

AN ANALYSIS OF ONLINE NEWSPAPER READERSHIP PATTERN IN RIVERS STATE**¹Benneth, Chimaroke Ekezie, ²Prof. G.B. Okon & Prof. R.N. Amadi****¹Department of Mass Communication, ²Department of Development Communication Studies, ³Department of Public Relations and Advertising, ^{1,2&3}Faculty of Communication and Media Studies, Rivers State University, Port Harcourt, Nigeria****Introduction**

The mass media perform numerous functions which have engendered audience dependence on them. Some of the key media functions are information provision, transmission of culture and education, socialization of people into the norms and mores of their culture, entertainment and interpretation of reported events. Others include: drawing attention to unethical behaviours by individuals, groups and institutions watching over governments to ensure that they behave responsibly and responsively to the tasks for which they were elected, providing reports and mobilization of the citizenry. These functions appear to generate audience expectations of what the media have to do, in line with what the gratifications media audiences tend to derive from their various needs.

Littlejohn (2002) explains that "people" tend to depend more on the media that meet an appreciable number of their needs than those that touch on only a few of their needs." Okenwa (2002) submits that "current scholarship presents more complex interaction between the media and the society, with the media generating information from a network of relations and influences, coupled with individual interpretations and evaluations of the information provided." A multitude of factors such as political, economic, geographical including cultural influences make the media, to operate properly not how news worthy events are perceived and which are reported at all (Ahuja 1997; Lin 1998; Emenyonu 1998; Okenwa, 2002). Okenwa (2002) further amplifies says that; "it is through the persuasiveness of the mass media such as television, radio and the press messages reach their target audiences. These media have been largely responsible for structuring people's daily lives and routines." So why do people turn to the media? What motivates their interest? What needs do they want to gratify them? how do their needs impact on their preference for certain media contents?

Answering these questions situates within McQuail's (2005) Uses and Gratifications model which stresses on the reasons audience members have for consuming certain media content. McQuail op-cit notes that "audiences are often formed on the basis of similarities of individual needs, influence and taste, many of which appear to have social and psychological origins." Agee, Ault and Emery (2000), are of the opinion that "social situations and psychological characteristics motivate the need for media. This development leads one to be exposed to media that would seemingly fit certain expectations, leading to an ultimate gratification." Udoakah (2006) says that:

either consciously or unconsciously, those who have developed news brands seem to be attempting to satisfy Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, namely; physiological, safety, social esteem, and self actualization. It is easy to notice that there are new brands which carry information about food, drink and sex; some provide 'information on physical, social and • economic safety; others highlight information about making and keeping friendships, romance, affection in the family, Church, places of work, business and professional circles and on how to get or how people have been given a sense of belonging (p 59)

Thorson and Duffy (2005) suggest "a number of developments in a Uses and Gratifications theory that would make it more applicable to understanding how people choose news in the digital landscape" In Thorson and Duffy's "Media Choice Model, there is still a basic set of needs that stimulates audience to choose the media such as connectivity, information, entertainment, and shopping." Thorson and Duffy (2005) say that connectivity involves communicating with others while information and entertainment are dependent on individuals' choice. For example, "if a person is asked what medium he uses most for information in the evening before going to bed, no matter what kind of television programming the person watches, if he categorizes it as informational use, then that is the definition of information, Shopping refers to any activity that involves acquiring goods and services" (Thorson & Duffy, 2005).

Besides the emergence of online newspapers has created contradictory ideas about newspaper readership globally. Thorson & Duffy (2005) observe that "whereas the general feeling is that the online version of newspapers is a threat to the print's business model, it is difficult to tell between online version and hardcopy newspapers which one is more economically rewarding as both are readily available and appear to thrive at least in Nigeria." Ashong and Ogaraku (2017) report that "globally, the newspaper is passing through its hardest time ever, especially since the internet came to provide online functionalities and possibilities far beyond what the newspaper could offer instant and free news, interactive and multimedia features and easy accessibility through very simple handheld technologies like mobile phones and personal computers. Internet news publication is also simpler and cheaper."

With these attributes, therefore, Varian (2013) as quoted by Ashong and Ogaraku (2017), sees "the Internet as evidently a more superior way to distribute and read news. However, by astronomically increasing news sources, the Internet has inadvertently threatened the newspapers traditional stronghold on the news business." Thottam (1999) says 'in fact, it was in an attempt to tap into the Internet's huge resources, that newspapers joined other mass media to also deliver their contents digitally. But the moment readers began to rush online; print newspapers also began to suffer in three major ways: loss of breaking-news function, decline in newspaper readership and decline in advertising revenues." Chan (2005) argues that "these are newspaper's major revenue streams and the continuous failure of efforts of industry players (publishers, editors, reporters, media scholars, etc.) to contain the decline, informed the prediction or conclusion in some quarters that the end of the newspaper is close."

According to Smith (2005), "online newspapers have unlimited space, enabling them to cover as many or a few articles as they choose, as in-depth as they want. They also have the capability to hyperlink or connect to other related content. One can make use of multimedia features (e.g., video, audio, and pictures) and interactivity (e.g., users' reactions and polls), In other words, online publication enables users see, hear or read the sources reporters relied on via multimedia," while interactivity entails the "ability for readers to more easily interact with and respond to online news stories through reader forums, ratings, and reader-uploaded content" (Pavlik and Ross, 2000 p.124). Ashong and Ogaraku (2017) point out that "all these are not

without their implications for print. The Print readership has reduced drastically. Readers have developed the habit of wanting internet news free news, quick news and interactivity, i.e. news blog and user-generated content." Daily Trust, 2012' article reported that "newspaper vendors in Kaduna State have complained that since the introduction of online publication by newspapers, they have been experiencing low patronage as some persons read news on the Internet." Alabi (2013) says "now smart phones penetrate newspaper circulation."

Statement of the Problem

With the introduction of online newspapers, there has been a paradigm shift in the patronage of printed newspapers. The premise that many people read online versions of newspapers because of the gratifications they derive from online newspapers are commonplace. There is an assumption that hard copy (offline) newspapers may have lost readership. There is also the uncertainty as to whether newspaper readers show more interest with online version or hard copy. More worrisome is the view about what gratifications readers of online and hard copy newspapers do receive. This observation becomes necessary since the import of uses and gratifications theory is that "audience will always make use of the medium from which they derive gratifications." Gratifications derived from the media are multiple just as the media contents are multiple. The study, therefore, is set to investigate whether the online newspaper readers in Rivers State, read the online newspapers based on the gratifications they derive from them. If so, what are these gratifications?

Objective of the Study

The aim of the study is to ascertain the patterns of online newspaper readership in Rivers State, Nigeria.

The objectives of the study are to:

- i. find out the preferred contents by online newspaper readers in Rivers State
- ii. establish the factors that influence the choice of online newspapers among readers in Rivers State.
- iii. determine the gratifications derived from the choice of online newspapers by readers in Rivers State.

Research Questions

The research questions stated below were formulated to guide the study;

- i. what contents do the online newspaper readers in Rivers State, Nigeria prefer?
- ii. what factors influence the choice of online newspapers among readers in Rivers State, Nigeria?
- iii. how do gratifications derived from online newspapers influence choice of contents among readers in Rivers State, Nigeria?

Significance of the Study

The result of this study will help publishers/editors of online newspapers to know the demographics of their audience. From the findings that will be obtained from the study, publishers/editors of the online newspapers will be guided on the material to retain or remove from their online news contents. It will also help them to package contents that will help the young generation create good reading habit among them. This study will provide data for further studies in Uses and Gratifications Theory, especially, with regard to online readers' needs and gratifications and their influence on readers' choice of online newspaper content. It will further add to existing data on the Uses and Gratifications studies in Nigeria and enhance knowledge about online readers' use of the media generally.

Scope of the Study

The thrust of the study is on the readers of the online newspapers and gratifications derivable. The work is centered on online newspapers readers in Rivers State, covering all the three Senatorial Districts. They include the Rivers South East Senatorial District, Rivers West Senatorial District and Rivers East Senatorial District respectively

Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on the themes of Uses and Gratifications (UG), and Technological Determinism Theory (TDT)

Uses and Gratifications (UG)

The Uses and Gratifications theory was introduced by an Israeli Psychologist, Elihu Katz in the early 1970s. It explains "the way in which individuals use communication, among other resource in their environment, to satisfy their needs, achieve their goals and to do so by simply asking them." The theory holds that "the audience of mass communication is active and not passive; meaning that; they actively seek specific media and contents to achieve certain results or gratifications of their personal needs." Another assumption of the theory is that "in the communication process, much initiative linking need gratifications and media choice lies with the audience member; that the media compete with other sources of need satisfaction; that, many of the goals of mass media use can be derived from data supplied by individual audience members; that, value judgments about the cultural significance of mass communication should be suspended while audience orientations are explored on their own terms."

The theory is relevant to this study as it has shown the various needs, wishes, motives and satisfaction readers of online newspapers derive from their chosen newspaper. It has provided the basis for analysing what consumers seek in a particular medium and how they feel and associate with that medium and its contents and as noted by Ruggiero (2000), it explains the gratifications consumers seek in a particular medium and their perceptions of, and affinity for that medium and its contents. The research is set out to ascertain whether online newspaper readers in Rivers State, Nigeria read the online newspapers based on the gratification they derive from them and if so, what are these gratifications?

Technological Determinism Theory (TDT)

The theory was propounded by Thorsten Veblen (1857 - 1929) out its foundation was laid properly by Marshal McLuhan in 1965. "The theory believes that technology defines the nature of the society; it is viewed as the driving force of culture in the society and it determines its course of history." Ukonu, Ani and Nduhisi (2013) note, that McLuhan's assertion, 'The Medium is the Message,' encapsulated the full import of the theory. Expounding on the McLuhan's postulation, Griffin (2000) states that "the new technologies., radically after the entire way people use their five senses, the way they react to things and therefore their entire lives and the entire society."

Folarin (1998) observes that "the basic premise of the theory is that the media are the extensions of human body and that they alter not only the environment but also the very message they convey; they bring new perceptual habits while their technologies create new environments." Marx (2016) posits that "technological progress leads to new ways of production in a society and this ultimately influences the culture, political and economic aspects of a society, thereby inevitably changing the society". Max expounds on "how a feudal society that used a hand mill slowly changed into an industrial capitalist society with the introduction of the steam mill.

Technological Determinism Theory is applied at various levels beginning from the introduction of newer technologies to introducing, other ideas that will generate more knowledge as well. Asemah *et al.*, (2017) point out that "technological determinism theory acknowledges that technology has the ability to drive human interaction and create social change. This concept

stresses on the effects and/or impacts that information Communication Technologies (ICTs) have on users, organizations and society." It states that "media technology shapes how we, as individuals in the society think, feel, act or how society operates as it moves from one technological stage to another." Kunezik (1998) says that "new communication technologies tend to alter the journalists' working, environment" Ukonu *et al.*, (2013) cites Folarin (1998) as explaining that "installation of electronic (computerized) news distribution system tend to level out the differences between editorial production and phases of journalistic work."

The theory is relevant to this study as it has brought to the fore the changing nature of communication through technology which has created a process in the world where people are connected worldwide through participation in smaller communities using online media. It provides the foundation that online newspaper reader in Nigeria use technology to access the media and contents they desire.

Conceptual Review

Concept of Readership

Readership as a concept is central to the newspapers. It is an abstract concept which captures the act of reading. Though difficult to define, the 'concept of readership is usually associated with newspapers, magazines and all kinds of periodicals." "It is the number or type of people who read a particular newspaper or magazine" (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary. 2010). According to Bottle PR, a UK based Agency established in 2004, "readership is a general term that refers to the number of people reading a particular publication, including both the individual who purchased the publication and others who have read it" (Bottle PR, 201 1). For The Huntsville Time website (2011) 'readership is the number of adults (18+) in a specified geographic area who read or looked into the publication yesterday" (cited in Obald. 2013).

The Newspaper

Newspaper belongs to print media family. The word newspaper was coined from two Latin words *nēewe* (which means something new) and *papyrus*" (which means a piece which is used in writing & and the common piece is; paper). Communication scholars attempt to provide some, definitions of the newspaper. According to Sanderman *et al.*, cited in Okunna and Omenugha (2012), "a newspaper is an unbound printed publication issued at regular intervals which presents information in words: often supplemented with pictures." in line with the above definition is Nwodu's (2006) description of a newspaper 'as a printed unbound paper that contain news about current political, economic, socio- cultural, educational, environmental, scientific-cum-technological and sundry affairs." Newspapers are media form characterized by "a combination of content and delivery platform, initially being print but now also including digital editions" (Thurman & Fletcher, 2019). A newspaper is schedule publication containing news of current events, informative articles, diverse features, and advertising. It is usually printed on low- grade, inexpensive paper such as newsprint. Newspapers are a form of media, different from television and radio. It is more portable obsolete, and usually lighter with the exception of Sunday editions. As the name suggests, newspapers are made of paper, consisting of folded unstapled sheets and containing news, feature articles, advertisements, and' correspondence. It is a publication, usually issued daily or weekly containing current news events.

Overview of Online Newspapers in Nigeria

What could be described as an early example of an "online-only" newspaper or magazine was PLATO News Report. It was an online newspaper created by Bruce Parrello in 1974 on the PLATO System at the University of Illinois. In 1987, the Brazilian newspaper *Jornaldodia* ran on the state-owned Embratel network, moving to the Internet in the 1990s. By the late 1990s, hundreds of U.S. newspapers were publishing online versions but did not yet offer much interactivity (Anderson, 2007). The first newspaper service on America Onlie was launched by the Chicago Tribune in May 1992. Another example is Britain's Weekend City Press Review, which provided a weekly news summary online which started in 1995. It was from 1995 that the

online newspaper concept of today developed, featuring among others CNN as a global news engine. Six years later, in April 2001, American Trade Journal Editor and Publisher Interactive had registered in its database 12,878 news media online. 1995 was the year in which public Internet usage had its breakthrough in the entire Western world, largely due to a simpler "point-and-click" interface for the World Wide Web (Fernandes, Vinagre and Cortez, 2015). Today, online news has become a huge part of society. Austra Taylor, author of the popular book, *The People's Platform* argues that online news does not provide the detail needed to fully understand what actually happened. It is more just a fast summary to inform people what happened but does not give a solution or fixation to the problem. However, prior to the advent of Internet, newspapers had the constraint of circulating hard copy versions by transportation, with its concomitant loss in time. "With the availability of the Internet, newspapers have come up with online versions which overcome the constraint of circulating hard copy versions by transportation" (Nwanne, 2007).

There exist two - classes of online newspapers: those that are exclusively online without a print version (online-only newspapers) and those that have online versions as well as the print version (Mathew *et al.*, 2013). Examples of online-only newspapers are; The Atlantic Herald, US, Southport Reporter, UK and Daily Post, the Premium Times, Sahara Reporters, City Mirror, Nigeria. The New York Times, US, The Telegraph, UK and The Punch, Tribune, The Guardian, Vanguard in Nigeria are examples of newspapers that publish both online and print versions (Moller, 2001). The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2010, p. 16) reports that "the first online newspaper was published in 1994 by Palo Alta Weekly California." Since then, the worldwide online newspaper has grown significantly to 10, 600 with the French Le Monde setting up its website in 1995 and the New York Times in 1998" (Moller, 2001).

State of Newspaper Readership

From the day Marshall McLuhan "predicted about the global village phenomenon, there has been an unequalled surge in the introduction of new and better information tools, which, are increasingly complementing and replacing older traditional tools of mass information. New media delivery systems, new information processing, storage and retrieval systems have become the vogue." Presently, newspapers and magazines use the, World Wide Web (www) among other services of the net to create and maintain web servers in which they publish contents of their papers. The increase of newspapers and magazines online version may not be unconnected with some possible secondary reasons including enthusiasm for new technology and the general enc that one wishes to be part of the new wave at the moment not minding the adverse consequences.

Ashong and Ogaraku, (2017) study has shown that "globally the newspaper is passing through its hardest time ever, especially since the Internet came to provide online functionalities and possibilities far beyond what the newspaper could offer: instant and free news, interactive and multimedia features, and easy accessibility through very simple handheld technologies like mobile phones and personal computers."

Rodman (2010 p.109) observes that "with these basic features, then the production and distribution of the print editions of newspapers may be no doubt hampered thereby impinging on the revenue profile of some newspaper organizations. Above all, this phenomenon may signal an attempt at subsuming and fusing the print newspaper into the fast-paced communication technologies which are daily dominating the communication space." Literature is replete with "materials which chronicle the monumental shifts in news consumption occasioned around the globe. For examples, Murdoch Predicts Gloomy Future for Press" (Plunkett, 2005), "The Future of Newspapers: Who Killed the Newspaper?" (The Economist, 2006), "Goodbye to Newspapers?" (Bakei, 2007), "Newspaper Circulation Continues to Decline Rapidly" (Pérez-Pefia, 2008), "Newspaper Closings Raise Fears about Industry" (Lieberman, 2009). Similar reports in Nigeria

include: "Dwindling Sales: A Looming Media Challenge" in Daily Trust (Omoniyi, 2010), "Experts Debate Future of Print Media: On the Media, A Threat" in Nigerian Tribune (Ekeng, 2010), "Forget Circulation Figures, Print Media is still very relevant" (Adefaye, 2010, cited in Abdulrahem et al., 2012), "The Solution to the Dwindling Newspaper Circulation in Nigeria" (Popoola, 2010), "Kaduna newspaper vendors say online publication disrupts sales" (Daily Trust, 2012). Ashong and Ogaraku (2017) say "the decline is almost everywhere; what may differ is the degree or dimension of effect." As Rodman (2010) observes "changes in readership naturally affect the structure of the industry. Over the years, for example, readers moved from the cities to the suburbs, and the industry followed as the city papers died and new suburban papers were born."

Rodman (2010) observes that "the advent of the Information Communication Technology (ICT) has drastically changed the patronage level of the mainstream media (Newspaper, Radio and Television), especially the newspaper, which is the oldest among the trio." The author points out that "currently, newspaper publishers deploy the World Wide Web (www) among other services provided by the ICT to create and maintain web servers in which they publish contents of their papers. This is a departure from the traditional hard or print copy that has lasted over centuries; a development which may signal the possibility of low patronage by readers who may be technology savvies." From the newspaper industry's point of view, an alarming trend among changing patterns of readership is generally lower circulation and, more ominously, a lower readership among young people, who are failing to take up the newspaper-reading habits of their parents. The average age of today's newspaper reader is 53.

Online Newspapers and Readership

Generally, scholars and the public have "the notion that online has created more opportunities for newspapers, such as competing with broadcast journalism in presenting breaking news in a timelier manner" (Benson, Ashong & Oke, 2021). Patrick (2015) argues that "the marriage between a computer network (the Internet) and newspaper readership is said to have been contracted on July 1, 1980 and the first newspaper to offer readers electronic contents via the computer was the Ohio Columbus Dispatch which adopted the services provided by CompuServe, a computer software company based in Ohio in the United States of America.

A home user needed a computer, and a modem to couple the telephone to the computer, to connect to the database and access online versions of the *Ohio Columbus Dispatch* newspaper." Okonofua (2014) submits that "going online has created more opportunities for newspapers, such as competing with broadcast journalism in presenting breaking news in a timelier manner." Almost all the big newspapers including the local ones, in Nigeria, for instance, have their online versions. These include: The Guardian online, This Day online, Champion online, Daily Trust online, Punch online, The Nation online, Leadership online, Tribune online, Vanguard online, Daily Times online, and The Sun online. In short, no fewer than 50 Nigerian newspapers have their presence online, in addition to their traditional hard copy, while some others offer only online versions" (Uwakwe, 2010; Patrick, 2015).

Patrick (2015) maintains that "online newspapers are common features in the various social media platforms, especially Facebook and Twitter as their pages display fragrantly the news feed of social media users". The emergence of online newspapers is no doubt a product of technological innovations. As observed by Hanson (2005) "evolving technology has brought changes to newspaper business." Mbachu (2003) says "initially, online newspapers simply offered electronic versions of their hard copy contents. But it is no longer so as mainstream newspapers are now involved in the breaking news process."

Print and Online Newspapers Readership in Nigeria

Some studies have investigated print and online newspaper readership in Nigeria. For instance, the findings of Mathew, *et al.*, (2013) regarding readership of online newspapers in the country

showed that more than half of newspaper readers in Nigeria read online newspapers. This indicates that online newspaper accounts for more readers than their print counterparts in the country. The findings also proved some of the inferences of Uses and Gratification theory, which state that audiences are conscious of their reasons for choice of media messages they consider these reasons while searching media messages for satisfaction of their information needs. Online version of newspapers is currently being invoked in Nigeria. However, Okonofua's (2014) study showed that readers derive satisfaction for information need from print version of newspapers more than their online counterparts, affirming that readers of online newspapers also read print versions.

According to the study, the low readership phenomenon facing print newspapers in Nigeria might not be unconnected with the introduction of online newspapers, which provide content to the readers for free. In this regard, Ekarefo, *et al.*, (2013) note that an important issue of newspaper management in Nigeria is to combine editorial and technical decisions to provide quality print run. These studies did not explicitly focus on online newspaper readers' uses and gratification a gap which the present study seeks to fill, particularly in South-South Nigeria.

METHODOLOGY

The descriptive survey research design was used for this study; this is because the description survey design allows for the investigation of issues that are connected with human opinions, attitudes, beliefs and feelings. Idowu (1985) supports this when note that survey is particularly suitable in studying the attitudes and orientations of people in large population settings (Barbie, 2004).

Population of the Study

The population of this study was drawn from the online newspaper readers in the three Senatorial Districts of Rivers State i.e. Rivers South-East; Rivers South-West; and Rivers-East respectively. In view of the fact that there exists a paucity of data on the exact number of online newspaper readers in Rivers State, the researcher will purposively use the population of newspaper readers in the respective Local Government Area headquarters of the three Senatorial Districts. They are Ahoada, Eleme and Port Harcourt Local Government Areas respectively. According to the newspaper circulation Bureau, (NCB) in 2018, the population of Newspapers readers in Rivers State is 21,660. Out of which, the population of newspaper readers in Ahoada is 4,100, the population of newspaper readers in Eleme is 5,000 while the population of newspaper readers in Port Harcourt is 12,500 respectively. To account for online newspaper readers in the three selected Local Government Areas, the researcher again will purposively multiplied the average offline newspaper readers by three ($21,660 \times 3 = 64,980$). In multiplying the figure by three, the researcher will rely on the findings "that more than one and half of newspaper readers in Nigeria read online newspapers". (Mathew Ogedebe, Adeniji, 2013). Therefore, population of the study will stand at 263,580.

Sample and Sampling Procedure

The sample size for the study will be 384, using the Cohen, Manion and Morrison's (2007) model for sample size determination at 95% confidence level. The model shows that for a population of over 250,000 (two hundred and fifty thousand) at 95% confidence level and +5% error margins, the sample size should be 384. The proportionate stratified sampling technique will be used to determine the number of elements that will be studied in each of the selected LGA's. This technique ensures that stratification or homogenous subsets are represented based on their proportions in the population. This approach, as Wimmer and Dominick (2011) have observed, is used to ensure adequate representation of a sub-sample. Using this technique, if 20 percent of the populations are from a subset or strata, then 20 percent of the sample will be from that subset or sample. Ahoada constitutes 20 percent of the total population; Eleme constitutes 25 percent of the population while Port Harcourt constitutes 55 percent of the total population. The sample size that will be drawn from each LGA as follows;

Ahoada	-	20% of 76
Eleme	-	25 of 96
Port Harcourt	-	55 of 211.2

The researcher adopted purposive sampling technique to choose specific places where people who read online newspapers could be found. Such places include: universities, federal and LGA secretariats, schools, etc within the study area. The researcher also adopted purposive method in administering the instrument to the individual respondents. Here, the researcher did ensure that only respondents who read online newspapers were given the research instrument.

Description of the Measuring Instrument

The instrument for data collection of this study will be a 12-item questionnaire and will be divided into sections- A and B. Section A will covered items 1-6. it is designed to investigate the demographic and psychographic backgrounds of respondents and to address Research Question Four. Section B covered items 7-12. Items 7-8 is designed to elicit data on respondents' access to online newspapers and addressed Research Question one. Items 9-11 will elicit data on respondents' preferred contents and tackled Research Question Two while item 12 will be designed to elicit data on the gratifications derived by respondents after accessing online newspapers and addressed Research Question Three. The instrument will be structured using both closed and open-ended question format. Questions 7-9 and 12 will be structured in Likert Scale while question 10 will be open-ended.

Validity and Reliability of Research Instrument

To ensure validity of the research instrument, the questionnaire was made available to some senior academics to scrutinize, primarily for clarity of purpose and inclusiveness of items. The test-retest method of computing reliability using correlation coefficients was adopted for this study. In this method, the same people will be measured at two different points in time and a coefficient between the two scores will be computed. A group of 10 respondents in a different community within the study area will randomly be selected for a pilot study at two different period of time. The result of the pre-test was analyzed using the Pearson Product Moment Correlation formula, yielded 75, correlation coefficient to produce internal consistency of the content of the instrument.

Method of Data Collection

The researcher was adopted the face-to-face approach in the issuance of the research instrument to ensure that respondents get the instrument and also to minimize the risk of duplication and falsification of responses of the respondents. The researcher will train assistants in the distribution and collection of the instruments by hand. The exercise will be for eight weeks because of the distance between the areas to be covered.

Method of Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using description statistical tools such as frequency tables and simple percentages combined with a weighted mean score with 2.50 as the criterion. Tables will be used to illustrate and clarify the data for the purpose of making data simple to understand. Answers supplied in the questionnaire will be analyzed based on the responses received. In testing the hypotheses, the Pearson Product Moment Correlation Co-efficient statistics will be used to analyse how significant one variable correlated with the other.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Ninety-seven percent of the copies of the questionnaire administered (374) were returned and found usable while 3 % were either not returned or were not found usable. Fifty-eight per cent

of the respondents (n=216) were male while 42 % (n158) were female. Also 22.7% (n=85) were aged 18-25 while 31.5% (n118) were aged 26- 35. Also 42.3% (n=158) were aged 36-45 while 3.4% (n=13) were aged 46 and above. Data also show that 40% of the respondents (n=150) were single, 55% (n205) were married, 3% (n=11) were divorced, 1% (n4) were widowed while another 1% (n4) were separated. The data also show that 26.5% (n99) of the respondents had NCE/OND, 57% (n=213) had HND/Bachelor's degree 12% (n46) had Master's degree, 2% (n=8) had PhD and 1 per cent (n4) had primary/secondary school education. Fifteen per cent (n=56) of the respondents earned between N30, 000-N45,000, 35% (n=131) earned between N46,000-N51,000 and 45% (n168) earned between N52,000 - N77,000 while 11% (n41) earned from N77,000 and above. Data further show that 10% (n=37) were students, 11% (n=41) were job seekers, 8% (n=30) were self- employed while 25% (n=94) were private servants while 46% (n172) were public servants.

Table 1 Preferred Online Newspaper Contents

Contents	Frequency	Percentage %)
	(n)	
News	180	48
Features/Columns		10
Advertorial	25	7
Editorial		6
Entertainment	105	28
Graphics, aesthetics and visuals		
Total	374	100

Table 1 shows that 48% of the respondents accessed online newspaper for news while 1% accessed online newspapers because of graphics, aesthetics and visuals.

Table 2 Online Newspaper Reader's Gender

Contents	Gender	
	Male	Female
News	124(33%)	80(21%)
Features/Columns	30(8%)	10(3%)
Advertorial	11(3%)	15(4%)
Editorial	6(2%)	3(1%)
Entertainment	25(7%)	60(12%)
Graphics, aesthetics and visuals	7(2%)	3(1%)
Total	203(53%)	171(45%)

Table 2 shows that 33% male respondents preferred news as against 21% female. The difference is not very significant. However, 12% of female respondents preferred entertainment content most, against 7% male.

Table 3 Online Newspaper Reader's Age

Content	Age				
	18 -25	26 -35	36 -45	46 and above	Total
News	10 (3%)	38 (10%)	76(20%)	24 (6%)	148 (40%)
Features/Columns	5 (1%)	13(4%)	25 (7%)	11(3%)	54(14%)
Advertorial	2 (1%)	15 (4%)	12(3%)	-	29(8%)
Editorial	1(0%)	3 (1%)	10(3%)	3(1%)	17(5%)
Entertainment	40(11%)	46(12%)	28(8%)	-	114(30%)
Graphics, aesthetics and visuals	2(1%)	3(1%)	7(2%)	-	12(3%)
Total	50(13%)	118(31%)	158(42%)	38(10%)	374(100%)

Table 3 shows that news is the most preferred contents by 40% of the respondents from all ages. Also 42% of the respondents within the age bracket 36-4'5 accessed most of the contents while 10% of respondents within the age bracket of 46 and above accessed the least contents.

Table 4 Respondent's access to online newspaper contents by marital status

Content	Marital Status					Total
	Single	Married	Widowed	Separated	Divorced	
News	35(9%)	98(26%)	6(2%)	5(1%)	4(1%)	148(40%)
Features/Columns	10(4%)	30(8%)	11(3%)	1(0%)	2(1%)	54 (14%)
Editorial	5(1%)	20(5%)	2 (1%)	10%	1(0%)	29 (%)
Advertorial	6(2%)	10(3%)	1(0%)	-	-	17(5%)
Entertainment	65(22%)	40(11%)	5(1%)	2(1%)	2(1%)	114(30%)
Graphics, aesthetics and visuals	5(1%)	5(2%)	1(0%)	1(0%)	-	12(3%)
Total	126(46%)	203(54%)	26(4%)	10 (3%)	9(2%)	374(100%)

Table 4 shows that 54% of the respondents who are married did not only access most of the contents, they also accessed news content more than other respondents. Also, 3% and 2% of the respondents who are separated or divorced paid least attention to all the contents.

Table 5: Gratifications derived most by readers of online newspapers (Co affective needs)

Gratifications	Ranking Positions				Total		
	1 st Position	2 nd Position	3 rd position				
To get high quality information content	56	(15%)	18	(5%)	15	(4%)	89(24%)
Because it is exciting and entertaining	33	(9%)	25	(7%)	16	(4%)	74(20%)
Because it is current and cheaper	12	(3%)	4	(1%)	5	(1%)	21(6%)
to escape from realities of everyday life	22	(6%)	15	(4%)	10	(3%)	47(13%)
To view uncensored messages	5	(1%)	2	(1%)	4	(1%)	11(3%)
To forget about problems of life	16	(4%)	2	(1%)	3	(1%)	21(7%)
To view high quality production	6	(2%)	3	(1%)	8	(2%)	17(5%)
Because it is always available 24 hours a day	25	(7%)	19	(5%)	15	(4%)	59(16%)
Because it has a wide variety of contents	10	(3%)	7	(2%)	3	(1%)	20(5%)
Because it is interesting	6	(2%)	4	(1%)	5	(1%)	15(4%)
Because it is a pleasant rest	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	194		91		89		374(100%)

Table 5 shows that 15% of the respondents ranked "to get high quality information content" as the first affective need/gratification derived from reading online newspapers while % respondents ranked "Because it has a wide variety of items" first 2% respondents and third by 1% respondents.

Table 6: Gratifications derived most by readers of online newspapers (Cognitive Needs)

Gratifications	Ranking Positions			Total
	1 st Position	2 nd Position	3 rd position	

To get more global view of what is happening in the Word	35	(9%)	20	(5%)	21	(6%)	76(20%)
To learn from things happening in the world	12	(3%)	15	(4%)	4	(1.5%)	31(8%)
To acquire useful information for daily living	70	(19%)	50	(13%)	45	(12%)	165(44%)
To participate in discussion with friends	4	(1%)	2	(1%)	3	(1%)	9(2%)
To help me take a stand on important issues	2	(1%)	3	(1%)	3	(1%)	8(2%)
Because it is interesting	4	(1%)	5	(1%)	5	(1%)	14(4%)
To gain more knowledge about different cultures	28	(8%)	30	(8%)	21	(6%)	79(21%)
Total	155	(43%)	125		94		374(100%)

Table 7 shows that 19% of the respondents ranked "To acquire useful information for daily living" as the first cognitive need/gratifications derived from reading online newspapers and 1% respondents ranked "To help me take a stand on important issues" first, second by 1% respondents and third by 1% respondents.

Table 7: Respondents Motivation to online newspaper reading

Gratifications	Ranking Positions						Total
	1 st Position	2 nd Position	3 rd position				
Information/Education	78	(21%)	45	(12%)	50	(13%)	173 (46%)
Entertainment/Relaxation c	57	(15%)	30	(8%)	17	(5%)	104 (27%)
Companionship/overcoming Boredom	5	(1%)	3	(1%)	3	(1%)	11(3%)
Escape from trouble of life	3	(1%)	1	(1%)	1	(1%)	5(1%)
Surveillance/Gain Knowledge	37	(10%)	12	(3%)	15	(4%)	64 (17%)
For Advice on Various Issues	5	(1%)	3	(1%)	3	(1%)	11(3%)

Others (Specify)	3	(1%)	1	(1%)	2	(1%)	6(2%)
Total	188	(50%)	95	(25%)	91	(24%)	374(100%)

Table 7 shows that 21% of the respondents ranked information/education as the first motivation to reading online newspapers; companionship/overcoming boredom was placed first by 10% respondents, 12% placed it second while 4% placed it third.

Discussion of Findings

Research Question 1

What contents do online newspaper readers in Rivers State prefer?

The answer to this research question is found in Table 2 which presents readers' content preferences in online newspapers. The Table shows that readers sought contents selectively in online newspapers. This study shows that the respondents 48% ranked news as the most preferred content in online newspapers. "The making of news as the most preferred content in online newspapers had received empirical support from other studies which had that news is the most widely accessed media content by the audience" (Patrick, 2015; Hassan et al., 2015; Matthew et al., 2013).

Findings from this study also show that respondents 28% claimed features and columns were their preferred contents in online newspapers. Respondents who said advertorial was their preferred contents in online newspapers were 7%. Respondents 6%, 28% and 1% respectively stated that editorial, entertainment and graphics/aesthetics/visuals were their preferred contents in online newspapers. The fact that online newspaper readers sought contents selectively had been established in earlier studies. Patrick, (2015) observes that "online audience members prefer specific contents depending on their needs. This means that readers of online newspapers do not just access contents for the sake of doing so; they access the contents in relation to the gratifications they desire." The Uses and Gratifications theory of audience behaviour postulates that "media use is selective and motivated by rational self-awareness of the individual's own needs and the expectations that these needs will be satisfied by particular types of media and contents." Ndangam (2008) observes "that people sometimes seek media content that has functional relations to situations in which they are involved."

Research Question 2

What factors influence the choice of online newspapers among reader IN Rivers State, Nigeria?

The study shows that there is a positive correlation between readers' needs and their choice of online newspaper contents. This result is confirmed by hypothesis I of the study which reveals that there is a significant relationship (at 0.5 level of significance) between online newspaper readers and the choice of contents they accessed. These findings agree with the Uses and Gratifications theory which stipulates that the audiences are active and they access media contents that will meet their needs. A key tenet of the Uses and Gratifications theory of audience behaviour is that "media use is selective and motivated by rational self-awareness of the individual's own needs and an expectation that these needs will be satisfied by particular types of media and contents."

Similar studies have established that "certain factors are responsible in the determination of audience exposure to the mass media. The major factors have been classified into two: demographic and psychographic factors. Interest, nature of content, beliefs, habit and interest were classified as psychographic factors while demographic factors, are age, income, education and occupation" (Un, 2002; Ekanem, 2006; Nwabueze, 2010; Okonofua, 2014; Patrick, 2015).

Emenyonu (1998) reports "a third factor called environmental factor which includes availability of the media and preferred content, knowledge or usage of the medium, the viewer's environment and scheduling pattern of some media contents and usage of other media."

The finding of this study corroborates McQuail's (2005) categorization of the factors that influence audience preference of newspaper contents. He categorizes same into "audience side factors and media side factors where he lists audience side factors to include: personal attributes such as age, gender, family position, study and work situation level of income and lifestyle; social background and milieu, especially as reflected in social class, education, religion, cultural, political and family environment and region or locality of residence; media related needs for such personal benefits as company, distraction, information, etc."

Research Question 3

Do ratifications drive from online newspapers influence choice of contents among readers in Rivers State, Nigeria?

The data presented in Tables 5 and 6 have captured the gratifications derived by online newspaper readers in South-South, Nigeria. These gratifications resulted from the needs of the readers, either affective or cognitive. While Table 5 contains respondents' most derived affective needs gratification, Table 6 contains the most derived cognitive needs gratifications. From Table 5, it could be observed that the need for high quality information content was placed in the first position, followed by excitement and relaxation and the third position was 24 hours' availability of news each day. However, the tested hypothesis 2 suggested that there is no significant relationship between gratifications obtained by readers of online newspapers and the content they are exposed to in online newspapers. The calculated value of 0.068 is less than the critical table value of .7545 at 0.05 level of significance.

The result of the tested hypothesis is in contrast with several studies which have shown the gratifications derived from the use of media by audiences (McQuail, 2005b; Patrick, 2015; Hynds, 2006; Ijeh 2008 and Dominick, 2009). Li's (2013) study on "Gratifications obtained from television shows on Internet TV and conventional TV," showed that many people view television for entertainment, pass time, escape, information and companionship. Chang & Leung (2005), in their study "on traditional news media and online news adoption" list interaction, diversion and surveillance as gratifications users derive from the medium, while Gasher & Klein (2008), in their study, "Mapping the Geography of Online Newspapers," cited entertainment, sociability, acquisition and time. Oyero (2007) in his study on "The Implication of internet on the Media and the Practice of Mass Communication," reports that "online newspaper readers use the medium for entertainment, pass time, escape, social interaction and information" while another study on "Use of Internet," by Papacharissi & Rubin (2000) list "entertainment, pass time, interpersonal utility, information seeking and convenience."

CONCLUSION

From the findings of this study, it is concluded that readers' exposure to online newspaper contents was influenced by several factors; demographic, psychographic and environmental. It shows that the reader has a certain level of expectation before exposing him or herself to any content in the online newspaper that meets his needs. The study also confirms that there is a positive correlation between readers' needs and their choice of online newspaper contents. However, relationship between gratifications and choice of online newspaper contents could not be established.

RECOMMENDATIONS

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

This study shows that news is the most preferred content by online newspaper readers, hence;

- i. media organizations with online newspapers' version should frame, slant and generally package online news to attract more readership. Readers of online newspapers have shown clearly that they seek information and other contents of value to them. Online newspaper publishers should shift their focus to online contents that help readers gain knowledge and explore society generally.
- ii. many variables motivate online newspapers' readers to access contents that satisfy their needs. This would entail a great deal of creativity on the part of editors; for instance, inventing interactive, engaging and youth-friendly online contents, like interactive videos inserted in some pages. Results could be tremendous where online newspaper contents also focus primarily on their immediate surroundings, giving online readers exactly what they want - such news stories that are readily available on the web and routinely overlooked by the mainstream media.
- iii. online publishers should focus on contents that are primarily on the immediate surroundings of the online readers, giving them exactly what they want that are not captured by the mainstream media. Publishers of online newspapers should be guided by the laws of reporting in packaging contents to avoid unnecessary litigation that may ultimately put them out of business.

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