

Learners' Acceptance and Perceived Benefits of Online Facilitation in Open and Distance Learning Institutions in Nigeria.

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Abstract: This study investigated learners' acceptance and perceived benefits of online facilitation in open and distance learning institutions in Nigeria. ¹The descriptive survey research design was adopted for the study. The population of the study consisted of all ODL students in the 3 selected Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions in Nigeria. The two oldest ODL dual-mode institutions (the University of Nigeria Distance Learning Centre (UNN-DLC), Nsukka, and the University of Lagos, Distance Learning Institute (UNILAG-DLI), Lagos) and the only single-mode ODL institution (the National Open University of Nigeria, (NOUN)) were purposively selected for the study. A simple random technique was used to select learners from the three universities. A total sample of 829 learners participated in the study. Two research questions guided the study while two hypotheses were tested at a 0.05 significant level. A researcher-developed questionnaire titled: Open and Distance Learners' Acceptance of Online Facilitation Questionnaire (ODLAOFQ) was the instrument used for data collection. Data collected were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequency counts, percentages, mean, and standard deviation) and inferential statistics (Analysis of Variance - ANOVA). Results showed among others that the *F* value of 5.024 is statistically significant at a 0.05 level of significance which implies that the mean differences in the level of acceptance of online facilitation as the medium of instructional delivery across students' age groups are statistically significant. Based on the findings of the study, it was recommended among others that institutions should assist learners with subscribed laptops, and internet data to sustain their interests in online facilitation.

Keywords: Online facilitation, Open and distance learning, institutions

Introduction

In the accomplishment of quality-of-life indicators, it is expected that nations should hold on to factors that can propel the well-being of an individual. One such factor is education since education underpins the success of any society in the future. Every success made by a man can be attributed to the quality of the education received by such a person. Education is a dynamic instrument that offers solutions to the economic and social challenges of

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the world. Education has been the indispensable foundation for civilizations and development in Africa and the rest of the world. Ensuring inclusive and equitable access to quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all people remains a major challenge in developing countries. Quality education tackles the unemployment rate, especially in developing countries, and the poor standard of living of the populace. Smith (2015, 2021) revealed that education is a process of inviting truth and the possibility of encouraging and giving time to discovery. The development of a country is tied to different facets of economic activities of which education is one. Education is the genuine channel through which the vast potential of youths can be optimistically harnessed for the benefit of the country as a whole (Buhari, 2018). It is therefore necessary for all and sundry to embrace and access education to live a fulfilled life.

Open and Distance learning (ODL) is a process that is designed to make education accessible to many people who are ready and willing to gain excellently from quality education which is provided through flexible and affordable distance learning. Open and Distance Learning in recent times has emerged as an alternative to the conventional system, as it has not only proved to be cost-effective but also has the potential to reach out to a large segment of the unreached, the marginalized, and the needy (Oni, 2019). Open and distance learning is a cost-effective instruction that is independent of time, location, pace, and space. Onuorah, (2010) claimed that Open and distance learning education is a philosophic construct, implying the elimination of socially induced constraints on the acquisition of education. The openness is measured in terms of flexibility and the absence of conventional restraint on operation (Oni, 2019). Open and distance learning education is presently now widespread, not just in the open universities of the world alone, but in all education and training sectors such as Polytechnic, Secondary schools, and Fashion design among others.

The education system was starkly obstructed by the COVID-19 pandemic, and as a result, learning shifted from face-to-face to online facilitation in educational institutions. This unparalleled shift in the learning environment caused substantial challenges for learners all over the nation. The situation was more severe, particularly in developing nations. The medium of online facilitation accommodates all categories of learners, without limit to the number, request by learners, or distance in time and space (NOUN: Registry, 2014, 2016, 2018). Facilitation is a pedagogical term that applies to student-centered approaches to teaching which involves managing the communication of others online. Facilitation irrespective of its kind is assumed to provide satisfactory academic records of students and meet the obligations of the courses in which they have enrolled (Agbebaku, 2018). Online facilitation, in wide-ranging terms, can be seen as the act of managing the learners and the learning through an online medium. Bello (2021) described online facilitation as a veritable platform that allows seamless interaction between distance learners and their tutors. Online facilitation creates an online learning platform that establishes a new learning environment and provides multidimensional learning possibilities (Tuquero, 2011, Esobi, Lasode, & Barriguete, 2020). Online facilitation is an ODL instructional delivery medium that requires knowledgeable personnel with appropriate skills and the right attitude to moderate the teaching-learning process in virtual learning environments. Online facilitation can generally be seen as the act of managing the learners and learning resources through an online learning platform. Also, Gordon & Job (2021) claimed that E-learning fosters active learning, empowers learners to study at their own pace, and enables cooperative and collaborative learning activities among students.

Like many countries in Africa, online facilitation in Nigeria is evolving with many ODL institutions gradually putting facilities in place to connect students and tutors in the virtual learning environment. ICTs employed in online learning environments now form an integral and essential feature in the instructional delivery for education

and training, particularly for open and distance learning (ODL) in many educational and training institutions across the globe (Bawa, 2016; Lawn, Zhi & Morello, 2017). In recent times, online facilitation has become a buzzword in the field of education as there are no other alternatives to providing education to the learners in the class. Online facilitation has contributed immensely towards teaching and learning in ODL institutions, particularly in Nigeria. Some of its benefits include widening access to educational services at the same time irrespective of distance and population of learners. It means learners can join facilitation from anywhere, regardless of time and distance. Online facilitation enhances learners' active engagement and impacts academic goal achievement. It allows learners to interact, ask questions, and contribute meaningfully during facilitation. Since many benefits accorded online facilitation, it has become necessary for learners to accept online facilitation as it makes interaction with other students in the class very easy. The level of students' acceptance of online facilitation has been flaunted as a striking factor that could determine the effective use of technology to improve instructional delivery. It becomes so important to examine students' level of acceptance and perceived instructional benefits of this technology-mediated instructional delivery mode to understand possible factors that could influence its successful integration into the ODL system in as much as online facilitation is still relatively new in the context of institutions in Nigeria.

Statement of the Research Problem

Online facilitation has contributed immensely towards teaching and learning in ODL institutions, particularly in Nigeria. Some of its benefits include widening access to educational services at the same time, irrespective of distance and population of learners. It allows learners to interact, ask questions, and contribute meaningfully during facilitation. Since many benefits are accorded online facilitation, the need for students' acceptance and perceived benefits in online facilitation cannot be over-emphasized as it affects their participation and the consequent benefits they derive from it. However, experience and observations have shown that many students in the Nigerian Open and Distance Learning institutions do not participate in online facilitation. They give excuses such as lack of data, network, systems, etc. as their reasons for not participating. Non-participation is a result of their non-acceptance and non-perception of benefits derived from it. If they accept it and perceive that they have benefited from it, they will do all within their power to overcome their so-called excuses. It is on this note that this study investigated learners' acceptance and perceived instructional benefits of online facilitation in open and distance learning institutions in Nigeria to offer useful suggestions on how to ensure a successful implementation of online facilitation through learners' acceptance and perceived instructional benefits

Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of the study are:

1. To examine the level of learners' acceptance of online facilitation as a medium of instructional delivery in open and distance learning institutions in Nigeria.
2. To investigate learners' perceived instructional benefits of online facilitation as a medium of instructional delivery in open and distance learning institutions in Nigeria.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What is the level of learners' acceptance of online facilitation as a medium of instructional delivery in open and distance learning institutions in Nigeria?
2. What are the learners' perceived instructional benefits of online facilitation as a medium of instructional delivery in open and distance learning institutions in Nigeria?

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were tested at a 0.05 level of significance:

1. There is no significant difference in the level of acceptance of online facilitation as the medium of instructional delivery across students' age groups in ODL institutions in Nigeria.
2. There is no significant difference in the level of perceived instructional benefits of online facilitation as a medium of instructional delivery across students' age groups in ODL institutions in Nigeria.

Methodology

A descriptive survey research design was adopted for the study. The target population of the study consisted of all Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions and all ODL learners in Nigeria. A purposive sampling technique was used for the selection of the two oldest ODL dual mode institutions (the University of Nigeria Distance Learning Centre (UNN-DLC), Nsukka, and (the University of Lagos, Distance Learning Institute (UNILAG-DLI), Lagos) and the only single mode ODL institution [the National Open University of Nigeria, (NOUN)]. Participants were selected based on availability and willingness to participate in the study. The total sample size of 829 students participated in the study. Questionnaires were deployed through physical and Google forms to the learners of the selected ODL institutions. One instrument was developed by the researcher for the collection of data namely; the Open and Distance Learners' Acceptance of Online Facilitation Questionnaire (ODLAOFQ). The instrument has three sections. Section A deals with students' demography such as the name of the institution, Course of study, and age. Section B had 5 items about learners' level of acceptance of online facilitation as a medium of instructional delivery. Section C had 8 items that contained information on the learners' perceived instructional benefits of online facilitation. The reliability coefficient value of 0.80 was obtained using Cronbach Alpha. The draft of the instrument was subjected to a validation process by giving it to Open and Distance Learning experts and practitioners from the National Open University of Nigeria and experts in measurement and evaluation at the Faculty of Education of the same university. These processes ascertained the face validity of the instrument. Data collected for the study were analysed using descriptive statistics such as frequency counts, percentages, mean, standard deviation, and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA).

Result

Table 1: ODL Students' Demography

N = 829

Variable	Description	Number of respondents (%)
Institutions	NOUN	725 (87.5)
	UNILAG DLI	25 (9.5)
	UNN DLC	79(3.0)
Gender	Male	423(51.0)
	Female	406(49.0)
Age Range	15-35 years	528(63.7)
	36-45 years	19(2.3)
	46 above years	282(34.0)

Research Question 1: What is the level of learners' acceptance of online facilitation as a medium of instructional delivery?

Table 1: Learners' Level of acceptance of Online facilitation

S/N	Acceptance of Online Facilitation	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Std. Dev.
1.	Online facilitation should be used for all my courses.	364 (43.9)	339 (40.9)	96 (11.6)	30 (3.6)	3.25	0.798
2.	I am ready to interact with other learners on the online facilitation platform.	373 (45.0)	427 (51.5)	23 (2.8)	6 (0.7)	3.41	0.584
3.	It is worthwhile to use my internet data for online classes.	285 (34.4)	406 (49.0)	84 (10.1)	54 (6.5)	3.11	0.833
4.	Online facilitation is desirable because it makes interaction with other students in the class very easy	295 (35.6)	435 (52.5)	75 (9.0)	24 (2.9)	3.21	0.721
5.	I would prefer to participate in online classes anytime.	291 (35.1)	418 (50.4)	102 (12.3)	18 (2.2)	3.18	0.726

Table 1 above shows the level of acceptance of online facilitation as a medium of instructional delivery. More than half of the respondents agreed that all five (5) items on acceptance of online facilitation as a medium of instructional delivery are true. Those that agreed and strongly agreed with the five (5) items are above 50%. The mean ratings of each of the five (5) items are each above the 2.50 benchmark for the acceptance of a statement on a four-Likert scale. This is a confirmation of the result found from the frequency and percentage analyses.

Conclusively, in the opinion of the majority of the respondents; the following statements on the level of acceptance of online facilitation as a medium of instructional delivery are true that online facilitation should be used for all my courses, I am ready to interact with other learners on the online facilitation platform, it is worthwhile to use my internet data for online classes, online facilitation is desirable because it makes interaction with other students in the class very easy, and I would prefer to participate in online classes anytime.

Research Question 2: What are the learners' perceived instructional benefits of online facilitation as a medium of instructional delivery?

Table 2: Learners' Perceived instructional benefits of online facilitation as a medium of instructional delivery

S/N	Instructional Benefits of Online Facilitation	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Std. Dev.
1.	enables me to know my facilitator	334 (40.3)	443 (53.4)	46 (5.5)	6 (07)	3.33	0.614
2.	allows me to interact with my classmates	262 (31.6)	459 (55.4)	99 (11.9)	9 (1.1)	3.17	0.670
3.	develops confidence in me to face examination without any fear	273 (33.0)	457 (55.1)	88 (10.6)	11 (1.3)	3.19	0.671
4.	gives me the privilege to ask questions in the class	260 (31.3)	491 (59.2)	73 (8.8)	5 (06)	3.21	0.617
5.	improves my ICT skills	349 (42.1)	444 (53.6)	27 (3.3)	9 (1.1)	3.36	0.602
6.	enhances my performance in the examination	247 (29.8)	509 (61.4)	67 (8.1)	6 (07)	3.20	0.605
7.	makes course material content easier to understand	325 (39.2)	427 (51.5)	65 (7.8)	12 (1.4)	3.28	0.669
8.	allows me to join the class without the barrier of distance	389 (46.9)	408 (49.2)	18 (2.2)	14 (1.7)	3.41	0.623

Table 2 above shows the perceived instructional benefits of online facilitation as a medium of instructional delivery. More than half of the respondents disagreed that all eight items on perceived instructional benefits of online facilitation as a medium of instructional delivery are true. Those who agreed and strongly agreed with each of the eight (8) items on the perceived instructional benefits of online facilitation as a medium of instructional delivery are above 50%.

Conclusively, in the opinion of the majority of the respondents; the following statements on the perceived instructional benefits of online facilitation as a medium of instructional delivery are true online facilitation enables me to know my facilitator, allows me to interact with my classmates, develops confidence in me to face examination without any fear, gives me the privilege to ask questions in class, improves my ICT skills, enhances my performance in the examination, makes course material content easier to understand, and allows me to join the class without the barrier of distance

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant difference in the level of acceptance of online facilitation as a medium of instructional delivery across students' age groups.

Table 3: ANOVA Table for Acceptance of Online Facilitation Across Students' Age Groups

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	P-value
Between Groups	86.445	3	28.815	5.024	0.002
Within Groups	4732.199	825	5.024		
Total	4818.644	828			

The F value of 5.024 in Table 3 is statistically significant at a 0.05 level of significance, implying that the mean differences in the level of acceptance of online facilitation as the medium of instructional delivery across students' age groups are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

Table 4: Multiple Comparison of the Acceptance of Online Facilitation across Students' Age Groups

(I) Group	(J) Group	Mean Difference (I-J)	P-value
15-35	36-45	2.11725*	0.003
	46 and above	0.05193	0.995
36-45	15-35	-2.11725*	0.003
	46 and above	-2.06532	0.005
46 and above	15-35	-0.05193	0.995
	36-45	2.06532*	0.005

A further attempt was also made to locate the difference in the level of acceptance of online facilitation as the medium of instructional delivery across students' age groups with the aid of Scheffe's post-hoc analysis (Table 4). From Table 4, the mean comparison showed that the mean differences in the level of acceptance of online facilitation as a medium of instructional delivery varied significantly between the 15-35 years age group and 36-45 age group, giving the level of acceptance of online facilitation as a medium of instructional delivery of the 15-35 age group to be significantly higher than that of 36-45 age group. Also from the same table, the level of acceptance of online facilitation as a medium of instructional delivery varied significantly between the 36-45 years age group and 46 years and above age group, giving the level of acceptance of online facilitation as a medium of instructional delivery of the 36-45 age group to be significantly higher than that of 46 years and above age group. The two differences are generalisable.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant difference in the level of perceived instructional benefits of online facilitation as an interactive medium of instructional delivery across students' age groups.

Table 5: ANOVA Table for Comparing Perceived Instructional Benefits of Online Facilitation as an Interactive Medium of Instructional Delivery Across Students' Age Groups

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	P-value
Between Groups	98.879	2	49.439	3.419	0.033
Within Groups	11914.687	824	14.460		
Total	12013.565	826			

The F value of 3.419 in Table 5 is statistically significant at 0.05 level of significance, implying that the mean differences in the level of perceived instructional benefits of online facilitation as an interactive medium of instructional delivery across students' age groups are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

Table 6: Multiple Comparison of the Perceived Instruction Benefits of Online Facilitation as an Interactive Medium of Instructional Delivery Across Students' Age Groups

(I) Group	(J) Group	Mean Difference (I-J)	P-value
15-35	36-45	-0.54672	0.835
	46 and above	-0.72861*	0.035
36-45	15-35	0.54672	0.835
	46 and above	-0.18189	0.981
46 and above	15-35	0.72861*	0.035
	36-45	0.18189	0.981

A further attempt was also made to locate the difference with the aid of Scheffe post-hoc analysis. From Table 6, the mean comparison showed that the mean differences in the level of perceived instructional benefits of online facilitation as an interactive medium of instructional delivery across students' age groups varied significantly between 46 years and above years age group and 15-35 years age group, giving the level of perceived instructional benefits of online facilitation as an interactive medium of instructional delivery of the 46 years and above age group to be significantly higher than that of 15-35 years age group. The differences are generalisable.

Discussion of Finding

The findings from the study revealed that there was a high level of learners' acceptance of online facilitation as a medium of instructional delivery. This is because more than half of the respondents agreed that all five items (online facilitation should be used for all my courses, I am ready to interact with other learners on the online facilitation platform, and it is worthwhile to use my internet data for an online class, online facilitation is desirable because it makes internet with others students in the class easy, I would prefer to participate in online class anytime) on acceptance of online facilitation as a medium of instructional delivery are true. It implies that distance learners who participated in the online facilitation considered the intervention as a viable platform that could bridge the instructional gaps between learners and their tutors. Effective online facilitation promotes interaction between lecturer and students and also between students and students on the online facilitation platform. This is corroborated by Adesina (2020) that Online facilitation remains a crucial component of ODL as it allows seamless interaction between lecturers and students anytime, anywhere. Also, since there is a high level of acceptance of online facilitation among students, it shows that learners perceived online facilitation as an engaging platform that could enable them to reach out to other distance learners. This is well-captured by Traxler (2018) that new

technologies facilitate greater interaction and collaboration, and students in an online learning environment would find these tools useful to participate actively in the teaching-learning process

Contrary to earlier findings, Hutt, 2017; Abimbade, Adedoja, Fakayode, & Bello (2019) claimed that even though students can explore the possibilities provided by email and other messaging services in online facilitation platforms, the platforms lack the capabilities to get them the immediate feedback they would get if they were able to sit down with their instructors in the conventional classroom. It was also deduced that most of the respondents agreed and strongly agreed with each of the eight items on the perceived instructional benefits of online facilitation as a medium of instructional delivery above 50%. Online facilitation is beneficial in several ways because it meets the various needs of students, by providing sustenance to differently-abled persons and engaging learners meaningfully. Some of the benefits of online facilitation as claimed by the respondents are: that it improves their ICT skills, enables them to know their facilitators, makes course materials content easier to understand, and allows interaction with their classmates. All these factors become so important to promote learners' performance at the end of their course of study. This finding is supported by Adesina's (2020) assertion that it has been established that online facilitation strengthens the relationship among the learners and between learners and their tutors. Again, the finding of the study shows that the level of perceived instructional benefits of online facilitation as an interactive medium of instructional delivery across students' age groups is statistically significant. This indicated that age group is not a barrier to the benefits of online facilitation.

Conclusion

Online facilitation is progressively producing an instructive shift in the mode of engaging learners in open and distance learning, with an emphasis on interaction, collaboration, and discussion within online learning spaces. Online facilitation stimulates flexible and interactive learning content, which is more reason why institutions embark on it to promote interaction and collaboration among the students and between distance learners and their facilitators. Learners of open and distance learning remain strategic stakeholders in ODL across the world and the level of their acceptance and participation in online facilitation will go a long way in determining the effective implementation of this mode of instructional delivery.

Recommendation

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Online facilitation should be employed for all courses in the institutions in Nigeria
2. Institutions should take into consideration the learners' age to enable them to enjoy online facilitation maximally.
3. Institutions should assist learners with subscribed internet data to sustain their interests in online facilitation.

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