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# College Students' Perceptions, Motivations and Uses of Wikipedia

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# **College Students' Perceptions, Motivations and Uses of Wikipedia**

## **I. Purpose, Research Questions and Significance of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to understand college students' information behavior in using Wikipedia by exploring the following questions: 1) How do college students use Wikipedia? 2) Why do college students accept and use Wikipedia, despite its anonymous authorships? 3) How do college students perceive the information quality of Wikipedia? 4) Finally, to what extent are college students confident in evaluating the information quality of Wikipedia?

This study employs multiple theoretical frameworks, including Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) approach and certain models for credibility of information. The study's significance lies in the following: first, it provides new knowledge of user perceptions, motivations and uses concerning Wikipedia, which may enhance our understanding of human information behavior in the anonymous digital environment. Second, this study's findings may help librarians develop effective information literacy programs that may benefit students using Web resources.

## **II. Literature Review: Conceptual Frameworks**

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) serves as the main theoretical framework of this study. The basic premise of SCT is characterized as triadic reciprocal causations among behavior, personal factors and the environment (Bandura, 1997). Human beings influence the environment, but at the same time, are limited to their environment. Human beings' emotions, thoughts and personal properties shape their behavior, and their behavior affects their emotions and thoughts, as well. In addition, people's expectations and beliefs are influenced by their environments: as a result, an individual's reactions to the environment may differ, according to one's personal characteristics. Finally, all of these three factors are not equally strong, nor do they occur simultaneously (Bandura, 1997).

SCT has certain assumptions regarding human capabilities: in particular, SCT sees human beings as intentional, forethoughtful, self-reactive and self-reflective (Bandura, 2001). Specifically, human beings have the ability of forethought, thus enabling them to evaluate the anticipated outcomes of their behavior. Consequently, human beings can regulate their behavior based on projected goals and expected outcomes rather than on actual outcomes. Finally, self-efficacy, one's belief in the capability to perform a course of action, is a fundamental concept of SCT explaining human motivation and achievement (Bandura, 2001). Researchers in various areas of human behavior have attempted to apply this theory to their behavioral phenomena interests.

On the other hand, (Kelton, Fleischmann, & Wallace, 2008) conceptual framework links trust in digital information with its use. It seems that confidence in information (one of their bases of trust) is closely related to the concept of outcome expectations of SCT in the current study. Furthermore, the factors influencing trust, individual disposition to information, context and recommendations can be integrated into the SCT framework, as human expectations and behavior are explained by both personal and environmental (situational) factors within SCT. SCT and Kelton et al.'s (2008) model provide useful insights into this study.

The Uses and Gratifications (U&G) approach provides another useful framework of the study with respect to people's motivations in using Wikipedia. Assuming an active audience, the U&G approach explains an individual's selection of certain media by linking this individual's different needs and gratifications (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). By employing the U&G approach, researchers have attempted to explain why people use the Internet (Ebersole, 2000; LaRose & Eastin, 2004; Stafford & Gonier, 2004).

Finally, a number of researchers have examined how web users assess the credibility of web information. (Warnick, 2004) states that an author's identity is not the most important criterion in assessing web credibility to web users. Instead, other peripheral cues, such as professional design, usability, information structure and usefulness of site contents influence users' assessment of web credibility. Similarly, (Rieh & Hilligoss, 2007) found that their sample of students were willing to compromise information credibility for speed and convenience in some situations. In addition, college students may perceive certain information to be non-credible, but may still use such information due to other values, such as obtaining new ideas (Hilligoss & Rieh, 2008). These findings imply that web users may not always look for the optimal or best information on the web. The second best or less credible information may still sufficiently satisfy their needs. These findings provide useful insights into examining students' uses of Wikipedia.

### III. Methodology

A pilot study using a web survey regarding students' information behavior using Wikipedia was conducted in the summer of 2007. The population consisted of undergraduate students at a large public university in the mid-western United States. The study sample consisted of students who took any of eight summer courses whose instructors agreed with the use of their students for a study sample. A total of 103 students participated in the study.

The measurements of the study were developed or modified based on the literature of SCT, U&G and credibility. The items of motivation were developed based on the U&G and related literature (Ebersole, 2000; Stafford & Gonier, 2004). The items of information quality of Wikipedia were modified based on those of news credibility (Gaziano & McGrath, 1986; Tsfat & Cappella, 2005). The items of self-efficacy, sources of self-efficacy and expected outcomes regarding Wikipedia were developed based on the literature of SCT (Bandura, 1986; Bandura, 1986; Bandura, 1997; Compeau & Higgins, 1995b). This poster session will present the major findings of the study.

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