

The Lived Experiences of the Graduate School Students in using Off-Campus Internet Facilities as an Alternative Source for Research Activities: A Phenomenological Inquiry

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Abstract

The objective of this study was to examine and explore the lived experiences of the graduate school students who frequently used off-campus internet facilities for their research activities. It utilized the qualitative method by means of phenomenological inquiry. A total of 21 participants were interviewed, ten for in-depth and eleven for focus group discussions. Use was made of research questions carefully formulated to elicit more responses from the interviewees. Both positive and negative aspects of their experiences were highlighted in this paper's findings. The accessibility to all websites, availability, longer use of the internet, and comfort in using facilities and gadgets emerged as favorable while expensive facility services; noisy, crowded and unsafe environment; unreliability of information; vulnerability of computer units to viruses that could infect flash drives; susceptibility to power interruption; and lack of privacy appeared to be their unfavorable experiences. These results implied the urgency of creating a deeper study on the lived experiences of the students to include the actual conditions of the university on-campus internet facility as a sequel to this investigation.

Keywords: phenomenology; qualitative research; off-campus internet facility; Wi-Fi; research activities

1. Introduction

Technology has improved to the point where it now propels the expansion of businesses. Companies take advantage of this to increase performance, for which they seek out tech-savvy candidates that can provide value to their organizations. In keeping with this, education at school provides a solid background for future careers by incorporating technology into their system that can benefit the students through their materials, online facilities, and dedicated computer rooms. For today's youth are digital natives when it comes to their studies (ChildHope Philippines, 2021).

With this phenomenon in mind, this study was conducted to investigate the lived experiences of the graduate school students in using off-campus internet facilities as an alternative source in their research. The researcher documented the sentiments of students relating to the inadequacies of computers and internet connectivity at the university. Their struggling to use the internet facilities on the campus forced them to rely on the internet home-based broadband in offices, internet cafés, Wi-Fi zone areas, handheld pocket Wi-Fi and mobile-equipped internet gadgets for research. After

preliminary search, related literature was found addressing off-campus research activities by Buhari (2013) on web access in the Nigerian Polytechnic University. He found that students and staff frequently accessed connections at private internet cafés. He added that clients used to patronize internet cafés because of inadequate computer facilities at the university.

Similar experiences existed based on the research findings of Siddiquah and Salim (2017) and Bisht et al. (2020) concerning issues with the internet signal which could impede students' learning. According to a research study by Connected Nation, 67 per cent of schools nationwide still do not have the recommended internet connectivity speed of 1 megabit per second per student, thereby affecting 31.5 million learners by this digital learning gap (De la Rosa, 2020).

There were studies conducted on this topic in other countries as well. However, there has been no similar study conducted in the University of Mindanao. Therefore, this study was deemed necessary in order to determine both the favorable and unfavorable experiences of the students regarding their use of the off-campus internet facility as a prelude to the study of the on-campus internet facility for the improvement of the university internet facilities.

Grand Tour Question:

What are the lived experiences of the graduate school students in accessing the off-campus internet facility for research activities?

2. Method

Participants

A total of 21 interviewees were included in the study. There were 10 interviewed individually and 11 were interviewed in a group. They were students from the professional schools who were enrolled in master's and doctoral degree programs. Purposive sampling was used because, according to Bernard et al. (2002) and Lewis and Sheppard (2006), purposive sampling can be utilized when the researcher attempts to reduce the number of potential participants swiftly and efficiently. The first step was to find voluntary participants who were open to imparting their expertise and experience on the topic being studied. The participants were recruited according to their willingness and voluntary participation. The data were gathered professionally by means of an interview. The information extracted from the personal testimonies of the participants was recorded and transcribed to pave the way for its analysis.

Design

The qualitative method was used to describe a phenomenon appropriately as perceived by the researcher in the locale. Burns and Grove (2007) defined qualitative research as a method focusing on human experiences that permitted the researcher to uncover the meanings and understanding of a specific phenomenon of which experiences were observed, collected and interpreted.

Phenomenology was the research design employed in this study as Finlay (2009) stated that phenomenology is a study of a certain phenomenon, its significance and nature while Langdridge (2007) defined the term as “a condition about people's perception in the world where they belong and explore their lived experiences.”

To ensure trustworthiness of this study, the four criteria set by Lincoln and Guba (1985), namely credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, were used to evaluate the trustworthiness of the research findings. In addition, ethical considerations were given a high priority. Creswell (2009) explained that the researcher must anticipate ethical issues that may arise during the investigation. Permission was granted by the university administration provided ethical standards were followed. Cohen (2007) described ethical behavior as a “set of moral principles,

rules, or a person or a profession.” He suggested that to be ethical is to “do good and avoid evil.” This general definition was helpful in maintaining research ethics for this study.

3. Results and Discussion

In addressing the first question, students shared their lived experiences regarding the use of off-campus internet facilities. These were categorized into major themes from which core ideas were extracted. Emerging major themes explored related to the first inquiry were the favorable and unfavorable experiences of the participants. The presentation of the study results starts with the favorable experiences of the participants, followed by those less favorable.

Favorable Experiences

The favorable experiences were *Accessibility to All Websites*, *Fast Internet Connection*, *Availability of Internet Facilities*, *Longer Use of Internet Facilities*, and *Comfortability in the Use of Internet Facilities and Gadgets*. These core ideas are each discussed briefly.

It was articulated in the study that doing research should not only be restricted to satisfying the cognitive aspect of a person and enjoying the process, but it should also embrace the social and emotional tones to provide a feeling of accomplishment and satisfaction on the part of the users. As underscored by Koc and Ferneding (2013), the most common pattern of activities engaged in the internet cafés included communication, entertainment, schoolwork, and information searches. The internet offers essential benefits and advantages to research and learning experiences.

Accessibility to all Websites encompasses ProQuest, Google Advance, Google Scholar, Yahoo Search, and Yahoo E-mail which are websites where reliable sources of information can be found. Also, the participants mentioned that Slide Share, and other social networking sites such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Viber had broadened their scope of friendship and relationships. In like manner, another respondent elaborated on and expressed satisfaction with the versatility of almost all websites. He mentioned Google Advance, Google Scholar, Google Plus, Google Chrome, Yahoo Search, Yahoo E-mail, YouTube, Slide Share, DOAJ, JSTOR, OpenDOAR, GreenStone, MSN, Mozilla, Twitter, WhatsApp, Viber, Repository66, Lester, eBay, Budapest, Skype, Facebook, Instagram, ProQuest, ebrary, InfoSeek, ListServes, Telnet, InfoTrac, Wiley, Gopher, Alta Vista, Podcasting/Vodcasting, IM, Newsgroups, LinkedIn, Netscape, HotBot, Lycos, Bebo, and Excitea as excellent sources of information.

It appears that students who expose themselves to these technologies have developed their sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy. Their use has boosted their confidence in that their research activities provide support for them to comply with school requirements and submit on deadlines.

The research study of Muniandy (2010) of 92 Malaysian students revealed that they used the internet to find books in the library. Thirty-two per cent confirmed that they used the internet not only to find books but also to access other information using search engines such as Yahoo and Google websites. He mentioned that the utilization of academic databases such as ProQuest, E-Learning resources, university-owned library web-resources and library publications was low because students preferred to use the popular search engines such as Google and Yahoo Search. Students owned personal computers, laptops and other gadgets. They also subscribed to various internet services and accessed Wi-Fi connection through on-campus and off-campus connectivity.

Table 1: Lived experiences of the graduate school students in accessing off-campus internet facilities

Major Themes	Core Ideas
Favorable	Accessibility to All Websites
	Fast Internet Connection
	Availability of Internet Facilities
	Longer Use of Internet Facilities
	Comfort in Using Internet Facilities and Gadgets
Unfavorable	Expensive Facility Services
	Noisy Environment
	Crowded Environment
	Unsafe Environment
	Difficult Reliability of Information Verification
	Vulnerability of Computer Units to Viruses That Could Infect Flash Drives
	Susceptibility to Power Interruption
	Lack of Privacy

Fast Internet Connection. A participant mentioned that accessing information outside the campus is convenient because it is a high-speed connection. One revealed his experience in using broadband and a connection to a local area network (LAN), and Wi-Fi connected him to the internet. It made him feel comfortable and this connectivity ensured his research activities would be successful. Based on personal research investigations, it appears that off-campus internet facilities' connection is very fast and information can be loaded instantly with a click of a mouse. The World Wide Web is indeed a wonderful meeting place where people from all parts of the world can come together.

These experiences affirmed the research conducted by OnlineCities (2013) which emphasized that having access to high-speed internet makes web browsing quicker, simpler, and more fun. The loading of websites is lightning-fast, and switching between them is simple. Uploads are quick and simple with high-speed internet.

Availability of Internet Facilities. Millions of computers, from the smallest handheld personal mobile digital assistants to the most potent computer systems ever built, are connected by the internet, forming a large global network. The internet's power lies in its capacity to facilitate communication, information access, and publication among a global community of millions of users (Christopher & Gorretti, 2012).

In the conduct of the interview, one student voiced his opinion that the availability of the internet-connected devices such as desktops, laptops, iPads, tablets and mobile internet-ready gadgets make him feel comfortable in doing research for schoolwork compliance anytime and anywhere. With the voluminous assignments in the graduate school, internet services are much in demand from time to time. The students now have a resource for completing their research requirements thanks to access to information and communication technology (ICT), and the internet in particular. Internet-ready gadgets such as laptops, netbooks, iPads, internet ready mobile-phones, pocket Wi-Fi powered by Sun Cellular, Globe Tattoo and SmartBro Broadbands were amongst the devices in demand.

Longer Use of Internet Facilities. Using instant messaging software, it is possible to stay in touch with co-workers or friends. The activation of instant messages on both ends enables the exchange of

words, voices, and images. Furthermore, to improve study and job productivity, the internet offers a wealth of tools that allow the researcher to access information quickly in a variety of subject areas using search engines, online dictionaries, or encyclopedias. Thus, mobile internet services provide us with a wealth of materials (Reiersen & Davies, 2012).

From the participants' point of view, gaining access to the internet anytime and anywhere over a long period of time is the main advantage provided by internet services. Using digital gadgets, the internet is accessible from anywhere as well as the many services that are available. As such, this may make students' lives more convenient. The study participants shared their favorable experiences of having been able to use the internet facilities off campus for a longer period of time.

A participant explained that he was able to stay in touch with his loved ones and friends. With the longer use he stayed informed of the latest news. With the continued browsing, he quickly gathered information to improve his ability to study and work. He was entertained with information at his fingertips and enjoyed multi-media resources online. Downloading of applications added more functions to his handsets. He pointed out that Wi-Fi can be used anywhere, even on public transport.

Comfortability in the Use of Internet Facilities and Gadgets. The study conducted by Zickuhr (2011) indicated that numerous gadgets have mostly been used by the young generation, with a greater number now owning cellular phones, portable PCs and desktop PCs. More youthful grown-ups are leading the way in expanded mobility, using tablets and other internet-ready functional devices such as computer desktops, laptops, and cellular phones for a variety of functions, including web searches, email, music, amusement, and videos. The study conducted by Zickuhr confirmed that nowadays, young generations are born digitally-natived. They are totally at home with the use of mobile gadgets such as cellular phones, iPads, tablets, netbooks, laptops and the like for easy access of information online.

The study informants expressed their comfortability in using various gadgets for accessing information for research activities. This convenient experience gave them a feeling of satisfaction and confidence. A participant said that his access to the internet gave him a relaxing feeling. He was comfortable in using the internet outside the university. He took his pocket Wi-Fi wherever he went and he could use it anytime and anywhere. With the convenience of internet facilities and gadgets, the advancement of technology provides him with a better learning experience.

Unfavorable Experiences

The unfavorable experiences of the participants in the use of off-campus internet facilities were another identified major theme that emerged from data analysis. Extracted from the theme were the following core ideas: *Expensive Facility Services, Noisy Environment, Crowded Environment, Unsafe Internet Café Environment, Difficult Reliability of Information Verification, Susceptibility to Power Interruption, Vulnerability to Viruses that Could Infect Flash Drives, and Lack of Privacy.*

The participants in this study confessed that they experienced various problems when they used internet facilities off campus. Among these were expensive facility services; noisy, crowded and unsafe environments; difficulty in verifying the reliability of information; susceptibility to power interruption; vulnerability of computer units to viruses that could infect flash drives; and lack of privacy in doing research.

The study of Arthur and Brafi (2013) affirmed these unfavorable experiences when they mentioned that poor internet connection and the limited number of computer units in laboratories

on campus are problems commonly encountered by students. According to the study, although internet cafés were open 24 hours daily, some problems such as slow internet connection due to poor signals hampered research activities. He added that the cafés had other disadvantages such as poor management; they were crowded and noisy; and facilities were inadequate owing to equipment and maintenance costs.

Expensive Facility Services. In the interview, graduate school student participants disclosed that it was very expensive to access information in the cafés and load it to a pocket Wi-Fi device. However, despite the reality of the situation, students continued to use internet technology to complete their research assignments.

The internet facilities provide an avenue for the completion of their research requirements. However, the students also had to factor the additional expense into their budgets. Despite the expensive off-campus internet facilities' costs, the students needed to comply with their school requirements in order to obtain good pass marks.

These experiences are explained in the study conducted by Koc and Ferneding (2013) that indicated that the high connection costs, deficient telecommunications infrastructure, and the prohibitive cost of computer technology were all contributing factors to Turkey's poor internet usage. In addition, Nwezeh (2010) mentioned that, in spite of the fact that the majority of internet café establishments were open 24 hours a day, poor signal remained a service issue for their customers, according to his survey.

Noisy Environment. A participant mentioned that the noise in the internet cafés affected his concentration in online searching. Another respondent indicated that there was such a disturbance that he could not concentrate or maintain a high standard of work. Frequently, if not pressured by time, he resorted to leaving the internet café and looking for a better place. One stated his disappointment that young game players disturbed other users who religiously access the internet purely for research purposes. Moreover, he was disturbed by DOTA (Defense of the Ancients) players' shouting, expressing their amusement and using vulgar words while enjoying the game.

The researcher of this phenomenon shared the same agony as experienced by the participants, namely the internet café environment is very noisy. The disturbance caused by the uncontrollable shouting of the young players inconvenienced every user of the internet café's facilities. This is similar to the contention of Ramli et al. (2001) that nowadays numerous cybercafés have turned into boisterous battlegrounds with some young patrons exuberantly and loudly exhorting each other while playing action-packed computer games.

Crowded Environment. A student participant expressed discomfort during peak time at the internet café. On examination days, the cafés were fully occupied by users and became overcrowded. Another participant elaborated on his experience that café cubicles were fully occupied by users owing to rushed work in completing assignments. As a result, the environment became warmer and more uncomfortable. Instead of continuing his research, he had to look for a cooler place. In addition, another participant complained that the seats were never vacant: when one occupant left, one or two others rushed for the seat to complete their work. There were times when these students were classmates, one of which would be seated, browsing and searching, while others surrounded him, waiting to copy the same assignment by making print-outs for everybody.

A related study was conducted on the efficacy and efficiency of internet use in the Sunyani Municipality. Among the significant issues identified that led to the students' discontentment were the slow internet facility services, the crowded environment, the limited number of computers,

non-functional or slightly-damaged computer units, inadequate students' skills to browse information online, limited time at the internet cafés, and physical facility discomfort such as the condition of the room and temperature (Arthur & Brafi, 2013).

Unsafe Environment. Student researchers in the internet café were uneasy, worried and felt unsafe. This was confirmed by the experiences shared by one of the respondents, namely that there were instances of physical danger as when a drunkard came in and grabbed a computer unit. Since there was no security guard, those in the café had difficulty in driving him out of the café. Another informant also confessed to feeling unsafe in terms of other people's posting online damaging information or sharing unsafe irresponsible material. In this regard, the study conducted by Willard (2011) mentioned that the unsafe disclosure of personal information could be potentially dangerous or damaging.

Difficulty in Verifying the Reliability of Information. Several participants mentioned that information posted on the net became a 'boon' or a 'bane' for the researchers to verify its accuracy and authenticity. Another participant expressed his deep concern regarding the verification of the authenticity of authorship of the information posted. He added that he consulted some experts in the field in order to gain information about authenticity; however, it incurred spending a great deal of money spending time in an internet café.

Related literature was published by the Georgetown University Library (2016) reminding clients that practically anybody can post information on the web anytime should they so wish to. It is generally difficult to determine the origin of web sources and the authenticity of authorship; regardless of the fact that the creator is recorded, they may not generally speak to the truthfulness of their work. It is the sole responsibility of the user to verify information posted and assess the viability on the information's accuracy and truthfulness.

Vulnerability of Computer Units to Viruses that Could Infect Flash Drives. A participant expressed his frustration that most of his research work has been saved on flash drives and the USBs were not protected because the devices were infected with viruses. Another participant said that they had these devices scanned several times; nevertheless, every time they accessed information, some articles or parts thereof had been lost. It was very frustrating on his part because he could not comply with the requirements regarding the deadlines. A research study by Constantin (2014) reported the security researchers' findings that a fundamental security flaw in the majority of USB devices could be used to infect computers with malware in such a way that is difficult to prevent or detect.

Susceptibility to Power Interruption. An interruption in the electrical supply is known as a brownout. Brownouts, while not complete power outages, can nonetheless have a negative impact on electrical and electronic equipment. A participant elaborated that he was about to open the website, when a brownout occurred.

This is explained in the study by Halfgaar (2016), namely that many people believe their computer should be able to handle files and data seamlessly and without losing anything when the power is lost. Sadly, this was not quite that easy. Although the risk is minor for most individuals, users might wish to use a UPS if a computer is in frequent use and if the data is equally critical.

Lack of Privacy in Doing Research. For a variety of reasons, privacy is crucial. If there were no restrictions on the public's access, people could be harmed in terms of their personal information. This touches on respect for human dignity, the essence of human personhood. McFarland (2016) explained that respect for individual privacy is one of the tenets of personal dignity. A person's

life and dignity might be in some ways be compromised if they lose control over their personal information. However, absolute privacy does not exist. The participants realized that achieving complete anonymity is not necessary for those who have only a passing interest in internet privacy.

According to the participants, as internet users, people might protect their privacy through limited self-disclosure. He added that once when he was accessing his email in an internet café, a man was standing at his back, observing him. The next day he was unable to open his email anymore; the password had been changed.

4. Implications for Practice

The findings revealed some significant issues for consideration by the university administration. The students claimed that the internet facilities off campus served the purpose for their research activities. Their use has vigorously sharpened the graduate school students' learning experiences in their academic pursuit. Evidence proved through their favorable experiences that accessibility to all websites has kept them abreast of the latest information. The fast internet connection has accelerated their searching process activity, thereby implying time saving and effortless searching. The longer use of the facilities has provided them with enough time to search for additional necessary resources.

The availability of facilities and services has provided them with ease and comfort in completing and submitting class requirements. Their experience with comfortability in the use of the facilities and other gadgets has developed their professional competences and improved their skills in the use of these devices. These positive experiences of the graduate school students from off-campus facilities suggested continued patronage of outside services as a prime medium for research activities. Whenever they are pressured with voluminous class requirements, their first thoughts are to opt for an off-campus facility as an alternative source.

The lived experiences of the graduate school students are articulated in the study of Buhari (2013) on internet access in the Nigerian Polytechnic University which reinforced these experiences when it determined that students and staff frequently accessed connections at private internet cafés. He reported that users used to patronize internet cafés owing to inadequate internet facilities on campus. In this connection, Ogunlade et al. (2013) reported that 80 per cent of the internet users firmly believed that the off-campus internet connections could provide a better learning experience. The results showed that 92 per cent of the Nigerian students at Obafemi Awolowo University used the off-campus internet connections regularly.

This highlights the urgency of undertaking a deeper study on the lived experiences of the students to include the condition of the university internet facility. Hence, it would benefit the university administration to have a clearer understanding of the actual phenomenon as experienced by the students in accessing off-campus internet facilities.

5. Implications for Future Research

This research has collated numerous themes on the use off-campus internet facilities. These collections of interrelated notions on internet access indicated how vital the internet is to research and learning. The investigation might challenge future researchers to examine the traditional views on research and learning acquisition. Furthermore, readers are encouraged to critique and reflect not only on their own practices, but also on those in the framework and systems where they work.

The findings of this study have restricted validity because of its limited scope and the limited number of study participants that participated in the in-depth interview and the focus group discussion (FGD) of the graduate students. During the interview, one participant hesitated to

answer some of the questions raised. This was disappointing; however, it was a valuable lesson about flexibility in doing research.

Future researchers might consider increasing the number of participants to provide better and more convincing implications if the same study were to have a sequel. Moreover, another research study probably needs to be conducted to include the on-campus internet facility and compare it with that off campus. Future research studies may be extended to undergraduate, or postgraduate students and teachers at the university. It is significant that teachers used the internet facility to conduct research for their teaching across disciplines. It is foreseen that it would be significant if teachers could also impart their lived experiences in accessing the internet using the off-campus facilities. It would be interesting to know what relevant information could be gathered from their own stories. It is believed that many researchers would be curious about teachers' views on the efficacy of off-campus internet facilities for their research activities. The outcomes could contribute significantly to improving teaching-learning and research pursuits in the academe.

6. Conclusion

The application of the internet in the academic programs and activities of academics would significantly widen their horizons regarding the new opportunities that ICT in general has introduced into all spheres of human endeavors. The study showed that the graduate school students used the internet mainly for research purposes such as online databases, dictionaries, encyclopedias and online courses. However, the use of the free database services provided was not adequate. The users were also dissatisfied with the internet service provision, the slow speed of the internet connection and the insufficient number of computers in the computer laboratories at the university. This situation has the potential to limit effective use of the internet technology. As a result, the majority of the graduate school students at the university felt they were not fully afforded the opportunities offered by the internet facilities on campus.

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