



Scholars' Perception on Ethical Use of Digital Information: A Study at Tumkur University

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ABSTRACT

The study investigated the research scholars' perception of the ethical use of information. It evaluates the frequency and criteria used by scholars in accessing and assessing digital information sources. The study also examined the research scholars' understandings of copyright laws, plagiarism and their attitude in sharing digital information. The study's findings aim to inform the advancements of need-based support systems and resources for the research scholars, enhancing their research effectiveness and contributing to a productive academic environment.

Received: : 30 May 2024

Revised: 25 July 2024

Accepted: 4 August 2024

Copyright: with Author(s)

Keywords: Digital Information Skills, Information Skills, Research Scholars

1. Introduction

The ethical use of information refers to the responsible and moral handling, disseminating, and applying information in a manner that respects privacy, ensures accuracy, maintains transparency, acknowledges intellectual property rights, and protects information security. This approach aims to promote trust, fairness, and integrity in the management and utilization of information.

Research scholars are pivotal in advancing knowledge across various disciplines in the present academic landscape. The advent of technology has drastically influenced the way these scholars access, evaluate, and utilize information. However, the increasing complexity and volume of digital information pose substantial challenges, necessitating a nuanced understanding of scholars' digital information skills, behaviours, and needs. This study aims to evaluate the scholars' perception of the ethical use of digital information. With the proliferation of digital resources, scholars must be proficient in navigating and assessing the credibility of online information. This study investigates the frequency and criteria scholars use to access various digital sources. Ethical use of information is integral to maintaining the integrity of academic research.

This study explores scholars' understanding and application of copyright laws and plagiarism prevention. The research aims to promote best practices and adherence to ethical standards in academic work by identifying common ethical challenges.

2. Review of Literature

They are ensuring that the information used is accurate, reliable, and truthful, thereby avoiding the spread of misinformation or disinformation (American Library Association, 2008) and acknowledging and respecting the intellectual property rights of others by properly citing sources, avoiding plagiarism, and adhering to copyright laws (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, 2016). Using information just and equitably, avoiding discrimination or harm to individuals or groups (Fair Information Practice Principles, 1980). Protecting information from unauthorized access, breaches, or misuse through appropriate security measures (National Institute of Standards and Technology, 2018). Obtaining consent from individuals before using their personal information ensures they understand how their information will be used (General Data Protection Regulation, 2016). Being open about collecting, using, and sharing information, including any potential biases or limitations (European Commission, 2018) and respecting individuals' privacy and keeping sensitive information confidential unless explicit permission has been granted (Belmont Report, 1979). The study utilised the above ideas to prepare the questionnaire.

3. Need for the Study

The contemporary research landscape is rapidly evolving, driven by the techno revolutions and improved access to information. Research scholars play an imperative role in contributing knowledge across various fields. Understanding their perception of ethical use of information is essential in enhancing their research quality and academic success. With the vast amount of information available online, it is imperative to assess scholars' knowledge/skills in navigating, evaluating and utilising digital information to identify the gaps in the scholars' perception of the ethical use of information the present study has been taking. With the regular assessment of the needs and experiences of research scholars, the libraries can foster a culture of continuous improvement to ensure that scholars receive the best possible support throughout their academic journey. The insights of the present study will contribute to the overall effectiveness and success of research scholars, fostering a more inclusive, supportive, and productive research environment.

4. Objectives

The objectives of the present study are to:

- Valuate the frequency of using various digital information sources by research scholars
- Identify the criteria used by the research scholars to evaluate the credibility of online information sources
- Explore the understanding of copyright laws among research scholars
- Assess the practices in sharing online resources and identify the common examples of plagiarism recognised by research scholars

5. Methodology

The study is survey-based research. A structured questionnaire is used as a tool for data collection. A simple random technique is used to distribute the questionnaire. 100 questionnaires were distributed to get 85-90 responses. The study has received 62 duly filled responses with a 62% response rate. Data is tabulated into SPSS and presented in the form of tables.

Scope and Limitation: The study is intended to be conducted only among the research scholars pursuing their Ph.D. at Tumkur University.

Demographic Criteria	Category	Social Background		Total
		Rural	Urban	
Gender	Male	16(25.8%)	5(8.1%)	21(33.9%)
	Female	26(41.9%)	15(24.2%)	41(66.1%)
Total		42(67.7%)	20(32.3%)	62(100%)
Category of Research Scholars	Full Time	7(11.3%)	5(8.1%)	12(19.4%)
	Part-Time	35(56.5%)	15(24.2%)	50(80.6%)
Total		42(67.7%)	20(32.3%)	62(100%)

Table 1. Demographic Details

6. Data Analysis and Interpretation

The table provides an overview of the demographic details of the research scholars who participated in the study. The table shows 21 male research scholars represented 33.9% of the total participants. Among them, 16 (25.8% of total participants) were from a rural background and 5 (8.1% of total participants) were from an urban background. Most participants are female, with 41.9% (26) from a rural background and 24.2% (15) from an urban background, making up 66.1%. A significant portion of the participants, 67.7% (42), come from rural backgrounds, and the remaining 32.3% (20) of the participants come from urban backgrounds. 12 full-time research scholars and 50 part part-time research scholars participated in the study. It indicates the greater involvement of females in research activities within the sampled population. The notable dominance of scholars from rural backgrounds might indicate the rural reach and impact of educational institutions or studies. Most are part-time scholars, balancing their research work with other responsibilities.

SN	Resources	Most Frequently	Frequently	Sometimes	Less Frequently	Never
a	Library subscribed content	48(45.2%)	9(14.5%)	17(27.4%)	6(9.7%)	2(3.2%)
b	Library Website	22(35.5%)	9(14.5%)	21(33.9%)	7(11.3%)	2(3.2%)
c	Library Databases	27(43.5%)	7(11.3%)	9(14.5%)	12(19.4%)	3(4.8%)
d	Online Databases	24(38.7%)	21(33.9%)	9(14.5%)	6(9.7%)	60(96.8%)
e	Search engines	24(38.7%)	26(41.9%)	7(11.3%)	3(4.8%)	0(0.0%)
f	Subject Gateways	14(22.6%)	30(48.4%)	11(17.7%)	6(9.7%)	1(1.6%)
g	Online Forums	15(24.2%)	13(21.0%)	20(32.3%)	2(8.1%)	3(4.8%)
h	Reputed Institutions' Websites	14(22.6%)	11(17.7%)	23(37.1%)	9(14.5%)	1(1.6%)
i	Other institutional website	10(16.1%)	13(21.0%)	13(21.0%)	10(16.1%)	3(4.8%)
j	Social platforms Media	20(32.3%)	15(24.2%)	14(22.6%)	7(11.3%)	3(4.8%)

Table 2. Frequency of using various Digital Information Sources

Table 2 highlights the research scholars' frequency of use of various digital information sources. The highest proportion of users (45.2%) using library-subscribed content frequently indicates a strong reliance on library resources, which are likely trusted and tailored to their academic needs. 35.5% use the library website most frequently, which shows that the library's digital presence is a critical resource. Library databases are Used frequently or most frequently by 72.6%, indicating that external online databases complement the library's offerings. Search engines are highly used, with 38.7% using them most frequently and 41.9% frequently, showing the importance of general search tools in research. Subject gateways are less frequently used, with 48.4% using them frequently, suggesting they are helpful but secondary resources. The online forums were moderately used by 24.2% of them most frequently, indicating that scholars somewhat prefer the forums for information and peer inter-

action. The websites of reputed institutions were used most frequently by 22.6% of the participants, showing that authoritative sources are significant, not primary, and the other institutional websites were frequently used by 21.0%. Social media platforms were used most frequently by 32.3% of the 24.2%, highlighting their growing role in academic networking and information dissemination.

SN	Criteria	Responses
a	Authority of the author	28(45.2%)
b	Date of publication	41(66.1%)
c	Relevance to the topic	42(67.7%)
d	Author Credentials	35(56.5%)
e	Source Reputation	32(51.6%)
f	Citation & References	35(56.5%)
g	Writing Quality	30(48.4%)

Table 3. Criteria used by scholars to evaluate the credibility of a website or online

SN	Criteria	Statements	Responses
a	Scholars' consideration in using others' work	Giving credit to the original author	54(87.1%)
		Getting permission from the original author	42(67.7%)
		Making sure it's not copyrighted	37(59.7%)
		Using only for personal purposes	25(40.3%)
b	Which of the statement is an example of plagiarism	Paraphrasing someone else's work without crediting them	47(75.8%)
		Quoting someone else's work with proper citation	32(51.6%)
		Using someone else's work with permission	23(37.1%)
		Conducting original research	13(21.0%)
c	Scholars' Attitude towards in sharing online resources	Share it without checking the copyright	15(24.2%)
		Check the copyright and give credit to the original author	39(62.9%)
		Ask permission from the original author	31(50.0%)
		Don't share it	16(25.8%)
d	Which of the statement is an example of ethical use of information	Using someone else's work without crediting them	23(37.1%)
		Sharing personal information without consent	19(30.6%)
		Using information for the greater good	15(24.2%)
		Crediting the original author and using information for legitimate purposes	36(58.1%)
e	Scholars' attitude towards the privacy of others while collecting and using personal information	By getting consent and keeping it confidential	41(66.1%)
		By sharing it with others	14(22.6%)
		By using it for personal gain	11(17.7%)
		By ignoring it	17(27.4%)

Table 4. Scholars Perceptions on Ethical Use of Digital Information

As per the data presented in the above table, 45.2% of scholars consider the author's authority as important, which is relatively low, and there is a need for better awareness of

author credibility. 66.1% use the date of publication, emphasizing the importance of current information. The highest is at 67.7%, showing that relevance is the primary concern for scholars. Author credentials are considered important by 56.5%, indicating a moderate awareness of the importance of author qualifications. Citation and references were used by 56.5% of them, indicating a good practice of verifying sources through citations. Only 48.4% consider writing quality, suggesting that content quality is secondary to other criteria.

Table 4 outlines the scholars' perception of the ethical use of digital information sources; as per the table, 87.1% agreed to give credit to the original author, showing strong adherence to proper citation practices. 67.7% agreed to get permission from the original author, indicating good practice but room for improvement. 59.7% agreed to ensure it's not copyrighted, showing moderate concern for copyright issues. Only 40.3% agreed to use only for personal purposes, indicating that many use others' work for broader purposes.

Regarding the scholar's understanding of plagiarism, 75.8% recognized paraphrasing without crediting it as plagiarism, indicating good awareness. 51.6% incorrectly think that quoting with proper citation is plagiarism, showing confusion about proper citation. 37.1% mistakenly believe using work with permission is plagiarism, indicating a need for a better understanding of permissions, and 21.0% of them have an incorrect perception of conducting original research as plagiarism, showing significant misunderstanding.

Regarding the scholars' attitude towards sharing online resources, only 24.2% agreed to share without checking the copyright, showing good awareness of copyright issues. 62.9% of them agreed to check the copyright and give credit, indicating good practice. 50.0% of them opined as they ask permission, showing room for improvement and 25.8% indicated that they refrain from sharing, showing caution.

Further, in connection to the ethical use of digital information, 62.9% recognized using work without crediting as unethical, indicating good awareness. 69.4% opined that sharing personal information without consent is unethical, showing strong understanding. 75.8% recognized using information for the greater good as ethical, indicating a positive perspective, and for crediting the original author for legitimate purposes; 58.1% agreed, showing good ethical practice but room for improvement.

7. Suggestions

Based on the above analysis, the following suggestions were made to address the issues found in the study.

There is a need to increase awareness of under-utilized resources. Workshops and informational campaigns should encourage research scholars to use subject gateways, online forums, and websites of reputed institutions to diversify their sources of information. Training on advanced search techniques should also be provided to assist scholars in using search engines.

Conducting sessions on evaluating the authority of authors to improve the relatively low consideration of it and training sessions on assessing all aspects of digital sources, including writing quality and source reputation, in library user education programs.

There is a need to highlight the importance of copyright laws and permissions through mandatory training programs. Regular attempts to raise awareness of giving credit and seeking permissions in academic communications and guidelines are suggested. Mandatory workshops on plagiarism, covering the importance of crediting original authors and protecting personal information, are suggested to ensure a thorough understanding of plagiarism.

8. Conclusion

The analysis of the digital information skills and behaviours of research scholars reveals a nuanced understanding of their reliance on various digital resources and the criteria they use to evaluate the credibility of these resources. Scholars strongly prefer library-subscribed

content and databases, indicating the value they place on authoritative and curated information.

However, there is a noticeable gap in using certain resources like subject gateways and online forums, suggesting opportunities for increased awareness and utilization of these tools. The criteria for evaluating online sources show that while relevance and publication date are prioritized, there is a need to enhance the consideration of author credibility and writing quality. This calls for targeted training to bolster scholars' ability to critically assess digital information's reliability. Scholars recognise the ethical use of information and respect for privacy, but there is room for improvement in understanding and adhering to copyright laws and permission-seeking practices. Strengthening education on these topics will promote ethical information use and respect for intellectual property.

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