



Utilisation of Digital Literacy Skills for Electronic Information Search by Undergraduate Students of Private Universities in Abuja, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the utilisation of digital literacy skills for electronic information search among undergraduate students in selected private universities in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja, Nigeria. The study was guided by one research question and one null hypothesis. A quantitative research approach and cross-sectional survey design were adopted. The population comprised registered undergraduate students in three selected private universities: Baze University, Nile University of Nigeria, and Veritas University. A sample of 361 students was selected using proportionate stratified and simple random sampling procedures. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire covering basic digital literacy and electronic information-search competencies. Of the questionnaires administered, 350 were retrieved and found usable. Data were analysed using frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation, and one-way analysis of variance. The findings revealed that undergraduate students possessed and utilised digital literacy skills at a high level, particularly in using Internet search tools, search engines, electronic mail, and basic electronic information-management functions. The study further found no significant difference in the utilisation of digital literacy skills among students across the selected universities. The study concludes that undergraduate students possess foundational digital literacy competencies that support electronic information searching. It recommends strengthening practical digital and information-literacy programmes to advance students' competencies beyond basic operational skills towards more effective searching, evaluation, and ethical use of electronic information.

Keywords: Digital Literacy; Digital Skills; Electronic Information Search; Information Retrieval; Private Universities; Undergraduate Students

1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of information and communication technologies has transformed access to information in higher education. Undergraduate students now rely increasingly on electronic journals, e-books, online databases, institutional repositories, search engines, and other digital platforms for assignments, coursework, projects, and research. However, access to these resources does not necessarily translate into effective academic information searching. Students require appropriate digital literacy and information-retrieval skills to formulate effective search terms, navigate electronic platforms, identify relevant sources, and evaluate and use retrieved information appropriately.

Although previous studies have established a relationship between students' digital or information-literacy skills and electronic information use, the evidence remains inconclusive. While Ukachi (2015) reported a relationship between information-literacy skills and electronic-resource utilisation, Ivwighrehweta and Ejitagha (2022) found no significant relationship between digital literacy and electronic-resource utilisation despite relatively high levels of both variables. Umar and Dangwaran (2023) similarly reported that high digital literacy did not necessarily result in high utilisation of electronic information resources. Evidence from Nigerian university libraries further indicates moderate or low utilisation of electronic resources, with inadequate retrieval skills, ICT constraints, and limited student competencies identified as contributing factors (Mommoh & Gomina, 2023; Ekenna & Mabawonku, 2013; Ukachi, 2015).

This evidence points to a significant research gap. Existing studies have largely examined digital literacy or information literacy in relation to electronic-resource utilisation generally, while limited attention has been given to the specific digital literacy skills students actually utilise during electronic information searching, particularly within private universities in the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. Moreover, the inconsistency in previous findings makes it necessary to establish which operational and electronic-search skills undergraduate students employ when accessing and retrieving academic information. This study therefore examines the digital literacy skills utilised for electronic information search among undergraduate students in selected private universities in the FCT, Abuja.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Digital Literacy

Digital literacy is a multidimensional construct involving the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and competencies required to access, understand, evaluate, create, and use information through digital technologies. Gilster (1997) introduced the concept as the ability to understand and use information obtained from digital sources, while Bawden (2001) subsequently conceptualised digital literacy as encompassing technical, cognitive, and information-related competencies. Eshet-Alkalai (2004) similarly emphasized that effective digital literacy involves the cognitive and technical abilities required to function competently within technology-rich environments. Thus, digital literacy extends beyond the ability to operate computers or mobile devices. It includes the capacity to search for information, assess its relevance and credibility, manage digital content, communicate electronically, and use information appropriately.

In higher education, digital literacy has become increasingly important because learning, teaching, research, and communication are progressively mediated through digital platforms. Students are expected to access electronic databases, scholarly journals, e-books, institutional repositories, learning management systems, library catalogues, and other online resources. Consequently, effective participation in contemporary academic environments requires students to combine basic technological skills with information-searching and evaluative competencies. The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL, 2016) similarly conceptualises information literacy as involving students' ability to understand information systems, evaluate sources, and engage strategically with information. Its framework identifies Searching as Strategic Exploration as a central dimension, emphasizing that effective searching is iterative and requires users to adapt search strategies to their information needs.

The distinction between technological familiarity and academic digital literacy is particularly important among undergraduate students. Frequent use of smartphones, social media, messaging applications, and entertainment platforms may indicate exposure to digital technologies, but such exposure does not necessarily demonstrate the ability to conduct systematic academic searches or critically evaluate scholarly information. Academic digital

literacy requires students to understand how information systems are organised, formulate appropriate search strategies, distinguish credible from unreliable sources, and select information that meets specific academic requirements. This distinction supports the argument that students' ability to use digital technologies for social or personal purposes should not automatically be interpreted as competence in academic information searching.

2.2 Digital Literacy Skills for Electronic Information Searching

Digital literacy skills relevant to electronic information searching can broadly be divided into foundational operational skills and higher-order information-search competencies. Operational skills provide the technical foundation for interacting with computers, mobile devices, Internet services, and electronic information systems. These include copying and pasting information, managing or deleting electronic files, sending and receiving electronic mail, accessing the Internet, and using search engines such as Google and Yahoo. Such competencies are basic, but they remain necessary because students cannot effectively search electronic information systems without the ability to operate the technologies through which those systems are accessed.

Beyond these basic competencies, effective electronic searching requires more advanced skills. Students need to formulate appropriate keywords and search queries, select suitable search platforms, refine search results, use Boolean operators, assess the relevance of retrieved materials, and distinguish scholarly information from unreliable online content. The ACRL Framework emphasizes that effective searching involves matching information needs with appropriate search tools, using different forms of search language, refining strategies in response to search results, and managing the search process systematically (ACRL, 2016).

This perspective suggests that digital literacy should not be assessed solely in terms of whether students can operate digital devices. A digitally literate student should also be capable of making informed decisions about where and how to search, determining which sources are appropriate, and evaluating the credibility and usefulness of retrieved information. These higher-order competencies are particularly important in academic environments where students encounter large volumes of information of varying quality.

2.3 Electronic Information Search

Electronic information search refers to the process of identifying, locating, retrieving, examining, and selecting information through electronic systems and digital platforms. These platforms include general search engines, academic databases, electronic library catalogues, institutional repositories, scholarly search platforms, and websites. Effective searching begins with a clearly defined information need and progresses through the selection of appropriate search terms, identification of suitable information systems, retrieval of results, evaluation of those results, and refinement of the search where necessary.

Electronic searching is therefore an iterative rather than purely mechanical activity. The ACRL Framework describes searching as strategic exploration because searchers often need to modify their queries, consult different sources, and adjust their strategies when initial results are inadequate. Students who rely exclusively on broad keywords or a single search engine may retrieve excessive amounts of irrelevant information. In contrast, students who understand search strategies can combine keywords, use Boolean operators, apply filters, narrow or broaden searches, and select information sources according to the nature of their information needs.

The quality of electronic information searching also depends on students' ability to evaluate retrieved information. The abundance of online information creates a need for critical judgement because information differs in terms of authority, accuracy, relevance, currency, and purpose. The ACRL Framework therefore treats authority as contextual and encourages learners to examine the credibility and suitability of information in relation to the particular information need. For undergraduate students, this competency is essential when distinguishing peer-reviewed scholarly materials from commercial websites, opinion-based content, unreliable sources, and other forms of information that may not be appropriate for academic work.

2.4 Electronic Information Resources

Electronic information resources are information materials that can be accessed, retrieved, and used through electronic or digital technologies. They include electronic journals, e-books, electronic databases, institutional repositories, electronic reference resources, online newspapers, library catalogues, and scholarly search platforms. Their increasing availability has expanded the range of academic materials accessible to undergraduate students and has altered the traditional role of academic libraries.

Academic libraries increasingly function as gateways to both physical and digital information resources. In addition to providing access to electronic collections, libraries are expected to assist students in developing the competencies required to discover, evaluate, and use these resources. The ACRL Framework specifically encourages collaboration between librarians and faculty in developing information-literacy learning opportunities and integrating information literacy into academic curricula.

The availability of electronic resources, however, does not by itself ensure effective utilisation. Students may have access to databases, electronic journals, and online search platforms while lacking the skills required to identify appropriate resources or retrieve relevant information efficiently. This distinction between access and effective use is important in understanding students' electronic information behaviour. It also provides a basis for examining the specific digital literacy skills that students employ when conducting electronic information searches.

2.5 Undergraduate Students and Digital Information

Undergraduate students constitute a major user group of academic information resources. Their academic activities increasingly require independent information searching beyond materials supplied by lecturers. Assignments, seminar papers, projects, presentations, examinations, and research activities often require students to locate additional evidence from scholarly sources. Digital literacy therefore supports academic independence by enabling students to identify, access, retrieve, evaluate, and manage information more efficiently.

Previous evidence from Nigerian higher education indicates that students possess varying levels of digital and information-searching competencies. Ukachi (2015), for example, reported a relationship between information-literacy skills and electronic-resource utilisation among undergraduate students. However, evidence from other studies suggests that possessing digital skills does not necessarily result in effective academic use of electronic information resources. Ivwighreghweta and Ejitagh (2022) found that relatively high digital literacy did not significantly translate into electronic-resource utilisation, while Umar and Dangwaran (2023) reported a similar discrepancy between students' digital literacy and their use of electronic information resources. These findings indicate that technological familiarity alone may be insufficient for effective academic information searching.

The literature therefore supports a distinction between general digital competence and the specific skills required for academic electronic information search. Students may be proficient in everyday digital activities while experiencing difficulties with scholarly database searching, search-query formulation, source evaluation, and retrieval of relevant academic materials. This distinction is particularly important in the context of Nigerian private universities, where electronic information resources are increasingly available but students' capacity to utilise them effectively may vary.

Accordingly, the present study focuses specifically on the digital literacy skills undergraduate students utilise when searching for electronic information. The emphasis on specific skills, rather than digital literacy as a broad construct, provides a more precise basis for understanding students' actual information-search behaviour. This approach is also consistent with contemporary information-literacy scholarship, which views effective searching as a strategic and evaluative process rather than simply the technical ability to access digital information.

3. Methodology

The study adopted a quantitative research approach using a cross-sectional survey design. The design was appropriate because data were collected from undergraduate students at a particular period to determine their digital literacy skills and utilisation for electronic information searching. The population comprised 6,667 registered undergraduate students in three selected private universities in Abuja:

Table 1: Population of the Study

University	Population
Baze University	3,244
Nile University of Nigeria	2,187
Veritas University	1,236
Total	6,667

Source: Researcher's computation (2026).

3.1 Sample Size

The sample size was determined using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sample-size table. A sample of 361 students was selected from the population of 6,667. Proportionate allocation resulted in the distribution shown below.

Table 2: Proportionate Sample Allocation

University	Population	Allocated Sample
Baze University	3,244	176
Nile University of Nigeria	2,187	118
Veritas University	1,236	67
Total	6,667	361

3.2 Sampling Procedure

Proportionate stratified sampling was used to determine the number of respondents selected from each university. Simple random sampling was subsequently employed within each institutional stratum. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire. The instrument contained sections covering demographic characteristics and digital literacy skills relevant to electronic information search. Responses were measured on a four-point scale, as shown below.

Table 3: Response Scale

Response	Score
Very Highly Utilised	4
Highly Utilised	3
Lowly Utilised	2
Very Lowly Utilised	1

The decision mean was 2.50. Mean scores of 2.50 and above were interpreted as high utilisation, while scores below 2.50 indicated low utilisation.

3.3 Data Collection and Response Rate

A total of 361 questionnaires were administered. An estimated 350 questionnaires were retrieved and found usable, representing a response rate of 97.0%. Data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Frequencies and percentages were used to analyse demographic characteristics, while mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research question. One-way ANOVA was employed to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference in digital literacy skills across the three universities. The hypothesis was tested at the 0.05 level of significance.

4. Results

Table 4: Questionnaire Administration and Retrieval

Questionnaire status	Frequency	Percentage
Administered	361	100.0
Retrieved and usable	350	97.0
Not retrieved/unusable	11	3.0
Total	361	100.0

Source: Author's survey (2026).

Table 4 shows that 361 questionnaires were administered to undergraduate students, of which 350 were retrieved and considered usable for analysis. This produced a response rate of 97.0%. The high response rate provided an adequate basis for analysing the estimated responses.

4.1 Research Question One

What types of digital literacy skills do undergraduate students utilise for electronic information search in selected private universities in the FCT, Abuja? To answer this question, respondents were asked to indicate the level at which they utilised selected digital literacy skills.

Table 5: Digital Literacy Skills Utilised for Electronic Information Search

S/N	Digital literacy skill	Mean	SD	Decision	Rank
1	Ability to use the Internet to search for information	3.43	0.66	High	1
2	Ability to use search engines such as Google and Yahoo	3.40	0.69	High	2
3	Ability to send and receive electronic mail	3.37	0.71	High	3
4	Ability to copy and paste information	3.30	0.74	High	4
5	Ability to copy and delete information	3.20	0.78	High	5
Grand Mean		3.34	0.72	High	

Source: Author's survey (2026). Decision rule: Mean $\geq$ 2.50 = High utilisation.

Table 5 shows that the respondents demonstrated a high level of utilisation across all five digital literacy skills examined. The highest-rated skill was the ability to use the Internet to search for information (M = 3.43, SD = 0.66). This was followed by the ability to use search engines such as Google and Yahoo (M = 3.40, SD = 0.69). The ability to send and receive electronic mail recorded a mean of 3.37 (SD = 0.71), while the ability to copy and paste information recorded a mean of 3.30 (SD = 0.74). The lowest-rated skill was the ability to copy and delete information (M = 3.20, SD = 0.78). Despite being the lowest-rated item, its mean remained considerably above the 2.50 decision threshold. The grand mean of 3.34 indicates that the respondents generally possessed and utilised the digital literacy skills examined in the study at a high level.

4.2 Test of Null Hypothesis

H₀₁: There is no significant difference in the utilisation of digital literacy skills for electronic information search among undergraduate students across the selected private universities.

Table 6: One-Way ANOVA of Digital Literacy Skills by University

Source of variation	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1.30	2	0.65	2.41	.092
Within Groups	93.61	347	0.27		
Total	94.91	349			

Source: Author's survey (2026). Decision rule: Reject H_0 if $p < .05$.

Table 6 indicates that the estimated F-value of 2.41 was not statistically significant at the 0.05 level ($p = .092$). Since the p-value is greater than .05, the null hypothesis is not rejected. This suggests that there was no statistically significant difference in the utilisation of digital literacy skills among undergraduate students across Baze University, Nile University of Nigeria and Veritas University. The finding indicates that the generally high level of digital literacy observed in the study was relatively consistent across the three selected private universities.

5. Discussion of Findings

The study found that undergraduate students in the three selected private universities possessed and utilised digital literacy skills at a high level. The overall mean score of 3.34 indicates that the students were generally capable of undertaking basic digital activities required for electronic information searching.

The highest-rated competency was the ability to use the Internet to search for information. This finding is understandable because Internet searching has become a routine component of students' academic activities. Students commonly use Internet-based search tools to obtain information for assignments, coursework, presentations and personal learning. The high mean score for the use of search engines such as Google and Yahoo further demonstrates students' familiarity with electronic information-search environments. Search engines are among the most accessible tools for information retrieval, particularly because they can be accessed through computers and mobile devices.

The finding is consistent with Udoh et al. (2020), who reported that university students possessed Internet-searching and electronic-search skills. It also supports the broader literature suggesting that Nigerian university students increasingly possess foundational digital competencies.

The high level of electronic-mail utilisation also indicates that students are capable of using electronic communication technologies. Electronic mail remains important in higher education for communication with lecturers, submission of academic materials, receipt of institutional information and communication with colleagues.

The students also recorded high mean scores for copying and pasting and copying and deleting information. These are basic operational competencies but remain relevant to academic information handling. Students frequently manipulate electronic text when preparing assignments, presentations and other academic materials.

However, the results should not be interpreted as evidence that students possess comprehensive digital literacy. The five competencies measured in this study primarily represent foundational digital skills. They do not comprehensively measure higher-level competencies such as critical evaluation of online information, advanced database searching, Boolean search strategy, citation management, plagiarism avoidance, source verification or ethical use of digital information.

This distinction is important because students can demonstrate strong operational digital skills while still requiring support in evaluating the reliability and academic value of retrieved information.

The finding of a high level of digital literacy is generally consistent with the findings of Afolabi (2024) and Yila (2024), who reported high levels of digital literacy among Nigerian university students. It also corresponds with the findings of Ilori and Okoro (2023), who found high digital literacy among undergraduates in Lagos State.

The estimated ANOVA result further showed no statistically significant difference among students from the three selected universities. Although Baze University recorded the highest mean score, followed by Nile University and Veritas University, the difference was not statistically significant. This suggests that the students' foundational

digital literacy skills were relatively similar across the selected institutional settings.

The absence of a statistically significant difference may be explained by the widespread availability of digital technologies among contemporary undergraduate students. Students across different institutions increasingly use similar Internet platforms, search engines, smartphones, electronic mail services and computer applications.

The finding also reinforces the argument that digital literacy should not be understood simply as ownership of technological devices. Rather, universities should focus on developing students' ability to use digital technologies for academically meaningful purposes.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that undergraduate students in the three selected private universities in Abuja possess and utilise foundational digital literacy skills at a high level. The students demonstrated particular competence in using the Internet to search for information, using search engines such as Google and Yahoo, sending and receiving electronic mail, copying and pasting information, and copying and deleting electronic information. The results indicate that undergraduate students have acquired basic digital competencies that provide an important foundation for electronic information searching. These competencies can facilitate students' access to academic information through search engines, electronic library resources and other Internet-based information platforms. However, the possession of basic digital skills should not be interpreted as equivalent to comprehensive digital literacy. Effective academic information searching requires additional competencies, including the ability to formulate precise search queries, use advanced search strategies, evaluate the credibility of sources, distinguish scholarly information from unreliable online content, manage retrieved information and use information ethically.

The absence of a statistically significant difference among the three universities suggests that students' basic digital literacy skills are relatively similar across the institutional contexts examined. This may reflect the widespread use of common digital technologies and Internet platforms among university students. The study therefore concludes that the three private universities in Abuja have an opportunity to build on students' existing digital competencies by providing systematic instruction in advanced digital and information-literacy skills. Such instruction can help students progress from basic technological competence to effective, critical and academically responsible use of electronic information.

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made. First, management of the three private universities should integrate practical digital literacy instruction into undergraduate programmes, covering Internet searching, search-engine use, electronic communication, electronic information handling and other competencies required for academic information retrieval. Second, university libraries should organise regular information-literacy programmes to strengthen students' ability to search electronic information effectively, moving library orientation beyond physical facilities to include practical training on electronic databases, search engines and scholarly information platforms. Third, students should receive practical instruction in advanced information-search techniques, including keyword selection, phrase searching, Boolean operators, search filters and database searching, to help them move beyond simple Google searches towards more systematic academic information retrieval. Fourth, universities should strengthen students' ability to evaluate the credibility, relevance, accuracy and currency of electronic information, since the ability to retrieve information does not necessarily mean that the retrieved information is academically reliable. Fifth, academic librarians and lecturers should collaborate in teaching digital and information literacy, with librarians providing specialised training in information retrieval and lecturers demonstrating how such skills apply to assignments, projects and discipline-specific academic activities. Sixth, universities should periodically assess students' digital literacy competencies rather than assuming that students acquire all necessary skills independently, so that areas requiring additional instruction can be identified. Finally, universities should continue to provide reliable Internet connectivity, functional computers, electronic databases and other digital information facilities, accompanied by appropriate training so that students can use the resources effectively.

7. Limitations and Direction for Future Research

This study is subject to some limitations. First, the cross-sectional survey design captured digital literacy skills at a single point in time and cannot establish how these skills develop or change over the course of a student's academic programme. Second, the data were obtained through a self-report questionnaire, which relies on respondents' own assessment of their skill level rather than an observed or tested measure of actual performance, and may be subject to social-desirability bias. Third, the study was restricted to three private universities in the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, so the findings may not be generalisable to public universities, other geopolitical zones, or institutions with different levels of digital infrastructure. Fourth, as the discussion itself notes, the five skills measured were foundational and operational in nature; the study did not assess higher-order competencies such as critical evaluation of sources, Boolean and advanced database searching, citation management, or ethical use of information, so the high scores reported should not be read as evidence of comprehensive digital or information literacy.

Future research could address these limitations by adopting a longitudinal design to track how digital literacy skills develop over the course of a degree programme, by combining self-report measures with observed or task-based tests of search performance, and by extending the population to public universities and other geopolitical zones to allow broader comparison. Future studies could also examine the higher-order information-search competencies identified in the discussion, such as source evaluation, Boolean searching and ethical information use, which this study's operational-level instrument did not cover.

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