

Wikipedia's Impact on Students' Research Behaviors

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Abstract

Wikipedia has emerged as a common starting point for undergraduates, but it is relatively unknown if it leads them to more scholarly content. The reasons for Wikipedia's popularity extend beyond the site itself to reflect student attitudes about the research process. The authors will present the results of a study examining how students use Wikipedia's bibliographies and how they assess the online encyclopedia's reliability. The study has implications for librarians in developing user-centered discovery mechanisms and influencing students' research behaviors.

Introduction

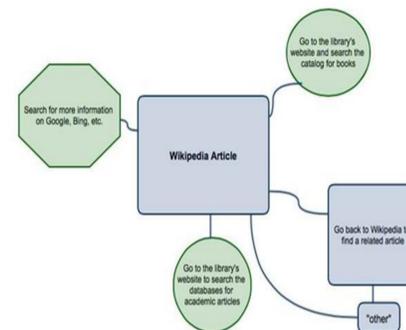
The undergraduate student researcher has to balance many considerations when selecting the sources to include in their academic papers. Among them, assignment requirements, prior experience with online resources, and the factors of ease and convenience have to be negotiated. The students' motivation and social influences also play a role in what ultimately becomes their research path, culminating in those first efforts in academic writing. While research process of undergraduates is complex and multi-faceted, one common feature in their journey remains the popular online resource Wikipedia.

One fundamental aspect, however, remains unknown: How do undergraduates actually use Wikipedia and how does this resource influence their subsequent use of information resources and overall research trajectory? For example, it is unclear whether students use the citations in the bibliographies of Wikipedia pages as a finding aid for additional content through the library's databases. It is also unknown if students are able to critically evaluate the quality of sources that are linked in the bibliographies of the online encyclopedia.

Method

- Recruited 30 students from the English 201 Writing Program
- Asked participants to respond to a 20-30 min Qualtrics® survey instrument
- Provided a pre- and a post- test to evaluate students' understanding of issues related to the authority of research sources, as well as their preferences when prioritizing issues of access and source quality.
- Gave participants a hypothetical research assignment and asked them to read a pre-selected Wikipedia article
- Asked participants to rate the quality of the sources by using modified Source Educational Evaluation Rubric (SEER®)
- 3 Research hypotheses:

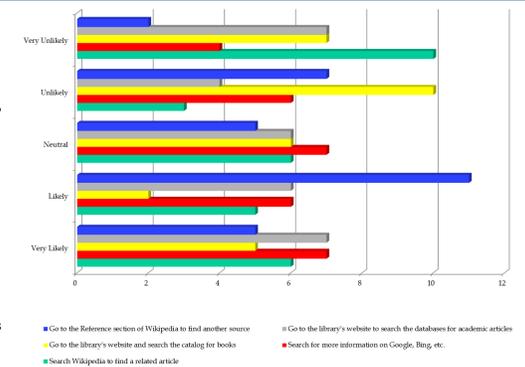
- Hypothesis 1 – Does Wikipedia use encourage the discovery of library research collections?
- Hypothesis 2 – Do students favor in using library-affiliated scholarly e-content than other non-scholarly content?
- Hypothesis 3 – Do students who assist in testing of library products benefit by learning from librarians how to effectively select research sources?



Results

After reading a Wikipedia page, students were most likely to do the following (in order):

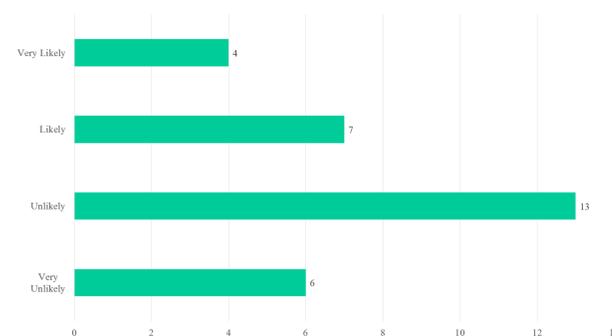
1. Search Google for more information
2. Search Wikipedia for another related article
3. Go to the library's webpage and use the databases
4. Use the Reference section of Wikipedia to find more information on their topic
5. Search the library's catalog for books



Comments

- "i [sic] like using Wikipedia and it is very easily accessible for me"
- "I usually use Google Scholar and then go to an article i [sic] like and that usually leads me to another with its cited sources"

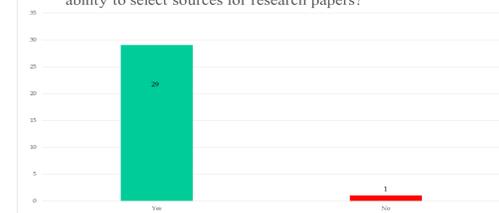
"In general, when you read articles on Wikipedia, are you likely to follow the links in the References or Notes section at the end of the article to find additional information?"



Comments

- "Generally, articles on Wikipedia are extremely long and detail-oriented in which the reader will only skim the article, skipping over the reference or note section"
- "It is the last section that I do not really take into consideration. I feel as though most of the reference content is already on the wiki article so there would be no reason for me to further look...."
- "Many of the sites that Wikipedia may very well be citing look credible, but they just look messy and cluttered and it makes me not want to get more information from them."
- "i've [sic] never even considered doing this."

"Do you find the use of an evaluation scale to determine the authority/quality of a source is beneficial to your ability to select sources for research papers?"



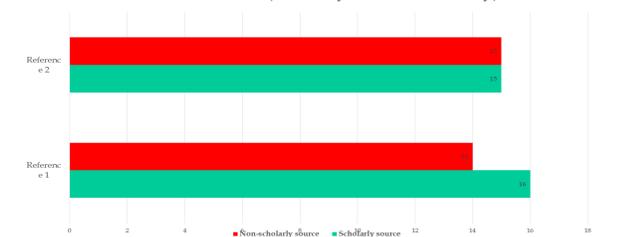
Results

- 29 of the 30 students find the supplied evaluation scale useful when selecting sources for research papers

Comments

- "An evaluation scale does an excellent job of prioritizing the information an author puts out there which makes it easier for the individual that will use this article to determine whether it is useful or not."
- "It makes it easier to decide if I want the source, or if I do not, instead of having to read through and ask myself if it is really worth using"

Select Reference source (Scholarly vs. Non-Scholarly)



Results

- At least 50% (15 of 30) students chose a scholarly source after reading Wikipedia article

Comments

- "I chose these two sources because they can be found on the Rutgers library website which is considered the main place for students to get credible sources. Moreover, these sources are published by universities."
- "It seems to be a detailed article on the specific topic given. It is also from a journal which makes the source more credited."

Conclusion

- Students use Wikipedia mostly because of ease-of-use
- Wikipedia information is used by students for background information
- Students find it useful to use a provided evaluation scale to determine the authority/quality of an electronic source
- Students mostly select scholarly e-content for their research paper
- Students feels not important to consult with the reference section when reviewing Wikipedia content

Next Steps

- Collaborate with RUL librarians and Wikipedians to work on identified Wikipedia content by contributing reliable scholarly sources
- Host edit-a-thon sessions and teach faculty and students how to edit Wikipedia content and examine the quality of reference notes
- Learn Wikipedia editing cultural and editing and introduce the concept of peer-review process and ranking mechanism to students