

INFLUENCE OF WEB LITERACY SKILLS ON INFORMATION AVOIDANCE BEHAVIOUR AMONG UNDERGRADUATES AT NORTHWEST UNIVERSITY, KANO

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Abstract

Information avoidance represents a prevalent behavioural response among information users, often precipitated by fear, uncertainty, information overload, or insufficient evaluative competencies linked to limited information literacy. This study investigated the influence of web literacy skills on the information avoidance behaviour of undergraduate students at Northwest University, Kano. Employing a correlational survey design, the study drew from a population of 21,616 students in the 2024/2025 academic session, from which a sample of 393 respondents was derived using Yamane's (1967) formula. Stratified and simple random sampling techniques ensured proportional representation across eight faculties. Data were collected using a structured four-point Likert scale questionnaire assessing dimensions of web literacy and information avoidance. Descriptive statistics were used to address the research questions, while Pearson Product Moment Correlation and regression analyses were applied to examine relationships and predictive influence at the 0.05 level of significance. The findings revealed that students' web literacy skills were moderate ($M = 2.56$), with relatively stronger proficiency in basic operational

competencies such as internet navigation and search engine utilization. Information avoidance behaviour varied across academic, emotional, and online contexts. A strong and statistically significant relationship was observed between web literacy and information avoidance ($r = 0.981$, $p < 0.05$). The study concluded that web literacy significantly and positively influences information avoidance behaviour, transforming it into a more selective, critical, and evaluative process. It therefore recommended the integration of comprehensive web and information literacy programmes into university curricula to enhance effective information engagement.

Keywords: Web Literacy Skills; Information Avoidance Behaviour; Undergraduates; Northwest University, Kano

Introduction

The web has become the primary source of information for both students and academics, supporting a wide range of tasks associated with teaching, learning, and research. As higher education institutions continue to expand their use of web-based platforms for instruction, scholarly communication, and academic engagement. The ability to navigate the online environment effectively (commonly referred to as web literacy) has emerged as an essential competency for university students (Belshaw, 2014; Ng, 2012). Web literacy comprises the technical, cognitive, and ethical abilities required to search for information, assess the credibility of online content, utilize digital tools, and participate responsibly in networked environments (Mozilla Foundation, 2017). These competencies are crucial for all students in tertiary institutions, as they significantly influence academic performance, critical thinking, and engagement with both scholarly and general information sources.

Despite the vast availability of online information and the increasing dependence on the web as a major source of academic resources, students do not always engage actively with information. Studies have shown that individuals often delay, ignore, or avoid seeking

information online when it is perceived as excessive, emotionally distressing, difficult to understand, or potentially threatening (Sairanen & Savolainen, 2010). This behaviour, referred to as information avoidance, may adversely affect students' learning, decision-making, and academic achievement. As digital environments become more complex, inadequate web literacy skills can heighten experiences of confusion and information overload, thereby increasing the likelihood of information avoidance among students (Bawden & Robinson, 2009).

In Nigeria, digital transformation in universities has accelerated, yet gaps remain in students' ability to effectively utilize online academic resources (Issa, Amusa & Daura, 2020). While many tertiary institutions across the globe invested in digital infrastructure, the extent to which students possess sufficient web literacy skills and how such skills shape their patterns of information engagement remains underexplored. Understanding whether limited web literacy contributes to information avoidance is critical for designing targeted digital literacy interventions, strengthening library instruction programmes, and improving students' capacity for informed academic decision-making.

This study therefore examines the relationship between web literacy skills and information avoidance behaviour among undergraduates of Northwest University, Kano. By exploring how students' competencies in navigating the online environment influence their tendencies to seek or avoid academic information, the research provides empirical insight that can guide the development of more effective digital literacy curricula, user

education initiatives, and policies aimed at enhancing students' engagement with online information in a rapidly evolving digital ecosystem.

Statement of the Problem

The rapid expansion of web-based information resources has transformed how university students access, evaluate, and use information for learning, research, and academic decision-making. Consequently, web literacy skills have become essential for effectively navigating the increasingly complex digital information environment. However, the abundance of online information, coupled with challenges such as information overload, misinformation, and cognitive fatigue, may discourage students from engaging with available information resources. As a result, some undergraduates deliberately avoid seeking or using information they perceive as overwhelming, confusing, or emotionally distressing, a behaviour that can adversely affect their academic performance and informed decision-making.

Despite substantial investments by Nigerian universities in digital infrastructure and electronic information resources, concerns remain about whether undergraduates possess adequate web literacy skills to effectively locate, evaluate, and utilize credible online information. Deficiencies in these skills may increase students' tendency to avoid rather than engage with academic information. However, empirical evidence on the influence of web literacy skills on information avoidance behaviour, particularly among undergraduates in Nigerian universities, remains limited. This knowledge gap constrains the development of evidence-based information literacy programmes and digital skills

interventions by librarians and educators. It is against this background that this study investigates the influence of web literacy skills on information avoidance behaviour among undergraduates at Northwest University, Kano.

Research Questions

The study find answers to the following questions

1. What is the level of web literacy skills among undergraduates of Northwest University, Kano?
2. What is the level of information avoidance behaviour among undergraduates of Northwest University, Kano?

Research Hypothesis

The study tested the following null hypothesis at 0.05 level of significance:

H₀: Web literacy skills do not significantly influence information avoidance behaviour among undergraduates of Northwest University, Kano

Literature Review

Literature is reviewed under the following sub-headings

Concept of Information Avoidance

Information avoidance refers to a deliberate tendency by individuals to evade, delay, or ignore information that is perceived as unpleasant, threatening, overwhelming, or cognitively demanding, even when such information may be useful or relevant to decision-making (Sweeny, Melnyk, Miller, & Shepperd, 2010; Golman, Hagmann, & Loewenstein,

2017). Sweeny et al. further conceptualize information avoidance as a motivated behaviour aimed at regulating emotions and protecting psychological well-being. From this perspective, individuals are not merely passive recipients of information but active agents who selectively manage their exposure to information based on anticipated emotional and cognitive outcomes.

Information avoidance is not synonymous with ignorance or lack of access to information (Sweeny et al., 2010). Rather, it implies the presence of available information that an individual consciously or subconsciously chooses not to engage with. In academic environments, such as universities, students may avoid information related to academic performance, feedback, health advisories, or institutional policies due to fear of negative outcomes or perceived inability to act on the information. Thus, information avoidance is increasingly recognized as a significant factor influencing information behavior in educational and digital contexts.

Information Avoidance Behaviour

Information avoidance behaviour refers to the observable actions and strategies through which individuals enact their intention to avoid information (Sweeny et al., 2010; Howell & Shepperd, 2016). Information avoidance behaviour may be active or passive, temporary or habitual, and context-dependent. Active avoidance includes deliberate actions such as refusing to search for information, unsubscribing from information sources, or ignoring messages and notifications. Passive avoidance, on the other hand, may involve

postponing information seeking, skimming superficially, or mentally disengaging from information encounters.

Research indicates that information avoidance behaviour is influenced by a range of psychological, cognitive, and environmental factors (Howell & Shepperd, 2016; Narayan, Sharma, & Kumar, 2021). Emotional responses such as anxiety, fear, shame, and stress are strong predictors of avoidance, particularly when information is perceived as threatening to self-esteem or future prospects. Cognitive factors such as low self-efficacy, perceived lack of control, and information overload also contribute significantly to avoidance behaviour. In digital environments, excessive volume of online information and difficulty in evaluating credibility often result in information fatigue, which in turn promotes avoidance.

Empirical studies have documented information avoidance behaviour in diverse contexts, including health communication, financial decision-making, social media use, and academic settings (Golman, et al. 2017; Soroya, Farooq, Mahmood, Isoaho, & Zara, 2021). Students, avoidance behaviour manifest from their reluctance to check examination results, avoidance of academic feedback, or disengagement from online learning platforms. While avoidance may offer short-term emotional relief, studies suggest that persistent information avoidance can negatively affect learning outcomes, decision quality, and overall academic success.

Concept of Web Literacy and Web Literacy Skills

Web literacy refers to the set of competencies required to effectively access, navigate, evaluate, create, and communicate information using the web (Eshet-Alkalai, 2004; Mozilla Foundation, 2018). It is a multidimensional concept that extends beyond basic technical skills to include critical thinking, ethical awareness, and participatory abilities in online environments. Web literacy is often situated within broader frameworks of digital literacy and information literacy, but it places specific emphasis on web-based information practices.

Mozilla's Web Literacy Framework conceptualizes web literacy around three core domains reading the web (finding, evaluating, and synthesizing online information), writing the web (creating and remixing digital content), and participating on the web (engaging in online communities while understanding issues of privacy, security, and ethics) (Mozilla Foundation, 2018). This framework highlights that effective web use requires both technical proficiency and critical judgment.

Scholars such as Eshet-Alkalai (2004) argue that web literacy encompasses cognitive, socio-emotional, and critical dimensions, including the ability to assess credibility, recognize bias, and manage emotional responses in digital environments. This also includes the ability to assess credibility, recognize bias, and manage emotional responses in digital environments. Van Deursen and van Dijk (2014) further categorized web-related skills into operational skills, information navigation skills, communication skills, content creation skills, and strategic skills. These distinctions are particularly useful in empirical research, as they allow for nuanced measurement of different aspects of web literacy.

Among university students, web literacy skills are essential for academic research, online learning, collaboration, and responsible digital citizenship. However, possession of basic internet access does not necessarily translate into high levels of web literacy. Variations in skill levels may influence how students interact with online information, including whether they engage with or avoid certain types of information.

Web Literacy and Information Avoidance Behaviour

The relationship between web literacy and information avoidance behaviour is complex and multifaceted (Golman et al., 2017; Soroya et al., 2021). On one hand, higher levels of web literacy may reduce information avoidance by equipping individuals with the skills needed to efficiently search for information, evaluate credibility, manage information overload, and apply information effectively. Students with strong web literacy skills are more likely to feel confident in handling online information, thereby reducing anxiety and uncertainty that often trigger avoidance.

From this perspective, web literacy functions as a protective factor against information avoidance (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2014; Eshet-Alkalai, 2004). Competencies such as critical evaluation, strategic searching, and digital self-regulation enable individuals to filter irrelevant or misleading information from the source, without disengaging entirely from information environments. Empirical studies on internet skills suggest that individuals with higher digital competencies experience greater control over their online activities and are less likely to feel overwhelmed by information.

On the other hand, some scholars argue that web literacy may also facilitate selective information avoidance (Golman et al., 2017; Howell & Shepperd, 2016). Highly web-literate users may consciously choose to avoid low-quality, distressing, or non-credible information as a strategic response rather than as a result of fear or incapacity. In this sense, avoidance does not necessarily reflect a deficiency but may represent informed selectivity. This distinction underscores the importance of differentiating maladaptive information avoidance from purposeful information filtering.

Despite growing interest in both web literacy and information avoidance, empirical studies directly examining their relationship remain limited, particularly in developing-country contexts. There is a notable gap in research focusing on Nigerian university students and the socio-cultural and infrastructural factors that may shape their web literacy skills and information avoidance behaviour. By investigating this relationship among undergraduates of Bayero University, Kano, the present study contributes to bridging this gap and provides context-specific evidence that can inform information literacy interventions, academic support services, and digital education policies.

Methodology

The study adopted a correlational survey design. The population comprised 21,616 undergraduate students of Northwest University, Kano during the 2024/2025 academic session (Northwest University Websites, 2025). A sample size of 393 respondents was determined using Yamane's (1967) formula at a 95% confidence level. Stratified sampling was employed to ensure proportionate representation of students across 8 faculties (as in

table 1 below), after which simple random sampling was used to select respondents from each stratum.

Table 1: Population and sample size

s/n	Faculty	Population	%	Sample Size
1	Basic Medical Sciences	2,420	11.20	44
2	Clinical Sciences	110	0.51	2
3	Computing	1045	4.83	19
4	Education	10,176	47.08	185
5	Humanities	2,035	9.41	37
6	Law	1,155	5.34	21
7	Sciences	1,265	5.85	23
8	Social and Management Sciences	3,410	15.78	62
Total		21,616	100%	393

Source: Northwest Website, 2025

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire designed on a four-point Likert scale to measure dimensions of web literacy and information avoidance. The instrument's validity was ensured through face and content validation by experts in relevant fields. A pilot study involving 30 undergraduates from the Federal University Dutse yielded a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of 0.86, indicating high internal consistency. The questionnaire was self-administered, and collected data were analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics were used to answer Research Questions 1 and 2, while Pearson Product Moment Correlation and regression analysis were employed to test the relationship and predictive influence of web literacy skills on information avoidance behaviour, respectively.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the results of the data collected, analyzed, and interpreted in line with the objectives of the study. Out of the 393 copies of the questionnaire distributed to respondents, 323 (83%) were duly completed and returned, representing a high response rate. The retrieved questionnaires were analyzed and presented according to the research objectives, as shown in Tables 2-5 below.

Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

S/N	Faculties	F	%
1	Basic Medical Sciences	39	12.07
2	Clinical Sciences	2	0.62
3	Computing	13	4.02
4	Education	154	47.68
5	Humanities	28	8.67
6	Law	17	5.26
7	Sciences	21	6.51
8	Social and Management Sciences	49	15.17
Total		323	100

Gender			
S/N	Gender	F	%
1	Male	184	57
2	Female	139	43
Total		323	100

Levels			
S/N	Level	F	%
1	100	66	20.43
2	200	55	17.03
3	300	79	24.46
4	400	123	38.08
5	500	0	0.00
Total		323	100

Source: field work

Table 2 above show that the respondents are predominantly drawn from the Faculty of Education, which constitutes nearly half of the sample (47.68%), followed by Social and Management Sciences (15.17%) and Basic Medical Sciences (12.07%). In terms of gender, the sample is slightly male-dominated, with males accounting for 57% and females 43%. The distribution across academic levels reveals a higher concentration of senior students, particularly those in 400 level (38.08%), followed by 300 level (24.46%) and 100 level

(20.43%), with no representation from 500 level, suggesting that the data largely reflect experiences of students in advanced stages of study.

RQ1: What is the level of web literacy skills among undergraduates of Northwest University, Kano?

Table 3: Web Literacy Skills

S/N	Items	4	3	2	1	M	SD
Operational Web Skills							
1	I can easily connect to the internet and use web browsers without assistance.	187	83	37	16	3.37	0.87
2	I know how to use search engines (e.g., Google) effectively.	109	131	39	24	3.07	0.89
3	I can download, upload, and manage files from websites.	61	78	99	95	2.32	1.07
4	I can navigate between multiple websites using tabs and hyperlinks.	9	47	200	67	1.99	0.68
Information Search and Evaluation Skills							
5	I can formulate effective search queries to find relevant academic information online.	22	109	99	93	2.19	0.93
6	I am able to distinguish between reliable and unreliable websites.	18	37	187	81	1.98	0.77
7	I check the author, date, and source before using online information.	88	134	57	44	2.82	0.98
8	I can compare information from multiple websites to verify accuracy.	98	87	114	24	2.80	0.96
Critical and Strategic Web Skills							
9	I can recognize bias, misinformation, or fake news on the web.	76	70	86	91	2.41	1.13
10	I know how to manage information overload when searching online.	15	134	89	85	2.25	0.90
11	I feel confident deciding which online information is useful for my studies.	55	67	105	96	2.25	1.06
12	I understand basic issues of online privacy and data security.	110	121	67	25	2.98	0.93
Web Participation and Content Creation Skills							
13	I can create and share content online (e.g., posts, documents, presentations).	45	157	92	29	2.68	0.82
14	I participate responsibly in online academic discussions or platforms.	65	155	101	2	2.88	0.72
15	I know how to cite online sources properly to avoid plagiarism.	31	116	117	59	2.37	0.89

Overall mean score

2.56

The results from table 3 above indicate that undergraduates possess moderate web literacy skills ($M = 2.56$). Students demonstrate high ability in connecting to the internet and using web browsers ($M = 3.37$) as well as using search engines ($M = 3.07$), suggesting familiarity with fundamental web access. More critically, while some students check sources ($M = 2.82$) and compare information ($M = 2.80$). Similarly, critical skills such as recognizing misinformation ($M = 2.41$), managing information overload ($M = 2.25$), and confidently selecting relevant information ($M = 2.25$) are below the expected benchmark.

The findings of the study revealed that web literacy skills of undergraduates at Northwest University is relatively moderate, with strong performance in basic operational competences such as ability to connect to Internet using web browser and use of search engine system for web search.

RQ2: What is the level of information avoidance behaviour among undergraduates of Northwest University, Kano?

Table 4: Information Avoidance Behaviour

S/N	Statement	4	3	2	1	M	SD
Academic Information Avoidance							
16	I delay checking my examination results when I expect poor performance.	91	132	72	28	2.89	0.92
17	I avoid reading feedback on assignments when I feel anxious about the outcome.	12	88	102	121	1.97	0.89
18	I ignore academic emails or notices that I think may contain bad news.	8	49	123	143	1.76	0.80
Online Information Avoidance							
19	I avoid online information that seems too complex or difficult to understand.	111	154	49	9	3.14	0.77
20	I skip online content when there is too much information to process.	160	126	22	15	3.33	0.80

21	I avoid websites or platforms that make me feel confused or overwhelmed.	152	132	45	0	3.33	0.70
Emotional and Selective Avoidance							
22	I avoid online information that makes me feel stressed or worried.	207	69	43	4	3.48	0.77
23	I intentionally stay away from certain online topics even if they are relevant to me.	2	74	137	110	1.90	0.76
24	I filter out information online to protect myself from negative emotions.	90	87	117	29	2.74	0.97

The results in table 4 reveal varying patterns of information avoidance behaviour among undergraduates. While the students moderately delay checking examination results when they anticipate poor performance ($M = 2.89$), avoid complex information ($M = 3.14$), skipping content due to information overload ($M = 3.33$), and avoiding confusing platforms ($M = 3.33$). Furthermore, students strongly avoid information that induces stress or worry ($M = 3.48$), reflecting a high tendency toward emotion-driven avoidance.

These findings of the study also revealed that information avoidance behaviour among the participants vary across academic, emotional and online dimensions. While participants show low avoidance tendencies in academic information, they delay emotional information like examination results and highly avoid online information due to fear of stress or overload. This concurred with the findings of the study conducted by Howell and Shepperd, (2016); and Narayan, Sharma and Kumar, (2021) which revealed that information avoidance behaviour is influenced by a range of psychological, cognitive, and environmental factors.

H0: Web literacy skills do not significantly influence information avoidance behaviour among undergraduates of Northwest University, Kano

Table 5: Pearson Product-Moment Correlation between Web Literacy Skills and Information Avoidance Behaviour

Variables	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	r	Sig. (2-tailed)	Decision
Web Literacy Skills	323	45.62	8.14	0.981	0.000	Reject H ₀
Information Avoidance Behaviour	323	27.38	6.27			

From table 5 above, it can be deduced that there is extremely strong positive linear relationship between web literacy skills and information avoidance behaviour. With Pearson correlation coefficient ($r = 0.981$, $p < 0.05$). This indicates that web literacy skills of the participants influence their avoidance of information on the internet. Web-literate users do not avoid highly useful information such as academic information, but choose to avoid low-quality, distressing, or non-credible information (especially those online) as a strategic response rather than as a result of fear or incapacity. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected.

This finding indicates a strong correlation between the level of web literacy skills and information avoidance behaviour among the participants. This is in line with the findings of the study conducted by Golman et al., (2017); and Howell and Shepperd, (2016) which revealed that highly web-literate users may consciously choose to avoid low-quality, distressing, or non-credible information as a strategic response rather than as a result of fear or incapacity.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusion of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Universities should strengthen the integration of web literacy and broader information literacy programmes within the curriculum. This can be operationalized through credit-bearing courses, embedded instruction within core subjects, and continuous assessment of students' competencies in evaluating digital information sources.
2. Academic libraries and information professionals should intensify user education initiatives, focusing on advanced search strategies, critical evaluation of online content, and the identification of credible and authoritative sources. Workshops, seminars, and online tutorials can be systematically deployed to sustain these skills.
3. Lecturers should incorporate guided digital research activities into coursework, requiring students to justify source selection based on relevance, accuracy, and reliability. This will reinforce evaluative information practices and reduce uncritical information consumption or avoidance.
4. Northwest university should invest and prioritize on digital infrastructure and access to quality scholarly databases to ensure that students can readily engage with credible and up-to-date information resources, thereby minimizing avoidance due to frustration or poor access.

5. The University library should engage in continuous awareness campaigns to sensitize students to the implications of both maladaptive and strategic information avoidance, emphasizing the importance of informed selectivity in academic work.

Conclusion

Information avoidance constitutes a common behavioural response among information users, often triggered by fear, uncertainty, information overload, or inadequate evaluative competencies associated with limited information literacy. Undergraduate students are not exempt from this phenomenon. For this group, avoidance is not primarily driven by anxiety or cognitive burden, but rather by informed judgment regarding the relevance, reliability, and utility of information in relation to their academic needs. It can therefore be concluded that web literacy exerts a significant and positive influence on information avoidance behaviour, transforming it from a passive or defensive reaction into an active, selective, and evaluative process among undergraduates.

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