspapers are living up to expectations of the readers. Furthermore, significant portion of the readers asserts that Nigerian online newspapers' incorporates breaking news and timely updates and their contents are easy to react to compared to printed versions. The implication of these findings is that the perception of newspaper readers in Benin City about internet newspapers is of mixed feelings, going by the responses on the credibility, similarities and the feedback mechanism it affords the readers. This is in tandem with the study of Hassan, Latiff & Atek (2015) that readers are motivated to read online version of newspapers because of its interactive nature and its nature to provide timely updates.

Research objective three focuses on ascertaining the problems and difficulties encountered by readers of Nigerian online newspapers. Table 4, provided the answer to the question. In table 4, it was established that there are challenges associated with accessing Nigerian online newspapers. Respondents said that pages not loading on time, follow-up pages not being available and too many adverts are the prominent problems they encountered while trying to access the Nigerian Newspaper on the internet. The implication of this findings points to the fact that there are challenges and difficulties associated with reading of internet newspapers; a clear message to all online Nigerian newspaper publishers on the need to tackle and address these challenges so as to enable the readers maximise the potentials that internet newspapers presents. This is because the readers are active and will only use media that can easily fulfil their communications goals. This is in tandem with the thrust of the UGT as proposed by Katz (1978) that people are naturally more powerful than the media in the course of effects.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined readers' perception of Nigerian newspapers on the internet, by surveying readers in Benin City metropolis. Based on the findings of this study, it is reasonable, therefore, to conclude that the internet remains an essential and effective medium of public and mass communication. This is even more evident in that the internet has become a convergent media due to the myriads of capabilities and potentials it possesses. These potentials associated with the internet have also attracted Nigerian readers to reading Nigerian online newspapers.

From the foregoing, it is evident that online newspapers are becoming attractive and popular in the newspaper industry due to certain gratifications they give to readers, especially in the areas of speed, timely updates and interactivity. In line with the above, the following are recommended:

1. In order to adapt to the fundamental changes brought about by online newspapers, publishers of the print newspapers in Nigeria should continue to take advantage of the potentials of internet as a convergence medium.
2. Online newspaper publishers should develop more appealing and professional tactics in the placement and display of adverts alongside online newspapers contents so that both the advert messages and news items can be well utilised by the reader without one infringing on the other.
3. Finally, telecommunication and internet service providers should improve their data connection network so that there will be easy access and timely loading of web contents of online newspapers, as this will encourage and increase the readership of internet newspapers among Nigerians.

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