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Original Research

INFORMATION COMPETENCE AND INFORMATION USER BEHAVIOUR OF POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS IN UNIVERSITIES IN ABIA AND IMO STATES, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study examined information competence and information user behaviour of postgraduate students in universities in Abia and Imo States, Nigeria. Specifically, it determined the levels of information searching competence, information-source selection competence, and ethical information-use competence possessed by postgraduate students. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The population comprised 12,645 postgraduate students in universities in Abia and Imo States, Nigeria. A sample size of 388 was determined using Taro Yamane's formula at a 5% level of precision. Data were collected using the Information Competence and Information User Behaviour Questionnaire (ICIUBQ). Of the 388 copies administered, 367 were properly completed and returned, representing a 94.6% response rate. Data were analysed using descriptive mean. The findings revealed a high level of information searching competence (grand mean = 3.33), information-source selection competence (grand mean = 3.40), and ethical information use competence (grand mean = 3.67). Ethical information-use competence recorded the highest mean, while information searching competence recorded the lowest. The study recommends sustained information literacy programmes, advanced search training, research-support workshops, source-evaluation training, and continuous education on academic integrity. The study therefore concludes that postgraduate students in universities in Abia and Imo States possess a high level of essential information competencies required to search for, select, and ethically use information for academic and research purposes.

Keywords: Information Competence; Information Searching; Information-source Selection; Ethical Information use; Information user Behaviour; Postgraduate Students; Universities.

Introduction

Information is a fundamental resource for teaching, learning, research and knowledge creation in the university environment. Unegbu, Opara, and Emuchay (2023) further view information as answers to questions such as *who, what, where, when,* and *how many*. Information therefore helps individuals understand people, events, situations, and the world around them. According to Oziri, Unegbu, and Ndulaka (2023), information is the totality of accumulated human knowledge in various forms and subjects that can help users make rational decisions. Information is the fulcrum around which economic, social, political, industrial, educational, and technological development revolves. Postgraduate students require information to formulate research problems, review literature, select appropriate research methods, interpret findings and contribute to knowledge. Their academic success therefore depends not only on access to information but also on their ability to identify information needs, locate relevant sources, evaluate information and use it appropriately. Recent evidence indicates that information literacy among Nigerian postgraduate students involves identifying, finding, evaluating, selecting, applying and communicating information (Onifade, Olatoye, & Akinola, 2024).

The contemporary university information environment has expanded beyond traditional library resources to include electronic databases, online journals, institutional repositories, search engines, open educational resources and other digital platforms. While this expansion provides postgraduate students with greater access to information, it also creates challenges relating to information overload, credibility assessment, source selection and ethical use. Students therefore require information competence to determine their information needs, formulate effective search strategies, identify appropriate sources, evaluate retrieved information and apply it responsibly. Famaren and Doo (2021) found that postgraduate students in Nigeria were able to recognize information needs and access print and electronic resources, but experienced weaknesses in the use of reference sources and advanced searching techniques.

Information competence is closely related to information user behaviour. Information user behaviour refers to the ways individuals recognize information needs and interact with information sources, systems and people to satisfy those needs. Among postgraduate students, such behaviour may involve the use of library catalogues, electronic databases, scholarly journals, books, theses, dissertations, institutional repositories, search engines and human information sources such as supervisors, lecturers and librarians. Olaninhun, Adetimirin, and Akande (2025) reported that postgraduate information behaviour involves recognizing information needs, searching for relevant materials, evaluating sources and applying retrieved information.

Information searching is an important component of postgraduate information user behaviour. Effective searching requires the ability to formulate appropriate keywords, use subject terms and Boolean operators, refine search results and navigate electronic databases and other information systems. However, postgraduate students may possess basic searching abilities while experiencing difficulties with advanced search techniques (Famaren & Doo, 2021). Similarly, information-source selection competence enables students to determine which sources are appropriate for particular academic and research purposes. This is important

because postgraduate students encounter scholarly and non-scholarly information through different platforms. Oyenachi, Ogbuagu, Ukpabi, and Osicbe (2024) provided evidence of the importance of information-literacy skills in postgraduate students' use of electronic resources in public university libraries in Abia State.

Ethical information-use competence is another important dimension of information competence. Postgraduate students are expected to acknowledge sources, avoid plagiarism, respect copyright and intellectual-property rights and communicate information accurately. These responsibilities have become increasingly important in digital environments where information can easily be copied and redistributed. Onifade, Olatoye, and Akinola (2024) identified ethical use, copyright, plagiarism and communication of retrieved information as important aspects of information literacy among postgraduate students. The emergence of generative artificial intelligence further reinforces the need for students to verify information, identify authoritative sources and use information responsibly. The relationship between information competence and information user behaviour is therefore important. Students with effective searching skills may be better able to locate relevant information, while those with strong source-selection competence may be better positioned to distinguish credible and appropriate sources. Ethical information-use competence can also promote responsible application of retrieved information. Ugwulebo and Okuonghae (2021) found significant relationships among knowledge of electronic resources, search skills, access to information, information evaluation and utilization of electronic information resources by postgraduate students in Nigerian federal universities. Similarly, Udem and Molokwu (2026) demonstrated the relevance of information-literacy skills and computer self-efficacy to electronic information-resource usage among Library and Information Science postgraduate students in South-East Nigerian universities.

Although previous Nigerian studies have examined information literacy in relation to academic performance, research self-efficacy and electronic-resource utilization, and others have examined information behaviour and digital-resource use, relatively limited attention has been given to information competence as a multidimensional construct comprising information searching competence, information-source selection competence and ethical information-use competence in relation to information user behaviour among postgraduate students in Abia and Imo States. The present study therefore examines the relationship between information competence and information user behaviour of postgraduate students in universities in Abia and Imo States, Nigeria.

Research Questions

The following research questions will guide the study:

i. What is the level of information searching competence possessed by postgraduate students in universities in Abia and Imo States?
ii. What is the level of information-source selection competence possessed by postgraduate students in universities in Abia and Imo States?
iii. What is the level of ethical information-use competence possessed by postgraduate students in universities in Abia and Imo States?

Literature Review

Information is an essential resource for education, research, decision-making, communication and knowledge creation. In the university environment, information exists in various forms, including books, scholarly journals, conference proceedings, theses and dissertations, government publications, electronic databases, institutional repositories, websites and other digital resources. For postgraduate students, information provides the evidence required to formulate research problems, establish theoretical foundations, review previous studies, select appropriate research methods and develop new knowledge. The movement from predominantly print-based information environments to hybrid and digital environments has consequently transformed the ways postgraduate students identify, access and use information (Chinako & Daniel, 2022; Olaninhun, Adetimirin, & Akande, 2025).

Information is not useful merely because it is available. Its usefulness depends on such qualities as relevance, accuracy, authority, currency and accessibility. A postgraduate student may have access to thousands of documents but may still fail to satisfy an information need when the retrieved information is irrelevant, unreliable or inappropriate for the intended academic purpose. This makes information competence important in postgraduate education because students require the ability to locate relevant information, distinguish appropriate sources from unsuitable ones, assess information critically and use retrieved information responsibly (Famaren & Doo, 2021; Onifade, Olatoye, & Akinola, 2024). Information therefore serves as an important input into postgraduate research, particularly in identifying research gaps, developing theoretical and conceptual frameworks, selecting research methods and communicating scholarly arguments (Onifade, Olatoye, & Akinola, 2024).

Information competence refers to the integrated ability of an individual to recognize information needs, locate and search for appropriate information, select suitable sources, evaluate information, use it appropriately and communicate it ethically. It goes beyond basic searching skills because a competent information user should understand what information is required, where it can be obtained, which sources are suitable and how the information should be used in a particular academic context (Famaren & Doo, 2021; Onifade, Olatoye, & Akinola, 2024).

Information competence is particularly important to postgraduate students because postgraduate education requires independent research and extensive interaction with scholarly information systems. Students are expected to locate relevant literature, distinguish credible academic sources from unreliable materials, integrate evidence into their research and acknowledge the contributions of other scholars. Information competence can therefore be viewed as a multidimensional construct involving cognitive, technical, evaluative and ethical abilities (Onifade, Olatoye, & Akinola, 2024; Ugwulebo & Okuonghae, 2021).

Information searching competence refers to the ability to formulate and execute effective strategies for locating relevant information. It includes the ability to identify appropriate search terms, use keywords and subject headings, apply Boolean operators, use search filters, refine search results and navigate different information systems. Searching competence is particularly important for postgraduate students because scholarly databases, search engines and digital repositories contain large quantities of information, making

inefficient searching likely to produce either inadequate or excessive results (Famaren & Doo, 2021; Osun & Umoren, 2025). The contemporary information environment requires postgraduate students to search across library catalogues, discovery systems, electronic databases, institutional repositories, Google Scholar, general search engines and specialized disciplinary platforms. These systems may require different search approaches, and students who possess only basic keyword-searching skills may not be able to exploit the full capabilities of academic databases. Effective searching therefore requires students to formulate appropriate search strategies, combine search terms, refine results and identify information that is directly relevant to their research objectives (Osun & Umoren, 2025; Ugwulebo & Okuonghae, 2021).

Searching competence is particularly significant in postgraduate research because students are required to undertake comprehensive literature searches in order to establish the state of knowledge, identify theoretical and empirical evidence and discover gaps requiring further investigation. Osun and Umoren (2025) identified operational, formal, informational and strategic search procedures as important aspects of searching academic information resources. The ability to search strategically can therefore support postgraduate students in navigating large quantities of information and identifying materials relevant to their academic and research needs (Osun & Umoren, 2025).

Information-source selection competence refers to the ability to determine and choose information sources that are appropriate for a particular information need. Postgraduate students have access to different categories of information sources, including scholarly journals, books, conference proceedings, theses and dissertations, government publications, electronic databases, institutional repositories, websites and human information sources such as lecturers, supervisors and librarians (Chinako & Daniel, 2022; Mohammed, 2020). Effective source selection requires an understanding of the characteristics, strengths and limitations of different sources. A peer-reviewed journal may be appropriate for obtaining empirical research findings, while a government publication may be more suitable for official statistics. A thesis or dissertation may provide detailed methodological information, whereas a textbook may be useful for foundational knowledge. Competent postgraduate students should therefore select information sources according to their research purpose rather than merely selecting resources because they are easily accessible (Chinako & Daniel, 2022; Onifade, Olatoye, & Akinola, 2024). The increasing volume of information available through the Internet has made source selection more challenging. Search engines may present scholarly and non-scholarly information together, making it necessary for students to distinguish authoritative academic sources from unreliable or unsuitable materials. Source selection is consequently closely connected with information evaluation because students need to consider the credibility, relevance, authority, currency and purpose of sources before deciding to incorporate them into academic work (Onifade, Olatoye, & Akinola, 2024; Ugwulebo & Okuonghae, 2021). Chinako and Daniel (2022) reported that postgraduate students interact with textbooks, journals, Internet resources and human information sources to satisfy their information needs. This indicates that postgraduate information behaviour involves documentary, digital and interpersonal information channels. The ability to select appropriate sources is therefore important to the quality and credibility of postgraduate academic work because the suitability of the information

used depends partly on the appropriateness of the sources from which it is obtained (Chinako & Daniel, 2022).

Ethical information-use competence refers to the ability to use information in accordance with principles of academic integrity, copyright, intellectual property, attribution, citation, referencing and avoidance of plagiarism. Postgraduate students are expected to demonstrate high standards of scholarly integrity because their research contributes to knowledge production and may be disseminated through theses, dissertations, journal articles, conference presentations and other scholarly publications (Onifade, Olatoye, & Akinola, 2024). Ethical information use requires students to recognize the importance of acknowledging the ideas, words, data and findings of other scholars. It includes appropriate citation and referencing, accurate paraphrasing, respect for copyright and intellectual-property rights and avoidance of plagiarism. A student may possess strong searching and source-selection skills but still demonstrate inadequate information competence if information is used without proper attribution or in violation of academic and legal requirements. Ethical competence is therefore an integral component of information competence (Onifade, Olatoye, & Akinola, 2024). The importance of ethical information use has increased with the expansion of digital information. Digital resources can easily be copied, reproduced, modified and redistributed, thereby increasing the possibility of plagiarism and inappropriate use of intellectual property. Postgraduate students therefore need to understand the ethical responsibilities associated with accessing and using electronic information and should be able to acknowledge sources, cite accurately, paraphrase appropriately and respect the intellectual property of information creators (Onifade, Olatoye, & Akinola, 2024). The emergence of generative artificial intelligence has further strengthened the importance of ethical information-use competence. AI tools can assist students in information discovery, summarization and content development, but their use raises questions concerning attribution, intellectual ownership, accuracy and academic integrity. Students consequently need to verify information generated through such systems and ensure that AI-supported materials are used in accordance with institutional and scholarly requirements. This development reinforces the importance of responsible information use in contemporary postgraduate education.

Information user behaviour refers to the patterns of interaction through which individuals recognize information needs, identify sources, search for information, retrieve resources, evaluate information, use information and communicate information to achieve particular objectives. It is broader than information-seeking behaviour because it encompasses activities occurring before, during and after the search process (Mohammed, 2020; Olaninhun, Adetimirin, & Akande, 2025). Among postgraduate students, information user behaviour is strongly influenced by academic and research requirements. Students seek information to develop research topics, prepare literature reviews, identify methodological approaches, complete coursework, publish scholarly works and solve research problems. Their behaviour may involve formal sources such as libraries, catalogues, databases and repositories, as well as informal sources such as supervisors, lecturers, colleagues and professional networks (Chinako & Daniel, 2022; Mohammed, 2020). The contemporary postgraduate information environment is increasingly digital. Students now interact with electronic databases, digital libraries,

institutional repositories, online journals and Internet search engines alongside traditional library resources. Such changes have expanded the range of information channels available to postgraduate students and have consequently influenced the ways in which they seek, access, evaluate and use information (Olaninhun, Adetimirin, & Akande, 2025; Ugwulebo & Okuonghae, 2021).

The foregoing discussion demonstrates that information competence and information user behaviour are closely related. Effective information searching enables students to locate relevant materials; appropriate source-selection competence helps them identify information sources suitable for their academic needs; while ethical information-use competence ensures that retrieved information is used responsibly and in accordance with academic standards (Famaren & Doo, 2021; Onifade, Olatoye, & Akinola, 2024). Udem and Molokwu (2026) examined information literacy skills and computer self-efficacy as correlates of electronic information-resource usage among Library and Information Science postgraduate students in federal universities in South-East Nigeria. Their work reinforces the relevance of information-related competencies to postgraduate students' interaction with electronic information resources in the region. It can therefore be argued that information competence provides an important foundation for effective information user behaviour. Information searching competence supports the location of relevant information, information-source selection competence supports the identification of appropriate sources, while ethical information-use competence supports the responsible application and communication of retrieved information (Onifade, Olatoye, & Akinola, 2024; Ugwulebo & Okuonghae, 2021).

Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. This design was considered appropriate because the study sought to investigating information competence and information user behaviour among postgraduate students in universities in Abia and Imo States. The population of the study is 12,645 postgraduate students enrolled in master's and doctoral programmes in the four universities in Abia and Imo States, namely Abia State University, Uturu (ABSU); Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike (MOUAU); Federal University of Technology, Owerri (FUTO); and Imo State University, Owerri (IMSU)**.** Using Taro Yamane's formula at a 5% level of precision, a minimum sample size of 388 was obtained. Data was collected using the Information Competence and Information User Behaviour Questionnaire (ICIUBQ) and analysed using descriptive mean. A total of 388 copies of the Information Competence and Information User Behaviour Questionnaire (ICIUBQ) were distributed to postgraduate students in the four selected universities in Abia and Imo States. Of the 388 copies distributed, 367 were properly completed and returned, while 21 copies were not returned. This represents a response rate of 94.6%.

Analysis

Research Question One: What is the level of information searching competence possessed by postgraduate students in universities in Abia and Imo States?

Table 1: Mean Analysis of Information Searching Competence (N = 367)

Information Searching

S/N	Competence	SA	A	D	SD	Total	Mean	Decision
a	I can identity appropriate keywords when searching for information.	175	155	30	7	367	3.36	High
b	I can formulate effective search strategies to locate needed information.	165	160	35	7	367	3.32	High
c	I can use library catalogues and electronic databases to search for information.	170	155	35	7	367	3.33	High
d	I can use appropriate search terms and techniques to retrieve relevant information.	160	165	35	7	367	3.30	High
e	We can refine my search when the initial results do not provide the information I need.	175	150	35	7	367	3.34	High
	Grand Mean					**367**	**3.33**	**High**

Table 1 shows that the mean scores for information searching competence range from **3.30 to 3.36,** with all the scores exceeding the criterion mean of 2.50. The highest mean of 3.36 was recorded for the ability to identify appropriate keywords when searching for information, indicating that this was the strongest aspect of the respondents' information-searching competence. This was followed by the ability to refine searches, with a mean of 3.34, and the use of library catalogues and electronic databases, with a mean of 3.33. The lowest mean of 3.30 was recorded for the use of appropriate search terms and techniques, although this still falls within the high level. The grand mean of 3.33 indicates that postgraduate students in universities in Abla and Imo States possess a high level of information searching competence

Research Question Two: What is the level of information source selection competence possessed by postgraduate students in universities in Abia and Imo States?

Table 2: Mean Analysis of Information Source Selection Competence (N =367)

S/N	Information Source Competence Selection Competence	SA	A	D	SD	Total	Mean	Decision
a	I can identify appropriate information sources for my information needs	211	132	17	7	367	3.49	High
b	I can distinguish scholarly sources from non-scholarly sources.	164	175	9	19	367	3.32	High
c	I can select information sources that are relevant to my research topic.	209	109	36	13	367	3.40	High
d	I can assess the reliability and 4 authorities of an information source before using, it.	195	141	6	25	367	3.38	High
e	I can select current and up-to-date information sources for academic work.	187	155	17	8	367	3.42	High
	Grand Mean					**367**	**3.40**	**High**

Table 2 reveals that the mean scores for information source selection competence range from 3.32 to 3.49, all of which are above the criterion mean of 2.50. The highest mean of 3.49 was recorded for the ability to identify appropriate information sources for information needs, showing that this was the strongest indicator of source-selection competence. The ability to select current and up-to-date information sources followed with a mean of 3.42, while selecting sources relevant to research topics recorded 3.40. Assessing the reliability and authority of information sources recorded 3.38. The lowest mean of 3.32 was recorded for distinguishing scholarly sources from non-scholarly sources. Despite being the lowest, it was still rated high. The grand mean of 3.40 indicates that postgraduate students possess a high level of information-source selection competence.

Research Question Three: What is the level of ethical information-use competence possessed by postgraduate students in universities in Abia and Imo States?

Table 3: Mean Analysis of Ethical Information-Use Competence (N = 367)

S/N	Ethical Information-Use Competence	SA	A	D	SD	Total	Mean	Decision
a	I acknowledge the sources of information used in my academic work.	270	85	10	2	367	3.70	High
b	I can avoid plagiarism by properly citing and referencing information sources.	255	100	10	2	367	3.66	High
c	I understand the importance of obtaining permission when using copyrighted information.	260	95	10	2	367	3.67	High
d	I can use information without misrepresenting the ideas or findings of the original author.	250	105	10	2	367	3.64	High
e	I observe academic and ethical standards when using information obtained from different sources.	270	85	10	2	367	3.70	High
	Grand Mean					**367**	**3.67**	**High**

Table 3 indicates that the mean scores for ethical information-use competence range from 3.64 to 3.70, with all the scores considerably higher than the criterion mean of 2.50. The highest mean of 3.70 was recorded for both acknowledging sources used in academic work and observing academic and ethical standards when using information. Understanding the importance of obtaining permission when using copyrighted information recorded a mean of 3.67, while avoiding plagiarism through proper citation and referencing recorded 3.66. The lowest mean of 3.64 was recorded for using information without misrepresenting the ideas or findings of the original author. The grand mean of 3.67 indicates that postgraduate students in universities in Abia and Imo States possess a high level of ethical information-use competence. This was also the highest of the three competence areas examined.

Findings

The study found that postgraduate students in universities in Abia and Imo States possess a high level of information searching competence, with a grand mean of 3.33. The students

demonstrated competence in identifying keywords, formulating search strategies, using library catalogues and electronic databases, applying search techniques, and refining searches. This finding agrees with ACRL (2016), which describes information searching as a strategic and iterative process requiring learners to develop and revise search strategies. It is also consistent with Ugwulebo and Okuonghae (2021), who reported that search skills contribute significantly to postgraduate students' effective use of electronic information resources. However, information searching recorded the lowest grand mean among the three dimensions. This suggests that although the students are competent, there is still room for improvement, particularly in advanced search techniques. Famaren and Doo (2021) similarly reported some limitations in advanced information-searching techniques among postgraduate students.

The study revealed a high level of information-source selection competence, with a grand mean of 3.40. The students were able to identify appropriate sources, select relevant and current information, distinguish scholarly sources, and assess the reliability and authority of information. This finding agrees with ACRL (2016), which emphasises the importance of critically evaluating information sources based on authority and context. It is also consistent with Oyedokun et al. (2019), who found a high level of information-literacy skills among postgraduate students in Nigerian universities. The highest mean of 3.49 was recorded for identifying appropriate information sources, while distinguishing scholarly from non-scholarly sources had the lowest mean of 3.32. This suggests that source evaluation, particularly distinguishing scholarly materials from other information, should receive continued attention in postgraduate information-literacy programmes.

The study found that postgraduate students possess a high level of ethical information use competence, with a grand mean of 3.67, the highest of the three dimensions. The students demonstrated competence in acknowledging sources, avoiding plagiarism, respecting copyright, accurately representing authors' ideas, and observing academic standards. This finding agrees with ACRL (2016), which identifies the ethical and legal dimensions of information use as an essential component of information literacy. It also agrees with Onifade et al. (2023), who identified appropriate use of information, including awareness of plagiarism and copyright, as important information-literacy competencies among postgraduate students.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, it is concluded that postgraduate students in universities in Abia and Imo States possess a high level of essential information competencies required to search for, select, and ethically use information for academic and research purposes.

Recommendations

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

1) **Universities should strengthen information-literacy programmes:** Regular information-literacy instruction should be provided to postgraduate students to sustain and improve their competence in searching, selecting, evaluating, and using information.

2) **University libraries should provide advanced information-search training:** Greater emphasis should be placed on Boolean operators, truncation, phrase searching, database searching, subject searching, citation searching, and other advanced search techniques, particularly because information searching recorded the lowest grand mean.
3) **Librarians should organise regular research-support workshops:** Postgraduate students should be exposed to practical workshops on the use of library catalogues, electronic databases, institutional repositories, scholarly search engines, and other academic information resources.
4) **Universities should strengthen training on information-source evaluation:** Students should be trained to distinguish scholarly from non-scholarly sources and to assess information based on authority, accuracy, relevance, currency, credibility, and purpose.
5) **Academic integrity and ethical information-use education should be sustained:** Although ethical information-use competence was high, universities should continue to educate postgraduate students on plagiarism, citation and referencing, copyright, intellectual property, proper paraphrasing, and responsible use of information.
6) **University libraries should provide continuous information-literacy support for postgraduate students:** Rather than limiting instruction to library orientation programmes, libraries should integrate information-literacy support into postgraduate research training throughout the students' programmes.
7) **Postgraduate supervisors should encourage effective information practices:** Supervisors should guide students on appropriate information searching, source selection, evaluation, citation, referencing, and ethical use of scholarly information during research and thesis preparation.
8) **Universities should periodically assess postgraduate students' information competence:** Such assessments will help identify areas of weakness and enable libraries and academic departments to design targeted interventions for improving students' research and information-use skills.

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